

Animals (short story excerpt)

by Maria Adelmann

I had some sea monkeys once, but they weren't real pets. I ordered them from a catalog where there was this cartoon drawing of them looking like mermaid-lizards, naked and pale as macaroni. They were standing on two flippered feet and had spines like mountains and crazy tails with paddles at the ends and three antennae that looked like giraffe horns.

"BOWLFUL OF HAPPINESS," said the ad in all-caps.

"Bowlful of baloney," said Ma from the stove where she was sprinkling in the orange powder for the Mac 'n Cheese.

Why is Ma always right? They weren't even worth the shipping and handling. The sea monkeys were just a bunch of dumb specks, like the dots of i's that fell out of a book or like pepper sprinkled on water. I set the stupid plastic aquarium on top of the microwave in the kitchen and forgot all about it, and after awhile all the water was green and kind of fuzzy and the sea monkeys were all dead. They didn't even care. That's how you know when something isn't worth being alive, if it doesn't care if it's dead.

"You're being very callous, Ashley," said my friend Willa. We were at her house eating peanut butter cookies off giant pink napkins. Her dog Lionel, a yellow lab that Willa yapped about all the time, was licking crumbs up from all around my toes and making me giggle. Willa's kitchen was all white and clean, like a hospital. You could probably perform surgery right there on her kitchen table, and at the end her Ma would swoop in and clean up the blood with a Miracle Mop.

Willa was thin and kind of floppy, like a piece of boiled spaghetti. She had a nose that looked like it had been pinched into shape and she could stick her elbow out in the wrong direction, which she called double-jointed and I called gross. She always wore fancy barrettes and tops with sequins and glitter, and I always wore T-shirts and black sneakers and my favorite pair of turquoise leggings with the hole in the knee.

We were friends for three reasons: she was in my class, she lived three blocks away, and her Ma, Ms. Mary, stayed home all day to clean and make snacks. Willa lived in a two-story, red-brick house that her family had to itself, plus there was a yard in the back with a fence so you couldn't see the neighbors. Willa had about a million pets, a dog and two cats and a turtle named

Captain Eric and a ton of guinea pigs that were always having babies, plus a rock graveyard that took up like a quarter of the yard, where her dad helped her bury all the dead ones. Ms. Mary was always wandering around the house with a lint roller wheeling up fur.

“Very *what?*” I asked.

“Callous,” said Willa, licking at her fingers and wiping them on her skirt. “Like someone who doesn’t care about other people.”

“They weren’t *people*, that’s the point,” I said. “They weren’t even *monkeys*, they were *dots*.”

“Pets are important,” said Willa. “They teach kids about responsibility.” She’d collected a load of crumbs into her napkin, and she dumped them all over the floor below the table. Lionel abandoned my feet to go clean up the mess.

I made my napkin into a tunnel and poured all the crumbs right into my mouth. “Let’s go play,” I said, but Willa wanted to tell me about how she was going to be a *pescetarian*, which is a vegetarian that doesn’t care about fish.

I sighed inside myself and started folding my napkin into a Cootie Catcher. Willa was always telling me about the great things she was doing for animals, like not eating them and adopting pandas, while I waited around to play with her toys. She had three metal shelves full of toys in the basement, and you couldn’t even get to half of them without a step ladder. The shelves were organized in rows of blue plastic bins with white rectangular labels on them that said what was inside like Littlest Pet Shop, Polly Pocket, Board Games, Outdoor Toys, Crafts, Barbies, and American Girl Dolls. The only toy that I had that Willa didn’t was Creepy Crawlers, which is like an Easy Bake Oven for bugs.

“So say you’re a *pescetarian*,” I said to Willa, just to see what she’d say, “could you eat Captain Eric?” I was opening and closing my Cootie Catcher with my fingers as fast as I could.

“A turtle is an *amphibian*, Ashley,” Willa said, shaking her head really seriously like I’d missed some big important lesson in school. “You really need a pet,” she added. “It’s, like, not even right for a kid not to have one.” She had little cookie crumbs speckled all around her mouth, and I pictured Ms. Mary appearing to lint roll them off. “Also,” Willa said. “I would *never* kill Captain Eric.”

“You want to know about death?” I said with mystery in my voice. I snapped the Cootie Catcher closed and put it down on the table. Willa shook her head no, but I told her anyway. “My dad was climbing Mount Everest, and he fell off.”

“That’s not what my mom said,” said Willa.

“Who would know better, me or her?”

“I don’t know,” said Willa, squirming in her seat. “Did you have a funeral?”

“We couldn’t find his body,” I told her. “Let’s go play,” said Willa, and I jumped off the chair and led us to the basement.

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A few weeks later, Willa appeared on my stoop almost toppling over. She was holding a giant plastic crate that covered the entire upper half of her body, so she looked like a weird robot with a bunch of dangly limbs. The cage had one of those upside-down water bottles in it, plus a guinea pig. The upper half of the cage was clear, and it made Willa’s face look twisted and kind of crazy. She plopped the cage down on the scratchy welcome mat that had been a watermelon before all the color came off.

I looked over Willa’s shoulder into the street where Ms. Mary was smiling and waving at me from her car parked along the curb. Ms. Mary had long, skinny arms and legs like a model, but sometimes I thought of her as a raisin-version of Willa, kinda dark from sun-freckles and a little wrinkly. Even when something was three blocks away, Ms. Mary always drove. She drove Willa to the bus stop at the end of the street and around the neighborhood for trick-or-treating, which seemed pretty dumb to me.

“What’s this?” I asked. The guinea pig had crammed itself into a corner of the cage. He was white with a few blobs of brown and black that looked like accidents with a paint brush. He was so fuzzy you couldn’t see his face or legs, and he reminded me of a giant wad of dust collected under the couch.

Willa said that I’d been the victim of false advertising, plus it was important for kids to have pets. She was happy to give me the opportunity to take care of a pet myself. She told me this with a look on her face I’d seen before, very prideful, like at Pioneer Girls when she won a pink watch with a calculator on it for selling the most tins of popcorn, even though her parents had just bought them all.

“Thanks,” I said. There was this weird feeling in my stomach, sort of happy and ill at the same time, like when you’re in the middle of eating too much cake. I wanted a pet, but I suddenly wasn’t sure how committed I was to learning about responsibility.

“What are you going to name him?” Willa asked.

“Tiger,” I said.

Willa didn’t even crack a smile. “That’s condescending,” she said. “How would you feel if your parents named you, like, Dog or something?”

“I’d feel fine,” I said. “Better than a name like Ashley.”

She looked down at the guinea pig like maybe she better take it back. “This is just *one* pet, Ashley,” she said finally. “Try and keep it alive.”

When Ma got home from work she saw the guinea pig and said, “Jesus Christ” and rolled her eyes all around in her head. Then she sighed real big and draped her blue Rite Aid vest over the back of the rocking chair and plopped down on the orange-red couch and turned on the six o’clock news so she could be up-to-date with what was happening in the world. We’d flipped the cushions because the one side was all ratty, and now they were darker than the rest of the couch, and also the arms were all sunken in like Ma’s cheeks because of her missing side teeth.

Ma said I was going to return the guinea pig to Willa, but I banged all around the apartment in a rage and stomped back and forth in front of Peter Jennings, saying that it was important for kids to learn responsibility. She told me to be quiet or we’d get a call from Mr. S. downstairs. She looked away from the news to stare me in the eyes and say, “I’m not lifting ONE finger to take care of it, just so you know. Not one finger.”

It was a promise she kept. Tiger was a real pain. He was eating all of my money and also pooping on it. I had to clean his cage every week or else it would stink to high heaven, so I was always walking down to the pet shop on Glenmont to buy woodchips.

The pet shop was squeezed between an alcohol store and a café with no name that made the whole block smell like bacon and coffee. I tried to get Willa to walk down there with me once, but she said she wasn’t allowed, which made me feel a little haughty, which is like with your nose in the air. But maybe the reason Willa didn’t want to go was because she didn’t need to, because her parents always went, because she never paid for anything herself, not the woodchips or the dog food or the little treasure boxes that popped opened and closed in Captain Eric’s tank.

END OF SAMPLE