

Futures

Paper stars

A good day. By William R. D. Wood



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Little Bibi Bené couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned in her pod. Tiny paper stars hung above her, swaying gently. Bibi had drawn a face on each one. Most smiled, those were for the happy days, but some frowned, too.

Every day Bibi was awake, she made a new star and Mumi always hung it up for her. This made Bibi happy, even on sad days when the rusty old ship was scary and creaked extra loud.

Bibi could remember the day for each and every star. Days running in empty greenhouses, her giggles and footsteps bouncing off dusty glass. Days climbing through empty cargo pods, pretending they were metal mountains. Days shouting at the ship's shaky hull, yelling at the Big Empty outside, but it was always too scared to come in and fight her. And days splashing in the cooling ponds, imagining they were vast oceans like in the crinkly old books. Sometimes she fell in and got wet, but she always kept trying.

"I'm good at not giving up," Bibi whispered. Mumi always said so, and Mumi knew everything.

Something below clanged and red lights blinked up through the floor. Bibi peeked down and saw Mumi working with wires and pipes. Mumi's long body moved smoothly, her hands a blur.

"Mumi?" Bibi called softly.

"Yes, child." Mumi's voice click-click-clicked more than usual tonight. She stopped working and tilted her head to listen.

"I can't sleep," said Bibi. She twisted a small knot into her covers. "I'm hungry."

Mumi laughed, a sound like tiny kisses. "Surely you're tired, Bibi Bené. In a few days it'll be time for a Big Sleep. Tonight is just a little one. Say the words, and sleep will come."

Bibi yawned. "Yes, Mumi." But she wondered about the Big Sleep. Mumi said she made food during the Big Sleeps. Bibi didn't know how, but whenever she woke up, there was food.

Bibi tried to sleep, but couldn't. A soft cry

came from below. Bibi slipped out of her pod and tiptoed downstairs. The metal floor was cold on her feet.

Mumi stood by the blinking lights. A single flower sat in a pot next to her. Mumi said it was the last one. Bibi had never seen Mumi so still before. She looked like a tall flower herself with a dress full of holes. Red light blinked and blipped through the holes, making funny shapes on the walls and wires and pipes.

"Are your stars sad today?" Bibi asked, touching Mumi's dress. It hummed softly in her fingers.

"Bibi Bené, you're not asleep," said Mumi.

Bibi giggled. Her fingers found a hole in Mumi's dress.

"They are ..." Mumi's voice click-click-clicked, "happy stars."

Bibi thought red lights meant something was wrong. She was glad it didn't.

"This pretty star means you get a surprise. Tonight is a Big Sleep, after all."

Well, that didn't sound like fun. Air rustled

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her hair, tugging it.

“And when you wake up, there will be more surprises.”

“What kind?” Bibi couldn’t imagine.

“Well,” Mumi clicked, “flowers and food and people, too.”

Bibi gasped. She spun around with her arms out wide. “People! Like me?”

“Quickly now.”

She ran back to her pod and jumped in, squeezing her eyes shut so tight the red light leaked through. She had to say the words right away.

Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the stars my soul to keep. And if I should forget to wake ...

But Bibi couldn’t stop thinking about people. Outside, dust tapped on the ship, louder and louder, and air rustled the paper stars above her pod like crazy.

Mumi was by her side very fast, her long arms reaching up to the paper stars to keep them from blowing away. Their shadows moved across Bibi’s face.

Bibi felt warmth through the holes in Mumi’s dress.

“Oh!” said Mumi, looking at the red flashing lights through the floor. “We can’t forget the most important part of the day, but you have to hurry.”

Bibi got her paper and made a new star. It had the biggest smile ever. One more Big Sleep and when she woke up there would be people.

Mumi hung the star higher than all the rest. “It’s time, Bibi Bené.”

Bibi smiled and lay back down, her hands on her chest. Mumi always looked the same. She said she was happy today, but the red light made her look sad.

Mumi stroked Bibi’s face and leaned in close, until her cool metal cheek touched Bibi’s forehead. “I brought you something.”

Bibi felt Mumi put something in her hands. It felt like a flower stem. The flower from the pot!

“Your soul is the flower that always grows, Little Bibi Bené.”

Bibi smiled. The Big Sleep was coming. She

could feel it down in her toes. “Mumi?”

“Yes, child.”

“Will there really be people when I wake up?”

Mumi clicked softly. “What do you think?”

“Dozens and dozens and dozens.” Bibi imagined crowds of children just like her.

The ship shook a little, as if it was listening. “Then dozens and dozens and dozens there will be,” said Mumi. She tucked Bibi in nice and cosy. The pod was huge so a big person could fit, but tonight it was warm and snug.

“Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the stars my soul to keep.” Bibi closed her eyes, holding her flower tight. Above her, paper stars rustled in the wind and Mumi pulled down the covers.

*And if I should forget to wake,
I pray the stars my soul to take.*

William R. D. Wood writes speculative fiction (mostly cosmic horror) from a secret lair in the mountains of Virginia. You can find him online at www.williamrdwood.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

William R. D. Wood reveals the inspiration behind *Paper stars*.

Paper stars was born as a fairy tale. A little orphan girl runs recklessly through a deep, dark forest marvelling at everything, never more than an inch or an instant away from mortal danger. A kindly forest spirit has taken the girl under her wing and has been run ragged, constantly interceding on the girl’s behalf, protecting her without ever letting the girl realize just how close she comes to injury, or worse.



I think every parent or caretaker of a small child can relate. In the story, the spirit just wants the girl to lie down and go to sleep so the forest can enjoy a moment of peace. As much as the emotional core and imagery of the story warmed my heart, it just never seemed complete. At least not complete enough to send out into the world. I tried longer treatments. Shorter. More peril. Less. I even painted a nice horror story around it. That really didn’t work.

So, I placed it in the trunk file. Not every story gets its day. Besides, I write hard science fiction and science-fiction horror. What was I thinking trying to write a fairy tale?

Last year, not long after our youngest began her first year of university life, I woke with the story on my mind. It had been years since I’d given it a passing thought. The answer seemed so obvious. *Paper stars* wasn’t a fairy tale. It was a science-fiction story set on a generation ship with an autonomous AI and the last human survivor of a failed mission to the stars!

In a single sitting, I rebuilt the story from the ground up. It was flash length, told with exactly the right number of words, and kept its fairy tale bones, except the clear lesson and the happily ever after. But the magical elements are there. The innocent protagonist and the wise helper. The evil Big Empty and the symbolic elements such as the flower and the paper stars. Even the ritualistic language of the bedtime prayer.

It’s nice to know that stories stay with us, even the ones we’ve placed in the trunk, never thinking to revisit them. What triggered the story and its epiphany for me? Who can say. Just to be clear though, although my wife might disagree, in no way whatsoever does our youngest’s journey into the unknown of adulthood overlay against this story or any alleged fatherly fears. Just saying.

In *Paper stars*, Mumi’s choice is a hard one. A beautiful lie or an uncomfortable truth? I think I’d do the same. How about you?