

Ozric's Hole to China (REWRITE #1)
By Rob Lacy

Chapter 1
Where is Ozric?

The problem with being really good at Hide and Seek is that you spend a lot of time waiting. I'm usually one of the last people found, which means I have to sit under a bush, or crouch behind a rock, or perch on a tree branch, for a *really long time*! Once when my friend Alexander was seeking, I didn't bother to hide at all. I waited right behind him while he counted to 25. When he took off to find all the other kids, I followed along in his shadow. He had no idea I was right there behind him!

But on this day, I had chosen to hide behind a garbage can. It wasn't very big, but I'm not very big, either. I had hidden behind it before and I knew Alexander wouldn't look here for a while.

He doesn't realize it, but when we play Hide and Seek in Central Park, Alexander always checks the same places first. He counts with his eyes closed, and then he runs over to the big clump of bushes by the path. There are usually one or two kids hiding there. After that, he goes through the stand of trees between our field and Central Park West. That's the street that runs right through the park from one side of New York City to the other. It curves around the area where we play, and nobody is allowed to cross it when we are playing Hide and Seek.

I sat and waited for Alexander to finally make his way over to where I was hiding. I thought about the math homework I had to do that night. I decided it would be easy and I could finish it after dinner, no problem.

Then another thought struck me. Our friend Ozric wasn't at the Hide and Seek game. Actually, we hadn't seen him all day, which was strange. Alexander and Ozric and I are best friends and he almost never missed a game with us.

I stood up just as Alexander started up the path in my direction. I spotted him before he knew I was there. I'd recognize his pudgy belly and his blue Mets hat anywhere. I walked out into the middle of the sidewalk and waited for him to see me.

"Hey, Jenny!" he called. "What are you doing? You're supposed to be hiding!"

"I know," I replied. "But I was just thinking about Ozric. He should be here. Where do you think he is?"

He shrugged.

I crossed my arms. "Alexander, I'm serious. I think something might be wrong.

Alexander thought for a second before saying, "Maybe he's hiding."

"He isn't hiding."

"Why not? We're playing Hide and Seek. *Hide and Seek.*"

"Alexander, in order to play a game of Hide and Seek, you have to *tell* someone you're playing. Otherwise you're just hiding for no reason at all and nobody will ever come find you. That's not much of a game."

"I guess".

I continued to make my case. “Ozric always plays with us on the weekends. That means something is keeping him from being here. After this game, I think we should go look for him.”

“Okay,” he finally agreed.

We set out to find the rest of the kids who were still hiding. Mostly I thought of places to look and sent Alexander to check them out. I probably boss him around too much, but he doesn’t seem to mind. He did a good job finding Paul Spielman, who had actually joined another group of kids playing soccer nearby.

Paul thought he was so clever by hiding like that. He doesn’t really like soccer so he never thought we’d look for him there. But Alexander joined the game too and when Paul got the ball, he ran up to him and yelled, “Gotcha!” Paul almost fainted, which served him right for quitting our game for a different one, even if it was just pretend.

After the game was over, Alexander and I left to look for Ozric. I didn’t really know where to start, so we decided to search around the park some more. Central Park is a big place, but most of our friends stay in the same area. It makes it easier to find each other after school and on weekends when we want to play a game.

We checked the baseball field. We looked by the swings. We even searched around where the grownups are always roller skating and playing loud music. But we didn’t find him. Then I remembered that he sometimes liked to climb a big tree in the middle of a field nearby. We started heading in that direction. As we walked, Alexander said to me, “You know, Jenny, this is a lot like playing Hide and Seek.”

I rolled my eyes. But he did have a point. Ozric hadn’t joined our game, but here we were looking for him.

Alexander stopped and said, “Look!”

I followed where his finger pointed and then I saw it. In the sandbox where the younger kids play, a snarling dog looked ready to attack a policeman’s horse. The horse reared up on two legs while its owner tried to pull it back by the reins. The dog jumped at the horse, but someone stood in its way. A scrawny boy with a mop of tangled brown hair. Our friend, Ozric Powers.

I began to run.

Chapter 2 Dog vs. Horse vs. Kid

When the dog pounced on Ozric, I stopped in my tracks and screamed, “Ozric, no!” My hands quickly rose to cover my face.

Alexander caught up to me and put his arm around my shoulder. “It’s okay,” he said. “Look!”

I peeked out between my fingers for just a moment and I will never forget what I saw. The dog was sitting next to Ozric, licking his hand! Its tail was *wagging*! I plopped to the ground and started laughing. It took Alexander several minutes to get me up again so we could walk over to our friend.

Ozric looked up and smiled when he saw us. “Hi, guys!” he said, still scratching behind the dog’s ears. The dog was a Doberman pinscher, but at that moment it looked as harmless as a poodle. Ozric held a shovel in his other hand, but I couldn’t tell why.

The policeman had managed to get control of his horse. He led it to a nearby tree and tied it up. Walking back to the sandbox, he said, "Nice work, son. What's your name?"

"Thanks. I'm Ozric Powers, sir."

"Officer Fred Harbiter. Nice to meet you." When they shook hands, his hand looked like it swallowed up Ozric's entirely.

"And who are these? Friends of yours?"

Ozric looked toward us and replied, "These are my friends, Alexander and Jenny."

The policeman turned to us. "Good to meet you, kids. Your friend just did an amazing thing. Sparky over there doesn't like dogs very much. I was afraid he was going to stomp on it."

I was about to reply when a voice called out from behind me, "My dog, Atropos, can handle himself. I would be more concerned for your horse, if I were you."

We turned to see a bald man in a silver tracksuit walking toward us. He led two Dobermans on leashes and carried another leash in his hands. When he reached Ozric, he attached it to the third dog's collar and gave a quick jerk. The Doberman shot right up and joined its friends sitting at attention behind the man.

Officer Harbiter looked the man up and down. Pointing a thumb over his shoulder, he replied, "I'm not too worried about Sparky over there, but I am concerned with the safety of the people visiting this park. You know we have leash laws here, right?"

The man changed his tone. "I'm terribly sorry, officer. I don't know what got into Atropos. I took the leash off for just a moment and he bolted. Must have seen a squirrel, I imagine."

"Must have," said the police officer.

The man narrowed his eyes briefly. But then he looked up and put on a smile.

"Like I said, I'm terribly sorry and it will never happen again."

Officer Harbiter waved his hand in the air. "Just make sure it doesn't." He turned to rejoin Sparky and left the group of us alone at the sandbox.

The bald man – his head was completely shaved – turned to Ozric and said, "Young man, I can't thank you enough for handling that situation so well. I don't know what might have happened if you hadn't been there."

Ozric replied, "It's no problem. Your dog might have been seriously hurt by that horse, though."

The man cackled. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about Atropos. But the police would have given me trouble if he had taken a bite out of the creature's leg. Silly things, I don't know why the police use them anymore."

Ozric raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"Well," the man continued. "I should be going now. But it was nice to meet you and if there's ever anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to ask."

Without another word, he turned and strode off, pulling the three dogs along by their leashes. We watched them disappear over a ridge some distance away.

When they were out of sight, Alexander said, "Wow, Ozric, That was incredible! Where did you learn how to handle dogs like that?"

I punched him in the arm and said, "You know the answer, silly! Ozric is a dog-walker."

“That’s right,” Ozric nodded. “I had to learn all about handling dogs before I could start working with them. People wouldn’t want to leave their animals with someone who didn’t know how to keep them under control.”

“Still,” continued Alexander, shaking his head. “Jenny and I thought it was going to bite your head off! That was awesome!”

“Thanks,” he said, and smiled. That’s when I noticed that Ozric still held a shovel in his hand. And when I looked closer, I realized that he was lower than Alexander and me. He was standing in a hole in the sandbox that was about two feet deep.

“Ozric,” I began. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, this?” he said, holding up the shovel. “Why, I’m digging a hole.”

“A hole,” said Alexander. “What for?”

Ozric smiled. “To get to China. I’m digging a hole to China!”

Chapter 3 Ozric’s Hole to China

“Well, it’s more of a tunnel, really,” Ozric explained, driving his shovel into the sand so it stood up on its own. “If I can dig at just the right angle, I should be able to get to Beijing. That’s the capital of China. Over 15 million people live there; that’s almost twice as many as live in New York City!”

“Wow,” said Alexander. “But why do you want to go there?”

“Oh. Well, you know how I’m home-schooled, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So my mom started me on geography last week. We are studying countries in Asia and I just learned about China. She said she tried to dig a hole to China when she was a little girl and I thought it was a cool idea!”

I asked, “So, what angle do you have to dig at, Ozric?”

“Down,” said Alexander.

I rolled my eyes. “Funny guy, Alex. So you are really going to try to dig a hole all the way to China?”

Ozric laughed and said, “That’s the plan.”

“Well then, we would love to help! Both of us.” I looked over at Alexander. He opened his mouth, but then closed it again and said nothing.

Ozric beamed. “Great! I was going to go find you guys this morning, but then I got too excited and wanted to get started. Sorry I missed the Hide and Seek game. How was it?”

“Eh,” I replied. “Same as usual. So what should we do about shovels?”

“I can get some!” offered Alexander. “My dad has a couple in our closet. I’ll be right back!” He ran off in the direction of our neighborhood.

Ozric grabbed his shovel and began to dig. I examined the work he had done to that point.

“You haven’t gotten very far yet, have you, Ozric?”

“No. It’s hard. The sides of the hole keep caving in and sand pours back down to where I just dug. Do you wanna try?”

He handed me the shovel and climbed back up to the ground level. I stepped down into the hole, which seemed deeper once I was at the bottom. It was about two feet deep at that point. I drove the shovel into the sand and lifted a scoop out. As soon as I had dumped it up by Ozric's feet, the same amount of sand had come sliding down the side to take its place.

"I see what you mean," I said. I didn't know what else to say. I kept digging.

After watching me for a couple minutes, Ozric said, "I think we should make the hole wider."

I climbed out of the hole and gave him the shovel back. He told me to back up a few steps and then took the blade of his shovel and traced a big circle in the sand. It was about five feet in diameter.

"There," he said. "If we dig inside that circle and carry the sand a few feet away, maybe it will be easier. And now that you and Alexander are helping, it will go faster, too! Let's wait for him to come back before we get started."

I nodded in agreement and we sat down to wait for our friend to return with the shovels.

When Alexander came back, not only did he have shovels, but he had also brought brownies and juice boxes for us. We thanked him and quickly gobbled and slurped them down.

"I made the brownies myself!" exclaimed Alexander.

I smiled. "They're great! You didn't just make them now, did you?"

"No, this morning. I was going to bring them to Hide and Seek, but I forgot. That's the other reason I wanted to go home, to surprise you guys!"

Ozric said, "Thanks, Big A!" He sometimes calls him that and he's the only one that Alexander will let get away with it. "Okay, let's get back to work. Did you know China has more people than any other country in the world and almost four times as many as the U.S.?" And with that he drove his shovel into the sand and tossed a scoopful out of the circle.