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opening extract from

Holidays According to Humphrey

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The End (of School)

It was a warm afternoon and there was a lovely ray of sunlight beaming into my cage, as golden as my fur. It made me feel so cosy and dozy, I guess I nodded off during science class. The last thing I remembered Mrs Brisbane saying was 'cumulus clouds'. Then I was floating away on my own fluffy little cloud, as peaceful as a hamster can be. *Until* I was awakened by a LOUD-LOUD-LOUD voice that could only belong to my classmate Lower-Your-Voice-A.J.

'How many more days are there?' he boomed.

'Four,' Mrs Brisbane answered.

I opened one eye and listened carefully.

'Just four days until the end of school,' she continued.

I opened both eyes, jumped up and let out a loud 'Eeek!'

'Sounds like Humphrey Dumpty is anxious for school to be out,' A.J. said. 'Like me!'

The end of school? Did she mean that there wouldn't be school EVER-EVER-EVER again? Or was it just another holiday?

'I will miss you,' the teacher said. 'But it's time to move on.'

Move on? Can a school move?

'Og,' I squeaked to my neighbour, 'did you hear that?'

Og splashed in his tank a little, then let out a loud 'BOING!' That's the twangy way green frogs like him talk.

Stop-Giggling-Gail giggled. 'I guess Og is ready for summer, too!'

'Hands up before speaking, please, class,' Mrs Brisbane reminded her students. She wouldn't be able to remind them much longer. 'Yes, Kirk?'

'May I tell a summer joke please?' he asked. At least I-Heard-That-Kirk Chen had learned not to blurt out his jokes without asking.

'Yes, if it's short,' Mrs Brisbane told him.

'What did the pig say on the beach on a hot summer day?' he asked.

'I don't know,' the teacher admitted.

'I'm *bakin'*! Get it? Like, I'm *bacon*!' Kirk proudly explained.

'I get it,' Mrs Brisbane said.

Gail giggled again, of course, along with her best friend, Heidi.

There was a shuffle of feet as the clock moved towards the end of the school day.

'Wait-for–the-Bell-Garth,' Mrs Brisbane told Garth Tugwell. He was always the first one out of his chair.

As soon as he sat down, the bell rang and, with plenty of clattering and chattering, my friends hurried out of Room 26. While they hurried, I worried.

Was it the end of Longfellow School for ever?

What would everyone *do*?

And, most importantly, where would Og and I go?

What does a classroom pet do when his job is over?

Mrs Brisbane tidied up her desk, the way she usually did when school was over for the day. She didn't seem bothered about the end of school. In fact, she was humming a happy tune.

I didn't feel like humming.

Maybe Og and I would go to live with Mrs Brisbane and her husband, Bert. I enjoyed staying at their house, but I didn't want to be there all the time without my friends around. How I'd miss Sayeh and Art and Seth and Tabitha and Miranda. Miranda! I could hardly imagine not seeing Golden Miranda again.

'Eeek!' I squeaked. Again. It just slipped out.

Mrs Brisbane heard me and walked over to the table by the window where Og and I lived.

'I guess you fellows are wondering what you'll be doing when school is over,' she said.

'RIGHT-RIGHT-RIGHT!' I replied, although all that came out was SQUEAK-SQUEAK-SQUEAK as usual.

'Well, I can't tell you because it's a surprise,' she said.

And then, humming her little tune, Mrs Brisbane left Room 26 for the day, and left me with a lot to think about.



While my mind raced, I suddenly noticed that it was warm in Room 26. Even a little bit hot. I almost wished I could take off my fur coat. Or that I could swim around in nice cool water like Og. (Not that I ever would, since hamsters should never – and I mean *never* – get wet.)

Also, I'd been noticing for a while that the sky was staying light longer, which makes life a bit difficult for a nocturnal creature like me, who looks forward to night-time.

One reason I look forward to night-time is that Aldo comes in to clean.

'Greetings, friends! You are looking at a happy

fellow,' he announced as he pushed his cleaning trolley into the classroom.

Aldo had always seemed like a happy fellow, but that night he was even happier than usual.

'Hi, Aldo! What's new?' I squeaked.

Og added a friendly 'BOING!'

'School's out for me! It's over!' Aldo was beaming happily. 'And my grades were very good. Even in Spanish!'

'Way to go, Aldo!' I squeaked.

Aldo cleans at night but goes to school during the day so he can be a teacher some day. He had a little trouble with his Spanish class earlier in the year, so I was happy for him.

I thought for a moment, trying to remember the Spanish word for 'good'.

'*¡Bueno!*' I added.

'School's out, school's out. Teacher let the mules out,' he said with a laugh.

I had no idea there were mules at Aldo's college!

Mrs Brisbane had been humming earlier in the day and now Aldo whistled as he briskly swept the floors and dusted the furniture. The end of school certainly seemed to make people musical.

When he had finished, he pulled a chair up close to my cage and Og's tank. Then he took out his dinner.

'No more eating from paper bags for a while,' he said, biting into his sandwich.

I liked to watch Aldo eat. His big black moustache made it difficult to see his mouth, so when he ate the food just seemed to disappear.

'No, my friends,' he said. 'When Longfellow School closes next week, I'm leaving town! I'm out of here.'

I shivered even though it was hot. That meant there would be no more school *and* no more Aldo!

'Here, buddy, have a carrot,' Aldo said, slipping me a crunchy treat as he did every night.

No more treats either, I thought.

It wasn't just the end of school. It was the end of life as I'd known it.

'Can you believe it, Sue?' our head teacher, Mr Morales, asked the next morning before class began. 'Three days until it's all over.' Mr Morales had a collection of special ties and today he was wearing a blue one with bright yellow suns on it.

He seemed happy about the end of school, too. But what does a head teacher do if he doesn't have a school to go to every day?

'The whole family will be hitting the road,' he said. 'What about you and Bert?'

'We're leaving, too,' she said. 'Jason's getting married in Tokyo and we're going for the wedding.'

Mrs Brisbane was positively beaming with joy. Jason was her son and he lived in Tokyo, which is FAR-FAR-FAR away.

So I guess she was going FAR-FAR-FAR away, too. Was that her surprise – *everybody* was leaving?

'What about us?' I squeaked to Og.

He splashed loudly in his tank.

'I guess we'll have to hit the road, too,' I said. But it didn't sound like much fun.

That night, I dreamed about Og and me on the open road. It was a scary dream because we had to dodge huge cars and lorries that were whizzing by. Once, I saw Mr Morales and his family speed right past us. Then I heard a loud engine buzzing. I looked up and saw Mr and Mrs Brisbane waving to us from an aeroplane. Later, a big bus passed us and a lot of my friends from Room 26 shouted and waved: Golden Miranda and Repeat-It-Please-Richie and Don't-Complain-Mandy Payne.

Og and I walked and hopped for hours and hours, but we didn't get very far. I was glad to wake up, I can tell you that. And I was tired from all the walking.

But I was happier than ever to see my friends the next morning. I looked around at them smiling, fidgeting, whispering. They seemed unsqueakably

happy. Why was I the only one who was upset that Longfellow School was closing down?

Nobody seemed to mind the End of School . . . except me and possibly Og.

The next night, after Aldo's visit, I opened my cage's lock-that-doesn't-lock (it just looks locked, which allows me to get out and have adventures without anyone knowing) and wandered over to Og's tank.

'Whatever happens, Og, let's stick together, okay?' I suggested.

It's always a little hard to tell if Og is listening, because he just stares with those googly eyes and a huge frozen smile on his face.

'BOING-BOING,' he said, jumping up and down.

I can't understand everything Og says, but it sounded as if he agreed with me.

At least I wouldn't be alone. That was the good news.

But hamsters and frogs have very different likes and needs. That was the bad news.

I decided it was time to take a final walk through the halls of my beloved Longfellow School. Such a fine building – why on earth would humans close it down?

I felt a little sorry for Og as I started my journey. After all, he isn't able to get out of his tank and roam freely, the way I do. Even if he could, he'd probably start to dry out after a while, which wouldn't be comfortable for a frog.

After bidding Og farewell, I slid down the leg of the table and scampered across the floor. I took a deep breath, then slipped through the narrow space under the classroom door.

It was DARK-DARK-DARK in the hallway, though there were some low lights around the building. There was a time when Longfellow School at night seemed mysterious and even scary, but not any more.

I visited the library first, sliding under the door. Even in the semi-darkness, I could see the big aquarium, glowing and alive with brightly coloured fish. I scurried forward to take a peek at the little sunken ship lying at the bottom of the tank. It always gave me a thrill – and a chill.

I wondered what would happen to the fish when Longfellow School was no more.

Then I hopped up a series of shelves next to the desk until I reached the top. I pulled hard with all my might and raised myself on to the desktop. It was a few quick steps to the remote control that was always there. I hit the 'on' button and was

thrilled to see pictures appear before me on a big screen as music played.

I never knew what I'd see on my trips into the library at night.

Tonight it was a thrilling but frightening film about a dense jungle full of beautiful, dangerous creatures such as lions and tigers. I was gripped by the growls and roars, the teeth and claws that I saw and heard!

When the show was over, I tapped the 'off' button, a little reluctantly since I didn't know when – if ever – I'd have the chance to see a film like that again. I hurried back down the shelves to the floor of the library. Without bothering to glance back at the aquarium and the sunken ship, I scurried out into the hallway to have one last look around.

I strolled along the darkened corridors, past other classrooms, down to Mr Morales's office. I stood there, looking up at the sign that said 'Head Teacher', the glass window and the suggestions box hanging high up on the big door.

I couldn't reach the box, but if I had been able to, I know what my suggestion would be: 'Don't close the school!'

On my way back, I passed the big double doors to the cafeteria. That's where my friends have lunch every single day. I'd always wanted to see it and this was my last chance. I slid under the door

but was disappointed to find that it was a large empty room with tables folded against the wall and not a crumb of food left on the floor!

By the time I got back to my table in Room 26, I was pretty tired, because that's the hardest part of my adventures. I can slide DOWN-DOWN-DOWN my table leg, but I can't slide UP-UP-UP. Instead, I have to grab on to the cord of the blinds, which is very long, then swing it back and forth until I'm up to the table level. Then I cross my paws, close my eyes and leap on to the table. Whew!

Still, as tired as I was, I had a lot of thinking to do. So I took out the little notebook I keep hidden behind my mirror, and the little pencil that goes with it, and I began to write.

NOTE TO SELF: Unlike hamsters, humans love to make big changes. Unfortunately, they almost always forget to tell their pets what's going on.