

Hanako Masutani

Emi and Mini

ADVANCE READERS COPY, NOT FOR SALE



illustrations by **Stéphane Jorish**





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For all the mini Masutanis: Eiko, Ren, Naoki, Soren, and Mei.—HM

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx—SJ



CHAPTER 1

My name is Emiko. But you can call me Emi. Most people do.

I like polka dots. I like green. I like curly noodles and curly fries and bacon fried rice with *umeboshi*. I like playing soccer, especially goalie, and I like to draw. Most of all, I like dogs.

My mom and I just moved to a small apartment in a big city. We have lots of pretty plants and fat books and colourful rice bowls that stack. We have my Auntie Akiko and Uncle Noah and my cousins, Soren and Mei, too. But they live back in Comox, a town on Vancouver Island. That's where we moved from.

Every day my cousins text me silly photos with their tongues sticking out to say they miss me. I text the same kind of goofy photos back. Some days, Soren and Mei also send photos of Hugo, their huge Bernese Mountain

dog. Hugo is never too busy to let me use him as a pillow. He's shaggy and slobbery, roly-poly and soft-eyed.

Our landlady says we can't have a dog. Our apartment is too small. But if I could have a dog, I'd name her Frida. I'd let her sleep under my covers. I'd take her for walks in all weather. If I had a dog, I would never feel lonely.

CHAPTER 2

My birthday is just around the corner. On the weekend, Mom and I plan it at the kitchen table with my papers and pencil crayons.

"I want gold balloons." I draw them. "And red streamers." I squiggle them all over the page. "The red is for Mei, of course." We both know that red is Mei's favourite. "I can't wait to see them," I say. "Can I have pop on the ferry?"

Mom gives me a sad look. Pop is not her favourite. Still, she doesn't have to look so sad. "Emi. We're not going to be able to go and see your cousins for your birthday. We can't take the ferry again so soon after moving. It's expensive."

My heart drops down to my stomach, where hearts do not belong.

"I know it's disappointing. We'll go during spring break, okay? We'll have a party for you

with your cousins then.”

I nod, but my face feels hot, and my eyes start to fill up. “Sure,” I say.

“Maybe you can invite someone from school or soccer.”

I shake my head. I don’t know anyone at school or soccer that I could invite to my party. Not yet.

“We’ll talk to Soren and Mei on Zoom on your birthday. We can blow out candles and everything.” Mom holds my hand between hers, making our warm “hand sandwich.”

“Okay,” I say. I look out the window. People are out walking their dogs in the rain. “Look, Mom.” I sniff. There’s a French bulldog going down the other side of the street in a shiny gold raincoat, like a walking birthday balloon.

“Posh puppy!” Mom says. We laugh. “Emiko, I know how much you love dogs.” Mom plays with her hair the way that tells me she is thinking. “How about I call our landlord? Maybe I can convince her to let us have a pet.”

“Really?” Suddenly my heart is break-dancing in my chest.

“Now, don’t get too excited, Emi. She may say no.”

I nod fast a whole bunch of times.

“Remember, animals need a lot of care and attention.”

“Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Mom smiles and pulls out her phone.



CHAPTER 3

Mom wants me to have the stuff I want, especially for my birthday. I know that. When I do not get what I want, it's because there is no way my mom can help me get it or because the thing I want is not exactly good for me. Like eating all my Easter candy in one day. Or riding my bike super fast down the alley without my helmet on. So when Mom calls our landlord, I know she'll do her best to help me get a dog. Dogs are not even a little bit bad for me.

I run into my room and let my excitement pour out onto my scrap paper in a rainbow of dog pictures. I draw a zillion.

Eventually, Mom comes in. "There is good news and bad news," she says.

"No dog?" My heart stops dancing.

"Sadly, no. But she did say we could get a pet in a cage. A bird maybe, or a turtle . . ."

My heart curls up tight, hard and sharp. "Emi? Are you okay?"

I shake my head. I am not okay. If I open my mouth, I will cry. Mom squeezes me, so the tears come out anyway.



CHAPTER 4

We park outside the animal shelter on the way home from school on Friday. Mom turns in her front seat and looks at me. “Emi, try to keep an open mind.”

“I know,” I say. “I will.” I’m lucky I can get a pet, even if it can’t be a dog.

The room with the small pets is loud with animal sounds and smells kind of like a barn and kind of like a hospital. It’s noisy and a bit gross. But there are stacks of cages, all full of pets—guinea pigs, bunnies, even a parrot.

Mom and the shelter worker talk about good restaurants. That is something adults seem to love to talk about.

I give each pet a hard look. “You’re scruffy,” I say to one eating a weed. Another rodent is running on a wheel. “You know you’re not going anywhere, right?”

From right beside me, I hear a sudden squeak. I turn to see who’s making the sound.





CHAPTER 5

It's a furry white animal, maybe a rat.

The shelter worker comes up to me. "You like her?"

"Maybe," I say. "What is she?"

"She's a Syrian hamster, a friendly one. She's already grown up, so, as you can see, she's nice and calm."

Mom comes over and we watch the woman bring the hamster out of her cage. "Wow," Mom says. "She seems big for a hamster."

The shelter worker nods. "She's the biggest one I've ever seen."

I look at the hamster. The adults might think she's big, but she's little. Like a puppy.



CHAPTER 6

It's fun to get new things, especially when they are early birthday presents. I put my new hamster cage in the corner of my room. I put a new hamster dish with food into the cage and hang the new water bottle on the outside. Its spout pops inside so my hamster can drink from the bottle like a baby. Why is it that new things are so much fun?

Finally, I lift my hamster out of her carrying box and into her new home. I sit back to see what she'll do. Will she eat? Drink? Will she run around in happy hamster circles?

My hamster waddles over to a corner of the cage, curls up into a ball and goes to sleep. She is no puppy. A puppy would be excited about new things, just like me.

My hamster sleeps for the rest of the day.

At bedtime, just as I'm snuggling deep under my duvet, I hear scuffling coming from the hamster corner. I sit up. My hamster is running around her cage, kicking up sawdust. She stops when she sees me, stands on her hind feet and chews the bars of her cage so they rattle.

I get out of bed and peek at her. "What are you up to?"

My hamster takes one look at me and heads to her food bowl as if she understands and is answering me. Her front paws look like tiny hands. She uses them to pick up corn kernels and stuff them into her cheeks. Her face bulges. I can't believe how much she can stuff in. I have to admit, it's kind of cute.

"You are a funny one," I whisper. I get back into bed and fall asleep to the sound of her busy munching.

CHAPTER 7

“Happy Birthday!” Soren and Mei squeeze their heads into my computer screen. They sing ‘Happy Birthday’ so loud I have to turn the volume down.

“Thanks, you two. Also, thanks for the paints.” I hold up the watercolours they sent me in the mail. “I’m going to make so many pictures with these.”

I’m just about to tell them about my hamster when Soren says, “Check out what we just got.” He lifts up something small and white.

I lean closer. “What IS that?”

“Our new puppy! We’re naming her Joyce.”

“Or Sunjammer!” Mei yells.

Soren gives his sister his annoyed look. Then he grins back at me. “Look at how creamy soft she is.” He strokes the puppy, and she really does look cotton-ball soft.

I don’t say that. I say, “I can’t see how your dog feels, Soren. I can’t feel through a screen.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot.” The puppy licks Soren’s cheek.

“Her face is all pushed in,” I say. “Kind of funny looking. I bet Hugo will be jealous.”

“Hugo loves Sunjammer,” says Mei. The white puppy is all over them both, licking and sniffing and nuzzling.

“I have to go,” I say, even though I do not. Mei and Soren are so busy with the new puppy they don’t even notice when I leave our Zoom room.

CHAPTER 8

My birthday feels long. And flat. Like a squished loaf of bread. After we eat curly fries for a late lunch and as much ice cream cake as we can without getting sick, Mom asks, “What did Soren and Mei think of your hamster?”

“I didn’t have time to show them.”

Mom looks confused, but says, “Did you know that a hamster can learn its own name? Why don’t you take your hamster out of her cage and see?”

I go back to my bedroom and take my hamster out of her cage, even though I know Mom is wrong. Hamsters cannot learn their names. Not like a puppy can.

At first, we just look at each other, me and my hamster. We’re face to face on the carpet.



She squeaks like she did at the shelter.

“Come, Hammy, Hammy,” I try. My hamster does not budge a muscle.

Okay, maybe she can learn to sit. “Sit,” I say. She continues to stand.

I carry her to the couch in the living room.

“What are you going to call her?” Mom asks from the kitchen.

“Don’t know,” I say. “Hammy?”

“Really?” Mom says. She walks over and sits down beside us. She puts a bowl of popcorn down on the coffee table. “Maybe you both need a treat. I hear a little bit of popcorn is safe for them to eat.”

I sit my hamster on my lap. Maybe she will curl up like a puppy and nibble on her snack. But no. My hamster scampers down my leg like it’s a ladder and rolls onto the carpet.

I glare at Mom. “She’s not friendly,” I say. “See! I need a real puppy like Soren and Mei!”

“Watch out!” says Mom.

My hamster is making a run for it.

CHAPTER 9

My hamster speeds across the floor. I pull a blanket off the couch to try and net her with it, but she is way too fast. In under one second, my new pet is gone.



CHAPTER 10

Can a hamster vanish? Mom and I look everywhere. We look under the couch and under the chairs and crawl on our hands and knees everywhere we think a hamster might fit. Our place is small for humans but, it turns out, for hamster hiding spots, it is enormous.

This is my fault. I should have given her a



name. Maybe if I did, I would be able to call her now, and she would come running.

Mom and I make curly noodles in cream sauce for my birthday dinner, but I don't eat much. Where would a hamster hide? I look under the couch and chairs again. I think I see something, but it's just a sock. When Mom tells me I have to go to bed, I check the cage. There's no hamster in it. I snuggle under my duvet and feel sad. My hamster likes to snuggle in her toilet paper nests. I miss her scuffling sound and the way she stuffs her cheeks.



CHAPTER 11

“Did you know a wild hamster can run five miles in one night?” Mom looks up from the Google search on her phone. We’re eating bacon fried rice for breakfast. Mom knows my favourites.

“There are wild hamsters?” I try to imagine my hamster living in the wild, hopping over dirt and scurrying through tall grasses, all scruffy and fierce. “That’s a long way for something small to run. I bet that’s more than a puppy can go in one day.”

“Definitely,” says Mom. We eat without talking for a while. Even though the hamster sleeps during the day, it feels emptier without her.

“Do you think she was trying to run away?” I ask Mom. “Is it because I didn’t love her enough?”

“Well. I think she’s probably curious. After all, she’s never been in an apartment before. If I were her, I would want to explore. What would you do if you were her?”

“If I were her, I would hide in a small space all by myself. But then I would feel lonely.”

Mom nods very slowly.

“And I might get scared.”

“Scared that no one would find you?” asks Mom.

“Yeah. And scared of the world outside.”

Mom waves me over to her lap and gives me one of her good, warm hugs.



CHAPTER 12

In the afternoon, I draw a zillion pictures of my hamster. I try to get her eyes right. They are like bright black diamonds. But then her nose is too big. And her paws. She has four toes in front and five in the back. Who knew? One by one, I hold my pictures up. A few would make good Lost Hamster signs. I sigh.

I search everywhere all over again.

Finally, I sit down and look out the window. A girl my age is walking out of our building in a soccer jersey and cleats. I had no idea there was someone my age in the building who played soccer. Maybe I'll play against her team one day. Maybe she likes hamsters.

The girl's dad comes out of our building, and I watch them walk down Main Street. The usual dogs and owners are out for their evening walk. The girl stops to pet a big

bouncy dog. And I realize something surprising. I'm not looking at the dog and wishing it was mine. I just want my hamster back. She should be home, sleeping in her nest.

I get an idea.

"Emi! What are you doing?"

I've got a cozy pile of toilet paper strips on the couch. "I'm tearing up this roll to make a nest for my hamster. Maybe she'll come out to sleep in it."

Mom looks like she wants to say something about the mess on the couch, but she just sits down beside me. "Maybe she will."

We sit very quiet. Quiet like, well, hamsters. In that quiet, I hear a small sound, a scuffling sound, over by the fridge.

Mom looks at me. She hears it too. She speaks in a whisper. "Emiko, my love. I am going to stand up very quietly and sneak into the kitchen."

Mom bends down by the fridge. That is where she finds my hamster. My hamster is

covered in lint. She looks sticky and miserable. I am so relieved and still scared at the same time, my heart doesn't know how to beat.

"See if you can get her, Emi," says Mom. "Your arms are smaller and might be able to squeeze through."

I get my arm to fit between the fridge and the side of the bottom kitchen cupboard, but I can't reach far enough. My hand is not even close to my hamster. "I can't, Mom. Maybe you can reach."

Only the first half of Mom's hand can fit through the gap. Mom shakes her head. "We're going to have to think of another way."

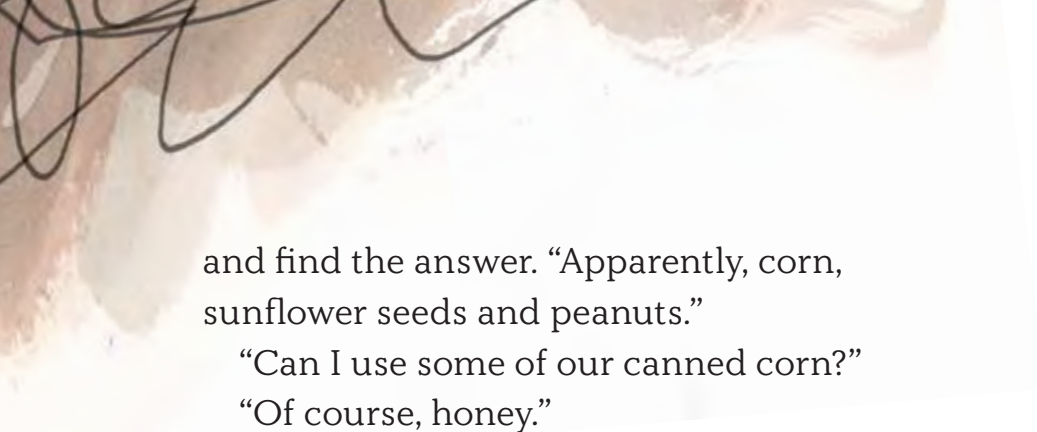
CHAPTER 13

Mom makes dinner while my tummy rumbles. "My hamster must be hungry, too," I say. I am still on the floor by the fridge keeping watch over her. "And thirsty. Maybe I can give her some greens?"

"I'll check the SPCA hamster guide." Mom is a pro at finding things out on the internet. "Okay. I've got it. It says they can eat a bit of egg, but not too much, or they'll get fat." My mom smiles and hands me my dinner. It's omelette, gai lan, and rice.

"Perfect!" I take a tiny bit of my omelette and put it on the floor between me and the fridge. My hamster looks half asleep. She doesn't seem to notice the egg. "What else can I try?" I ask Mom. "What are their favourites?"

It takes a moment for Mom to type, scroll



and find the answer. “Apparently, corn, sunflower seeds and peanuts.”

“Can I use some of our canned corn?”

“Of course, honey.”

I jump up, put my plate on the table, and get a can of corn out of the cupboard. But my hamster doesn’t even notice the little sun-yellow pile of sweet corn I’ve put down for her. She ignores it like she ignored the omelette.

“You need to eat some supper too,” Mom says. I get my plate and lie back down by the fridge. Maybe if she sees me eating, my hamster will feel hungrier.

“Emi, I’ve found something. It says we can make a trap to catch your hamster while we sleep. All we need is a bucket and something to make a ramp or steps out of. Then we put treats on the ramp and your hamster will eat them one by one, all the way up to the top and into the bucket.”

“Like Hansel and Gretel,” I say. “She won’t get hurt?”

“We’ll put a towel in the bottom of the bucket to make it nice and soft and more treats there too. She’ll be stuck, but she’ll be cozy and safe.”

“That’s great, Mom.” It is. It’s a smart plan. At the same time, I don’t like the idea of my hamster being at the bottom of a bucket all night, all alone.

I take a bunch of our hardcover books off the shelf and stack them to build a staircase. The book-steps go right up to the top of our red cleaning bucket. Mom covers my staircase with a tea towel.

“Now it won’t be slippery,” she says.

I put another towel at the bottom of the bucket. Then I use the egg and corn to make a trail of treats up the steps and into the bucket. I add a bit of chopped cucumber in case she’s thirsty.

Mom stands up, stretches, and yawns. “Emi, it’s way past your bedtime, and it’s school in the morning. Let’s head to bed.”

I follow Mom down the hallway to our bedrooms. I give her a big hug goodnight. Once she's closed her bedroom door, I turn around and walk back to the kitchen, slow and quiet, on my tiptoes.

CHAPTER 14

I lie back down on the kitchen floor by the fridge. My hamster is awake, her black eyes shining. Things feel different at night, quieter. Or noisy in different ways. Back where we used to live, I could hear the frogs croaking at night. In the city, I hear tires splashing in puddles under streetlights, far-off sirens, and the voices of people up late, laughing as they walk down the sidewalk. When it's night, I feel like my sounds have to change too. They have to hush. So when I decide to talk to my hamster, I whisper.

"Hi," I say. "I don't think I've mentioned that I'm Emiko, Emi for short. It's a Japanese name. Emiko means 'illustrious and beautiful girl,' which I am, of course." I do my usual hair flip and fake snob face. I pause. What else can I tell her?

I want her to know that I'm sorry. "I really was hoping to get a dog," I say. "And you're not a dog. I can see that. But that's not your fault." My hamster sits on her haunches. She licks her little pink paws and uses them to brush her ears. She's trying to get clean.

In case she can understand, I keep talking. "You're something different from a dog. Which is not to say you aren't good in your own way. I'm sorry I haven't been a better friend to you."

I try to think of how she is different from a dog. "You don't eat dog food like Hugo does. That's okay. You like nuts." I smile at her. "Actually, I like nuts too."

This gives me a new idea. Very gently, so I don't scare her, I open a cupboard. I take out a bag of trail mix. It's the unsalted kind, the only kind that Mom will buy. For once, that's a good thing. I pick out the peanuts and cup them in my hand like treasure.

I sit back down and push a peanut behind the fridge towards my hamster. "Here," I say.

Her little nose twitches. Then she lowers herself down to all fours and takes a couple steps forward. I do not even breathe. I do not even think. I just watch. My hamster starts eating the peanut.

Slowly, I lie back down on the floor. I take more peanuts out of my palm. I lay a track of the peanut halves along the floor, from beside the fridge out to where I am lying on my stomach. My hamster crunches on the nuts. I pop one into my mouth and crunch too. She comes closer and closer. Now she starts tucking peanuts into her cheeks for later, like she's packing a suitcase. Her face gets big and lumpy.

My hamster likes peanuts about as much as I do. A lot. For all I know, there are a bunch of things we both like.

I am close enough to grab her now, but I don't. I admire her. I put my two palms together to make a bigger cup with my last peanuts in the middle. My hamster sniffs my fingertips with her pretty pink nose. She

climbs into my hands. Her feet are warm.
“You’re a beauty,” I say, “and you need a name.”

She looks up from the peanut. I lean over and put my nose into her white fur. She is dirty and sticky, but she still smells like cuteness and softness and fun.

“What do you think of Mini?” I say. “It’s funny because, for a hamster, you are not.

Also, the ‘mi’ part means ‘beautiful,’ just like in my name.” My hamster stops chewing and looks straight into my eyes like she couldn’t agree more.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Also, Mini, you need a bath.”



CHAPTER 15

I carry Mini to the washroom, careful not to wake up Mom, and wonder how to clean a hamster.

“Let’s be as careful as possible.” When Mom washes something delicate, like her jewelry, she uses a clean toothbrush. We have loads in the bathroom drawer. I pick an orange one—the colour neither Mom or I would choose for our teeth—wet it and sit down with Mini on the bathroom floor. I’ve shut the door so she can’t run away again.

“Here we go, Mini.” I stroke her fur lightly with the toothbrush a couple times. “How’s that?”

Mini touches her nose to my thumb, a nudge as if to say, yes it’s fine.

Mini is a champ. I gently rub her with the damp toothbrush until all her stickiness is gone. But now she’s quite wet.

I pick up the hair dryer. How shall I do this? I choose the lowest setting, hold it as far away from Mini as I can and turn it on. Surprise—Mini loves having her fur blow dried! (And Mom stays asleep!)





CHAPTER 16

While I wait for Soren to let me into our Zoom room, my heart does gymnastics, the kind where you run on a bouncy floor then jump, tuck, roll, flip, run some more, backflip and end up with your feet together and your hands high in the air. My heart does that over and over again. I am showing my family my new friend.

“She is so cool!” says Soren. “So soft!”

“I want a mouse!” Mei yells.

“Well, actually, she’s a hamster.” I hold her against my cheek so Mini can see everyone better and I can feel her warm fur on my face.

CHAPTER 17

It is not easy to change. I did not want to leave my home in Comox. I did not want to move away from my aunt and uncle and cousins. But Mom got her dream job. What can you do?”

As I talk to her, I stroke the top of Mini’s head.

“And if we had never moved to Vancouver, I would never have discovered bubble tea, which you cannot get in Comox. I would also not have met you, the world’s best pocket-sized pet.”

Nighttime is magic, Mini and I agree. We chat as we look out at all the city lights. The lights smile back at us, like visiting stars.

I tell Mini that she is one of my favourites, beautiful in some of the best ways—gentle, listening and twinkle-eyed.

Mini does not look away when I talk. She looks straight at what I am feeling—sadness, sleepiness, amazement, the relief of having my first city friend and excitement about the ones I’ll make next. She sniffs up towards my face. I think she is saying, “Go on. Tell me more.”





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Emi gets a new pet, Mini, a loveable fat hamster. But unfortunately, Emi is not a huge fan of hamsters—she really wanted a dog. After Mini escapes from her cage and hides somewhere in the house, Emi finally realizes she loves her new little friend.

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HANAKO MASUTANI writes fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and literature for children. She was a contributor to the short story collection *Henry Chow and other Stories* published by Tradewind Books. She lives in Vancouver with her three children.

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