

THREE FEET HIGH & RISING

SUMMARY

It is a young mother's most horrible nightmare. Lying there in the glare of the delivery room in those last terrible, glorious moments of giving birth. All of her hopes, all of her future dreams are coming together at this very moment. With joy and relief, she feels her baby's arrival and then – she hears the doctor say the words every woman dreads in the deepest part of her soul. “Uh oh. There's something wrong here.”

This is a story about courage. About bravery in the face of a decision everyone in your world begs you not to make. It is the story of a beautiful life that was not supposed to be, and a heart-breaking death that came way too soon. Most of all, it is the story of a mother's choice. Back in the days just before sonograms and new medical breakthroughs would reveal the mysteries taking place in a woman's womb, Vikki Cordova became pregnant with her second child. Like a lot of women at the time, Vikki had been taking the now infamous prescription drug, Bendectin, to treat nausea. She still vividly remembers the gasps and horrified expressions of the doctor and nurses attending her on that fateful day. Her fists curl in anger at the helplessness she felt when, without her ever getting to see him, her baby boy was whisked away.

A few hours after delivery, when doctors finally felt she was calm and rational enough to be told what had happened, Vikki and her husband heard the gut-wrenching news. Their baby, whom they had already named Marco, had been born what the doctor called “a monster.” Severely retarded. He was without arms and had extremely deformed legs. With no hope of anything even resembling a normal life. The doctor told a heart broken Vikki that to bring such a “monster” into her home would pose impossible burdens, maybe even destroy her marriage and her family along with it. Under pressure from everyone around her, Vikki reluctantly agreed to the doctor's suggestion that baby Marco be sent to a foster home where he could live out his short life under expert care and without pain. The doctor privately told Marco's father that he should do everything within his power to resist any requests Vikki made to see her baby. To do so would be very damaging for all concerned.

For three months Vikki stifled her anger at what had happened and her longing to see, even if just once, the child to whom she had given birth. She spent many days alone, depressed and crying for her loss, and for the tragedy of her innocent son's life. As he was instructed, her husband forbade her to visit Marco. But in the end the decision would not be his to make. On a July afternoon, Vikki went by herself to the foster home where Marco was living. She could see that the infant boy did not have arms and had severely deformed legs. The doctor's report had been accurate in describing the physical defects. But Vikki also saw something else. Something maybe only a mother could see. Looking past his terrible deformities, Vikki saw a gorgeous, bright eyed young face, and a beautiful head of dark curly hair. A face shining with life and despite what the doctors had told her, eyes bristling with curiosity and intelligence. And so in defiance of her husband, her friends, the doctors and everyone else she had sought for advice, Vikki reclaimed her little boy and brought him home to live.

The next part of Vikki's story is a miracle. Showered with love and support, Marco grew into the bright, happy boy she saw in the foster home that morning. He lit up the house with his laughter. From the earliest age he showed a fearless determination to overcome his astonishing handicaps. A local reporter, hearing about this amazing family did a story on Marco. And the world quickly noticed. Talk shows followed and Marco became a poster child for the March of Dimes. Showered with support from strangers, with the love of his incredible family and armed with his

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own fierce determination, Marco defied the experts at every turn. During his amazing life, Marco was proven to have many talents and to be of above average intelligence. He learned to write, use the telephone, play the drums and guitar and in many ways amaze people with his deftness and skills. He attended regular public schools. If he needed a special tool to do something, he fabricated it himself and even learned to weld. He played golf and soccer. He wrote poetry, made detailed art drawings, had girlfriends and learned to drive a specially equipped car. He had his own heavy metal band. In his short life Marco became an inspiration to thousands of other kids in his situation.

Despite all of Marco's seeming success in overcoming his birth defects, as he grew into a teenager and young man things began to change for him. For the first time in his life he started to realize that no matter how many things he taught himself to do, there were limitations in his life and he was different. Like a lot of kids he sometimes got into trouble as the confusion and turmoil of growing up and facing adult life set in. In the end, however, there was the constant mutual love between Vikki, the rest of their amazing family and Marco that kept them all together and got them through.

And then it happened. At the age of 27, on a beautiful evening, not far from their northern California home, Marco was as always defying the odds by taking a trip to the corner store on his skateboard down the country lane in front of his parents' ranch. He saw the truck that was going way too fast and veering all over the road before it hit him. His family knows this because they heard him scream just before the fatal moment of impact. Marco's father rushed across the large property and down the street to find Marco on the road. No one knows if he was killed instantly, or if he suffered in the minutes it took for his father and the ambulance to reach him. The driver fled the scene, and was later found to have been drunk and underage. When Vikki rushed to the scene to see her son, the ambulance workers held her back. It would not be good for anyone to look upon such a disaster she was told. The funeral director and her older son also pleaded with her not to look at his body at the funeral home, so that her final memories would not be of horrific injuries. The same things she had been told all those years ago in the hospital delivery room. Marco's casket was closed at his memorial service.

And so ended an amazing journey and the incredible story of a mother and her choice. When asked now if the decision she made way back then was the right one, for her family, for her son, Vikki nods her head. For all the loss and tragedy, there were also mostly happy, wonderful times and Marco was and continues to be an inspiration to all who met him. Many people have said that he lived more, faced more, and accomplished more in his 27 years than many people do who live into old age. And when you see the startling footage of this beautiful little boy, you can't help but agree.

On a universal note, research statistics show that an average of 78% of women who, through amniocentesis or sonogram, find out that their unborn child is mentally or physically disabled, choose to abort the pregnancy and not have the baby.

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ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

John Coppola - Director

Born into a filmmaking family and a native of Brooklyn, New York, John Coppola is a multi-talented director, producer, teacher and actor whose career has taken him from the footlights of Broadway to the soundstages of Hollywood. John began his acting career over twenty years ago, attending Yale's prestigious Dramat Purple Crayon. He first appeared on Broadway in Neil Simon's *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, followed by *Biloxi Blues*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *American Buffalo*, and the European revival tours of *Hair* and *West Side Story*. John's television credits include Fox TV's *Herman's Head*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, among others. On film, John starred in *Into the Paradise* and has also appeared in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *Out of Gas on Lover's Leap*, and Terry Southern's *You Gotta Leave Your Mark*. John also produced and starred-in his award-winning one-man show entitled *The DeVivo Variation*, which premiered at the prestigious HBO Workspace in Los Angeles, and successfully ran for over two years on both coasts, garnering two Critic's Choice Awards and a Dramalogue Award. As a director, John has helmed over twenty-five theatrical productions in New York, Los Angeles, and abroad. His credits include groundbreaking productions of Shakespeare, Brecht, John Patrick Shanley, and Caryl Churchill. John's directorial accolades include the award for Best Director at the 2005 New York International Film & Video Festival for his film, *Possibility*, which also took the Grand Jury Prize for short film. Most recently, he has completed *Bourbon Street*, a new television pilot he directed in New Orleans for producer, Joel Castleberg. John currently lives in Los Angeles, where as part of Studio C, he offers his unique style of acting and private coaching to a thriving group of students, established actors, and movie stars.

Michael Sonntag – Producer

Michael Sonntag is a film and television producer, casting director, teacher, and actor. Born and raised in St. Louis, MO, Michael began his career producing local evening news for NBC, after graduating from the University of Notre Dame. He has worked both in front of and behind the camera, in a wide range of positions - most recently, developing several films with his business partner, John Coppola. His producing credits include Co-Producer on award-winning director Vince DiPersio's acclaimed feature documentary, *Truth In Terms Of Beauty*, and Associate Producer & UPM on *Semper Fi: One Marine's Journey*, for Showtime. Michael also served as line producer and casting director for the television series, *Bourbon Street*, for Rampart Entertainment. His other casting credits include the feature film, *Nephilim*, as well as a number of commercials for clients such as TV Land, Centegra Health, and FleetStreet Games. His next project will be a web series for The Disney Channel. Prior to starting his own company, Michael held the titles of Director of Development for Shakrah Films; associate producer for Alton Entertainment, where he was involved in the development, writing, and daily production of their television shows; and as a freelance producer on a number of commercial and industrial projects for Dark Light Pictures. Michael's varied career has included a position at Roth Capital Partners, where he assisted in arranging venture capital for several internet IPO's, as well as working for many years as an actor in Hollywood. One of the founding partners of Studio C, he also currently teaches acting classes to both kids and adults, and offers private coaching. Michael is very proud of his work with Voices in Harmony, a mentoring program that links actors with inner-city teens, and was instrumental in the productions of two of their stage shows, as well as their film, *Listen: Everyone Has a Story to Tell*, starring Jim Carrey.

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Vince DiPersio – Executive Producer

“A genuine iconoclastic talent worth applauding.”

Variety – April 10, 1997

These words in response to Vince DiPersio’s second feature film, *The Price of Kissing* just begin to tell the tale. Three Academy Award nominations, three Emmys, prizes from film festivals around the world, the Robert F. Kennedy Award for Journalism, Vince brings a level of passion and excitement to every project he embarks on.

Over the course of his career Vince has done award-winning documentaries for HBO, CBS, Turner Television, Frontline, ABC, Showtime. He has written and directed features for David Putnam and MDP Worldwide. He’s done re-writes for projects such as Robert Townsend’s *Little Richard* and sold his own screenplays on *Houdini* to TNT and on Robert Kennedy’s Last Campaign to Ed Zwick and Fox Studios. He’s written TV pilots for Tom Fontana and HBO and for James Elroy and FX Television.

Vince has directed major TV commercials for Reebok, LucasFilm, Fox Studios, and Universal. Five years ago he started his own independent documentary company, Sputnik Pictures and so far they’ve produced three films on their own, the last of which is Vince’s own *People of Earth*. That film, a definitely wacky look at people obsessed with aliens and alien abductions is currently playing at festivals around the country.

Vince’s recent film, *The Truth In Terms Of Beauty*, about the legendary Jazz photographer Herman Leonard was given a special screening at South by Southwest and a special showcase at the Maui Film Festival. His most recent film, *Semper fi – One Marine’s Journey* premieres on Showtime in June. The film has won Best Documentary at the Breckenridge Film Festival, Best American Documentary at the Swansea Film Festival, Best Documentary and Audience Choice Award as Best Film at the Birmingham Film Festival. Vince is currently putting together his next independent feature, *Howl*, about a wild twenty-four hours in the lives of beat lions, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady. He is also in post-production on his new film, *The Forgiveness Project* for Paulist Productions. That film, for theatrical release, is scheduled for completion late spring.