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by Gabriella Bonavoglia

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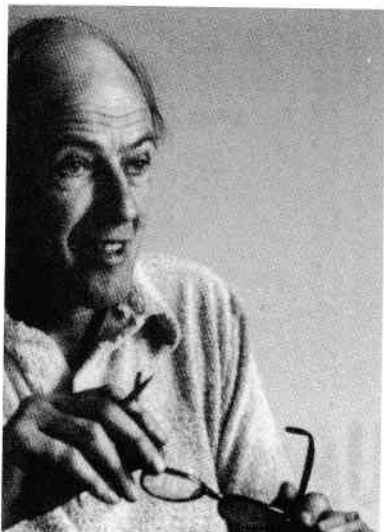
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THE UMBRELLA MAN

by ROALD DAHL



ROALD DAHL was born in South Wales in 1916 of Norwegian parents. During the 2nd World War he served as an RAF pilot in Greece, Syria and Libya, where he was seriously wounded.

In 1942 he was posted to Washington as Assistant Air Attaché and his first short stories, mostly based on his wartime experiences, date back to that period.

There followed several collections of short stories which were highly acclaimed by critics and public alike and have been translated into many languages.

His publications include: *Someone Like You*, *Kiss Kiss*, *Switch Birch*, *Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life*, *Tales of the Unexpected*, *Roald Dahl's Book of Ghost Stories*, and a novel *My Uncle Oswald*.

He also wrote many highly successful children's books including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Magic Finger*, *Fantastic Mr Fox*, *The Witches* and *Matilda*.

Roald Dahl is also remembered for inventing the Gremlins, which became popular all over the world after a film version of his book was made by Walt Disney.

He died in November 1990.

Before reading

1 How do you react if a stranger comes up to you? Do you agree with any of the statements given below? Give reasons for your choice(s).

- Always be suspicious of strangers.
- Do not judge people by appearances.
- Trust people and you will be rewarded.
- You can trust people if they are well-dressed and distinguished-looking.
- The nicer people seem to be, the less you should trust them!

2 Look at the title of the story. What do you expect the story to be about?

Tick one of the alternatives below:

- a man who repairs umbrellas
- a man who has found an umbrella
- a man who offers his umbrella to someone

3 Imagine you have gone out to do some shopping. The weather is fine at first but then it suddenly changes and it starts raining heavily. You do not have an umbrella with you. A man sheltering under a large umbrella comes up to you.

What would you expect him to say?

4 Listen to the first part of the story twice. Decide if the following statements are true or false and tick accordingly. Then read the text to check your results.

	True	False
a The story is set in Wales.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b The weather is bad.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c The "girl" narrator is 20 years old.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d She went to the dentist's.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e Her mother is with her.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f A tall, middle-aged man approaches them.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>



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 nearly¹ as tall as her already. Yesterday afternoon, my mother took me up to

5 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 split² and my mother had a cup of coffee. By the time we got up to leave, it was about six o'clock.

10 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.³

'It isn't going to stop,' my mother said. 'We must get home.'

15 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.

20 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 bushy⁴ white eyebrows and a wrinkly⁵ pink face. He was sheltering under an umbrella which he held high over his head.

'Yes?' my mother said, very cool and distant.

25 'I wonder if I could ask a small favour of you,' he said. 'It is only a very small favour.'

1 **nearly** : almost.

2 **banana split** : banana cut in half and served with ice-cream.

3 **gorgeous** ['gɔ:dʒəs] : (here) delicious.

4 **bushy** ['bʊʃi] : thick with hair.

5 **wrinkly** ['rɪŋkli] : with small folds or lines in the skin showing age.

- 5 What favour do you think the umbrella man will ask? Discuss in pairs.
- 6 Now listen to the next part of the story and then answer the questions on page 6.

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.⁶ This man had beautiful brown shoes. 30 35

‘The truth of the matter is,’ the little man was saying, ‘I’ve got myself into a bit of a scrape.⁷ 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 ...’ 40

My mother’s chin was up and she was staring down at him along the full length of her nose. It was a fearsome⁸ thing, this frosty-nosed stare⁹ of my mother’s. Most people go to pieces completely when she gives it to them. I once saw my own headmistress begin to stammer¹⁰ and simper like an idiot when my mother gave her a really foul¹¹ frosty-noser. But 45

6 **sayings** : (here) often repeated expressions.

7 **scrape** [skreɪp] : (infml) embarrassing situation.

8 **fearsome** ['fiəsəm] : frightening.

9 **frosty-nosed stare** : cold look of superiority and hostility.

10 **stammer** : speak with rapid repetitions of same syllable.

11 **foul** [faʊl] : terrible.

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.'

50 'I should hope not,' my mother said.

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 ¹² to him.' But I didn't say anything.

55 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. ¹³

'My wallet,' he said. 'I must have left it in my other jacket. Isn't that the silliest thing to do?'

60 'Are you asking me to give you money?' my mother said.

'Oh, good gracious me, ¹⁴ 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 ¹⁵ here.'

65 '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 ¹⁶ just to get me home.'

- a What favour did the umbrella man ask?
- b What reason did he give for having to ask this favour?

Were your predictions right?

- 12 **beastly** ['bi:stli] : unpleasant, unkind.
- 13 **sternly** [stɜ:nli] : seriously, disapprovingly.
- 14 **good gracious me** : (dated) exclamation of surprise or indignation.
- 15 **soaked to the skin** : (idm) completely wet.
- 16 **taxi-fare** ['tæksi feə] : money charged for a journey by taxi.

7 Find these phrases in the text, then look at how they are used in context, read the definitions given and tick the one you think is right.

a pokes around inside it:

- mixes it around very quickly
- makes little pushing movements, showing suspicion
- doesn't concentrate on what she is doing

b staring down:

- looking at someone kindly, showing sympathy
- looking at someone with indifference
- looking at someone in a condescending way

c go to pieces:

- feel a little uneasy but soon recover
- lose control of themselves because they are upset or nervous
- can't speak

d didn't bat an eyelid:

- didn't react
- didn't move his eyes
- was impatient

8 Look back at Extracts 1 and 2. Fill in the table below with information about the characters introduced by the "girl" narrator.

	MAN	MOTHER
Physical details		
Psychological details		

Which character does the "girl" narrator sympathize with most?

9 Look at two of the mother's sayings.

- "The nicer the man seems to be, the more suspicious you must become."
- "You can always spot a gentleman by the shoes he wears."

What is strange about them?

10 Go through the list of adjectives below and in the spaces provided write the one(s) you consider appropriate to each character (if you are not sure read on before deciding).

- | | | | |
|------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|
| • trustworthy | • sensitive | • witty | • independent |
| • inconsistent | • prejudiced | • snobbish | • pompous |
| • short-tempered | • generous | • unfriendly | • persistent |
| • conceited | • wise | • critical | • authoritarian |
| • well-mannered | • polite | • rude | • eccentric |

GIRL	
HER MOTHER	
THE MAN	