

# Olivia's Secret Wish



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To Olivia and her family with affection.

Illustrations adapted from photographs  
by  
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## Chapter 1

When she was small, Olivia had a secret wish. But as we all know, the problem with a secret wish is that it cannot be shared, which means that nobody can help make it come true. All Olivia could do, whenever it came to birthdays or Christmases or visits from distant relatives, was to give out the biggest clues she could think of.

And so it was, about a week before her ninth birthday, when her mum closed her big catalogue listing all the toys in the world and said with a sigh, “I don’t know, Olivia, everything in here is either too expensive, not suitable, or else something you have already,” Olivia immediately said in her quiet but confident way,

“I would like to have a pet.”

“What!?” cried her father, looking up from his newspaper for the first time all evening, “A pet!? Oh dear no, no, oh no.”

Everyone fell silent. Her father looked hurriedly around the room in search of someone who might take his side.

“Well, I mean, smelly dogs running about the place scratching themselves. Cats tearing up the furniture and leaving half-chewed mice on the doorstep! Really Olivia, I don’t think so. How about a nice new doll?”

But Olivia’s mother was already seeing matters differently.

“I think it might be good for her, Martin,” she announced. “But understand this, Olivia. Pets are not toys. You can’t just play with them one day and throw them out the next. Pets come with *responsibilities*.”

This was a word Olivia had heard before. Responsibilities seemed to be things that belonged to older people. Her

brother Thomas, now in secondary school, was *responsible* for putting the chairs onto the desks after the last lesson, and his best friend had the *responsibility* of closing all the classroom windows. So a responsibility was like having a job to do. Olivia did not mind one bit that her job was to have a pet to play with.

“Something in a cage perhaps,” her mother went on, leaving Olivia’s heart to sink a little. She had no wish, secret or otherwise, for an animal in a cage, not even a lion or a monkey or a giraffe or a hippopotamus.

Nothing more was said about pets - well, not to Olivia at least. Later that night she did overhear whispering, and the next day she caught the end of a phone call, and both times she was sure she heard the words, ‘Pet Shop’. When her birthday finally arrived she could hardly wait to see which zoo animal was to become her new friend. But all she was given at the breakfast table (apart from a book of horrid jokes from Thomas) was a green envelope! No animal that she could think of was flat enough to fit inside an envelope, except maybe a worm. Perhaps her father had got his way after all.

Inside she found a lovely birthday card - a picture of a girl dancing who looked just like Olivia, with her long straight hair flicked over one eye, her thin mouth bent into a smile and her pretty dress swirling as she spun around under a tree. The message inside wished her a very, very happy ninth birthday and a little footnote at the bottom said:

*Dear Miss Olivia.*

*The pleasure of your company is requested this afternoon at:  
The Pet Emporium.*

Even though she had no idea what an emporium was, Olivia was so excited that she tried to hug her mum, her dad

and her brother all at once, and ended up with strawberry jam on her skirt. But today no-one seemed to mind. After a morning of cakes and candles, the whole family piled into the car and headed off into town. Her mother offered to sit in the back with Thomas so that Olivia could ride upfront. Her father even let her change the gears when there were no other cars nearby!

The Pet Emporium was a dark and slightly sad kind of a place. It smelled of farmyards and her dad's socks. Shelf after shelf from floor to ceiling was stacked high with cages, like a miniature zoo, but there were no snarling wild beasts to be seen, only a collection of harmless creatures like a parrot, a budgie, a guinea pig and a rabbit. Olivia could see no reason to put these dear little things behind bars. She wanted to buy them all so that she could set them all free.

The shopkeeper himself looked every bit as harmless. He was very stooped and had round glasses and thin white hair. His hooked nose reminded Olivia of the parrot's beak and he smelled the same as the shop.

"Ah, the birthday girl," he said as they approached the counter. He had a kindly voice. With a wink he whispered to the rest of the family, "I shall take over from here. You may go now," and before she could even say goodbye, Olivia was left alone with this curious old man.

"They tell me you are nine. And this will be your first pet." He took her hand and led her over to a particularly dusty corner. "I know you're hoping for something very, very magical."

He said these words with another of his funny winks and Olivia wondered if this strange shopkeeper had already guessed her secret wish.

"But first, I'm going to start you off with this little chap. I need to know that you can be responsible for taking good

care of God's creatures."

It was that word again. *Responsible*. Only now it sounded so much more important, as though her very life depended on it. She found herself standing in front of a glass box with a wire lid. It was half filled with soil, into which sticks of wood had been pushed to make trees. There was water, food and a wheel inside, but Olivia could see no signs of life. Then a little twitching nose appeared from a burrow, followed by a pair of twitching whiskers. Suddenly something darted across the box and leapt up onto the wheel. It was about ten centimetres long (not including its tail, which was as long again) and had short brown fur. She thought it too big to be a mouse.

"Is it a rat?" she trembled, clutching the keeper's hand.

"Not a rat, my dear. A gerbil."

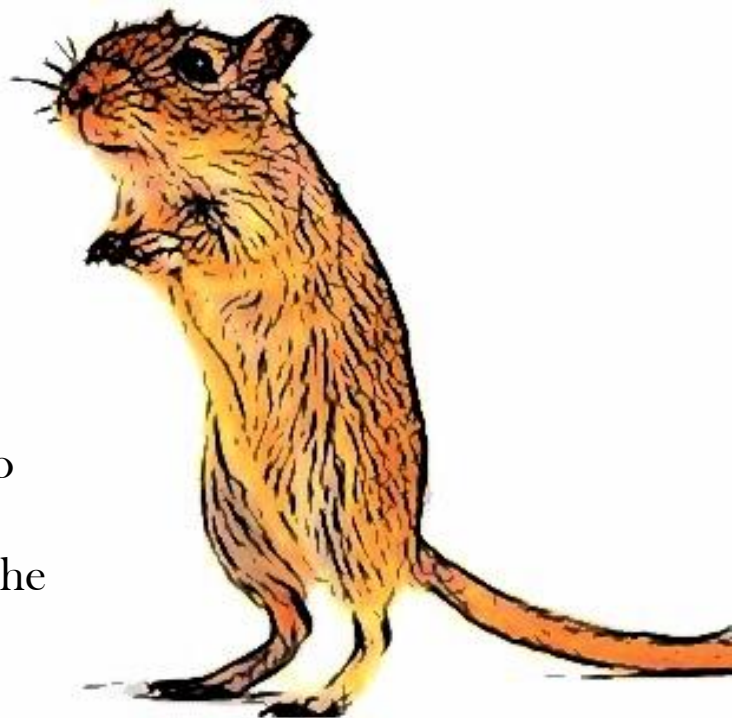
"Oh. Why did you put him in a fish tank and not in a cage like the others?"

"It's called a gerbilarium." He laughed, "but you don't need to worry about that!

Cages aren't good for gerbils. They nibble at the bars, which makes their mouths very sore."

She wanted to tell him that cages weren't good for any of the other pets either, but decided to stay silent.

"They like to burrow into the soil," he went on. "And love climbing, which is why he has these wooden sticks. You can always add more when you get him home.



Give him plenty of water and feed him nuts and seeds and some vegetables like carrots or turnips.” He turned to her, looking suddenly very serious. “And always remember to put the wire lid safely back when you’ve finished.”

As you might have guessed, a gerbil was about as close to Olivia’s secret wish as a spoonful of medicine was to her favourite ice cream. But when she looked into its beady black eyes she felt warm inside and excited to be the one who would look after this little fellow. When her mother and brother returned to the shop (father insisting on staying outside), they carried the tank carefully to the car and placed it on the back seat and told father to drive home very slowly.

As the weeks went by, Olivia became very skilled at looking after Jeremy (for that was now his name). Every morning before school she would take off the lid, fill the feeding bottle and tray with water and food (and a few treats now and then), replace the bedding, rearrange his toys, lift him out and stroke him for a while and then put him back, always careful to close the lid when she had finished.

And then one day something very unexpected happened.

All through school Olivia had been thinking about Jeremy. On her return home, as she was taking off her shoes and coat, she suddenly realised that something was terribly, terribly wrong.

The lid of the tank was pushed aside. Racing over to see, she found one of the wooden sticks propped up against the outside of the glass and a trail of little muddy footprints disappearing over the edge of the table. Her gerbil was nowhere to be seen!

“Mummy, come quickly!” she shrieked. “Jeremy has escaped.”

“Oh, Olivia!” said her mother. “Why did you leave one of the sticks like that, and why didn’t you close the lid

properly?”

“I was sure I didn’t - I mean I did,” Olivia protested, before bursting into tears.

“Come on, don’t worry. We’ll find him.”

They searched and searched. When Thomas came home he searched as well, and when their father came home even he joined in, everyone down on their knees, under tables, behind doors, or standing on tiptoe peering into cupboards. But Jeremy was gone and that was that. By the time they finally gave up looking, father had become grumpy and hungry.

“Well, so much for pets,” he said. “When’s dinner?”

“Martin, don’t,” scolded Olivia’s mother.

“Well, for goodness sake. The lid was left off and Olivia’s responsible.”

Now poor Olivia was really confused. She had been told she had to be responsible as though responsibility was a good thing. Now her father was telling her that being responsible was a very bad thing. She wished suddenly she had never asked for a pet. She sat silent all through dinner and went to her room early and lay on the bed with her thoughts going round and round. She wondered how Jeremy would feed himself. She worried that he would get cold and feared he would be lonely. And she was terrified he would fall prey to the vicious cat from next door.

It took about two hours for Olivia to cry herself to sleep.

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What would you like to happen next? Should they get rid of the glass tank, or return to the pet shop for another gerbil, or would you prefer Jeremy to come safely home? Make a wish. Well, let’s see if you are right shall we?