

# CHILD OF THE UNIVERSE

*A short story by Kit Thornton*

As I gaze down on the sleeping girl my heart is filled with a strange mixture of emotions. I am sad. Sad because she looks so frail and vulnerable as she lies in the hospital bed connected by wires and tubes to machines clicking and whirring with flickering electronic displays. I am worried. Worried for the loving parents and older brother who are constantly trying to hold back the tears as they take turns to sit at the bedside, tenderly holding the girl's fragile hand. And, finally, I am amazed. How is it possible? How can this have happened? For although I barely recognise her, that sleeping girl in the small hospital room is Laura Kennedy, and I am Laura; the sleeping girl is me.

“Oh, Harry,” whispered Sue as she looked sorrowfully at their sleeping daughter, “Please tell me that Laura's going to get better.”

“Yes love,” replied Harry, gently squeezing his wife's hand, “She will be fine. Remember how she was last week; running in the school sports, swimming in the gala, fooling around with her brother. Laura's resting, but she's fit and strong. She'll get through this, I promise.”

Harry wished that he felt as confident as he had tried to sound. Dr Morris, the family's GP, had acted quickly when he saw the symptoms of possible meningococcal infection, and Ian Woodley, the young paediatrician attending Laura, was friendly and reassuring. But during the four days since Laura had been rushed into the hospital she seemed to be steadily slipping deeper into the coma that now held her 10-year old body trapped, immobile, scarcely breathing. And earlier today Dr Woodley had admitted to Harry that he was a little puzzled.

“Laura's brain activity is not quite what we might have expected,” Ian Woodley had said. “Mostly the rhythms are steady, relaxed, just like sleeping, but then there are extended periods of tranquillity, quiescence, when her pulse fades almost to nothing. It's rather worrying, but we must keep positive.”

It all started with Pogo, you know. He's my best friend. Of course, no one can see him, except me. Mummy and Daddy call Pogo my 'imaginary friend', which is silly because he's not imaginary, he's real. And they think I'm too old to have an imaginary friend so I don't talk to them about Pogo any more. Anyway, Pogo came with me in the ambulance to hospital; we were both excited because the ambulance was going so fast. We could hear the siren, and Pogo said the blue light was flashing. At the hospital we met a nice doctor – Ian, he said his name was – and he took my temperature and felt my pulse and looked into my eyes with a funny magnifying thing. I was feeling sleepy then, and I don't really remember much more until I heard Pogo calling me.

“Wake up, Laura! Wake up,” Pogo said, “But keep your eyes shut, and let’s go for an adventure.”

Well, I was confused, and a bit frightened because I’m only ten. I remembered going into hospital but now I didn’t know where I was. “Here, hold my hand tightly,” whispered Pogo, “And imagine you can fly.”

I trusted Pogo completely, so I took his hand and imagined that I had wings. I flapped my wings, gently at first, and then a bit more strongly. “Don’t worry about wings,” said Pogo, “We don’t need them. Now, you can open your eyes and look.” So I opened my eyes and looked, and there, asleep on the hospital bed just below, was me!

And here I am, looking at myself sleeping; it is really weird. But Pogo is tugging at my hand; “Come on Laura,” he says, “Let’s explore.” I don’t really want to go because I can see Mummy and Daddy talking to two nurses, and I want to hear what they are saying, but Pogo keeps pulling my hand so I go with him.

I don’t understand how he does it, but Pogo takes me out of the ward and along the corridor. I am trying to hide from all the people we pass but Pogo squeezes my hand and says, “Don’t worry, Laura, they can’t see us and they can’t hear us. Where would you like to go?”

I tell Pogo I want to peep at the children’s ward and then go outside. I am in a small room by myself; at least, that’s where my body is. (This is very weird, isn’t it?) But I know there must be other children in this hospital and I want to see them. In a moment I am looking at a long ward with rows of beds along each side. Some have curtains around them. Most of the children in the beds are sleeping; some are just lying there, eyes open, looking so sad. I wish I could help them, make them smile, take them with me. But now Pogo tells me I must rest. It is my first adventure, he says, and next time we will be going outside. I close my eyes...

“There, can you see that?” Dr Woodley was pointing at one of the flickering displays. “Laura’s sleeping normally again.”

Sue Kennedy was doing the bedside shift just then and she sighed as she heard Ian Woodley’s words. She was learning to read the machines and she felt as if she had been holding her breath ever since she noticed the drop in Laura’s pulse rate. Now she patted Laura’s hand. “Good girl. Just keep on fighting.”

For our next adventure Pogo took me right outside the hospital and into the countryside. I found myself looking down on an amazing coloured patchwork of fields; green grass with cows, sheep and even a few horses; bright gold of the sun on ripening corn; glaring yellow of oilseed rape; and the darker speckled green of trees and bushes in the woods and hedgerows. This is brilliant! I remember my holidays on Uncle Fred’s farm and Pogo says we can go there. I recognise the farm buildings, and even my room in the farmhouse. Uncle Fred is working in the farmyard and Auntie Emma is feeding the chickens in the paddock; I wave at them, although I know that they can’t see me. Now I am riding Blackie, Auntie Emma’s black pony, and we gallop across the meadow, slowing to canter through the open gate into the woods beyond. I love the feel of the breeze in my hair as I guide Blackie amongst the bracken, and we play at riding on the beams of sunlight filtering

through the oaks and beeches. I slip easily from the saddle and stretch out on the soft ground while Blackie nibbles at the grass beside me. I want to stay here forever, but Pogo reminds me that it is time to go back...

"She's still with us," said Harry Kennedy, watching the displays as they indicated that Laura's brain activity had resumed a stronger rhythm. He felt emotionally and physically drained and he knew that his wife was the same, probably more so. Although he sometimes caught himself dozing, it was impossible really to rest in the little room where he seemed to be surrounded by the clicking, whirring, buzzing, thumping machines that were holding on to Laura's life.

"I wonder what's going on in that pretty head," Sue said, "Is she dreaming? Can she hear us? Does she know how much we love her and want her back home with us?"

"I'm sure she does know that," Harry replied, "And now that she seems a little stronger I think you should take a break. Try to get some sleep while I sit with Laura."

I have always wanted to go skiing but Mummy and Daddy told me I must wait until I am older. When I reminded Pogo, he said why didn't we go now? So here we are in Austria. I knew what it would be like because I had looked at pictures on the Internet, but it is amazing to see it for real. It's just like a page from a fairytale; a winter wonderland. I am whizzing down a long snowy track, dodging great boulders that stick up through the snow. On each side there are steep slopes covered with white-tipped pine trees, and in the distance, over the tops of the trees, I can see pale snow-capped mountains. Suddenly I come out from the trees into a wide open space where the snow has been shaped by the winds into rolling dunes. There is an alpine village with snow-covered roofs and, further away, I can see people on the snowy fields like ants crawling over a white table-cloth. It is magical; I want to go back to the top of the mountain and ski down again. But Pogo tells me I must not try to do too much; I must rest between adventures...

"This is interesting, but I am worried." Dr Ian Woodley was talking to the nurse who had been sitting with Laura while her parents went off for a meal together. They were both looking at the machines monitoring pulse and brain activity.

"Her pulse has strengthened again," said the nurse, "And while there's life there's hope."

"We must try not to use such clichés;" Ian Woodley smiled at the nurse, "But you're right, of course, and we need to keep on encouraging Mr and Mrs Kennedy.

"In the meantime," he continued, "I think we should be trying to wean Laura off the sedatives."

I want to go home. I know that I can see Mummy and Daddy but I want them to be able to see me; I mean, to see me awake. I want to talk to them; to hug them; to tell them that I love them. I want everything to go back to the way it was. I attempt to explain to Pogo but he looks a bit doubtful, which worries me. Let's do another adventure, says Pogo, and I know that he's just trying to take my mind off going home. How about Florida, I suggest; Disneyland, Universal Studios. Or perhaps exploring the Amazon rain forests; or playing

with penguins in the Antarctic; there are so many places in the world that I want to see. But Pogo tells me to set my imagination free. You are a child of the universe, he says; let's go to the moon, the planets, the stars, he says. And then we are off, up and away, soaring into the heavens.

This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I cannot believe that it is Earth, The World, and that I am looking down on it from the sky. I thought the sky would be blue, but it's not, it's black. The Earth is blue. Bright blue with swirls of white cloud. It reminds me of one of the glass marbles my brother used to play with. I can see America, and I can even recognise the shape of Florida; that's where Disneyland is. I'm just about to ask Pogo if we can go down to Disneyland when he tells me to look at the moon. It is enormous, and I cannot believe how close it is. I think I could almost touch it but Pogo says that would not be a good idea, and so we set off again. We are going towards Saturn and I can clearly see its rings and lots of moons around it. I think Saturn is even more beautiful than earth. The rings are all different colours and I try to count the moons. Pogo tells me there are about thirty and he even knows the names of some of them: Titan, Helene, Calypso, Janus, Atlas, Phoebe — I tell him to stop because I will never remember them, and anyway, I want to go on. We pass Neptune, and then Pluto with its moons, Charon and the others. And still we go on, out amongst the stars. Is this what infinity is like? Am I in heaven? There are lights all around me, yellow, pink, green, orange, and they are constantly flickering, like fireworks a long way off.

This is so much fun! I feel thrilled but at the same time I am sad. Perhaps I will roam amongst the stars like this forever...

"Mrs Kennedy, I think you'd better come." The nurse had found Sue in the hospital's little chapel where she had been saying a prayer for the daughter she felt she was about to lose. "I'm terribly sorry," the nurse said, "But I'm afraid it doesn't look good."

The two women hurried to the room where Laura still lay and Ian Woodley stepped back so that Sue could sit near the head of the bed opposite her husband who smiled sadly at her. The doctor gently took Laura's wrist, feeling once again for the pulse that was now so faint. "I'm so very, very sorry," he said to Sue, "Laura seems to be slipping away. Even without the sedatives she's showing no sign of waking. There's scarcely any pulse and almost no evidence of brain activity." He looked distraught.

"We know that you've done all you can, doctor," Sue whispered, trying to keep her voice steady. "We can only wait —"

I don't quite know where I am just now but there is a man sitting on a stone wall. He is wearing a long brown robe and he has sandals on his feet. "Hello Laura," he says to me. He has the kindest eyes that I have ever seen. Suddenly I am all confused and shy. I think I am blushing. I want to say hello to the man and to ask him who he is, but my tongue doesn't work and so I say nothing. He goes on, "Laura, my little one, you have so much to offer. You are a child of the universe." (I hear the echo of my friend's words.) "You can go anywhere, be anyone, achieve anything. You just need to have confidence in yourself and be determined to overcome whatever obstacles you find in your way. You are fortunate to have been given a glimpse of what life might hold in store for you. It is not yet time for your stay

on earth to come to an end. Now you must go back; go back to the parents who love you. And be at peace in your world.”

Sitting as usual in the chair next to Laura’s bed, with Sue sitting opposite, Harry Kennedy was dozing gently. Suddenly he became aware that his daughter’s eyes were open, and she was looking at him. “Hello Daddy,” she said. Instantly Harry felt the tears spring to his eyes; an up-swelling of emotion that seemed almost to engulf him. On the other side of the bed he could see that Sue was equally overcome and Ian Woodley was standing with an expression of surprise and delight on his face.

“Laura, my love, you are all right!” Harry said, smiling through his tears.

“Yes Daddy, of course I’m all right.” Laura grinned at him and turned her head. “Hello Mummy; hello Dr Woodley. I’m so glad you’re all here. I’ve had the most amazing adventures. Just wait until I tell you where I’ve been; you’ll never believe it!” And, naturally enough, they didn’t believe it; they were simply too pleased that Laura had returned.

Copyright © 2011 Kit Thornton

*Child of the Universe was first published in Competitions Anthology 2009,  
Sunpenny Publishing. (www.sunpenny.com)*