



The Sisters and Trouble-Brothers of Joybow Street

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Seven-year-old Lenna's best friends are Mirtel, Emma, and Saskia, who all live on the same street. They're such good friends that Mirtel's mother calls them sisters. Hanging out together is a blast, especially when the summer holidays roll around. The girls hold garden parties, play 'cherry scarecrow', tend to the flower garden, and fetch fresh eggs from the neighbouring farm to bake delicious cakes. Also living nearby are Mart, Oskar, and Siim, whom the girls like to spy upon, occasionally play with, or even get into some light mischief together. Life is never a bore on their street near the city limits!



Reading sample

Oscar's Frog Farm

Oscar's frog farm began with the frog migration period. Up till then, Steve had had the most animals out of anyone on our street. Specifically, between him and his brother Andy, they owned five pet mice. I just have two cats. Saskia has a hamster. Nobody else has any. Marty got Toby much later.

One day in late April, Oscar said he wanted to show us something. He was wearing boots and a grim expression. "Just look at it," he said, pointing to a shallow puddle after we'd circled around to the back of his yard. "It was the same thing last year. A couple dozen frogs swimming around. But back then, there was a big open ditch here. They laid a pipe down and a bulldozer filled it in last autumn. You see what I'm getting at?"

We did, for the most part.

Oscar continued.

"It's a huge problem! Frogs always return to their home pond to spawn. But since there's no pond or ditch or anything here anymore, they've all shown up for nothing."

"I reckon they'll figure out their mistake and leave at some point," Steve said.

"But what if they don't? They're here already! If the frogs stay and spawn in this little puddle, then their tadpoles won't survive because it'll probably be dried up in a week's time already."

"Then we'll just pour more water in," Mirtel proposed.

"I dunno," Oscar said doubtfully. "That's a different kind of water. And it'll just dry up, anyway."

Helping the frogs would've been such a noble act. We wracked our brains for an idea.

"Poor things," Emma sighed.

"There's no point in talking to them either, I suppose," I said. I had my doubts about frogs' intelligence.

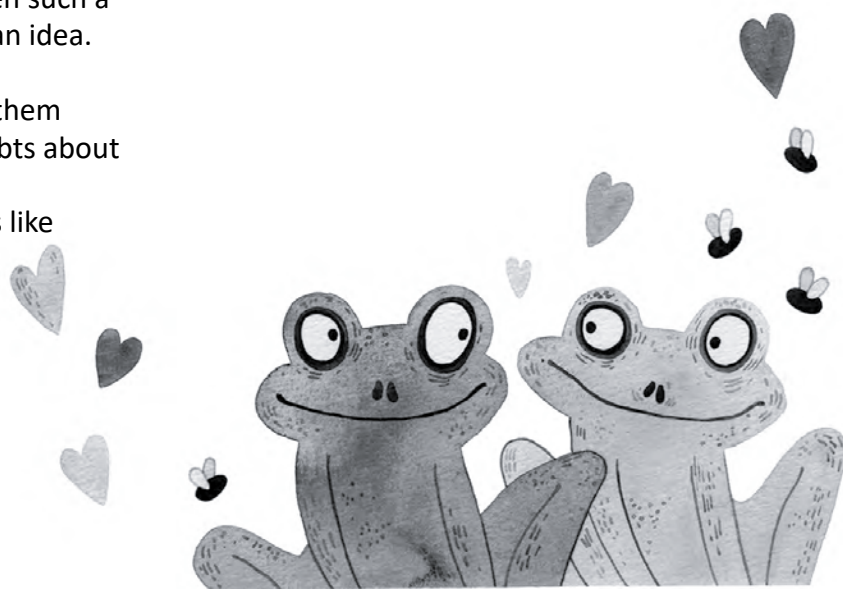
Oscar grunted and said: "Looks like

we've got no choice. I reckon they'll need to be moved to another ditch. I know a good spot. Beavers built a dam nearby. Now, it's like a pond that won't even dry up in the middle of summer."

This being decided, we grabbed some buckets, pulled on gloves, and set out to save the frogs. We were like a rescue team. First of all, they had to be caught. We tried to be as quiet and cautious as we could while encircling them. But whenever the girls and I got a chance to grab one, it would always hop away at the last second. We squealed each time they startled us. In the end, we only got ahold of one, but even that frog jumped out of the bucket because it didn't have a lid. Frogs are extremely talented jumpers. We found this hilarious, but Oscar got pretty ornery. "These frogs are a protected species," he said. "You're not supposed to laugh at them." Ultimately, Oscar caught almost all of the frogs himself. We took them to a ditch that was pretty close to the river, right by the Witch's House.

The next few evenings, we went to hear the frog concert by the side of the ditch. They were croaking mating songs and swimming around in pairs. Oscar read to us from *The Frog Book*: "The male frog holds the female frog tight with his front legs. Then, the female lays lots of tiny eggs in the water and the male fertilizes it."

When Steve started to giggle, Oscar said: "Chickens lay eggs, too—why doesn't that make you laugh?"



At some point in late April, we climbed down to the water and searched for frog eggs. Actually, they're called 'spawn'. Each one was a slippery, grayish, transparent little ball with a black speck inside. There were tons of balls and specks in the ditch water, all bunched together. We inspected them for quite a while. Oscar flipped through his book again and read aloud: "Within two weeks, the spawn develops into tadpoles. A tadpole has a large head and a long tail. Tadpoles don't look anything like big frogs. They swim around and feed on aquatic plants."

But before the tadpoles started doing laps in the ditch, Oscar discovered that a few frogs had managed to evade us and spawn behind his yard. He immediately fetched a bucket. The puddle in which the frog eggs were floating had almost totally dried up. He scooped the jello-like spawn into the bucket together with some muddy water, and we deposited them in the same place we'd released the frogs earlier.

It made me feel great and somewhat proud, as if we were sort of like the frog spawn's moms and dads. I reckon those emotions were especially strong for Oscar, who no longer wanted to chase after Steve anymore. Whenever Steve wanted to play football but Oscar wanted to go check on his frog farm, Steve called him "Mud Frog". Then they'd fight, of course. Oscar kept taking his trips to the ditch and told Steve that he'd never play football with him again if he didn't quit his teasing. It worked, because Oscar is a real ace and a fantastic goalkeeper.

Oscar made regular trips to check in on the frogs and the tadpoles for several months. He'd even worn a nice clear path into the tall grass. Marty, Steve, and we girls would sometimes go along. Even now, there's still a sign staked into the ground a good fifty feet before the ditch, which reads:

OSCAR'S FROG FARM
TRESPASSERS KEEP OUT!

None of us were trespassers, of course, so we could trot right behind the proud owner's heels.

"You hear that?" Oscar asked, sticking his index finger into the air. "That's my Mar and Theodor croaking. I can pick them out by the sounds they make from a mile away."

We laughed. Lately, Oscar had been calling every frog he could spy by its name.

"What, you think I don't recognize my own frogs or something?" he'd grumble testily. We picked our way down the side of the ditch, keeping an eye out for the croakers.

"Look, that one with the thoughtful look on her face," Oscar said, pointing. "That's Mar, in any case."

"'In any case' my behind! It's way too big!"

Oscar glared at Saskia, taking offense. "What do *you* know about my frogs?!"

We did all know a thing or two about them, in fact, but Oscar certainly knew the very most. He'd read *The Frog Book* from cover to cover multiple times.

"Hey, Oscar's been watching all of them since they were babies," Steve defended him.

"Since they were *tadpoles*," Oscar corrected.

"Right, tadpoles," Steve said. "If you're a farmer, then you've got to know your livestock."

I didn't say anything, because it could certainly be true that all frogs have different-looking faces, just like people. Even though you can't really tell them apart.

Oscar pulled a matchbox from his pocket. It contained the frogs' dinner. "Tadpoles eat algae, mosquito larvae, and water bugs," he told us. "Adult frogs eat insects, too. They especially like mosquitos and horseflies. They eat slugs, too, in the garden. They're really useful."

It made us a little worried to hear that because we were insect rescuers as well, and we didn't protect them just so that Oscar's frogs could gulp them down!

"Why not, though?!" Oscar argued back when he heard this. "Why shouldn't they get a full belly? It's called natural balance. Frogs eat bugs. Big fish like catfish and pike eat the frogs. Animals like badgers and otters do, too."

"And storks," Mirtel chipped in.

"And seagulls," Oscar added. "They've got loads of enemies in the wild."

He opened his matchbox and called out: "Susan! Susan, come close, will ya?"

Susan, a tadpole that resembled a ball with a tail, darted around the water before hiding behind a partly submerged stick.

"Come out, come out! Are you stupid or something!?" Oscar said, trying to coax her back.

"Sure seems like it," Mirtel said with a smirk. "Look at how tiny she is."

Oscar rushed to Susan's defense. "She's not so little anymore and she's not stupid, either. I was just teasing."

The girls and I held our tongues after that, just in case.

"I wonder—do frogs even have brains?" Marty asked.

"Of course they've got brains! Really complex ones, too!" Oscar sniffed indignantly.

Steve, who'd been standing beside us with infinite patience, started tossing the football up and down in his hands and said: "Hurry up and feed them, then let's go."

Oscar didn't increase his pace one bit.

Finally, Steve finally blurted out: "Come on, these frogs will get their fill even without you coming to feed them!"

Oscar shot him a warning glare, and Steve quieted down immediately. They didn't fight that evening, so we were all right back by the ditch the very next day. It was fun to watch the little tadpoles grow bigger and more frog-like with every day. Soon, they sprouted legs and lost their tails. Oscar told us that their gills were being replaced with lungs. In the end, all the fully-formed frogs crawled out of the water and started hopping around the ground. They sure were tiny and cute at first!

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How We're Cherry Scarecrows, Alpinists, and Businesswomen

Growing in our yard are three pines, two birches, five apple trees, a pear tree, lots of cherry trees, two plum trees, and two hazelnuts. Early each spring, Gramps comes and prunes the fruit trees' fresh shoots. He also cuts old vines off the berry bushes and trims the new growth. I don't really know how many berry bushes we have in the garden—tons, in any case! Last autumn, all the mothers on our street came to pick the berries. Mom and I did, too. Afterward, we made them into jams and juices.

Mom thinks this will be a good cherry year, just like last summer. All the trees were covered in blossoms. It's fantastic news, because I like cherries most of all. One big tree gives us sweet mottled yellow and red ones. They're so juicy that it dribbles down your chin when you eat one. I can't wait for them to ripen.

Last year, the girls and I played scarecrow for the cherry trees. We stood still beneath one with our arms outstretched and only moved whenever a woodpecker, jay, or blackbird approached. As soon as the bird whooshed past in disappointment, we froze again. And when it circled back around for another attempt, we started waving our arms again. I have to say that the birds were way more determined than we were. Maybe they even like the taste of cherries more!

When we got bored with our scarecrowing job, Mom suggested that we make a tent beneath one of the cherry trees with low, sturdy branches. So, we tossed a sheet over one branch, dragged a mattress beneath it, and just like that, we had our tent. We pretended to be alpinists trying to climb to the top of Mount Elbrus. Before ascending the summit, we'd stopped to put up our tents and spend the night on a lower-altitude ridge. Sitting cross-legged in front of our tent, we enjoyed steaming soup from tin bowls. Mom told us that up in



the mountains, the air is thin and it's difficult to breathe. We had a hard time breathing, too. Our heads were spinning, but we kept climbing, regardless—all the way to the top of the cherry tree and back down. When exhaustion really did get the best of us, we stretched out on the mattress. Still, if you want to scale peaks, then you're not allowed to be lazy. Puffing and panting, we got out and started climbing again. We were alpinists the next day, too, but not the one after that. Birds flocked to the trees and snacked on the cherries in peace.

One week later, Mom took out the ladder and we started gathering whatever the birds had left behind. We picked cherries for half the day, filling three wash bins and a bucket to the point of overflowing. Mom reckoned it was more than we would be able to eat on our own. On top of that, you've got to remove the pits before eating the cherries, and that takes even more time than it does to pick them. Then, an idea popped into my head—the kind that Mirtel sometimes calls “genius”. I asked: “What if the girls and I were to set up a booth on the other side of the fence? We could start selling some of the cherries, couldn't we?”

The girls were ecstatic about my plan. Mom covered a little table in a flower-print vinyl tablecloth and helped us carry it through the gate. It was perfect for a sales booth. Mom provided our kitchen scale, Saskia brought a calculator, and Mirtel supplied us with lots of boxes. What a great time it was! We weighed out portions to put into the boxes so they'd all be equal. Saskia labeled the boxes in big red letters:

1 BOX

COSTS

40 CENTS

Then, we put on our salesperson faces and waited for the customers to arrive.

None did.

Only Emma's dad showed up and asked: “What's this little lemonade stand you've got here?” We complained about the lack of buyers

and he suggested that we advertise. “These days, you can't sell a single thing without advertising,” he informed us. We discussed it a little and decided to hire the boys to be our salesmen in exchange for one cup of cherries. Steve zoomed around the village on his bike, barking into Emma's microphone: “16 Joybow Street! Cherry avalanche! Forty cents for a cup! Hurry before they're gone!” The other boys followed him on their own bikes and hollered, too, though they didn't have battery-powered microphones.

Our first customer showed up five minutes later.

“What can I offer you?” Saskia asked, as if we had anything else in stock.

“One cup of cherries, please,” the girl answered. I didn't know her back then, but I do now. Her name is Laura and she was in fifth grade last year.

Laura placed forty cents on the table.

“Thank you! Come again!” said Saskia.

Our salesmen returned, out of breath, and immediately gobbled down several boxes for free. Right after that came Raul and Kristjan from Cheerstream Street. They bought two boxes each. All the sales put us in pretty high spirits. We were just weighing out a few more boxes when a group of cyclists stopped and asked if they could pay by card. They seemed to find the question funny, too. “Sorry, no can do,” we told them. They patted their pockets and magically, one of them found some coins. We gave them two boxes. They didn't even ask for change.

What a business it was! Steve said that as soon as he grows up, he's going to be a salesman, too. He'd heard they make loads of money and don't really have to do anything to get it. Marty, who had wanted to be a veterinarian before, said he'd probably become a salesman, too. Emma asked: “Can salesmen sometimes be women?” That made Steve laugh hysterically. He asked: “Since when have women ever been men?” and suggested that Emma stick to flexing her brain muscles.

But Mirtel, who is always a powerhouse of ideas, stated resolutely: “We girls are going to become *businesswomen* instead. Businesswomen make way more money than

salesmen do. Two times as much.”

After that, Mirtel’s dad, Uncle Thomas, rolled up in his rumbling motorcycle and bought two kilograms of cherries. Saskia’s mom also purchased two. We had to fetch more cherries from inside because there were so many customers. They just kept coming and coming with coins between their fingertips. In total, we earned 15 euros that day. We were covered in cherry juice from head to do, as filthy rich as real businesswomen, and totally satisfied

with all of it. When the ice cream truck showed up that evening, we spent nine euros to treat ourselves and the boys. We put the remaining six euros aside for unexpected costs. Grams would have called it “seed money” or said, “Wherever there’s some, more’s to come.”

Sometimes, I’ve considered becoming a writer just like my mom. But I do like money, too. That means I might never start writing books, but will become a businesswoman instead. I’m not really sure yet.

