



“Storybook”

Text by [Anti Saar](#)

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The Way Things Are With Us is a humorous book about life in a completely ordinary family. Vassel lives in a nice little Estonian town with his mother, father, and little brother Joona, who is just two-and-a-half years old. Vassel shows the way things are in his family – how they read, write, and draw; cook and eat; tell ghost stories; argue; wait up for elves to bring presents around Christmastime; drive in the car; go to sleep; get lost; play football; host guests; and forget things.

The book was an immediate hit in Estonia, and a couple of additional print runs have already been made.

Awards:

2014 The White Ravens

2013 Annual Children’s Literature Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia

2013 Raisin of the Year Award

2013 Good Children’s Book



Reading example

Chapter Zero – the chapter that's not really about anything

Hi! My name's Vassel and I want to tell you about how things are going with us. I mean that in a general way, because I know of course, that "things" don't really get up and go. People and animals and other things do, of course, things that have legs. But not tables and chairs, their legs are made of wood. And just two years ago my little brother Joonas couldn't go anywhere either, even though he had legs on when he was born, and they're not made of wood. I've been walking for donkey's years of course and I've got strong legs, I can kick a ball, kerpow! Right over our fence!

Right then. You've heard how people just say how things are going. And I want to tell you how they're going with us. You can read about it and then write to me to tell me how things are going with you. Or even better, come and visit us, and we can talk about things face-to-face! Our house is no bother to find. The most important thing is to come on the 5:30 train because that's when all of us are usually at home: me, Joonas, mum and dad. When you get off the train, go straight across the zebra, then through the park, round the school to the left, and you're right there: the big red building right next to the green one. Our house has an address as well, but I'm forever forgetting it. But I can always

remember our door code: C 2357 Y. Why is "Y" the last letter? Because it stands for "Yippee! Yes!" So don't worry about the address, just try the code on lots of doors and the one that opens is ours. Come right in!

And now about the thing, or really the things. Things are different for all of us probably because we are all really different in our own ways. That's something you might not realise just from looking at the picture of us. All of us have two eyes, two ears, two noses ... no hold on a tick, we each have one nose, one mouth, a pair of hands and feet, and brown hair on our heads.

Not that you'd know that from the picture.

In the first place there's Mum's hair: it's not brown at all, it's red, but we couldn't colour it brown because my brown crayon is lost somewhere.

In the second place dad usually has a beard. But not all the time. Dad's beard is like a fly on a slice of bread and jam: he whisks it off, but it always comes back again. It comes from inside dad's chin and how much there is left in there I just don't know. So when you look at the picture of us, you can pencil a beard on dad. But if you do, be careful to rub it out again in a few weeks!



And in the third place: I'm still quite small in the picture. But by now, by the time you'll be looking at the picture in this book, I might have grown. Perhaps so big that I wouldn't fit into the picture any more – maybe you'd just see my legs! I can say that for absolute definite because mum and dad think that one day I'll be taller than both of them. At least, that's what they tell me when my trousers get too short or when I try on a new "big boy's" shirt. And then they both want to hug me tight and sit me on their laps and call me their little boy and stuff.

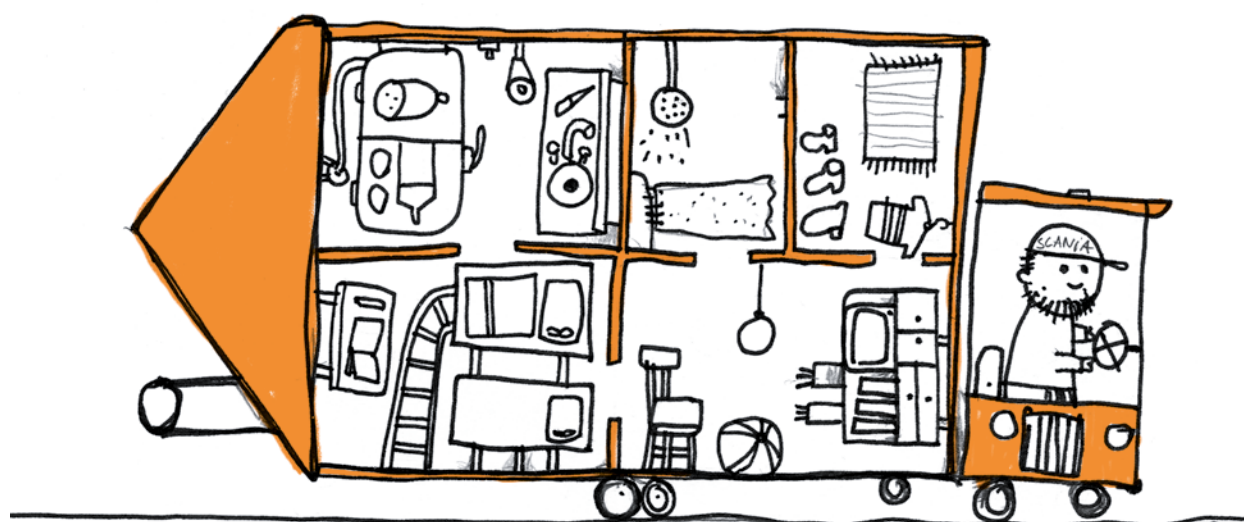
So yes, we are all really different. And in lots of different ways: for example I like travelling by train but mum likes the bus and dad likes his bicycle. I like running games and computer games but Joonas likes puzzles and hide and seek. And dad likes liver and pickles. And sometimes he drinks beer, that's something that Joonas and I definitely don't drink, although mum does sometimes. And we, that's me and mum, we like liquorice. And Joonas likes throwing things and rolling down Toomemäe in the leaves. That's something I like too. And so does mum, although she doesn't usually race us. And definitely not when she's wearing her beautiful flecked coat, the one that Dad brought back for her from a trip. She likes that coat even more than rolling! Dad likes mum's flecked coat as well, but he likes mum more, with or without the coat. Dad also likes animals because he was a country boy when he was a lad. I like animals too, but only ones smaller than me. Like, I'm a bit scared of cows. But Joonas is even scared of hens! In spring, Mum has freckles, dad has a tennis racket and I have a football. And Joonas has nothing but toys. Perhaps he's still a bit small, just over two years old – or nearly 2 ½. Dad

thinks we don't really need to have many things. And mum seems to agree with him. I don't though. Like, I really, really need a new yo-yo because Joonas threw my old one at the chimney breast and it broke. Mum says that the most important thing is that we have each other. And that's something I think we all do agree on.

Chapter 1 – the chapter about where our things came from

This chapter will explain how we got to the house we live in now. Easy- peasy-lemon-squeezy. We moved here! It was years and years ago, I was about one or zero. I don't remember much from those days, and I don't remember anything at all about moving.

For a while I thought that our flat moved with us: that a gigantic crane lifted all our clobber, two rooms, the kitchen, the hall and the toilet onto the back of a gigantic lorry that drove it here to the building we live in now. But do you know what? That's not what happened at all! The other day, mum and dad explained to me that only our cupboards and beds and cooker and washing machine and all the smaller things moved buildings. The flat itself stayed put in the old one, all empty. And a new flat in a new place was waiting for us, all ready for our clobber. The people who lived in it before had moved somewhere else. Only they hadn't been able to take the fireplace with them. Well, it's made of stone and weighs at least 100 kg! And we've also got the toilet bowl that the people who used to live here had.



It's a bit of a shame though, that I don't remember moving. At first all the stuff that had moved with us was in cardboard boxes all over the flat – just as if a special kind of friendly Father Christmas had been. And it must have been really exciting to open all those packages! You couldn't have known whether what would come out of the box would be a rocking horse, or a TV, or the stool that dad made, or Mum's mug with the elephant picture on. Of course you could have a guess from the size of the package, but even so!

So that's us and our stuff. But that's not how all our things got here. Like, Joonas didn't move here with us, instead he was born later from mum's tummy. That's what happened with lots of our books and toys as well. I don't mean that they came out of mummy's tummy too, just that we didn't have them in the old flat. And I bet not a single piece food from the old flat is in our fridge now either – it would have gone off yonks ago and started to stink the place out.

What usually happens with new stuff is that mum and dad buy it from a shop. And from the market. For milk and bread and meat and other things like that they give the shopkeeper paper money with coloured pictures on and yellow and red coins and the sellers don't seem to mind swapping at all. I find that a bit strange, because that paper money all looks a bit the same, annoyingly, and to be honest the pictures are quite boring. But apparently the shopkeepers like the pictures – can you believe that they'll even swap an ice cream for them! We don't have to buy all our food in shops. We bring potatoes and carrots and cauliflowers and apples and other things like that from grandma and grandad's in the countryside in Oaveski. Same with eggs and pork. Grandad has a dinner table's worth of hens: 19 of them! He used to have 20 but the pig ate one. One day people – that means us – will eat the pig. It would be only fair if the hens ate people, but that definitely won't happen, no way. They just want grain and porridge and eggshells.

Dad says that the food we bring from the countryside is pure and that often shop food has been dipped in soda or something. Anyhow, we are lucky to have grandma and granddad.

It should be obvious now where my dad is from. Oaveski of course, he is grandma and grandad's son. We got our Mum from Peedu. We still get jam and compotes and firewood from there. And all sorts of clothes: jumpers, socks, hats, scarves. Grandma is a really fast knitter. Then again I'm a really fast runner, perhaps I run even faster than grandma knits. We should race each other some time, but I don't exactly know how we could set it up.

It's almost like grandma's knitting knits itself while she's doing something else. Just like, I don't have to look at my legs when I'm running, well grandma doesn't look at her needles when she's knitting. Sometimes I think she might surprise herself with what she's made. So perhaps she thinks she's making a mitten but when she looks she sees that oops! she's made a glove! Or a sock! Or... Or trousers! No, what am I saying, grandma doesn't knit trousers. Or coats. And every idiot knows that there is absolutely no point to knitted boots – your feet would get wet straight away!

That's enough of that. Now I'll tell you a bit about something that we get from really peculiar paths that come out to us, it's something that you don't usually think about.

For example, there are wires running through our walls and electricity comes through them to the flat. Well, it's not that the wires actually run, just that they're somewhere in the wall, but in any case you can't always know for sure where they are. At least dad didn't know when he hit one with a screw. That was not his plan at all – he just wanted to screw the upper part of the bookshelf into the wall so that it wouldn't fall on our heads, and so Joonas and I could do gymnastics on it without worrying. But suddenly dad shouted out damn, and some other words, and Joonas and I ran quickly to see where the dam was and whether there was a flood and whether dad's life was in danger. But there was no dam, it was just that the screw had broken the electric wire. It was really dangerous and dad could have died but fortunately he didn't. He just shook for a bit afterwards.

Anyway dad didn't catch fire from the electricity and it didn't make him light up or spin. That's what

the other electric things in our house do: lightbulbs, the hot water boiler, the toaster, the mixer... And the washing machine drum sometimes makes such a racket that silly people, like Joonas, won't even go near it!

We get our light from lightbulbs, but in the day it comes straight through the window from the sun. In winter the sun only just rises as high as the chimney of the building opposite, but in summer it shines into our living room until late in the evening and draws jumbly patterns on the floor through the curtains. Dad is home from work, he lies on the floor, a mirror in his hand and lets us catch sunbeams on the wall. Mum brings all of us ice cream and raspberries from the kitchen.

Oops! I went a bit off track there, but so what: summer is my favourite season. Except for winter and spring. And autumn, although it rains too often then.

Okay, so I'll carry on with where our things come from. Hot water is heated for us by the boiler, and the cold water comes straight from the ground. Yes, really, from the place where there are moles and worms and dinosaur skeletons. I shan't say anything else about it because I don't really know any more to be honest.

Like I said earlier, our wood comes from Peedu. When the snow falls, dad and grandad go into the forest and cut down loads of large trees in the middle of their winter sleep. They make stocky logs out of the tallest trees and then chop them into the best firewood. To make sure that the firewood doesn't start hissing in the grate and that it burns properly, they dry it in the woodpile over the summer. This spring I helped stack the woodpile. It's very hard work. The woodpile is like Lego: if the firewood isn't stacked tightly, the pile collapses with a clatter and you have to do the work all over again.

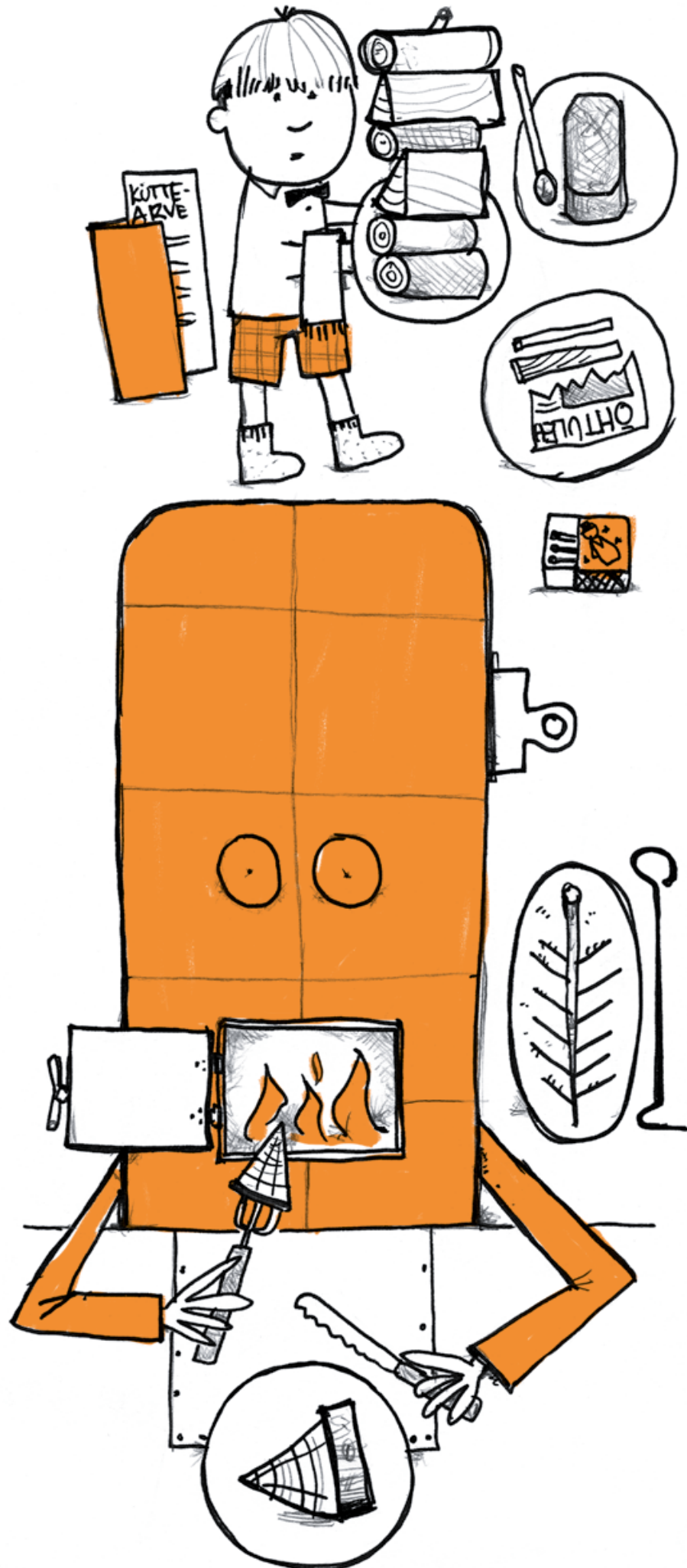
But in autumn the dried wood moves to the second floor of our block's two-floor woodshed. We also live on the second floor – in our maisonette building though, not the woodshed. And during a fairly cold winter we stoke our fire with a woodshed's worth of wood.

Our fireplace even has a name: Jaanus. Mum and dad picked it after moving in. And when dad goes to the shed to fetch wood he sometimes says I'm off to get some fodder for Jaanus. The other things in our flat don't have such lovely names. The table's name is table, the lamp's name is lamp and so on. Joonas and I have names for our cuddly toys, of course: I have a mouse and his name is Miki, and Joonas has a lamb, also called Miki. He always copies me.

When our fireplace Jaanus guzzles wood, it gets hot and over around it. But there's no fireplace at my school, at least I haven't found one. Instead there are radiators under the windows. Just where the heat gets into the radiators from I do not know. At least, there isn't a place next to them for loading wood.

Now a bit more about the heating. Right, to start the fire we need splinters and newspapers. Dad cuts the splinters in the woodshed with a small axe. And did you know that really small splinters are also called "chips"? And the paper bag where you keep chips is called a chip bag – tee-hee, that's quite funny, isn't it? We collect such an enormous pile of newspapers in summer in front of the fireplace that Joonas and I can play mountain climbers on top of it. Well, actually we can't, because like all mountains, newspaper mountains are in danger of avalanches and collapses that we can't put back into a proper pile by ourselves. And then mum gets really cross.

So where do the newspapers come from? I suppose from the mailbox in the lobby. Every morning, one at a time. And for dad to have the newspapers to read with his morning coffee the postman must deliver it before 7 o'clock! I have of course told dad to let the poor postman bring several at once, a whole week's worth or something like that. After all we don't get things like potatoes one by one from Oaveski! But dad says that a newspaper has to be fresh. I shall have to investigate this more carefully because now that I come to think of it, the papers at the bottom of the pile in front of the fireplace aren't rotting or going mouldy even though they're goodness knows how many months old, no – they look perfectly fresh, hmm, this thing of dad needing fresh newspapers really is a bit strange.



That's all for this chapter. Oh hang on, one more thing: a couple of times a year a big fat man comes to our house to change a big red gas bottle in the corner of our kitchen. He puts the empty bottle over his shoulder and takes it away with him. Gas is mysterious stuff: you can't see it but four tiny flames must light from it on the hob. There's no need for wood or newspapers or anything. And we cook food for us to eat on top of those four teeny flames.

But just like electricity, gas can be dangerous: if it isn't handled carefully it might explode and the flat would blow into the air! But not like a bird or an aeroplane – that would be really amazing. No the flat would be blown into little pieces, and so would we.

But if we're careful and don't fiddle with the bottle then that won't happen and I'll be able to carry on telling you about all sorts of things.

[...]

Chapter 11 – the chapter about how we run into danger

If you've got a home and a mum and dad then your life is definitely safe and secure. In your own room or backyard you don't have to be afraid that a snake or a crocodile will bite you or that an avalanche or a train will hit you or that a big boy will come and push you over like can happen in the playground.

But you have to be careful at home too. You can be in danger at every step! You could fall down the stairs. Or jam your fingers in the cupboard door. Or slip on the floor when running in your socks. Or burn your tongue on hot porridge. Or get stuck in your shirt if the collar is too tight. Or... Or forget how to breathe, or swallow your food. And you can't live without air or food!

There are dangers outside your house too, but they are different of course. There aren't any snakes or crocodiles, unless you live in Africa, but you don't need them to get into trouble. Like, my dad had an accident on his bicycle and broke his arm. And mum fell asleep on the train and instead of going to Peedu went to Palupera, and that was definitely the wrong

stop for her. And Joonas stood on the moving stairs in the department store and before mum noticed, he was in the gents' section, which for him was even more wrong than Palupera was for mum...

And what about me? Once I got lost in our very own town. And no-one really saw! Even now I'm not completely sure who really got lost that day, because I thought that I lost mum and dad and Joonas, not that they lost me. Not that there's that much difference really.

Anyway it all happened last winter just before Christmas. Tons of snow had fallen. And in the evenings if we had enough time, the whole family would go to Raekoja Square because there's someone there who reads fairy-tales in the run-up to Christmas. And every evening they opened a picture painted for the fairy story in the windows of Raekoja square. The pictures were really beautiful, but I always felt a bit sorry for the mayor and the other important people who worked in Raekoja Square because the pictures stopped them seeing the square from their offices. They meant they couldn't see the Christmas lights hanging from the buildings or the wonderful tree that had been brought to the square from the forest.

The fairy-tales were usually exciting but there was the odd boring one too. And when they read a boring one me and Joonas wouldn't listen to it, instead we'd climb the piles of snow that had been shovelled across the square. The snow piles were amazingly high, just like real hills. You could slide down from the top and tunnels had been dug out inside them. There were always other children there and I always wanted to stay and play. But then the fairy tale would end. Or dad would say we had to go home to light the fire. Or mum would say that her toes were starting to freeze. Or Joonas would say... No, Joonas was always on my side, he liked playing in the snow as much as I did. But we never stayed in the city for the night.

"Time to go, Vassel!" shouted dad far away from the foot of the hill. "We're off!"

And I decided to pretend I hadn't heard so I could carry on climbing for a bit longer. I knew I'd get into trouble for it, but sometimes I'd carry on climbing anyway. And sometimes I did get into trouble. But

not often because I also knew that if Joonas and I listened, we would come back to hear another fairytale again the next evening. And I secretly hoped that the fairy tale would be a boring one and I could have fun climbing on the tops of the snow heaps again.

We always took the path through the park to go home. And the walk was never very gloomy really because there was snow piled up on either side and when I was right at the top I could get from Raekoja Square to the swimming pool by walking on the snow heaps. No cars drive on the path through the park and mum, dad and Joonas were on the central path, headed for home, with Joonas riding in the sledge, pulled by dad.

I played that I was a mountain climber toiling across the mountain range. I had travelled by the long route, scaled mighty peaks and leapt deep crevices. At the swimming baths I descended from the glacier. And I thought that now yes I would ask dad if I could have a little carry because my legs were really tired. And then all of a sudden I saw that there was no mum or dad or Joonas. I mean I saw that I couldn't see them anywhere! I looked far in front and far behind – no one. The mountain range again became a snow heap and around me there wandered only strange men and women and children.

I burst into tears almost straight away, but all sorts of thoughts went through my mind before I did: dad had called and I hadn't heard, but he thought that I always pretended not to hear so they all – dad, mum and Joonas – they had all decided to let me suffer the consequences and had left without me, they were already at home and dad was rubbing mum's toes so they wouldn't get colder and Joonas was playing with the train set and I'd never see them again, never ever! And that's when I burst into tears and shouted for them, although I knew that they wouldn't hear. You know it really is true that when you have an emergency or are really ill, the word "mummy!" comes out all by itself. Even at school!

Even though I was tired I walked and walked. I was still crying and didn't know where I was walking. I couldn't see anything through my tears! I felt as if I was no longer in our town, I was somewhere else, somewhere that didn't exist. I know my own town fairly well of course, and I know my way home from the swimming pool easy-peasy. Sometimes, when dad and I walk home from somewhere, dad lets me go a couple of steps in front and take a couple of the side streets in front of him so that I get used to looking both ways and am not always walking holding his hand. But that, like everything else, counted for nothing now. It was as if I no



longer had a home. No parents, no Joonas or anyone else. And I cried even louder and walked faster and faster until I was running. And then I ran into someone. It was a huge man and when he squatted down in front of me I realised from his clothes that he was a policeman. I can't say what I thought, perhaps that crying loudly in the street wasn't allowed, but anyhow I wanted to run away from the policeman. But he began to talk to me in a very friendly voice and patted me on the head and said that everything was okay and that I shouldn't cry anymore and when I had calmed down properly a bit the policeman asked who my mum and dad were and if I knew their telephone numbers. And can you believe it, I couldn't tell him anything! Okay, so I didn't know mum and dad's telephone numbers, but I couldn't even remember their names straight away. Then I felt like I really needed a wee. And I told the policeman that I needed a wee. The policeman didn't know what to say. He seemed a bit embarrassed. He took out his big telephone and phoned somewhere and said:

"A boy... About five years old... On the path in the Park outside the swimming pool... A blue jacket and trousers, hat with an owl motif."

It's not an owl on my hat, it's Totoro, but I didn't dare try to correct the policeman. I just stood there and sobbed. And can you believe it, after a short while I suddenly saw mum running towards me! I've never seen her moving so fast! The policeman let go of my hand and I raced towards her, crying very loudly, and mum lifted me into her arms and was laughing and crying with me and the tears were flooding out. And then, a short while later, I saw dad over mum's shoulder, running on the other side of the snow heaps and trees some distance away,, Joonas in his arms, holding the sledge by the handle, and yelling:

"Vaaasss-seeeeee! Vaaasss-seeeeee!"

I shouted back, but he didn't hear and carried on past us until he at last recognised us from mum's shout.

And then we were all hugging and crying and laughing and dad said over and over again oh my dear little boy oh my dear little Vassel. The policeman was standing a short distance away and

didn't seem to be very happy. More likely than not he was a bit upset that we had left him out of our big hug. But soon dad shook his hand and said thank you lots of times. That evening dad said almost everything lots of times.

And when I looked round again, I recognised everything around me and it looked familiar and homely and even the complete strangers walking past seemed friendly. Dad put me on the sledge and we set off for home. I asked mum how the policeman had phoned her to tell her to come and get me when I hadn't been able to tell him her phone number. And mum explained that the policeman had phoned the emergency centre where she'd reported my disappearance just a short time before. That's how the emergency centre knew mum's number and was able to phone her back and set it up for us to meet. Mum and dad's phone numbers tend to get all mixed up still. But I can definitely remember the emergency centre's. It's three nines:

999.

I really felt I needed a wee again when we got to our road.

It's so good to have a mum and dad to help you in an emergency! And it's so good to have a home and a toilet at home! Because needing a wee can sometimes be a very serious emergency.

Translated by Susan Wilson