

Barn Owls and Bookworms

“The voles are in the storeroom again,” said Dad. “The cats can’t keep up. And out in the field...” He shook his head. “I’m going to have to buy more pesticide.”

“Oh, Harold!” Mom covered his hand with hers. “I hate this. It’s so expensive. Do you think we’ll ever be able to start turning this into a no-poisons organic farm?”

Iris looked up. “Did you say voles are ruining our crop? I was just reading about that!”

“Not now, Iris,” said Mom. “We have a problem here, and it means cutting our expenses. We might have to postpone your dental work for a few months, and you know what the dentist said about that.”

“But I read...”

“And put that silly magazine down. Go do something useful!” Mom added.

“You heard your mother,” Dad said. “This is a grown-up conversation.”

Iris nodded slowly. But she knew she could help, if only they would listen.

Later that night she crept into her brother’s room and asked if he could help her on the computer. “I need to write to The Barn Owl Trust,” she said. “If we got a family of barn owls living here, we wouldn’t need so much pesticide.”

Robin patted her head in his annoying Big Brother way. “Your imagination is just working overtime, Squirt,” he said.

Iris stamped her foot. “Really! I was just reading about barn owls. In Israel, school kids are helping scientists find good places for barn owl houses. The article says that some farms have stopped using pesticide completely because the barn owls do such a good job of getting rid of pests. A family of barn owls can eat 2000 to 5000 mice or voles in one year.”

“So what? That’s nothing to do with us!”

“You’re wrong! Dad and Mom are worried about using more poisons on the fields, but they have to because of all the voles.”

Robin smiled in the superior way that was just as annoying as his head pat. “I never heard them say that.”

“Because you always have your ear buds in. I’ll show you the article!”

She dashed to her bedroom and returned in a moment with the magazine. “See? It’s about poisons and pests and what Israeli kids are doing to protect the environment. There’s a bunch of websites listed for more information.”

“Gimme,” said Robin, snatching the magazine from his sister’s hand. After he looked over the article, he stared at Iris. For the first time his eyes were filled with respect. “This might work!” He brushed a pile of clothes off a chair and pushed it toward her. “Sit, let’s find these websites!” In a moment they were buried deep in the Internet.

Suddenly Dad threw open the bedroom door. “What are you kids doing on the computer? Iris, you should be in bed.”

“Look, Dad,” said Robin. “This is about farming.”

Iris practically bounced in the chair. “We can get rid of the voles without poisons, Dad. Listen! ‘The Barn Owl’s diet consists mainly of small mammals,’” she read from the website. “Look, almost half of their diet is field voles. That’s what you said is eating our crop! It says they also eat common shrews, wood mice, and other small critters.”

Dad shook his head. “That’s just useless book knowledge. I’ve never seen any barn owls around here, so that won’t help.”

Robin clicked on another link. “Here’s a video on habitat, the kind of places that barn owls like to live. We’ve got just the right kind of land for them. All we need are barn owl houses. You and I could make those, Dad!”

“I don’t know anything about making an owl house, or where to put it!”

“The website tells us,” Iris said. “And we found this, too.” She clicked on another tab. “This video says that in a corner where Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories meet, farmers have been working together using barn owls for more than 10 years. There are more than 24,700 acres (almost 10,000 hectares) where for years no pesticides have been needed because of the owls. No poisons!”

“Really?” Dad stepped closer to the computer and peered at the screen.

Iris jumped off her chair and pushed it toward her father. “Sit!”

“Philippa,” Dad called, “Come see this!”

“I thought you were sending Iris to bed,” Mom said as she approached the bedroom.

“I was, but this is more important. We might even be able to make your dream of an organic farm come true. Robin, you did great finding this!”

“It wasn’t me!” Robin put his arm around Iris’s shoulder. “It was my bookworm sister. She read it in that science magazine she borrowed from school.”

Dad and Mom stared at Iris. “You read about this?”

“Uh-huh,” said Iris. “I tried to tell you.”

“I owe you an apology,” said Dad, hugging her. “I thought you were just wasting time reading silly stories. I had no idea those magazines you like have real information! You’re learning things that are practical and a help for all of us.”

“I agree,” said Mom, looking up from the computer. “As long as you keep getting your chores done, I’ll stop nagging you to put the books and magazines down.”

“We’ll need to use pesticides now,” said Dad, “because if we don’t do something immediately we’ll lose our crop. But by next year we can have nest boxes up. We’ll be on the way to having a real organic farm. Now, turn off the computer. We’ll read more about this tomorrow and get started.”

“It’s really late,” said Mom. “But this calls for a celebration. How does some hot chocolate sound?”

As Iris held her steaming, chocolaty drink, she couldn’t stop smiling. Tonight she wasn’t Squirt or Bookworm. She was the proud daughter of farmers, and she was helping her family help save the planet.
