



13 Thanks But No Thanks

Since Mrs Brisbane didn't say a word to me for most of the drive home, I had time to reflect on the last few months. I had not had a bad experience with any of the families I had visited. In fact, they had all been gracious and welcoming (except Miranda's dog, Clem, but I knew how to handle him). In return, I'd lent them a helping paw here and there. After all, you can learn a lot about yourself by getting to know another species.

I was overdue for trouble. And I was likely to get it at Brisbane's House of Horrors. That's how I pictured her

home: decorated with skeletons and bats and eerie jack-o'-lanterns all year long. I was shivering at the picture I had in mind when Mrs Brisbane finally spoke.

'Humphrey, I need you like I need a hole in the head,' she complained. 'THE SAME TO YOU!' I squeaked back rudely, knowing she wouldn't understand.

'I don't know what Bert's going to say about you. But whatever it is, it won't be pleasant. Nothing he says is, lately,' she continued.

Bert? Who's Bert? Then I realized it must be her husband. The one who's sick. Well, I was certainly not looking forward to meeting him after what I'd just heard.

'It won't be much of a Thanksgiving,' she said. 'We don't have much to be thankful for this year. But I'll try.'

'Good for you,' I squeaked.

She almost smiled. 'Thanks for the

support.'

The Brisbane house was yellow with white shutters and lots of big trees. Rust-coloured leaves covered the front yard.

'And on top of everything else, I have to rake!' Mrs Brisbane said through gritted teeth.

Inside, the house was surprisingly cosy. Not a skeleton or bat in sight.

Lots of pretty pictures on the walls and some big yellow flowers in a vase on the table.

'Bert? I'm home,' Mrs Brisbane called out.

A few seconds later, an old man rolled into the room in a wheelchair.

His grey hair was uncombed and stuck out in places it shouldn't. His chin was covered with grey stubble and he wore very wrinkled tan pyjamas.

His expression was so sour; he looked as if he'd just drunk a glass of

vinegar.

Mrs Brisbane set my cage on the low coffee-table. 'We have a guest for the weekend.'

I could tell she was trying hard to sound cheerful.

'His name is Humphrey.'

Mr Brisbane sneered. 'This is unacceptable! For the little pay you get, that school can't force you to spend your weekend baby-sitting a rat!'

I bit my tongue to keep from saying something unsqueakably bad.

'They're not forcing me,' argued Mrs Brisbane. 'It's just that no one else could do it. Let's not make a mountain out of a molehill.'

Pardon me, but I resented being called a molehill almost as much as being called a rat.

Mrs Brisbane quickly changed the subject. 'I thought you were going to get dressed today.'

'Why should I? I'm not going to see anybody,' Bert Brisbane growled.

'Except you and the rat.'

Mrs Brisbane got up and walked out of the room without saying another word.

Boy, nobody in Room 26 could get away with talking to Mrs Brisbane like that. I wished I could send her husband to Headmaster Morales's office right now.

Everything was really quiet around the house for a while. Mrs Brisbane changed her clothes (to jeans!) and moved my cage on to a card table in the corner of the living room. Then she sat down and read the *Guide to the Care and Feeding of Hamsters* and the chart my classmates kept on me.

'Looks like your friends have been taking good care of you,' she said.

'VERY-VERY-VERY GOOD,' I squeaked.

She fed me and gave me clean water and then she and Mr Brisbane ate dinner in another room while they watched TV. They went to bed early. I'll bet they didn't say two words to each other. Even Ms Mac talked more at home than they did, and she lived alone.

The next morning, Mrs Brisbane was up very early and soon the house smelled yum-yummy. I thought maybe I would like this Thanksgiving thing after all. At least the good-smelling and eating parts.

What I didn't like about Thanksgiving was Mr Brisbane. While Mrs Brisbane was clattering pots and clinking pans and making things smell good, he sat in his wheelchair in the living room and frowned. No, I know a better vocabulary word: scowled.

After a while, he called into the kitchen. 'Sue, why don't you stop all

the cooking and just sit down for a minute?'

Mrs Brisbane popped her head through the door and said it wouldn't be Thanksgiving without turkey and all the trimmings. Then Mr Brisbane said he didn't have anything to be thankful for. Mrs Brisbane went back in the kitchen and banged around some pots and pans again.

That sour expression on the old man's face was starting to get to me, so I decided to take a little spin on my wheel. I really got that thing going at high speed. I was going so fast, I couldn't even see whether Mr Brisbane was smiling or frowning. Finally, Mrs Brisbane came into the room to sit down.

'Would you look at that, Sue?' her husband asked.

'He does that all the time,' she said. 'Just spinning his wheels like me. Stuck in a cage and going nowhere.'

Mr Brisbane's voice was so grim, I stopped spinning.
Whew. I was a little dizzy.
'You're wrong, Bert,' said Mrs Brisbane. 'Humphrey's not stuck; he goes everywhere. Every weekend, he goes to a new house. He eats different foods. He gets out of the cage and runs through mazes. He runs and jumps and climbs. You're the one spinning your wheels and going nowhere. You're stuck in a cage, but it's a cage you made!' Well. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard Mrs Brisbane talk that way.
Mr Brisbane was surprised, too.
'Do you think I wanted that car to hit me? Do you think that was my choice?' he asked.
'Of course not, Bert. I'm so grateful you lived through it. That's the point. You're alive, but you certainly don't act like it.'

With that, Mrs Brisbane got up and went back into the kitchen.
Meanwhile, Mr Brisbane scowled and frowned and glared ... at me!
Finally, Mrs Brisbane put the food on the dining-room table. I watched them eating their dinner from my vantage point on the table in the living room. They ate, but they didn't say much.
'The food is delicious,' Mr Brisbane finally said.
That's the nicest thing I'd heard him say so far.
'Thank you,' Mrs Brisbane replied.
There was silence for a while. Then Mr Brisbane said, 'Just think, last year after Thanksgiving dinner, Jason and I played football in the backyard. Now I'm stuck here and Jason is in Tokyo.'
'Let's call him, Bert,' his wife suggested.
'It's too early there,' he said. 'We'll

have to call later.’ Football. Jason. Tokyo. You can learn a lot if you stop spinning and start listening. I listened late that night when they called Jason, who turned out to be their grown-up son who was working in Tokyo, which is FAR-FAR-FAR away, even farther than Brazil, according to the maps in Room 26. Wow, there were more Mrs Brisbanes than I’d ever dreamed possible. One was mean to me. One was nice to students. One was a wife. Another was a mother. One was a cook. One wore dark suits. Another wore jeans. But which one was the *real* Mrs Brisbane? That night, as they headed out of the living room and towards the bedroom, I heard Mrs Brisbane, the wife, say, ‘I know you think I was being hard on you, Bert. But it really is time for you to think about what

you’re going to do with the rest of your life.’

Mr Brisbane didn’t answer.

TIP THIRTEEN

Remember, hamsters are very, very curious.

*Guide to the Care and Feeding of
Hamsters*

Dr Harvey H. Hammer