

This story might be disturbing to some readers.

“Not tonight ok?” Candy canes decorate Shari’s sleep pants, and they dance impassively as she inches backwards. “If that’s what you call loving somebody, I don’t think I want to be a part of it.” “God damnit! I barely broke even at work, then you have me take the kid out for dinner. Don’t get me wrong I think you have a great daughter but there’s a reason I haven’t had kids of my own. I can’t handle them very good. On top of that some lady a table over is just shovelin’ food into her face making it really awkward then runs out on the check. Now you ain’t gonna let me even touch ya?” An unfinished puzzle spans the kitchen table. The borders are done, and in the middle three horse heads float around a pool of fake wood. Shari’s heel finds the burnt orange carpet, and the gold colored metal strip that divides the kitchen from the living room. To her right, the couch smiles with a mouth of duct tape holding together the front seam on the middle cushion, curved from the weight of so many asses. She continues to step into the living room towards her fish tank.

Most women think Alan is in the military when they first see him. A six foot one inch white man, buzz cut leaning back with both elbows on the bar. He would be holding a beer casually in one hand with the stare of someone fresh from getting yelled at. They imagine a uniform on him and it seems to fit so well they almost believe it before they even speak to him. Instead of the uniform Alan will be wearing cargo shorts, a white t-shirt, and his brown leather jacket. When he came back to Shari’s place tonight Alan kept his jacket on.

“It’s just that you were nice the first few times we hung out but then when it started to get serious you changed. It was too rough. I’m afraid it’ll get worse.”

“Seemed like you enjoyed it at the time. I thought you understood me.”

Next to the toaster Shari had set her shower radio to a Christian Evangelist, combating Satan from 7:00 p.m. to midnight. As Alan joined her on the recently vacuumed carpet the radio was heard to say, ‘But this did not please the Lord!’ Alan turned off the radio.

“You don’t even go to church. I don’t know why you listen to this crap.”

The fish bowl stand poked Shari’s lumbar. In reflex she grabbed the edge, causing the fish bowl to list precariously. Fish swim in circles, watching their universe tip and plummet. Everything sloshes onto the ground and Shari knelt, gasping. She doesn’t know what kind of fish they are, but the little creatures are more like family than the man bending towards her, more than the girl crying under her blankets. One of the fish is pointed and slender, metallic green-yellow. His name is Ritz. The other she calls Finnigan, and it’s the kind of fish that resembles a slice of cheese with eyes. It didn’t flop or fight. It just opened its mouth. Then closed it.

“Jesus bitch,” Alan sank his hand into her hair and shoved her face down among the wet pebbles, on top of Finnigan. He put his weight on her head, and yanked her pants down around her thighs. Shari senses the delicate bones crush beneath her eye socket. Salty slime and blood seeps up the corner of her mouth. Pebbles grind against her jaw. She hates herself for moaning. For pounding harder against his fingers. For spreading her own cheeks when his stubble hurts. For a second her internal self pulls back and takes a good look at the scene. It is disgusted. Shari moves away trying to get her legs into soaked pajama pants.

“I can’t do this. Please leave. Don’t come back.”

Alan looks down at the remains of Finnigan and realizes what he has done. He’s ruined another one. Every time he opens himself up pain comes out and covers the one he loves. He looks up at Shari and beams.

“Should have known better. This happens every time. I get it. I’m a fucking monster. This is just the only way that feels right to show people my feelings.”

He wipes pebbles off his jeans and strides back through the kitchen.

From the other room he calls, “By the way, I fixed your shower earlier today.” The front door slams, and it’s quiet.

Ritz isn’t flopping, and Finnigan is a smear of poorly blended oil paints: yellow, black, red, and white. Shari goes into the bathroom and sees a new shower head and fresh caulking around the

bottom of the tub. She turns on the water and it shoots out better than when she moved in. Without turning it off she sits on the edge of the tub and weeps.

He opened up and I rejected him, she thinks. Why can't I find a normal guy?

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