

What, of this Goldfish, Would You Wish?

A short story by Etgar Keret

Author and filmmaker Etgar Keret was born in Tel Aviv in 1967. Salman Rushdie has called him “the voice of the next generation” and his work has been translated into 29 languages. The following story is from his sixth collection, *Suddenly a Knock on the Door*, published on 23rd February by Chatto & Windus.

The idea for this story, translated by Nathan Englander, came to Keret after he read his five-year-old son Alexander Pushkin’s “The Fisherman and the Goldfish.” Keret says, “My son asked me what I would do if I had three wishes. He quickly rejected my ‘safe’ wishes for family health or world peace and insisted that I ask for something I really, really wanted. And that’s when my goldfish story began.”

Yonatan had a brilliant idea for a documentary. He’d knock on doors. Just him. No camera crew, no nonsense. Just Yonatan, on his own, a small camera in hand, asking, “If you found a talking goldfish that granted you three wishes, what would you wish for?”

People would give their answers, and Yoni would edit them down and make clips of the more surprising responses. Before every set of answers, you’d see the person standing stock-still in the entrance to his house. Onto this shot he’d superimpose the subject’s name, family situation, monthly income, and maybe even the party he’d voted for in the last election. All that, combined with the three wishes, and maybe he’d end up with a poignant piece of social commentary, a testament to the massive rift between our dreams and the often compromised reality in which we live.

It was genius, Yoni was sure. And, if not, at least it was cheap. All he needed was a door to knock on and a heart beating on the other side. With some decent footage, he was sure he’d be able to sell it to Channel 8 or Discovery in a flash, either as a film or as a collection of vignettes, little cinematic corners, each with that singular soul standing in a doorway, followed by three killer wishes, precious, every one.

Even better, maybe he’d sell out, package it with a slogan and flog it to a bank or mobile phone company. Maybe tag it with something like, “Different dreams, different wishes, one bank.” Or, “The bank that makes dreams come true.”

No prep, no plotting, natural as can be, Yoni grabbed his camera and went out knocking on doors. In the first neighborhood he went to, the nice people that took part generally requested the obvious things: health, money, bigger flats, to shave off either a couple of years or a couple of pounds. But there were also powerful moments. One drawn, wizened old lady asked simply for a child. A Holocaust survivor with a number on his arm asked very slowly, in a quiet voice—as if he’d been waiting for Yoni to come, as if it wasn’t an exercise at all—he’d been wondering (if this fish didn’t mind), would it be

possible for all the Nazis left living in the world to be held accountable for their crimes? A cocky, broad-shouldered ladykiller put out his cigarette and, as if the camera wasn't there, wished he were a girl. "Just for a night," he added, holding a single finger right up to the lens.

And these were wishes from just one short block in one small, sleepy suburb of Tel Aviv. Yonatan could hardly imagine what people were dreaming of in the development towns and the collectives along the northern border, in the West Bank settlements and Arab villages, the immigrant absorption centers full of broken trailers and tired people left to fry out in the desert sun.

Yonatan knew that if the project was going to have any weight, he'd have to get to everyone, to the unemployed, to the ultra-religious, to the Arabs and Ethiopians and American expats. He began to plan a shooting schedule for the coming days: Yaffo, Dimona, Ashdod, Sderot, Taibe, Talpiot. Maybe Hebron even. If he could sneak past the wall, Hebron would be great. Maybe somewhere in that city some beleaguered Arab man would stand in his doorway and, looking through Yonatan and his camera, looking out into nothingness, just pause for a minute, nod his head and wish for peace—that would be something to see.

Sergei Goralick doesn't much like strangers banging on his door. Especially when those strangers are asking him questions. In Russia, when Sergei was young, it happened a lot. The KGB felt right at home knocking on his door. His father had been a Zionist, which was pretty much an invitation for them to pop over any old time.

When Sergei got to Israel and then moved to Yaffo, his family couldn't get their heads round it. They'd ask him, "What are you hoping to find in a place like that? There's no one there but addicts and Arabs and pensioners." But what is most excellent about addicts and Arabs and pensioners is that they don't come round knocking on Sergei's door. That way Sergei can get his sleep, and get up when it's still dark. He can take his little boat out into the sea and fish until he's finished fishing. By himself. In silence. The way it should be. The way it was.

Until one day some kid with a ring in his ear, looking a little bit homosexual, comes knocking. Hard like that—rapping at his door. Just the way Sergei doesn't like. And he says, this kid, that he has some questions he wants to put on the TV.

Sergei tells the boy, tells him in what he thinks is a straightforward manner, that he doesn't want it. Not interested. Sergei gives the camera a shove, to help make it clear. But the earring boy is stubborn. He says all kinds of things, fast things. And it's hard for Sergei to follow; his Hebrew isn't great.

The boy slows down, tells Sergei he has a strong face, a nice face, and that he simply has to have him for this film. Sergei can also slow down, he can also make it clear. He

tells the boy to fuck off. But the boy is slippery and somehow between saying no and pushing the door closed, Sergei finds that the boy is in his house. He's already making his film, running his camera without any permission, and from behind the camera he's still telling Sergei about his face, that it's full of feeling, that it's tender. Suddenly the boy spots Sergei's goldfish flitting around in its big glass jar in his kitchen.

The kid with the earring starts screaming, "Goldfish, goldfish," he's so excited. And this, this really pressures Sergei, who tells the boy, it's nothing, just a normal goldfish, stop filming it. Just a goldfish, Sergei tells him, just something he found flapping around in the net, a deep-sea goldfish. But the boy isn't listening. He's still filming and getting closer and saying something about talking and fish and a magic wish.

Sergei doesn't like this, doesn't like that the boy is almost at it, already reaching for the jar. In this instant Sergei understands the boy hasn't come for television, what he's come for, specifically, is to snatch Sergei's fish, to steal it away. Before the mind of Sergei Goralick really understands what it is his body has done, he seems to have taken the pan off the stove and hit the boy on the head. The boy falls. The camera falls with him. The camera breaks open on the floor, along with the boy's skull. There's a lot of blood coming out of the head, and Sergei really doesn't know what to do.

That is, he knows exactly what to do, but it really would complicate things. Because if he takes this kid to the hospital, people are going to ask what happened, and it would take things in a direction Sergei doesn't want to go.

"No reason to take him to the hospital anyway," says the goldfish, in Russian. "That one's already dead."

"He can't be dead," Sergei says, with a moan. "I barely touched him. It's only a pan. Only a little thing." Sergei holds it up to the fish, taps it against his own skull to prove it. "It's not even that hard."

"Maybe not," says the fish. "But, apparently, it's harder than that kid's head."

"He wanted to take you from me," Sergei says, almost crying.

"Nonsense," the fish says. "He was only here to make a little thing for TV."

"But he said—"

"He said," says the fish, interrupting, "exactly what he was doing. But you didn't get it. Honestly, your Hebrew, it's terrible."

"And yours is better?" Sergei says. "Yours is so great?"

"Yes. Mine's super-great," the goldfish says, sounding impatient. "I'm a magic fish. I'm fluent in everything." All the while the puddle of blood from the earring boy's head is

getting bigger and bigger and Sergei is on his toes, up against the kitchen wall, desperate not to step in it, not to get blood on his feet.

“You do have one wish left,” the fish reminds Sergei. He says it simply like that, as if Sergei doesn’t know—as if either of them ever loses count.

“No,” Sergei says. He’s shaking his head from side to side. “I can’t,” he says. “I’ve been saving it. Saving it for something.”

“For what?” the fish says.

But Sergei won’t answer.

That first wish, Sergei used up when they discovered a cancer in his sister. A lung cancer, the kind you don’t get better from. The fish undid it in an instant—the words barely out of Sergei’s mouth. The second wish Sergei used up five years ago, on Sveta’s boy. The kid was still small then, barely three, but the doctors already knew. Something in her son’s head wasn’t right. He was going to grow big but not in the brain. Three was about as clever as he’d get. Sveta cried to Sergei in bed all night. Sergei walked home along the beach when the sun came up, and he called to the fish, asked the goldfish to fix it as soon as he’d crossed through the door. He never told Sveta. And a few months later she left him for some policeman, a Moroccan with a shiny Honda. In his heart, Sergei kept telling himself it wasn’t for Sveta that he’d done it, that he’d wished his wish purely for the boy. In his mind, he was less sure, and all kinds of thoughts about other things he could have done with that wish continued to gnaw at him, driving him half mad. The third wish, Sergei hadn’t yet wished for.

“I can restore him,” says the goldfish. “I can bring him back to life.”

“No one’s asking,” Sergei says.

“I can bring him back to the moment before,” the goldfish says. “To before he knocks on your door. I can put him back to right there. I can do it. All you need to do is ask.”

“To wish my wish,” Sergei says. “My last.”

The fish swishes his fish tail back and forth in the water, the way he does, Sergei knows, when he’s truly excited. The goldfish can already taste freedom. Sergei can see it in him.

After the last wish, Sergei won’t have a choice. He’ll have to let the goldfish go. His magic goldfish. His friend.

“Fixable,” Sergei says. “I’ll just mop up the blood. A good sponge and it’ll be like it never happened.”

That tail just goes back and forth, the fish's head steady.

Sergei takes a deep breath. He steps out into the middle of the kitchen, out into the puddle. "When I'm fishing, while it's dark and the world's asleep," he says, half to himself and half to the fish, "I'll tie the kid to a rock and dump him in the sea. Not a chance, not in a million years, of anyone ever finding him."

"You killed him, Sergei," the goldfish says. "You murdered someone—but you're not a murderer." The goldfish stops swishing his tail. "If, on this, you won't waste a wish, then tell me, Sergei, what is it good for?"

It was in Bethlehem, actually, that Yonatan found his Arab, a handsome man who used his first wish to ask for peace. His name was Munir; he was fat with a big white mustache. Really photogenic. It was moving, the way he said it. Perfect, the way in which Munir wished his wish. Yoni just knew even as he was filming that this man would be his promo.

Either him or that Russian. The one with the faded tattoos that Yoni had met in Yaffo. The one that looked straight into the camera and said, if he ever found a talking goldfish he wouldn't ask of it a single thing. He'd just stick it on a shelf in a big glass jar and talk to him all day, it didn't matter about what. Maybe sports, maybe politics, whatever a goldfish was interested in chatting about.

Anything, the Russian said, not to be alone.