

# Babysitting

When Vanessa called, Laura said yes, though it wasn't to help Vanessa. They didn't even know each other. Laura was just the girl who had babysat her sister-in-law's neighbour's son a couple of times. Laura didn't particularly want to say yes. She didn't know these kids or this woman. Her plan was to go to a photography exhibition, but saying yes was easier. As a babysitter she was in demand. Laura never said no. That was unless two people wanted her at the same time. In which case, after much worrying, she'd figure out a way to please everyone, and was usually successful. Laura felt good about saying yes. Thinking about her childhood, the only chance her mother had for a break was the babysitter. She was these women's only chance for freedom; this is what Laura thought as she walked down the long, long driveway.

It was a flash area. There was a slim, weedy storm-water drain with ducks running parallel to the drive. It reminded Laura of the stream near her cousin's house. When they were younger they had waded along it, down into foreign backyards, looking at washing lines and making dogs bark. The houses that forked off this driveway were all modern. They were the sort you'd find in any new subdivision, but they had extra bits, concrete columns by the doors and real wood floors in the kitchens. Homes with bathroom and wardrobes opening up everywhere. Vanessa's house was the end one. Despite having its own complement of pillars it looked much the same as the rest.

Laura pressed the buzzer. The door opened, too quickly. Vanessa had been waiting. She stood in her bathrobe with a towel turban over her hair.

"Come in."

Vanessa pulled the door back until she was folded behind it and then closed the door. She showed Laura into the living room. Every surface; ceiling, walls, carpet, was a shade of cream.

"This is Amy, and this George."

Two children perched on a giant leather lounge suite. Laura looked down at her dirty boots, then back at the kids.

“Hi, I’m Laura.”

The girl looked about eight years old. She sat with her back straight. Amy seemed like a child from a school photograph. She was dressed in a tartan skirt and tights, her hair tidied into a tight ponytail high on the back of her head. Vanessa excused herself to get ready. The children didn’t flinch and Laura then examined George. He was only two. Like a terrible huhu grub, nothing but fat white folds packed into a Bob the Builder t-shirt and little sneakers. No trousers, just a nappy. Laura crouched in front of them; they stared past her and out into the garden. The television was turned off.

“So Amy, how old do you think I am?”

“Sixteen.”

Amy’s high voice reminded Laura of the girls at her old school that played netball. Those who get politely termed confident, the ones other children know as bullies.

“That’s right.” Laura lied, she was nineteen. “I can see you’re pretty sharp. How old are you?”

“I’m nine.”

“Great. How old is your brother?”

Ages means a lot to children. The difference between three and six or seven and ten is much bigger than that between twenty and twenty-three, despite what a maths teacher might tell you.

“He’s just two.”

“I bet you help your mum look after him.”

Amy agreed and said she always fed him and that she got him dressed when her mum was sick in bed.

“Amy.” Vanessa was ready. “Don’t go telling tales about us. Laura’s not interested anyway. Are you Laura?” Then, in a higher voice Vanessa said, “Don’t pay any attention to her Laura, half of what Amy says is just monsters under the bed and fairies in the garden. She has quite an imagination.”

Vanessa's husband appeared at her side. He was wearing a black suit and silky red tie that looked more like Saturday evening than Sunday afternoon. He smiled at Laura, shook her hand.

"Help yourself to anything in the pantry. We should be back by four. Our cell phone numbers are written on the notice board." He ruffled George's hair. "You kids be good for the babysitter, okay?"

Amy didn't respond. Her eyes had returned to the garden, she watched the summer tree sway. Its limbs moved up and down. Like somebody was pulling strings to make each of the thin, lime leaves move. The room went quiet; the double glazing meant no-one could hear the wind outside. It was one of those silences that wash over classrooms, what Laura's old teacher used to call an angel passing overhead.

Vanessa spoke. "She's just a bit shy, aren't you Amy?"

Still there was no response. Amy kept staring at the tree, wanting its branches to crash and snap and her parents to leave.

The Dad picked up the car keys. "We'd better get going. Have fun kids."

"Please. Come and watch us Laura. I can go with no hands. Please?" Laura lent against the bridge at the end of the driveway. She listened for cars and picked the leaves of a Hebe bush. Then tossed them into the water. They fell slowly, twisting.

"Look at me." Amy stopped next to Laura. There was nothing shy about her now. Her voice carried through the Sunday air; the sound was one of certainty.

"I was watching. I saw everything."

"No you didn't. You weren't even looking. Watch this time." She looked at Laura and wanted to be like her, to wear earrings, have a wallet and keys. Amy pedalled back down the driveway and proceeded to head towards Laura with her hands hovering above the handlebars. George was on a green plastic trike, rocketing across the concrete by placing his feet on the

ground and pushing, rather than use the pedals. Laura watched; felt her heart clench each time the two nearly collided.

“Come on guys, let’s go inside.”

Laura felt cold standing in the shade.

“No.” Amy continued to speed around her. Laura wouldn’t leave the two of them alone out there, despite Amy’s assurance that she could watch George. It happened; George hit the concrete kerb and stubbed his toe. Thin orangey blood flowed from the crease where nail joins skin. Laura picked him up; before she could find which door lead to bathroom Amy had the bandage ready to apply. His face was wet. He screamed as they cleaned the cut.

They sat on Amy’s bed. This house had a lot of rooms but Amy and George shared. It was a narrow room, painted cream like the rest. The floor was strewn with toys. There were Lucky Book Club posters of horses and dogs. Laura felt old looking at them. Her friend had had the same poster, Labrador puppies with pink panting faces frozen.

“So, what’s your favourite subject at school Amy?” George was almost asleep.

“Art and maths. Mainly art.”

“Neat. What kind of art do you like doing? Drawing? Or painting?”

Amy jumped off the bed, said she’d be back in a moment. Laura looked at the clock; it had been a long hour. Laura hoped they’d come back early, it didn’t matter about the money. It wasn’t much anyway. Amy returned with her arms stacked with folders and boxes and told Laura that these were her ‘resources’. She had labelled them all, a testament to neatly applied stickers and glitter.

“Let’s do some art Laura.”

“Okay.”

Laura drew the same scene every time, a simple tree beside the ocean. Amy had unpacked stencils and watercolours.

“Do it properly Laura, that’s boring. I’m making a butterfly.”

Laura added colours and seagulls, shells and treasure chests, then a rainbow, a cat and a dog. Amy’s was beautiful, much better than Laura’s effort.

“I have plans.”

They had been silent for a couple of minutes before Amy said this. Laura nodded, busy colouring the palm tree.

“I’ve got plans.”

“Okay. What are your plans?”

Laura predicted they involved butterflies, or ponies. Amy’s face was like a cube, all angles and lines. A very serious cube.

“I won’t tell you. I can’t tell anyone.”

Laura nodded again, and smiled, too much.

“I’m serious. If I tell you they won’t come true.”

“Okay.”

Suddenly Amy began to file everything back. Laura tried to sort out the felt pens, but put them in the wrong way and Amy pushed her aside. There was another awkward silence when Amy returned from putting the resources away. Laura was beyond caring whether Amy was having a good time; instead she closed her eyes and lay back on the bed.

“Get up. Let’s read the Guinness Book of Records. I got it out from the library.” The ticking of the clock was audible. Amy turned the pages and read bits out loud. On one page there was a man with long finger nails, another person ate airplanes, someone else held their breath for nine minutes. Opposite that there was a child from Surrey with teaspoons balanced on her face. They hung off the tip of her nose, her eyebrows, her cheeks, chin and ears. Eight of them. Amy had never seen anything like it before. The girl looked like her, and there she was in the record book.

“I could do that.”

She ran to the kitchen to collect teaspoons, ten of them. Outside Amy licked them, and then positioned them on her face. The extra two went on her cheeks as well. Amy broke the world record at three-twenty that Sunday afternoon. Only Laura witnessed this and while she was amazed, they had no proof. She just clapped and laughed and said well done. Amy was such a determined child. Laura had never babysat a kid like her, who wasn't happy to just watch something they weren't allowed to on TV. Not satisfied with smashing Rebecca Middleton's record first time, Amy slowly climbed onto her bike and proceeded to do a lap with no hands. All the while the spoons wobbled on her face. In the end she smiled too much and their balance was destroyed, they fell onto the driveway. The sound was like a wind chime.

Once they went back inside Laura suggested tidying up the bedroom. That was always a winner with the parents. George slept on, with snot trailed over his cheeks and blood on his sock. Amy placed the Lego into its box. Like the resources, everything was put in its right place, in colour, size and shape order. Laura placed the books back on the shelf. These kids had a lot of books. There were framed photos of Amy and her parents on holiday at Dreamworld and at Orana Park with the meerkats. There was a miniature house full of Sylvanian animals, the lights really worked. Laura looked in all the windows at the happy families of badgers and cats, sitting at breakfast tables and tucked up in beds. Laura went to grab something that was behind the shelf.

"Don't touch it." Amy didn't like Laura putting anything in the wrong place. "Leave it alone."

Amy's hands hung at her sides, capped with small fists and her eyebrows have collapsed. She was serious.

"Okay. What is it anyway?"

It didn't look like anything but a stick. Amy continued to file the Lego; she didn't look at Laura or change her tone of voice.

"It's," she paused. She knew she shouldn't tell Laura, so she didn't. Amy wondered what Laura thought. Was her Dad like that? Was anyone's? Amy had no idea. Laura caught her eyes, saw the panic. Shit. She didn't even

know these people. They both kept stacking things, though Amy wasn't looking where she placed them anymore.

"What school do you go to?" Laura's voice sounded stretched. "And what's your teacher's name?" Laura wrote it down.

Amy was glad; she thought Laura had changed the subject. Laura stood up, grabbed back her picture of the ocean and wrote down some quote she'd seen about dreams coming true. She pinned it back on the wall by the puppies.

It felt ridiculous; she didn't give Amy her phone number or anything. She didn't talk with Vanessa. Instead when they arrived Laura took the money and ran down the driveway, even though her legs felt too light and she almost tripped.

Laura handled the piece of pink paper in her pocket until it was worn as soft as tissue. She pulled it out of her wallet, on buses and during boring lectures. She carried the paper with her until one day she finally tucked it at back of her locker. Laura knew she would never call. Instead, when people called her asking for a babysitter, she lied. Now it was always someone's birthday. When she said it, she imagined Amy's birthday. Laura thought of sending her a card, more resources, or teaspoons. She pictured Amy as she blew out the candles and made a wish.