

## UNSUNG HEROES

There are many heroes in this world. There's people like firefighters, police officers, lifeguards...they save lives. That's what you think of when you think hero, right? But those things are what everyone thinks. Heroes around me...well, there are teachers, lifeguards, police, firefighters, and many more. But there are small heroes, too, like a little boy giving his marmalade and bread to someone in need. Someone helping an old woman cross the street. Heroes are everywhere.

"Sir, sir, please, would you like to buy a candle? Please! Anyone?" Elise said. Today had been another day with no money, no food. Shivering, Elise ran quickly under the streetlights of Paris to her only shelter in an alley. Her so-called shelter was a tent with no walls, but she loved and took care of it. In one corner, there was a sheet of plastic covered with an old cloth that she slept on. The other corner was a box with a few clothes that Elise changed into every few weeks. The third corner was the most important corner. Hidden under a napkin, in a basket with many holes, there was Elise's treasure. It was a thin book she had found on a bridge, and although she couldn't read, she traced the vibrant pictures with her fingers, trying to recognize what they meant. The fourth corner held a cardboard box of things Elise collected that people had dropped. There were newspapers, string, and a small raggedy doll that Elise slept with every night. This night had been the first night in Paris that it had snowed in a long time, and everything was lined with crystal white. Shivering, Elise stared into the white world around her, and her stomach growled loudly. She took her book out of her basket and sat on her makeshift bed. She opened the book to the first page. There were sheep in green fields and meadows filled with yellow flowers. The next page showed a family eating a feast with plump chickens, soft bread rolls, roast potatoes, green beans, and cups of warm coffee. Elise smiled and shivered with pleasure as she imagined sitting down and eating a feast all by herself. Lost in a world of bread rolls and sunshine, she pulled her blanket up around her and tried to sleep. It was difficult with the cold weather, and she shivered, longing to be inside a warm house or shop. After many hours, she drifted into an uncomfortable sleep in the midst of cold, wet snow.

Elise woke up to the blinding light of the sun. She hurriedly got up and put her book away and took her tray of candles. Running out of the alley, she felt the warm sunshine on her face and looked at the crystal snow around her. She reached the stairs she sold candles in front of. They were stairs in front of the busiest place in all of Paris. She stood there from morning to evening.

"Candles! Candles for sale! Only two euros!" Elise called, smiling at a young woman hurrying on her way to work. The woman smiled back but did not stop to buy a candle. This happened over and over, Elise becoming more and more hungry. She couldn't take it anymore. Running to a pastry shop, she ran into the warm indoors and stood, not sure what she was planning to do.

"Excuse me! Can you please give me some bread?" Elise said, looking pleadingly at a little girl her age and her mother in the pastry shop. The mother ignored her, but the girl stared at her, and had... pity in her eyes. As they moved away, Elise stood in the middle of the shop, not sure what she could do. She left the shop, hungrier than ever. She sat down on the stairs on the driest part she could find. A few minutes later, she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Here, my slice of bread." Elise looked up and saw a smiling face, the very face of the girl she had asked for bread in the pastry shop... and a packet of warm, soft bread.

"Thank you, thank you so much." Elise whispered. She took the bread and watched as the girl turned and walked away with her mother. But hunger overcame the feeling of gratitude that she had, and she gobbled up the bread. She put the packet in her pocket, saving a few bites of the bread for later. By the end of the day, she hadn't sold any candles, but she was happy, because she had something in her belly and slept a sleep with no bad dreams, but she was cold and shivered and woke up every few hours. The girl had been kind, although her mother was not. She had, in a way, saved Elise's life, which made Elise believe that she was a hero.

The next day, Elise woke up and went through her routine. At the stairs, she saw the girl...her hero...again! She smiled happily, and the girl came and extended her hand.

"I am Sarah. Your name?" Sarah asked.

"Elise. Pleased to meet you, Miss Sarah." Elise said, and shook Sarah's hand. Sarah smiled and ran back to her mother, who reluctantly took something out of her purse. Sarah quickly ran back to Elise.

"My old jacket. Hopefully it will keep you warmer." Sarah said. Elise took the jacket out of Sarah's hands and twirled around with it. She couldn't contain her happiness and ran to the mother and gave her two candles for free. The mother smiled slightly, although she tried hard to contain it.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Elise said. She put on the jacket and felt the cold wind blocked out. She felt safe with the jacket on and said goodbye to Sarah.

"I'll try to come tomorrow, Elise!" Sarah called, waving her hand elegantly. Elise waved back. At her shelter that night, she was warmer than she had ever been. She felt safe and warm, and thought that Sarah was the kindest person in the world, that she was a strong hero. Sarah, in her elegant home, sat at her bed and wondered where little Elise stayed and what had happened to her to make her all alone.

The next few days passed, and there was no sign of Sarah. Elise was sad, then worried. What had happened to Sarah? Was she alright? Then, on a cold Monday morning, Elise saw Sarah walking towards her.

"Bonjour, Elise! Sorry, I couldn't come the last few days, my Papa was here, and we went to the Eiffel Tower." Sarah sat down on the bench next to Elise. Elise smiled up at her, happy that she was with her hero again. Then, she looked around and saw Sarah's mother walking up the stairs.

"Your Mamma! She's going to the stairs! You have to go too?" Elise said. Sarah smiled.

"Mamma said I could stay with you till she comes back. I want to be your friend. Tell me about yourself, Elise!" Elise smiled.

"I really am not much. I don't know how to read. Or write. I live in a shelter that I love very much, although it is likely drab and boring compared to your house." Elise said. As she spoke, Sarah listened intently, nodding and making noises of acknowledgement.

"Elise. You speak like you are nothing. You are more!" Sarah said, laughing lightly.

"Tell me about you, Miss Sarah. Please? Describe everything, your house, your garden, your food, your room, your books. Everything!" Elise said with enthusiasm.

"Well. I live in a mansion near 14<sup>th</sup> Street. It is big and bright, and Mamma and Papa always have guests over. The garden is quite beautiful. There is a corner with flowers, my favorite. Then on the fence there is a rose-vine. It is so, so beautiful. The rest of the garden is a covered patio for Mamma and Papa's guests in the summer. Inside, when you walk in, there is a glittering chandelier and a sitting-room. There is the kitchen and dining room, then stairs leading up to my bedroom, the guest room, and Mamma and Papa's bedroom. My bedroom, when you walk in, has is quite large. One corner takes up my desk, the other corner the light pink-golden bed, and then there is my massive book shelf that goes from the wall to my closet. It is huge, Elise! I have many books from different places in there. You would love them!" Sarah said happily, and Elise nodded and waited, as if she was listening to a story. Sarah smiled, and there was an awkward silence for a few minutes.

"Tell me about...about your friends." Elise said earnestly.

"That's just the thing, Elise! I don't know who my real friends are! They all act posh and they always come to my house and use all my things, but that's it! We never talk or do anything. You're different. You're sweet and you ask about me, what I am, what I do. Wait... we are friends... right?"

"Of course, Miss Sarah!" Elise said.

"Please, don't call me Miss Sarah, Elise! It makes me quite uncomfortable." Sarah said. Elise nodded. They looked over at the stairs and Sarah jumped up when she saw her mother. She waved and smiled at Elise as they walked away, and Elise quickly started selling candles again.

The next day, Elise saw Sarah walking towards her with a huge smile on her face. Elise began to smile but stopped when Sarah turned around. There was an older man, who had a stern look on his face. Sarah turned to face Elise and the smile on her face was gone to be replaced by a sad and angry look. Sarah shook her head slightly. Elise nodded and went back to selling candles, but was deeply hurt and wanted to know what was wrong. She finally couldn't take it and sat down on a bench with her head down when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Elise looked up, and there was Sarah and the older man! Elise smiled.

"Little girl, I want three candles. Your best ones." The older man said.

"Oh, Papa. She's very sweet! Now, Elise, this is my father, I've convinced him to employ you in the kitchen at home!" Sarah said. Elise couldn't believe her ears. She was shocked, excited, amazed, and scared, scared of what changes this would bring. She didn't have a life apart from this, and in a matter of seconds, she did! Everything else was a blur from there. She remembered showing Sarah her shelter, and Sarah gasping when she saw the book, Sarah saying that it was her favorite book, but she was so happy that she didn't remember anything else.

"Elise! I'm home!" Sarah yelled, three months after Elise had begun working in their kitchen. Elise ran to greet her, and Sarah began chattering away like no time had passed. They both went up to Sarah's room, and Elise smiled as Sarah picked up her favorite book and began reading it out loud. It was her favorite part of the day—listening to Sarah read a story and following along herself. It had been confusing settling in, but she was used to it now. She had a good life, good friends, someone who cared. That's all that mattered.

There are many Elise's in the world...but only a few Sarah's who can save those lives. Many people think a hero is something huge, like Superman rescuing an old lady from a burning building, but heroes can be small. I went to India on vacation, and there were many kids who were roaming the streets, asking for money, selling things that were not too valuable. People like them need Sarah's to live a good, safe life. Anyone can be a hero, anywhere, anytime, and in small and big ways.