



The Day Barbara Stanwyck Lost Her Power over Me

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My mother's weird but pretty. She also has a cruel streak she turns on me whenever life disappoints her. I'm her daughter Gina, and when this story begins, I'm eleven and a half years old but not typical for my age. I have a special skill. I know how to handle difficult, demanding people whose moods range from explosive to indifferent. I know how to read the tiniest clues.

It's 1952 and we live in Scotia, New York, a town of 6,000, two miles west of Schenectady (our big city) and south of Saratoga, where rich New Yorkers come to watch horse races in the summer. No one's rich in Scotia, but it's not run down either. It has lots of bungalows and old Victorians, some in better condition than others, all fronting close to tree-lined streets. We—me, my brother Ronald, and my mother—live with my grandparents at 227 Glen Avenue. Ronald is two years older than me and my mother's favorite.

My father left ten years ago, and I don't blame him one bit. He lives in New Jersey now, with his new wife. Once a year, in December, he takes the train to Schenectady where he meets my mother, Ronald, and me at Rusty's Seafood House on State Street. My brother and I order the same thing every year: fried scallops with tartar sauce followed by chocolate ice cream. After the meal we go next door to Carl's Department Store, where my father buys Ronald and me new shoes. We say good-bye to him in front of Carl's. He walks back to the train station, and we take the bus home. These annual visits make me sad.

Betty, or "Bettye" as she prefers to spell it, is my mother. She's a big problem in my life because I never know who she'll be when she wakes up in the morning. Mostly I can count on her being Barbara Stanwyck about five days a week. Barbara's my mother's favorite movie actress and I know why. It's like watching herself on the screen, only a little trimmer. Barbara plays roles requiring foot-stamping bursts of anger, gross manipulation of other people's lives, and lots of fake tears she turns on whenever she wants. I never cry, or almost never. That's so I can be as different from Betty as possible.

Betty makes me go to the movies with her, even if it's a week night and I have homework. It's not my company she craves, she just doesn't want to go alone. When she announces we're going to the movies tonight, I reply "Another B.S. movie?" She doesn't get the double meaning and I smile.

My mother doesn't answer my questions during Barbara Stanwyck movies. It's like asking a statue. Barbara gets herself into some pretty tortured situations that require explanations I'm never given. Sometimes Betty buys me a box of Black Crows, my favorite licorice candy, the only good feature of going to the movies with her. Later in my life I'll find that most people never heard of Black Crows or Barbara Stanwyck, two staples of my adolescence.

Here's one of those questions she would never answer: Barbara's in love with Richard and hoping to marry him when one night, seated in front of the fireplace sipping sherry and listening to the roar and crackle of the blaze, Richard, grimacing, turns to Barbara saying, "I've decided to become a priest. I leave for the seminary in two weeks." Betty and Barbara go rigid in the same moment.

Ever-tuned to my mother's changing moods, I ask, "Why's she upset?"

No answer.

"Who cares if he wants to be a priest?"

No answer.

"Don't priests make much money?"

"Quiet," she hisses.

Well, at least she said something.

Despite Betty not telling me why becoming a priest's a bad thing, I know Barbara's being thwarted in a major way and the rest of the movie will be devoted to her master manipulations. I know from past experience that Richard will either give up becoming a priest or die since Barbara never tolerates half measures. Although I can't imagine Betty finding a priest in Scotia, she does not lack for husbands: four (eventually) or boyfriends (legions).

Last night my grandfather asks her the same question he asks her several nights a week: "Are you going out again? Which Tom, Dick, or Harry is it tonight?" He needn't have worried as they all wound up on her scrap heap of men except for Porter who briefly, for three weeks, becomes Husband Number Two. When Betty returns from their Florida honeymoon, she announces she's left Porter because he doesn't like kids and wants her to put Ronald and me in the Schenectady Home for Children. This is a Barbara Stanwyck reason. I later overhear her on the phone with her sister saying, "His mother disinherited him after the wedding and cut off his income."

Now that's a Betty reason.

Well, it's still 1952, October to be exact, and I'm still eleven but nearly twelve. Here's how B.S. lost her power over me: It's a Saturday morning and not just any Saturday but the Saturday of the Scotia High School Homecoming Football Game.

Anyone who's anyone will be there. Unluckily for me, Betty's in a capital sulk, demanding that I locate her missing bedroom slipper, find the Breck shampoo she bought last night and someone took, and bring her coffee. This is just the tip of the iceberg, but I comply, hoping she'll wash her hair and I can make my escape. I bring her coffee in her favorite white cup with the pink tea roses and gold handle, then find her bedroom slipper and the shampoo. In a few minutes the bathroom door closes and water runs. *Thank you, Jesus* flits across my mind.

Skipping breakfast, I dress and creep to the front door. Turning the knob, I step onto the front porch, closing the door behind me. A rush of cool, fall air, that special type that's mixed with smoke, hits my face. I skip down the three wooden steps and turn right toward Collins Park, joy rising inside me. I've anticipated this day for weeks and pick up my pace.

I hear Betty shriek, "Get back in this house now; we're going shopping!"

Turning, I notice she's on the front porch and can see me. I'm only a half block away. I feel as if a cold, gray snake wrapped itself around my throat. I toy with pretending I don't hear her and keep on walking, but I'm afraid. Frustration arises and settles in my throat, canceling my voice.

Trudging back to 227, I notice the front door's wide open but can't see anyone. Startling me, she steps from behind the door and announces, "We're going clothes shopping for you."

I try hard to control myself and say, "Today's the big game. Ronald's there, and so are all my friends." I taper off with an appeasing, "Can't we go next Saturday?"

"No, we can't. We're going today."

I blurt out "I don't want to go clothes shopping, don't you understand ANYTHING AT ALL?"

"Listen to me, miss. I said we're going shopping and I mean now!"

Whenever "miss" is introduced into her demands, it's a fatal sign she's dug in for the long haul.

My grandfather comes out from the living room with the morning paper. He taps her on the arm. "Let her go to the game. You'll have all the neighbors out with your shouting."

In a flash Barbara Stanwyck takes over. She whirls on him, stamping her feet and sobbing, "I'm trying to raise my own daughter, and you won't let me." In the midst of the sobbing and stamping, she grabs the neck of my sweater and pulls me into the hall.

He says, "You're being mean."

She shoves me up the stairs. In our shared bedroom there are no more theatrics, just the calm voice of B.S. now operating in complete control and triumph. A triumph over me isn't important, but besting her father rates as a coup. She's afraid of him because he sees straight into her heart.

Even if I have nothing to do, I hate going clothes shopping with Betty. Her taste is "feminine" as she puts it. Feminine translates to lace, ruffles, pretty prints, and, above all, button holes trimmed in satin: the hallmark of a well-made dress. She's told me this seven thousand times. I like to think my taste runs to the plain or classic, but I don't actually know my own taste, just that it has to be the opposite of hers.

It's noontime now and we're on Mohawk Avenue, our main drag, boarding the bus to Schenectady. I'm sullen, of course, which means Betty can afford to hum little tunes and remark on people she sees through the bus window. "Oh, look, there's Judy Stotler. She's in your class, isn't she? You're much prettier." That's a lie and she knows it.

The bus stops in front of Carl's Department Store, an old Schenectady landmark, generally populated with heavy women in suits, wearing hats and gloves. We march down the long, marble hallway to the elevators and push three for Girls. The elevator stops and we get out. I stay as far away from Betty as I can and loaf through a rack of dresses. I'm thinking of Collins Park, my friends, and the game. A slow rage builds, the kind when everything's been taken away and there's nothing to lose. A dangerous kind of rage. Betty picks out an armload of dresses and signals me into the ladies fitting room—a series of stalls, each with a privacy curtain, some with chairs. I pick one without a chair so Betty can't sit down.

I take off my dress and stand there in my panties. Although I have budding breasts, they are not yet big enough to wear a bra.

"Try this one on. It's adorable," she says.

I inspect the buttonholes and tell her they're not bound in satin so I can't wear it.

"Put it on now, miss!" Her eyes flash.

I cross the line. I don't care. "Could you please leave? I need some privacy. I'll come out and show it to you." She leaves and I slide the curtain over. A few seconds later she's back

with a chair and, opening the curtain, slides it in the stall. Now I'm in full view of passersby. I cross my arms over my chest and ask her to leave.

"I'm not going anywhere until you try on these dresses." I reach up to slide the curtain closed, but Betty puts out her hand to stop me. "It's too hot in here. Now get a move on, miss." I turn around and face the wall. It's all I can do. I'm not going to obey this time.

Just then a woman in the next stall says, in a loud voice, "I know how you feel, sweetie. I have a daughter your age, and she likes her privacy too."

Betty tilts back her chair. "Please mind your own business." The saleslady comes by and closes the curtain. Betty shouts, "Did I ask you to close this curtain?"

"Well, no, but the girl's practically naked."

"OK, I've had it." Betty jumps up and takes all the clothes with her into the hallway. A split second later she leans back and grabs the dress I wore to Carl's that morning.

"Hey, bring back my dress."

No answer.

I wait forever but she doesn't return. At last, the saleslady appears. I tell her my mother took my own dress and I've nothing to wear.

"I'll find her, dear. Not to worry."

But I do worry. She doesn't know Betty like I do. Another eternity passes.

She returns. "Your mother isn't anywhere on the floor. Here's my raincoat, you'll have to look for her yourself. Don't forget to bring it back."

I thank her and wrap the raincoat around my nakedness.

I'm pretty sure I know where Betty went. I head for the elevator. Arriving on the sixth floor, my heart pounds as I stomp through Good China into the Rose Tea Room. I spot Betty sitting by a window eating a napoleon and gazing down on State Street. Sprinting across the restaurant, I stop in front of her and, using the only leverage I have, shout, "I'm going to tell your father!" I've never called my grandfather "your father" before, and it sounds strange to me.

She hands my dress over saying, in a matter-of-fact tone, "Meet me in the front of the store in ten minutes." She takes a

sip of coffee.

“I hate you! Do you hear me? I hate you.” I punctuate this with sharp foot stamping. Very Barbara Stanwyck but I can barely control my rage.

We don’t speak on the way home. When we reach 227, there’s still time to get to Collins Park, but now I don’t care. Rushing through the front door, I call out “Grandpa, I want to tell you something.” He’s seated at the dining room table doing a crossword puzzle. Sobbing and gulping for air, I blurt out what happened. Betty’s upstairs. He listens to me without asking me to calm down.

“Wait here.” He climbs the stairs.

He knocks on her door. There are words I can’t make out, but he raises his voice. He comes downstairs shaking his head. “Come on,” he says “I’ll take you to Stewart’s Ice Cream Parlor.”

“No.”

He takes my hand and we leave. We each order a vanilla cone and sit in the same familiar red, cracked, vinyl booth. Looking at me and wagging his index finger, he says, “You can’t trust your mother, so conduct yourself accordingly.”

I burst into tears and he hands me a napkin.

“It won’t be long before you leave here. The next few years will go by faster than you think, and then you’ll go away to school.”

While he’s talking to me, a shift occurs inside myself as if something that was loose and soft now has a definite shape or boundaries. I can’t tell if it’s in my stomach or my chest, but I’m different and it makes me sit up straight. I feel calm and focused when we walk home. He tries to hold my hand, but I slide it into my pocket.

Betty notices I’m different right away. I never go to another Barbara Stanwyck movie with her. She goes alone and says she misses my company. I believe her. But it doesn’t change a thing. I’m leading my own life now.

Justine Casagrande lives in Washington, D.C. She was a publisher of financial data for 35 years and sold her company in 2006. A lifelong avid reader, she hoped to write fiction (albeit late in life) and has studied at The Writers Center in Bethesda, Maryland for the past 5 years. She has written a number of short stories and is at work on a novel. This is her first publication.

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