

## Forgive Us Our Trespasses

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This is my slight homage to director George Romero. Any similarities to those living, or dead, is strictly coincidental. (smb)

(Warning: rated M for violence and gore. Not for the squeamish.)

## European Theater of Operations, August, 1944

Kirby sat on a tree stump and lit up his last smoke. In the past weeks his life had gone from just this side of bearable to absolute hell. His friends, Littlejohn and Billy Nelson, were dead, killed when an artillery shell disintegrated the shack they'd chosen in which to seek shelter.

Caje and Lieutenant Hanley were seriously wounded in that same battle and were whisked away, back to Battalion Aid and from there, home, or so scuttlebutt said.

*Doc*, Kirby took a deep drag on the cigarette. *Doc*. He hadn't seen the medic since that battle but refused to believe the soft-spoken southerner was dead. Enough loss, enough pain; he refused to believe the worst.

*And Sergeant Saunders*. Kirby threw up a brick wall when it came to the fate of the Sarge. If he didn't think about it, well it couldn't be true. Kirby finished the smoke, flipped the butt aside and hauled himself to his feet.

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*If war is hell then this place epitomized the definition. Nothing was as it should've been. King Company was a shambles, its men, those few left alive, were farmed out wherever they were needed. PFC William G. Kirby, alone and scared, found himself submerged in a waking nightmare, one without end or purpose.*

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They materialized from out of the tree line, ghosts, spirits, apparitions, dressed in tattered, bloody German uniforms. A few still carried their weapons. Others were unarmed.

Kirby rubbed his eyes. Surely this was his mind playing tricks on him.

The Germans continued their advance, their lines ragged and their steps halting, like marionettes puppeted by unseen strings. Machine gun bullets tearing into their bodies knocked them to the ground, but miraculously, they rose again and continued their forward momentum, even those with ghastly wounds lurched onward.

Kirby wanted to scream. Instead he grabbed up the Tommy gun lying next to him and opened fire into their midst.

"Pull back! Pull back!" The order was given and the PFC obeyed, but he continued to rake the oncoming krauts, walking backwards and keeping the enemy in sight until the machine gun ran out of ammo. Slinging the weapon, he turned on his heels and ran.

He ran until his breath whined in his ears and he could no longer obey his own desire to put as much distance between himself and those krauts as was humanly possible. He dropped to

the ground, exhausted, scared, confused, and found himself among the remainder of his squad, his new squad. They'd made it to their lines and relative safety.

Listening to the frightened talk of those around him, Kirby realized that if his eyes were playing tricks on him, so were his comrades then equally deceived. Conversations overlapped. Thoughts blurted out, no matter the subject seemed impossible, continued.

"Kirby. Kirby!" The soldier seated to the PFC's left poked him rudely in the ribs.



"Huh?" Kirby replied, deep in thought, deep in shock.

"What do you think they are...them krauts, some kinda new secret weapon? I heard the crazy bastards are actually tryin' to breed some super race. Maybe they did it. Maybe them krauts are super soldiers!"

Kirby shook his head, the visions of what occurred earlier still vivid. "I dunno." He turned slowly to gaze vacantly at the other man. "They didn't look alive," he muttered.

This declaration met with general disagreement, and in more than one case, guffaws. "How the hell could a dead man walk around? Eh? You tell me?"

Again, Kirby shook his head. "I dunno. You asked what I thought and I told you. How the hell should I know?"

He glanced down at his hands and wasn't surprised to find them shaking uncontrollably. He wished he had a good stiff drink, or two. Hell, even a good strong cup of coffee would help. But the chances of either coffee or booze were slim to none here, at the frontlines.

The corporal came by, handing out ammo. "Where'd you get that Tommy gun?"

"Sarge...Sergeant Saunders got it... got killed. I ran outta ammo for my BAR so I picked up the Thompson."

The corporal chewed on that for a moment then handed Kirby a half dozen clips for the machine gun. "Yeah, well, guess it's yours now until an officer decides he wants it. Tommies are better in this kinda close up fight than a rifle, anyhow," the non-com added, as if Kirby wasn't already aware of that fact. The corporal leaned down a bit and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Was I you, I'd aim for the head. I dunno what they're feedin' them kraut bastards lately, but they just keep comin' and comin', like robots. Only thing puts 'em down and keeps 'em that way is a head shot."

Kirby nodded. "I'll remember."

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If that day proved to be an eye-opener for the men in Kirby's company, the next day was some kind of revelation. As the soldiers walked the battlefield of the previous day, they were sickened to a man, nauseated, by what they saw.



It appeared as if scavengers had been at work for what else could possibly wreak such carnage on a human corpse? The bodies of the dead lay pocked with hideous wounds. What looked to be bite marks scored the corpses. Half-devoured bodies lay bloating in the midday sun, entrails strewn about, legs and arms dragged from dismembered torsos.

Just when Kirby figured he'd seen all the hell on earth he ever thought to see, now this. He joined his buddies, bent over, retching, swilling warm tinny water from canteens to wash the foul taste from the mouth and wiping tearing eyes across filthy sleeves.

"Damn...there ain't enough left of some of these poor buggers to even bury!" Sergeant Ridgeway commented between gagging and retching, this old soldier, a veteran from the previous war and a man Kirby figured to have seen every disgusting thing there was to see, sickened. "Damn it!" Kirby spat.

However, as the day proceeded, events got stranger, if that was even possible. As the GIs fanned out, following what seemed to be a mass retreat of the Germans back towards their

own lines, Kirby and his companions came across more mutilated corpses. In fact, there wasn't one single body, German or American, that hadn't suffered extensive mutilation.

Kirby no longer felt the need to avert his eyes at the carnage. He'd already become pretty much inured to the sickening appearance of the dead, but the sight of bodies blanketed by thousands of flies which caused the bodies to move and undulate as if still harboring life was almost more than he could take.

The lieutenant called a halt. The sun was high and the air, warm. Kirby didn't think he could eat any rations, even though most of the men were digging in with relish to tinned cheese and gelatinous mystery-meat that even his mutt back home wouldn't touch, starving or not. Kirby wasn't sure what stunk the worst, the canned food or the bodies littering the area and which were just beginning to smell – that sickly sweet stink of rotting flesh. Kirby took a long swig of water from his canteen, swished it around in his mouth and spat it out. He begged a smoke off the soldier next to him, lit up, and inhaled deeply. The cigarette helped keep his mind off the singularly disgusting smells and calmed his shaky nerves. He hadn't felt this scared, this unsure and sick at his stomach, since landing on D-Day. He hadn't thought he'd ever feel that way again.

The men sat, unnaturally quiet for a bunch of GIs on a break. No friendly bantering, no good-natured jibing, only the sounds of nature, birds flitting about in what remained of the decimated forest, the occasional rustling of some small animal among the fallen leaves, the hum of flies and the buzzing of bees. Kirby found himself lulled into a sort of stupor. He didn't want to think of what he'd seen. Hell, he didn't want to think at all. In an instant, no longer than it took the first man to blurt out a surprised yelp, everything changed.

From out of nowhere appeared perhaps a hundred soldiers, a combination of both German and American, acting together, attacking together. They swarmed over and across the unsuspecting GIs, the soldiers so taken by surprise only a few got off a rifle shot. And oddly enough, not one of the attackers had fired a weapon. In fact, it appeared none of them were even armed.

From where he stood, Kirby tried to get a bead on the tree line, at the point where the attackers were funneling through a narrow gap and into the small clearing, but his own men were in the way. Grappling with the frenzied enemy, the GIs were literally torn limb from limb, their flesh ripped from their living bodies and stuffed into the gaping maws of their attackers. The soldiers were being eaten alive!

Kirby did the only thing possible, he ran. He left his buddies to the mercy of the insane and he ran. Only a short way from the carnage he, too, found himself surrounded. Only then did he focus on his pursuers. Up close and almost in his face, Kirby found himself at the mercy of the most hideous creatures imaginable. Even as a child, even in those worst of childhood nightmares, nothing and no one compared to the faces of these *things*. They looked for all the world like any other dead body, one that had lain in the sun, or in the water, for days, the gray flesh rotting, lips and noses missing, eyes glazed and dripping from their sockets.

Kirby stood frozen to the spot, the Thompson hanging uselessly from his nerveless fingers. He opened his mouth and screamed. He screamed his high-pitched scream of absolute horror until there was no more breath to continue and for some reason, the walking dead men stopped. They stopped en masse as if some switch had been turned off. They stopped and they stared at Kirby with their glazed eyes and lipless mouths. He raised the Thompson and fired. He fired until he'd used up an entire thirty round clip. Remembering what the sergeant had told him about shooting for the head, he did so. Their rotting flesh exploded, the heavy .45 caliber slugs decimating the bodies, the skulls exploding like so many overly ripe melons. They dropped and lay still.

Sweat drenched Kirby's body and his breath came in great heaving gasps. Dropping the empty Thompson clip, he slapped in another. He stood, staring down at his handiwork, and then

he raked the bodies again. A cloud of blue smoke hung in the air and the sudden silence was deafening.

It's over," he whispered, incredulous that he'd survived the attack. "It's over!" he repeated, louder, with more enthusiasm. "IT'S OVER!" he roared and then the laughter gripped him, an insane laughter that rolled over him and which he could neither explain nor stop. Men lay scattered before him, dead by his hands, yet Kirby howled with uncontrollable laughter.

The medics found him, still laughing, hollow-eyed, exhausted, yet laughter continued to bubble from his lips as he gestured wildly at the corpses among whom he sat, the bodies' appearance no longer resembling anything even once remotely human. Decay, flies and animal scavengers had seen to that.

"Come on, buddy. We'll get you back. Come on," the medic coaxed, urging Kirby to his feet. Turning to his companion he whispered, "Worse case a shell shock I've ever seen." The second medic never got a chance to respond. A hand on his shoulder forced him around. He shrieked once and fell back into Kirby.

Kirby, his laughter stilled, pushed the frightened medic off and his eyes focused on the figure standing before him, but it couldn't be so. His eyes, his mind were playing foul tricks on him, taunting him, teasing him, confusing him. Kirby rubbed a grimy hand back across his eyes, but the figure remained the same, coming more into focus. Kirby stepped back, shaking his head. "No," he murmured. "No! You're dead!"

Sergeant Saunders took a wobbly step toward Kirby, his finger, what was left of his right index finger, a naked fleshless bone, pointing down at Kirby's feet, at the Thompson which lay there, at Saunders' own weapon.

Kirby bent down, never taking his attention from the sergeant as he plucked the Tommy gun from the ground. He held the weapon out to Saunders. "Here... here, Sarge."

What Kirby supposed was a grin creased what remained of the sergeant's face and a gurgling giggle erupted from the mangled throat as Saunders took the Thompson from Kirby's shaking grasp. The creature, the thing, whatever remained of Sergeant Chip Saunders, pulled back the bolt.

"Run," Kirby whispered to the medics who stood there as if paralyzed. "Run!" Kirby pushed past the medics and took off, but he made it only so far. He couldn't run, not again. Kirby forced himself to turn around, to confront his terror.

The two unfortunate medics stood rooted to the ground, their fear robbing them of coherent thought. Sergeant Saunders fiddled around with the Thompson like a small child with a new toy. It might be only a matter of seconds before what remained of his brain told what was left of his index finger to apply pressure to the Tommy's trigger. For the moment he didn't seem at all interested in the horrified medics who stood directly in front of him.

Kirby struggled to get past the hazy numbness in his brain, to focus on the here and now. He weighed his options. Foremost in his thoughts remained the desire to run, run as far and as fast as his legs would carry him. Yet, his humanity told him to help his fellow soldiers. He'd learned that much in this damned war – learned that sometimes all one soldier had to rely on, to keep him alive and safe, was the guy next to him.

Glancing at the ground, and at the bodies splayed across it, Kirby searched for a weapon, any weapon. Attached to the tattered, blood-soaked jacket of one unfortunate were several hand grenades. Kirby crouched down and gingerly worked to remove the grenades. The pineapples were slick with gore and difficult to work free, but he didn't give up and soon two grenades were in his possession. It was none too soon.

Unable to figure out the machine gun, a weapon he'd previously used to excellent advantage on more occasions than a man could count; *this* Sergeant Saunders tossed aside the Thompson and focused all his attention on the medics. One had regained enough of his senses to begin backing away, one small step at a time. However, the other poor soul remained frozen and unmoving. With a snarl akin to some wild animal, Saunders pitched forward,

grabbing the medic by the shoulders. His lipless gaping mouth, teeth barred, fastened onto the medic's throat.

"Run!" Kirby screamed to the remaining medic. "Run!" He pulled the pin on the first grenade.

The medic turned and stumbled off, falling to his knees, but crabbing his way to safety. Kirby tossed the first grenade, pulled the pin on the second and threw it as well, *better to be safe than sorry*, he thought, surprised at his own rationality.

His nearness to the explosions, one on top of the other, threw Kirby to the ground and for a moment the concussion rendered him deaf and defenseless. When he felt a hand on his shoulder he fought like a madman to crawl out from beneath the steely grip. Hands rolled him over onto his back. He kept his eyes squeezed tightly shut and waited for what must come...



The End