

Sally and the Goldfish

They were still friends, but not the way they used to be.

The room where the gang used to play cards was now overrun with Sally's toys and books and crayon-scribbled 'art'. The once immaculately organized tabletops and counters were now strewn with mini cartons of goldfish crackers, squeezable packs of applesauce and half-finished platefuls of toast.

Gone were the days of yore; of TV marathons and boozy bonfires and idyllic crafternoons at Melissa's. Jaimie surveyed the change as if atop Mount Olympus, removed from the human chaos. Having kids wasn't in the cards for her. It was like getting married. It was something she never *wanted*. Having the job was enough; having the house was enough. Having her friends would have been great too, if they had stayed friends and hadn't turned into somebody's mother. *You become a martyr*, a coworker once told her. A coworker with three kids, all girls. *Your life? It's over.*

Children were monstrous in that manner. Brutal. They just took, took, took.

"Sally's drawing a picture. She's so creative." Melissa looked like shit, her hair up, wearing sweats, zero make-up. She had baby Jonah in one arm and her phone in the other. She drew in a breath. "Sally! Aunt Jaimie's here!"

"OK." A little voice muttered from under the old card-playing table.

Jaimie smirked. The kid didn't even sound excited. But why would she? What impact could a grown-up have on Sally's picture? She set her bag on the end table.

"New fish?" Jaimie noticed. The old one was an easy blue beta; this orange monster was yet another marked change.

“Shit. Can you feed it? The food’s in the drawer.” Melissa sighed. “I’m such a bad fish mom.”

“Because you’re being a *real* mom.” Jaimie assured, sprinkling pellets into the fish’s bowl. Melissa tittered, pleased but strung out.

“We haven’t had luck with the fish,” she admitted, propping Jonah’s head. Jaimie studied the wisps of infant hair, knowing the bones still hadn’t solidified. Urgh. What a freak out, having spaces between your skull.

Babies. Monsters.

“Nobody has luck with fish,” Jaimie demurred, “They’re a short lease pet.” Except for Jaimie’s beta fish from college, still alive and kicking. Or swimming. Or whatever. The thing was, what, how old? Four years? Old enough that now Jaimie was embarrassed to say its name (Master the beta, a play on *masturbator*), whereas before it was the cause of appreciative snickers.

“Sally’s been broken, absolutely *broken*, every time they die. I think this is our third fish. Or fourth,” Melissa was saying. Memory, that was another thing that went with kids, right? “Sally insists that we replace poor Fishie every time...ah, whatever. Fish are cheap.” Jonah squalled from her arms. “Listen, Jame, thanks so much for coming over.”

“No prob.” Melissa still called her Jame. At least there was that.

“If I don’t have a shower, a nap, or food, I’m going to die.”

“Which one first?” Jaimie asked, taking the baby. That was why she was here, after all. To babysit. She sniffed the top of its head and was rewarded with a moist, fleshy smell. Why did people like doing that?

“Shower. Someone’s had an upset tummy today,” Melissa said, nodding towards Jonah.

Great.

And off Melissa went. The shower water cranked on from the other room.

“Hey, you,” Jaimie sighed. Talking to the baby. Because who else was there to talk to? Sally? Certainly not Melissa, not anymore. All Melissa could talk about was Sally’s gymnastics teacher, or the other kids in Sally’s storytime, or the fact that Jonah would be graduating to solids, and wasn’t teething a bitch?

Jaimie sat on the couch, studying Jonah’s face. It looked like a baby’s face. They all looked the same.

There was something final and indelible about having a child. You could never go back –you could never *not* be a mother, even up to your nursing home and vanilla pudding days. It was why she had never gotten a tattoo –all that permanence was plainly unappealing.

And all the blood, they never told you about. A nurse friend told her that they measure how much blood comes out, in a cup or a pail. Why? To see if something’s wrong. If you lose too much blood, something’s wrong.

Shitting yourself. Tearing your vag. Hemorrhoids. Floppy fat and distended breasts. Jaimie couldn’t do it. It reminded her of the movie *Alien*; children were nothing but parasites.

“Aunt Jaimie.” Sally, crouching at the armrest. “You want to see something?”

“Sure,” Jaimie said, thinking she’d be ‘treated’ to Sally’s ‘artwork.’ God. All the misbegotten creations Melissa probably had have to deal with...

But Sally smiled with her small teeth and slipped her hand into the fish bowl.

They waited. Maybe the kid thought this was impressive. Who knows. Who knows what kids think.

“Oh. I see,” Jaimie said, hoping Sally would take her hand out of the fishbowl. Jonah’s body was hot in her arms.

“Shh.” Sally’s fingers were very straight and very still within the water. The fish circled. Circled.

Like a predator, the four year old waited for the right moment to curl her hand shut and pull it out, fish and all. She held the dripping hand over the couch.

“He tickles,” Sally breathed. “You want to feel?”

“No that’s fine,” Jaimie said. “Now what do you do?”

That small toothed grin again. Sally crouched, put the fish on the floor.

“Now I watch him,” she explained. “And then I’ll put him back in his bowl when he’s dead. Mommy doesn’t know. So now it’s our secret.”

Jaimie considered this.

“That’s very smart of you.”

She was right. Monsters, every one of them.