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Cast of Characters

In order of appearance:

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.

GERMAN SOLDIER

A CHORUS of children.

Setting

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

Production Note

The following play is based on a true story.

Acknowledgments

The Bells of Charlemont was originally performed by Haltom High School in Haltom City, Texas on March 21, 2007. The original cast was as follows:

JOHNPatrick Carstarphen
LAURAChristina Thompson
GEORGE..... Briley Floyd
KAPPA.....Anthony Hernandez
MILO..... Bradley Faught
CHOOEYJulian Arredondo
MADAME ROUSSEAU.....Sonia Rehman
GERMAN SOLDIER.....Jimmy Sefcik
CHORUSBailey Lamar, Alexis Ozment,
 Laura McFeeters, Melissa McFeeters,
 Stephanie Coss, Natalie Bodak,
 Jasmine Zaro, Sarah Weeks,
 Yanina Gonzalez

THE BELLS OF CHARLEMONT

by Don Zolidis

(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.)

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.

KAPPA. Me too.

(JOHN starts to leave.)

Maybe a bottle of rum. You drink rum?

JOHN. No.

KAPPA. You got a lot to learn, smart boy!

(KAPPA goes back to watching the distance, smoking his cigarette.)

(Lights shift. Outside the mayor's office. CHOOEY, a tall blonde soldier is talking to MRS. ROUSSEAU, an older French woman. Neither can understand anything the other is saying.)

MRS. ROUSSEAU. *Y'a quelqu'un qui parle français ici?* [Is there anyone here who speaks French?]

CHOOEY. I'm sorry lady—

MRS. ROUSSEAU. *Y'a quelqu'un ici que je pourrais parler?* [Is there anyone here I could talk to?]

CHOOEY. I can ask some of the guys, but uh... je ne parlez france.

MRS. ROUSSEAU. *Mon mari était maire ici, s'il vous plait, il faut que je parle à quelqu'un.* [My husband was the mayor here. Please. I need to speak to someone.]

CHOOEY. Uh... wait right here, okay?

(Lights shift as CHOOEY steps "inside" a dimly lit building. GEORGE sits, shivering. MRS. ROUSSEAU continues to wait.)

GEORGE. Now what is it again?

CHOOEY. I think there's a woman here to see you.

GEORGE. You think there's a woman?

CHOOEY. I think she's here to see you. I don't know. She doesn't speak English.

GEORGE. Does she want food or something?

CHOOEY. I guess so. I don't know, I don't speak French.

GEORGE. I gathered that, Chooley.

CHOOEY. Should I let her in?

GEORGE. Go find someone in town who speaks English. Okay? Bring her here to translate.

CHOOEY. Yes, sir.

GEORGE. And Chooley? Be nice about it. These people have been through enough.

CHOOEY. Of course, sir.

(CHOOEY exits. The lights flicker and raise in intensity.)

GEORGE. Thank you.

(He heads to a transistor radio and turns it. First there is static... then nothing.)

Damn it.

(MILO enters.)

Milo you're a genius.

MILO. Indeed I am, sergeant.

(The lights go dim again.)

GEORGE. Shoot.

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 Chooley, 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?

(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.

(Lights change. JOHN sits in thought.)

JOHN. 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.

JOHN. No problem, ma'am. Miss. Mademoiselle.

(JOHN starts to leave, then stops. He turns back to look at her.)

LAURA. Did you forget something?

JOHN. Um... I don't know how long I'm going to be here, but... the other day we found a wine cellar on the outskirts of town, and—

LAURA. You want to have a bottle of wine with me?

JOHN. I was getting around to that. Might taste better than the water.

LAURA. Depends on what vintage.

JOHN. Yeah, I don't know. So... um?

LAURA. Do you have a girl in every village?

JOHN. No this is my first one. My first village. Not my first girl. I mean, it is, in that way, uh... but...

LAURA. Yes I will have a bottle of wine with you.

JOHN. Thanks.

(He stands there for a moment.)

LAURA. Goodbye, John.

JOHN. Yeah, right. Goodbye.

(She leaves.)

(KAPPA is there moments after she leaves.)

KAPPA. Damn!

JOHN. Shut up.

KAPPA. Johnny-boy! What's her name?

JOHN. No idea.

KAPPA. You don't even know her name?

JOHN. Don't you have a girl back home?

KAPPA. Back home. I got a girl *back home*. I don't got a girl *right here*. She got any friends?

JOHN. She seemed very unfriendly.

KAPPA. All women are unfriendly until they get desperate. You just gotta find 'em at that low point, you know? That's the key. Like the lion chasing down the wounded gazelle.

JOHN. What?

KAPPA. Let me show you a technique. Come here.

JOHN. I really should get back to—

KAPPA. Look at me. You don't even have to say nothing. You just stare at 'em. Watch.

(KAPPA looks at JOHN seductively.)

JOHN. What are you doing?

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. Chooley 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, Chooley?

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 Chooley 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 Chooley. Another one for Chooley. Chooley 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.)

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.

LAURA. I'm a widow. Like so many. We were married for seven months—

JOHN. What happened?

LAURA. He left to fight them. He never came home.

JOHN. I'm sorry.

LAURA. It is a common story. There are a dozen women in Charlemont with the same one. One learns to accept these things.

JOHN. It'll be over soon.

LAURA. You are very young.

JOHN. I'm probably the same age as you.

LAURA. Let us think cheerful thoughts, shall we? I managed to hide this from the soldiers—

(She produces a record.)

You like Beethoven? He's German, but I try not to hold that against him.

JOHN. We didn't have a record player when I was growing up.

LAURA. You are in for a treat, then.

(She plays the record—Beethoven's Symphony No. 7.)

I want to thank you for all that you have done.

JOHN. I haven't really done anything, actually. I haven't even been shot at.

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. 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, Choey. 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?

GEORGE. Our orders are to leave at 0600—

JOHN. It's just past midnight. We can make it! We get all our stuff together right now—

MILO. What'll we pass out?

KAPPA. I got an idea for that.

JOHN. What do you say, sergeant? This way—everybody wins.

GEORGE. You got an hour.

JOHN. All right, all right.

(The men begin to act.)

Milo—you go ring the church bell. Chooley—

CHOOEY. I got it.

(He starts getting into the outfit.)

JOHN. Sergeant you find some hand-held bells or something—I'm gonna go knock on doors—

KAPPA. I need your help with it, but I got the presents.

JOHN. All right. We need candles too. To light the way.

GEORGE. So you're in charge now?

JOHN. For an hour. Let's go.

(The men disperse. First there is a very faint ringing in the distance. Lights fade.)

(More bells begin ringing. Children begin appearing in the street. LAURA and MRS. ROUSSEAU hold candles to light the way. A bright moon provides the rest of the illumination. In the distance, we hear a procession of bells. Slowly, almost in slow-motion, CHOOEY (as Father Christmas) is accompanied down the street by MILO and KAPPA. GEORGE and JOHN are nearby, continuing to ring the bells. As they approach, the children are held back by the older women, forming a path. CHOOEY carries a large sack and reaches into it as he passes children, handing them brightly wrapped packages.)

(The children begin tearing into the presents, ripping off the paper. One finds a sweater, another a pair of socks, another a package of food. One child discovers Milo's teddy bear and squeals with delight. Every single present the men received, the sole exception being the photo of George's boy, is doled out by CHOOEY. When there is nothing left, the children continue to crowd about.)

(Music. The children continue to take and take from the soldiers. They freeze as JOHN emerges from the crowd to find LAURA.)

JOHN. I needed to say good-bye to you.

LAURA. Good luck.

JOHN. Are you gonna be okay here without us?

LAURA. We'll manage.

(Pause.)

Thank you.

(She goes to touch him, but can't.)

JOHN. Am I ever going to see you again?

LAURA. When the war is over.

(JOHN takes her hands.)

JOHN. I don't think there's anything I can really say to you... just... I've got this feeling that you could be the woman—

LAURA. Shhh---

JOHN. No no I want to say this. I just want you to know that if I die down there—

LAURA. Please don't.

JOHN. Coming here made it worth it. Okay? It's funny, isn't it? I haven't even kissed you.

(They are about to kiss.)

(A whistle from somewhere off. JOHN looks to it. She grabs him and kisses him.)

LAURA. Goodbye.

JOHN. Be happy, all right? It's Christmas, after all.

(JOHN exits, LAURA fades into the darkness. The MEN appear, each in their own space. Music [Beethoven's 7th Symphony, 2nd movement] begins.)

Later on it was called the Battle of the Bulge. In the moment we really didn't have a proper name for it except the fact that that all of a sudden the Germans were throwing everything they had at one weak spot in our line. One last attempt to break through like they had done in the early part of the war. And I felt like a little kid. Lost

and scared and watching all of this. But I didn't run. I was scared as hell, but I didn't. None of us did. I was with Kappa, he was right next to me, hiding in my shadow like he said.

(KAPPA appears, behind JOHN.)

Sergeant George...

(GEORGE appears, elsewhere on the stage.)

Was separated from us almost immediately. He got caught up in a bit where the panzers were thick—and last I saw of him there was a flash as a mortar round broke the ground beneath us. Whether he lived or died... but those things, those life and death things, became all of a sudden crystal, when a man is near you dead, when his body falls upon you, when you see a burst of rock shatter someone's skull—Milo tried to stay near the rear, but he was swept up in it too—

(MILO appears near the back.)

And I wondered if you could get faith back and lose it again in one day. And then there was Chooey, Father Christmas, taller than the rest of us, braver too... and if there was anyone who didn't deserve to die on any day it was him. I never heard from him again either. And then there was that moment. The moment it came for me—

(A GERMAN SOLDIER appears, scared, dusty, a teenager just like JOHN.)

This must have been his first fight too, cause he looked all of fifteen.

(The GERMAN SOLDIER raises his gun toward JOHN.)

MILO. You'll be amazed at what you can do.

(Shaking and frightened, The GERMAN SOLDIER fires. The sound is deafening, echoing, and the music stops instantly. JOHN drops like a stone.)

(The GERMAN SOLDIER watches for a moment, before another shot is fired. He drops this time.)

(KAPPA emerges, holding his rifle.)

(JOHN sits up.)

GEORGE. There was a hole right through my helmet.

(JOHN holds up his helmet, there's a hole through it.)

JOHN. Imagine the odds.

(KAPPA stares at the helmet.)

KAPPA. Damn.

JOHN. Thanks.

KAPPA. Probably woulda been better if I shot him before he shot you, but—

JOHN. Thanks, anyway.

(More explosions.)

I made it. We pushed them back. I was transferred to a new unit after the battle, and after the war was over I didn't go back to Charlemont. I didn't know why at the time—maybe I was just sick of Europe and wanted to go home, maybe I didn't want to be there without my friends, maybe I was scared. But I went back to Cleveland. I met a girl two years later, we got married, we had three kids, two sons and a daughter in-between. It's funny how life just washes over you—like a current in a stream—and for a moment you think you have all the time in the world to do something you promised, but one day you wake up and you realize your time is slipping away from you.

(Short pause. JOHN seems to age before us. He heads over to the walker he set aside at the beginning of the play.)

I got old. It happened day by day, but I got old. I worked, and I was a father, and then I was a grandfather. And finally, a year and a half ago I became a great grandfather. My wife died, and I was alone, eventually, finally and totally alone, with just about everyone I knew dead, passed on, vanished, until I was just a small grey speck. And my daughter was about to move me to an assisted living center, maybe just for some company, and I thought about my life... how it had taken me all these places I never intended on going, and about three weeks before Christmas, something happened. I got a letter.

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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