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Opening extract from

Friendship According to Humphrey

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Strange Change

BUMP-BUMP-BUMP!

Mrs Brisbane and I were heading back to Longfellow School after the long winter holiday. But there were a lot more bumps in the road since the last time I rode in her small blue estate car.

'Now, Humphrey,' Mrs Brisbane said. She was interrupted by another BUMP! 'Don't be surprised.' BUMP! 'If there are a few changes.' BUMP! 'In Room 26.' BUMP!

My stomach felt slightly queasy as I hung on tightly to my ladder, so I had a hard time understanding what she was telling me. What did she mean by 'changes'?

'While you were at home with Bert.' BUMP! 'I came back to school to get things ready.'

I was at home with her husband Bert a lot over the holidays, and as much as I like him, I was worn

out from running mazes a couple of times a day. Mr Brisbane loves to watch me run mazes. At least back in school, I could catch forty winks once in a while. And since I am a classroom hamster, I belong in the classroom.

My stomach calmed down a bit as Mrs Brisbane pulled her car into a parking space.

'Now, what about these changes?' I asked, but it came out as 'Squeak-squeak-squeak,' as usual.

'It's good to shake things up once in a while, Humphrey,' Mrs Brisbane assured me as she opened the car door. 'You'll see.'

I was already shaken up from the bumpy ride. Then a blast of icy wind made me shiver and I couldn't see a thing because Mrs Brisbane had thrown a woollen scarf over my cage. I didn't mind, as long as I was on the way back to my classroom, where I'd see all my friends again. Just thinking about them gave me a warm feeling. Or maybe it was the heat from the school boiler as we walked in the front door.

'Hi, Sue! Are we on for today?' a familiar voice called out. I couldn't see Miss Loomis, but I recognized her voice. Miss Loomis taught a class down the corridor. She was also Mrs Brisbane's friend.

'Sure, Angie. How about after morning break?'

'See you then,' said Miss Loomis.

Finally, Mrs Brisbane put my cage down in

Room 26 and removed the scarf. When she did, I was in for a shock. Something unsqueakable had happened to my classroom! For one thing, the tables faced the wrong direction. They used to point towards the front of the room. Now they were sideways.

Instead of being arranged in neat rows like before, the tables were clumped together in groups. Mrs Brisbane's desk had moved to the corner of the room. Pictures of people I'd never seen before replaced the happy snowmen who had covered the notice board in December.

I was so dizzy from all the changes, I didn't notice the room filling up until Lower-Your-Voice-A.J. yelled, 'Hiya, Humphrey!' as he came out of the cloakroom.

Soon my other friends stopped by to say hello.

'Did you have a good holiday?' asked Miranda Golden. Miranda is an almost perfect human. That's why I think of her as Golden Miranda.

'My mother sends you her greetings,' Speak-Up-Sayeh said in her sweet, soft voice.

'Hey, Humphrey-Dumpty,' Garth shouted. That made Gail snigger, but I didn't mind. She laughed at everything.

At that moment, the bell rang. 'Class, look for your names and please take your seats now,' Mrs Brisbane said.

There was a lot of thumping and bumping as my classmates located their new seats. Now I had a better view of some of the students who used to sit on the opposite side of the room, like Don't-Complain-Mandy Payne, Sit-Still-Seth Stevenson and I-Heard-That-Kirk Chen. Maybe it is good to shake things up once in a while.

Then I noticed something odd. There was a stranger in Room 26, sitting near Sayeh, Gail and Kirk.

'Mrs Brisbane, she doesn't belong here!' I squeaked out loud. 'She's in the wrong room!'

Maybe Mrs Brisbane didn't hear me.

'Class, as you can see, we're making some changes this year. And one of our changes is our brand-new pupil,' the teacher announced. 'Come here, Tabitha.'

The new girl seemed SCARED-SCARED-SCARED as she got up and stood next to Mrs Brisbane. 'This is Tabitha Clark and I want you all to welcome her. Tabitha, why don't you tell us something about yourself?' The new girl looked down and shook her head. Mrs Brisbane quickly turned back to the class. 'We'll do that later. Now, who would like to be in charge of showing Tabitha around today?'

'Me!' a voice called out. Of course, it was Raise-Your-Hand-Heidi Hopper, who always forgets to raise her hand.

'Hands, please, Heidi. I think Mandy had her hand up first. Mandy, you will be Tabitha's buddy. I expect each of you to introduce yourself to Tabitha and include her in your activities.' She turned to the girl. 'I know you'll make a lot of good friends in Room 26. You may sit down now.'

The girl kept staring at the floor as she returned to her seat. She looked as if she needed a friend. I was so busy watching her, I only half listened to what Mrs Brisbane was saying. Was she really talking about 'poultry'?

'After all, this is Longfellow School,' she said. 'And as I hope you know, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a famous American poet.'

Poetry! Nothing to do with chickens or turkeys, thank goodness. I have to admit, I'm a little scared of things with feathers, ever since my early days at Pet-O-Rama. I still have nightmares about the day a large green parrot escaped and flung himself at my cage, screeching, 'Yum, yum! Time to eat! Bawk!' He was still shrieking as Carl, the shop assistant, carried him away.

That unpleasant memory was interrupted when someone blurted, 'I'm a poet and I don't know it. My feet show it – they're *long fellows*.'

'I-Heard-That-Kirk,' said Mrs Brisbane. 'Now, as I was saying, much of this term will be spent reading and writing poetry.'

The groans were loud. I guess some people are afraid of poetry, even without feathers.

Seth squirmed in his seat and pretended to pound his head on the table. 'Poetry,' he moaned.

'Sit-Still-Seth,' said Mrs Brisbane.

Sitting still wasn't easy for Seth. Now that he was practically right in front of me, I could see him wiggling and jiggling in his chair, which made Gail Morgenstern laugh.

'Stop-Giggling-Gail!' Mrs Brisbane warned.

Gail stopped giggling and started hiccuping.

'Please, go and get a drink of water,' Mrs Brisbane told her. She turned to the new girl. 'Tabitha, please put that toy away.'

Everybody stared at Tabitha, including me. She was cradling a scruffy teddy bear in her arms. The grey bear had cotton coming out of his ears and wore washed-out blue overalls with a button missing. Even his smile seemed a little faded.

'Now, please,' said Mrs Brisbane.

It was quiet in the room, thank goodness. I'm afraid that if Gail had been there, we would have heard peals of laughter and heaps of hiccups!

Tabitha slid the shabby bear under her table without a word.

Just about then, Mr Morales, the headmaster, marched through the door.

'Sorry for interrupting, Mrs Brisbane. I just

want to personally welcome you all back to school!'

The headmaster looked spiffy, with a tie that had little pencils all over it. He always wore a tie because he was the Most Important Person at Longfellow School.

'Thank you, Mr Morales,' said Mrs Brisbane. 'We have a new student, Tabitha Clark, and a whole new set-up for our class, as you can see.'

'Welcome, Tabitha,' said the headmaster. 'I'm sure you'll love it here in Room 26. I'm glad to see that our friend Humphrey is back as well.'

He walked all the way across the classroom to my cage.

'GLAD TO SEE YOU!' I squeaked in my loudest squeak.

'Hi, old pal,' he greeted me. He turned back to the rest of the class. 'You can all learn a lot from Humphrey. And I wish you a very successful term.'

After he left, I turned my attention back to Tabitha. She was still staring straight down. I couldn't see her face clearly, but it was almost as red as her copper-coloured hair. I guess I watched her for a long time, because suddenly the bell rang for break.

'Come on, Tabitha, let's get our coats,' Mandy said. Tabitha slipped the teddy bear into her pocket and followed Mandy to the cloakroom.

As soon as the students were gone, Miss Loomis

bustled into the room. Two pink dots of excitement coloured her cheeks and her curls bounced in all directions.

'Are you ready? Should we do it?' she asked Mrs Brisbane excitedly.

'Why not?' my teacher answered. 'I'll make room for him now.'

They walked over to the table in front of the window where my cage sits.

'Yes, he'll fit right here,' said Miss Loomis, pointing to a spot near my house.

Mrs Brisbane slid some of my supplies down to the end of the table. 'Now, you're sure he's not a lot of trouble?'

'Oh, no. Not nearly as much trouble as a hamster,' Miss Loomis answered.

WHAT-WHAT-WHAT? Not nearly as much trouble as a hamster! Since when have I caused any trouble in Room 26? Since when did I not totally dedicate myself to helping my classmates and teacher? Surprisingly, Mrs Brisbane didn't correct her. I was about to squeak up for myself when the bell rang again and Miss Loomis scurried out of the room.

I wondered who wasn't as much trouble as I am. 'He,' Miss Loomis had said.

He who? Curiosity made my whiskers twitch and my paws tingle.

My fur was practically standing on end as the tables filled up. I saw Tabitha slip her bear out of her pocket. Heidi saw it too, and rolled her eyes at Gail, who almost giggled but managed to stop herself.

'Now, class, I told you there were some changes in our room this year,' Mrs Brisbane announced. 'Another of the changes is a brand-new classroom pet. I think he'll add a lot to Room 26.'

New classroom pet? Why did she want a new classroom pet when she already had a wonderful, terrific – OK, perfect – classroom pet, namely me? Was I being replaced?

Miss Loomis entered, carrying a large glass tank. I couldn't see what it was because my classmates were standing up, craning their necks, *ooh*-ing and *aah*-ing and chattering away.

'It's a frog!' shouted Heidi.

Miss Loomis put the glass box right next to my cage. Now I could see some water, rocks, and something green and REALLY-REALLY-REALLY lumpy.

'Meet our new frog,' said Mrs Brisbane. 'Miss Loomis will tell you about him.'

'Well, boys and girls, as you may know, we have a frog in our classroom. His name is George and he's a bullfrog. Before the holidays, one of our students brought in this frog to keep George company. We named him Og the Frog. Unfortunately, George

didn't like Og. And being a bullfrog, George let us know he didn't like Og by making a lot of noise. That upset Og, I guess, because he would leap and splash all day long while George was croaking.'

My classmates laughed, but I didn't. On the one paw, I could see why George didn't want another frog to compete with. On the other paw, croaking at Og wasn't a very friendly way to act.

'With all the noise, we were having trouble getting any work done at all,' Miss Loomis continued. 'So I asked Mrs Brisbane if your class would like to have Og, and she said yes. He's a very quiet frog. Do you like him?'

My friends all yelled, 'YES!' Everyone except Tabitha, who was secretly petting her little bear.

Somebody went 'Ribbit-ribbit' in a funny croaking voice. It wasn't the frog.

'I-Heard-That-Kirk. That's quite enough. Og can provide the sound effects from now on. I think he'll make a nice friend for Humphrey,' Mrs Brisbane said.

A friend for me? At least he wasn't my replacement – whew! But I was already friends with every single person in Room 26, so she really didn't need to find me another one. Still, I didn't want to act unfriendly, the way George had.

After Miss Loomis left, Mrs Brisbane let the students have a closer look at Og.

Seth tapped at the glass.

'Don't do that, Seth,' the teacher warned him. 'You'll frighten him.'

'He doesn't seem frightened of anything,' Miranda observed.

'I think he's smiling,' added Kirk. 'That must mean he's *hoppy*.'

For once, Gail didn't giggle, which seemed to bother Kirk. 'Get it? Hoppy? Happy?' he tried to explain.

Gail rolled her eyes and groaned, which didn't make Kirk hoppy at all.

Mrs Brisbane called to the new girl. 'Come and see Og, Tabitha.'

Tabitha stared down at her table and shook her head.

'Come on, Tabitha!' Mandy sounded impatient.

Again, Tabitha shook her head.

'She hasn't wanted to do anything all day!' Mandy grumbled.

'Mandy –,' Mrs Brisbane warned her.

'Is he really a frog?' Richie stared hard at Og, who stared right back. 'Don't frogs live in water?'

'Some do,' said Mrs Brisbane. 'And some frogs live in trees. Og is a common green frog. He likes to live near the water, but not in it. That's why he has a tank that's half land and half water.'

A common green frog didn't sound very interest-

ing, but Og had certainly attracted the attention of my classmates.

'Can I take care of Og?' A.J. asked loudly.

'Lower-Your-Voice-A.J.,' said Mrs Brisbane. 'We will all take care of him.'

Once the students had returned to their seats, Mrs Brisbane held up a book on the care of frogs. 'We'll have to study this,' she explained. 'Taking care of Og will be quite different from caring for Humphrey. After all, Humphrey is a warm-blooded mammal. Og is a cold-blooded amphibian.'

Amphibian! That's nothing like a mammal. The very word made my warm blood run cold! I hoped that she would never ever put that word in a spelling test.

Mrs Brisbane looked through the book. 'Aha,' she said. 'It says that the common green frog is a medium-sized frog with a calm nature. It makes a distinctive twanging sound.'

'BOING!'

I almost fell off my ladder. What on earth could that noise be?

Then I heard another sound: the laughter of my classmates.

'That certainly is a distinctive twanging sound,' said Mrs Brisbane, looking puzzled.

'BOING!' This time the noise was clearly coming from the frog. What kind of a way is that to talk?

Aren't frogs supposed to say 'ribbit'?

Mrs Brisbane turned towards Og's glass box. 'Thank you for the demonstration, Og.'

Then I heard: 'Boing-boing-boing!' It didn't come from the frog this time.

'I-Heard-That-Kirk Chen,' said the teacher. She continued to talk on and on about amphibians and their life cycle.

'What does he eat?' Heidi called out.

'Hands, please, Heidi,' said Mrs Brisbane wearily. 'Mostly insects. Miss Loomis gave me a container of crickets.'

'Cool!' said Kirk.

Everybody else in the class groaned. 'Ewwwww!'

When I finished gagging, I squeaked, 'LIVE insects?' Not that anyone was listening to me. Especially not Og, who calmly sat there doing absolutely nothing.



At the end of the day, as the students gathered up their books and coats and filed past our table, at least half of them said, 'Bye, Og,' or 'Catch you later, Oggy.'

Not one of my classmates said goodbye to me. I suppose they all forgot.

Mandy stayed for a minute after class. 'Mrs Brisbane, you told me to be friendly to that new girl,

but she isn't very friendly back.'

'Don't-Complain-Mandy,' said the teacher. 'It's not easy to be the new kid in the classroom. Put yourself in her shoes. Give her some time. After all, we've got the whole term ahead of us.'

A whole term ahead of us – and I had to spend it with a frog?

Mrs Brisbane had shaken things up all right. And I felt queasy all over again.

The better part of one's life consists of his friendships.

Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth president of the United States