

# **PONTIFF BLUES, OR THE SMOKE BREAK**



**A SHORT PLAY BY JARED MICHAEL DELANEY**

*CHARACTERS:*

*Y, a new member of the Swiss Guard*

*O, a veteran member of the Swiss Guard*

*Lights rise slowly as Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail" is heard. A simple, mostly bare stage is revealed. There is a set of large wooden doors, vaguely medieval, with ironwork (if possible). If there can be some suggestion of marble, that would be ideal. The only other visible set piece is a wooden torch, aged and blackened from being repeatedly lit and extinguished over the years.*

*Y is standing, back to the door. He produces a cigarette, and pulling out a Zippo lighter, proceeds to light it. He takes a long, slow drag off of the cigarette and exhales just as slowly.*

*O, meanwhile, sits opposite from Y on the floor, head resting against the doorjamb, His eyes are closed and he appears to be asleep. He hears the clink of the lighter and opens an eye, turning it on Y. He closes it and extends an arm towards Y, looking for a smoke of his own. Y looks at the proffered hand, turns away a moment. He considers. Then he pulls out another cigarette, puts it in his own mouth, lights it and places it in O's waiting hand. O, without opening his eyes, takes a slow drag in the same manner that Y has done. Both men continue to smoke the entirety of their cigarettes that way, letting it take the time it takes. After the two have crushed out their cigarettes, there is a long pause.*

Y: *(finally)* How long has it been?

O: What?

Y: How long has it been?

O: I don't know. 36 hours. Maybe 42.

Y: When will we-

O: *(mentor-like)* When they do.

*A pause*

Y: This sucks.

O: *(opening an eye)* Careful.

Y: I know, I know. I'm just saying.

O: You never know you might-

Y: Yes, I know. It does though.

*A pause.*

Y: It's still exciting though. You know? It's just...well, I think it is.

*A beat.*

Y: My mother's excited.

*O says nothing, eyes closed.*

Y: She's nervous too. Anxious. So am I! So, I underst--you know?

*A pause wherein Y looks at his surrounding. He takes the torch gently down from its place on the wall, turns it over in his hands, and just as gently places it back.*

Y: She--my mother--she's hoping to see me on television! Ha!

*He looks to O, who says nothing.*

Y: Do you think that we'll--that maybe we'll be on...?

*O continues to sit quietly, eyes closed. Y continues to speak in a rapid, nervous fashion.*

Y: It's just, I always hoped, my *family* always hoped, that this would happen. That one day I'd be a member, one of the Guard! Ha. You know? It's all my mother would talk about, it seemed like. "*Join the Guard and then you're something, boy!*" Heh. You know? She talked about it all the time. So she's hoping to see me on...you know, so she can brag, you know, to her friends kind-of-thing. And you know, we all want to make our mothers proud! Right? Heh, heh. But besides that, besides all that, it's *such* an honor! Don't you think? To be chosen for...I mean, this duty is so, well, *sacred*, I guess. Is that

the word? Well...it's just important. That's for sure. You know? The other thing, you know, the other thing is that the uniforms are just...wow! They're just so cool, don't you think?

*O finally opens his eyes and looks at Y like he's out of his mind. Y, however, doesn't notice. He gently strokes the fabric of his own uniform, as if he can't believe that he's here.*

Y: *(softly)*...cool...

*Y recovers himself and there is a moment of silence were he realizes what he has been doing and that O is staring at him.*

Y: So, uh, how long does it--? Is it always so--?

O: It's different every time.

Y: Oh.

*A pause wherein Y pulls out his Zippo and proceeds to click it open and closed, repeatedly.*

Y: What was yours?

O: What?

Y: Your longest. What was your--?

O:*(seeming troubled for a moment)* Oh. Ah...a week, I suppose.

Y: A week? When you couldn't--?

O: Yes.

Y: And you had to--?

O: Yes.

Y: My god.

O: You said it.

*A pause.*

Y: A work week?

O: What?

Y: A work week? Was it a work--?

O: A work...?

Y: Yes, you know. A work week. Monday to Friday. Or was it a *full week*? You know, Sunday to--

O: *(a little frustrated with this)* Actually, I think it was ten days.

Y: *(strangely disappointed)* Oh.

*Silence. Y takes the torch down again, goes over it again with his hands, replaces it.*

Y: There's so many of them.

O: What?

Y: Don't you think? It seems...

O: So many of--?

Y: *(indicating the door)* Them.

*A pause.*

O: There's been more.

Y: Really?

O: Sure.

Y: I always--

O: Sometimes there's less.

Y: I thought it was constant.

O: Constant?

Y: Yeah, I thought it was permanent.

O: How could it be?

Y: I don't know. I just--

O: Nope.

*A beat.*

Y: I see.

*Y takes out his cigarettes, packs them. He thinks about taking one, then puts them back in his pocket.*

Y: So what did you do?

O: When?

Y: During that week. What did you do?

O: What are you--?

Y: To pass the time.

*A pause, where O stares at Y.*

Y: You must have done--

O: Nothing.

Y: Nothing?

O: Yes.

Y: That can't be--

O: It is.

Y: C'mon. Tell me! I won't--

O: We're not allowed to do anything. We have to--

Y: --be at attention. Yes. I know. But--

O: No buts. I was at attention.

Y: For a whole week?

O: Ten days.

Y: Whatever. That whole time you--

O: I was at attention.

Y: *(bravely)* Just like when you were sleeping a little while ago?

O: *(defensive)* I was n--

*It is Y's turn to give a cold hard stare to O. A pause.*

O: Give me a cigarette.

*Y hands one over dutifully, along with his lighter. O takes it, lights, takes a deeo drag, then blows it out.*

O: Yes. Fine. All right. There was...something...that occupied my time.

*A very long pause.*

Y: *(exploding)* Well?!? What? What did you--

O: I can't.

Y: What do you mean you--?

O: I can't tell you.

Y: Why not?

O: You're not ready to hear it.

Y: What?

O: You heard me.

Y: I'm not ready to--

O: You're not ready to hear it.

Y: *(confused)* I'm not...

O: That's right. You're not ready yet.

Y: What the hell are you talking about?

O: It's not time.

Y: Time? Time for what? What are you talking about? Listen can't you just explain *why* you cant tell me?

O: Hey, who's the rookie here? I determine when it's time, not you.

Y: Ok, look, I don't want to--I'm not--I'm not trying to rock the boat or anything and I want to make a good impression and you seem like a really good guy, but I just don't understand why--

O: (*definitively*) Because it's dangerous, that's why.

Y: Dangerous?

O: Not so loud! If they hear...

Y: Are you being serious?

O: Completely.

Y: Dangerous? To whom?

O: To you. To me. To everyone and everything you know.

Y: (*astonished and intrigued*) Really? I...wow...really?

*A beat. O nods silently.*

Y: Well... I don't know what to...well. I have to say I didn't expect that.

O: Few do.

Y: Yeah. Right. ...so...what is it?

O: Didn't you just hear me? I said it's-

Y: Yeah, I know, but c'mon! I *have* to know now!

O: I'm not sure if--

Y: I won't say anything!

O: How do I know that?

Y: We're brothers-in-arms! You can trust me!

*O hesitates a moment.*

O: No. I can't. I've been here longer than you. There's more at stake for me.

Y: I'm sorry, I just don't--is this a joke on the new--? I don't--what could you have done for a week--

O: Ten days.

Y: --ten days that could have been such a problem? *Please* tell me! I give you my word I won't saying anything! Swiss Guard's honor!

*A silence. O shakes his head to himself, as if making a decision. He gestures for another smoke. Y hands it over. O puts it in his mouth, but does not light it. When he finally speaks, it is slow and deliberate, like an odd combination of a pulp detective voiceover and a war veteran telling the story of the day he lost his whole platoon.*

O: You have to understand--the first thing is that you have to understand that is very quiet here. Especially during conclave detail. It's a silence that's almost alive. It creeps around you like a fog. There's nothing to be done. You just stand. And wait. And the quiet closes in on you like a prison. You can't listen to music. You can't read. You have to be at attention! You have to be ready! Ready for when the bell sounds. Ready to light the world with the news. But the bell doesn't sound. And anticipation drags into lethargy. And you wait. And wait.

*A beat. He plays with the cigarette a moment.*

O: Do you know how they do it?

Y: *(riveted & afraid)* How they do what?

O: How they choose?

Y: How they--*(indicating the door)*

O: Yes. Do you know?

Y: *(hesitating)* How they--? Sure. Yes. I know.

O: Tell me. Tell me how.

Y: What?

O: If you know how it's done, tell me. I want to hear what you think.

Y: What? What I--? (*gathering himself*) They have a vote. A series of votes. Eliminations.

*A beat. O looks at Y with bemused coldness.*

Y: Isn't that--isn't that how they--with a series of votes?

O: That's what they *want* you to think.

Y: (*now more than a little frightened*) Look, maybe we should just forget--

O: NO! You wanted to know! You wanted to go through the looking glass! Now you have to step through all the way. You can't stay in-between. You have to come through!

*Y has been trying to inch away from O, but O grabs him and holds on.*

Y: Hey--hey listen, I don't want--can you please just--?

O: You wanted to know? I'll tell you. I'm going to tell you what happened. What happened during that week.

Y: Ten days.

O: (*shaking him*) Do you want to know?

*Y says nothing.*

O: DO YOU?!?

Y: YES! Yes! Tell me, yes!

O: (*letting go of Y and calming down*) Vert good. All right. ...here's what happened.

*Y, exhausted, slumps down. O, standing up, takes the cigarette he had been playing with, lights it, and takes a slow deep drag. That film-noir/war-story tone comes back. Deliberate. Dramatic. Perhaps a spot hits O.*

O: It was spring. It was raining. I remember. Have you ever looked at wet marble? It's strangely beautiful. The way it glistens as water runs along it. There's nothing here but marble. (*beat*) I hate it. (*beat*) There was a heavy tension in the air. There always is, during conclave. But it seemed even more so this time around. I had pulled torch duty. Just like now. Just like you. At first, I was excited! What an honor! Just. Like. You.

*He turns slowly to Y, who shrinks a little before him.*

O: But by the fourth day of waiting, the excitement, well...it died.

Y: *(meekly)* What day was it?

O: Excuse me?

Y: The day. What day was it?

O: What day?

Y: Was it a Monday or...?

O: Why does that matter?

Y: *(nattering)* I'm just curious, that's all. I'm trying to get a full picture in my head, you know? A more complete grasp of the--

O: *(stopping the ramble before it really gets going)* Wednesday. It was a Wednesday.

Y: *(with wisdom)* Ah! Hump Day..

*O looks at him blankly for a moment, then continues.*

O: Boredom sets it. Everything was a struggle. Focus. Fatigue. You mind wanders. Thoughts drift like snow. Eventually they blur. And before you know it, you've entered a place between waking and dreaming, that has elements of both and belongs to neither. Do you understand?

Y: *(afraid to say anything different)* Of course.

O: I was in that place. And body, feeling my surrendering, began to weaken. I know longer stood. I sagged. I slumped. I slacked.

Y: Right.

O: Don't you understand? Do you know what that means?

Y: Ah...

O: It means I leaned back. Do you understand? I leaned back!

Y: You--?

O: I leaned! Yes. I leaned back. Against the door.

Y: The door?

O: Yes! *The* door. Their door. The conclave.

Y: You leaned against--?

O: The conclave door.

Y: (*not getting it*) So?

O: So? SO?!? Don't you see? Don't you understand? It opened! This door. *The door!* It opened!

Y: (*placing a hand on door, protectively*) It--? Oh my god. Isn't it supposed--I mean, I thought it was locked?

O: It should have been. It was supposed it be. But for whatever reason, it wasn't. I leaned back...and it opened.

Y: What happened? Did you fall into the room??

O: No! Thanks heavens, no. I caught myself and the door is too heavy to swing all the way in. ...but...it was enough. Enough for me to see. And to hear. Oh yes. Yes indeed.

Y: What...what did you see?

O: And hear.

Y: And hear.

O: A sudden shout. A masculine, joyful sound. A sound of camaraderie, of bonding. At first, I was afraid. Had they discovered me? Had I disturbed the most secret and sacred of rites? But as I listened, I realized, no. They weren't even aware that the door had opened. So engrossed they were in what they were doing.

Y: (*softly*) What was it? What were they doing?

O: They were choosing. They were choosing the new one.

Y: Choosing the new--?

O: Yes.

Y: (*hopefully*)...with a series of votes?

O *silently shakes his head no.*

Y: Then what...how do they choose?

*A pause.*

O: *(with sad authority)* A tournament.

Y: What? A--?

O: Yes. A tourney.

*A pause wherein O smokes his cigarette, while Y, stunned by this revelation, tries to take it in.*

Y: *(with dread)* What...what kind of tourney--I mean--tournament?

*O takes another deep dramatic drag off of the cigarette.*

O: Rock. Paper. Scissors.

*Y is stunned beyond belief. He moves away from O, shaking his head in denial. O, meanwhile, has focused his attention straight ahead, continuing to smoke without much pleasure. But he has become calmer, as if telling this story has somehow exorcised a demon from within. Y takes the torch down from the wall, cradles it in his hands, sighing and looking around with dismay, slack-jawed and a little vacant.*

Y: That's not--it *can't* be. Rock...*(he finished the phrase with the gestures.)*

O: I'm afraid it's true.

Y: Are you sure? I mean, maybe you didn't see--

O: Of course I'm sure.

Y: *That's how they decide?!?*

O: Yes.

Y: I--I don't know what to say...

O: I understand.

Y: I mean, *ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS?!?* Of all the...what a way to decide the most...I mean, at least if it was chess, maybe I could see that..but, but..*(he does the gestures again)*

O: You'd be surprised. There's more strategy involved than you might think.

Y: What?

O: Some of them are really good. That's all I'm saying.

Y: WHAT?

O: I'm not justifying it. I'm just saying, is all.

Y: And this...this *contest* is what's happening behind this door right now?

O: Yes.

Y: (*puts ear to door*) Are you sure? I don't hear anything. No cheering or...

O: The door's thick. I didn't hear anything either.

Y: (*desperate*) Maybe that's not how they do it. Maybe you walked in while they were taking a break, just blowing off steam!

O: There were tournament brackets on the walls with all their names.

Y: Oh...oh my...

O: They were even seeded, if I remember correctly.

Y: ALL RIGHT! ...okay. All right. Tell me...all right, tell me what happened next. (*he puts the torch back*)

O: Next?

Y: Yes! Next! What happened? They didn't see you?

O: No. Of course not. Not. If they had, do you think I'd be here talking to you?

Y: You mean they would have had you discharged?

O: (*laughing*) No. They would have had me killed.

Y: What?

O: Do you honestly think, that if they *knew* that someone else *knew* this secret that they would stop at just firing him?

Y: I...I...

O: In any case, no. They didn't discover me. I quietly shut the door as they cheered and egged each other on. I was shaken to the core, as you can imagine. I stepped away from the door and looked out into the night. You have to understand, that everything I believed was now in question. It was shaking ground, a fault line running through me, shaped like rocks, papers and scissors. Boredom and silence were no longer a problem. My mind was as focused as light off of a razor. What could I do? I had a sacred duty to perform, but how could I perform it? In good conscience, how could I maintain myself when it was in support of such a weak foundation? I had to do something. I had to do *something*. And then I realized, there was only one thing I could do.

*A pause. Y staring at O with laser-like intensity.*

Y: What was it? What was the one thing?

O: That night, I crept into the Archives.

Y: The Archives? What for?

O: So I could understand, so I could try to fathom where this had come from. Don't you see? All through that night, I studied papers, documents and ancient records, from the early days of the Church. And finally, I found my answer.

Y: What...what was it?

O: It seems that this...tradition...has always been with us, right before our very eyes.

Y: I don't understand. What are you saying?

*A beat.*

O: Think for a moment. What is probably the most famous image of the Church?

Y: The most famous...? I don't know...uh...Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*?

O: Exactly! And what do we see in that image?

Y: Uh...Jesus giving a blessing to his disciples?

O: That's what most of the world sees. But what is Jesus *doing*?

Y: Oh, uh...spreading his hands out on either side for the blessing?

*A beat.*

Y: (*uncertainly*) ...he's not giving a blessing?

O: (*with grave authority*) He's giving out Paper on either side.

Y: (*incredulous*) What?

O: He's playing two matches with disciples on either side.

Y: I can't believe this. This is..I don't...

O: (*with awe*) Da Vinci! He just knew everything. You know? Like in that book?

Y: (*confused*) What?

O: What?

Y: I don't understand any of this.

O: But it makes sense. Think. what do we call St. Peter, the first pope?

Y: (*utterly bewildered*) ...Peter? Uh...he's called the...uh...

O: The Rock.

Y: Wait, what?

O: Most people think that Jesus called Peter "The Rock" because he would be the stone upon which the Church would be built.

Y: He's not?

O: (*laughing gently*) Oh no. I'm afraid not. He called the Rock...

Y: (*shocked realization*) ...Oh God no...

O: Yes. Peter won the first tourney. By throwing rock. Over and over.

Y: But why--?

O: Why didn't someone throw Paper? Hard to say. I guess they weren't all that bright. Judas seemed to have a fondness for scissors and James the Lesser would--

Y: (*with great frustration*) STOP! I don't want to know! I can't take this!

O: Even the famous peace sign is really just scissors inverted. One could even say corrupted.

Y: I feel sick. Oh God...

O: Trust me, you're better off knowing now. It's easier to get over the disillusionment if you haven't been here as long. Some of the others--

Y: The others? You told other members of the--?

O: Of course I did. I had a sacred duty. Don't you remember your oath?

Y: What? My oath?

O: Yes. Your oath. *"I pledge to the Commandant and to my other superiors respect, fidelity and obedience. I swear to abide by all the requirements attendant to the dignity of my rank."* Part of that respect as being truthful to your fellow guards and officers. To have kept this terrible knowledge to myself would have been wrong. At some point I would have lied to someone in the ranks. I had to tell them.

Y: What happened after that?

O: When I told my superiors you mean?

Y: Yes.

O: Oh, I was dismissed as a crank. People started calling me "Mulder." But I persevered. Carefully documenting proof, until I could present it at the proper time. It was the ancient tournament bracket that showed how Pope Joan that finally won them over, I think.

Y: Pope Joan? I thought she was was a myth!

O: Of course you've been led to believe that. They don't want a woman to beat a man at anything. Especially rock, paper scissors. C'mon now.

Y: No. Yeah, you're right. So...then everyone in the Guard knows this...this...secret?

O: Actually, I'm not really sure. A lot of us do. There is a waiting period on rookies, like yourself. It's left to me to determine when it's time, if at all. I wasn't sure about you, but you were pushing. And I was pretty bored just standing here, so..

Y: But...there's one thing I don't understand...

O: One thing?

Y: How has this remained quiet? How is it that the world doesn't know?

O: Because of the first half of your oath. *"I swear to faithfully, honestly and honorably serve the Sovereign Pontiff and his legitimate successors, as well as to dedicate myself*

*to them with all strength, ready to sacrifice, should it become necessary, even my own life in their defense."* That's it. That's what keeps it under wraps.

Y: You still honor that oath?

O: Why wouldn't I?

Y: But everything you honor to protect is a lie!

O: The oath doesn't specify anything other than our service. It doesn't care how the Pope is chosen. It cares about how we serve him.

Y: Or her.

O: Or her.

Y: Yeah, ok, I get that, but GOD! How can you stay here, knowing what you know and being what you are?

O: Are you joking? This a great gig! Good benefits. Pension plans. You live in Italy. Tourists want photos of you. Do you have any idea how many family photo albums I must be in?

Y: This is unbelievable.

O: ...must be hundreds by now.

Y: I just...I just don't know what to think.

O; Hmm? What to--?

Y: To think! I don't know what to think! I don't know what I should do. I was so excited! I was so...oh my God...my mother! What am I going to tell my mother? She's going to...oh God, oh God...I mean.... ROCK, PAPER, SCISSORS??

*Y turns to O, who returns the stare. Not offering anything. Just a look.*

Y: Can you...is there...can you help me?

O: There's nothing I can do, I'm afraid. You have to do what you feel is the right thing.

Y: ...the right...?

O: For me, it was honoring the oath I took. It wasn't easy, by any means. But I learned to make peace with it. I've also learned how to be a killer rock, paper, scissors player.

Y:(*feeling sickly*) ...you have?

O: Ohhhh yeah boy. One day...one day...who knows? Maybe there will be a Pope Harry, Pretty cool, right?

Y: Pope Harry?

O: (*in a reverie*) Yeah, That would be pretty sweet. But maybe "Pope Hal" would be better. Hm. No. Harry I think. Right? Harry or Hal?

Y: Huh?

O: I don't think Huh is a nickname for Harry. But maybe!

Y: You're planning..you're planning on entering the...(*barely able to bring himself to say it*) the tourney?

O: Well, not this time. Maybe not at all. But I've thought about it. I mean, if that's all it takes, than who's to say who is truly the vessel of the divine, am I right?

Y: Yeah. That's hard to argue with.

O: Listen, I know this is hard to accept. It a lot to take in. There's no doubt about it. If you like, I'd be happy to train you.

Y: Train me?

O: Sure. You know. (*makes the "rock, paper, scissors" gestures*)

Y: Oh, thank you. I'm...uh...I'm not really sure if I want to.

O: Hey, look at it this way: it'll help pass the time, if nothing else, am I right?

Y: Yeah. Yes, that's true.

O: (*clapping him on the back*) That's the spirit! All right now, let's have a match!

*They stand opposite each other, in a slightly aggressive posture, arms thrown back.*

O: Ready? One, two, three...

Y: Wait! Hold on.

O: What?

Y: It's just that...you think...you think you know something and then...you see under the rug, look behind the curtain and then...

O: There's no wizard, you know. It's just men. Like you and me.

*From somewhere, O produces a cigarette and hands one to Y, the first time he has done so.*

O: So relax. Have a smoke.

*Y takes the cigarette gratefully.*

O: And think how proud your mom would be if you *won* the tourney...

*Y's eyes widen at that prospect and he smiles. He looks at O, lights the smoke and resumes the "match" posture.*

Y: Let's do this.

*Robert Johnson's "Crossroad Blues" begins to play. O grins at Y, assumes the posture and they start playing Rock, Paper, Scissors as lights fade.*

**END OF PLAY.**