



15 Happy Hamsterday

In December, things in Room 26 really began to change. For one thing, it got cold outside and a little chilly by my window. In the early morning, frost pictures would appear on the glass. One picture looked like a big snowflake. Another looked like a lion. Scary.

Still, it was nice and cosy in my sleeping house.

More snowflakes appeared. Not real ones, but cut-out paper snowflakes, bordering all the blackboards. And there were snowmen made of fluffy cotton and pictures of candles and packages and sleighs.

The holidays were almost here: Christmas and Hanukkah and Kwanzaa! There were songs to be sung and presents to be wrapped and a big two-week holiday to come! The weekend after Thanksgiving, I went home with Pay-Attention-Art. He paid a lot of attention to me. But sometimes – not every night – during the week, Mrs Brisbane would take me home to see Mr Brisbane and he'd put up his obstacle course and we'd laugh and squeak and have a wonderful time.

The next weekend I stayed at Gail Morgenstern's house. Friday night was really nice because she convinced her mum to let me watch while she lit the menorah for the family. And the food was yummy. I was glad that Mrs Brisbane didn't take me home every night. For one thing, if I ran through the obstacle course every night, I'd probably

waste away to nothing. For another thing, I wouldn't have been able to see Aldo.

Aldo could now balance the broom on his head. Yep, he'd put the tip of the broomstick on top of his head and keep it up there a while. He'd have to bob and weave to keep it balanced and he made funny faces, too.

But one night during the week, Aldo pulled his chair up close to my cage and said, 'Humphrey, old pal, I've got something to discuss.'

This sounded serious, so I put on my most serious, problem-solving face. 'I'm thinking of getting Maria a ring for Christmas. You know, like an engagement ring. With something shiny in it. I know, we haven't known each other very long. And we wouldn't have to get married right away. On the other hand, I'm no spring chicken and I'd like to settle

down and raise a couple of kids and maybe a couple of hamsters, too, you know?’

‘I understand,’ I squeaked softly.

‘So what do you think?’ Aldo fixed his big brown eyes on me. ‘Should I ask her to marry me?’

I stood up on my hind legs and screeched, ‘DO IT! DO IT! DO IT!’

Then he stood up and shouted, ‘You’re right! I will! I’d be crazy not to!’

He raced out of the room so fast, he forgot his cleaning trolley, but when he returned for it, he yelled, ‘Thanks!’

Sometimes – most times – it pays to squeak up.

The third weekend after

Thanksgiving I spent at Heidi Hopper’s house and watched her family put up their Christmas tree. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen, second only to the little tree

Heidi put in my cage. It was made of my favourite treat: broccoli!

And then it was almost Christmas holidays.

Suddenly, it seemed as if we didn’t have quite as much work to do in class. Everybody was planning the party for the last day of school.

One day, Garth (who never used to wait for the bell) stayed after school to ask Mrs Brisbane a question.

‘May I please take Humphrey home with me over the holidays?’ he asked. Mrs Brisbane looked as surprised as I was. ‘Well, Garth, I thought that was a problem.’

Garth smiled broadly. ‘My mum is much better now and Dad says it’s okay to bring Humphrey home.’

Mrs Brisbane smiled back. ‘That is wonderful news. But I think two weeks might be a little much. How about the first weekend in January?’ Garth nodded, but he looked

disappointed.

‘Tell you what, why don’t you have your parents bring you by our house to see Humphrey over the holidays? You can watch him run through his obstacle course.’

Garth didn’t look disappointed any more.



On the last day of school, everybody was very dressed up. I had on my fur coat as usual. Mrs Brisbane wore a red-and-green striped sweater and a green skirt. She also wore a Santa Claus hat.

This was an entirely new Mrs Brisbane. The dressing-up Mrs Brisbane.

‘Class, I have an important announcement. We’re having a surprise visitor this morning, before our party. So there’ll be no vocabulary test today.’

After the cheers died down, Mrs

Brisbane went out in the hall and waved. A minute later, you’ll never guess who entered the classroom. Mr Bert Brisbane!

He was wearing a Santa Claus hat, too. He looked a lot better now. No grey stubble or wrinkled pyjamas. On his lap, he had a large box. Mrs Brisbane introduced him to the class and they all applauded. Then he told them that his surprise was actually for ME-ME-ME!

First, he pulled out something like my cage – only bigger.

‘This is my gift to Humphrey. This extension attaches to his cage and makes it bigger. Now you’re all going to help me build Humphrey his Christmas present: his very own playground.’

The kids squealed and giggled and clapped, and I couldn’t hold back a big squeal of my own. I could keep my homey cage with its lock-that-

doesn't-lock, but I'd also have my own park to play in!

Mr Brisbane gathered my classmates around the big table and explained his plans. Mrs Brisbane unloaded the pieces. First there was a seesaw, then a tree branch to swing from, a big jungle gym and two ladders: one to climb and one to walk across like a bridge. MY-MY-MY!

Sayeh held me while the other kids worked on my cage. She patted me gently and murmured comforting words. Meanwhile, Mr Brisbane patiently instructed the children as they arranged the pieces. He even made sure everyone got a turn.

Then Mr Morales dropped by to see how things were going. He was wearing a tie that had little Christmas lights that really lit up!

He and Mrs Brisbane stood behind the children, watching as my playground took shape.

'Looks like Bert should be a teacher, too,' the headmaster told Mrs Brisbane.

'He already is,' I heard Mrs Brisbane respond. 'He just started teaching arts and crafts to seniors and kids at the Community Centre.'

'So he's made a new start,' said the headmaster.

'Thanks to Humphrey.'

I believe those words were the best present I could ever have.

'Guess what I got my kids for Christmas,' the headmaster said. 'A hamster. Maybe it's a present for me, as well. I think my papa will enjoy it, too.'

When Sayeh put me back in my cage, everyone watched as I raced to my new playground, climbed the jungle gym, made a leap to the tree branch and jumped over to the seesaw. Now I could have playtime whenever I wanted. Whoopee!

Just then, two parent volunteers arrived with cupcakes and juice. While they passed around the food, Sayeh and Miranda slipped quietly out of the room.

A little while later, Mrs Brisbane announced that she had another surprise: gifts for the class. The door opened and in came Miranda and Sayeh, wearing red dresses trimmed in white fur (not real fur like mine) and white fur hats. They each had a basket filled with small presents and they danced around the room singing a song about the wonders of winter while they handed out the gifts. When the kids opened their packages, they each found a keyring with a small furry toy hamster attached. The hamsters came in all colours: red, green, purple, gold, silver. Nice.

The classroom assistants presented Mrs Brisbane with a gift – a pair of

red earrings, which she put on right away. I already thought it was a perfect day. But it wasn't really totally perfect until Mr Morales peeked out into the hall and announced that he had a big surprise.

I wasn't sure we could stand many more surprises.

And then she walked in. The biggest surprise I could imagine.

Ms Mac was back!

She was wearing a long flowered skirt and a bright red blouse, and she had a butterfly in her hair. (Not a real one, of course.) She also had a huge canvas bag with her.

'Remember me?' she asked with a huge smile.

My classmates were thrilled and they all rushed to her side.

I was so surprised, I was positively squeakless.

Mrs Brisbane made everyone sit

down again and asked Ms Mac (of course, she insisted on calling her Ms McNamara) about her travels.

Ms Mac told us about the rain forest and teaching in a school in Brazil. Then she opened her big bag and took out a stack of holiday cards. Her Brazilian students had made a card for each child in Room 26!

While my classmates were sharing their cards with one another, Ms Mac came over to see me at last.

‘Well, I can see by your cage that you’ve done very well for yourself,’ she said with a smile. ‘And I thought you’d be pining away for me.’

‘I HAVE BEEN!’ I squeaked.

She reached into her big bag. ‘And I have a present for you. But don’t tell anybody.’

She pulled out a brand-new tiny notebook with blank pages – lots of them. And a new tiny pencil with a very sharp point. ‘I thought you

might need this.’ Then she tucked it behind my mirror.

Ms Mac stared at me a little longer, then softly said, ‘I’ve seen a lot of creatures in a lot of places in the last few months, but you’re still the handsomest and smartest of all.’

YES-YES-YES!

‘And don’t worry. I’ll be back to see you again.’ She was still the same wonderful Ms Mac. I’d follow her to the ends of the earth, I thought. Or at least to Brazil.

But then, it hit me. As much as I love her and she loves me, Ms Mac doesn’t need me. Not as much as the Brisbanes and my classmates and their families do. Maybe that’s what Ms Mac was thinking when she left me in Room 26. This is where I belong.

All too soon, the bell rang. School was over for the day. School was over for the rest of the year. My head was

reeling from all the surprises and excitement as we headed out to the car.

In the car park, Aldo raced over to greet us and wish us merry Christmas. He had come to pick up Richie.

‘I hope you have a very happy Christmas, too,’ Mrs Brisbane told Aldo.

Aldo grinned until his huge moustache shook like Santa’s tummy.

‘I’m sure I will. You see, I just got engaged! I’m going to get married!’

‘Yahoo!’ I squeaked with delight.

Aldo leaned towards me. ‘Thanks, my friend.’

That night at the Brisbanes’ house there was one more surprise. The doorbell rang and a very tall and good-looking young man appeared. He was wearing a Santa Claus hat, but he wasn’t Santa.

He was Jason, the Brisbanes’ son.

He’d come all the way from Tokyo to surprise his parents. They were so happy to see him, they both cried, just a little.

I almost cried, too.

Soon, the house was filled with friends and neighbours and Mrs Brisbane played the piano while everyone sang carols and drank hot cider.

I nibbled on raw apple and squeaked along.



Later that night, when the house was quiet, I thought about all I’d done in the months since I had left Pet-O-Rama. I didn’t know anything about the world then, but I’ve certainly learned a lot. I can read and write and I know all the capitals of the United States. Just ask me one! I learned you should never turn your back on a dog. And that it’s a good idea to turn off the TV once in a

while.

**I found out that kids have problems
and so do teachers and headmasters.**

**But sometimes all people need is a
little encouragement.**

**Most of all, I learned that one small
hamster really can make a big
difference.**

**I decided to write down some of the
things I've learned from my
adventures, but there was just one
more line left in my first notebook.
So I thought and thought and then I
scribbled down exactly what I was
feeling deep in my hamster heart:**

**JOY-JOY-JOY to the WHOLE WIDE WORLD!
(And that includes YOU!)**

Humphrey