

## The Frogs

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The first case on record involved a baby girl, referred to even today as Baby Alpha. It may not seem like such a phenomenon now, but at the time, her birth was both remarkable and extraordinary, something that generated thousands of books and articles worldwide. She was the first to send us on the path we live today.

Of course there was no warning of what would happen, but, in retrospect, it seems ironic that it would happen to her mother, a biology teacher from LeSueur, Minnesota. When Minna Hawkins gave birth, her daughter was born with two small flaps of skin just above each shoulder blade. Described by some as a set of unformed scabs, the flaps of skin were thin, almost translucent, and each took the shape of a small crescent moon. They measured just a few centimeters in length, so it was easy not to notice them at first. The two flaps looked as though they were folds of skin on Baby Alpha's back that somehow never completely closed up. Or perhaps they looked like small lacerations, as such things can be expected when one travels through the birth canal. Whatever they were, when Minna Hawkins reached out to touch them, they winced like rubbery worms. After that she always hesitated before touching her daughter, telling herself it was out of fear of causing infection.

"What are they?" She asked the doctor, afraid of what his answer would be. The doctor stood bewildered, perplexed, challenged. He had never seen anything like this before.

At first he asked Minna Hawkins if she ate anything unusual during her pregnancy, or if she traveled to any foreign country, to which she replied no. These were always the first choices to blame in the event of such phenomena.

He then replied, "I don't know how to explain this. We'll need to run some tests, of course, to find out more information, but it appears that your daughter has two openings on her back which resemble small eyelids. Until they open, we have no idea what they are or what lies behind them." As bizarre as this sounded, Minna Hawkins said nothing, and instead looked away as if to keep a secret.

Less alarming, yet equally perplexing, were Baby Alpha's eyes. They were close together, less than an inch of space between them, each devoid of lashes and black as the night, with a hint of ruby when the light shone just right. They stared silently at the world outside her window.

Minna Hawkins and her baby spent the next few days in the hospital. As an infant Baby Alpha was quiet, never crying aloud in the middle of the night, never once making any noise at all. If her mother's hesitance to touch her affected her in any way, nothing she did revealed that. In fact, in many ways Baby Alpha was quite normal. For instance, the hospital staff changed her diapers eight to ten times a day. She liked to be rocked to sleep while listening to a lullaby, and she ate every three hours, sucking on her mother's breast ever so gently as if knowing the pain a cracked nipple can bring. This was the only time Minna Hawkins held her daughter. But still there were the two flaps of skin on Baby Alpha's back, which seemed to move like almonds under her skin

when they were covered by anything as restrictive as a hospital blanket. Best to keep them exposed, both Minna Hawkins and the doctor agreed, so they did.

The first step to understanding what was happening to Baby Alpha came that night, when Minna Hawkins noticed that her daughter flinched when she rolled over on her back, withdrawing as if responding to scalding heat. When she told this to the doctor the next day, he simply replied that babies should never sleep on their backs anyway. "What I mean is I can sense she is in unusual pain," Minna Hawkins told him. "Come look." And with that she gently placed her daughter on her back, and Baby Alpha squirmed and her eyes grew bigger and welled up with tears, as if they were asking her mother to move her. "You see, Doctor. She does not like lying on her back."

And the doctor, having witnessed the entire event, simply replied, "No newborn child does, Mrs. Hawkins," and then turned the baby over on her stomach.

It wasn't until the third day when people began to talk. It was then, during one of Baby Alpha's baths, when the nurse lay the child on her back in a small plastic tub filled halfway with warm water. As the nurse cleaned Baby Alpha's face and pinched her nose to prevent her from ingesting the water, she waited for Baby Alpha to open her mouth to breathe. But the minutes passed by and Baby Alpha never once opened her mouth. The nurse eventually released her hold, afraid of suffocating the child. When she gave her account to the doctor, he ordered another bath, and watched as the nurse repeated the procedure. Again she pinched Baby Alpha's nose. Again Baby Alpha never once opened her mouth. It was then that the doctor reached under and turned

the child on her side, only to see the two small flaps of skin opening and closing with the pace of a breath.

“My God, they’re gills!” Said the doctor who gained modest attention with the birth of Baby Alpha. She was his medical miracle. His uncharted territory. Now she would be his retirement plan.

Gills are exactly what they were, though no one really knew why, nor could they tell until Baby Alpha opened them for the first time. It was then they began to take form. The skin around the gills hardened to the consistency of cartilage. Tiny bone-like structures formed along the edges of each flap like gill arches on a fish, the tiny, V-shaped formations that provide support for the gills and their blood vessels. Sleeping on them must have felt like sleeping on sharp needles.

More astonishing was what the doctor discovered when he saw his patient the next day. At that time, with nothing but air surrounding them, the gills *moved*. It was not underwater like what he had already witnessed; this time the gills were actually breathing air! This is how the newspaper would later report the events. The headlines read *Baby Alpha Breathes Through Gills*. Reports say on that day the highest number of newspapers were sold in history, an event unheard of in the era of cable news and Internet media. Even higher than on the day she was born. Flaps, after all, are not nearly as newsworthy as gills.

No one, however, reported the strange color in her eyes, which shone like blood clots. And no one reported that since her birth Baby Alpha never uttered a sound, or

that she looked only at the lake outside the hospital window. Wanting it as if it were her mother.

With the discovery of the gills the doctor returned to Minna Hawkins's bedside and decided to tell her the truth himself. He told her that both x-rays and CAT scans indicated the presence of an air passageway from the openings in her daughter's back directly to her lungs. "Whereas your daughter's nose and mouth function perfectly," he said, "she seems to have acquired a second respiratory system, in addition to the one we all have. I don't know how to explain this, Mrs. Hawkins, but your daughter has developed a set of gills on her back, similar to what we see in fish."

As bizarre as this sounded, Minna Hawkins waited before responding, looking instead at the table next to her bed which bore the two items she brought with her the day her daughter was born. The first was a photograph of her husband taken a year before. He celebrated his wife's pregnancy by buying a dozen minnows and taking them to the local bar, where he threw them in a mug of cold beer and drank the entire thing before his friends, swallowing each one in honor of his fatherhood. Less than two months later, he left after deciding that the east coast was a far more lucrative proposition for a fisherman than a frozen lake in Minnesota.

The second item on her bedside table was a stuffed frog given to her by the sixth grade students in her biology class, which she grabbed and held closely to her chest.

"Gills?" She finally asked, confronting her disbelief. "What on earth could have caused gills?"

And then the doctor told her the theory that would explain the phenomenon that began with Baby Alpha. "At four weeks, the human embryo is about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an inch long, and looks something like a tadpole. The structure that will eventually develop into a head is visible, a noticeable tail. The embryo has structures similar to the gills of a fish in the area that will later develop into a throat. It's possible that something, perhaps something traumatic, occurred during that stage of development and in turn resulted in your daughter having gills. This could also explain why, since your daughter's birth, she has not made a single sound."

Minna Hawkins held the stuffed animal closer to her and asked, "Could it have been the frogs, Doctor? Could it have anything to do with the frogs?"

The doctor raised his brow in confusion as she then examined the animal in her hands and told him the story of the nature hike, the field trip she took with her biology students when she was four weeks pregnant to the day.

On that trip one student found an oak leaf shaped like a ghost, and another found a grasshopper hidden in a tall thicket. But it was she, Minna Hawkins, who found the most peculiar item of all. Instead of finding leaves and insects, Minna Hawkins found a deformed leopard frog in the wetlands nearby. At first she thought it had a dislocated hip or a separated forelimb. But after a more careful review, it turned out that the frog had an extra set of legs sprouting from its back. Walking further with her students, Minna Hawkins then found two more frogs, each with an extra set of eyes. Startled, she told her students not to touch them, and instead reported them to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. Later that day, when the students asked her why

the frogs were born deformed, Minna Hawkins replied, "These frogs were born this way for a reason. It's our job to find out why." Within months, the agency received dozens of reports of similar frogs along the Minnesota River Valley. Minna Hawkins went on to tell the doctor that after that day she grew more engaged in her work in discovering deformed frogs. Within the next two months, she found eight more frogs, earning the title of Frog Woman by the students in her school. "The frogs were my discovery," she told the doctor, "and this stuffed animal is proof of that."

The doctor listened with the attention of a journalist, never once interrupting while Minna Hawkins fascinated him with her story. When she finished, all he could say was, "We'll have to look into this further."

Nearly three months passed since Baby Alpha was born, and, with the news of her daughter's birth still in the papers, Minna Hawkins continued to discover more frogs. She already found sixteen that year, surpassing last year's total by two. She sometimes went out searching with her students, but usually she did this on her own. Her discoveries became her personal quest, and something to which she dedicated all of her time. She established *Friends of Frogs*, a network of teachers, students and citizens who surveyed wetlands to try to come up with answers to the abnormalities. She even traveled to over twenty counties in Minnesota in search of deformed frogs, unaware that frogs with similar defects were also beginning to be reported in other states nearby.

She could do this because by that time, Baby Alpha spent most of her days at the newly built Ichthyanthropology Unit at the university's research hospital. At first

Minna Hawkins refused. She understood the ways of medical discoveries, the constant examinations, the poking and prodding, the medications to stupefy the subjects. But she also wanted her daughter to be normal, to be able to breathe like an ordinary human being, without having to worry about infection and keeping her back constantly exposed. It was because of this, a mother's need to want only the best for her child, that she agreed to admit Baby Alpha into the research facility. As her doctor told her that day, "Your daughter is trying to tell us something, Mrs. Hawkins, and we need to find out what it is. She was born this way for a reason, and it's the job of the research facility to find out why."

It's hard to imagine what it was like for Minna Hawkins to hear the doctor say the exact same words she herself used with her students just a few short months ago. All we know is that she said, "I understand completely," and then looked away.

At this point, people across the country knew of Baby Alpha, and they flew from all over just to see her. She was exhibited, mostly in pictures throughout the research center, which later built a special unit which served as an observation room. They also displayed her in special windows reserved mainly for the press and medical students. They always kept her behind glass and always approached her with rubber gloves. She still did not speak, but she was not deaf because she responded to her name by blinking. She was studied by medical doctors, speech pathologists, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and veterinarians. And no one had any answers.

Not two months had passed when Minna Hawkins received the phone call notifying her of the procedure that would hopefully turn her daughter into a normal human being. "Because your daughter has a human respiratory system," she was told, "it is probable that the gills are not your daughter's primary source for air. In other words, it does not appear that she even needs the gills at all. She should be quite able to breathe without them."

This was news that Minna Hawkins welcomed enthusiastically, so when the researcher asked her for her consent to sew the gills shut and seal them forever, Minna Hawkins gladly concurred, unaware of what we now know. And so the next week, with Minna Hawkins waiting in a room nearby, the researcher sutured the gills shut with the precision of a tailor. The procedure itself took only twenty minutes to perform, but to Minna Hawkins, it seemed like an eternity. At the end of it all, Minna Hawkins took her daughter in her arms, caressed her weary face and cradled her for the first time since her birth.

But it didn't take long, perhaps fifteen minutes or so, for Baby Alpha to turn red, and then a faint blue, as if she were asphyxiating. "She's losing oxygen!" Cried the researcher, mumbling something about brain damage. He then quickly grabbed Baby Alpha from her mother's arms and returned her to the operating room to remove the sutures that were now killing her.

Minna Hawkins crumbled to the floor, wrapping her arms around her shoulders and rocking herself uncontrollably. "She'll never be normal!" She cried hysterically. "Never!"

Minna Hawkins rarely saw her daughter after that. By then, medical experts referred to Baby Alpha as a mutant, and tabloids called her a circus freak. With all the attention her daughter received, Minna Hawkins became obsessed with finding and reporting more frogs. As she once put it to one of her students, "The frogs, they need us now more than ever!" She could be seen any time of the year, even in the dead of winter, with scarcely more than a pair of hiking shorts and a sweater, searching for new discoveries. She continued to send the agency photographs of deformed frogs, which she took daily. But every now and then she made the error of reporting perfectly normal frogs, as though she had forgotten how to distinguish between the two. "I swear that looks like an extra set of legs sprouting from its back," she once tried to persuade an unconvinced official. Her thoughts became consumed by the fact that the frogs were prevented from catching insects and avoiding predators. "They are not plant eaters," she worried. "Without insects they'll be sure to die! They'll never survive in the wild!"

Reports of the frogs soon started to come from other countries, and members of her network reported that they did not know what was going to happen in the future, both to Minna Hawkins and to the frogs.

Shortly after that, Minna Hawkins left her job. It happened on the last day of class, when school officials overheard her as she sat at her desk teaching a biology lesson to a classroom of empty chairs. "Including my baby," she was heard saying,

“twelve gilled infants have been born in the United States. Six were born in Canada, where fishing has been outlawed throughout the country, one of the few things the governments of Canada and Quebec have agreed upon in decades. Five were born in France, which brought on a wave of fashion designers, each determined to face the challenge of a body with gills, and four were born in Spain, where the first child was named Alita Cervantes, adding a new history to an already historic name.” Looking out into the black sky outside her window, she added through her tears, “That makes 27 babies born with gills. Twenty-seven babies silent as the night. Twenty-seven frightened mothers, wondering what is happening to their children.”

That was when history forgot Minna Hawkins. We don't even know if she was aware of the second gilled infant born just sixty miles from where she lived just a little more than two years after the birth of her daughter. Back then, when the world was just starting to give birth to babies with gills, people knew what was happening; they just didn't know why. The church, which first wanted people to believe we had angels among us, changed its position because gills are not close enough to wings. Instead, it argued that our sins were leading us back in time, to a time before original sin, a time of reptiles and amphibians.

It was not known until more than a decade later that what we first experienced with the birth of Baby Alpha was a true example of pure Darwinian theory personified before our eyes. In the same way that Africans have dark skin to adapt to prolonged exposure to the sun, so, too, have we now developed gills. As one famed biologist put

it, "As a species, we have evolved as far as we can go, and now, we have no choice but to go backwards in our evolution." It is as though the land can no longer contain us, as if the Earth no longer wants us or our ways. It is just a matter of time before we are nothing more than mere bacteria.

So that is why we were born this way. A case of devolution is what most people call it. But we don't think of it as going back; it somehow makes our purpose seem less important. Instead, we tell ourselves that we are leading others to the place where it all began. A place that is safe and secure; a place we've carelessly abandoned.

We think of it, instead, as going home.