

THE HUNCHBACK OF MARSHALL AVENUE

A Play In One Act

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The Hunchback of Marshall Avenue

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CHARACTERS:

GEOFFREY – A businessman; 40's

DREYDAN – A disfigured stranger; ageless

MIA – A young woman; 20's

SYNOPSIS:

A lonely businessman encounters a misshapen man during his daily walks to the train station, and discovers the true meaning of beauty.

SETTING:

A street in urban America.

TIME:

Present.

SCENE ONE

A city street in mid December, late afternoon. There is a sidewalk which runs from right to left in the center, and a row of electric street lamps – intentionally manufactured to resemble old-fashioned gas lights – upstage from the walkway, which act as a dividing line to the moderate rush hour traffic. A park bench sets along the walkway, near center stage.

GEOFFREY, tall and slender, wearing a long wool overcoat and carrying a briefcase, enters from the right, absorbed in his own thoughts. After a few steps, he stops and turns toward the audience.

GEOFFREY

Ever have one of those days when you feel like you've forgotten something? Not just your keys, or your wallet, or to turn your office's alarm system on ... or off. No, something much more important than that.

(with hand to chin)

If I left the stove on this morning, the whole apartment building will surely be burned to the ground by the time I get home. Especially if the train is late – again.

(he takes another step; pauses again)

I'm kind of young for Alzheimer's. Or ... maybe I have Alzheimer's and just can't remember that I have it?

(DREYDAN enters from the left, walking as if one leg is shorter than the other, at a very slow pace. He is slightly stooped, as if there should be a hump on his back – though there's not – and his face is grotesque, though his handsome head of hair belies his misshapen countenance.

Geoffrey notices the man, takes a step or two toward him, then stops again).

GEOFFREY

How ... peculiar. I know that I've passed this very same man

before.

(The two men continue to approach one another – Geoffrey trying to make eye contact, but Dreydan constantly gazing at the ground.

When their paths intersect, Geoffrey stops walking – just for a split-second, as if tempted to address Dreydan – but then both men continue walking in complete silence.

Dreydan exits to the right, and Geoffrey stops in his tracks at far left-center).

GEOFFREY
(to audience)

I know that I've passed him before – definitely! I have the same feeling of sadness inside, and yet I am angry at the same time – for feeling sad! HE didn't ask for my sympathy. But I'm ready to offer it, nonetheless. I mean, how do I know what his life has been like with ... you know ... a face that not only frightens, but could kill. There, I've said it! A man who looks like a brute could be brutish. Could be vengeful even! And who could blame him. If I had to endure people staring at me like I just did, well I might feel like raising my fists, too! (pause) Only he ... didn't. Or doesn't. He seems so ... peaceful.

(The lights briefly go down as Geoffrey steps off stage).

SCENE TWO

(Lights gradually rise as Geoffrey quickly returns to the stage from the left. He takes a few steps along the sidewalk, then stops).

GEOFFREY
(glancing at his watch)

I hate how dark it is at the end of the day now. (he shivers) What I hate even more is my cold empty apartment. Maybe I'll eat out—

(Dreydan enters from the right, dressed much as before, his head still hanging as he walks).

GEOFFREY
(to audience)

I wonder how cold or empty his apartment is. Or even if he has a roof over his head.

(As Dreydan continues to walk, Geoffrey takes a few more steps – then stops again).

GEOFFREY
Maybe I should ask him to dinner?

(As the two men's paths intersect, Geoffrey again attempts to make eye contact. He nods at Dreydan, and opens his mouth as if to speak. Dreydan not only fails to acknowledge Geoffrey, but continues walking).

GEOFFREY
(beside himself)
Ask him to dinner! What, is he supposed to hear my brains rattle? No wonder I go home to an empty apartment. I haven't had the nerve to ask a girl out since ... (sadly) since Miranda died. (admonishing himself) You need to talk to people, Geoffrey. (pause) I need to talk.

(Lights down as Geoffrey and Dreydan both exit).

SCENE THREE

(Lights up on the same city street and sidewalk. It is early morning again, and Geoffrey enters the stage from the right, walking toward his office. He stops to address the audience).

GEOFFREY
And so it continued, like a cycle, or circle, or some living, breathing

Déjà vu. I walked in one direction ..

(Dreydan enters from the left, his head still hanging).

GEOFFREY

And the stranger walked in the other. And though I truly wished that I could call him – and call out to him – as something other than a “stranger” ...

(Their paths once again intersect – and this time Geoffrey is able to utter a weak salutation).

GEOFFREY

“Good morning .. sir.”

(Dreydan ignores him, continues walking).

GEOFFREY

(anguished)

That’s all I had to offer. (repeating the same line, but this time scolding himself) That’s all I had to offer? And so close to Christmas? I couldn’t even say “happy holidays?” Really?

(he turns, shouting after Dreydan)

You have a name, I bet! And so, do I! I’m Geoffrey, and I’d really like to ...

(Dreydan does a brief stutter-step, as if tempted to turn around – but instead continues walking, disappearing offstage).

GEOFFREY

(hanging his head)

I’d really like to say ...

(lifting his head)

This is ridiculous.

(he begins to run after Dreydan)

Wait! Wait!

SCENE FOUR

(Same setting as before. But now it is early afternoon on Christmas Eve. Geoffrey enters from the right, with a briefcase in one hand, and a wrapped present in the other. He is walking slowly, and keeps checking his wrist watch).

GEOFFREY

(half-mumbling to himself)

What are the chances? He has no idea that I was only scheduled for a half day. (pause) But I'm sure he must know it's Christmas Eve, and that bosses – even the less caring ones – have softer hearts at this time of year.

(he approaches the park bench, and pauses)

What the hell, I'm in no hurry. And my apartment will be even more empty tonight, so ...

(He sits down, setting his briefcase on the ground, and his package next to him. After a brief moment, he begins to hum "I'll Be Home For Christmas.")

He glances to the left, then to the right as he hums, and then ends his brief musical foray by singing a line aloud).

GEOFFREY

If Only In My Dreams ...

(At that precise moment, Dreydan enters from the left, perhaps walking a little slower than before, with a seeming burden on his shoulders.

Immediately, Geoffrey sits up straight in his seat, adjusting his lapel and patting the present, as if to tell himself "don't blow this.")

Dreydan takes a few steps, notices Geoffrey, and for the first time does an aside to the audience himself – in a surprisingly eloquent voice).

DREYDAN

He looks as if he's ready to "pop the question." I wonder who the lucky young lady is?

(Geoffrey, a goofy Cheshire cat-like grin on his face, gives him a nod)

Though maybe I jumped the gun by saying "lucky."

(Dreydan resumes walking, and as he nears the bench, Geoffrey calls out to him).

GEOFFREY

Merry Christmas!

(Dreydan stops, raising one eyebrow, then turns once again to the audience).

DREYDAN

Is this where I'm supposed to say "Bah, humbug" and beat him within an inch of his life? (as if reacting to a lack of response)
No? What, you don't find me menacing?

(Geoffrey repeats his salutation, this time while extending the wrapped gift toward Dreydan).

GEOFFREY

Merry, MERRY Christmas!

(Dreydan feigns surprise).

DREYDAN

For ... me?

(he turns for another aside)

Probably a full-head mask – a superhero or a clown? – so that he can carry on a conversation without looking at my face.

(turning, to Geoffrey)

Hope you got the largest size they have, because I have a really big head.

(Geoffrey seems a bit taken aback).

GEOFFREY

Largest ... size? Extra large, actually. How did you know it was a sweater?

DREYDAN

A ... sweater? Oh, right ... I guess I'm psychic, or something.

(A brief silence. Then suddenly both men speak at the same time).

GEOFFREY/Dreydan

Want to sit down?/Care if I sit down?

(Geoffrey pats the bench).

GEOFFREY

Please. Do.

(Dreydan sits. Geoffrey eyes him up and down, but peripherally).

DREYDAN

The repulsion is more intense when you look directly at me.

GEOFFREY

Oh. Right.

(turning to face Dreydan)

Sorry, no offense, but—

DREYDAN

You don't like being turned to stone, from head to toe?

GEOFFREY

Oh, come on. I didn't say anything about Medusa.

DREYDAN

Oh? Right. (pause) In that case, do you like getting "stoned" from head to toe?

GEOFFREY

What? I didn't say anything blasphemous. Did I?

(Shaking his head, Dreydan reaches into his jacket pocket, pulls out a small hashish pipe).

DREYDAN

Okay, I'll repeat the question again ...

(he lights up the pipe and briefly inhales)

Do you ... (puffs) ... like ... (puffs) ... getting stoned?

(Geoffrey reacts with shock and fear).

GEOFFREY

What are you doing! The police, they go by here regularly.

(Dreydan takes one last puff, then puts away the pipe).

DREYDAN

I'm sorry. But it's the only thing that gets me through the pain.

GEOFFREY

The pain? Of what?

DREYDAN

(solemnly, with a bit of hesitation)

Of existence.

(There is a brief moment of silence. Then, as if he never actually missed a beat, Dreydan extends his hand).

DREYDAN

Dreydan.

(Geoffrey smiles, and shakes his hand).

GEOFFREY

Geoffrey.

DREYDAN

So ... what gives?

GEOFFREY

What do you mean?

DREYDAN

I mean, are you in the habit of buying gifts for complete strangers?

GEOFFREY

Well, no ... but I feel like I know you. (pause) On some level.

DREYDAN

Because you've passed me on the sidewalk every day for weeks?
(Geoffrey nods) What a bunch of bunk. (pause) But I'm never one
to pass up a free sweater. I mean, wind chills are supposed to be brutal
tonight.

GEOFFREY

So you ARE homeless!

DREYDAN

No. I just don't like being cold. (pause) Oh, wait a minute, you think
because I could pass for the Elephant Man's slightly more handsome
brother, that no one in their right mind would give me a mortgage?
Please!

GEOFFREY

I didn't say that!

DREYDAN

I bet you think I have a hump on my shoulder, too. (Geoffrey is silent)
Wait, you really do, don't you? Just because my posture is a little ...
compromised?

(he stands, takes off his jacket)

If I had asked you to guess my name, what would you have said?
Quasimodo? Eygore?

(he begins impersonating the latter)

"Oh, master, it's me, here to do your every bidding. The Hunchback of ...

... of ... (he spies the nearby street sign) ... of Marshall Avenue!”

(Dreydan begins to laugh hysterically, but when he notices that Geoffrey is offended, he stops abruptly, then sits down).

DREYDAN

Forgive me. I really should be more gracious. But my sincerity meter is on the fritz.

GEOFFREY

You mean ... you don't know if I'm being ... genuine?

DREYDAN

It's one of the hazards of being a freak, I guess. (pause) The inability to discern friends from foes.

GEOFFREY

That's difficult for anyone.

DREYDAN

Yes. But an even tougher task when someone secretly believes you should be in a sideshow. (pause) Do you?

GEOFFREY

Never! Look, Dreydan, I didn't come here to ridicule or (he lifts up the gift) ... regale you! That's not at all who I am, you can ask any one of my ... my ... well, I don't have many friends. But when you come across one, feel free to ask.

(Brief silence. Then Dreydan slaps Geoffrey on the back and begins to laugh. Geoffrey joins in).

DREYDAN

Don't understand why you should be so friendless. You, with your suit and fancy coat, and a leather attaché case which is surely the sign of a successful man about town! Are you ... an accountant?

GEOFFREY

Almost THAT boring, but no. A law clerk. (pause) Okay, now you

know pretty much all you need to know about my lonely-hearts existence, so it's your turn.

DREYDAN

Trust me, I'm really not very interesting.

GEOFFREY

Oh, come on. There's gotta be a good story behind that ... (wanting to say "face," but thinking better of it) ... that ... sober façade.

DREYDAN

Don't you mean "sobering?"

GEOFFREY

No, no, no! I didn't mean—

(Dreydan calmly puts a hand on Geoffrey's shoulder).

DREYDAN

Relax, friend. I'm not offended in the least. My story is a short one, better consumed at a short sitting. Well (patting bench) like this one ...

(Lights down, and spotlight on Dreydan).

DREYDAN

I was born a happy boy. Right from the get-go, you could say, I was what you'd call a "smiler." I laughed and giggled an awful lot, as my mother used to tell everyone. But that only lasted until ... well, I was old enough to go to school. I thought I was normal, but other kids ... God isn't the only one who knows they can be mean. At first I thought they were picking on me because I was shy and, you know, smiled a lot. But there was no one else like me. And so, no one else who liked me.

(he stands, begins to pace)

I made it through those tumultuous school years somehow, and trust me, they were definitely tumultuous, and even graduated from college. Yet people didn't remember me as the "one most likely to succeed." They just recalled my ... face. (pause) Funny, because every morning, when I would look in the mirror, I'd want to forget it. (with sudden fervor) I

started wearing a hoodie! Extra-extra large, so the hood would shadow my face! And I wore it everywhere, even to job interviews – because, of course, I had to make a living. And what an impression I surely made – with my hood on, a hoodlum, and without it ... a ... beast. I was destined for infamy ... and solitude. Or so I thought.

(he pulls a photo out of his pocket)

My ... angel. (he kisses the picture) Such an ... angel. I miss her so. She saved me. Or rather, first she interviewed me. For “chief engineer” at WTIP Radio. I thought she was blind when she said “you’re hired.” And felt for sure she was insane when she said “yes” to dinner one colder-than normal afternoon in September.

(he kisses the photo again, then sits down)

The rest is, well ... of historical proportions.

(Spotlight down as lights are raised. Dreydan hands the photo to Geoffrey).

GEOFFREY

I ... am ... moved. (studying the photo) And so impressed.

DREYDAN

Only thing impressive is that I’m still alive after all these years. You know, I didn’t want to live after ... after she passed.

GEOFFREY

I still don’t want to live some days. And it’s been three years since Miranda died.

(A brief silence. Then Dreydan jumps to his feet).

DREYDAN

Well, life goes on, my friend. And it IS Christmas Eve. I don’t want to keep my daughter waiting ...

(Dreydan quickly shakes Geoffrey’s hand, then grabs the gift and turns to depart.

Geoffrey smiles, calmly watching Dreydan depart; but then a sudden thought occurs to him, and he shouts).

GEOFFREY

Wait! You have a daughter?

(Lights down).

SCENE FIVE

(Same city sidewalk, the first working day of the New Year. Morning. Geoffrey enters from the right, walking at an anxious pace, and stops at center stage).

GEOFFREY

I wonder. (suddenly bursts into song) I wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wonder!
(pause) I “wonder” what could be keeping him. (turns to audience)
Sorry. I don’t know why I’m so happy. First day back to work after the holidays and I’m feeling as giddy as ... well, Alastair Sim in “A Christmas Carol.”

(he pauses, looking first in front of himself,
and then behind, then at his watch)

Usually he’s here by now.

(He shrugs his shoulders, then resumes walking –
this time at a snail’s pace.

MIA enters from the left. She is a bright-eyed,
rose-cheeked woman, with a certain bounce to
her step. She takes a few steps and, spying
Geoffrey, hesitates for a brief moment.

As Mia and Geoffrey’s paths intersect, she pauses
for a instant – as if wanting to speak - but
Geoffrey walks past her without acknowledgment.

Mia turns toward the audience and speaks).

MIA

What a peculiar man. Acts as if he’s in his own little world.
(she takes several more steps, then stops again)
But he definitely was tall.

(She turns to look at Geoffrey – just as he is exiting to the left. Then shrugs her shoulders, and exits herself).

(Lights down, then quickly up again).

SCENE SIX

(Same scene, same day, late afternoon. This time Geoffrey enters from the left, and Mia from the right.

They walk slowly toward one another, and this time Geoffrey notices her – and is struck by her beauty. He stops in his tracks, addresses the audience using lyrics from the song “On The Sunny Side of the Street”).

GEOFFREY

Can't you hear ... (he glances first at Mia, then the sky) ... the pit-a-pat?

(Mia also notices Geoffrey, and stops and turns toward the audience).

MIA

(continuing the song)

And that happy tune is your step ...

(Suddenly caught up in a moment, Geoffrey grasps Mia by the hand and leads her in a twirl while they both sing).

GEOFFREY

Life can be complete ...

MIA

On the sunny side of the street!

(They both act suddenly embarrassed and pull away from each other).

GEOFFREY

I'm ... sorry.

MIA

Me too.

GEOFFREY

Well, not really, but ...

MIA

It was kind of spontaneous. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but ...

GEOFFREY

I haven't been spontaneous since ... since ...

(he is struck with a memory of Dreydan)

You didn't happen to pass a man when you were walking, did you? A ... an extraordinary man. A little taller than you, with a ... smile, and a gentle soul that could ...

(he reaches into his pocket, pulls out the photo of Dreydan's late wife)

... win the heart of a woman like this?

(Mia glances at the photo – and is instantly brought to tears).

MIA

My ... mother! And you!

(she rushes to embrace Geoffrey)

It's you! Right where he said you would be.

(Geoffrey, slow to come to terms with things, is suddenly quite aware of who is hugging him - and hugs her back).

GEOFFREY

Wait, so you are?

(Mia pulls back a step, peering up into

Geoffrey's eyes)

MIA

Mia. I am Mia. Daughter of—

(He pulls her close for a moment, and then excitedly pulls back to gaze into her eyes).

GEOFFREY

Dreydan! I have been looking for your father. Is he on an extended vacation? I wanted to return this photograph to him, because I know it meant so much—

(Mia pulls away, her tears intensifying).

GEOFFREY

Wait, what did I say?

MIA

It's ... it's not you. It's just that ...

GEOFFREY

Is your father okay? Please tell me that nothing has happened.

(Mia hangs her head).

MIA

It was a gradual decline. He knew it was coming – and so did I – just not so soon. On Christmas morning ...

GEOFFREY

On Christmas? I am so, so sorry.

MIA

No, please no pity for him! He never wanted any, especially not now. He lived a full life, and passed very ... happy.

(she begins crying anew)

He said I was his happiness. His only happiness, until he met you.

GEOFFREY

Me? We only actually talked that one time. Though I wanted to talk many times before. (pause) Your words ... you said I was right where he said I would be?

MIA

He said you were very kind to him. I gave my word that I would meet you. (she tries to smile) He's always been a very good judge of people, you know.

GEOFFREY

I am so s—

(She puts her finger to her lips).

MIA

Remember, no pity. (she lets out a small laugh) He would prefer that we rejoice instead – for all the beauty in the world!

GEOFFREY

Why do you ... laugh?

MIA

Oh, nothing. (she giggles) I am just remembering the way father described you ...

(Geoffrey strikes a semi-macho pose).

GEOFFREY

Tall, handsome ... I hope?

MIA

Well, he put it this way ...

(Lights fade down as a spotlight shines stage right, where Dreydan, wearing the sweater that Geoffrey gave him, is sitting in a chair).

DREYDAN

He's a little homely. His nose is a bit too big for the rest of his

face, and his ears surely flap and flutter on a windy day.

(Geoffrey and Mia embrace in the background)

But rarely have I met a man in this world who is willing to look beyond imperfections – his own, and others – and see the true goodness in the human soul. You really need to meet him.

(Light begins to fade)

Promise me you will meet him.

LIGHTS DOWN