

JOE CARBONE'S JOB by Art Shulman

ACT 1

SETTING: Eclectic Angie's Coffeehouse, which is furnished with tables, chairs, bookcases, etc... On one table is a chessboard, and a dartboard is on one wall. A goldfish bowl is on the bar/counter.

AT RISE: No one is on stage. ANGIE enters from the kitchen and begins tidying up and arranging things. Shortly, LOUDMOUTH enters.

LOUDMOUTH

Hey waitress, where's the crowd?

ANGIE

It's early. Why don't you take a seat? I'll be right with you.

LOUDMOUTH

No. thanks. I never drink alone.

ANGIE

Suit yourself.

(THERESA enters)

THERESA

Hi Angie.

ANGIE

Hi Theresa. What a pretty bunch of roses you've got tonight!

THERESA

Guess I'm a little early. Your customers aren't here yet.

LOUDMOUTH

Hey, I'm a customer!

THERESA

(Holding up rose to LOUDMOUTH, who sneezes on it)
Would you like to buy a rose?

LOUDMOUTH

No thanks. I'm not exactly the rose type!

THERESA

Well Angie. I'll be back later, when some real customers come in.

ANGIE

See you later Theresa.

(THERESA exits)

LOUDMOUTH

Don't you just love those people walking around selling flowers! Like that girl!

ANGIE

What's wrong with selling roses?

LOUDMOUTH

Nothing, if you don't mind street peddlers who pay no business tax, and take trade away from legitimate merchants.

ANGIE

Excuse me, she helps support her family. She's got five younger brothers and sisters. Besides, how do you know she doesn't pay taxes?

LOUDMOUTH

Those type of people never do. Just like the people who sell oranges on the streets. At least you can eat an orange. You can't eat a flower, unless you include rose hip tea!

ANGIE

Flowers are not meant for eating.

LOUDMOUTH

Yeah, they're meant for making people sneeze, with all the pollen they shoot in the air.

ANGIE

A lot of people love flowers.

LOUDMOUTH

Yeah, they're the same one whose existence is so drab they need something to add color to their lives. Besides, why buy a flower when you can snatch one from someone's hedge?

ANGIE

How can anyone not like roses?

LOUDMOUTH

Why should anyone like something with thorns? I say if you're going to buy anything, get something that lasts, not something that dries out and falls apart in a few days.

ANGIE

You are not a sensitive person!

LOUDMOUTH

The truth sometimes hurts, huh lady? Hey, I'll be back when you get more people in here.

ANGIE

Don't rush!

(ANGIE exits to kitchen. JOE enters as LOUDMOUTH nears exit.)

LOUDMOUTH

Don't bother going in there, it's dead.

(LOUDMOUTH exits)

JOE

This place has more character with no customers than most places with customers like that.

I'm Joe Carbone. I work with chickens. In a poultry plant. I been there twenty years. After all this time, suddenly I got a conscience problem. The poor chickens! Day after day I'm surrounded by chickens. On one side of me there's live ones, chirping, peeping. On the other side the chickens are closer to being part of someone's dinner. Much closer. It's quieter on that side. Much quieter.

A chicken comes in there, he don't leave, except shrink-wrapped. He don't die from old age. Some of the guys affectionately call the place the House of Death. How'd you like to work the House of Death, even if it wasn't your death they were talking about?

You know the expression, "Running around like a chicken without a head." Well it refers to when you chop their heads off, they do this cute chicken dance before they die. One thing making my job hard is recognizing that different chickens have different personalities, and that each chicken is an individual in his own right, even if they all do the same dance step before they finally die.

Working there you realize that chickens can communicate with each other. They talk to one another. Sometime you get the feeling they're talking to you. Their sounds are not random noises. Each puk-puk-puk has a purpose. In a way, I think of chickens as I do little children, making their little noises, playful, and somewhat intelligent, but not real smart. If they were real smart the chickens on this side would notice what happened to the chickens on the side, talk it over with each other, and they'd be much more nervous than they are.

When new workers start we stress to them, "Don't make friends with the chickens." Signs all over, "Don't make friends with the chickens." But some chickens are so cute you just can't help it. That's when it's real hard; when you have to kill one of you little pals, who you've spoke to the past few weeks, and you wonder if he'll end up boiled, fried, or fricassee.

Some of my workers still let themselves get away with rationalizations for killing another living being. Don, who has been born again, he says, "You have no problem swatting a fly or stepping on a roach. If you don't feel bad about killing them, why worry about chickens? All animals are equal in God's eyes."

Herbie, he says, "Chicken soup makes sick people better. How else you gonna make chicken soup unless you kill the chicken?"

Chickens were my father's life work. His name was Nick Carbone. He founded the poultry plant thirty years ago, just the other side of the river. Six months ago he died. Before he

passed I was just in charge of production. I run it all now. Or, closer to the truth, it runs itself. The only place I worked in my whole life, until last week, is the poultry plant. I loved my father. He was my idol, my buddy. He always put his big hand on my shoulder, told me I did good. But since his passing, things have changed.

I have an offer to sell the place. Buster Findel wants to buy me out. He owns a restaurant chain we sell chickens to, plus lots of other businesses. My father never liked him. My father, who rarely said bad about anyone, called him a pompous moneygrubber. I don't know if I could sell my father's poultry plant to someone he didn't like. And if I sell, I can't be on the company bowling team. The league championship tournament is next month.

Still, given how hard it is for me to continue at the poultry plant, I might have to sell and change careers. But what career should I go into? I don't want to make a mistake and have my new career give me regrets, like at the plant.

(ANGIE enters, goes to goldfish bowl on bar)

A week ago I was passing by this coffeehouse and saw a sign in the window saying, "Waiter needed for evenings." I said to myself, "Hey Joe, why not! You like to talk to people. A coffeehouse could be the perfect opportunity to meet different kinds of people and ask them about what they do for a living. Who knows what you might find out?"

So, I applied for the job. Of course at first I didn't tell Angie, the owner, what I did during the day, though it came out later. She hired me right away. So far I'm still working on what to do with my life. I been talking to the customers, but I haven't figured the answer yet. Sell the poultry plant to Findel? Find the new career that's just for me? Or what? Nothing seems right.

(COMPUTER SCIENTIST enters, sits at chessboard)

So here I am, waiting tables, cleaning up, and most important, when it's not too busy, conversing with customers, picking their brain about their career. I come in, I put on a clean apron.... all white, no red splotches on it and I'm ready for work. All kinds of people come in. People like coffee. We got different kinds -- espresso, cappuccino, regular and decaf. Coffee beans. Tea also, herbal and regular. Scones, danish, muffins. A good place for people to relax, play some games, maybe read a bit, or have a conversation.

That's Angie. Isn't she pretty! We get along. I'd like her to be my girlfriend, but yesterday she told me she couldn't be serious with someone who ran a poultry plant.

ANGIE

I love animals. I keep 4 cats, 3 dogs, 2 guinea pigs, and a parakeet in my apartment. None of them is in a cage. I think it's cruel to keep an animal in a cage. Some people say my apartment stinks, but when I come home, there's no sweeter smell to my nose.

Once I thought of getting a boa constrictor, but I get real cuddly with my pets, and I was afraid that one night he'd creep under the covers with me in my bed, and when I woke up in the morning I'd find myself accidentally strangled to death.

I'd never have a place that served cooked animals. When we serve bear claws and alligator pastries, we're honoring animals, not actually eating them. I won't eat anything with a soul. That's where I draw the line. And I think all animals have souls. As far as fruits and vegetables having souls, I think that's ridiculous. They have pits, not souls. I wonder if pits have souls?

So, I'm a vegetarian. I think eating meat makes people too aggressive and violent. And it's not right for humans to take advantage of animals, who can't stand up for themselves against human cruelty. I feel really strongly about animal rights. I'm willing to do anything necessary to fight for them. I'd even consider joining a terrorist organization which would blow up

laboratories that victimize helpless animals.

But I'm no fanatic. I used to be. Once, I got lice in my hair and I shaved my head bald so I wouldn't have to kill any of the lice, who have to live too somehow. Nowadays I'd use a shampoo to put them to sleep. When I see a cockroach crawling around here, I don't let him have the run of the place. I kindly pick him up and show him the door.

(ANGIE throws imaginary cockroach out the door)

Oops, sorry mister!

As a symbol of my sense of oneness with animals, sometimes I sprinkle parakeet seeds on my salad. And every Saturday afternoon I have a sandwich of vegetarian dog food on wheat-- a very small sandwich. Personally I like canned Veggie Kibbles.

My customers really like Joe. I could tell. They give him nice tips. He's an okay waiter. He talks a little too much with customers, and sometimes I get the feeling he talks to himself. We have some good conversations, and he's very sweet, and I think I could really get to like him. But I told him I could never be serious about anybody who ran a slaughterhouse. So, right now, my personal life is on hold.

JOE

What Angie said about the poultry plant is in my mind. But she doesn't know everything about me. Like the meaning bowling has for me.

I like being here. There's always something going on, always someone to talk to. Someone who can give you a good perspective on the profession they're in. And it's amazing how many of them mention an animal when you ask about their career. My ear listens for that, given my current one-sided relationship with chickens.

(JOE approaches COMPUTER SCIENTIST, who is playing chess against himself)

Hi, I'm Joe. I'm your server tonight.

COMPUTER SCIENTIST

Hello.

JOE

What's your name?

COMPUTER SCIENTIST

Why do I need to know my name?

JOE

I don't really. I was just going to ask you a question, and I thought it would be nice to know your name.

COMPUTER SCIENTIST

What type of question?

JOE

Well, see, I'm thinking of changing careers, and I'm working here temporarily talking to people about what they do, to help me decide what I should do.

COMPUTER SCIENTIST

(Moves chess piece)

Oh, another "I'm not really a waiter" waiter. Checkmate! I won.

JOE

No, really. I own a poultry plant and I'm thinking of selling and getting into something new.

COMPUTER SCIENTIST

(Turns around chessboard)

But I also lost. Drat! So, you own a poultry plant. Well, well. I write manuals for computer software. We must have a lot in common.

JOE

You're in the computer business? There's a similarity right there. We're both concerned with bites. Could you tell me what it's like.

COMPUTER SCIENTIST

You want to know what my job is like. In my position -- preparing computer software user manuals -- you've got to understand both computers and people. Understanding computers is much easier. They're logical, they have no imagination, no moods to drive you crazy. They're consistent, reliable. Click on Format and it does the same thing it did the last time you clicked Format. When people make a big mistake on the computer they usually blame the computer or the program, not themselves. I'm sick of it!

I guess I'm down on people right now. Including my co-workers. Especially my co-workers. I used to enjoy my life, until some of my co-workers began to preach that I couldn't possibly reach my full potential unless I became an enlightened member of their consciousness-raising group. One promises if I join his group I'll develop a positive cosmic energy flow. Another says his group has a twelve step program to put me in touch with my personal heavenly angels. Another, involved with fasting, wants me to join him in cleansing our bodies of poisons inhibiting personal growth; besides, I'll be less likely to develop colon cancer.

Yesterday a colleague glances at specifications I've just written for a user's manual and tells me I'm holding back. If I attend his group's meeting I'll learn to let go, and I'll be surprised how my writing will improve. When I say I'm writing a technical book, not a novel, he lets me know I lack the ability to express myself emotionally and unless I change, I'll always be a computer person rather than a people person.

They all tell me how much fun it is to be a member of their group. But it I wanted to have fun by attending seminars and meetings, I'd rather go to ones like "How to Pick Up Girls" or "How To Get Rich Buying Penny Stocks."

So many of them have tried to convince me to join their group, I figure something must be wrong with me. I wish I could get away from some of them. I think if I could be an animal right now I'd be one with such dignity and inner serenity that others wouldn't even think of trying to change me. I think I'd like to be a giraffe, an animal with no enemies, and the instant ability to get above it all by merely raising his head, and who does it so naturally, he's not accused of being defensive. An animal who doesn't talk, and so is not constantly taunted to open up, or accused of withholding feelings.

I had an idea about how I could get people off my neck. I've observed you're usually considered fair game to those who want you to join their group only if you're not currently involved with another self-improvement group. So, my idea was to ask them to enlist in my own group, which raises consciousness by trying to pick up girls and buying penny stocks. The only problem is that my group sounded so good that most of them decided to join, and the first meeting is next Wednesday.

Meanwhile, I'm a little hesitant to see any of them while I still have this stiff neck.

According to them a stiff neck rarely has physical causes. Rather than accept explanations like cold breezes or car accidents, they blame stress. They'll say my stiff neck is due to my being unable to handle stress, and if I only become a member of their group I'll learn how. Well, the only recent stress I've had is dealing with my friends who want me to join up with them. Besides, they'll never accept the real explanation -- that I got my stiff neck after pretending I was a giraffe.

JOE

Would you like ice for your neck? Thanks for telling me all that. What can I serve you?

(THERESA enters)

COMPUTER SCIENTIST

I'll have a cappuccino.

(CABBIE enters, rushes into restroom, offstage, carrying carafe of pale yellow liquid)

ANGIE

So Joe, did Gilbert tell you much about the computer field?

JOE

He wants to get away from people. That's not me. I need a job where I'm around people. Can I buy a flower Theresa?

THERESA

Sure. This is a nice one, Joe. I like selling flowers here. This place feels like an immense living room. So relaxed. Like working here, Joe?

JOE

I truly love it here. Being able to banter with customers, the atmosphere, Angie and all.

THERESA

You own a chicken slaughterhouse too, huh Joe? Angie told me.

JOE

Yeah. A poultry plant.

THERESA

You like owning a slaughterhouse?

JOE

I don't like the killing part any more. But I like the idea I'm supplying people with food to eat. It's a public service.

THERESA

I'm like Angie. I don't eat chicken. People can get along without eating meat.

JOE

Maybe you and Angie don't eat chicken, but almost everybody else does. And most people think chicken is a native dish of their nationality. Like Americans think chickens are American. But chickens are truly international. Who eats Chickens? Everybody! The Italians, the Chinese, the French, the Smorgasbords. The Smorgasbords love their chicken. There's always a chicken dish on the menu, when the Smorgasbords put out their buffet! I can't think of a single nationality that doesn't eat chickens, except maybe the Eskimo.

THERESA

You eat a lot of chicken yourself?

JOE

No, not anymore.

THERESA

Well, I've got some business to take care of. See you later Joe.

(THERESA heads to restroom)

JOE

See you later, Theresa.

(BUSTER FINDEL enters, and sits)

Hey Angie, is that who I think it is just walked in?

ANGIE

If you think it's Buster Findel, it's who you think it is. He comes in about once a week. Reads his paper. Usually takes espresso and a napoleon.

JOE

A napoleon. I'm not surprised.

ANGIE

Know him?

JOE

He's the bigshot who offered to buy me out. I think he means to tear down the plant, build an industrial park.

(ASTROLOGER enters, sits. JOE walks over to her)

Hi! I'm Joe. Would you like some peanuts?

ASTROLOGER

Hi! Has anyone ever read your palm, Joe?

JOE

No they haven't. What's your name?

ASTROLOGER

Jill Joysong.

JOE

Is that with one "1" or two?

ASTROLOGER

Two!

JOE

Before I take your order, I wanted to say I just work here as a waiter temporary, and I need a new career. If you have a few minutes would you mind telling me what you do for a living?

ASTROLOGER

I'll talk about astrology anytime.

JOE

You an astrologer?

ASTROLOGER

It's my life

You know what? Not everybody believes in astrology. Some people actually believe God controls their fate, not the positioning of the stars. And some so-called scientists got together a few years ago and proclaimed astrology had no scientific basis. You know what? Four centuries before that Nostradamus analyzed the stars and predicted a group of scientist would make the proclamation in four hundred years.

Our biggest nemeses are astronomers who think they know more that we do. If they're so smart why can't they predict the future, like we do? They readily admit they can only see the past. They seem to take pride in observing events they admit took place light years ago. Their scopes take in what happened. Our scopes predict what will happen. And on a much more personal level that they ever get to Horoscopes are much more useful to the average person than telescopes!

Astrology works. Too many things happen that can't be coincidence. How come just about every Cancer is mellow? And have you ever met two opposite sex water signs faithful to each other for more that a year? And if astrology didn't work, why would there be an astrology column in just about every major newspaper in the country?

The profession of astrology has matured as the public has become educated and familiar with its nuances. While there's still room for generalists, astrology professionals have now developed specializations. And just like you wouldn't visit the proctologist if you had an earache, you'd want to visit the astrologer who specialized in the area of life you wanted to know about. For example, you might visit your financial astrologer, your health and safety astrologer, your political astrologer, or someone like me, your sex astrologer.

You know what? I have so many animals I like -- crabs, scorpions, rams, bulls, fish, goats. I wish all of the signs could have been animals. For example, it probably wouldn't have been to difficult for someone to have drawn different line between the stars that are in what's known as Gemini, and outlined a bear. A bear would make a lovely sign, especially a kodiak bear, so we columnists could have fun with it, calling it kodiak of the zodiac.

I'm a Leo. Yesterday my column advised Leos to "Prepare yourself for action." Last night both I and the prediction were fulfilled. You know what? Today's message is, "Aries is rising and may be ready for ramming."

Even though some people seem so negative you suspect they were born under a minus sign, you just might have caught them on a bad day under the cusp, and you can't really blame

the stars, since all the signs have more positive than negative to them. Very rarely do my columns predict something negative. Even if the stars indicate rubber items may cause rashes today, I won't put it in -- in my column. Astrologers have morality and decency! We rarely attack the ethics of anyone, no less a whole profession, like astronomers do to us. They'll learn. You know what? Just like physicians gradually had to accept that chiropractors could cure backaches they couldn't, sooner or later the scientific community will accept us.

Meanwhile, I think the only thing I have in common with astronomers is that we both believe in the big bang theory.

JOE

That was fascinating. What may I serve you?

(LOUDMOUTH enters shaking a paper bag. THERESA enters from the restroom)

LOUDMOUTH

Down boy! Down! I said down!

(LOUDMOUTH slaps bag hard. THERESA gasps. LOUDMOUTH tosses empty bag to THERESA. THERESA exits, fuming)

Lighten up, honey!

(CABBIE enters from restroom with empty carafe)

ANGIE

I'll serve the horoscope lady, Joe. Louie XYZ!

CABBIE

Thanks Angie.

(CABBIE zips fly goes to bar)

Got anything greasy?

(CUSTOMER RELATIONS REP enters, sits in chair near dartboard. Shortly SHE begins playing darts)

JOE

You like your job?

CABBIE

Sure. I drive a cab.

JOE

So what's it like to drive a cab?

CABBIE

What's it like?

The word I'd apply to most cabbies is "decent". Decent people making a decent living. None of us is rich, but there's food on the table, a bed to sleep in, and thank God a bathroom at home. One thing for sure is cabbies can't have a weak bladder. Sometimes you're caught in traffic and can't pull over. Even if you haven't got a fare it's hard to find a place to relieve yourself in the city. There's always people around, even in the alleys, some of whom are sleeping

in what you want to relieve yourself of.

(CABBIE shows empty carafe.)

Most of us carry jars, but it can be embarrassing when a truck driver in the next lane looks down and sees what you're doing. Or a passenger in the back leans over, especially a woman. So it's not unusual for us to walk into restaurants pretending to be customers.

I'm in my cab more than in my home, so I try to keep it nice. OK, it has some dents. All cabs have dents. But I wash the windows each day. I keep it neat. I try to make it comfortable for my fares. I used to smoke cigars, but I stopped when I realized some people mind the smoke. Besides, with the type of food I eat sitting in my stomach, I get gas, so there's already enough strong aroma in the cab.

The main skill in being profitable, besides driving fast and knowing when to cut off other drivers, is gauging the customer. Your ideal customer's an out of town airport pickup you take the long way, showing him the sights. Driving a cab's a dollar and cents proposition. You can tell how well you did each day by the total on your meter, and by the tips in your pocket and out of sight of the IRS. I keep a family picture in the cab where my fares can't miss seeing it. There's two smiling kids with their mother. The kids are the cutest. I cut it out from a magazine and framed it, but I let my passengers think it's my wife and kids. It's harder for fares to stiff me on the tip if they think I have a family to support. I think I make more money from that picture than by claiming I ain't got change.

I been almost everywhere in the city. Sometimes the passenger says the destination, I pull down the flag, and I feel I'm on automatic pilot. I sometimes think I'm like the smart rat in the maze, driving between tall buildings, going from start to finish without hitting any dead ends or taking wrong turns. Of course some wrong turns I take intentionally to build the total on the meter. When I reach the end of the maze, the passengers, destination, I get my reward. My nickname is Rat, because of this long thin face. Rats are misunderstood. They do what they have to survive in today's world. Like cabbies. Believe me if they could get enough food in the sewer they wouldn't show up in people's homes.

Once I had this lady passenger I took all the way from the airport to the suburbs. It happened to be one of those times I had to once or twice what I call let some air out of the tire from the chili I ate. Her clothes said she was rich. She gives me a dime tip. I say, "You sure this is all?"

"That's all you deserve," she says.

"Why?" I ask.

"It's smells like a pig sty in there," she says.

So I go, "Lady, you're wrong. The only pig in the cab was you! But you should know you've been sitting in a Rat's cab filled with road dents."

Road dents. Get it? Road dents?