

The
STORK
Club

A NOVEL BY
IRIS RAINER DART



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
BOSTON TORONTO LONDON

The
STORK
Club

A NOVEL BY
IRIS RAINER DART



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
BOSTON TORONTO LONDON

Copyright © 1992 by Iris Rainer Dart

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

First Edition

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dart, Iris Rainer.

The Stork Club : a novel / by Iris Rainer Dart. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-316-17332-0

I. Title.

PS3554.A78S76 1992

813'.54—dc20

92-15612

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

MV-NY

Published simultaneously in Canada
by Little, Brown & Company (Canada) Limited

Printed in the United States of America

To Steve, Greg, and Rachel.
My three miracles.

Thank You

Elaine Markson—for being there even when I wasn't

Dr. Melanie Allen—with gratitude for the many hours of your time and the benefit of your gifts in the field of child psychology

Barbara Gordon, MSW—for the unending information and patience you gave to me and to all who need your warmth and love

David Radis—the Zen baby lawyer, whose gentle touch has brought joy into the lives of so many families

Marilyn Brown—Senior Director of the parenting center at Stephen S. Wise Temple, for loving information personal and professional

Dr. Betsy Aigen, director of the Surrogate Mother Program of New York—for insight into the process

Vicki Gold Levy—a wonderful friend, and a new mother at fifty!

Christopher Priestly—my strong and dear man. You know some of this is for you

In memory of the late *David Panich*

With love as always to *Barry Adelman*

Mary Blann—There would be no books without you in my life.

Meg Sivitz—There would be no life in my life without you.

Francois R. Brenot—without whom I would still be using a pencil

Susan Sivitz—for her time and effort and love

Cathy Muske—for sharing her painful ordeal

Mary Kaye Powell—for inside tips

Dr. Jeff Galpin—a technical adviser, friend, and terrific writer

Dr. Pam Schaff—a toddler-group colleague from the early days

Sandi—for friendship and support and laughter through it all

Fredrica Friedman—a wonderful editor and friend, whose loving style
makes it easier for me to work hard

All the families in the Mommy and Me groups who shared their lives,
their toys, their snacks, and their stories with me

And most of all for the children.

"My baby. My baby . . . !"

"Mother!" The madness is infectious.

"My love, my one and only, precious, precious . . ."

Mother, monogamy, romance. High spurts the fountain; fierce and foamy the wild jet. The urge has but a single outlet. My love, my baby. No wonder those poor pre-moderns were mad and wicked and miserable. Their world didn't allow them to take things easily, didn't allow them to be sane, virtuous, happy. What with mothers and lovers, what with the prohibitions they were not conditioned to obey, what with the temptations and the lonely remorse, what with all the diseases and the endless isolating pain, what with the uncertainties and the poverty—they were forced to feel strongly. And feeling strongly (and strongly, what was more, in solitude, in hopelessly individual isolation), how could they be stable?

—Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

The
STORK
Club

I

BARBARA SINGER couldn't stand Howard Kramer. Especially the sight of the top of his shiny bald head when it caught the too-bright light of the examining room while he sat on a creaking little chair on wheels between her outspread legs and moved his cold, K-Y Jellied speculum inside her. And every time she reclined on the examining table with her upturned feet against the cold hard metal stirrups, she vowed to herself and the heavens above that before her next checkup she was going to find a female gynecologist. A doctor who, as her seventy-year-old mother, Gracie, liked to put it, "knows how it feels because she has the same plumbing."

But the months would rush by, and her life would be busy and frantic. And soon the postcard she'd addressed to herself the last time she left Howard Kramer's office would appear in her mail, reminding her she was due for another routine visit, and she still hadn't found a woman doctor.

For a few days she'd feel the postcard staring at her from her desk and want to make the calls, but she wouldn't have a free minute. Then she'd worry that if she didn't get a checkup soon, by the time she did something would be found festering inside her. So eventually, she'd take the path of least resistance and call Howard Kramer's office again, because she knew that since

he was her husband's golfing buddy he'd agree to stay in the office to see her during her rare free lunch break from work.

And once again there she'd be, squinting to avoid the light bouncing from the shiny bald head of Howard Kramer, whose only charm was his lunchtime availability, swearing to herself yet again while he invaded her genitals that after this visit she'd take the time to find a new doctor. Unfortunately, finding the time to take was nearly impossible.

She'd given up manicures completely, hadn't had her hair colored in she didn't remember how many months, didn't ever have a break to eat a real lunch in a restaurant or even at a counter in a coffee shop. Instead she ordered the charbroiled chicken sandwich and a diet Coke from the drive-through at Carl's Junior, and ate it while she nosed her cluttered car through the traffic between her private office on Wilshire Boulevard to the clinic downtown, or from the clinic to the pediatric development unit at the hospital.

And that was why her gynecologist of record continued to be hairless Howie, a physician of such skill and such powers of concentration that at the same time he probed, scraped, and pressed down too hard on everything, he was able to describe the Sunday buffet he'd enjoyed last week at Hillcrest Country Club. Praising the Nova Scotia salmon in the same nasal voice that always grated on Barbara when he looked over her chart and asked the obligatory questions.

"Date of last period? Are they still regular? What are you using for birth control?"

"Exhaustion," she'd answer, hoping to get a laugh, though there was truth in her joke. Her own crazy schedule and Stan's busy legal practice often left them with just enough energy to eat a hastily thrown-together dinner or a meal delivered from the neighborhood Chinese restaurant, read a page or two of the newspaper, and fall asleep.

"Really, Barb," Howard said. "At your age, why fool around and have to worry about it?"

She certainly didn't want to report to the doctor that the way

she'd been feeling lately, she wasn't thinking about what a man whose office was festooned with degrees and awards from Harvard Medical School still referred to as "fooling around." Besides, she knew if she got into that discussion it would lead to Howie using terms like *premenopausal*. And eventually he'd ask the question that always sent a jolt of anger through her, which was "Why don't you just let me tie your tubes?"

Tie your tubes. He tossed it off as if he were saying "tie your shoes." As if it were that simple an act, that simple a concept. Not to mention the way the words "at your age" always sounded as if he meant "Why does an old bag like you need any parts that have to do with reproduction?" She was only forty-two, for God's sake. Somewhere, she would laugh to herself, in that gray area between fecundity and a face-lift. There were plenty of women well into their forties who were still having babies.

So what, she thought, if Stan and I started early and our babies are twenty-three and seventeen? I'm not going under a general anesthetic just because Howard Kramer, OB/GYN, thinks I'm too old to have to worry about birth control. And each time he'd offered her that option, she'd made some joke like, "I'll tell you what. I'll agree to a tubal ligation if you have the plastic surgeon standing by. That way when you're finished at your end of the table, he can step right up and do my eyes. As long as I'm knocked out anyway, why not?" But she knew she was wasting the levity on Howard Kramer, who'd never been famous for his sense of humor.

After Howard removed his rubber gloves and made some notes on her chart, he invariably launched into a long story about one of the celebrities he treated. It was appalling to her, the way he could go on endlessly about some anchorwoman's cervix or some television star's sterility, leaving in the names and details, while a too-polite-to-stop-him Barbara sat on the table, a prisoner of his monologue.

Sometimes she'd try rustling the blue paper gown in which she'd been uncomfortably clad for the examination, hoping the sound would bring Howie back from his narcissistic reverie,

convey the message that now that her Pap had been smeared, she was out of there. But he never noticed. And that was why, she told herself this morning as she sat at her desk enjoying a rare quiet moment in her workday, she was postponing making her appointment this month. Because being face to face with Howie Kramer, not to mention face to vagina, was never a picnic.

This morning she looked at the most recent postcard from his office sitting on her desk with a coffee ring on it because she'd been using it as a coaster for her mug. No. She'd be damned if she'd fall into the same trap and go to Howie Kramer again. This minute she'd call her friend Marcy and ask about the female doctor who treated both Marcy and her daughter, Pam.

She got as far as putting her hand on the phone, but something stopped her from making the call. Probably it was the reality that going to a new gynecologist would mean somehow juggling her own time to fit into the doctor's schedule, then sitting in a strange waiting room filling out a clipboard full of forms. So she promised herself she'd worry about the gynecologist decision later, and she pushed the rewind button on her answering machine.

Beep. "Barbara, this is Joan Levine. I'm calling to tell you that Ronald is trying to get out of our session with you today because, as usual, he says he has some business he can't put aside . . . even for his own son. I'd really appreciate it if you'd call him and tell him he has to show up for the sake of Scottie's sanity. This is just another example of how that son of a bitch doesn't give a good goddamn about Scottie and when we go into court, believe me, I plan to use it. I, of course, will be there at eleven as scheduled. Thank you."

Poor little Scottie Levine; his parents were going to keep beating each other over the head with him until he fell apart, Barbara thought as she made a note to call Joan Levine back and tell her it was okay if her estranged husband didn't come in today. Joan and Barbara could use the time to talk about how

the parents' problems with the impending divorce were having a damaging effect on Scottie.

Beep. "Barbara, this is Adrienne Dorn. Jacob's mom. Jacob peed on the floor in his dad's closet again, all over my husband's shoes. And he's waking every night and climbing into bed with me when my husband is out of town. Our session with you isn't until next Thursday, and I'm afraid if we leave these problems undiscussed until then, Jack won't have a pair of shoes left to wear."

Jack Dorn traveled for business three days out of every week. Jacob Dorn, age three, probably figured if his daddy's shoes were covered with urine, he wouldn't be able to leave home. Simplistic maybe, but Barbara was sure the problems the little boy was having centered on his father's constant absences. She made a note to call Adrienne Dorn back and offer to see her today.

She could imagine what her mother would say if she heard those messages. "Spoiled West Side parents who think they're buying their children a fashionable indulgence or an emotional vaccination." Gracie had no patience for her daughter's West Side yuppie clientele. Her own background was in cultural anthropology and she wore her disdain for the world of psychology on her sleeve. "I think you ought to drop the private practice completely. Spend all your time with the needy ones, with crucial life problems. That's where the juice is."

At the family clinic where Barbara spent about a third of her workweek, there was a long waiting list of those. Troubled, anxiety-ridden children whose tiny brows were already permanently furrowed as if they'd seen it all, and many of them had. There were days when she looked into the very old eyes of those very young children and ached to see the absence of hope in them.

Some were referred by social workers, like five-year-old Jimmy Escalante, whose father was murdered while the two of them were having breakfast together one morning at a Bob's Big Boy as a robbery took place. Jimmy had survived the shooting

by hiding under his father's jacket until the robbers left and the police came. Now he woke up screaming every night. Last week he told Barbara that someday he would "kill the world" to get even for his father's death.

Some were referred by pediatric clinics, and some children were brought in to her by parents who managed to find their way there by instinct. They were the ones who presented their hurting children to her as unsure of what she could do as if they were handing them over to a witch doctor. The way Angel Cardone had with Rico.

"I think somebody at the nursery school is doing something funny to him."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Cardone?"

"I mean, a couple of times he tried to tell me somebody's been sucking his little pee pee."

"You think there's someone at the school who's molesting him?"

"I don't know exactly. But there's lots of people around there. Teachers, helpers, big kids who get paid to work there in the summer. Maybe one of *them* is doing it."

"Have you examined him? Had a doctor examine him? Is his penis red or irritated?"

"No. I mean, that's the thing. It don't look like he puts up a fight about it, 'cause he don't have no bruises."

"Is there anyone at the school you can trust to talk to?"

"There's nobody anyplace I trust."

"Why don't you bring Rico in?" Barbara asked, her mind racing to think of an open time when she could try to get through to the little boy, and wondering how she would approach him. "How about early tomorrow morning, before you take him to school? Maybe I can find out from him what's going on?"

"I can't pay for coming in again."

"Don't worry about paying. You don't have to pay. Will you work with me on this?"

"Yeah. Sure," she said, turning to go. Then she turned back

and looked gratefully into Barbara's eyes. "You're a nice person."

Thinking about Jimmy Escalante's cries of revenge and fearing that Rico Cardone was being sexually abused brought nightmares that made Barbara cry out in her sleep. Many nights Stan had to wake her and hold her and assure her everything was all right. But after he'd calmed her and fell back to sleep, she stayed awake and worried with a heart-pounding anxiety because she knew better. Everything was not all right.

"I'm losing it," she told Stan more than once at the end of a workday. "So often I see the parents look at me blankly, then look at the clock, and I know they're thinking, 'When the hell can I get out of here? And what does all this psychological crap have to do with me?'"

"At least those families have found you," Stan would tell her. "That means there may be solutions for them."

At the end of a difficult day she'd let herself imagine how it would be if she let herself live a life in which Stan supported them completely with his law practice. Tried to picture how it would be if she woke up every day and did whatever she happened to feel like doing. Instead of shuttling between the families who had too much and the families who had too little, listening to the painful stories that seeped into her soul.

This morning while she waited in her Beverly Hills office for the red light on the switchplate next to the door to go on, signaling that her first private patient had arrived, she doodled absently on the coffee-stained postcard from Howie Kramer's office. After a while she picked up the morning newspaper and turned to the View section to find her horoscope.

"Even a scientist like you can't resist the magic," Gracie always teased when she caught Barbara checking in with her astrological forecast.

"It's harmless fun, Mother," Barbara would say defensively. But the truth was she *did* feel foolish about skipping the front page and going right to the astrology.

"Not to the countless people who are loony enough to change

their entire lives based on what it says,” Gracie said, bristling. Bristling was what Gracie did best. But at least she had a sense of humor about herself. “Now read me mine,” she’d always add with a mock-serious face.

Today for Pisces, Barbara’s sign, the message read: *Unexplored territory offers exciting life-changing opportunity*. Barbara laughed a little burst of a laugh out loud, just as the red light came on. “I sure as hell hope so,” she said, then she stood to open the door to welcome her first family of the day.