Title: The Umbrella Man

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Genre: Short Stories

Rationale:

What would you do if a complete stranger approached you and unexpectedly asked for a favor? You could be wary of complete strangers and react in various ways. In any case, this story is analogous to this situation. It takes place on a rainy evening in London. In the story, a mother and her daughter went to the dentist to have the daughter's tooth filled. The incidents that follow turn out to be a lesson for both the mother and her daughter.

This story is told in chronological order, with lots of expression and discussion. The reader will recognize the characters and events in the story.

I'm going to tell you about a funny thing that happened to my mother and me yesterday evening. I am twelve years old and I'm a girl. My mother is thirty- four but I am nearly as tall as her already.

Yesterday afternoon, my mother took me up to London to see the dentist. He found one hole. It was in a back tooth and he filled it without hurting me too much. After that, we went to a café. I had a banana split and my mother had a cup of coffee. By the time we got up to leave, it was about six o'clock.

When we came out of the café it had started to rain.

"We must get a taxi," my mother said. We were wearing ordinary hats and coats, and it was raining quite hard. "Why don't we go back into the café and wait for it to stop?" I said. I wanted another of those banana splits. They were gorgeous. "It isn't going to stop," my mother said. "We must go home." We stood on the pavement in the rain, looking for a taxi. Lots of them came by but they all had passengers inside them. "I wish we had a car with a chauffeur," my mother said.

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Just then, a man came up to us. He was a small man and he was pretty old, probably seventy or more. He raised his hat politely and said to my mother "Excuse me. I do hope you will excuse me. . . ." He had a fine white moustache and bushy white eyebrows and a wrinkly pink face. He was sheltering under an umbrella which he held high over his head.

"Yes?" my mother said, very cool and distant. "I wonder if I could ask a small favour of you. " he said. "It is only a very small favour." I saw my mother looking at him suspiciously. She is a suspicious person, my mother. She is especially suspicious of two things - strange men and boiled eggs.

When she cuts the top off a boiled egg, she pokes around inside it with her spoon as though expecting to find a mouse or something. With strange men she has a golden rule which says, "The nicer the man seems to be, the more suspicious you must become." This little old man was particularly nice. He was polite. He was well-spoken. He was well-dressed. He was a real gentleman. The reason I knew he was a gentleman was because of his shoes. "You can always spot a gentleman by the shoes he wears," was another of my mother's favourite sayings. This man had beautiful brown shoes.

"The truth of the matter is," the little man was saying, "I've got myself into a bit of a scrape. I need some help. Not much, I assure you. It's almost nothing, in fact, but I do need it. You see, madam, old people like me often become terribly forgetful. . . ." My mother's chin was up and she was staring down at him along the full length of her nose. It is a fearsome thing, this frosty-nosed stare of my mother's. Most people go to pieces completely when she gives it to them.

I once saw my own headmistress begin to stammer and simper like an idiot when my mother gave her a really foul frosty-noser. But the little man on the pavement with the umbrella over his head didn't bat an eyelid.

He gave a gentle smile and said, "I beg you to believe, madam, that I am not in the habit of stopping ladies in the street and telling them my troubles." "I should hope not," my mother said.

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I felt quite embarrassed by my mother's sharpness. I wanted to say to her, "Oh, mummy, for heaven's sake, he's a very very old man, and he's sweet and polite, and he's in some sort of trouble, so don't be so beastly to him." But I didn't say anything.

The little man shifted his umbrella from one hand to the other. "I've never forgotten it before," he said.

"You've never forgotten what?" my mother asked sternly.

"My wallet," he said. "I must have left it in my other jacket. Isn't that the silliest thing to do?" "Are you asking me to give you money?" my mother said.

"Oh, goodness gracious me, no!" he cried. "Heaven forbid I should ever do that!" "Then what are you asking?" my mother said. "Do hurry up. We're getting soaked to the skin standing here." "I know you are," he said. "And that is why I'm offering you this umbrella of mine to protect you, and to keep forever, if . . . if only . . ." "If only what?" my mother said.

"If only you would give me in return a pound for my taxi-fare just to get me home." My mother was still suspicious. "If you had no money in the first place," she said, "then how did you get here?" "I walked," he answered. "Every day I go for a lovely long walk and then I summon a taxi to take me home. I do it every day of the year." "Why don't you walk home now," my mother asked.

"Oh, I wish I could," he said. "I do wish I could. But I don't think I could manage it on these silly old legs of mine. I've gone too far already." My mother stood there chewing her lower lip. She was beginning to melt a bit, I could see that. And the idea of getting an umbrella to shelter under must have tempted her a good deal.

"It's a lovely umbrella," the little man said. "So I've noticed," my mother said.

"It's silk," he said.

"I can see that." "Then why don't you take it, madam," he said. "It cost

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me over twenty pounds, I promise you. But that's of no importance so long as I can get home and rest these old legs of mine." I saw my mother's hand feeling for the clasp on her purse. She saw me watching her. I was giving her one of my own frosty-nosed looks this time and she knew exactly what I was telling her. Now listen, mummy, I was telling her, you simply mustn't take advantage of a tired old man in this way. It's a rotten thing to do. My mother paused and looked back at me. Then she said to the little man, "I don't think it's quite right that I should take a silk umbrella from you worth twenty pounds. I think I'd just better give you the taxi-fare and be done with it." "No, no, no!" he cried. "It's out of the question! I wouldn't dream of it! Not in a million years! I would never accept money from you like that! Take the umbrella, dear lady, and keep the rain off your shoulders!" My mother gave me a triumphant sideways look.

There you are, she was telling me. You're wrong. He wants me to have it.

She fished into her purse and took out a pound note.

She held it out to the little man. He took it and handed her the umbrella. He pocketed the pound, raised his hat, gave a quick bow from the waist, and said. "Thank you, madam, thank you. " Then he was gone.

"Come under here and keep dry, darling," my mother said. "Aren't we lucky. I've never had a silk umbrella before. I couldn't afford it." "Why were you so horrid to him in the beginning?" I asked.

"I wanted to satisfy myself he wasn't a trickster," she said. "And I did. He was a gentleman. I'm very pleased I was able to help him." "Yes, mummy," I said. "A real gentleman," she went on. "Wealthy, too, otherwise he wouldn't

have had a silk umbrella. I shouldn't be surprised if he isn't a titled person. Sir Harry Goldsworthy or something like that." "Yes, mummy." "This will be a good lesson to you," she went on.

"Never rush things. Always take your time when you are summing someone up. Then you'll never make mistakes." "There he goes," I said. "Look." "Where?" "Over there. He's crossing the street. Goodness, mummy, what a

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