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"Catherine and the Peas"

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Age: 8+

Lately, it's been rough going for Catherine. Her dad found a new partner and moved out, and her mom only has time and attention to spare for her job. Now that summer break has arrived, busy little Catherine feels truly alone. But then the girl meets Martin from her dad's new family and also befriends a fun old woman named Alice who moves into the neighbouring house. Together, they plant peas, care for the plants, and do all kinds of other entertaining things.

Awards:

2018 Tartu Prize for Children's Literature (Childhood Prize)

2017 25 Best-Designed Estonian Books

2017 Good Children's Book



Reading sample [pp 5–12]

The No-Fun Spring

That spring was quite the headache, as Mom always says. [...]

First of all, I was sick with chest pain for a whole week and had to sit around home like a ghost. When our long-awaited class field trip finally arrived, it poured rain all day long and our teacher didn't let us go hiking or to the lake, so we simply bounced around on the bus from one set of castle ruins to another. It was dreadfully boring. Marie and I got into a fight because she broke my scooter by riding it into a telephone pole. She did so on purpose, by the way, because she wanted to see how strong scooters really are. It goes without saying that she didn't dare to try it out on her own. Then, I slammed my finger in a cupboard door, which hurt like crazy. And at the school dance, Claus only danced with Marta the whole time and didn't even look my way. Mom washed my phone in the laundry because I'd forgotten it in my jeans pocket, which meant it stopped working, even after drying it with a hairdryer for a long time. And last but not least (or to start it all off, actually), Dad moved out. He went to live with some lady named Julia who has a son around my age. That happened back in March.

When I asked Mom why Dad left, she answered the way she usually does, saying she didn't have time to explain it all to me right then and that I'd figure it out myself when I got older.

"You're a smart girl, you know that?" she added, then hurried off to some conference.

I don't know how old I have to be to figure everything out for myself. Thirteen, maybe? Or will I have to wait until my fifteenth birthday? That's a long time! I'd sure like to figure things out earlier.

Dad himself said he was moving out because things would be better that way.

"Better for whom?" I asked.

"For everybody."

"Who's everybody?"

"Everybody is everybody. You'll understand it once you're older."

Doesn't that make you mad? All you hear is "once you're older" this, "once you're older" that! What am I supposed to do in the meantime till I'm old enough?

If anybody were to ask me why I think Dad moved out, then I suppose I'd explain it like this:

Mom was at work all the time.

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When you're at work all the time, you forget how nice it is to be home with the rest of your family.

When you've forgotten how great it is to be at home with the rest of your family, then you might as well be someplace else.

And then, you move out.

But nobody's asked for my opinion.



Dinner with Mom

For the first time in what seemed like forever, report card day promised to be a nice one.

"Cathy, honey, I took off of work tonight and you and I are going to a café," Mom announced at the breakfast table as she held a sandwich in one hand and packed up her laptop with the other. "Isn't that fantastic? We'll celebrate the end of the school year and the start of summer break."

"Cool! Are you sure you've got time?"

Mom nodded. She didn't have a chance to reply because her phone started ringing.

"What time will you get home?" I asked when she finished the call.

"Four o'clock."

Mom kissed me on the nose and hurried off into the entryway. Her phone rang again.

"Hello, this is Helen. Yes, the Milano conference is in a week's time and global warming will be on the agenda ..."

And with those words, she left.

As I washed the dishes, I daydreamed about all the scrumptious things I'd order at the café that evening. I would definitely want spaghetti with a huge heap of parmesan on top. Then, for dessert, I'd have pancakes and an ice-cream cocktail, of course. And we could order fries on the side, too. I do like meatballs in tomato sauce, but not if there's too much onion.

I went to school, got my report card (which was pretty good, overall), did bike tricks with Anna and Robert, fell and scraped my arm, went home, put on my favorite T-shirt and jeans for dinner at the café, and at three forty-five, I sat down to wait for Mom. I was as ravenous as wolf. Mom arrived at five.

"Oh, I see you're here and waiting," Mom said, clapping her hands together.

"I've been here for nine years already and I've been waiting for over an hour."

"Don't pout, Cath. There was a ton of stuff to do at work today and I just didn't notice how fast the time flew."

I sighed. In reality, I was quite pleased, because when we were supposed to go to the theater together on September 1st, Mom only got home from her meeting after ten o'clock at night, which meant I had to head straight to bed instead of seeing Peter Pan. No, there really wasn't much of a reason to pout right now.

The café was packed, but there was still one empty table right by the door. I ordered spaghetti, pancakes, and an ice-cream cocktail. Mom got a glass of water and a carrot salad.

"I'm on a diet," she announced.

"Huh?" I asked, wide-eyed.

"Starting today."

"Why? You're as thin as a rake."

"You don't know about these things yet, Cathy. Once you grow up, you'll understand better and start dieting, too."

"I certainly will not!" I protested. "I'll eat spaghetti to the end of my days."

"Don't be silly. Now, go and wash your hands in the bathroom."

I had to wait in a ridiculously long line for the restroom. By the time I made it back to the table, our food had been served and Mom had her nose buried in her laptop. I ate and stared out the window. A boy about my age was balancing on a picket fence in front of the apartment building across the street. He'd first climbed onto the back of a bench, made it onto the fence from there, and was now trying to leap up and grab the building's fire-escape ladder. Things were getting exciting.

I have to say that I'm kind of a hotshot when it

comes to climbing. Shimmying up a tree, a ladder, a climbing rope, an observation tower, or anything in a heart-stopping adventure park is way better than any other means of passing the time. The only problem is that adults don't always approve, especially when we're talking about their own ladders or apple trees. On top of that, people usually think that girls shouldn't be clambering around high places, but knitting at home or going to dance lessons, instead. Don't count on it with me!

I watched the boy's progress in fascination: he was nearly able to stretch to the ladder from the top of the fence, but his fingers still couldn't brush the bottom rung. I wondered what he planned to do next. The boy glanced cautiously down at the street to make sure he hadn't been noticed by any of the people bustling around below. He sized up the ladder again, gauged the distance, squatted, and leapt. Holy moly, he did it! The boy launched himself off the fence, grabbed the ladder, and hung there with his legs dangling in the air. What a sight! If he hadn't managed to wrap his fingers around the bar, then the outcome would have been crashing onto the asphalt below and bloody knees. It was an outstanding performance.

I stood up and walked over to the window. Mom's eyes were still glued to the screen. The climber appeared to be enjoying his situation. After dangling there a little while for fun, he heaved himself upward, steadied against the wall with his feet, and grabbed onto the next rung. After a little more grunting and straining, the boy had both feet planted firmly on the ladder.

I was so excited that I reckon I even forgot to breathe for a minute. I'd have liked to run outside and climb up after the boy, but Mom's presence nailed me to the spot. I'd just have to be an observer this time.

There was a fair amount of foot traffic on the sidewalk. A woman with curly hair left the café and was chatting on the telephone between bursts of laughter. The boy stared at her for several seconds. As soon as she turned the corner, he turned his attention back to climbing. Scaling a ladder isn't the least bit difficult, but how high you dare to go is

another thing entirely. The building he was climbing was five stories high and the ladder ended at the roof. Taking a deep breath, the boy began his climb. He was as agile as Spider Man. The first two floors went by like a flash. Once he reached the third, he stopped for a moment and looked down. Believe me – the third story is quite an accomplishment! I know what I'm talking about. It's my record.

I followed every move the boy made. His journey continued, maybe just a teensy bit slower, but he managed to clear the fourth floor as well. The boy stopped again. Would he make it? Would he really make it all the way up to the roof? That'd be a real feat. The boy's pace was noticeably slower by now, though he was still completely determined as he progressed step by step. He didn't look down anymore, and it's a wise thing he didn't. There are other things to do than to stare downward when you're up that high. It came down to the last few rungs, the last few seconds, the last bursts of effort, and finally, that was it – the boy had reached the edge of the roof!

I dashed outside. I'd have wanted to cheer and clap, but luckily caught myself before I did, because that would definitely have attracted the adults' attention and the boy would be discovered. It was as clear as day that he wouldn't have escaped getting into serious trouble. I stood on the sidewalk, my fingers crossed, and stared upward as casually as I could, even though sweat was beading on my forehead from the tension. Now, all the pro climber had left to do was climb back down. That part went smoothly as well – he didn't even take any breaks on the way. Finally, he was swinging from the bottom rung again. He let go, landed on the top of the fence, slid down onto the bench, and sat there massaging his palms.

"Martin! Martin!" a woman's high-pitched voice cried from the distance. "Where are you, Martin?!"

The same curly-haired woman who had left the café earlier sprinted out from around the corner. Seeing the boy sitting on the bench, the woman stormed over to him, seized him by the wrist, and pulled him up.

"Where on earth did you go? I thought you'd gone off climbing who-knows-where again. I've been



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looking for you everywhere!"

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"I've been here the whole time."

"Oh, you! Come along now, we're in a hurry."

The woman set off at a trot with the boy following her obediently. Suddenly, he turned around, looked me in the eye, and whispered:

"Did you see me?"

"Yeah. That was awesome!"

I realized my fingers were still crossed. The boy nodded and ran after the woman.

When I went back into the café, Mom was still sitting in front of her laptop. Without even noticing it, she'd drank the whole refreshing ice cream cocktail, devoured the pancakes doused in maple syrup, and had finished up sending some important e-mails.

"Well, Cath, I'm full. Let's head home."

We left.

"That was a nice evening, wasn't it?" Mom asked as we hurried through the park.

"Yeah, it was great!"

Operation "Ladder"

I had to wait an eternity for that one day to tie the rope ladder to the tree. Mom didn't want to call Dad for help, saying we could manage without him. I doubt he would have even showed up. I'd already started to suspect I would turn at least as old as Aunt Alice before I had a chance to climb up the ladder, and by then, I might not be too agile anymore. Yet on Friday afternoon, Mom came home from work with a bearded colleague in tow.

"Well, Kate—now, you got your wish. Sven here came to help us hang up the ladder."

The bearded man plopped down into our armchair.

"I came to help like a whale with kelp," he joked loudly.

With his big potbelly, balding head, and red suspenders, the man looked quite bizarre.

"First things first: should we have a cup of coffee? Work's no bunny who'll bound away," the man joked again.

Mom hurried to the kitchen to make coffee.

"And what's a young lady like you going to be doing with a rope ladder, huh?" he turned to me and asked.

It was hard to think of a dumber question.

"Climbing it."

"Boys climb. Young ladies dance, bake, and knit sweaters."

"Where's that written down?"

"Huh?"

"Where's the rule that girls only dance, bake, and knit sweaters?"

"Ah, it's no rule," the man said with a wave of his hand. "That's just how life is. Then, everything's as right as rain."

He grabbed the bowl of cookies from the table. Mom came back from the kitchen with coffee and sandwiches.

"Would you like a little snack?" she asked, offering the man the platter.

"Sure would, sure would," he murmured before starting to devour the food and drink, not stopping until the whole tray, the bowl of cookies, and the coffee pot were empty. All he did was yammer away the entire time. Mom sank deeper and deeper into the corner of the couch, obviously tired of our guest. Nevertheless, the ladder still hadn't been hung yet.

For quite some time, the man had been telling us how talented he'd once been at basketball when he was a boy, sinking three-point shots left and right.

"I tossed balls into the basket like peas into a pot," he declared, slapping his knees. "I was quite the popular guy at school—believe you me! I climbed, ran, tossed, threw, wrestled... tip top, a boy so pop!" he exclaimed, laughing so hard his belly quivered.

Mom grimaced.

"What do you think about another pot of coffee, Helen? It's so nice chatting with you two. I haven't been over at anyone's place in a long time."

The man extended the empty tray.

"And you're a master at making these sandwiches, too. Maybe I could get another one or two?"

I saw I had to take the reins into my own hands. Otherwise, he'd just sit here drinking liter after liter of coffee and the job would never get done.

"Mom will make more sandwiches while we hang the ladder on the tree."

"Ah, so straight to it, then, huh? Well, why not—work first, fun later."

The man got up from the armchair. Without further ado, I led him outside to the big oak tree and showed him which branch the ladder should be tied to. I'd scoped everything out beforehand, but had trouble tying strong, proper knots. That's why we needed Sven.

"Let's do it—piece of cake."

The man seized the lowest branch and started climbing. I watched anxiously as his portly body pressed tight against the tree trunk.

"Would it be better if I climbed up and gave you a hand?" I called up from the ground.

"Would it, would it," the man mocked from above. "If a pig would have wings, he'd fly to the rooftop."

Sven clambered a couple branches higher, but then appeared to run into a problem.

"Did something happen?"

No response—just the sound of rustling, struggling, and swearing from the treetop.

"Mister, did something happen? Should I come help?"

"If the young lady isn't in a rush to do some knitting, then maybe she could climb up and untangle me from this branch. My suspenders got tangled." I scurried up the tree.

"It's as nice a bird's nest as any up here, but a little tight for me," the man gasped while I untangled his suspenders. "Though if you can't get me out of this, I guess I'll have to make do with what's here. Better than nothing, I reckon."

I tugged and unwound the suspenders until my fingers hurt.

"Young lady's sure a swell climber—like a bobcat on a branch."

"Mister's just a bit rusty, on the other hand; he should practice more," I snapped back.

"Practice with care, you'll make it there," the man laughed.

Finally, I managed to set him free, and from there, we worked on it together. At long last, after an awful lot of huffing and puffing, the ladder was in place.

"There you go, young lady—climb to your heart's content!"

"Thanks!" I exclaimed, very pleased with the result.
"Be careful when you go back down. There's a branch there that could easily break."

"Climbing down is a piece of cake for an old athlete like me. One, two, three, and..."

Sven dropped from the tree like a ripe plum.

When I made it back to the ground, he was sitting on the grass, his face beet-red and sweat pouring down his cheeks. He pointed to his left leg.

"I got a mighty big sprain, just like back in the good old days when I played basketball at school and was a popular guy."

The man burst out laughing. I helped him to his feet. When Mom appeared in the yard carrying another tray of sandwiches, he was already limping out the gate, laughing and waving to us.

"It's dangerous here in this women's household. But all the same—if you ever need help anytime in the future, just give me a call, we'll reminisce about these fun times!"

Translated by Adam Cullen

