

Ned's Gift

A dramatic radio play

by

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Adapted from the short story 'Evening in Paris'

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Synopsis:

A young man's journey from boyhood on a rural orchard - where life seems blissfully simple and trouble-free, to manhood and the brutal realities of war. Amongst the obscenities of battle - cruelty, death and desperation, he encounters a simple act of kindness.

Characters:

STANLEY	A young boy growing to manhood
JIM	Stanley's best friend
GRANDSON	Grandson of Stanley
NED	A fellow prisoner in Burma
MAGGIE	Stanley's wife

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NED'S GIFT

Scene 1 1942 In a prison camp in Burma at "The Line"

AUDIO: Sounds of Drums and Marching Men

STANLEY : *quietly weeping*

NED: *(whispering)* Are you ok?

STANLEY: *(wearily)* What's today? Is it Tuesday?

NED: I think so, why?

STANLEY: I just think Jim's mother would want to know what day her son died in this godforsaken prison camp. Oh Ned - I tried to get him to stand up! But he wouldn't – he couldn't.

NED: You did what you could. And those bloody nips forced him up – tried to get him back to work. Evil bastards. But you know Stan - poor Jim was just worn out – belted too often –you know he's been sick for a long time. Jeez, he was skinny even before we ended up in here! *(pause)* But mate – they beat you up pretty badly. I thought you were going the same way as Jim. And all for burying him and putting up a cross beside The Line. And in this belting hot sun! How many more men are going to die building this railway for the Japs?

STANLEY: Yeah, hell-hole Burma! Anyway, I didn't feel it. I didn't care. What's a beating when your best mate's done for, eh?

NED: Well you were a mess when that poor excuse of a doctor dragged you back in here all bandaged up. You've been out to it for four hours!

PAUSE

Stan – here – smell this.

STANLEY: What is it?

NED: Open the stopper. It's perfume.

STANLEY: (*pause – sighing*) It reminds me of home – and family – my mother.....

Scene 2 Present Day A Living Room

GRANDSON: Grandpa told me about his life on the farm as a boy. To me, it sounded idyllic. On hot days he would often lie on the grass with his beloved dog, dreaming of his future. Or he and Jim would swim in the river, hurling themselves into the water from the rope they'd tied to a tree. School years flew by and Stanley – (I mean Grandpa) and Jim remained good mates, riding to school on their bikes, watching the pickers working the vines in January. Sometimes they helped out and revelled in the banter as the men joked and shouted – themselves edging closer towards manhood. And at night - listening to the radio with their parents, the broadcasts becoming increasingly sombre and frightening as war loomed.

And Stanley – always restless, yearning for excitement and action

Scene 3 1938 By the River

AUDIO: Magpies, birds twittering

STANLEY: I'll race you to the other side of the river.

JIM: You're on!

AUDIO: Sound of splashing, boys laughing and yelling, dog barking

STANLEY: Jim, what do you want to do when you grow up? I just want to get off the farm and do something exciting. I want to go to the Big Smoke and make something of myself. I dunno, a fireman, or a policeman – anything really.

JIM: I reckon I want to be a soldier. Gosh, that'd be exciting. Marching, shooting practice - but, whatever we do Stan, let's do it together. We're pals aren't we?

STANLEY: Yeah, a soldier – that's it! That'd be a good life – travelling to foreign countries and learning about other parts of the world – it'd be a good change from the quietness of this place!

AUDIO: Sounds of guns, battle and men shouting. Then Japanese voices shouting

Scene 4: 1942 Japanese Prison Camp in Burma,

JIM: *(He should sound increasingly tired and weak during this scene)* Hey Stan, do you remember when we couldn't wait to join up? Jeez, when I think of it.

STANLEY: *(wearily)* Yeah, we had to wait till Christmas in 1940 before we turned 18. We were so jealous of the Carter twins when they came poncing around in their uniforms to say goodbye.

JIM: Then finally after months of training, we were on our way to Singapore. January 1942! Remember those long days on the ship - endlessly drilling, marching from bow to stern, and getting blisters on our feet from our new boots?

STANLEY: Learning how to use our guns, scanning the sky for danger. And none of us admitting we were shit scared!

JIM: But still - we couldn't wait for action, even then!

STANLEY: We got it soon enough –Singapore burning! You could see the smoke before we landed.

JIM: *(loudly, imitating a sergeant)* “Keep your heads down and move”! And we did. Hearts hammering, fighting, obeying orders. The terror, the noise – gunfire growing closer and closer. The stink of burning fuel.

STANLEY: How many days of fighting before we were captured? Six, seven? Those blokes who reckoned reinforcements were coming – *(slowly)* faint hope.....marched away, prisoners. And then – after months in Changi, shipped off to Burma.

JIM: *(Jim has a fit of coughing, then, tiredly)* Oh geez!

STANLEY: *(worried)* Jim, try to sleep mate. You need your strength for tomorrow

JIM: Stan, I dunno how long I can keep going. Every day out in the heat, building this bloody railway – “The Line”.

Scene 5 1942 Working on the railway

AUDIO: Sounds of clanking, metallic sounds, hammering, shouting

AUDIO: Shouting of Japanese Guards “Speedo, speedo”!

STANLEY: Leave him alone! Get up mate.

AUDIO: Shouting of Japanese Guards

STANLEY: *(Shouting)* Leave him alone you bastards. Jim, Jim! Get up mate! Let him go you bastards! No, leave him, please!

AUDIO: Sound dies out

PAUSE

Scene 6: 1942 Japanese Prison Camp in Burma

STANLEY: Those swine. They've punished us ALL for what I did for Jim. – God, I'm so sorry fellows - taking all our treasured possessions and burning them!

NED: What did they take from under the floorboards, Stan?

STANLEY: I had two photos - one of Mum and Dad and my sisters, and one of the farm.

NED: They must have meant a lot to you.

STANLEY: They gave me a bit of comfort in this stinking place. Their dear, familiar faces; and the gums – I could almost smell the eucalyptus – and the grapes warming in the sun and orange blossom in the spring. I would dream of being there. The photos were fading, fragile ... like I am ...

PAUSE

Scene 7 Present Living Room

GRANDSON: He didn't talk much about the war. But Grandpa had a rough time in the Prison Camp. He saw his best mates die and endured cruelty and starvation. But after the war, he fell in love with a girl – a bright, beautiful girl with auburn curls and a cluster of freckles. Grandpa said her green eyes reminded him of that patch of grass where he used to lie, gazing up at the sky. But it wasn't until much later that Mum told me about the first present Grandpa gave my Grandmother - Maggie. After Grandpa died she told me the story of Ned, and how his small act of kindness helped keep his spirits alive when all about him was darkness.

Scene 8 1947 Maggie's house:

MAGGIE: But Stan, it's not even my birthday! Oh thank you - it's beautiful! It reminds me of apricots and ah, violets ... and orange blossom,

STANLEY ... and a garden at the end of summer ...

MAGGIE: Stan, what is it? Oh Stan, please tell me.

STANLEY: Oh Maggie, I was thinking of the night Jim died. And how the Japs punished all of us for what I did. They took my precious photos. I was pretty low and I couldn't stop crying in my miserable bunk. Ned heard me. And I felt him press something in my hand – it was a bottle of perfume

MAGGIE: Where did he get it from?

STANLEY: It was given to him by his mother, as he was leaving, and he gained precious comfort from it. But Ned shared the dreams and memories in that bottle of scent with us poor wretches. Ned – a great tall man from a farm on the other side of the world. He would hold the bottle, carefully removing the stopper, for a patiently waiting queue of men. He replaced it as each man breathed in the fading scent. It kept hope alive for him – and for me.

MAGGIE: What's the name of the perfume?

STANLEY: It's called "Evening in Paris" and it makes me think of the very best of people.

PAUSE

Scene 9 1977 Maggie and Stan's house:

AUDIO: "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square" (Playing softly underneath Maggie's following speech.)

MAGGIE: I was always particular in my taste in perfume. I only ever wore one. It was very old fashioned but I loved it. Stanley gave it to me when we had only

been going out together for a few months and then for every birthday and Christmas. He reckoned it magically softened those awful memories of Burma – (*quoting Stanley*) “like putting on a soft, shimmering gossamer cloak - of warmth and kindness” – (*small pause*) - that elegant small, blue bottle, with the label made of silver paper that said “Evening in Paris”.

AUDIO: “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square” swelling in volume

END