

CHAPTER ONE



GRANDMA ADA HAS A SAYING: ‘A problem shared is a problem halved.’ Some might say ‘good advice’, except I am a very, very bad sharer. Then again, if I’d listened to Grandma Ada, maybe I wouldn’t have found myself halfway round the world, alone in an airport with no money and no idea what to do.

Don’t judge me. I get that sharing is the right thing to do, but somehow, when it comes to the crunch, it is just NOT how my brain works. And hey, is that really *my* problem?

For example, if Grandma Ada, on one of her trips to the Pound Shop, buys her three grandchildren a festive chocolate lolly, and holds them out to Stu or Mimi to choose first, but I have set my heart on

the Reindeer in Red Dungarees, then I have to have that one – or WATCH OUT!

And if we sit on a bus and I want the window seat (so I can draw snowflakes), then everyone knows not to argue, because if they did it would mess everything up and the bus might crash or something much worse.... Helicopters circling, burning skyscrapers, eleven-year-old girl losing the plot. You get the picture?

I'm ashamed to say, if I don't get my way, it sometimes results in a MELTDOWN. Imagine a giant marshmallow man growing bigger and bigger till he explodes and covers all the walls in a sticky mess. That's what it feels like to be me. One minute I'm eyeing up a foil-covered reindeer; the next, I wake up in a war zone, where civilians are red-eyed and everyone is shell-shocked and not talking. Maybe the marshmallow glued their lips shut.

As you can see, being a bad sharer has its ups and downs:

- PROS: you usually get your own way. 👍
- CONS: it has a habit of upsetting EVERYONE.



I learnt about pros and cons from Mrs Anezka. She says they are a ‘wonderful way of seeing both points of ze view’. (Note: Mrs Anezka is Polish.) Mrs Anezka’s job is to help everyone in Nurture group (Josh, Ava and me) using her flashcards and ‘breathing fingers’, things like SOCIAL SKILLS and seeing the world from the other person’s point of view. As she puts it, ‘Ze world looks very different when you looking in someone else’s slippers.’ Mrs Anezka is my favourite human in the world.

Under Mrs Anezka’s skilful mentoring, I have been working on several skills related to sharing, which I have (now and then) begun to master.

1. TURN-TAKING – e.g. Scrabble. In Scrabble, I sometimes let Ava and Josh pick their letters first, and I don’t freak any more when they get a triple word score. This can be especially

hard if they use a Q or a Z. For example, the day Ava put 'QUIZ' on the board = 66 points for only FOUR letters! That was the day my teeth made a hole in my lip.

2. ANGER MANAGEMENT – e.g. Uno. In the past, I might have got a little vexed and my tummy super-whooshy when I had UNO, then I had to pick up two lots of eight cards ... and lose. Anger management is especially tricky under those circumstances.
3. TOLERANCE – e.g. Group Lego. If I have in my head that we are building a grotto, and Josh has decided we are building a garage, then what might happen is that I take bits off that Josh has stuck on and try to ram them up his NOSTRILS! But, what must happen is that I use kind words to describe what I want, and listen to what others want, and between us we must be happy, even if what we've built looks like something Rudolph threw up.

Mrs Anezka has made it her life's work to teach us these things and is *radosny* (Polish for 'happy') if at bell Ava isn't crying and Josh's nostrils are Lego-free. This is called super teamwork. Then she will give us chocolate milk, a Freddo frog and a house point. If it's a day when one of us is not quite ourselves, or is having a tricky day, then that means no choco milk, no outing for Freddo and no house points – and worst of all, we lose our break by having to tidy up the Lego that ended up extremely everywhere, when Josh extremely unfairly threw the Lego out of the window, in his extremely bad temper.

Sharing is not always as simple as it sounds. If it was, then (1) it would be easier and (2) Animals would do it. Evidence:

- Many animals hunt and kill their food. Not very sharey.
- If you ask a predator to share, they will show their teeth or claws. Not sharey.
- If you give a hamster some seeds, he will stuff

them all in his fat cheeks then hide them in his bed. DEFINITELY NOT SHAREY.

I know this because I have a hamster. A fluffy, brilliant hamster, who I love more than anyone or anything – even Mrs Anezka!

FYI: I love all animals, and they love me. Cats, rabbits, tree frogs. Sometimes I feel a bit sorry for their owners, like the time Ralf the spaniel decided he would rather go home with me than his owner (who told me she had walked him six miles in the rain and picked up THREE POOPIE BAGS of his poopage). I'm with Ralf, because nobody can choose who they like. I mean, I prefer animals (maybe they can tell?), and if I had the choice, I might swap my actual family for animals. I had a dream last week where this happened.

I swapped my brother Stu for a walrus (I kept him in the bath, but it wasn't cruelty, as I let him go downstairs whenever he wanted). He could have bubble bath and hot water, and even cinnamon candles if he was in the mood. He smelt a lot better

than actual Stu, who looks like a walrus, is growing whiskers, and is about as slobby as a walrus – only he won't go into a bathroom by choice, except to leave brown marks in the toilet.

I swapped my little sister Mimi for a pot-bellied pig. Pot-bellied pigs have pink bellies, and Mimi-pig adored Mimi's pink bedroom for that reason, especially the pink teepee, which wasn't exactly pink after Mimi-pig had finished with it. I wish Mimi had been there to see. Mimi HATES dirt on anything. You should see how traumatised she is, going to the loo after Stu!

Dad got traded in for a giraffe. He is quiet and tall and would make an impressive giraffe. Austin the giraffe had to live in the garden, as his ossicones kept scraping against the ceiling, but he seemed happy enough rocking Dad's entire collection of silk ties in one go!

Mum was a racehorse, who morphed into a giant rat. She is always dashing about and moaning about being 'stuck in the rat race', which might be why. Mrs Anezka would say that was my subconscious in

action: ‘Taking little bits of your day and sortsing them out while you sleeps.’

I was quite pleased with my subconscious’s efforts that night, except for Mum. If my awake brain had been in charge, I would have swapped her for something slow like a sloth. Tam the Sloth has a nice ring to it. S-L-O-T-H. You even have to say it s-l-o-w-l-y. Unless you’re Mum, in which case you’d probably shriek it, while frantically stuffing things in your handbag.

Sloths are those lazy, yawny things that like lounging on sofas and hanging from trees. Mum is the opposite of lazy, and I can’t remember the last time I saw her sit on a sofa, never mind lounge on one. She is always busy, either running around after us or actually running. She also ‘runs’ projects for a big company called Our Way. Beating all the targets they give her keeps her pretty busy.

If those animals were my family, I reckon there would be a lot more fun in our house. More mess, more noise, more fun – and of course, no arguments whatsoever.

But despite my love of animals (and months of relentless begging), my parents cruelly said I was only allowed to choose one measly pet, but after quite a few fun (for me) trips to pet shops we chose Hammy, the Russian dwarf hamster, and I was happy. It didn't take long to choose his name – it just fitted.

Hammy is my best friend in the entire world, and I am his. He feels soft and warm in my hand and has big brown eyes (for a dwarf hamster). He sleeps in the day and runs marathons on his wheel at night, but he doesn't mind at all if I wake him up to play or tell him my problems. If I am fed up or sad, he always knows what to do and what not to say, and he always lets me choose what movies we watch. Plus, I don't like seeds, and he doesn't like chocolate reindeer lollies or window seats on buses, so no sharing is required. The end.

PRISON DIARY: DAY 101

Today I made a run for it. Vam! Down the blanket, past the roller skates, across the plate, paws sliding through ketchup.

‘Hammy?!’

I freeze beneath a pair of shorts. Movement. Her feet on a squeaky floorboard nearby. The doorway within reach... everything I ever dreamed of, just a whisker away...

But my tiny ketchupy pawprints betray me, and before I know it, I am in her vice-like grip once more and headed right back to captivity.

It was just another failed attempt in a long line of movie-inspired escape plans, such as the day I hid in a bin bag, (the chewing gum horror from which I shall never recover) or my search for passing assistance (why was that moth so indifferent to my requests for wire-cutters?). Or even my attempt to pretend to be dead, proving that a hamster’s willpower is no match for the lure of a tasty treat.

The Hand That Feeds calls me by a pet name, though my birth name is Hambleton Browne. She fills my bowl with hamster nuggets (similar to rabbit droppings, though marginally tastier and apparently full of nutritional goodness,

if you are to believe the packet. Please understand, the reading material you come by on the inside is most limited).

She cares for me well, changes my water daily, and exercises me on her bed. She creates moderately stimulating games for me and grooms me often. Life is not so bad. But it's no longer enough to watch other people's amazing adventures on-screen and from afar. I must discover the world for myself and make my mark on it, even if that means leaving my home and its supply of high-quality hamster muesli behind forever.