

Futures

Goodnight, Moon

A change of scene. By Wendy Nickel

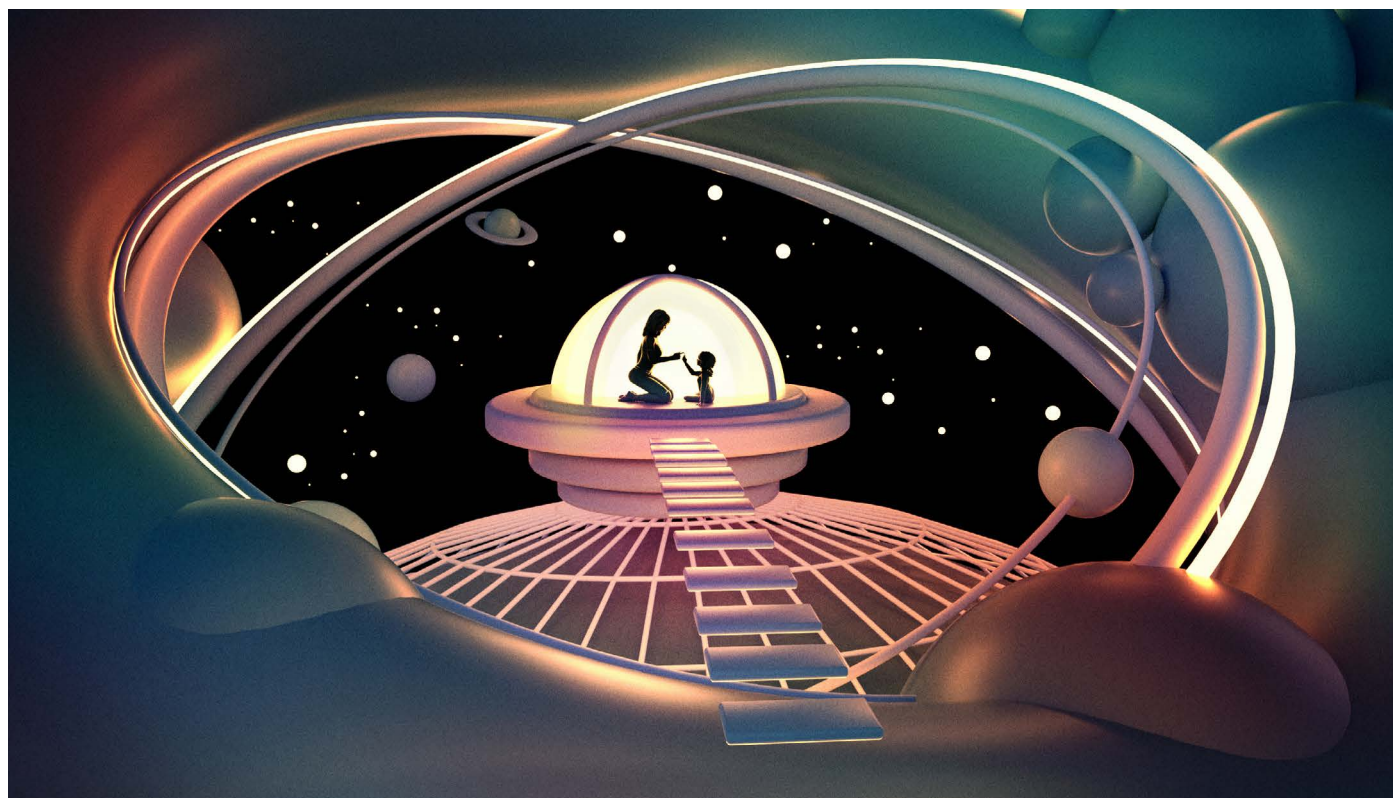


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Samara clutches PinkPony as we stand in line at the airlock.

In our rush to leave, I'd nearly forgotten the threadbare stuffed horse. Samara would never have forgiven me. I doubt Chad would've, either.

The lunar surface, which we've waited so long to see, is obscured by a maze of semi-transparent pop-up tunnels and inflated tents that have been unfurled and unfolded like origami figures from the lunar lander. I try to take Samara's hand – as much for my own comfort as hers – but she pulls away.

"It'll take some time to get everyone processed and figure out who's assigned where," the attendant tells us.

"I know where we've been assigned. My husband has been here for months already, working on the habitat at Mare Imbrium."

"You'll have to sit tight here for tonight, but don't worry," he says glibly. "There's a Moon buggy heading out to Mare Imbrium in the morning, but in the meantime, we've made

arrangements for each family to have a private space. You and your daughter are this way."

"Step-daughter," Samara says. She's always quick to clarify this.

Our 'private space' is a six-foot dome with a waxy sheet hung across the doorway that separates us from the walkways. It's a mystery to me how these delicate-looking layers of plastic are supposed to protect us from the outside elements. By the quiver in Samara's chin, it seems the same thought is unnerving her.

"Well, this is fun." I try to force some cheer into my voice. "Looks like the two of us are camping out tonight. Help me roll out these sleeping bags, and then we'll see what they've given us for our picnic dinner."

Unwilling to set PinkPony down, Samara one-handedly straightens the corner. "I want my own blankets."

"These are antistatic," I start explaining, then stop myself when I notice her frown deepen. She isn't looking for an explanation, is she? She, like any other seven-year-old, just wants

comfort. The familiar. She wants her own pink bedroom with her own pink bed and curtains and to be surrounded by those who know her and understand her. She wants a life that's consistent. Predictable.

"You wouldn't want your blankets to zap you, would you?" I stick out one finger and gently touch her arm. "Zap."

She smiles weakly and, latching onto the game, zaps me back until we're both laughing and zapping and scrabbling around the habitat. Someone approaches through the tunnel – a shapeless figure, all echoes and shadows – and we clamp our hands over our mouths to muffle our giggles.

"I wish Dad was here," Samara says with a sigh when the stranger has passed.

"Me, too," I say, smoothing out the blanket as if somehow, in doing so, I could smooth out the all-too-familiar pockets of loneliness ballooning in my chest. Me, too.

The past few months have been rough, even before the fires that whipped through

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the valley, driving us from our home and fast-tracking our applications for lunar refugee status. Chad would've been there for us if he could: smoothing over our arguments, bridging our communication chasms, reassuring me that all kids Samara's age go through these phases and that I hadn't damaged her with my flawed and fledgling parenting skills. But there's only so much anyone can do from 240,000 miles away, and more often than not, I've had to face the day-to-day on my own. Even now, with the distance reduced to mere miles, it's still just me and her facing the world, which is now rising over the lunar horizon with great, smoke-darkened clouds whirling across its surface.

"Looks like they made us PBJs." I nudge her, trying to put on a brave face. "Your favourite."

"Not when camping. They should've given us hot dogs and s'mores."

"Can't argue with that."

After we choke down the last of our sandwiches, I announce, "Looks like it's time for bed, ponies."

Samara whines out of habit but perks up at the novelty of going to sleep in our day clothes. It will be a long night for both of us – one final long night in a series of seemingly endless long nights; one final time of darkness, waiting for a brighter dawn.

As we climb into our antistatic sleeping bags, the other domes around us are still a flurry of activity. It's supposed to be quiet hours now, but that's a relative term.

I focus on the sound of Samara's breath slowing, deepening, relaxing – assuring me that, in spite of everything, I managed to keep her safe through another day.

"We're not alone, are we?"

It takes a moment for me to realize Samara's not asking about the shadowy figures passing along the walkway, their footsteps muffled and

weary. She's not asking about the lander's spotlights, sweeping with perfect regularity across the tunnels.

I follow her gaze to the other domes. Each is an illuminated snow globe, capturing this singular moment of eagerness and optimism and fears. Each holds a family. A story. A bubble of hope. And in the reflection of Samara's eyes, I see that she sees it, too.

"No, Samara," I whisper back. "We're not alone."

Nodding, Samara slips her tiny hand from beneath the blanket and places it in mine.

Wendy Nikel is a speculative-fiction author with a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. For more info, visit wendynikel.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Wendy Nikel reveals the inspiration behind *Goodnight, Moon*.

This story, like many of my short stories, started from a writing prompt; this one was based on the word 'camping'. As I was writing, I tried to find ways to flip the concept on its head. Rather than the characters camping somewhere on Earth and staring up at the Moon, they're on the Moon, staring up at Earth. Rather than nylon or polyester tents to keep wind out, the tent in this story is inflatable and designed to keep the breathable air in.

And rather than a recreational activity, done for leisure and relaxation, these characters are experiencing the anxieties and fears of a desperate escape.

My stories often start as being 'about' one thing but, as they're developing, they become a way to explore other topics and ideas that are weighing on my mind, and this is no exception. There are many refugees in our world today, fleeing from circumstances beyond their control, having to sleep each night in places that are utterly unfamiliar and strange. There are many parents struggling to find the words to explain to their kids all that's going on in the world right now. It's my hope that stories like this will be a talking point, a source of connection, and a way for us to put ourselves in others' shoes and, in doing so, become more empathetic people.

