

Soft Focus Fish

Ali Giles

Carly Jacobs had long blond, perfectly smoothed, perfectly conditioned hair.

Whenever she talked, she combed through it with her fingers. She did it endlessly. She took a hank of it over her shoulder and combed it slowly, top to bottom, inspecting her fingers each time for any loose strands and then sprinkling them on the table or the floor. I always hovered when she left.

“So I bought a goldfish aquarium because fish are relaxing, right? I saw yours in reception and thought I’d get one.” She got out her phone, and showed me a picture. “It’s soft focus. I might print it as a poster to put in my room.”

“Works well,” I said, smiling. I actually thought they looked like chopped carrots with eyes, but then I hadn’t put my glasses on.

“But there’s this one fish who literally keeps bumping into the glass like he’s trying to get my attention. All the time, like he’s unhappy, and then he literally sinks to the bottom and it worries me.” She swiped through a couple more pictures.

“The tank looks pretty small, Carly. Goldfish need loads of room.”

“It’s big enough, though, right?”

“I’ve kept goldfish for years,” I said, “and I think it’s too small.”

Carly put away her phone. “He’ll be fine.”

“Did you know his innards will become stunted as he grows, and he’ll be slowly poisoned on his own excrement?”

“He’s literally only the size of what, I don’t know,” she said, starting to groom, “but he’s small, but every time I go past he’s bumping the glass at me sort of all unhappy, and I feel guilty. Like I can’t help him. I think about him at work, this one stupid little fish. Sometimes I feel like that fish, you know, and...”

I shifted minutely, so I could see past Carly into the bright, sunny day outside. I could see my car in the car park from there, it’s wing mirror held on with gaffer tape. It needed washing and the oil badly needed topping up; I made a mental note to definitely do it that weekend.

“...so it doesn't feel so good when people keep crowding me out like that, I don't know if any of it makes much sense but I wish they'd give me a chance because they must see I'm anxious...”

...I literally hate that, I mean why can't people invite me in, I'm never included, what is it about me...”

Outside, Miriam and Jenny were walking across the car park. Going for lunch at the Harvester, probably; Jenny was wearing that awful skirt again, the checked one that made her arse look huge and flat.

I surreptitiously checked my watch. “Carly. On your initial assessment form you wrote: ‘I don't like to be alone. Even more, I don't like being with people.’”

Carly stared blankly, fingers poised mid-groom. “And it's true.”

“Well,” I continued brightly, “so have you been doing the diary? And the breathing exercises?”

“A little, but I don't think it'll work. I feel stupid doing the breathing thing...”

“The ‘breathing thing’ stops the physical symptoms of anxiety; the dizziness and the panic.”

“It won't work. It literally makes me anxious.”

“And the diary?”

“I'm writing things down sometimes...”

“Great. Shall we go through them? Quickly?”

“I didn't bring it with me.” She paused. “To be honest, I read back through some of it and it upset me. It just made me feel worse. Like, I sound so whiny and self-obsessed.”

“Literally,” I said.

Carly dropped her eyes and resumed grooming, a slow flush spreading from her neck up to her face. “You're such a good listener, really. Thank you. I'm sorry. Can we just keep doing this? I don't know how you put up with me.”

“Oh, I'm neutral,” I said, watching the loose hair drift between us. “I have no emotional attachment to you. None whatsoever.”

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I stopped to look at the aquarium on my way out, at the fish clamouring at the glass. I used to imagine they were blowing kisses at me.

People are so fucking exhausting. Like goldfish, but in a universe of their own making, swilling around in their own shit until eventually, they're too stunted to see past it at all.