

The Dead Pet Shop

by Tony Bonds

The funeral took place on Saturday morning and Peach was still in her pajamas. They let her stay inside because she feared funerals. From her bedroom window she watched the three of them in the back yard. None of them wore black.

Peach's father, a man with the body frame of a frog made to stand on its hind legs, stooped to jab a shovel at the earth, his red face threatening to burst.

Aunt Fanny kept shifting her weight from one leg to the other. Her plump face was beaded with moisture and she fanned herself with her hand.

Peach's bone-thin mother looked like a sun dress held up by a wire coat hanger. She'd lost so much weight. Acting as pallbearer, she held the wooden cigar box with both hands, making it look heavy, as if it were filled with gold bricks instead of a dead iguana. She kept looking at Peach's window, trying to catch her eye. When at last she did, she tilted her head and managed a weary smile.

Peach looked away from her mother, focusing on the ground around her family's feet. It had changed. Just a week ago the lawn was painted yellow with spring dandelions. Now the yellow was gone and their downy white bulbs flicked around in the wind. Things changed, she knew. But lately, they'd been changing so quickly.

Tangy body odor soon filled the air conditioned living room as everyone settled down on couches and recliners to sip lemonade and spend another Family Saturday in strained silence.

Family Saturdays used to involve actually doing something as a family. Everyone (including Aunt Fanny who lived down the street) would ride into the city. They would go to places like the natural history museum because her brother, Brent, wanted to see the Bodies exhibit. Other times they went to the zoo so Brent, could see the peacocks; or to the Imax to see a movie he'd heard about; or to the city library where he would wander the stacks for hours while Peach flipped through magazines. Whatever Brent wanted to do, they did. Even if Peach had other ideas for her weekend, Saturdays were non-negotiable. She learned to bury her complaints for fear of her mother's bug-eyed scowl which meant, *don't you dare ruin this day for him*. Brent was going to experience as much joy as possible while he was still on this Earth, and that was that.

But without Brent, Family Saturdays had become lifeless. Almost frighteningly quiet, except for the chatter of the TV. If her brother could see all of them now, Peach thought, he'd be disappointed. TV was one activity Brent never cared for.

Peach's father stretched out in his recliner as he watched the football game, the juice glass perched on his paunch. Aunt Fanny sat on the arm of the couch, and her marble-shooter eyes were now bugging out as if she were working out some riddle, "I know," she said, shifting closer to Peach, "How bout we getchy nother pet?"

Peach slouched further into the couch.

Her mother emerged from the kitchen with another pitcher of lemonade and Fanny stood as if to help her, but then her arms crossed in front of her. The women leaned their heads together, conspiring softly enough to not be understood. Occasionally, one of them would look meaningfully at Peach, who pretended to be watching the football game.

It was her fault he died, no question. His jaws had become puffy ever since she inherited him. The vet said he was deficient in calcium and recommended a supplement. For months, Peach sprinkled the chalky white vitamins on Mr. Zip's romaine lettuce and squash, but in the past month or so she neglected this duty. She hadn't forgotten. In fact she still fed him every day, she just didn't feel like applying the vitamins. Something about the responsibility of having a pet, of having another living thing rely on her, sucked the strength right out of her. As Mr. Zip's jaws inflated, Peach found it increasingly difficult to get out of bed, she lost her appetite. The emptiness inside her was expanding like a big balloon in her chest.

Mr. Zip relied on Peach for food, vitamins, turning his heat rock on at nights, cleaning up his poop, everything. He would rely on her forever. And ever.

Brent let Mr. Zip sleep on his tummy at night. Peach never took him out of his pen because she didn't like touching him. She kept having this nightmare where she was covered with crawling iguanas.

When Mr. Zip was alive, Peach would lie awake nights, watching the lizard sprawled on the heat rock inside the glass terrarium. It never seemed to sleep. Its yellow eyes were always trained right on her. She wondered if her brother somehow lived on in Mr. Zip. When the iguana watched her through its weird reptile eyes, it felt like her brother watched her. He was there in the room, staring at her. He was there. But he was also gone forever.

And then it happened. Her mother found Mr. Zip underneath the dusty twin bed in the spare room—Brent’s old room. Peach peeked through the cracked door after hearing her mother’s gasp. The iguana’s body and limbs, once bright green, had turned a milky, sick kind of green. His head was white. Her mother lifted the carcass, which stayed perfectly straight like a plastic lizard toy, and dropped it into an old cigar box.

“What do ya say?” said Aunt Fanny. “We’ll find you another lizard. Better’n the last one.”

“That sounds like a fabulous idea,” offered Peach’s mother, producing her over-sized vinyl red wallet and unfolding some bills into her sister’s hand. “Thank you so much Fanny, it means the world to her.”

The women simultaneously faced Peach with slack smiles, waiting for her reaction.

“I don’t want another pet.”

Smiles faded. Her mother’s hand went to her hip.

Peach pawed at her father's fleshy arm. "Daddy, I don't want another pet," she said.

"It's between you and your mother." He took a sip of his lemonade, then he glanced at Peach. "And don't give me that puppy dog look."

"Well if she don't want to, that's fine," said Aunt Fanny turning away and flinging her arms up. "I guess she's got better things to do."

"Young lady!" snapped her mother, "You're acting like you're five years old. Don't be rude."

"What's rude about it? I don't want a new pet!"

"I thought this was *Family Day!*" her mother crowed.

"It was *never* Family Day!" Peach felt her face flush. "It was Brent Day. Now it's Do Nothing In Front of the TV Day."

Her mother's eyes bugged out. "Your Aunt Fanny came to the funeral for you. Because she cares. Least you could do is show her a little courtesy."

"I didn't even want to have a stupid funeral!" shouted Peach.

Before her mother could shout back, Peach turned and flew into her room and slammed her bedroom door and locked it. The glass terrarium sat empty and useless beneath her window. She envied her brother and Mr. Zip. They had found a way out. They had escaped. Now they were somewhere far, far away from this family.

Brent had only two friends: Mr. Zip and Peach. Toward the end, the lizard was his best friend by a long shot. Brent never clicked with the

kids at school. His condition made him somewhat unapproachable—his chest rattled when he breathed and he was forever coughing up phlegm.

He had to make frequent visits to the nurse's office for treatment. Peach knew this was the hardest part for Brent, not because the treatment was particularly painful, but because the nurse's office had an enormous window that faced out to the main hall of the elementary school where everyone in the world could see him. It was so big you could probably see it from space.

When Brent entered first grade, Peach would sit next to him in the nurse's office to help bear some of the brunt of his embarrassment. Most people saw him through the window accidentally, and were startled, maybe even frightened to see him with a nebuliser mask strapped over his blushing face and what looked like a bullet-proof vest that shook him like a pathetic little flower. Some kids avoided eye contact when they saw him, others openly laughed at him. Brent took it like a champ, though, and never complained. Once, as she sat there with her brother, Peach asked the head nurse why they couldn't just install a curtain or something over the window so Brent wouldn't have to spend hours a day like a zoo animal. The nurse said she was okay with that. The curtain was never installed.

By the time Brent was in his second year of school, Peach wasn't sitting with him anymore during his treatments. She felt bad about it sometimes. But the strain of being there, being seen next to him, all blushing and vulnerable and being shaken by that vest, was too much. Maybe if there had been a curtain over the nurse's window it would have

been a different story. It was during that year that Brent retreated even more inward. He began whispering to himself in between coughing fits. He picked up the habit of writing little stories in notebooks—and sometimes his breathless voice would echo down the hallway when he read his stories to Mr. Zip.

From a box in her closet, Peach removed one of Brent's old notebooks. The edges were soft from her reading through them so often, looking for meaning in every misspelling, every strange use of a big word, every unfulfilled connection.

Flipping through the black notebook, she found what she was looking for, a short story called "The Dead Pet Shop" about a pet shop run by a zoologist who sells only dead animals. The story begins with a description of the shop: in an aquarium, rainbows of dead fish bob on the surface of the water. In another fish tank, expired blowfish bob next to the water pump like spiny golf balls. Brightly colored macaws and parrots and cockatiels all lie in a pile at the bottom of a birdcage. Tortoises of various sizes are heaped like a pile of rocks on one shelf. Purebred collies and German shepherds and poodles lie a little too heavily on padded beds. Snakes are coiled tightly in the corners of terrariums, iguanas are stretched over cold rocks. A million tiny mice are piled in the window like a collection of cotton balls, above them a sign says, **THREE FOR ONE!**

The shop is wildly popular. People come from distant cities just to buy the man's dead pets.

The reason for the shop's popularity is this: the zoologist has figured out a way to bring dead animals back to life. People pick out the animal they like, the zoologist injects them with some kind of miracle syrum, and poof! The dog is running in circles, or the macaw is fluttering its wings, or the tortoise pokes its head out.

Peach noticed that the final few sentences on the page were peppered with bold letters. When **Brent** was thinking or didn't know how to proceed, he would trace over what he had written. At least, that was what Peach had decided earlier in her study of his writings. **Bold** letters meant that **Brent** had hit a wall in the story and didn't know how to proceed. This was a clue that the present story was unfinished.

Peach didn't know what should happen next. **B**ut she wanted to help **Brent** finish what he had begun. She put her pen to the next blank line and, to her own surprise, words began to flow.

Peach wrote about a girl, about her own age, who comes in to the shop one day. She tells the zoologist that her brother has died recently, and she'd like him to be resurrected. The zoologist says he's never done anything like that before, but the girl tells him about how close they were, and soon convinces the zoologist to help him.

So the zoologist comes to the house where the girl lives, injects the dead boy with the miracle syrum, and he's up and chatting up a storm in no time. What's more, his cough is gone and he no longer wheezes when he laughs. The girl is glad because now things can go back to the way they were.

But there is a problem. The boy becomes famous because he's the first person since Jesus to be resurrected from the dead. Everyone at school wants to be his friend. He writes a book about his death and rebirth and goes on tour and becomes rich and famous. He is gone for years. So long he forgets about his sister.

When at last he comes home, he is a grown man. All signs of his childhood illness have long since vanished. He is happy to be home. But his parents' faces are grim. They sit him down, saying they have bad news. His sister has passed away. She hadn't been eating enough calcium, and one day she just died.

The boy-turned-man goes back to the dead pet shop to find the zoologist and make him bring his sister back to life. But when he arrives, he is shocked to find living animals in the windows. The owner, who is not the zoologist, tells him that the dead pet shop closed down years ago. The zoologist himself had died, and nobody knew how to bring him back.

Peach's hand was cramped. Was this the end? She reread what she'd written, skimming through the leaves of the notebook. She scratched paragraphs out. Then she scratched out whole pages. She started to work out another direction for the plot, but after a few lines she sighed and dropped her pen.

This was not how Brent would have written it, she was sure of that. The story he had started was different, more significant than hers. Her words, her turns of speech, they were flimsy and powerless. They lacked some essential quality, something that evaded the tip of her pen.

Peach realized she was tracing over the final letters of her last page. She had filled in the e's, a's, and d's and made tiny stars over the i's.

Would her brother thank her for at least trying to complete his story? Or would he be mad because she ruined what was already finished and perfect as it was?

She felt like Brent was peeking over her shoulder, or was somewhere just out of reach, lingering just beyond her locked bedroom door, or in the shadows of her closet, resisting the urge to leap out and offer an explanation for his absence.

But she would never get an explanation, just as she would never really know her brother.

Peach flipped to a fresh sheet of paper and began to catalogue, in no particular order, everything she could remember about him: once, she pulled his hair so hard it made him cry, then she started crying. Another time, her parents took him to the grocery store for his favorite sherbet instead of taking her to the ice cream place she liked. She remembered the Christmas before last, they celebrated at the hospital because that's where Brent was. He gave her a slip of paper that said *I.O.U. 1,000 Compliments*, and at the bottom: *No daily limit. Redeemable at any Brent location.* She'd only gotten about 50 compliments before the whites of his eyes and skin began to yellow, and his legs began to swell, he became so confused she had to tell him her name every time she visited.

Her hand was cramped but she couldn't stop writing. The words were pouring from her head. She was half way through the second page when someone knocked on her door.

"I'm busy," hollered Peach.

"Okay." It was her mother's voice. She sounded like she'd been crying. "Listen," she said. But then she didn't say anything.

"I'm listening," said Peach.

"So, your daddy and I were thinking—maybe we could all go to the zoo. If you feel like it. Or we could do something you'd like more."

"I like the zoo," yelped Peach.

"Okay then, good." Her mother sounded relieved. "Good. We should leave pretty soon."

"Okay. I'll start getting ready."

"Oh, and listen," her mother paused.

"What?"

"Love you."

"Love you too, mama."

"Okay then. See you out here."

As Peach changed into her silk violet dress, her eyes were drawn to the window. Wind whistled through the eaves of the house. It looked like rain in the distance, but for now it was sunny. Peach looked for the white dandelions heads sticking up from the grass, but the wind had been too strong. All that remained to decorate the black lump that was Mr. Zip's burial mound were bare stems.

