

A Visit to the Doctor

From Boy: Tales of Childhood by Roald Dahl

I have only one unpleasant memory of the summer holidays in Norway. We were in the grandparents' house in Oslo and my mother said to me, "We are going to the doctor this afternoon. He wants to look at your nose and mouth."

I think I was eight at the time. "What's wrong with my nose and mouth?" I asked.

"Nothing much," my mother said. "But I think you've got adenoids."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "It's nothing."

I held my mother's hand as we walked to the doctor's house. It took us about half an hour. There was a kind of dentist's chair in the surgery and I was lifted into it. The doctor had a round mirror strapped to his forehead and he peered up my nose and into my mouth. He then took my mother aside and they held a whispered conversation. I saw my mother looking rather grim, but she nodded.

The doctor now put some water to boil in an aluminum mug over a gas flame, and into the boiling water he placed a long thin shiny steel instrument. I sat there watching the steam coming off the boiling water. I was not in the least apprehensive. I was too young to realize that something out of the ordinary was going to happen.

Then a nurse dressed in white came in. She was carrying a red rubber apron and a curved white enamel bowl. She put the apron over the front of my body and tied it around my neck. It was far too big. Then she held the enamel bowl under my chin. The curve of the bowl fitted perfectly against the curve of my chest.

The doctor was bending over me. In his hand he held that long shiny steel instrument. He held it right in front of my face, and to this day I can still describe it perfectly. It was about the thickness and length of a pencil, and like most pencils it had a lot of sides to it. Towards the end, the metal became much thinner, and at the very end of the thin bit of metal there was a tiny blade set at an angle. The blade wasn't more than a centimeter long, very small, very sharp and very shiny.

"Open your mouth," the doctor said, speaking Norwegian.

I refused. I thought he was going to do something to my teeth, and everything anyone had ever done to my teeth had been painful.

"It won't take two seconds," the doctor said. He spoke gently, and I was seduced by his voice. Like an ass, I opened my mouth.

The tiny blade flashed in the bright light and disappeared into my mouth. It went high up into the roof of my mouth. It went high up into the roof of my mouth, and the hand that held the blade gave four

or five very quick little twists and the next moment, out of my mouth into the basin came tumbling a whole mass of flesh and blood.

I was too shocked and outraged to do anything but yelp. I was horrified by the huge red lumps that had fallen out of my mouth into the white basin and my first thought was that the doctor had cut out the whole of the middle of my head.

"Those were your adenoids," I heard the doctor saying.

"I sat there gasping. The roof of my mouth seemed to be on fire. I grabbed my mother's hand and held on to it tight. I couldn't believe that anyone would do this to me.

"Stay where you are, the doctor said. "You'll be all right in a minute."

Blood was still coming out of my mouth and dripping into the basin the nurse was holding. "Spit it all out," she said, "there's a good boy."

You'll be able to breathe much better through your nose after this," the doctor said.

The nurse wiped my lips and washed my face with a wet flannel. Then they lifted me out of the chair and stood me on my feet. I felt a bit groggy.

"We'll get you home," my Mother said, taking my hand. Down the stairs we went and on to the street. We started walking. I said *waking*. No trolley-car or taxi. We walked the full half-hour journey back to my grandparents' house, and when we arrived at last, I can remember as clearly as anything my grandmother saying, "Let him sit down in that chair and rest for a while. After all, he's had an operation."

Someone placed a chair for me beside my grandmother's armchair, and I sat down. My grandmother reached over and discovered one of my hands in both of hers. "That won't be the last time you'll go to a doctor in your life, she said. "And with a bit of luck, they won't do you too much harm."

That was in 1924, and taking out a child's adenoids, and often the tonsils as well, without any anesthetic was common practice in those days. I wonder, though, what you would think if some doctor did that to you today.

Understanding the Text:

1. How does Roald Dahl explain the fact that he wasn't frightened when he saw the doctor preparing the 'long shiny steel instrument'?
2. Explain why Dahl says "Like an ass, I opened my mouth."

3. How seriously did his mother and grandmother treat Dahl's operation? Quote from the passage to support your answer.
4. Why do you think Dahl included this story from his past in his autobiography?