

Have You Ever Seen the Rain

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*Someone told me long ago There's a calm before the storm,
I know; its been comin' for some time.
When it's over, so they say, it'll rain a sunny day,
I know; shinin' down like water.
~Creedence Clearwater Revival*

"You'll be fine, it's just a bad sprain on that ankle."

Jackson gritted his teeth as another lurching step jostled his throbbing leg. Fisting his hand in the material of Doc's shirt to keep from losing his balance, the two men ducked briefly to clear the hanging edge of the camouflage netting that decorated the aid tent. "Yeah, I know, lucky me. Back to the lines before I know it." With a surge of self-pity, Jackson surveyed the occupied cots, wondering which of these GIs had drawn the million-dollar-wound and a trip home.

"Having an easy day of it, Doc?" A corpsman slid over to them and pulled Jackson's other arm over his shoulder, steering both men toward a group of empty treatment beds at the rear of the temporary structure.

Doc's good-natured laugh ended with a soft grunt as Jackson's weight evened out across his shoulders. Cramped muscles, held in the same lopsided position for too long, resisted the change, rewarding him with a new set of aches. "Easy day, huh? I suppose you think trekkin' a few miles as a human crutch is an easy day's work?"

"Depends on the day." They eased Jackson down on the cot. "Hanley's waiting for you over at the CP."

"Hm, right." Doc nodded and pushed his helmet back away from his forehead. "Well, I think you're set, Jackson. You take care, all right?"

"Yeah, thanks, Doc."

The CP was in a building at the corner of the narrow rubble-strewn street that probably used to house a business of some sort. The front door to the shop stood partially open in its warped frame. Doc pushed against it with his shoulder, and it swung inward with a creak, scribing an arc in the weathered oak floor with the bottom corner. Doc walked in just as Hanley was dropping the radio receiver back onto its cradle.

"You wanted to see me, Lieutenant?"

Hanley had managed to scrounge a stack of crates and assorted boxes and topped it with a window shutter to put together a makeshift desk. He motioned Doc over as he unfolded a map and laid it out, smoothing the creases. "You're to meet up with the squad back at Montanel. The Krauts have some of our men boxed in at Argouges; several of them wounded." Hanley's finger followed roughly penciled lines as they intersected with village names and crossed the faded colors of landscape contours. "I've got 3rd platoon already on their way. If you head out right now, you can get to Montanel before Saunders, and there won't be any unnecessary delay."

"Sure, Lieutenant, I just need to pick up some supplies."

Frequent glances at his watch told Doc that he was making good time on his walk back to Montanel. The sun was higher in its mid-day path, bringing the summer humidity to an uncomfortable swelter that barely receded even when he passed through the shade of a low tree. The sky overhead was a crystal clear blue except for a few knots of gray clouds casting slow moving shadows across the forest about ten miles to the east. Light showers of translucent rain fell in columns beneath them, glinting in the surrounding sunlight.

Even though he'd already been through Montanel several times, he still found it eerie. Not far from his home back in the States, an old mine sat abandoned, littered with bits of

equipment, run-down shacks and rusted carts. It didn't compare to an entire village that had been emptied of hundreds of people.

He passed through the town square, skirting the remains of a stone fountain. Stagnant green water sat in the bottom, pooling below the broken edge of the lower collection bowl, staining the marble as it evaporated in the heat. Weathered slate steps on the opposite side of the square rose to the skeletal rubble of a burned out shop, its brick and mortar crumbling under the weight of collapsed beams.

Doc dropped down to the steps and slid his pouch off his shoulder. Digging inside his jacket, he snagged a crumpled box of rations and settled in to wait for the squad to arrive.



The boy slowed his breathing and lowered the old rifle, barely recognizing the dirt encrusted white circle and Red Cross emblem on the soldier's helmet in time to avoid pulling the trigger. He turned his head to the side as he heard a shuffling noise behind him and knew that the little girl was still following him. With a frustrated sigh, he rose from his crouch and tucked the rifle in at his side.

The American Medic's eyes widened in surprise as the boy emerged from the alley, his eating utensil clattering to the step as he stood up. "Where'd you come from?"

The boy hovered nearby, keeping his distance. Doc had seen children like this before: a young boy who searched relentlessly for the German who murdered his sister, and Claudine, the young girl who wanted nothing more than to heal the injured. He'd also heard other stories from the guys as well. Not even a teenager yet, this kid was in dirty, threadbare clothes, probably starving and without a home. But somehow, he'd found himself a rifle and become a soldier.

Doc lowered himself back down onto the steps. After a moment's consideration, he reached into his ration box and pulled out the package of biscuits. "You hungry?"

Narrowed eyes returned his offering.

"I'm not gonna hurt ya." Doc smiled to himself and set the pack down next to him. "I'll just set it right here if you want it."

Slowly the boy walked over, watching the medic's every move. He readjusted the rifle as the old leather strap started to slip from his thin shoulder, and then bent to pick up the biscuits. "You are American."

Doc nodded. *So the kid did understand English.* "Who's your friend?"

The boy turned to look back at the alley. The small girl was hovering near the edge, sniffing and crying to herself. She called out to him quietly in French, choking on a tiny sob.

"What's she saying?"

"It is nothing."

"Here, why don't you take her some food." Doc fished around in an outer pocket and took out the chocolate bar he'd been saving. He separated the heat-softened candy into two equal pieces and handed them to the young soldier. "You can share it with her."

The boy stared at the chocolate in indecision. Doc set his ration aside and stood up, placing a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder. "Come on, let's take her some food."



They walked over to the entrance to the alley and the boy stopped about ten feet away, face set in steel, almost as if refusing to move any closer. The girl shied back, bare feet tripping over the rubble.

Doc looked between the two children, one eleven or twelve, the other not more than five. Finally, he took one half of the candy bar from the boy's hands and knelt down, offering it to the girl. "Come on, now, I won't hurt you." He held his hand out, disgusted at how similar the motion was to beckoning a hungry dog, yet determined not to let the emotion show on his face. Frustrated with her lack of response, he appealed to Jean. "Tell her to come over."

The boy sighed and pocketed his portion of candy. "Viens ici, petite!" he growled at her impatiently. Her head popped up, startled, and then he waved her toward them with his hand. "Vite, vite!"

Little by little, the girl moved, eyes constantly shifting between Doc and the boy. In the end, hunger won out over any fear, and as soon as she was close enough, she snatched the candy from Doc's hand and fled behind the boy. Doc chuckled as the kid sighed again.

"What's your name?" the medic asked him.

The boy unslung his rifle and clicked the safety back and forth as the little girl grabbed one corner of his torn shirt with chocolate-smudged fingers. "Jean."

"Where'd you learn English, Jean?"

"My mother was a...unh...school teacher."

"Was?"

"She is gone now." The boy's slim fingers tightened around the rifle in his hands.

"What about the girl?"

"She does not belong to me."

The little girl released her hold on the lower corner of Jean's shirt and latched onto his ragged sleeve, whining piteously. "Mon chien...mon chien."

"Arrête de pleurer—le Bosche a mangé le chien!" Jean yanked away from her fragile grasp and pushed her down. She dropped onto the ground wailing, tears making tracks down her dirty face.

"Hey, don't do that." Doc knelt down and pulled the small child toward him and she burrowed into his side, her need for human contact winning out over any internal struggle of fear. He fought to control his anger as he tried to hush the loud sobbing. Still, he couldn't help feeling sorry for Jean. The kid hadn't wanted any of this. Like most children of war, he had had the realities of adulthood thrust on him before he was ready to deal with it. To him, she was probably just an alarm clock waiting to alert the Krauts and another mouth to feed when he was starving himself.

The girl's sobs had turned to soft hiccups as Doc gently rubbed her back. "Now come on, what's she crying about?"

Jean stopped fidgeting, but refused to look at either Doc or the girl. "Her dog is missing."

"Did you help her look for it?"

"It does not matter now. I told her it was dead." The statement was mostly true. What he'd told the girl had been much worse, he'd said the Bosche had eaten the dog, but it was no business of the American's. Jean was just tired of her following him around.

Doc opened his mouth to answer, but stopped as the rumble of a truck engine came toward them from the far side of town. In moments, the beat up hulk of a German personnel carrier came around the corner, filled with at least a dozen men lining the back bed. He lifted the girl awkwardly on one hip, ignoring her weak cry of protest, then reached out to grab Jean by the scruff of the neck as he scuttled backwards into the alleyway. He gathered both of the children against him, one to each arm, as he flattened himself against the wall in a crouch.



Jean jerked and tried to get his arms free, managing to swing the lower part of his rifle in a small arc that cracked against the medic's knee. Holding an explosive breath against the shock, Doc readjusted his grip on the boy, swinging him face-down across the offended leg. He pressed an arm across the kid's back, pinning him down. "Unless you wanna get us all killed... keep quiet. You hear me?" he hissed.

The boy continued to protest for a few more moments, before finally falling limp and shaking across Doc's leg.

"You hear me?"

Jean nodded and Doc stood him up against the wall. "Good, now you stand right there and keep quiet."

Up until now, the little girl had been fairly silent. Aside from an initial complaint when Doc had picked her up to pull her into the darkness of the alleyway, she'd gone as limp as a kitten in its mother's teeth. During his struggle with Jean, though, her breath had slowly started to hitch in the back of her throat as she tried to stifle soft cries, one tiny fist rubbing her eye like an over-tired tot. Doc relaxed his arm to pat her awkwardly on the back a few times, smiling as she almost teetered over.



For the first time, he noticed the deep cuts and bruises marring the fragile skin on her legs and feet. Weeks, or maybe even months of scavenging around in the junkyards of bombed out villages without shoes or proper clothes would be an easy place to pick up wounds and infections. He reminded himself to take a closer look at them when they were all out of danger. Automatically, he reached to pat his medical pack, finding only empty space where it usually rested against his side.

In a moment of sudden panic, Doc realized that he'd left his bag and ration on the steps back in the square. Taking a steadying breath, he leaned around the corner and his eyes widened in alarm. A German soldier was poking the barrel of his rifle through the strap of his pack and lifting it up in the air.

The German Captain's eyes narrowed at the canvas pouch swinging from the end of his soldier's weapon. "Leutnant!"

"Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann!"

The captain swept his arm in a wide arc around the village. Doc didn't have to understand German to know that the officer was ordering his men to start searching the town.

The men drew to attention and pulled their rifles forward as the lieutenant split the troops up and sent them off in different directions to scamper in and out of the buildings looking for the American.

Doc flattened himself back against the wall again. He looked at his watch and took a hasty swipe at the sweat beading his forehead. Saunders squad wasn't due for a while yet.

"We need to get outta here right now. You're both coming with me."

Jean was standing facing the entrance to the alleyway, his face split by shadow. "No, I must fight."

Doc's helmet wobbled as he shook his head, sending the hanging straps swinging. "You're crazy! You can't fight a squad of Germans by yourself!"

"Ça ne fait rien. Je ne suis pas important." The answer was soft, almost as if the boy had forgotten that Doc and the girl were there.

"What?"

It does not matter. I am not important. As he stood watching the Germans, a darkness descended over Jean's heart, and with it, came a fearlessness.

Doc studied the boy's blank expression and the fierce grip on his rifle, and then with a sigh, he pulled Jean away from the side of the building.

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Doc reached out to steady himself against the stucco wall, feeling slightly unsteady in the heat. He pulled off his helmet and rested it on his knee, sparing a glance to offer a small smile to the girl.

Nearby, rocks shifted and tumbled beneath booted feet as two Wehrmacht soldiers ran up to the house across the street and kicked in the door. The click of a hammer being cocked at his side was all that alerted Doc to the boy's ready firing stance. Jean stood stiffly out beyond the edge of the wall, lining up the sights on his rifle.

Doc reached out to wrestle the rifle away, only managing to grab a piece of Jean's shirt in his haste to stop the boy from pulling the trigger. As Jean was pulled off balance, the shot went wild, exploding up into the air in a fine burst of gunpowder. Jean yanked his arm out of Doc's grasp before kicking off in a cloud of dust, his worn shoes struggling to gain purchase in the shifting layers of gravel.

Doc heard shouts in German and then shots started pelting the ground at Jean's feet, following the boy closely in his flight across the intervening space. "Damn kid! You better run fast!" Doc spun around and grabbed his other charge, taking off in the opposite direction

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On the outskirts of the town, the medic stumbled to a halt and let the girl slide down his hip, fighting the tightness in his chest as he struggled to catch his breath. Through narrowed eyes, he stared back the way he had come, listening to the gunfire, startling slightly as he felt a touch on his pant leg. He looked down at the girl, suddenly berating himself for not trying to find out what her name was. More than at any time in his tour, he wished that Caje were here to ease what would surely be a stumbling attempt on his part into a conversation of less than a minute.

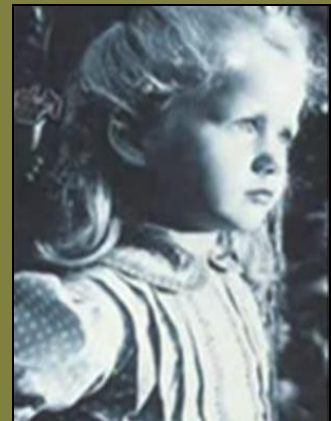
He bent down, holding her out at arm's length. "Can you stay here for me?" The responding cant of her head would've almost been comical if Doc hadn't been so pressed for time. He backed up, keeping a hand in the center of her chest so she couldn't step forward, then motioned down.

As he stood to turn, she crept forward uncertainly, not wanting to separate herself from the adult.

"No, no." Doc eased her back and sat her gently on the ground, making the non-verbal motions he hoped would make sense in any culture. With a smile and a lingering touch on her chin, he pulled back again and walked away, ears straining to pick up any sounds that would indicate she was following him into the line of fire.

Doc's steps quickened in concert with the increase in weapons fire as he crossed from scorched dirt to patches of blackened and wilted vegetation and back to the scattered rubble, wood, and metal that marked the outer perimeter of the town. The echoes drew him to a narrow alleyway whose entrance had at one time been proudly fronted by an archway and painted columns. He paused beneath the arch, not concerned that its stones might be clinging together by nothing more than a mere force of will atop the shifting supports. The distant barking sound and delighted squeal of a small female child registered in his brain only seconds before the explosion.

A cloud of dust and debris rose above the dead, spindly branches of charred trees back in the barren field where he'd left the girl. He spun away from the alleyway and the gunfire, falling to his hands in his haste, ignoring the sharp rocks as they cut into his palms.



The dog lay by the child's side whimpering, muzzle resting on her thin arm. Doc didn't know how long he'd been sitting on his knees by her side until he felt the soft, sun-warmed raindrops begin falling on his neck. He watched them patter softly into the dirt one by one as they fell off the rim of his helmet, his eyes the only part of his body moving. Through it all, the dog sat with him, blinking when the drops hit across the bridge of its nose.

Feeling oddly detached, Doc brushed the matted hair back from the girl's face. He looked up as the dog's ears swiveled forward.

"Doc?" Cajé bent down silently on one knee beside the medic, resting the butt of his rifle on the wet ground.

The medic's eyes scanned slowly back down. "We have to bury her, Cajé."

"There isn't time, we have to get moving."

"I'll stay."

"It's not safe here, Doc. You know what Sarge'll say. C'mon, let's go."

"What about the boy?"

"We found the kid trying to hold off a squad of Krauts. And not doing too bad a job."

Doc felt Cajé's fingers grip his shoulder gently. "He's fine." Cajé's dark eyes were shiny with unshed tears. He understood the futility. He had experienced his own heartbreak with a child. "C'mon, Doc. You've got wounded men to take care of at Argouges."

"Gimme a minute."

"I brought your bag." The Cajun set the medical pouch down and left as silently as he had appeared.

Doc reached across the child and let his hand linger on the dog's head, eliciting another whimper, then he folded the girl's tiny hands across her stomach, and reached up and pulled his helmet from his head. He wiped the worst of the dirt from the wet surface, once again revealing the red crosses inside the painted white circles; he looked down at the canvas pouch he had filled with fresh supplies just this morning. None of his medicine or training could help this child. Finally, he opened the pack and pulled out the small bible he always carried with him, placing it carefully beneath her hands. Then he bowed his head, saying a silent prayer for all the children of war. Finally, he looked up into the sky, and let the summer rain wash the tears from his face.

The dog lifted its head and watched him as he stood up.

"I've got to go, boy."

The mutt ducked its head and dropped its muzzle back down to the girl's arm, releasing a plaintive sigh.

Leaving her in the hands of such a loyal protector, the medic finally allowed himself to walk away with the knowledge that he would be back to do the one last thing he could do for this child of war. But first, he would have to come up with a proper name to put on the wooden cross.



The End