

Bang! You're Dead!

By RAY BRADBURY



Wounds were fake, men lying there were playing, blood was only something like catsup—you didn't get caught if you could duck like Johnny Choir

JOHNNY CHOIR came like the spring lambs over the green Italian hills, gamboling at the game of war. He leaped a line of bullets as if it were the hedge fronting his Iowa home. He ducked and dodged; a pedestrian in war traffic. Most of all, he laughed and was indefatigable

as some khaki kangaroo, forever hopping. Bullets, mortar shells and shrapnel were only rumors in the air to Johnny. They were not true.

He moved with long-legged strides near San Vittore, froze, pointed his gun, fingered the trigger, cried, "Bang! I gotcha!" and

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watched a German fall with a red orchid pinned to one lapel. Then Johnny jiggled again, to escape the answering machine-gun blast.

An artillery shell approached. Johnny twisted, crying, "Missed!"

It did. It missed, *like always*.

Private Smith followed in Johnny's wake. Only Smith traveled on his thin-muscled stomach, face sweaty and juju'd with Italian mud. Smith crawled, ran, fell, got up again, and never let those enemy bullets near him. Frequently he yelled angrily at Johnny:

"Lie down, you dumb egg! They'll gut you!"

But Johnny danced on to the metal music of bullets like new, bright hummingbirds on the air. While Smith crawled earthwormwise taking each kilometer, Johnny catapulted toward the enemy, giggling. Tall as the sky, loud as a bazooka gun! Smith broke out a ration of cold sweat just watching the kid.

Germans screamed and ran away from Johnny. When they saw his limbs flourished in a kind of classical St. Vitus—while bullets whistled under his ear-lobes, between his knees and betwixt thumb and forefinger—German morale disintegrated. They fled wildly!

Laughing heartily, Johnny Choir sat down, pulled out a chocolate ration and teathed on it, while Smith came inching up. Johnny glimpsed the crawling figure's exposed rump, and inquired, "Smith?"

The anonymous rump went down, a familiar thin face came up. "Yeah." Firing had ceased in the area. They were alone and safe. Smith wiped dirt from his chin. "Honest to God, I get the weemies watching you. You gallop around like a kid in the rain. Only it's the wrong kind of rain."

"I'll duck," said Johnny, munching.

He had a big handsome face with blue child eyes captured in innocent wonder in it, and small pink child lips. His shorn hair resembled the blonde stubble of a clothes-brush. Now immersed deeply in the enjoyment of candy, he had forgotten war.

"I duck," he explained again.

A thousand times Smith'd heard that excuse. It was *too* simple an explanation. God had a hand in this somewhere, Smith

was certain. Johnny had probably been dunked in holy water. Bullets detoured around him, not daring to touch. Yeah. That was it. Smith laughed musingly.

"What happens if you forget to duck, Johnny?"

Johnny replied, "I play dead."

"YOU—" said Smith, blinking, staring, "—you play dead. Uh-huh." He exhaled slowly. "Yeah. Sure. Okay."

Johnny threw away the candy wrapper. "I been thinking. It's almost my turn to play dead, isn't it? Everybody's done it, except me. It's only fair I take my turn. Everybody's been so decent about it, I think I'll play dead today."

Smith found that his hands were shaking. His appetite was gone, too. "Now what do you want to talk that way for?" he argued.

"I'm tired," said Johnny simply.

"Take a nap, then. You're the damndest one for snoozing. Take a nap."

Johnny considered that with a pout. Then he arranged himself on the grass in the shape of a fried shrimp. "All right, Private Smith. If you say so."

Smith consulted his watch. "You got twenty minutes. Snooze fast. We'll be moving up as soon as the captain shows. And we don't want him finding you asleep."

BUT Johnny was already deep in soft dreams. Smith looked at him with wonder and envy. God, what a guy. Sleeping in the middle of hell. Smith had to stay, watching over him. It wouldn't do to have some stray German sniping Johnny while he couldn't duck. Strangest damn thing he ever knew. . . .

A soldier ran heavily up, panting. "Hi, Smith!"

Smith recognized the soldier, uneasily. "Oh, it's you, Melter . . ."

"Somebody wounded?" Melter was big, too, but off-center with his fat and too high and hoarse with his voice. "Oh, it's Johnny Choir. Dead?"

"Taking a nap."

Melter gaped. "A nap? For cripes sake, that infant! That moron!"

Smith said, quietly, "Moron, hell. He just brushed the Heinies off this rise with one hand. I saw them throw a thousand rounds at Johnny, a thousand rounds, mind.

you, and Johnny slipped through it like a knife through warm ribs."

Melter's pink face looked worried. "What makes him tick, anyway?"

Smith shrugged. "As far as I can figure, he thinks this is all a game. He never grew up. He's got a big body with a kid's mind in it. He doesn't take war serious. He thinks we're all playing at this."

Melter swore. "Don't I wish we were." He eyed Johnny jealously. "I've watched him before, running like a fool, and he's still alive. Him and that shimmy of his, and yelling, "Missed me!" like a kid, and yelling "Gotcha!" when he shot a Heinie. How do you explain that?"

Johnny turned in his sleep, and his lips fumbled with words. A couple came out, soft, easy. "Mom! Hey, Mom! You there? Mom? You there, Mom?"

Smith reached over to take Johnny's hand. Johnny squeezed it in his sleep, saying, with a little smile, "Oh, Mom."

"So now," said Smith, "after all this, I'm a mother."

They stayed there, the three of them, for all of three minutes, silent. Melter finally cleared his throat, nervously. "Some—somebody ought to tell Johnny about the facts of life. Death is real, and war is real, and bullets can knock out your guts. Let's tell him when he wakes up."

Smith laid Johnny's hand aside. He pointed at Melter, and his face got paler and harder with each word. "Look now, don't come around here with your philosophy! What's bad for you ain't bad for him! Let him dream his dreams, if he wants. I been with him since boot-camp, watching over him like a brother. I know. There's only one thing that keeps him in one piece, and that's thinking the things he thinks, believing that war is fun and we're all kids! And if you so much as flip your lip, I'll drop you in the Gagliano River with anchors on."

"Okay, okay, don't get tough. I only thought—"

Smith stood up. "You thought. You thought! Why, damn you, I can see the stinking look on your face! You'd like to see Johnny dead. You're yellow jealous, that's what! Well, now look—" He made a sweep of his arm, furiously. "—you keep away! From now on, you romp on the other

side of any hill we're on! I don't want you running off at the mouth! Now, get the hell out of here!"

Melter's fat face was red as Italian *vino*. He held his gun hard. His fingers itched the butt end of it. "It ain't fair," he replied tightly, hoarsely. "It ain't fair to us that he gets by. It ain't fair he lives while we die. What you expect, me to love him? Ha! When I-gotta die, he lives, so I should kiss him? I don't work that way!"

Melter strode off, his back stiff and working funny, his neck like a ramrod, his fingers tight fists, his strides short and jolting.

Smith watched him. There I go with my big mouth, he thought. I should have stroked him nice. Now, maybe he tells the captain, and the captain turns Johnny over to the psychiatric ward for observation. Then maybe they trundle him back to the States and I lose my best friend. God, Smith, you lummo! Why ain't you got lock-jaw?

Johnny was waking up, rubbing eyes with big farmer-boy knuckles, tongue exploring the outer reaches of his chin for stray particles of ration chocolate.

They went over another hill together, Johnny Choir and Private Smith. Johnny dancing in his special way, always ahead. Smith wisely but not happily bringing up the rear; afraid where Johnny was never afraid, careful where Johnny always splurged, groaning while Johnny was laughing into enemy fire. . . .

"JOHNNY!"

It was inevitable. As Smith felt the machine-gun bullet enter his right side, just above the hip, felt pain hammer, pound, wallop through him under tremendous striking impact, felt blood running in pulses through suddenly slippery, numb fingers, smelled his own blood like some nightmare chemical, he knew it was inevitable.

He yelled again.

"Johnny!"

Johnny stopped. He came running back, grinning. He put away his grin when he saw Smith lying there giving a blood transfusion to the body of the Earth.

"Hey, Private Smith, what's this about?" he asked.

"I'm—I'm playing wounded," said Smith on one elbow, not looking up, sucking in air,

blowing it out. "You—go on ahead, Johnny, and don't mind me."

Johnny looked like a kid told to stand in the corner.

"Hey. That's not fair. You should've told me, and I could play wounded, too. I'll get too far ahead and you won't be able to catch up."

Smith forced a sick smile, weak and pale, and the blood pumped. "You were always too far ahead of me anyway, Johnny. Even if I ran in circles around you, I could never catch up."

That was too subtle for Johnny, who gave forth with a confused scowl. "I thought you were my pal, Smith?"

"Sure. Sure I am, Johnny. I am." Smith coughed. "Sure. But, you see, I just sudden-like found out I was tired. It came on me quick, you see. No time to tell you. So I'm playing wounded."

Johnny brightened, crouching down. "I'll play wounded, too."

"Like hell you will!" Smith tried to rise, but pain clenched him in a hot, tight fist, and he couldn't speak for half a minute. Then: "Look now—you keep your nose out of this. You get the hell on to Rome!"

Johnny said, "You don't want me to play—wounded?"

"No, dammit!" cried Smith, and things got darker, darker.

Johnny said nothing, just stood there, tall and quiet and not understanding, and lost. Here was the man who had been his best friend since the first day in the Army, since leaving New York harbor; his best friend all up through Africa, the Sicilian hills and Italy, now lying here and telling him to go on—alone.

In the webbed dark of his mind, Smith felt it, too. Keen and sharp like a new kind of razor slicing him down the middle. Wounded, and Johnny going on alone.

Who would tell Johnny to keep away from bodies, it was against the rules? Who would assure him, as Smith'd done, to keep intact that incredible phantasy of Johnny's beliefs; who would assure him that those wounds were fake, that this blood was only something like catsup carried by soldiers when they wanted time out? Who would censor Johnny's outbursts like that time in Tunis when Johnny asked his commanding officer?

"When do I get my bottle of catsup, sir?"

"Catsup. Catsup?"

"Yes, sir, for when I want to be wounded, sir?"

Who would storm in and explain to the commanding officer, "You see, sir, Johnny means, does he carry his blood plasma with him from the Red Cross, sir? In case he needs a transfusion, sir."

"Uh. Oh, is *that* what he means? No. The medical unit carries that. They'll give it to you when the necessity arises."

Who will extricate Johnny from situations like that? Or the time Johnny asked of a senior officer, "If I play dead, sir, how long do I stay dead before I'm allowed to get up, sir?"

Who will tell the officer that Johnny is only joking, sir, only joking, ha ha, and not an infant in overgrown skin. Who? thought Smith.

SOMEONE hurried up in the dimness of pain and the sounds of conflict. By the sound of the big clumsy feet, Smith knew it was Melter.

Melter's voice came from the gathering dark.

"Oh, it's you, Johnny. Who's that at your feet? Well—" Melter laughed. Johnny laughed, too, to be compatible. Oh, Johnny, how can you laugh? If you only knew, son. "Well, well, if it ain't Smith. Dead?"

Johnny said, eagerly. "No, only playing wounded."

"Playing?" said Melter. Smith couldn't see the man, but he heard the subtle sound of Melter's tongue touching that word. "Playing, eh? Playing wounded. So. Hmm."

Smith got his eyes open, but he couldn't speak, he could only blink, watching Melter.

Melter spat on the ground. "Can you talk, Smith? No? Good." Melter looked in four directions, nodding, satisfied. He took Johnny by the shoulder. "Come here, Johnny, I'd like to ask a few questions."

"Sure, Private Melter."

Melter patted Johnny's arm, and his eyes shone hot and funny. "I hear you're the lad who knows how to duck bullets?"

"Sure. Best ducker in the army. Smith's pretty good, too. A little slower, maybe, but I'm teaching him."

Melter said, "Think you can teach me, Johnny?"

Johnny said, "You already learned, haven't you?"

"Have I?" Melter wondered. "Well, yeah, I guess I have—a little. Sure. But not like you, Johnny. You got the technique down good. What—what's the secret?"

Johnny considered a moment, and Smith tried to say something, tried to shout or scream or even wriggle, and he didn't have the strength. He heard Johnny say, far away.

"I don't know. You know how it is when you're a kid and play cops and robbers. The other guy is selfish. He never wants to lie down, when you say 'Bang, I gotcha!' The whole secret is in saying, 'Bang, I gotcha!' first. Then they've got to lie down."

"Oh." Melter looked at him as if he were crazy. "Say that again, will you?"

Johnny said it again, and Smith had to laugh inside his hell of pain. Melter thought he was being kidded. Johnny said it again.

"Don't hand me that!" snarled Melter, impatiently. "There's a good deal more to it than that! You go running and jumping around like a bull-moose and nobody even touches you!"

"I duck," said Johnny.

Smith laughed some more. Old jokes are the best jokes.

Then Smith's stomach caught and held pain.

Melter's face was all deep-cut lines and suspicion and hate.

"Okay, smart guy, if you're so good—suppose you walk off a hundred feet and let me take pot shots at you?"

Johnny smiled. "Sure. Why not?"

He walked off and left Melter standing there. He walked off a hundred paces and stood there tall and blond and so damn young and clean as butter. Smith wiggled his fingers, screaming inside. "Johnny, don't do it, Johnny! For Crissake, God, knock Melter down with the butt-end of a lightning bolt!"

THEY were in a kind of depression between hills, a small place where you could do things and not be seen too well by anyone. Melter stood against the trunk of an olive tree so as to shield his action, just in case, and casually lifted his gun.

Melter loved his gun with his fingers,

carefully adjusting it to his eyes, finding Johnny in the sights, caressing the trigger, pulling back slowly.

Where in hell IS everybody! wondered Smith. AH!

Melter fired.

Johnny ducked.

"Missed me!" came Johnny's good-humored shout.

Johnny stood, intact. Melter swore. Melter aimed again, even slower this time. He found Johnny's heart with the sight and Smith screamed some more, but none of it got out of his mouth. Melter licked his lips and—fired!

"Missed again!" observed Johnny.

Melter fired four times more, quicker, faster, angered and potent and furious, color gorging his neck, rage in his eyes, hands fumbling—and with each report that knocked the warm afternoon air, Johnny skipped rope or ducked doors or sidestepped elbows or kicked a football or did a ballet dance, and Melter's gun fumed empty.

Melter rammed more bullets in it, his face now blanched white, his knees sagging.

Johnny came running up.

Melter whispered, fearfully. "How in God's name do you do it?"

"Like I told you."

A long pause. "Do you think I could learn."

"Anybody can learn, if they want."

"Teach me. Teach me, Johnny. I don't want to die, I don't want to die. I hate this whole damn war. Teach me, Johnny. Teach me, and I'll be your friend."

Johnny shrugged. "Do just like I told you, that's all."

Melter said, slowly. "Now, you are joking again."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, I think you are joking again," said Melter in a pale, thick anger. He shifted his gun to the ground, considering new tactics and decided about it. "Well, listen here, smart boy, for your information, I will tell you something." He jerked one hand. "Those men you passed in the field, they weren't playing, no, they were really, actually, finally dead! Dead, yes, dead, you hear! Dead! Not playing, not kidding, not joking, but dead, dead, cold dead!" He beat it at Johnny like fists. He beat the air with

it and turned the day into winter cold. "Dead!"

Smith winced inside. Johnny, don't listen to him! Don't let him hurt you, Johnny! Go on believing the world is a good place. Go on living intact and unafraid! Don't let fear in, Johnny. You'll crumble with it!

Johnny said to Melter, "What're you talking about?"

"Death!" bellowed Melter wildly. "That's what I'm talking about! Death. You can die, and Smith can die, and I can die from bullets. Gangrene, rot, death! You've been fooling yourself. Grow up, you fool, before it's too late! Grow up!"

Johnny stood there a long time, and then he began to sway, his fists in big farmer-knotted pendulums. "No. You're lying," he said, stubbornly.

"Bullets can kill, this is war!"

"You're lying to me," said Johnny.

"You can die, so can Smith. Smith's dying now. Smell his blood! What do you think that stench is from the fox-holes, wild grapes for the winepresses of war? Yes, death and bones!"

Johnny looked around with unsteady eyes. "No, I won't believe it." He bit his lips and closed his eyes. "I won't. You're mean, you're bad, you're—"

"You can die, Johnny, die!"

Johnny began to cry, then. Like a babe in some barren wilderness, and Smith wrenched his shoulder trying to get up. Johnny cried and it was a new and small sound in the wide world.

Melter pushed Johnny staggeringly toward the front lines. "Go on. Get out there and die, Johnny. Get out there and get your heart pinned on a stone wall like a dripping medal!"

Don't go, Johnny, Smith's shouting got lost in the red, pain cavern of his interior, lost and useless and mute. Don't go, kid. Stay here, don't listen to this guy! Stick around, Johnny-lad!

Johnny stumbled away, sobbing, toward the blunt staccato of machine guns, toward the whine of artillery shells. His gun was held in one long limp arm, its butt dragging pebbles in a dry rattling stone laughter.

Melter looked after him in a hysterical kind of triumph.

Then Melter hefted his weapon and walked East over another hill, out of view.

Smith lay there, his thoughts getting sicker and dimmer, and Johnny walked on and on. If only there were some way to cry out. *Johnny, look out!*

An artillery shell came over and burst. Johnny fell down on the ground without a sound and lay there, not making a movement of his once-miraculous limbs.

Johnny!

Have you stopped believing? Johnny, get up! Are you dead now? Johnny?

And then darkness mercifully gathered Smith in and swallowed him down.

SCALPELS rose and fell like small keen guillotines, cutting away death and decay, beheading misery, eliminating metal pain. The bullet, plucked from Smith's wound, was cast away, small, dark, clattering into a metal pan. The doctors pantomimed over and around him in a series of blurred frenzies. Smith breathed easily.

Across the dim interior of the tent Johnny's body lay on another operating table, doctors curious over him in a sterile tableau.

"Johnny?" and this time Smith had a voice.

"Easy does it," a doctor cautioned. The lips under the white mask moved. "That a friend of yours—over there?"

"Yeah. How is he?"

"Not so good. Head injury. Fifty-fifty chance."

They concluded with Smith, stitches, swabbings, bandages and all. Smith watched the wound vanish under white gauze; then he looked at the assembled crowd of medics. "Let me help with him, will you?"

"Well, now, after all, soldier—"

"I know the guy. I know him. He's funny. If it means keeping him alive, how's about it?"

The scowl formed over the surgical mask, and Smith's heart beat slow, slow. The doctor blinked. "I can't chance it. What can you possibly do to help me?"

"Wheel me over. I tell you I can help. I'm his bosom-pal. I can't let him conk out now. Hell, no!"

The doctors conferred.

They transferred Smith to a portable stretcher and two orderlies delivered him across the tent where the surgeons were engaged with Johnny's shaved, naked skull.

Johnny looked asleep and dreaming a nightmare. His face twisted, worried, frightening, wondering, disappointed and dismayed. One of the surgeons sighed.

Smith touched one surgical elbow. "Don't give up; Doc. Oh, God, don't give up." To Johnny: "Johnny-lad. Listen. Listen to me. Forget everything Melter said. Forget everything he said—you hear me? He was full of crap up to here!"

Johnny's face still was irritated, changing like disturbed water. Smith gathered his breath and continued.

"Johnny, you gotta go on playing, like always. Go on ducking, like in the old days. You always knew how, Johnny. It was part of you. It didn't take learning or teaching, it was natural. And you let Melter put ideas in your head. Ideas that may be okay for people like Melter and me and others, but don't jibe for you."

One surgeon made an impatient gesture with a rubber-gloved hand.

Smith asked him, "Is his head hurt bad, Doc?"

"Pressure on the skull, on the brain. May cause temporary loss of memory."

"Will he remember being wounded?"

"It's hard to say. Probably not."

Smith had to be held down. "Good! Good! Look," he whispered quickly, confidentially to Johnny's head. "Johnny, just think about being a kid, and how it was then, and don't think about what happened today. Think about running in ravines and through creeks and skipping pebbles on water, and ducking b-b guns, and laughing, Johnny!"

Inside, Johnny thought about it.

A MOSQUITO hummed somewhere, hummed and circled for an endless time. Somewhere guns rumbled.

Someone finally told Smith, "Respiration improved."

Someone else said, "Heart action picking up."

Smith kept talking, part of him that wasn't pain, that was only hope and anxiety in his

larynx, and fear-fever in his brain. The war thunder came closer, closer, but it was only the blood hurled through his head by his heart. Half an hour passed by. Johnny listened like a kid in school to an over-patient teacher. Listened and smoothed out the pain, erased the dismay in his expression, and regained the old certainty and youth and sureness and calm acceptance of belief.

The surgeon stripped off his tight rubber gloves.

"He'll pull through."

Smith felt like singing. "Thanks, doc. Thanks."

The doc said, "You from Unit 45, you and Choir and a guy named Melter?"

"Yeah. What about Melter?"

"Funniest darn thing. Ran head on into a burst of German machine-gun fire. Ran down a hill screaming something about being a kid again." The doc scratched his jaw. "We picked up his body with fifty bullets in it."

Smith swallowed, lying back to sweat. Ice-cold, shivering sweat.

"That's Melter for you. He just didn't know how. He grew up, too fast, like all of us. He didn't know how to stay young, like Johnny. That's why it didn't work. I—I gotta give him credit for trying, though, the nut. But there's only one Johnny Choir."

"You," diagnosed the surgeon, "are delirious. Better take a sedative."

Smith shook his head. "What about home? Are we going, Johnny and I, with our wounds?"

The surgeon formed a smile under the mask. "Home to America, the two of you."

"Now, you're delirious!" Smith let out a careful whoop of glee. He twisted to get a good look at Johnny sleeping so peacefully and easily and dreaming, and he said, "You hear that, Johnny? We're going home! You and me! Home!"

And Johnny replied, softly, "Mom? Oh, Mom."

Smith held Johnny's hand. "Okay," he said to the surgeons. "So now I'm a mother. Pass the cigars!"