

Martha and Jonno

She'd always been a difficult child and, although her mother and father had accepted that all babies were demanding of their parents' attention, Martha appeared to take her self-absorption to a different level. From the moment they carried her back from the hospital and placed her in the Moses basket – a family heirloom, handed down through two generations of Bradys – she had made it abundantly clear that she, and she only, was the one in charge. This, two days after the occasion of her birth, was the start, not just of a new millennium, but of a new era – an era in which she, baby Martha, was to reign, and reign absolutely.

And so it went: constant night-time calls for her mother's milk; screamed demands to be picked up and cuddled; and then, as the years passed and she found her feet, an obstinate refusal to share and play with her many toys (most of which were rapidly discarded) and the aggressive rejection of potential playmates, all of whom knew, with little shadow of doubt, that they had met their match.

In short, she had become an insufferable (and in truth, unlovable) spoiled brat.

One late December morning, in the month Martha turned five, her mother knocked gently, then edged into her bedroom. Her father lagged behind. 'Martha, darling,' she said quietly, 'we've something exciting to tell you. It's a surprise!' Martha sat up in bed and scowled. She didn't like surprises. Her mother turned to her father who ran a finger under his collar before speaking. 'It's a Christmas surprise, darling!' He looked nervously at his wife and felt a sharp elbow digging into his ribs. 'You're going to have a very special Christmas present!' Martha sat up straighter and cocked her head. 'Santa's going to bring you...a baby brother!'

What happened next is almost beyond the powers of the writer to describe. (Martha, it goes without saying, had not seen this eventuality coming, and her mother's swelling belly, if she had noticed it at all, would have engendered little or no interest in the girl). First, the air was riven by the loudest, most high-pitched shriek that the Brady household had ever heard. Next, things started to fly – a teddy, her pillows, a beaker of water, Barbie, and a book. As they covered outside, several other unidentified objects clattered the door. 'I don't think she's happy,' her mother said, glumly.

It was the middle of January when they started to worry about Jonathon, Martha's new brother. Most of the time, his eyes drifted, went cross-eyed ('normal in newborns' they were told), failed to focus ('normal') and didn't seem to respond to brightly coloured toys or sudden movements – 'give it time, Mr and Mrs Brady. Babies hit their milestones at different times. All babies are different...'

Looking back, it was obvious: Baby Jonathon was blind; his huge eyes bright, and blue - but unseeing. And for Martha, this newcomer wasn't the playmate her parents had prayed for, depriving her of the attention she craved.

Then, one day, when Martha was ten, her mother beckoned to her husband to follow her. Together, they tiptoed to the back of the house, to the playroom, where the children were playing. Her mother put her finger to her lips, and they both peered around the door.

'You see, Jonno, if I wear a mask, we're the same, and that makes it fair.'

Martha was standing, her arms outstretched, a make-do blindfold covering her eyes. Her brother stood at the far end of the room, arms also outstretched, a huge grin on his face.

'You go first and try to catch *me*. Then it'll be my turn.'

Slowly, Jonathon started to move, his ears finely attuned to the slightest of sounds. Martha, edged this way, then that, straining to locate her tiny pursuer. Eventually, it was her giggle that gave her away as her brother wrapped his arms around her knees. Then she hugged him, and they fell to the floor, laughing uncontrollably.

This was the first of many such occasions; most, but not all, of which went unseen by their parents. Slowly, and over the ensuing years, the worries they had for their children started to subside, each now progressing, in their very different ways, through the harsh realities of the world outside the confines of their family home. And as childhood turned into adulthood, their friendship grew stronger and closer with every passing year...

When the funeral was over, when all their mother's friends and surviving relations had gone, they sat alone in their favourite café. In the background a 24-hour news reel was playing quietly (something about King William's visit to Bhutan, his remaining Commonwealth country) and outside, dog-walkers and young lovers were enjoying the gentle warmth of a fine spring day. Jonathon reached over and took hold of his sister's hand.

'Now that it's just the two of us, I want to say something - something that should have been said a long, long, time ago. I want to say *thank you*. *Thank you* for giving me this,' - he pointed first to his left eye, then to his right- 'the gift of sight. Surely, the greatest gift any sister could give their little brother.'

Martha smiled and patted his hand in return.

'Honestly, it was nothing, Jonno. And what did I lose? A few hundred stem cells? A morning off work? But what *you* gave *me* was the understanding of what it is to love, to care, and the chance to think of someone other than myself. Could you have given *me* a more precious gift?'

They sat a moment, letting the question hang, until Jonathon broke the silence, stood, and took Martha's arm.

'Right, Sis, it looks like we've both come out as winners. Mum and Dad would have been proud of us.'

Then, they made for the door, waved their goodbyes to the baristas, and walked, arm in arm, into the bright, April sunshine.