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Higgins



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Today I found an abandoned baby on the tube.

I was on my way back from Oxford Street with Angie. We'd gone up after school to see the lights and do a spot of late-night Christmas shopping. As far as our mums were concerned we'd stayed late at school, practising for the carol concert. I can't sing for toffee but I do play the violin (badly, considering the millions of lessons I've had) and because there are only two of us at our school who do, and the other one is the music teacher, I'm in demand at this time of year. Angie's got a lovely voice, sweet and clear as a bell, and she always gets to sing the solo, so both our mums believed us when we said we had a rehearsal.

We'd bought lots of small stuff like jewellery and make-up and underwear with Christmas motifs on them so we could get them home without anyone noticing. We're busy sifting through them when this dead fit boy

gets on and sits down next to me. I pull a pair of bright red knickers covered in sprigs of holly out of my pocket and pretend to examine them to see what he'll do. Angie starts to giggle. She gets up and stands with her back against the pole, her phone out ready to take a photo, but he's got his ears plugged into his iPod and his face stuck inside a free newspaper and he doesn't bat an eyelid. After a while she turns her attention elsewhere.

'Aahh,' she says. 'Aren't you gorgeous?'

'What?' I lift my head, startled. I'd stuffed the knickers back in my pocket so I could inspect the five pairs of earrings I'd bought: one for Mum, one for Grandma, one for Angie (she'd chosen them but she still wanted them wrapped up), one for me for going out, one for my brother Felix (no, I'm joking), one spare in case someone bought me a surprise Christmas present. Well, you never know, do you? They'd got tangled up together in the bag and I was trying to sort them out.

'Look, Gabs,' she says. 'Blooming beautiful, yeah?'

Angie was bending over, her head inside a pram. Might've known it. Angie's attracted to babies like magnets are to fridge doors. You'd think she'd have had enough with all the kids in her family: she's got so many, all of them living in the same block of flats, you can't tell who's a proper sibling, who's a step, who's a cousin and who's just wandered in off the street. It's the same with

the grown-ups, everyone's called Aunty or Uncle. Something though I'm sure they're not all related. For ages, when I first got to know her, I thought her gran was her mum.

It's not surprising really. She calls her Mimi, everyone does. Plus, her gran looks loads younger than *my* mum.

'Yeah,' I agree, trying not to sound as bored as I felt. Honestly, Angie's hopeless. Last summer we went down to Brighton for the day on the train on our own and we walked along the seafront to eye up the talent but I swear she was far more interested in inspecting the contents of the baby buggies. She'll end up like her mum, with a baby at sixteen, the way she's going.

'Come and have a look, Gabs.' She's practically drooling over this pram. Its hood is up but she's pushed her face up close and is grinning inanely at the contents. I sigh, put away the earrings and stand up obediently. Angie moves back to let me see. Two dark eyes stare up at me from inside a nest of blankets. It's a little girl, ebony-skinned, a curl of jet-black hair caught up in a red festive ribbon on top of her head.

'Cute,' I say perfunctorily, but to be honest I'm not that impressed. I don't really get babies. From the little I know about them, they seem to be a whole lot of hard work for no gain. As far as I can remember from my little brother Freddie who's six now, going on seven, they cry

a lot, are sick all the time, do horrible stinky things in their nappies and keep everyone awake at night. Like, why would you go gaga over someone with no teeth who can't even control their own bowel movements? I mean, we'd been to the old people's home to do a Christmas concert last week and I didn't see Angie simpering all over the old biddies there. It's the same thing, isn't it?

Suddenly I sneeze, twice. Loudly. It's hard to sneeze silently. It's *impossible* to sneeze with your eyes open, I've tried it.

'Ahh, you made her laugh!'

I look back at the pram. For some reason the baby seems to think my sneezing is outrageously funny. She's smiling up at me in delight, her cheeks stretched wide in a big gummy grin. I laugh and she chuckles back at me, her eyes shining.

'She thinks you're hilarious, Gabby!'

'I am, aren't I?'

To my surprise, she coos back at me. I've never spoken directly to a baby before, not since I've grown up I mean. I always thought they wouldn't know what you were talking about and I'd feel stupid. And there was no way I'd ever do that baby talk thing in a high, squeaky voice, it's too embarrassing. Anyway, I've never actually come across a baby at such close quarters before, not since

Freddie, which was ages ago. As far as I can remember, I used to avoid him as much as possible, like I do now.

The baby sounds just like one of the pigeons in Trafalgar Square. I giggle and say without thinking, 'You're a little birdy, you are,' and then I feel silly because I've used baby language after all, but she chuckles again as if she thinks that's the funniest thing she's ever heard. I'm right, she *is* cute.

I straighten up and her smile disappears. She studies me intently as if she's afraid she'll miss something, like I'm a stand-up comic and she's my number one fan. Her eyes are wide open and framed by long, dark lashes. She's waiting. 'What?' I ask her. 'What do you want?'

She beams again and arches her back in delight, pushing her tummy up.

Angie laughs. 'I never knew you were good with babies.'

'I'm not! I don't like them.'

'She likes you!'

It's true, she does. I cross my eyes and she chortles and waves her arms about. She gives a little grunt as if she's prompting me to entertain her some more so I cross my eyes again, sticking my tongue out as well this time for good measure. I'm rewarded with a series of chuckles from the pram, like she's having a convulsion or something. iPod Boy gets up and stands by the door, like

he thinks it's a good idea to make a quick getaway. I stick my tongue out at *him* this time, behind his back.

'Who does she belong to?' asks Angie.

'Dunno.' I glance around. 'Those two, I guess.'

I indicate a couple talking animatedly. The baby's eyes move from my face to Angie's and back and she grunts again, seeking my attention. She likes me best. The train slows down as it pulls into a station and the doors open. iPod Boy quickly steps down on to the platform followed by nearly everybody else in the carriage, including the couple who dive off at the last minute.

'Oops! They've forgotten her!' I say and Angie looks momentarily stunned as the doors close and the train pulls away. 'Only joking!'

'Who's she with then?'

I glance around and spot a blonde woman sitting further down the carriage, reading to a toddler on her knee. 'Her, I suppose.'

Angie snorts. 'I don't think so.'

'Why not?'

'Duh!' She grins at me, showing her even, white teeth. 'Wrong colour?'

'Oh yeah.' I grin back. The baby could have been Angie's actually, she's got the same perfect dusky skin and bright eyes. She's still staring unblinkingly at me, like I'm the most fascinating person she's ever seen in her life,

then, suddenly, she gives a huge, pink yawn, her mouth so wide she looks as if she's going to swallow herself. Her fists come up to scrub furiously at her eyes then she turns her head to one side, puts her thumb in her mouth, encircles her nose with a tiny finger and clutches compulsively at the top of her blanket with her other hand. Her eyes close. Within seconds she's fast asleep. I feel disappointed. No, more than that, I feel dismissed, like when I've had a telling-off at school and it's all over and I'm told to go. My presence is no longer required.

'She's got to be with someone,' insists Angie.

I look up and down the carriage. There's a bloke asleep on his own, his head lolling back, mouth open, the shadow of fatigue beneath his eyes. A rucksack lies at his feet. He looks as if he's on his way home from work. 'Can't be him.'

'What about her then?' Angie nods towards an old woman with untidy grey hair, surrounded by bags. She's bundled up inside woolly cardigans, a grubby scarf and a big scruffy coat and she's mumbling away to herself.

'No way!' My lip curls in derision. My eyes move back to the sleeping baby, clean and well-cared-for in her nest of soft blankets, even if her pram isn't brand-new. Somebody loves her and it's definitely not some old bag lady. I search the carriage again. The only other

occupants left are two boys in school uniform, flicking bits of paper at each other, and an elderly Chinese couple. 'Do you think she's with them?'

It was Angie's turn to be scathing. 'Like, on a scale of one to ten, I guess that's a nought.'

'Well, there's nobody else.'

'Do you think she's been abandoned?' Angie's face lights up with excitement. She loves a drama, does Angie.

'Don't be daft,' I say automatically. 'She can't have been.'

But my voice falters. Could she? Could someone abandon a little scrap like that? Maybe. You read about stuff like this in the newspaper every day. I glance up at the tube map. 'It's our stop next.'

'What are we going to do?' asks Angie, looking genuinely upset. 'Poor little thing. We can't leave her here.'

'She's got to be with someone.'

'Who? Gabby, we get off in a minute!'

'I don't know! Let me think.'

'I bet it was that couple. I bet they've got no money to look after her. Maybe he's found out she's not his and he's given his girlfriend an ultimatum. Me or the baby, but you can't have us both. Or maybe they've kidnapped her and now they've got the ransom, they're ditching her. I bet they're—'

'Angie, SHUT UP!' The train's slowing down. The sleeping guy wakes up, stretches and picks up his bag. The

woman closes the book and sets the toddler on her feet, holding her steady by the arm as the train lurches its way into the station. The bag lady continues arguing with herself and the Chinese couple stare impassively out of the window as the platform appears. The boys stand up, slinging their bags on their shoulders and move towards the door, tripping each other up as they go. There's a gasp of brakes as the train comes to a halt and the doors swish open.

'What are we going to do!' Angie's face is pleading, urgent.

'I don't know!'

'Right! I'm going to find someone, quick. You get the pram off, I'll get a guard.'

Angie leaps off the train and disappears up the platform. The boys and the man follow and I wait for the woman with the toddler to alight. I'm going to have to manhandle the pram on to the platform on my own, somehow.

'Excuse me.'

'Sorry?'

'Excuse me. Can I get to my pram?'

'Is she yours?'

'Yes.'

'She can't be.' My hand curls protectively round the handle.

The woman gapes at me in surprise. 'I beg your pardon?'

I study her and her little girl, both of them blonde and pink-cheeked.

I look at the sleeping baby, black hair with red bow, dark-skinned. Perfect.

'She's . . . different.'

'What?' She's irritable. 'Look I need to get off here.' She puts out her hand to reach for the pram and automatically my grip tightens. At that moment, Angie reappears, panting and red-faced, with an official in tow, a big burly guy in uniform wearing a bright yellow, day-glo safety jacket.

'What's going on here?' he asks.

'I'm trying to get off the train,' says the woman icily. 'This girl is obstructing me.'

The official glowers at me.

'It's not her baby!' I say desperately. 'It can't be.'

The man turns to her. 'Is this your baby, madam?'

'Yes. Well, no actually. Not exactly.'

'See!' I say triumphantly. 'She's trying to steal it!'

'Of course, I'm not! Don't be ridiculous.' The woman turns on me ferociously. 'I'm her child-minder, for goodness sake.' She forages around in her bag and brandishes a card at us triumphantly. 'Look! Here's my ID. I've been checked by the county council, you know!'

My heart sinks.

‘We need to check this out,’ says the official. ‘Off the train, please! Come with me, all of you.’

‘For goodness sake!’ snaps the woman, shooting me a look of pure venom. ‘I’m going to be late now! Her mother will be worried sick!’

Angie looks round wildly as if she’s contemplating making a run for it. The official must have thought so too because he grabs her by the arm. ‘Not so fast, young lady,’ he says and the next second he’s calling for assistance on his radio mike. Within minutes we’re all being escorted to the lift by more day-glo, luminescent look-alikes.

‘My gran’ll go crazy if I’m arrested!’ whispers Angie.

‘It’s all your fault!’

‘No it isn’t!’

‘I’m sorry,’ I plead miserably to the woman’s back, ramrod straight with rage, as she blazes along the platform, pushing the pram before her. ‘It was all a mistake!’

In answer she turns round and stabs me furiously through the heart with her eyes. I fall silent, wounded to the core. The baby wakes up and starts crying.

Honestly, it could only happen to Angie and me. It *was* her fault.

I don’t even like babies, for goodness sake!



It works out all right in the end, after we explain everything to the transport police. Poor Angie, she was trembling. She was scared stiff her gran would find out. Mimi is pretty fearsome; she rules the whole family with a rod of iron, and she'd go absolutely ballistic if Angie was to get in trouble with the police.

I don't want my mother to find out either but for a different reason. Mum would never let me hear the end of it. She'd be telling the story at yoga-lunches and parents' evenings for years to come. She doesn't actually have a life of her own, even though she clogs it up with as many pointless activities as she can. Instead she lives vicariously through her children and seems to expect everyone else to find us as fascinating as she does.

They don't.

Actually, I'm not too keen on my dad finding out either. Not the way he is at the moment.

Anyway, it didn't come to that, thank goodness. The woman calmed down eventually, once they'd checked her credentials. In the end she even seemed to see the funny side of it. We were free to go.

When we get outside the station, Angie races off because she'll get it in the neck for being late. I debate getting a taxi but then remember I've spent all my money in the shops. Anyway, I won't get in trouble like Angie, just as long as I'm home before Dad. Mum'll have her hands full with Freddie and won't even have noticed I'm late. So I set off walking in the other direction. You'd never think we were in the same catchment area for our school. Angie lives in the flats on the estate. I live in one of the so-called posh houses by the park.

By the time I get home, I'm starving.

'What's for tea?' I yell as soon as I get through the door. All the low-energy lights in our house are blazing furiously. That's my mother, a walking, talking, contradiction in terms. She's for ever reading up about how we should be saving the planet and spends a fortune on being green.

The house is nice and tidy, the cleaner's been. From upstairs I can hear water splashing and somebody screaming blue murder. (What is blue murder, by the way? As opposed to ordinary murder, that is.)

‘Where’ve you been?’

My brother, Felix, is huddled under a duvet on the sofa watching television. He’s wearing an Alice band.

‘That’s mine,’ I say automatically.

‘No it’s not, I bought it myself.’

‘Don’t let Dad see you wearing it.’

He pulls a face.

‘How was school?’

He pulls a worse face and snuggles further under the duvet. ‘Why are you late?’

‘Been shopping. Got your Christmas pressie.’

His face lights up. ‘Can I see it?’

I empty the earrings on to the sofa. ‘Take your pick.’

He looks up at me quizzically. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Get real! What do you want, anyway?’

His face falls. ‘Dunno. I’ll have a think.’

‘Where’s Mum?’

‘Bathing Freddie. Can’t you hear?’

Freddie’s wails pierce the air. Even for him, they’re impressive.

‘He’s having his hair washed.’

‘He’s nearly seven. He should be washing his own hair,’ I say irritably, scooping the earrings back into my pocket. ‘Angie’s little sister’s not even five and she can shower and wash her own hair.’

‘Freddie can’t even wipe his own bum,’ observes Felix.

Then he adds in a touching moment of honesty, ‘He can beat me at footie though.’

‘And tag rugby, and swimming, and cricket, and running,’ I point out helpfully.

‘And catching, and short tennis. Most things really,’ Felix says morosely. ‘Horrible little beast.’

‘Never mind. He still acts like a baby half the time.’

‘I know.’ Felix brightens up. ‘Mum was feeding him at teatime, off a spoon, because he wouldn’t eat his tea. She made a potato mountain for him with a fish finger fort at the top. She said the peas were enemy soldiers going up the mountain and every time he ate one, he’d captured a soldier.’

‘Did it work?’

‘Yep. He scoffed the lot. He would’ve done anyway. He was just attention-seeking.’

‘He’ll want her to do that all the time now. He’s so spoilt.’

I go into the kitchen to find something to eat. There’s a smell of burning. Something veggie, grainy and disgusting is bubbling dry on the stove. I wish I’d come home earlier and had a fish finger fort for tea. I turn the heat down and give it a stir, mixing in the black bits stuck to the bottom of the pan, then I help myself to one of Mum’s organic, wholemeal scones (home-made of course) plastering it in ‘locally-sourced’ honey. Yeah, like

there are millions of beehives round here. Upstairs the yells subside. I can hear Mum's voice singing a song I remember from my bedtimes in the dim and distant past. I pour myself a glass of milk and smother another scone with honey.

'Here she is! Here's your big sister.' Mum comes into the kitchen, out of breath, with Freddie in her arms. His legs are trailing practically all the way down to the floor. He's far too big to be carried. 'Look at this nice clean boy.'

I eye Freddie with distaste. He's blond-haired and blue-eyed which means he should be appealing, all pink-cheeked and smelling of soap as he is from his hot bath. But my little brother, far from being irresistible, is very resistible indeed, because, along with his clean, well-pressed pyjamas he's wearing his usual grumpy frown and the downturned mouth he's inherited from Dad, and he's sniffing unbecomingly.

'What's up with him?'

'He doesn't like the nasty water going in his eyes, do you, darling?' says Mum, cuddling him to her.

'He swims for his school, for goodness sake. He should be used to water in his eyes.'

'Not with nasty, stingy shampoo in it,' says Mum, nuzzling his neck. Freddie twists away from her attentions and she staggers slightly as his not

inconsiderable weight is dispersed in her arms.

‘Put him down, for goodness sake, you’ll drop him,’ I say, turning away in disgust.

Mum thankfully places him on the floor. ‘He’s getting to be such a big boy, aren’t you, darling?’

‘Yes, he’s seven soon,’ I say cuttingly, but it’s wasted on Mum.

‘My baby,’ she coos and pulls him back towards her for a cuddle. Squashed against her not inconsiderable stomach and unseen by her, he sticks his tongue out at me. I pull a face in return. Freddie whines.

‘Don’t do that, darling,’ says Mum, her arms closing protectively around him. ‘It frightens him.’

‘Stop babying him. He’s a monster.’

She’s not listening. She never does. She hasn’t even noticed I’m late home.

Yes she has.

‘You’ve missed tea, Gabby, so you can have supper tonight with Mummy and Daddy when Daddy gets home.’

‘Yippee.’

The sarcasm’s lost on her. She’s too busy brushing Freddie’s hair up into blond peaks. He looks ridiculous.

‘I want supper with Mummy and Daddy,’ whines Freddie.

‘Freddie needs his sleep,’ says Mum. ‘It’s Freddie’s

bedtime and Mummy's going to read him a lovely story.'

'I don't want a story!' yells Freddie. 'I want to watch television.'

I don't blame him either. Mum's idea of a bedtime story is disgustingly twee. She's the master (or should I say the mistress) of the silly voice and she likes to get into the persona of all the different characters. It's so annoying.

'It's too late for television, sweetheart. There are only grown-up, scary programmes on now.'

'I like grown-up, scary programmes!'

'They'll give Freddie bad dreams.'

'Felix is watching it!'

'Felix is four years older than you!' I retort furiously.

'Turn it off, Felix darling,' calls Mum predictably. 'Have you done your homework?'

Felix mumbles something indistinct but turns the television off resignedly and comes into the kitchen to get his bag. Freddie runs into the lounge and turns the telly back on. I can see him from here. He's thrown himself on the sofa and pulled Felix's duvet over him. Mum sighs.

'Five minutes, that's all, Freddie.'

Honestly, she's so . . . wet when it comes to Freddie. That little squirt runs rings around her. Normally she's a non-stop, inexhaustible bundle of energy, but sometimes

I think Freddie defeats her. It's her own fault for treating him like a baby all the time. She never treated Felix or me like that.

She was pushing it when she had Freddie, she was nearly forty. Luckily I didn't really understand at the time how embarrassing that was.

She sits down heavily at the kitchen table. She looks tired. Come to think of it, she does seem to have lost her sparkle lately. It's probably the menopause. I think that's supposed to make you tired.

'Want a cup of tea, Mum?'

Her head jerks up in surprise. No wonder. Gabby doing caring? Even I don't know where that came from. That little baby on the tube must have brought out my softer side.

'You go and give Felix a hand with his homework in the lounge. I'll bring it in to you,' I say gruffly.

She gives me a small, grateful look and for once in her life says nothing.

It's normal to be embarrassed by your parents. Most people my age complain about their parents, about their dress-sense or the way they dance, or the daft things they come out with in front of your friends or the photos they insist on showing your latest boyfriend of you naked on the carpet as a baby. But all that's par for the course, it's what you expect from parents and actually it's

quite endearing and you can have a giggle about it with your mates.

But my parents are not just embarrassing, they're mortifying, in an appalling, blush-making, cringeworthy way. No one believes me till they meet them. Then no one believes I belong to them.

In fact, my whole family is awful. Except for Gran, maybe. She's more on my wavelength. I can cope with her.

I can't cope with my mother and father.

Especially my mother.

Mum is called Posy of all things. Actually that's not her real name, she was christened Pauline, but that doesn't suit her image at all, so she's reinvented herself as Posy. Posy is loud, and large in a windmill sort of way, wider at the bottom with flailing arms that thrash about a lot. She's quite wide at the top too, with a big bosom and a broad pink face that peers short-sightedly at the world through rimless spectacles. I swear she's getting fatter by the day. Maybe she's more like a lighthouse than a windmill because she beams at people all the time and, if that doesn't get their attention, she booms at them like a foghorn, in a rich, plummy tone. Goodness knows where the posh accent came from, Gran speaks with a northern twang. My mother also enfolds people to her bosom a lot which can be quite scary when you meet

her for the first time. And, as I mentioned before, she's ancient.

Why couldn't I have had a cool mum like Angie's? She's young and pretty with long dark hair which she straightens and wears back in a pony tail and she's got huge dark eyes with long sweeping eyelashes like Angie's, and great cheekbones. She works in a solicitor's office, even though she left school to have Angie at sixteen. Mum says she's done really well for herself, in her best patronizing voice. When she comes to parents' evenings all the boys fancy her and all the girls drool over her clothes, which are the same as they wear, only they look better on her because she's got a great figure and bags of confidence.

More often than not, Angie's gran comes too and even she looks OK, just normal, middle-aged-smart, and not too conspicuous. Last time, because we were choosing our options for GCSEs, her stepdad came as well and he's cool as, with a shaved head and a black leather jacket and jeans. They all spent ages deciding the best subjects Angie should take. She wants to do something with child-care. What a surprise.

I haven't a clue what I want to do.

Mum and Dad came to the parents' evening of course. It was the highlight of their social calendar, they wouldn't have missed it for the world. They brought Felix and

Freddie with them too. Mum turned up wearing some sort of bright pink and orange patterned tent that actually, I happen to know, cost the earth, but looked hideous, and green wellies with frogs on them because it was raining. I could see everybody nudging each other and giggling.

Dad was in his business suit, all buttoned up and creased around the middle where he's got a load of middle-aged spread. Or, if I'm to be brutally honest, maybe I should say, old-age spread. You see, he's even older than Mum. He's called Leonard and he's a city analyst (don't ask, it's too boring for words) and back in the dark ages he used to be Mum's boss, that's how they met. He looks donkeys' years older than any of my friends' dads. He's going bald – not trendy, shaven-headed bald, but receding, greasy-strands-combed-over-the-skull bald – and he's got a droopy grey moustache and a face like a melted candle, all saggy and lined. When he walks, his head bows gently to one side as if it's too heavy for him and his shoulders droop with the weight of it all.

OK, maybe I am being a bit harsh. I've made him sound horrible. He's not that bad really. It's just that, at the moment, I'm a bit fed up with him. He's not being very much fun.

Felix had his long brown hair tied back in a ponytail that night. Not too bad, but he'd used a scrunchie which

attracted a bit of unwelcome attention from the boys, though he sat there in a world of his own as usual and didn't notice. At least he sat still. Freddie was being a pain, running around and crashing into people and generally getting in the way. When we were talking to my form teacher, he was crawling around under her desk and inspecting the contents of her bag as if he was about one year old. Mum was oblivious to it all, rabbiting away loudly to Miss Bell who was obviously more worried about what Freddie was doing rooting round in her personal possessions than my future. Justifiably as it turned out, when he started emptying out her box of tampons on the floor and playing spitfires with them, to everyone's amusement except mine and my teacher's.

'He doesn't understand,' said Mum as Miss Bell snatched them off him and stuffed them back in her bag, her cheeks on fire. Little horror, he understood all right. He's for ever messing about with my private things.

It was a waste of time after that. Miss Bell had lost concentration and obviously couldn't give a stuff what subjects I decided to do next year, she just wanted to get rid of the monster under her desk. I think she may have put me down for Life Skills to get her own back. I'll end up with all the losers.

Outside Dad's car pulls up. Felix is sitting at the table with Mum, his head bent over a book, but I can see his

face darken. Mum looks up and glances at Freddie but he's switched off the television without even being asked.

'Bed?' she asks quietly and he nods and gets to his feet. 'Come on, soldier,' she says and picks him up. 'Make Daddy a drink, would you, Gabby darling?'

I go back out to the kitchen without a word. Best to do as Mum says.

Dad's been a bit grumpy lately.

We're all walking on eggshells.