



7 Sayeh Speaks Up

On Friday afternoon, Sayeh's father, Mr Nasiri, picked us up after school. He had a friendly smile and gentle eyes, but he was as quiet as his daughter.

Sayeh lived in a tall building, so Mr Nasiri carried my cage up one, two, three flights of stairs to their clean and quiet flat.

Mrs Nasiri opened the door for us. She spoke to her husband and daughter, but I couldn't exactly understand what they were saying. 'Hummy! Hummy!' a little voice called out.

Sayeh's little brother, Darek, toddled

towards the door to greet me.

‘Say *Humphrey*,’ Sayeh gently corrected him.

‘Rummy,’ he said.

The Nasiris put my cage in the living room, right in the middle of a big table. Then they pulled up chairs so they could all sit and stare into my cage.

It seemed as if they were waiting for something to happen, so I decided to give them a show. First I spun on my wheel for a while. Then I climbed up the side of the cage and dived down into a pile of soft paper.

They were obviously impressed with my performance as they talked quietly. The funny thing is, I couldn’t understand a word they were saying. No wonder Sayeh got 100 per cent on all her vocabulary tests. She and her family knew many more words than I did.

They finally went to the kitchen to eat

dinner. Later, while the rest of the family watched television, Sayeh’s mother quietly sat by my cage, watching me. She seemed NICE-NICE-NICE.

Eventually, it was bedtime for the Nasiris. But after the lights were out, Sayeh slipped out of her room and came back to my cage and whispered to me. I could understand her again.

‘Now you know my secret, Humphrey,’ she whispered. ‘My family doesn’t speak English. Well, my dad does a little, but he’s shy about it. Mum hasn’t learned any English at all. And Darek’s too little.’ ‘I understand,’ I squeaked.

‘That’s why I don’t like to talk in class,’ she explained. ‘I don’t talk like the other kids. I’m afraid they’ll laugh at my accent. That happened to me when I was little.’

‘But you don’t sound different,’ I frantically squeaked. ‘I understand

you just fine.'

Unfortunately, she didn't understand me. All she heard was 'Squeak-squeak-squeak.' I suppose maybe I have an accent, too.

'But I have an idea that maybe you could help me teach Mum English,' Sayeh continued.

'Glad to help out if I can,' I squeaked to her.

'You're a real friend,' Sayeh replied. See? She understood me after all.

The next day, I dozed until late afternoon, when Sayeh led her mother back to my cage.

'Humphrey only understands English, Mama,' Sayeh said. 'Speak English. Say, "Humphrey."'

Sayeh's mum looked a little frightened, but she tried.

'Hum-freee,' she said.

'Rummy,' Darek cried as he raced into the room and climbed on to his mother's lap.

'Say, "Hello, Humphrey,"' Sayeh told her mother.

'Hel-lo, Hump-free,' Mrs Nasiri said. I squeaked, 'Hello,' right back and she broke into a huge smile.

'Hello,' she said.

'Good job,' I said.

Well, things went swimmingly from then on. In a matter of hours, Sayeh's mum was saying, 'How do you do?'

'Nice to meet you.' 'Would you like some water?' (I did, thank you.)

Even when Sayeh and Darek left to go to the shops with their father, Mrs Nasiri kept on talking. I let her know I understood what she was saying by wiggling my whiskers and hanging by one paw from the top of my cage.

'Good boy, Humphrey,' she said.

Sayeh and her father were amazed at Mrs Nasiri's progress when they returned. The family spent the rest of the evening practising English.

First, Sayeh pretended to be a guest

at the door. She went into the hall and knocked.

Her mother opened the door. 'Hello, Sayeh,' she said. 'Won't you come in?'

Then Darek went out and knocked.

Mrs Nasiri opened the door and said, 'Hello, Darek. Won't you come in?'

He rushed in and toddled right over to the table, shouting, 'Humfy! Humfy!'

Next, Sayeh convinced her dad to practise English with her mum.

'What time it is?' asked Mrs Nasiri.

'What time is it?' Sayeh corrected her.

Mrs Nasiri got it right the second time.

Then Dad looked at his watch.

'Seven-fifteen,' he answered.

'Would you like some tea?' asked Mrs Nasiri.

'Yes, please. I would like some tea,' answered Mr Nasiri.

Guess what? They had a tea party

right on my table. As a reward for all their hard work, I spun my wheel as fast as my legs would go, and they all cheered.

Later, after they'd gone to bed, Sayeh slipped out of her room to talk to me again.

'Thank you, Humphrey,' she whispered. 'My mum says she's ready to go to English classes now. But I wish you were the teacher.'

'So do I,' I squeaked, and I meant it. There were more English lessons on Sunday, and Sayeh showed Darek how to clean out my cage. Suddenly, the boy began to giggle.

'Humphrey poop!' he yelled. His English was improving, too.

On Sunday night, Sayeh gathered her family together again.

'I want to teach you the American song,' she said. Then she opened her mouth and began to sing, 'Oh, say, can you see? By the dawn's early

light.'

I stood up, just like we do in the classroom when 'The Star-Spangled Banner' is being sung. But I'd never heard it sung like that before. Sayeh had the most beautiful voice in the world! It was like a gentle breeze ... No, like rippling waters ... No, it was ... well, it was beautiful.

If only our classmates in Room 26 could hear her!

Which gave me the start of another idea. But I didn't have time to think much at all. Because soon, the whole family was singing 'The Star-Spangled Banner', and I squeaked right along with them! Even on those high notes.

When we got back to school on Monday morning, though, I was a little disappointed. Mrs Brisbane asked Sayeh how things had gone over the weekend.

'Fine,' said Sayeh. And nothing more.

Like Ms Mac said, 'You can learn a lot about yourself by getting to know another species.' But, boy, sometimes it's a lot of work.

That Monday, I sat in my cage worrying about Sayeh for quite a while before I dozed off. When I woke up, I noticed that Room 26 had changed. The bulletin board was covered with brightly coloured leaves. The tops of the blackboards were lined with big paper witches, ghosts and skeletons. Hanging from the light fixtures were black crêpe-paper bats. Then I looked to my right and gasped. A horrible, huge orange face with an evil grin was staring directly at me. I jumped back, my heart pounding.

'Hey, Humphrey, don't you like old pumpkin head?' A.J. whispered to me from his seat near by.

'Look! Humphrey's scared of a little old jack-o'-lantern,' Garth said.

‘Scaredy-cat. Scaredy-hamster.’

I stood up straight and looked as brave as I possibly could.

‘Quiet, Garth and A.J.,’ said Mrs Brisbane. Then she quickly returned to a maths question she was writing on the board.

Suddenly, I noticed a little movement in the centre of the room. A murmur.

A change. I looked over and YES-YES-YES! Sayeh had her hand up.

Everyone noticed it, except Mrs Brisbane, who had her back to the rest of us. ‘Mrs Brisbane?’ Heidi called out.

Without turning, the teacher said, ‘Raise-Your-Hand-Heidi.’

Now Heidi had her hand raised as well as Sayeh.

‘Well, what is it?’ Mrs Brisbane turned to face the class and was obviously surprised by what she saw.

‘Yes, Sayeh,’ she said.

In a loud, clear voice, Sayeh said,

‘May I move the pumpkin away from Humphrey’s cage?’

Mrs Brisbane looked from Sayeh to the cage and back.

‘Yes. I suppose it is a little close. Thank you, Sayeh.’

Sayeh rose and hurried to my table to push the ugly old jack-o’-lantern away. She didn’t say a word, but she winked at me and I knew what she meant.

‘Heidi, did you want to say something?’ Mrs Brisbane asked.

‘Not any more,’ she said.

Everything went back to normal until the bell rang for break. As my classmates all scattered and ran towards the door, Garth paused by my cage.

‘Scaredy-cat,’ he muttered. Then he moved the pumpkin right up against my cage again.

I puffed up my cheeks as big as I could get them. It was going to be a

very long day.

TIP SEVEN

**When hamsters feel intimidated,
they often puff up their cheeks.**

*Guide to the Care and Feeding of
Hamsters*

Dr Harvey H. Hammer

Task-please answer the following questions.

1. Why couldn't Humphrey understand the Nasiris?
2. Why is Sayeh afraid to speak in class?
3. What did Sayeh do to help her mom speak English?
4. Prediction: Do you think Humphrey will find a way for Sayeh to sing in front Room 26? How?