

# three little words



Sarah n. harvey

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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**Summary:** When Sid leaves his foster family on their remote island home in search of the mother he doesn't remember and a brother he's never met, he's ill-prepared for the surprises he finds.

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*For Robin Stevenson*

# Have a Heart

“Sid, this is Fariza.”

Sid looks up at the sound of Megan’s voice. She is standing in the kitchen doorway, her hand resting lightly on a little girl’s head. The girl is wearing a long baggy gray T-shirt that stops just short of her knees. Her feet are bare and dirty; flakes of sparkly purple polish cling to her toenails. Her curly black hair is long and matted, like a feral poodle’s. A beaded bracelet encircles one skinny brown wrist. She must have arrived in the night, on the last ferry. It is only seven o’clock now, barely light. Sid isn’t usually up this early in the summer, but he has promised to help Caleb on the boat today, getting it ready for another charter.

“Hey,” he says to the girl, “want some Cheerios?” He gestures at the yellow box on the table in front

of him and stands up to get another bowl from the cupboard.

The girl flinches and ducks behind Megan. Sid shrugs and goes back to his newspaper. Not that he was reading the news. He never does. He figures if something is important enough—Canada going to war, another oil spill on the coast, Brad and Angelina breaking up—he'll hear about it soon enough from his friend Chloe, who lives next door. Chloe doesn't read the newspaper either. She gets her news online: CNN, TMZ and *The New York Times*. She says news reporting is like eggs: hard-boiled, soft-boiled or medium.

No, Sid is reading the comics and grappling with the same questions he has asked ever since he was old enough to read a caption: Why is *Family Circus* still in print? Who reads it? Who likes it? Why do the kids never grow up the way they do in *For Better or Worse*? Why is everybody white? Why are their heads shaped like soccer balls? He hates *Hi and Lois* too. And *Blondie*. He imagines they all live on the same boring street in the same boring suburb. All their houses are identical and all the fathers mow their lawns on Sundays before they fire up the barbecues and char some meat. Sid smiles. Maybe the *Family Circus* mom is having an affair with Hi. Lois and Blondie become lovers and leave all the kids with the *Family Circus* grandma, whose bingo addiction gets out of control. *Family Circus* dad has a breakdown and is arrested after he robs a convenience store at gunpoint,

wearing only one of his ex's aprons and high heels. Dagwood writes a tell-all memoir, gets rich and dies of a heart attack in bed with two underage male hookers dressed as Batman and Robin.

"What's so funny, Sid?" Caleb sits down at the table and reaches for the cereal.

Sid shakes his head. "Nothing. Just reading the comics."

"Did you meet our new arrival?"

"Yeah. What's up with her?"

"Emergency placement. Really bad family scene in Vancouver. She's been in care for six months, bouncing around. Social Services was looking for a long-term placement and thought she'd be better away from the city. Can't tell you much more than that."

Sid nods. Over the years he has lived with Megan and Caleb, dozens of kids have come and gone. Some stay longer than others; none has stayed as long as Sid. Fourteen years. Since he was two and Megan fished him out of the water between Megan and Caleb's boat, the *Caprice*, and the piece of shit boat he and his hippie-wannabe mom had been living on. Sid has only the wispiest memories of the boat or his birth mother. The boat—Megan says it was called *Amphitrite*, like the Greek goddess of the sea—was dark green and smelled of rotting wood and what he now knows was dope. Even now it makes him nauseous to be around anyone who's smoking up. Sid's birth mother's legal name was Deborah, but she called herself Devi, after some Hindu goddess.

The name on her son's birth certificate is Siddhartha Eikenboom. Sid's father's name is listed as *Unknown*.

Sid was ten when Megan finally showed him his birth certificate and explained that Siddhartha was another name for Buddha. He was more puzzled than upset by his full name and his birth father's anonymity. Caleb was his father, wasn't he? Megan nodded and said she was sorry that she didn't have any other information. Sid shrugged and asked if he could go and play with Chloe. The birth certificate was returned to a safe deposit box at the bank. Devi was long gone, taking with her the knowledge of Sid's paternity—if she ever knew it. The *Amphitrite* pulled away from the wharf soon after Megan reported Devi to Social Services. Devi hasn't been back nor has she stayed in touch. To Sid she is a chimera with long red curls like his own, curls the color of the bark of the arbutus trees that ring the cove.

Sid was Megan and Caleb's first foster child. He will probably be their last. He can't imagine living anywhere else. The three of them moved off the boat when Sid was three, and there has always been another kid or two in the big house by the ferry dock. Every time another kid arrives, Megan says it will be the last time, but Sid knows better. He also knows better than to get attached to any of the other kids, especially after what happened with Tobin, who had come to stay at the house when Sid was eleven. Sid had thought Tobin would stay forever. Thick as thieves, Megan always said. He really believed that they would build a cabin in the orchard, where Sid would draw and



Tobin would play his guitar. But Tobin said he couldn't play music by himself. And an audience of one, no matter how devoted, wasn't enough. He had left six months ago, not long after he turned eighteen. He called every now and again, usually from some club, but Sid knew he wasn't coming back. Not to stay, anyway. After Tobin, Sid kept his distance from the kids who came and went.

"How old is she?" he asks now.

"Eight," Caleb replies.

"She's scared."

Caleb sighs. "Yeah. She's got reason to be. Believe me. She might be here a while."

"Cool," Sid replies. "Chloe needs a new project. She's driving me crazy."

Caleb laughs. "Good for her. That's what friends are for, right? Someone's gotta drag you away from that book." He nods toward a coil-bound sketchbook that sits on the table at Sid's elbow.

Sid spreads his hand over the book's scuffed cover, although he knows Caleb won't touch it. Respect and privacy are big in this house. Really big. Caleb is right though: left alone, Sid would sit at his desk all day, dreaming and drawing. Forgetting to eat, sleep or change his clothes, although he has a simple system for clothes. From the Ides of March to Thanksgiving he wears plain short-sleeved black T-shirts, skinny black jeans cut off to just below the knee, black Vans, no socks and a plain black ball cap. If he's cold, he puts on a plain black hoodie.

After Thanksgiving, his shirt has long sleeves, his jeans aren't cut off and he trades in his high-tops for Romeos, the slip-on boots the local fishermen wear. He wears them with thick gray woolen work socks, the kind with the red stripe at the top. The stripe is his only concession to color. He covers his curls with a Black Watch cap. He has a puffy black North Face jacket he hardly ever wears. Shopping is straightforward and relatively painless. Once in a while, on festive occasions—Christmas or his birthday—he will wear the belt Chloe bought him. Wide and black with four rows of conical studs, it makes him feel menacing, like a cop weighted down at the hips with a gun, a night stick, a Taser. When he wears it, everybody smiles, including him. He is about as menacing as a Q-tip.

Megan says he was a chatty toddler, racing up and down the wharf, investigating crab traps and coils of rope, chasing seagulls in his clunky thrift-store boots. He only believes her because he knows she doesn't lie. That child is gone. His bouncy toddler self appears only briefly in his notebook—then it is lost in the chasm between the two boats, along with one of his boots. Not that he's unhappy now—far from it—but no one would ever describe him as chatty or bouncy.

He stands up and puts his bowl in the dishwasher. “What are we doing today?” he asks Caleb.

“The usual stuff. You clean the boat and I make sure the engine's running okay. Then we'll do some grocery shopping. Hit the liquor store.”

“Who’s on board this time?”

“Four oil guys from Calgary. That’s a lot of beer. We’ll be gone by noon tomorrow. Back in a week or so, depending on the fish.”

“Sounds good.” Sid never goes on the charter trips with Caleb. Even if he’d felt comfortable with the kind of men who charter the boat—loud, red-faced, hearty, hard-drinking—there isn’t enough room on the boat for another body, even one as skinny as Sid’s. As it is, Caleb sleeps in the cockpit, under a tarp if it’s raining.

Megan comes back into the kitchen as Sid is zipping up his hoodie. “I finally managed to get Fariza to sleep.” She sighs. “Poor kid. I’ve been up with her most of the night. Maybe when she wakes up she’ll feel better.”

Caleb pours Megan a mug of coffee and puts it into her hands. “Sit down,” he says. “I’ll make you something to eat before we go.”

Megan shakes her head. “I’m good. You guys get going.”

“You sure?” Caleb pulls a red *Caprice Charters* ball cap over his bald head.

Megan nods. “Chloe coming over later?” she asks Sid.

He shrugs. “No doubt. Maybe she can play with the new kid.”

“Maybe,” Megan says, taking a sip of her coffee. “Chloe might be just what she needs.”

“Chloe talks enough for two people, so you could be right,” Sid says.

Caleb cuffs him good-naturedly on the shoulder and opens the back door.

“See you in a few hours,” Caleb says.

“Tell Chloe I’ll be back later,” Sid adds.

When Sid and Caleb come back from the boat at the end of the day, Megan is in the kitchen making dinner and Chloe is in the living room, sitting cross-legged on one end of the couch. Fariza is at the other end. A mountain of stuffed animals sits between them. Bears, zebras, cats, dogs, wolves, whales, deer, mice, parrots, giraffes, rabbits, monkeys, cows, penguins, moose, lambs, raccoons, foxes, owls, dolphins. Megan has been collecting them for years. Each new kid gets to choose and keep one. Sid still has the porcupine he chose when he was two; he named it Spike. Not very original, he thinks now, but Spike still sits on Sid’s windowsill, his quills gathering dust. Fariza is clutching a gigantic pink flamingo by its scrawny neck. She is dressed in clothes that Sid recognizes from helping with the laundry. Stuffed animals are not the only things Megan collects. There is a cupboard full of used clothing upstairs, all sizes and styles. Everything from flip-flops to parkas. You could outfit a whole village in Africa from that cupboard.

Fariza has chosen an oversize red T-shirt, baggy cargo shorts and neon-green Crocs. From the first day, kids are allowed to choose their own clothes. Megan says it makes them feel more in control. Sid vaguely remembers

loving a hand-knit red sweater with a spaceship on the back, and he still pays attention to what kids choose out of the clothes cupboard. Looking at Fariza, he thinks how much she looks like a little boy in an older brother's hand-me-downs. Most of the girls who come to stay at the house gravitate toward skirts and shirts that are too tight and too short. They paw through the clothes cupboard, pouncing on bright colors and anything that sparkles. When Tobin first arrived, he traded his Walmart jeans for a men's kilt, which he wore with an assortment of wrinkled plaid shirts. Sid waited for him to get beat up, or at least bullied, but it never happened. Not to his knowledge anyway. He figured it helped that at fifteen, Tobin was six foot six and tattooed like a Samoan warrior.

"You and Fariza waiting for an ark, Chloe?" Caleb says as he and Sid shuck off their shoes by the front door.

"Might as well be," Chloe says. "Megan said it was okay to get out the stuffies. I thought maybe it would make Fariza feel better. I tried reading to her, but she won't sit close enough to me to see the pictures. Which means I couldn't do her hair or nails either." Chloe jumps up, causing an avalanche of animals. Fariza cringes deeper into the cushions.

Sid looks down at the pile of books on the battered wooden coffee table. All his old favorites: *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Peepo*, *Mr. Gumpy's Outing*, *Blueberries for Sal*. After Megan rescued him, all he wanted to do was sit beside her on the old green corduroy couch and trace his

fingers over the pictures as she read. Over the years he has read to his share of kids. Some frightened, some angry, some inconsolable. Some of them couldn't sit still for very long, some of them fell asleep while he was reading, some of them sucked their thumbs, some of them smacked the books with an open palm or sucked on the corners. No matter what they did, Sid just kept reading. *Mr. Gumpy owned a boat and his house was by a river*. He wants to tell Chloe that she should be more patient, but she's already pulling on her shoes, babbling about being late for dinner, and how Irena, her grandmother, will kill her if she doesn't set the table. Patience is not Chloe's strength. Sid looks over at Caleb, who raises his eyebrows.

"Irena runs a tight ship," Caleb agrees. Chloe's grandmother is a legendary island matriarch: stern, demanding but also, in Sid's experience, intelligent, kind (to him anyway) and an awesome cook.

"Everything okay out here?" Megan says from the kitchen doorway. Her round face is flushed and sweaty, her khaki shorts wrinkled, her T-shirt stained. She wipes her hands on her shorts, leaving a trail of flour. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing," Caleb says. "Just Chloe racing off like she's got a bee in her bra."

Sid snorts. Chloe blushes and glares at him.

"It's been a long day," Megan says. "Chloe, I'd never have gotten my work done without you. Are you sure you won't stay for dinner?"

Chloe shakes her head. “No thanks, Megan. I told Mom I’d be back.”

Sid squats down in front of Fariza and peers into her eyes, which he expects to be brown. Instead, they are as green as a stick of celery. She turns away and buries her face in a panda bear’s belly, but she seems more shy than frightened now.

“She won’t talk, you know,” Chloe says. “All she says is please and thank you.”

“I know,” Sid replies. “I don’t mind. Kind of a nice change. She can talk or not. Doesn’t matter to me.” He straightens up and pats the flamingo’s head.

Chloe slams the door on her way out.

“What’s that about?” Sid says to no one in particular. He’s used to Chloe’s emotional storms—they’ve been friends forever—but lately she often seems on edge or angry or upset. He wants to ask why, but he knows better than to ask a question when he’s afraid of the answer. He has learned the hard way that nothing stays the same, no matter how much he wants it to.

“Women,” Caleb says.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Megan asks.

“Nothing.” Caleb laughs and puts his arm around Megan. “Can’t live without ’em.”

“You got that right,” she says. “Sid, wash your hands and then set the table, please. Maybe Fariza could help you.”

Sid nods. Another one of Megan’s theories is that helping out around the house makes kids feel better.

Sid's specialty is laundry. Collecting it, sorting it, folding it, putting it away. He hates ironing though. Not a good job for a daydreamer, Caleb said after Sid burnt a hole in one of Caleb's good shirts.

"Yo, Fariza," Sid says. "You wanna wash up first?"

Fariza blinks her huge green eyes and then slides off the couch and scurries past him, dragging the flamingo behind her. When he comes into the kitchen, she is hiding behind Megan, shifting the flamingo from hand to hand.

"She's had some bad experiences with boys," Megan says.

Who hasn't? Sid thinks as he gets the cutlery out of the drawer. Chloe and her girlfriends are always talking about how lame guys are, and he stills feel the sting of Tobin's absence. He circles the table—knife, fork, spoon; knife, fork, spoon. Cloth napkins folded in triangles to the left of each fork. Water glasses at the tips of the knives. Fariza has come out from behind Megan. He can feel her watching him as he moves around the table. He puts a hot-pink napkin at one place, and a glass painted with the Little Mermaid.

He points and says, "That's your place, Fariza. And here's a chair for your friend." He pulls up an extra chair, and Fariza seats the flamingo on it. Its head flops forward onto the table, like a guest who's had too much to drink. "Thank you," Fariza whispers.

"You're welcome," Sid replies, bowing slightly.





**Sarah N. Harvey** is the author of nine books for children and young adults. Some of her books have been translated into Korean, German and Slovenian, none of which she speaks or reads (although she is trying to learn Italian). Her novel *The Lit Report* has been optioned for a feature film. She will not be in it. Sarah lives and writes in Victoria, British Columbia. Visit [www.sarahnharvey.com](http://www.sarahnharvey.com) for more information.