



4 The Most Important Man in the World

Luckily, Friday went by smoothly. Sorry to say, Sayeh didn't raise her hand. But Heidi Hopper did – amazing! A.J. actually whispered. Richie cleaned my cage. I tried to imagine him with a big black moustache like his uncle Aldo. Later, when Mrs Brisbane asked him to name the capital of Kentucky, Richie said, 'Hot dog.' Everyone giggled, of course. Especially Stop-Giggling-Gail. Otherwise known as Gail Morgenstern. 'Repeat-That-Please-Richie,' said the

teacher.

Richie realized he'd made a mistake, so he tried again. 'Frankfurter,' he said.

More giggles. Explosive giggles.

'Try again, Richie,' said Mrs Brisbane, who was on the verge of smiling herself.

'Uh ... Frankfort!' he said proudly. (That was the correct answer, by the way.)

So, you see, it wasn't exactly a bad day in Room 26. It's just that I was jittery, wondering what would happen to me when the bell rang. Would I be left alone ... hungry, utterly forsaken for two whole days? Or would I be a captive in the haunted house of Mrs Brisbane? At last, the bell rang and the students flew out of the door like a flock of homing pigeons in a movie Ms Mac showed us.

Just then, two classroom assistants

stopped by. One was Heidi Hopper's mum and the other one was Art Patel's. (That's Pay-Attention-Art.) They came to talk to Mrs Brisbane about Halloween, which was less than two weeks away.

I didn't know what Halloween was, but it certainly sounded scary, especially when they talked about bringing bats and witches and, even worse, cats right into the classroom! SHIVER-QUIVER-SHAKE. What could they be thinking?

I was about ready to fling open my cage and escape when the door opened and in walked the headmaster, Mr Morales.

Mr Morales is the Most Important Person at Longfellow School. He runs the place and everyone respects him. You can tell. For one thing, Mr Morales always wears a tie. No one else in the whole school wears a tie. For another thing, when Mr Morales

comes into the room, everyone stops what they're doing and waits to see what he has to say. And for a third thing, both Ms Mac and Mrs Brisbane sometimes threatened to send a misbehaving student to Mr Morales's office. As soon as the teacher mentioned the headmaster's name, the student would start acting very, very nice.

'Good afternoon, ladies,' said Mr Morales. He was wearing a light blue shirt and a tie that had tiny books all over it.

Everyone said, 'Hello.'

'Well, how's your first week back, Sue?' he asked.

'Sue' was apparently Mrs Brisbane, although I'd never thought of her having a first name before. She said it was great to be back and what a wonderful class it was, which obviously pleased the mothers. Then Mr Morales leaned over my

cage and smiled. His tie dangled right over my head.

‘I’ll bet you’re enjoying this furry little pupil,’ he said with a grin.

I expected Mrs Brisbane to tell him what a trouble-making rodent I was. But instead, she forced a smile and said, ‘Well, yes, but he’s quite a bit of extra work.’

Mr Morales waved a finger at me. He didn’t seem to hear what Mrs Brisbane said.

‘I always wanted one of these fellows,’ he said. ‘But my papa wouldn’t let me have one. He sure is cute.’

Mrs Brisbane cleared her throat.

‘Yes, but I’m afraid he’s a little distracting. I was going to see if Mr Kim in Room 12 wants him.’

I was shocked. Luckily, so were the classroom assistants. ‘Oh, no! The children just love Humphrey,’ said Mrs Patel.

‘Heidi talks about him all the time. And it’s a wonderful way to teach the kids responsibility,’ Mrs Hopper said.

‘Yes, but it’s a little too much responsibility for me,’ Mrs Brisbane sighed. ‘At least I have a couple of days away from him this weekend.’ ‘You’re not taking him home with you?’ asked Mrs Patel.

Mrs Brisbane backed away from the cage. ‘Oh, no. It’s out of the question.’ ‘But Ms Mac always took him home,’ said Mrs Hopper.

‘He’ll be fine. He has plenty of food,’ Mrs Brisbane answered very, very firmly.

The classroom assistants were silent for a second. Mr Morales was still wiggling his finger at me.

Then Mrs Hopper spoke up. ‘Why don’t the kids take turns bringing Humphrey home for the weekend? They can sign up, we’ll talk to their

parents and give them instructions. It will be a great experience!’

‘Some people might not want him,’ said Mrs Brisbane.

Squeak for yourself, Mrs Brisbane!

‘That’s fine,’ said Mrs Hopper.

‘There’ll be plenty who will.’

‘I think it’s great,’ Mrs Patel agreed.

‘I’d take him today, but we’re going up to the lake for the weekend.’

‘Oh, I’d take him, too,’ said Mrs Hopper. ‘But we’re painting the house and the place is a mess. Next week for sure.’

‘Yes, I could do it next week,’ Mrs Patel agreed.

Mrs Brisbane smiled a fake smile. ‘So who’s going to take him this weekend?’

The classroom assistants looked at one another.

‘I could make a few quick calls. Maybe the Rinaldis,’ Mrs Patel suggested.

‘CALL-CALL-CALL,’ I squeaked. Suddenly, Mr Morales stood up straight. ‘I have a better idea,’ he announced. ‘I’ll take Humphrey home for the weekend. My kids will love him. Then, starting next week, you can have the students take turns.’ The three women were almost as surprised as I was.

‘Don’t worry. He’ll be in good hands,’ Mr Morales assured them.

Well, I suppose I would be. After all, I was going home with the Most Important Person at Longfellow School!



As he drove me to his house, Mr Morales told me how he’d always wanted a hamster when he was a kid. But his dad always said they didn’t need another mouth to feed. ‘I argued with him, Humphrey. I said, “Papa, I will feed him off my own plate.” Then Papa said we’d have to

buy the cage and stuff to put in it. I suppose he was right, Humphrey. We couldn't afford it.'

He smiled his big smile. 'But not any more. Now I'm the headmaster of my own school.'

I told you he was important.

His house was nice, but I didn't get to see much of it because as soon as we came in the door, two little whirlwinds tumbled into the room, shrieking and squealing.

'Quiet down, now. You'll frighten the little fellow,' Mr Morales told them.

He got that right.

He introduced us. The little boy, who was about five, was named Willy. He kept poking his fingers through the wires of the cage. I was about to bite him – pure instinct – but then I remembered: this is the son of the Most Important Person at Longfellow School. So I didn't.

The little girl, who was about seven,

was named Brenda. She kept sticking her face up against the cage and squealing. I tried squeaking back at her, but I don't think she could hear me.

Mr Morales tried to quieten them down. He explained that I was a guest for the weekend and they had to treat me with respect.

They didn't listen.

A pretty lady rushed through the room, jingling her car keys. 'I'm late. I have a house to show.' She glanced in my direction. 'We'll talk about that later. *Adios.*'

Mr Morales wished her luck and she was gone. Then he carried me into the den with Willy and Brenda clinging to his legs and yelping.

My cage was swinging back and forth so much, I was getting airsick. Or cage-sick.

Mr Morales set my cage on a table in their living room.

'Now get back and listen to me,' he told his children. 'I'll tell you all about him.'

'Can we take him out?' screamed Willy.

'Can we put him in my room?' shouted Brenda. 'Can he sleep with me tonight?'

'We can't do anything until you settle down,' Mr Morales said.

Bravo, Mr Morales, I thought.

But still the children didn't listen.

The Most Important Person at Longfellow School was not treated with respect in his own house.

Willy lurched forward and swung open the cage door.

'Oooh, there's *poo* in there!' he screamed.

'Where? Where?' shrieked Brenda.

Willy pointed to my potty corner, which I thought was unsqueakably rude of him.

'I want to hold him,' said Brenda,

grabbing me.

She squeezed me so hard, I let out a squeal.

'Stop!' said Mr Morales. 'Put him back right now!'

She opened her hand and dropped me on to the floor of my cage.

Luckily, I landed in a pile of soft bedding. Luckily, I didn't land in my poo.

I was a little dizzy, but I heard Mr Morales send Willy and Brenda to their rooms.

'I will not allow you to mistreat an animal. Upstairs. Doors shut. No playing until I say you can,' he said. Suddenly, Mr Morales didn't look so important. He slumped down in the chair next to my cage and loosened his tie.

'Now you know my secret, Humphrey. At school, everybody listens to me. At home, nobody listens to me,' he said.

Mr Morales looked TIRED-TIRED-TIRED.

Above our heads came the sounds of thumping and bumping. It sounded as if the ceiling was about to fall in.

‘They’re bouncing on their beds, Humphrey. Not supposed to do that, either,’ he said.

He slowly rose and went to the stairway in the hall. ‘Willy! Brenda! Stop that now!’ he yelled.

Surprisingly, the thumping and bumping stopped.

‘They listened!’ I squeaked when the headmaster sat down again. But the thumping and bumping began again in a minute.

‘I wish I knew what to do,’ he said.

‘Some way to teach them a lesson.’

I nodded. A lesson is just what those children needed.

And I was just the hamster to teach them.

TIP FOUR

Never, ever squeeze, pinch or crush a hamster. If it runs away, squeals or mutters, leave the hamster alone.

*Guide to the Care and Feeding of
Hamsters*

Dr Harvey H. Hammer

Task-please answer the following questions.

- 1. How did the classroom assistants feel about Humphrey going to another classroom?**
- 2. Why was Mr. Morales so excited to take Humphrey home?**
- 3. Describe what happened at Mr. Morales’s home?**
- 4. What secret did Mr. Morales tell Humphrey?**