

# Out of the Rain

A Short Story by G. M. Sapper

Note: Some of the events in this story are true

Others are fiction. I dedicate it to

Clarence

It was a cold rain, but he had been in cold rains before back as the kids say ‘in the day.’ He was younger then, and he seemed to feel it more now besides, his socks were soaked and he hated that. Looking around, he saw a sign on a marquee had “WW2 explained.” Part of him felt like a chuckle, the other part of him wanted to scream but it was close so he quietly made his way in. It was one of those big theater type halls where the seats angled up from the floor to the highest row, which is where he quietly took a seat.

There was a young man, maybe in his 30s on the stage, very nice suit, laser pointer in one hand small button in his other. The object of his attention was a big screen on the screen were slides of World War 2 scenes. He had seen them before, and a lot more. He quietly watched and listened for a while, all the while having a slight nausea in the lower part of his stomach, no, it was a nausea in his soul. A lot of what the young man said was right, occasionally made a joke, to which most of the younger ladies laughed. Then a slide popped into view, one that he knew well. The young man quipped something, girls laughed, but it was wrong, too wrong to let pass.

“Uh, excuse me” he said rather loudly “but you made a mistake.” The young man was insulted but tried to conceal it with a labored laugh and comment. “Oh, excuse me” he said louder than before, addressing a voice from someone he couldn’t see in the upper row. “If I made a mistake please feel free to come down here and enlighten me, I’ve only spent seven years and earned this Ph.D.” He thought to himself ‘game over.’ There was the squeak of a chair, a movement, and an old man started walking down the aisle. “Little boy” said the old man, “ I AM history. So you know all about me? Seriously?”

He didn’t want to sound like some old fool. He quickly and effortlessly took the laser pointer from the cocky speaker, quick enough to be upsetting to the previous holder. “If you know me” said the old man as he pointed to a face among the many faces of young soldiers after a battle. Most were bloody, some were smoking a cigarette. All of them had a distant look in their eyes, the look of people who are in shock. “Who is that?” “Huh? Was the reply. “Easy question, who is that fella right there?” The young snappy dresser was getting mad. “I have no idea who that is or was. How should I know that?”

“Who are you?” he shouted, unprofessionally, “God or something? I suppose He was there too!” The old man, as cool as marble, said “Yeah, He was there, even though it doesn’t look like it. Yeah, I was there too” He redirected the pointer to another face. This time it was owned by a young man, about the speaker’s age but looking much older, and tired in his soul. “That ugly guy there is me.” There was a soft mutter from the audience. The young professor wasn’t going to go down without a fight. “Ok, if that’s you, there’s a big bandage right there over your left shoulder, you should have a big scar.” Feeling victory, he got a childish smile, not much, that would make him look like a dope but enough that people who looked could see. Without a word the old man calmly unbuttoned his shirt to reveal a nasty scar about the size of a man’s fist. The murmur from the audience was no longer a murmur, it was conversations.

“See that other one, on the other side, down by my belt?” He pulled up his shirt “yeah, that was put there by a kar98k. A German guy, almost dead, managed to roll over and get one last shot. He died before I had a chance to get him.” Defeated and feeling humiliated, the young professor said (with a slight tone of respect) “You should be giving this talk. You’re right, you ARE history.” With that he handed the old man the controller and stepped aside.

“Well” I ain’t a teacher, why don’t you young folks ask what’s on your mind and I’ll answer if I can, but I want to make one thing clear. There wasn’t anything funny about that war. Sure, we laughed sometimes, but that was to keep us from cracking up.” “Sir” asked a young lady as she raised her hand and stood up. “Aw” replied the old man “don’t call me sir. My name is Clarence. What’s on your mind?” “Ok, Clarence, Are you able to tell us YOUR story, not the textbook version?” “Why did you ask ‘If I’m able?’” The young lady thought for a second before answering then said “My grandpa was over there, in the South Pacific and he doesn’t like to talk about it. I didn’t want to cause you pain.” Clearly this girl had brain as well as looks and it touched him.” “Thanks for your consideration and yes, I can talk about it, somebody has to because when my generation is gone all you’ll have is this stuff.” He took a breath and collected his thoughts. He hadn’t planned on giving a discourse, he had only planned to walk down the street and replenish his stock of jellybeans.

“Well, I was part of the 82nd Airborne” he paused for a second in case there was a question. There was. “You jumped out of planes?” asked someone. “Wasn’t that scary” It was a dumb question, but this was a youngster and patience was called for. “Yeah” Clarence replied, “but all the bullets whizzing past me were worse. A bunch of my unit never hit the ground alive. Our goal was to take Cheneux. There were around 8000 of us and I think 40,000 something of the enemy, but the real enemy wasn’t people, it was weather. The clowns that planned things didn’t give us boots for winter. Most of the time we couldn’t feel our fingers, they stuck to the bullets when we tried to load up. A lot of us lost fingers, toes, hands or feet. At least it hit the Germans as bad as us. Sometimes the snow was falling so heavy we couldn’t tell if anybody was within four feet of us. We walked right past the enemy and neither of us knew it. One walked right past me, saw me, and asked for a smoke. I’d have given it to him if he wouldn’t have asked in German. I gave him the blade of my knife then gave him a light. After that I made a point of keeping my mouth closed.”

“That big scar you saw was from part of a brake drum that came from a jeep that had been blasted by a Panzer, at least so I’m told, it knocked me back about ten or fifteen feet and I was out like a light. My buddy, Riff” he fell into a memory for a while then was back in the auditorium. “We called him Riff because he smoked a pipe and smoked this nasty stuff...” “MaryJane?” someone replied without considering this was a serious matter. Clarence thought for a second and answered “No, if he had he’d had to have enough to share and sharing with 8000 plus guys would have been a big stash.” The room exploded in laughs. Clarence was gaining their respect. He wasn’t what they expected an old geezer to be.

“If I had some herb I’d sure have used a joint as big as my arm. Anyway, I woke up, Riff’s ugly face looking down at me. He asked me if I could walk. Before I could answer, his head exploded.” There were gasps and other unintelligible comments. “That was war” said Clarence to whoever was listening. He looked up again at the slide, which he hadn’t advanced. He pointed with the little red beam at another face. “This was Hound Dog, he was blown to pieces the day after this was taken. This” he moved to another face “was Ronnie Ratcatcher. His name was Rettiger, it seemed fitting.” Moving to another man “This was Blue. He never said much, kept to himself but was a good man to have with you in a fight. I don’t know what happened to him. I wanted to keep fighting but they insisted that I go to a hospital.

I was mad but orders is orders so I let them take me.” “did you get to come home?” asked another young lady? At this Clarence smiled, it was a secret smile, it demanded an explanation. “Fortunately, no. I wouldn’t admit it but I was worn out, I needed some recovery time.” Then he smiled inwardly and outwardly and those in the front row could see a tear in his eyes. That’s when I met Elise.” Another moment of silence then he continued, but in a different tone of voice. “Elise was the nurse. Not just a nurse but THE nurse. She was perfect...in every way. She called me Mon rat de foin “Before he could translate someone did it for him. My hay rat?” Everybody laughed, including Clarence. “Yeah, like I said it was really cold. We ran across this barn, it was full of hay so we grabbed as much as we could carry and put it in our fox holes. We were a little warmer, but the farmer got mad and came to our commanding officer and told him that we stole his hay. We ended up giving him a pound or two of coffee and all the tobacco we could scrounge up. He was ok then, that’s why Elise gave me that name.

Part of my recovery involved long walks, that hurt, hurt bad, but with Elise by my side I could have climbed Everest. She had to hold my hand to keep me steady, at least that’s the reason I used. She looked as delicate as a rose but was as tough as a cactus. Touching her face...was like...like a narcotic. I fell hopelessly in love with her but was afraid to tell her.” He paused a minute then added “Young folks, if you have feelings for somebody... tell them, tell them now because you might not get another chance. Life is so frail, so frail.” “Was she killed?” a girl asked somberly. “No, I don’t know not right then anyway. I got the nerve to tell her, felt like a fool. It surprised me when I found out that she felt the same way. We didn’t know if there would even have a tomorrow so we got married.” Got a few days leave, I was recovering anyway, so we got married and spent four days on our honeymoon.

We had four days in what had to be the closest thing to heaven that there could be in this life. We made plans for after the war, the thought of one or both of us not surviving wasn’t even brought up. It was more than we could stand.

The world is cruel. Our hospital was bombed, it was chaos. We got separated. I haven't seen her since but it wasn't for lack of trying. After the war I spent everything I had to go back to France...reliving those nightmares, remembering friends lost. Reliving hell. I stood at the exact spot where I had held a little girl in my arms that we found in rubble. I had put her down, just for a second, to open a door on a truck and when I reached down to get her she was hit with machine gun fire. I watched a nine year girl disintegrated before my eyes." Now even the back row could see the tears, there were a lot of tears. They had asked for real history. They got history, the real history, not scrubbed, not sugar coated, but the dirty reality. Clarence didn't want to break down, especially in front of this group so he changed the subject. In truth, there were a lot of people in the room who were about to cry or already doing so.

He told them about the time they stole a whole truck of beer and buried it because the big wigs were having a party and wouldn't share the Blue Ribbon with them so the engineers dug a hole and buried the whole truck. As far as Clarence knew, it was still there, buried, what was left of the beer waited to be found. He told them about the time Patton gave him a cigar. Clarence told them everything they wanted to know, and a whole lot more. The room laughed together, they cried together, they learned to appreciate life together. They learned how fragile and fleeting life can be. Elise, however, was still in everyone's thoughts.

Finally it had to be asked. "Did you ever find Elise?" The question was asked by the same girl that asked him if he could tell his story. The question took courage to ask, but for everyone in the auditorium's sake it had to be asked. Clarence knew the question would be asked, he knew he would be called upon to give an account. "No" he answered, no emotion in his voice but a storm of emotion in his mind the size of a hurricane. "I looked everywhere I could think of. I showed her picture, passed her name around. She just disappeared from the planet." He turned away from the audience to hide his tears which were gushing uncontrollably now. He was at the end of his story. The same girl that asked him the last question asked one more. "Did you marry someone? Do you have a family?"

"I was already married" Clarence replied, "I had a wife, even if I knew she was dead, there couldn't be another. No. Nobody could fill that void, I've spent my life alone. If I could find her I could and would die happy." He looked back at the slide on the screen, it hadn't changed since he walked onto the stage.

Then, from somewhere in the audience came some words spoken in French "Je suis ici mon rat de foin "

"I'm here, my hay rat" Someone was trying to play games with him, he was hurt that he had shared his life and they mocked him. He said, still facing the screen "So that's funny? Just some silly old fool babbling!" He spun around, ready to face his mocker, but there was none. Everybody he could see was somber, red eyed, compassionate. Who then? From one of the upper rows that like the young professor he couldn't see there was a squeak of a chair. A form arose and slowly walked to the stage. It was impossible. It was her.

After searching two continents and almost 70 years...Elise was there, right in front of him. "How?" was all he could manage to get out. Was his mind gone? Was this some cruel joke? She was older, but it was her, hopelessly beautiful. "How?" he repeated. All the room was silent. A mouse running across the carpet could have been heard. Everybody present knew they were witnessing a miracle, even the people who didn't believe anything knew that they were watching something that had never happened before.

"I was injured....and I was with child. Our child. I was in a hospital in Bastogne for months. I couldn't speak, I couldn't walk for months. Finally I gave birth to our daughter. I named her Clarice, after you. She was ten years old when she was killed in an accident. It was more than I could bear. I spent more years than I know in an institution. I am so sorry, my love. Can you ever forgive me?" "Forgive YOU?" The old man cried. "My dearest, you had to endure all of that by yourself.... And I wasn't there. No, my love, can you ever forgive me?" Elise ran up onto the stage, into Clarence's arms.

The instant she was in his arms that feeling of the influence of some wonderful narcotic that he had longed for but had never for a second forgotten was back and he never wanted to lose it again. Her face but an inch away, her eyes looking into his. He knew how to speak French, she had taught him. He whispered words in her ear, French words, only for her to hear. She replied in the same manner. For the first time in almost 70 years, his lips softly, gently, slowly touched each other. His life was complete, there was nothing left but Elise. Nothing else was needed.

He felt a pain where the big scar was, it set his chest on fire, but he didn't care. Suddenly the pain stopped, all of his pain stopped. His bad knee felt new. His back, that had hurt for years because of the injury caused by the exploding jeep didn't hurt. He opened his eyes, he looked into Elise's eyes. They were young eyes. Her hair was no longer gray. She was the Elise he had known years ago He noticed his hand, it was free of wrinkles. Elise ran her hand over his face. He was the same Clarence she had known years ago.

They were only seeing each other, they didn't see or hear the turmoil and screams in the room. They didn't notice the two inanimate forms on the floor. They only heard one sound. It was a small voice. "papa, mama" A little girl stood by them. Elise looked at her. "Clarice, my dear child, my dear dear child" The little girl reached out with both hands. Clarence took one hand, Elise took the other. Together, the three of them, walked hand in hand out of the chaotic room. As they walked out, Clarence asked "Of all the places you could have went into, why did you come into THIS room?" She smiled and said "I wanted to get out of the rain."