

Andrus Kivirähk

# Sirli, Siim ja saladused



## "Sirli, Siim and the Secrets"

Text by [Andrus Kivirähk](#)

Illustrated by Ilmar Trull

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*Storybook, fiction*

Age: 10+

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Slovenian

Sirli, Siim, and the Secrets is an enchanting tale about ordinary city-dwellers whose everyday lives are brightened and enriched by dreams. Residing in a humdrum little apartment house in a quiet neighbourhood is a small family: the daughter Sirli, who voyages to visit a sky dancer; the son Siim, who is a wizard in a miniature world beneath his desk; the mother, who occasionally runs away to a majestic castle to be treated as royalty; and the father, who loves competing as the famous boxer "Ironfist". The eccentric building caretaker dreams of becoming the Prince of the Waters, while only the writer Sheep lacks any visions at all – because of this, he grows bitter and callous.

### Awards:

2010 Children and Young Adult Jury (Bērnu un

jauniešu žūrija), Latvia, 2nd place (Grades 5–7)

1999 5 Best-Designed Estonian Children's Books



## Reading sample

### 1

Summer was already over and in a few days school and kindergarten would begin again, but Dad had still not taken Siim fishing. Siim was not happy about this and sneaked up on him, fork in hand, and gently prodded him in the behind with it.

"Ow!" said Dad. "What do you think you're doing? Why are you poking me with a fork? Do you think I'm some kind of hot-dog sausage?"

"You're no-one's hot-dog," replied Siim angrily.  
"You're my Dad and you have to take me fishing."

"Yes, we'll go," said Dad, but Siim had heard enough of this kind of promise and remarked, crossly, "  
'We'll go, we'll go,' that's what you always say. When are we going? I'm back at kindergarten the day after tomorrow!"

"Well, we shouldn't go on a school day, so let's go on Saturday," remarked Dad. "What are you so keen to go fishing for! You won't even eat fish."

But Siim did not allow himself to be distracted by Dad's crafty chit-chat; instead he pestered him until he made a definite promise – that Saturday they would catch a train and go fishing. Only then did Siim take the fork back to the kitchen and carry on eating his potatoes.

The fishing idea had been put into Siim's head by his friend from kindergarten, a Russian boy named Styopa. Styopa often went with his father and had once even come to kindergarten carrying an ornate tin bucket in which a tiny fish, reputedly caught by Styopa himself, was swimming. Closer inspection revealed that the creature had died, and the children buried it in the sandpit. But what did that matter? Siim was very envious of Styopa. Ever since the spring end-of-term party he had been nagging Dad to take him, but Dad had always managed to put it off.

The fact was that Dad himself had never gone fishing before, but was embarrassed about saying so to

his son. The fact was that he knew not the slightest thing about fishing. He had heard somewhere that you needed a rod tipped with a hook which in turn was tipped with an earthworm. But that was all. This made Dad very anxious and he awaited Saturday nervously.



### 2

Mum and Sirli were eating in the kitchen. Sirli was six years older than Siim and in a few days would be starting Year Four. She had a ponytail and wore a blue ring with a space where a glass heart had accidentally fallen out.

"Why are you wearing a ring at the table?" asked Siim, taking his place. "That's not allowed."

"Why not? It is," replied Sirli.

"It's not. You should have clean hands when you're eating. You shouldn't come to the table with dirty hands."

"My ring isn't dirty," Sirli informed him, offended.  
"My ring is quite the opposite – it's beautiful!"

"I'm wearing a ring too," said Mum. Siim looked at Mum's hand – it was true, she was! Mum had also come to the table wearing a ring.

"Dear oh dear, if only my kindergarten teacher could see you now," said Siim earnestly. Mum and Sirli should be relieved that it was just Siim who was here to tell them off. His kindergarten teacher would have been so much sterner with them, Siim didn't punish Mum and his sister, they were after all, family, and very dear to him, even though their hands weren't clean.

"My hands are clean anyway," he remarked loftily.

"You don't understand women's things," said Sirli, a little haughtily. Siim wanted to counter with a clever remark but before he could, Mum asked, "What's Dad up to that's stopping him coming to the table?"

"He's watching the telly. There are some men running round."

"The high jump's on," said Sirli.

"Then I'll take his meal to him in the other room," Mum decided. "Otherwise it'll get cold."

Mum started to pile the dishes onto a tray; Sirli and Siim ate up their potatoes.

"I'm going into the yard," said Sirli.

"I'm going to my room," said Siim.

"What happened with the fishing thing?" Sirli asked.  
"Have you managed to pester Dad into it?"

Siim's face had a knowing look.

"We're going on Saturday."

"Bet you don't catch a single fish," said Sirli.

"We'll catch loads," promised Siim.

"Yeah, right!"

"You're stupid, Sirli." Siim said it almost pityingly.  
"And you don't understand men's things."

"Stop arguing," said Mum. "And don't call each other 'stupid'!"

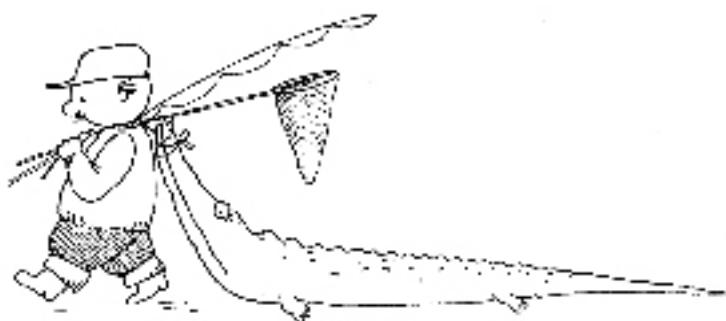
She took Dad's food to him in the other room and asked, "Is it true you're going fishing on Saturday?"

Dad gave his wife an unhappy look and she was suddenly very sorry for him. But what can you do? He'd made a promise to his son so he would have to go.

"Not to worry," whispered Mum into Dad's ear. "I went on a carousel with Sirli once, I was so nervous

I was hanging onto the post for dear life. Think you might catch a fish or two?"

"A crocodile perhaps," muttered Dad, shaking his head.



## 14

But the first day back at school brought Sirli no joy.

"We've got a new maths teacher," she complained at home. "A lady. She worships her maths and makes us do sums all the time. For tomorrow I have to add together all the numbers from one to a hundred."

"We'll help you," Mum promised. You can do from one to ten, I'll do ten to thirty and Dad can do the rest."

"Why is it me who has to do the most, and they're the most difficult ones!" grumbled Dad and shouted, "You donkey! What are you thinking of? There's no-one there!"

"What donkey?" asked Siim.

"That man there," explained Dad, who was watching the basketball on TV. "He should have thrown the ball to the guy under the basket but instead he's chucked it goodness knows where! What an ape!"

"Yeah, he looks more like an ape than a donkey," agreed Siim, peering at the tall player. "He's got a stupid look on his face like an ape's and long arms."

"Eh, heh-heeh!" laughed Dad. "You're dead right. Son, you really understand basketball."

His Dad's praise delighted Siim, but not before Styopa the Russian had managed to thoroughly upset him at kindergarten. What had annoyed Siim was Styopa telling him that he and his Dad had been fishing a hundred times in the summer if they'd been at all, at least once in the daytime and sometimes at night too, when they'd fished by torchlight. Hearing this had made Siim jealous and he was now pulling on his father's shirt-tails, telling him what Styopa had said.

Dad's face dropped.

"You're not on about fishing again?" he snapped.  
"I've already told you we'll go one Saturday."

"So now it's 'one' Saturday is it!" Siim flung back.  
"We have to go this Saturday!"

"Have to', do we?" mumbled Dad sullenly. "Well, since we have to, then let's do it."

"Way to go!" shouted Siim. Dad glowered angrily at the TV. The basket-ball player with the ape-like expression finally, after a long pause, slammed the ball into the basket, but it did nothing to cheer Dad up. He was worrying about fishing. Where could he get hold of some earthworms? He took the encyclopaedia down from the shelf and leafed through it. Earthworm... Where was it? This was definitely an emergency, a disaster even!

All of them were a little unhappy today, and that's not good for the first day back at school. Sirli was worried about her new teacher, Siim was jealous that Styopa had done so much fishing when he had never been. Dad was afraid of the coming Saturday and Mum couldn't bring herself to be the only happy one when the rest of the family was out of sorts.

And through the wall of their apartment there was Mr Lamb, a writer, and he too was in a bad mood. As usual. He was writing a scary book.

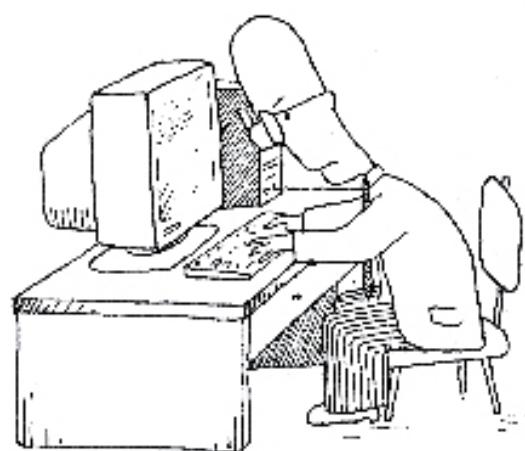
"Peeter was lying in a ditch, groaning. He was running a fever, his arms and legs were shivering, but there was no doctor on the way. Instead, a reindeer ran over him, trod on Peeter's face and caused the ill man more pain. Then..."

Mr Lamb pondered what terrible things might still befall Peeter.

"Then a snake came by!" he wrote happily. "The snake bit Peeter on his nose and his belly and his back!"

Mr Lamb smiled cruelly and carried on writing.

The only person who wasn't in a sulk was the concierge. He floated around the sunken ship in the broom cupboard in a good mood.



## 15

The next day they all felt in need of cheering up. Mum went to work and came home via her own secret castle where the servants were waiting for her expectantly.

"How are the Prince and Princess?" asked the butler as he took her briefcase and set it down on a golden cushion.

"The Prince is fine," she replied, "but Sirli has some problems. She's got a new teacher who's very pernickety. She wants Sirli to spend every day doing nothing but sums."

"Heavens above!" exclaimed the butler. "Do such dreadful people really exist? Your Highness should have the nasty brute locked up!"

Mum was torn.

"Your Highness!" the butler went on. "Our jails are currently completely empty, one dreadful teacher could come in useful! Picking on the Princess is a serious crime! Your Highness, do you remember when you were a princess yourself? Remember that gym teacher who used to torment you?"

Mum remembered only too well. Her gym teacher had been a tiny vicious old bat who thought that young girls should spend their whole lives vaulting over gym horses. Mum simply couldn't get the hang of it and the gym teacher kept her behind in the gym for ages after lessons to practise vaulting like a mad thing. It had worn Mum out completely and in the evening she had been too tired even to eat properly, much less pop into her castle.

"There were several weeks when you didn't visit us at all and our castle nearly crumbled away," mused the butler. "Rats ate the crown and the royal toys drowned in dust. It was a dreadful time. But finally Your Highness vaulted over the horse and came back to us and our castle began to flourish once more. The toys dug themselves out of the dust with spades, the rats made a new crown and that dreadful gym teacher..."

"Was locked up!" interrupted Mum. "Yes, she was thrown into the deepest dungeon, I was delighted to hear! Served her right! But afterwards she left our school and began working as a dog-trainer and I forgot about her completely. What happened to her here in the castle? Did she escape from the dungeon?"

"Oh no," said the butler, shaking his head. "Our dungeon is secure. There's no escape for anyone whom Your Highness does not deign to pardon. Come with me, Your Highness, if you please!"

They went down the narrow, winding steps together, down and down, until they reached the cellars. In amongst the jars of jam and bottles of juice there was a door marked "Dungeon". Mum and the butler stepped inside.

There was the tiny, horrible gym teacher, wearing a blue tracksuit. She scowled at her visitors and shouted, "Go and start vaulting over that horse! Get a move on! Start vaulting! And then climb onto

the beam and walk along it until your feet are two big blisters. Get that back straight! Tummy in! Get going!"

"Be quiet!" said the butler, telling her off. "Otherwise I shall give the order to have your stopwatch and whistle removed!"

"You mustn't do that!" cried the gym teacher. "I can't live without my whistle and my stopwatch!"

"Then hush!" ordered the butler. "Stand in the corner and let's sort this out."

The gym teacher took herself off to the corner of the dungeon cell, grumbling under her breath, and began to play with the sports ball there.

Mum watched her, an expression of triumph mingled with compassion on her face.

"I don't know, perhaps we should let her go," she said after a while. "I think it's childish for me to still be so angry. It's a long time since I left school and I'd completely forgotten about vaulting over that horse."

"If Your Highness so wishes the gym teacher shall be released immediately and be gone from the castle," the butler suggested. "But what shall we do with the Princess's teacher? Should we lock her up?"

"No," Mum replied. "This is my castle and I can't help my daughter here. She has to come to some arrangement with her teacher herself. Perhaps she has some daydreams of her own already."

Mum thought for a bit longer and then whispered into the butler's ear,

"Going back to my gym teacher... keep her in the dungeon for a bit longer. She was really horrible – once she even hit me with a skipping rope!"

## 25

Siim put the wizard's cloak on, and was again in the secret world that belonged only to him. Roosa the pig trotted over to him and shook her head sadly.

"There's been a big disaster!" she snorted. "Distress and calamity are upon us."

"What's happened, pig?" asked Siim.

"I'm not a pig, I'm a ladybird," said the pig. "I was transformed into a pig! A witch flew here on a broom and she's been casting spells and now everything is all topsy-turvy!"

This made Siim angry. In his magic world no witch or wizard had the right to perform their own tricks – only one person was allowed to perform magic – Siim himself. On the other hand though, he was in a good mood again as a fight with the witch promised to be exciting.

"Let's go to the witch's right now and I'll show her!" said Siim. "Show me the way!"

"But will I be turned back into a ladybird?" whimpered the pig. "I really don't want to be a pig because pigs can't fly and they don't have beautiful spotted backs."

Siim promised to turn him straight back into a ladybird after the battle with the witch. They set off together and on the way Siim came across plenty of evidence of the witch's mischief. Large numbers of animals had been enchanted: dogs turned into cats, horses into cows, wolves into donkeys and bears into rats. All of them were very annoyed, they were calling the witch names and asked Siim for help while stretching out their strange coats to try and make them fit.

"That won't help," said Siim to one of the wolves who, thanks to the witch had to tramp about as a donkey and was pulling on his tail with his own teeth. "You won't get rid of the donkey skin that way. Hang on a bit and I'll change you back into a wolf."

"Please do," grumbled the wolf. "As soon as I look back and see donkey legs my mouth starts watering and I think – wey hey! there's a donkey over there! Let me get stuck in to that! And then I remember that the donkey legs belong to me! Good wizard, please change me back into a wolf soon!"

"First I have some business to conduct with the witch," said Siim sternly in a manner befitting a dignified wizard and left the wolf-donkey where he was. He realised that he was getting very near the witch's den because the enchanted animals were growing in number and even a granddad shambled out from behind a bush, barking earnestly. Siim realised that the man wasn't really anyone's granddad but a dog in the grip of an enchantment and suddenly even he began to feel afraid, then remembered he was a powerful wizard and didn't mind about the yelping granddad, he merely conjured up a muzzle for it and went on. And then – he saw the witch! She was leaning on her broom and working with such intensity that her brow was damp. The poor animals were squealing and mewling in terrible distress but the witch showed mercy to none of them and bewitched them all.

"What do you think you're doing, witch!" shouted Siim bravely. "This is my forest and I will not let anyone do bad magic here!"

"How can you stop me?" asked the witch insolently. "Now better be quiet, else I'll turn you into a shoe brush!"

Siim was not afraid of the witch's threats, however, because he knew that no-one could cast a spell on him as he was a powerful wizard. So he merely laughed at the witch's words and said, "If you continue with your horrible mischief then I shall bewitch you as a punishment. Behold you are a zebra!"

Instantly the witch became a zebra but she still had the powers she had had before. She kicked out and neighed, "Well, a zebra I may be, makes no difference to me! My sorcery won't stop!"

And as proof she transformed a rabbit into an elephant, which hopped off dolefully into the bushes making the earth clamour.

Siim frowned and began to transform the witch into all sorts of things – the zebra became a mouse, the mouse a cow, the cow a rhinoceros. But the change to the witch's appearance had no effect, she continued with her own trickery. Once Siim changed the witch into a lamb but something must have gone wrong because suddenly Mr Lamb was standing in the clearing, not the white, woolly lambkin Siim had intended, and he cried out in a loud voice, "Why is it so dark in the corridor?"

"Better if you're a witch again," decided Siim in fright and changed Mr Lamb back into the witch. She cackled and shouted, "Aha, you cannot overcome me! Turn me into whoever you like, my magic will never stop, not so long as I have the strength for my magic words!"

Siim was already in real trouble and bewildered, but the witch's words gave him a good idea. He had to change her into something that couldn't talk. Like a duster or a pine cone...Just let her try casting magic spells then!

Siim moved his hand and the witch changed into a tiny mushroom.

"Umm–mmm-puck," mumbled the witch – as she no longer had a mouth, she could no longer speak intelligibly. What she wanted to say was, "Horse, be transformed into a fly!" but instead she could only mumble, "Oss-orm-my!"

The horse spat in contempt and replied, "Can't understand a word!" And was not transformed into anything.

The witch was filled with anger and tried to enchant another animal.

"Snail!, Be transformed into a frog!" she meant to shout, but all that anyone heard was, "Eyy-ugg!"

"I don't understand, sir!" said the snail and crept on, unperturbed.

The witch panted and puffed but was no longer able to enchant a single animal because no one could make out any of the things the mushroom was saying. So the witch had no option but to remain silent and stop her mischief.

The animals cheered and a squirrel banged on a tree-stump as if it were a drum.

"Hey, squirrel!" shouted Siim. "You can have that mushroom for your dray."

"I'm not a squirrel, I'm a tiger!" replied the squirrel on the stump, offended, but a giraffe wandered over and said in a melancholy voice, "I am actually a squirrel but there's no room for me in my dray anymore, my neck is too long."

"Sorry, I completely forgot that the witch had turned everything topsy-turvy," said Siim. He spent a long time restoring the animals back to their original forms – the pig into a ladybird, the granddad into a dog, the giraffe into a squirrel. Only the mushroom was left as a mushroom.

*Translated by Susan Wilson*

