

"there was a girl in my school... Verity Ashkenazy, her name was. There were all sorts of stories about her. I didn't really figure things out till years and years later. Her parents both disappeared in the holocaust, but she herself, apparently, was hidden by nuns in a convent. She grew up Catholic, and then after the war—"

"My wife," said the man on the bed, "gave testimony today. My ex-wife. At the Zundel trial."

"I was in awe of her," Katherine said. "She was older than me by several years. She was like... how can I explain? People said she was brilliant, but it was something else besides that... She'd been immunized against harm, nothing could touch her. There was something... she gave off something... She fascinated me."

"My wife," said the stranger on the bed, "was part of the group who laid charges." He bent double across the pillow, as though stuffing it into some terrible pain, some gaping hole in his side. "She has nightmares whenever she relives it, nightmares, night terrors... you've no idea of the..." He puts his hands over his ears.

"As a matter of fact," Katherine said. "She changed my life. There was a certain kind of strength she gave me." She looked at something in her cupped hands. "She fascinated everyone. But Nicholas most of all."

"She sobs," said the stranger on the bed. "She writes letters to dead people in France, in Le Raincy, that's where her family lived. Sometimes I think it's heroic and sometimes I think it's perverse." He held the pillow to his face, blocking out the light. "I shouldn't have gone, but I had to be there. You can't leave, you can't

abandon someone like that."

"It's all right," Katherine soothed. "It's all right, Nicholas."

"In some ways," he said. "She's a tyrant."

"It's all right," Katherine soothed. "It's all right."

He began nuzzling her, sucking her, biting her impersonally. Ravenously. She might have been prison rations. Twisting into his need and her own, she unbuttoned his shirt and kissed the hollow of his neck. She kissed the star-shaped mole in the hollow of his neck.

When Katherine woke it was dark, and a stranger lay beside her in bed.

"Oh god," she said, looking at her watch. "Oh my god." Her arm was pinned under the stranger's shoulder.

First the tidal waves of lunacy recede, and then a most ghastly clarity is left in their wake. This is a physical law. She tugged her arm free.

"Wha-?" he mumbled. "What time is it?"

"It's after midnight," she said. "Oh my god. My family will be frantic. I have to make a call."

"Midnight?" he said. "Oh no, I've missed the last flight. Shit. I've got a class first thing in the morning."

"A class?"

"I teach at M.I.T. I'm a physicist.

"Oh, no, not another academic. I put my whole respectable life at risk for another academic?"

"Are you going to tell me," he said dryly, "that you're not in the habit of doing this?"

"I'm not in the habit of doing this," she said levelly. Her hands, sliding over zip-

pers and buttons, were beginning to tremble with anger, with anxiety, with self-disgust. "And I would like you to remember that I do have a name. It's Katherine Sussex."

(Later, surprised, she wondered why her tongue had instinctively reverted to Sussex, why she hadn't given her married name. Was it middle-class prudence? Or was there some other more arcane reason?)

Above the pulling-on of his trousers, he smiled at her. "Thanks for the lovely evening, Katherine." Sardonic, but not insulting. He fastened his belt buckle and then held out his hand. "Koenig," he said. "Actually, I'm the one who should be embarrassed."

They shook hands.

Oh Nicholas, she incurably and foolishly thought, as the lamplight fell on his curls.

In the taxi, arranging and rehearsing versions and explanations, she saw again the moment at the desk: two strangers paying for several hours' use of a room, a meticulous sharing of costs. She saw the desk clerk's glance in her direction; it was a discreet but unmistakable smirk. She wanted to hit him. Where the smirk touched her, nausea sprang like a weed. She was feeling queasy. The feeling grew rapidly worse.

"Excuse me." She tapped the taxi driver on the shoulder. "Could you stop for a minute? I think I'm going to be sick."

She had to hang onto the guardrail that ran between the shoulder of the 401 and the hulks, the bland and indifferent hulks of condominium towers.

# Pretty Goldfish

*A Story by Libby Scheier*

During bran flakes Sam noticed that Pretty Goldfish was belly up. "What's the fish doing, Ellie?" he asked.

"I'd rather be called Mom," I said. "Why do you keep calling me Ellie?"

"Because that's your *name*," Sam said. "Don't be dumb."

"Maybe you could try Mom once in a while."

"Everybody's called Mom. Nobody's called Ellie. It's special."

"But Mom makes me feel like I'm special to you," I said.

Sam sighed. "Okay, I'll try and do it sometimes. What about the *fish*, Ellie. What's the matter with the fish?"

I looked at the goldfish bowl. "Oh no. It's dead."

Sam couldn't believe it. "What do you mean he's dead. How come? How come he's dead? Is he really dead? How come?"

After a minute, I said, "I think it was just time for it to die, you know. Fish don't live a really long time. I think it just died because it had lived as long as it was supposed to."

Sam's eyes got red and wet. He was

going to cry. Okay, I said to myself, think of the right thing to say. It was one thing practicing in the effective parenting workshop, it was another facing an on-the-spot crisis. Sam looked completely devastated. I thought as hard as I could about the workshop. Validate feelings. I'm supposed to validate how he's feeling, that's right. Don't say it's nothing, that it was the fish's time to go, say he is right to feel whatever he feels. Right.

"I know you feel sad," I said. "You liked Pretty Goldfish a lot. You can cry if you want, it's okay, you know."

Sam immediately dried his eyes with a napkin and got himself under control. "You don't care that he's dead. It's not fair," he said, angry. "It's too short. It's not like people. People have a long time. It's not fair for Pretty Goldfish."

I panicked and regressed to pre-workshop thinking. "It seems longer to a fish than it does to you," I said. "For the fish it feels as long as a person's life feels to a person." I had no idea if this were true, but it seemed like a good thing to say in the circumstances.

Pretty had lived for six months in fact, which was longer than I had expected. We bought it one day in Woolworth's, after me and Sam and Norman had all jammed into a 25-cent photo machine booth and made fools of ourselves in front of crowds of Saturday shoppers. When we came out of the booth we found ourselves face to face with a huge tank filled with hundreds of goldfish.

"Let's get a fish!" Sam screamed.

"Yeah, all right!" Norman and I shouted back at him. "Your first pet!" Sam had just turned five.

"Which one do you want?" I made the mistake of asking. It took Sam twenty minutes to study all the fish. To me, each one was a perfect gold twin of the last, but Sam could grasp their individual essence.

Finally, he pointed to one toward the bottom of the tank, swimming away from the pack. "That one," he said. "That's a pretty one."

It was with relief that I watch Sam take a mothering attitude toward the fish. I figured that meant I was nice to Sam, even if I hadn't studied effective parenting until he was five, and that the reason Sam was turning out so good had something to do with my mothering. Maybe, on the other hand, I told myself, Sam had a wonderful nature that no amount of fucked-up parenting could destroy.

Pretty lived on the big wooden kitchen table where we took all our meals. It was a very nervous fish and grew at an enormous rate. We'd bought one of those

ordinary small goldfish bowls and the fish twitched and darted around and was always hungry. You're supposed to feed fish once a day or they get overfed and die, Norman said, but it became obvious that Pretty, like rest of us, took three regular meals. If it hadn't been fed, it would slam itself against the sides of the fishbowl as it swam and jerked back and forth. When you picked up the red fishfood can and approached the bowl, it stopped dead for a moment from its sideways darting back and forth, then swam straight up to the surface, nose first, as though suddenly pulled there by a heavenly fishing pole. Needless to say, it ate with great voracity.

Looking back on it, I think I was a little insensitive to Pretty. I didn't buy any greens or plants or other things that fish like. The fish looked lonely in the barren bowl one morning, so I took a green marble frog from the mantelpiece and plunked it in. I guess I expected Pretty to swim over and give it a pucker, but instead the fish seized up, darted to the other side of the bowl, and stayed there, dead still, for an hour. Finally, it slowly approached the frog and nosed around it, then began swimming around as usual. I felt better about nearly scaring the fish to death when, later, Pretty began to use the frog to hide behind when it felt anti-social.

Pretty quadrupled in size in about a month and, at its death, it was at least ten times bigger than when we had bought it. If we had put it in the bathtub, it probably would have become as big as a cat. So we fed it well, but it was still nervous, even when it wasn't hungry. It would lie quietly near the bottom, but as soon as someone came into the room, Pretty would begin darting from side to side and round and round. I took this as a reflection on me, of course. But then, I asked myself, how come I don't have a nervous kid? It was nature-nurture again. The old question. Maybe it was Norman's effect on the fish. Norman and I had lived together for six months, and he was playing stepdad to Sam. Norman was nice but he had high anxiety about his health and about his conversations with other grown-ups. He was great with Sam, and he had almost gotten used to me, though talking with me still made him nervous sometimes. He also had a touch of the passive-aggressive in him, never being one to raise his voice, but preferring to lie down in bed with the covers over his head in the middle of an argument. He was a tall, thin man who ate tons of food but, unlike Pretty Goldfish, never gained weight. But if Norman had made the fish nervous, how come he hadn't made Sam nervous? To tell the

truth, I am not a calm individual myself, but rather the high-strung, explosive, heart-attack type, averaging one burst of temper a week. These often took place in the kitchen where there were more breakable things to choose from. Since the fish bowl is in the kitchen, you could have pinned Pretty's nervousness on me. Then again, I had not managed in five years to stress my son, or at least he didn't show it. So it was either that nothing could make Sam nervous because he was such a remarkable, centre child (*my* remarkable, centred child) or that nothing could make the fish calm because it had such a fragile, nervous nature to begin with.

Sam became attached to the fish, of course. More than that, he granted it a natural and rightful place in the house in a way that never occurred to me or Norman. We were playing a number game at dinner and Sam gave us a question: who's the youngest member of the family? We guessed him, then each other, each time Sam saying "no" with a big smile. We gave up and Sam shouted, "It's the fish! Ha, ha, you lose!" Sam always included the fish when expressions of affection were being exchanged, and in the deliberations of family meetings. I recalled how intensely boring I had found it when people talked about their dogs as "one of the family," and then continued to talk and talk about them, as though they *were* one of the family. But I realized now that these people had been influenced by their young children, who have emotional relationships with everything, from dolls to dogs to parents. It's either a largeness of spirit that doesn't survive childhood, or a lack of discrimination.

"How do you know Pretty Goldfish felt that way?" Sam said, his wet eyes staring at the upside-down fish. "How do you know he felt his life was long. Maybe he felt short."

"I read it in a book," I said, feeling guilty.

"I want another pet," Sam said. "I want a pet that doesn't die fast. How about a cat? Does a cat die fast?"

"No, a cat lives about 15 years," I said. "Okay, let's get a cat."

This seemed a disrespectful conversation over the not-yet-cold body of Pretty Goldfish, but Sam had had a deeper emotional relationship with the fish than me, to say the least, and I wasn't about to criticize him for talking about live cats in front of his dead fish. "Let's talk it over with Norman," I said. "Cats are more work than fish, and cost more money, and are more trouble. We'll have to think it over."

"Okay, we'll talk with Norman tonight," Sam said.

Norman had a meeting at work and didn't get home till Sam was asleep. I couldn't give him the bad news straight. "Guess what?" I said, after he'd taken his coat and shoes off and collapsed on the sofa.

"Animal, vegetable or mineral?" he asked.

"Animal," I said.

He sat up. "You're pregnant," he said, his face grey.

"Nope, try again."

"Okay, you said it's animal, right?"

"Right."

"Animal-human or animal-animal?"

"Animal-animal."

"Oh no. The fish died."

"Right."

Norman looked genuinely sad. I told him how it went with Sam. "Maybe we should talk to him some more about it," I said. "Death has been a big topic of conversation this year. It's the first year he's been concerned with it. And now we have our first practical example. Show and tell. The only thing is, I don't really know what to say."

"Just don't give him that 'everything dies' stuff. I don't think he's conscious of his own death yet. He's only five."

"Oh yes, he is, he's conscious of it, there's some conversations that went on around here before you came on board," I said ungenerously. "But Sam's mostly been concerned about me, because he heard that old people die and he figures I'm old and I could die any moment and he's afraid to be alone. Most of our talks about dying have been me reassuring him that I'm not going to die until he's grown up and can take care of himself. He asked once or twice about himself, and I told him it was a really, really long time before he'd die, like a hundred years. That seemed like so much time to him, that he seemed to stop worrying about it. But I don't know. What's wrong with saying 'everything dies'. It does, and I think I've already said that to Sam and he's plenty aware of that. Dying is part of living, you know," I said, wincing at my cozy motto.

"I don't think putting it like that does much good," Norman said. "I think we should just tell him it's okay to be sad, that we're sad, too, and that we all miss Pretty Goldfish." Norman had also attended the effective parenting workshop.

"He wants a cat."

"Well, maybe we'll get a cat."

"What should we do about the fish?"

"I guess the three of us could bury it in the backyard tomorrow."

"Can we leave it overnight in the bowl, or is it going to rot and stink up the kitchen?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't think fish rot so fast when they're in water. Besides, it's so small. How much of a stink could it make? We can wait till tomorrow," Norman said.

We went into the kitchen to get ourselves a drink, and it had already begun to smell from Pretty Goldfish. "Looks like we have to do something tonight. I'll empty the bowl and put some ice in it and put the fish back in," I said. Norman scooped the fish out of the bowl with a soup spoon and put it on a dish.

The bright gold colour had already faded to a pale yellow. The belly was white and a greyish translucent jelly coated the perfectly round eyes, white with solid black centres. Where the belly had begun to rot, in the centre, it was pinkish brown. The tiny scaled skin looked slimy and sticky. The fish lay completely still on the dish, like a sardine, like any dead fish, its nervous spirit gone and departed.

Norman grimaced. "You wouldn't think such a small fish would smell so much," he said.

He washed out the bowl and I filled it with two trays of ice cubes, scooped Pretty up again and put it on the ice. Its nose slid down between two cubes. "This is really stupid," I said. "Why don't I just wrap it up and put it in the freezer. This ice is going to melt, by morning the water will be warm and smelly. Putting it in the freezer is easier, anyway."

"Just wrap it in tin foil and put it in the fridge, that's the best thing to do. Then we can bury it inside the tin foil," said Norman.

"Can't we just bury it as is? Do we really need a coffin?" I said.

Norman's face showed suffering. "Ellie, how are you going to carry it out to the garden, by its smelly tail?"

"Yeah, okay, you're right." I got the tin foil and tried to get the fish out of the ice cubes. This was hard, because as they slowly melted, it kept slipping between them. I was afraid if I slipped the whole thing out, the cubes would fall on the fish and break it to pieces. But I couldn't get it out and finally I tipped everything into a large dish. The fish emerged in one piece. I touched its side with my forefinger and it felt surprisingly solid. I suddenly felt a catch in my throat.

"This is ridiculous," I said to Norman. "I'm getting upset."

"I know," he said. "I'm upset too."

"God knows I've seen a lot of dead fish." I felt like an idiot and was grateful

that I managed not to cry.

"You know," Norman confessed, "I saw the fish up near the top of the water last night and it looked like it was gasping a bit for air and I told myself maybe I should change the water and then I was tired and decided to do it the next day."

"Oh for Christ's sake, don't start guilt-ing yourself about the fish," I said. "We didn't expect it to last a month. I thought you said six months was a long life for a fish."

"I don't know," Norman said. "I don't know how long fish are supposed to live. My brother kept fish and they died every month. He kept buying more. He loved fish."

I got some tin foil, nudged the fish onto it with my finger, wrapped it up and put it in the freezer.

We went upstairs and Norman talked for a while about his meeting at work before we fell asleep. In the morning when we got up, we found Sam pretending to his stuffed bears. I was in the bathroom when I heard Sam say, "Norman, I've got some bad news for you."

"What's that?" Norman asked.

"The fish died."

Norman had forgotten all about it. So had I.

"I know," Norman said. I could feel him gathering up his internal resources as he next said, "Let's sit down and talk about it."

"Wait for me!" I shouted from the bathroom. "I'm coming too." I rushed down the hallway and Norman was sitting on the bed with Sam on his lap, asking him how he felt about the fish dying.

"Sad," Sam said. "I want a cat."

"It's okay to be sad," Norman and I said simultaneously. Sam stared at both of us.

"I'm sad too," I said.

"Me too," said Norman.

"The fish's spirit is still alive," I said.

Sam looked at me and said, "Ellie."

"Do you want to talk some more about it?" Norman asked.

"I want to get up," Sam said. He got off Norman's lap and went to play with his bears.

"We'll talk with him some more later," Norman said to me, and got his coat to go to work.

He came into Sam's room to say good-bye. "I'll see you later," he said. "I'll see you tonight."

"I'll see you tonight," Sam said, cheerfully. "And tomorrow too. And the next day. I'll see you forever."

Norman went down the stairs.

"I'll see you till you're dead," Sam called after him.