

EVEN GOD SOMETIMES MAKES MISTAKES

A hot Saturday in July - we had just sat down for lunch when the phone rang. It was Günter. "Heidrun, you will not believe what has happened. Nicole is dead."

Nicole, Günter's daughter, was nine, a lovely girl with long blond hair. I had sat next to her three weeks previously at a meeting of our amateur theatrical group. Nicole had acted as a bridesmaid in our latest production of Max Frisch's *Don Juan*, I had played Miranda, the whore. Günter had been assistant to the director and Margrit, Nicole's mother, responsible for costumes.

The meeting still stood out clearly in mind. Nicole had sat next to me. While we were discussing the next production, Nicole was absorbed in a very complex drawing. I had watched her, fascinated. She was creating a sort of living map of a village. There were streets and squares with people performing tasks, houses, shops, a church with a walled-in cemetery full of crosses. What amazed me was that she never stopped to think what else should go in or rub something out to make adjustments. With the same consistent speed, she drew in detail after detail. It was as if she had a very clear and complete picture in her mind, and it was just a question of transferring it onto paper. I had envied Günter and Margrit for such a talented and beautiful girl.

"No, Günter, you can't be right," I answered. "It is true", he said. Then for the next hour or two - I cannot remember how long, time had stopped - Günter talked about Nicole and how it had happened.

Nicole had been at a summer camp. The first day, all the girls had gone for a hike in the mountains. The second day, she had woken up with a sore throat and a temperature. The woman in charge took her to the doctor who examined her and decided she had probably caught the flu. He told her to rest and drink plenty of fluids. She rested all morning, got up for lunch and had a yogurt, then went back to bed. At around three, she woke up thirsty, got up to get a drink of water, collapsed and died.

Meningitis shock, the autopsy concluded.

Günter continued to talk about everyday events. How Nicole had enjoyed snuggling up in bed between him and Margrit on Sunday mornings, how creative

she had been and how loving. He kept on talking, as if the phone were his connection to a reality he feared was slipping away from him. And maybe talking about Nicole was keeping her alive, present, with us, stopped her from drifting off to another planet. I did not ask. All I felt was his urgent need to stay connected.

Günter told me how much Nicole had loved flowers. Her favourite had been a white rose tinged with pink. It was of this bush, the most prolific in his garden, that Günter had cut a big bunch on the opening night of Don Juan to give one to each of us. Nicole had loved flowers as if she were a butterfly. "Why did she have to die?"

Nicole had enjoyed school, had enjoyed learning. Her teachers only had praise for her. With her class mates she had been popular. "Why did she have to go?"

"How could God do this to her?" Nicole was so religious. She had never missed Sunday school. Once she had said to Günter, "Daddy, I have two fathers: you and God." "What sort of a god was this who killed a girl who loved him so?"

"And why was there no warning?" Günter wanted to know. If there had been signs of a serious illness, surely something could have been done? "Why did God not at least give a warning? Why? Why?"

I had no answers. I had no comforts to offer. All I could say was that God had certainly not intended to punish Nicole. "It was just an accident. Even God sometimes makes mistakes."

I felt immensely sad, immensely helpless, hollow. Now that I had hung up the phone, I, too, begged God for an explanation. But I got no answer.

THE STORY OF THE STORY

The funeral was scheduled for Monday morning. I wanted to write something to show Günter I had heard him, and that I shared his grief, their grief. Empty as my hands were, I was desperately searching for something to give.

I started a poem about a butterfly happily flying from flower to flower, but I soon abandoned that project as it was leading to the issue of life cycle, an experience Nicole had not been permitted to complete. But I could not think of anything else. And time was running out fast.

Sunday morning came. My husband had gone off on a bike ride, my teen-age sons and their friends were still asleep. This was my last chance. If I did not produce something within the next hour or two, I would have nothing to give.

The lines of my writing pad remained ominously blank. The minutes were racing by. The pressure to produce was becoming an impediment to the flow of thoughts. And then, as if impelled by another mind, a parable began to take shape. Just as Nicole's hand had seemed directed by another force as she was drawing, so was mine in that hour. All I had to do was to listen to Günter's words again and the transfiguration followed.

Günter became the proud and caring gardener. Nicole slipped into the shape of her favourite rose. The blue and cloudless sky gave no warning of the thunderstorm already brewing, just as the absence of symptoms failed to indicate the serious illness. God appears as the flash of lightning which had not set out to kill Nicole but had hit the rose accidentally because he could not see the ground.

But most important, I wanted Günter to see himself surrounded by the many people who shared his grief, feel the arms of the many friends around him who were crying with him. I wanted to give him a concrete picture to hold on to.

The new, as yet unnamed rose, born out of the tears of grief for Nicole, I hoped Günter and Margrit would come to see as a symbol for a new beginning.

The thought of presenting the story at the service briefly passed through my mind but was discarded immediately as inappropriate. I did not want to hug the limelight. Yet, came Monday morning, I woke up with a clear order to read the piece. Strange, just as I had felt led in my writing, I now felt compelled by something outside of myself to read it. I had no choice. Even my otherwise persistent inner voice criticizing my very efforts was strangely silent, and I was only concerned with the problem of how to proceed.

When I arrived at the church, I immediately set off to look for the priest. I found him in the sacristy and with a beating heart asked him if he would permit me to read a story. "No," he answered, "you must understand we have our own thoughts on this." I bowed my head in the respect I was taught and left. All the members of our drama group by now had gathered around Nicole's coffin. The coffin was open, Nicole's blond hair lay surrounded by a halo of flowers. Overcome by her still beauty, my feet turned and propelled me back to the sacristy. "If I am honest," I said, "I don't understand." The priest tore the pages out of my hand glancing at them quickly. "And for whom are you speaking?" he wanted to know. "For

nobody," I mumbled, taken aback by the question. "All right, you can read it before the service then," and with that he motioned me out of the room.

I joined the group once again and together we moved into the church for the service. My self-questioning voice was now as loud as my heartbeat, "what, if it is all wrong, what if Margrit and Günter do not like my story? What if it is not appropriate after all?" The priest entered from the side, walked to the altar stairs and addressed the mourners, "somebody wants to read something." The sheets of paper were trembling in my hand, my voice was trembling. I can't remember how I got to the end.

I stumbled back to my seat, tears veiling my vision. Then the priest officiated the service. He spoke about Nicole as an adult always using her first and last name. He spoke of her as a person whose time was simply up. He did not speak of her as the unusually gifted, unusually devoted girl she had been. He did not indicate he understood what a loss Nicole's death must be to her mother and father and brother. Not a sign of empathy.

A woman, Nicole's catechist I was later informed, went up to the pulpit and read from the Bible - a piece about deliverance from sin. Why the topic of sin in a girl so young, so pure, so loving? No mention of Nicole's eagerness in Sunday school, no mention of Nicole's religious commitment, unusual for a girl her age. No word of loss, no personal word.

Her classmates were not there to sing, it was still holiday time. Her teacher was not there to voice his loss of a gifted student.

Was it this absence of personal contributions, this lack of warmth and comfort I had detected in the priest's cold response to my request that gave me the strength to pursue? Or was there really a presence that had pushed me forward? I do not know.

The hardest part of the funeral was still to come - seeing the white coffin, covered with flowers, lowered into the grave. Then the first handful of earth followed by many other handfuls. Layer after layer of tear-soaked earth was beginning to separate us from Nicole. Eventually, the moment came when we walked away from the grave, leaving Nicole there - alone, - our minds still clinging to the fair-haired girl, our legs disconnectedly walking on towards the living.

After a time "that was neither short nor long" Margrit and Günter joined Compassionate Friends, a self-help group of bereaved parents. Two years later they set off for Birmingham to attend an international meeting of the association.

Wishing to share my story, they asked me to translate it into English. The simple job of translating turned into a laborious rewriting in English, as closer scrutiny of the original German version showed that to be full of inconsistencies, not a piece carefully written.

Margrit and Günter have since also become supporters of Friends in Sri Lanka. This charitable organisation was initiated by a Norwegian journalist, who found the tiny Mary crying helplessly in the street. When Margrit heard about this organisation, she and Günter decided to 'adopt' Cheryl, a girl Nicole's age. Together with their son Rene they visited Cheryl and the other children they had found sponsors for. It was then that they learnt of the special project run by Mary's Friends at the neurological clinic of the hospital in Colombo. There, children receive free treatment for all neurological diseases, meningitis being one of these. Margrit is now committed to raising funds to help alleviate the otherwise appalling conditions in the hospital. She does this by collecting the bits and pieces friends and acquaintances now longer need and then selling them at flea markets.

The circle for me will be complete when publication of my story leads to income - an income to be funneled into this project on behalf of Nicole. Not that helping other children with a similar disease can lend meaning to Nicole's death - that it never will - but at least her loss will have led to help where help is desperately needed.

P.S. I have just received the latest rose catalogue from Kordes in northern Germany - one of the best-known growers in the world. On page 61 there's a rose called Nicole, its description fits my purely invented Nicole rose. I have ordered two: one for Günter and Margrit's garden, one for my own.