

3 Stories by Laura Solomon

Prosthesis

The new right arm was a welcome addition. He'd lost his old paw by neglecting his diabetes and contracting gangrene from below the shoulder. They'd been forced to amputate or the gangrene would have spread. The arm was black and fashioned from carbon fibre. He was a pianist; it was important that the fingers worked and that the sensors in the fingertips offered feedback. He had complete control over all five fingers. There were tactile pads which controlled how fast the fingers opened and closed. The fake arm used electrodes stuck onto the outside of his upper arm to sense muscular impulses in the residual limb. The signals from these electrodes were picked up by artificial sensors in the prosthetic arm, where a touch and pressure feedback system sent signals back to the brain. He could feel what he was doing without having to look. Artificial nerves; artificial feelings. He could use the hand in the dark.

The socket was carefully moulded around a plaster cast taken from a residual limb. The stump changed shape and size over the years, so new sockets were needed from time to time. The artificial arm was controlled by the brain. When he thought "I want to move my fingers", his brain

stimulated muscles in his residual limb to move and the prosthetic arm would shift accordingly. Transhumanism. The hand was strong enough to crush a can. It could be cleaned with baby wipes but was not to be used in a shower or pool. It cost approximately \$50,000. He had inherited the money to pay for it from his grandfather who had owned a supermarket chain.

He played on cruise ships. He was a hit with the women. The hand gave them something to talk about. There were ladies, many ladies, cruising the world on their husband's pensions. Predictably, the husbands got jealous. He got tired of playing the same old standards and would occasionally break out into improvised jazz.

It was in 2019, when he had been playing on the ships for two years that it started. At first he thought that he was imagining things, but then it became obvious that he was no longer the leader, he was now the follower. The hand was leading the way, playing on its own, capering around the piano like an out of control pony who had lost its reins. Try as he might to exert his will over it, he could not harness it. The hand had gone wild, broken free.

Something in its programming, no doubt, he thought to himself.

Out loud, to others, he was unsure of what to say. The hand was putting his job in danger. Half of the time the sound it came out with was harsh and discordant - far from easy on the ears. People were vacating the dining hall when he played, getting up and leaving, their meals half finished

upon the table. Untamed, set free, the hand was dangerous, like a wild hawk that turns upon its owner.

They hadn't warned him about this in the brochures! This hand could be the death of him if he wasn't careful. It was out of control. It could get him in trouble; get him into very hot water. Unsure of how to handle the situation, he decided to telephone the company responsible for the hand's manufacture.

The phone was picked up after three rings and answered by an efficient sounding voice.

"Good morning Watson and Sons. How can I help?"

"Hello I bought a prosthetic limb from you some months ago and it appears to be faulty."

There was a pause.

"Can you please provide more information Sir?"

"I am a pianist and I rely on my hand to obey instructions from my brain. However, of late, it appears to have developed a mind and a will of its own. It's gone crazy. It's serious. My job is in danger."

"That's no good. Can you provide me with the make and model number please? It's located on the base of the unit."

He took off his limb and looked at the base. The numbers were worn but visible.

"The make is Pros365. The model is Proton3000."

"Thank you very much for that information. What's your phone number please?"

He recited the number.

"I'll look into it and call you back."

She hung up rather abruptly and he was left with the dial tone ringing in his ear.

Time passed and the hand did not modify its behavior. If anything, it got worse. It turned randy. When women would stand by his piano to listen to his playing (which they did less and less these days) it would try and force itself down their tops or up their skirts. These women (who were proper and often fancied themselves as upper class) were horrified by the hand's behavior and would blame it on him. The hand was slapped, but so was he – in the face. It was no use trying to explain that he was not responsible for the hand's habits. It was connected to him, and so the ladies' reasoned, it *was* him!

The manager took him to one side.

"Listen. These antics cannot continue. I've been turning a blind eye up until now because I knew that you needed a job. However, it is up to me to run a respectable ship. There are rules to be followed. Your wild playing is way out of line. And as for your recent ways with the women....I am going to have to let you go. Without notice."

The hand grabbed the manager by the throat and squeezed. The pianist was horrified. Was the hand capable of murder? He tried to will it to let go but it only tightened its grip. The manager started turning red in the face and struggling for breath. The pianist began to panic, his

stomach churning. What would be the consequences of this? Would charges be pressed?

Finally, the hand released its grip. The blood drained out of the strangled man's throat.

"Right that's it. You're leaving at the next port. We're calling in at Sydney tomorrow. You're to stay in your cabin until then. I don't want you roaming the ship. You're dangerous. You're lucky I'm not calling the police."

Back in his cabin, the pianist mused on recent events. The hand had got him into trouble, *deep* trouble. He wanted to return it to the manufacturer. He wanted his money back. There was nothing for it – he would have to return it to where it had come from and ask for a refund. He should have known it was too good to be true – an all singing, all dancing hand that could play the piano in an accomplished manner. A hand that could play as competently as a real human hand. The hand was possessed.

He had purchased the hand from the suburbs of Sydney, in Darlington, in an old disused warehouse that had been converted. It had been manufactured by a bunch of ex-programmers who had banded together, having left their former companies. He should have known better than to buy it on the black market.

He disembarked at Sydney, went home to his flat in Newtown and the next day, took a bus out to where the warehouse was located. Old newspapers were blown down the street by the wind and a few mangy looking cats roamed around. Seeing the warehouse up ahead of him, he

did not take the front entrance. Instead he snuck in around the back and had a good snoop around. There were several large television screens mounted upon the walls. On the TV screens were displayed a number of amputees making fools of themselves; joggers running backwards, ballet dancers doing the highland fling, skiers crashing into other skiers. He was so engrossed in the action that he did not notice that somebody else had entered the room. Suddenly the screens were switched off, went blank.

"Well what have we here then? Bit of a nosey parker, is it?"

The pianist froze. Busted. A man with a glass eye walked into his field of vision.

"Thought you'd come and see what was what, did you?" he said in an extremely intimidating manner.

He wore a long black overcoat and walked with a cane. The pianist gathered his courage.

"All these people on the screens. They're all amputees that you're meant to be helping. But you're ruining their lives. You're selling them faulty limbs and so they're making idiots of themselves in public. You're ruining careers. It's not fair. You need to stop it. Right now. It's evil, pure evil."

The man with the glass eye laughed.

"The world *is* evil", he said. "Anybody who claims otherwise is a naïve idiot. We've all been hard done by. We've all been fired from our jobs – without redundancy packages I might add. Severance without pay. This is what you get when programmers go to the dark side. This is what you get when

global corporations don't treat people right. Surveillance cameras are fitted into the prosthetic limbs so we back here at base can have a good laugh."

The pianist couldn't help himself. A sob escaped his lips.

"*How could you?*" he shouted. "How could you take it out on defenseless amputees? Those people are already down on their luck. They've lost a limb and often their livelihood with it. What you've done is the lowest of the low."

The head developer looked ashamed.

"What about what happened to *me*? What about how *I* was treated?"

"You shouldn't abuse other people just because you've been mistreated. I know it's hard but you need to try and rise above the harsh blows. To absorb them somehow without giving hatred back. You're obviously very talented. Can't you put your talents to use for good rather than evil?"

There was a lengthy pause.

"I'll leave you with that thought", said the pianist and left the building.

The pianist returned to his rented accommodation. How the hell was he going to survive without the money that playing on the cruise ships brought in? There were other more serious considerations too. The hand had stopped obeying him when he was eating. It would play up, play silly buggers, flick food onto the floor and onto the far wall, treating his eating like a game. He had got around this problem by using his other arm (thank God he hadn't lost

both to gangrene!). He was right-handed so everything was awkward, but then everything *had* been awkward since losing his arm. Food preparation was also a problem – he could no longer use the prosthetic arm for this as it would go crazy with the knives and attempt to chop at his good hand.

He had been at home for five days when things started to come right. He was eating his morning muesli and decided to give the prosthetic hand a tentative try with the milk pouring. Miraculously, it obeyed! The milk did not spill over onto the table as he had feared that it might, instead it flowed smoothly into his bowl. He decided to give the arm a go with the spoon. He shifted the silver implement from his left hand into his right and focused hard on sending the correct signals from his brain to his residual limb. More success! The spoon rose effortlessly to his mouth – the food was delivered, chewed and digested.

In the past, the hand had not complied when he was dressing. Today, it behaved perfectly, doing up the buttons on his shirt and zipping up his fly, pulling on his socks and tying the laces on his shoes. It was nothing short of a miracle.

The next day there was an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Police were pleasantly surprised today when they went to investigate suspicious happenings in a warehouse in Darlington. Tipped off by an amputee who wishes to remain anonymous, the police were seeking to arrest Andrew Edwards, and were seeking evidence that he had

been controlling prosthetic limbs remotely and in a malicious manner, seeking to harm others. However, when they arrived at the warehouse from which Mr Edwards and his colleagues work, Mr Edwards confessed that although he had been remotely controlling the limbs in the past he had now seen the error of his ways and that the prosthetic limbs were now fully controlled by the amputee's brains. Mr Edwards had assured police that he has now disabled the capability for the software to be controlled remotely. Over ten amputees have filed claims against Mr Edwards, but they are now reporting that their limbs are working properly again. No charges will be pressed but several of the victims are seeking damages.

The pianist filed for damages and was awarded \$30,000 for loss of earnings. Several weeks after the money arrived in his bank account a small newspaper clipping arrived in the post.

Pianist wanted for cabaret bar.

Must be able to work evenings and weekends.

Tel. 9651 2455

The initials A.E. were penned in the right hand corner of the clipping with the words 'good luck' written afterwards.

Castle

Jack Davidson could fly only in his dreams. In real life it was another story. In real life the opposite was true. Jack was wheelchair bound, his muscles weakened by muscular dystrophy, dependent on his Mum to feed him, to wash him and, most humiliating of all, to take him to the toilet. In real life Jack Davidson was a target, easy meat, prey for bully boys. He had friends too though, a small gang who gathered protectively around him, drawn by his personality. You had to have something going for you, didn't you? It's not as if he was eye candy or anything. Jack hated how weak he was. What he really wanted was strength, power, the ability to lift two hundred kilogram weights, when in reality he was struggling to lift a glass of water. He also resented the fact that he could no longer hug his Mum. When his step-brother visited he would throw his arms around Jack's Mum and Jack would be green with envy and go to his room and cry in secret. He hated for people to see him crying; that would be an admission that the illness was getting him down, affecting him deep inside. Above all else Jack Davidson wanted to be strong, a champion, a hero, able to help others when in reality he couldn't even help himself.

Jack Davidson also had a secret. A secret that kept him going, that got him through his bad days, his troubled times, his darkest hours. It was a magnificent, marvellous secret, but terrible and dangerous too. Jack had discovered a portal to other dimensions. The first time that it happened he hadn't quite believed what was occurring, what was

taking place. Still, there was no mistaking what had transpired. He had been sucked right through the chessboard and into a real life version of his imagination.

Jack had no idea what the person left behind sitting at the chessboard (his Dad) was thinking. They would be mystified, surely, that was only natural. To have somebody vanish just like that, at the drop of a hat, to have a person, a *human body* disappear into thin air, how could that not create a sense of bewilderment?

He'd been thinking about elves at the time he was transported (childish, he knew, but hey, a guy can't always control his thoughts) and suddenly he found himself in some sort of Elf Land, with irritatingly happy-go-lucky little creatures dancing around him, holding hands. They seemed harmless enough at first, but then when he looked closer he noticed that some of them had knives. Fear and anger propelled him out of his wheelchair. He grabbed the nearest elf by the wrist and twisted, then karate chopped him in the elbow. The elf squealed and dropped the knife. The other elves fled in terror, fearful of meeting the same fate. Jack was delighted. He could do it! He had strength. To him it seemed marvellous, magical, a miracle. Jack looked around at the world he was in. It was outlandish but eerie as if he was on another planet; green skies and a red moon. The trees looked as if they were made of static, like a bad TV broadcast. Now that the elves had vanished there was nobody else in sight and Jack was completely alone. He decided to explore the world a little more. There was a scungy-looking river running down to his right. A pink

unicorn with a golden horn appeared and he followed it along until he reached the coast. The unicorn bent down and took a drink from the river and the water became golden. Jack followed suit. He felt himself expand, enlarge. He flexed his arm and his muscles bulged. He had grown three feet and his view extended for miles around - he could see a neighbouring village in the distance. He felt that he could gaze into the universe. Now that the elves were gone it was a pleasant enough world, but it was tea time and he was hungry. He needed to find a way back, back to his Mum and the home cooked meal that would be waiting on the kitchen table. The unicorn dived into the river, swam down underneath the surface and disappeared. Jack followed it, holding his breath and diving under till he found where the unicorn had gone; into an underwater passageway, a stone cavern that lead him back to the room he had left from, the room with the chessboard.

'Where the hell have you been?' his father asked, when he re-appeared on the side of the board. "You vanished."

Jack fobbed him off.

"Just went to the loo while you weren't looking. Mum met me in the corridor and helped me."

His father looked skeptical but said nothing. Jack checked the clock. Only five minutes had past, long enough for a quick loo break.

He wheeled his chair through into the kitchen where his Mum took a plate of cottage pie from the microwave and set it on the table.

'There's your dinner anyway.'

'Thanks very much.'

Jack was starving after his adventure. He hoed into the cottage pie, smothering it with tomato sauce. After dinner he went straight to bed, exhausted from the day's exciting findings.

Jack had experienced a particularly trying day at school. The bully boys didn't usually get physical – mostly their abuse took the form of verbal taunts and jeers. *Jack can't walk, Jack can't walk*. However, on this day which weather-wise was a grey and miserable one, as if external weather matched internal mood, two of the three bullies had bonded together and conspired to tip over Jack's wheelchair. It was malicious behaviour and far from a harmless prank; Jack put out his hands to break his fall and fractured the bone in the little finger of his right hand. He cried out in pain and the bullies danced around him in circles chanting *Jack's a cry baby, Jack's a cry baby*. Everything about the incident was awful. His protectors, his little gang of friends were nowhere in the vicinity. He was alone, horribly, utterly alone, sprawled on the ground in an undignified fashion. It was, somewhat predictably, a teacher who saved him. Good old Mrs McLary, watching the entire scenario unfold from her classroom window came rushing to his aid, righting his wheelchair and helping him back up into it. She patted his shoulder in what Jack assumed was supposed to be a reassuring fashion. It only made him feel worse, patronised. She told him he could stay in the sickbay for the

afternoon. Jack was bored silly in the sick bay but he found a nurse who, discovering a chessboard in the games cupboard in the library, agreed to play the game with him. Jack had thought that the act of vanishing to another dimension when castling might have been a one-off but, no, it happened again. He castled when playing against the nurse and once again was sucked, rushing through the chessboard and into another time. He was in the school playground, on the basketball court, up and out of his wheelchair. He looked down at his clothes; he was clad in a long maroon robe with gold tassels and held a wand in his hand. Magic! He felt in his left hand pocket. There was a piece of chalk in there; he bent down and drew a circle on the ground so that he would be safe when he cast his spells. He looked out across the playground – here came the bullies now. One was smacking a fist into an open palm, the other was picking his nose. Jack felt the old terror clench in his gut, then he drew a deep breath, raised himself up to full height and pointed his wand at the bullies, muttering 'Cravius blind mouses'.

It worked! Jack could hardly believe his eyes but now, heading his way were not three bullies, but three blind mice. He could step on them if he wanted. He could put them in a sack and drown them. He could destroy them, easily and on a whim. Jack picked up the mice by their tails, walked with them down to the stream that ran along the back of the school and drowned them, one by one. He then made his way to the sick bay, where a chess board was set up, moved his queen to take a rook and found himself back in his prior time.

The next day at school assembly there was an announcement. Three boys had drowned off the coast, near Velware Rock. Three names were read out – they were the three boys who had taunted Jack the previous day. Jack felt a pang of guilt travel through him. Had he really been responsible for their deaths? By turning them into mice and drowning them, had he somehow magically, crazily, brought about their destruction in real life? If so, Jack wasn't sure how he felt about being a murderer. They had bullied him, but he had killed them. Surely that was the worse sin and God, if He was looking down from the heavens, would not look favourably upon a killer, even if there had been mitigating circumstances.

The next time Jack castled he was thinking of the family cat. He found himself in cat land, surrounded by snooty, independent cats. The nearest one was snacking on a mouse.

"How come you cats get to prance and pounce all day when I'm stuck in a wheelchair", asked Jack.

"In this land you are no longer a cripple. Come on, get up out of that wheelchair and walk."

One of the cats let out a soft meow. Jack put one hand either side of his wheelchair and pushed himself up to his feet. He put his left foot forward in front of his right, then his right foot forward in front of his left. Step by step, that was the way. He looked down at his shoes – he was walking! It was

a miracle. It would have been a spectacle had there been spectators, but no humans were present, just the cats, who seemed remarkably under impressed, just going about their business. One was licking its front paws clean, another was sharpening its claws upon a tree. Jack wished there was a witness, somebody there to take a photograph or make a drawing of this, his most marvellous moment in years, but nobody was around. He lay down on the ground, closed his eyes and wished himself back home.

The scariest castling of all occurred when Jack was thinking of the dangers posed to him by the white tail spider that was crawling across the chessboard when he swapped his rook and his king. He found himself transported to the centre of a vast, dark cave whose walls were spun with sticky webs. At one end of the cave, blocking the exit, sat an enormous Shelob-style spider possessed of great hairy legs as thick as punga logs, glistening red eyes and enormous fangs that hung down low. Jack was terrified. This spider could eat him alive. He backed away, tentatively, slowly, to the opposite end of the cave, sat down on the ground and took a swig from his thermos. He'd been clutching it when he castled, thank God - it was thirsty work hovering just metres from a forbidding spider, and he took a long swig from the thermos. He felt in his left hand pocket. It was there, the wand. Thanking God for large mercies, Jack withdrew the wand and waved it in the direction of the spider. Immediately, it diminished in size, shrinking smaller and smaller until it was no larger than the size of fifty pence.

Jack could have done anything. He could have stomped on the spider. He could have enticed it onto a piece of paper and carried it to a different place. He could have trimmed one of its legs. Jack didn't do any of these things. Instead he walked past the spider and out through the exit, via the path that the spider had previously blocked. The cave's exit became the entrance to his home and he walked in through the front door to find his mother taking a tray of freshly baked meringues from the oven.

Jack's Dad, Gullivar, who was an astronomer, had given Jack a copy of *Dark Energy For Dummies* for Christmas in an effort to get his son interested in his own field. After dinner on Monday night, Jack sat down to play his Dad at chess. *Dark Energy For Dummies* sat beside the chessboard. Jack waited until his Dad had his knights out and into the game, then cleared the spaces between his rook and his king and castled. *Woosh*. There was a great sucking of air, as if Jack was being engulfed into a vacuum. He found himself on a planet of pure gravity. An invisible planet, an unseen realm, at a constant temperature, hot but not so warm that Jack couldn't stand it. A world comprised of dark matter. To the left of him sat a darkly glowing orb. Jack looked into it and saw a future version of himself, lying bedridden at home. He shuddered and wiped the orb with his hankie. This time it showed him a happier vision; his parents together on a Pacific Cruise. Jack put out his right hand, and picked up the orb and was immediately transported back to his house, still clutching the orb in his hand.

Back at home Jack began feeling the effects of having been in a world comprised of dark matter. He felt empty, drained. The gamma rays produced by the annihilation of dark matter had proved harmful and damaging to his body. He slept badly that night, tossing and turning and haunted by nightmares, terrible dreams that stuck with him far into the next day. When he finally did get out of bed he wondered if the bad dreams might not be in some way connected to the orb and he took it through into his father's study and resolved never to look into it again, so frightened was he of the vision of his dying self he had seen therein.

The land of robots was the most helpful place that Jack visited. All sorts of robots were there for the taking. There were robots dancing in synchronicity, robots doing the cleaning, robots making other robots, and lazy robots just sitting around doing nothing.

A short, fat man with a loudhailer seemed to be in charge. Jack approached cautiously.

"Err, hello," he said. "I wanted to enquire about the cost of these 'bots.'

Jack patted his wallet, trying to give the impression that he was flush with cash. His mother gave him pocket money and he had been saving it up for several years.

"Selling cheap. The cleaners are \$50, the dancers are \$60. The lazy robots are for free."

Jack took one of the cleaning robots, intending to take it home for his Mum. The robot was made out of titanium and had a microcontroller for a brain.

"Say", he said, sidling a little closer. "You haven't got anything that could help out with....with a *person*, have you?"

"A *person*? What do you mean help out with a *person*?"

"Well it's like this. I know I can walk in this world, but back in my world I have muscular dystrophy and am confined to a wheelchair. It's a real pain and my Mum has to do absolutely *everything* for me. Have you got a 'bot that could help her take care of me?"

"Let's see now. You want the HHH – the Handy Home Helper. Can feed you, wipe ya bum and give you a shower. Not all at the same time mind you."

Jack's ears perked up.

"How much?"

"\$99.95 A bargain at twice the price."

Jack wondered about the quality of the goods he was buying, given the cheapness, but he took them anyway.

"Say, got anything that could help with teleportation?"

"You betcha."

A small red droid exchanged hands. Jack held it out in front of him and was teleported back home to his Mum, clutching a robot under either arm.

Back at home, he delivered the robots to his mother and explained what they did. She was thrilled at the new home help and what it signified – namely, a significant diminishment of her workload. It freed her up to spend more time with Jack, talking with him, reading to him and holding his hand.

The most exciting land that Jack visited was the land of fantasy. This was a place where unicorns, griffins, green panda and lightening leopards roamed free. Ruling this land was a lady called Lavender who wore a gingham purple and white dress and carried a black wand that sparkled in the sunlight. She offered to give Jack a tour of the land which was the most beautiful place he had ever seen, blessed with swiftly flowing rivers, snow capped mountains and waterfalls which tumbled down from a great height. Jack was in awe of the landscape and looked around him, mouth agape, taking in its splendour. Lavender took Jack by the hand and together they went wading into one of the nearby streams. The water splashed playfully around their ankles. This was one land that Jack did not want to leave. As evening drew in the giants came out to play. They had been hiding in caves, fearful of the sunlight but as soon as the sun began to go down they came forth. They leapt over ravines and rivers, took it all in gigantic stride and Jack began to feel himself swell and expand too, growing larger and larger, as if he had drunk of some magical elixir like Alice in Wonderland. Now he was

Superjack, stronger than strong, capable of lifting boulders and throwing whole cars out of his way, a cripple transformed. A World Warrior, travelling through space and time, doing magic, doing good. One of the giants invited Jack back to his lair for a cup of tea, stirring in three teaspoons of sugar. Feeling a little guilty, Jack pocketed the spoon as a souvenir to take back and show his Mum.

At eight pm a bell rang, a bell that sounded terrible to Jack's ears as he knew it would summon him back to the real world. Sure enough, soon after the bell had rung, the glorious vision that was the land of fantasy began to pale and fade and Jack found himself back in the real world, in his own small home sitting opposite his mother at the kitchen table. Jack found himself clutching what, in the land of the giants had been a teaspoon but which was, in this world, the size of a spade. He handed it to her mother and told her she could use it for her gardening. Jack's mother was a saint. Because of his disease she had to do everything for her son although she was aided now by robots. Of course, she could have put him into a care home but she was too kind-hearted to do this. The thought of giving up her son was more than she could bear and so she took upon herself the many tasks associated with being a sole caregiver. She lifted Jack on and off the toilet and wiped his bottom for him. She chopped his meals into bite sized pieces and fed him with a fork. She bathed him every night in soapy water and cleaned his teeth for him. She tried hard not to show the burden that she felt. If the Lord had chosen to try her in this way then so be it, she was not one to complain or make a fuss.

The following day Jack's mother was gardening with her new shovel in the vegetable patch down at the end of the garden, when it broke free from her hands and started doing the digging for her all on its own. She stood back, put her hands on her hips and exclaimed "Well, I never, a self-digging shovel. Where on earth did you get this from Jack!" The shovel dug on, oblivious to criticism or praise until it had turned the entire vegetable garden and dug a series of neat furrows all ready for planting.

The most intellectually challenging world that Jack visited was chess land. It was when he was playing chess with his Dad that he castled into chess land and then castled again from the giant chess board in chess land to his deepest darkest nightmares. They were so bad that when he went home he had bad dreams for a week. The nightmares were of his muscular dystrophy getting worse and him dying very, very slowly.

The most spellbinding adventure was when he went to the land of water. Under the water were all manner of different and interesting creatures that lived under the sea. He also realized, when he castled to this dimension, that he could breathe underwater and talk to the various ocean creatures that he met. After an hour in the water conversing with dolphins and whales and tropical fish, it was time to go home; back to the death bed.

Only Jack's Dad knew that he could travel to other dimensions and Jack was glad that he had someone to talk about it too.

"Hey Dad, I've been travelling", he said to his father, one day after dinner.

"*Travelling? What do you mean travelling?*"

"Venturing far and wide."

"Who with?"

"Just on my own. Via a chess board."

"Via a chess board. Whadda ya mean 'via a chess board'. You can't travel using a chess board.'"

"Yes you can. When I castle I go to other dimensions. It's fantastic. I would offer to take you with me, but I think these are trips I have to make solo."

The most treacherous land was the land of danger. It had snakes, bears, dragons, and Venus fly traps that ate humans. While Jack was walking along the dirt path a Venus fly trap tried to grab him but he turned it into a harmless rose petal and loads of skulls and bones full out. *Phew* he thought *that was a close one*. He decided to go home before any more bad things happened to him. Back to the death bed he thought grimly. He tapped one of the bones that had fallen out of the Venus fly trap against his thigh, and found himself back at home in his wheelchair.

The most joyful world was the land of good luck where there were always happy and merry people. There was happiness and laughter in the air you could just sense it. Here the people were all happy no matter what they had. Unlike the land of bad luck it was a land of joy and laughter.

The complete opposite of the land of good luck was the land of bad luck. It was a monstrous place with loads of horrific and terrifying things happening. There were tons of graveyards and dead people and everyone was sad and miserable. There were also heaps of people in poverty with no food and it was raining all the time. Jack didn't stay there that long because he couldn't bear to see such misery. There were many skeletons in this world; the skeletons of people who had died in nasty ways and their spirits hadn't crossed over to the other side properly. They were haunted people, hungry people and people who had died in distress. Jack didn't like to see so much suffering so he tried to make them happy, but they were tortured souls. He tried to cheer them up by doing magic tricks and clowning around. The weather in the land of bad luck was always thunderstorms and rain. Jack did a dance which was the opposite of a rain dance and the sun came out and shone, albeit a little weakly. The skeletons rose up and joined in the dance too and Jack was glad to have brought a little joy to this dull and bleak place.

Back in the real world, Jack's muscular dystrophy progressed. He grew weaker and more distressed with

each passing day. As he lay on his death bed, his father sat down to play a game of chess with him.

'Go on then son, choose. Which dimension will you pick as your final destination?'

Jack closed his eyes and thought of his idea of heaven. There would be fields of beautiful flowers, a sun that always shone and idyllic beaches. He castled and then he was there, transported to his imagined destination, his own heaven. Jack Davidson had earned his passport to paradise.

Marsha's Deal

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 knew that the Devil, like God, was omniscient, so she kept 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?"

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; Bettie, one of her fellow seamstresses and Lucille, her old friend from high school, both of them overwhelmed with quiet despair. 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. I just want a chance to pass on my DNA. I want to give birth to a baby."

"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.

"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 adieu," 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 a humble electrician, often out of work 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 Braggleswaite. And then the disease had set in.

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, and this time I don't want to be afflicted with Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva thank *you* very much. Please let me go back to earth to give birth."

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. 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."

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 reborn.

During her first life, 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 the thumbs up.

And so the relationship was born.

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 know 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.

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.

As her disease progressed, sewing became too difficult for Marsha and she said goodbye to Lucinda and the factory, gave up her job and stayed at home during the day, casually attending to the housework and preparing meals. This led to depression and she began drinking during the day, gin and tonics mostly, which led to further depression until she took to her bed and wouldn't budge from it except for to pour herself another drink. Don was aware of the

situation, but wasn't quite sure what to do about it. Up until this point in time Marsha had been a soldier. Fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva had been her battleground. Don took on the role that he had known, when they first met, he might have to take – that of caregiver. He brought Marsha meals in bed, which she simply picked at. Her jaws had begun to fuse together. He tried to talk her into getting up, into facing the world. She had become too afraid of damaging herself, of further ossification. The bed was a safe place, she reasoned, a cocoon, a haven. A place where no injuries could occur. Don knew she was on a slippery, downwards, agoraphobic slope. He tried to coax her out of her budding alcoholic hiding place but she would not be budged. She took to ordering bottles of gin and tonic online, the empty bottles building up besides the bed.

Two of her friends from the factory visited. They came together, Doris Heywater and Patricia Halwell; they came bearing flowers and a basket of fruit. Ignoring the empty gin bottles, they sat down together on the end of Marsha's bed and kept talking to her until she emerged from beneath the duvet. She looked a fright; her hair was matted and unkempt and hadn't been washed in two weeks. She was in her nightie. Doris and Patricia did not care. They did not mind, they simply talked on, figuring that their stream of chatter would help to lift Marsha out of the doldrums. It worked. Marsha emerged from her squalor and said "Right then, that's enough of that. I'm sick of wallowing." She picked herself up, dusted herself off, had a shower and with the help of Doris, dressed in some of her best clothes and the three women went out to lunch at a nearby café.

Marsha grew increasingly frail and progressively trapped in bone. Don became Marsha's caregiver. He took on the role willingly and did not act begrudgingly towards her. Marsha became more unstable and unsteady on her feet and falls became increasingly common which led to further damage and bone growth. It was a vicious cycle she was trapped in. However, she continued to face the world with bravery and did not take to her bed or the bottle again. Marsha couldn't cook or clean anymore, but she read a lot; from Byron to Bronte, from Bukowski to Barnes, she took to devouring books with a vengeance and Don was glad that she was still improving her mind as her body quickly deteriorated. Her friends from the factory proved themselves to be true and visited her once a week, often bringing home baking or flowers to cheer her up. If it was not for this, hers would have been an isolated, solitary existence, shut away from the world and locked up in bone, her face turned away from the sun, inclined towards the pages of a book. She was losing herself in literature. Like many before her, she was seeking solace in words when the world, and her own body, had let her down so badly.

Marsha did not want to be a burden to Don. She went online and filled out the forms to suicide at Dignitas. The contract was signed. She telephoned her sister to advise her of her plans and to ask her for money. She bought her plane ticket to Switzerland. She kept her date with Nembutal, she kept her date with death.

Marsha was reborn in the maternity ward at St Helens hospital, right on time. Like most babies, she came screaming into the world. Soon the infant was being cradled, wrapped in a white blanket, by her mother. Isobel bent down and, kissing the tiny nose, swore to the child that no matter what the future held they would face it together. It was not uncommon in those days that the men folk would be asked to wait outside until all the business was finished. Therefore, it was with some trepidation that husband Aaron entered the room. He quickly and quietly hugged both mother and child, the relief written all over his face. In a few days, they would all go home and take those few tentative steps into what would become their family life together.

Like all new mothers, Isobel often wondered if she was doing the right thing whenever Marsha became ill. The local Plunket assured her that she was doing just fine and that Marsha was developing nicely and meeting those milestones that are typical of a normal child. By eight months Marsha was beginning to attempt to crawl and soon after this she started to walk. It was also safe to report that Marsha was quite the chatterbox and seemed to be able to pick up new words and phrases at a reasonable pace. Getting her to stop talking was proving to be a challenge.

Aaron and Isobel were delighted and proud that they had such a perfect child as Marsha proved to be. They ran a small grocery store just outside of the town's main thoroughfare and were very busy, but they somehow

managed to juggle childcare arrangements so that Marsha was well looked after. As parents, they soon realised that the good behaviour and fine manners of their daughter would reflect well on them. Marsha made friends easily and seemed such a caring person. There were the inevitable tantrums that childhood brings but thankfully these were few and far between.

As Marsha grew she was soon ready to attend school, a daunting experience for any parent let alone the child. Isobel was aware that her daughter would now come under the influence of others and could only hope that Marsha's good common sense would prevail. This proved to be the case for all through primary school Marsha thrived and soaked up the knowledge departed.

It was only when entering high school that Marsha's temperament began to break down as a result of being bullied, cajoled and told that she was useless almost every day by a group of older students. When Isobel became aware of what was going on at school she tried in vain to protect her daughter. However, the damage was done and there were days in which Marsha would visibly shrink a few inches and disappear to her room. It was during those periods of solitude and quiet contemplation that Marsha vowed that no-one would ever do that to her daughter and get away with it. She wanted her child to leave school as soon as she could and did not care about the consequences of having little or no qualifications.

Marsha left school at fifteen and managed to get a job in the local bakery. She could be found at all hours of the day

and night, making her way home, stumbling, and covered in so much flour that she looked like a ghost. It wasn't much of a job and the money was nothing to write home about, but at least it wasn't school. The job also granted her a measure of independence – it was good to have some money coming in. The thought of payday kept her going all week.

Marsha remembered her past life (and meeting the Devil) only in dreams and nightmares. She would often dream that she was cast in stone, and she would awake from these nightmares feverish and sweating. The Devil would appear to her too, swinging his tail and flexing his pointy horns, and these horrors would leave her feeling frightened and cowed for the rest of the next day and sometimes for the remainder of the week. She had no idea that these were memories of her past life lingering in her unconscious mind; she simply knew that she dreamed and she often remembered what her dreams were about when she awoke.

Perhaps some things in life are meant to be. Free will versus fate. Who really has the answer to that one?

In her second life, during her second time around, Marsha was walking home from work, covered lightly in flour, when she stopped into the Post Office to post a letter. As she walked towards the letterbox, she bumped into a gentleman in a long grey coat and dropped her letter. She

bent down to pick it up but he beat her to it, taking the white envelope in his hand and pressing it gently into hers. Their eyes locked – freeze frame. He extended his hand.

“Please”, he said. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Don. Don the picker-upper of letters.”

Marsha laughed. She walked the few steps to the letterbox, posted the letter, then turned around and looked at Don again.

“Fancy a cup of coffee?” asked Don, summoning his courage.

“Sure, why not?”

Marsha reached up and brushed some flour off her cheek.

Marsha followed Don the short distance to Harrelson’s café. Marsha ordered a cappuccino and Don ordered a flat white. They sat opposite each other at the table, sipping their coffees. For a good five minutes neither spoke, they simply sat staring at one another, mildly smitten, though each had only just made the other’s acquaintance.

Something was in the air. They were two like two trains on a single track, destined to meet at some romantic junction. Marsha was only eighteen and Don twenty-three; a huge age gap at that time in their lives. She was not so world wise as he and, she thought, that this could only benefit her. It was not long before they both felt ready to commit to a more settled existence and they married. A mere ten months later Marsha gave birth to a little girl. They named her Ingrid after Marsha’s great-grandmother. Don

commented at the time Ingrid was first introduced to him, "By God she's just like you Marsha".

The parachute jump was a wedding anniversary gift to celebrate two years of marriage. After a day of training, Marsha booked in for the jump on Wednesday the 9th of March 2015. The day dawned fine and clear and Marsha set out from home with a spring in her step. She had no real worries, no real cares. She was twenty-three; she was full of the joys of life. She loved her parents and her husband. She was about to fall from the sky.

She walked into the reception area and handed across her ticket, then made her way to the aircraft hanger where she greeted several men.

"Hello," she said. "I'm here for a solo jump. Without a static line please."

"Right you are."

One of the men handed Marsha her parachute and showed her how to put it on. Butterflies danced in her stomach. She took a deep breath. She boarded the plane.

The plane flew high into the clear blue sky. When they reached 12,000 feet the plane levelled off. Marsha did as her training had taught her to do and walked to the door of the plane, looking out rather than down to combat vertigo. She tucked her feet beneath the plane and launched herself out into empty space. As instructed, she allowed herself to fall for the requisite sixty seconds, before reaching for the cord of the parachute. The parachute had not been packed correctly and the chute failed to open. Marsha fell and kept

falling. She hit the ground, her neck snapped and she was killed instantly. The Devil had come to collect.



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She has been short-listed in Bridport, Edwin Morgan, Ware Poets, Willesden Herald, Mere Literary Festival, and Essex Poetry Festival competitions.

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Her play 'The Dummy Bride' was part of the 1996 Wellington Fringe Festival and her play 'Sprout' was part of the 2005 Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

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