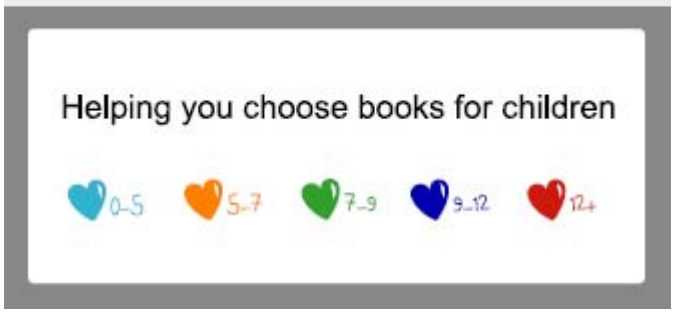
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Today I found an abandoned baby on the tube.

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 is 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!