

THE DAWNING OF THE DAY

By EPM

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I know I just posted "Broken" but something kept after me until I finished this. I hope those who love Combat will enjoy this short piece. This isn't the first time I've taken inspiration from a song but it is the first time I've let the lyrics set the scenes. If you are not familiar with this song by Mary Fahl or any of her work for that matter, you are missing a rare treat. No copyright infringement is intended.

Thank you to Doc II for reading my story and the helpful hints along the way.

***This morning early I walked on
while my darling was in a dream.
The last sweet days of summer bloomed
and dressed the trees in green.
Then soaring high in the gleaming sky
from far across the bay,
came a fearsome roar from a distant shore
at the dawning of the day.***

He sat quietly next to the window and watched the rising sun bully its way into the night sky. It was as if a switch had been turned on as the orange ball rose above the skyline. The smoke from his cigarette curled upward, momentarily shrouding his view.

Caje rose and added the stub to the already overflowing ashtray.

He looked over at the bed he had just vacated. Waves of dark brown hair spilled across the pillow obscuring the face of the woman with whom he had just spent the last two days.

72 hours earlier

First Squad returned, exhausted and as close to breaking as Hanley had ever seen. The lieutenant was glad he could give them a three day reprieve. He held little hope that seventy-two hours would heal their deprived bodies but more importantly, he knew it was only a temporary fix for their shattered spirit, a Band aid for wounds never likely to heal.

This time the Army set up a kitchen for hot food. Hanley joined the squad as they descended all at once. And there were no complaints about the chow. It was hot and it was plentiful and that's all they cared about. The town was big enough to have a barbershop that sported a real shower. Men lined up with clean clothes and hopes for a little warm water and soap.

Littlejohn and Billy, glad for full stomachs and at least a semblance of cleanliness, opted to find a place to sleep. Doc decided to join them. Kirby's flagging morale was energized enough for him to suggest a foray into town. Caje waffled between the lure of his bedroll and the exploration of the village. In the end, he and Kirby wandered into town after a stiff warning from Saunders that if either or both of them landed in the stockade, he'd leave them there.

The Café was small and crowded with GIs looking for a little bit of normalcy amid the aberrancy of war. Caje and Kirby wove their way toward the rear of the

establishment where Kirby's sharp eyes spied a table that was just opening up. He volunteered to push his way to the bar and bring back a sample from the local vineyards.

"Now, should I meet up with some likely mam`zelle, you're on your own, buddy." Kirby grinned at Cajé before he muscled his way into the crowd.

Cajé just shook his head. He looked around at the sea of American faces. Men from all over the country whose accents were sometimes as foreign sounding to him as his was to them. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a person stumbling and starting to fall. He bolted forward and steadied the wobbly patron.

Surprised, Cajé found himself looking into distinctly feminine, green eyes. Not a customer at all, the young woman had been balancing a tray that fortunately, was empty at the time.

< "Thank you, Sir. I'm not usually so clumsy".> She straightened up, wiping her hands on the apron tied around her hips.

< 'You're welcome, Miss. There are a lot of big feet in here to trip over.> He caught the surprised look on her face when he answered her in French. < "You are thinking, an American GI who speaks French with a funny accent?"> An easy smile accompanied his question.

< "You speak French very well, but you're right, you do speak with a funny accent."> She lowered her eyes as if embarrassed by her own words.

Cajé did his best to put her at ease. < "French is the language of my people. English is the language of my country.">

A male voice rose over the din. <"Gabrielle! Gabrielle, where are you?">

<"Over here. I am coming."> She turned to go. <"Thank you again. I will try to be more careful of the big feet.">

<"It was my pleasure, Miss.">

She turned back for a moment. Her eyes held his in a steady gaze. < "Gabrielle— my name is Gabrielle.">

Cajé repeated her name as she walked away.

It was getting late and all but a few diehard drinkers were left. Kirby had long since given up on his quest for female companionship and wandered back to the

rest of the squad. If he questioned Cajé's intent on staying behind, it was lost in his desire to sleep for at least the next 48 hours.

First Squad's scout contented himself with sipping wine and watching Gabrielle as she went about readying the tavern for the night. He couldn't help but notice the graceful way she moved and the slopes and curves of her body. He thought that she must be in her very early twenties. Finally, he got up, intending to leave. Had it been a different time, a different place, he would have done his best to pursue her.

She stood behind the bar, washing the last dregs from the glasses.

< Good night, Gabrielle,"> he said, tugging the black beret into place.

<"Would you like one more glass of wine before you leave? It seems the least I can do for someone who saved me from the floor.> She righted one of the clean glasses she had just washed.

<"Thank you, Gabrielle."> He liked the sound of her name and how he felt when he said it. Cajé leaned against the small bar.

They found themselves talking very late into the night. Cajé explained to her about his ancestry and described the bayou. He didn't know if it was the wine or the thoughts of home or the girl, but he found himself in a place where he hadn't been in a long time. He felt safe and comfortable.

She explained that both of her parents had been killed by the war and that her plans to study art in Paris had ended with the German occupation. She lived in her parent's home, waiting for her future to begin again.

The night sky bled into the dark grey of early dawn and they both knew the sun wasn't far behind. Cajé walked her to her home.

"Good night, Paul."

A smile slid across his dark features. "I'd almost forgotten how my name sounded, especially when spoken by a beautiful woman."

Gabrielle laughed at his blatant flirting. "I'm glad I could bring you a little piece of home."

Cajé brushed her cheek with the back of his hand. He stepped in closer and kissed her then stepped back. "Good night, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle watched as Cajé disappeared into the early morning mist. A touch of melancholy pierced her heart.

By early afternoon, Cajé found himself retracing his steps from the night before. An argument raged inside his head but it was if he were nothing more than a bystander to this internal dispute. He let the voices continue.

Why am I going to find this girl? I'll be back on the line again within the next two days. She's not the kind I would use for my own pleasure then walk away. What do I want from her?

What does it matter? I've taken solace in a pair of soft arms before. Willing partners who knew it was nothing more than relief and a kind of brief divergence from the reality that surrounded them.

But it did matter. Somehow, he knew she could matter a great deal to him. Cajé found himself in front of Gabrielle's house. He took a deep breath and dredged up the courage to knock. He found himself rehearsing what he would say when she opened the door. But every thought abandoned him and he stood before her, speechless.

"Hello, Paul". Her smile put him at ease.

Cajé found his voice. "I hope you don't mind my coming to your home. I didn't want to go away without seeing you again."

"I'm glad you came. Come in."

They spent the rest of the afternoon wandering along the meandering path of the river that ran along the edge of town. Their conversation was easy and sprinkled with laughter. It seemed natural when Gabrielle took Cajé's arm, and he drew her in close. For a time, the war was forgotten.

That night, they shared bread and wine and cheese. Cajé added canned fruit and chocolate. A full moon lit the late summer landscape as they shared the meager feast. Their time together had been so effortless, as if they had known each other long and well, before all the hunger and pain and death— before the war.

Finally, Cajé rose from the table. His voice was thick with emotion. "I should leave, now." He placed a hand on her cheek.

"Stay with me, Paul." She kissed the open palm.

"Gabrielle, if I stay..."

Her answer was a single word. "Yes."

And now it was time to leave her. Caje moved closer to the bed, long fingers gently pushing the hair away from her face. He tried hard to imprint her features into his memory. God, how he wanted to stay. A fist tightened in his gut when he tore his gaze away from her. He dressed and looked out the window once more. Reaching into the buttoned pocket of his shirt, he pulled out the image of St. Christopher his mother had given him the night before he shipped out. <To keep you safe, my son,> she had said. He placed it on the pillow where he had slept. "Goodbye, Gabrielle. God keep you."

***Then I called my men to follow me
knowing well that the view was dim.
Though tired and worn, how they fought all morn`
as time was closing in.
And my heart was sad though sore with pride
for brave lads all were they.
As the angels fly, how they climbed so high
on the dawning of the day.***

They heard the constant bombardment as the German artillery pounded the American lines. Saunders' men joined Hanley's other squads, trying to plug the gaps torn open by enemy shells.

Gunfire replaced explosions, and the German troops swarmed toward the American forces. Thick smoke and the cries of the dying added to the chaos. Saunders turned toward the familiar voice shouting behind him.

Hanley's deep tones could be heard interspersed with the gunfire. "Pull back—pull back!" Men retreated on the lieutenant's command. Squads were separated, and soldiers scrambled for whatever cover they could find. "Saunders—get your men back!"

The NCO ran parallel to Hanley's position, looking for men who had not heard the order. He saw Littlejohn trying to help a wounded Nelson up and out of a foxhole. "Get him out of there and head back!" He didn't stop.

The sound of a B.A.R. rose above the clamor of battle. Running in a serpentine pattern, Saunders headed toward the familiar sound. He launched himself forward, just as a grenade detonated not far in front of him. He landed hard on his left shoulder but managed to come up to firing position. He was greeted by the grinning faces of Caje and Kirby.

“Hey Sarge, you miss us so much you had to come visit?” Kirby only stopped firing long enough to flash a smile and ask his question.

“We’re pulling back. You two go while I cover you.” Saunders popped up over the rim and fired a burst from the Thompson. He saw that Caje was about to say something and cut him off. “Just do what you’re told—go!”

Both soldiers did as they were ordered and started back toward the shattered American lines. Saunders’ gun continued to rattle in response to the enemy onslaught. He knew he’d have to make a run for it soon or he’d be sharing the foxhole with the Krauts. He retreated the same way he came.

The sergeant ran past the mangled and bleeding bodies of American troops. He knew at a glance that they were beyond the pain and misery that surrounded them. He came up over a low rise and saw Hanley still waving men back. The lieutenant caught sight of Saunders, and the two exchanged a brief smile.

The explosion that hurled Hanley backward was deafening. Thick clouds of smoke, dirt and dust filled the air, making it hard to breath and harder to see.

The concussion flung Saunders to the ground. It took a minute for his jangled brain to clear. He staggered to his feet and looked around. The battered NCO didn’t see anyone else.

The sergeant stumbled forward, stopping short when he saw Hanley’s long frame stretched out on the still smoking ground. He dropped to his knees. The bright green eyes of his commander and friend stared unseeing into the late morning sun. Saunders touched the soft, black hair and felt the sticky, warmth of blood beneath his fingers. He squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted to scream. He wanted to rail against the injustice and futility of a war that killed young men, that robbed them of their futures. But nothing would come, and he could only hold onto Hanley’s shoulder, rocking back and forth to ease his own pain. Finally, Saunders closed the eyes of his fallen comrade for the last time. He snapped a tag from Hanley’s chain and buried it deep within a pocket.

***But the edge is moving near now
inside the fading sun
and calling, calling out to them
my brothers, one by one
But only dusty silence sounds
The ashes float away
As the twilight ends and the night descends
`til the dawning of the day***

By the time Saunders caught up with the retreating American forces, radio contact had been made with command. They were to dig in and hold the line. Promises of reinforcements came with the order to hold out at all costs.

Somehow, the squad had managed to find each other. They stood huddled around the wounded Nelson and Doc, who knelt at the young man's side. Saunders looked at each man in turn. Worry wrinkled Littlejohn's forehead, as he stared down at his friend. Kirby leaned on the B.A.R., shifting from foot to foot, waiting for Doc's verdict. Cajé was the first to see him. The sergeant noted the deep lines of concern that etched themselves into the scout's already gaunt features.

Billy was leaning against a fieldstone fence that had once surrounded a barn but all that remained was a jigsaw puzzle of broken and half burnt timbers. He was clutching his left side, leaving dirty smudges on the bandage that Doc had just reinforced. Saunders could see the fear on the boy's face.

The men gathered around their sergeant. "Doc, you need to take Billy back." His statement left little room for disagreement.

"I know, Sarge but..."

"No arguments, Doc."

"The squad's gonna need me, you know that." Doc could feel his heart rate quicken.

A faint smile crossed Saunders' face and he slowly shook his head. "No Doc—you need to go back."

The finality in Saunders' words hit hard and the flinty edges of panic crept through the squad's medic.

Littlejohn knelt next to Billy. "You sure you can make it back with Doc?"

The young man's voice shook. "Sure I can." He looked beyond Littlejohn to Cajé and Kirby. He struggled to keep his tears confined.

Once again, enemy shells started to whistle through the air landing out in front of the American lines.

Littlejohn helped his friend up. "You better go now. Take care of yourself, Billy."

Tears tracked down Nelson's face, drawing streaks in the dirt. "Bye, Littlejohn."

Doc shouldered Billy's weight. He took a moment to look at the four men, and then said, "I'll see you again."

***Forgive me love, I'm going now
so very far away
When darkness falls, only think me near
and do not be afraid
And please don't grieve when I am gone
abide in what remains
'til the shadows end and we meet again
on the dawning of the day***

The shells had stopped falling. The sun hid behind the clouds, creating a patchwork with the bright blue sky. Saunders' men could hear the approach of the German troops and machinery. Each man counted clips and grenades knowing it wouldn't take long before they'd be out of ammunition.

Cage took off his helmet and pulled the beret from his shoulder. Satisfied that it was in place, he reached for the breast pocket of his shirt. He hesitated then smiled when he remembered why it was empty.

The noise of the approaching enemy became louder.

Gabrielle held the image of St. Christopher close to her lips as she looked out from her bedroom window. She could see the flicker of lights in the night sky from the distant battle. *<God keep you, Paul.>*

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