**‘Only’ by Caroline Baum**

**(Goes with Chinese Cinderella)**

**In her new memoir, Caroline Baum reflects on being brought up an only child in a world of privilege ­­— but little freedom — and the primary focus of her exacting parents.**

"Your mother," my father would frequently announce like a king issuing a decree, "is the most beautiful woman in the world."

In a good mood, he was prone to making such hyperbolic pronouncements. Indifferent to compliments from a man capable of spitting insults at her, my mother responded with exaggerated eye-rolls, dismissive shrugs or a grimacing grin that mocked his flattery.

I was too young to understand how her handsome looks eclipsed more conventional notions of beauty. There was too much of the eagle in her face. And besides, I liked to argue for argument's sake: my father encouraged verbal jousting and the banter of rhetoric. "What about Audrey Hepburn? Sophia Loren? Elizabeth Taylor?" I challenged with irritating gnat-like persistence.

My father shook his head at the mention of each screen goddess. "Too made up", "Vulgar", "Cheap", he replied with unwavering devotion, consistently dismissing all the obvious contenders I could name. Beauty was a valued attribute in our home. We critiqued people's appearances anywhere we went, from theatre foyers to airport lounges. "Nice pair of legs," my father would say appreciatively and our heads would swivel to where his nodded. "Regarde comme elle est moche, celle-la" ("Look at how crummy she is"), my mother would say with the uncharitable spite of someone with plain features. Her judgment was merciless.

My appearance was subject to constant comment and scrutiny. My mother documented every haircut and new outfit with her cumbersome Leica and, later, an even more professional Nikon. The portraits continued even when I became too sulky to smile as first puberty, then adolescence, hit like long, grumbling storms. There are hundreds of photographs of me brooding soulfully in velvet capes and romantically ruffled dresses, my gaze often clouded with resentment or averted as a sign of non-co-operation. She might, by then, have called herself a war photographer, so hostile was her subject.

In early childhood I was a severe thumb-sucker who then graduated to chronic nail-biting, like my father. He marred his carefully groomed appearance by chewing his nails to the quick until they bled, turning his sausage fingers into mutilated stumps. I felt ashamed of how his hands must look in meetings and when he signed documents, but he never seemed embarrassed enough to hide them or to attempt to stop. The double standard that allowed him to tell me off for our shared habit while doing nothing to correct it in himself infuriated me.

On Sunday mornings, he would call me into his dressing room for an elaborate, weekly, humiliating and slightly creepy ritual inspection and manicure. I was instructed to soak my hands in warm, soapy water, then he would tidy my hang-nails with a pair of shaped cuticle scissors before slathering my fingers with cream, shaking his head in disapproval at the damage I'd done.

My objections that his self-mutilation was far worse were ignored. He painted my fingers with a disgusting-tasting clear liquid to act as a deterrent, offering me a pocket money reward as an incentive to grow my nails. It failed.

When my skin erupted in aggressive acne due to the inevitable pubescent hormonal surge, there was nowhere to hide my embarrassment and no one thought it might be tactful to ignore my condition. On the contrary, it was discussed in detail over dinner, making my already agonising self-consciousness worse.

While the acne raged, my teeth became a second focus of unwanted attention. Crowded and irregular, they required orthodontics. I hated the feeling of the ugly clamps when I ran my tongue over them. My mouth felt like a prison. The stainless-steel braces and wires made me lisp, food got caught in them and they inhibited my willingness to smile, making me seem even more sullen than usual.

At night, I had to wear an additional external brace resembling a scold's bridle, that medieval torture muzzle specifically designed for women. The metal boomerang on an elasticised headpiece made lying on my side uncomfortable and the thought of sleepovers with such a contraption inconceivable. I withdrew further into myself, my schoolwork and my books.

My chompers had already given me plenty of grief. When a milk tooth canine fell out but nothing dropped into its place, an X-ray revealed the tooth was hiding in my cheekbone, impacted somewhere near the edge of my eye socket.

I lived with the gap for a couple of years until I turned 13, when our Harley St dentist, Dr Preston, suggested that rather than scar my face to extract the tooth, he would attempt a world first: he would make an incision in my palate and drill through the bone, attaching a wire around the rogue tooth, gradually winching it down into place with a winding mechanism much like the key on a sardine tin. The surgery would be performed under local anaesthetic.

As the train pulled out of the station, I made a shameless scene, sobbing and wailing ... My face swollen and my throat raw from sustained crying, I was most probably hysterical.

On the appointed day, I woke up with a gnawing pain low in my belly and the bedsheets stained with rusty red smears. My period had decided to start, that day of all days. A brisk explanation from my mother was all there was time for, together with a bulky sanitary pad.

The surgery took much longer than expected and was extremely painful because the anaesthetic wore off.

When Dr Preston attempted to top it up with booster shots, his bifocals magnified the needle to grotesque proportions, prompting me to slide away from him down the dentist's chair in whimpering terror.

My mother sat in the room with me through the whole ordeal, clenching her fists and her jaw to remain composed, not daring to come near me and see the carnage for herself. But I could hear everything and see too much. Most traumatic was noticing tiny flecks of bone fly up from the drill and stick to Dr Preston's glasses. I was bleeding from both ends.

Towards the end of the surgery, tears ran down Dr Preston's crevassed cheeks as he repeated, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," for causing me so much pain.

The ordeal did not end there. The winching mechanism required tightening every few months, causing a temporary sensation of pressure and pulling. But, miracle of miracles, the procedure worked: two years later, a perfect canine appeared, its ivory tip heralded as it broke through the gum with all the jubilation of the moon landing. My father sent Dr Preston a case of Champagne.