

NIGHTMARES

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Author's Note: this is my interpretation of some events that shaped Private Kirby into the Kraut-hating goldbrick we all know and love. In his first episode, he seems to have a hatred of Krauts and dislike of 'kid' medics that I tried to explain here. Standard disclaimers apply—no financial gain gathered from this story, characters and situations do not belong to me--I'm just playing. Thanks to Miss Maquis, Doc II, and Skye for beta reading and invaluable grammatical advice.

June 1944, Normandy

"Kirby! Kirby, wake up!"

Kirby opened his eyes in terror, his heart racing. Slowly, he recognized the lean face above him-- the face of one of his new squad mates, the Cajun from Louisiana.

"You awake now, Kirby?" Cajé asked.

"Yeah, Yeah, I'm awake. Stop shaking me." Kirby pulled away from him, sat up, and took out a cigarette. "I'm fine, leave me alone."

"Well, you don't look fine." Cajé sat back on his heels. "That was some nightmare you were having."

"You'd have nightmares too, if you lost your whole squad around you."

"Yeah, I probably would."

A deep voice came out of the darkness. "If you could keep your nightmares to yourself, the rest of us would sleep better." It was Littlejohn, the private Kirby liked to refer to as 'the Moose'. Kirby rolled his eyes and made a derogatory noise. Before he could make a suitable reply, a sleepy voice from the direction of the Sarge told them to shut up and go back to sleep. Cajé returned to sentry duty, and Kirby heard the Moose roll over. He lit his cigarette and wondered how he ever ended up in this forsaken place...



April 1933, Chicago

"It's not open for discussion! We need the money, and I can't make enough here."

Eleven-year-old Billy Kirby lay in his bed, listening to his parents argue. The steady breathing in the bed next to him told him that his four-year-old brother George was fast asleep.

"If you go, what will happen to us?" his mother pleaded. "We still need to eat, still need to pay the rent. We can't go homeless, not with three kids."

"I'll send back every dime I make, I promise. But I have to go."

Billy turned over, trying to stuff his ears with his pillow so he wouldn't hear his mother cry. He knew the Depression had hit everyone hard, that there really wasn't enough money to go around. Too many nights he watched as his mother gave her food to nine-year-old Ruthie or little George, and he himself had become a scavenger, trying to gather up all the scrap metal he could find for a dime or two. Anything to help put food on the table. His father had been laid off more times than Billy could count.

The next morning Billy wasn't surprised when the announcement came during breakfast that his father would be leaving to look for work. His mother would find a job as a schoolteacher. She'd worked as a schoolteacher before she got married, and there was always a need for schoolteachers. Billy would be responsible for the younger kids. He'd be the man of the house while his father was gone. He wouldn't be "Little Billy Kirby" anymore.

Over the next few months occasional letters from his father would arrive, some with money in them, some without. Eventually the letters stopped coming. Bill wasn't too surprised when things got better but his father never returned home. They never did find out what happened to him.



March 1944, Chicago

"Bill! Bill Kirby!! Time to come home!" his mother called. Twenty-two year-old William G. Kirby looked up from his dice game.

"Awww, his momma's callin' him!" Joey teased.

"Go on home, Billy boy," Frank laughed.

"Yeah, you laugh," Bill said, "but I got all your money." He stood up, waving away the protests. "Don't worry, I'll give you a chance to win it back tomorrow." Bill swaggered off down the alley, turning into the gate in a chain-link fence and up a walkway that led to the back of a small, worn house. *Still needs painting.* He wondering idly just how much money he'd have to make—either gambling or actually working—to buy enough paint. Stamping up the three steps to the back door to knock the mud off his

shoes, he walked through the mudroom and into the kitchen. "Yeah, Ma, I'm here," he said. His mother looked up as he swiped a slice of tomato from the salad she was finishing as he walked by, planting a kiss on her worn cheek. "That ol' victory garden is coming right along, ain't it?"

"*Isn't*," she corrected automatically. "Yes, it is. It's a good thing, too. I just can't believe how prices have gone up since the war started."

He heard the front door slam. "Mail!" George came running into the kitchen. "Hey, Bill, there's one for you!"

"Naw, can't be. Nobody ever writes me." He took the letter, and a feeling of dread filled his heart when he saw the return address.

"What is it, son?" his mother asked.

"Nothin'." He walked out of the kitchen, heading into the bedroom he shared with George. There he opened the letter from the War Department.

Drafted.

He was drafted.

Somehow he hadn't thought this day would ever come. He did his part for the war, working in a munitions factory. Someone had to take care of his ma, Ruthie, and George, and ever since his father left all those years ago, that had been him.

He heard the front door open. That would be Ruthie, coming home from her job at a clothing factory. He heard George teasing her about the letter she'd received from Eddie Kopachek--his best friend and Ruthie's fiancé. Eddie had left about three months before, going into OTS, to be an intelligence officer. He opened the window and leaned out, wishing he had a cigarette. Ma didn't approve of him smoking, so he took care not to do it in the house. Now, when he really needed one, all his smokes were out of reach in the backyard.

"Bill!" his mother called. "Where did you go? Dinner's ready."

"I'm here, Ma." He folded up the letter, hid it under his pillow, and then went back into the kitchen. He greeted Ruthie with a kiss to the cheek. "How is ol' Eddie?"

"He's fine. Says he's going to graduate in another three months. I keep hoping the war will end before then."

"Me too, sis. Me too."

They sat down to dinner and Ma had them all take hands. Ruthie said grace, including a special mention for Eddie, then dinner started with the usual bustle of filling plates and passing dishes.

Bill sat back and watched his family eat. George was teasing Ruthie about her letter while his mother told them good-naturedly to behave. Ma, of course, noticed that he wasn't eating. "What's the matter, Bill? Aren't you hungry?" she asked him.

"Yeah, are you sick?" Ruthie teased.

"Eh, I'm all right. I just, well, I'm just happy to be here, is all." He shoveled a forkful of food into his mouth so he wouldn't have to reply to any more teasing.

After dinner, he went out on the front porch and sat on the steps, watching the sky grow darker. Soon, his mother joined him as he knew she would.

"What's the matter, son? You aren't acting yourself today."

"Ehnh, it's nothin'. Just that letter I got today is all." The words were out before he could stop them. He'd wanted to wait a little longer to tell her. Maybe never tell her at all. But if he just disappeared, that would be just as bad as his dad.

"What is it?"

"I love you, Ma, you know that, right?"

"Of course I do." She started to look worried. "What is it, Bill? You're not in trouble again, are you?"

He laughed derisively. "Nah. Nothin' that simple." He sighed. "I'm drafted."

She was quiet for so long, he finally looked over at her. She was gazing off into space, a single tear coursing down her cheek. "Aw, Ma, don't cry. It's not the end of the world. I'll be back before you know it. You know I will."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," she said, wiping the tear from her face. She smiled bravely. "I'm just a selfish old woman. I don't want you to leave." She looked away. "When do you have to report?"

"Next week."

"Alright, then." She stood. "When do you want to tell your brother and sister?"

"Right now, I guess. No sense keeping the bad news to ourselves." He stood and walked her back into the house.



Later that night, Bill and George were both in bed, pretending to sleep. "Are you scared?" George asked.

"Naw, I'm gonna go over there and let those Nazis—or maybe them Japs—know they shouldn't mess with us Americans."

"Good. 'Cause I don't want you to be scared."

"Well, don't you worry. Nothing's going to happen to ol' William G. Kirby, you can bet on that." George seemed reassured and soon Kirby heard his breathing become slow and regular. George slept, but Kirby stayed awake late into the night.



June 6, 1944, English Channel

"Hey, Kirby, you ready?" Johnson asked. The private punched Bill Kirby's arm good-naturedly.

"As ready as I'll ever be," he replied.

Weeks of basic training had honed him into a 'lean, mean fighting machine'. He found himself at the top of his classes in marksmanship, handling almost any weapon with ease and flair. His brash ways made him many friends; his luck at gambling made him many enemies. After he got used to the routine, Kirby found that he didn't mind the life of a soldier too much. Regular pay, regular food, regular card games, even if he did have to get up way too early in the morning. 'Course, it helped that there were plenty of women hanging around Fort Dix as well, willing to do their part for a soldier's morale.

Once training was completed, he traveled home for a last good-bye, a last kiss to his mother and sister, and a last tussle with George. Then he was shipped over to England to await the next big push into France. After weeks of unending boredom mixed with moments of hurried excitement, he was almost glad to see the shores of England recede into the distance. Except for two things: he really was going to be fighting in this war after all, and he'd lost the D-Day pool to some private in the 361st. Eight hundred US dollars. That much money would have repainted the house, helped his mother a bit, and still left him plenty to blow in Paris. He shook his head as he leaned against the side of the boat, looking towards the future. And France.

"What you thinkin' about?" This from Larson on his other side.

"Just what I coulda' spent that eight hundred dollars on in Paris is all," he replied, turning around and lighting a cigarette. At least the Army didn't care if he smoked--they even gave him cigarettes for free!

"Yeah, Paris," Johnson sighed. "I can't wait to see that!"

"Me either," Larson agreed.

Just then, an announcement was made to get ready and make their way to the landing boats. D-Day was about to begin.

Afterwards, Kirby could never fully recall the events of that day. He remembered running, firing his M-1, and jumping over bodies, both German and American. Towards the end of the day, his company met up just past the beaches near a farmhouse. Or, he should say, about one third of his company, because that's all that was left. Johnson and Larson both had been left on the beach somewhere behind him. It was all he could do to swallow some rations before wrapping up in his blanket and falling into an exhausted sleep.

The next morning he awoke with someone calling his name. "Kirby! Private Kirby!"

"Yes, sir, Captain Hastings, sir!" He scrambled to attention as the dusty form of the captain approached, followed by a ragged line of men. "You're a Private First Class, is that right?" The captain waved his hand to dismiss the salute.

"Yes, sir, that's right."

"I'm going to make you an acting corporal." He separated six men out of the line behind him. "You take these men and watch out for them. Get ready to move up."

"Yes, sir!" Kirby looked over the men—he knew a couple of them. They'd not been in the army much longer than he had. What was the captain thinking, putting him in charge?

"Be ready at 0600," the captain said, moving off with the rest of the men.

Kirby turned to his new squad. "Ok, sound off. Then get something to eat, fill your canteens, and get ready to move out."

They told him their names—he tried to remember them, really he did—and then they got ready to move out. Their second day in Normandy went pretty much like the first, but this time Kirby spent more time looking out for the six men put in his care. By the time the sun went down his company had been reduced by another third and three of his guys were gone as well. The captain gave him two more men who had lost their squad leader, and Kirby found a place for them to sleep for a few hours before it began again.

On D-Day plus three, Kirby's squad found Captain Hastings – and the rest of the platoon—slaughtered by machine gun fire. Hastings was on the ground, grimacing in pain; bullet wounds lacerated his side. Keeping two men to provide cover fire, Kirby sent two others to flank the machine gun nest on the left.

"Get out of here, Kirby," Hastings rasped.

"Not 'till I get you some help," Kirby replied.

Turning, he shouted as loud as he could. "MEDIC!!!"

"Kirby?" a young voice asked from behind him. "The Krauts got our guys! What do we do now?"

He looked into the scared face of the kid soldier and tried to grasp the situation. Just then a medic crawled up. Kirby looked around into the face of another kid who looked barely older than George. "Captain Hastings is wounded," he told the medic. He turned back to the kid in his squad—why was he surrounded by kids today? "Ok, Martin, it's ok. We're gonna be ok. Just give me a minute." He looked over where the two men he sent on the flanking maneuver lay dead on the field. He only had two soldiers left. He had to do something.

He turned to find the medic staring stupidly at the captain. "What are you doing?" he demanded. "Don't just stand there, help him!"

"I don't know what to do," the kid said. "I just got here this morning, they only let me carry the litters before today."

Kirby couldn't believe it. He grabbed the medic's uniform, forcing him to look him in the eye. "*Stop the bleeding.*" He threw the kid back towards the Captain. Grabbing his M1 he made sure he had a grenade with him.

"You're not gonna go out there, are you?" the medic exclaimed.

"You do your job, and I'll do mine." Kirby turned back to his men. "You two give me cover." They nodded. Kirby crawled forward under their fire, hoping his men wouldn't shoot him while they were at it. Suddenly, he saw a Kraut grenade fly through the air towards him. Without thinking, he jumped up, caught it, and threw it back. It had barely left his hand when it exploded. Shrapnel caught him in the stomach, but at first he didn't feel it. He saw his last two men die under the machine gun fire, but a few minutes later another squad of Americans came along from the right flank and finished off the Krauts.

The medic crawled out to him, to see how badly he was wounded. "What about the captain?" Kirby asked, needing to know.

"I'm sorry, he's dead. There wasn't anything I could do."

"Did you even *try*?" Kirby fell back. *Great*, he thought. *The kid who was too scared to save Captain Hastings is now helping me. Just great.* Darkness claimed him.



"I'm fine, I tell you! I gotta stay with my company, they need me!" Kirby insisted. The medic at the aid station nodded tolerantly. "Sure you do, boy. With that wound, you wouldn't do nothin' but hold

them up.”

“Who you callin’ boy? I’m older than you are.” Kirby was frustrated. He waited for the medic to leave, then took a look at his wound himself. “It’s not so bad,” he told himself. He maneuvered himself out of his cot, and over to a cabinet. Grabbing a handful of sulfa packets, he made it back to his cot. He opened the bandage enough to be able to pour the packets on the wound, wrapped it back up, and then looked around for his clothes.

“Just where do you think you’re going?” It was a doctor this time.

“I’m going back to my company, and you can’t stop me.”

The doctor looked at him with something like pity in his eyes. Kirby couldn’t stand being pitied.

“Why you lookin’ at me like that?”

“You’re with Captain Hastings’ company, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

“I hate to be the one to tell you this, but that company was completely wiped out. You and few other guys are the only ones left.”

Kirby stared at the doctor, uncomprehending. “What do you mean, wiped out?”

“Gone, caput, dead. All of ‘em. Including your captain.”

“No.” He denied it, but the last few minutes of the battle came to his mind. The captain, the men the captain had trusted him with, all the men in his company, completely gone?

“Now lay back down, private. That’s an order.”

He did as he was told. Eventually the numbness gave way to anger. *Stupid Krauts. Stupid kid medics. Not like they knew anything anyway. Just glorified litter-carriers, the lot of ‘em.* He hated them all. *I’ll get back at the Krauts for what they did to his men, to Captain Hastings, to all of the men that died on Omaha Beach. I’ll show them.*



A few days later, Aid station in Normandy

“Aww, come on, Kirby, what are you waiting for, a sign or somethin’?” The GI across the table from him sat back and laughed.

“Just waiting for the right cards, is all. I fold.” Kirby tossed his cards down on the table. Two weeks at an evac hospital left him with nothing to do but play cards with the other men in the ward. As he got better, the nurses had him help carry litters around and stuff, but it was still boring as bread. Tonight, he and a couple others that were being released soon had wrangled a pass to go to the local bistro for some drinks. At least the drinks made the cards more interesting. He picked up his glass and tossed back the remnants before reaching for the bottle.

“Hey, be careful there, Kirby. Don’t want to have to carry you back to your tent,” said the private on his right.

“Yeah, I still got shrapnel in my arm,” said the corporal on his left.

“Ennh, you just worry about yourself, friend.” He looked up as the door opened and another group of men came in. He sat up straight, recognizing the young medic from the foxhole where Captain Hastings had died—from lack of medical attention. Kirby surged to his feet. “You!”

The kid had the grace to look scared, just like he had in the foxhole. He backed up until he hit the wall behind him. “Not my fault” he sputtered.

Kirby tried to throw a punch, but one of the men who’d come in with the kid grabbed his arm and pulled it behind his back. Another man grabbed his other arm, effectively restraining him..

“Cut it out!” The stern voice of authority cut through Kirby’s madness. He looked up to see a tall Lieutenant facing him with a cold glare. “That’s enough, private. Why are you attacking this man?”

“He let Captain Hastings die!” Kirby cried.

“I didn’t! There wasn’t anything I could do!”

“You’re a coward!” Kirby fought against the men holding him.

“That’s enough!” the lieutenant bellowed. “Are you going to calm down, or do I have to throw you in jail?”

Kirby struggled. “It’s his fault! My whole squad—my whole platoon!” He began shouting obscenities, trying to get a rise out of the kid, but he just looked more and more scared. “Coward!”

“Uh, Lieutenant?” One of the men from the poker game spoke up. “Kirby’s had a little too much to

drink. We can take him back to his tent if you like.”

The lieutenant shook his head. “We can’t have men flying off the handle like this, regardless of the reason. Medics need to be able to do their job without fear of reprisals. Littlejohn, go get the MP’s.” A big private left quietly.

A few hours later after Kirby sobered up, he was no longer an ‘acting Corporal’ or a Private First Class. The lieutenant who’d arrested him, Lieutenant Hanley, had Kirby transferred to his platoon. Mostly to keep him away from the kid medic, Kirby suspected, but probably to keep an eye on him as well. *Great. Just great.*

The doctors decided to keep him a couple more days, but when they finally released him Lieutenant Hanley came back for him with that big ape of a private, Littlejohn. He was assigned to First Squad, same as Littlejohn—and same as the guy who’d won the D-Day pool. It was small consolation to find out that Private Braddock had somehow managed to lose all eight hundred dollars on D-Day.



And that was how he had ended up here.

“Hey, Kirby, you should try to get some more sleep.” The loud whisper jolted him back to the present, and he looked around for its source. Private March, the next bedroll over, was awake, looking up at him.

“Enh, what’s it to you if I sleep or not?” Kirby replied, taking another drag on his cigarette.

“Nuthin’, just don’t want you falling asleep when you should be watching my back.” March grinned up at him. In spite of himself, Kirby grinned back. Andy March was such an easy guy to like.

“Ok,” he said, “soon as my cig is finished.”

March nodded. “Good night, Kirby,” he said, rolling over.

“Good night, March.”



The End

Author’s Note: I added a few personal touches into this story. My grandfather did actually leave his family during the Depression to go out and look for work, and my grandmother found job as a schoolteacher, although she wasn’t paid as much as the men teachers in the same school. Unlike Kirby’s father, my grandfather did return to his family once things started getting better, although he did move to Southern California shortly thereafter (they had been living in southern Nevada). Like Kirby’s father, we have no idea what happened to him during the time he was gone.

Several of my father’s cousins served in the ET0 during WWII. One of them, after receiving a rather severe stomach wound, refused to stay at the aid station (if he had, he certainly would have received a purple heart). He poured sulfa powder on the wound, bound it up tightly, and then moved on with his company when they moved out. He knew that if he stayed, he’d be assigned to a new unit, where the likelihood of his being killed would go up. The new unit would have had all their friendships worked out, they would know what to expect from each other, and it would take a while for him to fit in. All the while he was fitting in, there was a higher probability that he’d get killed. So the whole thing about the new guys--or ‘red shirts’--in the show getting killed off first really is based on fact, as well as providing convenient people to kill off so the actors with signed contracts could stick around. This information was provided by my Uncle Bill, our family historian, who also served in WWII, but in the Pacific.