

Excerpts from *Fish in a Tree*

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff

Chapter 1: In Trouble Again

- 1 It's always there. Like the ground underneath my feet.
"Well, Ally? Are you going to write or aren't you?" Mrs. Hall asks.
If my teacher were mean it would be easier.
"C'mon," she says. "I know you can do it."
"What if I told you that I was going to climb a tree using only my teeth? Would you say I could *do it* then?"
Oliver laughs, throwing himself on his desk like it's a fumbled football.
Shay groans. "Ally, why can't you just act normal for once?" Near her, Albert, a bulky kid
- 2 who's worn the same thing every day—a dark T-shirt that reads *Flint*—sits up straight. Like he's waiting for a firecracker to go off.
Mrs. Hall sighs. "C'mon, now. I'm only asking for one page describing yourself."
I can't think of anything worse than having to describe myself. I'd rather write about something more positive. Like throwing up at your own birthday party.
"It's important," she says. "It's so your new teacher can get to know you."
I know that, and it's exactly why I don't want to do it. Teachers are like the machines that take quarters for bouncy balls. You know what you're going to get. Yet, you don't know, too.
"And," she says, "all that doodling of yours, Ally. If you weren't drawing all the time, your work might be done. Please put it away."
Embarrassed, I slide my drawings underneath my blank writing assignment. I've been drawing pictures of myself being shot out of a cannon. It would be easier than school. Less painful.
"C'mon," she says, moving my lined paper toward me. "Just do your best."
Seven schools in seven years and they're all the same. Whenever I do my best, they tell
- 3 me I don't try hard enough. Too messy. Careless spelling. Annoyed that the same word is spelled different ways on the same page. And the headaches. I always get headaches from looking at the brightness of dark letters on white pages for too long.
Mrs. Hall clears her throat.
The rest of the class is getting tired of me again. Chairs slide. Loud sighs. Maybe they think I can't hear their words: *Freak. Dumb. Loser.*
I wish she'd just go hang by Albert, the walking Google page who'd get a better grade than me if he just blew his nose into the paper.
The back of my neck heats up.

I don't get it. She always lets me slide. It must be because these are for the new teacher and she can't have one missing.

I stare at her big stomach. "So, did you decide what you're going to name the baby?" I ask. Last week we got her talking about baby names for a full half hour of social studies.

"C'mon, Ally. No more stalling."

I don't answer.

"I mean it," she says, and I know she does.

4 I watch a mind movie of her taking a stick and drawing a line in the dirt between us under a bright blue sky. She's dressed as a sheriff and I'm wearing black-and-white prisoner stripes. My mind does this all the time—shows me these movies that seem so real that they carry me away inside of them. They are a relief from my real life.

I steel up inside, willing myself to do something I don't really want to do. To escape this teacher who's holding on and won't let go.

I pick up my pencil and her body relaxes, probably relieved that I've given in.

But, instead, knowing she loves clean desks and things just so, I grip my pencil with a hard fist. And scribble all over my desk.

"Ally!" she steps forward quick. "Why would you *do* that?"

The circular scribbles are big on top and small on the bottom. It looks like a tornado and I wonder if I meant to draw a picture of my insides. I look back up at her. "It was there when I sat down."

The laughter starts—but they're not laughing because they think I'm funny.

"I can tell that you're upset, Ally," Mrs. Hall says.

I am not hiding that as well as I need to.

"She's such a freak," Shay says in one of those loud whispers that everyone is meant to hear.

Oliver is drumming on his desk now.

I fold my arms and stare up at her.

"That's *it*," Mrs. Hall finally says, "To the office. *Now*."

I wanted this but now I am having second thoughts.

5 "Ally."

"Huh?"

Everyone laughs again. She puts up her hand. "Anyone else who makes a sound gives up their recess." The room is quiet.

"Ally, I *said* to the office."

I can't go see our principal, Mrs. Silver, again. I go to the office so much, I wonder when they'll hang up a banner that says WELCOME, ALLY NICKERSON!

"I'm sorry," I say, actually meaning it. "I'll do it. I promise."

She sighs, "Okay, Ally, but if that pencil stops moving, you're *going*."

She moves me to the reading table next to a Thanksgiving bulletin board about being grateful. Meanwhile, she sprays my desk with cleaner. Glancing at me like she'd like to spray *me* with cleaner. Scrub off the dumb.

I squint a bit, hoping the lights will hurt my head less. And then I try to hold my pencil the way I'm supposed to instead of the weird way my hand wants to.

I write with one hand and shield my paper with the other. I know I better keep the pencil moving, so I write the word "Why?" over and over from the top of the page to the very bottom.

One, because I know how to spell it right and two, because I'm hoping someone will finally give me an answer.

Chapter 2: Yellow Card

- 6 For Mrs. Hall's baby shower, Jessica shows up with such a big bunch of flowers from her father's florist shop that you'd swear she ripped a bush out of the ground and wrapped the bottom in foil.

Whatever. I don't care. I found a bright card with yellow roses at the store. And a picture of flowers won't dry up in a week. I feel like it's my way of saying I'm sorry for being such a pain all the time.

Max gives his present to Mrs. Hall. He leans back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head as she opens it. He's given her diapers. I think he hoped to get a reaction from her and seems disappointed when she's happy.

- 7 Max likes attention. He also likes parties. Just about every day, he asks Mrs. Hall for a party, and today, he's finally getting one.

When Mrs. Hall slides my card out of the envelope, she doesn't read it out loud like all the others. She hesitates, and I know that she must really love it. And I feel proud, which isn't something I feel very much.

Mrs. Silver leans over to look. I figure I might finally get a compliment for once, but instead, her eyebrows bunch up and she motions me toward the door.

Shay has gotten up to look. She laughs and says, "The world gets dumber every time Ally Nickerson speaks."

"Shay. *Sit* down," Mrs. Hall says, but it's too late. You can't make people unhear something. I should be used to this, but it still takes a piece out of me every time.

As Shay and Jessica laugh. I remember how we dressed up as our favorite book characters for Halloween last week. I came as Alice in Wonderland, from the book my grandpa read to me a ton of times. Shay and her shadow, Jessica, called me Alice in Blunderland all day.

Keisha steps up to Shay and says, "Why don't you mind your own business for once?"

I like Keisha. She isn't afraid. And I'm afraid of so much.

Shay turns, looking like she's ready to swat a fly, "Like it's *your* business?" she asks her.

"That's right. It's *not* my business, but it's as much yours . . . as it is mine," Keisha replies.

- 8 Shay lets out a small gasp. "Stop talking to me."

"Stop being mean," Keisha replies, leaning forward.

Max folds his arms and leans forward across his desk. "Yes. There's going to be a fight," he says.

"There *isn't* going to be a *fight*," Mrs. Hall says.

Suki is holding one of her small wooden blocks. She has a collection of them that she keeps in a box and I've seen her take one out when she gets nervous. She's nervous now.

Shay glares at Keisha. Keisha is new this year and I'm surprised she's said something.

Everyone is all riled up and I don't even know how this all happened.

While Mrs. Hall tells them both to cool off and points out to Max that it's foolish to root for a fight, Mrs. Silver waves me toward the door. What the heck is going on?

Once we're out in the hallway, I can tell by Mrs. Silver's face that it's going to be another one of those times when I'll have to say I'm sorry or explain why I've done something. The thing is, I have no idea why I'm even in trouble this time.

I stuff my hands in my pockets to keep them from doing something I'll regret. I wish I could put my mouth in there, too.

9 "I just don't get it, Ally," she says. "You've done other things that have been inappropriate, but this is just . . . well . . . *different*. It's not like you."

It figures; I do something *nice* and she says it isn't like me. And I can't understand how buying a card is bad.

"Ally," Mrs. Silver says. "If you're looking for attention, this isn't the way to do it."

She has that wrong. I need attention like a fish needs a snorkel.

The door swings all the way open, hitting the lockers, and Oliver springs from the room. "Ally," he says. "I think you gave her that card to tell her you're sorry she has to leave us to go have some dumb baby. She's probably really sad. I feel sorry for her, too."

What is he *talking* about?

"Oliver?" Mrs. Silver asks. "Is there a reason you're out here?"

"Yeah! I was going to . . . um . . . I was . . . going to go to the boys' room. Yeah. That's it." And off he runs.

"Can I just go now?" I blurt out, like the job of just standing here is something I can't do for another second.

She shakes her head a bit as she speaks. "I just don't get it. Why in the *world* would you give a pregnant woman a sympathy card?"

10 *Sympathy card?* I think. And I think some more. And then I remember. My mom sends those to people when someone they love dies. My stomach churns, wondering what Mrs. Hall must have thought.

"You do know what a sympathy card is, Ally, don't you?"

I should deny that I know, but I nod because I don't want to have to hear Mrs. Silver explain it. And besides, she'll think I'm even dumber than I am. If that's possible.

"Then why would you do such a thing?"

I stand tall, but everything inside shrinks. The thing is, I feel real bad. I mean, I felt terrible when the neighbor's dog died, never mind if a baby had died. I just didn't know it was a sad card like that. All I could see were beautiful yellow flowers. And all I could imagine was how happy I was going to make her.

But there are piles of reasons I can't tell the absolute truth.

Not to her.

Not to anyone.

No matter how many times I have prayed and worked and hoped, reading for me is still like trying to make sense of a can of alphabet soup that's been dumped on a plate. I just don't know how other people do it.

Chapter 3: Never up to Me

- 11 Leaning against the wall in the hallway, I stay quiet. Some little kids walk by, reminding me that I'm in sixth grade—the highest grade in this school. But I feel like a baby.

"Ally? Do you have anything to say?" Mrs. Silver asks.

I'm afraid to open my mouth because sometimes things just come out that get me in more trouble.

Finally, she suggests we go to her office.

I sit in the principal's office staring out the window, silent. I wonder what it would be like to be able to relax at school and not have to worry every second of every minute.

- 12 I wish I had my Sketchbook of Impossible Things. It's the only thing that makes me feel like I'm not a waste of space. I like to watch the pictures in my head become real in my book. My recent favorite is a snowman that works in a furnace factory. And then I decide that the craziest, strangest, most unbelievable thing I could ever draw is me doing something right.

Mrs. Silver's sigh brings me back to reality. "Between last year and this year, you've been here for less than five months, Ally, and you've been to visit me far too much. You need to make some changes," she says.

I sit silent.

"It's up to you."

It's not up to me. It's *never* been up to me.

Mrs. Silver's talking is like background noise. Like the radio in the car. I don't have any words to explain. It was a mistake. And I'm ashamed and I don't feel like sharing that with her.

She takes a breath. "Did you think it would be funny?"

I shake my head.

"Did you want to hurt her?"

I look up quick. "No! I wouldn't hurt her. I just . . ."

- 13 And I wonder what I've wondered before. Should I just tell her? It's like my chair is over a trapdoor and there is a button to drop myself. I want to, but I'm afraid. I look up at her. Looking at me all disappointed. Again. And I think that there's no use. They already think I'm a pain, so why add *dumb* to their list? It's not like they can help, anyway. How can you cure dumb?

And so I look out the window again. Remind my mouth to keep shut.

I've learned from the seven different schools I've been to that it's better to stay quiet. Never argue unless I really have to.

I realize that both of my hands have curled into tight fists and Mrs. Silver is looking at them.

She sits down in the chair next to me. "Ally, sometimes it seems that you just *want* to get into trouble." She leans forward a bit. "Do you?"

I shake my head.

"C'mon, Ally. Tell me what's going on. Let me help you."

I look at her quick and then away. I mumble, "*No one* can help me."

"That's not true. Will you let me try?" She points at a poster on the wall.

"Can you read that for me, please?" she says, "Out loud."

The poster shows two hands reaching for each other.

Great. Probably some sappy saying about friends or sticking together or whatever. I don't even have any friends.

"C'mon, Ally. Read it for me, please."

14 The letters on the poster look like black beetles marching across the wall. I could probably figure most of them out, but I'd need a lot of time. And when I'm nervous, forget it. My brain goes blank like an Etch A Sketch turned upside down and shaken. Gray and empty.

"Well, what does it say?" she asks again.

"I don't need to read it to you. I get it," I say, trying to bluff. Staring her dead in the eyes. "Believe me. I know all about it already."

"I don't know about that, kiddo. I think you might need to work on it a bit."

Now I wish I knew what the poster said. I don't look at it, though. Then she'll want to talk about it more.

The bell rings.

Mrs. Silver rakes her hair with her fingers. "Ally. I don't know if you thought the card would be funny or you are upset that Mrs. Hall's leaving or what. But it feels like you've crossed a line this time."

I imagine myself crossing the finish line. My body breaking the bright red ribbon. The crowd cheering as confetti spins through the air. But I know this is not what she means.

"As of Monday, your new teacher will be Mr. Daniels. Let's try to avoid any negative consequences, okay?"

I think about how me avoiding *consequences* would be like the rain avoiding the sky.

15 She waves me out, and as I stand, I look at that poster again. I wish I knew what it was I should learn, because I know that I should know a lot more than I do.

She sighs as I leave her office and I know she's tired of me.

Even I'm tired of me.

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As I run from the office, the hallways are filing with kids. I head back to my classroom to apologize to Mrs. Hall before the buses leave. I run up behind her, tap her on the shoulder.

When she turns and looks at me, her face goes sad before straightening out. I stand there thinking how sorry I am. Hoping she doesn't think I'd wish anything bad on her baby.

But I can't find the words. My mind does the Exch A Sketch thing. Blank.

"What is it, Ally?" she finally asks. She puts her hands on her big belly like she needs to protect it.

I turn and run out of the room. Down the hall and out the front door. The buses are pulling away without me. But that's the way it should be, I guess. I deserve to walk.

All that long way. And all by myself.