

The Story of X

by Lois Gould

Once upon a time, a Baby named X was born. It was named X so that nobody could tell whether it was a boy or girl. Its parents could tell, of course, but they couldn't tell anybody else. They couldn't even tell Baby X - at least not until much, much later.

You see, X was a part of a very important Secret Scientific Xperiment known officially as Project Baby X. This Xperiment was going to cost Xactly 23 billion dollars and 72 cents. Which might seem like a lot for one Baby, even if it was an important Secret Scientific Xperiment Baby. But when you remember the cost of strained carrots, stuffed bunnies, booster shots, 28 shiny quarters from the tooth fairy...you begin to see how it adds up.

Long before Baby X was born, the smartest scientists had to work out the secret details of the Xperiment and to write the Official Instruction Manual in secret code for Baby X's parents, whoever they were. These parents had to be selected very carefully. Thousands of people volunteered to take thousands of tests with thousands of tricky questions. Almost everybody failed because it turned out almost everybody wanted a boy or a girl and not a Baby X at all. Also, almost everybody thought a Baby X would be more trouble than a boy or girl. (They were right too!)

There were families with grandparents named Milton and Agatha, who wanted the baby named Milton or Agatha instead of X, even if it was an X. There were aunts who wanted to knit tiny dresses and uncles who wanted to send tiny baseball mitts. Worst of all, there were families with other children who couldn't keep a Secret. Not if they knew the Secret was worth 23 billion dollars and 72 cents - and all you had to do was take one little peek at Baby X in the bathtub to know what it was.

Finally, the scientists found the Joneses, who really wanted to raise an X more than any other kind of baby - no matter how much trouble it was. The Joneses promised to take turns holding X, feeding X, and singing X to sleep. And they promised never to hire any babysitters. The scientists knew that a babysitter would probably peek at X in the bathtub, too.

The day the Joneses brought their baby home, lots of friends and relatives came to see it. And the first thing they asked was, what kind of a baby X was.

When the Joneses said, "It's an X!" nobody knew what to say. They couldn't say, "Look at her cute little dimples!" On the other hand, they couldn't



say, "Look at his husky little biceps!" And they didn't feel right about saying just plain "kitchy-coo". The relatives all felt embarrassed about having an X in the family. "People will think there's something wrong

with it!" they whispered. "Nonsense!" the Joneses said stoutly. "What could possibly be wrong with this perfectly adorable X?"

Clearly, nothing at all was wrong. Nevertheless, the cousins who had sent a tiny football helmet could not come and visit any more. And the neighbors who sent a pink-flowered romper suit pulled their shades down when the Joneses passed their house.

The Official Instruction Manual had warned the new parents that this would happen, so they didn't fret about it. Besides, they were too busy learning how to bring up Baby X. Ms. and Mr. Jones had to be Xtra careful. If they kept bouncing it up in the air and saying how strong and active it was, they'd be treating it more like a boy than an X. But if all they did was cuddle it and kiss it and tell it how sweet and dainty it was, they'd be treating it more like a girl than an X. On page 1654 of the Official Instruction Manual, the scientists prescribed: "Plenty of bouncing and plenty of cuddling, both. X ought to be strong and sweet and active. Forget about dainty altogether".

There were other problems, too. Toys, for instance. And clothes. On his first shopping trip, Mr. Jones told the store clerk, "I need some things for a new baby". The clerk smiled and said, "Well, now, is it a boy or a girl?" "It's an X," Mr. Jones said, smiling back. But the clerk got all red in the face and said huffily, "In that case, I'm afraid I can't help you, sir." Mr. Jones wandered the aisles trying to find what X needed. But everything was in sections marked BOYS or GIRLS: "Boys' Pajamas" and "Girls' Underwear" and "Boys' Fire Engines" and "Girls' Housekeeping Sets". Mr. Jones went home without buying anything for X.

That night he and Ms. Jones consulted page 2326 of the Official Instruction Manual. It said firmly: "Buy plenty of everything!" So they bought all kinds of toys. A boy doll that made pee-pee and cried "Pa-Pa". And a girl doll that talked in three



languages and said, "I am the Pre-i-dent of Gen-er-al Mo-tors". They bought a storybook about a brave princess who rescued a handsome prince from his tower, and another one about a sister and brother who grew up to be a baseball star and a ballet star and you had to guess which.

The head scientists of Project Baby X checked all their purchases and told them to keep up the good work. They also reminded the Joneses to see page 4629 of the Manual where it said, "Never make Baby X feel embarrassed or ashamed about what it wants to play with. And if X gets dirty climbing rocks, never say, "nice little Xes don't get dirty climbing rocks".

Likewise, it said, "if X falls down and cries, never say, "Brave little Xes don't cry. Because, of course, nice little Xes do get dirty, and brave little Xes do cry. No matter how dirty X gets or how hard it cries, don't worry. It's all part of the Xperiment."

Whenever the Joneses pushed Baby X's stroller in the park, smiling strangers would come over and coo: "is that a boy or a girl?" The Joneses would smile back and say, "it's an X". The stringers would stop smiling then and often snarl something nasty - as if the Joneses had said something nasty to them.

Once a little girl grabbed X's shovel in the sandbox and zonked X on the head with it. "Now, now Tracy," the mother began to scold, "little girls mustn't hit little - and she turned to ask X, "Are you a little boy or a little girl, dear?" Mr. Jones, who was sitting near the sandbox, held his breath and crossed his fingers. X smiled politely, even though X's head had never been zonked so hard in its life. "I'm a little X", said X. "You're a what?" the lady exclaimed angrily. "You're a little b-r-a-t, you mean!" "But little girls mustn't hit little Xes either!" said X, retrieving the shovel with another polite smile. "What good's hitting, anyway?" X's father finally X-hailed, uncrossed his fingers, and grinned. And at their next secret Project Baby X meeting, the scientists grinned, too. Baby X was doing fine.

But then it was time for X to start school. The Joneses were really worried about this, because school was even more full of rules for boys and

girls, and there were no rules for Xes. Teachers would tell boys to form a line, and girls to form another line. There would be boys' games and girls' games, and boys' secrets and girls' secrets. The school library would have a list of recommended books for girls and a different list for boys. There would even be a bathroom marked BOYS and another one marked GIRLS. Pretty soon, boys and girls would hardly talk to each other. What would happen to poor little X?

The Joneses spent weeks consulting their Instruction Manual. There were 249 pages of advice under "First Day of School". Then they were all summoned to an Urgent Xtra Special Conference with the smart scientists of Project Baby X.

The scientists had to make sure that X's mother had taught X how to throw and catch a ball properly, and that X's father had been sure to teach X what to serve at a doll's tea party. X had to know how to shoot marbles and jump rope and, most of all, what to say when the other children asked whether X was a boy or a girl.

Finally, X was ready. X's teacher had promised that the class could line up alphabetically, instead of forming separate lines for boys and girls. And X had permission to use the principal's bathroom, because it wasn't marked anything except BATHROOM. But nobody could help X with the biggest problem of all - Other Children.

Nobody in X's class had ever known an X. Nobody had even heard grown-ups say, "Some of my best friends are Xes". What would other children think? Would they make Xist jokes? or Would they make friends? You couldn't tell what X was by its clothes. Overalls don't even button right to left, like girls' clothes, or left to right, like boys' clothes. And did X have a girl's short haircut or a boy's long haircut? As for the games X liked, either X played ball very well for a girl, or else played house very well for a boy.

The children tried to find out by asking X tricky questions, like "who's your favorite sports star?" X had two favorite sports stars: a girl jockey named Robyn Smith and a boy archery champion named Robin Hood. Then they asked, "What's your favorite TV show?" And X said: "Lassie" which stars a girl dog played by a boy dog. When X said its favorite toy was a doll, everyone decided that X must be a girl. But then X said the doll was really a robot and that X had computerized it and it was programmed to bake fudge and then clean up the kitchen. After X told them that, they gave up guessing what X was. All they knew was they'd

like to see X's doll.

After school, X wanted to play with the other children. "How about shooting baskets in the gym?" X asked the girls. But all they did was make faces and giggle behind X's back. "Boy, is he weird," whispered Jim to Joe. "How about weaving some baskets in the arts and crafts room?" X asked the boys. But they all made faces and giggled behind X's back, too. "Boy, is she weird," whispered Susie to Peggy.

That night, Ms. and Mr. Jones asked X how things had gone at school. X tried to smile, but there were two big tears in its eyes. "The lessons are okay," X began, "but...." "But?" said Ms. Jones. "The Other Children hate me," X whispered. "Hate you?" said Mr. Jones. X nodded, which made the two big tears roll down and splash on its overalls. Once more, the Joneses reached for their Instruction Manual. Under "Other Children", it said: "What did you Xpect? Other Children have to obey silly boy-girl rules, because their parents taught them to. Lucky X - you don't have rules at all. All you have to do is be yourself. P.S. We're not saying it'll be easy.

X liked being itself. But X cried a lot that night. So X's father held X tight and cried a little too. X's mother cheered them up with an Xciting story about an enchanted prince called Sleeping Handsome, who woke up when Princess Charming kissed him.

The next morning, they all felt much better, and little X went back to school with a brave smile and a clean pair of red and white checked overalls.

There was a seven-letter word spelling bee in class that day. And a seven-lap boys' relay race in the gym. And a seven-layer-cake baking contest in the girls' kitchen corner. X won the spelling bee. X also won the relay race. And X almost won the baking contest Xcept it forgot to light the oven. (Remember nobody's perfect.)

One of the Other Children noticed something else, too. He said: "X doesn't care about winning. X just thinks it's fun playing boys' stuff and girls' stuff. "Come to think of it," said another one of the Other Children. "X is having twice as much fun as we are!"

After school that day, the girl who beat X in the baking contest gave X a big slice of her winning cake. And the boy X beat in the relay race asked X to race him home. From then on, some really funny things began to happen.

Susie, who sat next to X, refused to wear pink dresses to school any more. She wanted red and white checked overalls - just like X's. Overalls, she

told her parents, were better for climbing monkey bars. Then Jim, the class football nut, started wheeling his little sister's doll carriage around the football field. He'd put on his entire football uniform, except for the helmet. Then he'd put the helmet in the carriage, lovingly tucked under an old set of shoulder pads. Then he'd jog around the field, pushing the carriage and singing "Rockabye Baby" to his helmet. He said X did the same thing, so it must be okay. After all, X was the team's star quarterback.

Susie's parents were horrified by her behavior, and Jim's parents were worried sick about his. But the worst came when the twins, Joe and Peggy, decided to share everything with each other.

Peggy used Joe's hockey skates, and his microscope, and took half his newspaper route. Joe used Peggy's needlepoint kit, and her cookbooks, and took two of her three baby-sitting jobs. Peggy ran the lawn mower, and Joe ran the vacuum cleaner. Their parents weren't one bit pleased with Peggy's science experiments, or with Joe's terrific needlepoint pillows. They didn't care that Peggy mowed the lawn better, and that Joe vacuumed the carpet better. In fact, they were furious. It's all that little X's fault, they agreed. X doesn't know what it



is or what it's supposed to be! So X wants to mix everybody else up, too!

Peggy and Joe were forbidden to play with X any more. So was Susie and then Jim and then all the Other Children. But it

was too late. The Other Children stayed mixed up and happy and free and refused to go back to the way they'd been before X.

Finally, the parents held an emergency meeting to discuss "The X Problem". They sent a report to the principal stating that X was a "bad influence" and demanding immediate action. The Joneses, they said, should be forced to tell whether X was a boy or a girl. And X should be force to behave like whichever it was.

If the Joneses refused to tell, the parents said, then X must take an Xamination. An Impartial Team of Xperts would Xtract the secret. Then X would start obeying all the old rules. Or else. And if X turned out to be some kind of mixed-up misfit, then X must be Xpelled from school. Immediately! So that no little Xes would ever come to school again. The principal was very upset. Was X a bad influence? A mixed-up misfit? But X was an Xcellent student! X set a fine Xample! X was

Xtraordinary! X was president of the student council, X had won first prize in the art show, honorable mention in the science fair, and six events on field day, including the potato race.

Nevertheless, insisted the parents, X is a Problem Child. X is the *biggest problem child* we have ever had! So the principal reluctantly notified X's parents and the Joneses reported this to the Project X scientists, who referred them to page 85769 of the Instruction Manual. "Sooner or later," it said, "X will have to be Xamined by an Impartial Team of Xperts." "This may be the only way any of us will know for sure whether X is mixed up - or everyone else is."

At Xactly 9 o'clock the next day, X reported to the school health office. The principal, along with a committee from the Parents' Association, X's teacher, X's classmates, and Ms. and Mr. Jones, waited in the hall outside. Inside, the Xperts had set up their famous testing machine: the Superpsychobiometer. Nobody knew Xactly how the machine worked, but everybody knew that this examination would reveal Xactly what everyone wanted to know about X, but were afraid to ask.

It was terribly quiet in the hall. Almost spooky. They could hear very strange noises from the room. There were buzzes. And a beep or two. And several Bells. An occasional light flashed under the door. Was it an X-ray? Through it all, you could hear the Xperts' voices, asking questions, and X's voice answering answers. I wouldn't like to be in X's overalls right now, the children thought. At last, the door opened. Everyone crowded around to hear the results. X didn't look any different. In fact, X was smiling. But the Impartial Team of Xperts looked terrible. They looked as if they were crying! "What happened?" everyone began shouting. "Sssh," sshed the principal. "The Xperts are trying to speak." Wiping his eyes and clearing his throat, one Xpert began: "In our opinion," he whispered - you could tell he must be very upset - "In our opinion, young X here-" "Yes! Yes!" shouted a parent. "Young X," said the other Xpert, frowning, "is just about the least mixed-up child we've ever Xamined!" Xclaimed the two Xperts together. Behind the closed door, the Superpsychamedicosocietymeter made a noise like a contented hum. "Yay for X!" yelled one of the children. And then the others began yelling, too. Clapping and cheering and jumping up and down.

"SSSH!" SSShed the principal, but nobody did. The Parents' Committee was angry and bewildered. How could X have passed the whole Xamination? Didn't X have an identify problem!

Wasn't X messed up at all! Wasn't X any kind of a misfit? How could it not be, when it didn't even know what it was?

"Don't you see?" asked the Xperts. "X isn't one bit mixed up! As for being a misfit - ridiculous! X knows perfectly well what it is! Don't you, X?" The Xperts winked. X winked back. "But what is X?" shrieked Peggy and Joe's parents. "We still want to know what it is!" "Ah, yes," said the Xperts, winking again. "Well, don't worry. You'll all know one of these days. And you won't need us to tell you."

"What? What do they mean?" Jim's parents grumbled suspiciously. Susie and Peggy and Joe all answered at once. "They mean that by the time it matters which sex X is, it won't be a secret any more!" With that, the Xperts reached out to hug Ms. and Mr. Jones. "If we ever have an X of our own," they whispered, "we sure hope you'll lend us your Instruction Manual."

Needless to say, the Joneses were very happy. The Project Baby X scientists were rather pleased, too. So were Susie, Jim, Peggy, Joe and all the Other Children. Even the parents promised not to make any trouble. Later that day, all X's friends put on their red and white checked overalls and went over to see X. They found X in the backyard, playing with a very tiny baby that none of them had ever seen before. The baby was wearing very tiny red and white checked overalls.

"How do you like our new baby?" X asked the Other Children proudly. "It's got cute dimples," said Jim. "It's got husky biceps, too," said Susie. "What kind of baby is it?" asked Joe and Peggy. X frowned at them. "Can't you tell?" Then, X broke into a big, mischievous grin. "It's a Y!"