

Two small boys were having a boast-athon.

"I bet my dad's car is faster than yours!"

"Bet it isn't!"

"Bet it is. My dad's car can go at 100 miles per hour."

"Oh yeah?. Well, my dad always goes to work at 200 miles per hour!"

"He couldn't – he'd get arrested and put in jail!"

"Bet he does. And he's never been to jail, so there!"

"My dad's been arrested ten times."

"My mum's been arrested oftener than that. Happens to her all the time. Every Wednesday night."

"That's nothing, my Uncle Joe is a policeman and he arrests criminals and bike-thieves every day!"

"My bike's bigger than yours!"

"No, it isn't! And anyway, mine goes much faster than yours. Come on! – try and catch up with me!"

And so they raced round the block, old ladies leaped out of their way, dogs and cats flung themselves under parked cars, babies in prams shrieked. When they got back outside the front door of the house, breathless and red in the face, it was a dead heat.

"I won, I set off after you!"

"No you didn't!"

"Yes, I did!"

"Hamsters go faster on bikes," said a squeaky little voice.

The unexpected interruption silenced the two boys for a second. They looked around to see who had such a high-pitched voice. At first they could see no one. It was only when the hamsters manoeuvred their flying saucer around the garden a bit that the boys saw them. The saucer landed at their feet and three fat hamsters popped back the lid and poked their noses out.

"Not much pouches, those ones," sniffed one, as he pulled himself out of the saucer and leaped with a thump to the grass below.

"Hamsters have pouches," stated the second hamster, as he filled up with emergency rations, to an extent that the unwary might take shelter for fear of exploding cheeks.

"Hamsters go fast on bikes," repeated the third, before settling down to clean his ears.

Eventually one of the small boys found his voice again. "Who are you?" he asked.

"This Haricot Bert," said the last hamster, "And this Teddy Parker," he added. "And me Patty Perkins. Good day, small boys." Patty had been at the HamLabs™ School of Etiquette over the summer and had passed with flying colours and a packet of yoghurt drops.

"Hamsters can't ride bikes," said the small boys.

"Hamsters can ride bikes," said Patty Perkins.

"But your legs are too short – you couldn't possibly do it!" they protested.

"Oh, not bikes like yours," said Patty airily. "Hamsters ride hamster-bikes. You silly!"

"Teddy can run at 70 miles an hour," announced Haricot Bert.

One small boy looked suspiciously at Teddy Parker, who was by then engaged in chasing a walnut round and round the saucer, eyes popping out of his head. "He doesn't *look* as if he could run very fast," he said doubtfully. "I think you're fibbing."

"Hamsters not fib!" squeaked Patty, outraged. "Teddy run at 90 miles an hour. When he want." Patty turned to Teddy who had curled up for a snooze. "You want run at 100 miles an hour, Teddy?"

"Not yet," came the short answer, followed immediately by snores.

"Teddy could if he wanted," confirmed Patty.

"Hamsters can fly at speed of sound," muttered Haricot Bert. "If hamsters want," he added.

"Don't be stupid," said the small boys, laughing, "Hamsters can't fly at all!"

"Oh no, clever clogs?" asked Bert, chattering in annoyance. "Small boys just watch me, then." With some effort, Haricot Bert climbed and pulled himself up and puffed and slipped and climbed some more until he had reached the top of the hedge, some three feet above the boys' heads. Then, with a graceful kick of his back paws he sailed forwards and outwards. And rapidly downwards. And landed with a 'plop!' on a lavender bush. "Ouch," he muttered.

"Hamsters can fly," confirmed Patty Perkins.

"Yes, but only downwards," objected the small boys.

"Hamsters can dig all the way to Australia," boasted Teddy Parker, who had woken up at Bert's display.

"Bet you can't!" said the small boys.

"Hamsters can. Watch." And Teddy Parker proceeded with great energy and clouds of dust to scrape a hole in the ground. The hole was at least 2 centimetres deep, and all of 5 centimetres long. After a few minutes of fierce digging, Teddy got slower and slower; and then fell asleep in the little hollow he had made.

"Would be all right if was sawdust" said Patty Perkins, anxious lest the boys think Teddy had failed.

"But the Earth's not made of sawdust!" said the small boys.

"Pity," said Haricot Bert sadly. "Sawdust and broccoli. Earth made of. That be good..." he said wistfully. And chewed an old carrot end.

"Anything else you can do?" asked the small boys, beginning to get bored with this.

Bert and Teddy put their little heads together and muttered. They nudged Patty Perkins a lot, but he was now fast asleep.

"Hamsters can sniff anything," said Haricot Bert at last.

"And hamsters can sing," added Teddy, somewhat incautiously.

"Sing?!" exclaimed the small boys.

"Sing?" muttered Bert, looking aghast at his companion.

"But only at night," said Teddy comfortably. "At night hamsters can sing prettily. Not night now. Daytime," he said wisely.

The small boys were about to suggest something else, so Bert chipped in enthusiastically:

"Hamsters good at pouching."

And without more ado, Haricot Bert began to sniff around and to stuff into his voluminous pouches anything that his whiskers touched: leaves, grass, stones, bits of vegetable which had fallen out of the saucer, some nuts that Teddy had mislaid. "Hamster hungry!" he said. And he stuffed and he pouched and his pouches got larger and larger until he looked like he had grown wings. "Angster still 'ungry," he said. And then he pouched some newspaper, and some berries, and a pile of sweets the boys were keeping until later, until he looked as if his eyes were about to be launched into orbit. And then he found a juicy twig of apple-wood and he stuck it between his teeth and could pouch no more and waddled about triumphantly. "Ang-ang ung-ung," he said.

The small boys watched spellbound and barely resisted the temptation to applaud wildly, for that would have meant that the hamsters had won the boasting competition. Patty Perkins pressed home the hamster advantage.

"Hamsters clean faces better than small skinny boys," he stated. The other two hamsters nodded wildly.

"Hamsters can wash!" said Teddy

"Hamsters wash faces," confirmed Bert.

And without more ado, the three hamsters launched into a face-washing routine which was simply unbeatable. The small boys had nothing that could remotely match up to it. And when the faces and whiskers and umbrella ears were cleaned, then the furry chests and the backs and the pink paws and the stubby tails were next. It was a walkover. Once cleaned, the hamsters swaggered back to their saucer; flicked their whiskers in salute; sped off into the blue skies.

Leaving the two small boys to scuff their toes in the dust.

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