Ivy BOOKS
0845-5 (Canada $6.99) U.S. $5.99

# THE TABOO SCARF AND OTHER TALES OF THERAPY

"One of the very best books about the drama of psychotherapy... Eloquently and poignantly revealing."
M. SCOTT PECK, M.D.
Author of THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

GEORGE WEINBERG

# THE TABOO SCARF

## AND OTHER TALES

George Weinberg



IVY BOOKS • NEW YORK

Ivy Books
Published by Ballantine Books


Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 89-77846

ISBN 0-8041-0845-5

This edition published by arrangement with St. Martin's Press, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books Edition: October 1991

Cover art: John Register, "Watching the Storm (Denver)," 1988, oil on canvas, 40 × 90 inches, Collection of Mr. Barnaby Conrad III, Courtesy Modernism, San Francisco.

# CONTENTS

# PROLOGUE

I AM A PSYCHOTHERAPIST IN NEW YORK CITY. THE STORIES in this book come from my practice, though, technically, this book is in no way a collection of case studies. Much more is included in these tales than my patients' personal histories. My own reactions to the people I worked with, their meanings to me, and other aspects of my own life evoked by my experiences are mentioned at times.

Nor do I think, after much self-scrutiny, that the choice to include this material is simply self-indulgent. In recent decades, taking account of the observer, what has been called "relativistic thinking," has become commonplace in even the most objective disciplines, like physics. The importance of such material has always been appreciated by psychotherapists when they talk privately. But, above all, these are personal stories, as you will see.

# The Beacon

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I WANTED OF SUSAN, AND THE best defense against saying anything stupid was staying with the obvious.

Her face was still beautiful, an arched nose and high cheekbones. She was tall and leggy, and in her flowered silk summer dress she was, if anything, thinner than when I knew her. Maybe I was still in love with her. But she was in my office for a consultation, and that was that.

"How have you been?" I asked insipidly.

"Fine. Doing a lot of things. I'm worried about Lisa. Really worried."

We were both fumbling and vague—I because it mattered and she because she knew it had mattered to me.

"I understand. I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"She lives alone, in an apartment so shabby that you wouldn't believe it. She has no friends, only cats. I don't know how many by now, four last count, I think."

"No friends," I said.

"No. George, I'm afraid I haven't done a very good job. Marianne expected more of me, Lisa did too. I guess I don't even know what it is to be a mother, but I certainly want to do what I can."

"She was very little when your sister went to California and left her with you, wasn't she?"

"She was six. Oh, I forget it's been such a long time since we've talked."

"That's okay."

"Marianne took her two sons when she went off with that doctor. He didn't want any daughters, I guess. My sister's still out there, remarried again. But Lisa won't have anything to do with her, won't even talk to her."

"And Lisa's father?"

"Dead. Oh, dead for many years. I guess I haven't done a very good job."

"Look," I insisted, "you took her when her own mother didn't want her. You did your best. You stuck with her. You were the only one who did."

"I know. I had a good apartment, enough money. But I obviously didn't give her what she needed."

And Susan still had money, it would seem. She wore a black opal ring, surrounded by diamonds, a bit garish, like her gold bracelets. I could recognize the expensive shoes, though when I used to see her every day, I didn't know one pair of shoes from another.

I had tuned out for a moment, but returned to hear her still berating herself. "My values were, maybe still are, shallow. You knew that, you always knew it, you tried to help me. I can look great on the outside, but there's very little inside. Lisa's the proof. I think she hates me."

"There's got to be more to it than that," I said.

"You've always been so supportive, George. That's why I came here. It's gotten worse since she was in college. She was nearly an A student at Brandeis. But she didn't *talk* to anybody. Can you imagine it, an A student at Brandeis, and now she's working as an usherette, walking up and down inside the Beacon Theater with a flashlight, showing people to their seats. An usherette. Living alone. A college graduate living in the dark, and rushing home. That's what I produced."

"I'm really sorry to hear about that. But maybe she isn't so miserable. It's not what you want for her, I know."

"Not what I want for her! Not what I *want* for her!"

Perhaps my comment was a bit fatuous, but I was stunned at the celerity of her anger. It didn't go with that porcelain facial expression. I elected to say nothing.

"What I want for her is a full life. Friends, a husband, interests. A vacation now and then, to go somewhere else. I'm not saying she has to be a jet-setter. But I would like her to have a life, that's all, just a life."

I looked at her directly for the first time. She was still ash blonde, with a deep, sexy voice. She still had fantastic hands with long fingers. "You understand what I mean, a life!" she was saying.

But something was hollow about her, the years had done something to her. Her self-evaluation had not been totally wrong, perhaps even the implication that she had failed to convey some elixir of life, of hope, to Lisa.

". . . the way she dresses, the way she lives, the way she *moves*. I must have done something wrong. Terribly wrong."

"You're still on good terms?"

"We talk. She knows I'm coming here to talk to you. If you could cut down on the number of stray cats she has in that apartment, I'd appreciate it."

I said, "I don't know that she even wants therapy."

"Doesn't want it. What are you talking about?"

Now that I dared look at her more closely, I saw that it wasn't age itself that had changed her. Age can adorn if it brings complexity, if it replaces innocent love with another kind. Her face was pretty, but there was something vapid about it, as if a light had dimmed. Her eyes, which to me had connoted the ever-widening future, now gave a continual message of impatience, of joyless haste. I could imagine Lisa feeling discouraged by them.

After a pause, Susan said, "I'm sorry, maybe I haven't been clear, but there's a lot you don't know about her." She tried to say that warmly.

But I felt her apology was more manipulative than sincere.

"George, I've talked about you a lot, how bright and caring you are. I show her your articles sometimes, in *Glamour*. I've shown her your books. I have two of them, I don't remember the names."

"But we don't even know if she'll go to a therapist. You think there's a lot wrong with her. But does she?"

"She agreed to go."

"She's been in therapy before?"

"Never. You're the only person she'll see. If you agree. I promised her not to tell you anything about her. Maybe I said too much already."

It crossed my mind that other people must have loved Susan over the years, and fallen by the wayside. I wondered if any of them still felt the way I did.

"Look, Susan, maybe you're right and she does need therapy. But I don't think I'm the person to see her."

"Why not? I'll pay you whatever you want. Don't worry about that. I have money."

"No. It isn't that," I protested.

"Well, why not then? You're the one she trusts."

"Well, I know, but—" I started to say it was because of our relationship, but caught myself. What? A relationship twenty-five years ago stopping me from working with someone else! And I'd only seen Susan once between then and now. She would never understand. I wasn't even sure I did. How could I say, "Susan, I'd think about you too much, it wouldn't be fair."

I said nothing.

"Please, you're very well known now," she said.

"Well known? Hardly."

"Well, you're certainly doing well. And I don't trust anybody else. If I ever asked you anything, I'm asking you this. I've already spoken to her. I wouldn't know what to say if you said no."

She saw me hesitating. She said, "I told her all about you. Really."

"Susan, you know if I did work with Lisa, you and I couldn't talk anymore. It wouldn't be fair to her."

"Of course," she said, as if it didn't matter. It obviously meant a lot more to me than to her.

"Okay," I said. "Have her call me."

"I don't know if she will."

"She'd have to. I can't chase her. It wouldn't do."

"Of course. I understand."

She would understand the value of being solicited, being a high-level call girl. At the idea, I stopped myself forcibly from thinking of her that way.

"I'll have her call you. I'm so glad you're willing to see her. We consider it a compliment."

"Well, it's hardly that, Susan." I felt brokenhearted, and instantly regretted having consented.

As if on cue, she softened. "Are you still reading poetry, George?"

"Yes, I do. Not as often as I'd like, but I watch a lot of Shakespeare videotapes. I have a whole library."

"Oh, that's wonderful. How should I pay you?"

Something told me to resist the impulse not to charge Susan for that session. I said, "I'll add it on to Lisa's bill if she calls. I have your address."

"Well, I guess I'd better not take any more of your time."

We rose simultaneously.

At the door, I told her, "It was great to see you. I'll do my best."

It was a stupid final statement, I thought to myself.

The way Renoir must have touched his nearly finished paintings with hints of vermilion that gave them supernal life, the next day tinged my consciousness with memories of Susan when we were both seventeen. I could see her again, cool and fresh, her thick hair falling softly over the sides of her face, her white blouse contrasting with her deeply tanned neck.

Both of us were poor, going to City College and working in the library after hours, but we found time for long walks down Riverside Drive. Feeling completely unwor-

thy of her, I'd never dared make a sexual approach, which I felt might ruin everything. We shared the dream of becoming great writers, and I pictured our names etched in gold on adjacent black leather volumes of the Harvard Classics. Our two books would speak to lonely people as yet unborn, signaling them to awareness of the earth's magnificence.

One summer day, Susan and I had paused to lean on the low railing and gaze at the Hudson River, not far from the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. I recited Tennyson's line to her, "We dipped into the future, far as human eye could see." Her eyes sparkled as she looked unforgettably at me, and I will always think that she loved me in that moment.

She said to me, "George, I really want to give something beautiful to the world."

How could I have guessed that her willowy body and perfect oval face were to be her gift?

Already she was being pursued by much older men. I pictured them as coarse, wrinkled people in fedora hats, the kind who gauge everything by money and what it can buy. They brought her to shows and restaurants, but none of them ever recited poetry to her or believed in her the way I did.

One in particular offered to buy her a whole wardrobe if she would sleep with him. "I hardly know the man," she said to me, and seemed as repulsed by the offer as I was. I guess I imagined, What did she need money for? She could take out any book in the library, and that was what counted.

Naturally, she didn't inform me when she started accepting payment for sex. Her earrings, her new dress, she explained by saying that she had found a wonderful discount store downtown. But the lines I discovered and memorized and recited to her began to mean less. And one day she surprised me by saying, "You really could be a very attractive man if you learned something about

clothes." I felt confused and angry, not at what she said but at the distance from which she saw me.

Then she broke an appointment to meet me after an English class, and I didn't see her for months. When I met her by accident on Broadway, she told me she'd quit college, and I saw her no more.

I thought about her when I got into Columbia graduate school, when I got my doctor's degree, and in spot moments later on. It even crossed my mind that maybe I was betraying her by staying away and that if I had any integrity I would have shouted at her to come back, not to me but to life. However, I sensed I would be rebuffed, and so I didn't.

Lisa arrived ten minutes late, looking somewhat as Susan had led me to picture her. In a worn cotton dress, she seemed roundish. She wasn't unattractive, but she had inherited none of the beauty of Susan or her sister, and she obviously wanted none of the life-style that Susan had paid so dearly for.

She pointed at me as she said, "You're George Weinberg."

"And you're Lisa."

After sitting down, she asked, "So how do we start?"

I told her I'd spoken to Susan briefly about her. "But you tell me why you came here."

"My mother wants me to see you."

I asked her what she thought her mother was concerned about.

"She wants me to dress beautifully, exercise, and be gorgeous. She doesn't like the way I live. She doesn't like anything about me. She doesn't like the way Henry, Olivia, Honey, or Marshall live either."

I surmised that she meant her cats. "Why not?"

"They sleep too much, I guess. They don't go out and meet anybody, and they're satisfied with me."

"You have four of them?"

"She's never seen Miss Prim."

"Oh, I see. Why not?"

"When I found her, she was in an alley with her two dead kittens. Miss Prim is dying too. I don't want my mother to see her, do you understand?"

"You don't think your mother might help her? What exactly is wrong with her?"

"Her eyes look cloudy, and she has a big tumor near her tail. She can hardly move. She doesn't eat, except when I make her. That's enough about Miss Prim."

Lisa wasn't looking at me, but at the wall.

"Meanwhile," she said, "my mother wants me to lose twenty pounds so she can give me some of her dresses. And she wants me to find a fancy place to go in them. She'd like me to marry a doctor, maybe an ugly doctor because I'm ugly, and give him plenty of sex."

"She said that?"

"Not the sex part, but I know that's what's on her mind. But she knows I hate doctors, they're all ugly, really."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they all experiment on animals in medical school, don't they? They kill dogs and cats and mice, at least a few, don't they? They'd kill Miss Prim if they found her.

"I guess you'd like me to get a better job and to get married and to give up my cats, wouldn't you? And not to work as an usher, wouldn't you? To do everything different."

"Lisa, why do you say that?"

"I don't know."

But here I felt it was important to push. If she truly assumed I was against her, our work, whatever it was to be, would be over before it began.

"Lisa," I repeated, "why do you think I want you to change your whole life?"

At first she didn't answer. "Well, it would be the smart thing to do, wouldn't it?"

"Lisa, that's not my aim. Believe me, if you're happy,

I'm happy. If you're not, if you're unhappy about something, if things aren't working for you, that's where I want to help, if I can. I don't tell people how to live."

"Well, I have no desire to get married or to find the right man or to leave my apartment. It would be more than enough for me if Miss Prim didn't die. Much more than enough, whether you believe that or not, it's true. Whether you believe that or not, it's true."

With that, she tucked her feet under her, resting the soles of her badly cracked shoes squarely on my couch. She was making a statement, whose import I already knew was more sweeping than I could read at the time.

I chose the route of expressing my own annoyance as a way of reassuring her. "Listen, Lisa, you can believe this or not, but it's true. I don't give a damn if you stay in your job and in your apartment forever. Or if you never get married. Or if you never lose weight or go out on a date. I'm not here to tell people how to live. There's a lot of ways to live. Millions, maybe billions. Some work for the person and some don't. Do you believe me?"

Without bothering to look at me, she said simply, "No."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Mother said Doctor Dubman would help me. I talked to him for three months, he didn't say much of anything, except that he was helping me. Then I found out he told mother everything I said. They used to talk on the phone once a week."

"How did you find that out?"

"How did I find that out? How did I? She knew that I had found another cat. She asked me about the Sufi group that I visited, if they used drugs. She didn't even pretend. He told her everything. She said it was for my own good."

"You told him how angry you were?"

"No. I just never went back. Why should I educate him about how he fucked up, and help his practice, help

him ruin some other lives. Doctor Dubman. Dummery after dummery."

I felt hurt that Susan had lied about my being the first therapist. Maybe she'd felt that by the time I found out, it wouldn't matter—a curious form of mother love.

"So I'm condemned as an enemy, and there's nothing I can do, even before I start."

Lisa didn't answer.

Then I suggested, "Maybe a vet could help Miss Prim."

"Yeah. Four hundred dollars and then maybe. I talked to Phil's vet. He's supposed to be very good."

"Who's Phil?"

"A waiter in the diner next to the Beacon. Where am I going to get four hundred dollars? Susan won't give it to me. She won't lend it to me, not for a cat. I can't ask her for that. And Miss Prim doesn't eat. I bring her with me to the job, and leave her in the projection room, and I feed her sometimes and I talk to her, but she's on the way out. That's enough about Miss Prim."

She was twisting her hair.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She seemed reluctant to talk about her background when I asked and gave me only sparse facts. She mentioned the private school she had gone to and just one friend, an autistic girl whose family had liked Lisa. But the family had moved across the country and she never heard from the girl again. In school, Lisa had done especially well in history; she volunteered that she loved animals. "Anything that lives and doesn't bother you."

I thought of Miss Prim, but this time Lisa's mind went elsewhere. "Did you know that termites, when they're under attack, create more soldiers than usual? In one week, they give birth to ten percent warrior termites instead of two."

"Really!"

"Yes, they have many different kinds of specialists in the colony, the warriors, the queen, the drones, the ones

whose job it is to move the queen out of danger, that's me." She enumerated the rest.

"What do you call those who move the queen, your job?" I asked.

"The 'royal chariot.' They push her into some safe place when the ants attack."

Now she was twisting her hair violently, and I could virtually see her experiencing the onslaught.

"How many ants at a time?" I asked.

"Maybe three million. But the termites hide. They build walls, they have specialists at making paste so tough the ants can't get inside. But the warriors, they're outside fighting, and the walls get sealed up behind them. And they know they can't get back. They'll never get back. They know it, but they keep fighting. In the Middle Ages we used to do that when the thane was dead. We'd fight, and we'd fight until we collapsed. We knew we had to die."

She went on about the termites and about history, and I let her, knowing that people never just talk randomly, and glad that she was willing to talk about anything. It was her role to talk, and mine to translate, to accept that she was describing herself in whatever language she chose to speak.

Apparently, she'd first gotten interested in termites after seeing the movie *The Hellstrom Chronicle*. She'd seen it many times and then gotten books out on the insects.

"What do you call those termites who keep the queen out of danger, the ones like you? I don't understand that, by the way. What do you call them?"

"The royal chariot," she said, in a very definite voice.

"And you're like them?"

"Of course. My mother's the queen. I protect her. That's my job."

"What do you mean?" In retrospect, I'm sure I would have asked, even if I'd had no residue of curiosity about Susan and the way she lived.

"I lie. When men call up, I say she isn't there. If

they're the wrong ones, I make up stories. I protect her. Once I actually called the police to protect her. That's enough of that.''

I showed my deference to her wishes by returning to the termites. ''How many are there in a what-do-you-call-it?''

''A colony. Could be twenty million. Even a billion, I think. But this isn't helping Miss Prim, and it isn't helping me.''

I thought she felt uncomfortable about having been so talkative.

Suddenly she pointed to one of the two big plants in the corner of my office. ''Look at that bromeliad. Why don't you let it dry out so it can think?''

She got up and rushed over to it and touched the thick, veined leaves. ''You're killing it with kindness, just like my mother. The poor plant, it can't even think.''

''I didn't mean to hurt it,'' I said feebly.

'' 'Didn't mean!' That's what my mother says. They get more light on the forest floor than they do here.'' With that she scanned the room. ''This is a grim place. Grimmmmm.'' She shuddered, insultingly.

Toward the end of the hour, I realized that she would expect me to go right back to Susan with everything she'd said. How could she possibly think otherwise or trust me after what had happened with Doctor—I couldn't remember the name, only the word ''Dummery''! I realized that nothing short of beseeching her for confidentiality could show her the force of my own commitment to it, and even doing this would be only a start in allaying her fears.

I announced, ''Look, Lisa. Please don't talk about anything we say here. It's very important that you don't discuss with Susan or with anyone else what either of us says, and I won't either. Okay?''

She just listened.

''And I won't be talking to Susan about you or anything you said. That would destroy everything. We need strict confidentiality. If she calls, I'll tell her to call back