

Smoke 'Em If You Got 'Em

A 10-Minute Play

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[Two American soldiers, both draftees, on patrol in the jungle of Viet Nam, 1969. Their platoon is taking a cigarette break. They're sitting on a log, a fallen tree, helmets off, rifles, M16s, between their legs. S1 is smoking. S2 sipping from a canteen. Evening, almost dark. Hot, humid. Haven't bathed in 3 days. Drenched in sweat. Filthy. A Medic (M) enters near end.]

S1 Do you ever think about us getting out of here?

S2 No, man. I don't go there ...

S1 I'm scared shitless ... every day ... I don't know how long I can take this.

S2 We're all scared, man. But that doesn't do anyone any good ...

S1 What do you mean by that?

S2 You got somebody waiting for you back home?

S1 Yea, my girl ...

S2 uh, huh ... Well, I don't want to rain on your parade but you can probably write her off ...

S1 Bullshit! I'm not doing that. She's my life – she's all I got ...

S2 And she AIN'T here. That's my point. The more you got your head on her and not on every fucking leaf, hole and hooch around here ... the more you're just liable to get it blown off ... and mine, too. I need **YOU** to keep your head in the game. You got my back, I got yours ... and if we do that **real** well and are **real** lucky, we just might see home again ...

(long pause – S1 tries to change the subject)

S1 Do you have anyone at home?

S2 Sure, I do. Did. But I wrote them off, man. That's what I'm trying to tell you ... You gotta choke off every one of those weak spots ...

(Long pause – S1 tries to change the subject)

S1 How long you been here?

S2 Almost 10 months ...

S1 How old are you?

S2 What are you, fucking Walter Kronkite ...? I just turned 22 ... got a degree in History from U of I – Iowa. Born and raised on a farm – my dad and older brother still work it. Had a girl in town ... Maggie. I was hoping to get a job teaching at the high school ...

(pause – shaking his head, laughing)

That'd be a hoot – I wasn't a troublemaker or anything like that, mind you, but I wasn't exactly valdictorian material, either ...

Maggie just started there ... teaching English and assistant coach of the girl's basketball team ... She played basketball at U of I – damn good, too. A point guard. Paid her way through college.

S1 Are you two serious ... ? Like marriage and all ...?

S2 I'm in Viet Nam, man ... like trying to survive **AND ALL** ... that's what I'm serious about.

S1 I don't get you ... you got all that going in your life, yet you blow it off like it doesn't exist

S2 It **DOESN'T EXIST** ... Listen ... I'm above ground with all my limbs right now, in part because that other shit **doesn't** exist anymore!

(LONG PAUSE)

S1 Man, I could really get depressed ...

S2 We call it the Big D ... everybody gets it ...

S1 Seriously ...?

(S2 nods ...)

What do you do about it?

S2 Get high ... Get laid ... Get a hot bath, a hot meal every so often ... stay alive, mostly ...

S1 Why is Dog so happy all the time? He doesn't seem depressed or scared at all? Always joking ... cutting up ...

S2 Yea, Dog's a trip, isn't he? He's from Detroit – thinks he's Mr. Motown – Marvin Gaye or somebody like that ... I can tell you, though, I envy him in a way ...

S1 Me, too ...

S2 So, where you from?

S1 Orem, Utah ...

S2 Never heard of it ... is that Morman country?

S1 Yea, there's Mormons around there ... I'm not one of them, though. So, you know about Mormons?

S2 Not really ... had a Christmas tape I used to like – The Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

S1 You want to sing a Christmas tune? (he starts singing) O Holy Night, the stars ...

S2 Can it, man. It's a hundred thousand fucking degrees ... I stink like, like ... god knows ... you do, too, by the way ... naw, this ain't no time for Christmas caroles ...

S1 What **does** happen over here around Christmas anyway?

S2 Grunts get shot up and killed ...body bags go out on C130s ...

S1 Shit, man ... why don't you drag me down or something ...?

S2 No problem ... like I said, you gotta ...

S1 (interrupting S1 ...) Yea, yea, I know ... Christ – the professor, the Professor of Doom ... hey, do they have a nick name for you? You know, like Dog and Sweet Home over there (he nods his head off stage to his left)

S2 Sweet Home ... there's another case of something (shaking his head, laughing) ... Nope.

S1 I got one for you, then. The Professor!

S2 hmm ... Cute ...

S1 It's fitting ...

S2 Yea, fuck you ...

S1 Two more months and you're out of here ...

S2 I don't want to talk about that ... I don't want to jinx anything.

S1 Will your girl be waiting for you? Maggie, you said?

S2 Yea, Maggie. (pause) Man ... I don't know. I suppose she'll be there, maybe. We were real tight before this ... (gesturing around) this happened ... but ...

S1 But, what?

S2 I'm dead inside, man ... stone. When I think of her, I used to get these feelings, picturing her ... I could almost smell her when I first got here ...

S1 Yea, yea, I know what you mean ... I can taste my mom's fried chicken still. Probably sounds nuts but, honest to god, I'll be eating some of that shit out of a can, and I swear I can taste the best damned fried chicken on planet earth ...

S2 (laughing) That's cool ... now that's a memory worth keeping ...

S1 Yea ... see! ... there's good things here ...

S2 You're a real perky son-of-a-bitch, aren't you ...

S1 Yea, well ... I wouldn't go that far ... (pause) Hey, what's this "dead inside" shit? You only got two months left ...

S2 **HEY** ... don't bring that up I said ...

S1 Fine. But you got this woman at home .. this life ... and you're like 100% doom and gloom ...?

S2 ... like I said. I feel dead inside ... I'm wired 24 - 7. Always watching, keyed up ... Always ready ... Semper Fi ... shit, I learned a whole new meaning for that term ... When I look at Maggie's picture, I don't see anybody ... I don't feel anything ... it's just ink on paper ...

[Machine gun fire ... mortar explosions ... sound of grenades exploding ... smoke ... continuous, terrifying rumble and rattle of battle for 20 seconds. S1 and S2 have gotten down behind log. They hide, protect themselves behind log ... audience can't see them or what's going on due to darkness, smoke with periodic flashes of light to mimic the flash explosion of mortars and grenades. Then all is quiet. Pause as smoke clears a bit.]

S1 Shit! Oh, shit ...! Medic! Medic! Over here ...man down!

M (Runs in from offstage, aid bag over shoulder, leaps over log, kneels down over S2 who still cannot be seen by audience. He works feverishly for a few seconds, then addresses S1)

It's bad (long pause) he'll live, I think. But it's bad ... gotta get him to a MASH unit ASAP

S1 Can he talk? Can I talk to him?

M No ... no way he can talk. Maybe never ... the front of his head's blown off ... (pointing over to aid bag) Get me some more bandages out of that bag – that big compression wrap ... yea, that one there ... Gotta stop the bleeding ... gotta keep this head wound covered ...

(pause – he continues working on S2)

What happened here anyway?

S1 What do you mean what happened? We were hit ... that's what happened.

M Yea, I know ... the fire fight ... but I mean with him ... he must have done this to himself

S1 Oh, no ... no way ...

M I've seen this before – a bullet straight up through the roof of the mouth, out the top of the head ... suicide, or a shitty try at suicide ... half the time it only fucks 'em up for the rest of their lives ... fucking waste ...

(pause, M continues working on S2, then says to S1)

Hey, take his wallet out and write down his name and ID number on a tag in the front pouch of my aid bag, would you ... ?

S1 Sure. (fumbles through S2's wallet ... gets tag from bag, writes as he reads aloud) ... Mark Cunningham ... 441-56-7721 ...

M Buddy of yours ...? (still working on S2)

S1 I just joined the unit ... but, yea, sort of

M He got next of kin ...?

S1 You said he was gonna live ...?

M Yea, if you call it that ... but he's gonna be a vegetable, likely ... his people back home aren't ready for this ... it's the worst ... I think I'd rather be dead than ...

S1 **Christ ...!**

M What ...?

S1 Margaret Cunningham – Maggie ... she's his wife! (pause as he looks through the wallet more) Oh, Jesus ... they have a kid ... Jason ... oh, god, he's just a toddler ...

M Sucks, doesn't it ...?

S1 (still looking) What's this? Cerebral Palsy Association ... ? Who ...? Jason ... Jesus ...

M Listen, I gotta get to the other guys now ... you stay here until the medics from the evac chopper come, okay?

(S1 looks at M, stunned, blank, wide-eyed look on his face, motionless) ...

... hey, man – **LISTEN TO ME – SNAP OUT OF IT!** I need you here – he needs you here. Hold this compress on his head ... just like this ... tight, press hard ... yea ... no, get around this way (M directs S1 to where he was kneeling) ... that's it ... good ... don't let up 'til the evac guys come, you hear ...?

(pause) Okay. (pause, looks at S2 and then at S1)

I gotta go ... right? ... you gonna be okay? (pause) Okay ...

Smoke 'em if you got 'em ...

(M runs off stage. S1's eyes follow him off ... still stunned. Lights go out.)

THE END