

Blossoms *on the* Roof

REBECCA MARTIN



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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Although the people in this story are imaginary, many of the events really happened. In 1894 several Amish families moved to North Dakota to claim a homestead. There the pioneers built and lived in their sod houses, endured prairie fires, blizzards, and droughts, and learned to earn a living from the land.

Cover by DesignByJulia, Woodland Park, Colorado

All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Summary: Ten-year-old Ben and eight-year-old Polly are used to their parents' struggle to make ends meet on their Indiana farm in the 1890s and look forward to a better life in North Dakota where they will be homesteaders, but the windswept prairie will provide new challenges.

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The Big Blue Umbrella

Polly stood with her nose pressed to the windowpane. “The rain has stopped. Can we go to Grandma’s now, Mom?”

Mother came and stood beside her to study the clouds that tumbled away to the horizon. “It does look as if the rain is over—for now. But the weather seems unsettled. What if another shower comes up? You need to be back by supper time because it’s Saturday night.”

Ten-year-old Ben had a solution to that problem. “Grandma has that blue umbrella, you know. I’m sure it’s big enough for Polly and me to walk underneath. Don’t you think so, Polly?”

“Oh, yes. Grandpa opened it up one day, and it was huge.”

Ben’s eyes danced. How many times had he stared longingly at that shiny, blue umbrella hanging behind

Grandpa's front door? How many times had he imagined what fun it would be to walk in the rain while holding up a roof to keep dry? He certainly hoped it would start to rain when it was time for them to come home.

Mother was still looking out the window. "All right, you may go. I do want Grandma to get this note today." Carefully she folded the paper on which she had written a letter for her mother. "Polly, you may put this in your pocket."

"I want to go too!" begged four-year-old Jakie when he saw Ben putting on his hat. Jakie was so excited that his red hair bounced up and down.

Mother said firmly, "No, Jakie. Today you can't go to Grandpa's. It might rain again soon, and you mustn't get wet. Remember, you still have a cough."

"I'm all well again," Jakie said, pouting.

"No, you are not all well, even if the cough is better," Mother said just as firmly. "Now, Ben and Polly, you had better be off if you want to be back in time for supper."

Grandpa and Grandma Yoder lived a half mile down the road. A half mile is not far to go for an eight-year-old girl and her ten-year-old brother, and certainly not when new, dark clouds are boiling up from the western horizon!

"It could start raining any minute," said Polly.

Ben eyed the clouds. "Let's run."

And run they did while the cold March wind nipped at their heels and the clouds rolled across the sky.

“I’m—I’m not even cold,” Polly said, trying to catch her breath while standing on Grandma’s porch.

Ben laughed. “I’m hot! Running keeps you warm.” He reached up to knock at Grandma’s green painted door.

Polly grabbed his arm. “It’s my turn to knock. Remember, you did last time.”

“Okay.” He let his arm drop.

Polly gave the door two good, hard raps. *Knock, knock.*

Just like that the door popped open, and Grandma’s round, wrinkled face beamed out at them. “Come in! Come in!” she said, inviting them into the house.

Polly knew exactly where to hang her bonnet in Grandma’s kitchen, and Ben knew exactly where to hang his hat. Beside the door were four wooden pegs. Polly and Ben knew the story behind those pegs. Grandpa had put up those pegs at just the right height for a girl to hang her clothes.

“Here’s a note from Mother,” Polly announced, fishing for the folded paper in her pocket.

“Thank you,” said Grandma. “I must get my glasses.” Perching her gold-rimmed spectacles on her nose, she read Mother’s note carefully.

Polly hoped Grandma would tell them what the note was about, but she did not.

Well, she did mention one part of it. “Your mother writes that you may stay for twenty minutes, and then you

must hurry home again. She also writes that if there is anything you can help me with, I'm to set you to work."

Grandma smiled at Polly and Ben. "You know, I could use someone to sweep the porch and someone to churn the butter." Grandma was a very busy person because she was the homemaker for her two grown sons, who still lived at home to help with the farm, and Grandpa. Both her daughters were married and had families of their own to care for.

"I'll churn the butter," Ben said quickly.

"And I'll do the porch." Polly grabbed the broom and went to work.

Up and down went the plunger of the big wooden butter churn. Ben listened carefully to the *glug-glug* sound inside, knowing that when cream turns to butter, the *glug-glug* turns to a *splish-splash* noise.

Polly had just swept the last corner of the porch when Ben shouted, "It's butter now! I can hear it."

"Good," said Grandma. She opened the churn, poured off the thick, white buttermilk, and then fished out golden globs of butter. "Here, I will put some butter into a jar for you to take home."

"Oh, thank you," said Polly. "We don't have butter very often since we sold our cow."

Grandma's kitchen was silent. All three of them knew why the Yoders had to sell their cow, and Polly wished she hadn't mentioned it.

"And here are cookies for you because you were my good

helpers,” Grandma said briskly. “I’m afraid your twenty minutes are up already.”

“Thank you,” said Ben, munching on the cookie. Then he looked out the window and said happily, “Oh, it’s raining again.”

Grandma was puzzled. “Why are you so happy about that?”

Ben glanced quickly at the blue umbrella hanging near the door. He knew he shouldn’t ask to use it, but ever since Grandpa had bought it last year, Ben had longed for an excuse to use it.

Grandma saw him look at the umbrella. “You could use our umbrella to walk home in the rain,” she suggested.

A big grin lit up Ben’s face. Another grin lit up Polly’s face. Ben promised, “We’ll take very good care of it.”

“Come out here on the porch, and I’ll show you how it works,” Grandma said.

Ben laughed. “I know why we have to go out on the porch. If we opened that umbrella in here, we could never get it through the door!”

“See this little white button?” said Grandma. “First you push it—like this.” *Click*. Just like that, the umbrella blossomed into a big, round roof!

“Now push it way up and past that other little button—like so. The umbrella is locked in place now.” And with that Grandma put the smooth, black-and-gold handle into Ben’s hands.

He beamed. “See, Polly? There’s lots of room for two under here.” Down the steps he went and out from under the porch roof. Rain began drumming on the fabric of the umbrella, but not a drop landed on Ben. “This is great, Grandma. I’ve never held an umbrella before.”

“Wait!” called Grandma. “I have to warn you about one thing. Always keep the umbrella turned toward the wind. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Ben, although this was only partly true. He understood that the round dome of the umbrella must always face the oncoming wind, but he did not understand why.

Clutching the gift of butter, Polly joined him under the umbrella. They waved goodbye to Grandma and set off.

Paddy Lang

While we are on Grandpa's driveway, I must keep the umbrella turned this way," Ben said. "Then when we go out on the road, I must turn it to face the wind. That's what Grandma said."

Polly trotted happily alongside her brother, watching the rain streaming off the edges of the umbrella and splashing down into the puddles.

After a while Ben said, "I think I know what would happen if we turned the umbrella so that the wind could get beneath it."

"Oh? What would happen?"

"Why, it would be like sailing a ship," Ben crowed. "You know that picture of a sailing ship Grandpa keeps in his desk?"

Polly nodded. "You mean the ship on which his grandpa sailed to America?"

“Right. In 1809.” Ben and Polly had heard the story of their ancestors so often that they could not forget the date. More than eighty years had passed since Grandpa’s grandpa had left his home in Europe to come to America.

“Anyway,” Ben went on to say, “a sailing ship works because the wind blows into the sails. So if I let the wind blow into the umbrella—”

“You’d fly away!” cried Polly with eyes wide with wonder.

Ben laughed so hard that he almost lost his grip on the umbrella’s handle. “So you think I would go sailing away over Grandpa’s field and even over the roof of his barn? No, it wouldn’t be like that. All I’d have to do is run very fast to keep up with the umbrella. Wouldn’t that be fun?” He glanced up and down the road to make sure there were no buggies coming.

“Don’t do it,” begged Polly, placing a hand on her brother’s arm. “I couldn’t keep up, and then I’d get wet. And besides, Ben, it would be wrong. Grandma told us not to, and you promised.”

Ben shook off her hand. Polly was a good sister, but sometimes he wished she weren’t quite so good. He wished she had more adventure in her bones. That was what Grandpa had said one day about Father. “He’s got adventure in his bones.” Ben wanted to be like Father, always ready to try something new. But he couldn’t if Polly was around.

“You won’t do it, Ben, will you?” Polly implored again.

“Aw, no, I guess not,” he replied. “We’re almost home anyway. Careful, I have to make a quarter turn with the umbrella as we turn into our lane.”

Now the umbrella was to their left. When they started off at Grandpa’s, it had been to their right. “The wind stays the same,” Polly said, “but we have to change directions.”



The wind suddenly turned the umbrella inside out.

Then it happened. Ben peered out from beneath the umbrella, and what he saw excited him so much that he forgot to keep the umbrella turned toward the wind. Poof! The wind gusted beneath the umbrella. How it tugged!

Ben managed to hang on and not sail away over the fields and rooftops. With a sickening *crack*, the umbrella turned inside out!

Polly wrung her hands. "It's ruined! Why did you do it?"

"I didn't do it! At least not on purpose. It just happened!" Sadly Ben inspected the remains of the umbrella. The gleaming spines were crumpled pieces of wire now. The fabric looked like a tattered, burst balloon.

Polly wailed. "Oh, why did you forget?" Neither of them thought about the rain, even though they were getting wet.

Ben pointed toward the hitching post in front of their white clapboard house. "Why did I forget? Because I saw that!"

Polly let out a little gasp. "Oh, it's him again." Tied to the post was a brown horse hitched to a top buggy that everyone knew very well. It was painted green, and the folding top was bright yellow.

No one else in the district had a buggy like that. If you saw it in your yard, you knew that Paddy Lang had come to pay a visit. And if you were renting one of Paddy's farms, then you were not glad to see him, especially not this year.

It was 1894, the second year of a depression that had left millions of people without jobs and without money.

“Many people,” Mother often said by way of reminding the children, “are without food too. But by the grace of God, we live on a farm and can raise our own food.”

The last time she’d said that, Father had put in, “Providing we can buy seeds. We can’t raise food without seeds.”

Mother had then reminded him that they could plant all the potatoes they weren’t able to sell last year.

“But what if nobody has money to buy potatoes this year?” Father had asked.

“Why, we’ll eat them,” Mother had replied. To Ben that hadn’t seemed like a real answer to the very real problem of how to buy seeds. Looking at Paddy Lang’s brightly painted buggy, he guessed Father was in the house talking with Paddy. And Ben knew what they were talking about—the rent, the money the Yoders owed Paddy for living on this farm.

Polly said worriedly, “The last time Paddy came, we sold the cow to pay the rent. I wonder what we’re going to sell this time.”

“Well, I just hope we never have to sell Jasper and Rob.” Ben looked over to the pasture where their team of dapple-gray horses stood near the gate. The rain had stopped, and the late afternoon sun sent slanting rays across the field, touching the horses’ white manes with gold.

“And I hope we don’t sell Flip either,” said Polly, stooping to pat the yellow puppy who came bounding to meet them.

“Huh? Nobody would give any money for Flip.” Ben looked to the ruined umbrella again. To think that he had almost planned to disobey Grandma! How terrible that would have been if the umbrella had been destroyed because of his disobedience. Having it happen by accident was bad enough.

He set the umbrella down near the front steps. “No use taking it inside if Paddy Lang’s here,” he said to his sister.

“I don’t even want to go in. I don’t like the way he talks to Mother and Father,” Polly said unhappily.

Ben paused with one foot on the bottom step. “Well, I guess we could go to the barn.”

Polly shrugged. “I don’t like going to the barn either.”

Ben knew why she said that. These days the barn was just too empty. First they sold two calves. Then they sold the ten sheep. Then—worst of all—they sold Lilac, the cow.

Before Ben and Polly could decide where they wanted to go, the door opened and Paddy Lang stepped out.

Mother had once said that Paddy’s last name should be Long, not Lang. He certainly was a long man. He stood over six feet tall, and he had long legs, long arms, a long face, and a long nose. Even his hair was long. His gray locks bounced on the collar of his green and black coat as he walked.

Paddy looked at the children with piercing black eyes. “Where have you been?”

“Uh—at Grandpa’s,” Ben stammered.

“Oh. Well, goodbye.” He walked out to his shiny buggy, untied the horse, and drove away.

Polly ran into the kitchen. “Oh, Mother, was he mean?” She looked from Mother’s face to Father’s face.

Mother sat in the rocking chair holding baby Lisbet. “No, Polly, Paddy wasn’t mean. He has never been mean.”

“But he...he made us sell all our animals!”

“No, he did not, Polly,” Father said kindly. “We ourselves decided to sell our things because we needed to pay our rent if we wanted to keep on living on Paddy’s farm. We owed it to him. We want to be honest.”

Now Ben had a question. “But why does he make us pay the rent when he knows we can’t make any money with his farm these days?”

Father turned to look at him. “Well, you might say that Paddy Lang is a good businessman. And today he was very good to us. We offered to sell the team—”

Ben held his breath and thought, *Not Jasper and Rob!*

“—in order to pay the rent, but Paddy told us no and that we couldn’t farm without the team, and so he will give us more time.”

“Shall I get the dishes, Mother?” Polly asked. There was no supper on the table, yet it was supper time.

“Yes, please. The soup is ready.”

Polly didn't need to ask what kind of soup. It was potato and turnip soup, of course, because those were the only two vegetables they had left in their root cellar. As long as they had onions and cabbage and carrots, Mother would make other kinds of soup, but this spring it was always potato and turnip soup, sometimes with a few lumps of dried beef or salt pork added.

"Father, I ruined Grandpa's umbrella," Ben said unhappily. "I happened to turn the wrong way, and the wind caught it."

"Oh, that's too bad," said Father, getting to his feet. "Where is the umbrella?"

Ben led him out to the front steps. "I never knew an umbrella could turn inside out."

"I guess you had no reason to know much about umbrellas," Father said kindly. "As far as I know, Grandpa is the only one in church who owns an umbrella."

He took the poor crumpled thing in his hands and turned it over several times. "I think we might be able to fix this."

"Really?" Ben said hopefully.

"Yes. I will use a pair of pliers to straighten these spines. I will pull the fabric back in place and mend this tear. It won't be as good as new, but it will work."

Polly came to the door in time to hear that. "Oh, I'm so glad you can make it right again. And Mother says to come in. Supper's ready."