

BEVERLY AKERMAN

The Mysteries

“YOU’LL HAVE TO GET YOURSELF to school this morning,” my mother says.

“But you always drive me,” I say. I’ve never walked to school alone before, though I know it isn’t far.

“Rebecca,” she yells, “you’re eight years old, you can get yourself to school once in a while!” She mutters something else, too. I think it’s that I make her sick. She says that sometimes. Later maybe she’ll apologize. As if that makes it better.

She was up half the night with Samuel, it’s probably another ear infection, she says. They have to get to the clinic right away, before the waiting room fills up. Without a prescription, the daycare won’t keep him. Then she’d have to stay home and how can she, it’s tax time?

“Fine,” I say. But when she comes to give me a hug goodbye, I just sit there all loose, my arms at my sides.

After they leave, I give up on breakfast. She always forgets to put cheese in my eggs, not like my dad. I wish he wasn’t away so much, but what can you do, he says, it’s a living.

For once, I can put as much raspberry jam as I want on my toast. I pick raspberries up north in the summer, raspberries grow like weeds in the country, that’s what my grandpa used to say. Sometimes when my dad’s in a good mood, he’ll make jam from the berries I pick. Even if it’s only a little, enough for one small piece of toast or even just one spoonful, he’ll still make it. It’s special, something he does just for me.

When I’ve finished my toast, I scrape my plate in the garbage and leave the dishes in the sink. I pour my milk out, too: it’s warm and there’s nothing worse than that.

I get the stuff for my backpack: lunch, notebook, pencil case and my book, *Charlotte’s Web*. I look at it and remember I was supposed to read some last night. I sit on the floor, flip through the pages. My favourite picture

is Fern feeding baby Wilbur a bottle. Wish I had a pet. Not a pig, but I'd take it if that was all I could get. What I really want is a dog. My mother says I can't have one, that she can't take care of one more living thing. I tell her I'd take care of it. I tell her and tell her, but she doesn't believe me.

E.B. White. How'd he do that? Wish I could write a book. Then I remember: I'm supposed to be getting ready for school. I get my coat and hat, leave my scarf. I hate wearing a scarf. If she notices, I'll say I forgot. My boots are at the bottom of the stairs, I kicked them off when I came in yesterday. My socks get wet when I walk down. My bag bumps along behind me. I hate wet feet. Serves me right, my mother would say, she can't do everything. But why can't she, that's what I want to know? If I say that she gets mad and sends me to my room. Once she said she'd call the police if I didn't behave, the police take children away who don't behave. I don't want to believe it, but how do I know?

Outside, I look up and down the streets. There's nobody there, nothing but duplexes, painted white or brown or turquoise, each with a tree like a dead stick out front. I go to check the time but I forgot my watch again. My mother makes a joke about forgetting my head sometimes. I never laugh when she makes it. She doesn't either. Some joke.

She's supposed to drive me, she always drives me, but that's life, like my dad says. He also says no use crying over spilt milk, but it should be no use screaming over spilt milk because I spilt some last week, and, man, was there a whole lot of screaming before it got wiped up.

The sky is grey with clouds, dark and thick like long underwear after a day of tobogganing. It's not very cold, as though the weather is deciding whether to stay winter or become spring. I see my breath. Everywhere the ice is fat, thick and shiny. Water drips from the sides of the houses and the snow piled up on balconies. Then it starts to rain. I hate this. What could be worse than walking to school alone in the rain? My nose starts to run and my pockets are empty. I take off my backpack and check it too. Finally, I wipe my nose on my mitten. Gross, but what can I do?

Halfway to school, only two more long blocks and then I'm on the street where my school is. Up the block, there's a man with a black umbrella, a long dark coat and bright red ear muffs. He has lots of grey hair, like a grandfather. My grandpa died last year; I miss him sometimes. The man comes toward me and I go toward him. What should I say because he is a stranger and I'm not supposed to talk to strangers but he's looking at me and it will be rude to walk by him and not say anything and I'm not supposed to be rude either and why don't they tell you what to do about things like this when they tell you so much other stuff you couldn't care less about anyway most of the time?

And then we meet. Because of the umbrella he takes up the whole sidewalk, so I stop. The umbrella keeps the rain off me, we are that close. We look at each other. He smiles and says “hello.”

I say “hello” back.

“Nice day,” he says.

I don’t say anything because this is so not true.

“Well,” he says, looking around. “Not really, I guess. It’s really a day to be home drinking hot chocolate, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I say, because he’s exactly right. “With marshmallows.”

His laugh is nice. “Marshmallows, I forgot the marshmallows,” he says. “We can’t have hot chocolate without marshmallows now, can we?”

“No,” I say. Imagine forgetting marshmallows if you’re having hot chocolate. “And a fire, don’t forget a fire in the fireplace, that would be nice too,” I say.

“Oh yes, a fire in the fireplace, that sounds very good.”

“And a puppy to curl up beside us. We could feed him marshmallows but not too many, because then he’d get worms. That would be disgusting.”

“Lord no, let’s not give the puppy worms. That would be disgusting,” he says and laughs again. “You’re a real little character, aren’t you?”

I don’t know what to say to that. I tell him, “I have to go. I’m late for school.”

“Well, I have a fireplace at home and I’m going there now. I’ll light it and think of you.”

I thank him because it feels like the right thing. I wish I could go with him, become somebody else, someone else’s child. If I went with him, I could have a puppy and a fireplace and some adventures. I could write a book about them when I’m older.

“You go to that school, just up there?” The man turns and points with his head.

“Yes. Just up the hill.”

“Well, it’s not far now. You won’t be too late,” he says. And I can tell he’s really a nice man. I get tears in my eyes which is silly just because someone is a bit like your dead grandpa and nice to you when you’re late for school and your father is away and your nose is running and your jacket’s getting wet straight through and your mother couldn’t care less because all she thinks about is the baby and not getting enough sleep and your father is never home to help and isn’t it his baby too?

“I’m going now. Thanks for letting me think about hot chocolate.”

He's still smiling. "No problem," he says. He moves so I can get by. As I pass, I feel his hand on my shoulder. I scoot to school fast as I can because even without my watch I can tell by now it's very late.

At the school, light shines like gold from the windows. It looks so friendly. How come I never noticed this before?

Inside, the corridors are empty. The clocks say forty minutes late, the latest I've ever been. What will Mrs. Spence say? She's the nicest grade two teacher but still, I don't think it will be very good. I put my things in my locker and stuff my wet feet in my running shoes and think about the corner. I've never been in the corner before. Maybe this will be the first time. I will hate it. It will be so embarrassing, everyone staring, knowing you did something wrong. My stomach pinches. I open the door, heavy with a shiny brass knob. Mrs. Spence is near me, at the front of the class. On the wall behind her is the blackboard, already full of writing. Above that is the alphabet in cursive. Mrs. Spence stands there with the eraser in her hand, red, white and black. She turns to look at me, everyone looks at me. "Rebecca?" she says. And just the way she says it. I burst into sobs and run to her. Mrs. Spence puts an arm round me. My face presses into her scratchy brown skirt. She smells like clean laundry. And chalk dust.

"Here, here Rebecca," she says, "what's all this, then?"

I can't say anything, just keep hugging.

"Class, please take out your readers and start the next story, 'The Naughty Squirrel,'" she says. "I'm taking Rebecca in the hall for a moment." She takes my bag off my back and leaves it on the floor. She grabs some tissues from the box on her large wood desk. We go out the door and sit on the bench. She gives me the tissues. I blow my nose.

"Goodness, what's wrong Rebecca? You're so late today," she says. I'm looking at the floor, black and white, like a checkerboard. I swing my feet. "My brother's sick and my mother had to take him to the clinic, so I had to get myself to school. And I'm so late, I was afraid you'd put me in the corner," I say, trying not to hiccup.

"Oh, Rebecca. Please don't worry about the corner. Sometimes things happen and we're late and that's okay. So long as we're doing our best, people will understand. Right Rebecca?"

I nod but don't look at her. What she says is nice but trying your best isn't always enough. She pats my back. I still can't look at her. If I do, I'm afraid I'll start crying again.

"Are you sure that's all this is about? Because you've been late before Rebecca, but you've never been upset like this."

She's so nice. There is a reason I'm so late, isn't there? "A man stopped me on the way to school," I tell her.

“A man,” she says. “On the way to school.” She doesn’t say anything for a bit, then, “Was it someone you know?”

“No,” I say, “it was a strange man.”

“Did he talk to you?”

“Yes.”

“What about?”

“We talked about hot chocolate.”

“Hot chocolate,” she says. Her voice changes but I don’t know why. Is she mad at me? Because I talked to him? She’s so nice to me and now I’m making her mad. What a dope I am.

“Did this man ask you to come with him for hot chocolate?” she says.

“I don’t know,” I say. “He talked about hot chocolate and what a not nice day it was. He said he’d light the fireplace at his house. He asked me if this was my school.”

“Anything else?”

“Puppies,” I say. “I’m not allowed to have a puppy.” Now why did I tell her that? It just jumped out. I don’t tell her that once my parents sat me down and told me something wonderful was going to happen. I thought it was a puppy but it was just the baby coming.

“I think we should go to the office,” Mrs. Spence says. And I know I must have done something wrong but I can’t tell what it is. She says, “Rebecca, please don’t cry,” and her voice sounds more normal. Maybe it will be all right.

I say, “Okay, let’s go.”

The vice-principal is walking in the hall and Mrs. Spence says, “Miss Harding, could you take my class for a moment while I bring Rebecca to the office?”

“Of course,” Miss Harding says. She stares at Mrs. Spence for a moment, then at me. Did Mrs. Spence say something? If she did, I didn’t hear it. Maybe she just moved her lips, but why would she do that?

We walk to the office. Mrs. Spence holds my hand. There’s the hum of the lights and the click of her shoes. This isn’t good. There’s that pinch in my stomach again.

At the office, Mrs. Spence talks to the secretary. I can’t hear anything, my heart thumps so loud in my ears. The principal’s office is worse than the corner. Only the baddest children are sent here. My stomach pinches even more.

Mr. Norman is bald and wears a blue suit and a blue tie. He smoothes the tie over his belly and tells us to sit down. His office is huge and white. The calendar on the wall is white and red with black boxes around black

numbers. Rain slides down the windows. When we're sitting, Mrs. Spence says, "Rebecca met a strange man outside the school on her way in this morning and it's upset her. Isn't that right Rebecca?" The smile leaves Mr. Norman's face.

I say, "Yes, yes," nodding too because my voice sounds funny. I remember my father telling me teachers used to smack his hands with a ruler when he misbehaved and my grandpa saying, "That's nothing, we used to get the strap across our buttocks," and maybe I shouldn't have said anything about that man.

Mr. Norman tells me to stand outside the door. The secretary has frizzy blonde hair and a puffy face. Her fingers whiz along the keyboard. I watch her, wishing I had a computer.

When they call me back, Mr. Norman is on the phone. Mrs. Spence says he's calling the police. "Maybe they can still find the man before he talks to someone else."

I bite the inside of my cheek. "Why the police?" I say. "I hardly spoke to him."

"Because he may be dangerous," Mrs. Spence says, and this is big news to me. I had no idea. Grownups know so many things, I wish I knew how. I guess that's why we have to go to school. Not just for learning math and spelling and gym but for other things. For mysteries.

"May I please have my mother with me if I have to talk to the police?"

"Of course," she says, "but you mustn't be afraid, because the police are here to help us." That's the kind of thing they tell you at school. She doesn't know my grandpa said the police are a bunch of damn crooks no better than the gangsters. When Mr. Norman gets off the phone, she asks him to call my mother.

"No wait," I say, "maybe she can't come. It's tax time."

Mr. Norman looks at Mrs. Spence. "Rebecca's mother's an accountant," she tells him.

I don't want my mother to come. She said she'd call the police if I kept misbehaving. Now the police are coming. Maybe she'll tell them to take me while they're here because she gives up. She says this sometimes when I make her angry, when I take things from the baby. Or spill the milk. She says I make her sick or push her round the bend. Like she hates me. Now I'm crying again. I don't even care anymore if they see.

Mr. Norman calls my mother's work. The secretary got the number from a file cabinet. My mother isn't there yet so he leaves a message to call him back. The police arrive and, man, are they tall and they wear such dark jackets and hats. My stomach feels worse than before. Mr. Norman and

the secretary bring in more chairs but then Mrs. Spence decides to go back to class. When she leaves, it's just me and the three men. The police tell me their names but I'm so scared I forget them right away. They put their coats on the back of the chairs and their hats on the principal's desk. Their hats have drops of water shining on the tops. I see the guns on their belts, in brown leather holders and then I know the police really are big trouble, just like grandpa said.

"I had a little girl like you," says the older police. The way he says it. I want to ask what happened to her, did she just grow up, or what? I wonder if she spoke to strangers. Maybe she would know better if her father's the police.

"Should we wait for her mother?" says Mr. Norman.

"That could take too long, we might miss him," says the policeman. He turns to me. "Do you mind if I ask a few questions?"

I say, "okay."

He says, "This man who spoke to you, what did he look like?"

"He was an old man, even older than you, like a grandfather," I say. "He had grey hair. He had red ear muffs."

"What else was he wearing?"

I tell them about the long dark coat and the black umbrella. "That's all I remember," I say.

"Colour of his eyes?"

"I don't remember." The policeman doesn't look happy with this.

"He have a moustache or a beard?"

"No," I say.

"He tell you to come with him?"

"I'm not sure," I say.

"Either he did or he didn't," the policeman says.

"He talked to you about hot chocolate, right," says Mr. Norman, "and puppies?" Both police look at him, then back at me.

"Did he tell you to come with him?" the policeman asks again.

He told me he'd light the fireplace for me, didn't he? "Yes," I say, "yes, he did. He told me to come with him."

"Did he touch you?"

"Uh-huh. He put his hand on my shoulder when I walked by."

"Was he trying to keep you from going?" asks the older police.

This scares me more. Why would he do that? And why is the younger one here, anyway? He never says anything. "I don't know," I say.

"Either he did or he didn't," the policeman says again. He's starting to sound mean.

I have to think about this. He touched my shoulder. To keep me from leaving? Why else? “Yes,” I say then. “But I ran away from him, to the school.”

“He asked if this was your school, right?” says the talking police.

“Yes.”

“Did he say he’d come back for you?”

This scares me. Why would he come back? “I don’t remember.”

“Either he did or he didn’t,” the policeman says and now I’m sure he’s mad at me. “Maybe,” I say.

“Maybe’s not an answer,” he says. He sounds sort of like my mother when she says I make her sick.

“Why would he come back for me?” I turn to Mr. Norman. He doesn’t say anything. The policeman says again, “Did he say he’d come back for you?”

They’re all making me mad now. Why doesn’t Mr. Norman help? And why did that stupid man have to start talking to me, anyway? This is all his fault. I stick my chin out. “He said he’d come back,” I say and suddenly my heart is jumping in my chest. Because this is a big, fat lie. That man better not come back. If he does, they’ll put him in jail and it’ll be all my fault. And when they find out I’m lying, I’ll get in real trouble. I remember the ruler and the strap. They don’t do that anymore, do they? My stomach pinches me worse than ever.

“Right,” the policeman says. He turns to Mr. Norman. “We’ll go on out, see if we can find him. He can’t have gotten far.” Then he turns back to me and says “You shouldn’t talk to strangers, didn’t anybody ever tell you that?”

And that’s when I have to stop looking at him. I can’t say anything else. This is my fault, I know it is. I should have been on time. If I hadn’t dawdled, I never would have met that man, never would have spoken to him.

“Well,” he says. He stands up and then the other men do, too. The police put on their stuff. Mr. Norman shakes their hands. The young one still hasn’t said a word but he ruffles my hair as he walks past me, the older one, too. My grandpa used to do that, instead of a hug, he said. But why would the police want to hug me?

When they’re gone, Mr. Norman takes me back to class. As he opens the door, he says, “Here you go.” I thank him. He pats my head as I pass. I go sit at my desk. “All right?” asks Mrs. Spence. Mr. Norman nods and leaves. I look at the corner, smile, and say, “Yes, all right.”

“Good,” she says. “We’re doing page eighty-seven in our math book.” So I go up to her desk for my backpack, then back to my seat. I get out my

stuff but I can't do any work. The numbers dance along the page. Too bad, math is usually my favourite. I look out the window. Still raining. I pick at a scab near my elbow till it bleeds. I don't look at anyone else. I feel funny about everything.



At eleven thirty, the bell rings. Before I can pull out my lunch, though, Miss Harding's at the door. She says my mother's at the office. When I think of the police again, my stomach feels so bad, I think I might throw up.

I leave all my things on my desk. "You can get them later," Miss Harding says. She doesn't give me her hand. Mrs. Spence watches us leave with a funny look on her face. What does it mean? Worried, maybe? That makes me feel worse.

In the hallway, hundreds of kids talk and walk and run, pushing and teasing until they see Miss Harding, then they stop. But soon as we pass, I know they'll start again and she knows too. So why am I the only one in trouble?

We get to the part of the building where the principal's office is. It's quieter here. Miss Harding has an office here too. It's smaller of course. Because she is the under principal, she's less important. He's the big boss of the whole school.

I look up and at the end of the hallway I see my mother in her camel hair coat with the large buttons, leather gloves in one hand, her purse hanging over her arm. Light from the school's front doors is behind her. She looks very beautiful, her lips the colour of raspberry jam. She stands with Mr. Norman. She is taller than him and much, much younger. He tries to stand straighter, what a silly thing. They are talking and don't see me. We get closer. Maybe I should turn around and run back down the hall because she will surely have had enough, she will give up, I will have made her sick all over again. I walk slower and slower until I stop. Miss Harding turns and says, "Rebecca dear, let's get a move on."

My mother and Mr. Norman stop talking and look at us. Then my mother comes toward me, the only sounds the click of her heels and the buzz of the lights. My stomach hurts more than ever. She comes right up to me, stops and stares down. I look up at her, I want to look away but I can't. I feel very strange, like this moment is frozen, like this moment can't decide whether to stay winter or become spring.

Then she drops down onto her knees and throws her arms around me, so tight it takes my breath away. "Honey, oh honey," she says, "are you

really okay?” Her next words all run together. “Tell-me-baby-sweet-Jesus-are-you-really-all-right?”

And I am so surprised. I was sure she would yell at me again. She will when she finds out. Lying is much worse than talking to strangers. And lying to the police, sending someone to jail ... I don't want to think about how bad that is.

Over my mother's shoulder I see Miss Harding put her hand over her mouth. Mr. Norman clears his throat and looks away. My mother keeps holding me, her purse pressing hard into my side. I hug her back, hard too. The pain fills my whole inside, from my stomach to my chest. I close my eyes and try to think of good things, like raspberries and puppies and my grandpa and my dad coming home soon. But then the police in their black uniforms, the gangsters and the guns, the rulers and the strap jump into my mind, I can't stop them. And then there's all the things I don't understand, like how did they know that man was dangerous? Why did he have to talk to me? What will happen when they find him? And how come I told all those lies?

And I know I can never ask. Because if I do, everyone will know how bad I really am. And because I'm only eight years old. And grownups never explain anything.