

Oskar and Me, and All the Places We Are

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[...]

Our Uncles' House, or, Grown-Ups Doing Bum Bounces on the Trampoline

It was no longer winter. All the snow had gone. Even the huge heap that the snowplough had made down at the end of the new houses had melted. But it wasn't quite spring yet either. At least not according to Mum.

'Woolly hats!' she called over to us as we were about to walk out the door.

Oskar and I looked at each other. We'd just lost the battle about footwear and were now wearing our big, bulky snow boots as we stood there in the corridor. We had our reflective vests on too, even though anybody could see that it was perfectly light outside.

'Heloise wasn't wearing her hat on Thursday,' said Oskar.

'That was on Thursday,' said Mum. 'Today it's windy and raining, so you've got to wear your hats.'

'Arvid never wears a hat,' I said. 'Even in winter.'

'Good for him,' said Mum.

'Mum, it's spring!' I shouted angrily. 'People have got their trampolines out!'

It was true. Yesterday we'd gone bouncing at Naia-Maj's house before we came home.

'I can't deal with any ear infections now on top of everything else,' said Mum. 'Put on your hats.'

Dad was going with us. He wasn't wearing a hat. Or a reflective jacket. Or snow boots either.

'Peter!' said Mum, annoyed.

'I'm a grown man,' said Dad, doing up his light jacket.

Then Mum lost her temper. 'Are you really?' she said. Then I heard her whispering fiercely to him that she didn't really give two hoots if his ears froze or whether car drivers who'd only just woken up could see him. But how were they going to get Oskar and me to wear warm clothes and reflective jackets if Dad waltzed out the door setting the worst example in the world?

'Why do I always have to be the strict one?' she whispered furiously.

I could see Dad was about to say that he often wondered the same thing, but luckily he didn't. He grabbed a reflective vest and gave Mum a quick hug.

I don't like it when they get like that. Sometimes they just pretend they're fighting. But other times, especially in the mornings, they fight for real. Then my stomach turns cold, and I wonder if they're going to get divorced. I don't really think they would, but still.

Oskar doesn't notice things like that. He trotted off cheerfully across the fields in his clunky boots, like a fluorescent blast of winter in the fresh spring. He was off to nursery, and I was going to school.

'Imagine if we had a trampoline too,' he said as we walked past Rafael and Rasim's house.

'We did have one once,' I said.

'Huh?' said Oskar.

He's always surprised when I remember things that he can't. But I've been big for longer than him.

And I remember that we used to have a trampoline in the garden. But then one morning, after a really windy night, we woke up to find that the enormous trampoline had upped sticks and vanished. Mum and Dad had started panicking. I could see from their expressions back then that it could be stressful having a trampoline when you've got no idea where it's gone.

'But where had the trampoline gone, then?' asked Oskar.

I told him the wind had lifted the whole thing up in the air. Then it smashed through a hedge and bounded across the fields. If anybody saw it, they must have thought it was a UFO with engine trouble careening through the night. Every time it landed, it left massive, strange tracks in the grass.

I told him that we found the remains over by the new houses. It was upside down next to a greenhouse belonging to a man called Edvard Lien. Dad said we should see it as a warning sign. We would never have a trampoline again.

'But where's the trampoline now?' asked Oskar.

'We took to it be recycled,' I said. 'It was a write-off.'

Oskar was so stunned by this that he didn't say another word for the rest of the way.

But by the afternoon he'd had time to think it over.

'It's not fair that we had a trampoline that I can't remember,' he said.

'Life's not fair,' Mum said curtly.

'We can make things fairer where we can,' I said, fed up with Mum always being annoyed.

'Forget it, Oskar,' said Dad. 'We'll never have a trampoline again.'

The very thought of trampolines made Mum and Dad turn pale. Imagine if our trampoline had wiped out a car or a person that day! Thank goodness it was only the hedge that got ruined.

'You can go trampolining at your friends' houses,' said Dad. 'We don't need trampolines in every single garden. Think about the environment.'

Mum nodded. That was more like it, she clearly thought.

'We can't afford one anyway,' she added.

Oskar looked at them, obviously pretty miffed.

'I'd like a trampoline for my birthday,' he said when we went to bed. 'From Uncle Øyvind and Uncle Bulle.'

We always get such lovely presents from them. But you can't ask for a trampoline.

'It's far too big,' I explained to Oskar. 'You've got to ask for something a bit more ordinary-sized. It's rude otherwise.'

'But I don't want something ordinary,' said Oskar. 'I'd like a trampoline.'

'You nitwit,' I said.

Luckily there were nine months to go until his birthday. He'd have forgotten all about the trampoline by then.

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But then, just two days later, Mum was going to visit our uncles at their house. While she was talking to Uncle Øyvind on the phone, he asked if Oskar and I could come along this time too. It had been such a long time since we'd last been.

'Yippie!' Oskar roared. He was all ready to go with his hat on, and his snow boots on the wrong feet, before Mum could even say yes or no.

'Alright, come on then,' she said, taking the car keys from their peg.

It takes almost an hour to drive to our uncles' house, which is in another place altogether.

'You must promise not to crash about too much there,' said Mum, looking sternly at us in the mirror. 'Uncle Øyvind can't cope with too much noise.'

Oskar nodded, but I could see that he wasn't listening. He was concentrating on playing with his dinosaurs. I put my forehead against the window and looked out at the strange wintry spring as it flew by. There were trampolines everywhere.

Uncle Øyvind's ill. Pretty much all he does is sit in a chair. But even so, he's always happy. I looked in the mirror at Mum's frowning face. Uncle Øyvind is ill but happy. Mum is healthy but grumpy, I thought. And when I grow up, I'm always going to be happy with my children. If I have children, that is.

'Hello-hello!' said Uncle Øyvind, reaching out with his long, skinny arms as we arrived.

He had a little plastic tube up his nose, and it went back somewhere behind his head. Oskar studied the tube, but luckily didn't say anything. Maybe he was starting to learn some manners after all? In some ways, I wished he would ask. I was wondering what it was too.

'Bulle will be coming soon,' said Uncle Øyvind.

'Has he gone to the bakery to buy treats?' asked Oskar.

'Oskar!' I scolded him under my breath.

'That's exactly what he's doing,' said Uncle Øyvind, nodding happily.

Back home we hardly ever got anything from the bakery. It's expensive and bad for you too. We make our own muffins and buns, and we get sweets on Saturdays and things like that, but at Uncle Øyvind and Uncle Bulle's place, we get cream puffs and vanilla slices and chocolate teacakes, and as many iced doughnuts as we can eat.

'I hope Uncle Bulle buys some of those buns with sugar on them,' said Oskar. 'And then...'

'Look at these!' said Mum, pulling the three toyboxes out of the shelves where they were kept at our uncles' house.

It was as if she just wanted us out of the way. Grumpy Mum.

'Uncle Øyvind?' said Oskar, completely ignoring the toyboxes. 'What's that thing up your nose?'

Mum looked like she wanted to take us home, but Uncle Øyvind showed us how the tube went into a little machine behind his chair.

'It's oxygen,' he explained. 'Air. It helps me to breathe.'

Oskar looked at the machine, fascinated. I knew that his brain was about to come up with ten more questions.

'Come on, Oskar,' I said, dragging him over to the toyboxes.

Mum looked at me gratefully, but I didn't look back at her. I think grown-ups should explain to children when there's something we're not sure about, without us having to ask. Then we wouldn't have to be rude.

The toys they had at our uncles' house were a bit babyish really. But I still like them, because they're always the same ones. It's a bit like finding things from the olden days, but my olden days. For instance, when I get out the toy clock, I remember what it was like playing with it before I knew how to tell the time. Or when I find the puzzle with the animals and tractors, then I remember all the pictures and what it was like to put them in the right places when I was little. It's fun.

Soon Oskar and I were in full swing down on the floor. Mum and Uncle Øyvind huddled together and talked. At one point, Mum put her head on Uncle Øyvind's shoulder, and he stroked her hair. That made me realise that Mum is still a little sister, even though she's a grown-up. I'd never thought of Mum as anything other than a mum. It was such a strange thing to think about that I completely forgot about keeping an eye on Oskar.

Then I suddenly spotted that he'd climbed up onto the windowsill. He was standing between two of the nice potted plants, looking out at Uncle Øyvind's lawn. It was full of birds out there, because Uncle Øyvind feeds them so well, with suet balls and seeds and pinecones with peanut butter and coconut halves and breadcrumbs, and who knows what else. The garden around our uncles' house is like a gourmet restaurant for birds.

Oskar sighed from up there on the windowsill.

'Don't you wish you had a trampoline, Uncle Øyvind?' he asked.

'Oskar!' said Mum, crossly. 'Get down from there right now.'

'A trampoline?' said Uncle Øyvind, in surprise. 'What would I do with a trampoline?'

Oskar looked at Uncle Øyvind's skinny legs.

'You could let other people have a go on it,' he said cleverly. 'People who come to see you.'

'Oskar!' Mum and I said in chorus.

My cheeks went bright red.

'I didn't say I wanted a trampoline,' said Oskar, jumping down to the floor with a massive bump.

I pulled my hood over my head and hid. He's completely hopeless.

Luckily Uncle Bulle came back then, carrying two huge bags from the bakery.

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I love eating cakes and pastries when I don't have to worry that they might run out. I was given a whole jumbo vanilla slice all to myself, and I stuffed my mouth with the most delicious vanilla cream and icing, all flat on the top. It was the best pastry ever to pass my lips, I think.

Uncle Øyvind looked at Uncle Bulle.

'Oskar thinks we should get a trampoline.'

'Oh?' said Uncle Bulle, brushing a little icing sugar off his beard.

'So that people who come to see us can go bouncing. And, well...'

 Uncle Øyvind went on, but then he couldn't say any more.

His shoulders began to quiver, and every time he opened his mouth to finish what he'd started saying, he just laughed more. Soon we were all chuckling along. All of us apart from Oskar.

'Why are you laughing?' he asked.

It was a good job he asked, because I was wondering too.

Uncle Øyvind took the deepest breath he could. 'Because I'm imagining the people who usually come to see me... haha... bouncing on a trampoline!' he said.

Then he started listing them: Ester from down the hill, Mr Larsen from the house next door, the members of the chess club, and Dorthé Meier, the librarian. But then he had to stop for a long, long pause. The thought of Dorthé Meier, the librarian, on a trampoline was clearly so hilarious that he just couldn't take it.

Now Mum was laughing too. She laughed so much she practically collapsed over the table. She and Uncle Øyvind had their heads full of unlikely people on trampolines. It was quite funny watching them.

'But most of all,' Uncle Øyvind eventually gasped, drying away tears of laughter, 'I'm imagining you, my dear Bulle, just...'

And then he laughed so much he couldn't get another word out. His shoulders just shook and shook.

Then Oskar finally worked out what was so funny. He looked at Bulle, sitting there with his round tummy, his braces holding up his trousers, and his long, grey beard. And I know Oskar well enough to know exactly what he was picturing. He was imagining Uncle Bulle bouncing down into the middle of the trampoline, bottom-first, and then bouncing back up again, his beard flapping about and his tummy all wobbling. Oskar's face turned a bright scarlet shade, just as it usually does when he's about to explode in fits of laughter. And then came the explosion. Icing sugar and little pieces of coconut came shooting out of his mouth and nose. Oskar laughed so much that eventually we had to pat him on the back to help him breathe again.

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When we were about to leave, Uncle Bulle helped Uncle Øyvind out of his chair. Uncle Bulle's so strong, and he loves Uncle Øyvind so much. Their eyes shone so warmly, as they stood there in the corridor, while we put our shoes on.

'Actually, I would like a trampoline,' said Oskar. 'But I can't say so, because it's rude,' he added.

'Oskar,' Mum sighed.

Then she explained to Uncle Øyvind and Uncle Bulle that we used to have a trampoline, but that we weren't going to get one again. For a whole host of reasons.

'But I can't remember us having one!' said Oskar, with tears in his eyes now. 'The whole family had a trampoline, but I didn't get to go on it! And I'm the one who'd like one more than anything!'

'Yes,' said Mum. 'But...'

'And it's my birthday!' he shouted.

'It's quite a while until your birthday though, isn't it?' said Uncle Øyvind.

'It's ages,' I said. '28 December. Nine months away.'

Oskar looked at me angrily.

'It's not that long to go,' he said.

'Well, it is a while to go, Oskar,' said Mum. 'It'll be winter again by the time your birthday comes round.'

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They gave us all the remaining cake and pastries to take home. I was looking forward to Dad being able to have a taste. Maybe our parents would decide that we could buy things at the bakery too, when they find out how tasty they are. I wish they'd stop thinking about sugar and money all the time.

Mum wasn't cross any more. Just quiet. Now and then she looked at us in the mirror and just smiled. Then she told us all she knew about Uncle Øyvind's plastic tube, without us even having to ask. His lungs were ill and couldn't work as hard at breathing as they used to. The tube in his nose meant that the oxygen could go straight in, without him having to strain too much. That gave Uncle Øyvind more energy for other things. Like people coming to see him.

'Is there anything else you're not sure about?' she said afterwards.

'Yes,' said Oskar. 'Do you think Dad will share the doughnuts with us?'

'He always shares,' said Mum.

He does actually. Dad is the best sharer in the family. Mum often eats sweets in the evening without telling us. I've seen the wrappers in the bin.

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The next week, it started snowing, even though it was April. It snowed and snowed. And it's a funny thing, snow, because when it comes in the autumn, we're so happy that we almost pass out, but when it comes in April, we're not happy at all. And nobody can be bothered to get out their skis or toboggans. We just look at the snow gloomily and wait for it to disappear.

And then, when so much snow had fallen that we almost couldn't imagine what spring was like any more, a massive lorry drove up to our house, with a parcel that was bigger than Dad.

'I think you must have got the wrong address,' Dad told the driver.

'Really?' said the driver, checking the papers. 'No, I don't think so...'

She gave Dad a piece of paper.

Dad read it once, then he read it again.

'What does it say?' I asked.

Mum had come out on the doorstep.

'It says...' Dad seemed to have got something stuck in his throat. 'It says: "For Oskar. Happy early birthday. Love from Uncle Øyvind and Uncle Bulle."''

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'It's a good job I didn't listen to you,' said Oskar that evening. 'Or I would never have been given a trampoline.'

I didn't answer. I was still in shock. Did people give away trampolines just like that? Oskar had spoken with Uncle Øyvind on the phone and thanked him very much. Now he was down in the bottom bunk, shaking with joy.

'Uncle Øyvind said that Uncle Bulle's going to come and tie it down so it doesn't fly away like the other one did,' said Oskar. 'I don't want this one ending up upside down at Edvard Lien's place, you know.'

I wouldn't mind, I thought. Oskar's trampoline could just as well smash Edvard Lien's greenhouse to smithereens for all I cared. I turned to face the wall in a huff.

It was unfair that Oskar should get a trampoline after being rude, while I wasn't getting anything, even though I was polite.

'Oh, by the way,' said Oskar, putting his feet up on the slats underneath my bed, making it bulge under my back.

'Stop it!' I snarled.

But Oskar didn't stop. He pushed harder. Then I leapt up and shot down to his bunk in a flash. I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

'Stop kicking my bed!' I growled.

'I just wanted to tell you something!' Oskar shouted.

'Tell me, then!'

'It was just that Uncle Øyvind said on the phone that the trampoline is for both of us. We've got to share it!'

I let go of Oskar.

'Did he? Why didn't you say so before?'

'I forgot,' said Oskar. 'You know what I'm like,' he said, pointing to his head. Something melted inside me.

'You can just call him and ask if you don't believe me,' said Oskar. 'Actually you should call them anyway to say thank you,' he added. 'It's rude otherwise.'

I crawled under his duvet. He wriggled his legs around. He was so happy.

'Do you want me to teach you how to do backflips?' I asked.

'Yeah!' Oskar yelled.

Of course, I'd have to learn how to do them myself first, but that would be no problem now that we had a trampoline and could practise whenever we wanted! We lay there for a while, just thinking about how fantastic it all was. They're really kind, I thought to myself. I want to be kind like that when I grow up. Well, I'd like to try, anyway.

I thought Oskar was asleep, but then he suddenly started guffawing like anything. And I knew what he was thinking about. He was thinking of Uncle Bulle bouncing on his bum.

[...]

School, or, The Tale of the Disappearing School Bag and Shooting at Letters

Oskar was going to start school soon. I wondered how it would go. He's the youngest of his age group and can't sit still on a chair unless we're having pancakes for dinner.

'Oskar's just the way he should be,' said Dad. 'It's not Oskar there's anything wrong with.'

I agreed with Dad, but I was still a bit worried. I think our parents have forgotten how much we have to sit still at school.

At the end of July, Oskar got a school bag. I thought in a way it might make him look more like he was ready for school, but it was really the opposite. Oskar absolutely had to have a bag that was meant for ages ten plus. He looked like a tortoise.

'Isn't it a bit big?' I whispered to Mum.

'It's Oskar who's small,' Mum sighed.

As for Oskar, he wasn't worried in the slightest about school. He couldn't wait.

'You'll be there, after all,' he said. 'And, anyway, watch this!'

Then he put on his new bag and strutted around the living room with a swagger.

'Seriously. There's space for all sorts in here. Books. Rocks. Imagine if we find an injured animal. Hey presto! There's space in here.'

'And if we get another vomiting bug, you won't need Else to help you carry the potatoes,' I said.

'Exactly!' said Oskar, beaming.

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We needn't have worried, either. Oskar's teacher was 'heaven-sent', as Mum put it. She was called Therese and was from Denmark. You'd think she was just as allergic to chairs as Oskar is.

They did maths on the football pitch, went hunting for letters in the trees, and made boats to go on the river next to the school. They went on day-long walks down by the shore or in the forest every week, and they sang songs until the cows came home, several times a day, probably so they could let off some steam. Oskar was having a brilliant time.

'They're outdoors all the time,' Naia-Maj said grumpily. 'When are they going to learn something?'

She looked jealously at the screeching little ones walking in a crocodile as they came back from yet another hill walk.

'They probably learn things outdoors too,' I said.

'Pfft,' said Naia-Maj. 'Not school things. Can Oskar read yet?'

I didn't answer. Oskar still mixed up letters as if he were trying to make cakes out of them instead of words, and he wasn't particularly interested in working it all out either. So no, he couldn't read. But I wasn't going to tell that to Naia-Maj.

Mum and Dad practised with him at home. But Oskar ran and hid under the living-room table almost every time.

‘Mum! The letters are chasing me!’ he screamed in terror one time.

Mum had cut out bits of paper, put the whole alphabet on them, and stuck them underneath the table. That was where he usually went when he had to do homework.

‘Try shooting at the vowels,’ she called to him.

So Oskar popped away, shaking the table as he shot at them, but he probably shot the consonants too, as he doesn’t know the difference.

‘Eeeee! Ooooh! Iiiii!’ he said as he pretended to hit them.

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Apart from the letters there was his bag. I can’t understand how it’s possible to love something so much and keep forgetting that you’ve got it. The whole time.

Almost every day, Oskar leapt out the door at home on his way to school without his bag on his back. I usually realised before we got past where we park our car, but not always. I’ve got my own things to think about, after all. Several times we were half-way to school before we noticed. Then we had to ride our bikes all the way home and fetch the bag together, because Oskar didn’t dare to go on his own yet. We were late to school three times because of this. And I couldn’t ride together with my friends either when we were so late.

When it was time to go home, it was the same story. Therese made sure that he took his bag out of the classroom, but as soon as he put it down in the corridor to put on his jacket and shoes, the bag vanished from his mind.

‘Oskar, your bag!’ I shouted, annoyed, as I saw all my friends riding off again, while I had to wait for him to go back indoors and fetch his bag.

Then there was all the junk Oskar filled his bag with.

‘You really need a wheelbarrow, never mind a bag,’ said Dad one day when he’d gone to get Oskar’s lunchbox only to find a bundle of twigs, eight snail shells, a white stone, a red stone, a speckly stone, two empty bottles, a crushed yoghurt pot, a jumper that wasn’t Oskar’s, fifteen pinecones, and a huge clump of seaweed.

‘That’s Japanese wireweed,’ Oskar said, very seriously. ‘It’s rare here. Therese said so.’

‘Hm, Japanese wireweed,’ said Dad. ‘Maybe we can try to dry it, then.’

Another time, Oskar was going to Heloise’s house after school. He’s been there a thousand times before, because our mums are friends. But this time they were going on the bus there, on their own. I promised Mum that I’d check Oskar had his bag with him, and that he and Heloise got safely onto the school bus and everything.

As I stood there, waiting for them, I saw my friends cycling off yet again, and I felt a twinge in my chest. I was almost starting to feel left out. We’d always had so much fun on the way to and from school. Now it was just one big hassle with Oskar from dawn to dusk.

And, for once, Oskar had remembered to bring what he was supposed to. I needn’t have waited there at all!

‘Got my bag and everything,’ he said, giving me a little salute as he got on the bus.

Then Oskar and Heloise set off on the bus all the way to Heloise’s house.

But Oskar’s bag went on a much longer journey. It rode on the bus all alone for the rest of the afternoon. Mum and Dad had to track it down long into the evening and go to fetch it

from some place called a lost property office many, many miles away. Then Oskar was so pleased to see it, he hugged his bag like a teddy bear. Half-way through hugging it, milk started running out of the side pocket, like out of a cow's udder. He'd put his milk there at school without putting the top back on.

'Oskar,' Mum sighed, as she emptied the bag to get it washed.

She needn't have bothered, as the next day the bag would get a thorough wash quite unintentionally. We were all sitting round the table, the whole family eating our dinner, when suddenly thunder and lightning came almost together, and the sky exploded with rain. We ran over to the kitchen window.

'What's that lying out in the field over there?' asked Dad. 'Is it an animal?'

We peered out. The rain made it difficult to see.

'What if it's a fox that's been struck by lightning?' said Oskar.

He turned to me eagerly.

'Then I can go and put it in my bag...'

He stopped mid-sentence.

'It's my bag!' he shrieked.

'Your bag?' said Dad. 'What's it doing over there in the field?'

'It's just lying there!' Oskar yelled.

'Why...?' Dad began, but then he just stopped. 'Did they give you the iPad to take home from school today?'

Oskar couldn't remember.

'Maybe,' he said gravely. 'It might be an iPad day.'

We saw Dad through the window. He ran like an elk across the field. The water splashed around him with every step. He picked up the bag like a superhero and raced back home.

It wasn't an iPad day. Apart from the day's haul of twigs and stones, there were just a few loose sheets of paper with blurry letters in the bag.

'Good bag,' said Oskar. 'Almost totally waterproof!'

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But the next day, when Oskar came out of school without his bag yet again, I'd had enough.

'Oskar! Your bag!' I roared.

Arvid and Naia-Maj and the others had already got on their bikes. They were talking about Halloween, and I wanted to go with them so I could hear what they were saying, and join in with the planning.

'I'm going,' I said.

'No!' said Oskar, starting to cry.

'Yes! I can't be bothered waiting for you!' I shouted.

But of course I waited. I'm not the type of person to cycle away from their crying little brother.

Oskar hurried as much he could, but by the time we got to the gravel track, there was not a soul to be seen. They'd long since gone. I'd never hear about the Halloween things Naia-Maj was talking about. They'd plan everything without me.

I was so close to pushing Oskar into the ditch.

'I'm so done with taking care of you and your bag,' I growled. 'You can't do anything!'

'I can do lots of things,' Oskar said stubbornly.

He was pedalling like mad on his little bike to keep up with me.

'Not at school!' I said. 'You can't even learn the alphabet!'

I regretted saying that straight away, but I was so angry that my stomach was boiling.

Oskar pedalled and pedalled on his little bike. It's got such small wheels, and no gears. I could see he was doing his best not to make me wait. My anger vanished like a puff of smoke, and then I just felt sad.

We'd actually been riding so fast that I could see Arvid off in the distance. Would we be able to catch up with him? I was about to call out to him when Naia-Maj came running out of the woods right in front of us. She'd been in there to pee, and then she saw the most horrible thing.

'This way,' she said, all flustered. 'THIS WAY!'

We threw down our bikes and followed her. And there, behind a tall rock, was something enormous and chestnut-coloured. 'I thought it was a sofa to start with,' Oskar said later. But it wasn't a sofa. It was a deer. A whole, massive deer. He was breathing and trying to get up. But he couldn't. He had loads of blood on its belly.

'What are we going to do?' Naia-Maj whispered, grabbing my arm as if she were trying to make a milkshake. 'WHAT are we going to do?'

'Um,' I said.

Oskar crouched down and put his little hand on the stag's neck. He stroked it and sighed.

'We've should contact the game management office,' he said.

'Game management office?' I asked. 'What's that?'

Oskar explained that if there's a sick or injured deer in our area, the game management people may have to come and put it down. If somebody runs over a deer, for instance. He'd learnt that from Therese. She's a hunter, or a deer stalker, as it's called.

'Therese knows the people at the game management office,' he said.

Then Oskar ran back down to his bike. Without delay, he rode back to school – all on his own – to tell Therese. Naia-Maj watched him go. She looked impressed. I sat down, like Oskar had done, and put my hand on the deer's neck. He was warm and alive, and very frightened.

'There, there,' I said, with a lump in my throat. 'There, there.'

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It's a terrible thing if a hunter shoots an animal that gets wounded but doesn't die. Then they've got to do whatever they can to find the animal as quickly as possible so it won't stay in pain. Many people had been looking for this stag since the day before. He'd wandered a very long way, from another area altogether. That was why they hadn't found him. Therese told us that the deer stalker himself and the whole deer management group were so happy and relieved when she called and said that the deer was behind the rock where Naia-Maj had gone to pee.

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'So when we finally found a wounded animal, it was too big for my bag,' Oskar sighed as we sat down at the dinner table.

Then he fell silent. He looked at me, his eyes suddenly full of tears.

'What's wrong, Oskar?' asked Mum.

'My bag,' he said quietly. 'I left it in the woods.'

'It'll be alright,' said Dad. 'We'll go and fetch it.'

But Oskar just shook his head.

'I can't do anything right at school,' he whispered.

I looked down at my plate.

'You can do loads of things,' said Mum, taking his hand. 'Oskar dear, my little smarty pants. You can do all the things you need to. You can!'

But Oskar just shook his head and looked at me, tears trickling silently down his cheeks.

* * *

Dad and I joined the search for the bag. We brought our torches, because it was dark outside now.

'There's the rock,' I said. 'You must've put it down here somewhere, right, Oskar?'

Dad shone the torch around where we'd found the deer. We couldn't see the bag anywhere. But suddenly, at the same time, all three of us saw something reflecting on the top of the rock.

'My bag's grown antlers!' Oskar gasped.

Dad reached up and lifted it down. Somebody had tied a huge pair of antlers onto the bag. A note was hanging from the very top point of the antlers.

'Wi...,' I started reading.

But Oskar snatched the note before I could get any further.

Dad placed a hand on my shoulder to stop me. Then he shone his torch on the note. I could see what it said as quick as a flash and had to bite my lip so I wouldn't say it out loud. Oskar read it out slowly:

'W... w... ii... th. With?'

'That's right,' said Dad. 'With.'

'With... th... aaaa... n... n... k... s...,' Oskar continued. 'With tanks?'

'Almost,' said Dad, crouching down.

He gave Oskar a little more help, and there, in the dark, silent woods, Oskar read his first two words: 'With thanks.'

'With thanks for what?' he asked.

'For your help,' I said, reading the rest. "'With thanks for your help. Best wishes from a happy hunter.'" See, you can read,' I said, giving him a little prod.

Oskar stuck his tummy out a bit and did that thing he does with his mouth when he's proud and happy.

If only Naia-Maj had been there, I thought. Then she would've seen that he does know how to do it. Reading, I mean. But then I was glad she wasn't there. She probably would've thought that she should get the antlers, since she found the deer. But that wouldn't have been fair. All Naia-Maj had done was peed and shouted. It was Oskar who'd known what to do, and who told Therese and everything.

'We can put these in our room,' said Oskar.

And so we did.

From that day on, Oskar and I had a set of deer antlers on the wall, and they were so cool that we smiled every time we looked at them.