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# The Concrete Wall

by

J.C. Svec

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# The Concrete Wall

by J.C. Svec

## Cast of Characters

**CHARLIE;** *a young man who has died a soldier, helping his sister get over his death* [The character is portrayed as a 13 year-old boy and as a young man of 19]

**ANNIE;** *a young woman who is having trouble letting go of her deceased, younger brother*

## Setting

*New Jersey. Summer, 1971. An implied concrete and cinder block wall on which is chalked a perfectly outlined strike zone. Opposite the wall sits a silver metal garbage can and lid.*

## Properties

Pink rubber ball

Baseball glove

Ballpoint pen

Chalk

N.Y. Yankee baseball hat

## The Concrete Wall

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*AT RISE: A young man, CHARLIE. His clothes and mannerisms are those of a young teenage boy. A baseball glove and a pink rubber ball sit at his feet. He meticulously runs white chalk over the heavily lined rectangle on the wall. CHARLIE'S head is bowed as he observes his work from under the pulled-down beak of his baseball cap. ANNIE, his sister, sits on the garbage can. She observes CHARLIE'S artistry before speaking directly to the audience.*

*NOTE: CHARLIE should only speak or refer to ANNIE when specified. Unlike CHARLIE, ANNIE is always aware of CHARLIE'S presence since it is her memory. The stage lighting should provide isolated areas in addition to areas to signify CHARLIE and ANNIE coming together and, ultimately, ANNIE accepting CHARLIE'S death.*

ANNIE

That's my little brother Charlie. His ball and glove. The wall belongs to Barney and Leo Miller. It's one of four walls that make up the building. But you probably could have figured that out for yourself. The roof completes the package we know as Miller's Auto Parts and Supply. That, you wouldn't have figured out. *(Looks at wall)* Don't worry about the chalk, it wears off. A heavy rain and it's gone in minutes. And besides, Barney and Leo don't mind. *(To CHARLIE)* Tilt your hat back, Charlie.

*(CHARLIE'S attention stays on the wall.)*

CHARLIE

I'm okay.

ANNIE

You're straining your eyes.

CHARLIE

*(Insistent)* No, I'm not.

ANNIE

Charlie.

CHARLIE

Alright, alright already.

ANNIE

*(To audience)* Ever since he was a little boy he's wanted to play baseball. For his ninth birthday our aunt and uncle gave him this replica Yankee's uniform. He insisted Mom sew a number "7" on the shirt.

CHARLIE

Only Mickey Mantle, the greatest Yankee, no, the greatest ballplayer who's ever lived.

ANNIE

*(Smiles)* It took Mom hours to find a piece of black material for that number and then sew it on. I don't know how she talked him out of wanting to draw pinstripes on it.

*(CHARLIE turns his head to ANNIE but doesn't make eye contact.)*

CHARLIE

*(Resolute)* "The Mick," Annie, "The Mick."

ANNIE

*(To audience)* He wore that heavy flannel uniform all summer. No matter how hot it got, and trust me, it was a hot summer; he wore that thing every single day. When it was in the laundry he'd cut out the "NY" and a number "7" from paper, color them in with a black crayon and pin them on a tee shirt. Eventually, he found a laundry marker and just drew them on.

CHARLIE

*(Disappointed)* Yeah, until Mom wouldn't let me do it anymore.

ANNIE

*(To CHARLIE)* You were running out of tee shirts. *(To audience)* Where were we? Right... the wall.

CHARLIE

*(To audience)* It's not perfect, but it's pretty close. Better than most I've seen, or pitched against, anyway. I'm really lucky... it being on the same block that I live on and everything. Just across the street.

*(CHARLIE returns to his chalking.)*

ANNIE

*(Looks up)* Across the street is up there. We live on the third floor. Me, Mom and Charlie. Dad died a few years ago. It's kind of... let's just say it's what we can afford. Mom tries to—

*(CHARLIE interrupts, referring to the wall.)*

CHARLIE

You see how this stuff... this...

ANNIE

Charlie, I was talking.

CHARLIE

Sorry. We don't talk about our father very much anymore. Mom hasn't adjusted very well.

CHARLIE

*(Still)* It wasn't fair, you know.

ANNIE

*(Encouraging)* What's that Charlie?

CHARLIE

You know.

ANNIE

Dad? *(Silence)* We talk sometimes. If nothing else, we do have each other. The night he died, Charlie spent hours out here. It was really quiet for a summer night. One of those rare evenings when no one was around. No kids; nobody hanging out on the corner. Seemed as every porch was empty. After the sun went down, all you could hear was that hollow ball hitting that wall.

CHARLIE

*(Interjects)* No sound like it in the world.

ANNIE

It was such a perfect cadence, too.

*(CHARLIE bounces the ball against the wall.)*

ANNIE, *Continues*

Such a rhythm. Like a machine.

CHARLIE

*(Changing mood)* Can I explain to them about the wall?

ANNIE

Sure.

CHARLIE

*(Teases)* What I started to point out before was... this stuff here...

ANNIE

The mortar.

CHARLIE

That's it. Pretty even with the brick. It's deep, but not too deep.

ANNIE

And that's important?

CHARLIE

*(Astonished)* Yeah, that's real important.

*(CHARLIE rubs the palm of his hand over the wall.)*

CHARLIE, *Continues*

*(Delighted)* Almost smooth. Amazing. *(To audience)* It may not seem like a big deal to you, but for a kid like me... *(He holds up the ball)* These things cost money. A new “Pennsy Pinkie” or a Spalding... that’s a big deal, a really big deal.

*(CHARLIE’s attention is back to the wall. ANNIE realizes he has left the audience without any further explanations.)*

ANNIE

*(To CHARLIE)* Charlie, you might want to explain yourself a little more.

CHARLIE

*(Embarrassed; to audience)* Sorry.

*(CHARLIE uses the ball and wall for show-and-tell.)*

CHARLIE, *Continues*

*(Serious)* If the ball doesn’t hit the wall flat and hits one of these groves or high spots... whoosh! Out to the left where you’ve got two sewers. One on each side of the block. Once the ball settles into a roll in the gutters, you can kiss this baby good-bye.

ANNIE

*(To audience)* Run after it.

CHARLIE

*(To audience)* See, that’s where you’d make a humongous mistake. With cars always parked on both sides of the street, you can’t always see it. You might run right past it.

ANNIE

*(To CHARLIE)* So, what’s the secret Charlie?

CHARLIE

*(Knowingly)* As soon as that sucker shoots out, hit the pavement. See where the ball is and head right for it. The trick is to run past it and then, just scoop it up like a routine ground ball. Disaster avoided... if you’re lucky.

*(CHARLIE takes a ballpoint pen from his pocket, sits ‘Indian-style’, and re-inks his name on the rubber ball.)*

ANNIE

*(To audience)* You always knew when a sewer claimed its latest victim. Charlie would race into the kitchen screaming for a wire hanger. Once he got one, it was a matter of seconds before he had the top untwisted. By the time he was back out the door and across the porch he had the hanger pretty much straightened out. Three flights back downstairs and through the back yard

ANNIE, *Continued*

and he's molded a perfect scooping utensil, handle included. Imagine a giant dipper for coloring Easter eggs.

CHARLIE

*(To himself)* I'd save a lot of time if Mom'd just let me keep one on the back porch. I'd clean it and everything.

*(ANNIE pinches her nose in CHARLIE's direction.)*

ANNIE

It's been down in the sewer, Charlie.

CHARLIE

*(Without looking)* Girl.

ANNIE

*(Regroups)* So, what if the ball bounces to your right?

CHARLIE

*(Aghast)* That's real trouble. The Boulevard.

ANNIE

*(To audience)* The main thoroughfare in our quaint little town. Four lanes of two-way traffic, all day, all night - every day, every night. It bounces out there and...

CHARLIE

*(Afraid)* It almost never gets clear across the street. It usually hits off the front of a car, or truck and then it could travel for a full block or two. It bounces off the front of a bus and you probably never find it. Ever.

ANNIE

Why's that?

CHARLIE

*(Depleted)* The size of the front of the bus, along with the height of the bumper, then add in the amount of space under the bus... any number of reasons the ball gets trapped and carried away.

ANNIE

*(To CHARLIE)* But if you do?

CHARLIE

*(Tentative)* Do? Do what?

ANNIE

*(To CHARLIE)* Find the ball.

CHARLIE

If you do, you are super lucky. Especially if the ball doesn't split in half, which it might do if it's an old, worn one.

ANNIE

*(Plays along)* Why would you be playing with an old, worn out ball?

CHARLIE

*(Matter-of-fact)* Only one left.

ANNIE

So if you're not 'super lucky' then...

*(CHARLIE and ANNIE simultaneously look up, beyond Charlie's wall.)*

CHARLIE

*(Flabbergasted)* Miller's roof.

ANNIE

*(To audience)* The older boys play stickball further up the block. A couple of houses down from Avenue A. They even have a home plate painted on the street.

CHARLIE

Dead center. Directly across from the fire hydrant in front of Danny Ryder's house.

ANNIE

*(To audience)* The first manhole cover down, the one with a yellow "X" on it, is designated as second base, even though no one actually ever runs the bases. A ball hit beyond it that bounces is an automatic single. Same rule for the next manhole, but that's a double. Somebody hits the Boulevard on a fly... automatic home run.

CHARLIE

*(To audience)* I've never seen it happen, myself. But they say Joey Nicholson hit three one summer.

ANNIE

*(Swoons)* Ahh, Joey Nicholson. What a cutie.

CHARLIE

He was like, only the number one stickball player this city has ever seen. And he came from this block. Our block.

ANNIE

*(To CHARLIE)* He was something else, that's for sure.

(*To audience*) Girl.

CHARLIE

Butt face.

ANNIE

Turd.

CHARLIE

Piss-ant.

ANNIE

Sister.

CHARLIE

Brother.

ANNIE

(*Silence.*)

(*Sincere*) Love you. Me too.

BOTH

(*To CHARLIE*) What were we talking about?

ANNIE

Rounding the bases.

CHARLIE

(*Sly*) Right, Joey Nicholson.

ANNIE

(*Disgusted*) Ughhh. Home runs.

CHARLIE

(*Playfully*) Right. Anyway, the guys have an endless supply of—

ANNIE

(*CHARLIE cuts her off so the type of ball is understood.*)

Spaldeens. Or Pennsys. Nothing too good for their stickball game.

CHARLIE

The ball gets hit onto Miller's roof and it's an automatic out. And since they don't need them...

ANNIE

CHARLIE

*(Grateful)* They leave them.

ANNIE

*(Gestures)* Enter Charlie the Circus Boy. Especially after one of those grey behemoths, barreling down the boulevard keeping on schedule, gobbles up one of those shots out to the right.

CHARLIE

*(Over his shoulder)* Can I, please?

ANNIE

*(Corrects him)* May I.

CHARLIE

*(Disappointed)* It's my story.

ANNIE

No, I was trying... go ahead.

CHARLIE

*(To audience)* I found a way onto the roof. You have to be real careful, though. There are bars on the back window so actually getting up the side of the building is the easy part.

ANNIE

*(To audience; proudly)* Tough guy, huh?

CHARLIE

Sneaking into the yard to get to the building, that's the hard part. *(CHARLIE pauses)* It's scary, really scary. If Mr. or Mrs. Cassidy ever caught me... they'd tell Mom and...

*(CHARLIE pantomimes death by dragging his thumb across his throat. He then puts a finger to his lips and shushes the audience.)*

CHARLIE, *Continues*

*(Whispers to audience)* Our secret, okay?

ANNIE

*(To audience)* To be honest, the Cassidys knew. They told Mom they'd keep an eye on him until he was down off the roof and on his way. So Mom knew. I knew. Barney and Leo Miller knew. Joey Nicholson knew. He told me he'd hit one up there on purpose every now and then. Just for Charlie.

CHARLIE

*(Solemn)* He was a really cool guy.

ANNIE

*(To herself)* Yes, he was.

*(Silence.)*

CHARLIE

*(Quietly)* I miss him.

ANNIE

*(To audience)* Joey was the first on our block to go to Vietnam. He didn't come home in body bag but he might as well have. The VA says he speaks a word every now and then. *(Increasingly angry)* Just a random word. He says nothing about nothing. The doctors try to encourage his parents. "At least his brain is functioning." "Be patient, first words then sentences." "At least he isn't violent." That's my favorite. "At least he isn't violent." Well, Doctor Doolittle, it's pretty hard to be violent when you don't have any arms and legs and the most consistent thing that comes out of your mouth is drool.

*(CHARLIE removes his baseball cap and looks over to his sister for the first time. His speech and mannerisms from this point of the play are those of a young man.)*

CHARLIE

*(To ANNIE)* The Cassidys spied on me?

ANNIE

*(To CHARLIE)* Yes, they watched out for you.

CHARLIE

Mom, too. Really?

ANNIE

I didn't have the heart to tell you.

CHARLIE

*(Amazed)* And almost everyone on the block knew.

ANNIE

Honestly?

CHARLIE

Yes.

ANNIE

I think everyone on the block knew.

*(CHARLIE looks up above the wall.)*

CHARLIE

*(Surprised)* I thought when I climbed up there it was the best kept secret in the world.

ANNIE

Like you don't anymore.

CHARLIE

You know I don't.

ANNIE

Don't be a wise guy. I saw you up there just the other day.

CHARLIE

*(Disconcerted)* Just the other day, huh?

ANNIE

When your little girlfriend from school called the house.

*(CHARLIE gives ANNIE a quizzical look.)*

ANNIE, *Continues*

*(Annoyed)* Donna. To invite you to her birthday party.

CHARLIE

*(Nods)* That's right. I remember, now.

ANNIE

*(Mocks)* I remember now. I look down from the porch to call you upstairs and instead I'm almost eye- to-eye with you up on the roof.

CHARLIE

Caught in the act.

ANNIE

I'd say so.

*(CHARLIE picks up his ball and glove. He tosses the pink sphere into the air several times.)*

CHARLIE

*(Smug)* Know how many I found that day?

ANNIE

Five.

CHARLIE

*(Surprised)* I told you?

ANNIE

More than once.

CHARLIE

It was a good day.

ANNIE

Except you never spoke to your girlfriend.

CHARLIE

*(Corrects)* She wasn't my girlfriend.

ANNIE

Could've been.

CHARLIE

*(Looks at ball)* This was more important. *(Silence)* Hey, Sis.

ANNIE

Yeah.

CHARLIE

That was four years ago.

ANNIE

*(Pause)* I know.

*(Silence.)*

ANNIE, *Continues*

*(Melancholy)* Seems like it was just the other day. It's all been a blur since you've been gone. I sit here, and stare at that wall and it's as if the two of us are out here like nothing ever happened. Like you're still... why'd you go Charlie?

*(CHARLIE simply shrugs his shoulders.)*

ANNIE, *Continues*

*(Annoyed)* That's not an answer.

CHARLIE

*(Defensive)* What do you want me say? What is it you still want after all this time?

*(Silence.)*

ANNIE

A reason.

CHARLIE

As if anything I say, any rationale, any explanation is going to satisfy you. Or make you feel better or even bring me home.

ANNIE

*(Hurt)* That's not fair.

CHARLIE

Neither was my dying. But that's what we're dealing with.

ANNIE

*(Calm)* You didn't have to go, though. You had an out. Several if I'm not mistaken.

CHARLIE

You don't know that, not for sure.

ANNIE

You could have tried.

CHARLIE

Do you really think they would have deferred me for being the last living male in our family? A bit of a stretch, don't you think?

ANNIE

Maybe. *(Pause)* There was college. You had a full scholarship. A thousand days and nights of throwing a ball against that wall would have paid off.

CHARLIE

Let it go, please. I believed what I believed.

ANNIE

You never believed in the war. We talked and you told me so.

CHARLIE

I got called to serve my country. Dad did.

ANNIE

*(Dumbfounded)* Charlie, that was World War II. It was a different war, a different time. Very, very different.

CHARLIE

Joey Nicholson went. You used tell me he was the smartest guy on the block. You said, 'Try to be like Joey, Charlie.' 'Listen to Joey, Charlie, he'll steer you right.'

ANNIE

*(Defensive)* I said a lot of things when you were growing up. Dad was gone and you were growing up faster than Mom and I could keep track of. You needed someone to, I don't know, look up to. Be able to talk to about stuff... whatever. And he loved you like a little brother.

CHARLIE

I know that. I didn't go because he did, or told me to. He also taught me to think for myself. Give me a little credit will you. It was my decision.

ANNIE

A decision that affected a lot of people.

*(Silence.)*

CHARLIE

I'm sorry you ended up losing both of us.

ANNIE

*(Pause)* I just really miss you.

CHARLIE

I miss you too, Sis. I never meant for you to be alone. Honest to God I didn't.

*(CHARLIE picks up the chalk from the base of the wall.)*

CHARLIE, *Continues*

Time to move on big sister.

ANNIE

*(Dismisses)* Yeah, yeah.

CHARLIE

I'm serious. No more of this. It's not healthy.

*(ANNIE initially ignores CHARLIE until he gets her attention.)*

CHARLIE, *Continues*

Hey, did you hear me?

ANNIE

I heard you.

CHARLIE

But are you listening?

ANNIE

No fair, that's what I used to say to you.

*(CHARLIE responds to ANNIE'S use of tense. She nods. CHARLIE kisses ANNIE on the forehead. She fights back tears as he hands her his ball and glove.)*

CHARLIE

Take care of these for me, okay?

ANNIE

What do you want me to do with them?

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