

A Readers' Theater Adaptation of MJ Auch's *One-Handed Catch*

By Nicki Stohr

©*One-Handed Catch* by MJ Auch, published by Henry Holt and Company, 2006.

Characters:

Leon

Norm

Mrs. Baumgartner

Dad

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Narrator 3

Narrator 2: This script comes from the novel, *One-Handed Catch*, by MJ Auch.

Narrator 3: It is a story that answers the question what would it be like to go through life with only one hand?

Leon: Hey, Norm, you gotta see this.

Narrator 1: Leon had his face pressed up to the screen door of the family meat market.

Norm was supposed to be stocking shelves, but he glanced over to see if his Dad was watching. Dad was waiting on a customer so Norm slipped outside.

Norm: What's the big deal?

Leon: You'll see. Come over here--behind the garbage cans.

Narrator 3: Norm followed him. Leon opened a paper bag.

Leon: Fireworks for tonight. Not just sparklers and snappers, either. These are the good ones.

Narrator 2: He held up a cardboard cylinder with a stick coming out of the bottom.

Leon: Get a load of this.

Norm: Wow is that a rocket? The kind that explodes way up in the air?

Leon: Sure is. I got three of them. And a couple of cherry bombs, too. If you come over, we can set them off behind the school after it gets dark.

Norm: Where did you get all this?

Leon: From my cousin, Bill. I have to give him my allowance for the next three weeks to pay for them. You should see all the stuff he has. He and his friends are driving out to the lake tonight to set them off.

Norm: This is great. I can't believe we get to see fireworks again.

Narrator 1: Norm had only been six years old when the war started, but he could still remember fireworks. They were banned during the war because of the blackouts.

Narrator 3: Folks couldn't even have firecrackers because the flame from a match might be seen from the air. Once, during a drill, Norm had opened the blackout shade just a slit to peek out. The neighborhood air-raid warden saw it and gave him holy heck.

Narrator 2: Norm was glad Leon had fireworks, but wasn't going to stand close to him when he set them off. Leon was a good friend, but he didn't always think things through.

Norm: Are you sure you know how to do this?

Leon: It's a cinch. You just set them up and light the fuse. Bill told me how.

Narrator 1: Norm could picture Leon lighting the wrong end of something and blowing them both to smithereens.

Norm: Maybe we should take this stuff to the lake with your cousin.

Leon: First off, Bill doesn't want us hanging around, because he'll have his girlfriend with him. Besides, my sister would never let me go if she knew they were doing fireworks. Our mom always used to tell us you can blow your hand off with these things.

Narrator 3: Leon lived with his father and his older sister, Phyllis, who was supposed to keep track of him.

Norm: Yeah, my mom says the same thing. She wouldn't let me go, either. I gotta get back to work, Leon. I'll come over to your house after dinner.

Narrator 2: Norm tried to keep the door from squeaking as he went back in. Then Mrs. Baumgartner came barreling in right behind him and let it slam. Dad looked up from behind the meat counter in the back, but Norm ducked in the canned vegetable aisle before he saw him.

Narrator 1: Norm had just opened a case of canned corn before Leon had called him outside. Now, he moved the cans of corn on the shelf to one side and checked the new price that his mom had written on the case. Norm marked the new cans with a grease pencil and pushed them to the back of the shelf. It was two cents more than before, so Norm had to wipe off the price on the old cans and re-mark them before stacking them in front of the new stuff.

Narrator 2: Mrs. Baumgartner came down my aisle.

Mrs. Baumgartner: Good morning, Norman. I'll take one of those cans before you raise the price. Eight cents is more than enough to pay for corn.

Narrator 3: Mrs. Baumgartner was always looking for a bargain.

Norm: Yes, ma'am.

Narrator 1: Norm handed it to her. Dad's rule was that the customers are always right, even when they're wrong, so Norm didn't argue with her.

Narrator 3: Norm finished up the corn and went to get a carton of canned peas from behind the meat counter. Mrs. Baumgartner was looking in the display case with a scowl on her face.

Mrs. Baumgartner: Your chicken livers are fifteen cents a pound, Walter? That's highway robbery. Morton's Grocery had them for ten cents this morning.

Narrator 2: My father was wrapping hot dogs.

Dad: Then why didn't you buy them from Morton, Mrs. Baumgartner?

Mrs. Baumgartner: Because he was out of them, that's why.

Narrator 1: Dad tied string around the package and slid it across the glass to his other customer. Then he leaned on the counter and smiled at Mrs. Baumgartner.

Dad: When I'm out of chicken livers, I sell them for a penny a pound.

Narrator 3: Mrs. Baumgartner looked huffy for a second, then almost smiled.

Mrs. Baumgartner: All right, Walter, give me a half pound of your gold-plated chicken livers.

Narrator 2: That's why everybody liked Dad. He could always joke people of their bad moods. Norm would have told old Mrs. Baumgartner to go fly a kite, which is why Norm didn't have to wait on customers very often.

Narrator 1: Norm liked stocking shelves because he could be a million miles away, thinking about things he'd rather be doing, like drawing pictures of cars or playing baseball, the same as he did in school last year. His fifth grade teacher nicknamed him "Dreamin' Norman" because he was always off in his own world.

Narrator 3: She also called him "Norman Rockwell" because whenever he wasn't day dreaming, he was doodling in his notebook.

Narrator 2: When Norm grows up, he wants to be either a baseball player or an artist, but has never told his family. Norm's dad thinks he'll work full-time in the family business after high school. He's always telling Mr. Knapp, the sign painter, that he'll need a "Schmidt and Son" sign printed one of these day, heck, Norm could paint that sign himself, if he wanted to work here, which he didn't.

Narrator 1: The screen door slammed every couple of minutes now. People were coming in to get hot dogs and chopped meat to make hamburgers for the Fourth of July cookouts. Dad had the chopped meat on special for the holiday – fourteen cents a pound. I suppose Mrs. Baumgartner would want that for less, too.

Narrator 3: This was the first Independence Day since the war ended, so people were celebrating in a big way. Meat rationing was over so now that people could buy as much as they wanted, so they went hog wild.

Narrator 2: There was a line of customers that wound from the meat counter to the potato chips and pretzels up by the front door. Ray, the only employee, was ringing up sales every few minutes.

Narrator 3: Usually Norm's mom would have been helping his father wait on customers, but she had taken Norm's younger sister, Ellie, to march with her Brownie Troop in the Fourth of July parade. If Norm's dad hadn't needed him in the store, he would have been marching, with his Boy Scout Troop.

Narrator 1: Ellie got off easy. She hardly ever had to do store work.

Dad: Norm, give me a hand back here.

Narrator 3: Norm thought he'd get stuck waiting on customers. That's not why Dad wanted Norm, though.

Dad: I'm running low on chopped meat. I need you to grind some more for me..

Norm: Sure, Dad.

Narrator 1: What a relief, Norm didn't get to use the meat grinder very often.

Narrator 3: If he worked for somebody else, he probably wouldn't get to use it all. But in a family business, everybody did what was needed, no questions asked. Mr. Schmidt had taught Norm how to use the meat grinder when he was nine.

Narrator 2: Norm's dad brought out a heavy tray of beef chunks and set it on the thick wooden table that had the grinder bolted to it.

Dad: Call me as soon as you're done with this, Norm. I need it as fast as you can grind it. We're selling more chopped meat than I expected.

Narrator 3: Norm started the motor, filled the tray on top with beef and pushed the pieces over so they fell through the hole in the tray down into the hopper. From there, a steel corkscrew grabbed the meat and moved it through a log tube. At the end, it was sliced by a rotating blade and pushed through a plate that had small holes.

Narrator 1: Ever since Norm was a little kid, playing in the back room while his parents worked, he liked to watch the meat come out of the grinder. The long, thin ropes

of beef looped back and fourth over themselves like the yarn wig of Ellie's Raggedy Ann doll.

Narrator 3: Norm shoved the meat down into the hopper with the wooden plunger, then refilled the tray.

Narrator 2: Norm didn't mind missing the parade, it looked like rain. Norm hoped it wouldn't rain tonight, though. The fireworks might be hard to light if they got wet. Maybe they'd just fizzle.

Narrator 1: Boy, that sure would be disappointing.

Narrator 2: The grinder motor slowed down, so he poked with the plunger, but it didn't help. Norm could see a piece of gristle that had gotten caught in the corkscrew. He grabbed the end of it and tugged. He must have loosened whatever was caught because the hunk of gristle suddenly tugged back – hard.

Narrator 3: Norm was not sure when he realized that he couldn't pull his hand out. Whenever it was, it was too late.

Narrator 2: Norm didn't know why he didn't flip the switch. He had to guess his brain couldn't believe what was happening.

Narrator 1: Norm's dad had asked him to give him a hand, and that's exactly what he was doing. Norm was fast becoming part of the fourteen-cent chopped meat special – which, he was told, was not a big seller for the rest of the day.

Narrator 3: To find out how Norm learn to do things he took for granted such as tying his shoes and riding his bicycle and then more complicated things such as playing baseball with one-hand, read *One-Handed Catch* by M.J. Auch.