

LAST CALL  
By Mabelle Reynoso  
Based on the life of Calvin Jones

CHARACTERS: Calvin, 94  
Younger Calvin  
MC/WAITRESS  
Uncle Sam/Producer/Judge  
SETTING: A café filled with young and old poetry enthusiasts.  
AT RISE: Calvin is sitting in front. The MC is getting ready to take the stage.

MC

Ladies and gentlemen, we've had a wonderful evening of amazing poetry. Kennedy once said, "When power corrupts, poetry cleanses." Let's prepare for our final cleansing of the night, and of course, we've saved the best for last. I'd like you to put your hands together for the one and only, Mr. Calvin Jones.

(Imaginary audience applauds as 94-year-old Calvin makes his way up to the stage with his manuscript.)

CALVIN

Thank you and good evening. This one is called, "If Appointments Be In Order."

If I must go  
Please God  
Call me at a time when emotion is on a high  
When love  
Or wrath  
Or ambition  
Or jealousy is at a crest. Or even hate.  
If I must go  
Let it be when feelings tell me I am alive  
Snatch me out of orgasmic ecstasy if you must  
Anything other than a life among the walking dead  
Or the living of one's own lingering death  
Take me please  
While I have something yet to give!

(Imaginary audience applauds. Calvin takes a seat. He looks at the actual audience.)

CALVIN

Don't put me down just yet. I still got plenty to give. And I don't think I've said it all. When I was a boy, the teacher asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I said I wanted to be President. Well, she sent me to the principal's office. A black president. My mother had to pick me up. Sometimes I think about all the things I've seen and I cannot believe I lived to see the day. When they elected this guy, I couldn't believe that. I was ready to die then, but I'm not dead yet.

WAITRESS

Hey Calvin, last call.

CALVIN

I'm all set, thank you, Babe.

WAITRESS

You got any big plan after this?

CALVIN

Yep, gonna head out to the Black and Tan.

WAITRESS

Is that the new club over on 4<sup>th</sup>?

CALVIN

No, my dear, it's over on Imperial.

WAITRESS

Calvin, you're not really going to go to Imperial at this time of night, are you?

CALVIN

Only in my dreams.

(Waitress smiles and walks off.)

CALVIN (to audience)

I'm 94 years old. If you could see the things I've seen, man. It's been a good rich trip. I have enough good things to remember and enough bad things to be able to differentiate. I wish everybody could be as satisfied. But that doesn't mean things were easy. My whole life was hard because I was always thinking beyond my means. When I was seventeen, I ran away from home and I ended up in San Francisco. Right after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Uncle Sam was everywhere, pointing his finger at me.

(Young Calvin emerges, with Uncle Sam following closely behind. Uncle Sam taps him on the shoulder.)

UNCLE SAM

Calvin Jones, I want you for the U.S. Army.

(Calvin shakes his head.)

UNCLE SAM

Navy?

YOUNG CALVIN

I don't think so.

UNCLE SAM  
Marines?

YOUNG CALVIN  
No way.

UNCLE SAM  
Merchant Marines?

YOUNG CALVIN  
Will you pay for me to go to college when I get out?

UNCLE SAM  
Sure, sure. Just sign here. You'll be a hero. America loves heroes.

YOUNG CALVIN  
I don't want to be a hero. I just want to get my college diploma. You promise me if I sign up to go to war, you'll pay for my education?

UNCLE SAM  
We promise.

YOUNG CALVIN  
You sure?

UNCLE SAM  
The Government of the United States does not lie, Calvin Jones.

CALVIN (to audience)  
So I did my time. Four years in the Merchant Marines, and I was in every theater of war in the Pacific. We lost a lot of men. A lot of ships. Most of us were at sea without protection. But I did survive. And when I got out, I went to get my diploma, just as Uncle Sam had promised.

YOUNG CALVIN  
Sir, I've done my duty.

UNCLE SAM  
Yes you have, and the United States thanks you for your service and sacrifice. (Uncle Sam turns his back to Calvin.)

YOUNG CALVIN  
Sir, I'm ready to go to college. Remember you said if I joined up, you'd pay for my college?

UNCLE SAM

Who did you say you were?

CALVIN

Jones, Sir. Calvin Jones. I was in the Merchant Marines.

UNCLE SAM

Oh. Right. Merchant Marines. (To the audience) The Merchant Marines were indispensable to America winning World War II, but because of politics, budgetary constraints, opposition by some in the military, the Merchant Marines Veterans of World War II were denied benefits including the GI Bill. President Franklin Roosevelt said, "I trust Congress will soon provide similar opportunities to members of the merchant marine who have risked their lives time and time again during war for the welfare of their country." But he died before this happened. (to Young Calvin) There is nothing I can do. God bless America!

CALVIN (to audience)

God bless America indeed. There I was, with no college education to look forward to and no money. Sure, I was angry but being angry, and being disgusted, is not the thing to do. It shortens your life. So I moved on. I've always been a hustler. And one of the greatest hustles I ever pulled was getting myself into showbiz.

Let me tell you about the Black and Tan. You know what a black and tan is, right? They were night clubs that catered to both white folks and black folks. It was the first jazz club in San Diego. That's where I got my start. I was a night clerk at a hotel. One night, a producer was moaning about needing a waiter to truck – that was a dance step.

(Producer emerges, flapping his arms about as Young Calvin is pretending to take notes, but is eavesdropping.)

PRODUCER

(frantic) The show's missing something. What do we need? What do we need? We need more truckin. (To Audience in encyclopedic tone) Truckin is considered today a Harlem Dance originating around 1927, though specific origins are under debate. Truckin' mostly consists of shoulders rising and falling while the fore finger points up and wiggles back and forth like a windshield wiper. (Back to frantic producer tone) We need more truckin. We need a waiter truckin. We need a waiter carrying a tray truckin across the stage. With wine glasses.

(Calvin trucks across the stage with wine glasses.)

YOUNG CALVIN

I can do that!

PRODUCER

What's your name, kid?

YOUNG CALVIN

Jones, Sir. Calvin Jones.

PRODUCER

Calvin Jones, you know how to dance?

YOUNG CALVIN

I sure do, Sir.

CALVIN (to audience)

I didn't know how to dance.

PRODUCER

Say, you're not intimidated by beautiful women are you?

YOUNG CALVIN

Absolutely not, Sir.

PRODUCER

Calvin Jones, you're hired. Go meet the chorus girls.

YOUNG CALVIN

Yes, Sir.

(Young Calvin trucks off stage with a big grin.)

CALVIN (to audience)

I broke a few wine glasses but I got the hang of it. Anyway that led to me starting my own act – The Harlem KnitWits. We were even on a bill with Nat Cole, before he was King. The producers thought our act was terrific, they just didn't think I was, so I went out on my own. I couldn't dance, so I did the next best thing – I became a standup comedian. And I got to meet a lot of wonderful people. I got to work with all the greats – Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Dorothy Dandridge. Whoowee – what a trip. But for all its glitz and glamour, I got tired of that life and I was ready to do something else. Here's the thing about me – I always have these great ideas, but I'm just not a nuts and bolts guy. So I did a little of this and a little of that. I found myself in trouble sometimes. I never was a bad guy. I never hurt anybody. I just kept getting in trouble. Sometimes it felt like my great talent in life was getting caught. Nothing underscored that more than that one time I really did myself in.

(Judge enters. Calvin is on trial before him.)

JUDGE

Mr. Jones, how old are you?

CALVIN

70, Your Honor.

JUDGE

And let me get this straight. You robbed a bank?

CALVIN

I didn't do anything. I wasn't there. I don't know anything about it. All I did was stand there and for all my troubles I only got three lousy dollars. That was my share.

JUDGE

Mr. Jones, you haven't seemed to learn your lesson. I sentence you to 20 years. (To audience) There is a lot more to the story. Mr. Jones wanted a trial. And then he didn't want a trial. And then he did. He was making a mockery out of the system. The court of law is no joke. Neither is robbing a bank, even if he only made out with three dollars. (To Calvin) Mr. Jones, I hereby sentence you to 20 years. That is all. (Strikes gavel)

CALVIN

Two days later, I was on a plane to Leavenworth. When they closed the doors behind me, I thought to myself, "Now I've really done it." Leavenworth is no joke. There's some real bad boys in there. Things got dark and deep.

(Calvin stands up and takes the stage. He reads his poem "Leavenworth.")

A man was let die tonight  
Violently  
A man  
A brother  
A neighbor who well could have been called "friend"  
But the tragedy does not end there  
His perhaps  
But certainly not mine  
The curtain had simply fallen on one episode  
And risen on another  
My tragedy being  
That of being witness to evil  
A delegate to a semi-world within a world  
Murky and fear-laden  
And fitted together like the puzzle of Chinese boxes  
With no purpose other than to conceal  
And this it does  
Admirably  
Camouflages well the heartlessness  
And disdain  
Of human life and its dignities  
And called retribution  
But does the one word 'tragic'  
Adequately describe a world  
Where one must face his fellowman  
No less  
Than three times each day

Sometimes for years  
And yet  
(out of a twisted concept of macho)  
Cringe  
From the prospect of one day having to admit  
That Fellowman lives too?  
Maybe yes  
And maybe no.  
At any rate  
As much as I would  
At this very moment  
Like to say "So long..."  
How does one go about saying  
Goodbye  
To someone to whom you've never said hello  
But then, animals are not expected to emote,  
Are they?

To Anyone, that is, except their masters.

But through the darkness shone the light. I landed one of the cushiest jobs an inmate could have – I became the Chaplain's clerk. I'm not religious or anything, but the penitentiary is full of all kinds of people – real smart and real dumb. I wasn't the smartest guy in town but I took an IQ test during inprocessing and had a rare moment when I was actually in the right place at the right time. The Chaplain had just lost his clerk who got busted for drinking the communion wine. He picked me as the replacement.

I made the best of my situation. I guess that's one of the things I'm good at. And in that scary, awful place, I got the one thing I wanted most in life. At Leavenworth, I finally got my college diploma. I never worked harder in my life than I did to graduate. But I did it. Because I always knew I needed an education to do something big.

And here I am now. Ninety-four years young. A World War II veteran. A comedian. An ex-con. A poet. A college graduate. A dreamer. What a beautiful, beautiful life.

(Waitress enters.)

WAITRESS

You ready to go, Calvin?

CALVIN

I'd never keep a beautiful woman waiting.

(Waitress links arms with Calvin. He winks at audience and they walk off stage together.)