

# The Hamster Eulogies

*by* angel readman

I tell my children I'll be won't be always be there. My son is seven; he looks at me vaguely worried, picking a scab off his hand. I tell him not to scratch and pass his excema cream. My daughter of four has no more than a vague curiosity, a glance between the tangles of her Barbie's hair.

'Where are you going?' they ask.

I don't sugar coat it. I say I don't know where I'm going till I get there. My son remembers a day trip in the car when I lost the map and we ended up at a fish and chip van in a closed seaside town. It was windy. We still managed to find dead crabs and candyfloss.

I tell them I'm dying. There is not talk about better places or heaven because we've never been to church. It seems like a red herring thrown into our living room, something that isn't there normally that would that fill them with fear and suspicion, a falsehood spotted instantly like 'we'll see' in the company of visitors ,the sing sing voice reply they never hear when I'm alone up to my neck in laundry. I never filled my kids heads with notions of heaven because I read the papers. There was a story about a girl of ten who hung herself with her nightdress after what someone at school said to her. Her parents were divorced. The note she left in orange crayon said she was going to a better place.

So, when the goldfish went belly up we flushed it and said goodbye, our voices echoing in the porcelain telephone of the toilet like the voices of our lesser seen selves. But not once did we mention heaven. The next day we bought another one, this one was white with a black eye-patch and orange flecks on his tail.

What you're expecting is there will be tears, tantrums, but I've played out this scene many times in my mind. I've had mine in private, take rests between for moments of quiet statement, calmness to wrap around my kids like a woollen blanket so they won't feel the coming fall. There is time enough to be cold when the leaves have all left the trees, for now late summer kicks its heels.

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So, now they simply listen, ask questions. Because they don't cry neither do I. One tear and the whole scene could come undone for everyone. What my son says is 'where will we go? Who will look after us?' Even in the shadow of his half formed fear his self survival takes hold. I am proud. They've been well raised. I make them remember their aunt's house with the pond full of frog spawn. They take a moment to imagine themselves there. They remember the cup cakes with such enthusiasm that I get a lump in my throat. My daughter asks, 'but if you're not coming, won't you miss out on the cup cakes?' I did this, I think, in rehearsal, I can do it again.

I try to be honest as I was when I buried the kids pets and never went for the heaven word kept in reserve. When the hamster was found feet up in his cage my daughter brought a shoebox while my son made the lolly stick grave markers. But it was up to me to find the words, compose the hamster eulogies. 'We will all miss Mr Sprinkles. His nose twitching on our fingers against the cage bars, what he did with apples, all he hid in his cheeks. He was truly the finest of hamsters, the best of friends.' We dug a hole in the garden with a blue plastic spade, then cover the hole. It was raining. Worms came to the surface of the earth and made a pink question mark on the grave. My daughter liked digging, getting her hands dirty and jumping in puddles. She asked what we could bury next year. I said I didn't know.

