

A Rendezvous with Death

by Spencer McCairns

Based on the poem 'I have a rendezvous with death' by Alan Seeger

Scene 1

Part One: Here's Johnny

The sounds of warfare echo in the background.

A soldier walks through a line of trench called Piccadilly Rd. He stops for a moment, watches a flare pass across the sky, and shudders. He steadies the helmet on his head and trudges forward.

Bishop, Trifle and Godrick enter a few moments later. Godrick is holding a ratty piece of paper in his hand. Bishop dusts off a cigarette from behind his ear and lights it.

GODRICK

(thick english accent)

Right, sit down, sit down fellas, how 'bout this.

(clears throat)

He held not our glory when he fell under twilight / his eyes so scared as he gave up the fight / our Johnny was brave, still innocent at soul / the enemy doesn't care for his life, they stole.

Silence.

BISHOP

(thick Irish accent)

Well, that don't make no sense at all!

GODRICK

What do you mean?

BISHOP

You make him sound like a baby! Johnny wasn't no baby!

TRIFLE

(thick English accent)

Yeah, why's you sayin' he's got no glory? And that he's was scared? That's not uplifting at all.

GODRICK

It's not supposed to be uplifting, it's supposed to be honest. I'm just tellin' the truth.

TRIFLE

Right, well, on then, mate.

Godrick clears his throat.

BISHOP

You don't gotta do that every time.

GODRICK

Yes I do.

(clears throat)

When he was a boy he wanted to sing / the joy of his voice, he wanted to bring / but the father don't care for his life or ours / ain't no grave for us under the stars.

Godrick bows.

BISHOP

See, that was much better. Make the first half like that.

TRIFLE

I liked the rhyme bits.

GODRICK

The first half had rhyme bits, too, you idiot.

TRIFLE

Well, make the first half rhyme like this one!

Godrick points at Trifle with his paper.

GODRICK

You know what, mate...

TRIFLE

I miss Johnny. We didn't fight when Johnny was here.

BISHOP

We fought all the time when Johnny was here.

TRIFLE

Well I still miss him.

BISHOP

Aye, he was a good lad, Johnny was.

GODRICK

I'll put that in the third verse.

BISHOP

Put what in the third verse.

GODRICK

That he was a good lad.

TRIFLE

Why?

GODRICK

Because I want everyone to remember that he was a good lad!

Johnny starts crawling on stage, pulling his body towards the trench from no man's land.

TRIFLE

But he was a little shit!

GODRICK

Bishop just called him a good lad! He was a good lad!

TRIFLE

And a bugger at the best of times.

Johnny rolls into the trench in a ruckus, arms flailing. Godrick pulls him up by the arm, inspecting his dirt covered face.

Trifle and Bishop draw their weapons.

GODRICK

Son of a bitch, stand down lads, it's Johnny! He ain't not dead at all!

Johnny coughs out a puff of dirt.

JOHNNY

Dead?!

BISHOP

We's all thought ya were dead, man!

TRIFLE

Big Rick was in a state all night about it.

JOHNNY

Well, I'm not dead.

GODRICK

Obviously.

BISHOP

How are you alive?

JOHNNY

A sweet little doggie like an angel led me back.

TRIFLE

Likely fuckin' story, mate. Have you lost it? Next are you gonna tell me you met god? I think he's lost it.

JOHNNY

Fuck off.

BISHOP

You should'a stayed out there another night, Johnny boy.

JOHNNY

What's that supposed to mean?

BISHOP

Godrick wrote a poem about ya he was gonna perform tonight but he can't now, can he? No use telling a poem about a dead man who ain't dead, is there?

JOHNNY

Just put someone else's name in it, then.

TRIFLE

Aye, Dan got blown over the parapet the other night. Everybody loved Dan, put his name in it.

BISHOP

Or Lewis. He stepped right on a buried artillery shell on Tuesday. Unlucky bugger.

GODRICK

That was Friday, you idiot.

JOHNNY

No, it was Thursday. Mail comes on Thursdays.

TRIFLE

We didn't get mail the gay Lewis died, we got mail the day Sid got crushed in his tunnel.

BISHOP

I thought tha' was Jerry?

GODRICK

Nah, mate, Jerry's up the line.

JOHNNY

Fuck me, then, he owes me two pounds on a bet!

BISHOP

What are ye gonna do with two pounds, kid? Yer a baby!

JOHNNY

I'm sixteen. AND I was gonna send it to me mum for her birthday.

TRIFLE

Aye, is it your mum's birthday?

JOHNNY

Not right now, but it will be at some point, won't it?

GODRICK

No one cares about your mum's birthday. What they do care about is my poem but you're not dead so either pop your head up over or tell me who to put in my damn poem!

JOHNNY

Right, so your poem is more important than me, is it?

GODRICK

All I'm sayin is that it's a pretty good poem. Listen-

Godrick clears his throat.

BISHOP

For fuck's sake

GODRICK

He held not our glory when he fell under twilight / his eyes so scared he gave up the fight / our Johnny was-

JOHNNY

Hold on, hold on - he held not our glory? Eyes so scared? What the hell does that mean? Making me sound like a baby!

TRIFLE

See, I told you it makes him sound like he's a deserter or something.

BISHOP

Or a wimp.

GODRICK

Well if you'd let me get to the next part you'd know I've called ya brave!

JOHNNY

You just called me a scared little boy!

Enter Colonel Buggsy. He's got a large moustache and is a bit ridiculous but no one will tell him.

GODRICK

Colonel Buggsy, sir!

Buggsy nods sternly.

BUGGSY

Attention, men!

Bishop, Johnny, Trifle, and Godrick stand up at attention.

BUGGSY

At ease, lads. There's rumblings going around that we'll be going over soon. If we do, you'll be with the first wave of men and likely die, but for king and country, eh, lads? Pop over, kill a kraut, get a medal, maybe this'll be the one, eh?

(deep uncomfortable laugh)

-by god, is that you, young Johnny Schneidick?

JOHNNY

Why did everyone think I'm dead? I was only gone since Thursday night.

BUGGSY

Son, you've been gone since Monday!

JOHNNY

What? But I was only gone one night and a day!

BUGGSY

Monday was three nights and four days ago, so you've been gone that long! Longer if you count the time we didn't know you were gone!

JOHNNY

Sir that doesn't make no sense!

GODRICK

No, he's right, three nights and four days!

JOHNNY

But I was only gone one night, I swear!

BUGGSY

Well if you were gone one night and one day then that would make Monday yesterday and mail came yesterday so yesterday was Thursday and Monday was three nights and four days before today.

TRIFLE

Sir, that would make him gone four days AND four nights.

BUGGSY

Oh, quite right. Four days and four nights, then. Anyhow, prepare your things. Write a letter to your mothers. Our advance could be any time now - tomorrow morning or a week or a month knowing army command. The buggers.

GODRICK

Right, well then now I've definitely got to perform my poem tonight.

Scene 2

Part Two: Bombardement: A Play

Clapping. Buggsy is sitting in one of two sad looking chairs.

Godrick Bows - he's just finished reciting his poem.

GODRICK

And now, before we get to our main event, a brief word from the Trench 44 Swim Club.

Unenthusiastic clapping. Godrick sits in the empty chair beside Buggsy. Enter Barty, a posh upper-class soldier who believes he's 'too good for the war' but his parents made him enlist for the public image.

BARTY

Hello, gentlemen. I'm here today to speak to you on behalf of the Trench 44 Swim Club. Due to the rainfall two nights ago we now have enough depth to have a proper relay - Trench 44 to Trafalgar. If you'd like to join up, please see me after the performance. Also, if you're the bloke who thought it would be funny to steal out trunks, it's not funny at all - we fundraised very hard for those. We were about to get snorkels but now that the trunks are gone we'd look ridiculous with just the snorkels, so...

(clears throat)

Trench 44 Swim club. Join up if you'd like to have a very good time.

Silence. Barty sits down on the ground beside the chairs. Godrick stands to address the audience again.

GODRICK

Alright, well erm, thanks for that great announcement Barty, sounds a real blast.

(beat)

Now, for the main event we've all been waiting for - the bi-annual Leftover Company play. May I proudly present to you *A Southern Miracle* written by myself, and once again starring no-longer-dead Johnny-boy!

Applause. Godrick sits down again.

Bishop and Trifle enter the trench dressed in ridiculous southern-belle costumes, speaking in horrible southern accents.

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE MAY)

Oh, mama, please let me go! I'll be good, I swear it, but I just have to see that handsome Harry Heartless!

TRIFLE (AS LUCY-ANNE)

I am not losing my daughter to an evil man like him. I'll let you go, but I forbid you from seeing that Mr. Heartless.

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE-MAY)

Oh, but mama, he's a war hero!

TRIFLE (AS LUCY-ANNE)

Oh, my sweet Maggie-May, so innocent you are. His name isn't just a name, it's who he is! He's a heartless man, darling.

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE-MAY)

Can anyone truly be heartless, Mama mine? Maybe he's just-

(pause for dramatics)

Misunderstood.

TRIFLE (AS LUCY-ANNE)

I said no, Maggie-May! I forbid you from it.

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE-MAY)

If I promise to stay far away from him? Then can I go?

TRIFLE (AS LUCY-ANNE)

If you promise me on all you cherish that you'll stay far away from that Harry Heartless then I'll let you go and find yourself a good southern boy.

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE-MAY)

Oh, thank you Mama, thank you! I swear it on everything I cherish that I'll stay far far away from him!

Pageant music starts to play.

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE-MAY)

I can't believe I'm finally at a ball! A real life ball!

Enter Harry Heartless, played by Johnny.

JOHNNY (AS HARRY HEARTLESS)

Oh well, oh well, oh well, oh well, I can't believe so many girls have come to my parent's party. Fools, all of them, thinking they could capture my heart-

Harry Heartless sees Maggie-May in the crowd, fanning herself.

JOHNNY (AS HARRY HEARTLESS)

By gee, by gee, by gee, by gee, that's the most beautiful girl I ever have done seen!

Harry Heartless makes his way over to Maggie-May.

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE-MAY)

Oh no, he's coming over to me!

JOHNNY (AS HARRY HEARTLESS)

Well, hello there darlin'.

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE-MAY)

Hi there.

JOHNNY (AS HARRY HEARTLESS)

What brings you to my most humble home?

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE-MAY)

Well, I'd never been to a ball before, but Mama said I was finally of age.

JOHNNY (AS HARRY HEARTLESS)

You'll have to thank Mama for me, then. Could I have a dance?

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE-MAY)

I thought you were

(pause for dramatics)

Heartless?

JOHNNY (AS HARRY HEARTLESS)

Darlin' mine, I could have a heart for you.

BISHOP (AS MAGGIE-MAY)

It's a southern miracle!

An explosion. The trench shakes. Flashing light then darkness. A shout.

Johnny, Bishop, Godrick, Trifle and Buggsy are illuminated by fire.

GODRICK

Fuckin' krauts! Interruptin' our play. How'd they fuckin' feel if we did that to them, huh? Bloody fuckin' war.

Godrick crawls over to Buggsy, who has fallen from his chair.

GODRICK

You alright, Colonel Buggsy?

BUGGSY

I feel the phantoms of the night coming for me, pulling me into a dark place.

GODRICK

What does that mean?

Bishop crawls over to Trifle, shaking his body and checking him over. Trifle is obviously fine.

BISHOP

You alright, you alright Trifle? You alright?

Trifle pushes him off.

TRIFLE

Get off me, man. I'm fine. You're the one who's bleeding.

BISHOP

I am not, that's your blood!

TRIFLE

Is not! Your arm is all cut up! Got it all over me, mate!

Bishop puts his hand to his arm. He shouts when he removes it and sees the blood.

BISHOP

As, fuck me, am I dying? Oh god, I don't wanna die! I don't wanna die!

JOHNNY

Calm your tits, mate, you're fine! It's just a scratch. No one ever died from just a scratch.

BISHOP

Danny got sent home for a scratch last week! Got all yellow and infected! I'm gonna die! Someone has to tell me mum I died brave and not all dressed up like a tart!

TRIFLE

You're not- hold on a second, is that why you call me fuckin' Trifle? Because you think I'm a tart? Just call me gay, then, ya wimp.

JOHNNY

It's not because we think you're gay, it's because you kissed Eddie in no man's land - we know you're gay.

TRIFLE

Wasn't kissing him, you idiot, it was mouth-to-mouth.

BISHOP

Yeah, kissing.

TRIFLE

You lot are stupid.

JOHNNY

Hey, how were we supposed to know?

BISHOP

Does this mean we can't call you Trifle anymore?

At some point during this, Godrick has taken Buggsy's head in his lap and he goes lifeless.

GODRICK

Stop your arguing, you lot! Buggsy's dead.

JOHNNY

Well, what do we do now, then? We can't lead ourselves.

GODRICK

They'll send someone new who looks the exact same - mustache, frown and all, with the same voice and the same distaste for us all.