

SMOKING FAGS ON A ROOFTOP

A playlet
By Craig Houk

PERUSAL

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Synopsis

On a smoke-choked London rooftop, three young, impeccably pink-clad men pass the time with cigarettes and brittle optimism while a new fascist regime cages others below and inexplicably spares them above. Convinced they are being preserved for their “usefulness” and cultural sparkle, Kemper, Logan, and Merrick rationalize their relative comfort even as the air grows hotter and the moral cost of their survival becomes harder to ignore. When Vince, an older outsider misplaced by a clerical error, joins them with a book and a blunt awareness of reality, their self-congratulatory logic begins to unravel. As smoke thickens and the truth becomes unavoidable, the playlet exposes the peril of complacency, the seduction of perceived exceptionalism, and the illusion that anyone can remain untouched while the world burns.

Characters

KEMPER Male, 20s, Any Race

LOGAN Male, 20s, Any Race

MERRICK Male, 20s, Any Race

VINCE Male/Trans Male, 40s, Any Race

Place

London, UK

Time

Present

Setting

A dreary rooftop somewhere in London.

Costuming Note

As noted, each character is dressed entirely in pink, but their outfits are not identical. Instead, each costume should reflect the character’s unique personality and individual sense of style.

Three very young men dressed head-to-toe in simple yet nicely fitted all pink outfits are smoking on a rooftop. The skyline behind them is drab, with plumes of smoke rising in the distance. Three velvet chairs are arranged around a small, ornate table topped with an elegant ashtray.

LOGAN

Things are looking bleak.

KEMPER

For the moment, yes. But there's not much we can do about it except buckle in and see where this tyrannical trolley takes us, yeah?

MERRICK

At least we get a bit of air up here.

LOGAN

Except there's nothing to do. No mobile, no computer, no streaming, no posting...

MERRICK

As if I could forget. I've lost all one hundred and thirty-nine thousand followers.

KEMPER

They've shut down all social media platforms. What difference does it make? For all we know, those platforms don't even exist anymore.

MERRICK

You had nearly a million, Kemper.

KEMPER

Yeah, and unlike you, I'm not going to stress over it. Honestly, I'm just grateful we can still smoke. A rooftop breeze and a fag. What more could you want?

LOGAN

You'd say that at the brink of doomsday, wouldn't you?

KEMPER

No need to exaggerate. We're not even close. Look at us. Still fabulous. Mostly free.

MERRICK

He's right. They won't touch us. I mean, sure, they've rounded up the others, packed them away on the floors below, locked in cages, stacked on top of one another, barely room to breathe, let alone move. And here we are. Not exactly first-class amenities, but we've space, the essentials.

And a bit of flair. Practically penthouse living. And we've still got plenty to offer. I'm sure they intend to keep us around.

LOGAN

Except for the lesbians and the drag queens.

MERRICK

What do you mean? What about them?

LOGAN

They're still out there. On the streets.

KEMPER

'Course they are. Holed up in empty bars, itching for a fight, never stopping to think things through. Meanwhile, we've pushed for radical change for years. Properly. Demanding representation, marching, protesting, lobbying... practically begging for equal footing. Not just for us but for everyone. And the rest? Overly cautious, electing leaders who tiptoe around progress, chase compromise, and only push equality as far as it won't cause a stir. Spineless bastards.

MERRICK

You're right. This was bound to happen. Honestly, I'm glad it did. This is what comes from not letting young liberals lead. I think that's why they're showing us some respect. Why we're being spared. In some twisted way, they see a bit of themselves in us. That makes us useful

KEMPER

That and every regime needs a bit of sparkle, doesn't it? A splash of pink to temper the flames. And who better than the young and influential? If nothing else, we've got reach. Assuming we're given the chance to reach again.

LOGAN

You make us sound like throw pillows in a death camp.

KEMPER

Isn't that what we are? And so, what? One day all of this will end. And everyone'll have learned a hard lesson; one we've warned them about for years. Then the pendulum will swing left. And we win.

MERRICK

And then we're all back to enjoying life's comforts. As equals.

LOGAN

Except for those who die along the way.

MERRICK

(He sniffs the air.)

What brand do you smoke, Kemper?

KEMPER

What?

MERRICK

Your cigarettes. What brand?

KEMPER

I roll my own.

MERRICK

What tobacco?

KEMPER

Why?

MERRICK

Because it smells awful.

KEMPER

Funny. I was thinking the same about yours.

MERRICK

It's not mine. What about you, Logan?

LOGAN

Oh. Erm, well... normally, Paramount. But admittedly, I'm out. So, I, erm... I pinched one from yours, Merrick.

MERRICK

You what?

LOGAN

I lifted one.

MERRICK

You did?

LOGAN

Yeah.

MERRICK

Bit rude, isn't it?

LOGAN

Sorry. I was desperate. Turns out, I'm rubbish at rationing.

MERRICK

Next time, ask. If I've got it, I'll share. But I won't tolerate a cheat.

KEMPER

Nor will I.

LOGAN

Of course. I am sorry. Truly. I tend to panic sometimes, especially when I'm craving a fag, and then I overthink. My thoughts, they just... take off. Next thing I know, I've done something wrong, something incredibly stupid. It won't happen again.

MERRICK

Good.

LOGAN

It's odd, you know. How my mind never completely stops racing. Thoughts flooding in, constant, persistent, overwhelming... Sometimes I feel they'll never let up. Then they do. Sort of. And just when I think I'm free, they come back. Like a hammer... relentless, pounding, until it feels like my head might crack open. Sometimes I think so much I could think the world away. In those moments, I think about giving up completely. But I can't. I'm as afraid of living as I am of dying. I wish there was a place between the two. A quiet refuge. Somewhere to disappear and wait to see if anyone notices I'm gone.

(A quiet moment and then...)

MERRICK

For fuck's sake, Logan. It was one fag.

KEMPER

That was... something. I think you should accept his apology, Merrick.

MERRICK

Yeah, yeah. Apology accepted, Logan.

KEMPER

Is it just me, or is it getting warmer?

MERRICK

What?

KEMPER

Feels warmer.

LOGAN

The air's heating up.

MERRICK

Were we expecting warmer weather?

KEMPER

I'm not even sure the time of year.

LOGAN

Autumn.

MERRICK

How do you know?

LOGAN

I've been keeping tally marks on the wall in my room.

KEMPER

Right. Seems unusually warm for Autumn.

MERRICK

Agreed.

KEMPER

It's sad.

LOGAN

What is?

KEMPER

That it's Autumn, except it doesn't feel like Autumn. Normally, it's my favorite time of year. The cool wind moving through the city, that distinct smell in the air, the leaves changing colors, the sun low in the sky, and everyone gearing up for the holidays, before the rush, before the pressures settle in. Before everything goes to sleep.

MERRICK

Global warming.

LOGAN

Sorry?

MERRICK

That's why we're having this weather. Global warming.

LOGAN

That's... not quite how global warming works, Merrick. You do know that, right?

MERRICK

How many followers did you have, Logan? On social media?

LOGAN

How's that relevant.

MERRICK

How many?

LOGAN

Ninety-two.

MERRICK

Thousand?

LOGAN

No. Just Ninety-two.

MERRICK

There you go then. And speaking of distinct smells in the air, it's getting worse. I don't think I've ever encountered anything quite like it. Absolutely rank.

(Vince enters carrying a book.)

Ah. There he is. The legendary man of mystery. He speaks only in whispers, if he speaks at all. What might he be hiding, we're all left to wonder.

LOGAN

What are you doing, Vincent? You know the rule: three people up here at a time. Our turn's nearly over. Then you and two others can come up.

KEMPER

Leave it, Logan. I'm sure it's fine.

LOGAN

We could be in real trouble.

VINCE

Vince.

KEMPER

Sorry?

VINCE

Name's Vince, not Vincent. If that's alright with you lot.

KEMPER

'Course. Vince.

VINCE

(Vince points to an empty chair.)

Do you mind?

KEMPER

Not at all.

(Vince sits and opens his book to read. A quiet moment and then...)

MERRICK

Just so we're clear... your name isn't actually Vince, is it? I know you go by Vince – a shortened version, a nickname of sorts – but your given name is Vincent, right? That's what's on your birth certificate

VINCE

No.

MERRICK

No?

VINCE

No. And, with respect, what's on my birth certificate isn't your business. I'd just like to finish my book. Just a few pages left.

MERRICK

Right. Fair.

(A quiet moment and then...)

Not to be funny but... Well, you don't exactly match the profile up here. You seem – and again, I'm not trying to be funny – a bit older and a bit more conservative, which I suspect might be linked to your age, whatever that may be, though I'd guess you're in your forties.

VINCE

Clerical error.

MERRICK

Meaning?

VINCE

Meaning I shouldn't be on this floor. I'd be a better fit for one of the lower floors, likely street level, or the basement if I'm to be honest. But there was a mistake, and so here I am.

MERRICK

Right.

KEMPER

Why didn't you speak up? That would've been the right thing to do, yeah?

VINCE

I did.

LOGAN

So, then what happened?

VINCE

Look, I'm on a tight schedule. I'd like to get back to it if you don't mind. Curious to see how it ends.

(He goes back to his book. A quiet moment and then...)

MERRICK

We're not supposed to have books.

VINCE

Not sure it matters now.

KEMPER

Why not?

VINCE

(He sighs and closes his book.)

Alright, quickly then. Yes, there was a cock-up with the paperwork. And yes, they found it. But instead of fixing it, they decided to chuck me in with you lot for a laugh. Said I looked like a right hard arse and figured I'd shake things up on the top floor. Thought maybe you'd get a bit miffed having someone like me in the mix. Piss everyone off and watch it all unravel. Thing is, I'm an introvert. And a pacifist. And honestly, you don't need my help to implode. You're managing that just fine on your own. So... have I answered your questions?

KEMPER

Erm... I believe you have, / yes.

KEMPER

/ Yes.

KEMPER

/ Yes.

VINCE

Good. Then I'll get back to my book. I'd like to finish before the fire reaches us.

(The others are dumbfounded. Logan moves to the edge of the rooftop and looks down. His eyes widen. Vince reads on, eyes fixed on the page, not looking up...)

Bet you wish you were hiding out with the lesbians and the drag queens right about now.

(Vince touches his index finger to his tongue and then turns the page. End of playlet.)