Sister's Room

Robert Raymer

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol17/iss3/14
Sister's Room

Abstract
Mama is making chapaties and tea for breakfast. I'll only get the chapaties - the small ones. Not the tea. Sister gets the tea and Mama doesn't spare the sugar. Not for Sister. Mama doesn't spare anything for Sister. That's why she has everything, especially her own own.

This serial is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol17/iss3/14
Sister’s Room

Mama is making chapaties and tea for breakfast. I’ll only get the chapaties – the small ones. Not the tea. Sister gets the tea and Mama doesn’t spare the sugar. Not for Sister. Mama doesn’t spare anything for Sister. That’s why she has everything, especially her own own.

When Sister isn’t looking I steal a sip of her tea. I drink it too fast and it burns my tongue and lips. Sister sees me and knocks the cup out of my hands, and the tea spills all over my sarong. Some sugar still remains at the bottom of the cup, so I grab it and run.

And Sister chases me.

I run into Sister’s room and Sister calls for Mama, and Mama shouts, ‘Child, stay out of that room! That’s Sister’s room!’ Mama’s tone is full of possession as though there are treasures hidden inside the room.

While Sister tugs on the cup I look all over. The room is small, without windows. A blanket and sheet covers most of the floor. And two pillows. I don’t have a pillow. I share Mama’s. Huddled in the corner are Sister’s papier-mâché box, mosquito coils, candle and match box. Four pretty colours: gold, green, red and blue. That’s not a treasure unless Sister hides something inside the papier-mâché box. Before I can reach it, Mama drags me out of the room and separates me from the cup.

The papier-mâché box comes from Kashmir. It was a gift from the sundry shop clerk. He comes once a week to visit Sister. Uncle introduced them. The sundry shop clerk isn’t handsome, but he’s polite. He likes to shake everyone’s hand, including mine. I ask Mama if she likes the sundry shop clerk and she nods her head. She says he’s taller than Papa, though. She says Papa doesn’t like to look up to people, especially someone younger.

Papa asks to see the papier-mâché box, and Sister fetches it. Papa says it’s cardboard, not papier-mâché. He says it comes from a shop in town, not from Kashmir. Sister says it’s papier-mâché from Kashmir. Papa says it’s not. Sister says it is and runs crying into her room.

When Sister tells Uncle that the sundry shop clerk wants to marry Sister, Uncle’s right eye twitches and his nostrils flare. He argues with Mama over Sister, and Papa sides with Uncle. Now the sundry shop clerk isn’t allowed to visit Sister anymore.

Uncle is introducing Sister to a skinny man whose eyes are focused on the floor space between them. Mama is in the kitchen, where she likes
to busy herself whenever one of Sister's friends come to visit. I ask Mama why Sister has so many friends. She says Sister likes to talk. Sister is a good talker, I know that. Mama says Sister can out-talk politicians. I tell Mama I want to have my own room, like Sister, so my friends can visit me. She says my friends make too much noise. I say I don't have that many. Only a few. She says when I attend the new school I will have plenty. I tell her I don't want to go to school unless Sister goes, too. I tell her I want to have my own room. I tell her -

Mama covers her ears with her hands and shouts, 'Child! Go outside and play!'

I prefer to play on the balcony.

Mama doesn't allow me to play there alone. She says the wooden railing is old. She's afraid I'll fall. Sister can sit on the balcony by herself whenever she wants. When we first moved in we used to run its length back and forth and wave at all the other girls on the other balconies along the road. Now we can only sit.

A cockroach is crawling down the wall where the plaster peeks through the blue paint. It hesitates beside Papa's dirty fingermarks, and I grab for it. It eludes my grasp, and drops to the floor. It hesitates in front of Sister's room, its antennas fluttering high in the air, looking confused. It darts one way, then the other, before seeking refuge beneath the closed door inches away from my fingers.

The door suddenly opens and out steps Sister's friend. He turns one way, then another, unsure which way to go. Sister guides him to the top of the stairs and he scampers down them as fast as he can. I sneak onto the balcony and watch him run into a food stall and nearly trip over two children playing in front of the tailor's shop, before he disappears around the corner.

Cars and motorcycles honk and drivers shout out their windows as I try to cross the busy street. An old man pushes me out of his way into the path of two boys riding bicycles. Their tires screech as I dash into the fruit market. While I'm there I gaze at all the different shapes and colours of the various fruits. After inspecting the mangoes, I smell one of the papaya's to see if it is ripe. The fruitseller accuses me of trying to steal his fruit and he chases after me, but I'm too fast and I run away. I slow down in front of the spice shop to admire the spices stacked high in baskets. Before I can smell each one, a fat man tosses a garlic bulb and tells me to go away. Next door, at the butcher's shop, there's a row of goat heads on a railing, so I stop and have a better look. The butcher says if I come any closer the heads will bite me. I don't believe him and I make a face. He starts to come after me, so again I run ...

Where we used to live, there was plenty of open space for Sister and I to play without being bothered by anyone. I liked to stand knee-deep in the river and feel the water rush between my legs. The house we had was fine. Papa built it himself using discarded plywood and sheets of corrugated zinc. He was going to add another room, so Sister and I
could share one and the two babies another. But the babies got sick – Mama says cholera – and died. Then a man from the city planned to build tall buildings right where we lived, so we had to move.

Uncle now lets us stay above his coffee shop. Soon after we moved in, Papa and Mama began to treat Sister special. Only Sister has her own room. I sleep with Papa and Mama on the floor in the main room, with Mama in the middle. I prefer to sleep next to Papa because Mama fidgets too much, but Mama doesn’t allow me anymore. She says I’m getting too old ...

When I return, Papa and Uncle are in the main room chewing betel nuts and spitting into a spittoon. Uncle passes money to Papa in a closed fist, and Papa tucks it into the folds of his dhoti. I pretend not to notice their betting as I sit down.

I tell Papa I want to have my own room. I tell Papa I want him to treat me like Sister. Like someone special. Papa grunts as he concentrates on his spitting. Ever since he hurt his back Papa grunts more than he talks. I tell Papa Sister is only three years older than me. I tell him I’m going to be twelve on my next birthday.

Uncle looks at me and a tiny smile appears on his face. I have never seen him with a big smile, only a tiny one. Or a sneer. Uncle continues to look at me long after Papa spits his red-stained saliva into the spittoon.

When Papa uses the bathroom, Uncle sits down beside me and strokes my hair. His hands are clammy and his breath smells of alcohol. His black beady eyes remind me of those belonging to a crow I once found dead on the balcony.

‘Twelve years old, is that right?’

Uncle pinches my cheeks and squeezes my shoulder and looks me over like he would a melon at the fruit market to see if it’s ripe.

I scoot away.

Uncle slides over, smiling that tiny smile of his. Uncle is not my real uncle. He’s an old friend of Papa’s.

Mama is standing in front of us holding a tray of tea. Her face is as twisted as a tomato that someone just stepped on.

‘Get away from her! Get away this minute!’

‘Now calm down. I was only –’

‘I know exactly what you were doing. It’s bad enough you got Sister. You’re not going to get Child, ever!’

‘Look, you don’t talk to me that way. You got a roof over your head, don’t you? Not some squatter’s shack, either. You got food to eat, don’t you? If it wasn’t for me –’

Papa appears. ‘You two fighting again? Now hand me that tea before it gets cold.’ Papa grabs for the tray, but Mama pulls it away and some tea spills. Papa yanks it out of her hands, spilling more.

Mama looks down at the tea and her eyes turn glassy. She goes back to the kitchen, and I start to follow until Papa calls after to me.
Later I join her and Sister on the balcony. Across the street a woman in a pink and red sari is buying fruit at the fruit market. Mama’s saris are old and faded. I point the woman out to Mama, and Mama says when I get older she’ll buy me a sari in any colour I like. I tell her yellow, the colour of the sun, because it’s bright and full of life.

Sister says she doesn’t like saris. She says they are old-fashioned. She likes to wear the pretty green dress that Uncle gave her. I once saw a white woman wear a dress like that. Sister looks just as good in it because she is fair. I ask her why she is so fair and she says the reason I’m dark is because I ate too many chocolates as a baby. I don’t remember eating any chocolates. Not real chocolates. I ask Mama if I ate any chocolates when I was a baby, and she laughs. Mama likes to laugh. She once told me laughing makes her forget. When I asked her what she wanted to forget she just looked at me with those big sunken eyes and didn’t say a word.

Sister says her hair is longer than that of the woman in the sari. It is. Mama wants to cut it short, but Uncle likes it long. He says the longer the hair, the younger she looks. Papa agrees. Papa agrees with everything Uncle says. I want to have my hair long like Sister’s. Mama, however, cuts it short.

Sister is wearing her green bangles. She has three on each arm. She used to wear red bangles, until Uncle gave her the pretty green dress. Now she wears only the green. I ask Sister if I can wear her red bangles. She says no. I tell Mama I want to have my own bangles. I tell Mama I’m going to ask Uncle to buy me a pretty green dress like Sister’s. Mama just sits there and stares at the woman in the sari.

The girls on the other balconies are waving to the people down below. Some of the passers-by are complete strangers, and others are too busy carrying things, or in too much of a hurry to take notice. Still, they keep on waving ... Across the street three boys are talking and grinning among themselves. When one of them looks up, I wave. Mama slaps my hand and scolds me, and Sister giggles. Music from the new jukebox Uncle bought for his coffee shop is now playing. Mama says the music is too loud. She says it gives her a headache. Smells of mutton and spices come on strong. Mama wishes it would rain. Dust rises all around us in little swirls. If I stick out my tongue I can taste it. I show Mama, and someone laughs.

It’s the new ice-man.

‘Put this on your tongue,’ he says, and tosses up a small chunk of ice. It lands at my feet and Sister and I scramble for it. I reach it first and slip it into my mouth. The ice cools me all over. Sister tries to take it away. She twists my arm, and I cry for Mama, and Mama tells Sister to let go of me. But she doesn’t. Mama gives up and goes inside where it’s quiet. When Sister hears the new ice-man calling for her, she finally lets go. She pushes back her hair and smiles down at him. The new ice-man tosses up another chunk of ice, and in the evening Uncle introduces him to Sister.
Papa tells Mama he doesn't like the new ice-man. Papa was the old ice-man before he fell down the steps and hurt his back. He was drinking a lot with Uncle, celebrating Uncle's birthday. Now Papa can't work.

Mama doesn't allow Papa to drink any more, but he still does. Sister says so. He drinks in Uncle's coffee shop late at night, when Uncle brings in dancing girls. I tell Mama I want to watch the dancing girls dance. Mama says only men go there. I show Mama I can dance. I dance the dance Sister taught me. I tell Mama I want to be a dancer. I tell Mama I want to dance like the other girls in Uncle's coffee shop.

'No!' Mama shouts, and she slaps me hard against my shoulder and I lose my balance and stumble against the kerosene burner, and I scorch my legs.

Sister says I can't be a dancer now, because of the scars. She says dancers need to have nice legs like hers. She says Uncle says she can be a dancer whenever she wants.

I tell Mama.

Mama and Uncle fight over the dancing, and now Sister is mad at me. But I don't care. Sister already has everything, especially her own room.

When Mama isn't looking, I continue practising with my dancing.

A policeman stops by Uncle's coffee shop, and later comes upstairs to talk to Papa and Mama about Sister. Mama is crying and Papa has to shush her so he can hear what the policeman is saying. Sister is crouched in the corner. Her eyes are red and swollen and she's as still and as watchful as a mouse. When the policeman takes her with him her green bangles jingle all the way down the steps.

Uncle comes that evening and he and Papa argue about Sister and about money. Papa says he's not getting enough and now he needs more, so he can bring back Sister. Uncle says he has a friend in the police station, and later that evening he returns with Sister, and Mama finally stops crying.

A month later Uncle's coffee shop is closed down by the same policeman. Uncle says it's because of the jukebox. Mama says it's because of the dancing girls. Now it's Uncle who complains about money. He complains every day for weeks, until one day he brings a white man to talk to Sister.

Mama tries to steer me away from him, but I break free and get a good look at him. The white man is tall and has hair as yellow as the sun and eyes greener than Sister's pretty green dress.

The white man comes three days in a row and Papa and Uncle celebrate. Mama cooks tandoori chicken for everyone — including Uncle — and even I get sugar in my tea.

The following week the white man comes alone. Without Uncle. He wants to talk to Sister and he hands Papa money. Lots of money. Papa is so excited he can't count it, he just shuffles the money back and forth.
between his hands. When Uncle finds out the white man was there his nostrils flare. He tells Papa to give him the white man’s money. Papa refuses, and he tells Uncle to leave.

That evening Uncle returns and heads straight for Sister’s room. Only Sister is inside – not the white man. Uncle searches the kitchen and the main room, where Papa is sleeping, and also the balcony. He doesn’t seem to notice me at the top of the stairs counting the moths hovering around the lone light bulb, when he leaves.

I stop counting when I see the white man hustling up the steps, taking them two at a time. He pats me on the head, and I follow him to Sister’s room and Sister locks the door after him.

Since Papa is sleeping and Mama is busy in the kitchen, I press my ear to the door, but I don’t hear any talking. Later, I do hear loud footfalls coming up the stairs, so I hurry away from the door. Eyes twitching, nostrils flaring, Uncle tries the handle, then buries his shoulder into the door, forcing it open. Sister and the white man are lying side by side on the blanket. Their clothes are piled in the corner.

‘Give me my money,’ Uncle shouts. ‘You give me money, not them!’

Mama calls for Papa and Papa comes running, with sleep still in his eyes. He tells Uncle to leave, and they argue over the white man’s money. Sister is crying, and she flees around them, holding onto her pretty green dress. The white man tries to follow her, but Uncle drives his shoulder into him and knocks him down and he lands on top of Sister’s papier-mâché box, smashing it. Only red bangles come out. No treasure.

Papa tries to stop Uncle from hurting the white man further, but Uncle is too angry to reason with, and he hits Papa in the face – and Mama screams. Papa shoves Uncle against the wall, and the white man scoots around Papa and heads for the stairs. Papa turns around and looks at Mama, and Uncle jumps onto Papa’s bad back. They stumble out of Sister’s room and crash onto the balcony where Sister is hiding.

Mama is swatting Uncle with a broom, and I manage to kick him once before Mama pushes me out of the way. Papa and Uncle roll back and forth, and Papa finally breaks free and clammers to his feet. Sister is crouched in the corner directly behind Papa, and when Uncle rises to his feet, she tries to get out of their way. She has to cut in front of Papa, but Papa’s head is already lowered like a bull. He rushes at Uncle and runs smack into Sister and she’s flung against the wooden railing, and the railing breaks away, and Sister falls from the balcony.

Mama catches a hold of my shoulders and wails. All the girls on the other balconies are all looking down at Sister. She is lying still, holding onto her pretty green dress. Her green bangles have all broken free.

Papa and Uncle’s eyes are filled with shame as they exchange tentative looks at one another. Their gaze gradually settles, and for a long time they stare at each other. Then they turn and look at me. They are looking real hard. Mama digs her fingers into my shoulders as she tightens her grip and adds to her wailing a piercing, ‘Nooooo...!’