

Light Pink Summer

Susan McMichael

I'm up first, before voices, it's cool and my line trickles in the water. I'm reading *The Mystery of the Brass Bound Trunk* – it's the loveliest book I've seen in ages, with a lilac spine and a picture of Nancy Drew on the front. This time Nancy meets Mrs Purdy, Nestrelida, Miss Brownley and Doris who all become her friends. She looks for the red-headed man, wandering down unknown corridors, stopped only by a strangely cold hand.

I wish I was brave enough to find where the waves in my stomach which waltz into my room, into my stomach, come from. They are intruders; come some nights, don't turn up for months. Then they turn up four times in a week only to vanish like Nancy's red-headed man in the ship.

When the waves come, I'm paralysed – stopping cleaning my teeth, feeling the waves climb into my stomach, rock, just one, then another. They're quiet, white waves, little ones, not rolling waves that make a boat rock when we go to Pittwater – they're the kind that lap on the beach with froth tops. I watch them fall in my stomach. One, it crosses my stomach and falls sideways and down. Another one comes, is quicker and another – this one is slower and larger, takes up all my stomach, and I'm floating.

Then they're all gone.

"What is it darling?" Mummy asks, eyebrows creased.

"Waves– in my tummy..."

My words are spiked like the rose thorns, there, and there, and there, – part of me is watching mummy and part of me is standing in the bedroom.

I can see the top of my head.

I sigh.

“They’re gone.”

“I’ll make you some milk. Go back to bed.”

I lie in bed waiting for mummy and the milk, sleepy – waves, words, and the floating, a bad dream. One day later, it might come back, but now I had to think about what to do about Tabitha.

I bought *The Mystery of the Brass Bound Trunk* with my Christmas money from Granny – the ten-dollar note was flat green, neatly sitting inside my Christmas card that wished me a Merry Christmas and a happy New Year. She does it every year and smiles, when I smile in astonishment at so much money, think what I can do with it. Each year, I buy a new Nancy Drew book and a bottle of Molly Bushell red and white humbugs for the boat.

In the peacefulness of Coal and Candle creek this morning, there are seven quiet boats, a rocky cliff and my line, which trickles across the wood of the boat, down into the bluey-grey water. Occasionally, I lift the line, lift my eyes, look at the hills, and then test that the bait is still floating. I like hand-line fishing best because I can read, fish and eat humbugs all at the same time. There is no whirr of a rod, no splash, only a plop, only the waiting.

Later, Dad and Vivien row us to the beach before lunch – We search for shells and I learn the names, hard and funny on my teeth – pippi, whelks, snail, and jingle shells. I can’t decide which is my favourite – Some days I choose the orange pippis, other days I pick the clear bracelet jingle shells.

With my jingle shell, I make a monocle, like Mlle’s, in *Claudine at St Claire’s*. I peer at my family, light pink and sandy. My mother waves to me. She’s caught up her hair with an olive-green and black scarf so her short-waved hair won’t curl, won’t twist with the damp. She’s reading and pushes her sunglasses away, as they slip down her nose.

Dancing across the shadowy rocks, my sister Vivien races the tide, throws sand at the seagulls and twirls. She is light and free and I feel the breath of the girls, as they watch her jealously, flying fast along the beach, beating the seagull, my father, my mother to the picnic rug that mum has spread out.

My father asks,

“Can you see New Zealand?”

His words float clearly through the light-pink, summer air. I want to keep his question, but my favourite shell is flat, thin as a birthday crepe, is no container, and holds nothing. Soon the holiday will be over and school

will begin, the shells dry and sandy.

Today, through the shell, his voice is distinct. Today, I see only his smile and the movement of his eyebrows. I can't see the girls' smiles, can't see their faces. Through my shell their voices are thin, don't echo, today.

The day is soft blue and you can't tell that that afternoon we all got sunburnt, and that night, tossed, unable to sleep, with the waves.

sukirex@tpg.com.au