

Name: _____ Date: _____

Writing without a morale

The year she was ten, Emmanuella - Emma for short - begged so hard for a Christmas pet that her parents finally relented and gave her the next best thing: a goldfish. Her father, who was a lawyer, had argued for years that money could buy better things than a flea collar, that Emma did not need a pet, that Emma had seen too many Walt Disney movies. Her mother, also a lawyer, argued that Emma should spend time with her viola, not with an animal. But that December, her parents decided to end the debate. They bought a goldfish and an aquarium from a young man who is moving out of town. They got the goldfish cheap because used goldfish are hard to unload onto someone else, but mainly because this particular goldfish was old and blind.

Even Emma's parents couldn't stoop to giving her a used aquarium with a used fish in it on Christmas morning, so, instead, on the 10th day of December they put the tank in her room, where she found it after school.

When Emma dropped her books on her bed, she took one look toward the corner and said, "What on Earth?"

At first she couldn't even imagine why an aquarium would be in her room. The word *fish* was so far from the *pet*, but her parents explained cheerfully that indeed a fish was the pet she

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had asked for, and Emma understood, truthfully, that it would be a fish or nothing.

The fish came already named by its former owner, who had called him Joshua. Emma didn't mind the name. In fact for a wrinkled, overgrown goldfish, most names just wouldn't have seemed right. Joshua, at least, was a natural name – old and natural.

In time, Emma came to like the fish after all. At night, with the water, glowing blue and Joshua moving serenely – reflections of yellow and gold and orange – above the pink gravel, it seemed to Emma that she had never seen anything so pretty. She watched her aquarium the way astronomers watch stars.

Emma couldn't help becoming fond of Joshua. The white creamy film covering his eyes made him always look confused. He sometimes made bold dashes around the tank as if he had some purpose in life, a job to do. Another day, he lolled about lazily, barely moving his fins, depending more on the water than on himself to keep his body afloat. Those lazy days, he had a habit of bumping his head into a plastic plant or colliding with his castle.

Emma watched him and felt she knew him. When she raised the squeaky lid of the aquarium to shake some shrimp flakes into the water, Joshua jumped up and came to the top just

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as cats and dogs will come running when their food dishes are being filled. Joshua had to guess where the flakes were as they lay on the surface, and he took several gulps of water when he missed. Emma laughed.

Joshua had lived with Emma nearly five months when one day in April she noticed Joshua's tail fin looked shabby, like a hair comb that was missing some teeth.

The next day, his tail looked worse, and he wobbled when he swam, as if he needed a cane.

Emma was growing worried.

Then, the third day, there were white spots on Joshua scales. He leaned his body against the side of the tank and rested. He did not dash and he did not loll. He leaned and rested.

Emma rushed to the pet store after school. She brought home a box of medicine. And the aquarium Joshua lay on his side. Sometimes he tried to move to a different part of the tank, but he couldn't swim and he just fell over again. Emma dropped two pills into the water.

"Please, "she whispered. "Please."

Late into the night, Emma watched as Joshua lay ill. Sometimes she cried. Once she sprinkled some shrimp flakes into the tank, but they just floated down to the bottom, settling on the gravel around Joshua.

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In the morning, Joshua was dead. Emma found him floating on top of the water when she woke up. When she lifted him out of the water into the net, it surprised her how heavy he was. He was as large as her hand, and it surprised her because she had never held him. For a few moments, she petted him as she had never been able to do then she buried him in the backyard along with his castle.

Her parents watched her from a window, inside a house.

There is no morale to this story. You are going to have to make a morale for yourself. I just had to tell you. I had to tell someone about Joshua, a gold fish, my first pet, a little guy that mattered to no one but me. I wish there was a lesson here but there is just pain and I want someone to know that he was loved.