

The Story of Mrs Berg

By Ingvild H. Rishøi

GRASS, GRAVEL, GATE, asphalt. Grass, gravel, gate, asphalt.

It still hasn't snowed.

I'm still in my nightie.

I just have to stare out of this window. I just have to stand here until she comes.

Grass, gravel, gate, asphalt.

I've have to keep staring, no blinking. I'm cold.

Black is nicer than grey, grey is nicer than brown, white is the prettiest colour of all.

The fridge is quiet now. I can hear Lina walking in her room upstairs, she's putting a cassette on, then she stops it, she's probably winding it back.

Now I need to blink.

I can hear Dad clear his throat in the living room.

"Hello, Kit Cat," he says.

But he never talks to Kit Cat like that. He's just trying to trick me into coming in there.

My feet are bare, I'm pressing my knees close together. There's no point getting dressed if she isn't coming, and I can't be sure she's coming. I can't be sure.

But if she does come we'll go to a café. But I can't be certain which café, or if she'll just want to stay at home after all, and I'm never sure how she'll look, apart from her hair, always loose. And her nails, her nails are always bitten, but when she's happy, then she can't stop smiling and looking at me, and she strokes my hand over the table and buys me hot chocolate and stirs more sugar in, and asks if I like it, and then she stirs even more sugar in and asks me if I like it *now*. But when she's scared, then she gets this pale face and red hair and big eyes. Like a witch, all white and stiff.

And suddenly she'll cry, suddenly she'll shake, and suddenly she'll forget everything. Oh, no, no. Suddenly she'll forget everything. I have to bite the inside of my mouth when I think about it. Snow, snow, white, white, white. Here comes Kit Cat.

He rubs himself along the kitchen wall. Maybe he'll come this way. But I won't know what to do then. I can't bend down and stroke him, I must keep watching the gate every second. Kit Cat meows. And I can hear Lina now, coming down the stairs, yes, there she is, in the doorway, I can see her in the corner of my eye, her dark hair, her pink hoodie. And her hand, twiddling her hair.

"Aren't you getting hungry?" she says.

"No," I say.

"I can make you a sandwich," she says.

“I’ve just had sugar puffs,” I say.

It’s a lie.

Lina never wants to see Mum any more. Why should I? is all she ever says when I ask. But she’s coming in now, and looking at me. I’m staring at the gate, it’s black, black is nicer than grey, all the terraced houses have gates that look the same. All I ate was that piece of cake in bed. But I don’t feel hungry – that’s the truth, and truth is better than lies.

“Are you just going to stand there, staring?”

“That’s what I want,” I say.

Then she walks out into the living room.

Oh no, now it’s coming. Oh no. I’ve got to think now, no, no, don’t, please, no. And now I feel sick. That sweet smell, it gets in my head. No. Now I need to think about nice things. That’s what Lina always says, she sits on my bed and holds my head and tells me, now you must think about nice things.

And I know all the nice things: When I won the drawing competition and had to go up to Miss and shake her hand and get a bar of chocolate, and then before that when Mum and I went home from the shopping centre and I carried the cage in both hands, and then before that when I was staring in the pet shop window and Mum said, we can go in if you want.

Then she opened the door for me. There were all these birds squawking inside. And I went over to the hamsters and looked down in their box. They were brown and white, they were climbing all over each other’s backs and treading on each other’s heads, I remember everything perfectly, and I said, “I wonder how much a hamster like that costs?”

Then a girl came over and said, “The hamsters are on special offer. They’re just forty kroner.”

“Forty! For a hamster! Just forty kroner!” I said, and Mum laughed, and the shop-girl laughed too.

And the girl walked off a bit and then Mum said, “Would you like a hamster, Emilie?”

“Yes, please!” I said, and smiled, and Mum smiled too, we just smiled and looked at each other, and then I picked Mrs Smith.

She was all white. She had black eyes and a smiley mouth. Forty kroner.

But we only had enough money for the littlest cage, they were so expensive, but I had to have a cage when I had a hamster. And the next week I won the drawing competition in my class too, and Miss sent the drawing round before she put it up, it was called “Everything a hamster needs”, I’d written it at the bottom. Now I can hear Dad rustling the newspaper, something’s going on in there. Oh, no. He’s about to say something to me, I can feel it.

“Emile,” he shouts. “Can you come in here?”

I don’t answer.

“Hm,” he says.

Now I can hear him put his paper down and get up, he’s coming, the floor is creaking, now he stops.

I can feel in the back of my head that he’s looking at me.

He’s standing in the doorway, he says: “Maybe we could play a game of cards?”

"I'm standing here just now," I say.

"Perhaps Lina will join in too," says Dad.

I say nothing.

Kit Cat is licking his tail. And Dad's coming in. He's looking at me, he's sitting down now, back-to-front on a chair, legs out to the sides, and he's staring at me.

"Are you going to sit there?" I ask.

"If I may," he says.

So I sigh and move closer to the window.

I put my hands on the glass, marks grow around them.

How long can I stand still? How still can I stand? With my hands like this. Right up close. And how close can I get to things? Never completely, even if I squeeze my fingers ever so hard against the windowpane, there will probably be a few atoms left between. No matter how much you divide things, you can always get a smaller bit. And no matter how huge, there's always something huger. But Kit Cat, Kit Cat, what are you doing? Are you purring? Making figures of eight?

Pussy-cat fur. Rubbing against my shins.

It's warm.

It's nice.

I have to peep at him, just for a second.

He's going over to his food now. Kit Cat has to eat from an ashtray. I want a proper cat-bowl made of blue plastic with Kit Cat written on it. I like cat-bowls. I like pet toys, fake mice for cats, and budgie mirrors and collars with bells. And I carried the cage in both hands, I'd never owned anything silver before, but Mrs Smith was very scared and she sat inside her house, 'cos there were cars all round us and a cold wind and traffic lights. There were lots of nicer cages in the shop, but mine was nice too, with a water-dispenser and a food bowl and a hamster house with a red roof, and her wheel was light blue and hung from the side.

But when I came back the next weekend I could see Mrs Smith hadn't been fed, 'cos she'd started gnawing on her wheel. Then I told Mum, you must remember to give her food every day.

"Yes," said Mum.

She was standing by the washing up. But she wasn't washing up.

She was looking straight into the wall and biting her lip.

"Shall I help you with the washing up?" I asked, and picked up the tea cloth.

Then we did the washing up.

But afterwards I ran in and gave Mrs Smith loads of fuss.

That evening she had cheeks bulging with seeds.

But Mrs Smith. Oh, Mrs Smith. Oh, no. Oh, no. I have to hold my breath now. Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight. Twenty-seven, twenty-six, twenty-five. I love you, I love you. Twenty-three, twenty-two, twenty-one. I must remember to say I love you. I must remember to smile when she gets me my hot chocolate. And afterwards, when we're leaving, I must say good night, good night, good night in my head, right until I can't see

her any more. Good night, good night, good night. Eleven. Ten. My chest's hurting now, all I can think about is getting air...four, three, two and now...I can breathe.

The window is white around my hands. Steam. I'm cold. Warm is better than cold, but ice cold is better than roasting hot. Dad's still sitting here. How long is he going to sit here, back-to-front on that chair, staring at me?

"Emilie," he says.

"Mm" I say.

"Are you going to stand here for your entire birthday?"

I don't answer.

"Emilie, can't you look at me?" I look quickly at his face.

"Yeah, what?" I say.

Then I look out again. He's got such bushy hair and a big nose and big eyes.

I look out again, but I can still hear everything, Lina's coming back now, I can hear, there she is, she stops at the door. Then she walks right over to us.

"Sorry, I want to get into the fridge," she says.

So I have to move closer to Dad.

She opens the fridge door behind me. It's getting crowded here, she smells of perfume. She's getting the milk out. Then she walks to the cupboard and finds the chocolate powder. I look outside – gravel, grass, gate. Her spoon clinks as she stirs.

Now she's standing by the bench drinking.

And Dad's sitting there staring, with hands resting on his trouser legs.

I wish they'd go out.

I wish it would snow.

I wish I was a bit different.

And that I had a little sister, a baby, babies have soft mouths and smooth tongues and their heads have a little hole where it's soft, and I always get the urge to squeeze it. Like with tiny animals. I always want to squeeze them. Hard. No. Don't.

"I'm standing here," I say.

They look at me. I don't know what made me say that right now.

"Let's go out then, Dad," says Lina.

"I thought I'd talk with Emily for a bit," says Dad.

"But she doesn't want to talk," Lina says, "Just let her stand there."

Dad's getting up, he's putting his arm round my shoulders, he's blocking my view, shaking me gently, it smells of washing powder, I'm trying to look past him, it's impossible, I look at him.

"Can't we talk another time?" I say, ducking under his arm and back to the window, and again I can see...gravel, grass, grey, brown.

Now he's leaving, that's a relief.

Because he doesn't believe she'll come. But she rang me and arranged it. But he still doesn't believe it, but I'm sure, we arranged it on the phone, I'd just opened the front

door when it rang, I was coming home from sports, and the cord on my gym bag was broken, so I had to carry it in both hands.

“Hi, it’s me,” she said.

“Hi,” I said.

“I just wondered what you wanted for your birthday?” she said, but I couldn’t think of anything.

I wanted a leather bag, but that was expensive, and I wanted stuff for the cat, but then I thought she’d remember Mrs Smith and all that. So I told her I couldn’t really remember.

“I can’t really remember,” I said.

But then she just went on talking, what café do you want to go to, she asked, I’ll come and get you around lunchtime, she said. I know for sure that she said it, and I know she meant it, I heard it.

And now Lina’s gone out.

There she is, walking towards the gate. She’s treading the backs of her shoes down, she can never be bothered to bend down. Where’s she going? She doesn’t stop at our mailbox. I don’t know where she’s going, she hasn’t even got a jacket on, I don’t like her going places, her pink hoodie kinda glows.

She walks straight across the road and opens Syversen’s gate.

I don’t know why.

But she won’t ever come with me, whatever I say, why should I, is all she answers when I ask her, why not, I say, ‘cos we never have a nice time there, she says, but that’s not true. I’ve had nice times there, I really have, like the time we played cards in the backyard and all the neighbours joined in, and I won lots of money, I’ve told Lina about that, but Lina just nods and shakes her head. And that other time, when we sorted my bedroom out, and I’ve got a really big bedroom there, I keep telling Lina, and that weekend when I had Mrs Smith there and I lay in bed listening to her on her wheel, and when I breathed in I could smell that smell, of sawdust and fur and seeds. And she ran and ran, all night, and the wheel spun round, *whirr, whirr*, and the water-dispenser clicked as she drank, like a baby’s bottle, it hung from the bars. I kept waking up, but that didn’t matter. Everything was new and different.

The morning after, when it was Saturday, it rained. I sat up in bed, I don’t have curtains there and I could see the grey sky and streets outside, people walking their dogs and carrying their shopping over the crossing. The water-dispenser clicked. And everything was lovely and new. That was the day I taught her to run through loo rolls, and I totally forgot where I was or who I was – Emilie – it’s a bit different with a hamster to a cat. It tickled when she ran up my arm. And she was so little, and when she sat in my hand I felt I could easily squash her, if I just squeezed her hard, or hit her with a big book. Outside it just rained and rained, and the window got ever-so wet. But there was a lovely yellow light from the ceiling lamp. And I felt like a different me.

And she ran through her loo roll.

It was the bestest day ever.

But why does it always have to be like that? The bestest thing ever, followed by the worstest, one after the other. Because then there was this horrid smell.

Oh, the worstest.

Because next time I went, I put my bag down and went into my bedroom.

Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight.

Go away, stupid thoughts.

It was autumn, and I came in and I put my bag down. I must forget it, I must forget it, but I can't forget it, twenty-six, twenty-five, twenty-four, and I walked into my bedroom, and the smell was so, so horrid. Really sweet. And I yelled out, Hello, Mrs Smith!

But I already knew it really. Hamsters shouldn't smell like that. And Mrs Smith lay there in the sawdust, and when I lifted her up she was limp, and flat, like a tiny, tiny mitten, and she'd been dead a long time, I think, her eyes were totally mashed.

Eighteen, seventeen, sixteen.

But I'd told her.

Sixteen. I really had. I'd told Mum! And now I've forgotten to count, I'll have to start again. You must remember, I said. But I only told her to give her food, how could I forget to say water? And now I'm forgetting to hold my breath too, thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight, and it was raining and raining and raining. And then I went home and cried and cried in the taxicab, Mum was the one who put me in a taxicab, because I couldn't, I couldn't stop crying, and then she couldn't have me there, she took me out into the street and hung my bag over my shoulder, and the strap hurt, I got soaked in the rain, and she went to the edge of the curb and waved, in her slippers. Then the taxicab came and switched off its light.

The cab driver said nothing. He just watched me in the mirror, and I put my head on my knees, I saw corduroy stripes and tears like glittery stars, we drove off, and my forehead banged on my knees, and the car drove on and on, and then the car braked and the driver said, you're nearly home now.

I sat up and the knees of my trousers were wet. I saw a pavement and a bush and some white houses, it took a moment, my head was spinning, then I realised, this was my street, to the left and right, and this was my pavement.

The cab driver got out and opened my door. Then I put my feet onto the pavement, and then Dad came, he ran out of the door and through the garden, then I fell down, I couldn't stand up any more, I sat there on the asphalt, near our fence, and closed my eyes tight and just started banging my forehead on the wire fence, and whispered that Mrs Smith was dead.

Mrs Smith is dead. Mrs Smith is dead.

I whispered.

It had stopped raining then.

Dad gave the cab driver some money, and I kept banging my head on the wire, but then Lina came out in her socks, I heard the taxicab drive off, Lina knelt down beside me and put her arms round me and tugged me backwards.

"Don't do that," said Lina, "Your forehead will go all criss-crossy."

But what could I do?

How could I ever go back into my bedroom? And my drawing was pinned up by the blackboard for everybody to see, so how could I ever go back to school?

But then they dragged me into the house and onto the sofa. And Dad started asking what had happened, but I just shook my head and held the blue cushion under my chin, and he kept asking and asking, but I just whispered and hiccupped and talked about the water dispenser and the food-bowl and the drawing competition. I couldn't talk properly and Dad said; "But Emilie, can't you tell us what happened?"

But my head felt so weird and I couldn't think properly, but in the end Lina understood, in the end Lina understood what had happened.

"She forgot to give the hamster water," said Lina.

"Did she?" asked Dad.

I nodded into the cushion.

Dad got up. He walked quickly over to the telephone, but then I chucked the cushion away and ran after him and clung to his arm.

"Don't call!" I screamed. "Don't call!"

I hung onto his arm and lifted my feet off the floor, I made myself heavy, so he couldn't get the receiver to his ear.

Then Lina said: "Don't, Dad."

So he put the receiver down and went back to the living room. With me hanging onto his arm, like a jacket.

But I think he rang her later.

And then perhaps she thought I hated her.

'Cos after that, she never rang me.

She never rang me, but at least I managed to go to school, that Monday I managed it after all, I just took my bag and went, I just imagined I had switched my head off, and then I went.

But she never rang me, lots of weekends went by, October and November, she never rang, not before that day I came from school and my gym bag was broken, I heard the telephone go the minute I opened the door.

Then I dropped my gym stuff on the floor and lifted the phone, and she said: "Emilie, it's me."

And I said; "Hi."

And I couldn't remember anything I wanted.

I tried to talk, but my voice sounded weird. So I didn't say anything more.

"Well, I'll pick you up, okay, and we'll go to a café," she said.

And then she just went on talking, about the neighbours and the doctor, and she had her lying-voice on, and I listened to it all, and went all sweaty. I always do. So I almost need a shower afterwards. The sweat just runs down my arms.

But in the end she said: "Bye-bye, darling, see you soon then."

Syversen's door is opening. Something pink, it's Lina. She's coming out backwards, she closes the door with her foot. Then she turns and walks down the steps, she's carrying something, a cardboard box. And she really can't walk properly with her shoes like that. The fridge stops humming. Lina's bending down, she's put the box down on the gravel, she's pulling her shoes on, and now she's picking the box up again.

She's holding it in both hands. She must be freezing by now, her breath is white, she walks quickly across the road, dark hair, white face, pink hoodie. Then she walks up our steps and in through the front door, there's a draft along the floor, and I can't see her any more.

I have to keep staring, no blinking. There's still no snow.

But she said she would come. And that we'd go to a café.

I'm tired, I must be, because my head feels all prickly.

The floor creaks in the hallway. It's Lina. She's standing in the doorway.

I am leaning my forehead against the glass. Gravel, grass, asphalt. And the glass is cold. And I wish I could go to sleep soon. Perhaps Lina will have some cornflakes now, I don't know.

She coughs. Then she comes over. I feel her hand, cold, on my arm.

"I've got a present for you," she says.

"Have you?" I say. I have to take a peep at her. She's smiling.

"I thought the jacket was from both of you?" I say.

"It was," says Lina. "But we've got one more thing too."

She goes out into the hall and comes back, she's holding a box in her hands, of cardboard, the same box, and now I understand.

"You have to be careful," she says.

I'm forgetting to look out of the window.

I remember all the presents I've had from Lina. A pony, a leather pencil-case and magic pens, and this year, the red jacket. Lina. She never wants to go to Mum's. Why should I, she answers whatever I say. But I'll give Lina a snug, flame-red jacket for her birthday.

Now I'm holding the box. It's not properly closed, there's just has a little bit of tape across the top.

I don't usually wrap things like this, I use shiny paper with loads of tape and ribbon. I look at Lina, she looks at me, smiling.

I look down.

I pull the tape off. I open the flaps.

It's a hamster.

White like Mrs Smith.

But Mrs Smith is dead.

She was lying there. Like a mitten or a little sock.

And I haven't got a cage.

And I've forgotten to look out now, forgotten for a long time, and that's bad luck. I completely forgot.

"We got your cage from Mum's," says Lina. "It's in the hall cupboard."

"Right," I say.

“And I’ve bought hamster food too,” says Lina. “And some of that woodchip.”

“Right,” I say.

The hamster’s scrabbling about in his box. I put it on the table.

“Aren’t you pleased?” says Lina.

“Yes,” I say.

And then I start crying. I can’t stop, I just start crying, and the hamster is scratching, and I cry so hard I stumble over to the sink, and my head, it just won’t stop thinking, ‘cos that’s how my stupid head works, I’m thinking what if Mum comes right now, I wrap my arms round my head and Lina yells, “Dad, Dad!”

But he’s gone out or upstairs. So Lina grabs my arms and holds them tight and says: “What’s up, Emilie?”

But I just sink down, she can’t hold me, and the hamster’s scratching at its box, trying to get out, and Lina says: “Shall I give it back to the pet shop? Do you want me to give it back?”

Then she lets go of me and reaches out for the box, and I yell, “No!”

And then I throw myself onto the floor and crawl under the table and hold my ears and bang my head against the table leg.

“No!” I shout. “No!”

“What’s going on?” says Dad.

Lina goes to say something, and Dad tries to drag me out, but I wrap myself around the table leg, I hold my ears, I screw my eyes tight shut, and I shout: “Please, don’t give it back! Please!”

Then he lets go, and I bang the table leg, shouting; “I love it! I love it!”

And Dad and Lina are quiet now, and it’s completely dark, and I bang and bang and shout and shout, and I’m sure the hamster must be ever-so scared.

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It’s evening soon, I think.

The sky is dark.

I have my hands on the window ledge.

They’ve taken the hamster away and put it upstairs.

Kit Cat’s not here either.

“Kit Cat,” I whisper. “Kit Cat.”

But he doesn’t come. Perhaps he’s outside.

I can stand here as long as I want now.

I open my eyes wide. I’m looking into the dark...gravel, grass, gate.

Dad’s put some woolie socks on me. I’m so hot and my legs feel so tired.

I’m closing my eyes.

Things that are white –

The fridge is white, my nightdress is white, and before I fall asleep it goes white inside my head, no, stop, I have to open my eyes again...one, two, three...my nightdress is white. And there's something falling...falling.

Now my forehead bumps into the glass.

And when I open my eyes, everything is different.

The snow. It's here. It's settling so gently. Covering everything.

And the grass has turned white.

The gravel has turned white.

And white is the prettiest colour.

Translated by Deborah Dawkin