



THE VERY LAST DANCE OF HOMELESS JOE

By

Richard Courage

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor EZRA NEIGHBORS writes... Whether its Bernie Sanders long lost son "Pink Floyd", a sharp-witted "Blind Sally", or even the Indigo Child bearing the title "Banzerini" Richard Courage makes his point clear; these stories are worthy of listening, but you're really going to want to listen to Homeless Joe. In this delightfully poignant one-act, we follow a journalist on the streets of New York investigating the stories of those affected by the national epidemic of homeless. Through these glimpses into the multiple realities of people affected by homelessness, Richard Courage is able to craft characters of dignity, candor, humor, and imbue them with a humanity that with tugs at heartstrings. Throw in a Garth Brooks quote to top it off? Well, we got a winner here.*

60 pages Drama Running Time – 90 minutes

THE VERY LAST DANCE OF HOMELESS JOE

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CAST:

CHARLIE: Narrator/main character – Woman, age 25 to 40

PINK FLOYD: Homeless White man, orphaned at birth – Age 45 or older

BLIND SALLY: Homeless Black woman, blind at age 16 – Age 40 or older

JIMMY BAG O' DONUTS: Italian homeless man who lost his blue collar life – Age 40 or older

MODESTO: Homeless Viet Nam veteran – Age 60 or older

SOUL: Homeless person who ran away from a Psychiatric Hospital – Age 25 to 40/Male or female

NOBODY: Homeless woman – Age 30 or older

Q: A young rapper. – Any age

THE GREAT BANZINI: Homeless man who reads folks' auras – Age 25 or older

JOE: Homeless man with a dog and a heartbreaking story – Age 35 to 50

FIRST HOMELESS MAN: Any age

SHIRTLESS HOMELESS MAN: Any age

HOMELESS WOMAN: Any age

The cast has 6 male characters, 3 female characters, and 1 character who can be male or female.

There are also two homeless men and one homeless woman on stage as the play opens.

The stage is dark. Lights come up on three people on stage, two men, and a woman. They are all dressed in tattered clothes, and one man has no shirt. A street musician busker stands or sits in a far corner of the stage softly strumming on an acoustic guitar. The busker plays softly during Charlie's upcoming monologues to the audience as well. The woman speaks first.

HOMELESS WOMAN

My leg is fractured, and I can't work. Please can you give me some money or food?

FIRST HOMELESS MAN

I was laid off from my company and can't get a job. Please can you spare a dollar for food?

SHIRTLESS HOMELESS MAN

I've lost everything. I have nothing. Can you please give me something?

All three homeless people talk at once, asking for food, money, help, over, and over again. A casually dressed young woman, Charlie, walks onto the stage and one by one gives each person a dollar, and says

CHARLIE

I hope this helps you.

Each person Charlie gives a dollar to stops speaking and leaves the stage till Charlie is left onstage alone. Charlie addresses the audience.

CHARLIE

Those folks? They were all somebody's baby once. They were clothed, fed, maybe even loved. Now they're just adrift. Homeless and alone. And they're everywhere. In front of the fancy shops in Soho. Beneath the bright billboards of Times Square. From the condos of Murray Hill to the cafes in Hell's Kitchen. East Village, West Village, upper east side, upper west side, from Wall Street to Washington Heights. The disenfranchised. The outcasts. Society's lost and forgotten children. Manhattan's homeless people. The castaways, stranded like uncharted islands in the stream of more fortunate New Yorkers. They haunt the streets with haunted eyes, like wandering spirits, watching the world they once knew go by, close enough to touch but just out of reach. They are hopeless. Untethered. Adrift on a concrete, asphalt ocean with no safe harbor in sight. They are

a statement. They are a result. They are a reminder. And they are legion. Sad. Tragic. Hopeless. And then there's Joe.

*A light comes up on a man in his thirties or forties sitting on a milk crate with a dog sitting beside him. Beside the pair is a cardboard sign which says **Let's all have a great day!!!***

CHARLIE

Joe is homeless. And yet he's always in good spirits. Nothing in the world his own but a few clothes and nick knacks and yet he seems to be as happy as a clam. And Joe has a dog. She's a sweetie. Loves everyone who comes by to pet her. Some people think, "How sad, a dog living on the street." They couldn't be more wrong. Mush, that's what Joe named her, 'cause she's a big mush, goes to Central Park four to five times a day. She swims in the cool lake by Bethesda Fountain. She has a ton of friends and admirers because she has such a sweet, friendly disposition. Mush and Joe live by a river called Broadway flowing with fast cars, trucks, buses, people and other doggies. Sometimes the other doggies floating by glance over at Mush and Joe, as if wondering why they are sleeping on a cardboard mattress on the bare sidewalk. And why do they seem so happy? That's a helluva story. But before I tell you Joe's story, let me tell you how I met up with him.

Light goes out on Joe and his dog.

CHARLIE

I'm a born and bred Manhattanite. Yeah, I love a toasted raisin bagel every morning, weekends rambling through museums and 24-hour bodegas that serve coffee at all hours. Good times.

I'm a copy editor for a little Manhattan newspaper called "On the Street". But I really want to be a writer. Never met a story I didn't like, exciting or boring, juicy, or dry. I needed to find a story that people would want to read. Something powerful. Something that concerned every resident. Every tourist. Everyone. I was standing on Columbus Circle waiting for inspiration when a man asked me for some change to buy a hot dog. I bought him a hot dog, he thanked me profusely, and that's when it hit me. Homelessness. There's a massive untold story there. Who are these people really? What are their names, their stories? So, I proceeded to find out.

*A light comes up on an older, bearded man wearing a pink camouflage shirt. He is holding a cardboard sign which reads, **I voted for Trump and now look at me.***

CHARLIE

The Trump hotel looms over Columbus Circle like a dark tower from a Stephen King novel. Dark, shiny, and foreboding. At it's black marbled feet, there are no heroes or villains, but nestled between the veggie juice cart and the Halal food wagon there sat this man with a cardboard sign that read, I VOTED FOR TRUMP AND NOW LOOK AT ME. I liked his sign and decided to start my story about the homeless with him.

CHARLIE

Clever sign. *Charlie drops some change into the man's cup.*
You really vote for him?

PINK FLOYD

Yessiree bob. Did it to piss off my dad.

CHARLIE

Your dad a democrat?

PINK FLOYD

He's Bernie Sanders.

CHARLIE

Bernie Sanders? The Vermont senator who ran for President?

PINK FLOYD

Yep.

CHARLIE

Bernie Sanders is your dad?

PINK FLOYD

He'd never admit it, but yeah. Back in the seventies, he and this wild flower child dropped acid at a Pink Floyd concert and bang! I was conceived in a wild purple haze. Love child without the love. Grew up hard in foster care and group homes. Ran away when I was fifteen and never looked back. Lived on the mean streets of Chicago for a time. Went to the school of hard knocks. Been a fry cook and a grease monkey. Louisiana boat shrimp boat man and a Manhattan bike messenger. Loved that job. Free as the breeze, carefree as you please. Oh, I spent a magical summer night in the Grand Canyon once. Never seen the stars look so bright. I miss that. No stars in Manhattan.

CHARLIE

Sounds romantic.

PINK

Huh. I guess sometimes it was. Lonely though. My name is Floyd by the way. Friends call me Pink and you fed the cup so that makes you a friend.

CHARLIE

My name's Charlie. Nice to meet you, Pink. That's quite a story. I'd like to hear more.

PINK FLOYD

Nothin' special really. Traveled all over America. Been homeless in every big city. Slept under the Hollywood sign and danced across the Golden Gate Bridge. Did Mardi Gras in New Orleans and protested the war in D.C.

CHARLIE

Which war?

PINK FLOYD

All of 'em kiddo. That's what us poor folks do. Not that the rich folks ever care to listen. You ever join a protest, Charlie?

CHARLIE

Nah. Not my thing really, joining anything. I have enough trouble standing up for myself never mind others. Although when I was thirteen, I did refuse to use make up for three weeks when I found out the cosmetic companies experiment on rabbits and stuff. But no one noticed. Mostly I feel like no one cares what I have to say.

PINK

Careful there Charlie. Thinking like that 'll get you a spot right next to me.

CHARLIE

So, tell me Pink, did you ever, even once think of settling down in one of those picturesque places? Friendly neighbors. Picket fences. Backyards. Steady paycheck. Maybe even a Mrs. Pink and a bunch of little Pinks running around?

PINK FLOYD

Ha! Little Pinks? They'd probably all run away from home to seek their fortune just like their old man. And marriage? Missed that boat many moons ago Charlie. Oh, I been with some women. Loved just one. Tessie Arizona was her name. Hair as gold as Kansas corn silk. Eyes as deep blue as the sky. Eyes so big you could fall into them. I loved her awful. We were inseparable. Gonna see the world together. But it wasn't meant to be.

CHARLIE

What happened?

PINK FLOYD

Her husband and kids asked her to come home. She missed her kids. And that was that.

CHARLIE

Wow. Tough break.

PINK FLOYD

It was what it was. Relationships are a bitch. Been flying solo ever since.

CHARLIE

But you rely upon the kindness of strangers.

PINK FLOYD

People ain't reliable lady. They leave. They lie. They freaking die. And then we dance. We tango through the lies, hip hop over the failures, waltz

through the leavings, and when folks die we break down and break it down. And Charlie, my heart's as broke down as it gets.

CHARLIE

Pretty harsh philosophy.

PINK FLOYD

Pretty harsh reality. But if you really want to hear a story, you should go talk to Homeless Joe. Man, he's got us all beat. Amazing story, let me tell you.

CHARLIE

Homeless Joe? What's his story?

.

PINK FLOYD

Better if he tells you himself. He'll break your heart man.

CHARLIE

Really sad, huh?

PINK FLOYD

Sad ain't the word Charlie. Tragic is more like it.

CHARLIE

So where do I find this Joe.

PINK FLOYD

Just walk up Broadway. Stay on the shady side. He has a dog with him. Friendly dog, real sweetie. You can't miss Joe. He's always in a good mood.

CHARLIE

If his story's so tragic, why's he in a good mood?

PINK FLOYD

Better if he tells you himself Charlie. Joe and his dog. You'll see. He'll break your heart man. Break your heart.

CHARLIE

You know you look a little old to be Bernie's son right Pink?

PINK FLOYD

The road's a harsh mistress kiddo. Ages a fellow well beyond his years.

CHARLIE

I wouldn't know.

PINK FLOYD

I hope you never do. I really do.

CHARLIE

I'm sorry you never found a home Pink.

PINK FLOYD

Nothing to be sorry about Charlie. You just don't get me. Early on I kinda knew in my heart, in my very bones that I was never meant to stay in one place too long, to settle down. I was in love with the world Charlie, and I had to let it know. What better way to show my love for the world than being in it. I've seen the sunrise set fire to the sky over the Atlantic Ocean, and watched it melt soundlessly into the Pacific. I've been so high up in the Colorado Rockies I felt like I could just turn up my face and kiss an angel. And I've spent nights in the Arizona desert that were so peaceful I wondered if I was the last man on Earth and laughed about it to the moon. I've been all over creation Charlie, and If I had it all to do again, I'd only change one thing.

CHARLIE

What's that?

PINK FLOYD

Wouldn't do it alone. No. I'd a begged Tessie Arizona to come along until she did. Make no mistake, I've had a great life, I just wish I'd shared it with somebody. Cause if I've gained any wisdom in all my travels Charlie it's that all we really have while we're here and all we take with us when we finally go is each other. And after a lifetime spent looking for I don't know what, I finally figured out, when it comes right down to it, each other is all we really need.

So, sorry? Charlie the only one of us who should be sorry is me. For you.

CHARLIE

Sorry for me? How so?

PINK

Inflation, pollution, overpopulation, wars. Mankind? Should've called ourselves Mancruel. Cruel to the planet. People just keep living like there's no tomorrow, and in just a few years from now, there just might not be. So yeah, I feel sorry for you Charlie. And if I were you? I'd seize every opportunity that comes your way to live passionately and well. And I'd do it with someone. And like I said Charlie, when the Angels call last dance we'll finally realize all we ever really had was each other, and each other is all we really needed anyway.

CHARLIE

The last dance before the Angels take us, eh? I hope it's a rave. Never been to a rave. Be a nice way to go, all of us yelling and jumping and just having a ball. Speaking of going, I may as well keep going myself. More people to talk to, stories to hear. So long Pink. Thanks for sharing your story with me. Nice talking to you. You've had some life huh?

PINK

Some life indeed Charlie. Now you go have some yourself. Life, that is. Happy trails kiddo.

Light goes out on Pink Floyd. Charlie stands alone on stage speaking to the audience.

CHARLIE

I waved goodbye and as I walked away, diving into the stream of folks flowing to and from the A train, I stopped and turned back to look at Pink. Squatting there on the cracked pavement, holding his little cardboard sign, he seemed like a castaway stranded on an island, asking people sailing by to throw him a lifeline. But no one did.

I wondered to myself if he could actually be Bernie Sander's son, or if he was just spinning a yarn, or if he was experiencing delusions. Any way you look at it, he was a person in need and there are so very many like him.

So many castaways. So many lost souls. Hungry souls, all starving for attention, all begging for their next meal and an ounce of human kindness. I drifted away, caught up in the pedestrian stream, wondering if I'd find this Homeless Joe guy and how his story could possibly be any more heartbreaking than a guy named Pink Floyd living on the streets of

Columbus Circle. And as I cruised up Broadway, I wondered what other homeless souls I'd stumble across and what sad tales they'd spin for me as well. And then I met Blind Sally.

*A light comes up on a middle-aged black woman wearing sunglasses and a tattered shawl. She is sitting on a milk crate in front of an upscale candy store called **SUGAR**. She has a cardboard sign that reads*

MY

NAME IS BLIND SALLY AND I DON'T DANCE ANYMORE

CHARLIE

Hello? Sally?

BLIND SALLY

Hello. And it's Blind Sally if you don't mind.

CHARLIE

Blind Sally. Sorry. My name's Charlie.

BLIND SALLY

Charlie. Nice name for a man. You are a man, right?

CHARLIE

I'm a woman.

BLIND SALLY

Dang. I can never tell nowadays. Damn millennials. All sound alike and for all I know you all probably look alike. So, what can I do for you Charlie?

CHARLIE

I'm a writer and I'd like to hear your story for an article I'm writing about homelessness.

BLIND SALLY

My story is I'm a dancer who doesn't dance. Nobody wants to dance with a blind woman, you know?

CHARLIE

I suppose not. You miss it? Dancing?

BLIND SALLY

I miss it powerful. In my mind's eye, which is still twenty-twenty technicolor. I often travel back in time to when I was fifteen, before the disease stole my sight and my dream of dancing with Alvin Ailey. I was beautiful to watch. Beautiful.

CHARLIE

I'm so sorry. That sounds awful.

BLIND SALLY

You have no idea mister.

CHARLIE

I'm a miss.

BLIND SALLY

You're sure about that?

CHARLIE

what Pretty sure. So, Blind Sally, in your mind's eye, in your memories,
do you see?

BLIND SALLY

You really want to know huh?

CHARLIE

I really want to know. Please.

BLIND SALLY

I used to dance. Day and night, night and day, and so did my parents. I danced with my mother, a lovely, soulful elementary school teacher from the Jamaican Islands. I danced with my father, a half Irish, half Cherokee truck driver whose heart was as big as the semi he drove. We all loved each other madly and all loved to dance. Any given day we'd mambo in the kitchen, limbo in the living room, and waltz through the shady, tree lined Brooklyn streets. We lived to dance and danced to feel life's joy.

In my mind, I see myself young and carefree, leaping, spinning, dipping and soaring around like some beautiful black bird. Then, like always, some kind soul drops some change into my cup and the memories fade, my mind's eye goes dark, and I'm fifty years old, wearing someone else's discarded dress and tattered shawl. Blind and homeless. No family, no friends, no future in sight. Alone among millions. As hopeless as a ripple in a rainstorm.

CHARLIE

Your mother. Your father. They sounded like they loved you very much. What happened to them?

BLIND SALLY

My father died as he lived. On the road. Heart attack. Too many lumberjack breakfasts in too many greasy spoons. Eat your vegetables, Charlie.

CHARLIE

So sorry. And your mother?

BLIND SALLY

After dad died, she was never the same. My going blind was a knife in her heart, and I guess my dad's death twisted the blade even worse. She stopped talking altogether, like she was only going through the motions of being alive. At the end of each day, I'd ask her, "Mother? Are you there?" One night she didn't answer, and I was left alone in the dark. I've been alone ever since.

CHARLIE

That's very sad. Listen, is there anything I can get for you?

BLIND SALLY

Some candy would be nice. Jelly babies please.

CHARLIE

TO AUDIENCE

I say sure and come back a minute later with a pound of jelly babies.

CHARLIE

Here you go Blind Sally.

CHARLIE HANDS BLIND SALLY THE JELLY BABIES

BLIND SALLY

Thank you, Charlie. Tell me, do you dance?

CHARLIE

Nah. Never learned. Don't know how.

BLIND SALLY

Yes, you do. In that kind heart of yours, in those kind bones you do. Life is a dance, Charlie. Dance is life. You can't have one without the other.

CHARLIE

You don't dance anymore Blind Sally.

BLIND SALLY

I don't really live either Charlie.

BLIND SALLY TAKES CHARLIE'S HAND IN HERS

Dance Charlie. Dance while you've still got the chance. Thanks again for the candy.

CHARLIE

You're very welcome. By the way, do you know a guy named Homeless Joe?

BLIND SALLY

Of course I do. Joe brings me candy, jelly babies, every Saturday evening. Nice boy. Precious dog. Such soft fur. He's who you should talk to. Sad, sad story. You keep heading on up Broadway, you're sure to find him. Thanks again for the candy and the company. And remember Charlie. Start dancing.
{LIGHTS GO OUT ON BLIND SALLY}

CHARLIE

TO AUDIENCE

I said thanks and goodbye and turned to go. I glanced over my shoulder and watched Blind Sally sitting on her milk crate, munching her candy with only a tattered shawl and her fading memories to comfort her. I wanted to wave goodbye, but I was as invisible to her as she was to the sea of people sailing past her. As I turned away, I imagined her dancing. Then I remembered that she doesn't dance anymore, and a deep sadness filled my chest as I drifted uptown. Then I met Jimmy.

*Lights come up on a man standing in front of an upscale coffee joint called **PATISSERIE**. He is late middle aged and is wearing a dark blue polo shirt, khaki pants, and brown penny loafers, all dusty. He has a cardboard sign at his feet which reads **I LOVE PASTRIES!! PLEASE GIVE!!***

JIMMY

Hey Miss, can you spare five dollars for a cup of coffee?

CHARLIE

Five dollars? That's expensive coffee.

JIMMY

It's a ritzy neighborhood. I'd move, but I can't beat the rent. So whataya say? Can you buy a coffee for a guy down on his luck?

CHARLIE

How do you like it?

JIMMY

Gallon o' cream, pound o' sugar. Diabetes here I come! Large please. Oh, and if you're feeling extra generous, the cherry cheese danish is to die for.

CHARLIE

TO AUDIENCE; So I bought Jimmy a coffee and a Danish and thought to myself that this little story on homeless folks was becoming ironically expensive.

Charlie hands Danish and coffee to Jimmy.

CHARLIE

Here you go.

JIMMY

{JIMMY SIPS COFFEE} Ahh! You make a nice!

CHARLIE

My name's Charlie by the way.

JIMMY

Thanks a bunch Charlie. I'm Jimmy. Jimmy bag o donuts to my friends and patrons such as yourself. My friend Joe, every Friday night he brings me a half dozen day old assorted from the Donut shop after it closes, and he calls me that. I like it. Makes me feel special. So Charlie, you from around here?

CHARLIE

No. I went to grade school near Lincoln Center though.

JIMMY

Really? Hey, your parents must've had long dollars, eh?

CHARLIE

Nah. I was a kid actor. Made a few commercials, paid for my private school, but I never really liked the business. Auditions, rejections. Lot of pressure for a kid. So, I retired at the ripe old age of twelve. Disappointed my mom something awful. Was her dream, not mine. But what's your story Jimmy? You're dressed pretty well for a guy asking

for someone to buy him coffee.

JIMMY

These clothes? Fugedaboutit. Goodwill thrift shop. I waltz in, change my clothes, and waltz out. It's the five-finger discount store.

CHARLIE

That's stealing Jimmy.

JIMMY

That's survival kiddo. And my story? Had it all, lost it all, went nuts, here I am. Ba da Bing, Ba da boom. House, job, wife, kids, all history.

CHARLIE

Sounds awful. Jimmy, what's the toughest part, the most challenging part of being homeless?

JIMMY

Hmm. Dating.

CHARLIE

Dating? Are you serious?

JIMMY

Sure. What, you don't think it gets lonely standin' out here all-day watching couples strollin' by, hand in hand kissing an' laughin' an' carrying on?

CHARLIE

I never really gave it much thought. But dating? Not food, shelter and like that?

JIMMY

Dating. Life on these mean streets is not designed for romance kiddo. Just cause I'm homeless don't mean I'm dead ya know?

CHARLIE

I guess not. So, when is the last time you were in a relationship?

JIMMY

Feels like forever. Since my wife left me. That was the last time a woman hugged, kissed or even smiled at me.

CHARLIE

That does sound lonely.

JIMMY

Lonely ain't the word kiddo. I've forgotten what intimacy feels like. And let me tell you Charlie, I haven't had sex in so long I go into Starbucks just to hear somebody scream my name. "JIMMY?"

{JIMMY MOANS}

CHARLIE

Ooookay. More than I wanted to know.

JIMMY

Hey, I wasn't always like this ya know. I wasn't born homeless. Back when I played football in High School, tight end, the girls were all over me. I was a catch. I even dated identical twins once. That was a unique experience let me tell ya.

CHARLIE

Twins? Both at once?

JIMMY

No, I'm not a pervert. One one night and the other another night.

CHARLIE

If they were identical, how did you tell them apart?

JIMMY

Easy peasy. Maria had a heart shaped mole on her right cheek. (pause) and James had a beard. Hey, I'm a progressive guy. Plus, James always picked up the check.

CHARLIE

Amazing. But Jimmy, I still would like to hear how you wound up homeless. You seem like an intelligent, decent guy.

JIMMY

Nothing to tell Charlie. I'm just a pathetic, pointless, donut eating ghost of the man I once was. My world ended Charlie. But I'm still in it okay? That's the short version.

CHARLIE

I'd like to hear the long version.

JIMMY

Long version, short version, they both end up with me on skid row. What does it matter how I got here? You want a story? Once upon a time I meant somethin' to somebody and now I mean nothing to nobody. The end.

CHARLIE

But maybe if you told me about your life before...

JIMMY

Before? Before what? Before I became a bum? You want to know who I was?

CHARLIE

No Jimmy. Not who you were. Who you are. Your past is part of that, Of your story. Please. I'd really like to hear it.

JIMMY

Okay. Okay. Why not. I was a plumber for twenty-five years. My own boss, steady work, good money. Married a girl from the neighborhood in Brooklyn. Sophia. What a looker. And could she cook? Minga! Best lasagna in Bensonhurst. I loved her more than I thought it was possible to love another person. Sophia was my world That is, until we had kids. Ray and a few years later, Angelina. Those kids? They were my world. My reason I was put on this earth. I worked, loved my family, and dreamed of playing with grandkids some wonderful day. Life was simple. Life was good. Then suddenly, life sucked. Hurt my back on a job. Real bad. Couldn't work after that. Hospital bills crushed my savings. Had to sell the house in Bensonhurst, which I'd inherited from my father and him from his father. Lotta memories in that house, let me tell ya. Christmas 's, birthdays, my first kiss with Bella the beauty. All gone. And my freakin' wife? Did she stand by me in my time of need? Fuggedaboutit! She left me flat. And you wanna know with who? The friggin' real estate broker. The real estate broker! Can you believe that? Talk about adding insult to injury. She took my infant

daughter and teenage son with her. She said they needed a father who could take care of them and I couldn't even take care of myself. Wasn't enough for her my body was broken, she had to break my heart too. I mean, she took my kids! My kids Charlie! She might as well a' ripped my heart right outta' me. I'm Italian. No family? No life. That was seven years ago. Haven't seen any of 'em since. I mean, I did everything I was supposed to do to have a good life. Good husband, father, hell I was a model American citizen. And what did it get me? A one-way ticket to nowhereville USA. Penniless, homeless, my body shattered, my spirit gone, I gave up. I drank and drugged and dreamed of my kids for years and eventually wound up on the well off streets of Lincoln Center. Except, I wasn't well, just off. Too despondent and crushingly depressed to rejoin regular society, stuffing my grief with cherry cheese Danish, I live from day to miserable freaking day. Some days are sweet, some salty, but most are downright bitter. That's the story Charlie. You happy now?

CHARLIE

I'm sorry for your losses Jimmy.

JIMMY

As my sainted mother used to say, it is what it is. And it ain't changin' any time soon. Maybe you should go now.

CHARLIE

Yeah okay. Oh Jimmy, do you know a guy named Homeless Joe?

JIMMY

Homeless Joe? Sure I do. Remember I told ya this guy brings me donuts every Friday? That's Homeless Joe. Nicest guy you'd wanna' meet. Got the sweetest dog on the planet too. Saddest story you ever heard though. Makes me seem like a lucky guy.

CHARLIE

You know where I can find him?

JIMMY

Just keep goin' up Broadway. Shady side. You're bound to bump into him. He'll break your heart kiddo.

CHARLIE

So I've heard. Thanks for sharing your story, Jimmy. I'm going to keep going on my way. And your story? It hasn't ended yet.

JIMMY

Thank you, Charlie. For the Danish, the Joe, and the therapy session. And Charlie? I hope you find what you're looking for.

LIGHTS GO OUT ON JIMMY

CHARLIE

TO AUDIENCE

Jimmy reminded me of some colorful character from a dime novel, but he wasn't a fictional person. He was a real-life reminder of society's flaws. I felt sad that he had given up and accepted his impoverished fate.

As I neared the corner of 65th street I noticed an older man with a cardboard sign that said **VETERAN RELIEF FUND**. I walked up to him and saw that his baseball cap also said VETERAN.

LIGHTS COME UP ON MODESTO, an obviously old Latinex man casually dressed, wearing a baseball cap which reads VIET NAM VETERAN.

CHARLIE

Hello. So, you're a veteran?

MODESTO

You're a genius lady. What tipped you off? The sign? The hat that says Veteran?

CHARLIE

Sorry, stupid question.

MODESTO

S'okay. Make it up to me with a generous donation to the Veteran relief fund.

CHARLIE

Veteran relief fund?

MODESTO

Yeah. I'm a veteran who needs relief. Food, clothes, subway. Nothing's free in this life. My war's over, but I'm still fighting.

CHARLIE

Fighting who?

MODESTO

Not who lady. What. Poverty, despair, loneliness. I fought for my country. Now I fight for me.

CHARLIE

Oh. Here, I hope this helps.

MODESTO

Can't hurt. Thanks. Most people just float on by. Like I'm not even here. My name's Modesto. And you are?

CHARLIE

I'm Charlie. Modesto, what a great name. Is it Spanish?

MODESTO

and his
gone for

My mother was from Puerto Rico. She named me after her dad
dad before him. I'm Modesto the third and the way things have
me, I'm probably the last.

CHARLIE

Well, I'm writing a story about people who are homeless, and I'd like to hear yours if that's okay.

MODESTO

A story? My story? You got a few days?

CHARLIE

I'm in no rush. Where did you serve Modesto?

{MODESTO ROLLS HIS EYES, TILTS HIS HEAD TOWARDS CHARLIE AND POINTS AT THE WORD "VETERAN" ON HIS HAT}

CHARLIE

Oh, Viet Nam. You were in Viet Nam?

MODESTO

No, I just liked the hat. Geeze Louise! But, yeah, I was in Nam

CHARLIE

Wow. Viet Nam.

MODESTO

Yeah. The bungle in the jungle. You weren't even born yet. I was just a kid myself.

CHARLIE

Did you see combat?

MODESTO

Two bronze stars and a purple heart.

CHARLIE

That's incredible.

MODESTO

Nothing incredible about it. I paid for those medals in blood. I've got three bullet hole scars in my leg, and a metal plate in my head. Whenever it rains, it plays W B L S radio. Drives me nuts.

CHARLIE

Really?

MODESTO

No, not really. You're a naive little thing, ain't you? What else you want to know? My life's an open book. But you better hurry up and read it 'cause the ink is fading on the pages. I'm seventy years old and my tired mind is starting to go. Memory ain't what it used to be. Sometimes that's a good thing.

CHARLIE

Well, can you tell me about Viet Nam?

MODESTO

Was a nightmare I never did wake up from. Flashbacks, you know? My body got out in mostly one piece, but part of my mind's still there. What do you know about Nam Charlie?

CHARLIE

It was the war nobody wanted. Massive protests. Martin Luther King spoke out against it. A whole generation of young men sacrificing their lives just because the government wanted to save face and win elections. It was a dark time.

MODESTO

You don't know the half of it. The intimate horrors of it, up close and unimaginable. Worse than someone like you, someone who's never seen war up close, can ever imagine. Hot. Always the freaking heat. Mosquitoes as big as your fist. Snakes.

Foot fungus from the steamy air. And blood. Rivers of blood. And death. A world of death lurking behind every tree and rock.

CHARLIE

God. You're right, I can't even imagine. How old were you, Modesto?

MODESTO

Seventeen. 101st Airborne Division. Machine Gunner. At seven freaking teen. My first damn day in the field, we were attacked. Lost twelve guys. Boys who'd never go to college, get married or see another sunrise. And for what? So some fat cat bomb maker could line his pockets and call us suckers for dying for nothing? It was my first combat mission, so I was shook up for about a week. But I had to pull it together to stay alive, and somehow in the middle of all the insanity I did.

CHARLIE

You must have been terrified. How did you function? How did you keep going?

MODESTO

Drugs. M J. Heroin. Anything to numb the brain, ice the heart and steady the hand. And fear. Fear kept me sharp. One moment the jungle was quiet, except for the birds. Next moment, the guy next to me's head exploded. Was a horror movie and we were the stars. No director
to yell cut though. No theme music like in the freaking movies
that
glorify war. The real thing is too horrific for you to stay sane. So, you adapt. Became a killing machine, like the Terminator. Or are you too young to have seen that movie?

CHARLIE

Yeah, I watched it on DVD last Halloween. Modern classic. Schwarzenegger's best work. But you can't seriously compare yourself to that soulless robot.

MODESTO

Oh, but I'm not. I'm much worse. We were both programmed, ordered to take lives, but I knew in my heart it was wrong and did it anyway.

We almost never really saw the enemy you know. Just muzzle flashes from the jungle. After the firefight, we'd find all these dead Vietnamese.

But Charlie, I shot a guy in the face once, a second before he was about to shoot me. And all I could think afterwards was that he had a mother and a father and maybe a wife and kids who'd never know how or when he died. I kept thinking he could've been me. And I'd never get to kiss a girl, or drink a beer with my buddies again, or hug my mom and smell her arroz con pollo again. I felt worse fear and despair in that moment than I'd ever felt in my young life. But little did I know the worst was yet to come.

CHARLIE

What happened?

MODESTO

The Tet Offensive.

CHARLIE

What was the Tet Offensive?

MODESTO

You youngsters. Don't know nothing. Damn shame what they don't teach you in school nowadays. No wonder everyone forgets how we bled for you. How we died so you could play X box and whine about how

tough your life is. See, while we were all getting high during a break from the fighting, what seemed like all of Vietnam decided to attack our base. I mean, we got hit from every direction. We were all going to die and never live our lives. We had to call in an air strike right on top of us. We dug in and prayed we didn't get killed by our own bombs. Some prayers were answered. Some not. Once the bombs fell, it was all luck if you made it out. Pure luck. Forty-two men lived that day. Ninety-four didn't. Pure luck.

CHARLIE

And you were one of the lucky ones.

MODESTO

Maybe. Maybe not. If I'd bought it on that day I wouldn't have had to live the next five decades haunted by the ghosts of men I shared mud and blood with. I still see their faces when I close my eyes.

But the party wasn't over. My ninth week in Nam I got blown out of a helicopter. Busted me up pretty good. When I recovered enough, they sent me home. But I didn't feel at home. I was suffering from P T S D and I'd become a junkie. Felt like I had a disco ball behind my eyes, but every time the drugs ran out and the disco stopped, I was just a broken bird limping towards his next fix. I was high through most of the seventies. But even after I got clean in the eighties, every time I got a job or tried to stay in one place, well, let's just say it didn't take. Home, family, possessions all seemed pointless to me. I was a killer with no one to kill. Except myself. So, I started drinking. That got me through the nineties. Finally did AA and sobered up physically, but I was still drunk with guilt and shame for all the lives I'd taken. All the horrors I'd witnessed. So, I started living on the streets. Homeless. Invisible. Killing time until time kills me. I've been on the streets ever since. Except at night. Thank God for Central Park. S'peaceful there. I don't relive the bombs and screams so much. And I've got friends in the park. Other veterans from different wars, but with the same story. Too broken inside and out to have normal lives. There are quite a few of us old soldiers who live in the park. The legion of the lost, I call us.

CHARLIE

I wish I could do more for you Modesto. Take some of the suffering from you somehow.

MODESTO

Can you turn back time? Make me a wide eyed eighteen-year-old again? Tell me to run off to Canada and never look back? No? Then just write about me. Tell my story. Hey, I always wanted my fifteen minutes of fame.

CHARLIE

Okay. Modesto, do you know someone named Homeless Joe?

MODESTO

Sure. He hangs out up Broadway a ways. Has this friendly dog with him. I see them swimming in the Central Park Lake once in a while.

What do you want with him?

CHARLIE

I hear he'll break my heart. But I think you've already done that.

MODESTO

Yeah, I never had much of a life this go round. But Joe? Charlie,
he's
lost more than I could ever even imagine having.

CHARLIE

How do you mean?

MODESTO

Ask Joe. He loves to talk. He'll tell you everything you want to know. Maybe even more than you want to know.

CHARLIE

Thanks Modesto. For the story and your service. Best wishes to you.

MODESTO

Bye Charlie. I'll see ya when I see ya.

Lights go out on Modesto. Charlie addresses the audience.

CHARLIE

As I walked away from Modesto I thought to myself that his story was the most tragic I'd heard so far. Modesto was not born to kill. He didn't even choose to kill. He was thrown into a hellish situation where it was kill or be killed by heartless old men in designer suits who made their living off young men dying. What kind of world do we live in that sends our sons and, nowadays, daughters to foreign shores to fight and die? And die for what? Our country? Freedom? A buck? And when they return, treat them as though they never existed? But people like Modesto do exist. Barely. And Joe's story was somehow worse? I started walking uptown again, images of war filling my mind, and barely went one block when I saw a young woman wearing a torn tee shirt standing beneath a streetlamp with her hand out. She wore a hospital bracelet on her outstretched

wrist, hospital pajama bottoms and a pair of flimsy hospital slipper socks on her feet. I walked up to her a little cautiously.

Lights come up on SOUL

SOUL

Can you please help me? I've lost my mind. Can you help me find it?

CHARLIE

What's your name?

SOUL

Soul. Call me Soul. They took my mind from me, but they couldn't take my soul.

CHARLIE

Soul. What a great name. I'm Charlie. Who took your mind Soul?

SOUL

On the island. The ravens. Odin's eyes.

CHARLIE

Odin's eyes? Who's Odin?

SOUL

Odin. The king of the gods who run the world. If you act too free, he sends his ravens, and they kidnap you and imprison you.

CHARLIE

Ravens? I don't understand Soul. Who are these ravens? What do they want from you?

SOUL

My soul. They want my soul because it's free. If you say what you think and do what you want, they know they can't control you, so they take away your freedom and sentence you to life on the island, where the ravens watch your every move in the halls that lead to nowhere, and if you act too happy or too sad they make you

take things that erase you and steal your thoughts and memories and hopes and dreams. Then the ravens eat them, and you forget who you are, and you never leave because you forget where and who you used to be before the ravens got you.

CHARLIE

Where is this island, Soul? Do you know what they call the island?

SOUL

The Ward. All's lost there. All the lost there. The windows don't open. The doors stay shut. Your brain goes bad like cream cheese in the sun. Your mind melts into the cracked linoleum and the ravens watch as you disintegrate. The ravens laugh at your misery with their heartless eyes.

CHARLIE

Ward. Ward's Island? Were you on Ward's Island?

SOUL

Where the ravens live.

CHARLIE

Were you in Manhattan Psychiatric Center?

SOUL

M P C, yes. My psychic cage.

CHARLIE

How long were you there Soul?

SOUL

Forever. I can't remember anywhere else. But I knew the world was ending and I wanted to see it before it was gone, so when the ravens were busy stealing

someone else's mind, I ran. And ran and ran and I know they're looking for me,
the ravens, but I need to warn everyone that the end is near.

CHARLIE

So you ran away.

SOUL

I didn't want to die there when the end comes.

CHARLIE

The end of what Soul?

SOUL

The world. The end of cruelty and laughter. Abandonment and togetherness.
Apathy and empathy. I wrote about it.

CHARLIE

A poem?

SOUL

A prophecy. The ravens don't want anyone to hear it 'cause if no one knows the
end is coming it'll just come, and no one will stop it and all will be lost. And the
ravens live off the lost.

CHARLIE

Oh my. Can I hear it?

SOUL

I call it **EARTH ON FIRE**. It goes like this...

all my memories have gone sour
snakes and ravens in my ear
I'm traveling a thousand miles an hour
but not getting anywhere

I keep dreaming of disaster
that sounds fun, but what comes after

angels free falling from the sky
I like that, don't ask me why

lithium rainbows in my brain
all my thoughtgrams smell the same
my generation's all screwed up
please put a dollar in my cup

this is the end my friends
we'll all be swimming soon
to the receding shoreline
riding a nuclear typhoon

the honeymoon is over
time for the cosmic bus
straight to the moon Alice
no growing old for us

broken dreams of green are endless
politics of dreams are friendless
greed's our credo, waste it all
oil us up and watch us fall

we're traveling on a one-way journey
to the techno demons, we impart
addictions to electronic passions
building firewalls around our hearts

if music is the food of life
technology is the breath of death
will our children still be playing
Nintendo and X box with their last breath

we share, we care, yet go on smoking
we're all such great pretenders
end of times we are evoking
to the Kardashians we've surrendered

there's no future in our eyes
Prozac and ham for breakfasts
red tide oceans, ashen skies
having hope today is reckless

CHARLIE

Soul. That's amazing.

SOUL

The ravens don't want me to tell anyone. They say I'm making things up. But it's all ending. We're all melting. Melting.

CHARLIE

Soul, I'd like to try and get you some help.

SOUL

Too late. It's too late. For me.

CHARLIE

At least, here, take my sweatshirt.

Charlie gives Soul her sweatshirt.

SOUL

Thank you. I have to go now. The ravens are watching.

Soul hurries off stage Charlie addresses the audience.

CHARLIE

As I watched Soul hurry away, I felt regret that I hadn't insisted I call somebody. But who would I call? The police? They'd just take her back to the hospital where she didn't want to be. And then what? Would I check up on her? Would I even think about her? Probably not, I thought to myself. As sadness washed over me, I walked further up Broadway hoping I'd see this Joe guy and his friendly dog, when I saw a young girl sitting cross legged on the sidewalk next to a shopping cart overflowing with garbage bags full of what looked like junk. She had a cardboard sign which read, **nobody needs help**

*Light comes up on a young girl dressed in rags. A shopping cart stuffed with garbage bags full of empty deposit bottles is beside her. She has a sign which reads **nobody needs help***

CHARLIE

Everybody needs help.

NOBODY

Everybody has help. Nobody needs it.

CHARLIE

Then why does your sign say nobody needs help?

NOBODY

I'm nobody.

CHARLIE

Oh. But you're not nobody. Everyone's somebody.

NOBODY

You don't know me. Nobody does.

CHARLIE

My name is Charlie. What's your name?

NOBODY

I'm nobody. Nobody used to be somebody. Had friends, family, a home, a job, hopes, dreams. Had lots of dreams once. But I lost myself. The world was hungry for somebody, so it ate somebody up and spit me out. Now, nobody knows me. Nobody remembers me. Nobody holds me. Nobody cares if I live or die. Nobody has a place for me. Nobody wants me around. Nobody loves me. Nobody tells me what to do, where to go and how to be. Nobody still has dreams, but the dreams are dark and silent now. Nobody has a story to tell. But Nobody talks to me, and Nobody listens. Nobody's story matters. Nobody's story is for everyone. And if Nobody's story is ever over?

Nobody will ever know.

CHARLIE

I'm listening to you. I don't see or hear nobody.

NOBODY

Exactly.

CHARLIE

No. I mean, I hear you and see you and you are somebody.

NOBODY

I'm nobody. Nobody needs anybody.

CHARLIE

Everybody needs somebody.

NOBODY

Nobody needs nobody. Nobody needs a measly dollar.

CHARLIE

Here. *Charlie gives Nobody a dollar.*

NOBODY

Nobody says thank you. Please go away now. Nobody wants to be alone.

Lights go out on Nobody. Charlie addresses audience.

CHARLIE

“What just happened?”, I thought to myself. But I knew the answer. That young girl, that sad, lost young soul was the true, tragic face of homelessness. Nobody sees her. Nobody wants her. Nobody cares. And her face could be mine. I mean, except for a tiny room I rent by the week at the shabby Times Square Hotel, and a job I could be laid off from...except for that, there but

for the grace of God go I. I have no family, no friends. I'm living from paycheck to paycheck, on the edge of being homeless myself in a heartbeat. And no one would want me, and no one would care. A chill went down my spine as I imagined myself dressed in rags, sitting forlornly on some sidewalk with a sign that declared, "I USED TO BE YOU!!!". More than a crime against humanity, homelessness, I decided, is a sin. And society is the sinner. And as I walk on I see a man with a sign that says, "I'm in Hell. How are you?"

{Q's sign says: "I'm in Hell. How are you?"}

CHARLIE

"Hello there. That's quite a sign. Are you okay?"

Q

"Hello there yourself kind lady
Welcome to my personal Hades
Seems I've lost the human race
My humanity's been erased
I have no hope left to embrace
No dreams left to chase
In most eyes I'm just a damn disgrace
But I see compassion in you're face"

CHARLIE

My name is Charlie. I'd like to hear more mister?"

Q

"Call me Q cause asking questions is my fame
Uncovering how society is to blame
For all our secret, hidden shame
For all the misery people bear
I'll lay it on you if you dare"

CHARLIE

"So you're a poet?"

Q

"Nah, I'm a rapper not no flapper
with warning chimes for desperate times
folks be dying loveless in the streets"

no place called home, just scraps to eat
'Cause greed holds this city in it's sway
till most of us have lost our way
So I expose the liars, whose hearts are ruthless
I am the dark knight of the inconvenient truthless"

CHARLIE

"So, you're a teacher kind of."

Q

"I'm like no silly quiz you took in school
where all they teach is to be fools
I've learned to read between the lines
so that when you listen to my rhymes
you'll find my wisdom is sublime"

CHARLIE

"I'd like to hear your truth Q"

Q

"For some cheddar little miss
I'll tell you exactly how it is"

{Q delivers his original Rap: One Word Counts}

One word counts for something
You read the book
But when the ground shook
I didn't turn and run
Gun by waist side
Looking for the devil
I didn't hide
but even if a shot won't do it
I know the truth and whats due to it
Forgiveness is pass due
So, I ask you
What does a sinner have that
No one else does
We all made of sweat and blood cousin
If He listened to the words that I said

I would ask for the entire universe
Now that's the beginning of the first
So I just lay back listen to my rap
And accept what I got

CHARLIE

Q, that was so great I...

Q

I'm not finished.
{Q delivers another original Rap;}

Don't erase the lines/ to combine/ to do things to others
The shai'een is not my brother/ so we sew seeds to make it
Live or die/ love or hated
I'm underrated/ spitting words truly naked
From overheard conversations my money not long enough/ but their mistaken
I don't do drugs or have to boost that
I retired the knapsack
So you lack
Good things to say/ as I overlay/ this track
My words is God son
Born from a path you gasp at/
I laugh at/ your fake ass situation/
Your just hatin'/ while I keep creatin'

CHARLIE

Wow. That was great Q! It was, it was...

Q

It was real. I've lived it, Charlie.

CHARLIE

That didn't rhyme.

Q

I'm not a clown here just to amuse you.

CHARLIE

I don't think you're a clown Q. I think you're an eloquent, passionate, beautiful human being.

Q

Remember that.

{Q tips his hat and exits}

{CHARLIE ADRESSES AUDIENCE}

I stood there on the corner for a bit lost in thought because a few of the phrases from Q's raps had really struck me. "You just hating while I keep creating." "What does a sinner have that no one else doesn't?" And "I'm underrated" The words kept running through my mind and all three phrases, I decided, meant one thing to me.

Q had courage. The courage to voice his original raps, poetic and heartfelt, to a complete stranger. The courage to compose poetic imagery based on his own harsh sounding life. And most brave and inspiring of all, the courage to keep speaking from his soul in a city where souls were too often ignored and neglected.

And Q deserved a bigger stage than a lonely street corner on Broadway.

I walked on hoping he would find one.

And then... Deep in thought, I almost bump into a tall thin man wearing a rainbow-colored vest and a wizard hat. At his feet is a sign which says, **YOUR FUTURE FOR SOME CHANGE.**

Light comes up on THE GREAT BANZINI.

GREAT BANZINI

Good day to you miss! How fare you this great day?

CHARLIE

So far so good thanks. How are you sir?

GREAT BANZINI

Still alive and therefore glorious. I am the Great Banzini! And you are?

CHARLIE

I'm Charlie.

GREAT BANZINI

Char Lee! A magnificent name. Tell me Char Lee, are you an only child?

CHARLIE

Me? Um, yeah.

GREAT BANZINI

I thought as much. Your aura suggests you spend a lot of time alone. Moody blue, don't you know.

CHARLIE

My aura?

GREAT BANZINI

Your aura, yes. Signature of the soul. Light of the spirit. The true face of the self. Your aura tells me everything I need to know about your past, present, and what the future may hold.

CHARLIE

And you see my aura?

GREAT BANZINI

My dear Char Lee, I am the seventh son of a seventh son. I am a seer, a poet, and a pirate of fate. I reveal people's pasts and chart their potential destinies. And yes, I see your aura. Blue with a hint of red and some orange striping. Most beautiful.

CHARLIE

Blue, red and orange huh? Is that good or not good?

GREAT BANZINI

Neither. The blue tells me you've lived through some ordeals. Heavy stuff. You still carry some of it with you. The red says you have deep passions and a soft heart. And the orange means you have great compassion for everyone. Except yourself.

CHARLIE

Wow. That's actually pretty accurate.

GREAT BANZINI

Your aura never lies Char Lee.

CHARLIE

What else do you see? In my aura?

GREAT BANZINI

you're on a daring journey my dear Char Lee
you are a seeker of truth and light
searching for something, for someone
you drift alone
to islands of loneliness, longing, regret
searching for the faintest glimmer of humanity and hope
seeking a joyful dreamer
in an ocean of sorrow
I see you buffeted by waves of sadness
so much sadness
a lost soul amid lost souls
yet full of untapped wellsprings of joy and hope
longing for love, companionship, belonging

your many questions will yield unexpected answers

courage

heartbreak

epiphany

until you discover the dreamer

and free the dreamer in you

CHARLIE

That was beautiful. Strange, but lovely. I am searching for someone. Can you tell me, what happens when I find them?

GREAT BANZINI

Ah, the future. My dear Char Lee, my observations of your past and present are free as the breeze. But to disclose your future, I humbly request a small donation.

CHARLIE

How about my last two bucks?

Charlie offers Banzini two dollars, which he takes with a smile

GREAT BANZINI

Your future, Char Lee, ... is what you make of it.

CHARLIE

That's all?

GREAT BANZINI

That's everything. Adieu good Char Lee. The future is yours. Make it glorious!

Banzini sees another patron off stage.

GREAT BANZINI

Good day to you sir! How fare you this great day?

Banzini exits the stage.

CHARLIE

I stood there for a long moment, wondering how the Great Banzini read me so easily and so scarily. On the next block up, I noticed a man and a dog sitting on a blanket in the shade of a movie marquee. The blanket was covered in dog toys. Homeless Joe. The man I'd been looking to meet. What was his story, I wondered to myself. Without a penny in my pocket and curiosity in my heart, I sailed up Broadway, expecting the best and preparing myself for the worst. I also hoped this Joe person and his dog were as friendly as Pink Floyd said they would be.

*Light comes up on a man in his forties casually dressed sitting on a milk crate with a pit bull by his side. A bunch of well chewed dog toys are strewn about them. A bag of high-end dog food and a knapsack lay beside the man. A cardboard sign bears the message **Let's All Have A Great Day!** Charlie walks up to the man, and he notices her.*

{Charlie sees Joe, addresses the audience, Joe begins to play his harmonica and sings Memories by the One Voice Children's Choir}

“There's a time that I remember
When I never knew no pain
} When I believed in Forever
And everything would stay the same
Now my heart feel like December
When somebody calls your name
And I can't reach out to call you
But I know I will one day
HEY!”}

CHARLIE

I love that song. You sang it really well.

JOE

Thank you thank you, just throw money.

CHARLIE

Are you Joe? I've been looking for him, you, if your you, I mean Joe. Are you?

JOE

Depends. If you're from the IRS, Joe moved to Alaska to see the glaciers before their gone. But if you're from Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes and he's won the Grand Prize... I'm back.

Or, o my god. Are you? Are you my daughter.

CHARLIE

What, no!

JOE

Well, who are you then, I'm all goosebumps with anticipation.

CHARLIE

My name's Charlie and I'm writing a story about people who are homeless for a small community newspaper. Would it be okay if I talk to you for a bit?

JOE

Sure, okay. But I'm not homeless. The road is my home, and I am an urban camper.

CHARLIE

Well, I'd still like to hear your story if you don't mind.

JOE

No problem. Tell you what though. I love a good story, so I'll tell you mine, if you tell me yours. Deal?

CHARLIE

Fair enough.

JOE

Groovy. I'm as you already know am Joe. That there is Mush. So, Charlie, what do you want to know?

CHARLIE

First of all is Mush friendly?

JOE

Put out your hand and find out. Just kidding. She's as friendly as they come. Just a big Mush, hence the name. Go ahead and pet her. She lives for it.

Charlie pets Mush

CHARLIE

What are those scars on her back from?

JOE

I think her previous owner must have abused her. I found her tied to a tree in Central Park on a freezing winter evening. Her paws were frozen to the ground, and she was half dead when I came across her. Took a few weeks and some doing, but she's fine and dandy now.

CHARLIE

She looks happy. Happy eyes. But where do you guys sleep?

JOE

A grassy hill in Central Park by the lake. Convenient, scenic and more comfortable than you might think.

CHARLIE

What about in the winter?

JOE

We hop a freight car and relocate. Florida baby. Warm sandy beaches. Sea breezes. Can't beat it. I used to live there.

CHARLIE

Florida huh? You have family there?

JOE

Used to. Mom, dad and two sisters. All wonderful, loving folks.

CHARLIE

Nice. Did they move somewhere else?

JOE

They all died in a fire when I was thirteen. Was sleeping over at a friend's. The whole house went up. Everyone I loved. Everyone who loved me. Gone without a trace. Like they never existed.

CHARLIE

Oh my god. I'm so sorry.

JOE

Yeah. We were a very loving family. Did everything together. Trips, picnics, birthdays, baseball games. I played first base in Little League and my parents and sister came to all my games. Jeez, that was thirty years ago. Messed me up pretty bad for a long time. I mean, my life hadn't really even begun yet, and suddenly it was over. At least, I thought it was. But life hadn't done with me yet. You have any family, Charlie?

CHARLIE

Me? Oh, no. My parents passed a long time ago. We weren't close though. Never were really. Not like you and your family. I'm so sorry.

JOE

It was a lifetime ago. I cherish their memories. What else you want to know?

CHARLIE

What brought you to New York?

JOE

The pizza. Kidding. I came to New York to get some distance between me and my sorrows, know what I mean?

CHARLIE

Yeah, I get it. And what happened once you got to New York?

JOE

Started over. Wasn't easy let me tell you. Got a job at this place called Save The Planet. Lobbying for clean energy. Solar, wind, electric, stuff like that. Seemed like meaningful work, and it turned out to be just that. Felt like I had a reason to live. Made some friends, yeah. But I thought for sure I'd never feel loved again. I was so wrong. Met this amazing, vibrant, beautiful woman there. Amy. I was staying at this shabby Men's Shelter and had no money to buy lunch, right? This woman, this, this angel walks right up to me and offers me her Tuna salad sandwich. Kind words, that smile in her eyes. I fell for her in a heartbeat. Charlie, fifteen years after I lost my family, I was still a ball of pain and sadness. But Amy, she shined a soft, bright light into my cold, dark heart. The kind words. Burned all the pain away. Made me glad to be alive again. Like it was meant to be. Anyway, we got to talking and that lead to a date. Couple of dates. Three months later we got married in Central Park down by the boat lake, under a willow tree right at sunset. Magical. Had ourselves a boy. Jeremy. Handsome, bright, so bright. Full of joy just like his mom.

CHARLIE

Nice. I'm jealous. How'd you wind up as an urban camper?

JOE

Amy and Jeremy. They died a year ago this past December. Drunk driver on Riverside Drive. I was at work when I got the call. I swear Charlie, my heart stopped. Couldn't breathe. The room spun. Woke up in a hospital ER a few hours later to the sight of my boss's face. Mildred. Very tough very kind Nigerian woman. Tears were streaming down her face as she came to me and hugged me. I hugged her back, tears streaming down my face. And we stayed like that, hugging each other for what seemed like forever. Eventually, I pushed away from her and ran out onto the street. I kept running. Didn't know where to go, what to do. It was all happening again. The only people in the world I loved. The only people who loved me. Gone. I wound up in Central Park near the lake where we were married. I started screaming. "How could you take them? Why didn't you take me? Why them? Why not me? How could you leave me alone?" But no one answered. I was all alone. Again.

CHARLIE turns and speaks to the audience.

CHARLIE

I was speechless. My body went numb, and I felt a chill go up my spine. Joe was breaking my heart, just Like Pink told me he would. I mean, Joe was telling me he'd lost everyone he ever loved his entire family. Twice. It was unthinkable. I mean, all the people whom I'd met on

the street had lost so much. Pink was abandoned at birth and lost his childhood. Blind Sally lost her sight and her dreams. Soul lost her freedom and her mind. Modesto lost part of his mind and his heart.

But Joe? He'd lost everyone and everything. Twice. I just sat there staring at Joe and, after a momentous silence, he spoke again.

JOE

So, there I was, screaming at God in Central Park. The park was covered with a blanket of snow, there was no one around and the air had that eerie winter quiet about it. I was about to jump into the icy lake when I heard something. Whimpering. I looked around and saw this poor dog tied to a tree a few yards away from me. Mush. I stared at her for a minute cause, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. She was shaking and whimpering. Someone had abandoned her, left her to die in the freezing cold and there was no one there to save her. But me. I turned back to the lake, but I kept looking over my shoulder at her. And the more I looked at her, the more she whimpered....and then, Charlie, I swear she looked me right in the eyes as if to say, "please help me." And I looked at the lake, looked at her, and then I looked up and yelled, "Hey! Hey! Are you kidding me? An innocent little dog? What's wrong with you? I've had it with you. You hear me? You want that poor little dog? Well, you can't have her. You took everyone I've ever loved from me. I'm taking the little dog from you. And then? You and I? We are done."

So, I trudged through the snow to her, Mush, untied her, picked her up, carried her out of the park and flagged down a police cruiser that happened to be sailing on by, and we all went to the twenty-four-hour Animal Hospital on East sixty second street. Took a few weeks and some doing, and I almost lost her a couple of times, but she lived. I saved Mush's life. And she saved mine. I mean, I was still in agony, but I couldn't just abandon her. I just couldn't. She gave me love when I needed it most. A reason to keep living, even though I really didn't want to. That was the first miracle.

CHARLIE

What was miracle number two?

JOE

Cancer.

CHARLIE

Cancer? What, you beat it or something?

JOE

Nope. I've got it. Cancer. Through my whole body. Docs give me three months tops.

CHARLIE

I don't understand. Where's the miracle?

JOE

Look Charlie, I prayed to God to let me die, and guess what? He answered. Cancer. No more sleepless nights. No more regrets, no loneliness, no despair... the list goes on and on.

CHARLIE

You're going to die? After everything you've been through? And you're glad about it? That's crazy Joe.

JOE

Look Charlie. The world can make you crazy. Sometimes you have to embrace the crazy in order to stay sane. I asked God to let me die right? And bingo! I'm dying. So, God exists, so heaven must exist and my whole family, everyone I've ever loved, is waiting for me. I'm going home Charlie. I'm going home. And I'm good with that.

CHARLIE

Jesus Joe. Don't you think you should talk to somebody about this?

JOE

I'm talking to you Charlie. Anyway, it's your turn.

CHARLIE

My turn. My turn for what?

JOE

I told you some of my story, so now you have to tell me some of yours.

CHARLIE

You just told me you're dying. What am I supposed to say to that?

JOE

Hey, a deal's a deal kiddo. Pull up that extra crate and tell me about you, Charlie.

CHARLIE addresses audience

CHARLIE

What could I say? Joe just told me he was on his way to heaven. Should I have told him he sounded crazy and needed help? What help? Someone to somehow convince Joe he wasn't guaranteed that he was going to heaven? Someone to invalidate his dream and bring him crashing down to reality?

I decided to sit on the dusty Sponge Bob blanket with Mush's head in my lap and told Joe my story.

CHARLIE speaks to JOE.

CHARLIE

I was born in Brooklyn. My father wanted a boy, so he named me Charlie. Dad was a proud Irish ex-marine; my mother was a failed Peruvian nightclub singer. Dad was a raging alcoholic, mom was manic depressive, and they fought like cats and dogs. I was scared a lot of the time growing up. I hid out in sci fi novels and Star Wars movies. I dreamed I was the first female star ship captain, sailing the galaxies and righting wrongs. I wrote down notebooks full of dreamed up stories. Action, romance, adventure. I was better at fantasy than I was at reality.

My dad couldn't keep a job, so we'd owe rent and move all the time. I lived in 13 different apartments before I was nine. At age twelve I started doing odd jobs to stay out of the house. Babysitting, shopping for seniors, whatever. Couldn't bring a friend home what with my parents fighting all the time, and I had few friends anyway. I had to sneak around to date boys and lie that I was out with the girls. I felt like a bottle adrift on the ocean with a message inside of me that said, "Help! Somebody please get me to safety!" My dad died of kidney disease when I was twenty-two and my mom soon after. She swallowed five bottles of pills and left a note which said, "No love." But I loved her. It just wasn't enough. I sort of lost my mind then and spent the next few years rambling around aimlessly. I moved from place to place, from job to job.

Bartender, waiter, line cook, I took whatever job came my way. I was a loner.

most of the time. There were some men, but I never fell in love. I finally got a job as a copy editor for this small Manhattan Newspaper. But I want to write something. Something important. Homelessness is that story. I'm sure of it. That's my story.

JOE

Nah.

CHARLIE

Nah? What do you mean nah? Nah what?

JOE

Nah, that's not your story. Not all of it anyway. There's a whole lot more to both of us.

CHARLIE

More? Like what? I had a crappy life so far and I'm out on the street looking for I don't know what. Absolution? Salvation? You just told me you've suffered pain no human being should endure, and on top of that, you are glad you're dying. What more is there to tell?

JOE

Plenty. Listen. I love sixties rock and roll, especially the Stones. *{Charlie sings a few lines of a Rolling Stones song, playing air guitar}* My wife, Amy, loved the Beatles. Their early stuff. We danced to sixties rock all the time around our house, passing Jeremy between us as we all laughed and sang. It was magical. I've read a ton of history books. Fell in love with the Vikings and Norse mythology. Especially Thor, the God of thunder. Imagine, Charlie, being able to summon a storm. I've only been out of the country once, when during my college years I took a trip to Scotland. Man, the castles, the moors, the green rolling hills. So surreal, so beautiful. I used to smoke Newports baby. I was too cool. But I quit cold turkey when I met Amy. I like deviled eggs, steak burritos and banana splits with hot fudge topping. Oh, once when I was twelve, I hit an inside the park home run in Little league baseball. When I slid into home I broke my arm, but I scored, and the crowd went wild. My favorite colors are sunset orange and Cancun Sea blue. And, oh! I met, true story, Johnny Depp once in a dive bar in New Orleans. We talked for hours about swordfish, five card stud, lost love and old bourbon. And Charlie? I loved my mom and dad, sisters, wife and son more than I've ever loved my own life. And now? Knowing I'm going to be seeing them again soon? Charlie, I'm more at peace than I've ever been.

CHARLIE

Okay. Okay Joe. Sounds like you've made up your mind Joe.

JOE

That I have Charlie. Now, come on, let me hear it. What do you want out of life? What do you care about? What do you love?

CHARLIE

Well. I love Hip Hop. The beats, the breaks, the vibes. It's...ecstatic. I love scarfing down a half pound bacon cheeseburger and a mountain of sweet potato fries with a giant-sized chocolate milkshake to wash it all down. I love Tarot cards. The significance of each card, the fantastic, evocative artwork. The magician, the fool, and of course, my favorite card, the lovers. Unity. Separation. Crossroads. What paths are before me and which ones do I take. So far, my path has

been sort of aimless. I root for both New York baseball teams, the Mets and The Yankees. Go New York. I love museums, especially the Modern Art 'cause its got Vincent Van Gogh's Starry Night. Such genius. Such passion. Such pain. Heart breakingly beautiful, like life often is. I love Hawks.

So confident. So majestic in flight. I saw one by the Brooklyn Bridge once. I wished I could fly away with him to someplace wild. Less crowded, less noisy. Someplace I could just be. I love the outdoors, especially the mountains and streams. My parents took me to Yellowstone Park once when I was just a kid. They didn't fight so much there, like we were in a sacred place. The lakes, the pine trees, the sky at night bursting with stars and possibilities. It was all so peaceful. It was the closest I've ever felt to God and heaven. I cried when we left. I want someone. Someone to hold. To be held by. To love and be loved by. To share what there is of this life with. My idea of a perfect evening would be sitting on a porch swing sipping mint flavored iced tea while watching an orange flavored sunset melt into the tree line. With someone I love. Just sipping and sitting with someone I love. That's my dream.

JOE

Now you're talking Charlie. And I bet that's just the tip of the iceberg of all your dreams and notions. Heck Charlie, I haven't told you about my dream to build a theme park based on , wait for it, . . sea life! Blue whale flume ride, tropical fish carousel and sea turtle shaped ice cream pie stand. Got the whole thing laid out in this notebook.

CHARLIE

Sounds wonderful. But what about Mush Joe? What happens to her when you, you know, go?

JOE

Oh, there's this rich lady who owns a big old upper west side apartment who comes by here all the time to visit us. She brings Mush toys and treats all the time. And she always says the same thing, "Joe, if anything ever happens to you, and it probably will, I'll give Mush a much better home than she's ever had!" Real classy lady. I'll let her know when it gets to be time to say goodbye.

CHARLIE

Mush will be heartbroken.

JOE

Oh, I'll see Mush again. On the other side. And hey, my wife and son always wanted to have a dog.

CHARLIE

One big happy family.

JOE

That's right Charlie. One big happy family. Now you're getting it. Family. Friends. The love you share with them. When it comes right down to it, what else is there? I like you, Charlie. Now, about my theme park. I hate to let the dream go to waste. So, I'm thinkin', I'd like you to have it.

CHARLIE

Me? Oh Joe, I couldn't...

JOE

Sure, you could. Look, I die, the dream dies with me. At least this way, if you take it, I'll know the dream was still alive. Please, please, please.

CHARLIE

Okay Joe. No one ever gave me their dream before.

JOE

Well, it's about damn time. Everyone should have a dream they carry around. We only get one shot at life on this Earth Charlie. One ticket to the cosmic dance. Everyone's invited. Everybody came to dance. But not everybody dances. So dance Charlie. Find somebody and dance while you've still got the chance.

CHARLIE

Blind Sally. She said almost those exact words to me.

JOE

Wise woman.

CHARLIE

Joe. If you could go back and change your life, would you?

JOE

Well Charlie, as a great philosopher once said,
“I could have missed the pain
But I’d have had to miss the dance.”

CHARLIE

Great quote. Blake?

Joe

Brooks. Garth. Brooks.

Charlie

I love Garth. I just wish I could do more for you Joe.

JOE

Charlie, you gave me kind words and a smile. That’s everything.

Hey, did I mention the Fun house made to look like a coral reef? Or the sea shell shaped snack bar? Let me tell you about the Great White Shark roller coaster.

JOE freezes and CHARLIE addresses the audience.

Joe and I talked for a while more, mostly about our dreams, until the pink sunset set on the Lincoln

Center skyline. Eventually, I thanked Joe, wished him and Mush the best, and just drifted away. That

was the last time I ever saw them.

LIGHT GOES OUT ON JOE

CHARLIE

As I sailed slowly back down Broadway I felt a wave of emotions. Angry that Joe was dying. Glad he didn’t seem to be suffering. Sad about all the folks who were homeless that I’d spoken with and the stories they’d told me. All of them alone and adrift in the city sea of seven million souls. I had a sudden sharp realization, not just about people who are homeless but about myself as well. Pink was right. All we really have in this crazy world is each other. And yet luckily,

once you realize that, each other is all we really need. And like Blind Sally had told me, we need to dance. But not alone.

A LIGHT COMES UP ON BLIND SALLY SITTING ON HER USUAL SPOT AND CHARLIE WALKS OVER TO HER

CHARLIE

Blind Sally? Hi, it's Charlie again. From before.

BLIND SALLY

Hello Charlie. You find Joe?

CHARLIE

Yeah, I found him alright.

BLIND SALLY

Good. Did he break your heart child?

CHARLIE

Yeah. He broke it open.

BLIND SALLY

Did he now? Very good. Hell of a tale, eh?

CHARLIE

It sure was. Blind sally...

BLIND SALLY

You can call me Sally Charlie.

CHARLIE

Okay. Sally. Can I ask you a personal question?

BLIND SALLY

Sure Charlie. Feel free.

CHARLIE

Sally, I know we barely know each other and all, and I have two left feet, but I was wondering... would you care to dance?

BLIND SALLY

Why Charlie. I thought you'd never ask. *{SALLY CALLS OUT TO THE MUSICIAN}*

BLIND SALLY

Hit it Kenny!

*CHARLIE HELPS BLIND SALLY TO HER FEET AND MUSIC PLAYS AS THE PAIR DANCE
AND THE LIGHTS FADE OUT*

THE END?

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *There's a saying. Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning how to dance in the rain.*

Having been hospitalized for mental illness over a dozen times in my crazy life, I've done my share of dancing. Thankfully, my life is pretty damn good today.

My play, The Very Last Dance of Homeless Joe, is the episodic story of a young woman who wants to write something important, something meaningful, and decides to write about people who are homeless. She meets folks who make her laugh, cry, open her eyes and ultimately change her life for the better. The play is the product of my passion for telling stories which not only entertain, but also open people's hearts and minds to the tragedies and triumphs of other people's lives. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did writing it. Be well please. Rich Courage

AUTHOR BIO: There's a saying. Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning how to dance in the rain.

Having been hospitalized for mental illness over a dozen times in my crazy life, I've done my share of dancing. Thankfully, my life is pretty darn tootin' good today.

I'm a born and bred 62-year-old Mannhatanite. But since the city's opened up again I feel like 21, plus shipping and handling. I worked at a kiosk in Times Square serving up coffee, conversation and resources to folks who are homeless, till I was laid off on Feb/10th/2022. My 62nd birthday. I was a bit too comedic and free spirited for my bosses. I love 'em anyway. Now I sell my tarot themed artworks on the sidewalks of Hell's Kitchen, and it has done pretty darn well. I live in Washington Heights, otherwise known as Manhattan's Little Dominican Republic. I recently made my stand up debut at the Broadway Comedy Club and they've asked me back. Twice. I love me my bacon cheddar burgers but, alas, they don't love me back. My beagle Snoopy passed away in 2019 and I still cry every so often when I look at pics of his smiling face. I've quit smoking many times. I go from thin to overweight, every day it fluctuates (That's an Ed Sheeran line.) My favorite painting is Starry Night.

My play, The Very Last Dance of Homeless Joe, was performed at the New York Theater Winterfest 2021. Then the play had its very well received world premiere Dec/1/2022 through Dec/18/2022 at Theater for the New City in Manhattan. I played Joe, the main character in the play because, well, except for a little poetic license here and there, he's mostly me. I love making people laugh, cry, and just feel completely, wonderfully alive. And there's a lot more to me.