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The Bells of Charlemont

A play in one act

By Don Zolidis

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One-act drama
2F 6M plus ensemble

On Christmas Eve, 1944, a small group of American soldiers are occupying a burned-out village in northern France. The town mayor's widow makes an extraordinary request, asking if they will help revive the town from the crippling malaise of Nazi occupation by restoring a lost Christmas tradition. But before the men can complete their task, they are given orders to join what will become known as the Battle of the Bulge. Will they desert the army to help the people they have come to love? Based on a true story, The Bells of Charlemont beautifully evokes the power of the human spirit in the midst of war.

Characters

JOHN, 18, a Greek-American soldier. Untried.

KAPPA, 20, a big, gruff young man from New Jersey.

CHOOEY, 19, a tall, blonde Mormon.

MILO, 19, a small, skinny kid from Georgia.

GEORGE, 22, their sergeant.

LAURA, 24, a young French widow.

MRS. ROUSSEAU, 40ish, the widow of the mayor of Charlemont.

CHORUS, (7 characters) consisting of young, thin girls, dressed mostly in rags. The Chorus members play various characters throughout the play.

GERMAN SOLDIER, 15

SETTING: December 1944. Charlemont, France. Just southwest of the border with Belgium.

The following play is based on a true story.

(Bare stage. A local Rotary Club dinner. JOHN, 80, the guest of honor, dressed in an army uniform resplendent in medals, moves slowly downstage, using a walker. He speaks directly to the audience.)

JOHN

Thank you for inviting me here today. And I appreciate the nice lunch. That chicken Marsala was something dynamite. You guys in the Rotary Club really know what you're doing. Not like them Lions club idiots.

(he laughs a bit at his joke.)

Little joke. When my daughter picked me up this morning, she told me I was gonna do just fine up here. I guess we'll find out. I used to tell her a lot of stories when she was real small, which is why she's got it in her head that I could stand up in front of two hundred people and tell y'all a story. At one point in time I was going to write this down, but I find I can remember it all right. I thank God that I still have my memory. Don't jump as high I used to, but…

(he looks off to the side.)

Yes I know dear I'm rambling. I do that. I'm eighty years old. This is the risk you took by bringing me up here.

(he gathers himself and looks back at the audience.)

I figure you've heard a lot of war stories. This one's mine.

(JOHN steps aside and sets his walker against the wall as the lights change. His back straightens, the shakes drop out of his fingers, and he slowly becomes a young man again.)

(The stage becomes dark, then is briefly illuminated by scattered flashes of light. Distant explosions slowly fade as the lights rise on a broken road in the ruins of Charlemont, an old village in northeastern France. Snow flutters. All of this may be suggested rather than literal.

(JOHN, now 18, stands alone, shivering. Two small CHILDREN run out, chasing one another. They are quite thin and dressed in ill-fitting, ragged, heavy coats.)

CHILD #1 *(referring to a marble)*

Rends le moi!
<Give it to me!>

CHILD #2

Tu n'auras pas dû le laisser tomber! T'en voulais même pas!
<You shouldn't have dropped it! You obviously didn't want it!>

CHILD #1

Tu me l'as arrachée des mains!
<You grabbed it out of my hand!>

CHILD #2

Si tu la voulais vraiment tu ne te serais pas laissé faire!
<If you wanted it, you would have held on to it harder!>

(They stop as they spot JOHN. They stop shouting at each other. CHILD #2 heads off quickly. CHILD #1 remains, watching. JOHN smiles at her, then settles against a wall with a pen and paper.)

JOHN

Dear Mom,

Merry Christmas.

(Pause.)

I'm sure it'll be past Christmas by the time you get this but… I just wanted to let you know that I am fine. It seems like all the action's been just ahead of me, everywhere I've gone. I guess that's a good thing. I'm the youngest one in my company, and they've all seen battle; our sergeant even made it through Normandy. He was a little gruff when I met him—

(GEORGE, 20, a young lieutenant, appears upstage in his own pool of light.)

GEORGE

What's your name?

JOHN

John Tsavakis, sir.

GEORGE

You ready to fight and die for your country, John?

JOHN

Yes, sir.

GEORGE

Have any idea what that means?

JOHN

Guess I'll find out sir.

GEORGE

Reckon you will.

(lights fade on him.)

JOHN *(the letter again)*

But the other guys are great. I guess I should tell you where we are—I can't get too specific, but we're in a little French village just west of the German border. It must have been beautiful once.

(CHILD #2, who has been watching JOHN this entire time, begins to approach. JOHN lets his letter drop a bit and addresses her.)

JOHN *(continued)*

Hi there. Bonjour.

(he tries out some French.)

Froid. Il fait froid. Oui?

(LAURA, a young widow, enters and grabs CHILD #2 by the scruff of the neck.)

LAURA

Ques'ce que tu fait?
<What are you doing?>

CHILD #2

Je ne fait rien!
<I'm not doing anything!>

LAURA

Rentrez, vous allez attrapé la mort!
<Get inside! You want to catch your death of cold?>

(LAURA chases CHILD #2 off-stage. JOHN tries to say something, but she doesn't look at him. He returns to his letter.)

JOHN

There are some pretty nice things about it though. We're supposed to stay put for a few days, which is fine with me. At least I'll have Christmas someplace nice. Don't worry about me, okay? I'm going to be fine. If you have a chance, send me some socks. Thick ones, because it's cold. Say hi to Jenny for me, and tell her her brother's going to be home soon. And Merry Christmas. Oh, and one more thing—

KAPPA

You always talk to yourself while you're writing a letter?

(JOHN quickly puts away the letter and sees KAPPA, a big young soldier leaning against a wall.)

JOHN

You always sneak up on people?

KAPPA

When they aren't paying attention. Who you writing to?

JOHN

My Mom.

KAPPA

That's sweet. Most guys write home to their sweethearts, but you got your Mommy. That's nice. Real mature. Nazis respect that.

JOHN

Well—

KAPPA

I ain't telling nobody. We'll keep it a secret, all right? Can you put in there that Kappa sends kisses? Damn it's cold out here.

JOHN

Yeah.

KAPPA

I got icicles in my underwear.

JOHN

I'm not melting them for you.

(KAPPA starts shaking around, trying to get the icicles out.)

KAPPA

I don't know why we gotta guard this dump. Georgie sends us out here to watch the road while he's cozied up in the mayor's office. Nothing's coming down this road, let me tell ya. The Krauts got their tails kicked ten miles south of here and they ain't coming back.

JOHN

I don't mind it here.

KAPPA

Yeah you don't mind it, no one's shooting at ya.

JOHN

What time is it?

(KAPPA checks his watch.)

KAPPA

Five after seven.

JOHN

Well I'm done.

KAPPA

You're not gonna stay out here with me?

JOHN

It's cold.

KAPPA

Come on Johnny, stick around. Keep me company. We'll talk about girls back home.

JOHN

I don't have a girl back home.

KAPPA

Yes, but there were girls where you were from, right? You didn't grow up in some kinda compound, didja?

JOHN

No.

KAPPA

We'll talk about your Mom, then. She got a nice rack?

JOHN

Shut up.

KAPPA

You learn that from those philosophy books you been reading? We'll talk about my girl then.

JOHN

Does she have a nice rack?

KAPPA

Hell yes she does! But her sister's got a nicer one!
(he laughs at his own joke and takes out cigarettes.)
You want one?

JOHN

I don't smoke.

KAPPA

You haven't been here long enough.

JOHN

I hear they're bad for you.

KAPPA

So are bullets.
(He lights one.)
Where are you from anyway, Johnny?

JOHN

Cleveland.

KAPPA
Cleveland. Land of the cleves. Everyone in Cleveland like you?

JOHN
No.

KAPPA
Must be a fun place then. I'm just kidding ya, kid. Don't take it personal. I kid everybody. When we were at Rouen, we're getting shot to pieces, and I call over to Georgie and I says, "Georgie, get down!" and he looks at me and says, "that's Sergeant to you!", so I says, "Sergeant! Get your dumb ass down!" Course he didn't get shot that day.

JOHN
Does he get shot a lot?

KAPPA
Every damn fight we're in he gets shot. I don't know how he's still walking around. But you'll see. Stick around. You'll get shot too. It's fun. Nah, I'm kidding ya. You won't get shot. You're our good luck charm. Ever since you got here the most fight we've seen has been three crows trying to get a nut from a squirrel. I like you, John. You know that? We had this kid in school, smartest kid in the school, he was a lot like you.

JOHN
Thanks.

KAPPA
I figure you're too smart to die here. That's why I'm standing next to you. Everywhere we go, you move, I move, `hey, who's that dumb idiot standing right behind me, oh, that's Kappa.'

JOHN
Well I'm too smart to stand out here in the cold. You have fun.
(JOHN starts to leave.)

KAPPA
That hurts. That hurts. Hey—what do you want for Christmas?

JOHN
Peace.

KAPPA
Seriously.

JOHN
Socks. Maybe a scarf.

Skipping Forward

MILO

Just wait.

(They wait.)

GEORGE

What are we waiting for?

MILO

It's gonna come back on. Wait for it.

GEORGE

It's not coming on.

MILO

It's coming on.

(They continue to wait.)

GEORGE

The war's gonna be over.

MILO

Good.

(They wait.)

Damn it, I thought that was gonna work. Like it says in the Bible, "Good things come to those who wait."

GEORGE

That's not in the Bible.

MILO

Nah, I'm pretty sure it's in the Bible.

GEORGE

We'll ask Chooey, he knows the thing backwards and forwards.

MILO

Are you kidding me? He's got that weird Bible with the extra chapters. He showed it to me one day, it's bizarre. Angels walking around in Pennsylvania or something.

GEORGE

What?

MILO

You take a look at that book of his.

(The lights come back on.)

GEORGE

Thank you.

MILO

We got any marching orders yet?

GEORGE

Sit tight.

MILO

So we might stay here for Christmas?

GEORGE

Looks that way. We're supposed to get mail too.

MILO

Don't get my hopes up. I haven't seen mail in two months. I wouldn't know what it looks like.

GEORGE

You'll see it. Now see what you can do about getting some heat in the place, all right?

MILO

Yes, sir.

(MILO leaves. The radio changes for a moment, a static-filled music begins to filter through.)

GEORGE

Will you listen to that?

(Music plays. The lights change.)

(Music continues to play as the lights shift to the road once again. JOHN is there, in the snow. A small child, dressed in rags, approaches him.)

CHILD #3

Monsieur? Monsieur?

JOHN

Oui?

CHILD #3

Quest-ce-que vous avez quelque chose a manger?

JOHN

I'm sorry I don't speak French. Ne parlez pas Francais.

CHILD #3

J'ai faim, monsieur.

JOHN

Sorry, kid.

(The CHILD holds out her hands.)

You want something to eat?

CHILD #3

S'il vous-plait. J'ai tres faim.

JOHN

Here.

(JOHN searches for something in his pack. He finds a piece of bread and gives it to her.)

CHILD #3

Merci, monsieur!

(she eats hungrily. Two more children appear and run to JOHN.)

JOHN

All right, all right.

(The children are crowding him and begging for food. JOHN hands out what he can. More children begin to appear. LAURA, emerges upstage.)

LAURA

Qu'est ce que vous faites? Voulez-vous obéir ! Rentrez tout de suite !
<What are you doing? What did I tell you? Go back inside!>

(The children complain.)

CHILD #4

Y'a rien à manger ici!
<There is nothing to eat in the house!>

LAURA

Si tu ne te dépêches pas, je vais chercher le martinet!
<You'll get a whipping if you don't hurry!>

(She makes a move toward them and the children scatter.)

LAURA *(in English)*

I am sorry about that.

JOHN

It's okay.

LAURA

They know better.

JOHN

You speak English?

LAURA

My father was a schoolteacher. He took me to London many times.

JOHN

That must have been exciting. I'd never been to another country before I came here. My name's John, by the way.

LAURA

Laura.

JOHN

That's a very pretty name.

LAURA

You are very kind to give them your food.

JOHN

It's no problem.
(Pause.)

LAURA

It is nice to see the children not fear soldiers.
(She starts to leave.)

JOHN

Hey uhm… Laura?

LAURA

Yes?

JOHN

Are those your kids?

LAURA

Do I look old enough to have that many babies?

JOHN

No.

LAURA

I watch them. We all must do our part. Au revoir.

JOHN

Yeah. Auvwa. Something like that.

(He watches her go. As he watches, the landscape becomes strange and melancholy. Figures dressed in rags appear at the edges of the stage, moving awkwardly, slowly. JOHN is alone, separated.

(Lights rise on MILO, elsewhere on the stage, in his own pool of light, sitting on the edge of a bunk.)

MILO

Do you believe in God, John?

(JOHN writes in his letter.)

JOHN

And then there's Milo.

(He approaches.)

JOHN

Yeah. You don't?

MILO

I don't know. I used to go to church all the time—every Sunday—and we'd stand and we'd sing and the minister would talk—it was pleasant. I tried to focus on the fact that we were talking about a man who had been tortured, who had suffocated in his own blood, and everything around me was pleasant. Like a kind of picnic. And then I got here. You see, I had never really had my faith tested. It was just a fact—it wasn't a decision I had made.

JOHN

Yeah.

MILO

The guy before you—Charlie Griffin. He was a great guy, had a wife back home, two daughters—kept pictures of them in a locket around his neck. If I could create a life for myself, that's the one I would pick. To be just like him. A mortar shell tore Charlie Griffin into pieces. I was standing right next to him—I felt the air get sucked out of me and then I felt a shower of rock, and then I was all wet. And it was about five minutes until I realized that was his blood on me. A random shell. And he was gone.

JOHN

I guess that's kinda how it's always been.

MILO

You haven't seen anything yet, John. You don't know. They tell you what happened in the last town we were in? What the Nazis did on the way out?

JOHN

Yeah.

MILO

Little kids. Five, six year old little kids. Stacked up like firewood on the edge of the road.

JOHN

They're butchers.

MILO

You think we would be any different if we were born in Berlin?

JOHN

Sure we would. We have a conscience.

MILO

You ever killed anybody?

JOHN

No.

MILO

You'd be amazed at what you can do. The last fight we were in, I shot a guy in the back of the head—he was lying on his stomach, trying to hide, and I snuck up on him—and before I could even really think about what to do I pulled the trigger. Is that what God wants me to do?

JOHN

I don't know. Maybe He understands what needs to be done. I don't think we can ever really know what God wants, or what His plan is—I guess I just want to believe that there is one.

MILO

You know why the sergeant doesn't talk to you much?

JOHN

I don't think he likes me.

MILO

He likes you fine. He doesn't want to get to know you. Because in your spot, replacements, kids straight here from the farm—he doesn't figure you'll last long.

JOHN

I didn't grow up on a farm.

MILO

Where'd you grow up?

JOHN

Ohio. Cleveland.

MILO

New Hampshire.

JOHN

Is it nice there?

MILO

Gorgeous. I just hope I can get back.

JOHN

You will.

MILO

Thanks.

(MILO heads out again.)

JOHN

I'm gonna be here for a while.

(JOHN sits in thought. The lights change on him.)

I thought about what Milo had to say. And about the sergeant had to say when he talked about his battle; the only thing he had ever said to me really—

GEORGE

Normandy. Got hit by a sniper. Knocked the helmet clear off my head. Put a hole right through it. Why does one man die and another live? Why does a bullet—

(he shows him the helmet with a hole in it.)

Miss you by half an inch? Maybe God's looking out for us.

(he puts the helmet back on his head.)

(Lights fade on GEORGE and return to the village. Dark figures of townspeople remain at the edge of the stage. JOHN notices them, thinks about approaching, and decides to avoid them, nearly bumping into LAURA, who carries water from the well.)

LAURA

John.

JOHN

Laura. Getting some water, huh?

LAURA

The well isn't frozen today.

JOHN

Let me help you with that.
(she sets it down.)

LAURA

That would be kind of you.
(JOHN hoists it and finds it quite heavy.)

JOHN

Oof. Which house is yours?

LAURA

Follow me.
(JOHN follows, slightly unsteadily. He spills some.)
That well has been here for three hundred years.

JOHN

Must be some fresh water.

LAURA

What? Fresh?

JOHN

Clean.

LAURA

It is, yes. Oh it was a joke.

JOHN

Not a good one I'm afraid.

LAURA

Sometimes they don't translate.

JOHN

Right.
(JOHN drops it off at her door.)

LAURA

Here we are. Thank you.

Skipping Forward

KAPPA

Look at my eyes.

JOHN

You look like you're going to punch me.

KAPPA

Nah, I'm gonna devour you. You're a wounded gazelle.

JOHN

I've had enough of this conversation.

KAPPA

It's in the eyes, John. Look at these peepers. I once made a forty-four year old woman fall in love me just by staring at her.

JOHN

Why?

KAPPA

Forty-four if she was a day. And I didn't say a word John. I just did this.

(He stares again.)

(CHOOEY enters.)

KAPPA

Hey Chooey, look!

(he stares at CHOOEY. CHOOEY stares back.)

CHOOEY

What?

KAPPA

Is this how you guys get all those wives?

CHOOEY

That was a long time ago.

JOHN

Wait a minute, wait a minute, what?

KAPPA

Chooey didn't tell you—he's a Mormon. He's got fourteen wives back home.

CHOOEY

I do not.

KAPPA

I'm gonna sign up to be a Mormon.

CHOOEY

I'm not married. And we don't do that.

KAPPA

Fourteen. Can you imagine that, John? Do you put `em all in one bed?

CHOOEY

Shut up.

JOHN

Kappa lay off him.

KAPPA

I'm just joking around with you, fella. I don't think you'll ever have one wife.
(CHOOEY makes a move to lunge at KAPPA)
Hey hey hey I thought you were non-violent!

JOHN

Guys? What do you want, Chooey?

CHOOEY

The sergeant wants us to meet him back at the mayor's office.

KAPPA

Why don't you just say George? The guy's name is George.

CHOOEY

You might not care about rank in the army, but I do.

KAPPA

Oooh.

JOHN

Save it for the Nazis, all right?

KAPPA

Well let's go see Georgie. Anybody ever tell you you look like a telephone pole?

CHOOEY

No.

KAPPA

You do. You look like a telephone pole.

CHOOEY

You look like a rat.

KAPPA

That supposed to be funny? You think you're tough just cause you're taller than me?

JOHN

We are fighting a war, gentlemen.

KAPPA

Well, Johnny, I don't know about you, but the Nazis are just gonna love a guy who looks like Chooey here, you big Mormon galoot.

(CHOOEY stares at KAPPA.)

JOHN

Kappa, shut up.

KAPPA

All right. Let's go see *the sergeant.*

(They exit.)

(Lights up on the mayor's office. MILO and GEORGE are there. CHOOEY rushes in, followed by JOHN and KAPPA.)

GEORGE

Merry Christmas, gentlemen. We've been attacked by Santa Claus.

MILO

Shipment just came in.

(MILO produces packages of various sizes.)

This one's for John.

GEORGE

Too bad we don't have a tree, huh?

KAPPA

I'll go chop one down.

MILO

Kappa, here you go.

GEORGE

I'm surprised anyone loves you.

KAPPA

Blow it out your ear, sergeant.

MILO

Here's one for Chooey. Another one for Chooey. Chooey again.

CHOOEY *(to KAPPA)*

Don't even start!

KAPPA

What? I wasn't gonna say nothin'. Except maybe each wife sending—

CHOOEY

Stuff it.

JOHN

So do Mormons get Christmas presents?

CHOOEY

No. These are Mormon presents. For December 23rd it's a big holiday for us—

MILO

He's kidding ya, John.

JOHN

Oh.

(JOHN pulls out a knit scarf. Oohs and Ahhs from the crowd.)

KAPPA

Your girl make that?

JOHN

My Mom. What'd you get, Chooey?

(CHOOEY has socks. He is ecstatic about it.)

CHOOEY

Never thought I'd be so happy to see socks.

(He begins removing strands of dried popcorn and other decorations.)

My little sisters made these.

(MILO has an old teddy bear.)

GEORGE

You miss your teddy, Milo?

MILO

My Mom thinks I'm eight. Nah this was mine growing up.

KAPPA

I had booties growing up but my Mom didn't send those.

MILO

It's a good luck charm.

KAPPA

Yeah the Nazis are gonna fall down laughing when they see a guy with a teddy bear coming at `em.

JOHN

What'd you get, Sergeant?

GEORGE

Cut that stuff out, it's Christmas. My name's George.

KAPPA

Told ya.

GEORGE

Well… I got socks…
(cheers from the men as they all hold up socks.)
A sweater… beef jerky…

MILO

I hate beef jerky.

KAPPA

Shut up, Milo.

GEORGE

And a picture frame with…
(he looks at the picture.)
A photo of my son.
(he shows it to the others.)
He just turned one. I've never met him.

KAPPA

You'll be there for his next birthday. We all will. We'll have a party.

GEORGE

Count on it. Merry Christmas, men.
(They raise up glasses and fall to Merry-making.)

MILO

Look what I found.

(He turns on the radio, static at first, but then very clearly Christmas music is heard. More cheers from the men. They begin singing along to the music as best they can. KAPPA gets up and begins to dance—he grabs MILO's teddy bear and romances it. MILO protests, but KAPPA ignores him.)

(After a moment, MRS. ROUSSEAU and LAURA enter. The men stop immediately, embarrassed.)

MRS. ROUSSEAU

Excusez-moi.

GEORGE

Madame Rousseau.

MRS. ROUSSEAU

Désolé de vous déranger, mais
<I'm sorry to intrude, but>
(she looks at LAURA)

LAURA

Mrs. Rousseau is sorry to bother you, but she has something she would like to ask you.

GEORGE

I'm all ears.

LAURA

We want to thank you for everything you have done for our village and we have one small request—

MRS. ROUSSEAU

Le plus grand devrait convenir.
<The tall one would work.>

LAURA

Mrs. Rousseau's husband was the mayor of Charlemont—he was killed over four years ago. Most of the young men went to fight—no one returned. Over the years the Nazis have taken every last man we've had. There are none left.

MRS. ROUSSEAU

Racontez-leur l'histoire.
<Tell them about the tradition.>

LAURA

There has been a tradition in Charlemont since the village was founded in the fourteenth century. And that is on Christmas Day, everyone in the town gathers in the central square, and the mayor disguises himself as Father Christmas, and he parades through the town and gives presents to all of the little children. Every year we have done this for almost six hundred years. But there has been no one, no mayor, no man able to play the part since we were occupied. Most of the children no longer remember our tradition. They cannot remember Christmas—they have never had presents. We would be honored if one of you would be our Father Christmas tomorrow.

(Pause.)

GEORGE

Of course.

MRS. ROUSSEAU

Le plus grand fera l'affaire. Les autres sont trop maigres.
<The tall one should do it. The other ones are too skinny.>

LAURA

Je sais, je sais. Un instant. <I know, I know. Give me one moment.> She says that the costume is very large, and you are all very skinny.

KAPPA

I'm working on it.

LAURA

But she believes that the tall one—

CHOOEY

Me?

LAURA

Yes. You should play the part. The costume will fit you.

KAPPA

He doesn't even believe in Christmas.

CHOOEY

I believe in Christmas. I can do it. I want to do it.

LAURA

D'accord.
<They say yes.>

MRS. ROUSSEAU

Merci infiniment, vous ne pouvez pas savoir combien on apprécie.
<Thank you so much, you have no idea how much this means to our people.>

LAURA

Thank you so much. It has been so long.

GEORGE

What time do you need us?

LAURA

Perhaps noon, tomorrow? Traditionally it has been at noon.

JOHN

What should we bring as presents?

LAURA

The presents do not matter. Wrap snow in paper and they will take it from you with joy. It is the appearance of Father Christmas that is important; it will let them know that it is time to live again.

(MRS. ROUSSEAU exits.)

The costume is in the basement. We hid it down there.

CHOOEY

So I just walk through—and hand out—

LAURA

Sweets, little toys, anything we can find.

MILO

Do you have any of that?

(LAURA shakes her head.)

JOHN

I could make bread.

(They look at him.)

It's good bread. If we have an oven somewhere.

KAPPA

Can you make me some cookies?

JOHN

Shut up.

LAURA

I have an oven that works.

(MRS. ROUSSEAU returns. She carries, folded in her arms, a long, green coat, tattered and frayed and clearly unworn in some time. She hands it over to CHOOEY and adjusts it on his frame.)

CHOOEY

Hey it fits.

(MRS. ROUSSEAU takes a long, (five-foot long) white beard)

MRS. ROUSSEAU

Mettez-le.
<Put it on.>

(CHOOEY adjusts the beard on his face. MRS. ROUSSEAU is pleased.)

Il ressemble à mon mari.
<He looks like my husband.>

CHOOEY

What'd she say?

LAURA

She says you look like her husband.

(CHOOEY laughs nervously.)

KAPPA

He musta been a looker.

(Lights fade as music rises.)

(Lights switch to the outside. JOHN makes his way through the darkened town, holding a large sack of materials. LAURA helps him into her house, guiding him past several silent figures. She begins lighting candles.)

LAURA

I'm sorry it is so dark.

JOHN

That's okay. I'm a great blind cooker.

LAURA

What?

JOHN

Um… doesn't translate.

LAURA

Oh.

(JOHN begins taking out supplies.)

LAURA *(cont'd)*

The army gives you that?

JOHN

No. My Mom owns a restaurant in Cleveland.

LAURA

Your father?

JOHN

Dead.

LAURA

I am sorry.

JOHN

But before he died he taught me to cook. So there are good things. Oh I almost forgot.
(He takes a bottle of wine out of his sack.)
Compliments of the United States army. Who says we aren't civilized?

LAURA

I'll find some glasses.

JOHN

I'd make baklava for tomorrow but I'm missing a few things. So I'm trying this instead.

LAURA

Is it a pastry?

JOHN

It's a variation on a theme.
(she pours them both a glass)

LAURA

To…

JOHN

To peace.

LAURA

To peace.
(They drink. She looks at him.)
It's good. I haven't had wine since my husband…

JOHN

I didn't know you were married.

Skipping Forward

LAURA

Perhaps your luck will hold.

JOHN

Maybe. I wonder what I'll do when it happens, though. If I'll have the… courage these other men have—whether I'll just freeze or run away or… a year ago I was worried about trying to pass Algebra. I don't know if I'll measure up.

LAURA

You will.

JOHN

But what does that even mean? Killing someone? I don't understand how that's noble.

LAURA

They are the killers, John. Sometimes we make things out to be more complicated than they are. You will do what is right. Like my husband. Enough of that. There is something so joyful in this music, yes? Like springtime or… the sunrise.

JOHN

Yeah.

LAURA

When the Nazis came it seemed like they pulled all the color out of our lives. And now, maybe, you will help it return.

JOHN

I hope we'll do okay tomorrow.

LAURA

The children will love it. You have no idea.

(She touches his arm.)

I grew up here. I remember going to the Christmas parade as a small child. It seemed like everyone went, your friends from school, your neighbors; all the children would line the street, my brother would hold me on his shoulders to get a better look. And with the bells, and the snow falling, and the horses that pulled the cart, so much joy—like the world was new. So long ago now. So many of those people are dead.

JOHN

Your brother?

(Pause.)

LAURA

All I wanted to do was grow up and live here. Raise a family. Take my own children.

JOHN

You will.

LAURA

You are a very kind person. Please let yourself stay that way.

JOHN

I'm not planning on changing.

LAURA

But you will. The war will change you. On the outside maybe, but keep some part of you…

JOHN

Pure?

LAURA

Clean.

JOHN

I'll try.

(she is very close to him.)

Um…

LAURA

What do you want to do with your life?

JOHN

If I make it out of here? I don't know. Fall in love. I don't want to die before I fall in love. I guess I don't want to die period.

LAURA

You guess?

JOHN

I know. Maybe I'll open a restaurant.

LAURA

Before or after falling in love?

JOHN

Probably after.

(She is very close to him. Pause. CHOOEY is banging on the door downstairs.)

CHOOEY

John! The sergeant needs you!

JOHN

I gotta go. Um… bye.

(He isn't sure whether to hug her or shake hands.)

CHOOEY

Hurry it up!

LAURA

Goodbye. I'll see you tomorrow at the parade.

JOHN

We didn't get this made—

LAURA

It's okay.

(He attempts something of a hand-shake/hug combination and fails miserably. He ends up waving, then darts out.

(Lights fade on LAURA as the music swells.)

(Lights up on the mayor's office.)

GEORGE

Looks like the Germans are trying some kind of massive offensive eighty miles south of here. All the divisions they got in the area. We pack up at 0600 and move out. Get your things together.

(Pause. None of the men move.)

What the hell's the matter with you? Get moving. We're not in this war to play Santa Claus.

CHOOEY

They already told the kids.

GEORGE

Well they'll have to tell `em something else. You heard me, let's go.

KAPPA

They need us right now?

GEORGE

No they need us two weeks from now! Of course they need us right now. Get moving.

(the men hold still, confused.)

That's an order.

CHOOEY

No.

GEORGE

What was that?

CHOOEY

I'm staying.

GEORGE

Excuse me, soldier?

CHOOEY

I'm staying, sir.

GEORGE

Is there a reason you think you possess greater knowledge of what is and isn't necessary in this war?

CHOOEY

I think I need to do this, sir.

GEORGE

I will take you there in handcuffs.

CHOOEY

I will come afterwards—

GEORGE

You'll come now.

CHOOEY

No, sir.

GEORGE

I don't need to reason with you. But think about this, Chooey. Do the people who live here deserve life more than the people who live south of here? By your action, are you willing to sacrifice lives in order to maintain a tradition. That's what we're talking about. Suppose you stay--we're talking about Milo's life, and John's life, and Kappa's life, and every other soldier on that battlefield—you have a responsibility to them. And if you're not there and one of these guys takes a bullet, that's on your head. Because you coulda been there. And you chose not to.

CHOOEY

I gave them my word that I would do this. Sergeant, I will catch up with you.

GEORGE

You are not going to do this.

CHOOEY

Please, sir.

MILO

Maybe he can stay behind or something—

GEORGE

Shut up, Milo.

MILO

Yes, sir.

GEORGE

I'm gonna give you to the count of three to get up and get your things together. One. Two.

MILO

I'm not going either.

GEORGE

What the hell is wrong with you?

MILO

John are you staying with us?

CHOOEY

Come on, John.

GEORGE

Three.

(no one moves.)

You are in violation of a direct order. You are—

JOHN

Wait wait! What if… what if we did it right now? What if we got everybody out of their houses and did the parade right now? And then as soon as we're done we pack up? Can we do that?

End of Excerpt.
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