

# SHORT STORIES

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## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Can you imagine what "voodoo" means or is? If not, look up the word in the dictionary.

## VOODOO FREDERIC BROWN

Mr. Decker's wife had just returned from a trip to Haiti - a trip she had taken alone - to give them a **cooling off**<sup>1</sup> period before they discussed a divorce.

It hadn't worked. Neither of them had cooled off in the slightest. In fact, they were finding now that they hated one another more than ever.

"Half", said Mrs. Decker firmly. "I'll not settle for anything less than half the money plus half of the property". "Ridiculous!" said Mr. Decker.

"Is it? I could have it all, you know. And quite easily, too. I studied voodoo while in Haiti".

"Rot!" said Mr. Decker.

"It isn't. And you should be glad that I am a good woman for I could kill you quite easily if I wished. I would then have *all* the money and *all* the real estate, and without any fear of consequences. A death accomplished by voodoo cannot be distinguished from death by heart failure".

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Decker.

"You think so? I have wax and a hatpin. Do you want to give me a tiny pinch of your hair or a fingernail clipping or two - that's all I need - and let me show you?"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Decker.

"Then why are you afraid to have me try? Since I know it works, I'll make you a proposition. If it doesn't kill you, I'll give you a divorce and ask for nothing. If it does, I'll get it all automatically",

"Done!" said Mr. Decker. "Get your wax and hatpin". He glanced at his fingernails. "Pretty short. I'll give you a bit of hair".

When he came back with a few short strands of hair in the lid of an aspirin tin, Mrs. Decker **kneaded** (2) the hair into it, then shaped it into the rough effigy of a human being.

"You'll be sorry", she said, and thrust the hatpin into the chest of the wax figure.

Mr. Decker was surprised, but he was more pleased than sorry. He had not believed in voodoo, but being a cautious man he never took chances.

Besides, it had always irritated him that his wife so seldom cleaned her hairbrush.

1. **cooling off**, a period when people try to come to an agreement  
2, **kneaded**., pressed,

(F. Brown, *Voodoo*, in *100 Great Fantasy Short Stories*, Avon Books, 1984)

## WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Read lines 1-8 and answer the following questions:
  - a. Why did Mrs. Decker go to Haiti?
  - b. What was the result of her trip?
  - c. What about Mr. Decker?
  - d. What does Mrs. Decker want as her share in the divorce settlement?
2. What is the tone of the following expressions?

"I could have it all, you know. And quite easily, too". Choose from the following:

wish threat hope persuasion warning promise

3. Read to line 17 and underline other words that sound like a threat.

4. Why is she so sure that she can accomplish what she threatens?

5. Read to line 22. What items does Mrs. Decker need to carry out the ritual?

6. a. List all the answers Mr. Decker gives his wife.

b. What do they express? Choose one of the following:

hate indifference disbelief annoyance

7. Read to line 25. What does Mrs. Decker propose?

8. Read the final part and say:

a. what Mr. Decker gives his wife to perform the ritual;

b. what the ritual consists of;

c. why Mr. Decker was surprised and quite pleased.

9. How did Mr. Decker's wife die?

10. Was he guilty of killing her? Discuss.

### **POST-READING ACTIVITY**

Have you ever heard of any other ritual? If so, tell your classmates.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Can you mention some scientific discoveries that have been dangerous to humanity? Explain why they are harmful.

### THE WEAPON FREDERIC BROWN

The room was quiet in the dimness of early evening. Dr. James Graham, key scientist of a very important project, sat in his favorite chair, thinking. It was so still that he could hear the turning of pages in the next room as his son leafed through a picture book.

Often Graham did his best work, his most creative thinking, under these circumstances, sitting alone in an unlighted room in his own apartment after the day's regular work. But tonight his mind would not work constructively. Mostly he thought about his mentally arrested son - his only son - in the next room. The thoughts were loving thoughts, not the bitter anguish he had felt years ago when he had first learned of the boy's condition. The boy was happy; wasn't that the main thing? And to how many men is given a child who will always be a child, who will not grow up to leave him? Certainly that was rationalization, but what is wrong with rationalization when... The doorbell rang.

Graham rose and turned on lights in the almost-dark room before he went through the hallway to the door. He was not annoyed; tonight, at this moment, almost any interruption to his thoughts was welcome.

He opened the door. A stranger stood there; he said, "Dr. Graham? My name is Niemand; I'd like to talk to you. May I come in a moment?"

Graham looked at him. He was a small man, nondescript, obviously harmless - possibly a reporter or an insurance agent.

But it didn't matter what he was. Graham found himself saying, "Of course. Come in, Mr. Niemand". A few minutes of conversation, he justified himself by thinking, might divert his thoughts and clear his mind.

"Sit down", he said, in the living room. "Care for a drink?"

Niemand said, "No, thank you". He sat in the chair; Graham sat on the sofa.

The small man interlocked his fingers; he leaned forward. He said, "Dr. Graham, you are the man whose scientific work is more likely than that of any other man to end the human race's chance for survival"

A **crackpot** (1), Graham thought. Too late now he realized that he should have asked the man's business before admitting him. It would be an embarrassing interview - he disliked being rude, yet only rudeness was effective.

"Dr. Graham, the weapon on which you are working..."

The visitor stopped and turned his head as the door that led to a bedroom opened and a boy of fifteen came in. The boy didn't notice Niemand; he ran to Graham.

"Daddy, will you read to me now?" The boy of fifteen laughed the sweet laughter of a child of four.

Graham put an arm around the boy. He looked at his visitor, wondering whether he had known about the boy. From the lack of surprise on Niemand's face, Graham felt sure he had known.

"Harry" - Graham's voice was warm with affection - "Daddy's so busy. Just for a little while. Go back to your room; I'll come and read to you soon".

"*Chicken Little*? You'll read me *Chicken Little*?"

"If you wish. Now run along. Wait. Harry, this is Mr. Niemand".

The boy smiled **bashfully**(2) at the visitor. Niemand said, "Hi, Harry", and smiled back at him, holding out his hand. Graham, watching, was sure now that Niemand had known: the smile and the gesture were for the boy's mental age, not his physical one.

The boy took Niemand's hand. For a moment it seemed that he was going to climb into Niemand's lap, and Graham pulled him back gently. He said, "Go to your room now, Harry".

The boy skipped back into his bedroom, not closing the door.

Niemand's eyes met Graham's and he said, "I like him", with obvious sincerity. He added, "I hope that what you're going to read to him will always be true".

Graham didn't understand. Niemand said, "*Chicken Little*, I mean. It's a fine story - but may *Chicken Little* always be wrong about the sky falling down".

Graham suddenly had liked Niemand when Niemand had shown liking for the boy. Now he remembered that he must close the interview quickly. He rose, in dismissal.

He said, "I fear you're wasting your time and mine, Mr. Niemand. I know all the arguments, everything you can say I've heard a thousand times. Possibly there is truth in what you believe, but it does not concern me. I'm a scientist, and only a scientist. Yes, it is public knowledge that I am working on a weapon, a rather ultimate one. But, for me personally, that is only a by-product of the fact that I am advancing science. I have thought it through, and I have found that that is my only concern".

"But, Dr. Graham, is humanity ready for an ultimate weapon?"

Graham frowned. "I have told you my point of view, Mr. Niemand".

Niemand rose slowly from the chair. He said, "Very well, if you do not choose to discuss it, I'll say no more". He passed a hand across his forehead. "I'll leave, Dr. Graham. I wonder, though... may I change my mind about the drink you offered me?"

Graham's irritation faded. He said, "Certainly. Will whisky and water do?"

"Admirably".

Graham excused himself and went into the kitchen. He got the decanter of whisky, another of water, ice cubes, glasses.

When he returned to the living room Niemand was just leaving the boy's bedroom. He heard Niemand's "Good night, Harry", and Harry's happy "Night, Mr. Niemand".

Graham made drinks, "I took the liberty of bringing a small gift to your son, doctor. I gave it to him while you were getting the drinks for us. I hope you'll forgive me".

"Of course. Thank you. Good night".

Graham closed the door; he walked through the living room into Harry's room. He said, "All right, Harry. Now I'll read to..."

There was sudden sweat on his forehead, but he forced his face and his voice to be calm as he stepped to the side of the bed.

"May I see that, Harry?" When he had it safely, his hands shook as he examined it.

He thought, *only a madman would give a loaded revolver to a retarded child.*

(F. Brown, *The Weapon*, in *Fifty Short Science Fiction Tales*, Street and Smith Publications, 1951)

1. **crackpot**, a person with very strange, foolish, or mad ideas
2. **bashfully**, afraid to meet people.

## WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Read the first part of the story answer the following questions:

- a. What is Dr. Graham?
- b. What do you know about his son?
- c. Who is Mr. Niemand?
- d. What does Dr. Graham think Mr. Niemand is?
- e. What is Dr. Graham working on?

2. Read lines 41-81. Then read the following statements and tick whether they are True or False:

	T	F
a. Niemand knows that Harry is retarded		
b. Niemand does not like Harry		
c. Graham is annoyed by Niemand		
d. Graham is working on a lethal weapon		
e. Niemand wants Graham to give up his work		
f. Graham is not concerned with the effects the weapon can have		

3. Read the following lines. What can you infer from the fact that Niemand first refuses a drink and then he asks for one?

Choose the best inference.

- a. He wasn't thirsty at first.
- b. He thought he might persuade Dr. Graham to give up his work.
- c. He had an alternative plan if the first one failed.
- d. He thought he needed more time to convince Dr. Graham

4. Read the final part and choose the interpretation of the story you think more appropriate:

- a. Niemand wants to harm the boy to get revenge since he was not able to persuade Graham to give up his work.
- b. Niemand is just a madman.
- c. Niemand is trying to get a message across to Graham by giving the gun to the boy.

5. Complete the following statement:

With his attitude and by his actions Niemand wants to demonstrate to Dr. Graham that his ultimate weapon is like a ..... given to a .....  
 .....and that anyone who does something like that must be a ..

## POST-READING ACTIVITIES

### ***Class discussion***

- Scientists have a moral responsibility to protect humanity from the dangerous effects of their discoveries.
- Scientists' only proper concern is to advance science and progress as much as possible.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Have you ever been stuck in a lift? If so, or even if you haven't, say what you did and felt or what you would do and feel.

### YOU AND I ARE ABOUT TO DIE...

BILL BRYSON

When the lift broke down somewhere between the seventh and eighth floors, the man beside me - the only other passenger - said rather a strange thing. He said: "I was afraid this might happen".

I looked at him in some amazement. "You expected the lift to break down?"

"Or worse", he said enigmatically and lounged back against the wall, watching without evident concern as I pushed the buttons on the control panel, all without effect.

After a moment, I sighed. "Nothing. Even the alarm bell doesn't work".

"I was afraid of that as well".

I looked at him again. He seemed curiously resigned and wholly unperturbed. "Either you know something about this lift or you're a remarkable pessimist", I said.

He smiled and straightened up slightly. "It's just that. I've come to expect these things. They happen to me all the time". "Indeed?"

He nodded grimly. "You see, I'm the unluckiest man in the world". He gave me a moment to absorb this disarming confession, then said: "I have something I think I should tell you, something rather important". He paused significantly. "Not to put too fine a point on it, you and I are about to die".

"I beg your pardon?"

"Yes, it's most unfortunate". He glanced at his watch. "We have just over five minutes. I think at the least you're entitled to an explanation".

Clearly he was either joking or mad. I broke into a nervous smile and started to speak but he silenced me.

"I assure you that in just over five minutes we will both be dead. Would you like to know how?"

There was nothing in his expression to show that he was joking; quite the contrary. Nor was there even the slightest indication that he might be mad. He was an **affluent** (1) looking man - self-made I would have guessed - with a well-cut suit and a leather-bound attache case. Dubiously, I nodded.

"You see", he said, "nothing goes right for me any more. I have only to pick up a teacup and it falls to pieces or enter a lift and it breaks down". He indicated our present circumstances. "Until about three years ago the very opposite was the case. Once, for instance, a friend gave me a **tip** (2) on the **Derby** (3). I misunderstood him, bet on the wrong horse and won £ 600. That was the story of my life - always lucky, always winning long shots; always finding fivers in the road. Even when things went wrong they turned out for the best: one time hurrying to catch a plane I had a puncture and missed my flight. The plane crashed. Eighty-one people were killed". He looked at me. "Do you get my point?"

Again I nodded.

"I had a wonderful wife, two splendid children, a half share in a small but prosperous factory. I inherited some money unexpectedly and invested it in **stocks** (4) which climbed quietly and resolutely. My life was free of even the most minor **setbacks** (5)".

I was uncomfortably conscious of time slipping away. "I'd like to know about the dying", I said quietly.

He looked at me with the slightest hint of irritation. "And then", he went on, "things very gradually started to go back. I lost my car keys. Someone spilled a drink over me at a pub. I was bitten by a dog. None of this had ever happened to me before. My stocks began to decline and then to **plummet** (6). My car was stolen. It was found, returned and stolen again. My father died and my brother died. My house was burgled. I became obsessed with my misfortune. I was afraid to go

out for fear I'd be hit by a bus. Finally my partner came to see me and suggested I go away somewhere for a rest. It seemed a good idea, so I booked into a private clinic in Scotland; on my third night there it burned down".

He looked at me searchingly.

"When I returned home I found out that my wife had moved in with my partner and that he was quietly easing me out of the business. That was three weeks ago and that, I'm afraid, was the final straw. I built this".

He held up his leather-bound attache case. "There's a bomb in here", he said simply.

I stared at him and felt my legs go weak. Without a word, I turned and began pushing the buttons on the control panel.

"I was on my way to see my partner just now", the man went on. "My life is finished. I thought at least I'd take him with me".

I began pounding on the doors and **bellowing** (7) for help.

"I'd keep my voice down if I were you", said my companion. "I'm afraid this thing is noise sensitive".

I stopped and looked at him. "It will also **go off** (8) if it's shaken or in so any way **tampered with** (9). He shrugged apologetically. "I'm a munitions expert. I thought of everything".

He seemed calmly resigned. He looked at his watch and said: "We have just over thirty seconds. I'm sorry".

I felt no panic, but instead a rage, a sense of incredible injustice that this should be happening to me. I pushed the control buttons fruitlessly. What else could I do? I was vaguely aware of the other man sitting himself down in the corner with the attache case on his lap.

"Twenty seconds" he said, his eyes fixed to his watch.

It is an amazing thing how slowly the seconds tick away when there are only a handful of them left to you. They say your life passes before your eyes, but mine didn't. All I could think about was the next few hours, the confusion our deaths would create, the police tramping around, someone having to tell my wife, her inevitable **bafflement** (10). Would she ever know how I'd come to be blown to bits or would it remain a mystery to her for ever?

"Ten seconds", said my companion and then began the long monotonous countdown.

"Nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two..."

I shut my eyes and wondered what it would feel like. There was an enormous and almost palpable silence. Nothing happened.

I opened my eyes. I don't know how much time passed, but it was at least a minute, perhaps a good deal more. My companion was staring at his attache case. He held it to his ear, shook it once and pushed it away in disgust.

"You see?" he said to me. "You see? Nothing goes right any more".

(B. Bryson, *You and I are about to die*, in "Evening News", July 1978)

1. *affluent*, wealthy
2. *tip*, a piece of information.
3. *Derby*, a famous race of horses in England
4. *stocks*, money certificates
5. *setbacks*, defeats.
6. *to plummet*, to fall suddenly.
7. *bellowing*, shouting.
8. *go off*, explode.
9. *tampered with*, touched.
10. *bafflement*, confusion.

## WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Read lines 1-14 and answer the following questions:
  - a. What happened to the lift?
  - b. How many people were there in the lift?

- c. What did the narrator try to do?
- d. How did the other passenger react?
2. Read to line 30. Underline what you consider the most interesting and effective lines and explain why.
3. Read lines 30-69. The passenger talks about his life. Make a list of all the lucky and unlucky things that happened to him.
4. Read to line 95 and answer the following questions:
  - a. How would they die?
  - b. Why did the man place a bomb in the case? c. How did the narrator react? d. What did the narrator think of before dying?
5. Read the final part. Say what happened and explain why.
6. The story is full of suspense. How does the author achieve it?

**POST-READING ACTIVITY**

Write about an episode of your life that created fear and anxiety.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

- 1 . What type of animals are unicorns?
2. In what narrative texts do you generally find them?

## THE LAST UNICORNS

EDWARD D. HOCH

The rain was still falling by the time he reached the little wooden **shack** (1) that stood in the center of the green, fertile valley. He opened his cloak for an instant to knock at the door, not really expecting a reply.

But it opened, pulled over the roughness of the rock floor by great hairy hands. "Come in", a voice commanded him. "Hurry! Before this rain floods me out".

"Thank you", the traveler said, removing the **soggy** (2) garment that covered him and squeezing out some of the water. "It's good to find a dry place. I've come a long way".

"Not many people are about in this weather", the man told him, pulling at his beard with a quick, nervous gesture.

"I came looking for you".

"For me ? What is your name?"

"You can call me Shem. I come from beyond the mountains".

The bearded man grunted. "I don't know the name. What do you seek?"

Shem sat down to rest himself on a pale stone Seat. "I hear talk that you have two fine unicorns here, recently brought from Africa".

The man smiled proudly. "That is correct. The only such creatures in this part of the world. I intend to breed them and sell them to the farmers as **beasts of burden** (3)".

"Oh?"

"They can do the work of strong horses and at the same time use their horns to defend themselves against attack".

"True", Shem agreed. "Very true. I... I don't suppose you'd want to part with them...?"

"Part with them! Are you mad, man? It cost me money to bring them all the way from Africa!"

"How much would you like for them?"

The bearded man rose from his Seat. "No amount, ever! Come back in two years when I've bred some. Until then, begone with you!"

"I *must* have them, sir".

"You must have nothing! Begone from here now before I take a **club** (4) to you!" And with those words he took a menacing step forward.

Shem retreated out the door, back into the rain, skipping lightly over a rushing stream of water from the higher ground. The door closed on him, and he was alone. But he looked out into the fields, where a small barnlike structure stood glistening in the downpour.

They would be in there, he knew.

He made his way across the field, sometimes sinking to his ankles in puddles of muddy water. But finally he reached the outbuilding and went in through a worn, rotten door.

Yes, they were there... Two tall and handsome beasts, very much like horses, but with longer tails and with that gleaming, twisted horn shooting straight up from the center of their foreheads. Unicorns - one of the rarest of God's creatures!

He moved a bit closer, trying now **to lure** (5) them out of the building without startling them. But there was a noise, and he turned suddenly to see the bearded man standing there, a long staff upraised in his hands.

"You try to steal them", he shouted, **lunging** (6) forward.

The staff thudded against the wall, inches from Shem's head. "Listen, old man..."

"Die! Die, you robber!"

But Shem leaped to one side, around the bearded figure of **wrath** (7) and through the open doorway. Behind him, the unicorns gave a fearful **snorts** (8) and **trampled** (9) the earthen floor with their **hoofs** (10).

Shem kept running, away from the shack, away from the man with the staff, away from the fertile valley.

After several hours of plodding over the rain-swept hills, he came at last upon his father's village, and he went down among the houses to the place where the handful of people had gathered.

And he saw his father standing near the base of the great wooden vessel, and he went up to him sadly.

"Yes, my son?" the old man questioned, unrolling a long damp scroll of **parchment** (11).

"No unicorns, Father".

"No unicorns", Noah repeated sadly, scratching out the name on his list. "It is too bad.

They were handsome beasts...

(E. D Hoch, "The Last Unicorns", in *100 Great Fantasy Short Stories*, Avon Books, 1984)

1. *shack*: a small roughly built house.
2. *soggy*: completely wet
3. *beasts of burden*, animals which carry things
4. *club*: a heavy, wooden stick.
5. *to lure*, to attract.
6. *lunging*, making a sudden movement.
7. *wrath*, great anger.
8. *sport*, a rough noise.
9. *trampled*, stepped heavily.
10. *hoofs*, feet of animals.
11. *scroll of parchment*: a piece of papyrus

### WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. The first 32 lines consist mainly of a dialogue between two men. Read them and complete the following statements choosing the words that are closest to the meaning in the context.

- a. the weather is (wet; - windy; - stormy).
- b. The traveller has come from (- another country; - far away; - the mountains)
- c. The traveller has come (- to see the bearded man; - to ask for some information; - to buy something)
- d. The bearded man does not want (- to listen to the man; - to sell what he has; - the traveller to come back.)

2. Read the same passage again and answer the following questions:

- a. What is the traveller looking for?
- b. Where do the unicorns come from?
- c. What are they being bred for?
- d. Why are they so precious?

3. Can you imagine why the traveller insists so much on having them?

4. Read lines 33-56 and underline the description of the unicorns. Compare it with what you have answered in Pre-reading activities, 1.

5. What does Shem, the traveller, try to do?

6. Read the final part and see if you can give the following words another name:

*Sham's father*:

*The great wooden vessel*:

*Rain*:

Read the first 7 lines and predict what the story will be about.

## THE HOBBYIST

FREDERIC BROWN

"I heard a rumor", Sangstrom said, "to the effect that you..." He turned his head and looked about him to make absolutely sure that he and the druggist were alone in the tiny prescription pharmacy. The druggist was a gnomelike, **gnarled** (1) little man who could have been any age from fifty to a hundred. They were alone, but Sangstrom dropped his voice just the same. "... to the effect that you have a completely undetectable poison".

The druggist nodded. He came around to the counter and locked the front door of the shop, then walked toward a doorway behind the counter. "I was about to take a coffee break", he said. "Come with me and have a cup".

Sangstrom followed him around the counter and through the doorway to a back room ringed by shelves of bottles from floor to ceiling. The druggist plugged in an electric **percolator** (2), found two cups and put them on a table that had a chair on either side of it. He motioned Sangstrom to one of the chairs and took the other himself. "Now", he said. "Tell me. Whom do you want to kill, and why?"

"Does it matter?" Sangstrom asked. "Isn't it enough that I pay for..."

The druggist interrupted him with an upraised hand. "Yes, it matters. I must be convinced that you deserve what I can give you. Otherwise..." He **shrugged** (3).

"All right", Sangstrom said. "The *whom* is my wife. The why..."

He started the long story. Before he had quite finished the percolator had completed its task and the druggist briefly interrupted to get the coffee for them. Sangstrom concluded his story.

The little druggist nodded. "Yes, I occasionally dispense an undetectable poison. I do so freely; I do not charge for it, if I think the case is deserving. I have helped many murderers".

"Fine", Sangstrom said. "Please give it to me then".

The druggist smiled at him. "I already have. By the time the coffee was ready I had decided that you deserved it. It was, as I said, free. But there is a price for the antidote".

Sangstrom turned pale. But he had anticipated - not this, but the possibility of a double cross or some form of **blackmail** (4). He pulled a pistol from his pocket.

The little druggist chuckled. "You daren't use that. Can you find the antidote..." he waved at the shelves "... among those thousands of bottles? Or would you find a faster, more virulent poison? Or if you think I'm bluffing, that you are not really poisoned, go ahead and shoot. You'll know the answer within three hours when the poison starts to work".

"How much for the antidote?" Sangstrom growled.

"Quite reasonable, a thousand dollars. After all, a man must live; even if his hobby is preventing murders, there's no reason why he shouldn't make money at it, is there?"

Sangstrom growled and put the pistol down, but within reach, and took out his wallet.

Maybe after he had the antidote, he'd still use that pistol. He *50* counted out a thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills and put them on the table.

The druggist made no immediate move to pick them up. He said "And one other thing - for your wife's safety and mine. You will write a confession of your intention - your former intention, I trust - to murder your wife. Then you will wait till I go out and mail it to a friend of mine on the homicide detail. He'll keep it as evidence in case you ever *do* decide to kill your wife. Or me, for that matter.

"When that is in the mail it will be safe for me to return here and give you the antidote. I'll get you paper and pen. Oh, one other thing although I do not absolutely insist on it. Please help spread the word about my undetectable poison, will you? One never knows, Mr. Sangstrom. The life you save, if you have any enemies, just might be your own".

(F. Brown, *The Hobbyist*, in D. Queen (ed.), *Configurations*. 1984)

1. *gnarled*: rough in appearance

2. *percolator*: a pot to make coffee
3. *shrugged*: raised his shoulders
4. *blackmail*: the obtaining of money by threatening

## WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Read lines 1-33 and complete the following statements using your own words:
  - a. Sangstrom goes to the druggist to buy some poison that must be undetectable because .....
  - b. He wants the poison to .....
  - c. The druggist puts the poison into Sangstrom's cup because ... ..
2. Read to line 51. What would you do if you were Sangstrom?  
Consider the pros and cons of the following alternatives and discuss them in class.
  - a. I would kill the druggist.
  - b. I would phone the police.
  - c. I would look for the antidote.
  - d. I wouldn't trust the druggist.
  - e. I would pay any amount of money for the antidote.
  - f.....
3. Now imagine you are the druggist. What would you do to avoid being killed?
4. Read the final part and say whether your strategy to avoid being killed (Activity 3) is the same the druggist used.
5. Why does the druggist have Sangstrom write a confession?
6. Why does the druggist suggest Mr. Sangstrom to publicize his poison?
7. Can you explain the title?

## POST-READING ACTIVITY

Write a short summary of the story you have just read.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Read the first six lines and guess

- what the Materializer is;
- who Ned Quinn is;
- what Ned Quinn is going to do.

## A LOT TO LEARN

*R. T. KUROSAKA*

**The Materializer was completed.**

**Ned Quinn stood back, wiped his hands, and admired the huge bank of dials, lights and switches. Several years and many fortunes had gone into this project. Finally it was ready.**

**Ned placed the metal skullcap on his head and plugged the wires into the control panel.**

## WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES

- Read to line 16. What does Ned Quinn order the machine to do?
- Can you explain now why the machine is called Materializer?
- Line 13 says that "He had a lot to learn". Why? What was wrong with ordering a "Martini"?

**He turned the switch to ON and spoke: "Pound note".**

**There was a whirring sound. In the Receiver a piece of paper appeared. Ned inspected it. Real.**

**"Martini", he said.**

**A whirring sound. A puddle formed in the Receiver. Ned cursed silently. He had a lot to learn.**

**"A bottle of beer", he said.**

**The whirring sound was followed by the appearance of the familiar brown bottle. Ned tasted the contents and grinned.**

- Read the following 3 lines. Can you imagine what "his greatest experiment" would consist of?

**Chuckling, he experimented further.**

**Ned enlarged the Receiver and prepared for his greatest experiment.**

- Read to line 23.
  - Was your guess right?

**He switched on the Materializer, took a deep breath and said: "Girl".**

**The whirring sound swelled and faded. In the Receiver stood a lovely girl. She was naked. Ned had not asked for clothing.**

- How do you imagine the girl in terms of hair, eyes, height, body, age, etc.?
- Read line 24.
    - Was your guess right? If not, what is your reaction to the truth?

**She had freckles, a brace and pigtails. She was eight years old.**

- Can you imagine Ned Quinn's reaction to her appearance and age?
  - Go back to how you imagined the appearance of the girl (Activity 5b). Compare it with your classmates' ideas. Are there any similarities? Is there any hint at stereotyping at the figure of the girl?
- Read the final lines and explain why Ned says "Hell!" and how the story ends.

**"Hell!", said Quinn. Whirr.**

**The fireman found two charred skeletons in the smouldering rubble.**

8. Go back to the title and explain what else Ned Quinn had to learn.

9. How would you define this short story?

You can choose one or more of the following definitions. Explain the reason for your choice.

a. a fairy tale;

b. a sexist short story;

c. an anti-sexist short story;

d. a science-fiction tale;

e. a horror story.

10. Is this short story similar to another short story you have read in this collection? If so, say which one and why they are similar.

**POST-READING ACTIVITY** If you had a Materializer what would you ask for?

---

[The COMPLETE STORY]:

The Materializer was completed.

Ned Quinn stood back, wiped his hands, and admired the huge bank of dials, lights and switches. Several years and many fortunes had gone into this project. Finally it was ready.

Ned placed the metal skullcap on his head and plugged the wires into the control panel.

He turned the switch to ON and spoke: "Pound note".

There was a whirring sound. In the Receiver a piece of paper appeared. Ned inspected it. Real.

"Martini", he said.

A whirring sound. A puddle formed in the Receiver. Ned cursed silently. He had a lot to learn.

"A bottle of beer", he said.

The whirring sound was followed by the appearance of the familiar brown bottle. Ned tasted the contents and grinned.

Chuckling, he experimented further.

Ned enlarged the Receiver and prepared for his greatest experiment.

He switched on the Materializer, took a deep breath and said: "Girl".

The whirring sound swelled and faded. In the Receiver stood a lovely girl. She was naked. Ned had not asked for clothing.

She had freckles, a brace and pigtails. She was eight years old.

"Hell!", said Quinn. Whirr.

The fireman found two charred skeletons in the smouldering rubble.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Can you remember a gift you received when you were a child? Say why you liked or disliked it.

2. How did you feel when you received it? The following list of adjectives may help you.

**happy excited disappointed angry shy upset sad**  
**frightened surprised grateful**

### THE DOLL

*JEAN RHYS*

How old was I when I smashed the fair doll's face? I remember vividly the satisfaction of being wicked. The guilt that was half triumph.

Two dolls had arrived from England, a present from Irish Granny I suppose. One was fair, one was dark. Both beautiful. But as soon as I saw thee dark doll I wanted her as I had never wanted anything in my life before. While I was still gazing my little sister made a quick **grab** (1).

"Oh no", I said. "Oh no, I saw her first".

But when I tried to take the doll away she yelled and my mother rushed to **her rescue** (2).

"You must your little sister have it. You don't want to grow up a selfish girl whom nobody will love, do you?" "I don't care".

"Silly. You ought to be pleased she's so happy".

"Now here's the fair one. She's just as pretty. Even prettier. And look, her eyes open and shut".

"I don't like her", I said.

"Don't be silly. Don't be selfish".

With the fair doll in my arms I walked away.

"Where are you going?"

"Into the garden". I walked out of the sun, into the shadow of the big mango tree. I laid the fair doll down. Her eyes were shut. Then I searched for a big stone, brought it down with all my force on her face and heard the smashing sound with delight.

There was a great fuss about this. Why? Why had I done such a naughty, a really wicked thing?

I didn't know. I was puzzled myself. Only I was sure that I must do it and for me it was right. My mother was so uneasy that she spoke to my father about my extraordinary behaviour.

In his consulting-room I stood and looked at him. I'd asked my mother once, "What colour are his eyes?"

"Your father has beautiful hazel eyes", she'd answered.

Hazel. A new word. I must remember that. And now what? What's going to happen?

"What am I going to do with you? It was a very stupid thing to do", he said, looking away.

"I wanted the other one. I saw her first", I managed to say. "She only wanted it because I did. It wasn't fair".

"Nothing is fair", he answered rather grimly. "Nothing. And the sooner you understand that the better. You weren't very fair to the poor doll if it comes to that. So silly, so naughty. Why not give it away if you didn't want it?"

This was a new idea. Why not? No, that wouldn't have been enough.

"Your mother thinks that Great-aunt Jane spoils you", he said, still looking away. "Encourages you to imagine that you must always get your own way or you will kick up a hell of a row. Perhaps you'd better stay here instead of going to Geneva next week".

Not go to Geneva? Not see Great-aunt Jane?

"Oh no, no!"

"Well, this time then. But you must not worry your mother like this. I will not have it. You must turn over a new leaf or I'll be very angry".

But he hadn't told me why I'd done it and I thought he knew everything.  
 It was only in Great-aunt Jane's arms that I could talk about it.  
 "They are always expecting me to do things. I don't want to do and I won't. I won't. I won't. I think about it all the time. I'll never do it again". (Never, ever).  
 She said, "Don't think about it any more".  
 For the first time I wept for the fair doll. "I'll bury her in the garden", I sniffed. "I'll put flowers on her grave".  
 "Well now, that will be a nice thing to do", said Aunt Jane.  
 "I can't imagine what will become of you", my mother often said. And Auntie B doesn't like me because I hate sewing.

(J. Rhys, *The Doll, in The Left Bank*, Jonathan Cage, 1927)

1. **grab**, a sudden attempt to seize something.
2. **to her rescue**, to support, to defend her

### WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Read lines 1-38 and answer the following questions:

- a. What gifts did the narrator and her sister receive from their granny?
- b. In what ways were the gifts different?
- c. What did the narrator do with her gift and why?
- d. How did the narrator feel after what she had done?
- e. What did her father do?
- f. How did she justify her behaviour to her father?

2. Read the rest of the story and say whether the following statements are True or False.

**T F**

- She thought that the idea of giving the doll away was good
- Her father thought that her aunt had a negative influence on her
- Her father told her she had to change.
- She felt no one understood her

3. Read the following statements and tick ( V ) the ones that best describe the narrator's feelings:

**T F**

- She felt confused about what she had done
- She felt satisfied at having smashed the doll
- She thought her parents exaggerated the importance of her act
- She felt ashamed of what she had done
- She regretted the act and promised not to behave like that any longer
- 

4. Read the lines below again. What feelings do they evoke?

- "But he hadn't told me why I'd done it and I thought he knew everything".
- "They are always expecting me to do things".

Choose from the following:

**reproach          disappointment          anger          shame          guilt          sadness**

5. Go over the answers you gave in Activities 3, 4, 5. Try to define the narrator's character. The following adjectives may be of some help:

**spoiled          contradictory          difficult          strong-willed          stubborn          uncertain**  
**insecure          unpredictable.**

### AFTER-READING ACTIVITIES

Discuss these questions with your partner:

- a. If you had been the narrator's parents would you have behaved in the same way or not?
- b. Can you justify the "irrational" act of the narrator?

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. What does the title of the story suggest?

The following dictionary entry may help you in predicting about the story:

**Emancipation**, the act of making free socially, politically, and in law from a contrived condition.

## EMANCIPATION: A LIFE FABLE

*KATE CHOPIN*

There was once an animal born into this world, and opening his eyes upon Life, he saw above and about him confining walls, and before him were bars of iron through which came air and light from without; this animal was born in a cage.

Here he grew, and **throve** (1) in strength and beauty under care of an invisible protecting hand. Hungering, food was ever at hand. When he thirsted water was brought, and when he felt the need of rest, there was provided a bed of straw upon which to lie: and here he found it good, licking his handsome **flanks** (2), to bask in the sun beam that he thought existed but to lighten his home.

Awaking one day from his **slothful** (3) rest, lo! the door of his cage stood open: accident had opened it. In the corner he crouched (4), wondering and fearfully. Then slowly did he approach the door, dreading the unaccustomed, and would have closed it, but for such a task his limbs were purposeless. So out the opening he thrust his head, to see the **canopy** (5) of the sky grow broader, and the world **waxing** (6) wider.

Back to his corner but not to rest, for the spell of the Unknown was over him, and again and again he goes to the open door, seeing each time more Light.

Then onetime standing in the flood of it; a deep in-drawn breath - a bracing (7) of strong limbs, and with a **bound** (8) he was gone.

On he rushes, in his mad flight **heedless** (9) that he is wounding and tearing his **sleek** (10) sides - seeing, smelling, touching of all things; even stopping to put his lips to the **noxious** (11) pool, thinking it may be sweet.

Hungering there is no food but such as he must seek and oftentimes fight for; and his limbs are weighted before he reaches the water that is good to his thirsting throat.

So does he live, seeking, finding, joying and suffering. The door which accident had opened is open still, but the cage remains forever empty!

(K. Chopin, *Emancipation: A Life Fable*, in *The Awakening and Selected Stories*, Penguin Books, 1984)

1. **throve**, developed.
2. **flanks**, sides.
3. **slothful**, lazy.
4. **crouched**, lowered the body to the ground.
5. **canopy**, the vault.
6. **waxing**, growing
7. **bracing**, a pair
8. **bound**, jump, leap.
9. **heedless**, paying no attention.
10. **sleek**, smooth and shining.
11. **noxious**, harmful.

## WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES

1. Read the text and divide it into three parts according to the subtitles:

From line ... to line ... PRISON

From line ... to line ... SURPRISE

From line ... to line ... FREEDOM

2. Go back to the first two paragraphs and complete the following statements:

When the animal was hungry....

When he was thirsty, . . .

When he wanted to rest, ....

3. Read lines 11-22 and answer the questions:

- a. What happened one day?
- b. How did he feel?
- c. What did he do?

4. Read the final part and match the statements on the left with the ones on the right.

- |                       |                                              |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| A. When he is hungry  | a. he is exhausted before he gets the water. |
| B. When he is thirsty | b. he must look for food.                    |
| C. He spends his life | c. going through joys and sorrows.           |

5. Go over the whole story again and say what big difference exists between living in the cage and living out of the cage.

6. Read the text again. It can be divided into three parts characterized by the use of:

- simple past: lines 1-7
- gerund: lines 18-22
- simple present: lines 23-32

Check whether this division corresponds to the one you made in Activity 1. If so, try to give an interpretation of the use of these verbal forms.

7. The author calls this short story a fable. Can you explain why? If not read the dictionary entry for fable and say what lesson the author wants to teach.

**fable**, n 1 [C] a short story that teaches a lesson (a MORAL) or truth, esp. a story in which animals or objects speak.

8. The cage here acquires a symbolic meaning. A symbol is something which represents something else, often by analogy or association.

Go through the short story again and say whether the symbol of cage respects the following rules by giving evidence from the text (**YES or NO**)

a. "The symbol should come naturally from the environment and the characters, and should fit early into action and movement of the story".		
b. "A symbol must have universality - be an aspect familiar to all".		
c. "The symbol must have a purpose".		
d. "When the symbol is used as a resolving device, it must be planted early in the story".		
e. "A symbol must never be too abstract to be understood".		
f. "In some stories a symbol parallels the story action".		
g. "Sometimes a symbol is used to create mood".		
h. "Sometimes writers have more than one symbol at work in the same story".		

9. This story is characterized by some unusual stylistic features that give it an archaic feeling. Can you detect them?

### POST-READING ACTIVITIES

#### Class discussion:

a. It is better to have less freedom and more comforts or more freedom and fewer comforts. Explain.

b. Write a brief story, or a fable you recollect, based on a moral teaching.

## GENESIS AND CATASTROPHE (1953)

by Roald Dahl (1916-90)

Roald Dahl was born in Wales of Norwegian parentage. He is internationally famous for his short stories and is one of the most well-known writers of children's literature. Some of his most famous works include: *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) and *Tales of the Unexpected* (1979).

This story by Dahl is one of his well-known 'tales of the unexpected'. These are stories in which the readers expectations are upset by a shock occurrence or discovery.

### Before you read

1 From the title what do you think the story is going to be about? Give reasons for your answers.

---

### Part 1

Everything 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.'

'What?'

'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 <sup>1</sup> 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 <sup>2</sup> for that.'

'You swear <sup>3</sup> 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.'

---

1 **patting** :touching lightly.

2 spare us a moment or two : give us time.

3 swear : promise.

---

## *Part 2*

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 <sup>1</sup> wife, who had come up to assist in the delivery, <sup>2</sup> had told him that the husband worked at the local customs-house <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> the innkeeper's wife had said, an arrogant, overbearing, 'bullying <sup>6</sup> 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 <sup>7</sup> that this was the husband's third marriage, that one wife had died and that the other had divorced him for unsavoury <sup>8</sup> 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 <sup>9</sup> me for being anxious.'

'Three?'

'This is my fourth... in four years.'

The doctor shifted <sup>10</sup> 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 <sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

'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 <sup>13</sup> over to the cradle <sup>14</sup> 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 bed. 'Please try to rest.' The woman's face was white and bloodless, and there was a slight bluish-grey tinge around the nostrils <sup>16</sup> and the mouth. A few strands <sup>17</sup> 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 is 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 had just buried <sup>19</sup> 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 <sup>20</sup> 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.'

- 
1. **Innkeeper:** someone who manages an inn.
  2. **Delivery:** the act of giving birth.
  3. **Customs-house:** the office at a port or frontier where customs duty is collected.
  4. **Drunkard:** a person who is habitually drunk.
  5. **Overbearing:** oppressive, dictatorial.
  6. **Bullying:** frightening or hurting someone weaker than you.
  7. **Rumour:** information that may or may not be true.
  8. **Unsavoury:** unpleasant, morally unacceptable.
  9. **Blame:** (here) judge.
  10. **Shifted:** moved.
  11. **Stared:** looked.
  12. **Tiles:** pieces of baked clay that are used in rows for covering roofs.
  13. **Creep:** walk quietly.
  14. **Cradle:** baby's bed.

.....

## Overview

1 In this section we also get to know something more about the woman and her husband. Go back to the first paragraph and find the words which describe them.

The woman is described as : The husband is described as .....

2 Do you think they have a good relationship? Why?/ Why not?

3 Why is the woman afraid that her new child will not survive?

4 Which of her three previous children survived the longest? How does she describe this child?

5 Look at the last part of the section. How did the woman feel about being pregnant again?

6 What was the husband's 'good news'?

7 How do the husband's words and attitude reveal his insensitivity?

## Zoom in

1 In this second section of the story the narrator makes his presence more felt by supplying us with some information. What information does the narrator give the reader? Is the narrator one of the characters?

2 In this section we also discover something more about the setting of the story. What time of the year is it? What is the weather like?

3 What effect does the woman's situation and emotional state have on the reader?

Choose from among the following:

- a it makes us feel sorry for her
- b it makes her seem ridiculous in our eyes
- c it leaves us indifferent

.....

---

### *Part 3*

'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.<sup>1</sup> I am certain there is something inherited<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup> insect and he said, "All I am saying is why can't they be better *specimens*?<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup> 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<sup>6</sup> and driving you crazy<sup>7</sup> with his chatter.<sup>8</sup> Have you settled on<sup>9</sup> 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 <sup>10</sup> 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 baptise him at once!’

‘Now, now,’<sup>11</sup> 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 Adolfus is a particularly fine name. It is one of my favourites. And look - here he comes now.’

---

1. **I can’t help it:** I can’t stop myself from
  2. **inherited :** (here) that comes from my family or that of my husband
  3. **tiny:** very small
  - 4 **specimens:** examples.
  5. **tougher:** stronger, more resilient
  6. **talking his head off:** speaking freely and confidently
  7. **driving you crazy:** annoying you
  8. **chatter :** talk.
  9. **settled on :** decided.
  10. **starting up :** moving quickly.
  11. **now, now :** used as an expression of mild protest.
- 

## *Part 4*

The innkeeper’s wife, carrying the baby high up on her enormous bosom,<sup>1</sup> came sailing across <sup>2</sup> the room towards the bed. ‘Here is the little beauty!’ she cried, beaming.<sup>3</sup> ‘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 <sup>5</sup> in a white woollen shawl, <sup>6</sup> 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.’<sup>7</sup>

‘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 s meticulously groomed <sup>9</sup> after the manner of the Emperor Franz Joseph, 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 <sup>10</sup> 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<sup>11</sup> 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 <sup>12</sup> up at him with a kind of supplicating look.

‘He has the most marvellous pair of lungs,’ <sup>13</sup> the innkeeper’s wife announced. ‘You should have heard him screaming just after he came into this world.’

‘But my God, Klara...’

‘What is it, dear?’

‘This one is even smaller than Otto was!’

The doctor took a couple of quick paces <sup>14</sup> 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 <sup>15</sup> and stricken. <sup>16</sup> ‘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?’ <sup>17</sup>

‘That’s enough!’ the doctor said sharply. <sup>18</sup>

The mother was weeping <sup>19</sup> y 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 <sup>20</sup> the husband’s shoulder hard and began pushing him forward surreptitiously <sup>21</sup> 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, <sup>22</sup> don’t you realise that?’

‘Of course.’

‘He *must* live, Alois. He *must*, he *must*... Oh God, be merciful unto him now...’

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1 **bosom** : breast.

2 **sailing across** : moving smoothly and fast.

3 **beaming** : smiling broadly

4 **well wrapped** : covered up against the cold.

5 **swaddled** : wrapped in a blanket.

6 **shawl** : piece of cloth worn around the shoulders or used to cover a baby

7 **to your heart’s content** : as much as you like.

8 **whiskers**: (here) moustache.

- 9 **groomed** : very neatly combed (said of hair).
- 10 **prancing stride** : funny way of walking by lifting one's legs in the air
- 11 **jerky** : sudden and abrupt.
- 12 **staring** : looking intensely
- 13 **lungs**: respiratory organs
- 14 **paces**: steps.
- 15 **bewildered**: confused.
- 16 **stricken** : shocked.
- 17 **talk him into his grave** : (idiomatic) give up hope of the child's survival.
- 18 **sharply**: angrily
- 19 **weeping** : crying
- 20 **squeezed** : pressed firmly
- 21 **surreptitiously**: in a way that is not noticed or declared.
- 32 **stand** : bear, tolerate

## **“Those Three Wishes” by Judith Gorog**

1           No one ever said that Melinda Alice was nice. That wasn't the word used. No, she was clever,  
2 even witty. She was called—never to her face, however—Melinda Malice. Melinda Alice was clever  
3 and cruel. Her mother, when she thought about it at all, hoped Melinda would grow out of it. To her  
4 father, Melinda's very good grades mattered.

5           It was Melinda Alice, back in the eighth grade, who had labeled the shy myopic new girl  
6 “Contamination” and was the first to pretend that anything or anyone touched by the new girl  
7 had to be cleaned, inoculated, or avoided. High school had merely given Melinda Alice greater scope  
8 for her talents.

9           The surprising thing about Melinda Alice was her power; no one trusted her, but no one avoided  
10 her either. She was always included, always in the middle. If you had seen her, pretty and  
11 witty, in the center of a group of students walking past your house, you'd have thought, “There  
12 goes a natural leader.”

13           Melinda Alice had left for school early. She wanted to study alone in a quiet spot she had  
14 because there was going to be big math test, and Melinda Alice was not prepared. That A  
15 mattered; so Melinda Alice walked to school alone, planning her studies. She didn't usually  
16 notice nature much, so she nearly stepped on a beautiful snail that was making its way across  
17 the sidewalk.

18           “Ugh. Yucky thing,” thought Melinda Alice, then stopped. Not wanting to step on the snail  
19 accidentally was one thing, but now she lifted her shoe to crush it.

20           “Please don't,” said the snail.

21           “Why not?” retorted Melinda Alice.

22           “I'll give you three wishes,” replied the snail evenly.

23           “Agreed,” said Melinda Alice. “My first wish is that my next,” she paused a split second, “my  
24 next thousand wishes come true.” She smiled triumphantly and opened her bag to take out a  
25 small notebook and pencil to keep track.

26           Melinda Alice was sure she heard the snail say, “What a clever girl,” as it made it to the safety  
27 of an ivy bed beside the sidewalk.

28           During the rest of the walk to school, Melinda Alice was occupied with wonderful ideas. She  
29 would have beautiful clothes. “Wish number two, that I will always be perfectly dressed,” and  
30 she was just that. True, her new outfit was not a lot different from the one she had worn leaving  
31 the house, but that only meant Melinda Alice liked her own taste.

32           After thinking for awhile, she wrote, “Wish number three. I wish for pierced ears and small  
33 gold earrings.” Her father had not allowed Melinda to have pierced ears, but now she had them  
34 anyway. She felt her new earrings and shook her beautiful hair in delight. “I can have anything: stereo,  
35 tapes, TV videodisc, moped, car, anything! All my life!” She hugged her books to herself in delight.

36           By the time she reached school, Melinda was almost an altruist; she could wish for peace. Then  
37 she wondered, “Is the snail that powerful?” She felt her ears, looked at her perfect blouse, skirt, jacket,  
38 shoes. “I could make ugly people beautiful, cure cripples...” She stopped. The wave of altruism had  
39 washed past. “I could pay people back who deserve it!” Melinda Alice looked at the school, at all the  
40 kids. She had an enormous sense of power. “They all have to do what I want now.” She walked down  
41 the crowded halls to her locker. Melinda Alice could be sweet; she could be witty. She could—The  
42 bell rang for homeroom. Melinda Alice stashed her books, slammed the locker shut, and just made it to  
43 her seat.

44           “Hey, Melinda Alice,” whispered Fred. “You know that big math test next period?”

45           “Oh, no,” grimaced Melinda Alice. Her thoughts raced; “That darned snail made me late, and I  
46 forgot to study.”

47           “I'll blow it,” she groaned aloud. “I wish I were dead.”