

Russell Kelfer
Ethel's
Amazing
Umbrella

191-B
Series: Fictional Stories:
A Christmas Story

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Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

What a difference a day makes! In the case of the little town of Forest Grove that day was Christmas day, a Christmas day so unlike any other they had ever celebrated that the whole town looks back on it as though it were their birthday.

They refer to it lovingly as the “Day that Grandpa Was Born”, for it was on that cold, icy December afternoon that Grandpa Billy Simpson stood up in a called meeting in the church house and poured fuel on an already simmering fire that was rapidly spreading into life after life in Forest Grove.

Having called that now famous meeting himself, Grandpa Billy's sole intent was to fire the Rev. Thompson and replace him with someone a bit more traditional, someone who could restore the “status quo” at the little church and stop this insane preachin’ on “heaven and hell” and bein’ “born over” (as his grandson Bobby called it).

His grandson Bobby, incidentally, just happened to be the spark that started this blaze of evangelical enthusiasm in Forest Grove.

It seems that one cold, November afternoon, little Bobby paid the parson a call to talk to him about the condition of his soul. What took place began as a comedy of errors, and after a few dozen calamities had left the Parson with a broken leg, and his house a shambles, little Bobby got down to the business at hand, and that business included asking Jesus to come into his life. Well, that sort of thing just didn't go on in Forest Grove; at least not before the Rev. Thompson arrived, and now our newly “born over” Bobby began behaving like a totally different boy; a fact few people would dispute, but even fewer seemed to understand.

Old Doc Forsythe was the next to follow suit. As he was bandaging the good Parson's leg, he began to ponder the issues of

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

spiritual life, and soon the old doctor was praying, asking Jesus into his life too! Before long there was a rumbling of spiritual freshness in Forest Grove that Grandpa Billy just couldn't handle.

So he had called a meeting for Christmas day to give the parson a special yuletide gift, a one-way ticket out of town. That was his plan, anyway.

But between the time Grandpa called the meetin' and the time the folks gathered that frosty December 25th, something happened to Grandpa. Something happened, indeed.

And what happened made that church meetin' the event of the century in Forest Grove, and Christmas day became such a time of celebration that people from all over came down just to see a town that counted Christmas it's birthday. And those who came down were never disappointed.

What happened that Sunday that so changed the course of Forest Grove was this: As Grandpa Billy stood up to ask the good parson to leave, he astonished the congregation by announcing that he had asked Jesus into his heart, too. And as his gleeful grandson Bobby tore up the Pastor's letter of resignation, Grandpa asked if there might be anyone else in that little church that Christmas day who had missed the meaning of Christmas (and the meaning of life, the way he had).

The ensuing service that went on for some two hours was an experience no one could have planned; no one, that is, but God.

Folks who had been feudin' for years wrapped their arms around each other and asked each other's forgiveness.

Folks who had been the pillars of the church got up from their pews and literally stood in line to ask the Reverend Thompson how they could be "born over" too. Before long, little pockets of people were scattered all over that auditorium on their knees askin' Jesus to come into their lives.

Pretty soon a song service broke out and you could all but hear the rocks in that old stone building start to shout with joy. They were the same songs they'd always sung in the Forest Grove Church. But my, my, how different they sounded.

Mrs. Peabody, horn-rimmed glasses in place, sat down at the organ as usual, but about half-way through the first song, she went down and talked to Grandpa and Bobby, too. Then big old tears began to form in the old lady's eyes and she knelt down to

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

pray.

When she got up and went back to the organ, she started pullin' out stops that hadn't been pulled in half a century . . . and music came out of those dusty pipes you'd have sworn was sent air mail from heaven.

When the service finally ended about five in the afternoon, the people poured out into the village still singing "Blest Be The Tie That Binds", and faces stained with tears were wrapped in smiles so wide they virtually stretched from one ear to the other.

It was Christmas Day in Forest Grove, and Jesus Christ had just been invited into so many hearts, no one even bothered to count them. It was Christmas day, indeed.

Five years have passed now since that eventful December 25th so lovingly called "The Day that Grandpa was Born". Five long years. Five winters have come and gone, along with all the isolation and solitude that seems to blanket the countryside in layers of ice and snow.

Five summers have come and gone, too, alongwith the frenzied activity that characterizes a town that tries to get a year's work done in seven months. As is always the case, nothing has stood still in those five years in Forest Grove. Well, almost nothing.

It's late December, as we wind our way through those ice-caked highways that twist and turn over Forest Creek, alongside Cloverdale, past River City, and now we begin to ascend into those majestic mountains, so much of the time painted white by the hand of God, carefully etched in ice and snow. And coasting past the tree-lined entrance into the village, we see come into view a little town that seems to have been preserved in ice from a century past; quaint, quiet, and almost obvious in its absence of life's more modern conveniences.

At the top of the hill stands the village's only stop light. Oh, it really wasn't needed. That's why the town's only policeman made sure that it only "blinked" off and on. That way it wouldn't really inconvenience anyone. But it stood as a reminder that Forest Grove could be just as modern as the next town . . . well, almost.

Just a half-block north of "the" traffic light, is Grandpa Billy's Drug Store. In one window is a Christmas tree, perfectly shaped, with tiny-twinkling blue lights flashing off and on. A banner draped above it reads, "Happy Birthday Jesus". In the

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

other window, is a huge replica of a birthday cake, and a sign that says, "Happy Birthday Forest Grove". A bit unusual, you'd have to admit . . . but then Forest Grove has turned out to be an unusual town to say the least.

You can park anywhere you like on Main street. The street is lined with what appear to be antiquated parking meters. They appear to be because they are . . . they haven't been checked in about twelve years, but Mayor Forrestal seems to think they add a touch of "class" to the street, and about once a month, some unknowing stranger goes and puts a dime in one. It never gets emptied, but it gives the home folks standin' by a bit of a chuckle. "Another visitor just paid his dues," they'll laugh, and they'll mosey on their way.

Once inside Grandpa Billy's drugstore, you see what appears to be a perfect replica of an old-fashioned pharmacy, only this is no replica. This is the real thing. If Grandpa Billy's there, the first thing you see is a smile so big you can't help but think those wrinkles on his leathery face are gonna break in two. "Hi, stranger," he's likely to greet you, "Welcome to Forest Grove. You passin' through? Or are you just plum lost?" With that, he'll more often than not point to the old aluminum coffee pot in the corner that's resting not so securely on a turn of the century hot plate. It's sending out an aroma of fresh perked coffee so tantalizing, it would send Mrs. Olsen into a coffee fit.

And should you take the time to join him for a cup, chances are that within a half hour or so, the kindly old druggist will ask you if you happen to know a friend of his. You'll imagine he means someone from back in Thorndale where you grew up, but what he's leadin' up to is a question about whether or not you've ever met his best friend, Jesus. And should you so much as express a casual interest, you'd best take off your coat and set a spell, for Grandpa the druggist is fixin' to become Grandpa the evangelist. You just can't imagine the number of strangers who have entered Forest Grove with no consciousness at all of eternity, and driven out the other side with a new Bible in their hand, and a new Saviour in their heart.

And to top it all off, the zealous old Grandpa knows that the minute he walks back behind the counter after his evangelistic encounter, he's gonna get a sermon or two of his own.

For just behind the drug counter, almost lost in a sea of pills

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

and powders is Grandpa's diminutive childhood sweetheart, and wife of 41 years, Ethel Simpson.

Ethel stands about five feet two inches tall in high heels (which she never wears) and she wouldn't weigh 100 lbs. if she had on a concrete overcoat.

Her hair, about the color of that antique coffee pot in the corner, is swept back into a knot on the top of her head, and any time, day or night, she looks like she's all dressed up to go to church, (though she seldom does). Whenever you see Ethel, every hair's in place, and every bit of clothing is matched; that's quite a contrast to grandpa's wardrobe which looks like it came from the reject pile outside the Salvation Army store up the road at Duncanville.

But don't let Ethel's size lure you into thinkin' she pulls no weight in the Simpson household. Beneath her steel blue eyes and gracious smile, Ethel Simpson is the proud owner of an iron will.

Raised on a farm outside River City, just up the road, the oldest of six kids, Ethel Moorehouse, as she was known before she married, lived a life of suffering and hardship.

Her mom died when she was in her teens, and for the next ten years of her life, Ethel raised the rest of the clan as though she were their mother. Her Dad died when she turned twenty, and for those final years at home, she was both ma and pa to the whole family; not to mention housekeeper, farm hand, bookeeper, nurse, policeman, and plumber . . . and all on the grand sum of about \$300 a month.

"A woman can do whatever she makes up her mind to," she would often philosophize, adding, "Nobody's gonna give you nothin' in this world; life's only gonna give you what you go out and get."

And her self-reliant philosophy saw two doctors, a lawyer, and a captain in the army emerge from that dingy farmhouse at the edge of River City, as she motivated her brothers and sisters with the crown of her philosophical gems: "God helps those who help themselves," uttered with such authority you'd think she coined the phrase herself. "That's in the Bible, you know," Ethel would modestly add, thinking for sure it really was.

So Ethel was no pint-sized pushover. Beneath that immaculate

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

ball of grey on her head was an IQ that was off the charts and a will that was virtually immovable.

She and Grandpa make quite a pair. She's a democrat; he's a republican. She's a liberal; he's a conservative. She likes chicken and blueberry pie; he can't stand either one of them . . . and on and on it goes.

But for all their incompatibilities, they're inseparable. In fact, their bantering back and forth about their assorted philosophical and political differences seems only to deepen their affections for one another.

There was always, however, at least one thing Billy and Ethel agreed on. It was religion; that is, at least until five years ago. Because up until that fateful Christmas day when Grandpa went and got "born over", he and Ethel raised their kids with Ethel's "God helps them that helps" philosophy, the undertone of which was a basic belief that religion is like cod liver oil; useful if not taken too frequently or in doses larger than necessary.

Grandpa Billy, in years past, had scarcely ever missed a church service, but only because he wanted to be sure nothin' happened that he didn't approve of. Grandma Ethel, meanwhile, saw goin' to church as a misuse of time that could be better spent feedin' the hogs and picklin' pears. (Except, of course, for Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter, when, as she piously expressed it, "A Christian ought to pay their respects to God.")

So you can just imagine the strain that's developed these past five years since Grandpa got "born over" and told the whole world about it that Christmas afternoon at the little church in Forest Grove. That strain has been compounded just a bit by the change that's taken place in Melba Peabody, Ethel's best friend for the last thirty years. Melba's the church organist, and it was her conversion that sparked the sudden change of tempo in the music that Christmas day, and it has sparked a change of tempo in her life as well.

Now Melba's not quite as "preachy" as Grandpa. She has taken care to maintain her close friendship with Ethel, and while she often talks about answered prayers and her time alone with God, she always does it in such a way as to provoke Ethel to curiosity, rather than to anger.

Their spiritual differences really came to a head about three

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

years ago, when the Reverend Thompson used Easter Sunday, of all times, to preach a message on Noah and the flood. His title was, "Noah's Amazing Umbrella". Being Easter, Ethel was there, all decked out in a new outfit acquired at Edmond's Elite Dress Shop up in Breezeville, about a half a day away (the way the Simpson's old Rambler rambled).

But Ethel left the service that Easter colored with a bit more red than she came with, the color coming from the anger that surfaced in her face at the way the good Parson talked about "coping with life".

The crux of his message was that Noah went through the storms of life safely because he had that amazing umbrella called faith. That umbrella, he went on, was to protect him from the harm of the storm, even though he had to pass through the storm to do God's will. The Reverend ended his message by asking, "What kind of umbrella do you have to weather the storms of life?" He went on to say, without apology, that if you haven't asked Jesus Christ to come into your life, when those storms really begin to come, you're going to find that your umbrella of self-reliance has a hole in it, and unless you trade it in for one of "God's Amazing Umbrellas", you'll never be able to weather life's storms. He got a few "amens" and some positive comments after the service, but Ethel Simpson wouldn't so much as look at him, and on the way home from church that day, Grandpa Billy got an earful from his perfectly dressed, but definitely out of sorts companion.

"Just who does he think he is, prescribing Jesus like a pill for hard times?" she almost shrieked in Billy's ear. "You Christians don't have a corner on strength. Strength comes from the will. You can't hang that one on God."

Grandpa was almost excited that the Parson had touched on a raw nerve. At least there was some evidence that she was wrestling with rejecting what he'd said. That, he surmised, was progress. Another thing really made an impact on Gramps. She had said, "You Christians," implying that she didn't categorize herself as "one of those" even though she met all the criteria (based on her own concept of "good works").

You see, one of Ethel's struggles with this "born over" stuff was that she had lived such a "good" life, she couldn't imagine needing to be saved from anything. She didn't lie, didn't have bad habits, didn't cuss, drink, smoke, or chew. She'd been a

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

nearly perfect mother, a loving wife, a diligent citizen, and a hard worker. She'd rescued her brothers and sisters from the brink of nothingness, and lifted them to the category of productive, useful citizens. Oh, she could see some psychological advantage to a religious experience for the "down and outer", but not for the do-gooders like herself. She could see maybe a savior for sinners, but by her standards at least, a sinner she definitely wasn't.

But Ethel's main gripe with the Reverend's theology was this "amazing umbrella" stuff, that indicated that there was a need in life for someone else to live your life for you, and enable you to become what he kept callin' "more than conquerors."

Ethel fancied herself a conqueror, and she had done it all with sheer will power. "I've got my own umbrella," she shouted into Billy's ear as they drove up the long cobblestone driveway to their ranchstyle house, "And my umbrella's got no holes in it. My umbrella does just fine in a storm, just fine," she murmured. "That parson's tryin' to make us into helpless cripples who have to depend on God for the breath we breathe," she went on. "God helps those who help themselves," she ranted in arrogant tones, now, once more inscribing the trademark of her theology as a postscript for her sermonette.

Grandpa had a good answer. "You've got a mighty fine umbrella, Ethel," he acknowledged, "a mighty fine umbrella. You've weathered some tough ones without so much as gettin' wet. I reckon', however, that some day you just might get into a storm that your umbrella can't handle. Then maybe you'll get the gist of what the good pastor's been sayin'." With that he gave her a big bear hug and headed for the kitchen, and the roast and potatoes, the aroma of which had been captivating his attention since before they left for church.

Of course, Ethel wasn't through discussing the ramifications of the good pastor's "do-nothin'" theology, but she decided not to let it ruin a perfectly good forty-year-plus marriage. Instead, she used Alexander Graham Bell's instrument of communication the next morning to lay an earful on her patient, but converted friend, Melba Peabody.

Melba listened, the way an exceptional friend would, then finally, used the same approach as Billy, simply acknowledging that up until now at least, Ethel did indeed have an amazing umbrella. "There just might come a time," she cautiously

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

concluded, "when you'll come to understand just what it is the good parson's talking about." Then, with the finesse of a skilled surgeon, she carefully guided the conversation into less controversial areas, and a detailed discussion of the hat Pearl Anderson had the gall to wear on Easter Sunday. At last, they had something they could agree upon again. The hat was atrocious. End of confrontation number one.

But it wasn't the end of the subject. Far from it. Nearly every week, something seemed to happen that was a bit unpleasant. Like the time the penicillin didn't arrive at the pharmacy on time, and the Merkins' kids had the flu, and Ethel had to drive through blinding snow to Cloverdale and get some more. The car broke down, she had a flat, had to walk two miles in the snow for help, and still got back with the penicillin in time. "My umbrella seemed to hold just fine," she quipped to Melba the next morning. "No prayers, no Bible verses, no divine intervention," she went on, almost gleefully. "You can do what you have to do if you just believe you can," she concluded. Melba was biting her tongue so hard she almost had to call Doc Forsythe to stop the bleeding, but graciously she simply responded, "You've got an amazing umbrella, Ethel, an amazing umbrella, indeed."

This kind of conversation sort of became the norm between these two old friends as the days passed into months and finally into years since that incredible Christmas day in Forest Grove. Ethel would chide Melba with every stroke of her self-reliant success, and Melba would quietly respond, "Amazing umbrella you've got, Ethel, simply amazing." But Melba was praying all the while that God would either expose Ethel to the true state of her self-righteous covering, or allow her to experience a storm her umbrella couldn't handle.

Ethel, of course, dreaded Christmas. It meant more work at the store, more work at home, and worst of all that horrendous birthday party at the Pharmacy on Christmas afternoon.

It would've seemed all right in a third grade Sunday school class in the Bible belt, but for grown men and women in a sophisticated little eastern village to stand around singing, "Happy Birthday to Jesus," and "Happy Birthday to Grandpa," and "Happy Birthday" to this one and that one on into the night, seemed at best a bit childish and unnecessary. And oh, that "testimony time" as they called it; if that wasn't the longest part

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

of Christmas day. All those supposedly mature grownups tellin' how Jesus led them to a certain job, or how Jesus helped them make it through some crisis (as though they couldn't have done it without Him).

She had to admit everyone else sure had a good time. It was like the whole town (in fact the whole county) waited all year for Grandpa Billy's Birthday party at Christmas. Folks would come for miles around to sing Christmas carols, eat birthday cake, and talk about Jesus and all that stuff. It was the highlight of the year for most of Forest Grove. Melba practically lived for the day. But for Ethel it was the longest day she had to suffer through. She was always there, makin' the punch, cuttin' the cake, and disappearin' into the back when the Jesus stories got a little heavy for her to handle.

So as December 24th rolled around and Grandpa's "fifth Birthday party" loomed on the horizon, Ethel Simpson once again faced the holidays with mixed emotions.

It's now about noon on Christmas eve, and the activity level at Grandpa Billy's Palace has reached a fevered pitch. Wall to wall "helpers" are busy stacking chairs, moving displays, putting up "Happy Birthday to" banners, and in general making it impossible for Ethel to count out 12 "somethin'-myacin" tablets to fill the prescription Doc Forsythe wrote out for Annabelle Foster's ten-year-old (the one with the strep throat).

"I can't run a business with this infernal partyin' goin' on," she muttered, thinking, of course, no one could hear.

"Careful, Ethel, your umbrella's startin' to leak," Melba Peabody whispered. Melba had been standin' right behind her on a ladder and just happened to hear the soulful murmuring of her agitated friend. "Just kiddin', Melba, just kiddin'," Ethel quickly replied, not wanting a short fuse to give anyone the wrong idea about her "more-than-adequate" umbrella of patience.

Melba smiled, and added softly, "Of course," and continued her somewhat unwelcome assistance in the banner-hanging department.

About that time, young Sergeant O'Reilly, the clean-cut chap who served as state trooper in this neck of the woods came rushing through the door, so out of breath it took a minute or two for his Irish brogue and his huffin' and puffin' to begin to

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

march to the same cadence so anyone could understand what he was saying.

"Big storm up at Marble Creek," he finally shouted, "Two houses blown down, three people missin', and the river's about to go out of its banks. I need some volunteers. I need at least ten willing men to help me with a rescue operation. I know it's Christmas eve, but we'll be back by sundown," the excited trooper went on. He was desperately trying not to show that he was panicking under pressure, but to most everyone around, it was obvious that on a scale of 1 to 10, his emotions were up somewhere around eleven and a half.

"I'll go," Brad Everson responded quickly, "Count me in." "Me too," Sonny Whitman chimed in. Soon Rob Severenson, Cal Brown, and Grandpa Billy joined the brigade, and before long, there were ten assorted volunteers piling in the long, stake bed pickup parked in front of the drug store (the one with the blue state trooper emblem faded, but still visible on the doors).

Somehow, Grandma Ethel breathed a sigh of relief. She hated to see everyone leave, especially for such a sad assignment on Christmas Eve, yet as the ranks thinned out in the drug store, it was as though she had room to breathe again, and with Grandpa down the road, doin' his duty as a volunteer, it left her in charge of the goin's on at the Pharmacy, and "Maybe," she thought, "I can restore a little order to the preparations for this 'birthday bash'." (And restore a little order, she did.)

By sundown, sleet was beginning to fall and the roads were like ribbons of plate glass, shimmering in the moonlight. Trees were beginning to bend to the breaking point, as the sheer weight of the ice that was forming seemed to create fan-shaped glaciers along Glenoak Lane, the long two-laned stretch that connected the main street of Forest Grove with the tiny road that ran along the outskirts of town where the Simpsons lived.

The trip home seemed to take an eternity for Ethel. You just can't drive too slowly on those kinds of streets, but even though she found herself just inching along, as she tried to negotiate that curve around Sanderson Creek, suddenly the right wheel on her little Rambler lost its footing, and before she could so much as respond, she had lost control, and found herself careening helplessly across the highway and into an ice-coated barbed wire fence that simply refused to give. As she crawled across the seat

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

and out the passenger door to see what damage had been done, she stepped down hurriedly on the icy pavement, and losing her footing, she fell to the ground with a sickening thud.

"My umbrella is adequate," you could almost hear her thinking out loud, as the unflappable grandma grabbed hold of the antenna on the car, pulled herself up, shook off the snow, and assessed the damage. One dented fender, one crushed headlight, no broken bones.

Carefully, she started the motor and put it in reverse. With the rear wheels slipping and sliding, she inched backwards until there was just enough room between her one good headlight and that somewhat stunned fence post, and slowly she rocked her rambler back and forth, until it began to move, ever so slowly, back towards the highly polished highway that led to home.

"Well, I'm not much the worse for the wear," she surmised, as she walked up her front steps, "and Benny Grogan's Body Shop can reconstruct old Rusty the Rambler; they've done it before." With that, she reached for the lights in the front room, grateful to be in the familiar setting of home at last.

But it didn't take long for reality to settle in. The light's didn't go on. And it was obvious they weren't about to. Another power failure. Well, Ethel Simpson had handled power failures before. Her umbrella had been quite adequate for those. This was, however, the first one she'd faced when Billy wasn't home to help.

Soon, reality #2 settled in. This time, the extra circuit that operated the fan on the furnace was out, too; and the temperature in that rambling ten-room house was apparently in a race to the finish to compete with the temperature outside, and it wasn't clear which one was winning. There was at least one silver lining in the cloud, though. Nothing in the freezer had thawed. The whole house was a freezer.

After struggling to find her good flashlight, she discovered Grandpa had borrowed the batteries to power his flashing "Happy Birthday" sign on the Christmas cake, which meant she had to grope her way in the dark to the shed in back where the backup generator (which was just a little older than she was) held her last ray of hope for light and heat. But alas, it hadn't been checked all winter, and now that she needed it, a faint grunt and a final groan were all it was able to deliver.

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

Shivering, Ethel cautiously inched her way back along the ice-covered sidewalk to the house, where she began to grope for every blanket and overcoat in sight. After what seemed like an eternity of searching, she found the matches to light the candles. It seems Gramps had moved them to his shop in the garage without calling a high-level conference and informing the other half of the household of the change. She'd have to have a chat with Billy about that little move!

By now, Ethel was sure that Grandpa and the men would be back at the Drug Store checkin' out the decorations, so she figured a phone call would bring her a little comfort and a chance to vent some of her anger at her husband's inefficiency where the generator and the matches were concerned. There was, however, one more slight problem. The telephones weren't working either. Apparently, the storm up the way had iced over the lines, causing them to snap and no one was going to call anyone from that phone for probably a week at best.

Ethel looked out the window. It was as if somebody had suddenly emptied heaven of all its snow on one square mile of planet earth. The wind began blowing so hard, you could almost feel it through the walls, and the snow was falling so heavily, even the bright moonlight which had led her home, was totally obscured by the blanket of white that literally surrounded her.

Suddenly, a feeling of panic settled in; a feeling she had not experienced before. Believe it or not, Ethel Simpson was afraid. And she didn't have the slightest idea what to do about it. Oh, for a brief moment, she thought about praying, but she had programmed herself for so long that prayer was nothing but an exercise in futility that she dismissed that thought immediately and began searching for ways to divert her attention from the apparent hopelessness of the situation. After what seemed like an eternity, she remembered the little portable radio she kept in the cedar chest in the hall. "If Billy didn't steal the batteries for some kind of lighted Bible cover or something," she reasoned sarcastically, "maybe I can at least listen to some music."

At last, success. She found the radio, batteries still intact, and she tuned it into station KLHG, an all night fm station up in Beaver City. Soon, soothing music began flowing from the tiny little receiver, and Ethel began to regain her composure, as though she had discovered a quick way to patch the hole that had

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

appeared unexpectedly in her umbrella of self-reliance. Propped up on the couch, wrapped in three coats and four blankets, Ethel Simpson began to doze off to the tune of "Winter Wonderland" on her tiny radio. But wouldn't you know it . . . just as she was starting to drift into a somewhat arctic dreamland, the announcer breaks in and interrupts the music.

"We interrupt this broadcast for a special news bulletin," he curtly announced. "This word is just in from Sheriff Bill Jamison in Marble Creek. A search party has been combing the area for the whereabouts of at least three people presumed to be lost when their houses were destroyed in today's storm."

"Sheriff Jamison just informed us that the search party came upon unexpected winds just north of the Oak Creek cutoff, and four of the ten searchers were swept away unexpectedly by the currents. We are glad to report that three of the four have been located and rescue teams are on the way. Only one is still missing. Tim O'Reilly, head of the search crew, lists the one still missing and feared lost to be . . . one Bill Simpson, age 62, from Forest Grove. We repeat, all others appear to have been saved. Stay tuned to this station for further developments."

It was at that point that Ethel Simpson's amazing umbrella began to leak, . . . and badly. For the first time in her life, circumstances were beyond her control. The one person in her life that mattered above all else was missing and presumed to be dead, and she was marooned in a house that resembled a rambling refrigerator, devoid of heat or light, cut off from all her friends and family. She had no place to turn.

Make that almost no place.

Trembling from head to foot, partly from the cold, and partly from the shock, she sank to her knees, her head resting on the cushions of the couch, and for the first time in her 61 years that she could remember, she began weeping uncontrollably.

What seemed like hours passed before she could stop sobbing long enough to speak. Finally, her throat hoarse from the weeping, she began to pray out loud.

"Dear God, I know you're there. I know because my husband told me you were. He's Bill Simpson, God," she asserted, just in case God hadn't made the connection, "and he appears to be

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

in big trouble. He may be,” the words stuck in her throat, “. . . dead.”

“All my life, God, I’ve taken pride in not needing You. I’ve boasted that I had an umbrella that could shelter me from any storm this life could bring. God, I was wrong. I can’t handle this.”

“I know You may not bring my Billy back. But God, I can’t live without him without some help. I’ve never said this before, God, but my umbrella’s leaking . . . bad.”

Ethel paused a moment, trying to recall just what it was she had heard Billy tell so many people huddled around that old coffee pot at the store to do to become “born over” or whatever it was that happened. She could remember them talking about being sinners. (She’s never fancied herself one of those.) Now suddenly for the first time in her life, she realized that her very unwillingness to trust God with her life was the greatest sin of all . . . and she all but shouted at the top of her lungs, “God, I AM A SINNER. Please forgive me.”

Then she remembered how a young man from down at Briscoe knelt down by that coffee pot one day, and prayed, asking Jesus into his heart. At the time, it seemed so childish. Now suddenly, Ethel’s voice, quivering, yet with a strange sense of authority quietly invited Jesus to take over her life. “I don’t know for sure what this means,” she added, “but I know that’s what I want. Dear Jesus, please take my tattered, self-righteous umbrella and change it for one that works. Amen.”

Ethel Simpson was kneeling on a cold floor in a house that was nearing the freezing mark, yet a kind of warmth swept through her soul that she had never experienced in her life. It was like summertime had settled in her heart. She stood to her feet, somewhat amazed at the peace that had suddenly swept over her.

She slipped to her knees once more. “Lord,” she prayed (for now He WAS her Lord), “I know it may be too late, and I know it may not be your will, but Lord, if it be possible, save my husband from dying so he can know that I’ve become a Christian at last. But Lord, if it’s what’s best, . . . You take him home . . . (the words seemed to stick in her throat again, but she went on) . . . Now I know that, either way, one day I’ll see him again.”

The sun finally rose in Forest Grove on Christmas morning,

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

but its rays of sunshine seemed to be too little too late. A town encased in ice and snow, paralyzed by the loss of electricity and telephones, seemed almost afraid to admit it was Christmas.

The church house was certainly not full that Christmas morning. Though the heat and lights returned just minutes before the service was to begin, the inside of the church still felt like a frozen grave. And as word about Grandpa Billy began to be whispered around, a hushed kind of mourning began to replace the usually festive Christmas scene.

Just as the organ began to play some rather sour notes (Melba was a little less than accurate with her gloves on), through the side door came Ethel Simpson. Every hair was in place. Her face was serene and composed. She sat down on the front row, next to where Melba would sit when she had finished chipping away the ice cubes in the organ. As Melba watched Ethel out of the corner of her eye, she was overwhelmed at the peace Ethel seemed to have. Either she hadn't heard the news, or her umbrella was a lot tougher than anyone thought. As Pastor Thompson stood up and made the announcement about Billy, it was obvious that Ethel was not surprised. She knew.

The song service was subdued, but still a bit long. Then several deacons stopped and prayed for Billy and Ethel, mostly for Ethel, that she would have the grace to stand under the load. Then Pastor Thompson stood up to preach, and Melba slipped into the seat by her grieving, but composed best friend.

"You seem to be at peace," Melba whispered, as she slipped her hand in Ethel's for comfort. "I traded umbrellas last night," Ethel whispered back, "Jesus is my umbrella now."

"Yippee!!" the usually subdued Melba shouted at the top of her voice, sending the poor pastor who was trying to be somber into such a state of shock, he almost fell head first out of the pulpit.

All eyes were now on Melba, whose face had just acquired a sunburn seldom seen in the frozen north. But before she had a chance to explain, in the side door came a bedraggled Tim O'Reilly, his uniform smeared with mud and his eyes obviously red from crying. He walked directly to where Ethel was sitting, and without looking in her eyes, said, "Mrs. Simpson, you're needed at the hospital right away, please. They've . . . uh . . . found your husband." With that, he wheeled around, and literally

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

ran through the door, apologizing for interrupting the service.

It took Ethel seven minutes to navigate the icy trail between the church and the emergency room of Forest Grove Memorial Hospital. She prayed the whole way, thanking God that He would give her the grace to endure. Soon, her one-eyed Rambler rounded the corner and pulled up to those big double doors, just behind a huge ambulance that was marked, "Marble Creek EMS". Fearfully, yet resigned to God's will, she slipped out of the car, and watched as they carried the stretchers of the injured into the hospital. One by one she watched them. Still no Billy.

Finally, two men went in and brought out the last one. All she could see from where she was standing was an ominous white sheet that seemed to signify the worst.

As they brought Billy's lifeless body from the ambulance, Ethel ran to his side, and bending over him, whispered, "Oh, Billy, if only you could've known. I've got a brand new umbrella, Billy. I asked your Jesus to come into my heart. Oh, Billy, I'll still see you some day . . . I'm a Christian now!"

Ethel stood, nearly motionless, weeping, by the body of her husband of 41 years. As she turned to walk away, a voice behind her spoke, "Happy Birthday, Ethel. Welcome to the family!"

Ethel wheeled around to see who it was that had followed her to the hospital that might be speaking. She looked, but there was no one in sight.

Then she looked down at Grandpa Billy one more time. One eye opened, then closed, as if he were mischievously winking his eye at his best girl (which he was).

"Happy Birthday, Ethel," Grandpa whispered again, as the old man finally began to regain consciousness. For seven hours he had held on at the edge of a frozen lake, hanging on to a tree limb for his life, singing hymns of praise to his Jesus, until finally he had lapsed into an unconscious state, somehow miraculously without letting go of that limb.

Tears of grief turned to tears of joy as Ethel Simpson, 61 years old in this world, and less than 12 hours old in Jesus, began to sing and to praise her new-found Lord for what He had done. Billy Simpson got so excited listening, he sat bolt upright on the stretcher, and, using all the strength he had, shouted, "My Ethel's got a new umbrella!" The folks in the emergency room

Ethel's Amazing Umbrella

didn't quite understand why a new umbrella deserved that kind of recognition . . . but we understand, don't we?

Now, if you thought they had birthday celebrations at Grandpa Billy's place before, you won't believe the likes of what goes on at Christmas now. A brand new banner has been added that reads, "Happy Birthday, Ethel," and instead of hidin' in the back with the cookies and cake, Grandma Ethel Simpson is the first one up on that make-shift platform Christmas day to give her testimony. And Christmas day isn't the only day she gives her testimony.

Why, if you drive up to Forest Grove tomorrow, and stop in at Grandpa Billy's Drug Store, you can just bank on the fact that as soon as you walk in, one kindly old gentleman, now with a little of a limp, but with no less of a smile, will still greet you, and point to that seemingly invincible coffee pot in the corner, where he'll proceed to ask you if you happen to know a friend of his, whose name is Jesus. The difference today is, should you hesitate to meet his friend, he'll just send you over to the drug counter, where a beaming Ethel Simpson waits to take over where he left off.

By the way, on the counter, just in front of her, is a twelve-inch cardboard replica of an umbrella. And neatly printed on it are the words, "Ask me about my amazing umbrella."

I just dare you to ask!

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