

Charlie's 
Thinking
 **Cheese**

A story to stimulate
young minds
and warm old hearts.

Mark Juarez

Dedicated to Humanity

Charlie's THINKING CHEESE
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TO THE READER

I couldn't help digging my fork into that last piece of scrumptiously smooth cheesecake, sliver by sliver. It began with only a tiny urge to taste the dessert one more time. I told myself I would only whittle a thin piece off the side and save the rest for her. Before I knew it, there was an irresistible urge to keep on going! When I finally realized what I had done, the whole slice was gone. I found myself nervously pacing back and forth in the kitchen; the last slice of that cheesecake was supposed to be an implicit reward for a hard day at work. She would be so disappointed to discover it's now gone. I attempted to find salvation in the perfect reason for how the last piece of cheesecake mysteriously disappeared...and voila!

Earlier that day as I was painting the kitchen, I had noticed a small hole in the baseboard next to the refrigerator. Underwhelmed with the monotony of painting and overwhelmed with the guilt of eating the last slice of cheesecake, I decided to have a little fun with this discovery. By painting a little house around the hole with the name "Charlie" above it, I created an endearing story as my alibi for eating the last piece of cheesecake, hopefully sparing my life. With that stroke of creative inspiration, my new friend Charlie the Mouse was created.

To my surprise, even though my story was not very believable, it seemed to go over well and was even cherished. "You're such an adorable dork!" Wow, she wasn't even mad at me! From that day on, Charlie and I could indulge in our favorite foods and enjoy them to our hearts and stomachs content, guilt-free. However,

it seemed to go both ways. Or at least it SEEMED like Charlie was beating me to some of my favorite snacks! Charlie became a beloved part of our happy family. We talked so much about Charlie that he began to seem very real—or perhaps he was just my alter ego!

I came up with this story to reflect my faith in humanity and the belief that EVERYTHING in life is an opportunity. Every time something goes wrong, or is unexpected, there's a valuable gift or lesson to be learned. Once I had this realization, I was excited because I was on the lookout for those precious learning opportunities. I could always trust that something great was going to happen and that I would gain wisdom through these experiences. The world is my classroom and I never want to stop being a student.

An excellent example is looking at the plethora of financial and psychological struggles we are currently facing as a nation, and indeed, a world. This is an excellent opportunity to create good things from a terrible situation. With this in mind, I decided to set the story of Charlie BOTH in the Great Depression of the 1930's and the current crisis. I wanted to parallel the eras to draw out the lessons in each period and the opportunities that can grow from that understanding. What might seem like our moment of despair may, in fact, be a great gift, if we just remain open enough to receive it.



I hope this book touches the lives and warms the hearts of all who read it.

-Mark Juarez

"Sometimes fictional characters are more real than real characters ~ let your imagination nourish your soul."

– Inspired by Richard Bach

Who ate the cheesecake?!



CHAPTER ONE BROKEN DREAMS OF GRANDEUR

"When the door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us." – Helen Keller

"Sandy, did you write this note?" Mitch asked as he stood at the kitchen door. "Who's Charlie?"

"Charlie's a mouse," Sandy answered absentmindedly from behind her book. The words slipped out and instantly she realized what she had done. All her plans of how to tell Mitch about Charlie were suddenly irrelevant.

"What are you reading? Whatever it is, you are seriously losing it!" Mitch returned to the sauce simmering on the stove, disregarding the note.

Sandy's eyes were still fixed on the book but her mind no longer comprehended its words. Why is it so hard to tell him? There was a time when Mitch and I could tell each other anything. What happened to us? I've got to tell him soon. Mitch will certainly encounter Charlie again or put together the signs of a mouse in the house. Charlie could actually be in danger! I'll tell him soon, I will!

I'll find just the right time.

At that moment, Mitch came back to the living room with a plate of food, turned on the TV and sat down. "Dinner's on the stove. Go dish up," Mitch grunted, grabbing the remote to start channel surfing.

Putting aside her book, Sandy went into the kitchen.

"Spaghetti again," she sighed.

Sandy looked at the kitchen table remembering times when the warm glow of candles and wafts of soft jazz added a special ambiance to their meals together. "Mitch can we eat in the kitchen tonight?" Sandy called.

"Yeah, not much on here anyway," said Mitch, taking the remote and joining her at the table.

"Mitch, I know this has been hard for you. Losing a job is never easy," Sandy began, gentle and concerned.

"I really don't want to talk about it," Mitch retorted.

"I'm just worried about you. My job is secure. We can live off what I make. This cottage is small and cozy—I think we could get used to it. I can only imagine how discouraging it is to be turned down

for every executive position you've applied for. Maybe you should look at some other possibilities. You once had a dream of changing the world. I loved it. Maybe you can start by volunteering and some opportunities will open up."

"I can't do that. We'll never get back to where we were on your salary alone. And if I volunteer it will only lead to a low paying non-profit job. We also had dreams of grandeur—I want to make a better life for you Sandy. I've got to stay focused. But I really don't want to talk about this anymore." Mitch ended the conversation by picking up his plate and heading into the living room, remote in hand. Now alone at the table, staring blankly at Mitch's chair, Sandy could feel a tear slowly sliding down her face. She quickly wiped her cheek with the back of her hand and retreated to the couch, escaping into a book she didn't want to read.

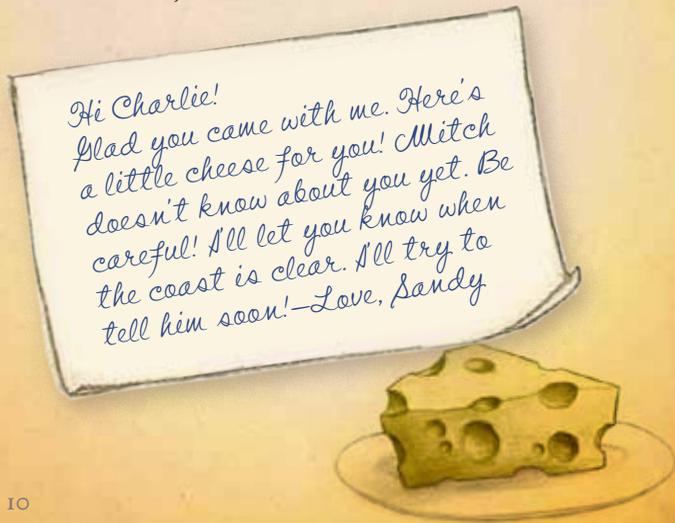
Staring at the pages, she thought of how else she might be able to help Mitch. She hated seeing him like this, dejected and longing for their former life. She felt certain that once Mitch met Charlie, everything would be okay. But she had no idea how to tell him without sounding crazy.

Sandy smiled as she remembered the day she realized that Charlie was still with her, even here. A week after they had moved into the cottage, Sandy began to notice food missing from the refrigerator

and pantry. It was never a lot, but she had seen the signs before. In fact, she'd grown up with them. The first sign was the missing food. Then came the heartwarming notes written in small curly letters, left in peculiar places along the floorboard, tucked into a crevice, behind the baking mix in the pantry, in the cookie jar, and even on the side of the refrigerator.

When Sandy found the first note in their new home, she quickly penned her response while Mitch was not in the room.

Behind the refrigerator looked like a perfect spot to tuck the little note. With it, she left a little hunk of Swiss cheese, Charlie's favorite.



CHAPTER TWO MORNING MEMORIES

"We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give." – Sir Winston Churchill

The next morning, as Mitch slept, Sandy snuck outside to welcome the early morning sun as it shone across the porch. She glanced around the neighborhood, appreciating the simple peace and the telltale signs of spring arriving. Since she and Mitch had moved into their new cottage, Sandy found refuge in the morning before Mitch woke up; it was her time to reflect on all the changes that had taken place since Mitch got laid off. It was her space from the tension that was gradually building between them.

Mornings were the hardest for Mitch. They were just another reminder that he had to start yet another day in an economy where his dreams, success and accomplishments didn't matter. Having to move to the small cottage had been a rude awakening for him. He felt like a failure for having to move them out of their luxurious, gated community. Sandy's positive outlook since they moved to the cottage made him feel even worse. He couldn't understand why it didn't bother Sandy as much as it bothered him, and he felt very alone in his frustration and misery.

Sandy, on the other hand, was enjoying the refreshing perspective that the new changes had brought. She had grown weary of coming home from work and spending her evenings alone in a large beautiful house while Mitch met with clients. Between their two jobs and their social events, they were constantly running around.

Over the years, she noticed herself losing touch with the simple things that had once brought her happiness, like relaxing on Sunday afternoons on the couch with her husband. She missed them cooking together, laughing as spaghetti sauce splattered their clothes. She even missed their nighttime conversations while crammed into their only available bathroom. Even though Mitch's job had provided very well for them, it still seemed something, everything, was missing.

Sandy had been secretly relieved when they had to downsize and move a few neighborhoods over, despite Mitch's promises that it was only temporary. This place reminded her of her grandfather's home in the country. She had spent innocent summers timelessly wandering the blue-green fields and vibrant, well-kept garden. The flood of smells floating on the gentle breeze across the grass led her back to those summers long ago. She welcomed in the memories - memories of family, of happiness, and of Charlie.

Sandy thought back over her life with Charlie. It had been some time since she had last seen him. He always

seemed to pop up when he was most needed and he had been with the family ever since the days of Great Grandfather Henry.

Sandy grew up with Charlie. He was part of the family. It was Charlie who had shown her family how to garden during the struggles of the Great Depression. It was Charlie who had rekindled a sense of abundance during her family's greatest time of need. And it was Charlie who showed them that all was possible.

However, getting someone outside the family to understand that Charlie was a mouse had always proven to be a nearly impossible task. Sandy worried about how to bring up Charlie to Mitch. She knew she would have to. But for now, she allowed herself to linger in the past, in the comfort of her memories and her many family stories.





Words of Wisdom

Charlie's Favorite Quotes

The simplest things are often the truest

– Richard Bach

“With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts.” – Eleanor Roosevelt

“The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God.” –Anne Frank

“The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our doubts of today.”

– Franklin D. Roosevelt

“In every conceivable manner, the family is link to our past, bridge to our future.” – Alex Haley

“Family and friends are hidden treasures; seek them and enjoy their riches.” – Wanda Hope Carter

“Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.” – Martin Luther

“Memory is a way of holding onto the things you love, the things you are, the things you never want to lose.” – Author Unknown

“The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.” – William James

CHAPTER THREE THE SMELL OF SOMETHING SINISTER

“I always entertain great hope.” – Robert Frost

Sandy remembered very little about Great Grandfather Henry. Black and white photos, yellowing and brittle, and the tales she had been told by her family were the only remnants she carried of him. He passed away while she was still in diapers. The only memories of him she could call her own were his warm brown eyes and the smell of the medicated cream he used, a strong menthol odor that had made her nose wrinkle.

It was Henry who had first officially met Charlie. In those days Henry was a young strapping fellow with a full head of dark hair, which he kept slicked back like Clark Gable. Henry's family, like everyone else in the country at the time, was completely destitute. He had been out of work for months and there were no prospects for work anytime soon. They had no money and very little food. Times were incredibly trying for everyone. But when Charlie arrived, that all changed.

“It's a rat!” Henry's youngest son, Andy screamed. Henry grabbed a broom and rushed into the

boys' bedroom. "Where is it, boys? Rats are filthy creatures. Dirty rodents! I bet these came from the Roberts' place. That place is a pigsty!"

They saw a tiny, gray mouse slip out from under the bed and race toward a pile of clothes in the corner. Unwilling to admit defeat in front of his sons, Henry began to toss clothes from the pile into the middle of the floor. After a while, it was clear to all of them that the mouse was long gone.

Finally giving up, Henry loudly declared, "That rodent is dead! I'll get him boys! Anna, I'm going to the hardware store!" Henry called out to his wife, then stormed out of the house. A little later he returned with a box of rat poison, a small box of death held tightly in a brown paper bag.

Later that evening, a tiny mouse cautiously left his hole in the wall to start his nightly chores. His stomach rumbled and he caught an enticing scent. He followed the faint aroma to a little box underneath the kitchen sink. He took a deep whiff of the tempting cheese. The usual tantalizing smell had a stinging chemical note that burned his sensitive nose. If a scent could be sinister and cold, this was it. No matter how loud his stomach grumbled in protest, he knew he should run from this cheese.

The cupboard! He looked around quickly to be sure

the kitchen was clear. After the close call in the boys' bedroom, he knew he needed to be more careful about not being seen. Scampering nimbly up to the high cupboard, he nibbled on a small cracker and then scrambled through a crack in the door.

The tiny creature had watched the family's food supply shrink over the past few months. "How empty their stomachs must be!" Charlie wrote in his journal. "I know there must be something I can do to help. Tomorrow I'm going exploring to see what I can find. All is possible!"

Charlie tucked his journal into its special place,



settling into a little bed he'd made from a clump of cotton and a tiny box. He picked up his favorite book, *All is Possible*. The last words he read before he dozed off for the night were, "Do good things for others, this will bring you true happiness." Charlie decided to follow his heart as he fell into a deep sleep, dreaming of what he could do.



Words of Wisdom

Charlie's Favorite Quotes

If you find it in your heart to care for somebody else, you will have succeeded.

– Maya Angelou

"There is a great difference between worry and concern. A worried person sees a problem, and a concerned person solves a problem." – Harold Stephens

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. – Maya Angelou

"Be the change that you want to see in the world" – Mohandas Gandhi

CHAPTER FOUR SEEDS OF INSPIRATION

"Happiness lies in the joy of achievement and the thrill of creative effort." –Franklin D. Roosevelt

The next day, Charlie went exploring in the most tucked away places in the house. First, the attic; Charlie figured he'd work from the top down. Every inch, every closet, every drawer, Charlie inspected it all. Nothing. Full of hope, he decided his next stop would be the root cellar. But there he was only greeted by a lot of old dust, dirt, cobwebs and broken baskets.

As he evaluated all that was before him, the mouse found something extraordinary. Way back in the far corner of the root cellar he spotted a lone, wrinkled potato. It was shriveled with age and sat beneath a stream of light that offered enough life-giving energy to produce two green, vibrant sprouts protruding from one end.

Charlie moved slowly through the dust to inspect the potato. The sprouts were healthy and eager to live. They were reaching to the sky, in the direction of the stream of light, and they quivered with life

when Charlie touched them. Looking past the sprouts Charlie saw a treasure trove of vegetables seeds bundled with a string just beyond the potato. Suddenly, it hit him!



He knew just what to do.

He knew exactly how he was going to help. He even knew just the spot, a neglected part of the yard where no one ever seemed to go.

Looking up at the window, he started planning how to get these seed packets up to the yard. They weren't heavy, but they would still make for a hefty task for little Charlie. He looked around and saw a nice, fat stick. Carrying it back to the window, he put his little shoulder to the corner and shoved hard.

A small opening appeared and Charlie quickly pushed the stick as far into it as he could. Then, getting underneath the middle of the stick, he pushed with all his might. The window made a creaking noise and opened about two full inches! He scampered outside as fast as he could with the seeds in tow. He returned for the potato and carried it outside.

The earth outside was rock-hard, dry and lifeless from neglect. He tried scraping into the stony surface with one pointy sharp fingernail; just a tiny indent was visible. He looked at the tiny carrot seed he pulled from one of the packets. Charlie knew that if he placed it in the small indent, the roots would not be able to penetrate the hard soil. "How can I fix this? I can't think! I need some cheese!"

Charlie always thought better with a piece of cheese in his paws. He called it "Thinking Cheese." He would hold it, turn it over in his small paws, smell the sweet aroma of his favorite thing in the world and, when the time was just right, he would tilt his head back and drop the whole thing in his mouth. Thinking Cheese fulfilled its promise no matter how small the bit. It was like his ticket to all things possible, no matter how challenging the situation. Whenever he had a puzzle to solve or a solution to find, even the tiniest bit of cheese would do. It was like a magical potion that could turn every problem into an opportunity to create something spectacular!

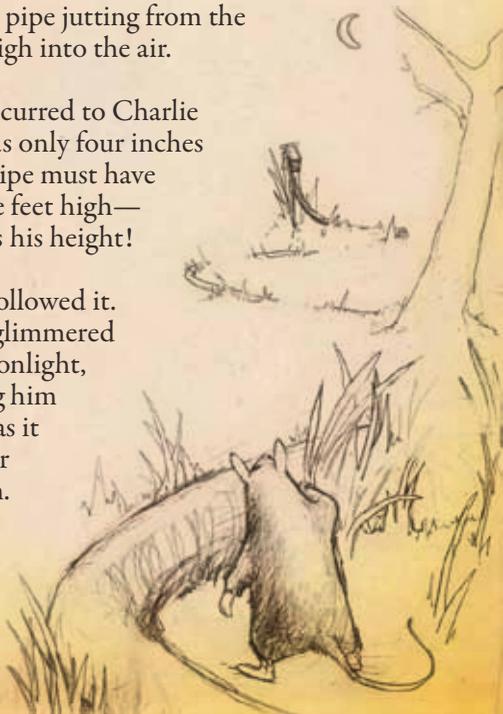
This time, he searched his secret stash for a tasty morsel of scrumptiousness and genius. No luck! Unfazed, he nibbled on a fingernail, tasting the brown dust of the earth he'd tried to till. Not quite the yummy cheese his taste buds longed for, but at the moment he needed all the inspiration he could get. Looking around for the answer, he scoured

every inch of the yard with his super-sharp, mouse vision until he discovered something.

What serendipity! What luck! Not far away, in a giant weed patch, he spotted something extremely useful! He scampered over to inspect a thatch of dry weeds. He scrambled along a dry rubber hose that lay like a slumbering snake in the grass, traveling its length until he came to an enormous pipe jutting from the ground, high into the air.

Then it occurred to Charlie that he was only four inches tall. The pipe must have been three feet high—nine times his height!

His eyes followed it. The pipe glimmered in the moonlight, beckoning him to its top as it loomed far above him.



He thought, “Once I get to the top of the pipe, will I be able to turn the handle? Can I do all this without anyone seeing me?”

Out of thinking cheese, he continued to nibble his fingernails instead. Such a nasty habit for Charlie! Taking a deep breath and standing tall, his determination grew.

“I can do it!” He looked carefully around the yard and up into the trees, not wanting to risk being seen by one of the family members or a hungry owl out for a midnight snack. No one in sight! He rubbed his tiny palms together briskly, adrenaline and energy pumping. He grasped the cool pipe and swiftly shimmied up the slick surface.

Now that he was at the top, Charlie’s tiny hands grasped the enormous handle. He tugged and pulled, shifted and pushed until he felt the smallest of movements! Was that enough? Better try harder! With one more firm tug, using every bit of strength he possessed, the handle gave way!

Charlie was ecstatic to feel the water coursing through the hose. He scrambled down the pipe, once again following the hose to where the cool water ran like a rushing river quenching the thirst of the hard, dry ground. Charlie looked on contently. “I knew it was possible! All is possible!” he thought, jumping up and down.

Charlie tended his field well, shifting the hose until each bit of ground had gotten a deep drink. He then ran back to turn off the hose. The ground was ready for the tiny seedlings.

Charlie dug a small hole and rolled the potato into its new home, partially covering it with dirt. Using an old roofing nail to plow straight furrows, Charlie masterfully dropped the seeds into the tiny holes, planting something new each night. Before long, the hard part was done. He slapped his hands together, knocking off the last of the soil. The mouse looked up to survey the work he'd done thus far and imagined his lovely garden. It's going to be beautiful!

Now I'll just have to keep the garden watered and battle an occasional predator, like a snail or slug, he thought, determined. Soon the seeds will grow into tiny green shoots. There will be bush beans, potatoes, lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, squash, garlic, onions and tender herbs. He took a deep breath and rocked back and forth on his feet in deep satisfaction. He could almost see Anna's pretty face hovering over a pot, taking in the tantalizing aroma as the vegetables simmered on the stove.

Little did Charlie know, there was someone watching him hard at work.

