

With Hippo

Kelly Magee and Carol Guess

It was my job to open the box when someone pushed the red button. An alarm went off, and I rushed to the nursery. The buzzer went off at least once a day, garbage, pranks, and false alarms. Three babies abandoned in the past nine months, but most of the time I found headless dolls. Pink flamingoes, plastic swans. Once a stone lion fuzzy with moss.

I couldn't see inside the box from the nursery, so there was also that creepy blind moment of reach. I took a deep breath when I opened the door.

Some countries called them baby hatches; in medieval times they were foundling wheels. We called it The Box. We called it The Button. We called them The Clients. And babies were Saved. Not saved in the religious sense, although some of my co-workers talked about Jesus. But they weren't the ones who opened the door to find condoms and gum stuck to the heat lamp. I didn't think we were angels of mercy. Mistakes with heartbeats are just hard to undo.

When I wasn't opening the box, rehoming stolen statuary, or bottle-feeding abandoned babies, I was a teller. Like a fortune teller, but with cash, not cards. Unfortunately most people's fortunes were small. I worked at a bank because I worked at a bank. There were other jobs, but they seemed like celebrities. I imagined doctors and sailors at parties, white coats so bright they had everyone fooled. At least I had health insurance and a 401K. If I was bored at work, that just made me humane.

The box was outside, by the ATM. Anyone could open the door, set down a baby, and press the red button. Once they shut the door, it locked. Warm blankets and heat lamps kept the temperature toasty. The inside door opened onto the nursery, which was created out of a supply closet.

When we voted to install the baby box, everyone's life got a little more interesting. It stopped us from worrying about People With Guns; it stopped us from joining the Occupy movement. We had a new cause, which made management happy. They'd soothed us without adding dental or vision. It was better than Facebook or smoking on break. When the alarm went off, whoever wasn't working would follow me into the nursery and wait while I twisted the key. Sometimes they wanted to stick their hands in, and bring out baby. I made them wear gloves, powdery latex, pulled over their wrists with a snap

and a sting. Always junk; no one else rescued babies. Only me, and only alone.

Also, the three times I'd rescued living, breathing human infants, the alarm hadn't gone off.

"Coincidence, huh?" Marisol was the office manager. She was grumpy before 1 o'clock.

"Makes sense to me," Lewis said, texting. "The parents didn't want anyone to see them, so they just ran off."

"Whatever. I'm on to you, Sadie." Marisol clicked her tongue to her teeth.

The three living, breathing human infants had all been wearing clothes from Baby Wear World. They'd all been clean, and surprisingly cheerful. Everyone cooed over them; and me, for my amazing rescue. Then people who wanted a baby drew straws. Kaylee got the first one, a girl she named Kayla. Then Robert took home little Gwendolyn Lou. The third baby went to Michael, who named him Ernie, middle name Bert.

It was great to see Kayla, Gwen, and Ernie so happy, especially when they'd come from such terrible situations. Sometimes, when another baby went missing from the mall, we'd post the newspaper clipping in the break room next to pictures of Kayla, Gwen, and Ernie. So sad! So sad that someone was stealing babies from shopping carts in Baby Wear World!

I just couldn't help it. Who leaves their kid in a shopping cart while they run down to the other end of the mall for a cheese pretzel?

It was a test. When someone agreed to leave their baby with me while they went to the Food Court, I knew that baby belonged with a better family, with parents like Kaylee, Robert, and Mike. I took them from the cart because they needed to be found. I put them in the box so someone would find them. That someone was me, which made it all perfect. I planned my trips to the mall weeks in advance.

One Tuesday I was daydreaming behind bulletproof glass, debating whether a weekend was too risky, when the alarm went off and didn't stop. Usually it beeped five times, then quit. At first I thought it was a car alarm, but the noise in the nursery was almost unbearable.

I was alone in the nursery when I opened the box.

At first I thought it was a pug. Then potbellied pig. Whatever it was, a miniature something, it was gray-black and breathing, too big for the box.

I reached for it, scared it might bite, but it was stunned, too scared to turn on me. I set it down in the crib and stroked its hide.

Hera. Hera the hippo. Hello.



I went to the employee kitchen for the formula we kept in a cabinet with the plastic forks and napkins and spare birthday candles. By the time I'd warmed up a bottle in the microwave, the alarm started going off again, so I rushed back into the nursery and opened the box. This time, there was a note.

We hope you enjoy your new baby hippo! Hippos need WATER so their skin doesn't dry out! Your new hippo will drink warm milk, but DON'T heat it up in the microwave, as this can cause heat pockets that will BURN BABY!! Hippos need a lot of LOVE but watch out — they can become AGGRESSIVE toward outsiders!

Then, in smaller print at the bottom: *Hippo is to be kept on premises at all times. Hippo may not interact with customers. Your emergency exotic animal veterinarian can be reached at the number below.*

I crumpled the note. I didn't care if it was some ploy from management. Hera was here, and she was mine. There would be no drawing straws this time, no goodbyes to choke back. I went to the crib, where Hera was gnawing on a bumper. She did look a little dry. I shook the bottle and tested it on my arm. I left it wedged between the crib slats and went back up to the front of the bank. Emptied the candy dish and filled it with water.

Hera put her feet in the water dish and tipped it over, soaking the mattress pad.

She needs a tub, I thought.

"She needs a tub," I said.

The alarm clanged again. I opened the box again.

Kiddie pools work great!! the note said.

*

On Monday, Marisol avoided me so conspicuously that I knew she'd been the one to turn me in. She seemed surprised to find me in the kiddie pool, but not the hippo. She patted its rump and splashed her fingers across the plastic pool for Hera to follow.

"It's like a mascot," Kaylee said from the door. "If banks had mascots."

"She," I said.

"What?" Kaylee said.

I stood up in the water, pulled my bathing suit down in back. "She's a she," I said. "Not an it."

Michael walked in just then, and Kaylee gave him a look. His phone buzzed in his hand and he glanced at the screen. "Ernie just smiled for the second time," he said. "Do you know that hippos defecate in the water?"

Marisol pulled her hand out of the water. I picked Hera up and held her.

Her skin felt like candle wax. “So does Ernie.”

Kaylee tried to give Michael another look, but Michael shrugged. “I hate it when he does that.”

“Kayla said dada,” Kaylee said, taking a step closer to me. “She’s only five months.”

I set Hera on the floor, and she walked up on my feet and stayed there, blinking. “Eventually Hera and I will form a bond,” I said, “and she will attack anyone who comes near me.”

Marisol, Kaylee, and Michael left the room. I prepared to warm Hera’s bottle.

*

Two things became clear: they weren’t going to fire me, and I didn’t have to work. I stayed in the nursery taking care of Hera all day, then went home to watch Law & Order reruns all evening. I slept in and returned midmorning to give Hera her breakfast bottle. A week or so of this, and the alarm went off again and the box provided a rubber-banded bunch of hay and some kind of kibble that I put in a bowl on the floor — *Two cups a day!* I realized I hadn’t heard the alarm in days. I’d been distracted; Hera was growing so fast. Now pictures of her covered Kayla, Gwen, and Ernie and their respective newspaper clippings: Hera in a Baby Wear World dress, Hera on her back in the crib with her legs in the air, Hera wearing sunglasses, Hera carrying a baby doll in her mouth. I’d taken all the pictures, so there was only one taken of me. I’d fallen asleep on the floor feeding her, and she’d climbed on my back. My face was in my arms, so you couldn’t really tell it was me. But I was the only one she’d climb on. We all knew that.

Sometimes I even forgot I was in a bank, and I’d go up front to tell Michael something cute Hera had done — the time she got hay stuck to her forehead like bangs, the time I let her lick a lemon and she made a face — and get stares. Maybe an older lady at the counter covered her mouth like I smelled bad (Hera definitely had her own odor). Maybe a little kid in line pointed. Then one day I forgot myself entirely and walked Hera right up to the counter. She was getting big, about the size of a cocker spaniel now, and she ran right up to a pregnant lady in line and rammed her. I don’t know if it was because the woman was pregnant, or because she was wearing red, or what, but Hera plowed into her so hard she knocked the woman down. Hera snorted and bellowed and tried to bite the woman until I carted her off.

The note that came through the box that evening was demanding: *Reminder! Under no circumstances is Hippo to interact with the customers!!!*

I wrote back: *She has a name, and her name is Hera.*

I added, *And my name is Sadie.*

And last, *And my lawyer's name is Valerie Frank*, just in case they had anything funny in mind.

*

They wrote back promptly. *Whoa, we don't want any trouble here! Hippo raising is a Fun Employee Diversion, but we are happy to send you up front again if you'd prefer! We can assure you that we're on the up and up with the law and whatnot, as all necessary permits and licenses have been filed, and building codes have been strictly enforced! No worries, friend!*

But then the food stopped coming.

And the dry towels stopped coming.

And the one-use cameras stopped coming.

The box sat empty, day after day, while Hera gnawed on her plastic pool.

*

They weren't going to fire me, exactly, but they'd quietly stopped paying me too. So when I went home and found my belongings on the lawn, I packed them into my car and drove them to the bank. Set up a table lamp and a pull-out in the nursery. Michael helped. He showed me a video on his phone of Ernie crawling across the room. "I owe it to you for finding him," he said. He gave me an awkward, one-armed hug.

"It was nothing," I said.

"Not nothing," he said, and we both lifted from the knees.

Hera liked the couch. She was a surprisingly good climber, for a hippo. I brought her handfuls of grass from the lawn outside the bank, but it was too green, too free of weeds, and I worried about feeding her pesticides. There was no money for hay or milk, though, so I didn't have a choice. Hera took to standing in her pool with her face in the water. Just standing there, pretending, I guessed, to be submerged.

When Hera got sick, finally, I called the emergency exotic animal vet. The line rang and rang. I didn't want to tell the others, so I gave her some liquid acetaminophen and hoped for the best. She nibbled at the grass in her bowl, threw up; nibbled, threw up. Stood in her pool with her head under water. Then lay down. I pulled her onto my lap, which she was too big for now.

"You'll be okay," I said. "Because you have to."

She snorted. Looked at me as if to say, *You too.*

But of course I didn't really know what she would've said. She wouldn't have said anything. She was a hippo.

It was their fault, the note-writers, for doing this to Hera. But I still felt like a bad mother. I still didn't want to tell my co-workers.

✱

They say a child's death is the worst thing. They don't say anything about a hippo's death. But for me, Hera's death was the worst thing.

She lay in the water. She didn't get back up.

I walked out of the bank. I had no money.

I went to the mall. Baby Wear World was full of people who stared at me. I smelled like a zoo. I looked like I hadn't showered in a long time because I hadn't. No one would leave their babies with me. A clerk asked if I needed any help.

I asked for an employment application. The clerk gave me a funny look and said they weren't hiring.

I followed a group of women pushing strollers. Fat baby arms beat rattles on their trays. Sockless feet kicked. I trailed them all the way to the food court, where they bought pretzels and parked their babies at the next table, facing out.

Kelly Magee's books include the Katherine Anne Porter prize-winning collection *Body Language* (UNT Press, 2006), and the forthcoming collections of fiction *With Animal* and poetry *The Reckless Remainder* (both co-written with Carol Guess). Find links to her writing at kellyelizabethmagee.com.

Carol Guess is the author of thirteen books of poetry and prose, including *Darling Endangered* and *Doll Studies: Forensics*. She is Professor of English at Western Washington University, and keeps a blog here: carolguess.blogspot.com.