

FROM RUSSIA WITH *love*

Jo Pritchard was 25, working in an orphanage and planning to travel the world. And then she met Marina, just a few months old, severely disabled – and about to change her life

Photographs Victoria Birkinshaw



I still find it hard to put into words how I felt when I met Marina. In a split second, I fell in love, and my life veered completely and brilliantly off plan. Just a few months old, and a new arrival at the Russian orphanage where I was working as a physiotherapist, Marina was in a cot on a balcony outside, wrapped up warm against the biting wind. Born with severe disabilities - no legs and only one arm, with just two fingers on her lone hand - the staff had already written her off.

A dummy was lying by her side. As I peered down at her, she looked me straight in the eye, then popped it back into her mouth, as if to say, 'Look what I can do.'

I was so overwhelmed, I couldn't speak. My experience working for The Promise, a charity supporting disabled children in the orphanage, told me she would grow up confined to her two-foot bed. She would probably never learn to speak, and almost certainly never walk, read, go to school, travel or taste the fear and excitement of falling in love. I couldn't sentence her to a life like that. I didn't even get to hold Marina that day, yet I saw the fight in her eyes. Given the opportunity, I knew she could do all those things and more. She could have anything she wanted - and I knew that I could give it to her.

Still, that night I told myself to forget her. I was being crazy. I was only 25, and having a family wasn't on my agenda. My boyfriend Gideon was training to be a police officer; we'd recently bought a flat and were organising our wedding. There were grand, long-term dreams of travelling the world. We'd talked about kids, and even discussed the idea of adoption, but imagined we had several years to enjoy each other beforehand.

I've always followed my gut, but I'm also level-headed. On one hand, I was being unrealistic - stupid, even - imagining I could save Marina from what I saw as her future. I had no idea how to be a mum, and knew nothing about adopting from abroad, other than it would be incredibly difficult - and would put an end to all the whimsical plans Gideon and I had made.

On the other hand, suddenly none of that mattered. All sensible thought went out the window and what I now know as maternal instinct took over. Returning to London, I tried to get on with my life, but after a few days it all came spilling out. I showed Gideon a photo of Marina and he listened patiently while I explained how I felt about her. I babbled away, saying maybe we could send money to support her in Russia; not even daring to suggest my real wish to make her part of our family as it seemed so mad and so much to ask of him.

When I paused for breath, Gideon found the words I hadn't dared to voice: 'Well then, let's bring her home.'

The next two years were a bureaucratic, financial and emotional nightmare. Social security checks, psychiatric evaluations, translating endless paperwork - we even had to sell our flat to buy a house (we were told we couldn't adopt without one). We endured one dispiriting delay after another. The adoption process was to cost £15,000, which meant investing all our savings and Gideon working overtime, while I did 20-hour days in three jobs. There were weeks when we hardly saw each other.

I spent a lot of time worrying that Gideon would have second thoughts about making such a mammoth commitment. But he never did. Countless times I ended up in floods of >>

tears, resigned to the fact that Marina's adoption might never happen. At one point, we even talked about moving to Russia to be with her there. It was always 'how?' though, never 'if'. We couldn't give up - she was our little girl and she deserved a family.

Gideon and I visited Marina six times before we brought her home. The first time Gideon met her, I was filled with nerves; not for him - I knew he would love her as much as I did, but I wanted her to feel that connection, too.

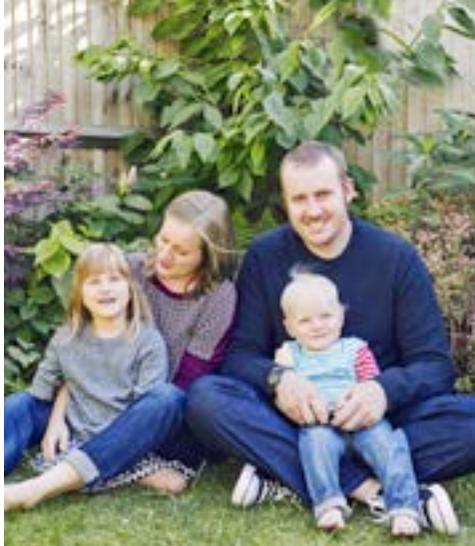
Yet from the word go they were clearly besotted with each other. The first time he held her, she cheekily reached up to poke his nose, then nuzzled in to him. Their bond was instant.

Marina finally came home for Christmas in 2010. Overnight, Gideon and I went from newlyweds to parents of a two-and-a-half-year-old who spoke no English. Unlike most new parents, our challenges didn't come in the form of exhaustion through lack of sleep; Marina slept through the night - in the orphanage, no one came if she cried. Instead, the bigger problems came with her adjustment to the bright, exciting and sometimes overwhelming new world she found herself in. We had to teach her how to play. She loved her room filled with colourful toys, but had no idea what to do with them. She was also severely malnourished. My visions of us sharing hearty home-cooked meals vanished when I realised Marina had only ever eaten porridge-like slosh. She was unnerved by all the new tastes and textures and had to be weaned on to proper food like a baby.

During this steep learning curve, Gideon and I would just look at each other, at a loss for what to do. Luckily, Marina was more resilient. In her first playgroup sessions she'd stay glued to my lap, just watching, but after a few weeks she wanted to be down on the floor with the other children, getting stuck in. She had portage sessions - which aid the development and wellbeing of young children with disabilities through play - and my physiotherapy training meant I could help her with exercises to strengthen her muscles. I had to fight the urge to be overprotective of her, though her fierce independence was already becoming evident.

I'd always assumed you'd have to work at bonding with a child you hadn't conceived. That it must take time and patience on both sides. But with Marina, it was instant. There was nothing planned or rational about my love for her - I had no choice in the matter. It just felt natural. When she was upset, I wanted to make it better. And when she broke the silence of those initial months and uttered her first words - 'dog' and 'cat', followed within days by hundreds more she'd obviously been saving up inside - I was so happy I sobbed. Her progress stunned everyone.

In 2012, I gave birth to Seth and our family became complete. I wondered if I'd feel



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differently towards our biological child but I can honestly say the deep, primal, unconditional love I felt when I first held my son is exactly the same as I felt for Marina on that balcony in Russia. Marina is now nearly six. I know that one day, when she's older, she'll start asking questions. We've always told her she was adopted, but she's yet to really understand what that means. She'll go through a period of loss when she realises I'm not her 'real'

mum, and learns about the mother who left her at the orphanage, unable to care for such a disabled child.

To outsiders, though, Marina and I could well be mother and daughter. We look spookily similar and, like me, she's stubborn and independent - nothing stands in her way. She sits upright and moves fast on her natural stumps, but also wears prosthetics and if she wants to do something, she'll say, 'Quick, put my legs on!' She goes to a mainstream school, takes part in sport, protects her little brother, dresses herself, writes and draws - everything her able-bodied friends can do.

People assume caring for a child like Marina is all about disability, but most of the time, our lives are pretty average, filled with the usual school runs and swimming lessons. Our home has a step for her to reach the toilet and an inflatable bath seat, but we haven't filled it with specialist equipment. She has an electric wheelchair for long trips out, but otherwise sits on ordinary chairs, climbs the stairs on her own and can even get in and out of a car unaided - all of which means she can get around without needing help.

There will always be challenges, but we work them out together, through perseverance rather than sacrifice. Of course there will be times when she'll get cross, frustrated or upset that she's different, but I do believe she can live a normal, independent life, do almost any job she wants, and, I hope, find love just like anyone else. Recently, she was set homework to draw what she wanted to be when she grew up. She drew herself with running blades, like the athletes she'd seen at the Paralympics. She knew if she wanted to run, she'd need faster legs.

I was so proud of her; I realised she was aware of exactly who she was and what she needed to know to achieve things.

I could have had an easier life, but the one I have now is far better than I could have ever imagined. When people say it's amazing what we did in adopting Marina, I don't know how to react. All I can say is that it just happened. In that moment on the balcony in Russia, I saw the future Marina could have - and now she has it. She found us and we found her. 📍

The Promise works to improve the lives of disabled children in Russia. To donate, or to find out more, visit thepromise.org.uk



Jo, husband Gideon and baby Marina in Moscow, 2010 and TOP: with Marina, aged five, and Seth, two