

A Rainy Day

by Elaine Fowler Palencia

On either side of the front walk at 302 Elizabeth Avenue, in Blue Valley, Kentucky, the leaves of the sugar maples hung motionless, as in a drawing. Gray clouds floated low over the roofs and treetops of the neighborhood. The morning breeze had ceased. Birds and squirrels had withdrawn to their nests. No one moved on the street. It was mid-morning on an April Saturday in 1951.

Emily Forrester, five years old, sat cross-legged before the screen door in the front hall, watching the street. The hardwood floor felt cool on her bare thighs. Barefoot, she was wearing her blue gingham play dress. Her mother was in the back yard, bringing laundry in from the clothesline. The radio had said rain was coming. Emily was waiting for the rain. A turn in the weather was always interesting. It could change the whole feeling of a day and how the day unfolded. The thickness of the air had seeped inside her, so that she felt heavy and sleepy. The world was a gray box, waiting for someone to lift the lid.

In the kitchen, vegetable beef soup simmered on the stove, the rich aroma foretelling lunch. Yesterday at the store Mama got soup bones from Leo and they talked to Scottie, the cashier. A young woman with fluffy red hair, snow white skin, and round blue eyes, she was called Scottie because she was from Scotland. Mama said Scottie was a War Bride. She had a little boy, named Eddie after his father.

Big Eddie worked for Carr Lumber. He was tall and wide and his boots hit the ground like big loud blocks of wood. Once when Emily and her mother were at the store, he came in to buy bananas and chewing tobacco. He laughed and joked and pulled Emily's pigtails. Another day Scottie took a box out from under the counter and showed Mama what little Eddie's grandparents had sent from Scotland for his birthday. Emily was envious of the cowboy outfit: hat, leather vest, neckerchief, chaps, red cowboy boots, and a cap pistol.

Scottie looked at Mama with tears in her eyes. "He'll be a little Yank! When all I want is to take him home!"

Later Mama explained that Scottie didn't get along with Big Eddie. "I told her she ought to go to school," Mama said. "She doesn't make anything at the store. A woman needs her own money."

"Why?" asked Emily.

"In case something happens," said Mama. "I've got money. My mama always had her own money. Want to stop at Baird's for a Coke?"

Outside the warm air had begun to stir, but it gave no relief from the feeling of waiting. A woman was coming up Second Street. Where the street made a T with Elizabeth Avenue, she turned towards their house.

It was Mrs. Fried, Dr. Fried's wife, and she carried a brown paper sack in one hand. Emily liked how jolly Mrs. Fried was. She and her husband were from Austria, a country in Europe. Europe was across the ocean.

"Hello, darling," called Mrs. Fried as she came up the walk.

Being from another country, she talked crooked. Scottie talked a little crooked, but Mrs. Fried's rich, deep voice sounded more foreign. Her voice made Emily think of the inside of a fruitcake, dark and moist and sweet. The Frieds lived in a tiny house on the edge of town. Emily liked to visit them. Dr. Fried, who taught at the college like Daddy, played music on his record player and chuckled when Emily danced to it. The music Emily liked best, which she called tippy-tippy music for the crisp, bright sound, was by Mozart. Mrs. Fried served delicious, complicated cakes with whipped cream on top.

"What a fine dress you wear. Is Mother home?" said Mrs. Fried, climbing the steps to the front porch. She was short and sturdy, with dark thick hair that flowed back from her square forehead in waves.

"Mama's in the kitchen," said Emily, scrambling to her feet just as her mother appeared in the hallway, tucking a lock of hair behind one ear.

"Hi, Regina," she said. "Come in. It's fixing to rain."

"No, no, darling, I cannot stay. I have brought you something." *I hef broat you zumsing*, Emily repeated to herself.

"Oh?" Mama hesitated, not liking to talk through the screen. "Sure you won't come in for a minute?"

"No, my dear, I must go to the grocery before Albert comes home for lunch."

Emily scooted to one side and Mama stepped out on the porch. Mrs. Fried opened the sack so that Mama could look in.

"Here there are two boxes of matzo. Matzo bread, unleavened. My sister sends it from New York for Passover. But Albert and I—," she waved a hand, "—we do not celebrate here. Here is different. Do you understand? There is no one."

Mama nodded slowly. "Okay," she said.

Mrs. Fried thrust the sack at Mama. "I do not want to waste. Albert said, perhaps the child will enjoy. With soup, with butter."

"Well, that's very nice of you," said Mama uncertainly. "Waste not, want not."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Fried. "Albert said, Norton will understand what it is."

"Oh, yes, I expect he will," said Mama, nodding again.

"Traditional for Passover," said Mrs. Fried as she turned to go, "but here we do not observe."

"Thank you," said Mama after her. "Are you going to bridge club on Tuesday?"

"Oh, yes. I am looking very much forward to it. Goodbye," said Mrs. Fried over her shoulder. "Goodbye, Emily."

"What is it?" asked Emily when Mrs. Fried had gone.

"It looks like big flat crackers," said Mama, pulling one out of the sack. "I reckon we can have some with the soup."

"What's Passover?"

"It's in the Bible. You remember," said Mama. "The part where the children of Israel put lamb's blood on their lintels so God would spare them when he was killing the Egyptians. And then the Israelites went into the desert without letting their bread rise, so it was unleavened. That was the Exodus."

“Oh, yeah,” said Emily. It was a part she didn’t like because of all the blood.

Mama broke off a piece of cracker and tasted it. “No salt, either. Ick.” She broke off another fragment and handed it to Emily.

As she chewed the cracker, a strange feeling came over Emily. The cracker felt odd in her mouth, not like a saltine. And the taste was empty. There was a big hole in it where the salt should be. It wasn’t like food. It was like something else, something that wanted to be food but wasn’t. She swallowed it. It tasted like the day—like waiting for rain and everything dead with waiting.

“Peanut butter would improve it,” said Mama, starting for the kitchen.

Following her, Emily asked, “Why did God kill the Egyptians?”

“Because they believed in different gods.”

“What gods? Baal?” asked Emily, remembering the word from Sunday School.

“Here,” said Mama, handing her a piece of matzo spread with Peter Pan.

“Would God kill us if we didn’t believe in him?”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” said Mama, putting the peanut butter jar back in the cabinet. “Regina’s doing real well learning bridge. What a shame that people like her and Albert had to flee for their lives.”

“I thought they were from Austria,” said Emily. “Not Egypt.”

“They are. Do you realize that woman has a Ph.D. from the University of Vienna? Just like Albert.”

“Why did they have to flee?”

“It was that old fool Hitler and the Nazis. They didn’t like Jewish people,” said Mama. “Can you imagine? Nice people like the Frieds.”

“Who’s Hitler?”

“A bad man. Ask your father when he gets home. Go on, now. I’ve got to get on this ironing.”

Emily carried her snack back to the front hall. Just as she arrived at the open door, a long sigh came down out of the trees: raindrops hitting the leaves.

It was a warm, straight-down rain. Nibbling the cracker, Emily sat on the floor and watched. The peanut butter made a big difference. Soon she was almost used to the new taste and asked for more. After she ate, she got the green umbrella out of the closet and walked out to the end of their sidewalk, splashing in every puddle. There she squatted under the umbrella and examined the activity in the gutter.

Clear and bright, rain sluiced down the gentle slope of the paved street. As the rain drummed louder on Emily’s umbrella, the stream in the gutter picked up freight. Leaves, twigs, and pebbles rode past, bound for the drain in front of the Longs’ house. Emily pulled some leaves from the japonicas by the driveway and set them a-sail. She tried floating objects of different weights. Acorns were too heavy. An ant swirled by, clinging to a maple seed. Now and then a car passed, the tires sending out sparkly sprays of water. Emily waved at the drivers, all people she knew.

After a while the little river in the gutter slowed and became shallower. The rain was letting up. When the sun peeped out of the clouds, Emily shut the umbrella and laid it in the grass. Fat pink worms had come out on the sidewalk. Emily was watching them ooze along on their mysterious errands when, from the head of the street, came a whistle. Her father was striding home from the college for lunch. He had furled his umbrella but still wore his fedora.

“Whatcha doing, little one?” he called.

Emily jumped to her feet. Just as she did so, a gray wave of sadness washed over her. Running towards her father, she began to cry.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, gathering her up. A big man, he carried her in the crook of an arm. “You’re not afraid of a little rain, are you?”

“No,” said Emily, feeling as if she would choke.

“Did a big old bear come along?”

“No.”

“Aren’t you glad to see Daddy?”

She was so very glad. But the question made her cry harder. She didn’t know why, but she felt afraid.

“Here, now. What is it?”

“I don’t know,” she wailed, pressing her face against his suit coat and inhaling his comforting smell, a blend of wool, drycleaning fluid, aftershave, and talcum powder.

“Well, you’re safe now,” said her father. “Daddy won’t let anything get you.” Chuckling, he bounced her on his arm.

Emily wiped her nose on her arm. “Daddy?”

“What?”

“Can I have an allowance like Donald?”

“Well, I guess you’re old enough. We’ll ask Mama. What do you want to use it for?”

They turned in at their sidewalk. Emily cringed as her father unknowingly stepped on an earthworm, turning it to pink paste.

“I’m not going to spend my allowance,” she said. “I’m going to save it.” In case something happened. A drop of rain rolled down the back of her neck and Emily shivered. The sun was warm on her face, but, inside her heart, it was still raining.