

Septic Tank Swim Team

The smell hits me as soon as I get off the school bus. The septic tank guy must be at our house today. I flick my ponytail over my shoulder and trudge up the driveway, breathing through my mouth. It doesn't work—the smell seeps in through my tonsils instead.

All day, I've been desperate to get home and play with our kittens. Our farm cat, Mischief, has three this time. They're eight weeks old, and they sleep in a box on our back verandah. I know my time with them is running out—Mum's already put an ad in the paper to give them away—so I've been playing with them as much as possible. But the septic stench puts me off that idea today.

City kids wouldn't know about septic tanks. When they flush the toilet, the contents get whisked away to the water treatment plant and they never have to think about it again. Easy peasy.

But country kids... well, we know it only goes as far as the small concrete tank sunk into our backyard. Sure, the bacteria in the tank do their thing, but the goopy stuff at the bottom still needs pumping out every year or two. I probably don't need to tell you where the watery stuff goes. There's a reason the grass is always greenest around the septic tank.

When I reach the house, Dad and the septic tank guy are chatting beside the truck. The lid's already off the tank—that explains the smell—but they haven't started pumping yet. I give them a wave then hightail it inside.

Mum's in the kitchen. She hands me a snack and asks about my day. Then she breaks the news. 'A lady called about my ad, Janey. She's coming to look at the kittens in an hour.'

I drop my snack and run outside. I don't want to waste a single minute. Only an hour

left with the kittens! I'll just have to put up with the smell.

I hurry to their box in the corner of the verandah.

They're not there.

I look around, checking all the usual spots. They're not lapping at their milk bowl.

They're not napping on the path. They're not scampering around the clothesline.

Then I hear it. A tiny 'mew'.

And two more. 'Mew! Mew!'

I look further into the backyard. Mischief is standing on top of the septic tank, her tail flicking worriedly. She's looking down at something. Something in the middle of the septic tank. The round lid of the tank is lying in the lush grass nearby.

I sprint over. I stare down through the opening. At first, all I see is a circle of oily brown sludge, surrounded by shadow.

Then they paddle into view. 'Mew! Mew! Mewww!'

'MUM!' I shriek. 'DAD! THE KITTENS ARE IN THE SEPTIC TANK!'

Mum erupts from the house. Dad and the septic tank guy rush over. The four of us—plus Mischief—gaze down into the tank as the three kittens doggy-paddle around their porridge-y pool of poo.

For a moment, we're all frozen.

Then Mischief dips an experimental paw through the opening. She pulls her paw back.

'A board!' Dad gasps. He runs off towards the shed.

Mum wrings her hands. 'Gloves!' she exclaims, dashing back into the house.

The septic tank guy just stares into the hole with his mouth hanging open.

'Mew! Mew! Mewww!'

I can't stand it any longer. I don't care about the smell. I don't care about the poo. I don't care about my white school shirt. I only care about the kittens.

I lie down on my stomach, my head over the hole. I reach into the tank, trying not to gag.

The black-and-white kitten swims towards me. I pinch the scruff of his neck and pluck him out of the sludge. He curls up, and I plop him into the grass beside the tank.

I lean over the hole again. I grab the ginger kitten. I lift her out of the tank and place her beside her brother. Mischief sniffs them, but doesn't seem to know what else to do.

Mum and Dad return, rubber gloves and wooden board in hand. I smile smugly to myself. I'm doing fine without them. I haven't even got any poo on my fingers.

I reach into the tank one more time. The little tabby kitten is paddling around the edge, almost out of reach. She's going at an awesome pace. She'd be unbeatable in the Cat Olympics. I lean in as far as I dare.

'Janey, use this!' Dad tries to angle the board through the hole. It catches my ponytail. The ends of my hair splash down into the poo. I jerk my head up. My slimy ponytail flicks across my mouth.

'BAURGH!' I spit.

I try to sit up. My hand misses the edge of the hole. I flop sideways, hitting my shoulder on the rim. My arm splashes down into the tank.

The little supercharged swim champ crashes into my arm. I scoop her up. I struggle upright and cuddle her to my chest.

For a moment, there's silence.

Then Dad and the septic tank guy break into applause. Mum flaps the gloves weakly and mumbles something about my white school shirt. Then she starts clapping too.

I have poo in my hair. Poo in my mouth. Poo up my arm. My shoulder hurts. I stink. And I feel like a hero.

An hour later, the lid is back on the tank. The truck has gone. The posh city lady who comes for the kittens likes the little tabby one the best. She cradles her against her cheek and inhales her fluffy, freshly-shampooed fur. She raves on and on about how fantastic she smells.

'I'll take her,' she says. 'But how did you get her to smell so amazing?'

I shrug. 'Just fresh country air,' I say. And I kiss the little tabby goodbye.