

# Reflections on the Death of Missy the Hamster

10 March 2002

Missy died last week, but not before she taught us a lesson. Missy was a white dwarf hamster. She lived in a little white cage in Elizabeth's room, where she ate nuts and seeds and the occasional bit of celery or carrot, and did gymnastic exercises hanging from the top bars of the cage.

Missy was an escape artist. Several times she managed to get out of her cage: twice because Pepper the kitten knocked the cage to the floor and broke it open, but more often because she found some small flaw in its assembly that allowed her to creep out. She was constantly looking for ways out of the cage, and from the cage, out of the room so that she could wander about the house.

Who knows what ancestral instincts, bred into her little brain, led her as she scurried down the hall and under the furniture? No doubt they were the urges of her ancestors uncounted generations ago, when they lived in the Syrian desert, foraging for seeds and roots, constantly alert for hawks, snakes, and foxes. Whatever it was she sought, the condition for it was certainly freedom, and the urge for freedom kept her constantly working to escape from the bars of her little cage.

But freedom was not without its dangers. Pepper was not brought up as a mouser, and apparently does not know enough to kill and eat a small rodent, but nevertheless she found Missy an excellent toy. When she could get into Elizabeth's room, she loved to stare at Missy in her cage, and when Missy got out, she pursued her and caught her, again and again. This treatment would have killed Missy in the end, so each time we tracked her down and returned her to the safety of the white bars. There within those bars, one day last week, she lay down peacefully and died.



Missy and Pepper

Missy preferred freedom with danger to security with a cage. In human affairs, as in hamster affairs, we see the same opposition. Security comes at the price of freedom; freedom, at the price of security.

In Russia and South Africa and many other countries in the last decade, we can see that one of the results of the fall of repressive governments has been an increase in crime. If there is a policeman on every corner, and the movements of citizens are constantly monitored and controlled, then everyone will be safer. In many of these cases, it was not the safety of the population, but of the governors, that motivated these measures. As our desire to keep Missy confined for our amusement also protected her from the domestic predator, keeping the populace in line also kept them safe.

Similarly, desire for security and safety can create a cage. If we try to make life secure and without danger, then we will limit freedom more and more. Terrorism is only the latest threat that has inspired this quest. No aspect of our lives is now immune from the constant urge to safety; ultimately, safety from the death that must overcome us all in the end. Airline security may evoke comment, but the sacred name of health overwhelms all consideration of freedom.

I imagine sometimes the healthy Utopia our contemporary culture seems to seek. The health police will monitor our lives, making sure we follow the healthiest “lifestyle.” They will make sure that no one smokes, or drinks more than the approved norm. They will deal out our food by order, in portions tailored to each person’s medical profile. They will make sure that we only reproduce in the eugenically correct amounts, and compel regular exercise to keep everyone fit. And if there should be any fat people (like me) we would be sent to special work and reeducation camps until we had lost that evil flab.

And in the end, every one of them, health police and healthy multitude alike, will die. The path of safety leads to the grave as surely as the path of freedom. You can’t live forever in a hamster cage any more than you can live forever in a desert full of foxes. In the cage, you may live longer, but in the desert there is freedom. We chose safe bondage for Missy, and the rulers of our contemporary world may choose safe bondage for us. Fleeing from death, we make life our cage, where we can live like hamsters on the seeds and nuts doled out to us. We seem willing to pay any price in freedom for a security we can never have.

Ecclesiastes reminds us, “All are from dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:20); “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (12:7). Missy’s body was wrapped in a paper towel and buried in the clay under a pine tree in the back yard. A like fate awaits us all, sooner or later, fat or thin, muscular or flabby. Whether we choose freedom or safety, whatever the body’s style of life, it has but one style of death, and that inevitable.