

Donkey Sleepover

by Sarah Johnson

“You should have a sleepover,” Mum says. “For your birthday.”

“A sleepover?” I say.

Eomma, my other mum, looks up from serving the rice. “Great idea,” she says.

I’ve never been to a sleepover. Where we used to live, there was no need. There was only a handful of houses – kids swapped between them whenever they liked.

It’s different here. The girls in my class are always organising sleepovers. It takes days and involves endless discussion: who to invite, what to do, what to eat ... that sort of thing. I haven’t been invited to one yet.

“Who would I ask?” I say.

“Your friends,” says Eomma.

“From school.”

“Friends?” I say. We’ve been here

two months. There are a couple of girls I hang out with – Chloe and Amisha – but I don’t think of them as friends yet. I like them, though.

“And where would we sleep?” I add.

Our new place is tiny. Mum calls it semi-detached, which sounds flash but really just means it’s joined to the flat next door, where Mrs Gray lives. I’ve got my own room, but it’s hardly bigger than a cupboard. On the plus side, there’s a yard big enough for my tramp and beyond that, a sports field.

“We’ll clear out the lounge,” says Eomma. “You could sleep on the floor.”

“And we can have donkey rides,” adds Mum.

“Donkey rides!” I say. “What?”

“There’s a gorgeous one at the shelter at the moment.”

Mum works at the animal rescue shelter. She’s always bringing home stray animals – though there’s never been a donkey. “We can tie him up in the yard,” she says. “He’s ex-circus and used to giving rides. You could take him round the sports field.”

“Mum,” I say. “I’m turning ten, not six.”

“Never too old for a donkey,” she says.

There’s no getting out of the sleepover. Apparently Eomma had them all the time when she was a girl. “We’d stay up late, listening to music and plaiting each other’s hair,” she says.

“I have short hair,” I point out.

“You could have a midnight feast instead. With kimchi and bulgogi and mandu – all your favourites.”

“The girls in my class won’t have tried that food.”

“Then it will be a treat,” Eomma says. “Something different.”

Something different. She’s got that right.

On Monday, I take the invites to school. Mum prints out five, but only two have names: Chloe’s and Amisha’s. I put the invites on my desk. That’s when Phoebe sees them. Phoebe sits near me, but we haven’t talked much.



“A sleepover,” she says. “I had an amazing sleepover in the holidays. There were thirteen of us. We hired a popcorn machine. You don’t have any cats, do you?”

“Cats?” I say, confused. “No.”

“Or dogs?”

I shake my head.

“I can come then. I couldn’t come if you had pets. I’m allergic to fur.” She takes an invite. “This means Frankie and Mia will be coming, too.”

“I don’t know them,” I say.

“Doesn’t matter,” says Phoebe. “If I say I’m going, they’ll come.” She picks up two more invites and notices the two that remain. “Chloe and Amisha?” she says. “You’re inviting them?” I nod, worried this won’t be OK, but Phoebe just shrugs.

I update Mum as soon as I get home. “We can’t have a donkey. Phoebe’s coming, and she’s allergic.”

“Allergic to donkeys?” says Mum. “What a shame. It was a fun idea.”



All week, Phoebe gives advice about the sleepover. I do a lot of nodding. I don’t have much to add – but by the weekend, I’m really nervous. Ten minutes before it’s due to start,

the doorbell goes. It’s Mrs Gray from next door. She’s carrying a big cake.

“I hear you’re having a sleepover,” she says. “I just love sleepovers.” I invite her in.

Mrs Gray starts telling Eomma about a sleepover she went to in 1962. “At least one person’s turned up,” I think.

The girls arrive all at once. There’s loads of noise – everyone seems very excited. I start to feel a lot better.

“Isn’t this wonderful!” says Mrs Gray. “What games are we playing?”

Frankie puts her hand in front of her mouth. “Who’s that?” she loud whispers.

“My neighbour,” I say.

Frankie grimaces. Then Phoebe sees the cake. “What kind of cake is that?” she asks suspiciously.

Mrs Gray hears and looks pleased. She smiles proudly. “Chocolate and zucchini. I grew –”

“Ew! Zucchini’s a vegetable!”

Frankie says. “Who puts vegetables in a cake?” She turns to me. “Let’s look at your room.”

So I show them my tiny bedroom. “We can’t all sleep here,” says Mia.

“No,” I say. “We’re sleeping in the lounge.”



I show them the lounge. We've pushed back the furniture to make more space.

"There were fourteen people at my sleepover," says Mia, "but I've got a huge room, so we all fitted." She points at the sleeping mats stacked against the wall. "What are those?"

"They're called yo," I say.

"You sleep on them, on the floor."

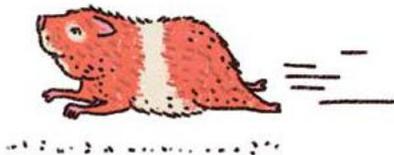
"Are they comfortable?" asks Phoebe. She looks sideways at Mia.

Then Mum arrives home from work. I'm so pleased to see her that at first, I don't pay much attention to the big brown box she's carrying. In fact, I don't twig until she's lifted the lid. By then, it's too late.

"Guinea pigs!" cries Amisha.

"I thought you girls might like to play with them," Mum says.

Amisha reaches into the box and lifts out the fattest, hairiest creature I've ever seen. "I just love guinea pigs!" she says, handing the hairy thing backwards to whoever's there. She doesn't bother to look. "Take this. I'll get the others."



The fat, hairy guinea pig lands right in Phoebe's arms. "Arrrggghh," she screams.

Within ten minutes, Phoebe's eyes have puffed up like a lizard's. Fifteen minutes, and large red welts are appearing on her arms and legs.



Mum looks concerned. She takes me to one side. "You didn't tell me she was allergic to guinea pigs."

"You didn't tell me we'd be having them," I say. "Phoebe's allergic to all fur."

"Oh, dear," Mum says. "I think I'd better take her home."

Mia and Frankie decide they need to go too. We watch them all leave.

Eomma's confused. "Why didn't Mia and Frankie stay?" she asks.

"They couldn't," says Chloe. "They come as a group." I try hard not to laugh out loud at this.

Chloe, Amisha, and I play with the guinea pigs while Eomma makes dinner and talks to Mrs Gray. When the food's ready, she calls us inside. She's set the table all nice with the fancy glasses and the linen tablecloth and flowers. Mum gets home just in time.

"Yum," says Chloe. "Kimchi. I love kimchi."

"You like Korean food?" Eomma asks. "Really?"

"Totally," says Chloe. "My uncle's Korean. We have it when he visits."

After dinner, we cut the cake. Just as I'm giving Mrs Gray a hug

to say thank you, there's a strange noise outside. "Gosh!" says Mum. "I wonder what that can be?"

We rush to the front door. Hitched to the back of Mum's car is a trailer, and inside the trailer is a donkey.

"I thought now that Phoebe's left ...," Mum says. "No one else is allergic, are they?"

"Awesome!" says Chloe.

We ride the donkey round and round the sports field until it gets dark. He's slow but very friendly, and we have loads of fun. Then Mum ties him to the tramp, and we go inside to watch a movie.



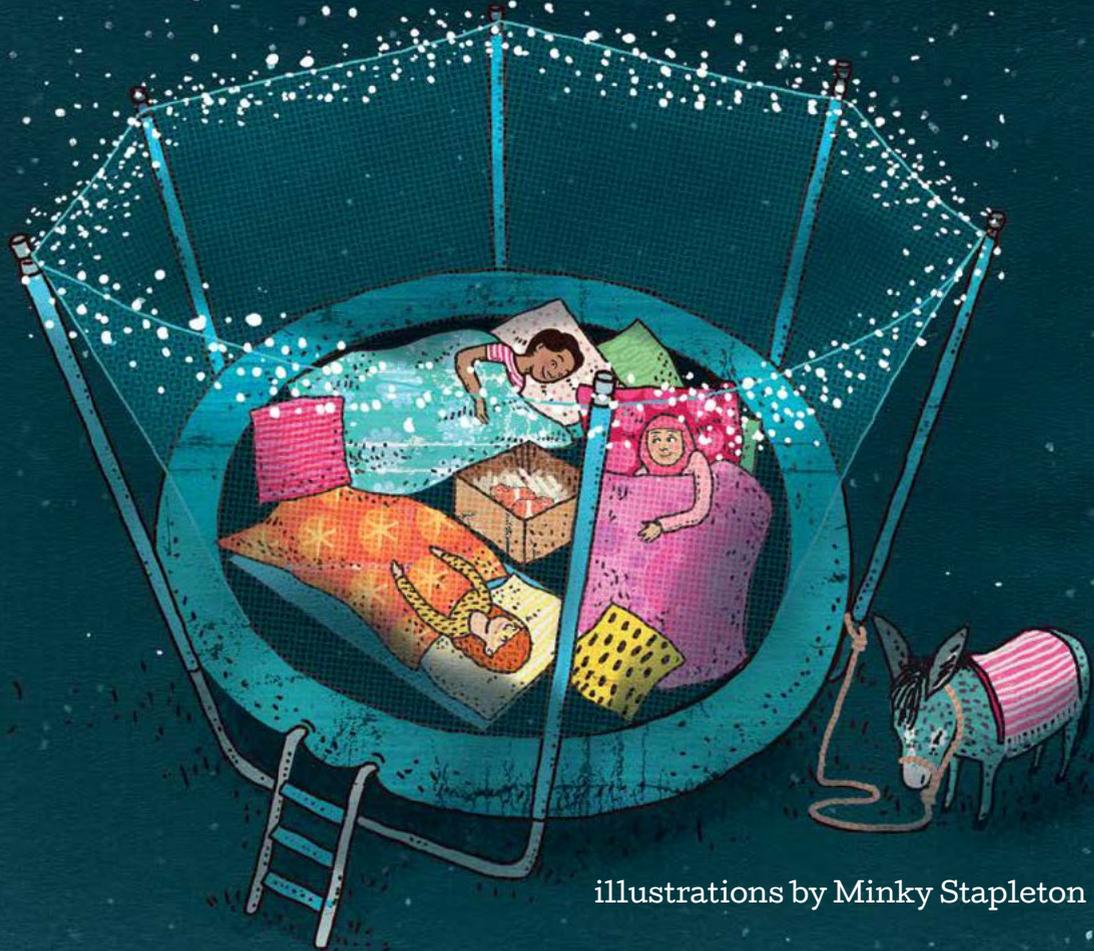
Mrs Gray is still there, and she watches, too. By the time the movie has finished, we're all yawning. Mrs Gray has fallen asleep on the couch. Her mouth's wide open and she's snoring. It's so loud, we decide to sleep on the tramp. We drag out the yo and arrange them in a circle, piling duvets on top. Mum brings out the box of guinea pigs, and Amisha zips up the net so they can't escape.

We each make a nest and lie back to look at the stars. At first, we can hear the guinea pigs rustling in their box, but after a while, they go quiet and the only sound is the occasional snort from the donkey.

Chloe yawns. "Cool sleepover," she says.

"Best one I've been to," says Amisha.

"Yeah," I say. "Me too."



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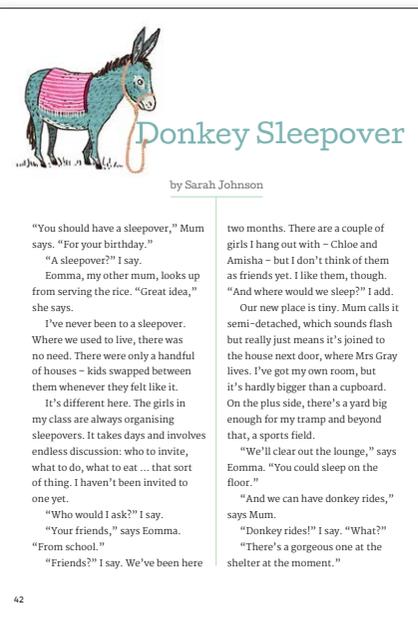
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