

Barbara J. Taylor

COOTIE BOY

The psychologist Alfred Adler said first memories are significant. Mine is of the emergency room after Sarge stabbed me in the arm with a fork. He'd had a hard day.

Babe said she married a guy she barely knew because it was war time, whatever that meant. My father had been a drill sergeant in WWII. In real life he was a rigid bastard who didn't like anybody, least of all his son, Douglas Vonnagel. Mom—Babe—always called me Dougie or Mr. Bumble, the latter probably a reference to my physical and mental clumsiness. Babe still looks like a million bucks because Sarge dropped dead from heart disease twenty years ago and she spends the inheritance on plastic surgery, tooth veneers and winter cruises to sunny climates. Old guys still go gaga over her.

I was a nervous child, for reasons that should be obvious if you're paying attention. I suffered from insomnia, because *if I should die before I wake* seemed like a real possibility. A life-size Jesus hung from a cross in the church we visited now and then in the 1950's. It seemed like a logical place for Babe and Sarge to dump me, but they slept in most Sundays and eventually lost interest in worshipping on Christmas and Easter as well.

Babe served canned lima beans at every meal, including breakfast, because Sarge couldn't get enough of the damn things. It's no wonder that dining with the family caused my throat to close and my stomach to shrink to the size of a robin's egg. Public school was purgatory—the dusty air, the Pine Sol smell, the creaky desks, the used books

covered in brown paper, the sour teachers. *Douglas, don't you want to be a blue bird ever in your life?*

I was too distracted by girls to learn to read right away. Girls were the only people I liked. They were pretty, they were clean, and they held the hope of nurturance. I wanted to be treated like one of their dolls. Tragically, playing with girls was for sissies. Turning into a sissy was the worst thing that could happen to you. That, and living at Fort Vonnagel, where it was always war time.

The neighbors in the subdivision called our split-level Fort Vonnagel because 1) somebody named Sarge lived there, and 2) it was the only house in Westchester County with boulders out front the size of storage buildings. If there was a wreck at our intersection, Sarge explained, the boulders served as a barrier between us and vehicles careening out of control. Imagine his satisfaction when a drunken teenager hit one head-on in the middle of the night. The red paint streak was permanent, as was the metal plate in the boy's head.

After the police and the ambulance left, the family stood shivering in the shadow of the boulders. We were wrapped in matching plaid bathrobes; I remember that. After swearing over the tire tracks scarring his pristine lawn, Sarge focused on the positive.

“What did I tell you?” he said proudly, slapping each boulder in turn. “These babies are here to stay.”

I never knew what Sarge was looking at, and this was unsettling. Wouldn't you know, I inherited a lazy eye like his and had to wear child-size glasses with a flesh-colored patch over one lens. On the bus en route to my eye exercises, Babe and I once sat across the aisle from a woman who claimed to be a psychic healer. She offered to lay

her hands on me, but Babe refused. My mother could be quite direct, but only with Jehovah Witnesses, pushy salespeople and psychic healers on buses. I've always thought it was unfortunate that the redheaded psychic didn't have the opportunity to take a crack at the damage she must have seen behind my weird glasses. One touch of her freckled hand could have changed my life.

"I want to be a nurse when I grow up," I announced one evening when my father's business partner and the wife were invited to join us for chicken/potato chip casserole and limas. Sarge knew better than to physically attack me when company was present, so there was only a nervous burst of laughter over my revelation. Later, as Babe sat on my bed in the glow of the night-light, twisting a curl beside her ear, Sarge marched back and forth, yelling that nursing was a girl's job. Did I want to wear dresses and white stockings? Was I crazy or what?

"You let him watch 'Annie Oakley,' for Christ's sake." Sarge arms flew up in the air and slapped his legs on the way down. "Now look at the mess we're in."

"Dougie?" Babe whispered. "Mr. Bumble? Talk to us."

I fiddled with the top button of my Howdy Doody pajamas. "Nurses save people," I said, mentally citing the emergency room after the fork attack.

"You could be a doctor," Babe said. "That's what men do."

"He'll have to learn to read first," Sarge barked.

Dr. Douglas Vonnagel. I liked the sound of it, but I was afraid of doctors. They looked like aliens with round mirrors in the middle of their foreheads, peering into my orifices with little flashlights.

My sister Valerie was born when I was five. I wasn't impressed with her, but she was the reason we moved to Westchester from our tiny post-war apartment in Brooklyn. Babe learned to drive the two-tone Chevy. My eye was straight since the corrective surgery. I finally got the hang of phonics. Suburban teachers made noises about certain aptitudes, such as music and drama, but it was all an illusion. Things appeared to be better when in fact they were worse.

I was a secret criminal. I lied whether I needed to or not and became a pro. I cheated on tests without repercussions and stole a keychain attached to a useless mustard-colored pocketknife from Woolworth's. I stole bigger and better things later on, but nothing that gave me such a sense of accomplishment. I guess the first time for anything is the most satisfying, but the thrill doesn't last.

Maybe I was suffering from guilt or self-hate, as has been suggested by more than one therapist, but I began having nightmares about bears jumping out of wood-paneled station wagons and chasing me around the yard. The dreams were always the same. Sarge, Babe and Valerie stood in the driveway, watching the bears terrorize me night after night, and didn't lift a finger to protect me. This proved what I had always known: my family didn't love me. Not only didn't they love me, I was unworthy of love. On the surface I might have looked like a regular kid, but underneath I was a worthless piece of shit and it wouldn't be long before everybody knew it. There was only one thing to do, and that was to find a worthy person to love me. Or at least tolerate me. I could bask in reflected glory.

Her name was Joelle Greenblatt and she was the most popular girl in our seventh grade class. For some reason known only to her, she started sharing her Fritos at lunch

and smiling at me in a special way. She had an abundance of wavy dirty-blonde hair and enormous blue eyes—the answer to my prayers in a short skirt. To be attached to Joelle was to realize my ambitions for a normal life. If I was acceptable to her, I'd be acceptable to anyone, anywhere. I would have gladly eaten her Fritos off the cafeteria floor. My visions of grandeur included boy-girl parties in basement rec rooms followed by necking in the back seat of a cool car with Joelle.

Then the unthinkable happened.

Steve DeVries, the little creep who sat behind me in math, started poking me between the shoulder blades and razzing me about Joelle.

“Joelle likes you, huh?” he wheezed through his braces. He smelled like mentholated cough drops. “Let’s hear it, Vonnagel. Is she your girlfriend, yes or no?”

“No,” I said.

As soon as the word came out of my mouth, my life, such as it was, was over. After years of therapy, it became clear I suffer from a chronic need to sabotage myself. It was Steve DeVries who really blew it for me, though. If he had just kept his goddamn trap shut, everything could have been different. The cycle might never have started. Steve got the ball rolling right there and then.

“Hey, Joelle,” Steve hissed. Her beautiful self swiveled to face us from two rows up. She was wearing a red gingham dress with a white Peter Pan collar. Little did she know fate was against us. “Vonnagel says he doesn’t like you.”

Her expression became impenetrable, like so many women since. I remember eyes like dull pebbles and a formerly kissable mouth transformed into a pale, thin, straight line that opened only slightly to reveal evil little teeth.

“Cootie Boy,” she said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Joelle,” I breathed. But it was too late. She disappeared behind an emotional roadblock.

“Douglas,” the teacher called. “What’s going on back there?”

“Nothing, Mrs. Wagner,” I answered, my voice cracking.

This wasn’t a total lie. I was nothing to my classmates and my social life was a wasteland for the next three years. “Cootie Boy” wasn’t invited to a single boy-girl party in junior high school, even after Joelle’s family moved back to Chicago. Mr. Bumble remained behind to mourn what could have been. I stopped meeting anyone’s eyes. I tripped over my own feet in the hallways. I developed bad skin. I hated to change clothes and shower in gym for fear a son of the redheaded psychic would see the real me and know it was too late for a miracle.

You might say, as so many therapists have in the past, that this error in judgment concerning Joelle was due to my adolescent immaturity. Something so minor couldn’t possibly represent a crucial turning point in my life. There is no way to know what would have happened if I had answered asshole Steve’s question in the affirmative. But my theory is that saying ‘yes’ to my true feelings would have spoken volumes to Joelle Greenblatt about fearless authenticity and male vulnerability. I’ve explained this scenario again and again to mental health professionals and countless women on first dates. When presented with a clear choice—a good one versus a disastrous, life-shattering one—I can be depended upon to self-destruct every time.

Not long after The Crushing Incident, I went blind in French class. Iridescent schools of fish started swimming in my line of vision and the verb conjugations on

notebook paper morphed into indecipherable hieroglyphics. I decided it was an act of God. He thought I was a loser, too, not to mention a Sunday school dropout. At least I'd get to go to a school for the handicapped in another city, learn Braille and get away from Sarge. Maybe this disability was the price I had to pay for happiness. I'd get hooked up with a fabulous blind girl. I raised my hand.

"I have a headache, Mademoiselle Rothstein," I said.

"Cootie Boy," whispered Carolea Gardocki.

"J'ai mal a la tete," Mademoiselle sighed. *"D'accord."*

"Merci, Mademoiselle." I stumbled to the door and the class laughed. Laughed at a blind boy.

I sat on the cot in the nurse's office and described the glowing fish that became exploding suns and the sharp pain on the left side of my head.

"I have a brain tumor, Miss Fisher," I said. "Now I can never be a nurse like you."

"You've seen a doctor, Douglas?" she asked. Accustomed to paper cuts and pink eye, she was naturally caught off guard.

"No," I said. "My dad gets real mad about medical bills." This was probably true, but I didn't know it for a fact.

"Do you feel sick to your stomach?" I promptly threw up green vomit on her white shoes. "Douglas! What in God's name—"

"I had lima beans for breakfast, Miss Fisher."

"I'm calling your mother. You stay right where you are. Don't move."

When Babe arrived half an hour later, she and Miss Fisher had a hushed conversation about my symptoms, diet and general tenseness.

“He’s afraid of church and the dentist,” Babe said, shaking her head. “He has nightmares about bears and tooth decay.”

“Are you vegetarians, Mrs. Vonnagel?” Miss Fisher asked.

“Heavens no,” Babe said.

Miss Fisher set up an appointment with my pediatrician and the school guidance counselor, Mr. Kluge. “He’s very understanding,” she said. Everybody knew Miss Fisher and Mr. Kluge had a thing going, so of course she blabbed about the nurse comment along with everything else.

Mr. Kluge started taking me out of study hall every Wednesday. So much for confidentiality. He asked if I really wanted to be a nurse. I nodded. He tapped his pencil eraser on the top of his blotter while I watched the second hand on the huge wall clock jerk from one dot to the next.

“How do you feel about—other boys, Douglas?”

I didn’t want to talk about stupid Steve DeVries, so I said I’d prefer to stay away from the subject. After a significant pause, I made up a story that I had been the target of a stink bomb attack by the local Girl Scout troop. Actually, they pelted me with prickly balls from a sweet gum tree, but stink bombs sounded less spontaneous; like they’d gone to some trouble on my account. Mr. Kluge nodded and wrote a lot of stuff on his pad until the buzzer sounded and it was time for me to go to social studies.

Wednesdays with Mr. Kluge made me even more nervous about life in general. Determined to “get to the bottom of things and find the real Douglas” he called Babe. It

had come to his attention that I'd had an overdue library book since the beginning of the semester. Why was I ignoring the reminders? Was this some sort of passive-aggressive resistance to authority? What emotions was I misplacing? My parents needed to come in for a conference. Babe cheerfully delivered the bad news to Sarge at the dinner table, which was typical.

"Are you some kind of a nut case?" Sarge yelled at me. My sister Valerie stared like I was a giant cockroach sitting across from her. "Where's the damn library book?"

"Mr. Kluge asked to meet with us to talk about it, dear. He seems to think Dougie has problems at home."

"I work for a living, Babe! I don't have time for appointments with guidance counselors. What kind of a job is that for a man to be doing? Tell him the boy will pay the fine out of his allowance. End of discussion."

"May I be excused?" I asked.

"Where's the goddamn library book?" Sarge roared.

"It's on top of the television, dear," Babe said, spooning fruit cocktail. "Will you have a little taste of this, Dougie?"

"I have a toothache," I said, holding my jaw.

"It's always something with this kid." Sarge threw his napkin onto his plate, got up from his chair and stormed out.

In dreams, my teeth are loose, rattling around in my mouth like castanets. The only way to keep them from falling out is to keep my mouth tightly closed. Therapists have had a field day with this one.

Our dentist was a sadist. If Sarge had been a dentist, he would have behaved exactly like him. “What’s the matter with you?” Dr. Gruber wanted to know. Struck dumb, I could only form the shape of words. He turned to my mother. “What’s the matter with him?” he asked in a slightly nicer tone because Babe was such a dish.

“He’s been complaining of a toothache,” Babe said with a beguiling smile.

“Which tooth?” He pried my mouth open with his antiseptic smelling fingers. I tapped my jaw where the offending molar was located. He poked back there with his metal tool sending a bolt of pain down my neck. “No wonder, you’ve got a cavity here.”

“How big?” Babe inquired, leaning over my shoulder.

“Big enough for him to fall into and drown.” I heard him chortle.

“What are you doing?” I mumbled as he readied the needle, squirting Novocain into the air.

“We’re going to drill, of course. Clear down to China if we have to.”

“Is it gonna hurt?” I swallowed hard.

“It’s not going to hurt *me*,” he said, jabbing the needle into my gum.

Driving home later in the car, Babe offered her usual opinion—that it could have been a whole lot worse. Thanks to Dr. Gruber, my tooth was saved. Let this be a lesson about the importance of good oral hygiene. Obviously I wasn’t brushing properly or often enough. I needed to floss. Did I intend to keep my own precious teeth for the rest of my life or did I plan on having every tooth in my head pulled and wearing ill-fitting dentures like Grandma Vonnagel?

I vaguely recalled her visits when she and Sarge were still speaking. She removed her false teeth at night and placed them beside the bathroom sink in a glass with

some tap water and a fizzy blue tablet. The sight caused me to avoid the bathroom and become constipated. This stopped being an issue when the visits ended. If Grandma Vonnagel wanted to visit somebody, she visited my Uncle Lester and soaked her teeth in his glassware, in his bathroom. Neither relative had been inside our house in years.

“They don’t love me,” I said, speaking through a mouthful of wadded cotton. I was spacey from the Novocain. I couldn’t feel my tongue or my top and bottom teeth touching.

“Who do you mean, Dougie?” Babe asked.

“Grandma V and Uncle Lester. They don’t love me.”

“Of course they love you. They’re your family.”

“I haven’t seen Grandma V for five years. And the last time I saw Uncle Lester was at that cookout when he poured beer all over the hamburgers. Remember that?”

“No.” There were a lot of things Babe didn’t seem to remember. She’d even forgotten the fork attack and accused me of making it up.

“The cookout. You know. I was in kindergarten. They had red, white and blue popsicles. Aunt Roberta was pregnant. She had elephant legs.”

“Really?”

“I’ve never seen my cousins. They live a mile away.”

“Lester is in sales. He has a hectic schedule. He commutes to Newark.” She shuddered.

“But—”

“It’s just that Sarge and his brother have so little in common. That’s it in a nutshell.”

“What about Grandma V?”

“What? Oh. Well, Lester is her baby. It’s only natural for her to be—close to him. Your father is, well—”

“But what about *me*? Why doesn’t she want to see *me*?”

Babe pulled into our driveway and leaned back into her seat with both hands still on the steering wheel. Here was a potential miracle worker, sitting beside me. If she could bring herself to spit out the truth, I would be healed. Something like, the old battle ax didn’t have the capacity to love anybody and it was no reflection on me. In fact, I should count myself lucky she wasn’t around. Then I’d feel like sharing my heartbreak over the loss of Joelle. I’d come clean and stop lying, cheating and stealing.

“I want you to promise me something,” she said with a catch in her voice.

“Sure,” I said, spitting out the wet cotton so I could kiss her powdered cheek when she apologized for burdening me with a bad father. We’d make our escape. She’d get a job as a receptionist to support us and I’d start over at a new school with soft drink machines where they’d never heard of Cootie Boy. Valerie could stay behind because she fit right in with Sarge and the rest of the asswipes. Babe would want my promise not to hold grudges against them. They were to be pitied. As my parting gesture, I’d forgive everyone, everywhere. I’d promise to be a doctor instead of a nurse. I’d promise anything if my mother would just save me.

“Mr. Bumble?” A tear glistened at the corner of her eye and she twisted her mouth.

“Yes, Mom?” In our new, authentic lives, we would have a deal that she’d never call me Mr. Bumble again. She’d call me *Doll* and all would be well.

“I want you to promise you will take care of your teeth from now on. Brush in the morning and before bed. And don’t forget to floss. You’ll never regret it.” She banged the steering wheel with the palms of her hands. We sat there until the car windows fogged up and the numbness in my jaw spread throughout my body.

I drove by the old house other day. Sarge’s boulders are still there. It would take an act of God to move them.

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