

In The Club

“You *can't* do that here!”

“I’m so sorry.” The woman pushed a strand of hair away from her face with the back of her wrist but didn’t look up.

“We do have a bathroom.” Marilyn held out an arm to indicate where it could be found. The woman sighed and did turn her head this time.

“Not a bathroom with enough room for us, I’m afraid. There isn’t even a table. I don’t know if you’ve ever tried it.”

“Certainly not.”

The woman turned back to her task like she’d proved a point. But this just wasn’t on and it was Marilyn’s duty to make it stop.

“This is a restaurant and people have to eat off that table. Please, you must move.”

“I really am very sorry, you can’t always predict these things ...” and she trailed off with a breathless little laugh, her hands still working. At that point, the baby began to cry, a reedy wail which reminded Marilyn of those very thin children with big stomachs and flies round their eyes you see on the television. How old was it? And where was its mother?

“It’s all right my darling, nearly done. We’ll have you all clean and fresh and lovely in no time, won’t we? Yes we will ...” The woman carried on talking to the baby in a sing-song voice, repeating words and phrases, looking directly into its eyes as she stuck tabs into place, put the pudgy little feet back into the cotton suit and did up the row of poppers. My god, this woman *was* its mother. Or purported to be. Marilyn moved closer to the table.

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“Madam, I understand ...” but as she spoke the woman scooped the baby up, tucked it under her chin and looked directly at Marilyn over its shoulder. She was still smiling, tiny lines radiating from the corners of her eyes, her jaw soft. She must be about Marilyn’s age.

“No, I don’t think you do ... but it’s all right, we’ve finished now. Haven’t we, my precious?” and she twisted her head round, leaning back to look into the baby’s face. Its brown head wobbled on its neck, its skin dark against her pale cheek.

“Can I get you anything else or would you like your bill?”

“Oh, I’m not leaving. I’m waiting for my friend. I’d like another cappuccino, please.” With the baby still clasped to her chest, the woman dipped her knees and put the balled up nappy into the big, colourful bag at her feet. “I’ll just go and wash my hands.”

Marilyn let out the breath she’d been holding.

“Of course.”

While Lettie made the coffee, Marilyn peered out through the crack in the double doors of the kitchen. The baby was in one of those carry buckets now, but still on the table. As she watched, another woman with a similar bucket came into the café and headed towards them. She was the same sort – a rounded body in a flowery, baggy dress and big cardigan, her red hair escaping from a plastic clip. The two women hugged, then peered into each other’s buckets with raised eyebrows and open-mouthed grins, wagging their heads from side to side and making high-pitched cooing noises.

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Lettie was waddling towards her with the cappuccino, foam spilling down the sides of the white cup. Marilyn frowned at her. "Get a cloth ..." then, exasperated by the look of exhausted incomprehension on the girl's face, she stalked off to get it herself. When the cappuccino was presentable, Marilyn took it out and put it down on the table. Neither woman took much notice, they were too deep in conversation.

"Can you believe it? I took all his clothes off and still he didn't wake up!"

"Yes, and when you want them to sleep, they're wide awake if you drop a tea towel."

They leaned back from each other, laughing and gently rocking their buckets. One of the babies was playing with its fingers, its eyes crossed in concentration. Marilyn hovered until the new woman finally looked at her.

"Just rooibos for me, please."

The first woman put her head on one side.

"I think it's wonderful you're breast feeding. I tried so hard. I took the tablets and everything but I couldn't make it work."

Marilyn hurried away to get the tea.

For the next few months, they came in every Wednesday afternoon, talking and laughing together, sometimes holding the babies in the crooks of their arms, swapping the children between them. Marilyn christened one of the women 'mouse hair' and the other 'red hair'. It was the only way she could tell them apart, with their identical wide, soft bodies and their matching, chocolate-coloured children. Why could some people not just accept that there was a good reason they had not been granted a natural child of their

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own? Women these days seemed to think they deserved everything. 'My right as a woman' isn't that what they were always saying? Why couldn't they learn to accept things as they are, as they were meant to be? As other people had had to? As she had done?

Marilyn made a point of getting Lettie to serve them. Might as well get the most out of her before she disappeared off who knows where. She watched through the crack in the door as they smiled at Lettie and asked her how she was. How long to go? And Lettie, she saw, always smiled back and answered their questions. Sometimes shyly asking one or two of her own, looking into the buckets herself. Marilyn could never hear what they were saying but she could see it made the women puff up with pride and self-satisfaction as they shared their precious knowledge, all of three of them part of that club.

Although the women weren't, were they? Not really.

Wednesdays were Marilyn's day to close up. The owner spent the afternoon watching her teenagers play sport or, if they weren't rushing about some field or other, taking them to another coffee shop. The kitchen girls were always desperate to get out of the door, especially since Lettie had gone and they were even more rushed off their feet and hard done by. So this Wednesday Marilyn was alone, as usual, as she stacked the menus under the counter, made sure the cream cakes were sealed in the refrigerator and turned off the cappuccino machine. It was nearly dark outside and occasionally she caught sight of her reflection in the plate glass windows, looking quickly away when she did so. She was thinking about whether she should stay out for a while,

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perhaps go along to the mall and see a movie before she went home. There was the new James Bond that people had been saying was good.

As she was putting the last of the cups and saucers in the cupboard at the back of the shop, she thought she heard something. She kept quiet and listened. It was a snuffling, like a small animal was loose somewhere and trying to find a corner to hide in. She followed the noise to the back of the café and discovered that the door to the ladies had been propped open.

Two steps inside, she stopped dead in her tracks. There it was, in its bucket in the centre of the floor, its fist jammed in its mouth, making little sucking and sighing noises. A bag was beside it. The big, round eyes rolled towards her, the irises dark against the bright whites. Its plump cheeks were wet with saliva. It was younger even than 'mouse hair's' and 'red hair's' babies had been when they first started coming in. What on earth was it doing here? And, more to the point, what was she going to do about it? The baby carried on looking at her while she considered her options. She began to formulate a simple plan. She would just creep quietly backwards and lock up as normal. After all, it had hardly made any sound, so she could easily have missed it. No one would ever blame her. They would blame the wretched, so-called mother.

But the baby had other ideas. As soon as Marilyn took her first step backwards, it started to cry. It didn't take time to get going, it just let rip, screwing up its face and waving its arms and legs, heaving in great breaths so that it could belt forth the next yell even more loudly. There was no sign that it

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would stop of its own accord and Marilyn realised that she was going to have to do something more than just leave. She would have to contact someone although she had no idea who. Perhaps she should call the owner. Yes, that's what she would do. She turned to go back into the shop but, as she did so, the child's cries grew even louder and more frantic. She was going to have to take it with her.

She walked towards it over the rough, blue carpet. As she got closer, she was hit by the stench that was coming off it and nearly gagged. How long had it been there, for God's sake? Keeping her head as far away as she could, she reached for the handle of the bucket, picked up the bag with her other hand and went back out into the café. The baby was getting more and more hysterical and, as it twisted its body from side to side, she caught a glimpse of the wet, brown stain working its way up the back of its yellow cotton suit.

Outside she put the bucket on one of the tables and the bag on the floor and went off to make the call. But the room was ringing with the baby's cries so that she couldn't think, she could hardly even breathe. She looked back at it. Tears were running down the sides of its cheeks, its eyes wide and pleading, it's small, square body shuddering with the effort. For a few seconds she was motionless, halfway between the phone and the screaming child. Perhaps if it were clean it would quieten down. Her stomach turned. Not that, please. But the noise drove any other possibilities from her head and she couldn't see a choice. She went over to the baby, undid the harness of the bucket, put her

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hands under its armpits and lifted. Its legs dangled and, for a second, it was shocked into silence. Then it started again.

Sticking out of the top of the nappy bag was a rolled-up changing mat. There was nothing for it. She propped the child against her shoulder, placing one forearm behind its legs. Leaning backwards slightly to keep it there, she hauled the bag onto the table and fished around for the mat with her other hand. The baby's firm little forehead hit her neck and for a moment it hiccupped into silence before continuing, tiring a bit now, its face wet against her skin. With the mat in her hand, Marilyn looked around for a second and then unrolled it onto the top of the table. She lay the baby down, putting her hand behind its head so it didn't fall back and hit the wood. After a couple of seconds, she began to undo the poppers of the suit. For a moment, the baby's curiosity overcame its misery and it looked directly into her eyes. "There we are." It was hardly more than a breath.

Because she was looking down at the baby, she didn't see the tiny movement the other side of the glass as Lettie turned from the brightness of the window and walked quickly away down the dark, quiet street.