

# The Prize

by Jeanne Holtzman

Linda hurried home from the church bazaar carrying the goldfish. Her brother was too busy stuffing his face with hot dogs and cotton candy to leave with her, and her best friend had to go on the Octopus five more times. Linda hadn't gone on the Octopus even once, but she felt tumbled and whirled and spun upside down.

She wanted to run, but that might hurt the fish. She held the plastic bag out in front of her as steadily as she could, and every so often looked back over her shoulder. No one was following her. She tripped over a crack in the sidewalk, but kept herself from falling. The fish still looked okay. A few strands of poop sank to the bottom of the bag, but the fins were waving and the mouth was moving. She'd won the fish by getting up on her tiptoes and leaning way over the railing to toss the ring. Kids crowded forward, eager for their turns, and one nasty boy pushed right up against her. She smelled his crackerjacks and sweat and then felt something hard thrust into her behind. She threw the ring and snapped upright. She didn't turn around. The ring circled around the bottle. The carnie rang the bell and came over with her prize fish, and the boy was gone. She never saw him. She wouldn't know him. He might go to her school. He might live in her building.

She was almost home. The fish would need a name, but she didn't know how to tell if it was a boy or a girl. Did fish have penises? Just a few weeks before her mom had sat her down and in an unfamiliar voice told her about penises and vaginas and sperm and eggs and babies. Sperm were tiny. But were they as tiny as germs? Could they swim through clothes? She'd seen *A Summer Place*, and not long after a fully clothed Sandra Dee made out with Troy Donahue under a tree, she was having a baby. Linda hadn't gotten her first period yet, so she was pretty sure she couldn't get pregnant. But how long did sperm live?

Linda hoped her mom would be home when she got there, but was relieved when she found the apartment empty. Her mom would

take one look at her and start asking questions. She locked the door behind her, placed the bag on the kitchen table and dragged a chair over to reach the highest cupboard where she found an old goldfish bowl. Later she would get colored gravel and a statue of an old ship. For now she rinsed out the bowl, filled it almost to the top with water, and added the goldfish. She decided it was a boy. She named him Billy.

Billy looked smaller in the bowl. He swam over to the glass and went up and down, up and down. Linda hoped he had already eaten and wouldn't starve before she could buy him food.

She carefully carried the bowl into the bathroom and put it on the vanity where she could see it from the tub. She filled the bathtub, took off all her clothes and got in. She wondered if sperm swam right over to the side and were going up and down. She closed her eyes, lay back, and smelled crackerjacks and sweat. She felt the boy pushing, pushing himself into her. Like he knew her somehow. Had found her. And she was afraid that, for a split second, she'd hesitated. She hadn't pulled away. Had pushed back against him.

When Linda opened her eyes, she saw Billy ogling her from across the room with his unblinking black eyes. He was just going to die anyway.

She stood and got out of the tub. She picked up the fishbowl, held Billy over the toilet and started to tip the bowl. Then she hesitated. She crossed the room and poured Billy into the bathtub. Linda got in, lay back, closed her eyes, and waited.

