

LISTEN TO THE FALLING RAIN

By: Mel Roberts



Tink, tink, tink. A long-suffering sigh, a rustle of fabric and squelch of mud, then... tink, tink, tink. Here it comes, Doc thought to himself.

"Aaargh, this rain is driving me nuts! At this rate, we'll be swimmin' our way to Hitler's doorstep." Kirby poked a thin dirty finger in his ear and wiggled it around, trying to rid himself of the annoying metallic pinging of the rain on his helmet.

Having found the solution to the monotonous noise hours ago, Doc really didn't have sympathy. You put up with the pinging of the rain, found shelter or just took off the heavy helmet and let your hair get wet. Since there was no shelter available, at least none that wasn't already occupied by one weary GI or another, Doc had opted for the last choice. Consequently, his annoyance was the rain that dripped off the end of his bangs.

Shifting his back so the rain dripped down and soaked a different patch of jacket, the medic stifled his own sigh. Kirby had been doing enough complaining for all of them. For hours. Just one more thing to wear on nerves already stretched thin by days of slogging through the rain and mud, heavy casualties, and still a very long way to go.

"Will you just listen to that rain? It ain't ever gonna stop."

"Neither is your complaining. Good grief, Kirby, just put a sock in it. We *know* it's raining."

"Shut up, Littlejohn. Nobody asked you."

"Well I'm tellin' you anyway. Shut up about the rain."

"Both of you button it and leave the rest of us in peace, because we've had enough!"

Feeling no less surprised by the outburst as the men staring at him with raised eyebrows and a few dropped jaws, Doc shook his head. He wiped the water from his face, a futile gesture, and shrugged. "Sorry."

Watching the argument from the shelter of a doorway across the muddy crater-filled road, Sergeant Saunders released a weary sigh. Saunders' benchmark for morale was the squad's quiet, steady medic. When Doc finally broke down and snapped at his fellow squad mates, Saunders knew it was time to find them relief. *If he could.*

He couldn't get them out of the move to join Charlie Company, but maybe he could find a way to make the journey a bit easier. Heaven knows they were all tired of trudging through the mud. Eyes roving over the huddled, miserable forms of his men, Saunders squared his shoulders with determination. What he needed was a truck.

Watching the sergeant leave his shelter to head purposely up the hill, Kirby sighed once more. He hadn't meant to set Doc off like that; he was just sick and tired of all the rain. Very, very tired. And wet. Kirby caught the medic's gaze and smiled wearily. No hard feelings. He caught a wry twinkle in Doc's blue eyes and snorted quietly to himself. At least Doc knew when to laugh at his own behavior. Something Kirby often wished he could do. Shrugging once again, he slipped his helmet off. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. He couldn't get any wetter. Maybe he could at least rid himself of the annoying noise. He was tired of listening to the rain.

Bracing himself against the downhill slope of the road, Saunders trudged back to his squad. At least this time the trudging was from the two inches of mud and clay stuck to the bottom of his boots. His spirits were actually much better than they had been a short hour ago. Against all odds... he'd actually procured a ride for his squad.

Maybe they'd manage to dry out a bit on the long ride to Charlie's position. Saunders could dare to hope, anyway. His uniform had been damp for days. His clothes were beginning to smell musty, and his trousers were starting to chafe.

Something he dearly wanted to avoid. There were just some things he'd rather not ask Doc's help for.

Saunders slid to an unsteady stop at the sight that greeted him when he rounded the stone wall his squad gathered near. Doc and Kirby were huddled close near the end, engaged in an intense battle of... odds and evens. He caught Doc's gaze and raised a questioning eyebrow. The medic simply grinned crookedly and gave a lopsided shrug. His expression was clear enough. *Hey, it keeps Kirby busy and out of everyone's hair.*

Chuckling under his breath, Saunders kicked his feet against the stones to dislodge some of the mud. "Saddle up guys. Found us a ride, but we have to double-time it if we want to catch it."

The sergeant was fairly certain he'd never seen his squad assemble so fast. "How come you goldbricks can't do that all the time?"

Kirby settled the strap of his heavy BAR more firmly on his shoulder, careful to keep the business end pointed down to avoid collecting water, and smiled broadly. "Maybe we ain't had the right motivation, Sarge."

"Well, motivate your butt up that hill, Kirby. We have a ride to catch."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Without a backward glance, the wiry private hustled up the street as fast he could, given the mud and water-filled craters.

"That'd be a first. Not having to tell Kirby something twice." Mumbling under his breath, Littlejohn stumbled his way up the hill with less enthusiasm. He wasn't sure which was worse... the rain, or being cooped up in a truck with Kirby.



The drone of the engine and rhythm of the rain soon had Cajé and Doc dozing in the back of the transport truck, despite the bickering coming from the opposite bench. From his place next to Cajé, Saunders tried to block out the two verbal combatants and take a quick nap himself. He let the cadence of Kirby's banter drown out the actual words and soon found himself drifting off on the twilight edge of sleep.

He wasn't sure how long he had slept when the whine of gears downshifting and the slowing of the truck jerked him to full alertness. He'd already shifted his Thompson in an unconscious move, ready for trouble, when he realized why the truck had slowed.

The change in rhythm startled Cajé awake as well. As the scout gripped his M1 and shifted position, he bumped Doc, who straightened and peered blearily at Saunders. "We there already?"

"Nope, just crossing a bridge. Sounds like an old one."

The tires thumped over worn wooden slats, causing a vibration that seemed to rattle their teeth. Saunders and Cajé relaxed their tense posture, Cajé once again resting the butt of this M1 on the truck's floor. Doc had simply nodded, shifted to lean against the cab and slipped back into sleep. An ominous crack followed by a sickening lurch jolted the medic awake once more.

Kirby only had time for a startled, "what—" before everything tilted, dumping him

in the floor in a tangle of limbs and weapons with Cajé and Doc. Over their own shouts, Kirby could hear the driver and his partner yelling something up front. Just as quickly as it all started, everything lurched to a stop. Nobody moved, he hardly dared even breathe.

Everyone seemed to freeze in place, the rushing water below sounding much too loud and much too close. The rain thudded on the canvas roof, a reminder that the river below them was probably swollen with the recent rainwater. The two men in the cab had fallen silent as well. It was just their panicked breathing, the rain, and the disheartening creaking of old wood.

Saunders took a deep breath and tried to calm his thudding heart. He carefully lifted his Thompson from the tangle of bodies on the floor and slipped the strap over his shoulder. He just as carefully slid closer to the back of the truck. "Nobody move. I'll check it out."

Doc tried to shift his weight ever so slightly to get the business end of Cajé's M1 out of his back, but froze at a look from Saunders. "Don't move 'til we know this thing isn't gonna fall in. It's bad enough I've got to move."

Glancing up at Kirby, leaning against Littlejohn's legs where he'd fallen, Doc could see his own anxiety reflected in the BAR man's face. Everyone seemed to hold his breath as Saunders slowly, painfully slow, climbed out of the back and lowered himself to the bridge. The rushing of the river seemed to grow louder by the second.

An eternity later, Saunders' voice called up from the back of the truck. "Okay, guys, listen up. One at a time, carefully...and I do mean carefully... climb out of the truck. Littlejohn, you first."

Anxious to get out of the transport, but aware of the precarious situation, Littlejohn stepped over the jumble of equipment and squad mates on the floor with more grace than most would give him credit for. Slowly, carefully, he climbed out to join Saunders in the rain. Breathing a collective sigh of relief, the remaining men shared shaky smiles.

"Okay, Doc, you next."

Sparing a glance at the others, Doc smiled reassuringly and lifted off the bruise-making M1. There was the creak of the driver and passenger doors opening, a shout of "No, not yet!" from Saunders then the transport lurched and pitched forward.

The large truck was nearly nose-down when the forward motion ground to a stop. Doc couldn't tell up from down. A whispered prayer from Cajé, a yelp from Kirby, and a shout for help from Billy let him know his friends were relatively okay. His heart raced, the sudden drop had caused a sinking sensation in his stomach... all in all, Doc felt like he was going to be sick.

Before any of them could move to untangle themselves, the truck finally dropped the rest of the way.

Throwing himself onto his stomach as close to the missing section of the bridge as he could, Saunders watched in horror as the truck began to lurch and bob downstream. Scrambling to his feet, he only paused long enough to shoot the driver a glare before pelting for the riverbank. Slipping and sliding on the slippery rocks and mud, the sergeant desperately tried to keep pace with the rapidly sinking truck. He heard the heavy tread of Littlejohn behind him, but it was no use. The water was faster than they were.

The flood of cold water entering the back of the truck snapped Doc out of his disoriented immobility. Cajé was already struggling out from under Billy and pulling his

way to a hole ripped in the canvas roof during their plunge into the river, Kirby fast on his heels. Kirby reached for the bar next to the hole once Caje had pulled himself out, and glanced back. Doc was struggling to bully a dazed Billy to his feet. Glancing once more at escape, Kirby frowned and reached down to grab a fist full of Billy's jacket. Between the two of them they got the younger man to his feet, albeit unsteadily.

"You got him, Doc?"

Not sure there was time to argue, the medic simply nodded and held onto Billy tighter, bracing himself for the extra weight. Kirby needed no urging and chinned himself up through the hole with the help of the roof bar. Watching the wiry BAR man wiggle free, Doc had a brief moment of doubt. The truck dipped and swayed like a boat and it was all he could do to maintain balance for both of them. The icy cold water was rising, or the truck was sinking, and it seemed to wake Billy enough for the young man to realize the danger.

Holding onto Doc's shoulder, Billy stepped onto the bench seat and reached unsteadily for the roof bar. Once he was sure he was somewhat balanced, he let go of Doc and grabbed for the bar. He glanced down and saw Doc holding out his clasped hands like a stirrup. Putting his boot in the offered hands, Billy let the medic boost him through the hole and out into the rain.

Once he was through and resting on the wet canvas roof, Billy nearly panicked. He was far from safe. The river rushed just below his level, seeming much too fast to swim. Hearing a grunt of effort, he looked around to see Doc pulling himself onto the roof as well. "I don't think I can swim this, Doc."

"Don't see how you have much choice. One way or another, we're goin' into that water."

"You see Kirby or Caje anywhere?"

Wiping water and too-long bangs out of his eyes, helmet having been abandoned below, Doc squinted against the rain. "No. But I'm sure they both made it to shore."

Billy didn't think the medic sounded very convincing. "Should we ride it out until the truck sinks or just try swimming to shore?"

One look at the ominous grey water was all it took for Doc. "We ride it out."

Having slowed to a pace less likely to end in a broken ankle, Saunders and Littlejohn hurried as best they could down the river. Standing on the banks made the river seem to rush past with the speed of a jeep. Neither wanted to face the fact that they may not like what they found washed up on the rocks.

Littlejohn was the first to voice their fear. "You think they're okay, Sarge?"

"We have to be realistic. That water's moving mighty fast."

That wasn't exactly what Littlejohn had been hoping for. Billy was his best friend in this hell they called France. He thought Doc and Caje were two of the bravest men he'd ever met. Hell, he even considered Kirby a friend. An annoying one, but a friend nonetheless. There wasn't one he'd want to lose to this river.

"They'll make it, Sarge. You mark my words." Littlejohn wasn't sure if he was trying to convince the sergeant... or himself.

The two trudged on in silence, keeping their eyes open for any sign of their missing comrades. They'd followed the river around a bend when they finally began to have hope. About fifty yards ahead of them a bedraggled figure was making his way toward them. Through the heavy rain, they couldn't be sure who it was. But he was sure a welcome sight.

Saunders gave a shout and the figure stopped a moment. They recognized the

accent, even through the cold-induces stutter when he shouted back. "Sarge! I don't know if everyone else got out!"

Picking up their pace, Saunders and Littlejohn hurried to catch up to Cajé. The scout had settled himself on a large rock and was nursing a sore shoulder when they finally caught up to him. The sergeant gave Cajé a quick once over and was relieved to see no visible injuries. "You okay?"

Cajé squinted up against the rain and smiled crookedly. "It was a helluva ride, Sarge. Even swimming with the current I wasn't sure I'd make it. Was nearly plowed over by a log. Grabbed hold and used it to help keep me afloat. Lost my M1, though."

Just thinking about his narrow escape reminded him of the ones he left behind. Taking a deep breath, Cajé stood and rolled his sore shoulder a bit. Glancing back to make sure the others followed, Cajé picked his way along the shore downriver. If he'd come out relatively intact, the others must have too. They must have.



His arms had turned into lead. Kirby was sure of it. It was a struggle just to drag his head above water once more. He kicked as hard as his equally leaden legs would allow, desperate to reach the shore he'd been so near for yards. He nearly screamed from frustration. He could almost reach the riverbank. If it just wasn't so deep, he could plant his feet, give a lunge and be on dry land. He was sure of it.

It was almost too late when he saw it. It loomed in his peripheral vision as he was struggling for the ever-elusive shore and he barely had enough time to flop around in the water to avoid bashing his head. He bashed his shoulder into it instead and let the water push him along and around the rough surface. And then he got lucky.

Once he rolled around the boulder, the current pushed him into a little eddy. It was enough let him pull himself from the powerful grip of the river. He kicked and stroked in a panic to reach safety. His knees scraped bottom and he literally crawled from the frigid water onto the mud and clay of the riverbank.

Coughing and retching, Kirby rid himself of about a gallon of river water. At least that's what it felt like. He pulled himself a little further up the bank when he was finished and collapsed in a shivering heap. The clay felt slippery against his cheek, but he didn't care. He didn't plan to move until he could feel his arms and legs again. He was fairly certain he'd never been so exhausted. Not even in basic. Not even after that marathon dance contest with Doris.

He'd just lay there and listen to the river rush past, just a few feet beyond his boots. Listened to the river, and the rain pelted the trees a few yard ahead. He'd never heard such a beautiful sound.

Kirby wanted to mention it, but there was nobody to mention it to. That thought was enough to drive him to his knees. He sat back on his heels for a few minutes, arms wrapped tightly across his chest to conserve what little body heat he had. The question was: did he go upstream to find Cajé, Sarge, and Littlejohn, or down to look for Doc and Billy?

Logic told him to go upstream. He'd have a better chance of finding somebody

that way. His conscience told him to go downriver. Billy had been stunned in the tumble into the river. Doc wouldn't have let him go without a fight. If either of them had made it, they'd probably need help. Kirby was closest.

Struggling to his feet, Kirby gave each leg a shake to get a little life into them and headed downstream with determination. Come hell or... well, high water... he was gonna find Doc and Billy. Both of them. Alive.

The distance they'd ridden down the river was just starting to get worrisome for Doc, when he felt the truck hit something. It lurched, spun, and started to roll over. There was no choice now. They were going in the water. Doc only had time to shout a quick warning to Billy and grab the younger man's jacket before they both hit the water with a splash.

It was cold. Colder than any mountain river he'd ever been in and it immediately sucked away all his breath. Gasping, Doc kicked his legs to get above water and hated the feel of his waterlogged boots. He'd lost his hold on Billy, and he floundered around in the water in the hopes of finding him.

Just out of arms reach, Billy stared back with frightened eyes. Doc coughed out a bit of water and tried to reassure the younger soldier. "We'll be okay, Billy! Just swim with the current. Don't fight it."

Easier said than done. The river was fast. Faster than it would normally be, Doc was sure, and most likely full of debris that could injure or kill them if they weren't careful. Trying to keep one eye on Billy, Doc struggled toward the riverbank. It seemed an impossible task.

In hindsight, Doc probably should've kept *both* eyes on where he was going. He was looking back at Billy, who'd nearly caught up with him, when he saw a look of fear on the younger man's face. He turned back toward the bank, but it was too late to try the same evasive maneuver Kirby had. Doc hit the unyielding rock before he'd fully processed it was there.

He was aware of the water, first. A persistent rushing sound in his ears. He sucked in a breath, only to choke. Rolling over, Doc managed to cough up enough water to breath properly. A sound of concern had him rolling back over and blinking against the rain. Billy was kneeling beside him, a look of relief on his battered face. Billy had a shiner and a cut above his left eyebrow. Doc could feel a matching goose egg on his own brow.

"What happened?"

"You hit a rock. A big one. I thought you were gonna drown for sure. I knew I couldn't keep us both afloat for long. There was another big rock not far from the first one, but I managed to get us on the lee side of it. I put my feet against it and pushed as we floated by. It was just enough to break out of the current and reach shallower water."

Sitting up with a wince, Doc reached out to shake Billy's hand. "I owe you one."

Billy crooked a grin, but took his hand. "Consider us even. I might not have got out of truck in the first place if you hadn't helped me."

"I knew there was a reason I got you out." Letting Billy help him to his feet, Doc looked upstream and sighed. "We might as well start heading back. I don't know about you, but I'd like to thump those two guys who put us in the drink."

Billy knew that what Doc meant was, he really needed to know if the others were okay. Something he kinda wanted to know, too.

Slick clay, gooey mud, and slippery rocks weren't the best way to travel, but neither wanted to leave the riverbank, lest they miss Caje or Kirby. They may be injured

and unable to walk out on their own. Both were weary beyond measure by the time they spotted a slight figure in the rain upstream.

Doc laughed and stopped, waiting for the person to catch up. "Figures the first one we'd find would be Kirby."

True to form, Kirby was grumbling a mile a minute by the time he caught up with them, and promptly plopped down onto a moss-covered rock. "Why'd you goldbricks have to float so far downstream? You know how far I've been walkin'?"

"Oddly enough, I'm happy to see even you, Kirby."

"That's gratitude, Billy. Here I am walkin' all this way, half freezing to death, just to make sure you didn't drown yourself."

Doc let them bicker good-naturedly for a few minutes so they could blow off a little fright-induced tension, and so he could rest a bit. It didn't take him long to get antsy, though. "You hurt anywhere, Kirby?"

"Nah. Bumps and bruises galore, I'm sure, but nothin' serious. Mostly cold."

"Then we need to get going. We have a long way to go."

"Why don't we just sit here and rest a bit? Sarge'll find us."

"Because if we start walkin', we'll meet up with 'em sooner. I'm sure Sarge and the others are worried about us, Kirby."



With a martyred sigh, Kirby climbed wearily to his feet and fell into step with Billy. "I wish you'd be selfish, Doc. Just once."

"I am being selfish, Kirby. The sooner we find the others, the sooner you'll be back to arguing with Littlejohn. Which means you'll be so busy botherin' him that you won't be botherin' me."

Throwing out his arms for balance as he slipped in the mud, Kirby lurched to a surprised stop. He watched the retreating back of the medic for a second then burst into laughter. He was still smiling when he finally caught up with Doc and Billy. He slapped one muddy hand on Doc's shoulder and gave him a slight shove. "You realize of course that it'll now be my *mission* to bug you."

"Only if it's a suicide mission."

Nearly giddy from the overwhelming relief of survival, Billy absorbed their quick-witted banter like a balm. If he hadn't had something to concentrate on, he was pretty sure he'd go a bit buggy. He hoped Cajé was okay.

"Cajé, we would've found them by now if they'd made it to shore."

Refusing to stop, even to slow his pace, Cajé glanced back over his shoulder. "You weren't out in that water, Sarge. It's *fast*. The last ones out would've gone a lot further than I did. Kirby was after me, but he might've gone downstream to look for the others."

Saunders had his doubts, but decided to let Cajé take the lead. They couldn't get any wetter and he never wanted any of them to have any doubts. If they didn't find their missing friends, it wouldn't be for lack of trying.

Glaring at the rushing water, Saunders trudged on. He was unsure how much further they'd traveled when Cajé finally stopped, shoulders slumped. It was hard to

hear the defeated words over the sound of river.

"We would've found them by now, Sarge."

His heart heavy with truth, Saunders nevertheless offered a bit of hope. Catching up with Cajé, he gripped the scout's shoulder in comfort and shook his head. "We'll go back to the road, see if we can get some help. Get someone to search the other side of the river. They might've struck out for the other shore."

"Maybe."

But Saunders could tell Cajé didn't have much hope. He could also see by the set of Littlejohn's jaw that leaving without finding Billy wasn't sitting well with the big guy. Without a word, Littlejohn turned to walk ahead of them as Cajé and Saunders gave up and started back upstream.

"Well there's a fine how-do-you-do! We walk all this way so you louts don't worry and what do you do? You leave."

Saunders jerked his head around so fast he thought he'd pulled something. He couldn't believe it. The bickering goldbrick had actually survived. The sergeant could see Billy and Doc straggling behind as well. Against any odds Saunders would've given them, they'd all survived.

"Just how long did you expect us to wait, Kirby?"

When the three missing men finally caught up, Saunders gave them a quick once-over. They all looked a bit beat up, but were still a sight for sore eyes. Littlejohn made a fuss over Billy's head wound, and Doc assured them that all three were sore, cold, wet, and weary, but okay.

Kirby rolled his eyes at Littlejohn's mother hen fussing, but let it slide. *For now.* Seeing Cajé alive and well had been a huge relief. He listened to the rain as it pelted the river, mud and trees. "Will you listen to that rain?"

Doc sighed, and Saunders rolled his eyes as everyone prepared for more complaining.

But Kirby simply smiled the smile of a man who'd stared death in the face and walked away. "Ain't it beautiful?"

end