

# Hamster

## Escape!

The chubby, eight-year-old boy pressed his nose worriedly against the metal bars of the hamster cage. “Sugar,” he explained to the little snowy white fur-ball which was busy stuffing herself with sunflower seeds. “Look, while we're going away on vacation for the summer, my friend Emily's going to take care of you, okay?” The hamster continued chewing lazily on her food, ignoring him. “Sugar,” the boy pleaded. “Don't escape from your cage again like you did a week ago.” Sugar squeaked. She didn't need to be reminded of the time Joshua had left the cage door open through the bars of the cage and had been hiding behind the fridge for three days before the boy's mother finally discovered her. She nibbled on a kernel of raw corn as she swore to herself, *I'm not going to run away again.* “I love you, Sugar,” the boy assured his hamster, and as Sugar glanced at his face she saw a tear sparkling in the corner of his eye. “I don't want to go to Canada without you, but I have to, Sugar. Okay?” *Whatever,* Sugar muttered. Ever since the little boy had dropped her on the hard tile floor she had disliked him. She would not allow anybody to touch her bruised body, because it hurt if they did. “Sugar,” the boy sobbed. “I love you. Remember that, hammy.” *Don't call me “hammy,”* Sugar growled. She hated that nickname.

The boy closed his fingers around a bar of the cage and gripped the bar so tightly his knuckles turned white. He sniffled loudly and muttered to himself, “Oh, come on, Joshua, it's not like you're never going to see Sugar ever again, right?” He took a deep, quavery breath. “Sugar, do you

hear me?" he asked Sugar. She glanced up at him carelessly. *I wish you weren't so talkative*, sighed the hamster sadly. "You're going to stay at my friend Emily's house. Got that?" Sugar gazed up at him doubtfully. *I know, I know*, she squeaked. *But I have a question for you. Are they nice and gentle or are they rough like you?* The boy did not answer her question. "And I love you, okay?" he said. The hamster sighed and shook her head. It wasn't because she was mean or anything that she didn't like the boy. She did. But after he had dropped her, she had turned a bit cranky and angry. She ignored every word the boy said, attacked his finger if he tried to pet her with it, and hid inside her little plastic igloo if the boy tried to pick her up. Everyone said she was a ferocious creature, except for the boy, but she wasn't. She was just cranky and didn't feel well. She would be nice soon, after a few days. But for now she was just unhappy and mean.

"Joshua!" the boy's mother shouted from the entrance room. "Haven't I told about three times to bring the hamster down, honey? And please be careful. We wouldn't want it to drop, would we? Don't shake the cage around in your arms and hold it still. The hamster hates to be shaken around." Joshua carefully lifted the hamster cage and smiled at Sugar. Sugar did not return the smile. It felt as if she were stuck inside a wobbly, shaking elevator that was a thousand stories high. She squeaked to show how much she disliked this. Sugar, frightened and annoyed, scrambled inside her plastic igloo and sat shivering in the the corner in a furry white ball. *Yikes*, she wailed as the cage tilted to one side and the igloo went skidding over to the food bowl. She dug a small tunnel in her wood shavings and scurried inside. Ah. It was nice and safe in here, with a wall of protective wood shavings all around her. Suddenly, the cage tilted to the other side and she tumbled, head over tail, to the place where her plastic igloo had once been. Her tunnel destroyed, she climbed out of under the wood shavings, saw her food bowl, and jumped inside. Gnawing anxiously on a sunflower seed, she screamed as she was thrown up into the air and *thump* she landed hard on the floor. It happened several more times until it finally stopped. *That must have been the stairs*, she said to herself as she looked at the mess around her. There seemed to be too much wood shavings on one side and barely any on the other. The food bowl had tipped over and all the food had spilled out. The plastic igloo was upside-down, and the tubes and tunnels for Sugar to crawl in were all over

the place. *Now look at my home. It's a mess*, she grumbled.

“Oh, there you are Joshua,” Joshua's mother said with a smile. She pursed her lips and made kissing sounds at Sugar. “Who's a little cutie? Who's a little cutie? That's right! You are,” she cooed in baby-talk to Sugar, who began to claw wildly at the cage bars, trying to break them so she could attack Joshua's mother. She hated it when someone baby-talked to her. It was so annoying. Sugar gave up and sat down angrily, crossing her arms. “Now come on,” Joshua's mother said. “Our plane leaves in three hours, and we've got to get this to Emily's house.” Joshua nodded, and poor Sugar had to suffer another whole round of bumping and being thrown around as the two trudged back to the garage. A large green Toyota car awaited them. Joshua's father was too busy wresting Joshua's screaming baby brother into his car seat to notice the two people.

Sugar and her cage were set on the seat next to Joshua and his brother, who had begun to howl and whack his rattle on the window. Sugar squeaked angrily. *Shut up, you silly baby*, she cried. *My eardrums have already burst!* The baby continued to scream. *I'll be glad to escape from you and finally live in another house where I hope there isn't any loud baby*, Sugar muttered to herself. Joshua's father started the engine and off they sped. If the ride downstairs was bad, this ride was about a million times worse. They encountered three speed bumps, and on the first one, as the car bumped over them, Sugar found herself being flung into the air and landing hard on the top of her plastic igloo. Slightly dazed, she tumbled off and dug a tunnel in the wood shavings. She quickly hurried inside, closed her eyes, and braced herself for the next speed bump that she could sense was coming. And it did come. Again she was thrown into the air and this time her head slammed against the roof of the cage and she fell in a heap inside her food bowl. She crammed as much food as she could inside her cheek pouches in case the food bowl tipped over and the food somehow rolled through the bars of the cage and there was no food left. Sugar took a deep breath and prayed that they would not encounter any more speed bumps. But they did. This time she was thrown into the air again, and she slammed the roof so hard that she nearly fainted. She fell onto the floor so hard on her right arm she thought she might have broken her bone, but she hadn't.

She got to her feet, wobbled, and collapsed with a groan. Joshua did not

seem to notice. He got out his iPod, scrolled through his play list, and began to sing "Beat It" by Micheal Jackson. *Quiet*, Sugar snapped, but since she was only a tiny hamster less than five weeks old, of course her owner didn't hear her. Rubbing her head where a bruise was forming, she clambered inside one of her colorful tubes and lay there for a few moments, shivering. She made sure her arm was okay, squirted some water from her bottle onto her bruised head, and felt slightly better. Ignoring the fact that he was stinging with pain, he stumbled over to the wall of his cage facing Joshua. He began to chatter angrily at the boy. *Look at you*, the hamster hissed, and scowled when she realized Joshua was too busy singing, "Just beat it! Yeah! Beat it! Yeah!" to hear her. She gnawed at the bars for a while, decided she couldn't break them, and sat back down, waiting for them to arrive at Emily's house.

After a few more long seconds, the car parked next to the curb and Joshua's father announced, "Right-o, people, we've arrived. Get out of the car, now." Sugar and her cage were lifted up in the air and carried by Joshua to the front door of a large, blue and white house. Joshua rang the door bell, cupped his hands around his mouth, and hollered, "It's Joshua!" The lock clicked and the door opened. Standing in the doorway was a short, Chinese lady with long black hair and a kind smile plastered across her lips. *That's Emily?* wondered Sugar, surprised that Joshua would be friends with a woman in her late thirties. "Hi," the lady greeted. "There's your little hamster." She chuckled. "Oh, isn't he cute?" *I'm not a 'he,'* scowled Sugar. *I'm a girl!*

"Yep," Joshua grinned. "Here's my sweet Sugar." He handed the lady Sugar and her cage. "The vet said we can't touch her for three days because we dropped her, you know, and she's all bruised and—" Joshua broke off, tears running like little streams down his cheeks. "And here's her food," Joshua said, handing the lady a bag of hamster food. "Bye, Sugar," he whispered to the hamster, who glared back at his teary face and said, *Good riddance, Josh. And terrific riddance to you, Joshua's little brother, whose name I think is Noah.*

"Joshua, hurry!" called his mother from the car.

"Yes, Mom!" Joshua yelled back. He opened the cage to pet Sugar, received a nasty bite from her, closed the cage, and dashed back to the car. Sugar, staring up at the strange new face, muttered, *Hello. Please be nice to*

*me and thank you. And what's your name? Emily? Honestly, why would Joshua be friends with a woman about thirty years older than him? That's just plain silly. I mean, like, old people and young kids to not have the same brains. Old people love nature, and even though I'm not old I love it too because that's where wild hamsters live. But let's get back to what I was saying. So, old people love nature, young kids hate it. Old people eat healthy, young people stuff themselves with chocolates. See? Why would Joshua be friends with you? Adults and children cannot be friends. Sugar was glad to get away from Noah, Joshua's screaming younger brother, Joshua's mother, who treated Sugar like a baby, Joshua's father, who acted like Sugar didn't exist, and Joshua himself, who was the whole reason why Sugar was a cranky animal. He was the one who had dropped her and made her whole tummy bruised. He was the one who had made her an irritable animal. It was all his fault.*

*Sugar was so happy that she was going to stay away from Joshua's family she instantly liked Emily's family. She felt very talkative like she wanted to blurt out all the nice things she had wanted to say. She swelled up with joy like a balloon and continued to talk, so fast she could barely understand herself. *I really hated Joshua, Emily, or at least I think your name is Emily, right? Well, I guess it is. But anyway, I really hated Joshua. He should take all the blame. He left the cage door open and it wasn't my fault, I just couldn't resist escaping, right? Wouldn't you escape if you had the chance? Everybody says it's my fault for escaping but it isn't! It's Joshua's fault. He left the cage door open, like I told you. So I escaped and then after a few days I kind of regretted I escaped. You know why? I'll tell you why. Hey are you listening?* The lady had begun to carry Sugar and her cage to the garage. But she didn't bounce around this time when the lady carried her. She walked smooth and lightly, not wobbly and clumsily like Joshua did. She opened the garage door and set the cage on top of another larger cage on a table.*

*Instantly a rodent three times longer and two times taller than the hamster bounded out of a bigger plastic igloo inside the cage. Its voice was squeaky and hard to understand it, but the hamster knew what it was saying. *Oh! it cried. Food, food, food! Have you got me some food? Food, food, food. Where's my food? I want food. Food! Ooh, ooh, I want carrots! Corn! Lettuce! Any food. But I want it now!* Suddenly the rodent froze. *Hey, what's that you just put on top of my cage? Is it food? Food, food, food! Ooh, hooray! It's food. I think. Wait. No, it's not! Humph! It smells like another cage and a rodent**

*just like me! Oh, oh, oh! Another guinea pig to talk to and play with! We'll be best buds. Oh, yes we will! But hey! Where's my food? Food, food, food!*

The hamster jumped backward in surprise and banged his bottom against his food bowl. The animal in the bigger cage was a guinea pig! Sugar had heard Joshua's mother once saying, "Guinea pigs are big eaters. I used to have one myself. Every time I came into the garage where his cage was, he'd start squeaking, begging for food. I have him a small plum each day, and in no time he was fatter than any other guinea pig I'd ever seen." Sugar had thought this was a complete lie, just to convince hamsters were better than guinea pigs, but now right here in this big cage below Sugar's was proof. Here was a guinea pig, begging for food, and as thick as a small tree trunk. Joshua's mother hadn't been lying. Most guinea pigs *were* terribly fat. Sugar smiled at her own slim, beautiful body.

*FOOD!* wailed the guinea pig, gnawing wildly on the edge of his empty food bowl to indicate that he had eaten all of the little pellets. He scampered around, opening his mouth hungrily. Sugar stared in disgust at the saliva dripping from his teeth. Gross, she thought. I'm glad I'm not a guinea pig. Now I understand why the second word of "guinea pig" is "pig." *F-U-D!* squealed the rodent. *F-U-D spells food! I want food! F-U-D! I want some food, you woman-who-doesn't-care-about-how-her-daughter's-guinea-pig-is-starving-to-DEEEEEATH! Hey, you!* The guinea pig pointed accusingly at the lady, who was busy sweeping the garage floor. The lady turned her head to face the guinea pig. She pressed a finger to her lips, which Sugar knew meant "quiet." *Yeah, you,* shrieked the guinea pig loudly. *Give me some food, woman!*

The hamster decided to speak up. He couldn't stand all this blabbering and screaming about food. Why, the guinea should have stored it away under his wood shavings like sensible hamsters do, so he could dig it up and eat it when he was hungry. That was what he should have done. But he hadn't. Any time he received food, he gobbled it all up so fast that in one second he had swallowed and was screaming for more. But hamsters, they were such cute, sweet little darlings, and smart, too. *They* stored their food away and saved it for a rainy day. *They* were the intelligent animals. But guinea pigs? Nope. *Hey!* Sugar yelled, loud enough for the guinea pig to hear over all his wailing. The hungry rodent froze. *Hey, Ginny!* The hamster quickly thought up a nickname for the guinea pig. *Do you want me*

to give you some of my food? At least that would keep the guinea pig quiet for a while. Sugar waited for an answer.

At first, the fat creature was silent. Then he shouted, *You know my name! You said, 'Hey, Ginny!' Ginny is my name! And yes I would love some food! Just stick it through the bars of your cage and it'll fall through the gaps of the bars of my cage and fall right at my feet! Ha, ha, ha!* Ginny the Guinea Pig, thought the hamster. Hmm. Interesting name. Ginny had a strong Texas accent, but Sugar didn't know where it came from, because she knew guinea pigs were South American. When Ginny laughed, Sugar was reminded suddenly of a character from a cartoon, and after thinking about what the character's name was, Sugar remembered it was, "Sponge-bob Square-pants," a little sea-sponge creature. Sugar snorted and wondered how such a strange animal with a weird voice could even exist.

Sugar nodded. Here, she squeaked. She went over to a corner of her cage and began to dig until her paws touched a juicy, sweet-smelling piece of fruit. She took it out, took a large bite out of it, and chewed thoughtfully on the fruit. Hmm, she muttered. I think this is a peach. Guinea pigs can eat that. She nibbled the delicious fruit a bit more until she was sure it was a fruit that the guinea pig could eat, because she did not want to be accused of feeding Ginny some strange fruit that he couldn't eat. Cleaning behind her teeth with her little pink tongue, Sugar bounded over to the cage wall of bars and managed to push the fruit through. The peach fell between the bars of the roof of Ginny's cage and landed at the fat animal's feet. Ginny gave a joyful squeal and attacked the peach. He bit a large chunk out of it and, with a dreamy smile plastered across his face, he ate the rest in one huge gulp. *Ah, he sighed. That did the job. Thanks, man.* He grinned at the hamster, who had been watching him, so disgusted that she could hardly talk. *In return, I'm going to tell you how to escape,* said the guinea pig, lowering his voice in case anyone should hear.

The hamster's ears perked up. *How to escape?* Sugar asked skeptically. Even though she was not keen on the idea of escaping at this very moment where the lady could see her, it would still be useful to know if she wanted to escape later. But she didn't want to escape now, and she wasn't very sure if she wanted to another day, either. If she did, she would be wandering around, day after day, slowly dying of hunger and thirst, until she was finally killed by some vicious cat from the neighborhood. That

wouldn't be very good. Sugar would not escape unless she wanted or needed to.

The guinea pig grinned evilly. *Yup, he said. Well, last time my mom's friend used to know this hamster, and it was, like, a tiny little baby one. So my momma's friend told him, 'Hey, since you're so small, you could easily fit through the cage bars.' So the little hamster did it, and he was free. He lives in a bush at Yellowstone National Park, real happy, that guy. So can you fit through the bars of your cage? Sugar tried, but couldn't. Well, said Ginny. No? Then I have another escape plan. Emily's bound to come and open your cage so she can feed you some food. The moment she opens she cage, you jump out. Climb down the side of my cage and off you go! But just make sure you don't get caught,* added the guinea pig. *I tried to escape once. But I was found, and I was glad that I was. I had to hide under the couch, eating the dead flies and spiders that I found.*

*Oh, so you tried to escape once. How silly of you!* replied the hamster. She didn't think she wanted to escape. It just wasn't a very smart thing to do. Sugar smiled proudly. She was so clever and intelligent and such a nice little cute hamster. She would never even *think* about escaping, but if she had told a guinea pig, he would have been bouncing around happily, shouting, *I'm going to escape!* Little would he know that great dangers would happen if he escaped. He might be able to run all day, free and no longer in a cage, but he was bound to be caught by a messy little child or caught by an eagle. And if he escaped into the house, not the wild, he might hide under the bed and before he knew it, he would be sucked up by the vacuum cleaner—if he could fit, that is. Sugar rolled her eyes. *Silly guinea pigs. Always didn't know what was going to happen if they did something. Always just cared about food. Silly, silly guinea pigs.*

*Flies and spiders don't taste very good,* muttered the hamster, a look of disgust spreading across his face. *Especially flies. I ate the body first because it was the worst and saved the legs for last because those were the best of the fly—not that it was delicious or anything. It just didn't have blood in it, and the blood was really gross, tasted like very, very, very, very, very sour grapes. But the bad thing about the legs was that it was sort of like a eating a hair. Ugh, it was gross. When they found me I looked awful—dust had settled on my back, fly and spider blood was smeared all over my mouth—*

*Enough! I don't want to hear any more about you . . . eating flies and spiders, okay? Please,* snarled the hamster. *Why would Ginny eat flies and spiders?*

There must have been to eat under there, like crumbs of bread or bits of cheese or something. There must have been. And the dumb guinea pig had eaten the bugs under there instead. Who had ever heard of a stranger animal? Nobody had, because guinea pigs were the strangest animals there is living in this world.

*And I had to eat dead mosquitoes,* added Ginny, looking more disgusted than ever. *First I ate the eyeballs, then I ate the—*

**ENOUGH!** roared the hamster. She didn't want to hear about how Ginny ate bugs.