

Cappelen Damm Agency *Spring 2024*



Billie and her family move from the big city to a remote, coastal town. The only available house is a closed-down train station, where no one has lived for years. At first, they love it, but it's not long before weird things start to happen. Billie can hear strange sounds in the house, things move around in the middle of the night, and there's a rumor that people have gone insane from living there...

Billie must start a new school and finds it difficult to make new friends. Luckily, she meets Rasmus, a mysterious boy who challenges her to try new things, and they become close friends. Billie confides in Rasmus, and together they start to investigate what happens at the station.

Who is whistling on the other side of Billie's wall? Why is the forest around the station named Mourning Forest? And isn't there something a bit strange about Rasmus?

The Ghost Station is the first book in a paranormal middle grade trilogy.

The Ghost Station

Author: Anne Elvedal

Illustrator: Hedda Kverndalen

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Age target group: middle grade, 9-12 yrs.

Series: Trilogy, book 1

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CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

The Ghost Station
Anne Elvedal

Anne Elvedal

Anne Elvedal is an author and one of Norway's most sought-after screenwriters for television and film. She has written screenplays for several crime series, and her three feature films have all been nominated for the Amanda Award. Anne also wrote the international award-winning documentary *Queen Without Land*. Her literary debut came in 2020 with the first book in *The Game of Death*, the first book in a paranormal horror trilogy for young adults. She is also qualified as a nurse and previously worked in psychiatric healthcare.



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Reviews

This first book in a new horror series is perfect for anyone who likes a proper ghost story. Anne Elvedal captures and holds the reader's attention from first sentence ... the excitement and tension lasts until the final sentence – a chilling cliffhanger before the next book.

NRK, five/six stars

The Ghost Station is a thrilling pageturner – nightmares and crying is almost guaranteed.

KLASSEKAMPEN

... simply put, terrific ... Energetic, solid and thorough. ... perfect timing of absurd and transgressive elements. ... full of surprises. Especially so when the book nears its end.

PERISKOP.no

Summary: The Ghost Station series by Anne Elvedal

Book 1: The Ghost Station

The autumn storm is approaching Helgrenda. It's a little coastal village in Northern Norway which has suffered from closures and people leaving the village over the last decades. This is where city girl **BILLIE ROSENBERG (12)** moves with her parents and her little brother **LUKAS (3)**. Billie thinks it's scary to move to such a small place, over thousand kilometres from the capital where she has always lived. Here, everything is strange and new. Billie has always been a curious and imaginative girl, with a tendency to imagine the worst about *what if, if only* situations, and when confronted with something new and unknown to her. Currently, a big question is gnawing a hole in her: What if she doesn't make any friends here?

Still, Billie does find moving a bit exciting. Especially because they're not moving into a regular house, but into an old closed-down train station. It's surrounded by a forest, it's far to their closest neighbour, but the station house itself is in good shape. The first floor is a colourful waiting room and an office full of old things, and on the second floor is a spacious apartment – where Billie finally gets her own room. But it's not long until things start to happen. Strange things. There's a strange prickling on Billie's neck, as if someone is following her. She can hear sounds from downstairs at night. Thumping. Hissing sounds. Are there footsteps? Someone whistling?

Rumours reach her. No one has managed to live long at the station. Only homeless people and drug addicts have spent any time at the station the past years. One night, Billie discovers that someone has been in the house and written a blood red warning on the tapestry of the waiting room: *Get out of here!*

The problem is that only Billie can see the warning. Her parents can't see it. Nor Billie's best friend from home, who she keeps in touch with over the phone. Is there something wrong with Billie? Or something wrong with the station? And why are suddenly both her pet rats in her backpack when she's meeting her new class for the first time? Billie has always wanted to fit in, not to stand out, but now she's causing full chaos in the classroom as one of the rats jump out of her backpack. Everyone panics, except one boy who seems to enjoy the scene: **RASMUS (12)**.

The rest of the class don't like Rasmus. They don't pass him the football in PE. And he's not invited to the class's Halloween party. But Billie likes Rasmus. Maybe because he's so curious to get to know her. Maybe because he makes her do things she's never done before. Like swim in the lake with her clothes on during a heavy rain shower. But perhaps most of all: Rasmus is the only other person to see the blood red warning on the wall.

Together, Billie and Rasmus start to explore what is going on at Helgrenda Station. What will happen to her and her family, if they don't «get out of here»?

When they investigate the warning, they find something hiding behind the tapestry: a secret door. It won't open, but through a tiny hole in the door crack they try to see what's hiding behind it – and see another eye staring back at them. Who is hiding there? A homeless person?

Although it's scary, they're eager to find out who it is. They try to send a minicamera through the hole, but as they're doing it a strange man appears in the waiting room. A tall man in a dark suit, who walks straight through the closed, secret door. A ghost?

There's no point in Billie telling her parents, they don't believe in ghosts. Billie doesn't really know what to think either. She just wants to be a normal girl. Not someone who can see the dead? She finds comfort in Rasmus, who has always felt different, and it brings them closer together. With the help from some old men who used to work at the station, they find out that the ghost is **THE MASTER (35)**. The old station master. But what is he doing there?

One night, Billie wakes up because her little brother is standing in her room, wearing The Master's uniform hat. Lukas although three years old, hasn't started talking yet, but now he suddenly says his first words, in a dark and strange voice: *Leave this place!*

Billie gets frightened for real. What's The Master doing with her sweet little brother? Things escalate when Billie discovers that another ghost is roaming behind the warehouse. A faceless ghost which gets chased away by The Master and a colony of bats, which apparently work as his guard dogs.

Billie and Rasmus search for information to understand what the ghosts want, and when Billie finds a stack of old love letters in the station house, she starts to get an idea of how it's all connected. Some ghosts can't pass on to where the dead lives because they have something unresolved in their lives. The Master was meant to get married to his girlfriend **FLORENTINA (28)**, but one day, as she was on her way to Helgrenda, she died in a train accident. Billie is convinced that the faceless ghost is Florentina, and that without her face The Master hasn't been able to recognise her.

The evening of Halloween, Billie and Rasmus set up a date for The Master and Florentina, in the rusty train carriage that's been abandoned on the overgrown train tracks. They hope that The Master will understand that the faceless ghost is Florentina, and that they can finally be together, and travel on to their next life – and leave Lukas and Billie alone. However, the night doesn't go as planned. When trying to find Florentina, Billie and Rasmus instead find the secret door in the waiting room open... And Lukas disappears behind it, together with The Master, before the door bangs closed again!

Billie is in despair, but Rasmus helps her realise that she should be happy she can see ghosts. Otherwise, no one would know what happened to Lukas. This makes Billie gather her courage. She wants to show The Master that it's *he* who should «get out of here». Billie and Rasmus finally manage to break open the door, and end up in the basement below the station. Here, they find several tunnels – and even more faceless ghosts...

Gradually, Billie uncovers the true story of Helgrenda Station. The crucial and life-changing discovery is when she finds out that her new friend – the boy she's shared so many thoughts and experiences with, the boy who's supported her and helped her, the boy she has started to fall in love with – is really

dead. Rasmus died in an accident a year ago, but he's not realised it himself. That's why no one in class will pass him the football – they can't see him.

Billie receives unexpected help from The Master. As it turns out, he isn't a dangerous type at all, instead he's tried to chase off Billie and her family in order to protect them and the station. Helgrenda Station isn't a regular station – it's like a stop-over station where the dead come to get a ticket to the End of the Lane, the last stop for the dead. It's only the dead without unresolved issues in their past who can get a ticket onwards. And if too much time passes before a dead accepts their own death, they will lose their soul and become a faceless, as The Master's beloved Florentina has become. And as Rasmus is about to become! The Master has tried to get help from Lukas, as Lukas can also see the ghosts. But now he needs Billie's help, as Rasmus's face is about to disappear.

Through some touching scenes, Billie succeeds in making Rasmus realise and accept his death. To Rasmus, the unresolved thing from his past was to meet a real soulmate, and he's found one now in Billie. And so, he thankfully avoids the destiny of the faceless, and gets a ticket to the End of the Line. Billie must say a difficult goodbye to him as the ghost train arrives to take him onwards.

However, as the train starts to leave the platform, Billie can see that a faceless managed to sneak on to the train. It's like getting the 'plague' as a passenger, because as they lack their own soul, the faceless are trying to steal the soul from other dead. Now Rasmus and the other dead are in danger of never making it to the End of the Line. The Master is too busy chasing off other faceless on the platform to see what Billie is seeing, and she must make a quick decision. She really must face her fear of the unknown, as she jumps onboard the train.

The Ghost Station is the first in a middle grade paranormal trilogy, where the underlying topic is the fear of the unknown. It's a scary and charming book, with the warm and touching friendship of Billie and Rasmus as its focal point. Through the journey they go on together, they dare to explore their unknown sides. And, they learn that things are only half as scary when they are two.

Book 2: The Ghost Train (preliminary plot)

Billie has jumped onto the ghost train – as the only living person. She’s also the only one who knows that a faceless ghost had managed to sneak onboard. When she tries to warn the other dead passengers, she is seen as an invader herself. What is a living doing on the ghost train?

Luckily, Billie finds Rasmus, and together they try to stop the faceless, to stop it from eating the souls of the other dead, prevent the ‘plague’ from spreading. If the faceless succeeds in swallowing the soul of another dead, the soul won’t be able to live in the faceless very long – and the soul will be lost, forever. However, it’s not only the dead that are in danger of never making it to the End of the Line. If the faceless manages to swallow the souls of all the dead onboard, including the train driver, Billie won’t make it back to Helgrenda Station.

We follow Billie and Rasmus on their adventure through the different train carriages, as they hunt the faceless. Where is it? Who is it? Is there a way to stop it?

The different train carriages house different perils and different dead. Not everyone likes the living, and so Billie ends up in conflicts and dangers. Thankfully, she and Rasmus also have some allies, such as the train driver, who proves to be Billie’s great grandmother, who grew up in Helgrenda, and who we briefly heard about in book 1. From her, Billie learns more about how her family has always been able to see and talk to the dead, and how she can develop this skill – in order to communicate with the faceless and figure out who it is.

The friendship between Billie and Rasmus also develops. In the first book, we sense that Billie is starting to fall in love with Rasmus, and this feeling deepens in the second book. But is it possible for someone who is alive to have a dead boyfriend?

The book ends with Billie and Rasmus stopping the faceless, and the ghost train can safely roll into The End of the Line. All the passengers flow off the train and into the ghost town, where all the dead live. Billie comes with Rasmus out onto the platform before the train travels on, but her great grandmother gets the feeling that not everything is as it should be in the town. Billie decides to stay until the next train. Perhaps she’s not ready to let go of Rasmus?

Book 3: The Ghost Town (preliminary plot)

Billie follows Rasmus into the ghost town. It's an exciting and diverse town. The same way the ghost train has different carriages with different dead, there are different boroughs with different types of dead, from the 'newest' dead to the old, wise ones. Both Billie and Rasmus meet old family members, and we learn more about the tasks of the dead. Time and place are different than in the living, logical world. Something that means that the dead can follow along with their living family, and help them with small and big stuff, everything from finding lost keys to support them through big life crises. Now, this unseen interaction is in danger – Billie and Rasmus discover that the town is haunted by some new faceless. They haven't stolen onto the train, but come in through a hole in the 'wall' which separates the dead from the living.

These faceless are different from those Billie and Rasmus have met previously. They are darker, more evil, and the more dead souls they swallow, the stronger they become. So strong that they might be able to do something that's never been done before: swallow the soul of a living human. This would fulfil their ultimate goal – to come back to life. As the only living in the town, Billie's life is in grave danger.

These new challenges also try the relationship between Billie and Rasmus, and through their journey Rasmus helps Billie understand that she must let him go, as death cannot limit life.

Together, they eventually manage to find a way for the faceless to recover their own, lost souls, and thus restore harmony and order in the dead and living worlds. This also means that The Master and Florentina are finally reunited, and Billie can return home to Helgrenda station. Once there, she takes over the job as station master and becomes the gate keeper between the world of the dead and the living. And although Billie must say goodbye to Rasmus, she knows that he will come to visit her if she's ever in need of his help.

THE GHOST STATION

by Anne Elvedal

Translation © Rachel Rankin

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1

It all started when my little brother ate the head of a bird. Not the head of a crow or an eagle – Lukas' mouth wasn't big enough for that – but a little sparrow. I think it was a house sparrow. I was the one who was meant to be looking after him, but for just a short moment I didn't pay enough attention. Not because I was off saving the world or anything like that. I'm not that special. I'm just a completely normal twelve-year-old who was away doing something completely normal, like going to the toilet. And when I came back into the living room, Lukas was no longer sitting on the floor playing with his train set. I found him out on the balcony, by the bird table where Dad puts out chunks of bread every morning. Lukas was holding the dead, headless body of the sparrow. I don't know if it was dead before he put it into his mouth or not, and I didn't want to think about it either. Even though I imagined that the sparrow had been alive. And that when its head was stuffed into that dark oral cavity, it must have felt the same mortal fear I felt that time a caramel got stuck in my throat at my best friend Ellinor's birthday party. I remember the feeling of not being able to breathe. I remember it so well. How the hard caramel lodged itself in my throat like a stopper and made my chest burn. So much so that my heart threatened to burst out of me. My legs became as weak as straws. The only thing I could move was my arms. I flapped and flapped, no doubt just as much as the sparrow must have flapped its wings. Fortunately, Ellinor eventually realised that I wasn't trying to mimic a chicken and thumped me on the back so hard that the caramel popped out like a cork. That popping probably sounded quite different to when Lukas closed his little milk teeth over the delicate neck of the sparrow. I bet that probably sounded more like crispbread being crushed between your teeth.

The thing is, Lukas isn't mean. Lukas is three years old and the cutest little brother in the world, with dark curls and soft, squishy cheeks. The problem is that he just puts everything he sees into his mouth. Maybe, since nothing ever really comes *out* of his mouth, he chooses to stuff things *in* instead. What I mean is that Lukas doesn't say a single word. He's a bit behind other three-year-olds in that respect. There's nothing wrong with his hearing and he doesn't have tongue-tie. He's had loads of different examinations with loads of different experts, and there might not be that much wrong with his head either. Because even though Lukas refuses to talk, he understands everything we say to him. He can also nod and shake his head and point. He can laugh. He can scream – loudly. And he can cry. Just like he did on that exact day, when we were sitting in the backseat of our car. Lukas waved his toy train around wildly as he cried and cried. Hysterically. I understood him well. My bum was also sore after having sat still for so long. Because we'd driven longer than super-long by that point. First nine hours before we stayed over at a hotel. Then eight more hours. Our apartment block in Oslo – which a new family was now going to move into – was over a thousand kilometres from here. If we'd driven just as far south instead of north, we'd have been in another country by now. Germany, maybe. Or the Mediterranean.

“Billie?” Mum’s voice pierced through my headphones and I pulled them off. She smiled at me from the driver’s seat, tired. “Could you help Lukas, please? We’ll be there very soon.”

I nodded. What else could I do? It was my fault we were here, after all.

The day after Lukas ate the bird’s head, Mum and Dad told us that we were going to move house. They didn’t exactly say outright that it was my fault we were moving from the city in which I’d lived my whole life. Mum is a doctor and researcher and Dad is a nurse, so they know how to dress up bad news. They said it was because Mum had lost her research job in the laboratory and now they wanted to *carpe diem*. Seize the day. Both felt like they were dying in the city, and now they wanted to move to the country in order to live. Where you could *hear* the silence. Then, with a snap of their fingers, they both got new jobs and bought a house in the north of Norway, in a little place by the fjord called Helgrenda, where my great-great-grandmother grew up. There would be so much fresh air here that Lukas and I would be a couple of much healthier children.

“Look! A cow,” I said, pointing out of the window. “And there’s the cow’s packed lunch.”

But Lukas was interested in neither the cows nor the huge, white plastic balls that lay strewn across the field. He just cried.

“First person to be quiet for ten seconds gets to play the train game,” I said.

Then Lukas’ mouth puckered. The tears were sucked back into his eyes and he smiled his loveliest smile.

I gave him my mobile, then leaned my forehead against the cool windowpane and looked out at the grey clouds. I tried to act like we were actually on holiday. Because then it’s exciting to arrive at a new place and see new things. Now we were driving past an incredibly old house, with broken windows and paint that was flaking off so much that it looked like the house was shedding its skin.

Mum sighed behind the wheel. “It’s so beautiful here!”

Dad was sitting beside her, his flatcap on his head, and he pinched his nose with two fingers so that it sounded like he was a tour-guide talking into a microphone. “Okay, now we’re driving through the most beautiful place in Norway: Helgrenda. To the right, we have a field. And to the left, yes, that looks like another field. And another. Gosh, it looks like we’re having a field day!”

Mum laughed. And Lukas forgot about the train game and laughed hysterically at Dad’s squeaky voice. Dad had done that trick since *I* was three years old, and I told him that it wasn’t funny anymore, but he just continued. He told us everything he knew about Helgrenda: that there had been a fishing factory here before, but it had since closed down. That this was the reason why there weren’t many jobs left here. That there were more people moving away from Helgrenda than to it. That only four-hundred people lived here now, almost as many as who lived in our apartment block back in the city. And then all the unsettling thoughts started crawling back: the ones that had haunted me the last few nights. What if...*nobody* here liked me? I’d been best friends with Ellinor since nursery. I didn’t really know how to make new friends.

Small raindrops hit the front window as we swung into a bumpy logging trail. It looked like it wouldn’t be long before it was overgrown again. Trees thick and thin pressed against us, but after a few minutes we rolled into an open area. Mum quickly stopped the car and switched off the engine.

“We’re here!” she beamed.

Three seconds later, all three of them were out of the car. Mum knocked eagerly on the car window. “Come on Billie, you as well. Aren’t you excited?”

As soon as I stepped out of the car, the bitter autumn wind grabbed hold of my hair. I pulled my jacket tighter around me. I’d seen photos of this place online in a sales listing, yet it was different seeing it in person. It looked more...lifeless?

A rusty train carriage gaped at me from the overgrown train tracks that stretched into the dense forest surrounding us. There were no apartment blocks to be seen here. No neighbouring houses. On the

edge of the forest stood a little grey house that looked much smaller than in the photos. The planks were rotten and there were holes in the roof. It was the depot, an old storehouse. The station house, where we were going to live, was much bigger, fortunately. A red brick building, two storeys high, lay empty and silent under the dark clouds that hung heavy above the mossy roof tiles. Above the main door was a sign made of black iron letters: *Helgrenda Station*. In other words, we weren't moving into any normal house. We were going to live in an abandoned train station. It was the only place here that had been for sale.

"Silly-Billie!" shouted Dad. "Don't stand there and freeze, you'll catch a cold!"

He and Lukas were bouncing eagerly beside the entrance. A little sculpture had been carved at either end of the gutters above them: a mix between a person and an animal. Water dripped from their open mouths, which were set in a silent scream.

Then something jangled beside my ear, so suddenly that I jumped. Mum stood beside me and shook a bunch of keys. "Do you want to open the door to our new paradise?"

A huge silver birch leaned against the side of the house, carpeting the steps with orange leaves. Hesitating, I ascended the four steps that led to the main door. It was shaped like an arch and made of thick, dark brown wood, and I imagined it coming loose as soon as I went to unlock it. And what if it fell onto us? All four members of the Rosenberg family would be squashed flat beneath it. It would be our gravestone, and people would come from far and wide to take selfies at *Death's Door*.

"Careful you don't slip on the leaves," said Dad.

People usually say I look most like Dad. We have the same hair. The same black, wiry hair where it's impossible to get even a single curl, even after a week of using hair rollers, curling cream and a curling iron. Mum, on the other hand, has red curls that smell of strawberries. Now she was nudging my back. "Go on, then."

I stuck the biggest key into the lock – but the door opened before I was able to turn it. The hinges screeched like a cat yowling in the night.

"Oh yes, that's right," said Mum with a smile. "I've heard that people don't lock their doors out in the country, apparently."

Then she disappeared inside along with Dad.

Lukas remained standing. He peeked into the gaping station house with big eyes.

I swallowed hard and gripped his little hand. "It's okay, Lukas. It's not dangerous."

But Lukas tore his hand away and rushed inside, like an express train flying fearlessly into a tunnel. I often think that Lukas and I were made according to two completely different recipes. With me, they added too many thoughts like *imagine this* and *what if that*. But with him, they simply added a huge dose of *chocks away!*

I closed my eyes and prayed that the doorway was a magic portal that would transport us back home to the city. That when I stepped over the threshold, we'd be back in the apartment block, in my and Lukas' cosy room, with bunk beds and nights filled with giggles, fairy lights on the ceiling and my little drawing nook. But when I opened my eyes, I was standing in an unfamiliar room that was completely different to any other room I'd ever seen before.

Mum swung around so that her dress flapped around her. "Isn't it nice here?"

It was nice. Like, *really* nice. I was standing right in the middle of what must have once been the waiting room. Now, it was no longer filled with passengers, only colours. It was as though we'd climbed inside a rainbow! The floor was covered in green and orange tiles. Flowery turquoise wallpaper stretched over both the walls and the ceiling. On either side of the entrance door was a row of golden-yellow chairs. In one corner, outside a guest toilet, shone two round café tables with bright pink cups and a coffee pot. A red chandelier glittered above me. It was impossible not to be filled with colour yourself. It was impossible not to smile.

While Dad started inspecting the floor tiles for cracks, Mum and Lukas disappeared into the ticket booth, a huge glass window with an office hidden behind it. I followed them. The office looked like a museum, filled to the brim with old objects I didn't know the name of.

Mum pointed at some black and white pictures that were hanging on the wall. "Traaaain," she said loudly and slowly. "Tuu-nn-eel."

But Lukas didn't copy her. He wanted to taste the pictures instead. Lukas had been interested in trains ever since he was a baby, and I was sure that Mum and Dad were hoping that moving into a train station would help him to talk. I glanced around. Just by the door stood an old coat stand, where there hung a black uniform cap with gold cord along the edges. I pulled it on and took a selfie, which I sent to Ellinor before sauntering further into the room. On one wall was a square box with a receiver. It looked like an old-fashioned telephone. I lifted the receiver. The line was dead.

I hung up and peeked inside a huge type case that reached up to the ceiling. It was filled with post and paper, old pens and stamps and other thingummyjigs. Beside the window of the ticket booth lay a bundle of old train tickets that looked like little cardboard cards. Alongside a thick book. The cover was made of brown leather, and on either side were handwritten rows of unknown names. Inside the room was a writing desk. On it lay a little whistle, a green hand flag, and a bowl of little white fish bones. An oblong plastic board was nailed to the wall above the table. The board looked like a map of the metro, but with fewer lines and some tiny lightbulbs. It had been a long time since any train had passed through this station. The sales listing said that it had been closed down over fifty years ago because a tunnel was being built nearby. Now I could imagine how it must have been in the olden days when the lightbulbs blinked to show that a train was on its way. All of a sudden, the lights flickered. Not the little lightbulbs on the board, but the ceiling lamp. I raised my shoulders. My neck was prickling. As though someone was standing right behind me, their eyes boring into me.

I turned towards Mum...

But she wasn't there. Neither was Lukas. The office was empty.

I looked through the ticket window. Dad has also vanished from the waiting room. Only the huge chandelier flickered at me. As though it was threatening to turn itself off.

It was completely silent now. The sort of silence you get in waiting rooms. The air was thick. Warm. And filled with small creaks...

From the roof?

I looked up. Heard: Lukas' infectious laughter warbling through the rafters from the floor above and into my chest.

I hung the uniform cap back on the coat stand and hurried out of the office and towards the back door, where a narrow wooden staircase arched up to the flat where the station master used to live. Now we were the ones who were going to live there. I was going to have my own room. I hoped it would be nice and big. Big enough to have new friends over to visit?

“Here’s the living room,” I said, scanning my mobile across the flowery brown wallpaper. Ellinor followed eagerly via FaceTime. Both a cleaning company and a moving company had been here before us, and now furniture and cardboard boxes were lying strewn across the floor. The dining table and the couch looked almost a bit sad in here, since this living room was twice as big as the one back in the city.

“This was already here,” I continued, letting the camera lens capture a massive grandfather clock that stood against one wall. A beautiful leaf pattern had been carved into the wood. The hands were hidden behind the glass and were frozen at three twenty-nine.

“Where’s your room, then?” asked Ellinor.

I walked over to the right-hand side of the living room, where there were three doors in a row. The first bedroom was yellow, and Dad was already putting together the double bed for him and Mum. The room beside it was small and pink, with a newly bought bed with a little slide at the end for Lukas.

I gripped the handle of the third door. “Ready?” I said. And when Ellinor nodded, I made a drumroll with my tongue and pulled the door open.

But there was only a purple bathroom, with a purple sink and a purple bathtub. And Mum helping Lukas, who was sitting on a purple toilet.

“Where’s my room?” I asked.

Mum waved to the camera. “Hi, Ellinor! Billie has the servants’ quarters inside the kitchen.”

Ellinor said something back, but we didn’t hear what, because the image on the mobile froze and the sound started lagging.

“The internet is a bit unstable here, unfortunately,” said Mum.

“Hello?” Ellinor’s head started moving again on the screen. “Did I miss anything?”

“No,” I said. “Close your eyes.”

Ellinor did as I said, and I hurried across to the kitchen, which was on the other side of the living room. It was red and spacious. Above the oven hung a greasy note with trembling handwriting: *eat at your own peril*. Beneath the warning was a drawing of a fish skeleton. And there, on the other side of the oven, was an open door.

I counted down as I stepped through the doorway. “3...2...1...now!”

Ellinor opened her eyes.

“Oh, you’re so lucky!” she cried.

I was lucky. The room was abundantly green and not big, but big enough for me. I could easily see it being lovely in here once I’d unpacked and all my new furniture was in place. Because since I was

getting a new room, everything was new: new bed, new wardrobe, new rug, new lamp. Apart from a chair and a bureau that was already here. It was a writing bureau, because when I opened the flap, it turned into a desk with lots of fun little drawers.

“Look!” I said, picking up a long, white feather from one of the drawers. “An old-fashioned quill.”

I heard the doorbell in Ellinor’s home, and she suddenly started rushing around. She had to leave for training. We finished the conversation, and I opened the curtains and let the grey day inside. It was probably one of the girls from basketball who had called in on her. Someone I don’t know that well. Ellinor was the only friend I had, but she had several best friends, and I hoped that she wouldn’t forget me now that we lived so far away from each other.

I opened one of the packing boxes on the floor. It was full of all my drawing things. Drawing pads of all shapes and sizes, pencils, crayons, felt-tips, pens, charcoals. I sorted them and placed them all in nice boxes on top of the writing bureau. Then I sank down into the chair and scrolled on my mobile until I found a photo of me and Ellinor. The one I took two days ago, the last night we were together, when we ate pizza at Ellinor’s house and she tried to teach me how to do my eyebrows perfectly.

I propped my mobile against the wall and started drawing us. I’d always heard that I was good at drawing, that I had a *natural talent*, even though I didn’t really like drawing the natural world. I liked drawing when I was happy. And if I was sad, I’d draw and then I’d be happy. If I drew a really nice picture of me and Ellinor now, she could frame it and hang it in her room.

I didn’t even manage to sketch her blonde hair before I heard a noise. A strange, scratching noise.

I stood up. Tried to find out where the noise was coming from. Found it. It was coming from a little box that lay among the other packing boxes.

I kneeled down beside it. I had never seen this box before. It was so much smaller than the others, the same size as a shoebox. I bent towards it – and grimaced. A rank smell buried itself in my nose. The box stank of...pee?

Suddenly, it moved. It started sliding across the floor, all by itself...

My breath caught in my throat. My eyes followed the little shoebox as it glided across the floor, first to one side and then to the other.

“Surprise!” came Mum’s voice from behind me.

She was standing in the doorway and laughing. Why was she laughing? I wasn’t laughing. As for the box, it was sliding towards me now, closer and closer...

Mum walked over to the box and lifted it up.

“Oooh, how I’ve been looking forward to this,” she said, sitting down on the floor with me. “I know how hard it’s been for you to move, Billie. I know you’re scared you won’t make any friends here.” She

stroked my cheek. "That's why I wanted to cheer you up a bit and give you two little friends who can live here with you in your room."

She opened the lid of the box, and there, over the edge, peeked two pairs of black eyes.

There were two rats. Two incredibly cute rats. One black and one white. Their long tails were intertwined.

"Meet number 4 and number 13," said Mum, showing me the numbers that were tattooed in the hollow of their right ears. "These little smarty-pants have helped me lots in the lab, but when I had to leave, they did as well, so I thought you could take care of them?"

I tried to see if Mum was joking. Every time she tried to trick me, all the muscles in her face relaxed, but they weren't now.

"Do you mean it?" I said.

"Of course! I got the movers to bring them up here so that I wouldn't give away the secret before we arrived."

"But what about Lukas?" I said, imagining him putting the rats' heads into his mouth as well. "And Dad?"

"Dad isn't allergic to rats," said Mum. "And we'll just have to be extra careful when Lukas is near." She stroked the rats' backs. "They're really intelligent, and they can do a lot of tricks. Look at this."

She took a handful of peanuts from her dress pocket. Then she leaned closer to the rats and said: "out of jail!"

Both lab rats jumped out of the box and Mum gave each of them a peanut. And then she showed me loads of other tricks they could also do, if they got a peanut as a prize: they could give high-fives and jump up onto Mum's shoulder. They rolled a ping-pong ball across the floor. And when Mum shouted "football!", they scored a goal each by nudging it into plastic cup lying on its side.

"Put out your hands," Mum told me.

I did as she said. Then she placed the black rat in my right hand and the white one in my left. Their toes prickled against my skin.

"You can give them new names if you want," she said. "It's maybe a bit boring to just call them by a number."

I studied them. I think they studied me as well. One was as white as snow. The other, as dark as night.

"Salt and Pepper," I said.

“Wonderful,” said Mum. And then she shouted: “hide and seek!”

Then Salt and Pepper scrambled over my wrists – and into my jumper and up my arms. I screamed. It tickled.

Mum fetched the cage in which the movers had transported them. It was full of tubes and ladders and climbing ropes on different platforms, hammocks, a sleeping nook, water bottles and food bowls. When we put Salt and Pepper inside, they went totally wild. As if they’d been away from their cage for a whole year and were finally home again.

“Come on, let’s go to the shop and buy some rat food,” said Mum.

It was raining heavier now. The windshield wipers swished wildly across the car window as we drove down the bumpy logging trail, away from the station, out of the forest, past farms and fields and even more abandoned houses with broken eyes and bald roofs. Houses that were so rotten and dilapidated that they weren't even for sale.

"And now we're arriving at the centre of the universe," squeaked Dad from the front seat, two fingers pinching his nose. "Helgrenda town centre!"

There were no lively city streets with lots of shops and people here. Only a narrow street with a petrol station, a Thai restaurant and a supermarket. We parked outside. There were no other cars here. No-one in sight. Just a hungry seagull who glared at us from the top of a bin. Down by the car park, beside the fjord, lay the rusty, abandoned fishing factory, alongside a few old fishing boats and a ruined fishing net.

"There's your school," said Dad as we got out of the car. He was pointing to the other side of the road, where a pretty house of yellow wood gaped back at us. Behind the school was the nursery, which looked more like a round barbecue hut. And behind that: a flat, oblong house that was the care home. That's where Mum and Dad were going to work now. Mum as Dad's boss. Now she wasn't going to work with lab rats, but rather help old people who couldn't live at home by themselves anymore.

Dad told us that the thick forest behind the centre stretched all the way to our station, but I wasn't listening. I'd caught sight of a boy in the playground. A boy in a red hoodie who was trundling around on a bike that was way too small for him. Or rather, it looked like he was dancing with it. Only the back wheel touched the ground; the front wheel pointed up towards the clouds while he swung round and round.

Suddenly, he stopped and looked towards me. I didn't quite know what to do, if I should act like I was looking somewhere else or wave to him. I ended up doing neither. I just stood there and stared at him, stiff as a statue, until he turned and wheeled around the corner of the school building.

"Silly-Billie?" Dad shouted to me from the door of the shop. "Don't stand there and get so wet that you end up with pneumonia, now!"

I ran over to him.

Inside the door sat two old geezers on plastic chairs, drinking coffee with their huge workers' hands. Their chattering stopped abruptly when they caught sight of us. Then they pulled their woollen hats over their foreheads and grinned and greeted us, trying to outdo each other. But behind those wrinkled faces – which looked exactly the same – they painted us with a suspicious gaze. As though they were undercover bouncers who were going to consider whether or not to let us in.

They didn't stop us. But they watched us carefully as we moved between the shelves.

The shop was big, and not just a normal supermarket. It also sold clothes, tools, plants, decorations, paint, medicine. It was like a mini shopping centre. We filled our trolley with food and bought peanuts and fruit and rat food for Salt and Pepper. Lukas got a new toy train made of wood, since the last one

was almost chewed to pieces. I got to choose a plant to have in my room. It was so big that when I carried it out, I almost couldn't see where I was going – and managed in my clumsy Billie way to trample on the foot of one of the old geezers who was sitting by the door.

Or did he try to trip me up?

In any case it was like I'd pressed a button when my shoe met his big toe, because he then opened his huge mouth.

"Tourists?" he said.

I shook my head and wanted to hurry after Mum and Dad, who were disappearing way too quickly with Lukas, but the geezers kept me behind.

"Newcomers?" they said.

I nodded. Hair was growing from their big noses and ears, as though their heads were actually covered in fur behind those wrinkled masks.

"Where?" they asked.

Their mouths were trembling so much that their false teeth rattled.

"Uh, the train station," I said.

"Jeezo..."

They looked at each other and whispered something I didn't hear. Then they both leaned towards me. Their pupils were grey; it almost looked like they were half-dead.

"I bet you'll last a week there, max," whispered one.

"A month, max," whispered the other. "Knock on wood."

And then they both knocked three times on the table that stood between them.

I backed out of the door, stumbling.

Their rough laughter rumbled behind me. "Kids these days! They're so helpless!"

Dad turned to me when I finally reached the safety of the backseat of the car. "How nice that you were chatting to those two lovely gentlemen!" I shook my head. "They weren't exactly *lovely*..." "Billie..." Mum looked sternly at me in the rear-view mirror. "But they didn't seem too happy that we'd moved here!"

"Oh, it's completely natural to be a bit sceptical of strangers," said Mum, starting the engine. "But things will start falling into place when we get to know each other a bit better. Living here will be a wonderful thing for us. Won't it, Leo?"

Dad nodded, and when Mum swung the car out onto the road again, he pinched his nose with two fingers and resumed his role as tour-guide: “Now we’ve met two of our new friends here in Helgrenda. Stay tuned, stay tuned for the next episode of *The Rosenberg family and their exciting life in the country.*”

Mum and Lukas laughed, but I put on my headphones and turned the music up full blast.

When night came, I couldn't sleep. Back home in the city, it was comforting to lie in bed at night and listen to all the familiar and reassuring sounds from the neighbouring flats: mumbling and music, laughter and babies crying. Here at the station, there were only unfamiliar sounds. The walls creaked and groaned here. And the big new plant in the corner looked like an alien with six arms.

I gave up and switched on my bedside lamp, took out a sketchbook and continued my drawing of me and Ellinor. My room was really cosy now. Dad and I had spent the whole evening putting up cupboards and shelves, and all the boxes were unpacked. My drawing pads were in a little set of shelves beside the writing bureau, along with my favourite books and my jewellery box. The fairy lights were hanging along the cornices, and the soft, new rug lay on the floor beneath Salt and Pepper's cage. They must have been exhausted after the long journey because they fell asleep soon after I'd filled up their food bowls. I was actually quite tired as well. My eyes were stinging. I had to concentrate hard in order to perfect Ellinor's eyebrow. It went badly. Because suddenly I heard a strange noise and I jumped, making the pencil line completely wonky.

I pricked up my ears.

And then I heard it again. A strange, whooshing sound.

In the city, we would hear whooshing from the ceiling if one of the upstairs neighbours had a shower or flushed the toilet. This whooshing was different. It was more like whispering. Wheezing.

Mum appeared in the doorway in her dressing gown, toothpaste in the corners of her mouth. "What, are you still awake?"

"I...can't sleep."

She sat down on the edge of the bed. "The first night in a new place is always a bit strange," she said.

Then I heard it again. That same whispering wheeze.

"Mum? Do you hear that?" I whispered.

"Hear what?"

"That weird sound?"

Mum glanced around, listening. "I don't hear anything."

I heard it loud and clear. Where did it come from?

"There's something whooshing and wheezing," I said. "Can't you hear it?"

Mum shook her head. "There are probably just some gaps in a window or two and the wind is blowing through them."

Just then, there was a loud creaking outside the room. I gripped Mum by the arm. "Did you hear that, at least?"

Mum stroked my cheek. "My darling. Old houses make lots of strange noises. Old houses are a bit different to apartment blocks in the city, you see. Old houses have *soul*."

I didn't entirely understand what she meant, but she tucked the duvet tightly around me and kissed me on the head. "Try and sleep now. Tomorrow you'll meet your new class, and that'll be exciting, won't it?"

I didn't want to think about that now. And I wasn't tired either. Not in the slightest.

"Can I finish my drawing first?" I asked.

"Okay, ten minutes. Then lights out."

Mum went out, leaving the door ajar. She didn't come back, so I finished the entire drawing, took a photo and sent it to Ellinor. It was almost midnight when I turned out the light.

Two seconds later, I turned it on again.

Because now I could hear it again. That same whooshing, wheezing sound. And it wasn't coming from the windows, the walls or the roof, but from the floor. From downstairs?

I got up and crept out of the room. The kitchen light was switched off. So was the one in the living room. But the half-moon that hung in the sky outside shone in through the living room windows and made long shadows of the cardboard boxes that were still piled on the floor like wonky mountains. On the living room rug lay Lukas' new toy train. I sneaked past it, past the silent grandfather clock. The old wooden floor whimpered beneath the soles of my feet, mixing in with Mum's snoring, which filtered through the gap in the bedroom door. I peeked inside. Beside her was Dad, wearing a sleep mask and yellow earplugs. And in between them was Lukas, which is where he usually ended up whenever he woke in the night. For a moment I wanted to crawl into bed beside them, but the whispering noises weren't letting up.

I sneaked through the living room, over to the stairs. I stopped by the banister and looked down at the steps that arched down towards the ground floor. It was silent now. Until it wasn't. Until a new sound crept towards me. Not up the stairs, but towards my back. A low, rolling sound.

I turned around. And saw something moving. On the floor. Was it Salt? Pepper? I squinted to see better in the darkness. It wasn't moving like a little animal. It was much stiffer. And then I saw what it was: Lukas' new wooden toy train.

I just stared at it. It rolled slowly out of the living room, past my feet and towards the stairs. Then it stopped at the edge of the first step. Stopped and kind of teetered. For a good while. Before it suddenly fell down nose first...

And landed with a *thump* on the next step down.

There was a thumping inside me as well. My heart pounded in my ears as I walked backwards in slow motion, back towards to the living room. I didn't look where I was putting my feet – and stood on something hard. I lost my balance and felt onto my knees. Right beside the thing I'd stumbled over: the toy train.

I stood up. Rushed back to the stairs again. Looked at the steps. The train wasn't on the next step down from the top anymore. It wasn't anywhere else on the stairs either. I went back to the living room. There it was. On the rug. As if it had been there the whole time.

I ran into my room, jumped into bed and dived under the covers. For the rest of the night, I lay there with my eyes open and my mobile in my hand. I searched online for *old houses with soul*. I tried to find out what it meant, but the only thing that came up was that you were very lucky if you lived in an old house with soul. It was so much more alive than other houses.

[...]

23

It was late at night, but Ellinor was also awake. We lay in our separate beds and sent messages that rushed back and forth, quick as lightning, over apartment blocks and mountaintops, through rain and darkness. She sent me several photos of the point guard with the shaved head. All of them were taken in secret from the stands in the hall.

Do you have any other photos of your boyfriend, or? she wrote.

He's not my boyfriend
Have you kissed?
Stop it
He probably has bad breath

??

Does he have a long tongue?
Ellinor!!
Sorry. He's really cute
He's actually really nice. And really funny
Maybe he can be my boyfriend then?

I regretted sending her a photo of Rasmus and me. One time, when I said that a boy in one of the other classes was cute, she suddenly fell in love with him.

I put my mobile away and started drawing instead. A toad. I read in the library book that the toads didn't need to be let loose in the house, but that you'd have most success by placing them close to something that had belonged to the dead person who was to be chased off. So when we came back from Mourning Forest, Rasmus and I had taken the black uniform cap that was hanging on the coat rack and placed the toad glass inside. And then we placed the hat and the glass at the very top and very back of a shelf in the office.

I finished drawing the toad, tore out the sheet from the notepad and placed it in the box in the bureau along with all the other drawings. I wasn't tired, so I picked up the bundle of love letters and read one of them. I read about Florentina, who wrote about how happy she was. She had never been so happy before in all her life. There was a rush inside her, like a waterfall. At the end of the letter, there was a lipstick kiss.

I must have fallen asleep after all, because a noise woke me with a start. A metallic clang that resounded like an echo in my ears. I checked my mobile. It was three twenty-nine in the middle of the night.

My body was slow. Sleep nagged at me, tried to drag me back to dreamland. Then I changed position and closed my eyes...

And heard a *thump*.
Then a *swish*.
Thump. Swish. Thump.

I was suddenly wide awake. I clutched the duvet tightly. Because these sounds were not coming from beneath the floor this time. They were creeping towards me. *Across* the floor.

Thump. Swish...Thump.

I didn't dare move. But I had to. I lifted my head, just a little, and peeked over the edge of the duvet.

In the darkness in front of me stood a figure. Not a long and thin figure. A little one.

I sat up in bed. "Lukas...?" I said. "What are you doing here? Can't you sleep?"

Lukas didn't move. And when my eyes started to get used to the darkness, I saw that he had something on his head. The black uniform cap.

"H-how did you get a hold of that hat?"

He just stood there, silent and stiff and staring at me. Well, I couldn't see his eyes. The brim of the hat cast a shadow over them. But I saw his mouth. It was smiling weakly, like a thin, crooked line.

"You..." I started, but just then Lukas opened his mouth. And from it came noises. Not that infectious, warbling laughter. Not tears. Not shrieking. Not the normal – and only – noises Lukas could make. They were unfamiliar noises. Words, that stuttered forth:

"GET. OUT. OF. HERE!!!"

I think all the blood ran out of me. Like a glass of juice with a hole in the bottom. I was empty of thoughts. Cold. As cold as an ice cube.

"GET OUT OF HERE!!!" repeated Lukas, with a voice that was way too dark for his little body.

Then he turned and walked out the door, his left foot dragging behind him.

Thump.

Swish...

Thump.

I gasped for air, like a fish on dry land. Through the open door I could hear the dragging steps get quieter before they disappeared completely. My heart was hammering desperately in my chest, trying to beat the life back into me, and after a while, short or long, I managed to move a finger, an arm, a foot. I stumbled out of the room, past the silent grandfather clock and all the way over to Lukas' bedroom.

He was lying in his bed, sleeping. Deep and peaceful, with the duvet half-kicked off of him and his thumb in his mouth. As though he'd been lying like that all night. I glanced around, on the floor, under the bed, under his duvet, but the black uniform cap was nowhere to be seen.

I felt his cheek. It was soft, not feverishly warm.

"Lukas?" I shook him gently. "Lukas?"

He didn't react.

Could he have found the toads and eaten them? Was that why he was acting so strange? Because they were poisonous?

I shook him harder. "Lukas! Hi! Hello!"

I didn't give up until he was awake, but Lukas wasn't saying anything now. He thought it was morning and slid eagerly onto the floor, where he started playing with his train.

There was a creak behind me. I turned around – and looked straight into Dad's tired eyes. He looked at Lukas, surprised, the sleep mask pulled up onto his forehead.

"What are you...it's way too early to get up now?" he said.

"D-Dad...there's something wrong with Lukas..." I stammered. "H-he...he was standing in my room and...*talking*."

Dad's beard sank down to his toes. I don't think I'd ever seen Dad open his mouth so wide before. You could almost fit a basketball inside. Or at least a tennis ball. "What? Lukas was *talking*?"

I nodded.

Dad became incredibly enthusiastic. "Karoline! Karoliine!" he shouted.

Mum quickly appeared in the room, with tousled hair and squinting eyes. Dad was shining like a torch in the darkness. "Billie says that Lukas *was talking*!"

Mum stifled a yawn. Then she pinched her cheek, as though she had to check that this wasn't a dream. "Is that true? What did he say? Did he say Mummy?"

"Or Daddy?" said Dad. "Did he say Daddy?"

"He said..." I stopped myself. Because suddenly I knew what they would say if I told them that Lukas had said exactly the same words that I'd found on the turquoise wallpaper. The words that none of them could see. They'd tell me that I'd heard wrong. That I'd seen wrong. That I must have dreamt it. Because Lukas was sitting here on the floor now and was just as he was before, cheerful and energetic – and silent. Not full of nasty words or a dragging gait.

"He didn't say anything," I mumbled. "I...probably just heard some sounds. From the house."

Mum sighed. Dejected. Irritated. “You have to stop waking us up at night, Billie.”

She stomped back to the bedroom.

“Mum’s a bit tired at the moment,” excused Dad. “Because of her new job, you know. She needs all the sleep she can get. We all do. Maybe you want to borrow some earplugs?”

I shook my head, and he lifted Lukas and carried him into the double bed. Not long after, all three were asleep again.

I wasn’t able to sleep. I went down to the ground floor. I didn’t want to, but I had to. I switched on the chandelier. I switched on all the lights.

The glass with the toads wasn’t on the office shelf where we’d left it.

It was in the middle of the writing desk, with all the toads inside.

The uniform cap was hanging in its permanent place on the coat rack.

I went over to it, stretched out my hand and felt it. The lining was warm.

I quickly grabbed hold of the large jam jar. I opened the window beside the writing desk and released all the toads. They hadn’t helped. All they’d done was make things worse instead.

A gust of wind grabbed the window and slammed it closed in front of me. So hard that a photo on the wall fell onto the floor.

I went over and picked it up. And when I looked at the photo, it was as if a cold snake was slithering up my back.

The photo was faded and showed a little group of men who must have worked here before. They stood lined up outside the station house and they were all wearing boiler suits. In front of them sat a man in a chair, and even though he was sitting down, he was just as tall as the others. His arms and legs were long and thin, and he was the only one dressed in a smart, dark suit. The only one who was wearing a hat: a black uniform cap with gold cord. Under the brim of the hat, I glimpsed a smile formed of a thin, crooked line – and eyes full of the night.

My neck started prickling. I turned around. To the secret door in the waiting room. And I felt it. I was completely certain. That something was watching me from back there. That someone was standing there, a crooked smile on their lips.

[...]

When I finally climbed out of the car and hurried towards the school building, I saw that the BMX was locked up in the rack. And when I went into the gym hall, Rasmus was standing there. Just like I saw him on my first day at the school. He was standing by the wall bars, doing keepie-uppies with a football.

I met his eyes. Half blue, half brown. I didn't know if I should wave or smile, and ended up doing neither. He didn't do anything either. He just continued juggling the ball between his thighs. It was as though he didn't want to show that he was scared now. As though he refused to acknowledge what had happened in Mourning Forest last time we met. How should I proceed? I wasn't as good as Mum and Dad at dressing up bad news. So I remained standing there, silent and unmoving, until Tiny whistled and divided the class into four teams for a game of corner football.

Rasmus was on the opposing team to me. Or rather, he thought he was on the red team because he was wearing his red hoodie. Stina and Sarah were on his team, but when he shouted at them to send him the ball, they didn't pass to him, and I saw how disappointed he was.

When Tiny whistled again and we took a little break so the other teams could play, I went over to him. I didn't dress it up, I just came out with it. I just said it. Because his eyes were starting to get fainter again...and that scared me. A lot.

"There's no point in shouting," I said.

He looked questioningly at me.

"Nobody is going to pass to you anyway."

He tried to hide how stung he was. "Don't you think I know that?"

"I do," I said. "But you don't know why."

"Ha, yes I do."

"Why, then?"

"Because they don't want to."

"No. Because they can't..." I swallowed. "Because they can't see you."

"Because they don't *want* to see me, you mean."

"Come."

"Huh?"

I grabbed his hand and went over to Stina and Sarah, who were sitting on the stage talking to Aleksander and Zishan.

"What's the deal with Rasmus?" I said.

Suddenly all four of them were serious.

"Why are you asking about that?" said Stina.

"Has Tiny spoken to you?" said Sarah.

"What are you doing?" whispered Rasmus to me, but I ignored him.

"What would you have said to Rasmus if he was here now?" I asked the others.

"Why are you so concerned with him?" asked Stina.

“Because I care about him.”

“You didn’t know him.”

“What if I do?” I said.

Both Stina and Sarah looked uncertainly at me.

Rasmus tried to pull his hand away, but I held tight.

“What would you have said to him?” I said to the others. “If you could have one last chance to say something to him now?”

Stina and Sarah exchanged a quick look. They sighed quietly. They were sad.

“I would have said...” whispered Stina. “That we should have asked him if he wanted to hang out with us more often.”

“I would have shown him our horror film,” said Sarah. “We made it in memory of him. To show everyone that it’s not actually that nice to ghost each other.”

“I would have asked him if he could teach me how to do tricks on my bike,” said Aleksander.

“I would have said that I miss him,” said Zishan. “Because he was always so crazy and funny.”

Tiny whistled again. “Time for the red and blue teams to play!”

Stina, Sarah and the boys ran out onto the court, but I stayed behind with Rasmus. I tried to catch his eye, but the haze in front was thick now. I couldn’t see the colour of his eyes anymore, and not his pupils either.

“Rasmus,” I whispered. “Listen...it’s extremely important that you understand what I’m telling you...”

Then he tore his hand away and ran towards the door.

I wanted to run after him, but was stopped by Stina and Sarah.

“Hey Billie?” said Stina. “Do you want to hang out with us after school?”

“It would be fun to hang out with you more,” said Sarah. “You’re really funny.”

I saw Rasmus open the door and flee.

“I...uh, I can’t today...but tomorrow?”

They both smiled. “Deal!”

And then they jogged back to the game. And while Tiny had her back turned, I rushed out of the gym hall.

I ran into the headwind. Through the rain that was pouring down. When I got close to the farm, I saw Rasmus cycling at the very bottom of the hill. He was cycling very slowly, as though he didn't have the energy to push the pedals. I caught up with him at the milk ramp.

"Rasmus! Wait!"

He turned around. His eyes were now completely gone, and his mouth and nose were barely visible.

"I know," he said. His voice was fainter. As though the words were coming from far away. "I know that you'd rather hang out with the others in class."

"No. I want to hang out with you. And I...I wish we could hang out...for a hundred years..."

"Why are you talking like that? Are you moving?"

I felt the tears coming.

"Don't you remember?" I whispered.

"Remember what?"

I turned towards the milk ramp and the fresh, colourful flowers that were lying there. "Your gran told me about an accident last autumn...that you crashed into a milk truck here..."

Now his nose was also gone. Barely a glimpse of his mouth remained.

"That's why you think your gran doesn't hear you or understand you," I said. "That's why nobody passes to you in P.E. That's why you weren't invited to the Halloween party...I'm the only one who can hear you, Rasmus. I'm the only one who can see you...Because..." My throat ached. "Because you're dead."

It was impossible to see what he was thinking. His face was now completely smooth and expressionless. But his shoulders sank. Then he threw the bike away from him and ran towards the logging trail and onwards into Mourning Forest. It was as though he had managed to muster just enough strength for his final escape.

I found him again at the lake. He was standing with the water up to his thighs and with his back to me, while the rain splashed onto the surface of the water around him. He was standing completely still. Like an old dock piling that had been forgotten and abandoned.

I went out into the water and stopped just behind him. It didn't seem like he noticed me. He was soaked through. His medium-length, golden-brown hair was stuck to his head. His arms hung loosely at his sides. His hands were trembling.

I reached out and grabbed one of his hands.

He squeezed my hand. Hard. As though he was afraid I'd let go. Then he turned to me.

His nose and his heart-shaped mouth were back on his face now. And slowly, his blue eye grew back. Then his brown eye. His gaze was direct...and filled with a raw and intense pain, grief, longing, loss, everything he had hidden at the bottom of the lake.

“How did I not realise I was dead?” he whispered.

“Maybe because...you were supposed to meet a soulmate first,” I whispered back.

Then he burst into tears. I held my arms around him. He held his arms around me. He cried, and I cried. For everything we had experienced together. For everything we would never experience together. And the sky, the trees, the birds, the toads – they all cried with us.

39

Tomorrow, Rasmus’ mother would go into the baking shed and see a big heart shaped in flour on the countertop.

Tomorrow, his gran or his father would go into the barn and see that a name was written on the nameplate outside the calf’s stall: *Rasmus*.

It was his way of saying goodbye to his family.

For my family, tomorrow would be a completely normal day. Tomorrow would also be a completely normal day for Ellinor. For Stina. For Sarah. For Aleksander and Zishan and all the others in my class. For everyone in Helgrenda. Everyone would get up and go to school or work or nursery. They’d eat breakfast and lunch and dinner. They’d play football and basketball, game, draw, listen to music and take pictures of cute boys in secret. They’d look at their mobiles and watch TV. They’d see each other. Argue a bit, maybe. Laugh. Cry.

For Rasmus and me, we only had today.

The wind had calmed down and there was drizzle in the air when we arrived at the station. The Master was standing on the stairs.

“Welcome,” he said to Rasmus, smiling. “My name is Mons, but everyone calls me the Master. I’ve been expecting you.”

He accompanied us to the ticket booth, where he gave Rasmus an old-fashioned ticket. It was thick and square and looked like a coaster. On the ticket was written the name of place Rasmus would be going: End of the Line.

“Am I going there now, right away?” said Rasmus.

“Tonight,” said the Master.

Rasmus and I looked at each other. And perhaps the Master saw how little we both wanted Rasmus to leave.

“He won’t be travelling alone,” said the Master, nodding towards Whole-Ear and Half-Ear, who were still sitting at the café table. They were awake now.

“We’ll look out for your friend, just as we’ve looked out for each other for almost ninety years,” they grinned. And then they started babbling on about how crazy it was that both the Master and the station were so different to what they had thought when they were alive. Now they were delighted that it was precisely the Master who made sure that all the dead folk who came here would have a safe final journey.

Rasmus and I sat down on one of the rows of seats.
So much I wanted to say to him.
So much I wanted to do with him.

Yet we just sat there without saying anything at all. It wasn’t necessary. We knew what each other was thinking and feeling. It was as though our souls were talking to each other without us having to say a single word.

Life was unfair. Death was unfair.

I wished that time would stand just as still as the grandfather clock in the living room, but the seconds ticked on, the minutes, the hours. Day turned to night, and when Dad shouted on me, I had to go up for supper. Mum wasn’t resting on the sofa or reading a textbook. Instead, she was in full swing painting the kitchen cupboards, and she’d collected loads of colour samples in case I wanted to paint my room. She wanted to decorate the house in our style now, without it losing its soul. Maybe I’d have better time here, if so?

When I had to go to bed, she tucked the duvet tightly around both me and Pepper and kissed us on the head.

“Hey, Mum?” I said.
“Mm?”
“Do you know anyone who’s seen a ghost?”
“Why are you thinking about that?”
“Because...”

I wanted to tell her about Rasmus, but then it struck me that if I told her about him now, about the Master, about Florentina and the Faceless, about Half-Ear and Whole-Ear, about the in-between station, then maybe she’d be convinced that there really were ghosts here and want to move? And I didn’t want to move away from here anymore. And for the first time since we arrived at the station, I felt that this really was *home*.

“Because we have a school project about ghost stories from Helgrenda,” I said.

Mum thought about it for quite a while. Then she said: “shall I tell you a secret?”

I nodded.

“My family has been doctors and researchers for many generations,” she said. “They have always believed in science, and that things that cannot be proven do not exist. But your great-great-grandmother – the one who grew up here in Helgrenda many years ago – well, she was different. She died when I was seven years old, but I remember her well. We were great friends, and it was said that she could see ghosts.”

I looked at Mum. Was she joking? It didn't look like it. The muscles in her face weren't relaxed, and she wasn't scratching her nose either.

A great-great grandmother who also saw ghosts?

“She was the one who used to say to me that you had to let go of what has been in order to make space for something new,” said Mum. “Basically, she meant that nobody is really afraid of what is new and unfamiliar. It's more a matter of being afraid to let go of what is safe and familiar.”

Mum stroked Pepper's back. “I know that Pepper has become a good friend for you here. But I'm sure you'll make plenty of other good friends in Helgrenda as well.”

While I waited for Mum and Dad to fall asleep, I drew a picture of me and Rasmus. A drawing he could take with him to End of the Line. So he wouldn't forget me. Ellinor and I still kept in contact after all, even though there were thousands of kilometres between us.

When I heard Mum's snoring fill the house, I went down to the waiting room again.

I gave Rasmus the drawing.

“Maybe we can write to each other?” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

Even though we didn't know if it was possible.

He took my hand. The warmth from him crept under my skin and made my blood bubble, and we stayed sitting like that. Up until we heard a metallic CRASH. From the living room upstairs. It was the broken grandfather clock chiming out. My mobile showed that it was three twenty-nine.

A loud, piercing sound came from outside the window: a loud, clear TOOT!

Rasmus and I peeked through the glass.

A train came rolling down the overgrown tracks. A steam engine with several carriages stretching out behind it. Even though the train was old, it looked completely new. A bat flew over the thick smoke that billowed from a pipe in the coal-black train.

“And so the train to End of the Line has arrived,” said the Master.

Rasmus and I exchanged a look. And even though everything inside me protested, I knew that it was time.

Time to say goodbye.

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The Ghost Station
Anne Elvedal

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I could see my breath. The first snowflakes of winter had settled on the platform. A flock of bats flew above the depot, screaming silently along with the gargoyles on the station roof.

Whole-Ear and Half-Ear, Rasmus and I all followed the Master, who was stomping towards the Ghost Train with quick, dragging steps. He looked anxiously at the depot.

“We have to be quick,” said the Master. “So none of the Faceless manage to sneak onboard the train.”

“What will happen if they do?” I asked.

The Master became gravely serious. “Then it will be like having the plague as a passenger – and none of the dead will make it to End of the Line.”

He opened the door of the first carriage and gestured for everyone to hurry inside.

Whole-Ear and Half-Ear went first, along with the twittering budgie.

Rasmus looked at me. His eyes were wet as well.

He stroked the green fishing net that was wound around my wrist.

“Maybe you can hang it up in Mourning Forest?” he said.

I shook my head. I would never bury Rasmus in Mourning Forest. I would never erase him from the scrapbook of my heart.

“I will always wear it,” I said. “We’ll always be connected to each other.”
He smiled.

And then he gave me a hug. A long one.

“See you in a hundred years,” he whispered.

I closed my eyes and placed his crooked smile inside my heart.

“See you,” I whispered.

Then he climbed into the carriage and sank down behind the window with Salt on his shoulder. Our eyes met. For the very last time. I was a water balloon, ready to burst at any moment.

The Master blew the whistle and waved the green flag. Rasmus waved. I waved back. Then the train started to slowly pull away. Rasmus pulled away from me. Carriage after carriage rolled past me. I saw several faces behind the windows. Old, young...

Then I jumped.

In one of the windows of the very last carriage, I caught a glimpse of a figure dressed in grey. A hood framed its face, and even though it was missing both its eyes and mouth, even though its face was as smooth as silk, it was as though it was smiling at me.

I turned around. "Master!" I shouted. "You have to stop the train!"

But the Master couldn't hear. He and the bats were fully preoccupied with chasing away several of the grey-clad Faceless who were roaming around the depot and trying to get onto the platform.

I looked at the train. I looked at the Master. If I ran to him first, then the train would manage to roll away from us before we were able to stop it. There was only one thing I could do. I had to *carpe diem*.

I started running. The train was past the platform now and I jumped down onto the tracks. I ran as fast as I could. I ran faster than the train, but it would soon start gathering speed, and then I wouldn't be able to catch up with it again. It was a matter of seconds.

I forced my legs to run even faster. Sparks flew from the train wheels in front of me. And just as the train tooted and a cloud of steam rose up to the sky, I grabbed hold of the railing at the back of the carriage – and climbed aboard.