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Britt-Marie Was Here

Written by Fredrik Backman

Translated from the Swedish by Henning Koch

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BRITT-MARIE WAS HERE

FREDRIK BACKMAN

Translated from the Swedish
by Henning Koch



SCEPTRE

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Borg is an imaginary place, and any apparent resemblance to real places is coincidental.

To my mother, who always made sure there was food in my stomach and books on my shelf.

'You love football because it's instinctive.
If a ball comes rolling down the street you give it a punt.
You love it for the same reason that you fall in love.
Because you don't know how to avoid it.'

1



Forks. Knives. Spoons.

In that order.

Britt-Marie is certainly not the kind of person who judges other people. Far from it.

But surely no civilised person would even think of arranging a cutlery drawer in a different way from how cutlery drawers are supposed to be arranged?

We're not animals, are we?

It's a Monday in January. She's sitting at a desk in the unemployment office. Admittedly there's no cutlery in sight, but it's on her mind because it sums up everything that's gone wrong recently. Cutlery should be arranged as it always has been, because life should go on unchanged. Normal life is presentable. In normal life you clean up the kitchen and keep your balcony tidy and take care of your children. It's hard work – harder than one might think. In normal life you certainly don't find yourself sitting in the unemployment office.

The girl who works here has staggeringly short hair, Britt-Marie thinks, like a man's. Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course – it's modern, no doubt. The girl points at a piece of paper and smiles, evidently in a hurry.

'Just fill in your name, social security number, and address here, please.'

Britt-Marie has to be registered. As if she were a criminal. As if she has come to steal a job rather than find one.

‘Milk and sugar?’ the girl asks, pouring some coffee into a plastic mug.

Britt-Marie doesn’t judge anyone. Far from it. But who would behave like that? A plastic mug! Are we at war? She’d like to say just that to the girl, but because Kent is always urging Britt-Marie to ‘be more socially aware’ she just smiles as diplomatically as she can and waits to be offered a coaster.

Kent is Britt-Marie’s husband. He’s an entrepreneur. Incredibly, incredibly successful. Has business dealings with Germany and is extremely, extremely socially aware.

The girl offers her two tiny disposable cartons of the sort of milk that doesn’t have to be kept in the fridge. Then she holds out a plastic mug with plastic teaspoons protruding from it. Britt-Marie could not have looked more startled if she’d been offered roadkill.

She shakes her head and brushes her hand over the table as if it was covered in invisible crumbs. There are papers everywhere, in any old order. The girl clearly doesn’t have time to tidy them up, Britt-Marie realises – she’s probably far too busy with her career.

‘OK,’ says the girl pleasantly, turning back to the form, ‘just write your address here.’

Britt-Marie fixes her gaze on her lap. She misses being at home with her cutlery drawer. She misses Kent, because Kent is the one who fills in all the forms.

When the girl looks like she's about to open her mouth again, Britt-Marie interrupts her.

‘You forgot to give me a coaster,’ says Britt-Marie, smiling, with all the social awareness she can muster. ‘I don’t want to make marks on your table. Could I trouble you to give me something to put my . . . coffee cup on?’

She uses that distinctive tone, which Britt-Marie relies on whenever she has to summon all her inner goodness, to refer to it as a ‘cup’ even though it is a plastic mug.

‘Oh don’t worry, just put it anywhere.’

As if life was as simple as that. As if using a coaster or

organising the cutlery drawer in the right order didn't matter. The girl – who clearly doesn't appreciate the value of coasters, or proper cups, or even mirrors, judging by her hairstyle – taps her pen against the paper, by the 'address' box.

'But surely we can't just put our cups on the table? That leaves marks on a table, surely you see that.'

The girl glances at the surface of the desk, which looks as if toddlers have been trying to eat potatoes off it. With pitchforks. In the dark.

'It really doesn't matter, it's so old and scratched up already!' she says with a smile.

Britt-Marie is screaming inside.

'I don't suppose you've considered that it's because you don't use coasters,' she mutters, not at all in a 'passive-aggressive' way, which is how Kent's children once described her when they thought she wasn't listening. Britt-Marie is not actually passive-aggressive. She's considerate. After she heard Kent's children saying she was passive-aggressive she was extra-considerate for several weeks.

The unemployment office girl looks a little strained. 'OK . . . what did you say your name was? Britt, right?'

'Britt-Marie. Only my sister calls me Britt.'

'OK, Britt-Marie, if you could just fill in the form. Please.'

Britt-Marie peers at the paper, which requires her to give assurances about where she lives and who she is. An unreasonable amount of paperwork is required these days just to be a human being. A preposterous amount of administration for society to let one take part. In the end she reluctantly fills in her name, social security number and her mobile telephone number. The address box is left empty.

'What's your educational background, Britt-Marie?'

Britt-Marie squeezes her handbag.

'I'll have you know that my education is excellent.'

'But no formal education?'

'For your information, I solve an enormous number of

crosswords. Which is not the sort of thing one can do without an education.'

She takes a very small gulp of the coffee. It doesn't taste like Kent's coffee at all. Kent makes very good coffee, everyone says so. Britt-Marie takes care of the coasters and Kent takes care of the coffee.

'OK . . . What sort of life experience do you have?'

'My latest employment was as a waitress. I had outstanding references.'

The girl looks hopeful. 'And when was that?'

'1978.'

'Ah . . . and you haven't worked since then?'

'I have worked *every day* since then. I've helped my husband with his company.'

Again the girl looks hopeful. 'And what sorts of tasks did you perform in the company?'

'I took care of the children and saw to it that our home was presentable.'

The girl smiles to hide her disappointment, as people do when they don't have the ability to distinguish between 'a place to live' and 'a home'. It's actually thoughtfulness that makes the difference. Because of thoughtfulness there are coasters and proper coffee cups and beds that are made so tightly in the mornings that Kent jokes with his acquaintances about how, if you stumble on the threshold on your way into the bedroom, there's 'a smaller risk of breaking your leg if you land on the floor than the bedspread.' Britt-Marie loathes it when he talks that way. Surely civilised people lift their feet when they walk across bedroom thresholds?

Whenever Britt-Marie and Kent go away, Britt-Marie sprinkles the mattress with bicarbonate of soda for twenty minutes before she makes the bed. The bicarbonate of soda absorbs dirt and humidity, leaving the mattress much fresher. Bicarbonate of soda helps almost everything, in Britt-Marie's experience. Kent usually complains about being late; Britt-Marie clasps her hands together over her stomach and says: 'I absolutely must be allowed to make the bed before we leave, Kent. Just imagine if we die!'

This is the actual reason why Britt-Marie hates travelling. Death. Not even bicarbonate of soda has any effect on death. Kent says she exaggerates, but people do actually drop dead all the time when they're away, and what would the landlord think if they had to break down the door only to find an unclean mattress? Surely they'd conclude that Kent and Britt-Marie lived in their own dirt?

The girl checks her watch.

'O . . . K,' she says.

Britt-Marie feels her tone has a note of criticism in it.

'The children are twins and we have a balcony. It's more work than you think, having a balcony.'

The girl nods tentatively.

'How old are your children?'

'Kent's children. They're thirty.'

'So they've left home?'

'Obviously.'

'And you're sixty-three years old?'

'Yes,' says Britt-Marie dismissively, as if this was highly irrelevant.

The girl clears her throat as if, actually, it's very relevant indeed.

'Well, Britt-Marie, quite honestly, because of the financial crisis and all that, I mean, there's a scarcity of jobs for people in your . . . situation.'

The girl sounds a bit as if 'situation' was not her first choice as a way of concluding the sentence. Britt-Marie smiles patiently.

'Kent says that the financial crisis is over. He's an entrepreneur, you must understand. So he understands these kind of things, which are possibly a little outside your field of competence.'

The girl blinks for an unnecessary amount of time. Checks her watch. She seems uncomfortable, which vexes Britt-Marie. She quickly decides to give the girl a compliment, just to show her goodwill. She looks around the room for something to compliment her about, and finally manages to say, with as generous a smile as she can muster:

‘You have a very modern hairstyle.’

‘What? Oh. Thanks,’ she replies, her fingertips moving self-consciously towards her scalp.

‘It’s very courageous of you to wear your hair so short when you have such a large forehead.’

Why does the girl look offended, Britt-Marie wonders? Clearly that’s what happens when you try to be sociable towards young people these days. The girl rises from her chair.

‘Thanks for coming, Britt-Marie. You are registered on our database. We’ll be in touch!’

She holds out her hand to say goodbye. Britt-Marie stands up and places the plastic mug of coffee in her hand.

‘When?’

‘Well, it’s difficult to say.’

‘I suppose I’m supposed to just sit and wait,’ counters Britt-Marie with a diplomatic smile, ‘As if I didn’t have anything better to do?’

The girl swallows.

‘Well, my colleague will be in touch with you about a jobseekers’ training course, an—’

‘I don’t want a course. I want a job.’

‘Absolutely, but it’s difficult to say when something will turn up . . .’

Britt-Marie gets out a notebook from her pocket.

‘Shall we say tomorrow, then?’

‘What?’

‘Could something turn up tomorrow?’

The girl clears her throat.

‘Well, it could, or I’d rather s . . .’

Britt-Marie gets out a pencil from her bag, eyes the pencil with some disapproval and then looks at the girl.

‘Might I trouble you for a pencil sharpener?’ she asks.

‘A pencil sharpener?’ asks the girl, as if she had been asked for a thousand-year-old magical artefact.

‘I need to put our meeting on the list.’

Some people don’t understand the value of lists, but

Britt-Marie is not one of those people. She has so many lists that she has to keep a separate list to list all the lists. Otherwise anything could happen. She could die. Or forget to buy bicarbonate of soda.

The girl offers her a biro and says something to the effect of, 'Actually I don't have time tomorrow,' but Britt-Marie is too busy peering at the biro to hear what she's saying.

'Surely we can't write lists in *ink*?' she bursts out.

'That's all I've got.' The girl says this with some finality. 'Is there anything else I can help you with today, Britt-Marie?'

'Ha,' Britt-Marie responds after a moment.

Britt-Marie often says that. 'Ha.' Not as in 'ha-ha' but as in 'Aha,' spoken in a particularly disappointed tone. Like when you find a wet towel thrown on the bathroom floor.

'Ha.' Immediately after saying this, Britt-Marie always firmly closes her mouth, to emphasise this is the last thing she intends to say on the subject. Although it rarely is the last thing.

The girl hesitates. Britt-Marie grasps the biro as if it's sticky. Looks at the list marked 'Tuesday' in her notebook, and, at the top, above 'Cleaning' and 'Shopping,' she writes 'Unemployment office to contact me.'

She hands back the pen.

'It was very nice to meet you,' says the girl robotically. 'We'll be in touch!'

'Ha,' says Britt-Marie with a nod.

Britt-Marie leaves the unemployment office. The girl is obviously under the impression that this is the last time they'll meet, because she's unaware of how scrupulously Britt-Marie sticks to her lists. Clearly the girl has never seen Britt-Marie's balcony.

It's an astonishingly, astonishingly presentable balcony.

It's January outside, a winter chill in the air but no snow on the ground – below zero without any evidence of it being so. The very worst time of year for balcony plants.

After leaving the unemployment office, Britt-Marie goes to a supermarket that is not her usual supermarket, where she buys everything on her list. She doesn't like shopping on her own,

because she doesn't like pushing the shopping trolley. Kent always pushes the shopping trolley, while Britt-Marie walks at his side and holds on to a corner of it. Not because she's trying to steer, only that she likes holding on to things while he is also holding on to them. For the sake of feeling that they are going somewhere at the same time.

She eats her dinner cold at exactly six o'clock. She's used to sitting up all night waiting for Kent, so she tries to put his portion in the fridge. But the only fridge here is full of very small bottles of alcohol. She lowers herself onto a bed that isn't hers, while rubbing her ring finger, a habit she falls into when she's nervous.

A few days ago she was sitting on her own bed, spinning her wedding ring, after cleaning the mattress extra-carefully with bicarbonate of soda. Now she's rubbing the white mark on her skin where the ring used to be.

The building has an address, but it's certainly neither a place to live nor a home. On the floor are two rectangular plastic boxes for balcony flowers, but the hostel room doesn't have a balcony. Britt-Marie has no one to sit up all night waiting for.

But she sits up anyway.