

How to Look After a Guinea Pig

Being the true account of what happened when Ava Silvano wrote a list of instructions for her grandfather, who followed every single one of them exactly

There is a guinea pig at my school called Sergeant Bumbles.

He is orange and white. He is shaped like a loaf of bread that has given up. When he is happy he makes a noise like a squeaky door, and when he is very happy he does a small jump in the air that our teacher, Miss Okafor, calls “popcorning,” which is the best word anyone has ever invented for anything.

Every holidays, one lucky person takes Sergeant Bumbles home.

These holidays, it was me.

I had waited two years for this. I had my room ready. I had a plan. And then Mum told me that on the Friday we had to drive four hours to my cousin Dominic’s wedding and stay two nights.

I said I would not go.

Mum said I would.

I said Sergeant Bumbles needed me.

Mum said Grandad Ray was coming to mind the house anyway, and he could mind the guinea pig too.

Now, I love my grandad. I want that written down before I say the next part.

But Grandad Ray was in the army for thirty-one years, and there are two things you need to know about him. The first is that he does not do anything by halves. The second is that if you give him an instruction, he will carry out that instruction, even if the building is on fire, even if the instruction is stupid, even if a normal person would stop and think about it for one second.

So on Friday morning, I sat at the kitchen table and I wrote him a list.

I was very proud of that list. It took me eleven minutes.

Here it is, exactly as I wrote it.

HOW TO LOOK AFTER SERGEANT BUMBLES

by Ava

1. Give Bumbles his food.
2. Fill up his water bottle.
3. Let him out for exercise.
4. Put fresh newspaper in the bottom of the cage.
5. Take the old newspaper out.
6. Clean the cage.

7. Give him a treat at 4 o'clock. He loves carrot.
8. Talk to him so he does not get lonely.

DO NOT LET HIM ESCAPE.

I stuck it on the fridge with a magnet. Grandad read it twice, all the way through, the way he reads everything. Then he said, "Understood," and he saluted the fridge.

I thought that was a joke.

I got in the car.

1. Give Bumbles his food.

The first phone call came on Friday night.

"All good here," said Grandad. "Fed the animal."

"How much did you give him?" I said.

"The list did not specify an amount," said Grandad. "So I gave him the bag."

"The bag," I said.

"The bag," said Grandad.

It was a two kilogram bag. Sergeant Bumbles weighs one kilogram. Grandad had emptied the entire thing into the cage, so that my guinea pig was now standing chest-deep in his own food, like a tiny farmer in a very small wheat field.

"He seems pleased," said Grandad.

2. Fill up his water bottle.

This one he did perfectly, and I want to be fair and say so.

In fact Grandad refilled that water bottle four times a day, checked the little metal ball at the end to make sure it was rolling properly, and wrote the times down on a piece of paper next to the cage. He has kept that piece of paper. It is titled "WATER LOG."

It turns out that if you spend thirty-one years in the army, nobody has to tell you about water.

3. Let him out for exercise.

I did not write "close the loungeroom door first."

I know that now.

Sergeant Bumbles was out of that cage for eleven hours. Eleven. Grandad searched the entire house with a torch, on his hands and knees, at the age of seventy-four, calling "SERGEANT" in a very serious voice, which he says is the only voice he has.

He found him at 1 a.m., inside the couch. Not under the couch. *Inside* it, in the lining, in a nest Bumbles had made for himself out of the corner of the good cushion and three pages of Grandad's crossword book.

"He had gone to ground," Grandad told me. "Textbook."

I asked if he was cross.

"Not at all," said Grandad. "Excellent instincts."

4. Put fresh newspaper in the bottom of the cage.

5. Take the old newspaper out.

Read those two again. In that order.

Clean paper goes IN first. Dirty paper comes OUT second.

You cannot do it in that order. Once the clean paper is in, the dirty paper is stuck underneath it, with a guinea pig standing on top of the whole lot.

Grandad tried anyway, because it was on the list.

He laid three fresh sheets in the bottom of the cage. Then he reached under them for the old ones. They tore. He got out one corner.

Three sheets in. One corner out.

He did it again on Friday night. Three sheets in, one corner out. Again on Saturday morning. Three sheets in, one corner out. Again on Saturday night.

By Sunday, the floor of that cage had risen fifteen centimetres.

Sergeant Bumbles was now living on a raised platform of newspaper, closer to the roof of his cage than he had ever been in his life, looking out over the lounge room like a small orange emperor surveying his lands.

Grandad had noticed the problem, obviously. He is not silly.

"The floor's coming up," he told me on the phone. "But that is the order it is written in."

6. Clean the cage.

I did not say where to clean it.

I did not say what to do with the guinea pig while you clean it.

So Grandad took the entire cage into the bathroom, put it in the shower, took the hot tap all the way around, and cleaned that cage until it shone.

The cage was immaculate. It has never been so clean. Miss Okafor said afterwards that she did not know it was that colour.

The bathroom, however, had two centimetres of guinea pig food floating in it, because he had not taken the food out first, because I had not written that down either.

And Sergeant Bumbles spent the whole operation sitting in the fruit bowl on the kitchen bench, between the bananas, because Grandad “needed him somewhere secure” and the list did not say where.

7. Give him a treat at 4 o’clock. He loves carrot.

At 1600 hours exactly — Grandad’s word, not mine — Sergeant Bumbles received one carrot.

One whole carrot. Not chopped. Not peeled. Not cut into little sticks the way I do it. The full carrot, straight from the fridge, leaves still on, roughly the same length as the guinea pig himself.

Bumbles did not eat it.

Bumbles *guarded* it.

He pushed it into the corner of his newspaper tower with his nose, sat down beside it, and stared out at the room, daring anybody to come near, a small round king with an enormous orange sword.

He did that both days. He now had two.

8. Talk to him so he does not get lonely.

I meant say hello to him. Maybe tell him he is a good boy.

Grandad read him the newspaper.

The whole newspaper. Front page to back, out loud, twice a day, in the serious voice. Sport. Weather. The weather in states we do not live in. The shipping news, which is a list of boats. The classified advertisements, which is a list of things strangers want to sell, including, on Saturday, a second-hand ride-on mower in Wanneroo.

I have to tell you something now, and I did not believe it either until I saw it.

Sergeant Bumbles loved it.

That guinea pig would come to the front of the cage and go completely still whenever Grandad opened a newspaper. He still does it. Miss Okafor has a newspaper in the reading corner at school and every time somebody turns a page, an orange head appears at the bars.

PART TWO

We got home on Sunday afternoon.

I got out of the car and ran up the driveway and opened the front door, and I stopped, because a lot of things were happening in our loungeroom at once.

There was a guinea pig, at chest height, standing on a mountain of newspaper, behind a wall made of two carrots.

There was a bag of guinea pig food, empty, folded neatly, on the coffee table.

There was a piece of paper on the wall that said WATER LOG.

There was a hole in the good couch.

And there was my grandfather, in his chair, reading out the results of the horse racing to an animal that was, and I want to be accurate here, *completely delighted*.

“Grandad,” I said. “What have you done?”

“I followed the instructions,” said Grandad.

And here is the thing.

He had. Every single one. He had not skipped a step, he had not been lazy, he had not gone off and forgotten about it. He had followed my list better than I have ever followed a list in my life, and my list was rubbish.

I did not say that out loud. I did not need to. We both stood there looking at the newspaper tower.

“You did not say how much food,” Grandad said, kindly.

“No,” I said.

“You did not say to shut the door.”

“No.”

“And you had four and five the wrong way round.”

“... Yes.”

Grandad nodded slowly. Then he said the thing I have thought about approximately one hundred times since.

“When you write instructions,” he said, “you have to write them for somebody who knows absolutely nothing. Because one day that will be exactly who reads them.”

Then he went and got the vacuum cleaner, and we cleaned it all up together, and he did not tell Mum about the couch, and I did not tell Mum about the bathroom, and that is a fair trade in my opinion.

There was only one real problem left.

On Monday morning, Sergeant Bumbles did not fit in the carry box.

I do not want to talk about it. He got in eventually. It took two of us and some encouragement.

When we got to school, Miss Okafor lifted him out and held him up and looked at him for a long moment.

“Ava,” she said. “He’s enormous.”

“He had a lovely time,” I said.

And Sergeant Bumbles, who had spent two days as an emperor on a paper mountain with a personal newsreader and unlimited carrots, did a small jump in the air.

Popcorning.

THE SAME INSTRUCTIONS, WRITTEN PROPERLY

by Ava Silvano, age 9, who has learned some things about lists

Goal: To look after Sergeant Bumbles for two days so that he is happy, healthy and the same size as when he arrived.

You will need:

- Sergeant Bumbles (1 guinea pig)
- his cage
- his food (2 tablespoons of pellets, twice a day, NOT the bag)
- fresh water
- 3 sheets of newspaper per day
- 1 carrot, cut into sticks about the size of your finger
- a cardboard box with high sides

Steps:

1. **Before you start**, shut every door in the room. Check the door is shut. This is the most important step and it is first for a reason.
2. Fill the water bottle with fresh water. Push the metal ball at the end with your finger to check the water comes out.
3. Put two tablespoons of pellets in his bowl. Two tablespoons. Not a cup, not a scoop, and definitely not the whole bag.
4. Add one handful of hay to the corner of the cage.
5. **Lift Bumbles out of the cage** and put him in the cardboard box while you clean. Do not put him in the fruit bowl.
6. **Take the old newspaper out** of the bottom of the cage and put it in the bin.
7. **Now** put three sheets of fresh newspaper in the bottom of the cage. (Steps 6 and 7 must be done in this order or the floor of the cage will slowly rise.)
8. Wipe the bottom of the cage with a damp cloth. Do this at the sink. Do not take the cage into the shower.
9. Put Bumbles back in the cage and shut the cage door.
10. At 4 o'clock, give him three carrot sticks. Cut them first. A whole carrot is bigger than his head and he will start a war over it.

11. Sit next to the cage for five minutes and talk to him quietly so he is not lonely. Five minutes is enough. You do not have to read him the shipping news.
12. Wash your hands.

Warnings:

- If you cannot see the guinea pig, stop everything and look inside the couch first. Not under it. Inside it.
- If the floor of the cage is getting higher every day, you are doing steps 6 and 7 in the wrong order.
- Guinea pigs cannot tell you that you have made a mistake. That is your job, before you start.

Sergeant Bumbles is back at school now, on a diet, listening to the sports pages.

Grandad Ray asks about him every Sunday.

And my list is on the wall of our classroom, laminated, with a photograph of a newspaper tower next to it, which Miss Okafor says is the best thing she has ever put up in that room.

THE END