

DEAR ALICE

by Alice Vandenberg

HE LOVES DOLLS

DEAR ALICE: My husband and I have just had another violent fight concerning our five-year-old son, Timothy, and I desperately need your advice.

My son adores playing with a doll I bought for him last Xmas. He spends hours with it, putting doll clothes on it and feeding it on doll dishes. This aggravates his father no end, and several other adults have

made nasty remarks about it, too.

Personally, I see nothing wrong with Timothy playing with this doll because it is a sailor doll. He puts a cute little white hat and uniform on it and I think the image is totally masculine.

Why is it when a little girl plays Cowboy and Indians, everyone says she's a darling little tomboy, but when a boy plays with a doll they say he's queer? Please answer this.

WORRIED MOTHER

I cut that "Dear Alice" thing out because it reminded me of Norton, and there are a few other things I've got to tell you about him because he gets involved in this memorial epic a little later on.

Lorraine told you she thinks Norton and I hate each other. It's true. Norton is so low on the scale of evolution he belongs back in the age of the Cro-Magnon man.

Norton actually did play with dolls when he was a kid. That was his mother's fault, just like in that "Dear Alice" column. When he was old enough to know better, he didn't play with dolls anymore. But the kids used to make cracks about him, so that made him go berserk around the age of ten. He was the only berserk ten-year-old in the neighborhood. From then on he turned tough guy all the way. He was always picking fights and throwing stones and beating up everybody. In fact, he got so tough he used to go around calling the other guys sissies.

When I was a freshman going through my Bath-

room-Bomber complex, Norton was a specialist in the five-finger discount. He used to shoplift everywhere he went. It used to be small-time stuff like costume jewelry for his mother and candy bars and newspapers. Then he got even worse, until now his eyes even drift out of focus when you're talking to him. He's the type of guy who could grow up to be a killer.

Now you can understand why I was suspicious when Norton invited me to the cemetery to have a beer just before Thanksgiving. That was more than a month after Lorraine and I first met the Pigman.

"How come you're going over there all the time?" Norton finally blurted out as he opened up a bottle of a putrid brand of beer and made believe he was deeply interested in looking down into one of the glass domes on top of Masterson's tomb.

"Where?"

He looked me straight in the eye for a second, and then one of his eyes moved away. "You know where—that old guy's house on Howard Avenue."

"Oh him."

"Is he queer or something?"

"He's just a nice guy."

"What's his house like?"

"Like?"

"Has he got anything worth stealing?" Norton clarified, his eyes beginning to get mean and sneaky

like an alley cat about to jump on a bird.

"Naw," I muttered, throwing a pebble down off the front of the tomb. "All he's got are some tools and stuff—"

"Tools?" Norton perked up. "What kind of tools?"

"Just some electrical junk."

"DD's been asking for a lot of that electric stuff. There's a big market for electronics, you know."

As soon as he mentioned DD I felt like socking him right in the face. I mean, DD is this lunatic man on Richmond Avenue who makes believe he's the leader of organized crime on Staten Island, but all he handles are the hubcaps and radios that kids steal. King of the kids.

"Any TV's or radios?"

"No," I said.

Norton had reached a new peak of ugliness that day with the afternoon sun shining down on him. He paused a minute, then took a sip of his beer.

"Well, what are you and that screech owl going over there for?"

"I told you not to call Lorraine a screech owl!"

"What if I feel like calling her a screech owl?"

I took a sip of my beer, which was as warm as @#\$\$%, and then looked him straight in the face. I wasn't scared of him because we were sort of evenly matched.

"I mean, what would you *do* about it?" Norton grinned.

"Oh, probably nothing," I said, smiling back at him. "Maybe I'd go buy some . . . marshmallows."

The grin on Norton's face faded away so quickly you'd think I just stuck a knife into him. "You wouldn't happen to know where I could buy some . . . marshmallows, would you?" I said, smiling.

"All right, I'm sorry I called her a screech owl," Norton said, trying to avoid the unavoidable.

"You got anything more to say to me?" I said, standing up.

"Yeah." Norton nodded slowly and with a return of courage said, "if you don't give me a little more information about that old goat, maybe Dennis and me will pay a little visit over there ourselves."

I yawned and stretched my arms into the air. "Well, I can see this conference is over. Thanks for the beer." Then I threw my empty bottle way in back of the tomb. I mean, I was really furious by this time, and I started walking down the path from the top and out across the white gravel courtyard.

"Maybe we'll pay a visit real soon!" Norton called out, and I turned to see him standing on top of the tomb. I walked a few steps farther so that I

was about a hundred yards or so away, and then I spun around.

"You do that," I yelled at the top of my lungs.

"You do that, you Marshmallow Kid!"

I knew Norton had to make believe he didn't hear that last remark because he would have had to run after me and try to bash my head in with a rock otherwise. It's like paranoia in reverse when people are really calling you insulting things and you deliberately pretend they aren't.

But I guess I'm just as screwed up as he is.

Sometimes I try to figure out why I'm the way I am. Take my drinking for instance.

"Johnny wants a sip of beer," Bore used to say in the old days. He got a big kick out of it when I was about ten years old, and I'd go around emptying all the beer glasses lying around the house.

"That kid's going to be a real drinker," he'd say in front of company, and then I'd go through my beer-drinking performance for everybody, and they'd laugh their heads off. It was about the only thing I ever did that got any attention. My brother was the one everybody really liked—Kenny, the smart college kid. The only thing I did better than him was drink beer.

"A chip off the old block."

Some chip.

When Bore got sclerosis of the liver like Lor-

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raine told you, he stopped drinking, but I didn't. I don't think I know exactly what year I noticed it, but then all of a sudden Bore and the Old Lady got old. They didn't fight anymore. They didn't do much of anything anymore, which is why I guess I nicknamed them the way I did. They just seemed tired, and I seemed out of place in the house. I had become a disturbing influence, as they say. If I light up a cigarette, all my mother's really worried about is that I'm going to burn a hole in the rug. If I want a beer, she's worried I'm not going to rinse the glass out.

"John, turn your radio down."

"John, you're disturbing your father."

"John, you're disturbing your mother."

"John, you're disturbing the cat."

"John, don't slam the door when you go out; don't make so much noise on the porch; don't bang your feet when you walk up the stairs; don't walk on the kitchen floor—don't, don't, don't."

"John, please do whatever you like. Make yourself comfortable. If you want something out of the refrigerator, help yourself. I want you to feel at home."

And always with a big smile so you knew he meant it.

That was the Pigman, and I knew I'd kill Norton if he tried to hurt the old man.

It got so that every day John and I would go over to the Pigman's after school and have a glass of wine and conversation. It was routine by the time the Christmas holidays came around, and it was nice to have some place to go besides the cemetery when it was cold out. Masterson's tomb is an escapist's dream in the summer, but it's a realist's nightmare in December.

"Where have you been?"

"I told you the Latin Club was meeting today—and then I missed the bus coming home."

I went right into the bedroom and took off my coat.

"Did I see you in a car today?" my mother asked, coming to the doorway to watch my reaction. "I was waiting for you to go to the store. When you didn't come home, I walked down myself, and I saw a girl in a car that looked just like you." She was holding the large coffee cup and stirring nervously.