

Friend of the Week

by Jane Hammons

At first Kerry thinks nothing of Mia's absence as she observes the elderly couple she assumes to be grandparents taking Rose, Mia's daughter, to kindergarten and picking her up. As the absence grows longer, she imagines Mia and her husband on an extended holiday in an exotic paradise. Maui or Cancun. Kerry envies Mia the husband who provides luxurious vacations and the parents available for childcare. Her own husband is unemployed, and her parents live in another state. She awaits Mia's return, eager for snippets about the trip: snorkeling; luaus; romantic evenings on the beach; a waiter who, without being beckoned, refreshes their tropical drinks.

Rose balks at the steps, the lobby, the door to the kindergarten. A clinger, she wraps her arms tightly around the grandmother's waist and has to be dragged into the classroom. Mia was always reluctant to leave her. The grandmother is not. Rose howls in the doorway and buries her face in her jacket.

Luke, Kerry's son, is not a clinger, but neither is he the confident, independent child, she had imagined herself raising. He does not cry, but he doesn't scamper off to play either. He wanders quietly, alone, touching the puppets, rolling a truck down the play table. He sits on a little wooden bench and thumbs through a picture book. When the teacher shakes the gourd rattle, he quietly follows the other children to the rug for circle time.

Though she can't recall Rose laughing, Kerry pictures the little girl squealing in delight when she receives her My parents went to Maui and this is all I got tee-shirt from Mia upon her return from the islands, suntanned and fragrant in fresh leis.

Weeks pass. By Halloween, the grandmother has developed dark circles under her eyes. Her hair, once a smooth gray helmet, frizzes

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out around her face. The grandfather begins to walk with a cane. One day as Kerry waits in the playground for the children to be dismissed, the grandfather turns to her and asks, "Does your son hate coming to school?"

"No. He usually wants to come to school."

The grandfather snorts. "When our kids were little, I'd tell my wife, Make'em miserable enough at home and they'll want to go to school."

"I didn't mean that." Kerry is horrified at the suggestion that she shares his philosophy. "Luke is not unhappy. He's not miserable." Not miserable, not unhappy, she tries again. "He likes being at home. Luke's happy everywhere." She broadcasts this information to everyone in earshot.

Children fill the doorway. Screeching and yowling, tweeting and growling, they parade out to the porch in their animal masks made of feathers, fabric and fur. Colorful cats chase zany dogs. Rose, a silent, exquisite bird, flaps her useless wings. Luke gasps for air, a comical, glubbing fish.

"I miss seeing Mia. Is everything all right?" Kerry asks the grandfather. Luke tucks his hands into his armpits making little fins, and swims toward her with quick disturbing motions. Kerry remembers pictures she has seen of thalidomide babies.

"All right." The grandfather mocks her. "Nothing's all right. Mia's not all right. But her doctor released her this morning anyway."

Rose flutters slowly alongside her grandfather, who supports himself on her shoulder as he limps down the steps. With a father like that, it was no wonder Mia often seemed depressed, Kerry thinks. Doctor. Mia has been in the hospital, not Hawaii. Breast cancer, Kerry

guesses. It is one of her own fears. She and Mia are in a high-risk group: Marin County; first child after age 35.

Kerry decides to write a card and leave it in the mailbox at Mia's house. She looks up the address on the Friendship List the kindergarten teacher published to encourage play dates. Kerry writes,

Please tell Mia that I ask about her. Here are some things I can do to help:

1. Take Rose to school and bring her home
2. Go to the grocery store
3. Do laundry.

Kerry signs her name and writes her telephone number clearly beneath it and drops it off at Mia's house, several blocks away.

A few days pass before the grandmother calls. "We appreciated your note. So many people offer to help, but they are never specific."

"How is Mia?" Kerry hopes for information.

"Mia." The grandmother sighs. "I'll be glad when her mother arrives, so I can go home."

In the silence that follows Kerry learns nothing other than that she was mistaken about whose parents the grandparents are. "You know that next week Rose is Friend of the Week," Kerry says. "The Friend provides snacks all week for the entire class." Before she can offer to help with The Friend's responsibilities, the grandmother screams,

"My God!" and Kerry imagines something terrible in the background of Mia's house: Mia has fallen; Rose cuts herself; the husband drops the milk. "The entire week! For all those children!"

"I'd be happy to make the snacks," Kerry says quickly.

"God bless you," the grandmother sighs with real relief.

On Sunday Kerry bakes banana bread, ignoring the disasters in the background of her own home. Her husband wrecked his truck last night. No big deal, he says. Kerry dreads the full story. He was drunk when pulled into the driveway and stumbled into the house. She doesn't know yet if police or insurance carriers are involved. Luke is standing in front of the TV, blocking his father's view of the 49ers game. He is being stubborn and won't move. There is yelling and then crying.

Kerry had planned to make four loaves, but is tired after three. Her arm is sore where her husband twisted it last night when she asked one too many questions. Angry with herself for not simply doubling the recipe twice, she decides three loaves will suffice: cut down the middle, cut again in half. Each child will have two small pieces and there will still be some for the teacher and classroom aides. She slides the pans into the oven and goes to find Luke in the hallway where his father puts him in time outs. Her husband doesn't understand the concept and uses it to keep Luke out of his way. She can not turn on the light or remove Luke without making her husband furious, so she joins her son in the dark.

On Monday morning Kerry arrives at the kindergarten ahead of Rose and her grandmother, who is no longer extremely grateful, just tired. She merely nods in Kerry's direction as she deposits Rose in the playground. The grandmother slips the Friend of the Week poster

inside the classroom door and hurries away. Rose does not cry. She gets the fat sticks of sidewalk chalk from the plastic storage bin and draws yellow circles of sunshine that smile huge red smiles and rain blue teardrops.

Luke positions himself at the head of a nonexistent line and waits for the other children to arrive. Kerry counts the slices of banana bread and reassures herself that she has made enough. When the teacher comes out and shakes her gourd rattle, the children line up behind Luke and enter the classroom.

Kerry falls into line and puts the bread on the large round table next to the Friend of the Week poster. The blank posterboard that each family is provided at the beginning of the school year is to be covered with photographs, creating a picture story of the child's life. Kerry gazes curiously at the display of family photos. Mia's face obscured by baby Rose as she holds her up for the photo. The family in front of the Thanksgiving table, Mia leaning over so that she is mostly hidden by the curtain of her own waist length hair. In another she appears to be a bystander at an amusement park, her gaze not on Rose spinning in tea cups, but elsewhere. A clump of trees. The exit.

During free time, the first fifteen minutes of the morning, the children choose their own activities. Luke makes monotonous Lego towers, columns of pieces all the same color and size. Rose stares blankly into the aquarium.

"Hi, Rose." Kerry squats down beside the little girl. "How are you?"

Rose shrugs.

"How's your mom?"

"She didn't hurt me." Rose answers too quickly. "She hurt herself."

She cut her arms like this." Rose takes a marker from a nearby table, turns her left palm up, and draws a bright orange incision from wrist to elbow, and before Kerry can stop her, another one up her right arm. "Sunshine makes her sad." Rose smudges the clean glass panels of the aquarium with greasy traces of breakfast and residue from sidewalk chalk.

In the aquarium, black mollies and angel fish circle the plaster deep-sea diver. When Kerry was a child she had an aquarium. Once when she was cleaning it, her black mollies slipped out of a shallow holding container and into the sink. She could not make herself reach down into the blades of the garbage disposal to rescue them. She told no one. Her mother ground them up with food scraps from dinner.

The teacher shakes her gourd again, and all the children gather on the rug. Kerry waves goodbye to Luke, who looks away from her. He's been angry since yesterday. Kerry thinks it is about the banana bread. He hasn't been Friend of the Week yet. She baked his favorite treat for another child. When she tried to help him buckle into his booster seat on the way to kindergarten, he shoved her away. "You're my mommy." Kerry hears an accusation in the reminder.

"Is your husband abusive?" the therapist asks. Therapy is Kerry's secret. It isn't that she's embarrassed about being in therapy; people at work talk openly about their therapists, their anti-depressants and medication for anxiety. But her husband doesn't like for her to talk about their private lives. With anyone. She hasn't even told her parents that he lost his job. She knows how to keep a secret.

"He doesn't hit us."

"There are other kinds of abuse." The therapist tells Kerry what she

already knows and suggests she bring Luke to the next session. "I'd like to see him, too, if he doesn't have a therapist of his own."

Kerry notes the baby dolls and Legos. The sand tray with dinosaurs and other animals. Children come here, too, she tells herself. Other people's children.

At Luke's first session, he stands silently near the tray and sifts sand through his fingers. He refuses to speak. He slips a plastic dinosaur into his pocket when it is time to leave.

"That's my dinosaur," the therapist says, retrieving it from Luke's pocket. She puts it back in the sand tray. "But you can play with it when you come back next week."

The following week, the therapist asks him to choose some animals and tell a story about his family. "This is Daddy." He picks up a bear. "G-r-r-r-r," he growls loudly. "And this is Mommy. She's hurt." He sets a tiger on its side in the sand.

"Who are you?" the therapist asks.

"I'm the baby rabbit," Luke squeaks and scrunches down beside the sand tray.

"And how do you feel?"

"Scared." He hops away from the therapist and crouches behind the couch, burying his face in his paws.

"You think you are protecting him," the therapist says in Kerry's follow-up session. "But you're not. He doesn't feel safe. He isn't safe."

Kerry has been thinking about divorce for years. Though her husband had wanted a child badly enough to endure fertility tests and sex determined by body temperature and calendar, he'd been nothing but angry since Luke's birth. Luke's crying made him angry. Her exhaustion made him angry. Nothing made him happy. He refused to go to counseling and went to bars instead, leaving Luke and Kerry to make a family of their own. She's been telling herself that her husband will find work. He'll stop drinking. Things will change. She tries to make the story of her life turn out all right.

The therapist hands Kerry a list. "Here are some good lawyers. Call one of them. Get restraining orders. Get out of your house. Or get your husband out." The therapist lets this sink in before she adds, "If you can't take care of this, I will have to inform Child Protective Services."

"I'll do it." Terrified Kerry rushes from the office. She is used to her husband's threats, but she's blindsided by this one. She doesn't go to work. She drives to a mall and sits in the parking lot. On her cell phone she calls Deborah, her boss at Bayside Book Café, and asks for a few days off. Family emergency, she says. Deborah tells Kerry to take as much time off as necessary.

"Call me," Deborah adds, "if you need help of any kind."

Kerry calls the first number on the list. She tells the lawyer it's urgent and meets with her the next day. They make a plan. Over the next few days, while Kerry decides whether or not to file for divorce, she finds an after-school program for Luke; she takes money out of the savings account holding a small inheritance from her grandmother and opens her own separate checking account; she cancels all of the credit cards she holds jointly with her husband. She meets with the lawyer again and files for divorce. The lawyer gets restraining orders. While she is in a constant panic waiting for

them to be served, her husband moves through his days as usual—drinking, sleeping, watching TV, occasionally asking, What's eating you?

Finally an officer of the court serves the papers during the designated time period when Luke is at school. Her husband has one hour to pack some belongings and get out of the house. His initial shock saddens Kerry. She tries to imagine herself in his place. But when he flies into a rage and throws a lamp at her, she flees out the front door. She can hear him yelling and breaking things as she runs down the street toward the park, ignoring her neighbor's question, Is everything all right?

As evidence that Luke is safe, Kerry provides the therapist with copies of various documents—divorce papers, restraining orders, letters from the school and the after-school program attesting to the fact that they have the restraining orders on file. And then she tells the therapist that she and Luke will not be returning. She has done what she had to do, but she will never again live with threats. Not from anyone.

Kerry dreams in gray. Luke sits in a dingy Lego sandbox surrounded by a chain link fence. Interlocking pieces enclose him. There are children in the playground. Other people's children. Luke isn't unhappy. Not miserable. Sometimes he sees her. He waves and says, "You're my mommy."

A week before Christmas, Luke is allowed a supervised visit with his father. Kerry stands stiffly in the kitchen and watches the clock. When the hour is up, she goes into the living room. The court-appointed supervisor and Luke's father, who appears to be weeping, are on their way out the door. Luke glares at her and turns on the TV to watch Sesame Street. He sings along with Ernie, Rubber duckie,

you're the one.

Later that evening, Deborah calls to ask Kerry if she can put in some overtime. Deborah offers to let Luke play in her office if Kerry can't find childcare for him. Kerry quickly agrees. The lawyer, the therapist, the after-school program, the impending holidays. She needs the money.

Cathykubocathykubocathykubo. The first time she hears it, Kerry thinks Luke has learned some kind of mantra at kindergarten where he does yoga and makes mandalas. Luke is in the bathtub, bubbles arranged in tall peaks around him. The bathroom door is open a crack, and when Luke sees her peering in, he whispers but does not stop saying Cathykubocathykubo. Late at night Cathy Kubo's name drifts like a prayer down the hallway.

"It's a self-soothing behavior," the new therapist explains. "If it becomes disruptive, we'll address it. For now, leave it alone. He needs it."

On Valentine's Day Kerry arrives at the school with Luke who skips eagerly up the steps. Today he is going to climb the wooden structure and slide down the pole, something he has been afraid to do. Cathy Kubo has been encouraging him. He admires her. She is strong and fast and full of courage. He wants her to admire him, too.

"Kerry." Someone calls her name. Across the street, she sees Mia standing in the shadow of a tall redwood tree. She holds a large heart-shaped box of candy tied up in shiny silver ribbon.

"I'll be right there," Kerry calls after Luke, then quickly crosses the street. "Mia, how are you doing?" Before Mia can reply, Kerry answers her own question. Not good. Mia reeks. Her clothes are torn and dirty.

"Give this to Rose," Mia barks and shoves the box of candy at Kerry.

Kerry is startled and backs away.

"Luke's Mom!" Cathy Kubo calls through the chain link fence that surrounds the playground. "Come on. It's almost Luke's turn."

"I have to go, Mia. Luke's going to slide down the pole," Kerry says, feeling a little silly. Compared to whatever has happened to Mia, this moment in Luke's life might seem small. But she can't miss it.

As Kerry hurries away, Mia grabs the straps of her canvas bag and forces the box into the opening. "Tell her it's from Mama."

Kerry rushes up the steps to the playground. From the top of a wooden platform, a fat white pole angles gently into the sand below. Luke glances nervously at her as he moves up in the line. Dakota Bynes, the most popular boy in the class, slides down the pole—one leg and arm outstretched. He hits the sand in seconds. The next child breaks the rules and hangs only by her legs. When she can touch the ground, she walks on her hands for a few steps before tumbling into the sand with a loud laugh.

Cathy Kubo stands behind Luke, and like a crossing guard, she holds her arms out to prevent any children from cutting in front of him. Luke pats the pole timidly then grabs it. He holds on so tightly that Kerry can measure his progress in inches. But eventually his feet touch the ground. Kerry applauds. Cathy Kubo jumps down from the platform and gives him a high five.

The teacher shakes the gourd rattle, and Luke runs to the wooden steps of the platform where he left his lunchbox and a paper bag of valentines to distribute to his classmates. Then he skips into line next to Cathy Kubo. Kerry sees Rose standing quietly near the front of the line with her father, who Kerry recognizes from the Friend of

the Week Poster, and a woman, who she does not recognize.

"Hi, Rose," Kerry says.

Rose smiles shyly. "That's Luke's mom," she whispers to her father.

"Paul." He introduces himself. "I never got a round to thanking you for helping my mother with Friend of the Week."

"Glad to do it." Kerry is aware of the gaudy box in her bag. She blows Luke a kiss. He grabs it and puts it in his pocket as he files into the classroom with the other children.

"I don't know how much you know. Or want to know," says Paul. "But Mia was living in a halfway house until about a month ago when she disappeared. She's suicidal." Paul shrugs unsure how to continue.

"She's crazy as a bedbug," adds the woman standing next to him. "I'm Sandra." She grabs Kerry's hand and gives it a firm shake.

Kerry smiles politely. Months ago she would have welcomed this information. Now she feels complicit in a situation she doesn't understand.

Sandra tugs on the silver ribbons. "Lover?"

Kerry shakes her head. "Friend." She hears the uncertainty in her voice.

"Well, have a happy Valentine's Day." Sandra giggles. "I know I will." She gives Paul a loud smooch on the cheek.

"Paul." Kerry tries to think of Rose instead of Mia. "I saw Mia this morning. She wants Rose to have this." She tries to hand Paul the box of candy, but Paul shoves it away.

"I have restraining orders!" he cries. "I better warn the school office." He storms away. Sandra jogs along beside him.

The kindergarten teacher comes out to collect sweaters and lunchboxes left on the playground. She pauses next to Kerry. "No candy. Not even on Valentine's Day."

"Of course not," says Kerry. She knows the rules. She and Luke made dietetically correct mini-muffins—no nuts; sweetened with applesauce—put them in plastic bags and secured them to homemade valentines. As Kerry leaves the school premises, she considers giving the box of candy to the office staff, but she sees Paul gesturing wildly at the secretary and decides against it.

Kerry drives to work and parks behind the Bayside Book Café. The homeless teens who sleep behind the bookstore with their dogs are just pulling themselves together to hit the streets for a day of panhandling. The pimple-faced boy spots the box of candy in Kerry's bag as she walks toward the back entrance. He falls to one knee. "Come live with me and be my love."

Kerry laughs and gives him the heart-shaped box.

"Give me some," says a skinny girl, her chapped lips cracked and bleeding. She grabs a handful of candy and scatters it on the ground for the dogs.

Kerry enters the building and unlocks the business office where Luke now has a permanent playspace. His little desk is covered with the remnants of the valentines he finished making last night. Kerry opens the blinds and watches the homeless boy finish off the candy. He tosses the silky box into the dumpster. Not long ago, Kerry had approached the boy. Your parents must be very worried.

You don't know anything about my parents, he yelled at her and retreated into the alley. Since then, Kerry has kept her distance. The line of poetry he gave her this morning was a pleasant surprise.

Kerry listens to the voicemail. Her therapist has cancelled today's session, so she'll have a rare afternoon to herself. Luke will be with his father, who recently completed rehab and lives in a small studio above a garage. He works part-time at a hardware store and can pick Luke up from the after-school program now that the restraining orders have been dropped. Luke is confused about why his father can't come home. Daddy's nice now, he says. The therapist assures Kerry that Luke will get used to having two households. But Kerry knows that getting used to something isn't the same as having what you want.

Before Deborah gets in, Kerry needs to clean up. She and Luke left in a hurry last night so they'd have time to bake muffins when they got home. He was cranky after a day of kindergarten, childcare and two hours at the office with her, so she hadn't made him put away his art supplies. Kerry gathers bits of lace doilies and leftover stickers. Pucker Up. Be Mine. 2 Cute 2 Be 4Gotten.

She wonders where Mia is now. Hiding out in the shadows? Had Paul called the police? She remembers Mia saying once that she

thought her husband was having an affair. Kerry had quipped that she wished her husband would have one so that he'd leave her alone. That is how they'd talked about their lives. Short one-liners exchanged at pick up and drop off time. Kerry can't remember what it is like to have a real friend. She sits down at Luke's desk and picks up a piece of red construction paper. With her finger she traces the heart-shaped hole in the center. "Cathy Kubo," Kerry whispers. Cathykubocathykubocathykubo.

