

Before you read, with a partner, recall some of the best school experiences you had when you were 11 years old.

As you read, compare your own early school experiences with Margie's.

# The Fun They Had

*He smiled at her and gave her an apple, then took the teacher apart.*

Short Story by Isaac Asimov

## Notes

Isaac Asimov (1920–1992), a Russian-born American writer, is considered one of the great science-fiction authors. He wrote more than 500 books covering virtually all areas of knowledge.

Margie even wrote it that night in her diary. On the page headed May 17, 2155, she wrote, "Today Tommy found a real book!"

It was a very old book. Margie's grandfather once said that when he was a little boy *his* grandfather told him there was a time all stories were printed on paper.

They turned the pages, which were yellow and crinkly, and it was awfully funny to read words that stood still instead of moving the way they were supposed to—on a screen, you know. And then, when they turned back to the page before, it had the same words on it that it had had when they read it the first time.

"Gee," said Tommy, "what a waste. When you're through with the book, you just throw it away, I guess. Our television screen must have had a million books on it and it's good for plenty more. I wouldn't throw it away."

"Same with mine," said Margie. She was 11 and hadn't seen as many telebooks as Tommy had. He was 13.

She said, "Where did you find it?"

"In my house." He pointed without looking, because he was busy reading. "In the attic."

"What's it about?"

"School."

Margie was scornful. "School? What's there to write about school? I hate school." Margie always hated school, but now she hated it more than ever. The mechanical teacher had been giving her test after test in geography and she had been doing worse and worse until her mother had shaken her head sorrowfully and sent for the County Inspector.



He was a round little man with a red face and a whole box of tools with dials and wires. He smiled at her and gave her an apple, then took the teacher apart. Margie had hoped he wouldn't know how to put it together again, but he knew how all right and after an hour or so, there it was again, large and black and ugly with a big screen on which all the lessons were shown and the questions were asked. That wasn't so bad. The part she hated most was the slot where she had to put homework and test papers. She always had to write them out in a punch code they made her learn when she was six years old, and the mechanical teacher calculated the mark in no time.

The Inspector had smiled after he was finished and patted her head. He said to her mother, "It's not the little girl's fault, Mrs. Jones. I think the geography sector was geared a little too quick. Those things happen sometimes. I've slowed it up to an average 10-year level. Actually, the overall pattern of her progress is quite satisfactory." And he patted Margie's head again.

Margie was disappointed. She had been hoping they would take the teacher away altogether. They had once taken Tommy's teacher away for nearly a month because the history sector had blanked out completely.

So she said to Tommy, "Why would anyone write about school?"

Tommy looked at her with very superior eyes. "Because it's not our kind of school, stupid. This is the old kind of school that they had hundreds and hundreds of years ago." He added loftily, pronouncing the word carefully, "*Centuries* ago."

Margie was hurt. "Well, I don't know what kind of school they had all that time ago." She read the book over his shoulder for a while, then said, "Anyway, they had a teacher."

"Sure they had a teacher, but it wasn't a *regular* teacher. It was a man."

"A man? How could a man be a teacher?"

"Well, he just told the boys and girls things and gave them homework and asked them questions."

"A man isn't smart enough."

"Sure he is. My father knows as much as my teacher."

"He can't. A man can't know as much as a teacher."

"He knows almost as much, I betcha."

Margie wasn't prepared to dispute that. She said, "I wouldn't want a strange man in my house to teach me."



Tommy screamed with laughter. "You don't know much, Margie. The teachers didn't live in the house. They had a special building and all the kids went there."

"And all the kids learned the same thing?"

"Sure, if they were the same age."

"But my mother says a teacher has to be adjusted to fit the mind of each boy and girl it teaches and that each kid has to be taught differently."

"Just the same they didn't do it that way then. If you don't like it, you don't have to read the book."

"I didn't say I didn't like it," Margie said quickly. She wanted to read about those funny schools.

They weren't even half finished when Margie's mother called, "Margie! School!"

Margie looked up. "Not yet, Mamma."

"Now," said Mrs. Jones. "And it's probably time for Tommy, too."

Margie said to Tommy, "Can I read the book some more with you after school?"

"Maybe," he said nonchalantly. He walked away whistling, the dusty old book tucked beneath his arm.

Margie went into the schoolroom. It was right next to her bedroom, and the mechanical teacher was on and waiting for her. It was always on at the same time every day except Saturday and Sunday, because her mother said little girls learned better if they learned at regular hours.

The screen was lit up, and it said: "Today's arithmetic lesson is on the addition of proper fractions. Please insert yesterday's homework in the proper slot."

Margie did so with a sigh. She was thinking about the old schools they had when her grandfather's grandfather was a little boy. All the kids from the whole neighbourhood came, laughing and shouting in the schoolyard, sitting together in the schoolroom, going home together at the end of the day. They learned the same things so they could help one another on the homework and talk about it.

And the teachers were people....

The mechanical teacher was flashing on the screen: "When we add the fractions  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{1}{4}$ —"

Margie was thinking about how the kids must have loved it in the old days. She was thinking about the fun they had.

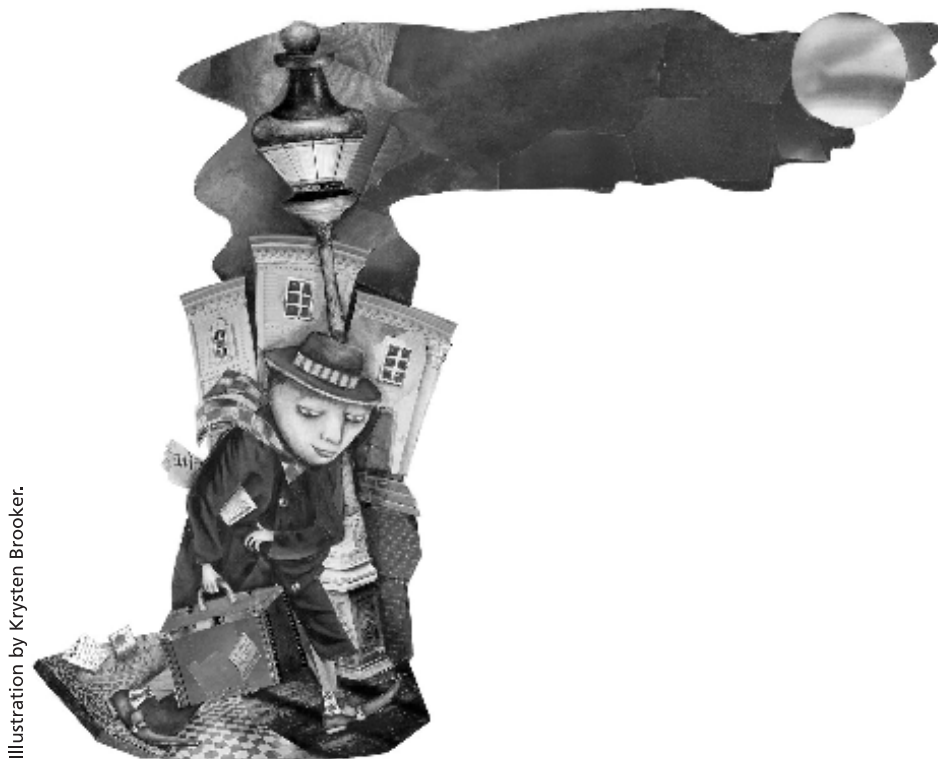
## **2 BL – LAVORO ESTIVO**

### **THE FUN THEY HAD – by ASIMOV**

1. Read your extract of the story.
2. Note down all words/expressions you might like to teach your colleagues.
3. Describe the setting.
4. List and describe the characters.
5. Define the style and technique used in this short story.
6. Be ready to summarize the extract you read.
7. Be ready to read it aloud. Check pronunciation. Use a dictionary.
8. write a possible ending for the story.

# The Landlady

Roald Dahl



Billy Weaver had traveled down from London on the slow afternoon train, with a change at Reading on the way, and by the time he got to Bath, it was about nine o'clock in the evening, and the moon was coming up out of a clear starry sky over the houses opposite the station entrance. But the air was deadly cold and the wind was like a flat blade of ice on his cheeks.

"Excuse me," he said, "but is there a fairly cheap hotel not too far away from here?"

10 "Try The Bell and Dragon," the porter<sup>1</sup> answered, pointing down the road. "They might take you in. It's about a quarter of a mile along on the other side."

## IDENTIFY

Pause at line 7. Circle the name of the **character** who is introduced in this passage. Underline details that establish the **setting**.

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1. **porter** *n.*: person hired to carry luggage.

"The Landlady" from *Kiss, Kiss* by Roald Dahl. Copyright © 1959 by Roald Dahl. Reproduced by permission of David Higham Associates.

## Notes

### INFER

Re-read lines 20–27. How would you describe Billy's mood?

### VISUALIZE

Underline details in lines 37–58 that make the boardinghouse seem inviting and comfortable.

Billy thanked him and picked up his suitcase and set out to walk the quarter-mile to The Bell and Dragon. He had never been to Bath before. He didn't know anyone who lived there. But Mr. Greenslade at the head office in London had told him it was a splendid town. "Find your own lodgings," he had said, "and then go along and report to the branch manager as soon as you've got yourself settled."

20 Billy was seventeen years old. He was wearing a new navy-blue overcoat, a new brown trilby hat,<sup>2</sup> and a new brown suit, and he was feeling fine. He walked briskly down the street. He was trying to do everything briskly these days. Briskness, he had decided, was the one common characteristic of all successful businessmen. The big shots up at the head office were absolutely fantastically brisk all the time. They were amazing.

30 There were no shops on this wide street that he was walking along, only a line of tall houses on each side, all of them identical. They had porches and pillars and four or five steps going up to their front doors, and it was obvious that once upon a time they had been very swanky residences. But now, even in the darkness, he could see that the paint was peeling from the woodwork on their doors and windows and that the handsome white facades<sup>3</sup> were cracked and blotchy from neglect.

40 Suddenly, in a downstairs window that was brilliantly illuminated by a street lamp not six yards away, Billy caught sight of a printed notice propped up against the glass in one of the upper panes. It said "Bed and Breakfast." There was a vase of yellow chrysanthemums, tall and beautiful, standing just underneath the notice.

He stopped walking. He moved a bit closer. Green curtains (some sort of velvety material) were hanging down

2. **trilby hat**: soft hat with the top deeply indented.

3. **facades** (fə·sädz') *n.*: fronts of buildings.



### FLUENCY

Re-read the boxed passage, lines 72–88, aloud. Underline details in the passage that build **suspense**. Read the passage aloud, and emphasize those words and phrases as you read.

### INTERPRET

What does the comparison of the landlady to a jack-in-the-box suggest about her (lines 90–91)?

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### INFER

Re-read lines 103–106. What is strange about the landlady's responses to Billy's comments?

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peculiar manner by the small notice that was there. BED AND  
BREAKFAST, it said. BED AND BREAKFAST, BED AND BREAKFAST,  
BED AND BREAKFAST. Each word was like a large black eye  
staring at him through the glass, holding him, compelling  
him, forcing him to stay where he was and not to walk  
80 away from that house, and the next thing he knew, he was  
actually moving across from the window to the front door  
of the house, climbing the steps that led up to it, and reach-  
ing for the bell.

He pressed the bell. Far away in a back room he heard  
it ringing, and then *at once*—it must have been at once  
because he hadn't even had time to take his finger from  
the bell button—the door swung open and a woman was  
standing there.

Normally you ring the bell and you have at least a  
90 half-minute's wait before the door opens. But this dame  
was like a jack-in-the-box. He pressed the bell—and out  
she popped! It made him jump.

She was about forty-five or fifty years old, and the  
moment she saw him, she gave him a warm, welcoming  
smile.

"Please come in," she said pleasantly. She stepped  
aside, holding the door wide open, and Billy found himself  
automatically starting forward. The compulsion or, more  
accurately, the desire to follow after her into that house was  
100 extraordinarily strong.

"I saw the notice in the window," he said, holding him-  
self back.

"Yes, I know."

"I was wondering about a room."

"It's *all* ready for you, my dear," she said. She had a  
round pink face and very gentle blue eyes.

"I was on my way to The Bell and Dragon," Billy told her. "But the notice in your window just happened to catch my eye."

110 "My dear boy," she said, "why don't you come in out of the cold?"

"How much do you charge?"

"Five and sixpence a night, including breakfast."

It was fantastically cheap. It was less than half of what he had been willing to pay.

"If that is too much," she added, "then perhaps I can reduce it just a tiny bit. Do you desire an egg for breakfast? Eggs are expensive at the moment. It would be sixpence less without the egg."

120 "Five and sixpence is fine," he answered. "I should like very much to stay here."

"I knew you would. Do come in."



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#### INFER

The landlady tells Billy that she knew he would stay at her bed and breakfast (line 122). Why do you think the landlady is so certain about Billy's intentions?

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PREDICT

There are no other guests in the boardinghouse (lines 129–130). What does this clue **foreshadow**?

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INFER

Pause at line 141. Why do you think the landlady has chosen Billy to be her guest?

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IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 143–152. Underline the things the landlady says and does that seem unusual or out of the ordinary.

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She seemed terribly nice. She looked exactly like the mother of one's best school friend welcoming one into the house to stay for the Christmas holidays. Billy took off his hat and stepped over the threshold.

"Just hang it there," she said, "and let me help you with your coat."

There were no other hats or coats in the hall. There  
130 were no umbrellas, no walking sticks—nothing.

"We have it *all* to ourselves," she said, smiling at him over her shoulder as she led the way upstairs. "You see, it isn't very often I have the pleasure of taking a visitor into my little nest."

The old girl is slightly dotty,<sup>9</sup> Billy told himself. But at five and sixpence a night, who cares about that? "I should've thought you'd be simply swamped with applicants," he said politely.

"Oh, I am, my dear, I am, of course I am. But the  
140 trouble is that I'm inclined to be just a teeny-weeny bit choosy and particular—if you see what I mean."

"Ah, yes."

"But I'm always ready. Everything is always ready day and night in this house just on the off chance that an acceptable young gentleman will come along. And it is such a pleasure, my dear, such a very great pleasure when now and again I open the door and I see someone standing there who is just *exactly* right." She was halfway up the stairs, and she paused with one hand on the stair rail, turning her head  
150 and smiling down at him with pale lips. "Like you," she added, and her blue eyes traveled slowly all the way down the length of Billy's body, to his feet, and then up again.

On the second-floor landing she said to him, "This floor is mine."

9. **dotty** *adj.*: crazy.

They climbed up another flight. “And this one is *all* yours,” she said. “Here’s your room. I do hope you’ll like it.” She took him into a small but charming front bedroom, switching on the light as she went in.

160 “The morning sun comes right in the window, Mr. Perkins. It *is* Mr. Perkins, isn’t it?”

“No,” he said. “It’s Weaver.”

“Mr. Weaver. How nice. I’ve put a water bottle between the sheets to air them out, Mr. Weaver. It’s such a comfort to have a hot-water bottle in a strange bed with clean sheets, don’t you agree? And you may light the gas fire at any time if you feel chilly.”

170 “Thank you,” Billy said. “Thank you ever so much.” He noticed that the bedspread had been taken off the bed and that the bedclothes had been neatly turned back on one side, all ready for someone to get in.

“I’m so glad you appeared,” she said, looking earnestly into his face. “I was beginning to get worried.”

“That’s all right,” Billy answered brightly. “You mustn’t worry about me.” He put his suitcase on the chair and started to open it.

“And what about supper, my dear? Did you manage to get anything to eat before you came here?”

180 “I’m not a bit hungry, thank you,” he said. “I think I’ll just go to bed as soon as possible because tomorrow I’ve got to get up rather early and report to the office.”

“Very well, then. I’ll leave you now so that you can unpack. But before you go to bed, would you be kind enough to pop into the sitting room on the ground floor and sign the book? Everyone has to do that because it’s the law of the land, and we don’t want to go breaking any laws at *this* stage in the proceedings, do we?” She gave him a little

## Notes

### CONNECT

Pause at line 170. If you were Billy, would you be worried? Tell why or why not.

**IDENTIFY**

Pause at line 188. How would you describe the landlady's personality? Explain.

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**IDENTIFY**

Circle the words in lines 189–194 that show what Billy thinks of the landlady.

**INTERPRET**

Pause at line 201. Do you agree that Billy is lucky? Explain.

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wave of the hand and went quickly out of the room and closed the door.

190 Now, the fact that his landlady appeared to be slightly off her rocker didn't worry Billy in the least. After all, she not only was harmless—there was no question about that—but she was also quite obviously a kind and generous soul. He guessed that she had probably lost a son in the war, or something like that, and had never gotten over it.

So a few minutes later, after unpacking his suitcase and washing his hands, he trotted downstairs to the ground floor and entered the living room. His landlady wasn't there, but the fire was glowing in the hearth, and the little dachshund was still sleeping soundly in front of it. The  
200 room was wonderfully warm and cozy. I'm a lucky fellow, he thought, rubbing his hands. This is a bit of all right.

He found the guest book lying open on the piano, so he took out his pen and wrote down his name and address. There were only two other entries above his on the page, and as one always does with guest books, he started to read them. One was a Christopher Mulholland from Cardiff. The other was Gregory W. Temple from Bristol.

That's funny, he thought suddenly. Christopher Mulholland. It rings a bell.

210 Now where on earth had he heard that rather unusual name before?

Was it a boy at school? No. Was it one of his sister's numerous young men, perhaps, or a friend of his father's? No, no, it wasn't any of those. He glanced down again at the book.

*Christopher Mulholland*  
231 Cathedral Road, Cardiff

*Gregory W. Temple*  
27 Sycamore Drive, Bristol

220 As a matter of fact, now he came to think of it, he wasn't at all sure that the second name didn't have almost as much of a familiar ring about it as the first.

"Gregory Temple?" he said aloud, searching his memory. "Christopher Mulholland? . . ."

"Such charming boys," a voice behind him answered, and he turned and saw his landlady sailing into the room with a large silver tea tray in her hands. She was holding it well out in front of her, and rather high up, as though the tray were a pair of reins on a frisky horse.

230 "They sound somehow familiar," he said.

"They do? How interesting."

"I'm almost positive I've heard those names before somewhere. Isn't that odd? Maybe it was in the newspapers. They weren't famous in any way, were they? I mean famous cricketers<sup>10</sup> or footballers or something like that?"

"Famous," she said, setting the tea tray down on the low table in front of the sofa. "Oh no, I don't think they were famous. But they were incredibly handsome, both of them, I can promise you that. They were tall and young and  
240 handsome, my dear, just exactly like you."

Once more, Billy glanced down at the book. "Look here," he said, noticing the dates. "This last entry is over two years old."

"It is?"

"Yes, indeed. And Christopher Mulholland's is nearly a year before that—more than *three years* ago."

"Dear me," she said, shaking her head and heaving a dainty little sigh. "I would never have thought it. How time does fly away from us all, doesn't it, Mr. Wilkins?"

250 "It's Weaver," Billy said. "W-e-a-v-e-r."

### IDENTIFY

What odd thing has Billy discovered in the guest book (lines 208–224)?

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### COMPARE & CONTRAST

Pause at line 240. According to the landlady, how does Billy resemble the previous guests?

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10. **cricketers** *n.*: people who play cricket, a game that is popular in Great Britain.

Why does the landlady keep forgetting Billy's last name (lines 248–253)?

260 “Well, you see, both of these names—Mulholland and Temple—I not only seem to remember each one of them separately, so to speak, but somehow or other, in some peculiar way, they both appear to be sort of connected together as well. As though they were both famous for the same sort of thing, if you see what I mean—like . . . well . . . like Dempsey and Tunney, for example, or Churchill and Roosevelt.”<sup>11</sup>

Re-read lines 257–264. What is Billy trying to figure out? What does he reveal about the two quests' names?



Illustration by Krysten Brooker.

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“How amusing,” she said. “But come over here now, dear, and sit down beside me on the sofa and I’ll give you a nice cup of tea and a ginger biscuit<sup>12</sup> before you go to bed.”

270 “You really shouldn’t bother,” Billy said. “I didn’t mean you to do anything like that.” He stood by the piano, watching her as she fussed about with the cups and saucers. He noticed that she had small, white, quickly moving hands and red fingernails.

“I’m almost positive it was in the newspapers I saw them,” Billy said. “I’ll think of it in a second. I’m sure I will.”

There is nothing more tantalizing<sup>13</sup> than a thing like this that lingers just outside the borders of one’s memory. He hated to give up.

280 “Now wait a minute,” he said. “Wait just a minute. Mulholland . . . Christopher Mulholland . . . wasn’t *that* the name of the Eton<sup>14</sup> schoolboy who was on a walking tour through the West Country, and then all of a sudden . . .”

“Milk?” she said. “And sugar?”

“Yes, please. And then all of a sudden . . .”

290 “Eton schoolboy?” she said. “Oh no, my dear, that can’t possibly be right, because *my* Mr. Mulholland was certainly not an Eton schoolboy when he came to me. He was a Cambridge<sup>15</sup> undergraduate. Come over here now and sit next to me and warm yourself in front of this lovely fire. Come on. Your tea’s all ready for you.” She patted the empty place beside her on the sofa, and she sat there smiling at Billy and waiting for him to come over.

12. **biscuit** (bis’kit) *n.*: British term meaning “cookie.”

13. **tantalizing** (tan’tə·līz’īŋ) *adj.*: teasing by remaining unavailable or by withholding something desired by someone; tempting. (In Greek mythology, Tantalus was a king condemned after death to stand in water that moved away whenever he tried to drink it and to remain under branches of fruit that were just out of reach.)

14. **Eton**: boys’ prep school near London.

15. **Cambridge**: famous university in England.

## Notes

### PREDICT

Billy seems about to remember why Christopher Mulholland’s name was in the newspaper (line 283). What do you think he’s about to say before he’s interrupted by the landlady?

### INFER

Pause at line 291. Why do you think the landlady keeps interrupting Billy?

**INFER**

Pause at line 306. What might the strange smell indicate?

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**PREDICT**

Re-read lines 307–315. What do you guess has happened to the two guests?

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**IDENTIFY**

Circle the words in lines 321–331 that indicate the landlady's interest in her guests' appearance.

He crossed the room slowly and sat down on the edge of the sofa. She placed his teacup on the table in front of him.

"*There we are,*" she said. "How nice and cozy this is, isn't it?"

Billy started sipping his tea. She did the same. For half a minute or so, neither of them spoke. But Billy knew that she was looking at him. Her body was half turned toward him, and he could feel her eyes resting on his face, watching him over the rim of her teacup. Now and again, he caught a whiff of a peculiar smell that seemed to emanate<sup>16</sup> directly from her person. It was not in the least unpleasant, and it reminded him—well, he wasn't quite sure what it reminded him of. Pickled walnuts? New leather? Or was it the corridors of a hospital?

At length, she said, "Mr. Mulholland was a great one for his tea. Never in my life have I seen anyone drink as much tea as dear, sweet Mr. Mulholland."

"I suppose he left fairly recently," Billy said. He was still puzzling his head about the two names. He was positive now that he had seen them in the newspapers—in the headlines.

"Left?" she said, arching her brows. "But my dear boy, he never left. He's still here. Mr. Temple is also here. They're on the fourth floor, both of them together."

Billy set his cup down slowly on the table and stared at his landlady. She smiled back at him, and then she put out one of her white hands and patted him comfortingly on the knee. "How old are you, my dear?" she asked.

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen!" she cried. "Oh, it's the perfect age! Mr. Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a trifle shorter than you are; in fact I'm sure he was, and his teeth

16. **emanate** (em'ə-nāt') v.: come forth.

weren't *quite* so white. You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr. Weaver, did you know that?"

"They're not as good as they look," Billy said. "They've got simply masses of fillings in them at the back."

"Mr. Temple, of course, was a little older," she said, ignoring his remark. "He was actually twenty-eight. And yet  
330 I never would have guessed it if he hadn't told me, never in my whole life. There wasn't a *blemish* on his body."

"A what?" Billy said.

"His skin was *just* like a baby's."

There was a pause. Billy picked up his teacup and took another sip of his tea; then he set it down again gently in its saucer. He waited for her to say something else, but she seemed to have lapsed into another of her silences. He sat there staring straight ahead of him into the far corner of the room, biting his lower lip.

340 "That parrot," he said at last. "You know something? It had me completely fooled when I first saw it through the window. I could have sworn it was alive."

"Alas, no longer."

"It's most terribly clever the way it's been done," he said. "It doesn't look in the least bit dead. Who did it?"

"I did."

"*You* did?"

"Of course," she said. "And have you met my little Basil as well?" She nodded toward the dachshund curled up so  
350 comfortably in front of the fire. Billy looked at it. And suddenly, he realized that this animal had all the time been just as silent and motionless as the parrot. He put out a hand and touched it gently on the top of its back. The back was hard and cold, and when he pushed the hair to one side with his fingers, he could see the skin underneath, grayish black and dry and perfectly preserved.

### INFER

Pause at line 327. Why do you think Billy tells the landlady about his fillings?

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### PREDICT

Pause at line 339. Billy seems to be thunderstruck by a sudden realization about the landlady. What do you think Billy is going to do?

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### IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 340–356. Underline the horrifying things the landlady reveals about her activities.

### INTERPRET

In lines 357–359, we learn that Billy looks at the landlady with admiration. Do you think his admiration is sincere or fake? Explain.

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### PREDICT

Pause at line 365. What do you think will happen to Billy?

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“Good gracious me,” he said. “How absolutely fascinating.” He turned away from the dog and stared with deep admiration at the little woman beside him on the sofa. “It must be most awfully difficult to do a thing like that.”

“Not in the least,” she said. “I stuff all my little pets myself when they pass away. Will you have another cup of tea?”

“No, thank you,” Billy said. The tea tasted faintly of bitter almonds, and he didn’t much care for it.

“You did sign the book, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yes.”

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“That’s good. Because later on, if I happen to forget what you were called, then I could always come down here and look it up. I still do that almost every day with Mr. Mulholland and Mr. . . . Mr. . . .”

“Temple,” Billy said, “Gregory Temple. Excuse my asking, but haven’t there been any other guests here except them in the last two or three years?”

Holding her teacup high in one hand, inclining her head slightly to the left, she looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes and gave him another gentle little smile.

“No, my dear,” she said. “Only you.”



Illustration by Krysten Brooker.

# Genesis and catastrophe: a true story

Roald Dahl

1962

"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 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 on 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 lace 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, Kiara, 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, Kiara,' 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."

"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 baptized 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 Adolfus 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 dare 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."

"Sssh!" 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, Klara..."

"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, signaling to 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..."