

A BREED OF HER OWN

BY

MARC PETTY CRUCIGER, M.D.

PRESENTED TO THE CHIT CHAT CLUB

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

NOVEMBER 11, 2014

DEDICATED TO MY FATHER

JAMES REID CRUCIGER

AND

COOTIE

“Marc, it’s your turn,” said the Chairman of the Board for The Guide Dogs For the Blind. And indeed, it was my turn. All new members of that board were required to spend two days of orientation at its campus in San Rafael, California, culminating in a celebratory dinner. After dinner, it is traditional for each new member to make a brief statement. As one might expect, most new Guide Dog board members choose to speak about their pet dogs. That year there were three new board members; I was the only man. To the delight of all, the two new women members told stories about their dogs. Then it was my turn. As the first ophthalmologist to serve on the board of trustees of the Guide Dogs for the Blind, I contemplated diverging from the pet stories and talk about blindness. All eyes were on me as I rose and looked around the room at the assembled 75 or so people. No, I thought to myself, I shall not talk about blindness. I shall tell the true story of our family dog named Cootie. I took a deep breath and began my tale.

In 1957, my family moved to New Jersey from Bombay, India where my father had worked as an engineer for Standard Oil of New Jersey. Our only pet had been a bunny that had arrived that Easter and somehow, miraculously, disappeared a month or so later. As a lover of magic, I actually checked my father’s top hat that he kept in the attic, but, sad to say, the rabbit had not used that time-honored method of concealment. We remained pet-less that year. But, in early 1958, my younger sister started her campaign to have a pet, in particular, a dog.

At 8 years of age my sister had my father wrapped around her little finger. She was very tiny, blond, and the poster child for cuteness. Precociously verbal for her age but with the habit of often mispronouncing words and sometimes getting her facts totally wrong, she would entertain all within earshot range. I remember the family playing a word game on one of our road trips. The question was asked by my father, “What is the name of the famous baseball player whose first and last name’s initials are the same?” Being Yankee fans, my twin brother and I were just about to scream out the correct answer Mickey Mantle in two part harmony when my little sister yelled from the back of the station wagon, “Sam Snead.” We all decided to give her partial credit for what we could all agree was a very good creative effort.

Since she was my father’s favorite, she thought getting a pet dog would be a snap. After all, she had always gotten whatever she wanted from him by merely asking. So she tried that direct method first. He promptly, and without hesitation, said, “No.” Not willing to take “no” for an answer, she resorted to more circuitous tactics. She tried sympathy: “It would mean so much to me, Daddy,” she implored. “No,” was his reply. “Why?” she asked. “Because we may be traveling overseas again and having a dog would be difficult should we have to move,” argued my father logically. So she tried her logic: “When you and mom are gone, the dog can protect me and your house.” Frankly, I thought that was actually a pretty good one, despite the fact that my brother and I were not on the list of persons or things to be protected by her potential canine. Again, “No” was his answer. Then she tried a threat with a bit of pathos thrown in for good measure: “If you don’t let

me get a dog,” she said, “I’m going to run away and I will die of starvation, and it will be all your fault.” I had to admit that was also a good one too, especially the added bit about starvation, but again “No” was his answer. She decided to retreat for a few days because, at that point, she had exhausted her best debating points.

After about ten days she resumed her quest. This time she employed a tactic that I, and all members of my gender would learn sooner or later was absolutely fail-proof of members of the other gender, namely the prodigious use of tears. It was Friday on a particularly beautiful spring afternoon when she decided to spring her trap. She asked our mother if she could be the one to serve my father a gin and tonic when he came home from work. My sister had never gotten the name of that cocktail correct, always calling it a “jim and tonic.” This charmed my father because his name was Jim. Utilizing that bit of inside emotional information, she arrived with his libation on a little silver tray embellished with a few crackers and cheese to sweeten the seduction and said, “Here’s your jim and tonic, Daddy.” He smiled, thanked her profusely, and took a sip. Sensing that this was the most vulnerable moment to strike, she said, “P-L-E-A-S-E, Daddy, can I have a dog?” That “please” was the longest one I had ever heard in my ten years on the planet and, come to think of it, ever since. We all awaited his reply. It was immediate but gentle: “I’m so sorry, honey, but I don’t think so.” And that is when she pulled the trump card to play from her stack. Throwing herself at his feet, the proverbial “river of tears” poured forth accompanied by wracking sobs. Within seconds his answer was “Yes.” The tears stopped immediately, and so did the sobbing. “When, Daddy? When can we go get the dog?” “We’ll go tomorrow,” said he, not terribly enthusiastically. Tomorrow would be a Saturday. I marveled at my sister’s timing. I suspect, later that night, my father did too. As I recall, he had another one or two gin and tonics but had to get them himself because my sister was too busy doing cartwheels and handstands of joy up and down the hallway to serve as his personal cocktail waitress.

Homer’s “rosy fingered dawn” found my sister, my brother, and me bouncing on my parents’ bed screaming, “Get up! Get up! Hurry up and get up! We’re going to get a dog!” My parents, like Lazurus, finally arose but without the help of Christ. However, I am sure I heard both my mother and father mutter Jesus’s name several times in the course of their forced levitation that early Saturday morning. Finally out of bed, they consumed their coffee and toast, while we wolfed down the requisite bowl of Cherrios, Rice Krispies, or Post Sugar Crisp. Fortified, we all jammed into the Ford station wagon and headed for the town’s pet store. In the window of the store were five little puppies pawing at the glass and pleading for adoption. The store owner’s signage informed all who passed by that only five dollars would be required to purchase a “doggie in the window.” In we went, squealing with joy—well, at least the small fry of the family were squealing with joy. My father’s verbal response was best described as a plaintive sigh. The owner let us play with all of the puppies. “These are all mutts,” he said to my parents, “but very healthy and very friendly ones as you can see.” One of them was particularly winsome. A female, she had short black fur with white socks, white chest, and a dab of white on the tip of her tail, like a freshly dipped paintbrush. We were all smitten, except perhaps my father, but he was agreeable and promptly paid the \$5 for our

new puppy. However, when offered a receipt, he declined saying, "That's OK. I really have absolutely no need for a receipt." He would later deeply regret that decision.

We clambered into the car and, of course, a fight immediately ensued in the back seat as to whose lap the puppy would sit in for the trip home. "Your sister's," a stern, authoritative voice said from behind the wheel, resulting in an immediate end to all sibling hostilities.

"You have to give her a name," my mother said to my little sister upon entering the house. My sister, never one to follow the herd, said, "I'm not going to give her a stupid name like the dog 'Spot' in those stupid books I had to read in the first grade about stupid Dick and stupid Jane." We were all in agreement on her expansion of the naming possibilities. My older sister, 14 years old at the time and a bit bored by all of this nonsense, had gone to her room and was listening to the top hit pop songs on her radio. Suddenly the sounds of one of the more unusual pop songs of 1958 wafted from her room. It was the song "Tequila." My little sister's ears perked up. "That's what I'm going to name my dog," my little sister said proudly, "Tequila!" And that is how our little five-dollar dog from New Jersey got her name. However, in a month or so, her name was shortened to "Cootie," a linguistic glissade that I am sure even Noam Chomsky on his best theoretical day at M.I.T. would have found totally incomprehensible.

Cootie quickly endeared herself to everyone she encountered, except, of course, my father, who felt hoodwinked over the entire transaction. As a puppy, she was as tall as one stair's step. But with lots of love, Kennel-Ration burger bits, and more than a few tasty tidbits sneaked to her by us under the dining room table, Cootie grew to about two and a half feet in height. And, of course, she became the center of our family's universe.

In early summer, my father announced to all of us at the dining room table, "We're going to move to the Middle East, to a place called Abadan, Iran." "Where is that?" we asked quite puzzled. My mother, who had obviously been briefed before the announcement, produced an atlas, seemingly out of thin air, and pointed to the spot on the map. We looked and then said, "When do we go?" "Very soon," said my father. We all looked at Cootie who was carefully taking in this conversation and seemed to be a bit worried whether she was going to be included in my father's pronoun "we." Because of her inability to ask, my sister and my brother and I said, in unison, "What about Cootie?" There was silence. "We can't leave Cootie; we have to bring her with us!" we cried plaintively. "Well, I'm not sure we can bring her with us," my father replied. We turned to my mother who by that time was as emotionally glued to Cootie as we were. "Mom, we have to have Cootie come with us!" "Your father and I shall discuss it later this evening," was all she said. We sensed that we had a powerful ally on our side. I looked at my father who suddenly looked very worried.

The next morning, it had been decided, probably through my mother's use of sexual coercion and tears, that Cootie would go with us to Iran. We were overjoyed, and we sensed Cootie was too.

Within a month we had arrived in Abadan, Iran. Cootie, however, flew separately, and my father, not the oil company, paid her entire airfare. This financial arrangement was in stark contrast to the moving of all our other possessions; their move was paid entirely by the oil company. Clearly, this five-dollar dog named Cootie was beginning to represent a serious drain in my father's bank account.

Yet my father was soon to learn that the worst was yet to come. Cootie arrived in Iran about a week after us. When we got the word that the plane had landed, we headed for the airport by taxi, accompanied by an Iranian who worked for the company and would act as translator and facilitator at customs. The crate was off loaded, driven to the terminal, and arrived at the luggage and customs center. Screaming with glee, we children rushed for the crate, opened the door, and Cootie emerged not the slightest bit jet-lagged, wagging her tail, jumping up and down, and yelping with joy. My little sister fastened the leash to her collar and headed for the door. The Iranian translator said to my father, "The customs officer told me that you cannot leave with your dog without a custom stamp. He says that there is an import duty that is dependent on the cost of the item. So, Mr. Cruciger, can you tell me what you paid for your dog?" "She's just a mutt. I paid five dollars for her less than a year ago," my father replied. There was some rapid Farsi exchanged between the customs officer and our company translator. It got a bit heated, and we heard a few guffaws from the custom officer. "I'm sorry, Mr. Cruciger, but the customs official needs to have documentation of the cost of your dog. Do you have the bill of sale? That should solve the problem immediately, and you and your family can be on your way." My father, now looking distraught, said, "No, I'm afraid I don't have the bill of sale." No translation was required for that response. Our translator continued, "Since you do not have the necessary documentation, the customs officer has the power to assess the value of your dog." More Farsi was exchanged between the customs officer and our representative. Again he turned to my father and said, "The customs man said that he cannot believe that anyone would pay the cost to fly a five dollar dog from the United States to the Middle East. So he thinks your dog is a very valuable and very special dog and must have cost you a great deal of money. He simply does not believe that this dog cost five dollars!" The customs officer interrupted the translation and now both were shouting at each other. When the customs officer finished his diatribe, our representative turned very slowly to my father and, with some trepidation, said, "He says he is giving a value of \$100 for your dog, and the duty fee is 200%. So you will have to give him \$200. I am very sorry, Mr. Cruciger, but if you want your dog, you will have to pay the duty. There's nothing more I can do." My father's face went ashen. We, on the other hand were screaming, "Pay the man, Daddy! Pay the man!" My father reluctantly reached into his pocket and brought out the requisite Iranian currency notes. The fee was paid, and Cootie was now legal to enter Iran.

On the taxi ride back to the hotel my father was very quiet. I believe it was at that moment that, I suppose, he realized that Cootie's stock had just appreciated astronomically as compared with the Esso stock in his portfolio. But unlike Esso's that paid dividends of a financial sort, Cootie would never do so. But, I suspect, my father probably rationalized that the hard earned shekels he had forked over to the Iranian

government justified the price to pay for domestic tranquility, a peace dividend if you will.

We lived in Iran for four years. During that time, Cootie was extremely fertile. But, I hasten to add, she was not promiscuous. Her lover of choice was a stray dog named BoBo. They would have their trysts under a water tower near our house. She and Bobo produced forty-eight puppies, and all of them essentially looked like Cootie: black with white markings, short haired, and about two and a half feet tall. Although my father probably wanted to charge at least ten dollars for each puppy in an attempt to recoup his financial losses, we pitied our pet-less international friends and gave the puppies free of charge to all of them. Our friends were ecstatic with a free puppy and their parents appreciated knowing the canine provenance. Everyone in those lucky forty-eight households, including the Iranians who worked in all of those American, British and Dutch homes, knew that the puppies had come from a very special dog with the unusual name, "Cootie."

When my father was transferred to Saudi Arabia, my parents decided to take Cootie with them. A trailblazer of the canine sort, Cootie had the distinction of being the very first dog, other than the Saluki breed, to be legally allowed into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Fortunately for my father's bank account, there was no import duty required for Cootie's admission that time.

Cootie's breeding days were over by the time she entered Saudi Arabia, but she lived a quiet, pampered, albeit celibate, life with my parents and their many friends. My mother told me that during those years, my father grew very fond of his four-legged investment, and Cootie would await his return from work each evening and then quietly sit at his feet until bedtime.

Tragically, in the fall of 1967, my father, at the age of 49, died in his sleep from a heart attack. Poignantly, his last words before falling asleep that night were, "Where's Cootie?" My mother left Saudi Arabia about ten days after my father's death. She decided it was best not to take Cootie because she had become so frail. She gave her to friends who she knew would love and pamper her. A few years later, Cootie, like my father, died in Saudi Arabia. She was buried on a beach in a high sand dune overlooking the Persian Gulf. Her grave was unmarked.

Ten years later I was in my ophthalmology residency at the Texas Medical Center in Houston. Coincidentally, one of my best American friends from my boyhood days in Iran was also studying there. One day when his father was visiting in Houston, he asked if I would like to join the both of them for dinner; I accepted immediately. At dinner, the conversation turned to stories and memories of our time living in Iran. Suddenly, my friend's father said to me, "Marc, do you remember your dog Cootie?" "Well, of course, I do!" I replied. "Well, as you know I worked in Iran for many years after your family left." And with a very warm smile he said, "I thought you would like to know that there is now a breed of dog in Southern Iran that is short haired, black and white, and stands

about two and half feet tall. The Iranians refer to them as “Cooties.” I was speechless! Totally amazed, I finally exclaimed, “Oh my God! Cootie became *a breed of her own!*”

And with those final words, I looked up at the men and women at the Guide Dogs Annual Dinner. They were all smiling, and then they began to applaud. I also smiled, knowing that somewhere, either very far away or perhaps right beside me, my father was smiling and, perhaps, applauding too.