

LITTLE MARVEL

‘I’m sorry, girls, I’ve finally lost patience. You’re meant to be civilised young ladies, not a herd of pigs wallowing in the swill.’

A nervous titter escaped from Sally-Anne. She tried to suppress it – too late.

‘So you think it’s *funny*, do you, Sally-Anne?’

‘No, Miss Bates.’

‘And do the *rest* of you think it’s funny?’

‘No, Miss Bates,’ they chorused dutifully, Dolores loudest of all. She had found little to amuse her in her eight years of life to date.

‘Well, that’s a blessing, I suppose.’ Miss Bates paused to blow her thin, arched nose – red and slightly swollen from a cold. ‘But since you all seem hell-bent on shovelling in your food like little savages, it’s time you were taught a lesson. What I want you to do now is to eat your peas one at a time, which I hope will slow you down.’

A gasp went up from the assembled girls; even a muffled cry: ‘Oh, *no!*’

‘Oh, *yes!*’ Miss Bates retorted. ‘Just one pea on the fork. And, Amanda – I’ve told you already – you’re meant to hold your fork the *other* way up, with the tines pointing down towards the food.’

‘What’s tines, Miss Bates?’

‘Never mind. You ask too many questions, child. Now, is everybody listening?’ Her sharp grey eyes swivelled round the refectory, corralling every girl on every table. ‘Good. That’s the first part of the exercise. The second part is equally important. You are to chew every pea fifty times before you swallow it. Have I made myself clear? Fifty times each pea. *That* should stop you guzzling.’

This new command was greeted with shocked silence, Dolores in particular feeling a surge of deep unease. How could you chew one tiny pea fifty times? Wouldn't it slip down on its own accord after only a couple of bites? And she and all the other girls had been given extra large portions, to compensate for the minuscule ration of meat, and for the fact that Cook had burned the potatoes that morning, chucked them in the waste-bin and refused to peel a second batch.

Staring down at her own substantial pile, she tried to count each individual pea, before giving up in despair as she reached a hundred and four. She detested peas in the first place, especially these particular ones, which were overcooked and shrivelled, some with splitting skins. She imagined them filling up her stomach, until there was no room for her heart or lungs and all the other squashy things people had inside them. And she hardly dared imagine what might happen the other end. Would they rattle into the toilet bowl in a torrent of green rabbit-shit?

'Slow *down*, Theresa! What did I just say?'

'Eat the peas one at a time, and chew each one fifty times. But that's *impossible*, Miss Bates. No would could ever do it, not even Superman.'

'I grant it isn't easy, but that's the whole point of the exercise, The trouble with you girls is that you're all far too impatient.'

Forking in her first pea, Dolores began anxiously to chew, but it was ready to be swallowed almost straight away. She would simply have to pretend to go on chewing, even though her mouth was empty. She made exaggerated movements with her jaw, aware that Miss Bates was patrolling the refectory, alert to any slackers.

'*Theresa!* How many more times do I have to tell you to stop gobbling like a turkey-cock? I don't know why I waste my breath when you ignore every word I say.'

'But I'm hungry, Miss Bates.'

‘Hunger’s got nothing to do with it. Suppose you had to live through a famine, like your Irish ancestors?’

Dolores closed her ears to the ensuing argument. The worst thing about school was that you could never be alone; swarms and shoals of girls always pressing in on every side. It was bad enough at home, where, as the youngest of eight children, there was never space enough to stretch or sprawl, nor peace enough to hear the sigh of lazy clouds idling their slow way across the sky, or the tiny squeaks of slugs and snails munching on a dandelion. Indeed, with seven brothers and sisters rampaging round the garden, most small creatures – including her - were trampled underfoot. When people mentioned Heaven, she imagined it as a vast expanse of shining space she didn’t have to share (as she was forced to share her bed and even bath). It would be hers, and hers alone, with no angels, no dead bodies, not even any God. From what she’d heard of God, she knew she wouldn’t like Him. He sounded very stern – a tyrant like Miss Bates, constantly thinking up beastly, senseless punishments.

Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen ... She had actually managed to chew a pea fourteen times before it vanished down her throat. That was an improvement, although she had to fake the remaining thirty-six chews as Miss Bates glanced her way. Her jaws were beginning to ache, yet she had eaten only seven peas so far, and the pile on her plate appeared to be getting larger. Worse, the peas were shifting slightly, as if they might erupt in a pea-earthquake. Last week, she’d seen an earthquake on the News: bloody bodies everywhere and houses collapsing into dust.

Theresa suddenly nudged her in the ribs. ‘Pea-Eyes!’ she taunted. ‘Pea-Eyes!’

Dolores flushed. Her green eyes were a source of constant gibes. She’d been called an alien, a Martian, a pussy cat, a frog, but Pea-Eyes was a new one. The thought of a loathsome pea wedged in each of her eye-sockets made her feel quite panicky. Frantically she rubbed her eyes, to dislodge the green intruders, only to stop herself in horror. Without eyes, she’d be

totally blind - unable to see the blackboard or read her favourite books. Could she put her eyes on strings, perhaps, like those tiny tots whose gloves were sewn to their coat-sleeves on pieces of elastic? While continuing to chew, she did a little business with an imaginary needle and thread, until her round pea-eyes were bobbing up and down in front of her face on lengths of black elastic.

‘Dolores, why do you keep rubbing your eyes? Are you developing a sty?’

‘No, Miss Bates.’

‘Well, what’s the trouble then?’

‘Nothing,’ she muttered.

‘Nothing, *what?*’

‘Nothing, Miss Bates.’ She forked in another pea. Although ten were gone, several hundred were left. They were definitely increasing. For every one she swallowed, another dozen sprang on to her plate. Things like that kept happening – things beyond all rational explanation; things that made you worry that God was breaking the Rules, deliberately and cruelly.

‘Miss Bates?’ a voice piped up.

‘Yes, what it is, Hannah?’

‘We have Games at half past one and it’s twenty past already. If we have to chew every pea fifty times, we’ll miss it.’

‘I’m well aware of the time, Hannah. Perhaps you should have thought about missing Games at the *beginning* of the lunch break rather than the end. I could see you girls were spoiling for a fight the minute you sat down, so now I’m afraid you’ll have to take the consequences.’

Dolores let the muffled groans wash over her, along with a further scolding from Miss Bates. She was trying to work out just how long they might be imprisoned in the refectory. It

wasn't only Games they'd miss, but all the afternoon lessons (including her favourite, Art), then home-time and bedtime and getting-up-in-the-morning-time. In fact, maybe the entire rest of their lives they would be sitting here chewing peas, one by one

one by one

one by one

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'Do sit down, Dolores. *May* I call you Dolores?'

'Please do.' She had always been embarrassed by her name, which meant 'sorrowful' in Spanish. Why her parents should have given her a Spanish name was something of a mystery, since they were robustly English and suspicious of most foreigners. As for 'sorrowful', she could only guess that an eighth child (and a sixth girl at that) could well have been a burden rather than a blessing.

'And do call me Willow.'

The name suited its frail owner, a slender, floaty sort of female, with a breathy voice and long rippling hair, who looked as if she might break in half, given a strong breeze.

'Well, what can I do to help?' she asked, seating herself on a floor-cushion and draping her billowy caftan over thin, frail, freckled legs.

Dolores hesitated, wondering where to start. Over the last few years, she had developed several *new* fears, including cnidophobia, but all of them were related to her

underlying pea phobia, which had become increasingly disabling. ‘I ... I’m frightened of peas,’ she blurted out, at last

Willow nodded kindly, giving no indication of surprise. Presumably she had heard it all before in her role as therapist. Or *alternative* therapist, as she was listed in the Yellow Pages. Dolores had warmed to that word ‘alternative’. In ordinary life there were all too few alternatives. ‘Oh, I know it sounds peculiar, or even downright mad. How could anyone be terrified of small, harmless thing like peas? But they’re *not* harmless – not to me. In fact, there’s hardly a place I can go now without a sense of danger. All supermarkets and general stores are out of bounds, of course, along with pubs and restaurants, but I also feel quite jittery in ordinary people’s homes. I mean, they’re almost certain to have peas in the freezer or tinned peas in the larder.’ She was reasonably safe with Willow, who saw her clients in the Natural Healing Centre, which didn’t have a café, and not in her own house. (One of the reasons she’d chosen her, in preference to the other names.) ‘I think I may have picked up the fear from my mother. She was always terribly anxious and -’

‘Just a moment, Dolores,’ Willow interrupted. ‘I’m not a conventional psychotherapist – I do hope you realize that. I don’t examine people’s childhood or delve into their past.’

‘Oh,’ she said, nonplussed. Her childhood was surely relevant, if only in view of the fact that the average number of peas in a pod was eight. When she was growing up in a tiny terraced house, there was just that sense of being squeezed and jostled in a claustrophobic pod, as she and her siblings swelled towards maturity, fighting for breathing space. Though it could have been worse, of course. Some varieties of pea boasted eleven or even twelve peas to the pod. And others were triple-podded, the very thought of which made her feel quite faint.

‘Perhaps I should tell you a little about my credentials.’ Willow leaned forward eagerly, in danger of overbalancing on the large squashy purple cushion. ‘I’ve trained in

several different disciplines, including Reiki and Shiatsu, but now I practise mainly Chinese Medicine.’

Dolores tried to hide her disappointment. Why on earth Chinese, when she and Willow were both living in Crouch End? Her parents had always distrusted China; her father muttering darkly about the dangers of a Yellow Peril. Nor, for that matter would he have approved of this consulting-room. There were no proper chairs (she herself was sitting on a pouffe-thing), the walls were painted insolent orange, and the only decoration was a large statue of a seated Buddha, who looked worryingly obese.

‘Which means I’d treat your fear in general, rather than concentrating on one specific phobia. You see, extreme amounts of fear often indicate a deficiency of kidney energy.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with my kidneys. My physical health is OK – well, OK-ish, I should say.’

‘It’s not the kidneys themselves, Dolores, it’s your kidney *Qi*.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘*Qi* is energy – the basic life force, you could call it. Everything in the universe has *Qi*.’

‘Do *peas* have it?’

Willow appeared to ignore the question, continuing serenely, ‘It flows around the body through channels or meridians.’

Like fear itself, thought Dolores, instantly alarmed. Things with foreign names were always best avoided.

‘The kidneys are the root of all energy in the body. So if a patient’s kidney *Qi* is low, they can experience anxiety, or even full-blown panic. But, of course, in order to make a proper diagnosis, I’ll need to take a case history.’

Dolores felt increasingly uneasy. Not only were they were going far too fast, but Willow was now staring at her intently, which was surely impolite. ‘What are you looking at?’ she demanded, blinking nervously.

‘Your eyes.’

‘Yes, I *know* they’re green, but I can’t help that. It’s a family trait. All my – ‘

‘It’s not your eye-colour I’m interested in, but the colour of the skin just below your eyes, which can reveal problems or deficiencies. A blackish tinge may indicate a kidney problem.’

‘*Blackish?*’ Dolores put her hand up to her face. She had extremely fair and fragile skin – the sort that never tanned. Not that she would ever dream of braving the dangers of the sun.

‘First I need to establish whether you have a kidney-yang deficiency or a kidney-yin deficiency. Do you tend to feel the cold, or are you always opening windows and complaining that it’s too hot?’

‘I *never* open windows.’ The risks were far too great. Wasps or bugs or sparrows might fly in on a whim, or pollutants waft their perilous way inside. ‘And I’m always cold. Instead of getting *undressed* at night, I put on several sweaters and two pairs of woolly tights, just to keep warm in bed.’

‘In that case, I’d suggest a change of diet. Make sure you eat warming foods like cinnamon bark and cloves, fenugreek seeds, quinoa, star anise ...’

Apart from the cloves, she had never heard of any of them. And they all sounded most peculiar, not to mention foreign again. Although she did like the word ‘star anise’. Perhaps she should change her name to Star Anise, which had a certain ring to it, and was definitely an improvement on Dolores. She tried it out under her breath, only to realise to her horror that it rhymed with peas.

‘Lobsters can be helpful, too.’

‘*Lobsters?*’

‘Yes. They’re very warming as a food.’

No way would she eat lobster. Any food with eyes or claws was totally taboo. Not to mention the expense. She’d had to pawn her watch just to pay for this appointment.

‘Before you leave, I’ll supply you with a diet-sheet, but I need to ask you a few more questions first. Do you suffer from weak legs or painful knees?’

‘Both,’ she said, her mind switching back to peas again. *They* had weak stems but, whatever their fragility, there was instant help to hand, in the shape of sturdy pea-sticks or supportive trellising. You could be jealous of a pea even while you feared it.

‘And do you tend to feel tired or lacking in vitality?’

‘Yes, constantly.’ Fear was a full-time job, depleting all her energies.

‘And do you find you have to get up in the night – you know, to go to the bathroom?’

‘I’m up half the night in any case. I have these frightful dreams, you see.’ The nightmares featured peas, of course – peas at their malevolent worst. However, she ought to count her blessings. At least she didn’t have clinophobia - the fear of going to bed at all – which caused many unfortunate sufferers to lose their partners, health and jobs.

‘Well, I’m beginning to get the picture, Dolores, and it’s definitely adding up to some sort of kidney deficiency. But I’d like to take your pulses, including the kidney pulse, and also have a look at your tongue. So if you lie down on the couch ...’

Dolores tensed. She hated lying down. A prone position made one much more vulnerable.

‘Then, subject to my diagnosis, I’ll do some acupuncture, to tonify and warm the kidney energy.’

‘Acupuncture?’ She sprang up from the pouffe. ‘You mean *needles?*’

‘Don’t worry – they’re extremely fine, barely thicker than a human hair. You’ll hardly feel them going in, though you *will* feel some sensation once they begin to work. It may be a dull ache, or just a sort of tingling, or it could feel like a mild electric shock.’

Dolores turned on her heel and fled. There were only two things more frightening than peas – needles and electric shocks.

She stood hunched outside Safeways, staring up at the huge letters of its name, blazoned on the store-front. How could any store be ‘SAFE’, filled as it was with peas: frozen peas, canned peas, mushy peas, marrowfat peas, not to mention all the deceitful peas lurking in soups and stews and ready-meals? Yet Duncan, her new therapist (Cognitive Behaviourist), had set her a task as homework. She had actually to enter this shop, phobia or no, and stand for three full minutes beside the frozen peas, before leaving slowly and quietly, without giving way to panic.

She consulted her watch. Ten past four. She had been here since 1.30, trying to pluck up courage, flurries of snow falling on her flimsy anorak. Several times she had advanced towards the automatic doors, only to retreat again. Better to die of hypothermia than come face to face with the source of her most overwhelming fear.

‘Excuse me, madam,’ said a deep male voice. ‘I was wondering if you needed any help?’

She jumped. A tall man in a smart grey suit, with a Safeways nametag clipped to the lapel, had sidled up to her. One of the store-managers, no doubt, come to nab her as a shop-lifter.

‘No,’ she muttered. ‘I’m, er, just waiting for someone. Ah – here they are, at last!’ She smiled broadly at a total stranger: a kindly looking matron in a pink padded coat and woolly hat, who was just entering the store. ‘Hello, Sally-Anne!’ she cried, tagging in after the

woman, only to immediately dart out of sight along the fruit and vegetable aisle, before ‘Sally-Anne’ could accost her.

She stood trembling in front of a pile of clementines, struggling to compose herself. She must remember Duncan’s advice. ‘Ignore the panic. Accept the physical symptoms, but don’t give way to them. Fear can’t kill you, Dolores.’

There, of course, he was wrong. Just yesterday she had read a piece in the *Mail* about a young man dying of shock at London Zoo, because he’d ventured into the Invertebrates House in an attempt to cure his arachnophobia.

None the less, she had to complete this exercise, especially now she had surmounted the first hurdle of actually entering the shop. She had sold half her mother’s jewellery – the emerald brooch, the diamond ring – in order to pay for Duncan’s programme, so if she backed out halfway through, it would be like tossing precious stones away. (And she had already wasted large amounts of money on a Jungian and a Rogerian, following the fiasco with Willow.)

Still fighting for breath, she ventured down the aisle, looking neither to right nor left, in case she saw that dreaded word. Even ‘pears’ could induce the panic, or ‘peanuts’ or ‘pearl barley’, just because they shared three letters with the most terrifying food of all. And, as she approached the Frozen Foods section, she felt so overwrought, the floor appeared to be buckling under her feet, and the fluorescent ceiling-lights glaring down as ruthlessly as search-lamps.

Within minutes she was face to face with the huge, swollen sacks of peas. It was all she could do not to turn tail and run, but somehow she found the courage to follow Duncan’s orders: stand her ground and examine them. Their hideous green faces were pictured all over the packets, accompanied by such wicked untruths as ‘extra sweet and tender’. At least she didn’t have to touch the things – that was next week’s challenge – but just looking at them

brought on a pounding headache, as if metal hammer was smashing into her skull. It was the sheer numbers that appalled – thousands upon thousands of peas swarming in the photographs: peas actually reproducing as she watched.

She tried to get a grip on herself and note down all the details, as Duncan had instructed. ‘A rich source of folic acid,’ she spelt out. Yes, acid was the word. Peas by their very nature were sour, acerbic, spiteful. Their sweetness was just a façade, like those smarmy people who wooed you with false smiles, only to stab you in the back. Spinach was more honest. It didn’t even pretend to be benign. And Brussels sprouts made no attempt to disguise their innate bitterness. Though, in actual fact, she ate neither sprouts nor spinach any more – ate nothing green at all, nor anything with scales or shells, eyes or feet or tails. Her preferred foods were swedes and parsnips, which were solid and dependable, not to mention cheap. She had lost a lot of weight, of course, but that was a small price to pay for avoiding extremes of fear.

‘From field to frozen in just two hours.’

That she did believe. There’d been a programme on the radio about new blast-freezing techniques, which could reduce the temperature of a single pea to minus fifteen centigrade in less than sixty seconds. The process was clearly traumatic – the peas were subjected to blasts of freezing air at a very high velocity, which would make them even more neurotic than they were in their natural state. And neurosis bred maliciousness. She knew that from her own case. Easy to be kind and cheery when you weren’t assailed by continual panics, or forced to stay awake each night to avoid dread-inducing nightmares. And of course the more your fears increased, the more you feared fear itself, until you landed up with full-blown phobophobia.

Summoning her last dregs of courage, she made herself proceed, inch by terrifying inch, along the line of freezers, all crammed to the brim with peas: Birds Eye, Findus, Safeways’ own, Oaken Farm Organic – each more vile and threatening than its neighbour.

The names of the actual pea varieties weren't printed on the packets, but she knew them off by heart - boastful and deceitful names, forever sneaking through her mind, however hard she tried to block them out: Perfection, Maestro, Kelvedon Wonder, Sparkle, Pioneer. Worst was Little Marvel, comprising *two* lies in its name. How could anything with such monstrous power be classified as 'Little'?

Stomach churning, she stopped to read a recipe for Pea and Coriander Soup, featured on a so-called 'Bumper Pack'. The peas had first to be simmered with an onion and the herbs, then liquidized to a purée. She could actually see them whizzing through the mixer in a tidal wave of spitting green-hot fury, along with all the pests and grubs that pea plants seemed to attract: aphids, weevils, midges, thrips ... People claimed that peas were good for you, but they were in fact polluted; prey to vile diseases such as downy mildew, root rot, fusarium wilt, and leaf spot.

A surge of nausea was rising in her gorge. Clamping her hand to her throat, she careered along the aisle, desperate to remove herself from the source of the contagion; colliding in her frantic haste with trolleys, shoppers, children, prams, and only stopping in blind panic as she approached the canned vegetable section – *more* splenetic peas leering at her, mobbing her, trying to waylay her.

'No!' she screamed, veering towards the automatic doors, darting wildly through them, then running for dear life, away from peas

peas

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peas

peas ...

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She slumped on a bench in the park. The snow was heavier now, shrouding her in white, turning the trees to shadowy spectres, closing in around her. Her feet were freezing, her fingers numb, yet the cold was nothing compared with the ice-sharp grip of fear. Duncan was over and done with, like all the other therapists. His tasks were just too perilous for someone of her temperament, who might land up in a mental home if she pushed herself too far. Even getting to her own home posed a major obstacle, since it involved returning to the High Street and passing not just Safeways but Sainsburys and the Co-op, all of which sold peas. And there were at least four different cafés – Nick’s Diner offering chips and peas with every single item on the menu, and even the upmarket *Dominique’s* serving pea purée and *mangetouts*.

An ordeal like that was beyond her failing powers. She would have to stay here in the park – all night, if necessary. Dusk was already falling, the park about to close, but she could conceal herself in the bushes until the park-keeper had done his rounds and padlocked both the gates. It would be terrifying, of course, to spend twelve hours in eerie darkness, with only ghosts for company and the relentless snow laying cruel hands on her heart. And what about the morning? Would it be any easier *then* to face that hazardous stretch of the High Street? Or would she be confined to this small municipal park for the remainder of her life, living like a squirrel on odd scraps and mouldy crusts?

Well, if the alternative was death by peas, there wasn’t any choice.

She tried to raise her head to look around her, but even the smallest movement seemed physically impossible. Where *was* she? Everything was dark and quiet, although she knew she wasn’t alone. There was a sense of other presences, a feeling of being gently squeezed both sides.

Her thinking process had slowed to the faintest flicker, but she eventually began to wonder *who* she was – perhaps a more important question than ‘where’. But however long she

pondered, she couldn't seem to remember her name, apart from the vaguest recollection that it began with P. Or Pea, maybe. Certainly she had fallen into a vegetative state, in which the life force burned extremely low.

She *liked* the state. It was restful, very soothing. Never before had she felt so imperturbable, so blissfully inert. Nothing seemed to matter any more. True, she was rooted to the spot, but that, too, was a blessing. No more need to brave the shops or venture anywhere; no more threat from sunburn, thunder, crowds. She was exquisitely protected by an impregnable green envelope: windproof, rain-proof, fear-proof. In fact, fear was now impossible. Her mind was ticking over at such an elementary level, all exaggerated emotions were naturally suppressed. She couldn't fret or agonize because she possessed a pea-sized brain.

She let that fact sink in, although it seemed to take some time, Not that she was bothered. She had all the time in the world. There were no more pressures, no more colours, even. Everything was simple, everything was green. All she had to do was bask in her green pod in a state of blank acceptance: safe, and snug, and slow, and sweet – and completely free of worry for the first time in her life.

Slowly, very slowly, a phrase was creeping into consciousness, a phrase describing her new state. At first, it failed to register. The letters were hazy, the concept indistinct, but gradually, eventually and, with a faint twitch of low-key pleasure, she finally grasped the happy truth.

She had become a ... a ... a ...

Little Marvel.