

# Percy's Big Dive



Penny Garnsworthy

‘Emily, let’s keep going,’ Frank signalled, ‘he’s gaining on us!’

But I’m so tired, Emily thought, I don’t think I can swim any faster.

‘C’mon Em, We can’t give up now, the beach is almost in sight. Think of home. Think of Percy.’

Emily thought about their son, waiting for his parents to come home. She was so proud of Percy.

With one last burst of energy, Emily propelled her flippers and glided through the water until she was only centimetres behind Frank.

‘There it is,’ Frank pointed excitedly, ‘there’s the beach. Em, just a few more metres.’

Emily barely made it up onto the sand before she collapsed, her fins aching from the swim, her body exhausted from the night’s fishing.

‘Its over now,’ Frank soothed gently as he went to her side. ‘Let’s go home.’

Frank helped her up and as they slowly made their way up the beach towards the safety of the dunes Emily looked over and saw Bernie, their neighbour, with his two sons, heading for their own burrow. They carried an enormous catch of fish. Emily looked at their own catch, small, but enough for dinner.

It was pitch black outside, with only the moon to guide them. Under the fence they went, through the shrubs into the dunes and then deep down into their burrow, where Percy waited anxiously for them, and his dinner.

‘You look pooped, mum,’ said Percy.

‘It was that seal again,’ said his father, dropping the fish on the floor, ‘it seems to know when we’re around and follows us. Fortunately we were with the neighbours, and that confused him a bit. C’mon Emily, you sit down. I’ll get dinner.’

‘Why does that seal always chase you?’ Percy asked as he swallowed a delicious morsel of fish.

‘He’s looking for food, son. Seals, and sharks too, think we would make a good meal.’

‘Really?’, said Percy.

Frank looked concerned. ‘Yes, son, but there’s no need to worry, you’re safe here, deep down in the burrow.’

‘But why? Why would that seal want to eat us?’

‘Well, just like we eat fish that are smaller than ourselves, so seals eat penguins. That’s just the way it is, son.’

‘Oh.’

Percy finished his fish while his dad encouraged mum to eat. Emily hardly spoke during dinner and was soon curled up asleep.

Frank looked down at her, shook his head and turned to Percy. ‘Your mother shouldn’t be fishing you know, she’s really not up to it. But you’re growing up, Percy, and soon, very soon, you’ll be able to fish, in the family tradition.’

‘When dad? When will I be able to go to sea?’ Percy asked enthusiastically.

‘Your graduation is only a few days away now son and your teacher tells us you’re a good swimmer, and diver. You should do very well in your water skills assessment this week.’

‘Yeah, I hope so,’ said Percy.

‘We’re very proud of you Percy.’

Percy’s white neck turned a deep shade of pink.

‘Thanks Dad.’

‘Of course, the annual Dive Fest this Saturday is where you’ll really be able show those other penguins what you’re made of!’

‘Yep. Especially that show-off, Gavin. He’s always giving me a hard time.’

His father smiled. ‘Well, its time for bed now. You have school in the morning.’

But as Percy lay in bed that night, he was still thinking about the seal that chased his parents, night after night. He’d noticed lately that they weren’t bringing home as many fish each night, and that there weren’t many leftovers. Dad was right. Percy needed to continue the family tradition - he had to pass his assessments.

But he wanted to make his parents extra proud - and more than anything he wanted to win the Dive Fest.

At school the next day their teacher talked to them about the dangers of being a penguin.

‘Can anyone tell me what our predators are?’ she asked.

There was silence throughout the class.

‘Well ... perhaps I should explain what a predator is. A predator is a creature that preys on other creatures - it hunts them down, to eat them.’

There were lots of gasps, particularly from the female penguins.

‘Now, can anyone give me an example of a predator?’

Percy’s fin shot up.

‘Yes, Percy.’

‘Seals,’ he said.

‘Very good. And also sharks are a predator in the water. But what about our predators on land?’ the teacher asked.

Another fin shot up at the back of the class. It was Gavin. Percy rolled his eyes. As if it wasn’t bad enough that Gavin was Percy’s main competitor in the Dive Fest, now he was trying to outdo him in class.

‘Yes, Gavin.’

‘Birds ... and foxes.’

‘Very good.’ The teacher smiled and then became serious again. ‘Class, you must always be on your guard – whether on land or at sea.’

‘All creatures have predators, but to know what they are, and to always be on the lookout and be prepared, well, that is half the battle.’

‘Tomorrow we’ll talk about some other dangers, specifically humans, and the damage they can do. Now let’s get into the pool and practice.’

Gavin waddled up to Percy after class.

‘Still think you can win the Dive Fest?’ Gavin said.  
‘I’m sure gonna try,’ said Percy.

‘Yeah, well, you can’t dive as deep as I can, so I don’t like your chances.’

‘We’ll see,’ said Percy.

Gavin smirked and waddled off.

‘That Gavin’s a real pain,’ Percy said as he burst in the door after diving practice that afternoon.

‘You can beat him Percy,’ said his mother, as she slowly preened her feathers, ‘just have faith in yourself.’

Percy turned to face her, surprised to see her at home in the afternoon. ‘Where’s dad?’ he asked.

‘He went out today without me. Last night was too much for me, Percy. Your father insisted I stay home today.’

‘He’s gone out alone?’ Percy cried.

‘No, not alone. He’s with Bernie and his boys again, he’ll be just fine.’

Percy felt relieved. He didn’t like the thought of his dad being out there all alone, not with that seal around. But Bernie was an excellent swimmer, and a good friend of his dad’s.

‘How was diving practice this afternoon?’

‘Good. I almost beat Gavin – I was real close.’

‘Well, just remember, its not winning that counts, its doing your best.’

Well maybe, thought Percy, someone should tell that to Gavin. ‘I just want to pass so I can go out fishing with dad.’

His mother chuckled. 'That's my boy. But Percy, don't wish it upon yourself too soon – it's a big ocean out there, with all sorts of dangers.'

'I know mum, I know. We learned all about it at school today.'

The next day at school their teacher talked to them about the danger of sharing the land, and the water with humans. 'Most humans are quite harmless,' the teacher said, 'some even help us by building fences around our burrows to keep wild animals out.'

'And many are fascinated by us - they like to watch us come up the beach, after a day's fishing. They don't try to get close, but they do take photographs, and sometimes we are temporarily blinded by the flashing. However, those kinds of humans are not the ones to be feared.'

'There's another kind of human that puts our lives in danger. Last year, way out to sea, an enormous ship ran aground and thousands of litres of oil leaked out into the water. The oil spread across the ocean for many kilometres.'

'This affected many ocean going creatures, including penguins. Because we dive down into the water to fish, and then come back out of the water onto the beach, we found ourselves covered in sticky black oil. When we tried to preen our feathers, we swallowed the oil, it got inside our bodies and poisoned us. Many of our colony died.'

There were moans all over the class.

‘But then, the good humans came to our rescue. We didn’t like them at first, because they captured us - we were scared and we fought them, kicking and screaming. But they were gentle with us, and they washed the oil from our feathers, put us into woollen suits and set us free.’

‘Woollen suits? Why?’ asked Percy.

‘It took us a long time to get used to wearing the suits, Percy, but in time we realised that because we were unable to preen ourselves, we also weren’t licking up poisonous oil. Eventually, our coats returned to normal we were well again. Then the humans captured us, removed the suits and set us free once more.’

‘So, you see, not all humans are bad - but you must be wary at all times. It isn’t just the seals and sharks in the sea, and the foxes and birds on land, it’s the humans as well, and the damage they do to our environment.’

‘Now, as you all know your water skills assessments are tomorrow. I’m sure you’ll all do your very best. And on Saturday some of you will take part in the annual Dive Fest. It’s a very exciting time and I know you’ve been practising hard.’

‘I just wanted to wish you all a happy graduation - and good luck with your first fishing trips, with fathers and brothers.’

‘And, I thought I’d tell you about a very brave little penguin who recently made world headlines. Humans

have a strange way of identifying us, and this particular penguin was given the number 662036. The humans had been watching a number of penguins for some time and were using special equipment to record the depth of their dives.'

'Why?' asked Gavin.

'I have no idea why Gavin - you never can tell why humans do the things they do, but in any case, you know what? Penguin number 662036 dived to a depth of 57 metres and broke the previous record by three metres. Isn't that amazing?'

Although there was general excitement throughout the class, Percy suddenly felt very anxious. He wanted to win the Dive Fest so badly, but his best dive to date was only 32 metres. And Gavin was beating him by three metres.

When the teacher released them from class, Percy waddled straight down to the pool. He was determined to practice his diving all afternoon, if need be, until he improved his depth. He knew he would pass the diving assessment, he could already dive past the minimum depth. But the Dive Fest was something else!

That afternoon when he arrived home, exhausted from diving practice, his mother was preparing an early dinner. This was odd - usually they waited until dad came home with the catch.

'Bernie and the boys next door had way too much fish last night, so your dad was able to bring home enough for two nights. He went out today, but just to

give Bernie a hand. We thought we'd have a quiet family meal, and an early night, in readiness for your assessments tomorrow.'

'Mum, did you know that a penguin recently dived 57 metres?'

'No!' she replied, dropping the fish she had been holding.

'Yeah, our teacher told us this afternoon. It's a world record.'

'But how do they know that?'

'Some humans recorded it. We don't know why ... but its incredible isn't it?'

Percy's dad walked in at the end of the conversation.

'Imagine how many fish you'd be able to catch if you could dive that deep?' his father said.

'Yeah,' said Percy, dreaming of his first big catch.

The next morning Percy was awake early, excited about his water skills assessment today. He knew he would pass the swimming assessment, after all the pool was only 50 metres long. And he only had to dive 28 metres, and he could do that easily.

It would be great to beat the school record of thirty-six metres, and Gavin, but that wasn't the most important thing as far as Percy was concerned. Graduation was what counted now, so he could go out fishing with dad.

When Percy arrived at the pool, Gavin was already there, limbering up his fins.

‘So, Percy, you all practiced up for the Dive Fest on Saturday?’ Gavin asked.

Percy tried to be as cool as he could be. ‘Just taking it easy Gavin,’ he replied. Gavin laughed and waddled off. It seemed to take forever for the first student to be called up to the starting blocks.

Percy’s teacher was standing at the other end of the pool, with a loudspeaker wrapped around her neck. ‘Now students,’ she said, ‘these assessments are simply to record your speed and depth, individually. You are required to swim the 50 metres and I will clock you, one penguin at a time. Sally, will you lead us off please?’

Percy sat on the sidelines until he was called, the fifth in his class. By that time there had already been two false starts and the teacher was not happy. Percy jumped up to the starting block and waited for the whistle.

At the sound, he dived into the pool and started to swim, gliding effortlessly through the water. Seconds later he reached the end, swam up the steps and waddled out.

‘Good swim Percy. Now Gavin, it’s your turn.’

Obviously the teacher wasn't going to give them their times until everyone was finished, so Percy sat back down at the side of the pool to wait. He couldn't tell if Gavin swam faster or not so he just crossed his fins and waited.

Finally the whole class had completed their laps and Percy was waiting to be called to the diving board.

He chatted briefly to a couple of his mates who seemed very nervous about their dives, and he started to worry about his own.

But then he remembered that mum had said to have faith in himself, and he took some deep breaths to calm himself. Finally his name was called.

‘Now class, can I have quiet please - we need to be respectful of each other when we are diving. Percy, will you take your place please?’

Percy waddled up to the dive board and made his way out to the end. As he glanced over the edge he could see an adjudicator penguin treading water towards the bottom of the diving pool - he was there to assess the depth of each dive.

‘On my whistle you may dive,’ said his teacher. The whistle blew and Percy dived into the water, straight down, his flippers tight against his body. Finally he bottomed out and then swam back up to the surface.

‘Good dive, Percy. Now, Gavin, you're next.’

Percy waddled back to his seat at the side of the pool and waited as Gavin took his place on the end of the board. With a flourish, Gavin dived in.

He seemed to be underwater for ages. This worried Percy, because Gavin seemed to be under much longer than he had been. Then Gavin surfaced, and Percy sat and waited until the rest of his classmates were finished.

His teacher thanked the last student and along with the adjudicator penguin, disappeared behind a row

of trees at the end of the pool. Nobody said much at all, as they sat, nervously awaiting their results. Finally the teacher emerged and made an announcement.

‘I am pleased to announce that everyone has passed their swimming assessment and the fastest penguin was Percy.’ Everyone clapped, and Percy’s white neck turned a bright shade of red.

‘However, the dive results weren’t quite as satisfactory. I will need the following students to re-dive,’ and she read out a list of five penguins. Percy sighed with relief that his name wasn’t called.

‘At this stage, the deepest dive, at thirty five point two metres, is Gavin. Congratulations Gavin.’

There was only halfhearted applause, because of those who had to re-dive. ‘All other penguins may dry off and make their way to class.’

Well, at least its over, Percy thought as he waddled off with a couple of his classmates.

‘That’s a relief,’ said one.

‘Yeah,’ replied Percy, ‘now there’s just Saturday.’

‘You diving?’ asked another.

‘Yeah,’ said Percy, ‘aren’t you?’

‘No way. I’ve passed my assessment now and I hear the competition is stiff at the Dive Fest.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah, Gavin reckons he’ll beat everyone. I couldn’t be bothered.’

‘Yeah, he reckons he’s pretty good,’ said another, ‘you really think you can beat him?’

Percy shook his head. 'I don't know. But I'm gonna try.'

Percy found it hard to concentrate in class that afternoon even though the teacher advised them all of their scores and he was pleased with his thirty four point five metre dive.

But all he could really think about was the Dive Fest on Saturday. And Percy's dad promised him they would go out together, on Sunday, following the Dive Fest.

'Percy, you've passed your water skills assessment,' dad had said, 'so don't worry if you don't beat Gavin on Saturday - we think you're a champ anyway.'

'Thanks Dad. But Gavin's such a showoff and I'll never hear the end of it if he beats me!'

The Dive Fest was an annual event and whoever chose to participate, did. Penguins were grouped into male or female by age-group and they included young penguins like Percy, high school and university penguins, working penguins and retired penguins. There was even a para-penguin team.

As Percy led his parents to the guest seating at the side of the pool on Saturday, he looked around to see if Gavin had arrived yet. Finally he saw Gavin with his parents, up behind the seating area, away from the main group. Gavin had his head down and it looked like his father was giving him a lecture.

‘Why don’t you go and speak to Gavin?’ Percy’s father said.

‘What for?’ Percy exclaimed.

‘Percy,’ his mother said, ‘we all know that you and Gavin are the best water skills students in the school. You’ve proved that to us by your results this week. Today should be a fun day, not just a day for competition. Go on, go speak to him.’

‘Oh, all right,’ Percy said reluctantly as he waddled up towards where Gavin and his parents were standing. But as he approached them, Percy could hear Gavin’s father yelling at him.

‘... and if you don’t win today Gavin, you’ll be a disgrace to this family. I’ll never be able to shake fins with another penguin. Do you hear what I’m saying?’

Percy gasped. Gavin’s father was really angry. He wondered what Gavin had done to annoy his dad so much. Now wasn’t a good time to go over and say hello. He turned and waddled back to his parents.

‘Well?’ said his mother, ‘did you speak to him?’

‘I couldn’t mum. Gavin’s dad was yelling at him and I didn’t want to interrupt.’

Percy’s dad looked over in that direction.

‘Morrie, Gavin’s dad, has always been a hot head. You know Percy, Morrie and I were in the same class at school, just like you and Gavin. Even then Morrie always had to have his own way. I’d say he’s giving Gavin a pep talk about his dive today.’

‘Sounded more like a lecture to me.’

‘Well, no matter. You just go in there and do your best son. We’ll be proud of you no matter what happens.’

His mother gave him a kiss, and Percy blushed before waddling off towards the marshalling area.

But somehow Percy’s enthusiasm wasn’t as great as it had been earlier this morning. He wondered ... if maybe Gavin’s dad was always giving him a hard time. Maybe that’s why Gavin was always so determined to win.

And he thought about Gavin’s dad, and his own. Gavin’s dad had said Gavin would be a disgrace if he didn’t win. Percy’s dad had said they’d be proud of him, no matter what the result. Percy found himself feeling sorry for Gavin.

As they lined up in the marshalling area, Gavin was right in front of Percy. He kept turning around, nudging him and telling him that he didn’t have a chance of winning. Percy felt annoyed, but tried to ignore Gavin while he waited patiently for his call to the diving board.

Finally the penguin in front of Gavin was called and Gavin moved up to the front of the line. He was still making comments, but Percy was determined not to let Gavin put him off.

‘Gavin - you’re next!’ said the marshal penguin.

Gavin waddled up to the end of the diving board. ‘When you’re ready.’

Gavin turned around but this time he didn’t look at Percy - he seemed to be looking up into the stands.

Percy followed his eyes. Gavin was looking at his parents. As he turned back around, Percy saw that Gavin looked nervous.

Then he dived, a big, fancy dive, down into the depths of the diving pool. Percy looked over the edge but Gavin had disappeared. Finally he surfaced and the marshall penguin said, 'Great dive Gavin, thirty five point five metres. Percy, you're next.'

Percy couldn't believe it. Gavin had barely passed the depth he got in the diving assessment at school. Percy knew he could win.

All week he had been practising for this dive - he'd planned to do the deepest, strongest dive ever. Percy glanced back and saw Gavin. He wasn't smirking anymore, he just looked worried.

Percy took a deep breath and dived. Down and down, propelling himself further and further into the depths of the diving pool, but then suddenly he slowed, bottomed out and swam back up. As he surfaced he heard applause all around the pool.

'Another great dive,' the marshall penguin said as Percy made his way out of the pool and waddled back to the marshalling area, 'a depth of thirty five point four metres.' Percy grinned. It was his best dive ever; he'd beaten his school diving assessment by almost a metre.

And he knew he could have gone deeper - all that practice had limbered him up. He looked over at Gavin whose face was all scrunched up in confusion. Percy

knew Gavin would be wondering why he pulled up short, why he had given up first place.

Now Gavin's dad wouldn't be mad at him, and Percy's parents would still be proud, that's what mattered, Percy told himself as he waddled off.

The announcement was made. 'Congratulations Gavin. You've won the junior Dive Fest.'

At first Gavin didn't do anything, just continued to stare at Percy. Then he shrugged his fins, jumped into the air and clapped them together.

Percy waddled back to his parents who were cheering him enthusiastically. He hadn't won the Dive Fest, and he had an empty, uneasy feeling inside, even though he knew he had done the right thing. Hadn't he?

So what? Percy told himself, there's always next year ...

Suddenly the marshall penguin spoke again. 'And since there was only point one of a metre between the two top competitors, the adjudicator penguins have decided to award an additional prize this year.'

Percy knew they were talking about him. He stopped and turned, his heart beating wildly. Everyone was looking at him, waiting for the announcement.

'To Percy,' the announcer said, 'to our inaugural winner of the Dive Fest sportsmanship award. Congratulations!'

Percy's stomach did a somersault as he chanced a look at Gavin. Gavin was grinning at Percy and clapping his fins like mad as he waddled over.

'Thanks for what you did Percy,' Gavin said, 'I'll never forget it.'

Percy smiled and the two young penguins finned a High 5 together and then waddled off.