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Pretty Baby

Written by Mary Kubica

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H E I D I

The first time I see her, she is standing at the Fullerton Station, on the train platform, clutching an infant in her arms. She braces herself and the baby as the purple line express soars past and out to Linden. It's the 8th of April, forty-eight degrees and raining. The rain lurches down from the sky, here, there and everywhere, the wind untamed and angry. A bad day for hair.

The girl is dressed in a pair of jeans, torn at the knee. Her coat is thin and nylon, an army green. She has no hood, no umbrella. She tucks her chin into the coat and stares straight ahead while the rain saturates her. Those around her cower beneath umbrellas, no one offering to share. The baby is quiet, stuffed inside the mother's coat like a joey in a kangaroo pouch. Tufts of slimy pink fleece sneak out from the coat and I convince myself that the baby, sound asleep in what feels to me like utter bedlam—chilled to the bone, the thunderous sound of the “L” soaring past—is a girl.

There's a suitcase beside her feet, vintage leather, brown and worn, beside a pair of lace-up boots, soaked thoroughly through.

She can't be older than sixteen.

She's thin. Malnourished, I tell myself, but maybe she's just thin. Her clothes droop. Her jeans are baggy, her coat too big.

A CTA announcement signals a train approaching, and the brown line pulls into the station. A cluster of morning rush hour commuters crowd into the warmer, drier train, but the girl does not move. I hesitate for a moment—feeling the need to do *something*—but then board the train like the other do-nothings and, slinking into a seat, watch out the window as the doors close and we slide away, leaving the girl and her baby in the rain.

But she stays with me all day.

I ride the train into the Loop, to the Adams/Wabash Station, and inch my way out, down the steps and onto the waterlogged street below, into the acrid sewage smell that hovers at the corners of the city streets, where the pigeons amble along in staggering circles, beside garbage bins and homeless men and millions of city dwellers rushing from point A to point B in the rain.

I spend whole chunks of time—between meetings on adult literacy and GED preparation and tutoring a man from Mumbai in ESL—imagining the girl and child wasting the better part of the day on the train's platform, watching the "L" come and go. I invent stories in my mind. The baby is colicky and only sleeps in flux. The vibration of approaching trains is the key to keeping the baby asleep. The woman's umbrella—I picture it, bright red with flamboyant golden daisies—was manhandled by a great gust of wind, turned inside out, as they tend to do, on days like this. It broke. The umbrella, the baby, the suitcase: it was more than her two arms could carry. Of course she couldn't leave the baby behind. And the suitcase? What was inside that suitcase that was of more importance than an umbrella on a day like this? Maybe she stood there all day, waiting. Maybe she was waiting for an arrival rather than a departure.

Or maybe she hopped on the red line seconds after the brown line disappeared from view.

When I come home that night, she's gone. I don't tell Chris about this because I know what he would say: who cares?

I help Zoe with her math homework at the kitchen table. Zoe says that she hates math. This comes as no surprise to me. These days Zoe hates most everything. She's twelve. I can't be certain, but I remember my "I hate everything" days coming much later than that: sixteen or seventeen. But these days everything comes sooner. I went to kindergarten to play, to learn my ABCs; Zoe went to kindergarten to learn to read, to become more technologically savvy than me. Boys and girls are entering puberty sooner, up to two years sooner in some cases, than my own generation. Ten-year-olds have cell phones; seven- and eight-year-old girls have breasts.

Chris eats dinner and then disappears to the office, as he always does, to pour over sleepy, coma-inducing spreadsheets until after Zoe and I have gone to bed.

The next day she's there again. The girl. And again it's raining. Only the second week of April, and already the meteorologists are predicting record rainfall for the month. The wettest April on record, they say. The day before, O'Hare reported 0.6 inches of rain for a single day. It's begun to creep into basements, collect in the pleats of low-lying city streets. Airport flights have been cancelled and delayed. I remind myself, *April showers bring May flowers*, tuck myself into a creamy waterproof parka and sink my feet into a pair of rubber boots for the trek to work.

She wears the same torn jeans, the same army-green jacket, the same lace-up boots. The vintage suitcase rests beside her feet. She shivers in the raw air, the baby writhing and upset. She bounces the baby up and down, up and down, and I read her lips—*shh*. I hear women beside me, drinking their piping

hot coffee beneath oversize golf umbrellas: *she shouldn't have that baby outside. On a day like today?* they sneer. *What's wrong with that girl? Where is the baby's hat?*

The purple line express soars past; the brown line rolls in and stops and the do-nothings file their way in like the moving products of an assembly line.

I linger, again, wanting to *do something*, but not wanting to seem intrusive or offensive. There's a fine line between helpful and disrespectful, one which I don't want to cross. There could be a million reasons why she's standing with the suitcase, holding the baby in the rain, a million reasons other than the one nagging thought that dawdles at the back of my brain: she's homeless.

I work with people who are often poverty stricken, mostly immigrants. Literacy statistics in Chicago are bleak. About a third of adults have a low level of literacy, which means they can't fill out job applications; they can't read directions or know which stop along the "L" track is theirs. They can't help their children with their homework.

The faces of poverty are grim: elderly women curled into balls on benches in the city's parks, their life's worth pushed around in a shopping cart as they scavenge the garbage for food; men pressed against high-rise buildings on the coldest of January days, sound asleep, a cardboard sign leaned against their inert body: Please Help. Hungry. God Bless. The victims of poverty live in substandard housing, in dangerous neighborhoods; their food supply is inadequate at best; they often go hungry. They have little or no access to health care, to proper immunization; their children go to underfunded schools, develop behavioral problems, witness violence. They have a greater risk of engaging in sexual activity, among other things, at a young age and thus, the cycle repeats itself. Teenage girls give birth to infants with low

birth weights, they have little access to health care, they cannot be properly immunized, the children get sick. They go hungry.

Poverty, in Chicago, is highest among blacks and Hispanics, but that doesn't negate the fact that a white girl can be poor.

All this scuttles through my mind in the split second I wonder what to do. Help the girl. Get on the train. Help the girl. Get on the train. Help the girl.

But then, to my surprise, the girl boards the train. She slips through the doors seconds before the automated announcement—*bing, bong, doors closing*—and I follow along, wondering where it is that we're going, the girl, her baby and me.

The car is crowded. A man rises from his seat, which he graciously offers to the girl; without a word, she accepts, scooting into the metal pew beside a wheeler-dealer in a long black coat, a man who looks at the baby as if it might just be from Mars. Passengers lose themselves in the morning commute—they're on their cell phones, on their laptops and other technological gadgets, they're reading novels, the newspaper, the morning's briefing; they sip their coffee and stare out the window at the city skyline, lost in the gloomy day. The girl carefully removes the baby from her kangaroo pouch. She unfolds the pink fleece blanket, and miraculously, beneath that blanket, the baby appears dry. The train lurches toward the Armitage station, soaring behind brick buildings and three and four flats, so close to people's homes I imagine the way they shake as the "L" passes by, glasses rattling in cabinets, TVs silenced by the reverberation of the train, every few minutes of the live long day and long into the night. We leave Lincoln Park, and head into Old Town, and somewhere along the way the baby settles down, her wailing reduced to a quiet whimper to the obvious relief of those on the train.

I'm forced to stand farther away from the girl than I'd like to be. Bracing myself for the unpredictability of the train's

movements, I peer past bodies and briefcases for the occasional glimpse—flawless ivory skin, patchy red from crying—the mother’s hollow cheeks—a white Onesies jumpsuit—the desperate, hungry suction on a pacifier—vacant eyes. A woman walks by and says, “Cute baby.” The girl forces a smile.

Smiling does not come naturally to the girl. I imagine her beside Zoe and know that she is older: the hopelessness in her eyes, for one, the lack of Zoe’s raw vulnerability, another. And of course, there is the baby (I have myself convinced that Zoe still believes babies are delivered by storks), though beside the businessman the girl is diminutive, like a child. Her hair is disproportional: cut blunt on one side, shoulder length the other. It’s drab, like an old sepia photograph, yellowing with time. There are streaks of red, not her natural hue. She wears dark, heavy eye makeup, smeared from the rain, hidden behind a screen of long, protective bangs.

The train slows its way into the Loop, careening around twists and turns. I watch as the baby is swaddled once again in the pink fleece and stuffed into the nylon coat and prepare myself for their departure. She gets off before I do, at State/Van Buren, and I watch through the window, trying not to lose her in the heavy congestion that fills the city streets at this time of day.

But I do anyway, and just like that, she’s gone.

C H R I S

“How was your day?” Heidi asks when I walk in the front door. I’m greeted by the funky scent of cumin, the sound of cable news from the living room TV, Zoe’s stereo blasting down the hall. On the news: record rainfall clobbering the Midwest. An accumulated collection of *wet things* resides by the front door: coats and umbrellas and shoes. I add to the collection and shake my head dry, like a wet dog. Moving into the kitchen I plant a kiss on Heidi’s cheek, more a force of habit than something sweet.

Heidi has changed into her pajamas already: red, flannel and plaid, her hair with its natural auburn waves deflated from the rain. Contacts out, glasses on. “Zoe!” she yells. “Dinner’s ready,” though down the hall, between the closed door of our daughter’s bedroom and the deafening sound of boy band music, there’s no chance she heard.

“What’s for dinner?” I ask.

“Chili. *Zoe!*”

I love chili, but these days Heidi’s chili is a vegetarian chili, loaded with not only black beans and kidney beans and gar-

banzo beans (and, apparently, cumin), but also what she calls *vegetarian meat crumbles*, to give the impression of meat without the cow. She snatches bowls from the cabinet, and begins laddling the chili. Heidi is not a vegetarian. But since Zoe began ranting about the fat in meat two weeks ago, Heidi made the family decision to go meat-free for a while. In that time we've had vegetarian meatloaf and spaghetti with vegetarian meatballs and vegetarian sloppy joes. But no meat.

"I'll get her," I say and head down the narrow hall of our condo. I knock on the pulsating door and, with Zoe's blessing, poke my head inside to tell her about dinner and she says okay. She's lying on her canopy bed, a yellow notebook—the one with all the teenybopper celebs she's torn from magazines taped to the front—on her lap. She slams it shut the minute I enter, gropes for social studies flashcards, which lie beside her, ignored.

I don't mention the crumbles. I trip over the cat on the way to Heidi and my bedroom, loosening my tie as I do.

Moments later, we sit at the kitchen table, and again Heidi asks me about my day.

"Good," I say. "You?"

"I hate beans," Zoe declares as she scoops up a spoonful of chili, and then lets it dribble back into the bowl. The living room TV is muted, yet our eyes drift toward it, trying our best to lip-read our way through the evening news. Zoe slumps in her chair, refusing to eat, a cloned version of Heidi, from the roundness of their faces to the wavy hair and brown eyes, everything alike down to their cupid's-bow lips and a handful of freckles splattered across their snub noses.

"What did you do?" Heidi asks and internally I grimace, not wanting to relive the day, and her stories—Sudanese refugees seeking asylum and illiterate grown men—are depressing. I just want to lip-read my way through the evening news in silence.

But I tell her anyway about a customer due-diligence call and

drafting a purchase agreement and a ridiculously early conference call with a client in Hong Kong. At 3:00 a.m. I sneaked from the bedroom that Heidi and I share and crept into the office for the call, and when it was finished, I showered and left for work, long before Heidi or Zoe began to stir.

"I'm leaving in the morning for San Francisco," I remind her.

She nods her head. "I know. How long?"

"One night."

And then I ask about her day and Heidi tells me about a young man who emigrated from India to the United States six months ago. He was living in the slums of Mumbai—*Dharavi, to be exact; one of the largest slums in the world*, as Heidi tells me, *where he was earning less than two American dollars a day in his home country*. She tells me about their toilets, how they're few and far between. The residents use the river instead. She's helping this man, she calls him Aakar, with his grammar. Which isn't easy. She reminds me: "English is a very difficult language to learn."

I say that I know.

My wife is a bleeding heart. Which was absolutely adorable when I asked her to marry me, but somehow, after fourteen years of marriage, the words *immigrant* and *refugee* hit a nerve for me, generally because I'm sure she's more concerned with their well-being than my own.

"And your day, Zoe?" Heidi asks.

"It sucked," Zoe grumbles, slumped in the chair, staring at that chili as though it might just be dog shit, and I laugh to myself. At least one of us is being honest. I want a do-over. My day sucked, too.

"Sucked how?" Heidi asks. I love when Heidi uses the word *sucked*. Its unnaturalness is comical; the only time Heidi talks about things *sucking* it's in reference to a lollipop or straw. And then, "What's wrong with your chili? Too hot?"

"I told you. I hate beans."

Five years ago, Heidi would have reminded her of the starving children in India or Sierra Leone or Burundi. But these days just getting Zoe to eat *anything* is an accomplishment. She either hates everything or it's loaded with fat, like meat. And so instead we eat crumbs.

From the recesses of my briefcase—sitting on the floor beside the front door—my cell phone rings and Heidi and Zoe turn to me, wondering whether or not I'll abscond with the phone in the middle of dinner to my office, the third bedroom we converted when it was clear there would be no more children for me and Heidi. I still catch her sometimes, when she's in the office with me, her eyes roving along espresso office furniture—a desk and bookshelves, my favorite leather chair—imagining something else entirely, a crib and changing table, playful safari animals prancing on the walls.

Heidi always wanted a big family. Things just didn't work out that way.

It's rare that we get through a quick dinner without the obnoxious sound of my cell. Depending on the night, my mood—or, more important Heidi's mood—or whatever emergency cropped up at work that day, I may or may not answer it. Tonight I stuff a bite of chili into my mouth as a rebuttal, and Heidi smiles sweetly, which I take to mean: *thank you*. Heidi has the sweetest smile, sugar-coated and delicious. Her smile comes from somewhere inside, not just planted on those cupid's-bow lips. When she smiles I imagine the first time we met, at a charity ball in the city, her body cloaked in a strapless vintage tulle dress—red, like her lipstick. She was a work of art. A masterpiece. She was still in college, an intern at the nonprofit she now all but runs. Back in the days when pulling an all-nighter was a piece of cake, and four hours of sleep was a good night for me. Back in the days when thirty seemed *old*, so old in fact that I didn't even consider what thirty-nine would be like.

Heidi thinks that I work too much. For me, seventy-hour work weeks are the norm. There are nights I don't get home until two o'clock; there are nights I'm home, but locked in my office until the sun begins to rise. My phone rings at all hours of the day and night, as if I'm an on-call physician and not someone who deals with mergers and acquisitions. But Heidi works at a nonprofit agency; only one of us is making enough money to pay for a condo in Lincoln Park, to cover Zoe's expensive private school tuition and save for college.

The phone stops ringing, and Heidi turns to Zoe. She wants to hear more about her day.

It turns out that Mrs. Peters, the seventh grade earth science teacher, wasn't there and the sub was a total... Zoe stops herself, thinks of a better adjective than the one implanted in her brain by misfit preteens...a total *nag*.

"Why's that?" Heidi asks.

Zoe avoids eye contact, stares at the chili. "I don't know. She just *was*."

Heidi takes a sip of her water, plants that big-eyed, inquisitive look on her face. The same one I got when I mentioned the 3:00 a.m. call. "She was mean?"

"Not really."

"Too strict?"

"No."

"Too...*ugly*?" I throw in to lighten the mood. Heidi's need to know sometimes puts a strain on things. She's convinced herself that being an involved parent (and by this I mean overinvolved) will assure Zoe that she's loved as she enters into what Heidi calls: *the tumultuous teenage years*. What I remember from my own tumultuous teenage years was the need to escape my parents. When they followed, I ran faster. But Heidi has taken out books from the library: psychology books on child devel-

opment, parenting with love, secrets of a happy family. She's bound and determined to do this right.

Zoe giggles. When she does—and it doesn't happen often—she becomes six again, consummately pure, twenty-four-carat gold. “No,” she answers.

“Just...a nag then? A nasty old nag,” I suggest. I push aside the black beans and look for something else. A tomato. Corn. A chili scavenger hunt. I avoid the vegetarian meat crumbles.

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“What else?” Heidi asks.

“Huh?” Zoe's got on a tie-dye shirt with the words *peace* and *love* written in hot pink. It's covered in glitter. She's got her hair in this side ponytail thing that makes her look too sophisticated for the tangerine braces that line her rambling teeth. She's drawn all over her left arm: peace signs, her own name, a heart. The name Austin.

Austin?

“What else sucked?” Heidi asks.

Who the hell is Austin?

“Taylor spilled her milk at lunch. All over my math book.”

“Is the book okay?” Heidi wants to know. Taylor has been Zoe's best friend, her bestie, her BFF, since the girls were about four. They share matching BFF necklaces, skulls of all things. Zoe's is lime green, and draped around her neck at all times, day or night. Her mother, Jennifer, is Heidi's best friend. If I remember correctly, they met at the city park, two little girls playing in the sandbox, their mothers taking a breather on the same park bench. Heidi calls it happenstance. Though I believe, in reality, Zoe threw sand in Taylor's eye and those first few moments weren't so fortunate after all. If it hadn't been for Heidi with her spare water bottle to wash off the sand, and if Jennifer hadn't been in the midst of a divorce and desperate for

someone on whom to unload—the story might have had a very different ending.

Zoe replies, “I don’t know. I guess so.”

“Do we need to replace it?”

No comment.

“Anything else happen? Anything *good*?”

She shakes her head.

And that, in a nutshell, is Zoe’s sucky day.

Zoe is excused from the table without eating her chili. Heidi convinces her to take a few bites of a cornbread muffin and finish a glass of milk, and then sends her to her room to finish her homework, leaving Heidi and me alone. Again, my cell phone rings. Heidi jumps up to start the dishes and I linger, wondering whether or not I’ve been excused. But instead I grab some dishes from the table and bring them to Heidi who’s dumping Zoe’s chili down the garbage disposal.

“The chili was good,” I lie. The chili was not good. I stack the dishes on the countertop for Heidi to rinse and hover behind her, my hand pressed to plaid red flannel.

“Who’s going to San Francisco?” Heidi asks. She turns off the water and turns to face me and I lean into her, remembering what it feels like when I’m with her, a familiarity so ingrained in us both; it’s natural, habit, second nature. I’ve been with Heidi for almost half my life. I know what she’s going to say before she says it. I know her body language, what it means. I know the inviting look in her eye when Zoe is at a sleepover or long after she’s in bed. I know that now, as she slips her arms around me and pulls me into her, locking her hands around the small of my back, it isn’t an act of affection; it’s one of ownership.

You are mine.

“Just a couple people from the office,” I tell her.

Again with the big inquisitive eyes. She wants me to elaborate.

“Tom,” I say, “and Henry Tomlin.” And then I hesitate, and it’s

probably the hesitation that does me in. “Cassidy Knudsen,” I admit, meekly, throwing in the last name as if she doesn’t know who Cassidy is. Cassidy Knudsen, with the silent K.

And with that she removes her hands and turns back to the sink.

“It’s a business trip,” I remind her. “Strictly business,” I say as I press my face into her hair. It smells like strawberries, sweet and juicy, combined with a hodgepodge of city smells: the dirtiness of the street, strangers on the train, the musty scent of rain.

“Does *she* know that?” Heidi asks.

“I’ll be sure to tell her,” I respond. And when the conversation goes quiet, the room silenced except for the indelicate propulsion of dishes into the dishwasher, I seize my opportunity to slip away, wandering into the bedroom to pack.

It isn’t my fault I have a coworker who’s nice on the eyes.