

RALPH'S WORLD
One Act
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by Eric Rice

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WHEN: Now.

WHERE: Alberta, Canada.

WHO: Ralph: A homeless person in his 60s, recently returned from living on the street to stay with his son.
Henry: His son. A city worker, sometime artist and quiet rebel.
Martha: A civil servant who's been trying to help people a long time.

THE SCENES:

Scene One: Henry's apartment.

Scene Two: A city park.

Scene Three: Henry's apartment.

Scene Four: A city park.

SCENE ONE
THERE'S NOTHING LIKE A HOME-COOKED MEAL

SETTING: *HENRY'S one-room apartment. A plain table with benches, a couch that might double for a bed. One door leads off the bathroom. Against the back wall behind the couch are leaning a number of large colourful abstracts on cheap wooden frames. Beside them in the corner is stacked an easel, some rolled up canvas, and a small cupboard that holds paints.*

AT RISE: *RALPH, a thin man with grey hair and grey jutting bristles on his chin wheels around the table in his wheelchair. In the background we can hear the shower running, and splashing sounds coming from the bathroom. RALPH is putting the final touches on a table setting. The sound of water in the bathroom stops, and we can hear a shower curtain pulled back. RALPH has finished setting the table and looks at it with obvious uncertainty. He moves the fork on one plate from one side to the other. Then he smacks the arms of his chair and wheels quickly over to the couch and retrieves from behind it an empty metal can stripped of its label. Desperately, he looks around, then hops out of his wheelchair, fishes some sad looking plants out from underneath the couch, places them in the can, and puts it in the centre of the table.*

HENRY comes out of the bathroom. In his late thirties, tending toward heaviness, he wears thick glasses and has a faded housecoat wrapped around him. He stops when he sees the table arrangement.

HENRY: Hey dad, this looks really great.

RALPH: I told 'ya. I can show you how to live like a king on nothing.

HENRY takes off his glasses and cleans them on his robe. He looks at the table again, and smiles.

HENRY: Maybe a king in exile dad. I don't think kings in their courts would have tables quite this plain.

RALPH: Well, what do kings know? Living off the backs of others. A man is only a man if he can look after his own needs, that's what I say.

HENRY: Well said.

RALPH: Have a seat, have a seat.

HENRY: *(sitting)* I really appreciate this dad. It's great to come back from work to a real meal.

RALPH: Least I could do. You wouldn't have to be working so hard if it wasn't for me.

RALPH wheels around to the small stove, takes one pan off and puts it on the table.

RALPH: Help yourself.

HENRY reaches into the pan with a fork and stabs a sausage. He looks at it dubiously as it hits the plate with a thunk.

HENRY: Sausage ala king.

RALPH: No need to make fun of me.

HENRY: I'm not. I'm just getting into the spirit of it. Eating my own meal at my own table with my father by my side. It can't get much better than this.

RALPH: Damn rights. You don't know how good you've got it.

RALPH takes the second pan and puts it on the table. Then he goes to the microwave and hits the controls. It hums to life.

RALPH: Go ahead, don't wait for me. I'm just getting the sauce.

HENRY: *(Reaching into the second pan with his spoon and dishing out some vegetables.)* Sauce? You have outdone yourself.

RALPH: Just trying to make you happy. You said things need to get better around here.

HENRY: Thank you dad.

The microwave beeps, and RALPH opens the door and pulls out a bowl. He sets it on the table and takes his place.

RALPH: Go ahead and try it.

HENRY takes the bowl and pours some of the sauce over his vegetables. He tastes it.

HENRY: This is good.

RALPH: I told ya'.

They eat in silence. RALPH has cut into his sausage, but winces when he chews. HENRY watches in sympathy. RALPH finally pushes it aside.

RALPH: I can't eat that. My teeth are no good.

HENRY: If you'd let me take you to the Social Service office we could get you fixed up with new teeth.

RALPH: No, don't want new teeth. The old ones are just fine.

HENRY: You just said that they were no good!

RALPH: Maybe I spoke too fast. I'll just cut it up a bit smaller.

HENRY: Dad. You need help.

RALPH: Can we eat our supper without talking about that? Can't we have a little peace and quiet while we eat?

HENRY: Of course dad.

They both eat. HENRY cuts his sausage, checks the interior and then bites into it gingerly. He nods as he chews, granting it a modicum of chewability. He tastes the vegetables and sauce.

HENRY: Hey, dad. This sauce tastes like real cheese. How did you do that?

RALPH: That neighbour of yours threw away a whole block of cheese and there hardly wasn't anything wrong with it. A bit of mold around the outside and that was all.

HENRY: You took the cheese for this sauce from the neighbour's garbage?

RALPH: They left it sitting in the hallway all day. Stupid waste.

HENRY: Is there anything else in here from the same...boutique?

RALPH: No. I found you some flowers though.

HENRY: Well. I must admit I never thought I'd be eating food taken out of the garbage. *(He sets his utensils down.)*

RALPH: There's nothing wrong with it.

HENRY: On a philosophical and practical plane, I absolutely agree. I just don't know if my stomach is on side.

RALPH: It wasn't easy you know, trying to get everything done from this wheelchair.

HENRY: I know dad. I know.

RALPH: You've fed me things that aren't any better than this.

HENRY: I know dad. I'm just struggling with the garbage idea. I've got a very good visual imagination. What kinds of things were beside the cheese, or on the cheese? I've heard what our neighbour gets up to at nights, and I know with who.

RALPH: You're not going to finish it?

HENRY: Sorry dad. I'll have the sausage.

RALPH wheels himself away from the table.

RALPH: It never used to bother you this much when I came to visit.

HENRY: I know. I'm just not used to having you here all the time that's all.

RALPH: When a man gets on in years he can't be as independent as he once was.

HENRY: You haven't been outside the apartment building in six months.

RALPH: I get lots of exercise wheeling around the room.

HENRY: We should get some help. There are government programs that are set up to help people like you.

RALPH: You mean when their own son doesn't want to?

HENRY: I want to dad, it's just...

RALPH: Just what?

HENRY: *(Sighs, and leans back in his chair.)* I'm not cut out for it dad. I'm used to living on my own. I'm a solitary, like you.

RALPH: Seems there's some things a man should be able to give up to help his family.

HENRY: And there are some things at the core of a man that can't be given up without giving up himself.

RALPH: Fancy talk, rubbish.

HENRY: Maybe. But look at you. You couldn't settle down your whole life. And now you're expecting me to.

RALPH: I'm just asking for your mom's sake.

HENRY: Don't bring mom into it.

RALPH: She would have wanted you to help me.

HENRY: That's enough. *(RALPH is silent.)* So, what do you want to do tonight? Do you want to play cards again or checkers? It's just about time you made a breakthrough in checkers. I've beaten you the last 40 games.

RALPH: I don't know.

HENRY: What did you used to do when you weren't living with me?

RAPLH: The thing I used to like to do was to find a smoke and a nice comfy spot and enjoy it.

HENRY: I can get some smokes for you.

RALPH: No.

HENRY: I can take you down to the little park at the corner. We can find a comfy spot.

RALPH: It's not the same. What it meant out there was that I'd lived another day. Found another set of meals. Went by without getting hurt. Here, it just doesn't seem like there's that much to celebrate.

HENRY: We can celebrate this great meal that you made.

RALPH: You didn't eat it. Nothing to celebrate.

HENRY: Can we celebrate that we can have another one tomorrow? This time I'll buy you some supplies so you don't have to scrounge?

RALPH: On the street it was a victory to find a meal. Especially a good meal. Here is doesn't mean anything.

HENRY: Listen, you know you're safe here. You know you're going to be alive tomorrow. And have a meal.

RALPH: Is that all there is?

HENRY picks up his plate and cutlery and takes them into the bathroom, where we hear water running. RALPH wheels back to the table, looks at his plate, and pushes it aside. HENRY comes back.

HENRY: I make do with very little dad.

RALPH: I know. Seems to me you ain't got a whole lot more than I did out there. And you're a damn sight more miserable.

HENRY: I'm not miserable.

RALPH: Well you're certainly not happy.

HENRY: What's happiness dad? The momentary cessation of desire? Some kind of ideal existence? I don't know what happiness is, so don't tell me I don't have it. I'm happy enough.

RALPH: You'd be happier if you got a tv.

HENRY: I'd be happier if you would let me get you some help. Some money, some medical treatments. Anything that would get you back on your feet.

RALPH: Don't need to be on my feet.

HENRY: Maybe I need you to be back on your feet.

RALPH: You want met out of here?

HENRY: I didn't say that.

RALPH: I can understand it. You're sick of your old man already.

HENRY: I just can't stand to see you giving up. You always used to be so...arrogant about it. You were the king of the road. I can't stand to see you beaten.

RALPH: I'm not beaten.

HENRY: Fine.

RALPH: What about you? I don't see you proud of what you do.

HENRY: Well I am.

RALPH: Huh! Cleaning up other peoples' garbage.

HENRY: It's my cross dad. It's the rock I push up the hill.

RALPH: It's stupid.

HENRY: It's not the only thing I do.

RALPH wheels over and pokes at one of the paintings.

RALPH: So why don't you show me some of that painting of yours then.

HENRY: Really?

RALPH: Yeah.

RALPH: All right.

HENRY starts to gather his art supplies – brushes, paint, easel, canvas and palette. As he does so he becomes more animated, and starts to whistle under his breath.

HENRY: I haven't done this for months. *(pauses to consider)* Not since you came dad.

RALPH: Not my doing.

HENRY: I didn't say it was. *(He stands back, palette and brush in hand, and considers the empty canvas.)* The first thing to consider when approaching the act of creation is that all form is a betrayal. Any line, any figure, any method evokes a preconceived meaning that is inherently in violation of the freedom of expression. All that really matters is the act, the precise moment when artist meets colour meets brush meets canvas. *(He creates a swirl of yellow in the upper left-hand corner of the canvas.)*

RALPH: I like pictures of birds. And jungle stuff. Helps me feel warm.

HENRY: *(Driving the paintbrush like a dagger into the centre of the painting with a big splash of red paint)* Form is the enemy. It stifles us. Represses us.

RALPH: I like birds. They mean freedom to me.

HENRY: Meaning is not important. *(He slashes with a dark blue across the canvas.)* Meaning is a construct that we create around ourselves to keep us from the world! *(He slashes violently at the painting with big bold strokes, creating something that looks vaguely like a face.)* All that really matters is the act of creation! *(He stands back, triumphant.)*

RALPH: It looks kind of like an ugly man.

HENRY: It's not supposed to be an ugly man.

RALPH: Then why'd you paint it that way?

HENRY: I didn't paint it that way! It's just you looking at it that way.

RALPH: What am I supposed to see then?

HENRY: Nothing. Or rather. Whatever you want.

RALPH: Well, if it's not a man's face then it just looks like a big mess to me.

HENRY: Don't criticize when you know nothing about it.

RALPH: Huh. Lots of people criticize me.

HENRY: You chose to live on the street!

RALPH: And you don't know anything about that. Yet you criticize it.

HENRY: I never criticized you dad. I just didn't understand you.

RALPH: Well, now we're even. I don't understand you either.

SCENE 1A
I HAD A DREAM

It is night. RALPH is sleeping on the couch, curled up like a child. HENRY is sleeping close by on a mattress on the floor. The light in the room looks different, colder, more like an institution than a home. The faint outline of light shining through a window casts a reverse shadow on RALPH'S sleeping body. Lights, like car lights, move across the stage, and we can hear the sound of a car pulling up, a door opening, muttering, and then the car door closing again. Suddenly, a shaft of light spills onto RALPH'S sleeping figure, like a door just opened letting in the light from an

overhead or streetlight. A large man wearing a hat and overcoat steps into the door, his shadow cut strong by the light. A voice, slurred and low, speaks.

SHADOW: Where are these people? It's Christmas and they're sleeping on the goddamn floor.

The SHADOW moves forward jerkily, and prods RALPH with his foot.

SHADOW: Hey, people. Good citizen of Alberta. Wake up.

RALPH wakes up groggily, yawning, smacking his lips like people do when hungover and they can't get the taste out of their mouths. He looks up, and freezes.

RALPH: Who is it?

SHADOW: *(Digging in his pocket, and snorting with glee.)* I'm an angel. Christmas angel. Come from, from...well, it ain't heaven. Guess it must be hell. *(He guffaws.)* Hell, that's where it is. Hell. That's what my life is.

RALPH: Angel. From Hell.

SHADOW: That's right. Come to save your soul. Wanna' know how to do it? Get a job! *(He throws some money from his pocket onto RALPH.)* Here. Merry Christmas.

RALPH grabs at his leg as he turns to leave.

RALPH: I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

SHADOW: Hey, leggo' my leg. Leggo' my eggo'. *(snorts with glee again)* Leggo' my leg'or I'll send you...somewhere bad.

RALPH: I don't want to die! Save me!

SHADOW: *(Shaking his leg free.)* Save yourself! Goddamn bumbs. Always asking for handouts. Save yourself! That's why we live in...the land of milk and...opportunity. So you can...do that. *(Snorts again with glee, and leans over RALPH with his hands spread out and shaking.)* You scared? *(The SHADOW yells.)* Save Yourself! Save Yourself! *(He snickers, then drops his hands and stumbles out. The door swings shut behind him, leaving RALPH in the dark.)*

RALPH: AAAAAHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

A light clicks on, and HENRY, dressed in pyjamas, leans over RALPH.

HENRY: Dad, dad. Wake up. You're screaming again.

RALPH screams again.

RALPH: Get away from me!

HENRY: *(Kneeling down, and helping RALPH to sit up.)* Dad, it's me. Henry.
(Shaking him gently.) Dad, it's me.

RALPH: Oh, Henry.

RALPH is now sitting up. HENRY goes to the bathroom to get a glass of water.

HENRY: Here. Have a drink.

RALPH: Angel. From Hell. Had this, bright light behind him. Told me. I had to save myself. Get a job, he said.

HENRY: It's okay. It's okay. Everything is okay. You're here. In my apartment. Everything is okay.

RALPH: Didn't have a face. Just smelled like. Booze. And peppermint.

HENRY: So, in your dream an angel came down from heaven...

RALPH: Nope. Not heaven, he said. Said from hell.

HENRY: So, an angel from hell told you to get a job.

RALPH: He had a big bright light behind him. It looked like fire. And his wings, they weren't spread out, they were all bunched up on his back. And he had a hat.

HENRY: Did he have horns or anything else?

RALPH: Didn't see his face. It was dark. Have to go to the bathroom.

HENRY rolls the wheelchair over, and helps RALPH climb into it. He pushes the chair around, and as he does so they come face to face with his recent painting. RALPH screams.

RALPH: AHHHHAAA! The face, the face of the angel of hell!

HENRY: Dad, it's an abstract.

RALPH: A face. A face!!

RALPH wrenches the wheelchair out of HENRY'S hands and wheels away.

RALPH: Get it away from me!

HENRY pursues him.

HENRY: Dad. Dad! Dad!!! Will you stop it. You can't go anywhere anyway!

RALPH: *(Near delirium.)* Angel from Hell!! Face of the devil!! No!! Noo!!

HENRY: *(Stopping the wheelchair and kneeling down in front of it.)* Dad! Dad! Get a grip. Nothing is going to happen. It was a dream, and a painting. Nothing is going to hurt you.

RALPH: *(Starting to blubber.)* Want a drink. Need a drink. Can't...can't...can't....

HENRY: *(Holding him.)* Dad, you know you can't drink. That's one of the rules, remember? Whenever you're with me. No booze.

RALPH: Need a drink.

HENRY: No way.

RALPH: *(After a moment, pushing him away.)* Get away from me. Bastard. And turn that picture to the wall.

HENRY: *(Doing so.)* You need help.

RALPH: I don't.

HENRY: You do, and tomorrow you're coming with me to get some.

RALPH: No I'm not.

HENRY: No options dad. You're coming.

RALPH: Have to go to the bathroom. *(He exits to the washroom. From inside we can hear his voice.)* I'm not going with you.

HENRY: You haven't been outside the apartment for six months. That's sickness of some kind. You're coming with me.

RALPH: *(off)* No I'm not.

HENRY: Dad, even if I have to tie you into your chair, you're coming. Now, I've got to get to sleep.

HENRY lays down on the floor again.

HENRY: Good night dad.

RALPH: *(off)* You're close by right?

HENRY: Right here dad. Close by.

End of Scene One

SCENE TWO LUNCHBOX LOVE

SETTING: *A city park. A picnic table with a garbage can beside it, the wall of a picnic shelter. The wall is covered with graffiti. a bright intricate design reminiscent of the Beatle's Yellow Submarine album, the word "LOVE" boldly standing out from the background.*

AT RISE: *The park is vacant. HENRY, pushing RALPH in the wheelchair and carrying a duffel bag over his shoulder, enters. RALPH is tied into the wheelchair and has a gaily coloured gift bag over his head that he is holding down by the twine handles. HENRY wheels the chair close to the picnic table, puts on the brake, and throws his bag on the table. He starts to take things out of it – a paint can, some brushes in a bag, a telescopic garbage stick with a long sharp point on the end. When he's done, he unties the rope around RALPH and sits down close to him.*

HENRY: Dad. Dad? We're here. Are you going to take that bag off?

RALPH: No.

HENRY: It's a beautiful day dad.

RALPH: Don't want to see.

HENRY: You know there's nothing here. Some trees, some grass, some garbage. There's nothing that can hurt you. *(He's met with silence.)* Well, I'm going to get to work. You just sit there if you like.

HENRY starts to take out the paint brushes and open the can of paint.

HENRY: You know, it doesn't bother anybody but you to have that bag over your head.

RALPH: You shouldn't have made me come.

HENRY: After last night, I'm not leaving you alone. Besides which, you need help, and a service worker that I know is going to meet with us here.

RALPH: What's she coming here for?

HENRY: To meet us.

RALPH: I don't want to meet anyone.

HENRY: You'll be fine. She's...nice.

RALPH: Does she paint useless pictures too?

HENRY: I don't know. But I had a good talk with her on the phone and she seems to really want to help.

RALPH: I don't need anything.

HENRY: Oh no, that's right. You're just fine. Nothing wrong at all with being terrified of everything.

RALPH: I want to go home.

HENRY: No way. There's nothing here to be frightened of. No angel from hell. Just the sunshine and trees.

RALPH: You didn't see him last night either.

HENRY: Ah. That's probably because he doesn't exist.

RALPH: He does for me.

HENRY: Well he's not here now. And as a matter of fact, I can state with some certainty that angels from hell are not allowed in city parks during daylight hours. So I think you'll be safe if you take the bag off.

RALPH slowly reaches up and lifts up a flap that has been cut in the bag. He looks like he's peering out of an oddly colourful knight's helmet.

HENRY: There, you see? Nothing here.

RALPH: You don't have to pretend I'm an idiot. I'm not stupid. I'm just, seeing things.

HENRY: That's all right. Lot's of people see things that aren't there.

RALPH: It is kind of nice out here. *(Pointing to something off in the distance.)*
Look at that. People throwing paper all over. Who the hell do they think they are?

HENRY: I don't know dad.

RALPH peers around himself, then reaches up and takes the bag off his head.

RALPH: People are stupid. And they're pigs.

HENRY: I guess if they weren't pigs I wouldn't have a job. Do you want to help me out?

(He proffers him the garbage stick.)

RALPH: Is that work?

HENRY: Only if you get paid for it. If you don't, then it's just stabbing things for fun.

RALPH: Give it here. *(He takes it and rolls off.)*

HENRY takes the paint can and brush and starts to cover the graffiti design with white paint. RALPH comes wheeling on, rolls over to the garbage can and scrapes a bunch of papers from the spike.

RALPH: The crap that you people throw out. It's unbelievable. People got to sleep in these parks. Don't the rich have any respect?

HENRY: Am I rich now dad? Just last night I was poor. What a remarkable transformation.

RALPH: You know what I mean. People who just walk through these places. Think that they're pretty and green. Then they leave their stuff all over the place. Don't they realize that other people have got to live here?

HENRY: They probably don't think of that dad. It doesn't usually enter peoples' minds.

RALPH: Well they should. It's hard enough to find a good place to sleep in the dark without worrying about left over potato chips and hot dog sticks. Christ. I woke up one morning covered in ants because some stupid kid had spilt their pop all over the grass and I laid down in it.

HENRY: Did they bite?

RALPH: No, it was just damn uncomfortable. And there were a bunch of young mothers out with their strollers. Tut tutting at me and shying away like I was indecent or something.

HENRY: You didn't strip down did you?

RALPH: No, but I should've. It's not like they hadn't seen a naked man before. Pretty obvious that they knew what a penis was for.

*RALPH rolls off stage again, brandishing his paper spike in the air.
MARTHA, a professional-looking woman in her late thirties, enters.*

MARTHA: Hello. Are you Henry?

HENRY: Yes. Martha?

MARTHA: Yes. Nice to meet you.

HENRY: Nice to meet you. Thanks for taking the time to meet me.

MARTHA: It sounded like such an interesting case over the phone. Besides, I don't mind getting out of the office. It's so pretty here, and green.

HENRY: It is, isn't it. It's hard to think that some people have to live here.

MARTHA: Yes. Very sad.

HENRY: Please, sit down.

MARTHA sits down on the picnic table and starts to take some papers out of her briefcase. HENRY sits across from her.

HENRY: I'm glad you could come. I never would have gotten him to go to your office.

MARTHA: Tell me a bit more about him?

HENRY: *(shrugs)* He's my father. He comes and he goes. Right now, he needs help. I need help.

MARTHA: How so?

HENRY: He's been staying with me for six months. I can't stand it. He always used to drop by before. You know, when he was really hungry or really cold, he'd drop by and then take off after a few days. But this time he's not taking off.

MARTHA: Where did he go before?

HENRY: Who knows? Back to live on the street. Back to live somewhere else.

MARTHA: Well, before we start I have to ask kind of an odd question. Does your dad have any political connections?

HENRY: None that I'm aware of. If he does he certainly doesn't benefit by it. Is he supposed to have political connections to get assistance?

MARTHA: No. Just...wondering. *(Handing him one copy of the papers and leaning over to point out parts of the forms.)* Now, this first part is straightforward. Just your name and address and your relationship to the client.

HENRY: Okay.

MARTHA: Now, we have to go through a list of questions about other sources of funding. Has Ralph applied for his old age pension?

HENRY: Not that I'm aware of. He doesn't get any mail. He hasn't even gone outside in the six months he's been with me.

MARTHA: When was he born?

HENRY: I don't know.

MARTHA: Where was he born?

HENRY: I don't know.

MARTHA: You don't know a lot about him do you?

HENRY: No. All I knew was that he wasn't with us. He'd stop in every once in a while for a meal, or to pick up some money from mom.

MARTHA: Is your mother still alive?

HENRY: No.

MARTHA: I'm sorry.

HENRY shrugs. From off stage we hear a cry of anguish, and RALPH rolls on stage, his paper stick balanced across his legs, his lap full of broken glass.

RALPH: The bastards. The bastards.

HENRY: *(Rising.)* What is it dad? What did they do to you?

RALPH: Who?

HENRY: I don't know. Whoever the bastards are.

RALPH: Didn't do anything to me. I got 'em good though. They won't be back here.

HENRY: Then what are you talking about?

RALPH: *(Depositing the broken glass in the garbage can.)* Bastards, drinking beer in the middle of the afternoon. And then do you know what they did? They found a sleeping spot where some poor guy had smoothed out a place and broke their beer bottles on it. On purpose!

MARTHA: Did you hurt them?

RALPH: Not much. A hell of a lot less than it would have hurt the poor bugger who was coming back to sleep on broken glass.

MARTHA: You can't assault people.

RALPH: Wasn't assaulting. Was defending. An unprovoked assault on one citizen is an unprovoked assault on all citizens. And they were assaulting the poor bugger who had to sleep there that night. So I defended him.

MARTHA: I see.

RALPH: You the social service lady?

MARTHA: Yes.

RALPH: Not trying to put me in a home?

MARTHA: No. My name is Martha. Pleased to meet you.

RALPH: I'm Ralph.

MARTHA: Have we met before?

RALPH: Nope.

MARTHA: Well, I just need you to answer some questions so we can get you some help.

RALPH is silent. He reaches over, takes the gift bag, and drops it over his head, then reaches up to open the flap.

HENRY: Ah. Dad has been having a few frightening visions lately. This is to help protect him.

MARTHA: I see.

RALPH: Do you?

MARTHA: I think I might.

RALPH: What does he look like to you?

MARTHA: What does who look like?

RALPH: She's an idiot son.

HENRY: He is of the impression that an angel of fire is pursuing him. It visits him in his sleep.

MARTHA: I'm afraid I haven't seen an angel of fire. Now, I'm going to ask you a few questions.

RALPH reaches up and closes the visor.

HENRY: Dad, we talked about this.

RALPH: No. You talked. I listened 'cause I had to.

HENRY: Dad. You can't chew. You can't sleep. You can't walk. I can't look after you like this by myself for the rest of my life. We need help.

RALPH: If that's the way you feel I'll just go back out on the street.

MARTHA: You don't need to do that. We can get you some assistance. To make your life better.

RALPH: You can't help me! You'd lock me in your little rooms. I've heard people screaming at night. I'm not going back there. Not where there's screaming.

MARTHA: It sounds like you had a bad experience. I'm very sorry for that, but I can assure you that we can help you.

RALPH: I don't need any help.

HENRY: Dad, you do. We do.

RALPH: Bloody poor excuse for a son. Just get some money from her. Tell her whatever you have to.

MARTHA: We have to go through the proper process. I can't just give out money.

RALPH: Then you're not much use, are you?

MARTHA: There is a proper way to do things in order to get you some assistance. I am not in control of that. I'm just a facilitator.

RALPH: Useless.

HENRY: Dad, that's enough. Go back to cleaning up the park.

RALPH lifts the visor, hoists his paper sticker like a lance, turns, and wheels off stage.

HENRY: I'm sorry about that.

MARTHA: That's all right. I've had worse things said to me.

HENRY: Really?

MARTHA: Yes. I've had just about every dirty name in the book yelled at me. He's pretty tame by comparison.

HENRY: Sometimes I think he's the biggest pain in the world. Sometimes I think that he's a living work of art.

MARTHA: Oh?

HENRY: If art for art's sake is fine art, then life for life's sake is fine life. That's what he lives for, is just to live. He's got no aspirations, no goals, no greater calling. He's just there to *be*. It's something that many philosophers have longed for.

MARTHA: I don't know how you could long to be homeless, cold and hungry.

HENRY: Neither do I. But I'm not willing to write off the value that his life might hold just because I don't understand it.

MARTHA: That's very insightful of you.

HENRY: Well, not really. He said it. He was giving me a rough time about my painting, and I told him not to criticize it if he didn't understand it. Then he pointed out, quite rightly, that I criticized his life without understanding it either.

MARTHA: You're a painter?

HENRY: More or less. So far I haven't managed to have even one of my paintings displayed in a local gallery or sold. I tend to recycle them a lot.

MARTHA: Why would you do that? There are plenty of ways to get your work out there.

HENRY: I don't know. I just think that the audience isn't ready for my kind of art. I've learned to live with it. Can we talk about something else?

MARTHA: Sure. How long has he been in the wheelchair?

HENRY: Ever since he came to live with me. He hasn't gotten out of it since.

MARTHA: What about mental capabilities?

HENRY: Well, you saw. He's usually okay, but every once in a while he gets an episode where he goes completely off the wall.

MARTHA: Has he tried to find work?

HENRY: Who would hire him?

MARTHA: That's not the point. He has to prove that he has actively sought employment or he's ineligible for assistance. It's a fairly stringent process. We need doctor's records, birth records, employment records, accident reports. Here's a list of things that we're going to need to start processing the application.

HENRY: There's a lot.

MARTHA: Yes, there is.

HENRY: I don't know. This is going to be a struggle.

MARTHA: If he's not capable of cooperating or trying to look after himself we could have him taken for a psychological assessment.

HENRY: And what would be the benefit of that?

MARTHA: If he's found to suffer from a severe psychological condition he could be hospitalized.

HENRY: No thanks.

MARTHA: I wasn't recommending it. Just raising the option.

HENRY: And what happens if we can't get all the paperwork?

MARTHA: It means I can't help you.

HENRY: Just like that?

MARTHA: There are other forms of assistance, but the rules for AISH are quite stringent.

RALPH has wheeled on quietly, and is listening.

HENRY: I guess I have trouble thinking of him as being severely handicapped. It seems so...final.

MARTHA: I'm sorry. It's never easy having someone who needs help.

HENRY: No.

RALPH wheels on the rest of the way, his paper sticker held high in the air, the tip covered with different pieces of garbage. He deposits them, then wheels up next to the garbage can, and starts to fish through it.

HENRY: What are you doing dad?

RALPH: Going to find some newspapers for that guy's bed down there. Makes it a bit softer.

HENRY: You're a good man, dad. Caring about people like that.

RALPH: Well, you know. Some of us do things to help other people.

As he is rummaging through the garbage can he comes across a bible. He holds it up.

RALPH: What the hell is this?

HENRY: That's a bible dad.

RALPH: Not a thing wrong with it. *(He tucks it into the seat of his wheelchair.)* Jesus you people. The things you throw away.

RALPH wheels out, and MARTHA gathers the papers up on the table.

MARTHA: You start to gather what you can and call me, okay?

HENRY: All right. Thanks.

MARTHA: You're welcome. I'd like to hear more about your art.

HENRY: Really?

MARTHA: Yes. *(She exits.)*

End of Scene Two

SCENE 3

It is night again. RALPH and HENRY are sleeping in the same positions as previously. As before, a shaft of light spills onto RALPH'S sleeping figure, like a door just opened letting in the light from an overhead or streetlight. The SHADOW steps into the door, his shadow cut strong by the light. A voice, slurred and low, speaks.

SHADOW: Where's my people? I wanna' see 'im.

RALPH: *(Wide awake. His eyes staring up in fear.)* Don't hurt me. I'm handicapped.

SHADOW: Handicapped. Christ. I'm handicapped. Got 2 million people dragging around on my back. It's so sore I can barely lift my arms. *(He demonstrates.)* See?

RALPH: What do you want from me?

SHADOW: Want? Don't want nothin'. Want respect.

RALPH: I respect you.

SHADOW: Not from you! Bumb. Want respect from all those academic types and artsy types. Dumb bastards. Don't have a clue how the world works.

RALPH: What do you want from me?

SHADOW: Nothin'! Don't need nothin'. Just want people to look after themselves. So I don't have to.

SHADOW sits heavily in the wheelchair.

SHADOW: Need a drink.

RALPH: You can't drink here. It's Henry's rules.

SHADOW: Rules. Shit. Can't drink anymore. Can't smoke anymore. Can't do nothin'. What are you looking at me for?

RALPH: You're in my chair.

SHADOW: Friggin' uncomfortable. *(He fishes around under his seat and pulls out the bible. He throws it at Ralph.)* I don't need this crap. Read it yourself.

RALPH: It's the bible.

SHADOW: The bible? Shouldn't have thrown that. Sorry. It's good, the bible. Do you know what it says in there? Says the poor will be with us always. Bloody smart, that Jesus. So why try to help them? That's what I say. What are you looking at me for?

RALPH: You're still in my chair.

SHADOW: I'm gettin' up. I'm gonna' rise again. You're gonna' see a resurrection. Like Christ. He was crucified and he was resurrected. *(He stands up.)* See? I'm gonna' show 'em. Show everybody. *(He stumbles off.)*

RALPH: AAAAHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!

RALPH sits bolt upright on the couch. HENRY groans from the floor.

HENRY: Dad, for Christ's sake. You've got to stop screaming in the middle of the night. You're driving me crazy.

RALPH: The angel. He was here.

HENRY: Again?

RALPH: He said something son. Said that I had to read the book.

HENRY: So now he's a teacher?

RALPH: No, still an angel. Angel of fire. His wings hurt he said. Couldn't lift them up. Couldn't fly.

HENRY: I wish he would. Then maybe he wouldn't be down here harassing you every night.

RALPH: Son?

HENRY: Yes?

RALPH: I can't read.

HENRY: You can't read?

RALPH: Not to speak of.

HENRY: How the hell have you survived all these years?

RALPH: Sold a bit of marijuana when I was younger. Pimped a bit. That's how I met your mom.

HENRY slowly raises himself from the floor to stare at his father.

HENRY: Mom was a prostitute?

RALPH: Ya. She didn't like it much. She quit. Wanted me to quit too. I was sorry I didn't make it to her funeral.

HENRY: Ya.

RALPH: I don't want to go back to sleep.

HENRY: I don't think I can sleep now that I know my mother was a prostitute.

RALPH: Nothing wrong with that. Lots of people have to do things they don't want to do to get by.

HENRY: Dad, it's letting other people touch you and use you for money. It's...wrong.

RALPH: Like painting over art or picking up garbage for money? Like putting people away in homes for money?

HENRY: There is a difference in degree between painting over graffiti and being a hooker.

RALPH: Not in my world.

HENRY: Huh. Well maybe then it's a good thing that your world isn't everybody's world.

RALPH: You're stupid sometimes son.

HENRY: Thank you. And you're a genius. Living on the street all your life has given you that depth of understanding and wisdom that lets you see the world as it is, while I just see the world all screwed up.

RALPH: You're a smart man to admit it.

HENRY: I'm not admitting it. I'm being sarcastic you idiot.

RALPH: No need to talk to your father that way.

HENRY: My father. My father! Do you know how many times I had to pretend I didn't have one? "My dad's an oil worker." "My dad's a welder." What could I have said? "My dad shows up once a month to take money from my mother?" *(He pauses.)* You were still using her, even after she stopped working.

RALPH: I needed the money.

HENRY: You are a bastard.

RALPH: I never asked to be your father.

HENRY: And I never asked to be your son.

RALPH: You're not going to put me in a home are you?

HENRY: No. But I should. I have to go to sleep. I have to work tomorrow to support us. I'm your whore now dad. Let me sleep so I can work, will you?

RALPH: I don't want to go back to sleep.

HENRY: Well just lay there awake then. I don't care.

RALPH: I can't just lay here. I've got an angel stuck in my head.

HENRY: Just ignore him. Maybe he'll go away.

RALPH: How do you get things out of your head?

HENRY: I paint them.

RALPH: Can I try it?

HENRY: You want to try painting?

RALPH: I can do just as good as you did.

HENRY: What do you want to paint?

RALPH: I want to paint...my angel.

HENRY: Really?

RALPH: Yes. That's not, crazy is it?

HENRY: Well, in relation to everything else you seem to think, it's not so bad. Art therapy is one of the most effective ways of resolving conflict. Get it out of your system. Get it out on paper.

RALPH: I can almost recognize him. I stare and stare and it looks to me like he's somebody I know. Somebody I've seen before. But it's dark. I've got to get it down somewhere. Somewhere where I can fill in the dark spots.

HENRY gets up and starts to gather the art supplies.

HENRY: You know what?

RALPH: What?

HENRY: I think I'm going to do the same thing. I'm going to paint you.

RALPH: What for?

HENRY: To get you out of my system.

End of Scene Three

SCENE FOUR
SAY IT AIN'T SO, RALPH

SETTING: *The park, wooden bench, garbage can, the wall of a picnic shelter. The wall is now covered completely in white paint.*

AT RISE: *RALPH has taped a paint brush onto the long handle of the paper spike. HE sits in his wheelchair, dipping his brush into a paint can on the ground. He is starting to make an outline of the angel, slightly larger than man size. HENRY stands behind him, hands in pockets, watching him with approval. MARTHA enters, and stops when she sees them.*

MARTHA: Hi.

HENRY: Hi Martha. Did we have an appointment?

MARTHA: No. No. I was just thinking about some of the things we talked about yesterday, so came back down here. What's he doing?

HENRY: He's painting his angel of fire.

MARTHA: Isn't that against the law?

HENRY: I'll cover it up again as soon as he's done.

MARTHA: Why?

HENRY: We were painting at home together. I was painting him. Every pore, every booze bump, every line on his face. And he was using the back of another one of my old canvases to paint his angel of fire. And he did a pretty good job, but it wasn't big enough. He just couldn't get perspective right. Couldn't pretend that what he was painting was just a piece of the whole thing. It had to be real. Seven feet tall with wings, and a hat. So, I just happened to know the location of a pristine white surface, and here we are.

MARTHA: I see. How are you?

HENRY: I'm all right, thanks. How are you?

MARTHA: I'm okay. Will he be all right here by himself? Can we sit down for a minute?

HENRY: Sure. He's not going anywhere.

(They cross the stage to sit at the picnic table. HENRY turns in his seat to watch RALPH.)

MARTHA: There's something very odd about your case.

HENRY: No kidding. You wouldn't believe what I found out last night.

MARTHA: What is it?

HENRY: I'd rather not say.

MARTHA: I need to know what's going on.

HENRY: It's personal.

MARTHA: I'm in a very difficult position with this case. I need to know as much as I can. Did you find out anything else about your father? His birth date, where he lived, anything?

HENRY: Found out he can't read, and he's a bastard.

MARTHA: Well that doesn't help much.

HENRY: Sorry. I found out something about my painting though. I realized that maybe art hadn't failed me. I realized that maybe I was just doing the wrong kind of art.

MARTHA: What do you mean?

HENRY: I focused on abstract art out of college. Don't know why. Maybe it's just because – I couldn't be judged for it.

MARTHA: Abstract art could be anything. Your stuff could be great.

HENRY: *(Sighing.)* I know. But in the end it has to affect somebody doesn't it? Somebody other than me. It has to make a difference. Like you do. You make a difference.

MARTHA: I don't know if I do or not. I go to work every day, meeting with people who are in need, or pretending to be in need, or desperately in need. And sometimes I can help the ones that need it, and sometimes I have to help the ones that don't. And nothing ever seems to get fixed, or better. It all just stays the same.

HENRY: And up until now, I've painted and painted, and nothing about my life ever changed. It all just stayed the same.

From the other side of the stage RALPH screams.

RALPH: AAAAHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!

HENRY doesn't even get up.

HENRY: What is it now dad?

RALPH: I can't see his face. It's just there. There on the edge. But I can't see it.

HENRY: Why don't you take a break? Go chase away some troubled youth or something.

RALPH slumps down in his chair.

RALPH: I need something to help me.

HENRY: It's called inspiration dad.

RALPH: Where do I get that?

HENRY: If I could tell you that, I'd be a rich man.

MARTHA: Sometimes when I need inspiration I read a book, or go for a walk, or look at some art.

RALPH: *(Pulling the bible from his chair.)* The angel. He told me to read it. AAAHHHH!!!! I can't!

MARTHA: I'll tell you what. You just hold your problem in your mind, flip through the book with your eyes closed and pick a page. Then point to a part of the page, any page, and I'll read it for you.

RALPH: That sounds crazy.

MARTHA: Who knows? It might work.

RALPH: Why should I trust you?

HENRY: Don't worry dad. I'll read it too.

RALPH: You think this is a good idea too? You're both crazy.

HENRY: Oh, just try it.

RALPH closes his eyes, rifles through the pages, and lands on a page. He points, and opens his eyes to look at it.

RALPH: Bloody gibberish. Here.

MARTHA: Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.

HENRY: You're kidding.

MARTHA: I'm not. Look yourself.

HENRY: Wow.

RALPH: Let's do it again.

HENRY hands the book to him and he goes through the same process.

MARTHA: Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon me. For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.

RALPH: The angel. That's what he said. That's what he said.

HENRY: I thought the angel told you to get a job?

RALPH: He did. But he seemed confused.

MARTHA: Have you ever had a job Ralph? Have you ever worked for the government perhaps?

RALPH: No. I'm not that stupid. I've never had a real job.

HENRY: Please don't tell her the kind of work that you did do?

RALPH: I was a pimp once. Hard work.

He sees the look on HENRY'S face and changes his mind about talking.

RALPH: I'm going to take a break.

RALPH peels the paint brush off his paper stick and drops it on the ground by the paint bucket. He hoists the stick like a lance, and heads off stage.

MARTHA: Should we let him go like that?

HENRY: He's not really going to hurt anybody.

MARTHA: So, you found another kind of painting?

HENRY gets up and goes over to the wall, picks up the paintbrush and dabs it in the can.

HENRY: Yes, painting him if you could believe it. *(As he talks he paints a quick cartoon of RALPH. Jutting jaw. Aggressive stubble. Bulbous nose. Thick lips.)* There's so many pieces of reality layered on his face. His fear. His years of drink. His complete self-indulgence.

MARTHA rises and comes to stand behind him.

MARTHA: That's good. You could be a cartoonist.

HENRY: A cartoonist?

MARTHA: What's wrong with that?

HENRY: I don't know. I guess I never thought about the possibility.

RALPH comes charging on, stick levelled at HENRY.

RALPH: Stop! Stop it! You're painting over my angel!

HENRY: Put your lance down. I am not painting over your angel. I was just showing Martha how I painted you.

RALPH: That's me?

HENRY: Sort of. Kind of an abstracted cartoon-like you, but you.

RALPH: That's me?

HENRY: Don't take it personally dad. It's just a cartoon.

RALPH: Do that, on the angel.

HENRY: Paint your face on the angel?

RALPH: Like it, but not the same. I'll tell you.

HENRY: All right. Where do I start?

RALPH: Start with the nose. Make it big and bumpy like mine. Yes, like that. Now, make the cheeks puff out and then kind of come down. Make the chin small. Kind of almost covered by the jowls. Now, little eyes. And big ears. And big hair, kind of swept back.

As HENRY is painting RALPH is getting more and more agitated, twisting and turning in his wheelchair.

RALPH: AAAAAIIIIIIIEEEEE! That's him. That's my angel.

HENRY steps back from the painting, and looks at it quizzically.

HENRY: That's a pretty ugly angel dad.

MARTHA: Henry, doesn't that look like somebody?

HENRY: Ya. Looks like dad's angel.

MARTHA: No, I mean like somebody else. In politics.

HENRY: You got me. I don't follow the news.

MARTHA: You don't even know what our premier looked like?

HENRY: *(Looking at the painting.)* That's Ed Stelmach?

MARTHA: No, not him. The old premier. The one who busted in on those drunks. Ralph Klein.

RALPH has backed away in his chair, and is nearly collapsed, staring up at the wall.

RALPH: That's my angel. Paint some wings on him. Not open. Just, bunched up around his shoulders.

HENRY does so.

RALPH: My angel is Ralph Klein.

HENRY: Dad, were you there the night Ralph Klein came into the Hope Mission?

MARTHA: But that was almost 10 years ago.

RALPH: The memory of the angel's visitation is burned into my soul.

HENRY: Ralph Klein is the angel of fire from hell who told you to get a job?

RALPH: *(In a state of near grace.)* He is. I didn't remember. He came to see us. Scared the death half out of us. But then he came back, and brought us all bottles of the best booze I've ever tasted. It was wonderful.

MARTHA: Ever since my manager saw your dad's name I've been getting phone calls asking me about it. From the press, from the Liberal Party, from the Conservative Party. Even from Stephen Harper. I couldn't figure out what the hell was going on.

HENRY: What is going on?

MARTHA: I don't know. I can't believe anybody would still be interested after all this time.

HENRY: Who would care?

MARTHA: I don't know.

As they've been talking RALPH has been slowly straightening up in his chair. Looking up at the picture with a beatific smile on his face he slowly pushes himself up from the wheelchair. He stands, flexes his legs a little bit, and then pushes the chair away. HENRY is watching him with a mixture of disbelief and anger in his eyes.

RALPH: I know.

HENRY: You're not crippled?

RALPH: He is going to resurrect himself. He said so.

MARTHA: You're not crippled?

RALPH: No.

HENRY: Ralph Klein is making a comeback? And you can walk?

RALPH: It's you guys that made me crippled. You would have kicked me out in a second if you thought I wasn't.

HENRY: That's not true.

RALPH: Isn't it? You tied me into the wheelchair just to get me down here yesterday.

HENRY: That was to help you.

RALPH: Was it? Or was it just to find a way to get rid of me? With your partner here?

MARTHA: That's not fair. We're here to help people.

RALPH: I don't know what you're here for. To make yourself feel good because you're better off than someone else. I don't know.

HENRY: Dad, she hasn't done anything to you.

RALPH: Is that so? How much did I go down in your opinion as soon as you started looking at those papers? "He's handicapped. Can't get a job." Well maybe I don't want a job. "The poor are always with us." The bible said.

HENRY: You can't take that as justification for living off other people.

RALPH: But some people live to help others. If I wasn't there for them to help, what else would they do?

RALPH flexes his knees, as if testing his legs.

RALPH: I'll be right back.

RALPH walks off stage gingerly. HENRY and MARTHA look at each other.

HENRY: I don't believe this is happening.

MARTHA: Your father can walk. And Ralph Klein is making a comeback.

HENRY: I'm frightened.

MARTHA: So am I. Hold me.

RALPH walks back on carrying a pack. A bedroll is strapped to one side.

RALPH: I've been keeping this hid, in case something happened.

HENRY: Dad, what are you doing?

RALPH: Gonna' go back where I came from.

HENRY: Dad, you're not going to make it out there. You're not as tough as you were.

RALPH: I have to son. The angel is guiding me.

HENRY: Why did you come back to stay with me?

RALPH: I was scared of dying. But it wasn't death I was dreaming about. It was Ralph Klein. I know what he's on about.

HENRY: Will I see you again?

RALPH: Maybe.

RALPH nods his head to MARTHA, hoists his pack, and walks off stage.

MARTHA: You're just going to let him walk away like that?

HENRY: Yes, I am.

MARTHA: Do you think he'll be back again?

HENRY: As long as he's alive. But I don't know if I'm going to be there. Do you want to grab some lunch? I'm hungry all of a sudden.

MARTHA: Yes. I would. I don't think I'm going to go back to work today.

HENRY: No?

MARTHA: No. I haven't missed a day in 15 years. I think it's about time.

HENRY: *(Indicating the wall pictures.)* Guess I should paint over this before we go though eh?

MARTHA: No. I'd leave it. Kind of a religious picture. A man and his angel.

HENRY: Could be political. The powerful and the powerless.

MARTHA: Could be the start of a whole new style of painting for you.

HENRY: Yes. It could be the start of a bunch of things.

HENRY holds out his hand, and after a moment's hesitation MARTHA reaches out to take it. They walk off the stage together.

THE END