

How the Hamster Died
by Cathy Ulrich

The hamster died because we aren't the sort of people to be entrusted with that kind of responsibility. Your hands, my hands, and the hamster we passed between them, round eyes blinking, whiskers quivering. We took turns tugging at its tiny feet.

We should never have gotten a hamster, except your mother home-schooled you and never let you out of the house. Your first boyfriend got you pregnant, said doggy-style didn't count and you believed him. My dad drank sometimes, and yelled. Said nobody would ever love me. But you do, I think, and the hamster could have. Could have loved us both.

Your first boyfriend took you to have an abortion. You didn't want to or you didn't think you wanted to, you didn't know.

I'm not sure I can kill a baby, you said, needling your hands against your belly.

He said: *Then are you going to tell your mother?* And so you went with him.

You thought it was kindness, then, that he took you, that he stayed by your side.

He was just afraid I wouldn't go through with it if he wasn't there, you say now and laugh in that clenched way you have.

We had been talking hamsters, you and me, talking drunk, whispering pet names, baby names, in each other's ears.

Then we were buying a hamster, had talked each other into it. Buying a cage, food pellets and one of those damn wheels for it to run in, and the pet store clerk was waving goodbye, sending us off with *the plumpest one*, you called it *the plumpest one*, liked the way it waddled.

After the hamster died, you wanted me to bury it, *bury it all*, even the little plastic igloo it was supposed to have slept under, that the clerk had recommended. I said that I would, but all I did, really, was drive around the corner and drop everything, hamster and everything, into the garbage bin there, and sit in the car in the dark for an hour or two.

You were on the couch when I came home, tried to hide your crying, wiped your face with the sleeve of your sweater.

It's just, you said, how could anything be that small?

You said: *I didn't think anything could be that small.*