

Bilberry

By Ari Juels

For his wife Bonnie on her thirty-fifth birthday

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Bilberry was the sixty-ninth of eighty children, and the youngest male in his family. You may find it surprising that he had so many brothers and sisters. But in a rabbit family—as Bilberry, I should mention, was a rabbit—large numbers of offspring are not unusual.

You may also find it surprising that a bilberry is a dark blue fruit, but Bilberry was a dark brown rabbit, and one with a white half-crescent on his forehead at that. Bilberry wasn't named for his fur color, though. Rabbits, you see, are born without fur. And rabbit families are so large that parents must bring particular discipline to the naming process, even if they don't to other aspects of family planning. They fix on a category of items—foodstuffs or beverages, say—then run off to a place like the supermarket or a farmer's market to harvest name ideas for their brood. Bilberry's parents decided to name all of their male progeny after fruits. By the time Bilberry himself came along, there were few good fruit-name choices left. Kiwi—a furry fruit name popular among rabbits—was already assigned to number seven. And Pummelo—also popular because many rabbits are so very plump and round—had gone to number thirteen. So Bilberry became Bilberry. Still, Bilberry felt lucky. His sisters were all named after liquors and cordials.

With so many brothers and sisters in the family, you may wonder why we've chosen to tell a story about Bilberry. Bilberry had more accomplished brothers and sisters, after all. His sister Chartreuse was an up-and-coming attorney who worked with her mother in class-action suits against detergent firms. His sister Kirsch was a rabbit bounty-hunter, like her father, and a very good one at that. And Bilberry's brother Tangelo was a singer of an eclectic type of “wordless” rabbit reggae, whose almost exclusively instrumental emphasis did not preclude healthy album sales.

But Bilberry was the most adventurous of his family. His brothers and sisters lollopped confidently within their spheres of influence. But they were small spheres, confined mostly to the family's small township, with occasional trips to a club in Soho or to the federal district court. Bilberry liked to travel to faraway places.

As a rabbit of limited means, he had to travel in ways that you or I might not consider. He tried to find work as an air courier, but who would entrust a ten-inch-long rabbit with a kidney sent urgently for transplant? He also tried to find work as an airline steward. But rabbits are not talkative animals. Awkward silences blemished his interviews. And while the airlines liked Bilberry's gentle ways, they felt that his “tick”—his nose twitched incessantly, you see—would be offputting to passengers. He did once come close. A hiring manager felt that Bilberry's twitching might stimulate alcohol sales among anxious passengers. But when Bilberry responded to mention of vodka by talking about his sister Vodka and her career as a letter opener, sadly the job slipped away.

Bilberry, however, had a friend at the United States Postal Service. For a small, avid traveler, this was an excellent thing.

Bilberry's first voyage by post was to Singapore. He had always heard that the food there was excellent, and that there was a public ginger garden. For this journey, Bilberry

prepared a nice, thick cardboard box. He lined it with plenty of straw, and outfitted it with:

- A cushioned seat with a seat belt and shoulder straps like one he'd seen in the movie Apollo 13;
- A helmet;
- A concealed, lockable flap for ingress and egress;
- A week's supply of food and water;
- A small plastic tub with an odor-proof cover;
- A small bolus of fresh ginger for motion sickness;
- A collection of microfiche comic books;
- An LED flashlight; and
- An international postage voucher, good for a return trip with some souvenirs.

Bilberry marked the box "Urgent" in English, French, Chinese, Malay, and Hindi, and addressed it to the U.S. Embassy in Singapore. He brought it to the post office, watched excitedly as his friend applied an "Overnight" label to it, and climbed in...

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Four-and-twenty hours later, with every provision exhausted except his food, trying with all his nauseous might to imagine himself in the public ginger garden, Bilberry arrived in Singapore. He knew he had arrived when he heard the following conversation outside his box:

"It's not addressed to anyone."

"Then it's *not* a bomb. Bombs are always addressed to someone."

"How do you know?"

"Because there's no point in blowing up nobody, is there now?"

A shout came from another room. The voices receded. Cautiously, Bilberry emerged from the secret flap into the mail room of the U.S. embassy. With heroic tugging at a metal drawer and then a running kick that sent his box flying several yards, he managed to hide it in a filing cabinet. He slipped out a rear door of the building, scrabbled through the gate, and made his way to the street—at last, in a foreign country!

Foreignness was in the very air. It was thick, humid air, blindingly bright. It made Bilberry at first wish he had white fur and then, on second thought, that he could for the moment remove his fur. He didn't go far, however, before finding refuge in an air conditioned shopping mall.

Here, in so many forms that he trembled to behold it, was the bounty Bilberry had dreamed of. There were restaurants of every flavor, stripe, and scent. A supermarket sold fruit—no, not fruit, but juicy objects of legend whose names he only heard when his mother summoned his brothers for dinner. Durians and dragon fruit, rambutans and stone fruit, star fruit and mangosteens. O Brave New World, where the roll call of contenders at the family trough was transformed into nectar and ambrosia!

Not yet daring to break the spell of heavenly gifts in this mall by selecting one of them, Bilberry was staring at a gigantic, illuminated fountain that spewed forth what seemed to be a pineapple, when he heard a gasp, and a canister of tennis balls slammed into his flank. A woman's shopping bag had burst. Its contents had dashed helter-skelter across the broad, slick floor. Bilberry collected some smaller items of escaped merchandise. He was helping the woman secure them in a second, still larger and more overfilled bag, when she scooped him up and, ignoring his soulful but mute protestations, stuffed him into a clump of silk stockings.

He tried to paw his way out, but the silk enveloped him. He tried to gnaw his way out, but only succeeded in creating runs in the stockings. It was when panic gave way to exhaustion—and the hammock-like swinging of the shopping-bag prison calmed his nerves—that he observed, not too far away from him, another rabbit.

"Excuse me," Bilberry asked, "do you know how to get out of here?"

"No," said the other rabbit mournfully, "I want to go back."

"Go back where?"

"To the shop."

"What shop?"

"The pet shop where I was sold. Don't you?"

"No," Bilberry said indignantly. Realizing then that tastes differ, and he might have caused offense, he softened his tone. "No, I come from another country."

"Oh," said the other rabbit, unmoved by this dash of cosmopolitanism.

"But not a pet shop," Bilberry clarified.

"Oh," said the other rabbit. Then he added, "I'm scared."

Bukit Timah was his name. The life of the pet shop was the only one he'd known. He was gentle and provincial, terrified by sudden withdrawal from his refuge of plate glass, screening, and the cheek-by-jowl camaraderie of other rabbits. Bilberry did what his elder siblings would have done: He told stories to the frightened rabbit. Stories of adventure, stories of travel, stories about the wider world and the grand variety of life and things beyond glass. It wasn't long before Bukit Timah forgot the unsettling jounce of the bag, the uncertain prospect of wholesome food and water, the inviting but too-tightly sealed canister of roasted peanuts pressing into his haunch. He wanted to learn more about what a restaurant was.

There was no time for cultural digressions, though, before their journey ended. The woman dropped and then unpacked her bag, an interminable process that involved a trying-on of every item of clothing, a call to a shop to complain about defective stockings, and then a call to an office to say she'd be returning soon from her doctor's appointment. Only when the bag was nearly empty did she retrieve the rabbits. They were picked up, scratched briefly on their bellies (a thing that Bilberry particularly hated), and dumped into a glass cage, along with a carrot and a parsnip.

This cage was not empty. When the rabbits landed—plop, plop—a hamster in a corner of the cage raised his head from a compact position of sleep and eyed them groggily. Then it tucked back its head and resumed its sleep.

Bukit Timah, who was still alive to the world's novelties and had never before seen a parsnip, gnawed on dinner. Bilberry inspected his new prison. The sides and

bottom were solid glass. The top was removable, but he had no way to reach it, and certainly no way to lever it off. And he could make out anyway what appeared to be clamps on either side; he'd seen the woman somehow securing the top. A water bottle hung from the top of the cage. There was an exercise wheel, a food bowl, a restroom of sorts consisting of a plastic box, a floor of cedar shavings—and nothing else. He'd known rabbits who could slip through a mouse hole. But here the situation seemed hopeless.

The hamster awoke a little later, had a light meal consisting of some noisome pellets and water from the hanging bottle, and then went for a short jog (in his wheel). He ignored the addresses of the two rabbits. They thought at first that he might be deaf, but after several tries, his look of contempt was unmistakable. He obviously disliked sharing his home.

Defeated, Bilberry curled up in a corner and slept.

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He woke in the middle of the night. He had never experienced jetlag before, and did not understand how he could be so wide awake in the dark. (Like most rabbits, Bilberry was crepuscular, meaning that he was active at dawn and dusk.) When his eyes adjusted, he again examined the cage. It seemed even more dismal, larger, more infernal now than by day. Vague shapes loomed outside. Given that the hamster had been sleeping during the day, Bilberry wondered if the creature was nocturnal. He scanned the cage, but did not see it. This was strange: The cedar shavings were too shallow for concealment; while dark, there was just enough light to make out a small animal.

Then his blood froze. Outside the cage, he saw a form move across the back of an armchair—too large, too lithe to be a hamster. It paused. Bilberry could feel its eyes upon him—two, green, impassive glints. The cat jumped from the chair and approached, noiselessly. A few feet from the cage, it crouched, ready to spring. Bilberry shut his eyes. He knew that the plate glass protected him. He supposed that he was too large—if only slightly—to serve as prey for this animal—it would at worst maul him a bit—but he could not move. He waited and waited, and then opened one eye. The cat had risen and was staring with bland malevolence. Then it walked away, swishing its tail slightly.

When the blood returned to his limbs, Bilberry decided to search again for the hamster. Clearly the hamster could not be outside the cage, with a cat on the prowl. He moved gently to avoid waking Bukit Timah, who was sleeping huddled by his side. He searched the entire cage. There could be no mistake. The hamster was gone—out—out there, somehow, with the cat.

Escape, then, might be possible. For a hamster, at least. They were notorious, like mice, for their ability to slip through the tiniest cracks. Bilberry would watch and wait for the hamster to return. Jetlag, though, doesn't just prop open eyes at inconvenient hours. It shuts them with equal disregard for the clock and for willpower. Come dawn, the hamster had not returned, but Bilberry, for all his eagerness to find a path to freedom, felt his vigilance subsiding, washed away by sleep, no longer in his heart now, but just a thought gnawing at his tranquility...

When he awoke, well into the morning, the hamster was back, asleep in its corner. Its round rump, Bilberry thought, looked particularly smug.

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Bilberry didn't know whether Bukit Timah had seen the cat. He worried that the mere sight of the cat would make his timid friend ill. Rabbits have even been known to have heart attacks at the sight of a death-dealing predator. But Bukit Timah *had* seen the cat that morning. He'd seen many cats in his lifetime—in the pet shop. Those cats were always in cages, and Bukit Timah had great faith in plate glass. Bilberry certainly wasn't going to tell him that the cage, for all its crystal solidity, was somehow not as tight as it seemed.

Bilberry slept as hard as he could that whole day to prepare for his nighttime vigil. And the next night, he waited again. Again, however, the poor rabbit, exhausted now not just by jetlag but worry, fell asleep soon after dusk.

But this time, in the middle of the night, he was roused by a noise. When he opened his eyes, the hamster was already on the move. It had nudged its wheel to the side of the cage, near the water bottle. It jammed the bottle's spout between two spokes of the wheel, immobilizing it. Then it climbed to the top of the wheel. Bilberry now saw that the cat was just a few feet away, watching the hamster's acrobatics, hungrily it seemed. He wondered by what marvel or stroke of magic this hamster, poised now like a daredevil atop its wheel, its front paws raised as though to leap or dive, would escape not only its cage, but also the green-eyed predator without. Then the strangest thing happened. The cat approached, raised its claw, and unlatched the clamps on the top of the cage. It lifted an edge of the screen top and the hamster scrabbled over the side—onto the cat's head!

The hamster jumped to the ground and the two animals proceeded together toward what Bilberry had identified as the kitchen. The cat waited while the hamster went off—somewhere too dark for Bilberry to descry in the gloom. The hamster returned with bulging cheeks. It removed some pellets from its mouth, which it no sooner set on the floor than the cat devoured them. The hamster, it seemed—probably by penetrating some small crack—was stealing treats for the cat. The hamster was the cat's cat's-paw!

When the two returned, and the cat lifted the cage top for the hamster, Bilberry called out, "Excuse me!"

"Who's that?" the cat asked the hamster.

"A lodger," said the hamster.

"Excuse me, Mr. Cat, I don't suppose you might be able to help me out too?"

"Help you out too, you ask? I'd be happy to. You're aware, I presume, through the offices of my gentle comrade the hamster here, that my fee for a night's travel at large is five cat treats."

"But I can do better than that," Bilberry answered.

"Really?" answered the cat, fruitily intoning its interest. "Really now?"

"Watch this," said Bilberry. He went to the plastic food bowl and gnawed—not at its contents, but at the bowl itself. With rapid precision, he bored a perfect, two-inch circle in its side.

"Intriguing," said the cat. "How are you with wooden cabinet doors?"

"I don't know. But that's what I had in mind. I think I could manage. It might take some time, but I have an assistant." He looked at Bukit Timah.

"I could, in that case," the cat mused, "Yes, with a well conceived structural engineering plan, I could most definitely abstract from the container as many treats as I like..."

While the cat pondered, the hamster glared evilly at Bilberry. This rabbit could put him out of business. In fact, the hamster thought, delicately withdrawing into the cage—in fact, if he were no longer useful, what was to prevent his becoming a cat treat himself?

"Yes," the cat said to Bilberry. "Yes, I have just the plan. You and your assistant will create a hole there," he pointed with his paw, "behind the strip light under the cabinet. The sawdust will settle in the sink, and can be easily and stealthily disposed of. I don't believe my caretaker will notice the alteration. Five—no, six—inches in diameter. An aperture that size would most certainly be worth a good deal to me."

"She'll notice," said the hamster.

"Perhaps," said the cat. "Perhaps she will. But given her scant use of the kitchen, the risk is a small one. And the consequences of discovery are minimal. Certainly *I* will not be blamed."

"You will," said the hamster.

"And if I am, I shall purr and roll on my back and by all manner of winsome and good natured frolicking reinstate myself in her good graces. I've really nothing to lose. I suppose you are worried that I shall eat you straightaway, my good friend, but you are, quite frankly, a most useful fellow to have in reserve."

"Get caught and she'll cut off your supply," said the hamster, feeling his retorts weaken. Still, he had to try. Staying alive was good, but the full run of the apartment at night was better. If he were unneeded, the cat might not let him out. And that business about being held "in reserve" was plainly ominous. There was more than one way to be held in reserve by a cat.

The cat disregarded him. "Small rabbit," he said, "I should like to execute our plan immediately. Is this fair night an auspicious one for our venture? How long will you need?"

With the cat's help, Bilberry and Bukit Timah slipped out of the cage. With instruction from the cat on the best way to use the furnishings of the kitchen as stepping stones—a mounted vacuum cleaner, the garbage pail, a spice rack—they hopped up to the construction site. And then they gnawed.

When a person gnaws, it is a desultory affair involving great gaps of time for luxuries like chewing, swallowing, musing on the quality and flavor of a dish, and so forth. When a rabbit gnaws, the rhythm is that of an electric sewing machine. Within two hours, a perfect hole—not circular, but ingeniously tailored by Bilberry to the cat's contours—had been cut from the rear underside of the cabinet containing the cat treats. Application of a water from the faucet removed all trace of the deed.

"Well done," the cat said, as it snacked. "And for daytime use, I'll stash a few of these delicacies in the potted palm over there. Did you wish to return home now? Or perhaps you'd like some saltines? There's a box in the cabinet..."

"We need to get out of this apartment," Bilberry explained.

"Out? Outside? Out there?" the cat asked.

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

“Yes.”

“An odd request, but very well. Very well. You’ve done all I can ask. Why you should want to leave this sweet haven, I cannot understand. Admittedly, some ingenuity is required to enjoy life at its fullest in this place. But the duties are light, the rewards ample.”

“It’s not my home. I’m from another country. I’m just a visitor here,” Bilberry protested.

“I see. I *did* detect something eccentric in your manner of speech. So hearth and home have been weighed in your heart against all the enticements of this honeyed existence, this enclave of leisure. And hearth and home have triumphed. The choice was a difficult one, I’m sure, but it cannot be said that you have chosen ignobly, small rabbit.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cat.”

“Now, what is the best way for you to leave this place? I must bethink myself. The trash is too dangerous, too dangerous. You’ll be cremated. Or worse. I need more brain food, more brain food,” he said, downing another treat. He purred and groomed his head contemplatively. “Yes, I have it. The briefcase. You shall travel in her briefcase.”

“Won’t she notice?”

“She’ll notice,” the hamster hissed across the room.

“No,” said the cat. “Her bag is laden with accoutrements of every sort. And she is always late in the morning. We’ll fit you in. And when you’re ready, you simply jump out. What say you? If you’re caught, we’ll try again.”

The cat unzipped the briefcase, removed a number of extraneous items—a hair brush, a small bag of medications, a change purse, an appointment book—and hid them under the armchair. The rabbits jumped in, and the cat zipped up the bag part-way.

“Are you comfortable?”

“I think so.”

“Can you gnaw your way out in an emergency?”

“I think so.”

“Very good. You’ve about an hour to wait. I’d bid you adieu now. Bon voyage, my lapine friends! And thank you. Thank you indeed.”

Soon they heard an alarm clock. And a shower and a radio. And then the clatter of a breakfast hastily consumed and a brief phone call and tapping on a computer keyboard and a great deal of bustle, and then (“Look at the time!”) the bag went aloft! They could not see where they were, but soon, even from inside the bag, the noise of cars and an infiltration of sunlight told them they were outdoors. As the woman walked, Bilberry peeped out. The moment was right.

“After me,” he whispered to his companion.

They slipped out and jumped, and were free! The woman felt and saw them and shouted after them, but it was too late. They dashed into a bush and into a patch thick with tropical vegetation and out and beyond and—they were free!

“Where are we?” Bukit Timah asked when they had run as long and hard as they could.

There was a large sign near them. Bilberry read, “Singapore Botanic Garden.” He exclaimed, “The Ginger Garden! This is where it is!”

The rest of their day in Singapore was a tourist's delight. Happily, Bukit Timah had removed a large banknote from the woman's purse, mistaking it for a snack. Bilberry chided him, but not too harshly. Only a corner was missing. They visited the ginger garden and went to a restaurant, and Bilberry even ate a new type of fruit unregistered among the names of his brethren—a custard apple. At the end of the day, they took a taxi to the U.S. Embassy and found their way to the mail room. Bilberry's box was still in the filing cabinet. Bukit Timah was just light enough that lacking souvenirs, there was sufficient postage for both of them.

Back home, Bilberry adopted Bukit Timah into the family. And no one noticed—or at least no one objected—when a hitherto unknown brother named Custard Apple made a regular appearance at family meals.