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# opening extract from the world according to humphrey

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# The Return of Mrs Brisbane

Today was the worst day of my life. Ms Mac left Room 26 of Longfellow School. For good. And that's bad.

Even worse, Mrs Brisbane came back. Until today, I didn't even know there was a Mrs Brisbane. Lucky me. Now I want to know: what was Ms Mac thinking? She must have known that soon she'd be leaving without me. And that Mrs Brisbane would come back to Room 26 and I'd be stuck with her.

I still like – okay, *love* – Ms Mac more than any human or hamster on earth, but what was she thinking? 'You can learn a lot about yourself by taking care of another species,' she told me on the way home the day she got me. 'You'll teach those kids a thing or two.'

That's what she was thinking. I don't think she was thinking very clearly.

I'm never going to squeak to her again. Of course, I'll probably never see her again because she's GONE-GONE-GONE – but if she comes back, I'm not even going to look at her. (I know that last sentence doesn't make sense. It's hard to make sense when your heart is broken.)

On the other hand, until Ms Mac arrived, I was going nowhere down at Pet-O-Rama. My days were spent sitting around, looking at a load of furry things in cages just like mine. We were treated all right: regular meals, clean cages, music piped in all day.

Over the music, Carl, the shop assistant, would answer the phone: 'Open nine to nine, seven days a week. Corner of Fifth and Alder, next to the Dairy Maid.'

Back then, I feared I'd never see Fifth and Alder, much less the Dairy Maid. Sometimes I'd see human eyes and noses (not always as clean as they should be) poking up against the glass. Nothing ever came of it. The children were excited to see me, but the parents usually had other ideas.

'Oh, come and see the fishes, Cornelia. So colourful and so much easier to take care of than a hamster,' Mama might say. Or 'No, no, Norbert. They have the cutest little puppies over here. After all, a dog is a boy's best friend.'

So there we were: hamsters, gerbils, mice and

guinea pigs – not nearly as popular as the fish, cats or dogs. I suspected that I'd be spinning my wheel at Pet-O-Rama for ever.

But once Ms Mac carried me out of the door a short six weeks ago, my life changed FAST-FAST-FAST. I saw Fifth! I saw Alder! I saw the Dairy Maid with the statue of a cow in an apron outside!

I was dozing when she first came to Pet-O-Rama, as I do during the day, because hamsters are more active at night.

'Hello.' A warm voice awakened me. When I opened my eyes, I saw a mass of bouncy black curls. A big, happy smile. Huge dark eyes. She smelled of apples. It was love at first sight.

'Aren't you the bright-eyed one?' she asked.

'And might I return the compliment?' I replied. Of course, it came out 'Squeak-squeak-squeak', as usual. Ms Mac opened her purse with the big pink and blue flowers on it.

'I'll take him,' she told Carl. 'He's obviously the most intelligent and handsome hamster you have.' Carl grunted. Then Ms Mac picked out a respectable cage – okay, not the three-storey pagoda I'd had my eye on – but a nice cage.

And soon, amid squeals of encouragement from my friends in the Small Pet Department, from the teeniest white mouse to the lumbering chinchilla, I left Pet-O-Rama with high hopes.

We sped down the street in Ms Mac's bright yellow car! (She called it a Bug, but I could see it was really a car.) She carried my cage up the stairs to her flat! We ate apples! We watched TV! She let me run around outside my cage! She gave me my very own name: Humphrey. And she told me all about Room 26, where we'd be going the next morning.

'And since you are an intelligent hamster who is going to school, I have a present for you, Humphrey,' she said.

Then she gave me a tiny notebook and a tiny pencil. 'I got these for you at the doll shop,' she explained. She tucked them behind my mirror where no one could see them except me.

'Of course, it might be a while before you learn to read and write,' she continued. 'But you're smart and I know you'll catch on fast.'

Little did she know I could already make out some words from my long, boring days at Pet-O-Rama.

Words like *Chew Toys. Kibble. Pooper-Scoopers.*

Remember, a hamster is grown up at about five weeks old. So if I could learn all the skills I need for life in five weeks, how long could it possibly take to learn to read?

I'll tell you: a week. Yep, in a week I could read and even write a little with the tiny pencil.

In addition to schoolwork, I learned quite a bit about the other students in Room 26. Like Lower-Your-Voice-A.J. and Speak-Up-Sayeh and Wait-for-the-Bell-Garth and Golden-Miranda. (Even after I found out her name is really Miranda Golden, I thought of her as Golden-Miranda because of her long blond hair. After all, I am a Golden Hamster.)

Yes, life in Room 26 suited me well during the day. My cage had all the comforts a hamster could desire. I had bars on the window to protect me from my enemies. I had a little sleeping house in one corner where no one could see me or bother me. There was my wheel to spin on, of course, and a lovely pile of nesting material. My mirror came in handy to check my grooming (and to hide my notebook). In one corner I kept my food. The opposite corner was my bathroom area because hamsters like to keep their poo away from their food. (Who doesn't?) All my needs were taken care of in one convenient cage.

At night, I went home from school with Ms Mac and we watched TV or listened to music. Sometimes Ms Mac played her bongo drums. She made a tunnel on the floor so I could race and wiggle to my hamster heart's content.

Oh, the memories of those six weeks with Morgan McNamara. That's her real name, but she told

her students to call her Ms Mac. That's how nice she is. Or was.

On the weekends, Ms Mac and I had all kinds of adventures. She put me in her shirt pocket (right over her heart!) and took me with her to the laundry room. She had friends over and they laughed and made a fuss over me. She even took me for a bike ride once. I can still feel the wind in my fur!

I didn't have an inkling – until this morning – of the unsqueakable thing she was about to do to me. On the way to work she said, 'Humphrey, I hate to tell you, but this is my last day in Room 26 and I'm going to miss you more than you'll ever know.'

What was she saying? I hung on to my wheel for dear life!

'You see, it's really Mrs Brisbane's class. But just before school started, her husband was in an accident, so I took over the class. Today, she's coming back for good.'

Good? I could see nothing good in what Ms Mac was saying.

'Besides, I want to see the world, Humphrey,' she told me.

Fine with me. I've thoroughly enjoyed all the world I've seen so far and would go to the ends of the earth with Ms Mac. But she wasn't finished yet.

'But I can't take you with me.'

All hopes dashed. Completely.

'Besides, the kids need you to teach them responsibility. Mrs Brisbane needs you, too.'



Unfortunately, she didn't tell Mrs Brisbane that.

Mrs Brisbane was already in Room 26 when we arrived. She smiled at Ms Mac and shook her hand. Then she frowned at me and said, 'Is that some kind of . . . *rodent*?'

Ms Mac gave her the speech about how much kids can learn from taking care of another species.

Mrs Brisbane looked horrified and said, '*I can't stand rodents!* Take *it* back!'

The 'it' she was talking about was me.

Ms Mac didn't bat an eyelash. She put my cage in its usual place next to the window and said the kids were already very attached to me. She attached Dr Harvey H. Hammer's *Guide to the Care and Feeding of Hamsters* to the cage, along with a chart to make sure I was fed and my cage was cleaned on time.

'The children know what to do. You won't have to do a thing,' Ms Mac said as Mrs Brisbane glared at me. Just then, my fellow-students came streaming into the room and within half an hour Ms Mac had said goodbye to everyone, including me.

'I'll never forget you, Humphrey,' she whispered.

'Don't you forget me, either.'

'Not likely. But I don't know if I can ever forgive you,' I squeaked.

And then she was gone. Without me.

Mrs Brisbane didn't even come close to my cage until recess. Then she walked over and said, 'Mister, you've got to go.'

But she doesn't know my secret: the latch on my cage door doesn't work. It never has. It's the lock-that-doesn't-lock.

So I've got news for Mrs Brisbane: if I've got to go, it will be when and where I decide to go. Not her. Meanwhile, I'm not turning my back on this woman. Not for a second. If I ever disappear and someone finds this notebook, just check out Mrs Brisbane. Please!

**TIP ONE**

***Choose your new hamster's home very carefully and make sure it is secure. Hamsters are skilful 'escape artists' and once out of their cages they are very difficult to find.***

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