

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

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After the barrage Sergeant Saunders lay quietly, relieved at the respite from sound and enveloped in stillness. Despite his throbbing thigh, pounding headache, and sore shoulder, he savoured the peace. The past hour had been anything but calm, and the next would bring pain and effort if he was to crawl out of the bushes and make his way home. Sunrise seemed a long time ago.



A predawn briefing and a quick rousing of his men had begun the day. Saunders assessed the squad's alertness, gave the men ten minutes to pull themselves together, and leaned on the doorframe as the sun's rays began to penetrate the barn. Predictably, Kirby was the first to speak.

"Hey, Sarge, what's up? I thought we were on guard duty."

"The Lieutenant's got a special assignment for us. We did such a good job yesterday, he's sending us out to patrol the same area again."

"Aw, Sarge, my boots ain't dried out yet from that river out there."

Billy spoke up. "Ya weren't supposed to fall in, Kirby, and it wasn't big enough to be a river, just a stream. Didn't even have to swim it. That little footbridge made sure of that. And at least there weren't any Krauts around."

Caje nodded quietly as he did a quick check of his equipment.

Littlejohn looked confused. "But, Sarge, Billy's right, there weren't any Krauts out there yesterday."

Saunders sighed. A dull ache had begun behind his eyes and his bedroll had never looked so inviting. "Reports of enemy movement nearby, maybe coming this way. So we're checking it out, just a day in the sun. Hopefully we're not gonna find anything and we'll be back for some hot chow. Piece o' cake. So saddle up!"

Two hours later the squad silently settled by the footbridge after crossing the stream, their day in the sun becoming a day in the drizzle. Caje had gone ahead to confirm that the road on the other side of the rise was still clear – the movement S2 reported had been a mile or so east on that same road. While the others chatted lazily, Saunders sat apart, back against a tree, helmet tipped down. The dull headache was growing and he began to regret coming without a medic who would dole out aspirin as needed. Come to think of it, his throat was getting scratchy, and despite the drizzle, his jacket was suddenly too warm. A cold? That's all he needed.

"Hey, Sarge, you okay?"

Saunders hadn't realized he had dozed off. He focused on the concerned face before him and sighed. "What is it Billy?" At least, that's what he tried to say. His throat felt like sandpaper and it took three tries to get it out.

Billy frowned. "Caje isn't back yet."

Suddenly alert, Saunders quickly rose and strode to the edge of the clearing. He peered in vain up the slope, hoping for a glimpse of Caje returning through the trees. The others joined him, ready to charge up the hill in search of their friend.

"I'm going to take a look, see if Caje is in trouble."

Kirby pushed forward. "But Sarge, we can help--"

"Stay put," Saunders croaked. "I want you all together when Caje and I get back."

With that the sergeant turned away and began the trek up the slick hill. Grabbing bushes and saplings for support when his boots found no purchase, he struggled to the crest of the hill. Behind him was the slope down to the river, before him the hillside fell suddenly away, almost treeless to the horizon.

Taking in the area through his binoculars, he saw no movement in the gray silence of the valley below, only a silvery road snaking through the mist.



About a hundred yards to his right Saunders glimpsed a familiar figure slipping stealthily through the trees. He tried to call the scout but was instantly grateful his voice was gone. A Kraut soldier was slinking in silent pursuit of Cajé and he was not alone.

Suddenly, it was imperative that he warn Cajé, but with no voice his options were limited. He searched for a rock to throw as a signal but with none in sight he regretfully lifted the Tommy gun to fire. Then he saw it: a solitary rock, partially hidden by some leaves. It would definitely make enough noise if he could heave it far enough.

Precious seconds were ticking away, leaving no time for subtlety. Slinging the Thompson to his back, Saunders gripped the rock with both hands, swung it back and, off balance, launched it toward the Germans. It landed with a thud, not only startling the lead soldier, but alerting Cajé to the danger, giving him time to take cover and begin firing.

Saunders listened as the squad joined the firefight, aware that if there were any more Krauts in the area they would arrive quickly. The Americans had to take out this patrol and get back to camp before any others arrived. His right shoulder protested as he lobbed a grenade to take out two of the Germans.

Seeing Saunders' movement the third Kraut raked the trees with his Schmeisser. One bullet punched into Saunders' thigh, the impact upsetting his precarious balance on the slippery slope and sending him tumbling down the hill until heavy brush halted his descent.

At the same moment the gunfire abruptly stopped and Cajé joined Kirby by the river.

"All clear here," Littlejohn called from the crest of the hill where he and Billy had been checking the dead Germans. "Hey, Cajé, good throw with the grenade."

Cajé shrugged. "Wasn't me. Listen, where's the Sarge? We gotta get back to Hanley. It's not just one patrol in this sector. There's a whole column of tanks and trucks starting down the road in the valley over there."

"Gee, isn't Sarge back? He took off to find you just before those guys showed up." Billy looked anxiously up the hill. "Shouldn't we wait for him?"

Cajé peered through the trees, wondering just where his sergeant had gone. "He'll make it just fine, you know Saunders. Like I said, Hanley needs to know about the Krauts, and you can bet there'll be more coming pretty quick after all that noise. Let's head out. Kirby, that means you too, and that means now."

Kirby had started up the slope, worry creasing his brow. "Why don't I go and look for the Sarge while you guys report to Hanley? If he's okay we'll be right behind ya, and if not... I'll get him back, just might take longer is all."

"No, we're moving out now. With Sarge gone I'm in charge, and I say we all go back together. The quicker we report, the quicker we can come out again. It's safer that way. Billy, take the point."

At the sound of footsteps at the top of the hill the four men froze momentarily. Then they turned and silently slipped across the footbridge and into the trees on the other side, bent on returning as soon as the report was in.

From his nest of bushes, Saunders helplessly watched them disappear. Dazed from the fall, he hadn't tried to get their attention until it was almost too late, and then he did the natural thing: he called out to them. After a couple of whispered attempts, he was about to shake the bushes when he, too, heard the approaching Germans. He nestled deeper under the leaves, heedless of the scratching branches.

While he waited for the Krauts to either pass by or discover him, he took stock of his condition, including the painful hole in his thigh. It was high time he dealt with that, so he carefully bound up the wound. It was hard to manoeuvre, partly because of the need for silence, partly because of the thick bushes, but also because of his infuriatingly sore right shoulder.



Muffled exclamations from the ridge indicated that the new patrol had found their fellow soldiers. It was impossible to see, but Saunders heard the squelch of approaching boots on grass and quiet conversation as the Germans came closer and searched the area for Americans. At length the voices

grew louder as the soldiers relaxed. A gurgle – someone was filling a canteen – then the scratch of a match lighting, finally a whiff of cigarette smoke. What he wouldn't give for a smoke right now.

This sounded like a larger group than the first. Someone was reporting on a radio while another told a long story punctuated by his own laughter. The only problem was that they were on the other side of the bushes, *his* bushes, apparently settling down to wait for orders. The story-teller paused and a new speaker began, louder this time, and soon they were all joining in uproarious laughter, vying for the chance to speak. Their voices pounded in Saunders' ears, intensifying his headache. He closed his eyes.

A radio crackled, cutting conversation short, a preface to the familiar sounds of soldiers preparing to move out. And then it began.

A roar overhead was followed by an explosion in the distance as American artillery began pounding down on the road over the hill. Suddenly, short rounds showered leaves and water everywhere, sending the enemy scrambling away. In his hiding place Saunders could do nothing to protect himself and he simply covered his ears, closed his eyes and waited it out. With rounds thundering above and crashing to earth, it was all he could do to stay, but the screams of the wounded and the reassuring voices of their friends told him trying to escape would mean certain death at the hands of his enemy, if not from the barrage. And still the shells came.

Suddenly, silence. And Saunders gasped in relief, surprised that stillness could be so palpable. He could almost touch it.



So now he lay in the bushes, relieved at the respite from sound and enveloped in stillness. Shafts of sunlight broke through the leaves above him. Thirsty, Saunders grimaced as he twisted to reach his canteen and forced his swollen throat to swallow the tepid water. Now that he had moved, the throbbing in his thigh became almost unbearable and he knew it was time to begin the trek home. If he didn't start soon he wouldn't have the strength to make it and he would perish here, his fate unknown. His men would need to know. His mother...

Extricating himself from branches that grasped at his uniform proved to be more difficult than expected but, finally free, Saunders sat on a fallen tree surveying the scene before him. Shell craters littered with leaves and branches. Broken bodies, flung aside. An arm nearby, a leg still in a boot – the men who so recently had been laughing, storytelling, soldiers like him and his men. He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them to focus on a way home. He had survived the barrage – had his men?



Fortunately there were branches available that were thick enough to hold his weight, and he chose one carefully from where he sat. Hobbling over to it, he leaned into its support and tested his ability to walk more than a foot or two.

He looked up to establish the bridge's location and found it gone. With his injured leg it would be tough to cross the stream, even though the water flowed slowly and only came up to his waist. The stream might be narrow, but it was still wide enough and deep enough to drown in.

Just a few minutes' exertion left him sweating and exhausted but he knew he had to keep moving. Pausing briefly at the water's edge, he planted his branch firmly about two feet out, grasped it with both hands and limped forward.

One step, two.

Plant the branch.

One step, two.

The water chilled him. He shivered uncontrollably, and the sun didn't begin to penetrate the cold. If only he could simply relax into the water, float away, never have to listen to orders, questions, complaints, or Kirby ever again.

Plant the branch.

One step, two.

At least the cold dulled the pain in his leg; the trade off was that leaning on the pole taxed his sore shoulder.

Plant the branch.
One step, two.
His world shrank.

At length Saunders could feel the streambed begin to rise, and he began to hurry, anxious to get out of the numbing cold. Suddenly the branch slipped on a rock, and he was engulfed by the water, flailing, scrambling for a foothold. One hand kept a tight grip on the branch as he surfaced and caught a quick breath before sinking again. He fought the water and the panic, finally regaining his balance to stand in the waist-deep water, breathing in and out, gradually relaxing. As the pounding in his ears abated, he gathered himself for the last few feet and the scramble to shore.

It was a struggle for the exhausted soldier but he drew on his last reserves of strength and dragged himself out of the water. He lay back, drained. His right arm ached all the way down now, his head throbbed, his throat felt raw, and his leg... with the numbness gone, his leg was on fire. Brushing away damp hair he gazed at the trees.

"I need help, I need a medic," he whispered, but sitting up proved to be an impossible move. Dizziness thrust him back to the ground again and he began to creep slowly toward the spot where his squad had disappeared into the trees. With one arm and one leg out of commission, it was a monumental task to move a few feet. Fever and pain began to blur his senses, and he imagined his mother's cool hand on his forehead, her calm face, knowing all the while that she was not really there. Then in slow motion a random shell – real or imagined? – cut her to ribbons. *That wasn't real, was it?* But the loss of her encouragement, genuine or not, left him bereft and comfortless. Still he struggled on.

Boots on undergrowth drew his attention but he had no way to protect himself. The enemy? An end to the struggle. An American? He would welcome a hand back home. Either way he was ready.

"Hey, Sarge, there you are." Kirby of all people. "What happened? Ya look terrible, didja fall in the river too? Here, let me look at that leg."

Saunders grabbed Kirby's arm, unable to speak, but his glare carried force just the same.

"Uh, well, ya know, I was kinda worried so I came back to look...uh, Caje made us leave but I...Well, don't look at me like that, they got back ta Hanley okay, I watched to make sure. Don't know how you made it, Sarge, with all that artillery coming in. I stayed back a bit, waited to come the rest of the way till it stopped. There, a clean bandage, the old one was pretty wet. Let's get you to the aid station. Didja know Caje got back to us just before some Krauts turned up?"

Kirby slipped an arm behind Saunders' back and gently helped him to his feet. "Yeah, it was really something, but someone threw a grenade – oh, was that you? Musta been. Thanks, Sarge. Okay, let's get back. I might be in trouble with – oh, look out for that branch stickin' out over there, a guy could get his eye poked out on something like that. Jus' lean on me, I got ya Sarge. Huh, what's that? You trying ta say something Sarge?"

Saunders missed the peace, the serenity, the quiet, but he welcomed this soldier's strength, his loyalty, his willingness to return for his leader. A smile played briefly across his lips as he rasped, "Shut up, Kirby."

The End