

## Last Minute Miracle

by Gregg Grippo

I don't have time for this," I muttered to myself, pulling my truck into the overgrown lot on the outskirts of town. I own a small construction company in upstate New York. A friend of a friend had asked if I'd do him a favor. An elderly woman had been burned out of her home. "She's been living in a little shack out there since May," he said. "Christmas is coming.

I thought maybe you could help her out. "

I eyeballed the property. Help her out how? There was a rickety garden shed and the charred remains of a modest house. What am I supposed to do - build her a new house? Out of the question. I had a business to run.

Just then the shed door opened and an elderly woman wearing a bright red scarf and wrapped in a too-light coat came out. Instead of warm boots, she wore old sneakers.

"Mrs. Turek," I said, "I'm Gregg Grippo."

"Grippo?" She cocked her head. "Are you related to Elizabeth Grippo?"

"That's my aunt. Don't tell me you know her."

"Long ago," she said. "We were schoolmates. I taught her to speak English"

When Aunt Elizabeth arrived in this country in 1920, she spoke only her native Italian. It must have been tough learning a whole new language. I moved closer. "How did your house burn down?" I asked.

Mrs. Turek lowered her eyes. "A log rolled out of the fireplace. I couldn't put the flames out. By the time the fire department arrived, it was too late. The house was gone. I should have left that night. But I couldn't. I've been here almost sixty years.

"Where have you been staying?" She led me to the shed and two cats slipped out. Oh, my, I thought. I followed her inside. The dim light showed a space about the size of a walk-in closet. Pots and pans were scattered on the floor. In the center was an old cot covered in afghans. Particle-board walls were all that separated her from the cold.

I spun around and walked outside. She should not be staying here, I thought. That friend of mine. He must have known I couldn't leave Mrs. Turek like this. But I couldn't build a house by myself. I needed a crew. It was almost Christmas.

Who had time? Couldn't she just move to a shelter? Suddenly an old saying of my grandmother's - Aunt Elizabeth's mother - came to mind, clear as a church bell: "If it's to be, it's up to me."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of everything," I heard myself tell Mrs. Turek. I loped toward my truck. As I climbed into the cab, I blurted out, "You'll have a new house by Christmas. "

Am I crazy? Even if I could lean on a few men, where would I find the materials? My eyes fell on the Bible I keep on the passenger seat in the truck. I thought again of my grandmother's words . "If it's to be, Lord,I prayed, it's up to me."

I called everyone I knew in construction - my crew, suppliers, even a competitor or two. "I need your help," I told them.

Within days, 15 men arrived in Mrs. Turek's yard, ready to work. We started pounding nails and raising beams. We'd agreed to donate our time, but I didn't know how long we could afford to continue. Even a small house is a big project once you start building.

Word spread. The next morning 20 showed up, then 30, then a local TV film crew. Mrs. Turek's story ran on the evening news. That night my phone lit up. "Kregg," said a man who explained he was an electrical contractor, "what can I do to help?"

"Saw you on TV:" another caller - a plumbing contractor - said' "Anything you need, you got it."

I got calls from roofing companies, heating supply companies, carpet suppliers. A car dealer offered Mrs. Turek use of an RV free of charge until her new house was completed.

The frame went up. We laid out the rooms. Mrs. Turek threw that old scarf over her head, pulled up a lawn chair and watched her new house go up, like she was watching a movie.

We finished on Christmas Eve. A cozy tan ranch with black shutters. Shiny new appliances adorned the kitchen and new furniture filled the house. The roofing company guys even chipped in for Christmas presents.

Mrs. Turek stared in disbelief. "It's my little doll house," she said, her eyes teary. A few of those tough guys in my crew teared up too, including yours truly.

I walked down the driveway to my pickup. I turned and looked at the house, now all lit up for the holiday. I thought of Aunt Elizabeth and of my grandmother's words again. When there was something you knew God wanted you to do, you took the first step - and you could trust him with the rest. It was the smallest home I'd ever built, but it gave me the biggest feeling I'd ever had.

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