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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

Henrietta

By Charles Conklin

I remember when I got a goldfish. I was seven years old and it was just after my dad and mom divorced. My mom left to go live in Los Angeles while I stayed in Bakersfield with my dad. My dad must have seen that it was a heavy transition for me, so he had me pick out a goldfish to bring my spirits up. I went for a fish that had a red circle atop his head. I named the fish Mario because the physical feature reminded me of the character from the Nintendo game. I brought him into my fish tank and watched him swim around the SpongeBob Pineapple house. The beams of light seeped in from the window's blinds and onto the golden scales of that red-hatted fish.

He gazed toward my bed. As a child, I thought he was probably noticing the stuffed husky that my mom had me pick out at Build-A-Bear workshop. The husky had blue eyes, a black leather jacket, and black jeans. It had a permanent smile that let me know he was always there when I went to sleep. If I pressed his left foot, he would say "you are my best friend, Charlie. Woof, Woof," in my recorded seven-year old voice. He had a collar with the name "Sam" imprinted on it. Mario looked at us, fluttering through the water as his fins shined spectacularly through the glass. His visible heart pulsed through his transparent gills. When I went to sleep, the soothing hum of the fish tank's filter was an additional comfort to the cotton-filled wolf against my thumping chest.

Not a week had passed before I woke up one morning to see Mario floating belly-up with a white fuzz around him. At first I thought it was a chrysalis, that maybe goldfish work the same way caterpillars do. Shock likes to play a game of possibilities before the truth rips and tears

apart the delicately-sewn threads that stitched the blankets of hope. It wasn't until I showed my dad that he confirmed the fish was, indeed, dead. We scooped the lifeless Mario into a cup and walked to the bathroom. My dad stood next to me as I dropped the dead fish into the toilet. He asked me if I had any words to say as tears burst from my eyes. My lips couldn't make a single sound. I asked my dad if he could say some words, and he did. But, I don't remember anything he said. I flushed Mario down, his body scraping and tumbling around the porcelain funnel before it was sucked into the dark pipes. The last thing I saw were the brilliant red scales layered just above his cranium. I walked back to my room, my arms dangling at my sides, flopped onto the bed, and pressed the left foot of my stuffed Siberian husky.

After that, my dad gave me more fish. They all died. Then, we switched to hermit crabs. I first saw a hermit crab at the mall where the lady selling them had one crawling on my hand. He had a galaxy painted on his black shell. The rocky ends of his legs brushed against the palms of my skin. It was as if every terrain he set foot on was a new, uncharted land. He then dug his claws into my thin skin; I screamed, tossing him back into the hermit crab sanctuary. I still wanted him, though; maybe even more so after I got hurt by him. Maybe it's because I started believing that to love something meant to be in pain. After all, loving Mario meant flushing him down the toilet. Loving Sam meant loving someone who moved to Los Angeles with her new husband, blaming her children for leaving. My mother used to say, "Well, you didn't want me around, so I left." That was partly true. Neither I nor my sister wanted to be dragged to church, or an Al-anon meeting, or some burgundy-curtained motel room where she constantly asked us whether or not we actually love her. I could only love small things after she left, like my hermit

crab. Although, it wasn't long before I forgot to feed him and he died, my heart breaking once again.

I never meant to not feed him. I had the responsibility of school; it was hours upon hours of sitting at my desk alone working on seemingly endless math equations while my dad played on the computer in his room. As I put my pencil to the paper, I would hear cheers of joy one second and screams of anger the next second. My quality time with him was watching him shoot people's brains out. I only hoped that anything I said would be heard by him as I watched his retina flicker across the screen. Loving these pets meant loving someone who played so much on the computer that he'd often forget to pick me up from school. As students along the sidewalk dwindled and cars honked their horns to let their child know they're there, I always looked to see if it was my dad.

We got five more hermit crabs, but they died too. As each hermit crab died, they meant less and less to me. I don't even remember their names. It wasn't until high school when I became a member of a club called Future Farmers of America (FFA) that I took the responsibility of owning an animal in a way in which they didn't die, unless it was on my terms.

She was a hog named Henrietta. As an FFA showman, my responsibilities included cleaning her pen every morning and evening, making sure she had enough food, walking her, and training her every day. The goal was to make the pigs fear the colored whip that FFA called "The Show Stick." I remember smacking her left thigh, casting an ephemeral red mark on her thick skin. She ran, but not in the direction I wanted her to go. The better place to hit her was the spot that we were instructed to tap, the head. Of course, it had those delicious muscles, like *lengua*. And those festive organs, like pig brain. But, other than that, the head wasn't very valuable. By

making her afraid of the show stick, all I had to do was put it near her and she would go in the opposite direction of where the stick was. If I wanted her to go left, I would put it on her right side. If I wanted her to go right, I would put it on her left side. In other words, I had full control over her. It was no different than programming a computer.

I wasn't actually supposed to smack her on the thigh. Not because it would be inhumane or because FFA actually cared about animals feelings, but because the thigh is valuable meat. The business was to grow her, train her, and find buyers for her, at which point she would be sold at the auction. So to be clear, smacking her on the thigh was an accident, although, there were days where I tapped her mouth cheeks a bit harder than usual. These were the times when she didn't listen to me. When I went to the Harvest Holidays showmanship rink, I demonstrated to the judge that she was thoroughly trained.

The doors opened and the blazing lights pierced onto the muddy hay of the playing rink. The judge wore boots, slacks, a buttoned-up shirt, and a cowboy hat that screamed its infatuation for Johnny Cash. I locked eyes with her, kept the pig by my side. It was my responsibility to make sure that the hog was behaving professionally. This means walking the pig around the judge, not going behind their back, making sure the pig was always in movement, that I was always locking eyes with the judge, never in a position where they couldn't see my hog, that my hog always walked alongside me, never running away from me, and that my judge got to see front, back, left, and right side of my hog. Everyone else in the playing field had the same mission. Fifteen other students like me would be fighting for the judge's gaze, and I would take any opportunity I had to make sure I wasn't where my judge couldn't see me. It was me, my judge, and my pig. Nothing else mattered. Not the other students who wanted to get the most

income out of their hog just as bad as I did, nor the students who were just in it for the glory of getting the first place ribbon. The only parts of my pig that mattered were the parts of her that would give me the best price. She was only useful to me if she could be cut up into pieces.

I kept Henrietta walking, taking a millisecond of glance of what was ahead of me, but redirecting my gaze back at the judge's penetrating blue eyes. A student moved in front of me with their pig. I turned my pig around and kept her moving forward, keeping the focus at the judge. As I walked passed a pig, my leg drove up against its butt while it was defecating and the bottom of my white dress pants were covered in feces. *Not important right now*, I would think as I moved on. Students began huddling together in one spot of the rink. I immediately navigated in the opposite direction in the window between students where my pig could be seen. I moved my pig so the judge can see her face as well as her hamstrings, not turning my back from the judge. I continued my cutting through other students so my pig could be seen. Although I wasn't paying close attention to them, the amount of students in that rink were lessening and lessening. They were shredded away like the giblets of a Halloween pumpkin's innards, leaving me and four other students in the rink.

The judge made us switch pigs. I ended up getting a pig that was surprisingly afraid of me. I walked beside the new hog that immediately ran away from me, squealing and picking up mud. Now, when a pig does this, what a proper showman is supposed to do is calmly walk to the pig, making their way to the pig's side and continuing to show. I, on the other hand, chased after him. After 3 good strides, I stopped dead, realizing my mistake. I looked over to the judge, hoping she hadn't seen what I just did. She was looking right at me when my eyes shot toward

her, saying that I can go to the pin with my pig. I lost my chance of placing in the top 3. To this day, I wish I didn't chase that pig.

After I auctioned her away, Sunday morning was for the pick-up guy to take the hogs to the slaughter house so that they can be sent to the buyers. The business of the people who bought my hog was the Driving School. They were sweet people, although I could only imagine how full their fridge must have been with all of Henrietta's parts stored inside. Many students actually thought I was attached to my pig because I spent a lot of time with her. I would caress her hair, give her apples and potatoes to munch on, and let her bite my boots. They thought I would cry the moment that my pig was gone, but a reason why I pet her is because soothing an animal reduces their stress, and stress doesn't make good meat. Although, I cannot deny that there were times when I enjoyed her company.

Every day after cross-country, I rode my bike to the farm through the sun-patched crops that glistened from the twilight's gaze, stamping the dry earth with the rubber fringes of my tire. I passed into the gates where the rich fumes of fertilizer and plant-based excrement satiated the air. After my daily chores with Henrietta, I would come into the pen and sit beside her, softly stroking my hands through the bristles of her back. My fingers would make their way up to her smooth, floppy ears. She'd look up at me, her warm pupils glowing dreamily. She would grunt as she relaxed her legs, rolling over to her side as she let me caress her smooth belly. I would put my fist to her mouth so she could nibble on it, though she would soon start chomping at my arm. There would be scratch marks across my skin, similar to the pinch mark a small hermit crab once gave me. The sounds of laughter and exclaiming statements of teenage play from just outside the pig pens gave no flinch or jitter to Henrietta. Other showmen would be just finishing up their

chores by now, and they would be hanging out before their rides took them home. I could have joined them, but I usually didn't. I had my bike, so I could leave whenever I wanted. Most of the times, though, I wouldn't want to leave.

I still have my stuffed husky, although it wasn't until recently that I realized when I now press Sam's left foot, not a single sound is made. My roommate said I could go back to Build-A-Bear and ask them to open him up and put another battery in him. But, the possibility that they can do that is a nicer thought than actually going and finding out that they can't. Similarly, the possibility of *a goldfish forming a chrysalis* works its wonders, and the possibility that *someone like me cannot be impacted by someone like Henrietta* has its own magic, but the reality tends to hit a bit harder. It is difficult to swallow the reality that someone buying their child a stuffed husky, or more goldfish when their first one died, or even apples and potatoes to munch on, is all an act of love.