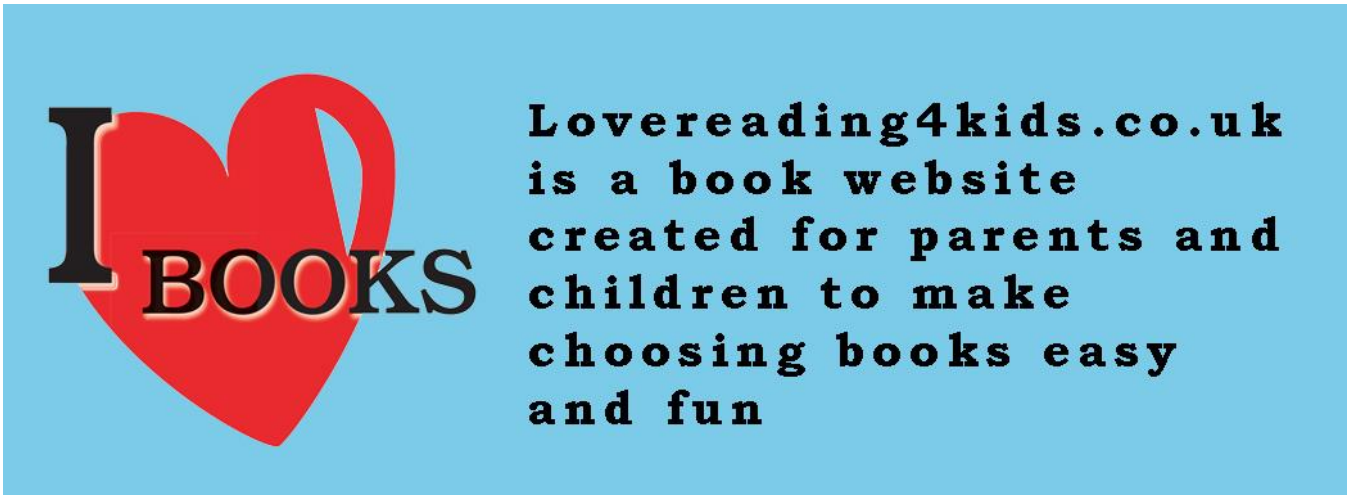


Opening extract from

Spring According to Humphrey

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1 March Misery

I didn't hear Mrs Brisbane's key turn as she opened the door that morning. I was sound asleep, snuggled under the bedding in my cage. It had been COLD-COLD-COLD all night and I was dreaming of summer. Nice, warm, sunny summer.

Suddenly, I heard Mrs Brisbane say, 'Be-Careful-Kelsey. Your boots are wet.'

And then she said, 'Simon! Slow down. I don't want anyone sliding across the floor and getting hurt.'

I poked my head out of the bedding and saw Mrs Brisbane and most of my fellow classmates in Room 26 coming through the

door. They wore caps and gloves, heavy jackets and boots.

'Sorry I was late,' Mrs Brisbane continued. 'The ice caused a traffic jam. I'm glad you all made it here safely.'

Ice? Just the word gave me a chill.

My cage sits near the windowsill, so I decided to peek outside.

'Eeek!' I squeaked.

'BOING!' my neighbour Og chimed in.

For most of the year, I look out at trees and grass and the school car park. In the autumn, the trees are red and gold. In the winter, they have branches that are either bare or tipped with snow.

But on this March day, the trees were silvery icicles, sparkling like diamonds. The brown earth glistened with a thin coating of shiny crystals.

'I *hate* winter!' Daniel said.

I turned and saw my friends all seated at their tables.

'I like deep snow, when you can make snowmen and go sledging,' Helpful-Holly said.

‘I only like snow when we get a snow day,’ Do-It-Now-Daniel said.

A lot of my friends agreed.

‘I think ice is cool,’ Simon said. ‘I skated down our driveway this morning without any skates!’

‘Oooh, that’s dangerous,’ Calm-Down-Cassie said. ‘My mum slipped on the ice and broke her arm a couple of years ago.’

Mrs Brisbane nodded. ‘It *is* dangerous, Simon.’

Simon just shrugged and said, ‘I think it’s fun.’

‘I like snow.’ Not-Now-Nicole shivered. ‘But I don’t like ice. It’s so . . . *icy*.’

The way she said it made me shiver, too.

Mrs Brisbane walked over to the windowsill and peered down at my cage. ‘Are you warm enough, Humphrey?’ she asked. ‘It might be too cold for you next to the window.’

‘I’m all right,’ I answered. ‘As long as I have nice, warm bedding and my fur coat.’

Unfortunately, since I am the classroom hamster, all she heard was ‘SQUEAK-SQUEAK-SQUEAK!’

Then Mrs Brisbane turned to Og. He's the pet frog in Room 26. 'How are you, Og? I know frogs don't like cold weather.'

Og hopped up and down and made his usual weird sound. 'BOING-BOING!'

Mrs Brisbane turned back to the class. 'Well, I don't like snow or ice when it makes me late for school.'

Tell-the-Truth-Thomas waved his hand and our teacher called on him.

'It's the beginning of March! It's not supposed to snow in March,' he complained.

Mrs Brisbane smiled. 'But sometimes it *does* snow. Have you heard the saying "March comes in like a lion but goes out like a lamb"?'

'What?' I squeaked.

Some of the students sitting close to me giggled.

'It means that at the beginning of March, we often have some wild weather roaring in. But by the time April rolls around, the weather is usually mild, like a lamb,' she explained.

Mrs Brisbane is unsqueakably smart! How does she know so much?

Small-Paul Fletcher raised his hand.

‘Meteorologists say that extreme winter weather is usually over around the end of February here,’ he said. ‘But it has been known to snow in March. Besides, this was a mix of freezing rain and snow.’

Small-Paul is SMART-SMART-SMART. Maybe he’ll be a meteorologist some day. But wait – don’t they study meteors from outer space?

Mrs Brisbane nodded. ‘Meteorologists study weather,’ she said. ‘So they would know.’

Rolling-Rosie raised her hand. ‘I don’t like ice. It’s hard to stop my wheelchair sometimes.’

I was surprised, because Rolling-Rosie is great at handling her wheelchair. She even knows how to pop a wheelie!

‘Does anybody know when the first day of spring is?’ Mrs Brisbane asked.

I glanced out the window again. ‘It’s definitely not today!’ I squeaked.

‘Too far away!’ Just-Joey grumbled.

Again Small-Paul raised his hand. ‘March the twentieth,’ he said.

Some of my friends groaned.

‘That’s weeks away!’ Stop-Talking-Sophie said.

I was still feeling cold and shivery, so I jumped on my wheel and began to spin. That always gets my whiskers wiggling again.

The door opened and Hurry-Up-Harry Ito walked in. ‘Sorry I’m late,’ he said. ‘We were stuck in lots of traffic.’ He handed Mrs Brisbane a piece of paper. ‘I have a note from the office.’

Mrs Brisbane nodded. ‘Go and take off your wet jacket and boots,’ she said.

Harry strolled to the cloakroom. I think he could have hurried up a little more, but that’s just the way he is.

‘Maybe spring will come faster if we pay attention to the signs that the season is beginning,’ Mrs Brisbane said. ‘And I also want to tell you about something to look forward to.’

There were murmurings around the room. I could tell she’d got my classmates’ interest. Mrs Brisbane always does!

‘Tell us – please!’ Kelsey said.

'We need good news,' Felipe added.

'PLEASE-PLEASE-PLEASE!' I begged her.

Mrs Brisbane smiled. 'Longfellow School is having a Family Fun Night in April. There will be games, prizes, pizza, and your whole family is invited.'

'I like pizza!' Thomas said. 'As long as it doesn't have mushrooms.' He made a face and everybody laughed.

'There will be lots more to do than eat pizza,' Mrs Brisbane continued. 'And each classroom has to come up with an activity or game. It will take some work, but it will also be fun.'

The news seemed to please my friends. I don't know much about Family Fun Nights or pizza or mushrooms, but I do know about having fun. I like it!

Tall-Paul raised his hand. 'What night of the week is it?' he asked.

'It's a Thursday,' our teacher answered.

Tall-Paul moaned. 'I figured.'

'What's wrong?' Mrs Brisbane asked.

'My mum's a nurse and she works Thursday

nights. She could come on Wednesday, though,' he replied.

'I don't think we can change the date at this point,' Mrs Brisbane said. 'Maybe she can switch with somebody.'

Paul shook his head. 'It's hard to change days. She's going to be disappointed.'

I think everybody in Room 26 was disappointed for Paul G. I certainly was!

'Well, my dad probably can't come. I only see him at weekends,' Just-Joey said.

'I know it's hard when not everyone can make it, but I promise you'll still have fun,' Mrs Brisbane said.

'Yeah,' Thomas agreed. 'You can still eat pizza! Unless it has mushrooms.'

Then Mrs Brisbane went back to talking about spring and told us our homework was to start looking for signs of the season and writing our observations.

'Don't forget to use all of your senses,' she said. 'Sight, smell, taste, feel, touch. When you find a sign of spring, write down the date and what you observed. Then either attach a photo or make a drawing of

it. I'll be posting them on the bulletin board.'

Slow-Down-Simon waved his hand and Mrs Brisbane called on him.

'You can't take a picture of a smell,' he said.

Mrs Brisbane agreed. 'Then use your words to describe it. But if you can get a picture of the thing that smelled, that would be great.'

'Simon's feet!' someone said. I'm not sure, but I think it was Tall-Paul. I think he meant it as a joke, because everybody giggled, including Simon.

'BOING-BOING!' Og said in his twangy voice. I guess he got the joke, too.

Then Mrs Brisbane moved on to talking about maths and carrying numbers. I was way too sleepy to carry anything, so I crawled into my little sleeping hut for a morning nap.

While I dozed, I had a dream. All my friends from Room 26 were coming up to my cage and introducing me to their family members. Of course, because I spend each weekend at a different student's house, I knew most of them.

'Humphrey, here's my mum,' they said. Or 'Humphrey, this is my dad.'

I met everybody in my dream from brothers and sisters to aunts and uncles and grandparents of all shapes and sizes. Humans have so many relatives, I don't know how they keep them all straight! And each family is different in a special way.

When I woke up, I had a funny feeling. Where were my mum and dad, my sisters and brothers? Did I have aunts and uncles and cousins?

As far as I could tell, all I had were my human friends and Og the Frog. I consider him a good friend, but I'm pretty sure we're not related. We certainly don't look alike.

I have beautiful golden fur. He is green and has no fur at all. How does he stay warm?

I have a tiny mouth and tiny eyes. Og's eyes are HUGE and so is his mouth.

I say, 'SQUEAK.'

He says, 'BOING!'

No, we're definitely not related.

During break, my friends didn't go out to the playground as usual. They stayed inside and

played FUN-FUN-FUN board games and card games.

While they were playing, I glanced out of the window again and was amazed to see the sun shining brightly. The tree branches dripped as the ice melted.

Maybe spring was on the way, after all.

I crossed my toes and hoped.



By the time Aldo arrived that night to clean Room 26, all of the ice had melted. (There are street lamps that help me see the street and car park.)

'*Mamma mia*,' he said. 'What a day! I was late to class because of all the ice. And I can't afford to be late to class. After all, I'm about to graduate from college!'

Aldo does an amazing job of keeping Room 26 clean. Of course, since he was going to college so he could become a teacher like Mrs Brisbane, he wouldn't be cleaning classrooms once he graduated.

'It won't be long now, Humphrey, and I'll be the father of twins!' he said.

I was happy that Aldo was having twins and going to college, but I wasn't so happy for me. After all, Aldo brought Og and me treats every night. That night, he brought little courgette sticks – crunchy and sweet! Og got some Froggy Fish Sticks. He loves them – which is another reason I know we're not related. Ick!

Aldo sat down and unwrapped his sandwich. 'I wonder if my twins will ever realize how hard I've worked to get ahead.'

'Of course they will,' I squeaked. 'They'll be proud!'

'I'm already applying for teaching jobs in the autumn,' Aldo said. 'But I have to say, every time I think about leaving Longfellow School, I think of how much I'll miss you two.'

My heart did a little flip-flop. 'I'll miss you, too,' I squeaked.

'BOING-BOING-BOING!' Og agreed.

Aldo finished his sandwich in silence. And when he was gone, I felt a teeny-tiny bit sad. I didn't care that much about the treats, but I would MISS-MISS-MISS seeing Aldo – and his amazing moustache!

Humphrey's Spring Things

I'm REALLY-REALLY-REALLY happy
that soon there will be spring.
But I don't know what to think
about this family thing!