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HONORABLE MENTION
JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION
Leslie Birdwell
However Unwilling

On the occasion of his twelfth birthday, my son Thomas received a set of in-line skates, a book, clothing, and the Amphibian Environment: Guaranteed Educational Toy. I gave him the book, *The Dream of the Blue Heron*, because I loved it when I was his age. It was ignored, along with the clothes. The Amphibian Environment was ceded to Meggy, our six-year-old.

“Where did this thing come from,” I asked my wife, Dorothy. The Amphibian Environment package was illustrated with a trio of unnaturally tinted frogs cavorting across a lush landscape.

“It came from the mall,” explained Dorothy, “It was on sale. So I defy you,” she added, without any challenge from me, “to call me anything less than thrifty.”

“Like Christmas,” said Meggy as she examined it. “Our Christmas presents were on sale, too.”

“Honey,” I said, “your Christmas gifts came from Santa.”

Thomas snorted when he heard that as he strapped himself into his new black skates. Dorothy crossed her arms and looked at me, making a point of not saying anything. “Not inside,” I told my son as he stood in the living room in his new skates.

“I don’t believe in Santa Clause,” said Meggy, all business. She opened the box and dumped the contents onto the floor: one plastic oval Environment (18” by 6”), six green plastic trees, an azure pool, and a gray plastic cave.

“Where are the frogs?” she asked.

“You have to send away for them,” explained Dorothy. “There’s a coupon in here someplace.” Dorothy crouched over the plastic, sorted, then took the box from Meggy and gave it a shake. Out fluttered the garish coupon that promised the joys of pet ownership, which I mailed the next afternoon, on my way to work, to the Life Supply Company of Monroe Station, Florida.

Leslie Birdwell

Ten days later (and not one day passing without Meggy's questions about her frogs), we received a leak-proof box. Dorothy handed me a knife. I opened the box. It contained a water-filled chamber in which three tadpoles thrashed—one blue, one green, and the third without any pigmentation at all. That last one was a strange little thing. All during its growth you could see the organs, like shadows, under its skin.

Meggy decorated the Environment with an old Barrel-Of-Monkeys game. The creatures hung by their question-mark arms in swags from the plastic trees. They looked festive. I put the Environment up on the kitchen counter and gingerly spilled the tadpoles into the new home in the azure pool. Upside-down at first, they soon righted themselves and whipsawed around the pool, their flagellate tails propelling them in loopy circles.

"You'll have to take good care of them," I cautioned Meggy. "That means catching live insects for food. We stood together, looking. I remembered a science-and-nature kit from my childhood, but I lost interest in it and after a family vacation to Florida, I returned home to an Ant Farm was an Ant Tomb of Ant Husks, forgotten in a shadowy corner of my bedroom.

"She won't have to catch anything," said Dorothy as she dug around in the packing. "The tadpoles came with a six month supply of feed pellets." She dropped a few out onto the counter. They were beige and clattered lightly as they fell. I picked up the feeding instructions that came with the package.

"Is this possible?" I asked as I read. "They do tricks when they're mature?"

"That's why I got them," explained my wife. "They're designed to do tricks." The Life Supply Company included colorful little balls for the grown amphibians to push with their squared-off snouts. A partial set of dice-sized pastel colored alphabet blocks was included also. For the creatures to stack? Surely not.

"Genetic engineering," explained Dorothy.

Within two days, they sprouted buds at the points of their limbs and their tails began shrinking. They passed through adolescence and gained some of the definition of their adult forms, growing to about

an inch and a half in height.

Meggy was the first to see them climb out of their pool. They lined up in a row: blue, green, and nothing, their splayed front feet pointing pigeon-toed and their bulbous eyes blinking serenely. Meggy tapped on the plastic. They rocked back onto their powerful haunches, raised their front legs—and waved. It was the damndest thing.

“Come and see, Daddy! They waved at me!” Meggy dug into the old sugar bowl where Dorothy kept the feed pellets and dropped a few through the screen top of the cage.

“That was very good, honey. You reinforced their behavior.”

The green one and the blue one reared back up on their legs again, but the plain one didn't. He took advantage of their performance to take extra pellets, snapping his pale tongue out of his mouth and French-kissing his food.

“Which is your favorite?” Meggy asked.

“I like them all the same,” I told her. Which was to say, not at all. They were assuming a toad-like aspect, with bumpy skin and the shorter rear legs not found in frogs. They sat in a row like contented Buddhas. They took ungainly hops, heaving their tubby bodies to the limits of their Environment. The plain one reminded me of an old family photo of my great-grandfather. He was a boxer for a time, in the early 1900s. In that photo, my great-grandfather assumed a classic pugilist's pose, his lower jaw jutting out and his face set with a heavy scowl while his fists, like hammers, kept their frozen guard on his upper body.

Meggy took off the Environment top and reached in.

“I'm not sure that's such a good idea,” I said, ready to pull her and her hand back.

“It's purring!” She was touching the blue one. It made a trilling sound, not unpleasant, not unlike a tree frog. I stuck my arm in too and touched the green one, who began to thrum with his fellow. I touched the plain one. Nothing. It looked at me, though, steadily, then made a slow blink. I liked how he felt, like a snake but without the scales. He was smoother than the others.

“They need names,” said Meggy. “Let's call the blue one Blue and

Leslie Birdwell

the green one Green. I don't know what to call yours."

"He's not mine. He belongs to you and Thomas."

"I think he likes you."

"He's not purring."

"Maybe he can't?" Meggy looked up at me, sad.

"I hadn't thought of that," I said. "Let's call him Pig, since he has none—no pigmentation."

"That's silly, Daddy." She sighed and rolled her eyes, looking exactly like her mother.



Meggy would stack up the blocks in the Environment and Thomas sometimes tapped the plastic. When he did, Green and Blue would hop to the clear wall. Pig would stay in the plastic cave. This irritated Dorothy. She felt as if she had not received good value.

"After all, she said, "we can't afford to waste money. Especially now."

I advised her to write to the company and ask for a refund.

"Daddy," asked Meggy, "are they boys or girls? Is Green a girl?"

"Why do you think Green is a girl?"

"She has eyelashes. Look! They're playing leap-frog!"

They were trying to mate and to distract them I tapped on the plastic. Green and Blue came forward but Pig launched himself into the pyramid of alphabet blocks, which clattered to the floor of the environment. Green and Blue jumped and blinked. Pig looked at them, then looked at me.



Dorothy accommodated me that night in bed. I released my grip on her shoulders. We separated. She rolled away to her side and I followed, pressing myself against her back. I kissed her and touched the hair at the nape of her neck, but she was already lost to me in sleep.

I got up, shrugged myself into my robe and went downstairs into the kitchen to look at the frogs. Only Pig was active, hopping straight up and knocking into a red plastic monkey hanging from a tree. It was the only one left; the others were down. He was fast—one moment on the ground, the next airborne. The red monkey

swayed on its branch. Pig hit it again, like a boxer practicing, the rhythm of his jumping like the pummeling roll of a leather glove against a leather bag.

As I went back to our room, I saw the book I'd given Thomas. It's about a boy, an Indian, taken from his family and forced to live in a government school and give up his culture. But he stole himself away for three days of fasting and dreaming and found his spirit animal. I always wished that the book stopped right there and I briefly considered slicing away the last chapters, when he returned to school, to the bigger world that he had to live in.



We lost Blue the day my wife cleaned the Environment. She fished out Green and Pig with a small net, transporting them to a high-sided stockpot, but Blue proved intractable so she simply cleaned around him, spraying down the plastic with a bleach solution. The resultant haze of household cleaner gas caused Blue to cry out. Cry out. I came running into the kitchen. Meggy was already there but I grabbed the environment first and took it outside, as if fresh air would help. He gasped a little and then died.

"Didn't you think?" I said to Dorothy when I came back in, sans Blue.

"Christ," she said. "I didn't do it on purpose." Her eyes were dry. Did the woman never cry anymore?

Meggy was crying. Thomas stood at the front door, holding his roller blades and twirling his helmet by the strap, ready to let himself out. I went over to the stockpot and looked in. Green was looking up, but Pig was trying to scale the sides of the pot.



I went to work that afternoon. I had once looked forward to working at the warehouse, thinking I would spend the empty time productively. I worked from 12:30 to 9:00 pm, until the night watchman came on duty and after 5:00 pm, I was the only employee. I planned to read *War and Peace*, to study a language. The free time would compensate for the loss of income, but I never used it productively. I managed to let the simple paper work jobs seep into those four silent hours; there were always Bills of Lading to verify, shipping

Leslie Birdwell

numbers to confirm, and excess filing. We were warehousing for a scientific supply company and the manifest made distracting reading—One Gross Locusts in Formaldehyde. Feline—MALE. Feline—FEMALE.

The last year I taught biology at West Marion High, my senior class was preparing to dissect pigs. My lab assistant (a resourceful boy who sported a white lab coat, one of the perks of the position) brought in a box of them, little Wilburs, like the redeemed pig in *Charlotte's Web*, their little mouths arced in something like a smile.

My students started with sheep eyes when they were 14, the year of 8th grade. Like meat in the grocery store, the eye no longer held anything. Then my students dissected frogs in their freshman year. They used a wire attached to a battery to send current into the legs, to make them mimic the jump they once made from pond's edge to water. Now that they were juniors and seniors, they came closer to the mystery of the human body and learned how to cut open unborn pigs. My assistant dug into the box and pulled one out, slapping it onto the black lab desk in front of another student, Sarah Nelson. I watched her face change over the corpse. She began to sob. Sarah was a quiet girl who handed in perfect lab notebooks and caused offense to no one. One afternoon, at the end of the school day, she came in and asked for an extension on a project. There were various problems at home, nothing she wouldn't grow out of one day. She touched on these lightly, and then stopped by to talk two or three times more. That was all. I stand by that.

But that day, when she cried, I thought of *Charlotte's Web* and vowed right then and there never to give the book to my daughter Meggy even though some other teacher would, knowing she'd love the story of Wilbur, the pig who lived because someone loved him, and then the whole damn thing would start up for Meggy. I instructed my assistant to cart the things to the school incinerator.

"Why—" he started.

"Look at her," I said, astonished by his callousness, his ignorance, "this has made her so unhappy." And I went over to the girl, as if I'd been drawn to her by sinews, cords made of dried flesh, ropes of

faith. And then, as if no one else was in the room, I put my arms around her and felt tears prick at my own eyes. My arms wound around her narrow shoulders and I felt the smallness of her, how flat her back was under my hands and how her poor breast heaved as she gave in to her misery. I felt her arms tighten in answer to mine.

I was reminded that I was teaching an upper-level biology course for college-bound seniors. I was reminded that I was paid to teach, not dispense sympathy. There were well-trained counselors for that. I was reminded that I wasn't being a team player. I was reminded and informed of a number of things during this and several meetings and conferences that followed hard upon.

It takes a long time to pack up the detritus of a teaching career. The collected books and lesson plans, fossils and bird nests, seemed to occupy an infinite number of boxes. I looked up from my warehouse desk, green metal with a glass top, the top supported by four pennies, one at each corner, all heads-up. It was 8:00 pm. Still light outside. I had another hour. I read the packing slips and spot-checked them against various containers. Locusts: check. Flatworms: check. Frogs: Check. An accounting of plagues. I came to the last lot. Fetal pigs, declared the black letters stenciled on the side of the box. I took a utility knife from my back pocket and eased the blade forward to slice the packing tape. I opened the heavy cardboard flaps. The aroma of preservative wafted out as I untwisted the opaque plastic bag to reveal the unborn litter. The top one was hairless, his skin mottled with black patches. His mouth hung open slightly, an imitation of a smile, and his eyes were half open too. The umbilical cord was still attached. He was flat, as newborn things can be, especially multiples to make room for their siblings in the belly of their mother, who had undoubtedly gone forward to some useful fate herself.



We kept Pig and Green in the stockpot. Green refused his pellets and starved to death. His skin dried quickly, like a veil stretched across the fine bones of his feet.

Thomas started football practice and was late for dinner on Saturday night, which irritated me since we could only eat together as a family two nights a week. When he did arrive, banging in the front

Leslie Birdwell

door, still gird with pads and helmet, I gave him a look of silent disapproval. If it registered, he gave no sign.

I picked up my knife and fork. The meat before me was tough. I looked down and saw the bones and tendons of my hand as I sawed at the meat on the white plate with the pattern of ivy leaves on the border. The white fat was cooked away, but the striated fibers of the muscle were still intact.

“Dad,” said Thomas, “if you’re not going to eat yours, can I have it?”



I dreamed about Pig. He was as lithe and supple as a newt. When he jumped, he reached an attenuated grace in mid-air. He spelled for me with his alphabet blocks. He did not spell P-L-E-A-S-E or H-E-L-P, but O-U-T. He blinked and looked at me.



Pig’s appetite increased. With more pellets than we would ever need, I got in the habit of giving him extra. He was growing.

“Looks the same to me,” said Thomas after I asked him to confirm.

While I was at work and Meggy and Thomas were at school, Dorothy tricked Pig into getting inside the return box from the Life Supply Company and shipped him back to Monroe Station, Florida.

“It was easy,” she explained, “I baited the container with lady bugs and he hopped right in it.”

“He’s not a tadpole anymore,” I said when I came home to the empty stock pot, “He might not survive the journey.”

“The company doesn’t care,” explained Dorothy, “They’ll give me a full refund anyway. Pretty good deal, don’t you think?”

Oh God. Pig in a dark place, tumbled like an imperfect stone in a polisher, finding balance as arbitrarily as he lost balance when his prison world came to rest, passed between the unknowing hands of letter carriers. I saw his box in a white canvas mail cart, then on a conveyer belt, then on a truck driving through a narrow road in the Everglades until whatever was left of him came back home. Home—or where he started.

When Meggy asked me where Pig went, I told her that he had

gotten out and was now living in the attic. We both heard scrabbling in the rafters the other day. Mice, I assume. Dorothy will figure it out and expect me to set the traps and lay the poison, as I now understand my duty, as I now understand what I should have done when Sarah was crying in my classroom over the dead pig lying on the black desk. I should have walked over to her. I should have closed my hand around her fist as she held the scalpel and, however unwilling, forced her to drive the blade home.

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