

# Gerald's Great Escape



Penny Garnsworthy

George crept slowly toward the light. Around the fluorescent tube, hundreds of small moths gathered, flapping their tiny wings.

As one moth veered away slightly from the others, George suddenly leapt forward and swiftly extended his long, sticky tongue. In an instant he had swallowed the moth, whole.

Not bad, he thought to himself. Maybe our new home won't be so bad after all.

Creeping back along the ceiling, George made his way to the far corner of the verandah where Gerald was just arriving home from school.

'How was your first night at school?' Gerald's mum asked.

'Not so good,' Gerald replied before plonking himself down on all fours.

'Why, what happened?'

'The other geckos don't like me.'

'But it was your first night, Gerald,' his dad said, 'it takes a while to settle in to a new school.'

'Maybe,' he said.

'I've just been scouting around on the verandah ceiling. A couple of those bright lights are alive with moths. And I saw a couple of beetles, and even a grasshopper.'

'That's a relief, George. I was worried about moving all the way up here from the city. And that bus ride wasn't as comfortable as I had hoped.'

‘There are lots of other gecko families living here too. One on the front verandah, one on the side verandah and one in the garage. All pretty friendly really. We were lucky that this back verandah area was vacant.’

George’s big round eyes shone bright. He smiled at his wife and said, ‘I think we’ll find this was a good move,’ and then turned to Gerald. ‘How about you and I head out to the far edge of the verandah and see what we can find for dinner?’

‘Sure dad,’ said Gerald as he picked himself up and followed his dad across the ceiling.

‘Do you think the other geckos will ever like me?’ Gerald asked as they crouched and waited in front of one of the big fluorescent lights. ‘I’m different from them.’

‘Different? How?’ George looked at his son, whose bright green scales glistened in the glow of the light.

‘I’m ... well, I’m green with gold spots!’ Gerald exclaimed.

George frowned at Gerald. ‘Oh, Gerald, there’s nothing wrong with that.’

‘But the others at school aren’t green like me. They’re all one colour; brown or grey.’

George sighed. ‘Gerald, just give them time.’

Suddenly George leapt forward and took a moth with his tongue. ‘Plenty of food up here, son,’ he said as he swallowed the moth, ‘why don’t you have a go?’

Gerald had been keeping a close eye on a moth, just like his dad had taught him, and finally he leapt out. But the moth was too quick and flew away. Gerald hung his head, ‘see, I can’t even catch a moth.’

‘Just keep watching me, son, that’s how I learned to hunt. By watching my dad.’

Gerald didn’t feel like going to school the next night so he had taken his time, crawling slowly across the verandah ceiling, down the outside wall and across the tiny strip of lawn between the two flower beds, to the house next door.

As Gerald took his place at the back, their teacher, Miss Gloria said, ‘tonight class, we’re going to learn about being safe. As you know, most geckos live in warm climates, like us here, in North Queensland.’

‘But I bet you don’t know that many geckos live in the wild, not in houses like us. Imagine running into an enormous snake; or a giant bird that could just pick you up and carry you away!’

Everyone in the class gasped, including Gerald. He remembered his dad telling him about his great-grandfather who had migrated all the way from Africa on a ship. With all those wild animals in Africa, it was a wonder great-grandfather had survived.

‘Can anyone tell me what dangers we face here?’

A girl gecko raised her hand.

‘Yes, Gisella,’ said Miss Gloria.

‘My mum says cats are dangerous.’

‘Yes, you’re right. And they can move very quickly too.’

Miss Gloria finished off by saying geckos should always know their way around, in case they needed to leave in a hurry. She suggested the class take a good look around the garage during break.

Gerald crawled off, on his own. Nobody seemed to want to talk to him. Slowly he made his way across the ceiling to the far corner. There he found a hole, just big enough to crawl through. Carefully he made his way down the timber wall to the ground.

He sat back and looked around. Huge towers poured light down onto the street in front. And there were dozens of different types of trees. And sweet flowery smells.

Looking both ways first, Gerald crawled down the driveway and out into the street. The only sounds he could hear were crickets chirping.

But suddenly he heard a growl and looked up. A cat was approaching.

In a second Gerald had turned and was racing back up the driveway to the garage.

He stopped and glanced back. The cat was catching up, it was only a metre away.

‘Oh no!’ cried Gerald as he took off again. He turned his head and saw that the cat was now only centimeters away, ready to pounce.

Panic stricken, Gerald almost flew onto the timber wall, the cat right behind him.

Up the wall Gerald dashed, faster than he had even run before. Gasping for breath, he looked back again.

The cat had tried to jump the wall but couldn't grip the timber and had fallen back down onto the driveway. It was sitting there, looking up at Gerald, and growling.

Gerald was panting as he almost fell through the hole and bounced up onto the ceiling. 'That was close,' he muttered between gasps, and a little female voice said, 'it was a cat, wasn't it?'

He looked around and saw Gisella.

'Um, yeah,' he gasped, 'it was.'

'You were lucky then,' she replied, 'my name's Gisella, you're Gerald, aren't you?'

'Yep.'

'You're different,' she said.

Gerald hung his head. Could things get any worse?

'But I really love your bright green scales. I only wish I had them, I'm such a boring colour.'

Gerald slowly raised his head. 'Really?'

'Sure. Do you want to see if we can catch a moth? My dad's been teaching me, but I'm not very good.'

Gerald smiled and led Gisella over to one of the fluorescent lights in the centre of the ceiling.

'How come you're speaking to me? Nobody else will,' he said.

'They're just afraid,' Gisella said.

'Of what?'

‘Because you’re different. But don’t worry, they’ll get over it,’ she said brightly.

Feeling better, Gerald started to follow a beetle that was hanging around the light.

‘What should I do?’ whispered Gisella.

‘Just watch and I’ll show you,’ Gerald said with great confidence. And then he thought, I hope I can do this, and not make a fool of myself.

Gisella stayed back as Gerald slowly crept along the ceiling, the beetle in his sights. It hadn’t moved for a whole minute and Gerald was getting closer.

Suddenly he sprung at the beetle and caught one of its legs with his tongue. As he held on tight, Gisella raced up beside him and grabbed another leg with her tongue.

And as they struggled to hold on, the beetle finally gave up and they were able to drag it back to their class.

‘You’ve both done very well,’ Miss Gloria said, ‘when class is over we’ll all have a feast.’

Gerald grinned for the first time. Finally he’d done something right. Maybe now the other geckos would like him.

But when Miss Gloria told the class about the beetle, the others just glanced at Gerald quickly and then looked away. He looked at Gisella who just shrugged her shoulders. Gerald’s grin quickly disappeared.

Miss Gloria said, ‘well I hope you all had a good look around – what did you see?’

There was silence. Finally Gisella raised her hand.  
'Yes, Gisella.'

'There's a hole over there, on the other corner of the ceiling.'

'You didn't find out where it went, did you?' asked Miss Gloria.

'Oh no Miss Gloria, I didn't, but ...' she stopped.

Gerald held his breath. If Gisella told Miss Gloria he'd gone through the hole, he'd be in real trouble.

'But what, Gisella?'

'But ... well, it looked ... interesting.'

Gerald realised he'd been holding his breath.

Finally he let it go and relaxed.

Miss Gloria smiled. 'That's very observant Gisella. What else did everyone see?'

Gerald was dying to tell the class how he captured the beetle, but he didn't dare speak.

'Someone must have seen something!'

Most of the class hung their heads.

'Gerald, why don't you tell us how you caught the beetle?'

Gerald could feel his face heating up. Finally he plucked up the courage to speak and told how he had stalked the beetle for a full minute before tackling it. And then Gisella had helped him to hold the beetle and drag it back to class.

'Excellent Gerald, and Gisella. Okay, its time to go home now, but don't forget there's fresh beetle in the corner, please help yourselves.'

‘And I’d like you all to think about who you’d like for class captain this year. Now, I’ll see you all again tomorrow night.’

Slowly the class began to break up and a few geckos headed over to the corner for some fresh beetle. Gerald waited behind until there were only a couple of geckos left and then he helped himself to some beetle before crawling through the hole and climbing down the wall towards home.

When his father saw the frown on Gerald’s face he said, ‘I guess school wasn’t any better tonight.’

‘Well, it was going okay. I mean, I caught a beetle at break and ...’

‘You did!’ exclaimed his dad, ‘that’s wonderful, son.’

Gisella helped me.

‘Who’s Gisella?’ asked his mum, smiling.

‘She’s just a girl in my class. While I was struggling to hold the beetle she came along and held onto another leg and together we dragged it across to class.’

‘Well, that’s lovely dear. It seems you’ve made a friend.’

‘Yeah, Gisella doesn’t care that I’m different, she likes me the way I am.’

Gerald’s mum frowned.

‘See, I told you they just needed time to get to know you,’ his dad said, ‘things will be better now.’

‘Well, time for school,’ Gerald’s mum said as she gently woke him.

‘Is it night already?’ he asked sleepily.

‘Yes, it is, and you’ve been asleep for hours. I guess all the excitement of catching that beetle last night was a bit much on a school day!’

‘Okay, I’m up,’ Gerald said, as he crawled across the ceiling and over to the garage next door.

‘Welcome class,’ said Miss Gloria as everyone settled in their places, ‘now tonight we’re going to learn some more about how other geckos live. Can anyone tell me what ...’ suddenly she stopped.

‘What’s that smell?’ she asked.

Everyone started to look around and sniff. The smell was getting stronger and a fine mist was slowly coming out of the door that led into the house. Then suddenly the air was filled with smoke.

‘It’s a fire!’ exclaimed Miss Gloria, ‘quickly! Everyone out of the garage!’

Everyone headed for the main door, with Gerald and Gisella close behind. Then someone yelled, ‘it’s blocked, there’s no way out!’

Some of the girls, including Gisella, and even some boys started to cry. Then Gerald remembered the other hole, across the ceiling.

Bravely he stood up on his four legs and yelled, above the noise, ‘I know a way out, follow me everyone!’

Gisella quickly dried her eyes and followed Gerald, a few others scurrying after them. As Gerald reached the hole, he stood back and let Gisella go first.

‘Can you wait outside and take them around the side of the timber wall. Just don’t go down - remember the cat!’

‘Okay,’ Gisella replied as she raced through the hole and then called for the others to follow.

Finally about ten geckos were through the hole and Gisella was leading them around the side of the house to safety.

Miss Gloria was gathering the rest of the class but they seemed too scared to move. ‘C’mon!’ she pleaded, ‘let’s go – over to where Gerald is standing.’

The smoke was getting thicker, but through it they could just make out Gerald’s bright gold spots. Coughing and spluttering they crawled towards him. By the time Miss Gloria arrived, the rest of the class was through the hole to the safety of outside.

‘Thank you Gerald,’ she gasped as she pushed him through the hole and followed behind. Reaching the outside Miss Gloria took deep breaths of fresh air until she was able to speak again.

‘It was you who found this hole last night wasn’t it?’

Gerald coughed lightly and said, ‘yes, it was me. And I’m sorry, but I did go outside.’

‘This time, Gerald, it was just as well, or you may not have been able to show us how to escape tonight. A

little curiosity is a good thing, but even so, you must always be wary of hidden dangers.’

Tell me about it, Gerald thought as he remembered his close call with the cat, and shivered at the thought.

As the class finally assembled on the strip of lawn between the two garden beds, some still coughing from the smoke, Miss Gloria asked for their attention.

‘Well, that was a very dangerous situation, class. And thanks to Gerald, we are all safe.’ Then she stopped and looked around at them all.

‘I know that some of you haven’t made Gerald welcome since he joined our class. Some of you believe that Gerald is ‘different’.

Several geckos nodded.

‘Well, you may think Gerald is different just because he has bright green scales. Other geckos are different because they live in trees. And still others are different because they are active during the day, not at night like us.

‘But we’re all still just one big family of geckos. And it doesn’t matter what colour we are, or if we live in houses or in trees, the real gecko is what’s in here,’ she said, placing her hand on her heart.

Gerald could feel his face burning up.

‘And Gerald has certainly shown what he’s made of, by helping us all to escape from danger. I think we all owe him a huge thank you for guiding us out of the garage to safety.’

There was silence for a few seconds and then Gisella started to clap, and before long everyone was clapping and cheering. Gerald looked up and saw that the other geckos were smiling at him. And everything was all right.

In fact, everything was just wonderful.

Tonight when Gerald raced home, he was grinning and laughing.

‘What’s happened?’ his mum asked.

‘The garage had a fire,’ Gerald said in a rush, ‘and we had to get out. But the main door was blocked ...’

‘Slow down son, slow down, what happened then?’ his dad asked, a serious look on his face.

‘Well, I found this other hole in the ceiling last night at school and I led everyone over there, and well, we all got out okay.’

Gerald’s mum gave him a big hug. ‘That’s wonderful Gerald, I’m so proud of you.’

‘Can we go hunting dad?’ Gerald asked.

‘You bet son,’ his dad said as they crawled towards the lights.

The next night Gerald was awake well before school and ready to leave early.

‘So school’s not so bad after all?’ his dad asked.

‘Well, at least I feel like I’m not so different now.’

And as he arrived at the main door to the garage it appeared that the blockage had been cleared and only a faint smell of smoke remained. Miss Gloria was waiting inside.

'You were wonderful last night Gerald. I hope your fellow classmates appreciate what you did for them.'

'Oh, that's okay,' Gerald replied, his face turning red once again.

Gisella raced straight over to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. 'My parents want to know if you and your parents would like to come for dinner tonight,' she said excitedly, 'we live on the back verandah of the house on the other side of yours. Please say you will.'

'Sure, I'll check with mum and dad when I get home.'

Suddenly there was a noise at the entrance as Gordon and Gavin came in. They were both carrying large objects.

'What do you have there, boys?' Miss Gloria asked.

They looked sheepish as they each held up a leaf. And on the leaves, hundreds of tiny insects had been stuck together to form words.

Gerald nearly fell over backwards in shock, but then he grinned at them both, and they grinned back.

The message on Gordon's leaf read, 'Class Captain' and on Gavin's leaf, 'Vote 1 for Gerald.'

'Well,' said Miss Gloria, 'it looks like we have our class captain for the year. Congratulations Gerald!'