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AMENDING MARGE

By PRISCILLA E PRATT

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*Amending
Marge*

A Novel

By the author of Cricket and Friends

Priscilla E. Pratt

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Excerpt from *The Charioteer of Delphi* by Caroline
Lawrence. (Roaring Brook Press, 2006)

1

Dory was in the kitchen playing with his colorful baby snake and talking to his mother as she prepared supper one day in late April. He poured the pencil-sized reptile from one hand to the other and frowned.

“It’s OUR fault when you come right down to it, Mom. It’s us. It’s MEN who make all the trouble in the world and mess everything up for everyone else. The women and girls are okay; they don’t do bad things like shoot kids in a classroom or cheat people out of billions of dollars in pizza schemes or pour water on guys to make them feel they are drowning or stuff like that. Men do those things. I don’t see why men are allowed to live when they grow up. They only get the world into trouble. They should all be in jail.”

Marge glanced at her son in alarm. No, he wasn't making a joke. His face was deadly serious. She wondered why this topic had come up all of a sudden. She put two potatoes in the microwave and pressed the buttons. She thought he was over that unfortunate experience.

“Dory, isn't that a little harsh? Not *all* men are bad. Your teacher Mr. Gaunt is a wonderful person and he wouldn't hurt a flea. You like him. And Mr. Johnson is very nice. Have you forgotten how he rescued you when you were wandering around Greenwich Village last year? I know you've met a few men who were just plain bad” (your father, for one, she thought but did not say) “and you will meet many more in your life. You mustn't let it get you down. There are certainly more good ones than bad ones. Here, have some cheese crackers, you must be starved. Supper will be ready in ten minutes. And it's a Ponzi scheme not pizza scheme.” She smiled.

“But the problem *is* men, Mom. Everybody knows that. Mr. Gaunt talks about men in history class who did this and that and it's all bad. Mrs. Dorkley says so too. Mrs. Dorkley told me her husband saw some terrible things when he was in the police force. Women who had been all beaten up and stuff like that.”

AMENDING MARGE

Mrs. Dorkley was their next door neighbor, a little gray-haired woman many years widowed, who spent hours working in her garden with her two cats, Ming and Morty. The rotten fence between the two properties had fallen down the summer before and nobody seemed interested in putting up a new one. Dory had gotten to know her and now had the run of her property. He loved to visit her as there were always cookies on the kitchen counter of her little house and stories to listen to and things to quibble about. Dory was always quoting his new friend.

“Mrs. Dorkley, yes, I see, she *would* find men difficult,” said Marge, half to herself. “Oh dear.” The little snake had slipped through Dory’s fingers and was now wriggling on the floor. He stooped to pick it up. Poor Snarky, thought Marge. Would he survive to adult snake-hood, this tiny offspring of her son’s former pet, Marilyn the Mexican milk snake? Dory was often preoccupied these days and tended to drop things. He was always losing things too—shoes, books, homework—which should surprise no one for he was now thirteen and a half, a teenager.

A sudden thought struck her. “Dory, has someone been bullying you in school?”

“No, Mom.” He held up his right arm and made a muscle. “See?”

She felt relief. She looked at the little snake.

“Did you call Marilyn Huggins yet and thank her for the baby snake?”

“Nope.”

“Well, don’t you think you ought to do that?”

“I sent her an email.”

“Oh, that’s good. It was nice of her to give you a baby snake. Of course she may be struggling to find homes for all the little ones. I think there were eleven, her mother said. I wonder how she’s getting along at college. You see, Dory, if men didn’t start all those colleges way back then and teach school and give money to universities think how much worse off the world would be.”

“Well...maybe, but there are some places where the men don’t even let girls go to school at all. Glenda said she read a book about that. Pakistan, I think.”

“I know, Dory. That’s really shameful, I have to admit it.”

He persisted. “Men are just plain bad—it’s like they have a disease in their blood. Why is that, Mom? Why? Why can’t they just be nice?”

Marge had no reply to make. The phone rang.

AMENDING MARGE

It was Cricket.

Marge was always glad to hear from her friend Cricket Johnson, who had been so supportive in her foggy days, as Marge called that period before her mind cleared and she bought Huntington Pianos. Dear Cricket. She had begun to feel the need for a new career what with the children all away at college or on their own elsewhere. She had taken a course in detective work last summer. That was no surprise as everyone knew she was nothing if not eternally inquisitive about people and their business and especially (if truth be told) their peccadilloes. After a few rocky months with a partner (a young man from the class who suddenly quit) she was working for a company that did private investigations. Yes, she was a nosy person but her heart was in the right place, usually.

“Hi Marge! What’s new with you?”

“Hi Cricket. Busy, busy, busy. The store is humming, getting to be like Grand Central Station, people coming and going, pianos moving in and moving out. We’re leasing to schools now. Of course I’m glad we’re busy. Thank goodness. I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have my assistant Gunnar. He takes care of so much of the daily work. He even

brought in his grandson Phil to computerize our records and processes so we have time to concentrate on the musical end of things. How's everything with you, Cricket?"

"Well, it's a mixed picture, I guess. Some good, some not so good. It would take an hour to explain, so I don't want to bend your ear right now, and you're probably having supper. I just wanted to say hello."

"But I want to hear everything. Can you come over to the store tomorrow? We can talk after lunch. If you're not busy, that is. And I want to ask *you* something, because you know all about boys."

"No, I'm not Okay, I'll stop in about two o'clock."

"Great. See you then."

She hung up and looked around. "Dory, would you set the table?" Now where was he? She looked out the window and saw her son sitting on the grass beside Mrs. Dorkley who was snapping the heads off some big dandelions that had sprung up from all the recent rain. He was talking and pouring his little snake from one hand to the other and back again.

2

Marge's assistant Gunnar was talking with a customer and Marge was on the phone as Cricket walked into the piano store the next afternoon. She was glad they were busy. This gave her a chance to indulge her curiosity and look around. Tall, silver-haired Gunnar was easy to look at, so Cricket seated herself in the corner and proceeded to look at him.

Now that Marge was a widow—and Cricket was annoyed that she hadn't had a chance to meet and make up her mind about the elusive Tom—she obviously needed to be provided with a new husband, a task which Cricket intended to accomplish for her friend as soon as possible. She had started her campaign last September as they were chatting about Dory's birthday party, or rather his non-party which

turned out to be an excursion by Dory, Glenda, and Dodo to an amusement park all on their own.

“So, Marge, would you like me to introduce you to a friend of ours? CM has a colleague who was just di ... I mean who is newly single. How ‘bout it? He’s very nice.”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe it’s too soon.”

“No-no. Never too soon. You should meet people. There are lots of nice men around. What about a teacher? What about Dory’s nice teacher, Mr. Gump?”

“Mr. Gaunt. He *is* nice, yes, but he’s too young for me. He’s hardly thirty, I think.”

Marge was nearing forty-two and aware of impending middle age, much more so than she used to be.

“Well, let’s see, how about _____?” and she named a timid man who went to her church. “I know he’s available.”

“Hmm. Well, maybe. But just for coffee, mind.”

Cricket arranged a coffee get-together at her house one Sunday afternoon. The timid man came. Marge came. They were introduced. Marge towered over him.

“Forget it, Cricket,” she said the next day. “I just don’t think I’m interested in meeting men. You didn’t say he was so short. Thanks anyway.”

AMENDING MARGE

So Cricket had shelved the project temporarily. That was six months ago. During the intervening time she had carried out an investigation, unbeknownst to Marge, of Gunnar the assistant. She knew how to do these things now.

Was he of good character? Yes. No arrests, no record of any kind with authorities.

Was he who he said he was, a retired chemist, retired from a New Jersey pharmaceutical company, a widower? Yes, yes, and yes, that all checked out.

How about his finances? Was he wealthy? As far as she could tell, yes, moderately well off. No bankruptcies, no liens, no court cases pending. Owned a house in Florida. Several bank and brokerage accounts. It was hard to get more info about that sort of thing these days, but she had enough to form an opinion.

Why not Gunnar? They got along well, they both loved music. And he was good-looking. Wouldn't it be natural if...?"

"Hi, Cricket. Sorry to keep you waiting. Some invoice problem with a school. Let's go out for coffee. There's too much going on here for us to have a really good chat. And I want to hear all your news."

They went to Baby's Bar and Grill, a small place around the corner where you could sit at the counter for hours nursing a beverage and talk, or not, as you pleased. The owner, Baby Barriga, greeted them.

"Hi, gals." She slapped a menu down in front of each of them. Baby was a solid three hundred pounds of cheerfulness and everybody loved her. As a realist might do, she kept a pistol under the counter in case she ever met a person who was the exception to that rule.

They ordered coffee. Baby waddled over to the coffee urn.

Cricket mused. How to bring the subject up?

Marge leaned over and whispered to Cricket, "She's always trying to fix me up with her brother." She giggled. "Every time I come in here it's 'Oh Marge, you should meet my brother, he just loves music, he plays the xylophone'. I don't want to hurt her feelings but I'm afraid if he's the same shape as she is then..." She broke off as their coffee was set down in front of them.

"So how is CM getting along in California?"

Cricket's husband CM—the initials stood for Chartwell Morehouse, an unthinkable appellation his mother had burdened him with fifty-four years earlier

and which Cricket refused to say—was presently in California on a six-month assignment for his company, a staid financial institution based in Manhattan. CM researched and rated bonds, a subject than which there is nothing drier. He was very good at it.

“He’s doing well. No problems. We have a nice chat every evening on the phone. Hasn’t done any sight-seeing yet, lord knows why. His mother is just an hour’s drive away and he stays there on weekends and helps her with this and that.”

“And how are *you* getting along on your own?”

“Oh, I keep busy with the job. I’m not completely alone. Guy is finishing his senior year so there’s always some excitement, some catastrophe. Kim is...planting grape vines upstate in the Finger Lakes region on a patch of land he bought, or rather we bought. And Alice is sailing brilliantly through her junior year at Harvard. She seems to be interested in the law.” Cricket gave a rueful smile. She was really very fortunate. Good health, nice family, beautiful home, enough money. Really, this was not the time to—it would sound so much like whining.

“Cricket.” Marge was frowning. “You know all about boys.”

“Well, not all, but I’ve spent almost two decades trying to raise a couple of them.”

“Cricket, I’m worried about Dory.”

“Dory? What do you mean?”

“Well, he talks so funny all of a sudden.”

“Funny?”

“Not funny ha-ha, funny strange. He’s so serious. He comes out with things that give me the creeps.”

“What things?”

“Well, for instance yesterday out of the blue he said that all men, all adult men should be locked up, that they just cause trouble, they make all the trouble in the world. He seems to, oh I don’t know, hate and fear his own gender.”

“Hmm.” Cricket tried to remember Kim and Guy at thirteen.

Marge went on. “Of course there are plenty of bad men in the world. Kids pick up on this sort of thing, can’t help it what with TV news and the internet and YouTube and social media and the school giving them alarming little talks all the time. I just feel that he’s a little, well, unbalanced in his view of the world right now.”

“Kids are...” Cricket chose her words carefully. “Boys are...It’s often surprising what they come out

with, and then the next day they're totally opposite in mood, but as for hating and despising men, not idolizing a hero, no, I don't remember Kim or Guy ever talking that way. They never had philosophical thoughts at all—still don't."

"Marge," trying to sound bright and cheerful, "I wouldn't worry about it. Kids are resilient. He'll probably be despising or spouting off about something else tomorrow. Women and girls probably." She laughed.

"You see, his father was not a good role model." Marge persisted and would not be put off or comforted with a laugh. "Tom was cold and self-centered and for the last six years he was completely absent from our lives. So Dory thinks all men are awful, not to be trusted. It shouldn't surprise me. He hasn't really known any good ones."

"That sounds plausible."

Marge nodded. "I'm not a psychologist but I think it all goes back to his father."

"Or," Cricket cocked her head, "back to his mother, who for years has had to be superwoman, both mother and father all the while struggling to regain her..." She trailed off.

“Sanity. Regain my sanity. Let’s face it, Cricket, I was nuts.”

“Well, not really. Just in a sort of fog, perhaps.”

“Nuts,” said Marge firmly.

At the end of the counter Baby who had extra sharp hearing looked over at them. Yes, her brother Karl had been like that too at one time. Oh, they were made for each other, Marge and Karl. She was sure of it.

3

Tadusch had a feeling of accomplishment. It had been a good morning's work. He adjusted the patch over his left eye and took a sip of the coffee his young office assistant, who was now engrossed in the computer, had brought him, good strong Turkish coffee, the kind you can only find on the Lower East Side of New York City.

He owed it to his former associate, now deceased, to provide for the poor lady back in Albania who was practically starving, from what he'd heard. Yes, he would help her all he could. Through his contacts he had this day managed to book her as a passenger on a container ship bound for America that would dock here in ten days' time. He could easily find a place for her, perhaps in the cousin's home in Connecticut. She would be a bother to no one there and quite safe for the

organization as she apparently knew not a word of English and had not played a part in the project, now derailed. She would be happy to eat regular meals and be housekeeper to the old lady with the bulldogs. Yes, that would work fine, just fine. He patted himself on the back mentally.

“Sasha,” he called to the girl at the computer, “can you get me some biscuits? I feel like having biscuits. I deserve a reward this morning—I’ve done a good deed. Run to the market, Sasha, will you please, and get me some of those nice Italian biscuits.”

4

Marge was glad Cricket had not brought up any more matchmaking ideas when they met for coffee as she didn't want to think about the subject now that she was so worried about Dory and his black moods. He was her main concern. Cricket's nonchalance had relieved her mind a bit. And yes, he seemed a little happier today. She had heard him trying to sing something in the shower this morning, if you could call it singing, more like the whining of a lovesick toad hunched at the edge of a backyard pond making noises toward whatever was in the cool green water. Noisy but unappealing. He hadn't mentioned his pretty little blond friend who moved away last summer in months. What was her name? Rachel, yes, Rachel must be history. She knew enough not to ask. Cricket with her new skills had managed to find out which Springfield

it was that the girl had moved to and had told them, but that was to no avail, as it seemed, for the girl hadn't written.

But now she recalled that Cricket had said nothing at all yesterday about her own job—was it with Homeland Security her company was affiliated? She couldn't remember what her friend had told her two months ago when they last talked. No, she hadn't said what she was working on; well, she couldn't very well do that, could she? But Cricket had not talked about herself at all, and that was unusual.

The world was full of unusual things, more and more all the time she was noticing. Take for example her assistant Gunnar. No sooner had he begun working in the store last July, and very satisfactorily she thought, than he shamefacedly asked for a leave of absence to go to Florida in September to sell his second home. That seemed reasonable enough. What does a widower need two houses for? She didn't want to lose him, so she gladly gave him the time off and when he came back two months later all tanned and sprightly (mission accomplished he indicated) he went back to work and had become her mainstay in the piano business. How did she ever get along before

Gunnar came into the store and sat down to play Rachmaninov? She didn't know.

And now, unpredictably, he was asking for another leave of absence.

"Marge," abashed, feet scuffling, "I hate to ask you this so soon after my other trip"—he had been back three months and Christmas was over—"but there is some urgent business I must take care of in Florida, and..."

"Oh dear, is someone ill?" She knew he had relatives in Florida.

"No, uh, it's just some business that needs to be settled. It can't wait any longer. It wasn't possible to settle it when I was there in the fall. I'm sorry, truly I am. You should really look for someone else to help you in the store, someone reliable..."

"Well," said Marge slowly, "you must go of course, since you need to. I'll think about the replacement issue. How long will you need?"

"Three or four weeks."

"Oh, I see." But she didn't and was too embarrassed to ask for more details and he offered none. Their talk turned to the problem of storage of leased pianos over the summer for a school that was undergoing renovations.

At the end of the week she took him to the airport after they had a quick meal at Baby's Bar and Grill. Dory was with them and Baby cooed over him in such a manner that Dory ducked his head and stared at his plate the whole time.

“What do you mean she gives you the creeps?”

“Oh, I don't know, she just does. She's so big and smiley and she wants to slobber over me all the time when we go in there. I hate it.”

Mrs. Dorkley threw the handful of wild onions into the weeding basket and sat back on her heels to look at Dory who was lying on the grass beside her with a half-eaten cookie in his hand. It was a Saturday in mid-May and the weeds were growing fast. Ming and Morty, her Maine coon cats, were chasing each other around the old apple tree.

“So don't go in there, that's all. I wouldn't if somebody slobbered over me. I don't like slobbering. I especially don't like dogs that slobber.”

“Mom takes me there for supper sometimes when she doesn't have time to cook.”

“Your mother is very busy with the store, isn't she?” The real meaning of the question was unspoken,

she's neglecting you. Kids should not be left alone, Mrs. Dorkley felt, especially boys with no father. Boys need adult men in their lives.

“My father’s...in Albania,” said Dory, as if reading her mind. “When he gets home then I’m going to go fishing with him, deep sea fishing. He promised.” The lie was easy. It was okay. He didn’t want people’s sympathy, *poor little fatherless boy*. He had never told Mrs. Dorkley anything about his family, nor had his mother ever stopped to gossip with the little gray-haired neighbor. Dory preferred it that way.

“That’s nice.”

There was a screeching yowl and a scrambling sound. They looked over and saw Ming high up in the apple tree clutching a branch and looking down at Morty. The play had gotten rough. Little Ming knew when to beat a hasty retreat. Morty lay in the long grass, her fluffy tail switching dangerously.

“I’ll get him down,” cried Dory and ran over to the tree. In a minute he was clambering up the trunk toward the frightened cat.

“Careful, Dory, he’ll scratch you. Even a friendly cat will strike out—oh!”

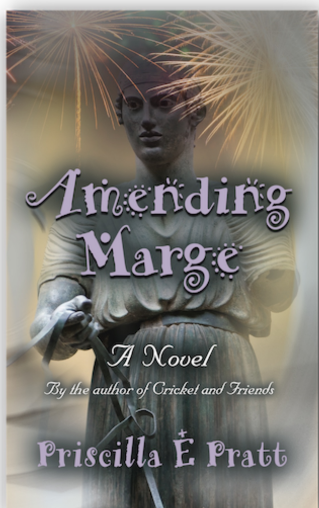
Little Ming, instead of relaxing and letting himself be rescued by Dory, had flung himself right out into

the air in a seeming suicidal leap but somehow landed on his feet on the grassy ground, after which he darted into the bushes chased by big old wicked Morty, who as it happens was his mother.

“Well,” said Dory, “at least he’s down. Hey! I can see really far from up here. I can see to the end of the street and beyond and I can see someone coming down the sidewalk. Oh, that’s Glenda. I’d better go hide. I just remember I was supposed to meet her at the library this morning and she doesn’t like it when I don’t show up.”

He scrambled down a little lower then jumped. “Ya-eee.” Hitting the ground he rolled like a parachute jumper he had seen in a movie. He grinned. “That was fun!” Then he ran and disappeared into Mrs. Dorkley’s kitchen.

She went on with her weeding.



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