

LET ME HAVE A GOLDFISH

by Ildi Vibók

illustrated by Tamás Mayer

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ILDI VIBOK

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[illustration]

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Chapter 1

In which it turns out that my parents don't care if it's a goldfish or a great white shark

The whole thing started with Kitty, who is actually a child and not a cat as you might easily think. I'm a child too, but don't worry, there will be animals in this book, you'll just have to hang on for a bit. Anyway, Kitty lives next door, and her parents buy her whatever she wants. In their garden she's got a roundabout, a pool, and a shack that's all decked out as a nursery. All of which is an aside because the point is that Kitty has pets, or rather she did have: she had an aquarium, a turtle, a dachshund and a dwarf rabbit, but then they all disappeared after a couple of days. When I asked Kitty's mum where Lightning, the turtle, Mr. Wiggles, the dachshund and Fluffy, the dwarf rabbit had gone, she just smiled knowingly, put her index finger to her lips and said 'Shh! That's the way of the world.'

Well, in my opinion, if disappearing acts like that are just the way of the world, then there's not much to smile about.

[*illustration]

The thing is, I've wanted a goldfish for absolutely ages, but that doesn't count for much around here. According to my dad, goldfish are quite a good animal because they don't need a lot of water, but you have to be 'properly prepared' for them.

We're talking about a goldfish here, not a great white shark!

When I pointed that out to my parents, they just looked at each other and nodded, made me get in the car and drove me down to my Uncle Bertie's. He lives in a tower at the end of the world—an hour and a half away—and has an antique rocking chair collection and a very strange door, but at that point in time I didn't know about the door.

[illustration below text]

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Chapter 2

In which I tell you a little about my Uncle Bertie

Uncle Bertie is one of mummy's relatives, which makes him one of my relatives, too, and he's crazy about animals and knows all about them. Well, almost everything about most animals. When we arrived, after an hour and a half in the car, Mummy turned to me and said, 'Honey, Uncle Bertie knows everything there is to know about animals and what they do and don't like, and so on. So you'd better ask him about it, and if you still insist on that fish when you've got a proper grasp of the whole fish business, well, then we'll get it for you. But only then, because we have to give it a chance.'

'A chance?'

Mummy's got a funny way of saying things, and it's worth clarifying things with her.

'Well, even a fish deserves a chance to survive us' she nodded. I got out, and they went on their way because Uncle Bertie is far too busy with animals to be bothered with adults, even if they are relatives, and my parents were quite clear about that. So, I rang the bell. Uncle Bertie opened the door and I walked straight in.

'Hi, I'd like a goldfish! Can you help me?'

'Well, I expect we can do something about that.' He nodded towards the stairs invitingly, so I went inside, and we started to climb.

[illustration]

Chapter 3

In which we enter Uncle Bertie's tower, and there's talk of animals (or at least I hope there will be...)

Uncle Bertie's tower is rather tall, and to get to the top you have to climb up a spiral staircase. We took a deep breath and set off, scrambling up to the top of the stairs. There we found ourselves in front of a green door covered with pictures of birds, bugs and lizards.

'Here we are' Uncle Bertie muttered. Besides animals, he also likes to mutter, ride his bike and eat coffee ice-cream. 'You can learn a lot about goldfish here...'

'Are there goldfish inside?'

'There might well be... of course, there could be anything... it's a closed door after all, so you never know what's not behind it. Originally, I planned to keep a library of instructions for animals in here. I came up with a pretty cool invention, although I say it myself, unfortunately it goes a little haywire every now and then. You know what? I'll get you a nice glass of raspberry juice while you have a good look around. You're going to need it.'

I nodded in agreement—because raspberry juice is always good—slowly opened the door and slipped inside. Behind the door, however, there was no fish tank, no glass jar, not even a teacup full of water for fish.

Chapter 4

In which animals do finally appear, but where are the goldfish?

There were, however, a lot of enormous trees in the room! They stretched out towards the top of the tower, surrounded by bushes, and with lianas crawling up their trunks—it was a real jungle! In among the tangle of plants there were some signs that looked like this:

[illustration showing 3 signs containing text as below]

[board 1] Rainforest on the right for 2m

(No balloons or chewing gum allowed!)

[Board 2] Please beware of the animals because unfortunately not all of them can bite.

[Board 3] Walking on the grass is compulsory!

Go on, try it out!

Roll about on it!

'But where is the fish department?' I thought to myself out loud. A mysterious voice answered from next to me. 'I'm here.'

I say 'mysterious' because there was no one there, but I asked out loud again, just in case.

'Over here!'

I carried on gawping, but in vain, because the place I had thought might be 'here' was vacant, and I couldn't see anyone anywhere else. Then – fortunately – the mystery voice added 'On the liana... here... crosswise... oh! hang on a minute... I think I forgot to turn on the visibility thingy... ah!... there we go... da-dah!!!'

I jumped in fright when suddenly, about two inches from my nose, a cross-eyed, banded chameleon with orange spots on a green background with some tiny purple flowers on a band of orange spots appeared magically. He just kept on talking.

'Yes, yes, this festive, guest-hosting outfit will do just fine,' he said, then adjusted his eyes so that he was now staring straight at me with both of them.

'Hello there, mysterious stranger! I'm Jasper, local administrator and animal expert. I really hope you have some urgent and complicated business to attend to that you want to entrust to me because that's my speciality' he explained, looking at the sky again with his left eye while still staring at me with his right.

'I'm looking for some instructions on looking after goldfish that will tell me everything I need to know about them.'

[illustration bottom right corner]

To put him at his ease I added, 'Because I would really love to have a goldfish.'

Jasper started to hum.

'Hmm... hmmm. So you're wishing for a goldfish... I must say, it's a bit unusual... I mean, it's usually the wishes that the goldfish give that people are after, not the goldfish itself... at least according to the literature I've studied.' He looked at me with his left eye and then climbed down onto a pile of paper. 'That's where this big pile of instruction manuals on animals will come in handy. Because, of course, as an expert, I know everything, don't I?' He continued, suddenly picking up a piece of paper. 'Wouldn't you rather have a bunch of *pteropus*, perhaps ten or twelve of them even?'

'I might' I said cautiously. 'What exactly is a *pteropus*?'

'It's a flying fox. It's a very practical way of passing the time, because you'll never have another boring or indeed free moment in your life. And you'll never have to bother with tidying up, because that's completely unnecessary with *pteropus*'. Same with washing, because you will smell weird because of them from now on in any case. And you'll never have to deal with fruit going off again. Sign here and you can pick them up on your way out! A dozen, if you like. They like to live in groups.' The chameleon clerk rolled his left eye and shoved a stack of papers into my hand.

[illustration below text]

Chapter 5

In which we finally find out what a *pteropus* (or a dozen of them) likes

INSTRUCTIONS FOR A *PTEROPUS*

(Aka, the giant flying fox)

Dear Bat Owner, I am pleased to inform you that you now have your very own flying fox. Where is it? You can't find it? What are you doing under the bed? Come on out and look upwards, quick! Yes, yes, that's it, the skanky-looking umbrella thing hanging on the curtain rail over there.

THAT'S YOUR FLYING FOX.

It looks like the bat in Auntie Mimi's attic, doesn't it? That's no accident. They are quite closely related. Just one big family; and all the members of this family can fly. What's the big deal, huh? You can too if you get a plane ticket. But they can do it without any gadgets. They don't even have conventional wings, they have big sail wings instead, which is a perfect means of transport for them, and now for you too, if you can just catch hold of it.

[illustration top, left and right of text]

It's worth knowing that...

- some flying foxes get really big. Say, they'll be as wide as your mum is longways and won't fit through the front door with their wings out.
- Their favourite time of year is the summer holidays, because they can't stand the cold, which is why there aren't many long, sentimental poems about friendships between flying foxes and snowmen.
- They love to hang out with the gang and are really not bothered by crowds. A 10000-bedded bedroom is quite normal for them (unlike for animal carers...). Their superpower is their hearing, especially when it comes to the squeaking of their own kids, who they could easily locate at a rock concert.
- A flying fox's top favourite object is a fruit bowl full of bananas, mangoes, figs—you name it! I hope you have a lot of greengrocers in your family.

[illustration to the right of the text]

- Flying foxes spend most of their time flapping around and when they're not, then they're hanging onto something by their fingernails, but whichever, they're certainly not long-distance walkers. Unlike other bats, however, they really don't enjoy being out in the pitch dark. With the solitary exception of the Nile flying fox, they've long since given up on sonar, so on a night outing they'd be likely to end up smeared onto the first wall they came to.

Let's take a look at what a flying fox is good for

[illustration to the right]

Just about anything! They can catch your frisbee as it flies and bring it back to you, or fly off with it... You can go hang-gliding with them. They will track down your apple if it rolls off somewhere, or a lost banana, or your little sister's melon pattern pyjamas. They will quickly remind you about any fruit flavoured gum you have stuck under your chair. If you use them as a cuddly at night then you won't be needing a quilt, and when you're camping, they have a built in two-in-one functionality, providing shelter and watchdog. If you find you've forgotten your broly when it rains, they can definitely help out... However, if you do stick one above your head don't forget to put a nappy on it first.

'That sound's great,' I said. Until now I had no idea just how much I wanted some flying foxes. It would great not to have to tidy up and wash up every night. Although fruit doesn't usually go rotten on me, nor indeed any other food because I happen to know a stray doggie near the school. But I had a feeling that Mummy might not be supportive of any flying-fox business, so I told Jasper that I'd rather stick to goldfish, and I was about to leave when suddenly some sticky pink rubbery stuff thwacked onto my nose.

'Hwang own a liwwl bit! I thwink I know someone who can helwp you,' said the chameleon.

[illustration bottom right corner]

'Good,' I said, and removed his sticky tongue from my nose.

'I have a secret friend who really has her finger on the pulse of life, and what she doesn't know about goldfish isn't worth knowing... She's eaten five in the last month alone. You know, just for the protein and the trace minerals.'

'But I don't want to eat one...'

'Then what on earth do you want it for?'

'As a friend!'

'That's very interesting' mused the omniscient chameleon. 'But wouldn't you prefer a chameleon? Like me? We are really very friendly!'

'Ah, you live here, and you're practically irreplaceable. Let's go find your friend and see if she knows of any fish in the area that she hasn't eaten yet!'

'You never know, you might change your mind' reflected the chameleon. 'You're still quite young and your taste could improve with time. You never can tell.'

'Maybe...' I nodded and took the brochure, which was horribly long, but at least it had lots of pictures on it.

[illustration]

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Chapter 6

In which we learn some crucial information about chameleons (first-hand)

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CHAMELEONS

[illustration]

Dear Fan! I'm pleased to inform you that you've come into some chameleons—although you just might not know it yet. That's not uncommon with chameleons. You are right to ask:

What is a chameleon?

The answer is very simple. A chameleon is a very strange creature that comes in a range of sizes from 15 millimetres to 70 centimetres in length. If you want to know more than that, don't stop reading just yet, because here's some crucial information coming up for the intensely curious...

» About their temperature control system: Chameleons are reptiles. They—and other reptiles—are warmed by the sun so that their bodies are not as cold as a frog's legs. So, in gloomy, chilly weather, they're all lazy and sluggish with a 'give me a break' attitude,

[illustration]

but when the sun comes out, they turn into 'Active, sporty, let's-go-hunting' chameleons.

[illustration]

» About their tongues: when the weather is hot it isn't just the chameleons who are busy, it's their tongues, too. The chameleon's tongue moves as fast as a bullet; it can be retracted and the end of it is sticky. Very sticky. That's its main weapon. Its tongue can extend to twice the length of its body. Now get out your measuring tape and see how long your tongue would be if you were a chameleon instead of a child. SHIVER ME TIMBERS! BRING ON THE CAKE SHOP!!!

[image]

» About their eyes: If you'd like to imagine the way a chameleon's eyes work, while you're reading this sentence with one eye, with the other look out of the window (if you succeeded, congratulations, you are a chameleon!) What's more, a chameleon can look around without moving its head at all. This would be very useful when you're working, but that's not what they use this superpower for. With their 360° vision and eyes that move independently, they can easily spot unwary

[illustration]

insects and even keep an eye on their own skin at the same time. That's how it goes when you prefer a juicy fly to a slice of chocolate cake. By the way, a chameleon can spot a fly from 10 metres away and then catch it.

- About their fingers: when you look at a chameleon, you would probably think it has five fingers, but the leather gloves that nature has kitted them out with is not five-fingered like yours and mine, but two, and believe it or not, it suits them just fine because they don't want to speed type, they want to be high-wire trapeze artists, and that's why they have such an amazing finger grip. If they catch hold of something and don't want to let go, they just don't and that's that.

[illustrations left and right side of the text]

- About their tails: animals have all sorts of reasons for having tails: some swish away flies with them, some use their tails to swim, some who are less attached to the ground use them to steer when flying, some use them as a fashion accessory. Just think of peacocks... But chameleons are not fashion victims! They need their tails to hang on and use them like a fifth arm. If you meet a long-tailed chameleon in the wild, you can say that it certainly lives high up in the trees and keeps its tail long to stop it from being blown away. Of course if you meet a chameleon on the street and its tail is short, you can safely say 'Well, this one doesn't want to get heatstroke either.' Because short-tailed chameleons don't climb to the top of trees. They can tolerate more overcast, windless terrain, especially close to the ground. They're shade lovers...
- About their hearing: Have you heard that chameleons can't hear anything? At all! Well, that's just a rumour that the snakes spread about them. It's true that they wouldn't get a place in the school choir, but they can hear perfectly well what they need to hear to survive.

[illustration to the left]

- About their skin: we humans can be white, black, yellow, red, or green (think of a queasy afternoon of tummy ache), but chameleons can do all of these colours at once and they don't even need to get indigestion. But—and this is the point—after thousands of years of secrecy, we have found out how they do it. Their skin contains cells full of coloured dye, different colours for each layer. On top are red and yellow and underneath are blue and white. These cells full of dye are enlarged or reduced in size, and the dye in them is mixed as they please. They can change their colour as fast as you can count to twenty.

Where do chameleons live?

You'd do best to go into your room first and have a good look around. If you're lucky you may find you've been the owner of a dozen or so chameleons for quite a while, you just didn't know it because they had blended into the background.

[illustration to the right]

What to do: walk around your room and make sure you touch absolutely everything.

1. If it sticks to your hand and is grey—you've caught a dust bunny, which could be useful at easter.
2. It sticks to your hand and it feels more leathery... or... oops! ...it's Norwegian patterned then well, hot diggety dog, you just caught yourself a chameleon!

If this method doesn't work, and you're really determined, then head online and find a chameleon breeder or an upmarket pet shop. (But if you only want to take a look at them, not live with them, then I suggest visiting the zoo or Madagascar.)

And finally, let's discuss what a chameleon is good for!

It's safe to say it's good for everything. For example, environmentally friendly mosquito control, which is child's play for a properly trained a chameleon.

But when it comes to training, 'fetch!' doesn't only work with dogs and smaller siblings, but also with trained chameleons. After training, you aim the animal at the desired object—usually chocolate—give the command and try to get the food off the sticky tongue before swallowing. Best of luck.

'Well?' asked Jasper when I'd finished reading. 'So, it's a chameleon then?'

'Goldfish.'

'Okay!' he sighed. 'Then let's climb down here behind the tree to the paper recycling bin, and if we're in luck, that's where my friend will be, because that's where she likes to hang out.'

[illustration at the bottom of the page]

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