

Evening in Paris

A radio play by Norah Dempster

Adapted from a short story by Michelle Deans.

Synopsis

In 1941 two Australian farm boys sign up for war service. Their mateship holds and they become Japanese prisoners-of-war. It is then that the true meaning of humanity shines through.

Characters in Order of Appearance

Peggy: Australian woman aged 24 years. Engaged to be married to Stan.

Stan: Australian male aged 20 years. Thoughtful, reflective. Left school early to work on family orchard in country district but becomes bored and restless with farm life.

Jim: Australian male aged 19 years. Eager and happy. Stan's neighbour and friend from school. Also left school early to work on family orchard.

Army Sergeant: Leader of the AIF troops directed to Singapore as reinforcements when Japanese invade.

Overlapping soldier voices: Australian male voices.

Radio Announcer: British Radio news announcer. Formal accent.

Japanese soldier: Guard in charge of prisoners-of-war building the Burma Railway.

Ned: English serviceman, ex farmer and prisoner-of-war captured in Malaya and transferred to build the Burma Railway.

Bayside U3A Writers' Discussion Group, Victoria, 2018

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Scene One: Australian Vineyard and Fruit Farm.

AUDIO: AUSTRALIAN BIRDS CALLING.

PEGGY: (*excitedly*) Ohhh, Stan, you've brought me a present. Can I open it now?

STAN: Of course, that's what presents are for.

PEGGY: (*still excited*) A little blue bottle. It's Evening in Paris perfume? Ohhh, Stan, thank you!
(*wonderingly*) How on earth did you know to choose this?

STAN: (*slowly*) I bought it, Peggy... for a reason. We're here together, getting married soon. No more Land Army for you. For me, I'm back home ... on the orchard again ... well ... the perfume makes me think ... it reminds me ... it takes me back to what happened ... (*voice fades*)

Scene Two: Same Farm, Five Years Earlier.

AUDIO: STEADY SOUND OF RIVER WATER PUMP IN BACKGROUND
INTERUPTED BY LOUD SOUND OF A SMALL WAR PLANE IN SKY, PUMP SOUND
RESUMES

STAN: Geez, it's boring here. Why do I always miss everything?

JIM: Whaddya saying, Stan?

STAN: (*impatiently*) Geez, Jim, being stuck here on this fruit farm! Nothing ever happens. I reckon that was a Spitfire that went over. Going to fight Hitler.

JIM: Come on, mate. It's picking time soon.

STAN: That's what I mean, Jim, picking, pruning, and thinning. Same thing year after year. And that noisy river pump never stops.

JIM: I do know whatya mean. School was a bit like that, too. Boring! Remember, we used to go up another row of desks every year, but nothing ever changed.

STAN: Grapes, grapes, grapes! Nothing but grapes. And oranges too, I suppose. (*laughs and voice changes from complaining to affection*) My Mum lo-v-es the oranges.

AUDIO: REPEAT LOUD SOUND OF SMALLWAR PLANE IN SKY.

(*excited*) Hey, there's that Spitfire again. Aussies fly them in Britain. Heard it on Radio Australia. Mum and Dad listen to the news every night and ya can't even breathe while it's on.

JIM: Ya read those posters in town? Asking for help in the war.

STAN: Are you going?

JIM: I dunno. Whadya reckon?

STAN: The Carter twins have gone. They came in uniform to say goodbye. Geez, they looked all shiny! Clean boots. Spick and span, mum said.

JIM: What about the cricket team this year? They're the fastest bowlers we got.

STAN: (*determined voice*) You know, I reckon I'm ready. I'm old enough. You wanna come?

JIM: I'm not old enough.

STAN: Ya will be by Christmas. It'll be an adventure. That's why I want to go.

JIM: Maybe. (*pause*) Mum had two brothers in Gallipolli. Only one came back. Uncle Ted. He never talked about it though.

STAN: (*thoughtful*) We could go together. The two of us. They give you a bit of training.

JIM: Yeah, we could. Stick together. I reckon I will. But you've got a girlfriend.

STAN: Peggy'll wait. We'll be back. Gotta get out of here first.

JIM: (*encouragingly*) You're right, Stan. Have an adventure first.

STAN: (*excited*) Yes, a REAL adventure.

AUDIO: FIRST TWO LINES "WISH ME LUCK AS YOU WAVE ME GOODBYE."
(Gracie Fields)

Scene Three: On Troop Ship.

AUDIO: SHIP ENGINE.

STAN: Where are we, Jim?

JIM: On a troop ship heading towards the Equator. Dunno anything else.

STAN: (*confidential*) They reckon we're precious cargo. We're going to reinforce something.

JIM: Yeah! We're reinforcements. Hey, blackout time. Block the portholes. Can you smell smoke?

STAN: Yes, something's burning, my eyes are stinging.

JIM: Hey, the ship's turning. What's the Sergeant shouting?

AUSTRALIAN SERGEANT: (*calling*) Attention! Line Up! Prepare to disembark. Guns at ready. One two, one two.

AUDIO: SOUND OF MARCHING BOOTS.

JIM: Geez, is this it?

STAN: Looks like it. Stick with me. We're together.

AUSTRALIAN SERGEANT: Left right, left right, left right (*voice fades*).

AUDIO: MARCHING BOOTS FADE.

Scene Four: Island of Singapore.

AUDIO: TROPICAL BIRDS CALLING.

WATER SPLASHING.

OVERLAPPING AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER VOICES: Mangroves! Don't fall. Don't fall.
Ow! I'm giddy!
Still got sea legs.
It's water. Keep going.
Where are we?

JIM: We're in Singapore. In the jungle.

AUSTRALIAN SERGEANT: (*shouting*) Keep your heads down! Move! Move! Shoot!

AUDIO: SOUNDS OF INCREASING GUNFIRE FOLLOWED BY
PLANE NOISES AND BOMBS DROPPING.

JIM: (*in panic*) Geez! We're being bombed. Run! Hide!

AUDIO: HEAVY BREATHING. BRANCHES BREAKING.
GARBLED JAPANESE VOICES IN DISTANCE.

JIM: (*loud whisper*) Is that you, Stan. We gotta hang on.

STAN: Yeah, hang on, mate! (*louder*) Quick! Shoot! Shoot! Run!

AUDIO: FEET CRASHING THROUGH JUNGLE.

Scene Five: Radio Studio in England.

AUDIO: CRACKLING SOUND OF RADIO STARTING.

RADIO ANNOUNCER: This is London last minute news, Feb 15, 1942. Tonight the Prime Minister, Mr. Winston Churchill announced that Singapore has fallen and the Malay Peninsula over-run by Japanese military troops. The British have surrendered unconditionally.

Prisoners have been taken.

Mr. Churchill said, 'I speak to you tonight under the shadow of a heavy and far-reaching military defeat.'

Scene Six: Coast Road in Singapore.

AUDIO: SOUND OF TROPICAL BIRDS CALLING.
SOLDIERS' FEET TRAMPING ON ROAD.

STAN: (*calling*) Jim, I thought you were gone!

JIM: (*voice croaking from thirst*) I'm here. Prisoner like you. The Japanese got this place now.

STAN: We gotta hang on.

JIM: (*with humour*) We gotta keep walking. Geez, I'm dyin' of thirst. All the houses got Japanese flags, but hey, the Chinese are coming out. They're bringing us water. Geez, thanks. (*gulps water*)

JIM: What are the Japs saying?

STAN: Dunno! But that soldier chap over there says they're putting us on a ship up front.

JIM: Another ship! Where to?

STAN: Look, everyone's goin' down in the belly.

JIM: Like real cargo this time.

STAN: (*hisses*) Shut up. Do what they tell us. We gotta survive.

JIM: Okay, but sod 'em all just the same.

Scene Seven: The Burma Railway – The Line.

AUDIO: SOUND OF HAMMERS ON IRON RAILS.
TROPICAL INSECTS. BIRDS.

JIM: (*with humour*) Never thought I'd be building a railway line in the Burma jungle.

STAN: Nor me! Grab that sleeper.

STAN and JIM together: (*Grunting.*) Drop!

AUDIO: SOUND OF RAILWAY SLEEPER BEING DROPPED.

STAN: Ya wonder about home? If they're picking yet? Dunno how long we've been here.

JIM: I reckon it's nearly Christmas.

STAN: Me too. Dad'll be out checkin' the grapevines. Mum 'll be baking. Grab that sleeper.

JIM (*sadly*) Shortbread. Xmas cake.

STAN and JIM together: (*Grunting.*) Drop!

AUDIO: SOUND OF RAILWAY SLEEPER BEING DROPPED.

STAN (*with longing*) My mum'll have done the Christmas cake, she bakes it at orange blossom time.

JIM: I wonder how that old water pump's going.

STAN: You used to power across that river. The current'd take you now you're so skinny. Geez you don't look good, Jim.

JIM: (*weakly*) Got the runs again. Real bad.

STAN: You should've stayed back in camp. Shut up, here's the Jap.

JAPANESE GUARD: (*angrily*) What you talking? What you say? Nobody stay back.

STAN: (*to the guard*) Okay, okay. (*to Jim*) I'll take the load, Jim. Hang on!

JIM: I think I'm crook, mate. (*Cry of pain*) Ahhh!

STAN: Hang on. I'll do it. I'll do it. (*grunts*)

AUDIO: SOUND OF HEAVY RAILWAY SLEEPER FALLING.
UNDERGROWTH CRASHING.

STAN: Done! Sit down a tick, Jim.

JIM: Ahhhh! (*cry of pain*) I'm really crook, mate.

JAPANESE GUARD: (*shouting*) Get up! Get up! (*garbled, angry Japanese word follow*)

STAN: Give him a minute, he's sick. Jim! I'm here.

JAPANESE GUARD: (*shouting*) Nobody minute. Speedo, speedo! Nobody sick.

AUDIO: THUMPING OF BEATING WITH RIFLE.

STAN: (*shouting*) Don't hit him! Don't hit him!

AUDIO: SOUND OF CONTINUED THUMPS AND BEATINGS.

STAN: (*anguished and panicked*) Jim! Jim! He can't get up! Leave him alone. Leave him!

AUDIO: SOUND OF RIFLE BEATINGS CONTINUE.

JAPANESE GUARD: (*shouting*) Hit you, hit you!

AUDIO: SOUND OF RIFLE BEATINGS FADE.

NED: (*quietly*) He's dead. Poor fellow.

JAPANESE GUARD: (*disgust*) Aach, pick up! Speedo, speedo, pick up.

AUDIO: SOUND OF GUARD'S FOOTSEPS LEAVING.

NED: Nothing you can do. He's done for. Join those crosses over there, that's all.

AUDIO: BEGINNING OF SONG "WE'LL MEET AGAIN"

(Vera Lynn)

Scene Eight: Soldiers' Sleeping Hut at Night.

AUDIO: CRIES AND MURMURINGS OF PRISONERS.

OVERLAPPING AUSTRALIAN SOLDIER VOICES: They've cleaned our hut out.
Sods. Thrown all our stuff.
They've gone.

NED: Get the mats. We've got to sleep.

NED: (*whispers*) I'm in bed. Are you all right?

STAN: He was my best friend, Jim was.

NED: You couldn't do anything more.

STAN: School, teenage, the lot. (*starting to weep*) We did everything together. We came together. We stuck together.

NED: He was very ill.

STAN: (*sobbing*) I couldn't help him. I couldn't help him.

NED: You did everything. No one could do more. You buried him well.

STAN: They beat him. Beat him to death.

NED: They beat you too. I saw them.

STAN: We worked on the orchard together. Picking grapes. (*sobs*)

NED: Here. Take this.

STAN: What?

NED: (*urgently*) Take it! Forget my bony hands.

STAN: (*wonderingly, crying*) What is it? A little blue bottle.

NED: Take the stopper out. Smell!

STAN: Smell, like sniff?

NED: (*urgently*) Yes, like sniff.

STAN: (*inhales and breathes out*) It's perfume.

NED: Yes.

STAN: Like fresh fruit. (*inhales deeply*) Apricots. There's violets, and, and, orange blossom. (*voice fills with longing*) I can smell orange blossom. Like home.

BRITISH SOLDIER: (*encouragingly*) Yes!

STAN: (*voice changes to happy tone*) Like spring and summer... at home.

BRITISH SOLDIER: Put the stopper back tight. Its gotta last. Pass it round.

STAN: What's it called? Wait, there's a bit of silver paper with a name.

BRITISH SOLDIER: It's called Evening in Paris. My mother gave it to me when I left our farm. And my name's Ned.

Scene Eight: BBC Radio Studio England.

AUDIO: CRACKLING SOUND OF RADIO STARTING.

RADIO ANNOUNCER: This is London. The Prime Minister the Rt. Honourable C.R. Attlee announced that Japan has today surrendered. The last of our enemies is laid low. At one time it appeared as though they might invade the mainland of Australia, but the tide has turned.

Scene Nine: Australian Orchard.

AUDIO: AUSTRALIAN BIRDS CALLING AS IN FIRST SCENE.

PEGGY: Oh Stan! I am so glad you told me your story.

STAN: You see, Peggy... Evening in Paris reminds me... it's like Rudyard Kipling wrote in that poem about Aussie soldiers.

“Smells are surer than sounds or sights, to make your heart strings crack--”

(*speaks slowly and thoughtfully*) Evening in Paris makes me think of the very best in people. Of kindness. Now you.

AUDIO: WALTZING MATILDA.