

Looking For Surprises

By Elsie Locke

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For the very first time, Melanie was going for a holiday with Uncle Len, Barry and Robyn. They had a hut in the mountains.

"There will be lots of surprises," said Uncle Len.

"What sort of surprises?" said Melanie

"Snow," said Barry.

"Keas," said Robyn.

"Rocks and rushing rivers and jaggedy mountains," said Uncle Len.

Melanie laughed, because none of these things were surprises. "I want a surprise I can't even guess," she said.

They went to the mountains on a train. They made a snowman with a carrot for a nose, and threw little rocks at the big rocks in the river, and watched the keas playing chase with each other. Then the clouds came over the sky, and they went into the hut, out of the cold.

"Have you found any surprises?" asked Uncle Len.

"No," said Melanie. "Not yet."

They cooked their dinner on the fat black stove. They lit candles that made funny shadows. The hut had only one room with four bunks in a corner, I and one door, and one square window without any curtains. When Melanie looked through the window, she couldn't see the jaggedy mountains because of all the heavy cloud.

Melanie wanted to sleep in the top bunk, but Uncle Len made her take the bottom one. "You might wake up in the night," he said. "I'll be right here in the other bunk. We'll be feet to feet, nearly."

Robyn read her a story, but Melanie was so warm and cosy that she fell asleep before the end.

The candles were out when she woke up. Melanie couldn't think where she was. At home, in the city, she could always see the door and the window and the furniture, even in the middle of the night. But here she was in a black space of nothing. She felt all alone and scared.

Then she remembered the train and the snowman and the river and the keas, and cooking the dinner on the fat black stove. She remembered Uncle Len saying, "We'll be feet to feet, nearly."

Melanie sat up and slid her hand along the side of her bunk until she found Uncle Len's big foot sticking up. And she grabbed it.

Uncle Len gave a whoop like a fire engine. It sounded like the biggest noise in the world. Robyn and Barry woke up and lit a candle. Now Melanie could see where everything was-the door and the window and the fat black stove. They talked and laughed, and she didn't feel scared any more.

When they got up, snow was falling. Melanie ran about trying to catch the gentle snowflakes. The snow spread like ice-cream on the arms of the trees and made puddings out of the stones. When the cloud cleared away and the snow stopped, everything glittered in the sunshine.

That night, Melanie woke up again. As before, she couldn't see the door or the fat black stove. But the square of window was like a picture frame with a pattern of silver lights.

Melanie went to the window and looked out. There was no moon. Bright stars covered the sky all the way to the black line of the jaggedy mountains. The snow that covered the ground was glittering with the light of the stars.

Melanie was enchanted. "Uncle Len!" she called softly. "Come and look!"

Robyn and Barry went on sleeping while the two of them stood there, as silent as the silent world outside.

"Uncle Len," whispered Melanie, "I've found two surprises."

"You have?" said Uncle Len. "Tell me the first one."

"The real dark," said Melanie. "The real *dark* dark where you can't see anything at all."

"Did that surprise you so much?" said Uncle Len. "And what's the other one?"

"The stars are different here," said Melanie. "They light up the snow. Our stars at home don't light anything. They're too little."

"At home they don't get a chance," said Uncle Len. "The lights of the city take over. Up here they're the same stars, but they've got the world to themselves."

"No they haven't," said Melanie. "They've got us."

"Somebody has to see how bright they can shine," said Uncle Len. "I'll tell you something else. If we don't get back to our bunks you'll have a third surprise-how cold it can be when there's starlight on the snow."

Melanie cuddled down again in her bunk. When she turned to the wall, there was the real *dark* dark. When she turned to the window, there was the picture frame of bright bright stars. And she drifted off to sleep.