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Marsha's Deal

Laura Solomon

The Reckoning

Marsha Lee Henry died on a Friday. She took her own life at Dignitas, the Swiss euthanasia clinic, after being diagnosed with Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, a rare disease that meant various parts of her body would turn to bone when damaged. She was beyond finding Dignitas creepy; she simply wanted to die. Enough was enough. She'd taken years of it, years of her body slowly turning to bone, trapping her, encasing her. She may as well have been turning to stone, like somebody who had looked into Medusa's eyes. She had filled out the Dignitas forms at home, passed their tests and been accepted. She had won the right to end her own life.

She had made the journey solo; a lonely trip. She had thought at the time that it was a one way ticket to the grave but this did not turn out to be the case. Her body was cremated; her spirit went straight to hell. She found herself face to face with the Devil.

"Hello there", said the Devil. "I've been expecting you."

Marsha remained silent. She looked around, taking in her surroundings. The environment was made of hard concrete with not much in the way of luxury. There were several steel planks to sit on, and three large TV screens hooked up to DVD players. Puffs of smoke wafted out from behind them. Nobody else was around. Marsha was horribly, terribly alone. She looked down at her body. At least one of her wishes had been granted – she was no longer a woman of bone; she had turned back to flesh. It had been years since she had been flexible and she did a few stretches, testing out her new suppleness.

"Fancy a steam bath?", asked the Devil, gesturing towards the wisps of smoke.

Marsha breathed deeply into both nostrils and drew courage. She did not tremble, she did not quake.

"Actually", she said. "What I *would* like is another crack at it."

"Crack at what?"

"At *life*."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I would like to be reborn as a baby, as myself. I want my time again, a second chance. This time around I don't want to be afflicted by disease. I want a clean life, a good life, a life of joy and happiness."

"You *yourself* are responsible for creating an awful lot of sorrow", said the Devil in a menacing tone, with a twitch of his horns. "Would you like to have a look at some of the misery you've left behind? Let me show you where you've slipped up."

Marsha hesitated. She knew that her absence must have left a void in a few hearts and minds and she felt no small amount of guilt. Suicide was selfish, wasn't that what they said. Was it true? Was it accurate even in the case of somebody diagnosed with a life threatening, life altering, illness?

"Okay then", said Marsha. "Show me the worst."

The Devil picked up a DVD remote, pressed play and said "Now I will show you those left behind."

The sobbing form of Marsha's husband started playing and Marsha felt a pang of sorrow shoot through her. What had she done? What fresh misery was this? Don was her one true love, her reason for existing, but he hadn't wanted her to go to Dignitas; she'd stolen away behind his back and look (*just look!*) at the grief it had caused. Don was beside himself, lying distraught on the sofa while great sobs wracked his body. Moving pictures of her friends were next; Doris, one of her fellow seamstresses and Lucille, her old friend from high school, both of them overwhelmed with quiet despair. Most heartbreakingly of all, footage of her daughter Iris was shown, alone in her Christchurch bedsit, clutching a photo of her adoptive mother and sobbing into her pillow. The only person who'd known about her trip to Dignitas was her sister, her brilliant sister, by now an IT consultant in Auckland, who'd come up with the money when Marsha had phoned and confronted her with her exit plans and her reason for them. Overcome by the footage, Marsha turned to The Devil and apologised.

"I'm sorry", she said. "I'm sorry for all the things I've done wrong, the bad decisions, the faulty moves. If you just give me one more chance at rebirth, I promise you I'll make you a better job of it. I'll right my wrongs. I'll fix my mistakes. I'll be a model citizen. I'll never do any harm."

"Your race has already been run," said The Devil. "What makes you think that *you* deserve a second chance?"

"I wish I'd known at the start what I know now."

The Devil scoffed. He had seven heads and they all looked in different directions.

"That's what they all say", he said. "All new entrants to hell get shown a retrospective."

He gestured towards a hard steel plank and Marsha obediently took a seat.

"So without further ado," boomed The Devil. "Marsha Lee Henry. This is your life!"

He pressed play on a DVD remote.

Marsha watched her life being played out before her very eyes, bore witness to her birth, saw herself playing with a mobile hung high above her cot, observed her first tentative steps, then onwards towards kindergarten and primary school, where she played elastics and knucklebones. Then to intermediate, where she held hands with her first boyfriend and received her first telling off from the school headmistress for losing her red parka and having to collect it after assembly. She won the standard two cross country, much to her mother's disbelief '*that can't be my child crossing the finish line in first place*', the bitchy school girl games that start up early, then high school with its peer pressure and politics. Her family, through it all, in the background, her mother a social worker, working with kids from problem families, her dad an insurance salesman, excelling at his job, and her over achieving sister Natalie, top of her class in mathematics and English and a local ballet star, regularly performing at the local theatre. A show off to Marsha's mind, but then Marsha was no great shakes at anything scholastic, although she was a whiz behind the sewing machine and had been given an old Singer for her birthday on which she had run up frocks for herself, Natalie and her mother, two barbecue aprons for her Dad and various outfits for the family cat. Leaving school at fifteen, the earliest age possible, and becoming a seamstress seemed like a natural choice. Marsha took work in a local factory, apprenticed to Lucinda Bragglethwaite. And then the disease had set in.

One of the girls, Doris, was a marvelous sewer and had sewn a beautiful green ball dress, with a satin layer underneath, chiffon on top, shoestring straps and handsewn sequins in a teardrop pattern on the bodice. Marsha was very taken with this outfit. Marsha was envious that she could not sew as well as Doris and she stole the outfit from the factory

store room, planning to keep it for only one night as she was going out on a first date. The date was a disaster. Firstly, Dave talked about himself all night and never once asked Marsha about herself. Marsha had anticipated a fancy restaurant but he took her to KFC. At the end of the night Dave grabbed Marsha tightly and would not let her go. Marsha told him she had a curfew and tried to break free. As she was struggling to get away the chiffon layer of the dress ripped. Marsha did not know how she was going to explain this to Doris. She would either have to take the outfit to a professional dressmaker and get the entire chiffon layer and sequins replaced (but then it would not be identical and Doris would know it was different) or not take the dress back at all. Marsha grew ashamed of what she had done. She went home that night and put the dress in the rubbish bin and never spoke of it. When Doris started asking if anybody had seen her dress Marsha said nothing, just put her head down over her sewing machine and kept sewing, as if her life depended on it.

An image of one of her old school friends came up on the DVD. Linda Davidson, who had been with her through high school, a constant companion, there in times of trouble, with Marsha through thick and thin. Linda was a firm friend, a person you could rely on. She hadn't turned away when Marsha had started turning to bone. A friend in need; a friend indeed.

"Hey", said Marsha. "What's Linda doing inserted there in the DVD just randomly like that?"

"Blast from the past, eh?" mocked the Devil with a cackle. "She's dead now. Got hit by a truck driving home from work one day. If you stick around I can re-introduce the two of you."

He paused.

"Why do you want to go back to earth anyway? It's much nicer down here."

He winked, then waltzed over to Marsha and coyly put one arm around her shoulders.

"Stay with me Marsha. Stay and be my companion. Stay and keep me company. Stay and be my friend. Stay and be *more* than just a friend, if you get my gist."

He got down on one knee.

"Life is rotten on Planet Earth, Marsha. War, violence, famine, rape, murder. There's none of that carry on down here. Just me and my...cronies. I can show you a good time. I can

make your dreams come true. I can give you a warm place to sleep at night. You'll never want for anything again if you just say you'll stay with me, yes stay."

For a moment Marsha forgot herself, staring into the Devil's eyes, as he wooed her with his promises, then she jumped back to her senses with a start remembering where she was and who she was and who *He* was.

"I'm sorry", she said (her mother had trained her to always be polite, even in the most trying of circumstances), "but I just don't believe a word you say. I ask you for just one thing. To go back to earth as a baby and to have a chance to live my life over again, I want to be born on the same date, to the same parents, and this time I don't want to be afflicted with Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva thank *you* very much."

She smiled at the Devil and He grinned back.

"Please good Sir," she added as an afterthought.

"Oh alright then, since you asked so nicely", said Satan. "Besides, I've been waiting for a new project to come along. But first you'll have to give me some information."

He tapped his long scaly fingers together.

"And you'll have to pay me of course."

"Pay you?"

Marsha looked around for her purse.

"Pay you how?"

The devil tapped his nose with one finger.

"That's for me to know and for you to find out, sunshine."

"What sort of information do I have to give?"

The devil shot her a sly sideways look.

"I would like to know information about your friends and family members. Their strengths and their weaknesses. Not just immediate family – extended family. No great rush. Here's a pen and paper. Take your time. Write it down for me. Then I will re-birth you."

Marsha hesitated. What was he up to? Still, she *really* wanted to be re-born and it seemed like her only chance was to do as he asked. She put pen to paper.

Isobel: Strengths – good homemaker. Weakness – chocolate.

Aaron: Strengths – Gift of the gab. Weakness – pretty young ladies.

Natalie: Strengths – Academia. Ballet. Weakness – Vanity.

Cousin Andrew: Strengths – Good mechanic. Weakness. Porn.

Aunt Abbey: Strengths – hairdressing. Weakness. Gossip. .

Uncle Murray: Strength – golf. Weakness. Fits of rage.

Friend Karen: Strength – good clairvoyant. Weakness. Love of money.

“Excellent”, said the devil with a smug smile.

He took the list from Marsha then made his own subset – areas to target.

Isobel: Gluttony.

Aaron: Lust.

Natalie: Pride.

Cousin Andrew: Sloth.

Aunt Abbey: Envy.

Uncle Murray: Anger.

Friend Karen: Greed.

He picked up his long pointy tail and swung it around in the air several times. Marsha felt like asking him what the hell he was doing, but she kept silent, hoping that he knew his stuff when it came to terrestrial transportation.

“Marsha Lee Henry I declare you reborn!”

He reached out and touched Marsha's shoulders. Marsha felt herself becoming lighter and lighter, felt her spirit detach itself from her body, keeping her mind. She grew faint and more and more distant and then the next thing she knew she was travelling back in time and being reborn.

The First Time Around

The Blue Man Pub was Marsha's local watering hole, and she could often be found there on a Friday, after work with two or three of her seamstress friends. They were underage drinkers. They were only sixteen but they looked older and the barman did not press them for ID. Marsha's condition had only just begun to manifest and had not yet been diagnosed, so she herself did not fully understand why she struggled to raise her arms up high enough to brush her hair and why dressing had become such a struggle. She was a stoic girl and she did not like to make a fuss. The bar was located in central Wellington, the prices were affordable and the beer and wine were pleasant. It was here that Marsha first met Don. The jukebox played in the background. Don, who was covered in sawdust, saw Marsha sitting with a group of her seamstress friends at a table on the other side of the bar, caught her eye and winked. Marsha blushed. She hadn't had much experience with men and she wasn't sure what to do. Should she look the other way? Should she wink back? She liked the look of Don, who was rugged and handsome, fit and strong from his building work and from playing rugby twice a week. She giggled, took a sip of her drink and coyly looked away. Don, who had only marginally more experience with women than Marsha had with men, turned to his friend Harry and said "Hey Harry, I like the look of that girl over there. The one in the red flowery dress. What do you think I should do?"

"Buy her a drink, you idiot. That's the best way to break the ice."

Harry looked over at the table where Marsha was sitting.

"Get her a white wine. That's what she's drinking."

Don ordered a white wine and walked with it, trembling, over to where Marsha sat.

"Oh, hello there", he said. "You caught my eye. I bought you a white wine."

Marsha giggled again, then reached out and took the glass of wine, brushing Don's fingers with her own as she did so.

"Thank you very much", she said, taking the glass of wine from his hand.

She gestured at the empty seat next to her own.

"Please, take a seat."

Don sat. Marsha took a small, lady-like sip of her wine, then a larger drink and then, much to Don's amazement, picked up the wine glass and drained the entire contents. Don looked astounded.

"Gosh", he said. "I've never seen a woman drink like *that* before."

Marsha smacked her lips.

"Down the hatch", she said. "Dutch courage."

And she rose to her feet and gave Don a kiss full on the lips *muack* just like that. It was Don's turn to blush. His mate, Harry, over at the bar, gave a cheer.

"Looks like you're in there, chum", he hollered, and gave a thumbs up.

And so the relationship was born.

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Shortly after her sixteenth birthday, Marsha tripped over the corner of a rug in her home and hit her hip on the corner of a table. It bruised and a second bone grew and Marsha began to have difficulty walking. Her family couldn't help but notice and her mother took her to the doctor who referred them to a specialist. After a series of tests, Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, one of the world's rarest conditions was diagnosed. Marsha and her mother were at a loss as to what to do. Marsha's mother did not want Marsha to know what lay in store for her, she wanted to protect her child, so she did not quiz the specialist in front of Marsha. Instead, she waited until they got home and then made a private phone call.

"Hello, it's just Isobel Williams here, calling about my daughter Marsha. We were in to see you earlier today. I was just wondering what we can expect as this...infirmity progresses."

"I'll be perfectly frank with you Isobel, it's not going to be pretty. Marsha will become gradually trapped in a second skeleton. She will find it more and more difficult to move and may have difficulty eating and swallowing. It is likely that she will be bedridden by thirty and dead by forty."

"So her body will make extra bone constantly."

"No. She may go months without a flare-up and then the disease can start up again. Nobody knows why. This can happen spontaneously but is likely to happen if she damages herself say through a fall, muscle overexertion, an injury, injection, surgery or even a virus."

“I see. Is there anything we can do to slow or halt the progress of this terrible condition?”

“I’m sorry, no. It’s a genetic disorder. Marsha has just been extremely unlucky. She’s been thrown a curve ball, dealt a bad card.”

“Oh well, that’s life”, said Isobel, doing her best to take a stiff upper lip approach. “We shall simply soldier on. Thank you very much for your time doctor.”

She put down the phone and burst into floods of tears.

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Down in hell, the Devil gathered his minions, his helpers, around him. There were seven of them – one of the devil’s heads looked each one in the eye in an intimidating fashion. The Devil carried a clipboard and a silver pen.

“Your task”, said Satan, with a hiss, “is to visit earth and tempt foolish naïve humans into committing one of the seven deadly sins. You have just seven days to complete your mission. The sins will be allocated as follows. Screech you will take Isobel and gluttony. Tig, you will go disguised as a counsellor called Madeline and tempt Aaron, playing on his lust. Kill, you are to pretend to be a ballerina named Bridget - you are chalked up to target Natalie the ballerina (the devil executed a parodic pirouette) and her excessive pride. Death you are running a homeless shelter – you are taking Cousin Andrew and his sloth. Now, Aunt Abbey....”

The devil tapped his teeth with his pen.

“Let’s see who did I have down for Aunt Abbey. Ah yes, Fire, you will take Aunt Abbey whose downfall will be her envy. You are to run a rival hairdressing salon directly opposite hers. Then we have Uncle Murray and his wrath. Jules, I’d like you to target him. Finally, we have Friend Karen and her terrible greed, for that I had down you Ice, could you please take Karen and wreak destruction in her life.”

#

The entry form was in the back of Women’s Day. ***Win a year’s supply of Devilishly Good chocolate. Just write in with your favourite chocolate recipe to be our lucky winner.***

Unbeknown to Isobel, the competition was being run by one of the devil's minion's, Screech. Isobel wrote in with her favourite recipe – chocolate muffins with cream cheese and a piece of chocolate in the middle. Four weeks later she heard back that her original recipe had been chosen to feature in the new Devilishly Good recipe book and that she was the winner of a year's supply of chocolate. Screech had rigged it. The chocolate was delivered by truck. It backed up the driveway at 7am on a Saturday morning. Isobel was up dressed, ready and waiting, standing at the window with a mug of coffee. She had cleaned out her spare room in order to devote it to the chocolate – a shrine. Two big strong men carried in five boxes of Devilishly Good chocolate and took it into the room. The chocolate was wrapped in red wrappers. Isobel thanked them for their troubles, watering at the mouth, eager to get to her stash. The devil was working on her greed. Each box of chocolate was a different flavour. Isobel picked up a bar of chocolate, looked closely at it and saw that it had expired. She realised that the competition had just been a ploy by Devilishly Good to get rid of a whole lot of expired chocolate.

Isobel developed an extremely unhealthy relationship with the chocolate, similar to that of Golem and the ring in Lord of the Rings. To her the chocolate was *precious*. She guarded it with her life. Within two months Isobel had gained 20kg of weight. She began talking to the chocolate. In the morning 'Good morning chocolate, how are you *feeling* this fine morning?' and last thing at night, 'Good night chocolate, sweet dreams.'

She caught her husband eating a bar of the good stuff while watching TV.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Isobel spat. "That's *my* chocolate. How dare you help yourself to my stash!!"

Aaron told her she needed to see a counsellor. He booked her in with Madelaine Rogers for the following Tuesday.

The counsellor was located in an old house on the outskirts of Wellington. Isobel didn't stay in the appointment for long – just long enough for Aaron to tell the counsellor about her chocolate obsession. It was Aaron who stayed the course. At the end of the session he gave the counsellor his number. She called him a week later. He whinged and he moaned that his wife's affections for him had been supplanted by chocolate. The final straw was when she started sleeping in the same room as the chocolate, bars of chocolate clasped in her hands. Aaron realised he could not compete with the chocolate any longer.

The devil began working on Aaron's lust. He had been replaced by chocolate, so he would replace her. He was jealous of the attention she gave the chocolate. He felt replaced by an inanimate object and he didn't like the feeling. Isobel had changed.

He was at the pub drowning his sorrows when Madelaine called.

"Just checking up on how it's going with your wife and her chocolate obsession. I have some reading material on obsessions you might be interested in."

"Great. When can I pick the reading material up?"

"I won't be in the office this week, but how about we meet for coffee at Café Affair?"

Aaron felt a twinge of happiness – for the first time in ages he was getting some real attention.

The following Wednesday, Aaron made his way to Café Affair. Madeleine was looking lovely; she had dressed up for the occasion. She was wearing a red dress with a black butterfly brooch and bright red lipstick. Aaron had no idea that she was a devil in disguise.

"You look like a million dollars", said Aaron.

"Why thank you", she answered.

They talked for two hours, getting along like a burning house. Soon the staff were sweeping up around them. They looked around and saw that everybody had gone and the café was closing. The place had emptied out.

They climbed into Aaron's car and drove to Oriental Parade. It was a lovely night for a stroll and they were both feeling buoyant; high on the buzz of each other's company. They walked along the promenade and then back. Once they were in Aaron's car again, Madeline asked if he wanted to come back to her house for a drink. Aaron did not say no. Madeline lived in Kelburn near the top of the cable car in an old wooden villa built in the 1930s with big bay windows and a beautiful flower garden where freishas bloomed alongside orange roses, carnations and lilies. She turned the key in the lock and pushed open the front door. Aaron stepped inside, noticing how tidy the place was. Isobel had let their place turn into a shambles lately – it was nice to be with a lady who took pride in the appearance of her house. Madeline opened the drinks cabinet and asked Aaron what he wanted to drink. Aaron asked for a Scotch on the rocks. They drank and talked into the night, discussing Isobel and how unhappy Aaron was in his home life (a manipulative ploy

on Madeline's part). Unprofessionally, Madeline discussed some of the more unusual cases she had come across in her counselling. Aaron stayed the night without a feeling of guilt. In hell, the devil rubbed his hands with glee.

At home Isobel sat up late into the night, eating chocolate and wondering where Aaron was. The chocolate could not fill the hole inside her, could not fill the void. She called Aaron's cellphone at 6pm, 7pm, 8pm, 8.15pm and 8.45pm. As Aaron's bad luck would have it, one of Isobel's friends, Karen, spotted Aaron's car outside Madeline's house and called up Isobel to tell her. Isobel burst into tears.

"That rat!" she exclaimed.

She asked the friend to come and pick her up and drive her to the scene of the crime. Karen arrived fifteen minutes later.

"Come on then", she said. "Jump in the car."

Isobel, teary-eyed, hopped into the vehicle.

They drove up to Kelburn. Isobel began fuming again when she saw Aaron's car.

"He's only known that tart five minutes. How dare he? That scumbag."

Isobel waddled up the path, puffing due to the 20kg she had put on. Adrenaline coursed through her veins. Isobel ignored the cutesy sparrow shaped doorbell and barged her way inside. Aaron and Madeline were at it on the couch in the front room. Sobbing, Isobel ran to Aaron and dragged him away.

"How could you?!" she screeched. "How could you betray me like this?!"

Aaron looked furtive.

"Look sweetheart. You don't put out anymore, you've gained 20kg, you're in love with your chocolate and I've grown fond of Madeline."

"You've only known her two seconds!!"

"I'm just...just not in love with you anymore."

"You'll pay for this!"

Isobel burst into tears then stormed from the building, slamming the door behind her.

Isobel's tears hardened and turned to a thirst for revenge. Karen gave her the name of the country's best divorce lawyer and Isobel contacted her.

“I want everything” she said at the initial meeting. “As much as I can get. That swine was an insurance salesman and he earned a small fortune every year. I’m after the money. And the house – I want the house.”

“On the grounds of infidelity we can work it so you get a packet. I only ask for 30% commission,” said the lawyer.

“Deal”, agreed Isobel.

The settlement came through and Isobel got the house. She also got fifty thousand dollars, leaving Aaron with his car and five grand in the bank. Aaron was furious but consoled himself in the knowledge that he had Madeline to lean on.

Aaron found a flat on his own, but spent a lot of time at Madeline’s place. At first, he didn’t think there was anything too unusual about her, but then he began noticing that she always ate hot chillis for breakfast, after he’d stayed the night and always had the fire on, even in the middle of summer. She drove a red sports car, *fast*. Too fast for Aaron who would be cowering in the passenger seat, saying *slow down, honey, slow down*, as Madeline ripped through the 50km zone at 90km per hour. She went 140km on the motorways but never seemed to get speeding tickets. It was as if she had made some infernal pact with the traffic cops of the city. She dumped him three months into the relationship saying he was too boring for her and Aaron was left alone and lonely in his one bedroom flat, living off beer and takeaway pizza. He’d never learned to cook.

The devil put two ticks in the checkboxes next to lust and greed, beside Aaron and Isobel’s names. He turned to the dark angel Steel and said, ‘Two down, five to go.’

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The quarter acre section in Lower Hutt was selling cheap. Not for the first time, Don's profession came in handy and he was able to build their house himself, a labour of love, a three bedroom weatherboard A frame number with aluminium windows. Don and Marsha moved in together when they were in their early twenties. They were in love, arguments

were rare and they cohabited happily together. Marsha had been frank with Don about her medical condition and he was aware that as it progressed he might have to become her caregiver. She already had difficulty walking due to the fact that she had banged her hip, but she got around by swinging one leg out wide as she went. They were frighteningly traditional. Don paid the bills; Marsha cooked the meals and took care of the housework. She did not complain much about her condition. Her mother had sheltered her from full knowledge, but she had been to the library and found an encyclopaedia article on the disorder so she knew some of what lay in store for her.

Unrelated but additional to Marsha's condition, there were fertility problems. They tried and they tried but they could not conceive. Unsure as to whether the problem lay with Don or Marsha, the two of them went together to the family doctor. Don provided semen for analysis, booked in for a testicular biopsy and had a blood test to determine his testosterone level. Marsha had ovulation and ovarian reserve testing and an X-Ray of her uterus. The results came back. They both had issues. Don's sperm weren't swimming and Marsha's eggs were not maturing as they should.

They decided to adopt. Together they visited Orlando's Orphanage. The orphanage was run by a strict matron who went by the name of Mrs Hamble. Don and Marsha walked together down the aisles of cots, peering into half-starved sleeping faces, trying to decide who to pick. There were differences of opinion. Don liked the look of this one, Marsha liked the look of that one - it was difficult for them to reach consensus. Most of the kids were crying and had snot running down their faces. At the end of one row, in a cot with one of the sides down lay a child who did not cry, a child who did not scream. This held instant appeal for Marsha, who wanted an easy baby, not somebody who was going to shout the house down. They had a spare room. They could accommodate it. Financially it might be a bit of a struggle, but nothing they couldn't take. At that very moment, at that point in time, there was nothing that Marsha Lee Henry wanted more in the world than to take home an adopted child. But not just any old kid. She wanted a specific sprog, the one in the cot in front of her, the quiet one, the one who did not kick and scream and make a fuss, the one who, although only an infant, knew how to behave itself, knew how to conduct herself in this wicked, terrible, wonderful world.

Marsha leaned over and picked up the baby. It smiled up at her with her blue eyes. It gurgled a bit and cooed. Marsha cuddled it closer, wrapping its shawl more tightly around it to keep out the cold and then handed it to Don. Don didn't quite know what to do with it, but at Marsha's prompting he gave it a snuggle and then he too was smitten. Mrs Hamble was standing in the doorway with her hand on her hip.

"Well", she said. "Do you want the baby or not?"

Marsha, who dreaded to think about the abuse that might go on within the four walls of this terrible place, quickly nodded. Marsha named the baby in her mind. Still carrying the baby, they made their way to Mrs Hamble's office. Everything inside was orderly and efficient. Money (quite a lot of it, to Marsha's thinking) was exchanged. Papers were signed. And the baby, the baby, was theirs.

"A baby!" exclaimed Marsha to Don when they had exited the horrible institution and were outside in the safety of their car. "Just imagine, a baby!"

A baby to have, a baby to hold. A baby to nurture and attend to, a baby to feed and to rock to sleep at night. A baby to sing sweet lullabies to and to soothe when it woke, crying, from nightmares. Somebody else's baby actually, an unwanted child, a baby that somebody else had, freely, given away. Marsha couldn't imagine why anybody would give away something as precious as a child. Was this child the result of an unwanted pregnancy? Was this baby, heaven forbid, the product of rape? She looked down at the tiny face, wrapped up in its white orphanage blanket, a blanket that was covered in stains. Why on *earth* would anybody give this baby away? No room at the inn perhaps. No money. Money too tight to mention. She cuddled the baby closer, then stared out the window at the cold dark night, lit only by a few dull stars. It was a cold world, and cruel, thought Marsha. Everything boiled down to money in the end. The root of all things dark and evil. Whatever happened to kindness and compassion?

They took the baby home, gave it a bottle of formula milk which they had bought in preparation and tucked it into the cot with the pink fluffy blanket covered in ABC lettering that Marsha had picked up cheap from the charity store. She sucked her thumb and settled into sleep, just as if she had always lived with Don and Marsha, in this home, in this street, in this particular suburb, on this island in the South Pacific in this corner of the globe. Marsha looked down at the quietly

sleeping form and said “*Iris*. Let’s call her *Iris*.” Don nodded in agreement. They both left the room.

Don and Marsha loved *Iris* unconditionally, just as surely as if she were their own child. Marsha bought her dolls from money she had saved working as a seamstress and Don built her a playhouse for the dolls to play in. He also built her a hut in a fig tree in the backyard, a swing and, when she was a little older, a wooden go-cart for her fifth birthday. *Iris*, who had been rather unceremoniously dumped on the doorstep of the nearest orphanage when she was two days old, latched onto the warmth and affection now offered her like a limpet clasping onto a rock. There seemed no prospect of her ever letting go. *Iris* grew quickly and soon Marsha was enrolling her at Chilton James Primary School, where she took a special shine to Miss Sampson, a kindly soul who always let *Iris* play for extra time in the sandpit and encouraged her in singing and colour painting.

During these primary school painting sessions, *Iris* made many vibrant, joyful depictions of her home life; pictures of Marsha pulling a fresh tray of scones from the oven, drawings of Don knocking up a garden shed from old bits of four by two that had been lying around the house. She also drew sketches of Marsha at her Singer sewing machine, running up *Iris*’s outfits; trousers and shirts and skirts. Miss Sampson always praised these paintings, glorified them to the high heavens, which of course made the other infants jealous, envy being one of the most primitive emotions and evident even in very small children. Yes, *Iris* may have been Miss Sampson’s favourite but this very fact didn’t make for an easy life. Because of it, she was picked on and bullied. The other kids threw sand into her eyes in the sandpit, they hit her with sticks and they gave her Chinese burns and snake bites. Miss Sampson would always race to *Iris*’s aid which only made things worse in the long run.

When *Iris* told Marsha about the bullying, Marsha was beside herself. She asked *Iris* for the names of the bullies and *Iris* told her. To Marsha’s disappointment, Don took a harsh stance. “It’s life in New Zealand”, he declared. “Cold and abusive. Being singled out for special treatment means everybody else hates you. The sooner she gets used to that sort of environment the better.”

Marsha couldn’t believe what Don was saying, yet she knew in her heart of hearts that it was true. What could she do to protect her adopted child from such cruelty? Marsha resolved to go along to the primary school and have a word with Miss Sampson to see if she could be made to

understand that it might be best to tone down the favouritism in order that the bullying ease off, or preferably, cease altogether.

Until this point in time, Marsha hadn't known that small children could be so cruel. She had thought that sadism was reserved for the Hitlers and Pol Pots of history – crazed leaders who gained power and then inflicted their twisted versions of authoritarianism upon their countries or the world – not young kids at primary school. During her own early school years she hadn't known any such unkindness, but then again, she hadn't been teacher's pet either.

The following Monday, Marsha put on her best trousers and jacket and headed down to the school. She knocked on the door to Miss Sampson's room.

“Come in.”

Marsha entered, swinging her leg beside her as she walked. She was used to people staring at her.

Miss Sampson sat behind a wooden desk. She looked friendly and kind, but Marsha knew she was rather unaware of the damage she was inadvertently inflicting on Iris's life due to her favouritism.

“I've come about Iris”, said Marsha.

“Yes, I thought you might have.”

“Don't get me wrong. It's kind of you to take her under your wing. However, in favouring her, you make the other kids jealous and they pick on her.”

“Oh, do they?”

Marsha couldn't believe Miss Sampson hadn't noticed. She pointed to the “Bullying: Zero Tolerance” poster that was pinned to the far wall.

“I can't have my child treated badly during the day”, she said. “Iris comes home in floods of tears and now suffers nightmares and cries out in the night.”

“Do you know which students were bullying her? What exactly were they doing?”

“It was Harriet Barker, Samuel Davidson and Sally Robertson. They have been giving her Chinese burns, snake bites and throwing sand into her eyes. It's not fair. If there's no solution I'll have to shift her to another school. Perhaps I could have the phone numbers of the mothers.”

“That would be a little outside the norm.”

Marsha stood her ground.

“This bullying can’t continue. I think it best if you don’t favour Iris so much and I have a chance to speak to the other mothers. Perhaps those mean children have problems in their home lives that need sorting out.”

Miss Sampson took out a pen and paper and rather reluctantly jotted down a few numbers.

“Okay then”, she said. “I’m sorry that you feel bullying has gone on at my school. Would you like *me* to ring the mothers and talk to them about the situation?”

Marsha stiffened.

“No no”, she said. “It’s perfectly fine. I can manage the situation. I can stick up for myself and my daughter.”

Marsha walked home with the telephone numbers in her pocket. She entered through the front door, sat down in the living room next to the telephone, withdrew the list from her pocket and dialled. The first number she called was picked up after three rings.

“Hello is that Candice Barker?”

“Speaking.”

“Hello my name is Marsha Lee Henry. I wanted to talk to you about some of the things that have been happening at Chilton James Primary School.”

“Okay.”

“My child is being bullied. It appears that your daughter is one of the main culprits.”

“I find that very difficult to believe.”

“Well, I’m afraid that it’s true. Iris says she gave her Chinese burns. Not pleasant in anybody’s book.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Come to think of it, she has been getting a little more aggressive with her brother of late.”

The conversation ended.

Marsha called each of the mothers in turn and explained the situation. Some were understanding, some were not. Some listened, others didn’t want to know. Two stayed on the line, one hung up. At the end of it, Marsha told herself that at least she’d given it her best shot and if it still didn’t work out they’d change schools to one on the other side of town. She took Iris to one side, told her what she’d done, explained the situation to her.

“I’m sticking up for you”, she said. “Since you’re too young to stick up for yourself. With time you’ll learn. You’ll learn how to give as good as you get, or to dodge and avoid, or ask a superior for help, all according to circumstances, but right now you needed my help, so I’ve given it to you for free, as a mother rightly should.”

Iris, who was too young to fully understand, but still got the gist of it, stood still and smiled and nodded. Marsha gave her a bear hug and an encouraging pat on the back and then sent her off to bed. It was Sunday night. Time to sleep; time to forget. Time to hope that all would be well in the morning.

Come Monday, a nervous Iris tottered through the gates of Chilton James Primary School, let go of Marsha’s hand, with encouragement and walked into her classroom. She took a seat in her usual place. Nobody bothered her before class started. A miracle! She was being left alone, left to her own devices. She pulled her books from her bag – two Dr Seuss numbers; *Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!* And *Oh Say Can You Say?* At playtime she wasn’t bothered and they didn’t harass her at lunchtime either. Iris thought her mother must have worked a magic spell on the class to turn their attitudes around so successfully and she was ever so grateful. That evening, when she went home, she gave her mother a great big kiss on the cheek *smack!* and said “Thanks very much, Mum” and Marsha knew, without having to be told, exactly what Iris was talking about.