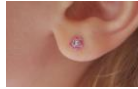


## **My Babysitting Problem**

Okay, so my mom said that when I was thirteen, I would finally be allowed to do the two things I'd always wanted to do:

1. Get my ears pierced



2. Babysit



Not just, you know, look out for my little brothers while my mom was at the store, either, but babysit for people not related to me. For actual money.

The ear-piercing thing was supposed to be the easy part. Except, of course, it wasn't, because my mom wouldn't let me just go to the mall and get my ears pierced at Claire's like Kate Malloy did. No, *my* mom had to take me to the *doctor's* office to have my ears pierced.

Even the *doctor* thought it was weird.

"Most people take their daughters to Claire's," he told my mom.

But Mom was totally inflexible. I was not going to die of blood poisoning if she had anything to say about it—even though there have been no reported deaths from blood poisoning of people who got their ears pierced at Claire's in the entire history of the mall. If I wanted my ears pierced, Dr. Bomba would have to do it, and that was the end of it.

And even though I haven't gotten blood poisoning (so far), the holes aren't even. My mom swears that isn't true, but it totally is.

Kate didn't get blood poisoning from Claire's, and her ear holes aren't uneven either.

The babysitting thing, though. Now, *that* wasn't going to be so easy. That's because there aren't that many little kids in my neighborhood. Most of the kids who live on our street are older than me, like Kate Malloy.

But the good thing is, a new couple, the Weinmans, moved in down the street, and they have a little baby. I wasn't especially stoked about the Weinmans baby, since the Weinmans live right next door to Kate Malloy and I figured they'd ask her to babysit before they'd ever ask me, on account of Kate living so close by and being two years older than me and already in high school and everything.

So when my mom told me, about a week after my thirteenth birthday—my ear holes were still sort of squishy; Dr. Bomba said that I have to twist my posts every morning and night to keep the uneven holes he'd punched into my earlobes from closing up—that Mrs. Weinman had called and asked if I—me, Jenny Greenley—could babysit Saturday night...well, I was pretty stoked. I even went to a library and checked out a book on babysitting so I would know what to do in an emergency if Molly—that was that baby's name—started choking on her own spit-up or whatever.

I guess I didn't think much about why the Weinmans had asked me, and not Kate, to babysit for Molly. I just figured they'd called Kate and she had been busy or something. Kate was starting tenth grade in the fall. I am only going into eighth. Tenth graders have a way more active social life than eighth graders. I know this on account of movies and TV. And from Kate telling me, every day, on the way home from the bus stop.

So when I got to the Weinmans' on Saturday night, and I was standing there while Mrs. Weinman told me where everything was and gave me her cell number in case of an emergency with Molly and all, I was kind of surprised when she went, in a nervous way, "Oh, and, Jenny, I don't know whether or not you are friends with the girl next door, Kate Malloy, but I would appreciate it if you wouldn't have her over while we are gone."

What surprised me about this is:

1. It had never occurred to me to have anyone over while I was babysitting (this seemed to me like it might be a distraction from my job, which was to watch Molly); and
2. The Weinmans didn't like Kate.

According to Kate, she is one of the most popular girls in school. Everyone likes Kate.

Except Mrs. Weinman, apparently.

After the Weinmans left, I sat in the living room with a coke—my mom never has soda in the house, on account of it causing cavities and diabetes and all of that—next to little Molly, who was dozing in her little bouncy chair, and watched TV. The Weinmans, unlike us, had all the premium cable movie channels.

I couldn't believe how great babysitting was. All I had to do was sit there and make sure Molly didn't choke to death on her own spit-up, and I could have all the Coke I wanted while watching HBO! I reached up as I sat there and twisted my gold posts. Squish, Squish. Being thirteen rocked.

I had just decided this when the doorbell rang. I was kind of surprised, since the Weinmans had only just left. I thought maybe they had forgotten their keys or something.

But when I opened the front door, it wasn't either Mr. or Mrs. Weinman standing on the porch. It was Kate. Kate Malloy. Along with a boy I recognized from the bus. He was in Kate's grade and lived a few blocks away.

"I knew it," Kate said when she saw me, her pretty blue eyes narrowing. She didn't look happy to see me. "I thought that was you. I saw you in the window as we were walking by. I should have known they'd call you instead of me."

I swallowed. This was bad. Very bad.

"Well," Kate said, "aren't you going to invite us in?"

"Um," I said. I wasn't nervous just because Mrs. Weinman had told me specifically not to have Kate over and it was my first babysitting job and I didn't want to mess up. And I wasn't nervous just because it was Kate and every time Kate saw me lately she called me a baby. No, I was also nervous because Kate had a boy with her that I didn't know.

"Come on, Jen," Kate said. "Let us in."

“Mrs. Weinman doesn’t want, um, people to come over while they’re out,” I said. I said *people* instead of *you* because I didn’t want to hurt Kate’s feelings.

“So?” Kate said. “What the Whine-Mans don’t know won’t hurt them. Don’t be such a baby.” Then she pushed me out of the way and came inside.

I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to act like a baby, especially in front of a boy—a high school boy. But at the same time, I didn’t want to mess up my first babysitting job ever.

I looked at the boy, who was still standing on the front porch.

“Hi,” he said, sticking out his hand. It was long, and pale and skinny, like the rest of him. “I’m Patrick.”

No boy had ever offered to shake hands with me before. I put my hand in his and shook it.

In the living room, I heard the volume on the TV go up. Way up. It woke Molly. She started to cry.

I let go of the screen door and went into the living room. Patrick followed me. Kate was standing in the middle of the room, holding the remote control and flipping through the channels, fast.

“Kate,” I said, “the TV’s too loud. It’s upsetting Molly.”

Kate looked down at Molly. “She likes it,” was all she said, and went on flipping channels.

Patrick looked down at Molly, too. “I don’t think she likes it,” he said.

Kate threw the remote control onto the coffee table and said, “Whatever,” in a bored voice. Then she collapsed onto the couch and went, “Pat and I are on our way downtown to Dairy Queen to get Blizzards. Come with us.”

“I can’t go downtown,” I said, a little shocked at the suggestion. “I have to stay here with Molly.”

Kate went, "The Whine-Mans left a number, right? Call them and tell them Molly is sick. Then they'll come home, and we can all go downtown."

I was even more shocked. First of all, I am not allowed to go downtown without an adult after dark. And second, it was my first-ever babysitting job, and all.

"I can't do that," I said.

"Why not?" Kate asked

"Because I would be lying," I said. I unbuckled Molly and picked her up from the bouncy seat, hoping that if I held her, she would stop crying. It didn't seem to work, though.

"Oh, Yeah," Kate said with a sneer. "I forgot. Little Jenny Greenley never lies." She looked over at Patrick. "I keep telling her she's never going to make it through ninth grade. She's going to get eaten alive."

Patrick was looking at Molly, who was getting kind of red in the face. He said, "Come on, Kate. She's busy with the baby. Let's go."

But Kate didn't look ready to go. She stayed where she was on the couch. "I wonder why they asked you to babysit and not me," she said. "The Whine-Mans, I mean."

"Because they probably thought you were busy," I said. I didn't want to tell Kate about Mrs. Weinman not liking her. Because even though Kate is always hurting my feelings, I didn't want to hurt hers. "With you being in high school and all."

"Yeah," Kate said. "But I have more experience with babies. You would think they would want the best care possible for their kid, instead of bringing in some neophyte."

Kate does that a lot. Uses words she knows I won't understand because I'm not in high school yet.

“Look,” I said. I didn’t want to, because I was afraid she might make fun of me some more in front of Patrick. But Molly was still crying, and I needed to calm her down, and I didn’t think I could do that with Kate and a strange boy in the house. “You guys just go on downtown and have Blizzards without me. I’ll come some other time.”

Kate sat up. “You know what that baby probably needs? Some music. Babies love music.”

Kate picked up the remote control and turned the channel to MTV. But the music they play on MTV is not really the kind of music babies like. It just made Molly cry harder.

“I think she needs some quiet time!” I yelled, starting to feel desperate.

“She’s just hungry,” Kate said. I was blocking her view of the TV, and she had to lean over to see around me. “Give her a bottle, and she’ll be all right.”

“No,” I said. “I think—”

Kate looked mad, and not just about me blocking her view. “Geez,” Kate said, “She’s just hungry. I know, I have brothers and sisters, remember? Or maybe you don’t remember, because you haven’t been over to my house in so long. Always busy with your new friends, aren’t you, Jen?”

I stood there holding Molly as she screamed in my ear. It was true. I *hadn’t* been over Kate’s house in a long time. I used to go over there every single day. In spite of the difference in our ages, Kate and I had been best friends once. We’d done everything together: gone to the pool and to the library every day all summer; sat in the back of the bus, where it was bumpiest, to and from school; spent the night at each other’s houses...everything. We had been inseparable. I had thought Kate was the coolest person in the world. I was always copying her, reading the books she read, trying to get my mom to get me the clothes she wore. When Kate had begun calling herself “Kate the Great,” after we’d read a book about King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, I had made up a name for

myself: “Jenny the Intrepid.” It didn’t sound as good as Kate the Great, but there aren’t many words that rhyme with Jenny.

And then last year Kate had gone to the high school, leaving me behind in seventh grade. And suddenly, she didn’t want to go to the library anymore. She wanted to go to the mall. When we went to the pool, she didn’t actually want to get in the water; she wanted to lie around in her bikini and work on her tan. Those things were kind of boring to me. Whenever I tried to remind her about being Kate the Great and Jenny the Intrepid, she told me not to be so babyish. She started telling me how I was never going to fit in when I got to high school. Like how, in high school, if you don’t straighten your hair or have nice clothes, no one will speak to you.

This hurt my feelings, of course, but there was nothing I could do about it. My mom told me that sometimes people just grow apart and that I should try to make some new friends. Eventually, I did. Making friends, it turns out, is easy, once you get over being shy. All you have to do is go up to a person who you know is nice and talk to her about stuff you know she likes. Then she will be your friend.

I got a lot of new friends. But then, so had Kate.

I reminded her of this by saying, with a glance in Patrick’s direction, “You have new friends, too.”

“Yeah,” Kate said. “But I don’t get why you’d rather be hanging out with your little baby friends when you could be hanging out with me. I mean, don’t you think hanging with someone in high school would be more fun than hanging with some eighth grader?”

It made me mad when she said that. I mean, *she* was the one who’d forgotten all about being Kate the Great and Jenny the Intrepid. *She’s* the one who was always going around telling me I’m such a baby.

My being mad at Kate gave me the courage to say to her, “Look, I’m sorry, but you have to leave now.”

Kate didn't like hearing that very much.

"What?" she said with an incredulous laugh.

"You have to leave now," I said again. This time, I didn't say it with as much conviction because the look on Kate's face was scaring me. But I still said it. And as I said it, I leaned down and, holding Molly with one arm, snatched the remote control away from Kate.

Then I turned off the TV.

Kate's face got almost as red as Molly's when I did that. But not because she was embarrassed. Because she was mad.

"You know, Jen," she said in a very hard voice, "you should really try to be a little more grateful that I am even willing to hang out with you. I mean, I have a lot better things to do than hang around a whiny little eighth grader."

I was tired of her always reminding me about what a baby I am. I went, "If you have so many better things to do than hang around with me, why don't you go do them, then? I don't even *like* you anymore, Kate. All you ever do is call me names and tell me how babyish I am. If that's what you think of me, why don't you just go away and leave me *alone*?"

Even as the words were coming out of my mouth, I couldn't believe I was saying them. I mean, this was *Kate* I was talking to. We had shared bowls of cake frosting with each other. We had made capes for ourselves out of towels and pretended our bikes were horses and played Kate the Great and Jenny the Intrepid, Knights of the Round Table.

And now Jenny the Intrepid was telling Kate the Great to leave her alone.

Kate's face went as white beneath her tan as if I had slapped her. Then she said—not yelling at all, which was somehow scarier than if she'd really let loose—"Fine. If that's how you feel, Jenny. Only don't expect me to come to your rescue when you start high school and no one will talk to you because you are such an immature freak."



“I don’t *want* your help.” I assured her.

“Fine.” Kate said. Then she spun around and started walking out of the house. “Come on, Pat.”

I didn’t even watch them go. Instead, I tried to comfort Molly, who was still crying. I knew how she felt. I wanted to cry too...

Especially when, after, like, ten minutes, Molly was still crying. I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t think anyone could cry for that long. I held the screaming baby, bouncing her a little in my arms, not certain what to do. Molly’s face was red, and her skin felt very hot. What if she was sick or something? I thought about calling my mom and asking her to come over. But I was sure Kate would find out somehow and think I was a bigger baby than ever—you know, calling my mommy to come and take care of my problems for me.

So instead, I did what it had said to do in the babysitting book I had read. I went to the phone and dialed Mrs. Weinman’s cell number.

I didn’t even have to say anything. I just went, “Mrs. Weinman—”

I guess she could hear Molly’s screams in the background, since she went, “We’ll be home in five minutes,” and hung up.

Molly didn’t stop crying until Mrs. Weinman, looking as scared, came in and took her from me and went, “There, there. It’s all right,” to the baby. “Everything is going to be all right.”

Mr. Weinman stood in the doorway, gazing worriedly at his wife and daughter.

“What happened?” he wanted to know.

“I don’t know,” I said. “She just wouldn’t stop crying.” I didn’t mention the part about Kate coming over.

“She’s all right,” Mrs. Weinman said, kissing Molly on the forehead. And Molly did look a lot better already. Her face was back to a normal color, and she

was only crying very softly now. “She just needed her mommy. Didn’t you, Molly? I’m going to try to put her to bed. It’s all right, Jenny. You can go on home.”

I felt really bad. I said, “Oh, no. You guys go ahead and go back out. I just thought she was sick or something. Now that she’s really all right. I can stay.”

“No,” Mrs. Weinman said, “You go on home. I don’t think Molly’s ready for babysitters yet.”

What she really meant was that *I* wasn’t ready for babysitting yet. She didn’t say so, but I knew that was what she was thinking. I wondered if the Weinmans would ever ask me to babysit again. I kind of doubted it.

Mrs. Weinman looked at me curiously from the doorway. She said, “Jenny, you didn’t by any chance have visitors over here while we were gone, did you?”

I said, turning bright red from my forehead to my earring holes, “Of course not.”

I’m not sure either of them believed me. All I know is, I couldn’t look the Weinmans in the eye as I said, “I’m glad Molly’s all right. I’m sorry if your evening got screwed up. Good-bye.”

I managed to make it out of their house before the tears came. I cried the whole way home—not far, since the Weinmans only live a few doors down from me. I couldn’t believe what an idiot I had been. I didn’t know how I was going to face my mother, who’d wonder what I was doing home so early. I’d have to tell her the truth—at least the part about thinking Molly was sick—because she’d be sure to talk to Mrs. Weinman tomorrow.

I went up to my front porch and sat down on the top step, lowered my forehead to my knees, and sobbed. I didn’t care who heard me, or who saw me, even. I was too mad to care.

The worst part of it was that it wasn’t even Kate’s fault that the Weinmans would never ask me to babysit again. It was *my* fault, for not having stood up to her in the first place. I should have told her a long time ago what I thought of her,

and her always telling me what a baby I was. I *had* been a baby ever to have let her treat me the way she had.

I don't know how long I sat there crying. I stopped when a mosquito bit me and I had to lift up my head to see where it was so I could smack it. I missed, though.

Then I saw some feet come out of the dark grass of the lawn and into the circle of light thrown by the porch lamp. To my surprise, Kate's friend Patrick was standing there. He said, "Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, red-faced that he had almost caught me crying. "I guess."

"Oh," he said. In the porch light, he looked as embarrassed as I felt. "Good. I just was on my way home and saw you..."

Heard me, was more like it. I reached up and wiped away what was left of my tears.

"I'm fine," I said, trying to mean it. "Why aren't you downtown with Kate, getting Blizzards?"

"Oh." Patrick looked uncomfortable. "Well, I guess I kind of blew her off. She makes me so mad sometimes. You know?"

Did I ever.

"That was really uncool of her, what she did to you, with the baby and all," he went on. "And all that stuff she said about high school."

I swallowed. "Yeah," I said.

"It's not true," he said.

"Really?" I was kind of shocked by this. "Then...why did she say it?"

"I don't know." Patrick sat down on the cement step beneath mine and looked out at our lawn. Lightning bugs were flying around, blinking on and off, like when my little brothers played disco with the light switch in the basement. "I

think she wanted to make sure you'd stay friends with her. You know, by making you think you needed her to help you get through ninth grade in another year. Kate doesn't have many friends."

"She doesn't?" This surprised me. About Kate not having many friends, I mean. "She's always going on about how popular she is and how many parties she gets invited to and all the people who like her and stuff."

"Well," Patrick said, "she's not. Popular, I mean. I think she just tells you that stuff to make herself sound...you know. Cool. And important."

I looked at him. It was pretty weird, to be sitting there on my front porch, talking to a boy, especially on who was so much older than me—two whole years—and in high school and everything.

Still, in spite of the weirdness—maybe because of my newfound intrepidity or something—I heard myself asking, "Why do *you* hang around with her?"

"I don't know," he said, swatting at a mosquito. "I guess I feel kind of sorry for her."

"Oh," I said.

And just like that, I stopped hating Kate. Not that I was going to rush out and be her friend again or anything. It was just...well, in spite of what she'd done to me, making me lose my first babysitting job and all, I realized that her life was way worse than mine. Because at least I don't have to go around lying about how popular I am. And at least I don't have boys hanging out with me because they feel sorry for me.

"Well," Patrick said, standing up again, "I better go. Sorry about that whole thing with the baby. I hope we didn't get you into trouble."

"That's okay," I said, smiling. Because, suddenly, it was.

"See you in school," he said, and started to walk away.

“Oh,” I said. “But I don’t go to your school.”

He looked back at me. “You will,” he said. “And I’ll see you then.”

Then he walked out of the ring of porch light and into the darkness.

I reached up and twisted my earrings, the way Dr. Bomba had told me to. Squish, squish. Then I went inside.