

The Faraway Moon

When I was 13 years old, I had a friend called Nicky. One day I was allowed to go over to her house to do homework for one hour. I took my shoes off at the door. Nicky went ahead. I heard a lady say, is that you darling, and Nicky called out yeah Mum it's me and Tania. In the kitchen, she opened a packet of sultana pasties and took out four. Grab some, she said. I took four too. She poured two glasses of orange juice, took one. That's yours. Come into the lounge and say hi to my mum.

Mrs Conning, pleased-to-meet-you-call-me-Julia-dear, reclined on a sofa in the sitting room. She wore lipstick. Nicky and her mum made kissing noises beside each other's cheeks. Please don't eat too many biscuits will you darling, you'll ruin your appetite for dinner. Would you like to stay for dinner Tania? We're having a bar-b-que, sausages and steaks. And salad and baked potatoes, how about it?

Thank you very much Mrs. Conning, Julia, maybe another time. Thank you.

Nicky shared a bedroom with her little sister – Katie. They had a bed each. A desk was at the foot of Nicky's bed and a bookshelf crammed with reference books sat beside that. Nicky changed out of her uniform. She put her home-clothes on and threw her uniform in a basket in a corner of the room. Aren't you worried about the creases? Nah, Mum will do the laundry tomorrow and anyway I have another one.

We studied together because we both loved reading. Our novel was, *The Red Pony*, by John Steinbeck. Our English teacher, Mrs Nelms was American. How lucky we were, to have an American teacher, teaching us American literature.

You can laze on my bed, and I'll sit on the chair, Nicky said.

I sat on the chair. We took turns at reading to each other. As I listened and as I read, I identified with Jody – the boy with the pony. My face heated up. My whole body tingled. And deep inside my puku just below my belly button a fire burned.

At home, I hung my uniform on a hanger and put it on the wardrobe door handle. I kissed my little twin sisters and my brother Bugs. I said hey to my big sister Bubby and I hugged my little brother Fred. I acknowledged my mother and Miri with a nod, and they both stared into the blank space in front of them.

I vacuumed the bedrooms, folded the washing and put it away. Some of the towels hadn't dried completely so I slung them over the pipe in the hot-water-cylinder cupboard, there wasn't enough room, so I draped what was left on hooks screwed to the inside of the door. The twins and Bugs watched television. Bubby, who had already cooked the stew, read Miri a story, so there was nothing for me to do until kai time. I did my homework at the table. Then I set it for dinner. I used a table cloth, the white one with ducks floating around its blue edge. I set places like at the pa. A spoon for Bugs, one for Miri, one each for the twins, and for me – a knife and fork. Our big sister Bubby didn't eat with us, she was allowed to eat in front of the T.V. in the sitting room. Our little brother Fred had already eaten. Our mother would eat with our father later or maybe she'd just sit there at the table as usual and stare at him, sadly.

I cut five thick slices of bread, I spread a thin layer of butter on each of them. In February, Aunty Joyce had dropped off some jars of jam. There was one half jar left so I spread it thinly. I put a piece of bread beside each place, I poured a cup of orange drink each, and I called the others in. I dished the stew out into bowls and then I plopped in a spoonful of mashed potato. The only sounds were; metal scraping on crockery, open-mouthed-chewing, swallowing, slurping and an occasional, mmm. I couldn't eat the kai in front of me, so I shared it amongst the others.

The twins packed-up the table, me and Miri did the dishes. I folded the table cloth and put it back in the drawer – for tomorrow. I sat at the table and finished my homework. I imagined Nicky at her desk, doing her homework. I saw her reach out for a dictionary or an

encyclopaedia. My school-set copy of *The Red Pony* was dog eared and wrinkled from the finger-licked page turnings of the many previous readers. Nicky had her own copy. Her mum had bought it for her as soon as she knew what we would be reading that year. I set the table for Dad and Mum, and then I ran the bath for the twins and Bugs.

That night in the bed that me and the seven year old twins shared, I told them about my time at Nicky's.

"Four chocolate biscuits?"

"Yeah."

"No wonder you weren't hungry when you got back."

"I think it's called ruining your appetite."

"N' you had orange drink?"

"No, orange juice, not orange coloured water, this was real juice."

"N' her mother called her darling?"

"Yeah."

"Imagine if mum called us darling. And kissed us."

"Imagine."

"And she didn't have to do jobs?"

"Nope, just changed out of her uniform, threw it in the washing-basket and put her home-clothes on. She had another uniform hanging up in the wardrobe.

"N' you went to the toilet?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"There was a fluffy thing on the seat so when you sit down, your bum doesn't get cold."

"What did you say about the toilet paper?"

"It had flowers printed on each square."

“And what about the flushing?”

“The water coming out was blue.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“And then what?”

“I went into the bathroom to wash my hands. The bathroom smelt like at the doctors. Like Pine trees.”

“And then what?”

“I saw six glasses lined up on the basin cabinet, there was a toothbrush in each glass. One each. One for the Mum and one for the Dad and one each for the four kids.”

“One each.”

“Then we did our homework.”

“In the room she shares with her little sister?”

“Yeah.”

“And they had a bed each?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think I’d like that.”

“How come?”

“I think you fellas would be too far away from me, I would get cold.”

“Me too.”

Just then Bugs started whimpering. First a whimper and then a soft groan. Then the screaming. I lifted him off the mattress on the floor, put him in with us. If we comforted him earlier on in his nightmare he wouldn’t get to the screaming part, and she wouldn’t come in and try to bash him to shut him up. Anyway she’d stopped that ever since that time I stood up to her. That time when we came home from school, Aunty Joyce was there to mind us. Mum

had been taken to the hospital near Te Awamutu. After a month, she was back. And medicated.

We all snuggled-up together. Me on the fall side lying on my left, Bugs next to me lying on his back. And the twins lying on their right sides spooning each other. With my right arm over all three of them and their little arms stretching over to as far as they could reach, to touch our brother and to touch me, right then I knew we were going to be okay tonight. So there we all were, breathing in each other's breathe smells and breathing them out again only to breathe them in once more. We closed in to one another. So closer than close in that double bed with the wire-wove spring and a kapok mattress.

So close.

We kept each other warm under the itchy blankets. Touching, breathing, holding. Talk of my time at Nicky's house had ceased. Here we were dealing with us now. As always: every night.

I thought about the boy called Jody who had to have a horse to teach him about how to be responsible and how to deal with death so he could cope with living. Then I thought oh well, that's how they do it in books. And people like me with nothing, not even the certainty of a tomorrow, we learn from those stories. We learn about coping and accepting what we've got. And we live for the now because we are in the now.

And.

For all the thoughts I had of living inside Nicky's life, she may as well have lived on the moon for all the distance there was between our ways. I only had to listen to my brothers' easy breathing and my little sisters talk of comfort in our togetherness to make me see sense.

by K-T Harrison