

## **The Miracle Baby 5-in-1**

Betsy Marshall filled out a contest entry form while seated in a metal folding chair across the aisle from the maternity department at Sears. The phone call came the following morning with news that she was chosen to receive one of three major prizes: a new car, an ocean cruise, or a gold-plated birthstone pendant. Against her better judgment, she agreed to a free, no obligation, in-home demonstration of *The Miracle Baby 5-in-1* to take place at 6 PM that evening.

Mark Marshall was not happy. He liked dinner on the table when he got home from work. Instead, there was a brochure for baby furniture.

“What the fuck, Betsy?”

“Mark, it will just take a minute. Then I’ll make grilled cheese. We don’t have to buy anything, but we do need a car, and we never had a real honeymoon.”

“Betsy, honey, everyone gets the pendant. It’s a scam.”

“You think you know, but you don’t know.”

Mark scrunched his face, finished his beer, and got up for another.

The salesman was a few minutes early. He waited in the car smoking his last Chesterfield. The street was identical three-story houses. The address, 1274 Northwestern Ave. #3, meant a top floor walkup. *The Miracle Baby 5-in-1* weighed fifty-seven pounds and came in a large, cumbersome box. The salesman weighed three hundred and twenty pounds and little of it was muscle. He remembered the bottle in the glove compartment. He took a swallow. Then another. He got out of the car. He turned the key in the trunk lock. He lugged the box from the

trunk to the top of the porch. Sweat poured off his face. Circles formed under his arms. He found some buttons and pressed #3.

“Your friend is here,” Mark said. “You going to invite him in, or what?”

“You’re sending your pregnant wife down all those stairs to let in some strange man? What kind of husband are you?”

Mark made an angry noise in the back of his throat and got up pushing his chair back so hard it toppled over. The buzzer rang again. The salesman still had his finger on the button when Mark opened the door just enough to poke his head through.

“We don’t want it, so you might as well scram.”

“Are you Mark Marshall?”

“You already know that.”

“Your wife is Betsy Marshall?” Not waiting for an answer George removed a card from his shirt pocket. “Your wife’s signature on this card constitutes a de facto contract. Do you know what that means?” Mark’s hands balled into fists. “It means you are obligated by law to invite me into your home where I will demonstrate to you and your wife *The Miracle Baby 5-in-1*. That’s the law.”

Mark’s right fist balled even tighter and wanted nothing more than to bury itself deep into the fat man’s gut.

“Something about a prize,” Mark smirked. “Tell me we won a car and I’ll write you a check for whatever the fuck’s in that box.”

George removed an envelope from the opposite pocket.

“The description and nature of your prize is in this sealed envelope, which I’m only authorized to open upon completion of the demonstration.”

“Okay, I give up,” Mark said and bounded, three at a time, up the stairs. He finished his beer and opened another. He thought about the fat guy carrying that box up all those stairs. It made him laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

The salesman made it to the top landing. He paused to catch his breath. He mopped his face with a handkerchief. He knocked on the door.

“Your turn,” Mark said.

With a big show of how huge and uncomfortable she was, Betsy waddled to the door.

“Oh, it’s you.”

It seemed odd to Betsy that the person who had persuaded her to fill out that card was the same person now standing by their kitchen door.

“So good to see you again, Betsy, Mrs. Marshall, and for inviting me into your home.”

“Jesus,” Mark said.

The salesman lifted the box one last time and entered yet another strange apartment. At this point he was supposed to say something complimentary about the place, but the place was a mess. These people were pigs.

“Mind if I sit? That was a climb.” He tried one more time for the compliment. “I can see why you two are in such excellent shape.”

Mark instinctively sucked in his beer gut. Betsy frowned, wondering if she would ever get her figure back. The salesman was still standing. Betsy motioned toward a chair. The salesman sat. He eyed the beer. He was tempted to ask for one. Not a good idea.

“Betsy, Mrs. Marshall, could I trouble you for a glass of water?”

Betsy looked at Mark. Mark nodded. Betsy took a glass from the dryer rack next to the sink. She ran the water for a few seconds, testing the temperature with her finger.

“Thanks.” George took a sip. The water was tepid and discolored. He needed a real drink. If not for those stairs, he’d have made an excuse to go back to the car and the whiskey. “You both look so young. Have you been married long?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Mark was slurring now, but still sensitive that they’d had to get married.

The salesman needed to start over. He looked around. It was all so sad. They were poor. They had nothing. The walls were stained. The curtains were plastic. There was a cat litter box under the kitchen table. On cue, a cat entered the room, pawed a bit in the sand, and left a fresh, smelly dump.

“You have a lovely place here. These old building are the best. You can never go wrong with brick.”

After an awkward pause, Betsy whispered, “Thanks.”

“Okay,” Mark said. “Let’s see what’s in the box.”

The next twenty minutes would be automatic. Once the box was opened, and the parts were spread out on the floor, it was the salesman’s job to change the thing from a buggy to a stroller to a highchair to a bassinet and, finally, to a car seat. It was difficult and complicated and the salesman needed to make it look so easy even a baby could do it.

Mark lit a cigarette. “Mister, seriously, how much does this thing cost?”

The salesman had the answer ready. “When you think about what you’re getting for your money, the cost is next to nothing.”

“Okay, but we’ve already got most of that stuff. The rest we can pick up at rummage sales.”

The salesman looked directly at Mark. “Is that what you really want for your baby? Wouldn’t you like your child to have the best that money can buy?” George smelled the smoke. He needed a cigarette.

“Sure, and I’d like a Cadillac, too. Which reminds me, what make of car are you giving away?”

George remained silent. He was struggling now, changing a stroller into a highchair. Pushing one piece of aluminum tubing into another, he pinched his finger. It hurt. He prayed it wouldn’t bleed. Finally, the piece snapped into place.

“This, Mark and Betsy, is state of the art when it comes to highchair safety and comfort, and, unlike most highchairs, which wobble and are easily upset, *The Miracle Baby 5-in1* is guaranteed to hold and protect your baby like a loving mother’s arms. Notice the specially designed harness strap which promotes perfect posture and healthy bone development. Any pediatrician will tell you that a poorly designed highchair can lead to a life of back pain and future surgeries. Statistics show that highchair strangulation is second only to bassinette suffocation as the major cause of infant deaths.”

Mark didn’t like this kind of talk, and he liked this guy even less. He used the brochure to snuff out his cigarette.

“Mark, use an ashtray.”

“Sorry.” Mark tossed the brochure into the garbage pail on his way to the refrigerator. “Are you about through?” Mark stared at the fat man kneeling on the floor. He twisted the cap off the bottle. “I haven’t had my dinner.”

“Mark, Betsy, I’m here because I believe in this product, and because I love children. Thousands of *The Miracle Baby 5-in-1* have been sold throughout Europe resulting in the mortality rate of infants dropping to half that of the United States. American manufacturers and retail stores are not allowed to produce or sell this product under penalty of patent infringement. You are among the first couples in this area to be introduced to our exclusive product. For that reason, I’ve been authorized to offer you a special, limited time only, ten percent discount.”

“Tell you what,” Mark said lighting another cigarette, “Leave your card. We’ll think it over and give you a call. That’s the best I can do for you today.”

“Today is the only day I can offer the discount.”

“Okay, I was trying to be nice, but we’re really not interested. I’m asking you to leave.”

“You’re making a mistake you’ll regret for the rest of your lives.”

“I doubt that very much.”

“Give me one minute. There’s something I want to show you. I just have to run down to the car. I’ll be right back.”

And then he was gone.

“Mark, you didn’t have to be rude.”

“I hate salesmen.”

The salesman opened the glove compartment and grabbed the whiskey bottle. On the passenger seat was a booklet. He flipped through the pages. He took a deep breath. This was his least favorite part of the job. He took a long drink.

Upstairs, Mark looked at his watch. Ten minutes had passed. There was a Cubs game he should be watching. He still hadn’t had dinner.

The salesman was back. "I was just on the phone with my manager. He authorized me to cut the price in half." This was a desperation move. At half price, the commission would buy a bottle of whiskey and a carton of cigarettes.

"Honey?" Betsy said, looking at Mark like this was the best news ever.

"God, I hate this," Mark said. "First it was a bargain at full price. Then ten-percent off. Now fifty. You guys are all crooks."

The salesman had nothing left to say. He opened the booklet to a picture of a dead baby dangling from the leg hole of a cheap looking highchair. George moved the album to the center of the table and turned it toward Betsy.

"This is what could ..."

Those were George's last words. Betsy screamed and ran into the bedroom slamming the door behind her. Mark raised the beer bottle over his head and cracked it hard against the fat man's skull. The fat man stood. He touched his scalp. There was blood. He took one step toward Mark and fell over backwards through the open door and down the stairs. The fall lasted awhile. It was almost funny. Mark closed the door and got another beer from the refrigerator.

He looked at the picture. It was obviously a doll, but still. Mark walked to the bedroom to get Betsy. He was hungry.

Betsy grilled the cheese. Mark went down to see if the fat guy was dead. He was. Back upstairs, Mark sipped his beer. Betsy used a spatula to move the sandwiches from the frying pan to paper plates.

Betsy made the 911 call and explained that a salesman had accidentally fallen down some stairs. An ambulance arrived and took away the body. A cop sat in the same chair that the

salesman had sat had in not that long ago. The questions were simple and direct. There was no indication of foul play. The head wound was a result of the fall.

No one came to pick up *The Miracle Baby 5-in-1*. Mark spent several evenings trying to make it into something. He finally put it out by the curb with the other garbage.

—*Dan Nielsen*