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OSKAR JA ASJAD



“Sirli, Siim and the Secrets”

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When Oskar’s mother flies away to take classes in America and his father has to go to work every day, the boy is sent to live with his grandmother in the countryside for the summer. Oskar doesn’t feel all that close to his grandma, who has lived so far away, and this makes him lonely and unhappy. His sense of abandonment worsens when he realizes he left his mobile phone at home. Luckily, the boy manages to find a way out of the dismal situation. He crafts a telephone out of a block of wood, and uses it to call all kinds of different things: be they a bored iron, a rhyming trashcan, or a red balloon that gets tangled in the crown of a birch tree and ultimately becomes Oskar’s best friend. Soon, everything around him comes to life!

Awards:

2016 Tartu Prize for Children’s Literature
(Childhood Prize)

2016 Eduard Vilde Literary Award

2015 Good Children’s Book

2015 5 Best Designed Estonian Children’s Books,
Special prize for perfect harmony of form and
content

2015 25 Best Designed Estonian Books



Reading sample

[Chapter 1]

Grandma was sitting at one end of the table, Dad at the other. Oscar sat between them. They were all eating meatball soup.

Oscar had always enjoyed eating meatball soup, and not only because he liked the taste. It was also amusing to eat! Pea soup, for instance, was nothing more than bland green guck, and you had to force it to be fun. So, whenever there was a bowl of pea soup in front of Oscar, he imagined it was a deep, bubbling swamp, and he had to empty it out to reach the treasure lying at the bottom. What's more, eating away the soup would expose sunken skeletons and ticked-off swamp monsters whose muddy green home had suddenly disappeared from around them.

There weren't really any treasures, skeletons, or monsters lying at the bottom of Oscar's pea soup, of course. He knew this, but meals were much more fun when he thought about things like that.

Meatball soup was far more entertaining to eat because you could clearly see the meatballs, potatoes, and carrots floating in it. The plump chunks of meat stood out best of all, of course. Oscar pretended they were fat sea lions swimming among white and orange icebergs, which were the potatoes and carrots. True, there was no such thing as orange icebergs in real life, but so what! Oscar's sea could have them for pretend, anyway. Oscar imagined he was a polar explorer flying above the ice soup. The sea lions would try to hide behind the icebergs, but they couldn't escape the boy's sharp eyesight. One by one, he scooped the icebergs up onto his spoon, and in the end, the startled sea lions were bobbing in empty waters. There was nowhere for them to hide! Oscar then nimbly caught each one, and brought it to the zoo. Well, actually, he just ate his meatballs.

However, Oscar wasn't hungry today. The sea lions could feel safe and secure among their icebergs. He had plopped his spoon into the soup but wasn't eating anything, and just kept pushing all the meatballs towards one end of the bowl.

"Eat, Oscar—don't poke at your food," Dad said.

"Mm-hmm," Oscar murmured, and started making rows in the soup.

"How could that mom of yours have gone to America for two whole months?"

Grandma asked. "Dearie me, that's almost the entire summer!"

"She's taking classes there," Dad replied, "and that's how long they last. What can we do? America is far away, you know—you can't just fly home for the weekend."



“Well, but why did she need to go there in the first place?” Grandmother argued further.

“She just did, that’s all,” Dad said a little irritatedly. “She’s studying there.”

“All people do these days is study,” Grandma sighed. “Back in my time, children would study and adults went to work.”

“Yes, well, look: I go to work,” Dad said. “And that’s why I brought Oscar here to be with you.”

“That’s nice,” Grandma said. “I’m glad to have Oscar here. It’s just a shame that you can’t stay, too, and take a vacation with your son.”

“I can’t right now. My vacation’s not until August,” Dad said. “You know that. We’ve gone over this several times already. Siri will be back home by then, too, and then we’re all going to go on vacation together. But until then, Oscar will be spending the summer with you. Isn’t that right, Oscar? It’s fun being out in the countryside.”

Oscar didn’t say anything, just stirred his soup. He wasn’t convinced at all that being in the country would be much fun, especially without his mom and dad. He had stayed at his grandma’s house before, of course—though not all that often, since she lived at the other end of the country and it was a very long drive to get there. Even so, Oscar and his parents visited every summer and always stayed overnight. It was just that his mother and father had always been there, too. Now, he had to stay at his grandma’s house all by himself. It felt a little scary. What was there to do here?

“We left my phone at home,” Oscar said softly.

“Yes, you already said that,” Dad replied. “Why didn’t you bring it along, then? I did ask you if you’d packed everything you needed.”

“I forgot,” Oscar mumbled.

“Not to worry. I’ve got a telephone here, too,” Grandma reassured him. “You can use it to call your dad if you start missing him.”

Oscar didn’t say anything. Grandma wouldn’t understand that his phone wasn’t meant for calling as much it was for playing. He had a lot of fun games on his phone, and was already missing them right now. Dad would be driving home before long, leaving him alone with his grandmother—and for two whole months! If Oscar at least had his phone with him, then he could curl up in a corner somewhere and tap away to pass the time. That way, he’d have some form of entertainment. But now... Oscar felt his nose droop and the muscles between his eyes start to squeeze, the way they did before crying.

Dad looked at him sympathetically.

“Come on, now,” he said, tousling Oscar’s hair. “It won’t be so bad. I spent my whole childhood living in this house. I didn’t have a cell phone, either—nobody did back then. Nor did I have any brothers or sisters to play with. But I had a ton of friends, all the same! There are other houses not far from here, and kids live in them these days, too. I bet you’ll make friends in no time, and will all be so busy running around together that when Mom and I come to get you in August, you won’t even want to hear about driving back to the city. Back in the day, I didn’t even have time to come inside and eat. We roamed around the woods and fields, built forts and kicked a ball around, went fishing and came up with all kinds of other fun things to do. Believe me—you’re going to have a wonderful time!”

“The country is just the place for kids in summer,” Grandma affirmed.

Oscar just glared at his soup. His dad’s words hadn’t cheered him up—quite the opposite. Oscar’s grandma did have her quirks, but he knew her well all the same, and since he’d been to her little house many times before, it even felt a little cozy and familiar. But complete strangers from some nearby farms, unfamiliar fields and forests—those were downright terrifying! It was just like when he had to go to the doctor to get a shot—there was an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach the very same morning at home. On top of that, it was terrible knowing there was nothing you could do about it; that there was no escape; that you had to yield to fate, get dressed, and climb into the car to go to the clinic, even

though it was the very last thing you wanted to do. For some reason, Oscar felt something similar now: as if his dad's car would barely manage to zoom out of the driveway before those neighboring kids would crawl up through the ground and haul him off to their fort, in spite of his struggling. And then they'd drag him into the woods and to go fishing and to who-knows-what other frightful places. And Grandma wouldn't protect him at all—she'd just stand on the front steps, holding a bucket, and nodding in satisfaction: ah, yes—the country's the place for kids in summer!

Oscar stared at his dad pitifully. Dad tugged on Oscar's ear.

"Don't look so unhappy!" he said. "I'll call you. And Mom will definitely be calling from America, too. It's not like she's somewhere underground or up in space, you know—it's entirely possible to talk to her as well."

"Though it is expensive to call from America," Grandma reckoned. "Don't you worry—Oscar and I will have a great time!"

Oscar was sure it'd be the opposite, but he didn't say anything. The meatball soup had gotten cold and was cloudy from poking at it with the spoon. Oscar stared at the bowl. He didn't like the soup at all anymore. He didn't like the kitchen table, either; not to mention the kitchen itself. Everything looked so grim and gloomy. A fat housefly buzzed around the ceiling light, and there was a dark stain on the wall next to the stove that Oscar had never noticed before, but which looked extraordinarily ugly now. And they're leaving me here for two months! Oscar thought. He felt a massive wave of sadness crash over him and nearly smooch him flat.

"Would you like some candy for dessert?" Grandma asked. She placed a couple pieces of caramel on the table—precisely the kind of treat that Oscar refused to put in his mouth.

"I'm not hungry," he mumbled. What else could he expect! His whole summer was going to drag by, surrounded by those flavorless caramels.

[Chapter 5, pp 36–39]

Oskar looked around the kitchen in boredom. Grandma had forgotten her iron on the table after doing the morning ironing. It seemed out of place somehow; like it was too new and modern. Otherwise, all of Grandma's things – her furniture and other stuff – were always old. They'd been lying around here since back when Oskar's father was a boy; maybe even longer. But the iron was new – it was a Christmas present from Oskar's mother and father.

And so, the iron somehow made Oskar feel more at home than his grandmother's other things did. The iron had also come from the city, and looked like it was just a little boy next to all the other ancient odds and ends. Oskar wondered – does the iron feel lonely here, like I do?

Just for fun, Oskar put his toy telephone up next to his ear and said:

"Hello, there, iron! How's it going?"

It was good thing none of his friends were there to see him doing those little-kid things!

But at that very moment, the wooden telephone made a soft click and someone's voice replied:

"Hey, it's going just great! Are you that boy with the arms and legs? What's your name?"



Oskar dropped the wooden mobile phone in his lap in shock. He stared at it. The chunk of wood was exactly the same as it was before. Had a voice really come from it? That was impossible! But no – he was almost certain that some noise was blaring from the toy phone. Someone called out: “Cuckoo! Where’d you go?” Oskar cautiously lifted the telephone back up to his ear.

“Hello...” he said.

“Hello, hello!” the voice perkily replied. “What happened, buddy? I asked what your name is!”

“Oskar.”

“That’s great. And do you have arms and legs?”

“I do,” Oskar replied.

“Yippide-doo! How many?”

“I have two legs and two arms,” Oskar said.

“Well, that’s just enough!” the voice complemented. “You can do great things with those!”

“But who are you?” Oskar now asked.

“Well, who do you think! You yourself just gave me a ring and now you’re asking me who I am? Are you having a brain fart? You said: “Hello, there, iron! How’s it going?” Did you forget already, huh?”

“So, you’re the iron?”

“Who else, then! No, I’m gingerbread dough! Make little stars and sheep out of me – baa!”

Oskar stared unblinkingly at the iron resting on the table. There wasn’t the slightest sign that the appliance was alive. It was an iron just like any other, made to stand up straight on its behind, its silvery belly flashing in the sunshine that spilled into the room. Was it really speaking to him?

“Listen, could you be a pal? If you truly do have two arms, then I’ve got a favor to ask,” the voice on the telephone continued while Oskar was pondering. “If you wouldn’t mind, then please lay me on my belly.

It’s dumb standing around on my butt like a dog begging for a treat. Would you be a pal?”

Oskar picked up the iron and laid it flat on the table.

“Oh, super!” the voice praised. “My heiny was already getting stiff. Your grandma always loves to keep me up on my tush like that and, well, she doesn’t have a telephone, does she, so I can’t call and say – hey, granny, quit it! It’s just marvelous that you and I can talk! I’ve wanted to have a friend with arms and legs for so long.”

“But how...” Oskar stammered. “Why... I don’t understand... This is just a block of wood... How was I able to call you on it?”

“How should I know? You think that since I’ve got a cord in my bottom and some electronic gadgets stuck in me that I’m some kind of an electrician? Forget it, buddy! I don’t know the first thing about stuff like that. I’m an iron, not a scientist. You called, I picked up – everything works! What are you poking and prying for?”

“Can I call other... things... too?” Oskar asked.

“Well, why not? If they can be bothered to pick up the phone, then of course you can.”

“But how? I don’t know their telephone numbers!”

“Hello, Sun; hello, Moon! What silly numbers do you need, anyway? Wake up, buddy! Are all creatures with arms and legs this blockheaded?”



[Chapter 27, pp 192–196]

Oskar sighed and took out his telephone. He wanted to chat with someone to lighten his gloomy mood. Grandma's big watering can was standing right next to the stairs, and that's exactly who Oskar called now.

"Hello, watering can!" he said. "I'm Oskar. What are you doing?"

"Hello, Oskar!" the watering can replied. "I'm watching the sky."

"Why?" Oskar asked.

"I'm waiting for my parents."

"Your parents?" Oskar asked in astonishment. "Does that mean your parents live in the sky?"

"Of course they do," the watering can said. "They're oh-so-big and carry lots and lots of water. A ton of it. Far more than I can hold. They swim leisurely across the sky and water the ground. Big, grey watering cans – those are my mother and father."

"You mean the clouds, then?" Oskar asked. "Rainclouds?"

"What do you mean, 'clouds'?" the watering can asked, confused. "I'm a watering can. That means my mother and father must be watering cans, too. A child looks just like its mother and father; now, doesn't it?"

Oskar was just about to start explaining that actually, those really are clouds carrying the rain, and that they have no connection at all to the watering can – that it was made by humans and bought at the store – but then, he stopped to think. The watering can's story seemed much nicer. Indeed – why can't you just call rainclouds "big watering cans" if you want to? It's not that big of a difference – both clouds and watering cans alike sprinkle water over the ground. If the watering can wanted to believe that clouds are its mother and father, then why not? Oskar had no reason to interfere.

"But then how did you end up down here on the

ground, if your parents live in the sky?" he asked instead.

"I don't know for sure," the watering can replied. "I can't remember. But I guess they must have laid me in an egg. The egg tumbled down from up there, and I hatched out of it."

"So, you've never actually seen your parents?" Oskar asked.

"Of course I have! They come to see me often," the watering can exclaimed. "They love me, you know. They fly around my head and gently pour water over me. Oh, they sure are good at watering! So good that the whole ground is wet, the trees are soaked, and there are puddles left everywhere. I still have much more to learn before I can be just as good as they are and go flying with them."

"Do you know how to fly, then?" Oskar asked. The watering can's story seemed more and more outlandish and exciting to him.



“No, not yet,” the watering can said. “I’m not a grown-up watering can yet, you know; I’m just a chick. That’s why my mother and father don’t take me along with them—I wouldn’t be able to stay up in the air. I have to wait and grow.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know,” the watering can said with a hint of regret. “But it’ll probably take a while longer, since I’m still very tiny compared with my mother and father. They’re so big that they cover the whole sky! The day that I finally grow up to be like them – well, I’m afraid that’ll take years and years.”

Oskar was reminded of the dinosaurs for some reason. They had also been gigantic, just like clouds. They had also laid eggs, and the teensy dinosaurs that hatched from those eggs might have been about the same size as that watering can. No doubt in those prehistoric times, they would also lay on their bellies in the tall grass and watch, wide-eyed, how the massive stomachs of their mothers and fathers swayed above them as they walked through the jungle.

“Are those your parents way up there, then?” Oskar asked, craning his neck to stare at the sky, which was turning cloudy.

“Oh, no,” the watering can said. “Those aren’t watering cans. They don’t have water in them. They’re white and lazy – all they do is fly around and don’t do anyone any good. But I have the feeling that my mother and father aren’t too far away. I believe they’ll get here before long. And then, I’ll be able to see them again. I think they’ll be proud of me, because I’ve watered so much land since I last saw them! My Mom and Dad can’t always make it everywhere, you know – a flowerbed or the back corner of a garden might start to get a little dry every once in a while, and that’s when I help out.”

While he was listening to the watering can, Oskar suddenly started to miss his own parents, too. They were far away as well; even farther away than the watering can’s mother and father. Clouds at least fly over the rooftops sometimes, but his mother was in America and his father in the city. And then there was that thing that happened to the balloon... Oskar started feeling gloomy.

“Come and sit next to me,” he said to the watering can, which he picked up and set down beside him on the steps. “Can I do something nice for you? I’ve got arms and legs, you see. I can take you somewhere or, vice-versa – maybe I can bring you something? Just say the word!”

“I don’t need anything,” the watering can reckoned. “I’ve just got to wait here patiently and grow until I’m big enough to soar through the sky with my mom and dad and water the ground.”

The watering can pondered for a moment.

“But maybe there is one thing you could do,” it spoke. “You could fill me up with water. I don’t like being empty, especially when my mom and dad are coming to visit. Being an empty watering can makes me look lazy and careless. Mom and Dad are never empty – they’re always chock-full of water.”

“I can do that,” Oskar promised. He knew very well where the spigot and hose were that his grandmother used to fill the watering can in the evenings. When he had filled the watering can up to the brim, he called it again on his wooden phone.

“Is that good?” he asked.

“Yes,” the watering can replied, sounding a little bubbly, as if water was sloshing up around its mouth. “Now, I’m ready. Now, they’ll be glad to see me.”

Oskar eyed the watering can, and he had a vision – he saw a little boy standing in front of him, wearing a white button-up shirt and a bow-tie, and who was waiting impatiently for his parents to come to the preschool Christmas party so that he could perform his songs and recite his freshly-memorized poems for them. All the boy did was constantly peek over at the door and chew his fingernails in excitement.

“I know they’ll come soon,” Oskar said. “And they’ll douse you with a downpour.”

Translated by Adam Cullen