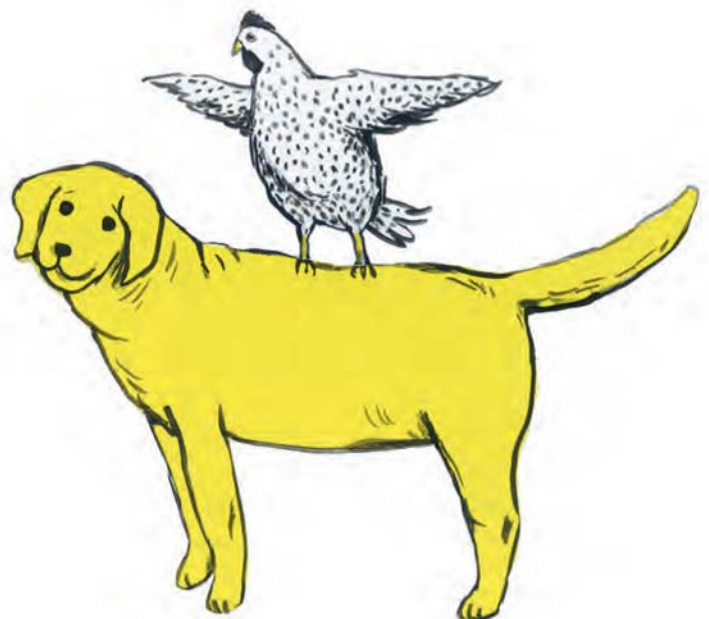


Ruuben, Tobias and Lilli

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In a little village, at Globeflower Street 6, lives Tobias Hackberry, a boy who loves to dash around and to sing. His favourite audience is his best friend, Lily, who happens to be a chicken. Tobias' brother, Ruuben, is happiest while inventing things. Since the siblings' parents are busy with their own work, Ruuben also has to "enjoy" looking after Tobias and Lily. "Perhaps it won't be as bad as last summer," Ruuben thinks. "Perhaps we will be able to work on my bike and explore, as Tobias is finally old enough to be allowed to leave the yard." But will it go as smoothly as Ruuben hopes?



Reading sample



[pp. 7–8]

Everyone living along lush, green Globeflower Street was just starting to wake up. The intoxicating scent of peonies was drifting through the flowerbeds, butterflies were dancing in the air, and a rooster cock-a-doodle-dood earnestly. In the garden of the house at nr. 6, the lilacs were finishing blossoming for the season just as the irises were unfurling their petals. The coffee-and-cream-colored wooden house with a spacious yard was home to the Toomepuu family: Dad, Mom, Ruuben, and little Tobias. It was eight-thirty in the morning when Ruuben's bedroom door flew open with a bang and Tobias dashed in. Tobias was constantly dashing somewhere and at home, he'd sometimes knock somebody off their feet or headbutt them in the stomach by accident, making the poor victim go green in the face.

"Rubes – check out the huge egg that Lilli laid!"

Tobias was standing at the foot of Ruuben's bed, his face flushed and an egg held between his fingers. Behind him, a mottled hen stepped over the doorway, pecked at a crumb of bread on the rug, and strutted away to inspect the floor beneath the desk. Their cat Muska, who was dozing on the windowsill, gave him a lazy glance, yawned luxuriously, and then continued napping. Muska was so old that he could probably be entered in the Guinness World Records.

"Tobi!" Ruuben groaned. "Stop bothering me. I'm sleeping."

"No, you're not," Tobias argued. "If you asleep, then you'd be snoring, not talking to me."

"A wise guy, huh? And I don't snore, by the way. Dad does."

"You may say so, but you don't hear yourself when you're snoring, do you?"

Ruuben smirked and rubbed his eyes. He'd just dreamed that he managed to put together his flying machine without a flaw for the very first time. But now, he couldn't remember what the solution had been. The thoughts all vanished and Tobias was obviously the one to blame. Ruuben was 100% certain about two things.

Firstly, that one fine day, he'd finish building his flying machine and everybody would marvel at Ruuben Toomepuu soaring through the sky!

Secondly, that little brothers are made for torturing their bigger siblings, and Tobias was one of the worst devils of all with his invisible tiny tail and horns.

[pp. 9–10]

Tobias and Lilli had been inseparable ever since she was brought into their family as a baby chick. The other chickens went about their lives and paid no attention to the boy, but Lilli started following him everywhere he went. He played with her inside the chicken pen at first, but they were soon strutting around the garden and, not long afterward, even indoors together. Now, Tobias would occasionally even walk around the village with her. There's nowhere that Lilli was more content than when she was with him, and it was plain as day to see. Tobias also couldn't be happier! How lucky he was to have the world's cutest chicken pick him to be her best friend! The boy vowed to be her very best friend in turn.

"I learn something new about Lilli every day," he told his brother. "By the time I'm old enough to go to school, I'll be so smart there'll be nothing new they can teach me there."

"They teach stuff other than nature studies, you know," Ruuben said with a grin. "Like mathematics. Tell me, Tobi-buddy: what's seven plus eight?"

Tobias carefully set the egg down on the table, stared at his fingers, crooked them one after another, and answered: "Fifteen." He snatched the egg back immediately.

Ruuben gaped. When had his pipsqueak little brother gotten a hang of adding and subtracting? Just a few weeks earlier, he'd insisted that five plus five was ninety-five.

"Mommy's helping me learn. She asks me to take Lilli six pieces of grain, or maybe ten plus two or fifteen plus three," Tobias said importantly. "I try over and over until I get it right. You think I'd just let her starve?"

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Mom and Dad had finished their morning coffee and were getting dressed. They were heading into town to buy a new washing machine. Ruuben and Tobias were eating ham-and-tomato sandwiches in the kitchen and taking turns tossing little bits of meat to Muska. The cat was so lazy that he couldn't even be bothered to get up and fetch the morsels that fell out of reach. Tobias was rocking back and forth on his chair and humming something to himself.

"You'll choke on a cucumber if you keep it up," Ruuben scolded. He finished his milk and got up to rinse the mug.

"No, I won't," Tobias shot back and started humming even more loudly. "Just watch me."

As fate would have it, he inhaled a crumb of bread into his windpipe and ended up coughing so hard his eyes watered.

"You really are a silly Tobi-geese!"

Ruuben laughed and slapped his brother on the back several times. His face beet red, Tobias coughed a couple more times before his throat was clear.

"Stupid crumbs," he grumbled, climbing off the chair. "I don't want this dumb sandwich anymore. I'll give it to Lilli instead! Ha!"

Mom poked her head into the kitchen.

"You two be good while we're gone. Dad and I will be back soon and then you can help us install the new washer. Ruuben, keep an eye on..."

"Tobias in the meantime," Ruuben finished. "Don't worry, I will."

Ruuben flipped open his laptop but decided to go outside instead. He still had a few bolts to add to the wings and it was so fun being in the garage. It had a peculiar sort of smell and he enjoyed the way the light streamed in through the window and the open door. Even the tiniest mote of dust in the air was illuminated in the rays of sunlight. The way they gently drifted like mysterious miniature worlds making their way through the universe had a calming effect.

Ruuben worked on the wings for a while, paused to admire them fondly, pushed on the frame to check its strength, and wiped a layer of dust off the crowbar. He inspected his blueprints for several minutes before grabbing a brush and doing a little painting. It was so cozy among all the jars of nuts and bolts, the rags smelling like paint and turpentine, and the glinting metal gadgets that Ruuben felt he could even spend the night there. Dad always demanded that the floor be swept clean and the space be kept neat and orderly. Everything had its own special



As soon as he stepped outside, he heard his little brother speaking in singsong in the chicken pen.

Peck, peck, chicky-chick,
come and show another trick...

Ruuben peeked from behind a bush. Tobias was standing before a bed of phloxes, looking important and addressing Lilli tenderly.

"Lilli-girl, my little chicky. You're doing such a good job. Now, let's go back over what you've learned so far."

Ruuben smirked. It sounded exactly like when Mom was teaching his little brother to count or read.

Tobias was holding a slice of Mom's apple pie.

"Lilli, what do you think: is this a sandwich or cake?"

The chicken gave him a sharp stare.

"Well, which one? A sandwich or cake?" he prompted.

"What an idiot! Why is he teasing poor Lilli?" Ruuben mumbled, crouching deeper in the bush to watch the circus unfold from his hiding place.

"Lilli, honey, you know the answer," Tobias said, holding out the cake. "Sandwich or cake?"

"Cake," Lilli replied. She said it so plainly and clearly that Ruuben's eyes bulged in amazement.

"And how many fingers am I holding up?" Tobias continued, raising his index finger.

"O-o-one," Lilli crowed confidently, shaking her tail and repeating: "One."

"That's right!"

Tobias took a big bite of apple pie and got a clever look on his face.

"But here comes the hard part. What does Rubes call the place in the garage where he

puts things he doesn't need but doesn't want to throw away yet?"

Lilli strutted towards the phloxes, studied the ground, looked up intently at Tobias, and said: "Cupboa-a-ard. Cupboard."

"Yes!" Tobias exclaimed, pumping his fist in the air triumphantly. "Amazing, Lilli-girl! Just amazing!"

He tossed her a bit of cake, stuffed the rest into his mouth, knelt down, and spread his arms wide. Lilli scurried straight to him.

"Give me a hug, my little friend!" he said, wrapping his arms around her. "You're the smartest, coolest chicken in the whole wide world. Now, let's go into the lilac bushes where you can strut around and peck for worms. Mommy says you're not allowed to go in the flowerbeds."

"Holy cow!" Ruuben murmured, slapping his forehead. "Can Lilli really talk?! I mean . . . holy cow!" Dazed, he walked back to the garage, looking as if he'd seen a blinking UFO land or something at least just as shocking.

Inside, he sat down on a stool, stared at his cupboard, and thought. Tobias had often nagged to play with the junk in Ruuben's cupboard, but he'd always refused. Who knew when that very thing would come in handy? Lilli's clearly-pronounced words were still echoing in his mind and he realized that an object as ordinary as a cupboard had suddenly gained a new, special meaning.

"I'd have never believed it if I didn't hear it for myself," he murmured, shaking his head and sighing while standing up. He recalled that Kalle loved to say one of their slower classmates



Heidi Raba. Ruuben, Tobias and Lilli. Translated by Adam Cullen

had a chicken brain. What an insult to Lilli and her fellow hens! Chickens, as it turned out, are extremely intelligent birds. And as Ruuben just witnessed, Lilli was an especially outstanding specimen.

“Okay, okay—I’d better focus on the wings, otherwise I’ll just keep staring off into space,” he mumbled. After another fifteen minutes of fiddling around with his contraption, Ruuben tied the wings to his back. They were light and comfortable and slid on like a hand into a glove. He’d made them to have two positions: folded and unfolded. There was still a lot more to figure out and construct, but the main frame was finished and the wings looked as real as could be.

Suddenly, he had the idea to climb onto the barn roof while wearing them. No, no, he wouldn’t do a test flight just yet—he wasn’t a complete nincompoop! That crucial moment would only arrive once the wings were ready down to the tiniest detail, and also involved a gravel pit, a ski jump, skis, snow, and... In short, he needed to be patient.

Ruuben leaned a ladder against the side of the barn and climbed onto the roof. It was a cinch with the wings folded up. Once he was on the ridge, he cautiously stood and looked around.

[...]

Ruuben spread his arms wide, closed his eyes, and tried to imagine what it would feel like to extend his wings and rise into the sky. The warm breeze caressed his face and ruffled his hair. One day, he’d find out. Yes—one day, Ruuben Toomepuu would spread his wings and soar like a young hawk!

