

Nava Semel

The Child Behind the Eyes

Monodrama for an actress

Translated from Hebrew by MIRIAM SHLESINGER

(Excerpt)

It's been more than a week since Grandma Erika died. I try not to count the days. I may not have seen her every day, but still she was always there. It seems so strange, even now, when I tell myself, logically: it's over. You're not going to see her anymore. I can still feel her though. She'd been so eager to see him go to school, but she didn't make it. Somebody up there messes up the timetable. They don't always make allowances.

He's supposed to be going to school today. Supposed to... The teacher will write "Good Morning First Grade" in block letters on the green board. Markings that won't mean a thing to him. It'll be a while before he can read. His clothes are all laid out. Not since yesterday; since two days ago. His schoolbag too. I didn't sleep all night. My body needed it badly, but I just couldn't. David turned the other way and we both pretended to be sleeping. Finally he got up very quietly, as if to keep from waking me. On tiptoe. He put on his running suit and went out to jog.

The light's slithering over the windowsill like a thief. My body is all cramped from so much tossing in bed. I can hear Talia and him breathing in the children's room. There's an abruptness about the way he turns over. He was very excited yesterday, but he didn't have any trouble falling asleep. He accepts things so naturally. He realizes that he's going to be in school and that it probably won't be easy. I gave him a big hug. Almost the same as I gave Talia four years ago, when I sent her off to school. almost.

I can hear David running outside. That's how he always is. Whenever he's got something on his mind, he runs. When he's suffering, he runs. When he's scared, he runs. Even the day before our wedding, he went out for a run. He's doing another lap. He won't stop. At the hospital back then, he wouldn't stop either. Like a machine.

They wouldn't let me off the bed, but I did get a peep through the window. The doctor and the nurses were at a loss. They mumbled something. Suddenly, David appeared in the window, as he bolted across the lawn and started to circle the giant building. He looked, at first, like a man possessed, but then he slowed down. I didn't believe he'd come back, but as soon as I spotted his legs through the window again, I knew for sure that my life had changed. Yesterday he told me that he'd stand outside the school gate all day long, and I said: "Not me. I'm staying here."

Their breathing in the nursery is so peaceful. I'll have to wake him up pretty soon, to shake him gently by the shoulder and say: "Get up little boy. It's time. You're going to school."

One of the neighbors came over to me yesterday and asked: "Are you sending **that child** to school?" Yes Mrs. Baum. I am sending that child to school. His name is Yotam. He's a child with a name. Surprised? all the other names they use I can recite in my sleep: idiot, imbecile, blockhead, slow, moron, dope, nitwit, simpleton... have I forgotten any? Oh yes. There's also the inevitable euphemism: "special child". Human imagination is so creative. It's only the paragons of etiquette who call him "that Child". The word isn't contagious, Mrs. Baum. You can use street language when you talk about him. I don't mind any more. You can point at him and say: "There's Thelma mongoloid kid."

I didn't care what people would think. I gave birth in a fit of screaming. The pain tore me apart and I gave in to it. I heard David pacing the hall, back and forth. As soon as he left, I let myself go. The midwife in the white kerchief looked like something by Breugel. "Control yourself," she scolded harshly. I knew it was a boy even before they told me. They were strangely silent around me. Big holes in the normal bustle of childbirth. I asked: "Is he OK?" The doctor hushed me: "Yes, yes. Now get some sleep." I don't remember whether I said I wanted to see him. When I did wake up, it seemed as though I'd lost a few days of living.

David only came for a few minutes. All the women who'd given birth with me were nursing by then. I was the only one who still hadn't seen her baby. I went to ask the nurses, not suspecting anything yet. The soul putting up its defenses perhaps? I talked myself into believing that the baby was simply underweight, that I'm about to see an incubator and some tubes and special formula. I wasn't ready for a distinguished-looking doctor who closed the door behind me and said: "The baby is suffering from Down Syndrome!" Suddenly I was so cold. He said: "Don't take him home. The best thing would be not to see him at all. Not to grow attached to him." He had a tinny voice, like a sort of machine. "You see, he's mongoloid." The dreaded word. It wasn't till I spotted David circling the building that the facts began to register. A chill swept over me. My breasts were sheer torture. A retarded child? Me??? To me? Like looking into a window of yourself and seeing a warped reflection.

As far as the doctors were concerned, it was very simple. A genetic deformity. 47 chromosomes instead of 46. One infinitesimal extension and the whole delicate network known as a human being falls apart. I filled in the questionnaire. Thelma Carmel, thirty six, frustrated career woman. A Picasso manquee. And just when she's about to find herself, along comes somebody to screw up her life. Suddenly the earth opens up and you fall straight through. And there's nothing to stop your fall. Just me and this infant. It's your infant, Thelma Carmel. It grew in your belly and nothing's going to change that. It's your disgrace, your indelible flaw.

The doctor tried to reason with me. "Get rid of the problem." He didn't even say "baby". "Cross it out. Erase it. Nothing will ever come of it. It's retarded and that's final. We only want what's best for you."