



10 Garth Versus A.J.

'If you have dogs or cats, you have to be very careful not to let them get near Humphrey,' Miranda warned the rest of the class when we returned to Room 26.

'You can say that again,' I squeaked. But she didn't.

I still considered Golden-Miranda to be a special friend and I had a very clean cage to show for my weekend, as well as a new respect for rubber bands. But I also decided that even though Miranda is practically a perfect person, I was not in a hurry to stay with her again.

A.J. raised his hand and Mrs

Brisbane called on him.

‘May I have Humphrey this weekend? We don’t have a dog or a cat,’ he bellowed.

‘Lower-Your-Voice-A.J. I’ll let you know on Thursday. There may be other students who want Humphrey as well.’

At least half the hands in the classroom went up as kids started shouting, ‘Me, me!’ I was quite flattered. But for some reason, the whole subject seemed to make Garth angry.

Within minutes, he shot a rubber band at A.J.

‘Ouch!’ A.J. complained loudly. When he told the teacher what had happened, Garth denied it.

‘Humphrey did it,’ he said.

Gail giggled. Mrs Brisbane did not. ‘I don’t believe a hamster can shoot a rubber band,’ she said sternly. A lot she knows!

The next day, Garth stuck out his foot and tripped Art as he went to sharpen his pencil.

‘I didn’t do it! He’s just clumsy,’ Garth protested when Mrs Brisbane angrily scolded him.

That same day, Garth pushed Gail during morning break. He spent afternoon break inside.

‘Garth Tugwell, you’re halfway to Headmaster Morales’s office right now.’ Mrs Brisbane sounded really angry.

Garth just shrugged his shoulders. On Wednesday, Garth sneaked back into the room while Mrs Brisbane went to the office during break, and he headed straight for my cage. The two of us were all alone in the room. ‘Hello, rat. Why don’t you just run away? Then nobody will take you home at the weekend,’ he said. He opened my cage door and grabbed me. ‘You’d like your freedom,

wouldn't you, rat?'

He set me on the floor. My heart was pounding. THUMP-THUMP-THUMP!

'Go on, rat. Skedaddle.' He gave me a little push with his hand.

I scampered under the table. I wanted to say something, but for the first time ever, I was scared squeakless. 'Have fun,' he said, and in an instant he was gone.

I was pretty confused. For one thing, I didn't want to run away. I was perfectly happy staying in Room 26 and having adventures at the weekend.

Where would I go? What would I do? There was no time to waste. I scampered over to the cord that hung down from the blinds and grabbed on to it. Then I started the old swinging routine, back and forth, swinging a little higher each time until I reached the tabletop. Back-forth-back-forth-back-forth ... leap! There wasn't time

to think about my queasy stomach as I raced into my cage, slamming the door shut behind me.

Just then, Mrs Brisbane returned. I darted into my sleeping house so she wouldn't see how hard I was breathing.

I saw her look at the window, puzzled. She walked over to it and stared at the blind cord, which was still swinging. She reached out and stopped it with her hand. Then she shook her head and walked away.

When morning break was over and my classmates filed back into the class, Garth looked over at my cage, half smiling. But that smile quickly disappeared when he saw that the door was closed. He leaped out of his seat and looked in my cage.

'Howdy,' I squeaked at him.

'Garth, please return to your seat,' Mrs Brisbane told him.

'But Humphrey!' he protested.

‘Well, what is it?’ Mrs Brisbane was getting irritated.

‘He’s in his cage!’ he said.

A few of my classmates giggled, but not Mrs Brisbane.

‘In case you haven’t noticed, he’s always in his cage, Garth,’ she said.

‘Now get back to your seat.’

Garth did what she said, but for the rest of the day I noticed him staring over at me.

On Thursday, Mrs Brisbane announced that I would be spending the weekend at A.J.’s house.

‘Yes!’ shouted A.J., delighted at the news.

A few seconds later, a series of rubber bands hit A.J. on his neck, shoulder and head.

‘Cool it, Garth!’ yelled A.J., jumping out of his chair. ‘Man, I’m tired of these rubber bands.’

Garth acted innocent. ‘I don’t know where they came from. They could

have come from anywhere.’

‘Garth did it,’ Heidi said. ‘I saw him.’

Mrs Brisbane didn’t remind Heidi to raise her hand. But she did tell Garth to stay in during afternoon break.

‘Not fair,’ Garth muttered under his breath.

When the bell rang for break, Garth stayed in his seat. Mrs Brisbane closed the door when all the other students had left and walked to his desk. Normally, I would have been napping at this time, but I was wide awake and wondering what that boy had to say.

‘Garth. You’ve been acting strangely lately. You never got into trouble at all until two weeks ago. Now you are shooting rubber bands at people and disturbing the entire class. Can you tell me why?’

Garth slowly shook his head.

‘Your marks are slipping, too. Has something changed in your life?’

Garth slowly shook his head again. 'How about at home? Is anything wrong?'

Garth didn't shake his head. He didn't move a muscle.

'Should I talk to your parents about your behaviour, Garth?'

Garth's face went very red. 'No,' he said with a choking sound.

Mrs Brisbane moved closer and put her hand on Garth's shoulder. 'Tell me what's wrong.'

'My ... mum's ... sick,' he said. 'Really sick.' Tears ran down his cheeks. I was feeling a little teary-eyed myself.

'How sick?' Mrs Brisbane asked.

'She lost all this weight and she was in and out of the hospital and now she's just tired all the time and ...'

Garth didn't try to finish his sentence. He wiped away the tears with the tissue Mrs Brisbane handed him. 'That's why I can't take Humphrey home. My dad says we

can't let anything bother Mum. Well, my little brother bothers her and we let him in the house.'

Mrs Brisbane smiled slightly.

'Humphrey is a big responsibility, Garth. That's why I don't take him home. My husband has been sick, too. Did you know that?'

Garth shook his head. 'No.'

'So I know what it's like. Listen, I'll make a few calls tonight. Maybe we can find a way for you to spend some time with Humphrey,' she said.

'But he hates me,' I squeaked.

'I'd like to,' said Garth.

Huh? I was confused.

'But you have to promise me that you won't disrupt the class any more,' Mrs Brisbane told him. 'Is that a deal?'

Garth nodded. 'Deal.'

As you know, I'm very good at coming up with plans to solve human problems. Very, very good. But try as

I might, I couldn't imagine what Mrs Brisbane's plan to get Garth to spend time with me could be.

I was still trying to work it out when Aldo arrived that night.

'Humphrey, my man!' he yelled when he opened the door.

I almost fell off my wheel.

'You are the most handsome, intelligent hamster in the world! And I am the luckiest man in the world!

Because I am dating the most beautiful woman in the world!'

Aldo swept his way towards my cage, then lowered his voice. 'Uh, but don't tell anybody I said so. Not yet. After all, Maria and I have been out only three times. But, oh, what times we've had!'

He pulled up a chair and sat very close to me.

'And it's all thanks to the Moonlighters Club. And that clipping over there ...' He pointed towards the

spot where the overhead projector had once stood. 'And you! I know you had something to do with it. I just can't figure out what. Anyway, don't tell anybody, but some day, I'm going to marry Maria. And when I do, I want you to be best man. Or best hamster, I suppose. I really mean it. If you were a guy, I'd buy you a burger.'

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a little piece of foil. 'Instead, I got you this.' He unwrapped a piece of carrot and put it in my cage.

'Thank you, Aldo,' I squeaked. 'I wish you lots of happiness.'

'I knew you'd be happy for me, Humphrey.' Aldo smiled and then jumped up. 'Whooo! I've got so much energy, I can clean this room in half the time. I could climb a mountain and not even get tired! I could conquer the world!' He leaned forward and grinned through his

glorious moustache. 'Ain't love grand?'

'If you say so,' I replied.

I'd never seen anyone so happy before. The only thing that would make me that happy would be if Ms Mac came back.

She's not coming back.

And I'm still stuck with Mrs Brisbane. And she's stuck with me. I wonder what she meant when she said she doesn't take me home because her husband's sick. Did she mean she *would* take me home if her husband wasn't sick?

I thought about it all night and came up with this answer: NO-NO-NO.

She doesn't take me home because she doesn't like me.

Maybe I'm lucky after all.

TIP TEN

Hamsters are incredible acrobats and climbers. They seem to defy the laws of gravity.

Guide to the Care and Feeding of Hamsters **Dr Harvey H. Hammer**

Task-please answer the following questions.

1. Why did Garth let Humphrey out of his cage?
2. How does Humphrey get back into his cage?
3. Why was Garth acting so strangely?
4. Why has Mrs. Brisbane not taken Humphrey home?
5. Why is Aldo so happy?