



Fishtank

by Lane Ashfeldt

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Sava cries a lot lately. Not about having a baby, that isn't real. She worries about stretch marks and cries over silly things, like people skipping the queue in front of her at the supermarket.

At four months, when she sees the swirling blue dots, she has a rush of warm feeling towards the little video blob. The nurse presses the sensor into the cold gel on her belly, and the thing onscreen tries to wriggle away. The picture zooms in on the head: a tiny skull in negative.

Sava says it's gruesome, and the nurse asks, 'Where's your maternal instinct?' After that comes a guided tour of various body parts. Sava can't decode the images; they're just a blur of blue-white dots, a pulsing submarine shape.

Later, she remembers the nurse saying, "Look how he's swimming" and "See his tiny hands", and Sava thinks, *Hey*, so it's a boy.

When her friend Tania had twins, Sava thought Tania just *would* have baby boys. At school, Tania had been first to wear a bra and smoke a cigarette; later, she deflowered boys as a hobby. She had so many lovers before she got married that her husband, Franco, still cries when he thinks about them. Now she has twin sons, Franco is jealous all over again. Sava always wanted to be like Tania but was scared to let it happen. So she's kind of shocked now, after her scan, to find herself becoming just a little like Tania after all.

The photograph album at her parents' house is full of photos of Sava's big brother, Joey: Joey asleep in his carry-cot, Joey on a rug in the back garden, Joey with all the grown-ups gathered round adoringly.

"Where are my baby photos?" Sava asks.

“Look, you’re in that one, aren’t you? And that.” Her mother points out bits of Sava behind or beside Joey, and goes back to her ironing.

“But don’t you have any proper ones of me, like this?” Sava flips to a large print of Joey from before she was born. He’s dressed like a tiny man, but he still has a head of baby fluff.

“Oh, I don’t know. Try looking in the garage.”

In the paint-splattered dresser where Sava’s father hoards screwdrivers, pliers, nuts and bolts, one drawer is stuffed with reject prints and negative bags. Sava still can’t find her baby photos. The faces are hard to make out in negative, like the baby’s head in the scan. She finds images of herself and Joey as ghostly toddlers, playing under black skies on eerie Cornish beaches. The later pictures are in colour; in them, she wears cheesy smiles, neatly brushed hair and freshly ironed dresses. Joey squints at the camera or looks away, bored, his hair blowing over his eyes.

Sava and TJ go on holiday and try to forget. They eat romantic dinners at riverside restaurants, and ask strangers to photograph the two of them like this is the last time they’ll ever be together. Each night on the way back to the hotel they stop at the bridge and watch the lights reflected in the soupy black water. TJ photographs Sava on the beach, her belly rounding out her swimsuit. She writes a postcard: *Dear Mum and Dad, having a lovely time. Weather great. By the way, baby due September.* She passes the card to TJ, who scribbles in the gap she has left, *TJ probable father.*

That night, TJ dreams about the baby. Thinking this for a sign he’s getting used to the whole baby idea, Sava asks what happened. Somehow the baby got up on the roof, he says, and he was scared it would try to fly down. “It’s so stupid,” he says. “It might like the idea of floating on air.” He wanted to rescue it, but he couldn’t find a ladder.

“So then what?” Sava asks.

“Well that’s when I woke up.”

She’s not sure she believes him.

“How did the baby get up there in the first place?”

“Oh I don’t know, you left it there probably.”

The sea is dead glassy as the plane drops over the English coast. There’s been a major heatwave in their absence, and London’s sticky as an ice lolly wrapper.

The phone is ringing as they unlock the door of their flat. It's Sava's mother, wanting to know when she and TJ are getting married. Finally Sava gets her off the phone. “I knew I shouldn't have told her,” she says. “Now I can't change my mind and have it adopted. At least I gave her a fake due date, so we'll have a few days peace.” “You what?”

TJ is theoretically on better terms with his mother, who lives a very long way away. He sees her every five years or so, and hasn't even told her about the baby yet.

Sava's mother rings back, sounding tearful. She's been thinking, with Joey taking so long to come out of his rebellious gay phase, perhaps it isn't such bad news after all. She might come to terms with it, in time. And she's really looking forward to becoming a grandmother. Sava hands the phone to TJ, and goes to bed.

“We'll have to get it a gameboy before it hits school,” TJ says.

“Nice of you to take an interest, but I'm not sure a gameboy's a good idea. Especially for a boy.”

“C'mon, you want it to be socially inept like all the other kids, don't you?” TJ asks. “I mean, you know how important conformity is at that age.”

A conciliatory parcel arrives, and a handwritten letter.

I expect you've got lots of baby things already. When Joey was born I had enough clothes for at least two babies.

In fact TJ and Sava have bought nothing. It seems weird, buying clothes for someone you've never met. What if they don't fit?

In the parcel is a blue one-piece suit with a teddybear motif. Sava holds it up to her tummy. It's enormous. The baby can't possibly be that big, she decides.

I'm thinking of getting my hair cut, she tells TJ the week before her due date. “It mightn't be practical to wear it this long. The baby might pull it.”

TJ is watching the X Files. He waits until an ad break comes up before saying, “Look, if the baby pulls your hair you should tell it to fuck off and move out. Think what you'd be like if I pulled your hair – why should it get special treatment?”

When Sava wakes up in the hospital and TJ tells her to look in the fishtank, she thinks the baby has been switched. “Ours is a boy. They said when I had the scan, remember?”

"Scans aren't definitive, apparently."

"What do you know? Besides, it's nothing like us."

"I should hope not - it's like something off Star Trek. Or Doctor Who." TJ yawns.

"Anyhow, I was watching while you were asleep, and no one switched it. We're stuck with this one, they don't do refunds.

He scoops the baby out of the tank and passes it to her. The baby stares at them and wiggles its fingers.

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