

## Animals

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 rollercoasters 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. 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 all 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, then 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 then 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 in the basement," I said.

"Not yet," said Willa. First she wanted to tell me all about how she was going to be a *pescetarian*, which is a vegetarian who doesn't care about fish.

I sighed inside myself and started folding my napkin into a Cootie Catcher. Willa loved to say "not yet" and then force me to listen to all of the great things she was doing for animals, like not eating them or adopting them, while I was sitting around waiting to play with her basement toys.

Willa's basement had three metal shelves full of toys, 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 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 shut.

Willa shook her head no. “My dad was climbing Mount Everest,” I said, “and he just kind of fell off.”

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

“Who would know better: me or your mom?” I asked. I mean, he *could’ve* fallen off Mount Everest. That would explain why I hadn’t heard from him since he left.

“I don’t know,” said Willa, squirming in her seat. “Then when was the funeral?”

“We couldn’t find the body,” I said.

Willa bit at the corner of her lip. “Let’s just go play,” she said.

“Cool,” I said, and I hopped off the chair and led us into the basement.

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A few weeks later, Willa appeared on my stoop almost toppling over. She was holding a giant cage that covered the entire upper half of her body, so she looked like a robot with a bunch of dangly limbs. The cage had one of those upside-down water bottles in it, plus a guinea pig. 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. 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. He reminded me of a giant wad of dust collected under the couch.

Willa said that the sea monkeys had made me a 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, at Pioneer Girls when she won a pink calculator watch 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 suddenly I 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 Willa."

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." 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. in the basement apartment. Ma was in a real mood ever since dad left, but I wasn't too distraught because he had finally sent me a postcard, a picture of a milkshake stand in the middle of a desert landscape. The stand was called "Desert Dessert." On the back he wrote in giant capital letters, "HAD A MILK SHAKE HERE + THOUGHT OF YOU. I SWEAR THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE FOR MILES. YOURS, DADDY." It wasn't a lot of information, but I loved mail and also

milkshakes. Life at home didn't seem all that different without him—when he was around, he was always at work.

Ma 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. Then again maybe Willa didn't want to go because she didn't need to, because her parents always drove her to the big pet store, because she never paid for anything herself, not the woodchips or the dog food or the little treasure boxes that popped open and closed in Captain Eric's tank.

Aleks with a K owned the pet store and he had a green parrot who flew around the place, and if you sneezed, the parrot would sneeze too, and Aleks said "wait'll you see what it does when you fart." One time when I was in a bad mood, my dad and I walked over to the pet store and he asked Aleks if I could play with the rabbit, and Aleks let me, but that was a long time ago.

Even though Aleks would sometimes give me a 10% discount for being a Loyal Customer, I still started to worry I'd run out of resources, especially when I heard Ma on the phone talking about how we didn't have any money left. I heard this sometimes when I'd sneak out of my room for a midnight snack, and Ma would be sitting at the kitchen table in her thin black nightgown and pink robe, twisted in the telephone cord like some spider had wound her up there and would have her for dinner later. She'd be saying stuff like, "He's hardly sent a dime" and "Men are bastards" and "men are animals" and "men suck you dry." But later I'd scrub the yellow tub out with Comet or something and she'd give me another dollar.

I tried to make Tiger run through a maze of VHS tapes, but he just lay around on the rug like a lump. I put a trail of food pellets through the maze, but Tiger still wouldn't move, even when I poked him in the butt over and over saying, "Lazy bones!" Finally I just took one of the

tapes out of the maze and popped it in the VCR and forgot to put him in his cage, and later I found a bunch of poop under the couch, plus him asleep in a ball.

Even though I didn't really like Tiger, I was also worried that he'd die, which was what made him worse than the sea monkeys. I'd rush home from school to look into his cage. He was usually sleeping, curled up like a giant, dirty cotton ball on top of his own poop. He was so fluffy you couldn't tell if he was breathing, so just to make sure he was alive, I'd tilt the cage up, and Tiger would wake up in a panic and scramble down the ramp to the side that was still on the floor, and I'd feel bad for waking him even though all he ever did was sleep.

One day, I tipped the cage and Tiger didn't scramble. He just rolled all the way down the woodchips covered in his poop and hit the other end of the cage with a thud. I was mad but also relieved because now I could stop wondering if he was dead.

Since we didn't have a yard, Ma and I walked to the park with Tiger in a Key Food bag. Ma was beautiful with some meat on her bones and a little darkness under her eyes like a rainy day and a chin that was pointed always a little toward the sky despite everything. She often wore these little blue dangly earrings that matched her Rite-Aid vest, and she was wearing them as we walked through the park to the edge of the woods, and they twinkled in the sun like they were expensive. We rolled Tiger up in a big, green maple leaf and Ma said, "Would you like to say a few words?" She put her hand on my shoulder as I held Tiger like a burrito.

"Tiger," I said. "You weren't that fun and you were expensive, but I'm sorry that you're dead." I *was* sorry, but it seemed that if a thing had to leave, it was better if it died—then you didn't have to wonder if it might come back. Otherwise, you're left feeling like you do when you have to return a chapter book to the library before you've finished reading it.

"Amen," said Ma. And we agreed that she would do the honors of pitching him into the woods because she had a great arm.

When Willa heard about this, she clutched her puffy hair and screamed, "You did WHAT?"

"He was eating me out of house and home," I said.

"Did you kill him?" she said, her eyes welling up with tears so they glittered like her stupid sparkly shirt. "Did you do it on purpose?"

“Are you kidding me?” I said. “I did everything for that bastard, and how does he thank me?”

Willa stared at me hard because Tiger was dead and I’d said a swear word—which, get over it—and then Willa’s dad, Mr. Tim, came in the door, whistling and carrying a big bag of dog food in his arms. “Everything alright in here?” he asked.

Willa didn’t even look at him. “Seriously, Dad,” she said, like it was none of his beeswax. When he left she whispered, “You’re so irresponsible, you can’t even keep a rodent alive. Then when he’s dead, you can’t even bury him right.”

“What’d you want me to do, bury it in a flower pot?” I asked.

“IT!” Willa screamed. “IT!!!!”

Then she stopped talking to me, and I went home without a cookie or a chance to play with her basement toys.

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A few weeks later Ma got off the phone and said, “Why don’t you join the 4-H club with Willa? Ms. Mary said she’ll drive you.” Ma was wearing her blue earrings, but the sun wasn’t out so they just looked like blue squares that I could’ve made out of Play-Doh.

“I hate Willa,” I said.

“That’s not true,” said Ma.

I was pretty sure it was true, but Ma said she could use a break and it was very nice of Ms. Mary to offer, so I didn’t have a choice.

Willa and I sat in the backseat in silence with our arms crossed, but first she aimed both of the AC vents in the back directly at her face, because it was her car. She was wearing new denim overalls with smiley faces bleached into them and had a triangle of red handkerchief in her hair, like she was some sort of farm child. “What’s going on girls?” Ms. Mary kept saying, looking back into the rearview with this big concerned crease in the middle of her forehead. “Willa, why don’t you tell Ashley what 4-H is like?” She had this high-pitched voice like a cartoon bird. Sometimes she sounded so friendly I wanted to smack her.

Willa didn’t say anything, she just casually slipped this little egg-shaped plastic thing out of her pocket, all cool, like it was just a stick of gum or something, but I knew that it was a

Tamagotchi because on the six o'clock news they'd talked about it and said it was going to be a fad. It cost twenty bucks and had this little screen where a pet lived, and you could press buttons to play with it and feed it so it would have full happiness and wouldn't die. I'd never seen one in real life, but I pretended not to be interested because I didn't want to give Willa the satisfaction. I looked out the window instead.

It was practically forever until we rolled up to this long dusty driveway, and at the end of it there was this giant white house with a porch on every side, and a big building out back like every farmhouse you ever saw in a book, bright red with white X's on giant doors. Instead of putting the Tamagotchi back in her pocket, Willa hooked it onto the belt loops of her overalls so it just hung at her side, and I couldn't help but look at it. On the screen, there was this little outline of a creature with giant lips, and he was bouncing around with happiness.

As soon as Ms. Mary turned the car engine off, Willa made a big show of jumping out of her seat and flinging open the car door and running over to the fence where these pigs and chickens and ducks were wandering all over the place. "So addorrrable!" she said, patting some crazy-eyed bleating goat on the head. "So cuuuttte!" I followed Willa over slowly, kicking my feet in the dirt.

"Who pays to feed all these things?" I asked.

"Everything's about money with you, isn't it?" Willa said. Ms. Mary told Willa to hush and I threw Willa a look like, even your Ma doesn't like you. There was this black, wiry-haired pot-bellied pig named Suzie Cakes and Ms. Mary got on one knee next to me and showed me how to feed it Cheerios, speaking very slowly to me in her high-pitched voice like I was an idiot.

Suzie Cakes started eating right out of my hand, her wet snout tickling my palm. "You know," said Ms. Mary, "you could train this piggy, and then you could show it at the fair. Remember Willa did that last year and she got a blue ribbon? She had a lot of fun."

"Is there prize money?" I asked, hoping Willa would hear, but she didn't even turn to look at me. She was pressing the buttons on her Tamagotchi again, while this big fat potbellied pig named Fifi pranced around next to her, wagging its tiny tail. Fifi was a Grand Champion and could do stuff like sit and roll over and fetch things.



Ms. Mary went inside and Suzie Cakes snorted around in my hand for awhile eating Cheerios, her little tail wagging around, and then I thought I should give her a nice hug, but when I reached out she made a run for it, slipping right out from under me and jetting off through the grass. For something so fat, Suzie Cakes was a really fast sprinter, and even though I was right on her tail, I couldn't quite catch up, and then she darted under the porch, and I couldn't fit in there unless I slithered in on my stomach, which I was not going to do. I stood next to the porch for a minute, trying to catch my breath and compose myself, because there was an angry feeling in me, and I was thinking about how dumb it was that the things you were supposed to love were always running away or dying.

The porch had a crisscross front like the top of a pie, but there was an opening at the side where I could sit on my haunches and peek through. Suzie Cakes was huddled at the back near the cement wall, basking in the shade. She didn't seem to care that I was outside in the hot sun saying nice things like, "You're very pretty, Suzie Cakes. Come on out!" I got a handful of Cheerios from the ziplock bag and shook it in her direction. "Come on now," I said very nicely, but she just kept her head down on the ground and blinked lazily, like she didn't care about anything.

"Quit messing around under there!" I shouted. I threw the Cheerios towards her, but she just ate them off the ground wherever she could reach her snout without getting up.

I looked around. Ms. Mary was inside having iced tea with the lady who owned the farm, but Willa was nearby on the grass. She was standing still as a statue with her skinny arm stretched above her head, her fingers in an OK shape, her Tamagotchi hanging perfectly still at her waist.

At first I didn't understand what Willa was doing, but then I saw Fifi on her haunches at Willa's feet, staring up at Willa's hand, and I knew she was holding a Cheerio. Fifi's back legs were twitching like she could hardly contain herself, and her tail was clicking back and forth like one of those piano timers.

Fifi was so excited that she started vibrating and her snout started moving in and out like an accordion and her nostrils were getting bigger and smaller, bigger and smaller, and still Willa didn't drop it. I felt embarrassed for Fifi, for how much she wanted a stupid little thing.

Fifi's head started jerking up and down, like maybe she thought Willa's hand was moving even though it was stone-still, and I kept thinking Fifi was going to jump up on her back legs and try to get the Cheerio, even though it was impossible for her to jump that high. I was sure that Willa would drop the Cheerio now, but she just stood there, the single O held high in the air.

"Come on," I said.

"Not yet," said Willa, and my chest started burning, worse than before.

I hated Willa, I was sure of it now. I hated her stupid sparkly shirts and the dumb handkerchief in her hair and the crazy barrettes she always wore, one of them with this Noah's Ark scene with all the animals going two by two. I hated her craft supplies, like glitter stickers in the shapes of letters so she always got A-pluses on poster board projects even though I drew all my letters by hand in this cool 3-D style. I hated her mom for driving her to the bus stop, and I hated her dad for buying the dog food, and I hated her pink calculator watch and her dumb basement toys and her stupid Tamagotchi that she got the second it was invented.

I didn't even think about what I did next, I just did it. I plunged my hand into my bag of Cheerios and started throwing handfuls at Willa, just shoving my hand in and out like a machine and throwing while walking towards her, and Fifi jumped up from sitting and snorted around in the grass with glee like it was a party, and Willa's stretched out arm came down to cover her face, and the egg-shaped Tamagotchi swung at her waist.

"Stop it!" Willa squealed as I chucked Cheerios at her. It was like a pebble had been tossed into me, and the angry feeling was moving out in ripples through my whole body, and I really felt wild, so when I ran out of Cheerios, I started pulling up clumps of grass with the roots and damp dirt falling off and pegging them at her while she shrieked.

And for some reason, while Willa was yelling "Stop!" and rolling up into a ball in the grass and I was trying to jimmy a mass of wet dirt into her face and Ms. Mary was running out of the backdoor of the big white house saying, "What's going on?" in her high-pitched bird-voice, I had this picture in my head of my dad, a picture of what he looked like one night before he left, his face moonlit, his hand smoothing my covers, his mouth saying, "People are gonna tell you that you can always make a good choice, but those are the kinds of people who have choices." And I was pretty sure which kind of person Willa was and which kind of person I was.

I had Willa down with my forearm across her chest when we caught each other's eyes for a split second. Hers were shiny with tears and they were looking at me like she didn't know who I was.

And I guess I was kind of confused, too, because I know you're supposed to feel bad when do you something mean like throw things at people and smash dirt in their faces, but I didn't feel bad, I felt this dark kind of happiness rising inside me, like how TV villains must feel when they cackle, and I thought maybe Willa was right about one thing, maybe I was callous after all.