

Edith's Umbrella

Moonlight shone through the window onto George's bed, resting on the thin wool blanket that covered his body. He shook in his sleep and his eyes fluttered open, their pale blue color piercingly bright against his wrinkled, tired face. "Edith's umbrella!" he gasped, before falling back into a fitful sleep.

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The previous morning George had woken to raindrops hitting his roof and running into the gutter. With a rain this heavy he would normally be able to hear the water rushing out of the drainpipe, which emptied into the street outside his bedroom window. The absence of this sound filled him with dread; he had forgotten to schedule the boy that cleaned the gutters each fall. With a heavy sigh he swung his legs over the bed and reached for the cane that was resting against his nightstand. Using slow, deliberate steps he made his way across the padded carpet, into the living room where they kept the telephone directory.

Rainy days made George sad. They reminded him of his wife and best friend of 63 years, Edith. She had loved the rain. On their first date he had taken her to a double feature: *The Jazz Singer* and *Sunrise*. During the intermission she noticed it had started to rain so she grabbed his hand and pulled him outside. They ran down the sidewalk and she smiled, her flowered cotton dress becoming soaked as they splashed through puddles illuminated by the street lamps. "Don't you just love the rain George?" she called out, as she pushed a curly wet lock of hair behind her

ear. He smiled in agreement and squeezed her hand, as she slowed down and leaned towards him. "I'm afraid I can never remember to bring an umbrella," she whispered, "but there is nothing I enjoy more than a rainy night."

On their second date George brought her a gift: a black silk umbrella with a curved wooden handle. She gushed with thanks and kissed him on the cheek, with a vow to never lose such a thoughtful present. She kept her promise; the umbrella followed them from their college days in New York City, to their wedding in her home town of Cambridge, to Boston where they bought their first house. With each move around the city, Edith took special care of the umbrella, always making sure it was the first item unpacked and set by the front door. Since her death it had sat stationary in the wooden coat rack. He had considered using it many times, but for one reason or another, always seemed to find an excuse to avoid going out in the rain. He glanced toward it as he walked across the living room and sat down in his armchair, then turned to the phone book on the coffee table. He opened it up to Armstrong, Adam, and wrote down the corresponding number on a piece of lined paper. He folded up the paper and slipped it into his pocket, then rose back up and walked to the front door. He pulled on his jacket and hat that were hanging on the coat rack and looked outside. He could see the telephone booth at the corner of his street; the rain was hitting the glass at an aggressive angle and running down the wall and into the gutter. Without looking down he took the umbrella, opened the door and carefully made his way down the sidewalk.

After scheduling the Armstrong boy for the following morning, George decided to call his son Jack, who lived with his wife and family in Maine. His smile brightened as he spoke to

his grandchildren, who passed the phone around the breakfast table with news of a prize at the regional spelling bee, a lost tooth, and plans for a princess-themed 5th birthday party. His daughter-in-law got on the phone last, apologizing for not writing him earlier. She invited him to the party and said they would arrange for airfare— Ruby had requested her grandfather as a special guest and hoped he would read one of his stories for her friends. George happily agreed to attend and as he hung up the phone his mind raced at the prospect of traveling by plane. He opened the door to the telephone booth and hastily grabbed his cane, walking as quickly as he could during the break in the rain so he could study his map of the East Coast at home.

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The umbrella sat perched in the telephone booth as the rain began to fall again. A bus pulled up to the stop nearby and a stroller emerged from the back door. Eleanor, a young woman in a sleek dark jacket, appeared next. She opened a large umbrella in a quick, practiced motion, doing her best to cover the baby. Just as the doors started to close, her son Henry, a frantic young boy in a slick red raincoat, pushed out of the bus. He landed with a splash, the water seeping into his Velcro shoes. He looked down in despair. His mother had warned him that boots would be a better choice, but he could not abandon his lucky Batman sneakers on such an important day. He did a quick stomp to ensure the lights were still functioning and tried to shake the water out of his hair, with little success. As he looked up to see how far ahead his mother was, he noticed the umbrella inside the telephone booth. He looked towards his sneakers with satisfaction and stood on his tiptoes to reach the door. Glancing around to ensure the no one was coming back for the umbrella, he slipped inside and grabbed his prize.

Pushing back outside he opened the umbrella with the same swift movement he had observed many times. He walked ahead with his head held high; he caught up quickly to his mother and the rain-slicked road mirrored their practiced gait. They rounded a corner and his school came into view, the red brick walls darkened by the torrents of rain. His mother opened the door for the stroller and he quickly stowed the umbrella out of sight before running inside. Once in the hallway she kissed his head and asked him to repeat his speech once more. Embarrassed, but never one to refuse attention, he opened his backpack and took out the action figure. “This is Batman, known to many as the most legendary of all superheroes. He lives in Gotham City and gets all the bad guys that are too sneaky for the cops to catch.” He lifted up the toy and smiled confidently at his imaginary audience. “Wonderful darling, you will do wonderfully,” his mother assured him, before saying her goodbyes and wheeling his sister back outside into the dark morning.

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The rain was falling more steadily as Eleanor walked to the bus stop; it ran down the sidewalk in hurried streams, gathering every leaf, twig and piece of debris in its path before emptying into the gutter. Eleanor paused to watch the continual stream of water, her mind wandering to a different rainy day, one without children, responsibilities and errands to run. She blinked quickly and resumed pushing the stroller. There was no time for thoughts like that. She had a lot to get done while Henry was in class. Keeping her chin up and her eyes focused ahead she navigated the driest route back to the bus stop and waited. The soft glow from the streetlamp

illuminated a tear that was falling down her cheek. As the bus pulled up she brushed it away and bit her lip, silently wishing it was easier to simply forget.

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Henry was ready and waiting when his mother returned to pick him up. He told her with glee each aspect of the show-and-tell, making sure to emphasize the level of expertise he displayed during the question-and-answer session. Eleanor smiled, happy for a diversion from her quiet morning. He continued talking as they walked out of the building and she listened carefully, trying to focus on his story so that the rain did not distract her again. From the sound of his voice she knew he was following close behind her, so it was not until they reached the bus stop that she looked back at him. Her eyes opened wide when she saw the umbrella he was holding; she took in its black silk material, curved wooden handle and delicate shape. “Where?” she started, but then trailed off, the events from that day rushing back before she could stop them.

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The rain had started just as they were walking out of class, and Eleanor realized she had forgotten her umbrella. Lane, a handsome boy from her lecture, observed her predicament and offered shelter under his umbrella. She noticed how well made it was, much nicer than the one she had forgotten at her apartment, and she graciously agreed to his proposal. She came closer to him and introduced herself, saying that she remembered him from American Lit last semester but

then instantly regretted adding this detail. To her relief he admitted to remembering this as well. and before long they were talking about favorite professors, most-read novels and preferred spots in the library. They had so much in common that she wondered why they had never met before. She watched him as he spoke, admiring the way his eyes lit up when he explained his passion for literature and writing. She forgot all about the rain as they talked; she felt as if she had known Lane her whole life and yet she wanted to learn everything about him. Before long they reached her apartment. She paused, unsure of how to thank him, and reluctant to end their walk. Sensing this he dropped the umbrella and gently pulled her to him. He kissed her sweetly on the lips and held her close as the cool rain fell down.

The blissful relationship that followed ended as quickly as it had started. Eleanor was accepted to Stanford for graduate school, and Lane decided to stay at Tufts. They decided it was best to break things off until they graduated, and Eleanor parted in tears later in the summer. She immersed herself in her studies while in California, trying to distract herself from thoughts of how happy Lane had made her. It wasn't until after she received a letter from him that explained he was seeing someone new that she started dating again.

Eleanor sped through the next four years of memories... marrying Russ after graduation and the birth of Henry, the painful knowledge of Russ's unfaithfulness and discovering she was pregnant as they began divorce proceedings. Finally moving back to Boston to raise her two children alone... It was not until this rainy morning that she had let herself remember how much happier she had been just five years earlier. Eleanor looked down at Henry and hugged him, much to his delight. She wheeled the stroller up to the telephone booth and propped the door

open, making sure her children were close as she called a number she knew by heart. Lane recognized her voice at once and asked if she was ok. She said she was and tried to explain why she had called, but didn't know where to start. When she said she had moved to back to Boston he suggested they meet the next morning a café close to Henry's school. She agreed and hung up the phone, a sense of joy washing over her as she stepped back outside.

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When George woke up the next morning he lay in bed thinking about his upcoming trip to Maine. He went over all the details in his head again, trying to remember everything his daughter-in-law has said to him. It was not until after he had made breakfast and was going out for his morning walk that he remembered the umbrella. He threw on his jacket and shoes and rushed outside, hoping he was not already too late.

When he reached the telephone booth the umbrella was nowhere to be found. He shook his head at his carelessness, wondering how he had let himself forget something so important. Looking up a flash caught his eye— across the street he spotted the golden spokes of an umbrella a woman was holding. He watched as she greeted a man walking towards her, her face lighting up when he offered her a bouquet of flowers. A light drizzle was starting to fall, which only seemed to increase her happiness. He moved under the umbrella and introduced himself, which caused her to laugh before she extended her own hand. George watched for a few more minutes as they talked and laughed, then turned back towards his house. He let the rain fall on his face as he walked home, whistling a jazzy melody with youthful glee.