



### 9 The Art of Self-Defence

Okay, I was having a great week, no doubt about it.

Not only did I get the blue ribbon on Wednesday, but on Thursday the class received a long letter from Ms Mac. She included a picture of her standing by a waterfall next to some very strange-looking creatures. They looked like hairy pigs or raccoony dogs.

‘These are coatis,’ Mrs Brisbane said, reading from the letter. ‘Pronounced *ko-ahh-tees*.’

The coatis looked weird. Ms Mac looked gorgeous, especially with all the red, yellow and orange flowers

surrounding her.

How I wished I could be there with her! Except maybe for the fact that those coatis might not be hamster-friendly.

At the end of her letter, Ms Mac wrote, ‘So farewell to all my wonderful friends in Room 26, especially the small one with the big heart: Humphrey.’

SIGH-SIGH-SIGH.

Though the thought of Ms Mac made me happy, the weekend was coming up soon and I always felt a little nervous about where I’d be spending it.

When it was decided on Thursday that I was going home with Golden-Miranda – I mean Miranda Golden – I was so excited that I got only 83 per cent on my vocabulary test. (Sayeh got 100 per cent. I know, because this time when Mrs Brisbane asked who got 100 per cent, she raised her

hand.)

I always thought that Miranda lived in a castle, because she reminded me of a fairy-tale princess in disguise.

Wherever it was, it had to be wonderful if Miranda lived there.

Well, Miranda's home wasn't exactly a castle, but it was very tall. Miranda lived in a fourth-floor flat with her mum and her big dog, Clem. We had to take a lift to get there.

The flat was nice. The mum was nice. Clem was not nice.

Let me explain. Miranda has a small bedroom and her mum let me stay there, right on the desk. To welcome me, the two of them did a complete clean-out of my cage. 'I'll bet nobody's done this for a while,' said Miranda's mum, and she was right. Pretty soon, I felt like a brand-new hamster!

Suddenly, Clem bounded into the room, a big mass of yellow fur poking

his huge nose right up against my cage. His wet nostrils were like two eyes staring in at me and he stuck out a giant tongue that came at me like a tidal wave. Luckily, the cage protected me.

'Mum!' Miranda yelled. 'Please get Clem out of here!'

Thank heavens Mum took Clem out for a walk in the park while Miranda showed me her room. She held pictures of her friends and family up to the cage so I could see. Her dad. Her stepmum. Her grandparents in Florida. Next, she introduced me to her goldfish, Fanny. She wasn't much of a conversationalist. I squeaked, 'Nice to meet you, Fanny,' and she said, 'Blub.'

I was thinking about how wonderful it would be to live with Miranda all the time when Clem returned from the park and galloped into the room. 'Clem, stay out!' Miranda shouted.



**But Clem just wagged his tail and barked.**

**Miranda closed the door so the dog had to stay outside, but we could still hear him whining and crying like a baby out in the hall.**

**Still, just being with Miranda made everything seem golden until her mum called her to go shopping.**

**Miranda protested. Good girl! But Mum didn't want her to stay inside on such a nice day. She had no choice, unless she was rude to her mum, which Miranda never would be!**

**'I won't be gone long,' Miranda told me. 'And I'll make sure the door is shut tightly so Clem can't get in.'**

**Everything would be all right, I assured myself. After all, Miranda had said so. I was all set to get in a good daytime snooze.**

**But as soon as the door to the flat closed, Clem started whining outside**

**the room. I could hear his big paws up on the door, trying to push it open. I was a little nervous, but Miranda had assured me I'd be all right. After all, she wouldn't be gone long.**

**Then I heard it, the slight turning of the doorknob as Clem flung himself repeatedly at the door. What a barbarian he was.**

**Suddenly, the door swung open and Clem burst in and ran straight to my cage.**

**I tried to distract him by spinning on my wheel. I can do that for hours, if necessary. I thought the spinning wheel might even hypnotize him, like in an old movie I'd seen with Ms Mac. (Ms Mac! Where was she when I needed her?)**

**But apparently all that spinning just excited Clem even more. He started barking at me, but I couldn't understand a word he said.**

**‘Now cut that out!’ I squeaked at him. That just seemed to make him more hot and bothered.**

**He plopped his front paws up on the desk and stuck his nose against the cage door, near the lock.**

**The lock-that-doesn’t-lock.**

**‘Easy now. Calm down,’ I squeaked soothingly at the beast, but he kept poking his nose at the cage, showing me his huge tongue and the huge teeth around it.**

**(Let me just say that Clem could do with some breath mints.)**

**He poked the lock again and again. I knew if he jiggled it enough, the door would swing open and I’d be history. Poor Miranda would never know what had happened to me. She might even cry. I couldn’t stand the thought of Miranda crying. I hopped back on my wheel and started spinning with all my might, hoping to buy some time.**

**Clem pulled back for a moment and stared at the wheel going round and round.**

**(Let me just say I’m glad that Clem is not well equipped in the brain department.)**

**Whew, I’m a good spinner, but I was getting worried about how long I could keep it up when Golden-Miranda rushed in. She never looked more beautiful to me than at that moment.**

**‘Clem! Stop it!’ she shouted in a very firm voice. ‘Bad boy!’**

**Clem raced to her side, wagging his tail.**

**Miranda’s mum dragged old Clem out of the room and closed the door behind her.**

**WHEW-WHEW-WHEW!**

**Miranda was very sorry. She opened the cage and reached in to pick me up. ‘Poor Humphrey,’ she said, hugging me. She set me on her desk**



and stroked me gently with one finger. 'I'm so sorry, Humphrey. So sorry.'

Ohhhhh. I don't know what felt better: the petting or Miranda's soothing words.

Miranda felt so terrible about what had happened, she let me play on her desk. She lined up books all along the edges so I wouldn't fall off. Then she let me wander around and see the sights.

A desktop is a very interesting place, in case you've never explored one. Miranda's desktop had a big cup with hearts all over it. The cup was filled with pencils. Ah, pencils smell so sweet. She had a round, silvery container full of paper clips and a square, purple container full of rubber bands. She had lots of paper in a pink box. And she had a great big fat dictionary. I could really use one of those. I wonder if they make doll-

sized dictionaries you can hide behind a hamster's mirror?

Miranda giggled as she watched me check things out. When I tried to climb into the paper-clip box, she stopped me with her finger.

'No, no, Humphrey. Those would hurt you.'

She did the same thing when I tried to roll in the rubber-band box.

'No, Humphrey. Rubber bands can be very dangerous,' she told me.

Well, I suppose I knew *that*. Hadn't Garth shot a rubber band at A.J. last week and almost got sent to Headmaster Morales's office? Hadn't A.J. held his arm and said, 'Ow,' when the rubber band hit him?

Anyway, I really enjoyed my time on the desk, until I heard Clem barking. Then I made a beeline for home. 'Oh, Humphrey, I won't let Clem hurt you. Honest,' Miranda assured me as she gently helped me back in my cage.

I believed her. I really did.  
But when it was bedtime and  
Miranda's mum came into the room  
to say goodnight, she said some  
words that sent a chill up my spine:  
'Don't forget, we're going to the  
Nicholsons' house tomorrow night.'  
Miranda protested. 'I hate to leave  
Humphrey. Clem gives him such a  
hard time.'  
'We'll lock the door this time, honey.  
He'll be okay,' her mum said. 'And  
tonight, Clem will be in my room.'  
After her mother left, Miranda  
assured me that Clem loves to sleep  
in Mum's room. 'But if anything  
happens and you get scared, just give  
me a squeak,' she told me.  
'Don't worry, I will!' I assured her.  
I didn't sleep that night. For one  
thing, the stars on Miranda's ceiling  
glow in the dark and they're so  
beautiful, I couldn't take my eyes off  
them.

For another thing ... well, I am  
nocturnal.  
But mainly I didn't sleep because I  
was worried about Clem.  
After my experience that afternoon, I  
believed that no lock could hold him  
back. And how could a little hamster  
fight back? What weapon would I  
have against a big, hairy, bad-  
breathed, small-brained creature?  
What weapon, indeed! I had an idea.  
Clem hadn't made a peep for hours,  
so I took a chance and quietly opened  
the lock-that-doesn't-lock and dashed  
across the desktop to pick my  
weapon, just in case of another  
encounter with Clem. Then I  
scampered back to the cage with it  
and quietly closed the door.  
I hid my weapon behind my mirror,  
next to the notebook, where no one  
could find it. Then I managed to get  
forty winks or so of sleep around  
sunrise.





Miranda and her mum kept Clem out of my sight all day, until it was time for them to go to their party.

‘I’m still worried,’ said Miranda, ‘I’m locking your door with a key on the outside,’ her mum said. ‘I’m locking Clem in my room. And Humphrey’s cage is closed tightly. Right?’

Miranda checked it. Everybody always checks it. It always seems locked from the outside. It even makes a clicking sound. But from the inside, believe me, it’s a piece of cake to open.

Miranda seemed satisfied with the arrangement, but I wasn’t. So I remained on high alert all that afternoon and evening. And here’s what happened.

After Miranda and her mum left, Clem barked for a while.

Then I heard jiggling and joggling for

about an hour.

Next, I heard big hairy feet padding down the hall towards Miranda’s room. Towards *my* room.

I sucked in my breath and waited.

Yes, I knew Miranda’s mom had locked the door with a key. But Clem didn’t seem to let little things like that stand in his way.

The doorknob squeaked and rattled.

It twisted and turned. Nothing happened. But that didn’t seem to bother Clem the barbarian.

He jiggled-rattled-and-twisted it some more. When he got tired of that, he threw his whole body at the door. And then, very slowly, the door opened.

Clem actually seemed surprised, but I wasn’t. I had spent the last two hours carefully preparing for this moment.

But my heart was still going THUMP-THUMP-THUMP very loudly. Even

Fanny the fish seemed nervous.  
Clem trotted right up to my cage and stuck his big wet nose up against it. 'Stay away! Keep your distance!' I squeaked. 'I'm warning you.'  
Clem wasn't discouraged one bit. 'Woof!' he barked, sending a foul cloud of doggy breath my way. I didn't even flinch.  
He barked a few more times and then began poking his big nose against the cage door. I wondered if he knew the lock was broken.  
The time had arrived to put my plan into action. I was in grave danger and I had no choice. I would have only one chance at Clem because I had only one weapon: a rubber band. It had taken me a long time to get it hooked around the edge of my food dish. Now I carefully pulled it back as far as I could, aiming directly at those big doggy nostrils.  
'You asked for it, beast!' I squeaked.

Then I let loose. The rubber band snapped and sailed through the air, hitting Clem squarely on the nose. He yelped like a baby and raced out of the room as if he'd seen a ghost. Too bad I didn't still have my ghost costume. That would have been a nice touch.  
I suppose Clem wasn't quite as stupid as I had thought, because he never even tried to come back in the room again.  
Of course, Miranda and her mum were really puzzled when they came home and found both bedrooms unlocked and Clem cowering under the living-room sofa.  
'I don't get it,' said Miranda.  
'Humphrey looks just fine. Maybe it was a burglar.'  
But Miranda's mum checked the cupboards and drawers, and nothing was missing. 'Now, that's a mystery,' she said after she'd searched the



whole flat.

Miranda stared at me, shaking her head. 'If only Humphrey could talk,' she said.

'But I can if you'd just listen,' I told her.

'I bet you'd have a lot to tell us,'

Miranda continued, not understanding my squeaks.

Yes, I do, I thought. Enough to fill a book.

#### **TIP NINE**

**Hamsters do not enjoy contact with other animals. A cat or dog may eat a hamster or at least do it bodily harm.**

*Guide to the Care and Feeding of  
Hamsters*

**Dr Harvey H. Hammer**

#### **Task-please answer the following questions.**

1. What three exciting things happened that week to Humphrey?
2. This chapter is called "The Art of Self-Defence". How does Humphrey defend himself at Miranda's house?
3. What is Hamster tip number 9?