

A Finned Farewell

by Gillian Frankley



It has to be said - I'm a murderer. Unintended of course but even so, I felt I should keep a low profile at the funeral. It was a good one too. The ceremony was dignified. There were flowers and lots of black ribbon and crêpe. The coffin was a rather startling neon pink, and perhaps Britney Spears was a little too upbeat for the occasion, but the principal mourners were perfectly satisfied. The man of the house spoke a few well-chosen words, a short prayer followed and the coffin was consigned to the flowerbed. Blackie the goldfish had gone.

I know it was my fault, but despite what He Who Knows All says, I did read the label. (Although I ask you, how difficult is it to use a shower cleaner? It's just a matter of when to wipe. Is it right now, in ten minutes or not at all? I had even chosen an environmentally-friendly cleaner. It just wasn't very friendly to Blackie...)

I was halfway through my clean-up operation when He Who Knows All wandered in: "What are you doing? Have you considered the fish?" a question that I felt had a somewhat biblical ring to it. "What do you mean?" I asked. "The fumes," he shouted. "It's like Chernobyl in here! Cover the tank!"

Within seconds the fish tank was shrouded in towels, the filter turned off and the windows thrown open to a howling gale. Goldie the common goldfish was looking sick - fins clamped miserably to her sides as she sulked in the corner. Blackie-the-exotic seemed fine. He Who Knows All broke into *ER* mode: "Bucket!" he snapped as he hauled nets and aquarium chemicals out of the cupboard.

Before you could say "dorsal fin" the bewildered fish were floating in the bucket while the tank, the fake grass, the little treasure chest and the multi-coloured stones were scrubbed and hosed down. I was detailed to wash down the shower to get rid of lingering fumes. Finally everything was put back into the tank and I slunk off in search of a quiet glass of wine.

The next day Goldie was fine but Blackie was ailing. The children flatly refused to believe my explanation that fish swim sideways when they are tired, while I politely declined their offers to nurse Blackie back to health instead of going to school. As soon as they came home they raced to the tank. Blackie was still swimming sideways but had developed a downward list. The pet shop people were pessimistic.

"Flush him," said their 'fish expert'.

Later that evening, He Who Knows All arrived home with an *Idiots Guide to Aquariums*, which he pored over with no apparent result. Blackie was bobbing around bumping into everything so I put him in the isolation tank well, the bucket actually. I prepared the children for the worst. "You poisoned him!" My eldest was not happy.

The next day the children bade Blackie an emotional farewell before they left for school. They barely glanced at me. Flipping through the guide, I came to a chapter on saltwater baths for very sick freshwater fish. "Worth a try," I thought.

The bath finished Blackie off altogether. Bowed with guilt, I wrapped his tiny corpse in plastic and took him downstairs. Since it was a hot day, I intended to put him in the fridge so the children could say goodbye to him later, but a knock at the door distracted me and I put him in the freezer by mistake.

When the children came home, I broke the news gently. "Can I see him?" asked the eldest tearfully. It was only then that I realised where I had left Blackie. Was he, I wondered, too small to defrost in the microwave?

"You froze him!" My eldest was horrified. She snatched the rock-solid corpse out of my hands and raced up to her room, with her sister pounding up the stairs behind her. "He was already dead," I volunteered without much hope. It was useless. They refused to talk to me and would only discuss funeral arrangements with He Who Knows All.

"Well, perhaps this will teach them something about death," I thought optimistically. It may have, but I think my youngest took the concept of life after death a little too literally. She dug up Blackie three times last week to "see if he's gone to heaven yet." Sensitive readers will be happy to learn that Blackie has now been relocated to an undisclosed place where he can rest in eternal peace. 