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ROALD DAHL

GENESIS AND CATASTROPHE

A True Story

“THIS is normal,” the doctor was saying. “Just lie back and relax.”

His voice was miles away in the distance and he seemed to be shouting at her. “You have a son.”

“You have a fine son. You understand that, don’t you? A fine son. Did you hear him crying?”

“Is he all right, Doctor?”

“Of course he is all right.”

“Please let me see him.”

“You’ll see him in a moment.”

“You are certain he is all right?”

“I am quite certain.”

“Is he still crying?”

“Try to rest. There is nothing to worry about.”

“Why has he stopped crying, Doctor? What happened?”

“Don’t excite yourself, please. Everything is normal.”

“I want to see him. Please let me see him.”

“Dear lady,” the doctor said, patting her hand. “You have a fine strong healthy child. Don’t you believe me when I tell you that?”

“What is the woman over there doing to him?”

“Your baby is being made to look pretty for you,” the doctor said. “We are giving him a

little wash, that is all. You must spare us a moment or two for that."

"You swear he is all right?"

"I swear it. Now lie back and relax. Close your eyes. Go on, close your eyes. That's right. That's better. Good girl.

"I have prayed and prayed that he will live, Doctor."

"Of course he will live. What are you talking about?"

"The others didn't."

"What?"

"None of my other ones lived, Doctor."

The doctor stood beside the bed looking down at the pale exhausted face of the young woman. He had never seen her before today. She and her husband were new people in the town. The innkeeper's wife, who had come up to assist in the delivery, had told him that the husband worked at the local customs-house on the border and that the two of them had arrived quite suddenly at the inn with one trunk and one suitcase about three months ago. The husband was a drunkard, the innkeeper's wife had said, an arrogant, overbearing, bullying little drunkard, but the young woman was gentle and religious. And she was very sad. She never smiled. In the few weeks that she had been here, the innkeeper's wife had never once seen her smile. Also there was a rumour that this was the husband's third marriage, that one wife had died and that the other had divorced him for unsavoury reasons. But that was only a rumour.

The doctor bent down and pulled the sheet up a little higher over the patient's chest. "You have nothing to worry about," he said gently. "This is a perfectly normal baby."

"That's exactly what they told me about the others. But I lost them all, Doctor. In the last eighteen months I have lost all three of my children, so you mustn't blame me for being anxious."

"Three?"

"This is my fourth…in four years."

The doctor shifted his feet uneasily on the bare floor.

"I don't think you know what it means, Doctor, to lose them all, all three of them, slowly, separately, one by one. I keep seeing them. I can see Gustav's face now as

clearly as if he were lying here beside me in the bed. Gustav was a lovely boy, Doctor. But he was always ill. It is terrible when they are always ill and there is nothing you can do to help them."

"I know."

The woman opened her eyes, stared up at the doctor for a few seconds, then closed them again.

"My little girl was called Ida. She died a few days before Christmas. That is only four months ago. I just wish you could have seen Ida, Doctor."

"You have a new one now."

"But Ida was so beautiful."

"Yes," the doctor said. "I know."

"How can you know?" she cried.

"I am sure that she was a lovely child. But this new one is also like that." The doctor turned away from the bed and walked over to the window and stood there looking out. It was a wet grey April afternoon, and across the street he could see the red roofs of the houses and the huge raindrops splashing on the tiles.

"Ida was two years old, Doctor…and she was so beautiful I was never able to take my eyes off her from the time I dressed her in the morning until she was safe in bed again at night. I used to live in holy terror of something happening to that child. Gustav had gone and my little Otto had also gone and she was all I had left. Sometimes I used to get up in the night and creep over to the cradle and put my ear close to her mouth just to make sure that she was breathing."

"Try to rest," the doctor said, going back to the bed. "Please try to rest." The woman's face was white and bloodless, and there was a slight bluish-grey tinge around the nostrils and the mouth. A few strands of damp hair hung down over her forehead, sticking to the skin.

"When she died…I was already pregnant again when that happened, Doctor. This new one was a good four months on its way when Ida died. "I don't want it!' I shouted after the funeral. "I won't have it! I have buried enough children!' And my husband…he was strolling among the guests with a big glass of beer in his hand…he turned around quickly and said, "I have news for you, Klara, I have good news.' Can you imagine that, Doctor? We have just buried our third child and he stands there with a glass of beer in his hand and tells me that he has good news. "Today I have been posted to Braunau,'

he says, “so you can start packing at once. This will be a new start for you, Klara,’ he says. “It will be a new place and you can have a new doctor “Please don’t talk any more.”

“You are the new doctor, aren’t you, Doctor?”

“That’s right.”

“And here we are in Braunau.”

“Yes.”

“I am frightened, Doctor.”

“Try not to be frightened.”

“What chance can the fourth one have now?”

“You must stop thinking like that.”

“I can’t help it. I am certain there is something inherited that causes my children to die in this way. There must be.”

“That is nonsense.”

“Do you know what my husband said to me when Otto was born, Doctor? He came into the room and he looked into the cradle where Otto was lying and he said, “Why do all my children have to be so small and weak?”

“I am sure he didn’t say that.”

“He put his head right into Otto’s cradle as though he were examining a tiny insect and he said, “All I am saying is why can’t they be better specimens? That’s all I am saying.’ And three days after that, Otto was dead. We baptised him quickly on the third day and he died the same evening. And then Gustav died. And then Ida died. All of them died, Doctor… and suddenly the whole house was empty “Don’t think about it now.”

“Is this one so very small?”

“He is a normal child.”

“But small?”

“He is a little small, perhaps. But the small ones are often a lot tougher than the big ones. Just imagine, Frau Hitler, this time next year he will be almost learning how to walk. Isn’t that a lovely thought?”

She didn’t answer this.

“And two years from now he will probably be talking his head off and driving you crazy with his chatter. Have you settled on a name for him yet?”

“A name?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. I think my husband said that if it was a boy we were going to call him Adolfus.”

“That means he would be called Adolf”

“Yes. My husband likes Adolf because it has a certain similarity to Alois. My husband is called Alois.”

“Excellent.”

“Oh no!” she cried, starting up suddenly from the pillow. “That’s the same question they asked me when Otto was born! It means he is going to die! You are going to baptize him at once!”

Now, now,” the doctor said, taking her gently by the shoulders. “You are quite wrong.

I promise you you are wrong. I was simply being an inquisitive old man, that is all. I love talking about names. I think Adolphus is a particularly fine name. It is one of my favourites. And look-here he comes now.”

The innkeeper’s wife, carrying the baby high up on her enormous bosom, came sailing across the room towards the bed. “Here is the little beauty!” she cried, beaming. “Would you like to hold him, my dear? Shall I put him beside you?”

“Is he well wrapped?” the doctor asked. “It is extremely cold in here.”

“Certainly he is well wrapped.”

The baby was tightly swaddled in a white woollen shawl, and only the tiny pink head protruded. The innkeeper’s wife placed him gently on the bed beside the mother. “There you are,” she said. “Now you can lie there and look at him to your heart’s

content.”

“I think you will like him,” the doctor said, smiling. “He is a fine little baby.”

“He has the most lovely hands!” the innkeeper’s wife exclaimed. “Such long delicate fingers!”

The mother didn’t move. She didn’t even turn her head to look.

“Go on!” cried the innkeeper’s wife. “He won’t bite you!”

“I am frightened to look. I don’t care to believe that I have another baby and that he is all right.”

“Don’t be so stupid.”

Slowly, the mother turned her head and looked at the small, incredibly serene face that lay on the pillow beside her.

“Is this my baby?”

“Of course.”

“Oh…oh…but he is beautiful.”

The doctor turned away and went over to the table and began putting his things into his bag. The mother lay on the bed gazing at the child and smiling and touching him and making little noises of pleasure. “Hello, Adolfus,” she whispered. “Hello, my little Adolf.

“Ssshh!” said the innkeeper’s wife. “Listen! I think your husband is coming.”

The doctor walked over to the door and opened it and looked out into the corridor.

“Herr Hitler!”

“Yes.”

“Come in, please.”

A small man in a dark-green uniform stepped softly into the room and looked around him.

“Congratulations,” the doctor said. “You have a son.”

The man had a pair of enormous whiskers meticulously groomed after the manner of the Emperor Franz Josef, and he smelled strongly of beer. “A son?”

“Yes.”

“How is he?”

“He is fine. So is your wife.”

“Good.” The father turned and walked with a curious little prancing stride over to the bed where his wife was lying. “Well, Klara,” he said, smiling through his whiskers. “How did It go? He bent down to take a look at the baby. Then he bent lower. In a series of quick jerky movements, he bent lower and lower until his face was only about twelve inches from the baby’s head. The wife lay sideways on the pillow, staring up at him with a kind of supplicating look.

“He has the most marvellous pair of lungs,” the innkeeper’s wife announced. “You should have heard him screaming just after he came into this world.”

“But my God, Kiara “What is it, dear?”

“This one is even smaller than Otto was!”

The doctor took a couple of quick paces forward. “There is nothing wrong with that child,” he said.

Slowly, the husband straightened up and turned away from the bed and looked at the doctor. He seemed bewildered and stricken. “It’s no good lying, Doctor,” he said. “I know what it means. It’s going to be the same all over again.”

“Now you listen to me,” the doctor said.

“But do you know what happened to the others, Doctor?”

“You must forget about the others, Herr Hitler. Give this one a chance.”

“But so small and weak!”

“My dear sir, he has only just been born.”

“Even so…

“What are you trying to do?” cried the innkeeper’s wife. “Talk him into his grave?”

“That’s enough!” the doctor said sharply.

The mother was weeping now. Great sobs were shaking her body.

The doctor walked over to the husband and put a hand on his shoulder. “Be good to her,” he whispered. “Please. It is very important.” Then he squeezed the husband’s shoulder hard and began pushing him forward surreptitiously to the edge of the bed. The husband hesitated. The doctor squeezed harder, signalling him urgently through fingers and thumb. At last, reluctantly, the husband bent down and kissed his wife lightly on the cheek.

“All right, Klara,” he said. “Now stop crying.”

“I have prayed so hard that he will live, Alois.”

“Yes.”

“Every day for months I have gone to the church and begged on my knees that this one will be allowed to live.”

“Yes, Klara, I know.”

“Three dead children is all that I can stand, don’t you realize that?”

“Of course.”

“He must live, Alois. He must, he must Oh God, be merciful unto him now…”