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Before Bears Slept
2

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Before Bears Slept
3

*This play is for my son, Craig,
who gave me the idea,
and who never ceases to surprise me
with his imagination.*

*And for my grandmother, Julia Freda,
who encourages and inspires
everyone who knows her.*

I love you both.

Before Bears Slept

CHILDREN'S COMEDY. Ever wonder why bears hibernate, why winter doesn't last all year, and why wolves howl? Well, you see, it all started with one troublemaking bear who loved winter and making snow angels. In fact, Bear loved winter so much, that he convinced the North Wind to stay—permanently! But the other forest creatures didn't like the thought of their forest glade turning into a glacier. Cold, hungry and eagerly awaiting spring, Fox, Owl, and Squirrel send a lone wolf to talk some sense into the selfish Bear and the snobbish North Wind.

Performance Time: Approximately 30- 35 minutes.

Cast of Characters

(1 M, 1 F, 11 flexible, opt. extras)

NARRATOR: Good-humored; flexible.

WOLF: Noble and strong; male.

BEAR: Selfish and childish; flexible.

NORTH WIND: Egomaniac, troublemaker; flexible.

SUN: Warm-hearted, kind, and more powerful than all the other forest creatures and the North Wind; female.

FOX: Fast and clever but secretly wishes to be a wolf; flexible.

SQUIRREL: More intelligent than others realize; flexible.

OWL: Intelligent and level-headed but secretly tormented by the eternal question asked by his fellow owls: "Who? Who?"; flexible.

TREE: Secretly suffering from hypothermic dementia; flexible.

RABBIT: Non-speaking; flexible.

CLOUD 1, 2: Non-speaking; flexible.

BIRD: Non-speaking; flexible.

EXTRAS (Opt.): As other forest creatures, clouds, or trees.

Setting

Forest glade, winter.

Set

Trees are heavily laden with snow, and there is a thick layer of snow on the ground. Outside Bear's den, there is a snow-covered rock large enough to sit on, a snow bank, and enough snow on the ground to make a snow angel.

Synopsis of Scenes

Scene 1: Forest glade, winter.

Scene 2: Forest glade, a few months earlier.

Scene 3: Forest glade, winter.

Scene 4: Forest glade, winter.

Scene 5: Outside Bear's den.

Scene 6: Outside Bear's den, a few moments later.

Scene 7: Outside Bear's den.

Scene 8: Outside Bear's den.

Props

Podium

Large storybook

Suitcase stuffed with clothing

Snowball

Long flowing robe for Sun

Special Effects

Wind
Fake snow (confetti)
Wind gusts
Wolves howling

"A long time ago,
when the world was new,
a strong winter fell.

The cold stopped everything in its tracks.

The birds were too cold to fly,
and the rabbits were too cold to hop.

Even the clouds seemed frozen in the sky..."

Scene 1

(AT RISE: A forest glade, winter. Rabbit, Bird, Squirrel, Owl, Tree, Fox, and Cloud 1, 2 are bundled up against the cold. The Narrator stands downstage behind a podium. There is a large storybook on the podium. The Narrator is tied to the story and, as such, should not be held accountable for anything that comes out of his mouth, no matter how annoyingly obvious or longwinded.)

NARRATOR: A long time ago, when the world was new, a strong winter fell. (*Cold winter winds.*) The cold stopped everything in its tracks. The birds were too cold to fly, and the rabbits were too cold to hop. Even the clouds seemed frozen in the sky.

(*Squirrel looks at Cloud 1, 2. The Clouds stand perfectly still.*)

SQUIRREL: Man, will you look at them clouds! They're not moving at all! (*Long pause. Everyone looks at Clouds 1, 2.*) Freaky.

OWL: Well, I remember back when I was just hatched, the snow—

SQUIRREL: Was right up to your nest. We know, we know.

FOX: Look, Owl, you can talk all day about winters gone by, but there's never been anything like this. I swear, if it doesn't let up soon, it's gonna be the end of us.

(*Tree makes muffled sound.*)

SQUIRREL: (*To Tree.*) What's that? (*Approaches Tree.*) You say something?

(*Tree makes louder muffled sound.*)

FOX: (*To Squirrel.*) Don't just stand there gawking, do something!

Before Bears Slept

II

OWL: *(To Squirrel.)* Clear away some of that snow. He can't breathe.

SQUIRREL: I was just gonna do that, thank you very much! If you'd just give me a minute –

OWL/FOX: Do it!

(Squirrel clears some snow away.)

SQUIRREL: *(Aside, muttering.)* No respect, if they'd just give me a chance to do it, I'd do it, but no –

(Squirrel finally clears all the snow away from Tree's mouth.)

TREE: Bear!

OWL: Not really. You still have a few leaves and snow on your important parts. Don't worry.

TREE: No, no! It was the Bear. The Bear did it!

OWL: The Bear did what?

TREE: The winter! It's all his fault. Oh, why doesn't anyone ever listen? I've been trying to tell you for months, but the snow covered me up, and, oh, this is just so awful!

SQUIRREL: Wait a minute, Tree. Slow down. *(Humors Tree.)* Of course the Bear did it. He's always doing things like this...changing the weather, making the grass grow. I hear he even chose blue for the sky. I would have gone with more of a soft lavender myself... *(Turns to the others and whispers, horrified.)* He's totally lost it! A classic case of hypothermic dementia. I expect he'll be dancing a jig and speaking in tongues before the day is out! *(Turns back to Tree and pats him sadly on a branch. Squirrel shakes his head. Speaking in a gentle, sympathetic voice.)* It's always the bears, isn't it? Aren't they just the very devil!

(Tree stares at Squirrel for a long moment and then pulls his branch away.)

Before Bears Sleep

12

TREE: Get away from me! I haven't lost it! I'm not crazy, and I don't have hypothermic anything! I was right here, and I saw it all.

SQUIRREL: Of course you did, sweetheart. (*Pats the Tree's branch again.*)

TREE: Stop that!

OWL: (*To Squirrel.*) Maybe we should listen to him.

SQUIRREL: What?

OWL: Trees are generally sensible creatures, firmly planted in the here and now, and not likely to go off on flights of fancy.

FOX: Not likely to go anywhere, really.

SQUIRREL: Fine. Whatever. (*Sits down.*) All right, Tree, do tell. What do you mean the Bear did it? Is he a magical bear? Does he have mystical polar powers that keep the snow from melting?

TREE: I don't want to talk to you.

SQUIRREL: What?

TREE: You, Squirrel, are mean and rude, and I hope you freeze!

OWL: Tree!

TREE: Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not gonna stand for being spoken to like that!

FOX: What you gonna do? Walk out?

TREE: Oh, that's nice!

OWL: Look, everybody, just calm down. Tree, if you really know what's going on, I think you'd better tell us.

(*Long pause.*)

TREE: Fine...the Bear did it.

SQUIRREL: That does it! I'm outta here! (*Gets up to leave.*)

OWL: (*To Squirrel.*) Sit down! Go ahead, Tree.

TREE: It was a couple of months ago...the spring thaw had just begun and Bear wasn't happy...

(*Blackout.*)

Scene 2

(AT RISE: *The forest, a few months earlier. There is less snow. Bear sits glumly in the melting snow. Cold winter winds are whistling through the trees.*)

BEAR: It's not fair. Spring's coming, and it's gonna get all hot and sticky. It's not fair!

NORTH WIND: (*Offstage.*) Tell me about it.

BEAR: Who's that?

NORTH WIND: It's me. The North Wind. (*Enters with the sound of a wind gust.*)

BEAR: The North Wind! (*Gets up, excited, and grabs North Wind's hand, pumping it hard up and down.*) Wow, this is such an honor! I mean, I've admired your work for years.

NORTH WIND: Yes, yes, I know. I'm wonderful.

BEAR: You are! You're wonderful! If it wasn't for you, it'd be hot and sticky all the time. But you...I mean, the snow, the ice...it's, like, just so cool!

NORTH WIND: Yes, well, that's me in a nutshell.

BEAR: Look, Wind—

NORTH WIND: North Wind.

BEAR: North Wind. Right. Sorry. Um...do you think you could...maybe...that is—

NORTH WIND: Spit it out. I don't have all day.

BEAR: Why don't you stick around? Winter's my favorite season. When you're gone, the snow will melt, and I'll be stuck with warm weather for months! Do you know what it's like wearing a fur coat in the middle of a heat wave?

NORTH WIND: Smelly, I would imagine.

BEAR: Uh...yeah, and well, that too. So how about it? Will you stick around?

NORTH WIND: No, I couldn't possibly. Where would I stay? The warm breezes from the south are taking over my place tomorrow afternoon, and if you think I'm gonna room with

Before Bears Sleep

12

them, you're crazy. You should hear them babbling about their vacations. (*In a high giggly voice.*) "Oh, we have pictures! Look, this is me with a cactus! This is me with a palm tree!" (*He shudders.*) No, thank you. They show up, and I'm outta there fast!

BEAR: Well, you could stay with me. I got a huge cave with lots of cool cracks and crevices you could blow through. You'll love it!

NORTH WIND: Hmm, I don't know, Bear. I really should be heading back up North for the summer. I got a sweet deal on some glacial property with a view of the ocean.

BEAR: Glacial? Come on, what are you gonna do with a glacier? Freeze it? It doesn't need you! It doesn't appreciate how amazing you are!

NORTH WIND: Keep talking...

BEAR: I'm your biggest fan! I swear! You're fierce and strong and...uh...really...uh...windy.

NORTH WIND: I am, aren't I?

BEAR: You're the coolest thing since...well, since...

NORTH WIND: Since myself?

BEAR: Uh, okay, that works.

NORTH WIND: You know, I like you, Bear. It's not often one meets such an intelligent, insightful individual.

BEAR: So you'll stay?

NORTH WIND: I'll stay.

(*Blackout.*)

Scene 3

(AT RISE: Forest glade, winter. Tree, Owl, Fox, Squirrel, Rabbit, Bird, and Cloud 1, 2 are in the same place as they were at the end of Scene 1.)

TREE: And just like that, it was winter ever since.

OWL: That's...well, that just can't be.

TREE: I know, but it is. Weird, huh?

SQUIRREL: Well, we have to do something about it.

FOX: And what would you suggest?

SQUIRREL: We have to get Bear to kick the North Wind out.

FOX: How?

SQUIRREL: Well, I think if he asked him nicely –

FOX: No, no. I mean, how do we get Bear to kick him out?

He's the one who asked him to stay. He practically begged him to.

OWL: He obviously doesn't want winter to end.

SQUIRREL: Well, we'll just have to make him see reason.

We'll explain to him that while he might have a thick winter coat and rolls of fat to keep him warm, some of us aren't so lucky. Surely, even a bear can be reasonable when something so important is at stake. I mean, if it doesn't get warm soon, we'll all freeze to death or starve.

FOX: Of course. You're right. So, I think you should be the one to go talk to him.

SQUIRREL: Excuse me?

FOX: You go right over to his cave and explain it to him just like you explained it to us. Off you go now.

(Squirrel doesn't move. Long pause.)

SQUIRREL: Um...

OWL: Go on. We'll be waiting right here.

SQUIRREL: Right. *(Still not moving.)*

FOX: What's the matter, Squirrel? Tail frozen to the ground again?

SQUIRREL: Um...well...no...I...uh...

OWL: You're not scared, are you?

FOX: (*Sarcastic.*) Him? Scared? Don't be ridiculous. Why, I once saw him stare down a grasshopper just to be ornery. Scared? Him?

SQUIRREL: Oh, be quiet, Fox.

FOX: What was that? I didn't quite catch what you—

SQUIRREL: I'm scared, okay? Is that what you wanted to hear? I'm scared, and I'm not gonna go talk to any bears or ask the North Wind to leave or do anything else. All right? Are you happy now?

FOX: Thrilled. (*Mutters to himself.*) Can't count on squirrels to do *anything!*

SQUIRREL: I'm standing *right here!* I can hear you, Fox, and I don't hear *you* volunteering.

FOX: Well, I would, but... (*Thinks.*) ...I'm busy.

SQUIRREL: Doing what, exactly?

FOX: Um...

SQUIRREL: What was that? I couldn't hear you.

FOX: Well...

(*Owl stretches his wings, dislodging snow from his feathers.*)

OWL: Let's face it, folks. We're *all* squirrels compared to the Bear, and he wouldn't listen to us even if we *did* volunteer to talk to him.

FOX: I was just about to say that. If I thought he'd listen to me, I'd volunteer in a second.

SQUIRREL: (*Sarcastic.*) Uh-huh.

OWL: So, that's settled. Good. Unfortunately, that leaves us back at square one. And square one isn't exactly Bermuda, in case you didn't notice.

NARRATOR: For a long time, the frozen animals sat around the forest glade shivering and counting their goose bumps

Before Bears Slept

17

as they tried to think of a solution. They never did. But, luckily, a solution found them.

(Blackout.)

Scene 4

(AT RISE: Forest glade, a few moments later. Wolf enters stage left. Even he looks cold.)

WOLF: Hey, guys. Cold enough for ya?

FOX: Wolfy! Baby! You're just the guy we were looking for!

WOLF: Wolfy?

FOX: It's funny you should ask about the cold, because as luck would have it, that's just what we were talking about.

WOLF: It's all anyone's talking about. I just came from the orchard, and you should hear the apple trees complaining. They'll be throwin' crabapples for years.

(Fox laughs wildly in an attempt to win favor with Wolf. No one else laughs.)

FOX: Crabapples! Fabulous! Did you hear that, Owl? Crabapples! Honestly, Wolf, that's gotta be just about the funniest thing I've ever heard.

(Fox shakes his head and grins, holding his stomach in an apparent attempt to contain his mirth. Wolf raises an eyebrow and looks questioningly at Owl.)

WOLF: *(To Owl.)* What's got into him?

OWL: Not enough oxygen, apparently.

FOX: Hey!

OWL: Sorry, Fox, I call 'em like I see 'em.

SQUIRREL: Oh, will someone just ask him already!

WOLF: Ask who what?

SQUIRREL: Ask *you* if you'll go ask the Bear to tell the North Wind to leave so spring will come and we won't all freeze to death.

Before Bears Slept

19

(Wolf looks at Owl.)

WOLF: *(To Owl.)* Hypothermic dementia? *(Indicates Squirrel.)*

OWL: You'd think so, but believe it or not, he's actually making sense.

WOLF: You coulda fooled me.

(As Narrator tells the following story, animals act out events.)

NARRATOR: Owl quickly laid out the situation for Wolf, who found it all very hard to believe. He was a very sensible animal, after all, and the whole tale just sounded like so much rubbish. But in the end, the forest animals managed to convince Wolf that their bizarre story was, in fact, the truth and the explanation for the seemingly endless winter. But what Wolf didn't understand was what they expected him to do about it.

WOLF: So, what do you expect me to do about it?

SQUIRREL: We want you to convince Bear to kick the North Wind out. The North Wind has to leave or else —

WOLF: You'll all freeze to death. Yeah, I got that part. But what I mean is...how do you expect me to accomplish it? Me and Bear aren't exactly the best of friends, you know. He's all like, "I'm so tough and my fur is thicker than yours. Oooh, look at me. I'm a bear!" And I don't look. I told him once that I'd rather be a wolf any day and that I'd rather be anything other than a bear...even a fox. *(Realizes. To Fox.)* No offense.

FOX: None taken.

(Fox smiles at Wolf and then shoots Wolf a dirty look when he isn't looking.)

WOLF: Well, it didn't exactly endear me to him, if you know what I'm saying. I think he would have torn me apart if he

could have caught me. He couldn't, of course. Too slow. (*Shrugs.*) That's bears for ya.

OWL: But that's exactly why you need to be the one. He can't catch you. He can't hurt you —

WOLF: He can't catch you either! You're an owl! And the day that slowpoke ever catches a squirrel, or even a fox... (*Fox shoots him another dirty look.*) ...I'll be a monkey's uncle. The only reason he even catches fish is 'cause they got water in their eyes! So why do you need me?

OWL: Two reasons. One, *some* of us... (*Glances meaningfully at the others.*) ...are afraid, and two, Bear doesn't respect us. At best, we're a nuisance, and at worst, we're a light snack. But you're strong. You're a predator just like he is. Maybe he doesn't like you, maybe he even hates your guts, but maybe...just maybe, he'll listen.

(*Wolf gives Squirrel a hungry look.*)

WOLF: (*Sulky, grumpy. To Squirrel.*) And maybe I'm in the mood for a light snack.

(*Squirrel takes a step back.*)

SQUIRREL: Hey now! None of that! Do you really want this winter to last forever? (*Wolf stares at his feet.*) Well, do you?

WOLF: (*Sheepishly.*) No...

OWL: Excellent! So, then, you'll do it? You'll ask Bear to send the North Wind away and bring this awful winter to an end?

WOLF: (*Reluctantly.*) Yeah, yeah. I'll do it. But for the record, I don't really mind the winter. I'm doing this outta the goodness of my heart.

OWL: Duly noted.

SQUIRREL: (*To Wolf, melodramatic.*) You're a prince among your kind. A truly kind and generous soul.

(Wolf grins slyly at Squirrel.)

WOLF: Don't get carried away. The reason I like winter, despite the cold, is how much easier you guys are to catch. *(They all take a step back.)* I'm still a wolf after all, and you're still...well...delicious. I just don't happen to be hungry at the moment.

SQUIRREL: Delicious. Um...thank you?

WOLF: *(Chuckles.)* Relax, Squirrel. You're a little scrawny for my taste. And anyway...there's no time for that. I have a forest to save. Wish me luck.

(Wolf exits stage right. Fox shakes his head.)

FOX: *(To Squirrel, mocking tone.)* "A prince among your kind."
What a suck-up.

SQUIRREL: Oh, go eat a crabapple.

(Blackout.)

Scene 5

(AT RISE: Another part of the forest outside Bear's den. Narrator enters.)

NARRATOR: Meanwhile, in the wonderfully snowy glade outside Bear's cave, our villain, the ever-selfish, wind-loving Bear was honing his predatorial skills, stalking his prey, exercising his powerful muscles, and generally enjoying the wonderfully snowy glade... (Bear runs on, throws himself into a fluffy snow bank and yells, "Weeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" He then begins to make a snow angel.) ...and as always, careful to maintain his dignity. (Long pause. Narrator watches Bear make a snow angel and shakes his head. With glee, Bear starts tossing snow into the air and watching it fall. Narrator sighs.) At any rate, it was right about this time that Wolf arrived on the scene.

(Wolf enters. Bear doesn't notice him. Wolf watches in silence for a moment, shakes his head, and looks questioningly at the Narrator. Wolf then makes a gesture that seems to say, "Is this guy for real?" The Narrator shrugs. Wolf sighs, strolls over to Bear, and taps him on the shoulder. Embarrassed, Bear freezes, and then, with a deep-throated and moderately impressive growl, digs a powerful claw deep into the snow and starts throwing snow around to make it look like he was looking for something all along.)

BEAR: (Acting threatening.) Where'd you go you little...uh... (Thinks.) ...squirrel? You think you can hide from me? I...am...Bearrrrrr!

(Wolf watches for a moment, unimpressed.)

WOLF: Nice snow angel.

(Bear looks up fiercely and pretends to see Wolf for the first time. He then sheepishly glances at his snow angel. They both look at it for a moment and then Bear scratches his head. All pretence of fierceness is forgotten.)

BEAR: *(Indicates snow angel.)* You don't think it makes me look fat?

(Wolf looks at the snow angel again.)

WOLF: Nah... *(Shrugs.)* ...big-boned maybe.

(Bear looks at his snow angel and sighs.)

BEAR: Whatcha doing here, Wolf? Thought I told you to stay out of my glade.

WOLF: Yeah, well, see, this is the thing...I have trouble with authority, see? I'm a loner...a rebel...a—

BEAR: Whatever. That doesn't answer my question. You looking for a fight?

WOLF: Who me? I wouldn't dream of it. I just came to talk.

BEAR: What happened? Get kicked out of your pack again? What did you do this time? Get caught chasing your tail during assembly?

(Wolf grits his teeth and tries not to lose his temper.)

WOLF: I'm not in trouble with the pack. Me and the pack are like this. *(Shows him two intertwined fingers.)* I really just need to talk to you about something.

BEAR: Well... *(Looking dubious.)* ...I'm kind of busy at the moment. But I guess that would be okay. Talk fast.

WOLF: No worries. It will only take a minute. It's about the winter.

BEAR: *(Brightening.)* Oh! No problem, then. It's awesome, isn't it?!

Before Bears Sleep

22

WOLF: Oh, no question. It's...um...totally radical...dude. For us, anyway. But, see, that's the problem. For us predators, we're good to go. Cold winds, slow prey, comfy snow banks to frolic in...uh...I mean, lay down on. It's great. But have you given any thought to the big picture?

(Bear glances at the snow angel, frowns at Wolf, and shakes his head.)

BEAR: I don't follow you.

WOLF: The big picture. Come on, think about it. I mean, for the moment, things are great. We've got nice temperatures, no sweating, no bugs. I like it, too, believe me. And the animals...wow...all little and helpless trying to run through all this stuff. *(Kicks at the snow. Pause. Takes a moment, savoring his own imaginings. He shakes his head.)* But what about in a few weeks, a few months...what will happen then?

(Bear nods.)

BEAR: *(Confused.)* I still don't follow you.

WOLF: What will we have to hunt? Look around, Bear! The little guys are frozen half-solid already! A few more months of this—a few more days even—and there won't be anyone left! Who will you hunt then? Snowflakes?

BEAR: Aw, that's nuts. There's plenty who'll do all right. Them squirrels got fur thicker than yours!

WOLF: *(Offended.)* They *do not!*

BEAR: And rabbits, and gophers, and foxes, and mooses—

WOLF: Moose.

BEAR: Where?

(Wolf sighs, then shakes his head.)

WOLF: Never mind. Look, what are they supposed to eat? After awhile, even the squirrels are gonna run out of food, and then they'll starve!

BEAR: Nah...them squirrels is clever. They'll figure something out.

WOLF: Look, Bear, I know you did this, and now you have to set things right.

BEAR: I didn't do anything.

WOLF: Yes, you did! I know all about your little celebrity encounter with the North Wind, and I know he's staying in your cave, and I know you started this whole mess, so stop denying it.

BEAR: I'm only denying it 'cause it's not true.

(North Wind enters. He strolls casually across the stage, tossing a snowball back and forth between his hands. He gives Bear a friendly nod in passing.)

NORTH WIND: Hey, Bear.

(North Wind exits. Wolf and Bear look at each other for a long moment.)

BEAR: That proves nothing.

NARRATOR: The two mighty predators argued that whole afternoon. Wolf tried everything: Logic... *(Wolf falls to the ground, kicking his feet and having a hissy fit. Bear laughs.)* ...bribery... *(Pats down his non-existent pockets as if looking for his wallet. Bear shakes his head.)* ...physical intimidation... *(Wolf hits Bear on the side of the head with a snowball. Bear chases him offstage and back onstage. Wolf stands with the snow bank between them. With his hands on his hips, Bear stands and watches Wolf.)* ...but nothing worked. In the end, all he had left to rely upon was his dignity.

(Wolf falls to his knees, pleading.)

Before Bears Sleep

26

WOLF: Please?

BEAR: No.

WOLF: Please?

BEAR: No.

WOLF: Please?

BEAR: No.

(Throughout the following, the mimed argument continues in the background. Every time the lights come back up, their positions have changed – sitting, lying, etc.)

NARRATOR: The sun went down... *(Lights go down.)* ...and still they argued. The sun came up... *(Lights go up.)* ...and still they argued...the sun went down again... *(Lights go down.)* ...and still they argued...and then, at last, as the sun came up again... *(Lights go up.)* ...they argued some more...then the sun went – *(Wolf and Bear stare at Narrator and start growling at him. Narrator clears his throat and moves the story along.)* Um...as the sun started to set for the third time... *(Exhausted, Wolf lies flat on his back, staring at the sky.)* ...Wolf finally gave up, throwing his hands in the air in frustration and giving in to the reality of the situation.

WOLF: *Please?!*

BEAR: Okay.

(Wolf sits up quickly.)

WOLF: *Really?*

BEAR: No.

(Wolf throws his hands up in the air in frustration and gives in.)

WOLF: Fine!

BEAR: *Fine.*

WOLF: Fine!

Before Bears Slept
27

(Wolf storms offstage. Bear shakes his head, watching him leave.)

BEAR: Drama queen!

[END OF FREEVIEW]