

Pigs on the wing

Aurorae in the sky with diamonds, just \$10.99 (exc. tax).

K. Erik Ziemelis

"Come on, Kirsty. Get a wriggle on!"

Frank has another look at his watch and glances out the window. No panic yet, but they're cutting it fine.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!"

Kirsty (age 6) not so much descends the stairs as free-falls into the living room, a flurry of brightly decorated limbs that seem to make contact with everything but the ground. Forward momentum absorbed by collision with the waiting adult, she gets to her feet, gives her uncle's legs a brief hug and presents herself for inspection.

"Nice one, kiddo. Let's hit the road."

BreathEazys firmly in place, the two scamper through the heat and haze of the forecourt to the carpool. Frank checks the gauge, disconnects the charger and bundles his niece into the waiting vehicle. Sliding in alongside, he seals the doors, gives the air a quick flush and keys in his ID.

"Colour?"

"Green!"

The Urban EcoWarrior shimmers from neutral grey to fluorescent emerald before rolling smoothly out of the lot to join the silent rainbow of evening rush-hour traffic. The two intrepid explorers settle back in their seats.

"So where are we going?"

Before Frank can articulate his well-rehearsed answer (it is supposed to be a surprise after all), a shrill voice pipes up from the vicinity of Kirsty's feet.

"We're off to see a 'rory who lives in the sky!"

Momentarily taken back by both the unexpected intrusion of a third party and the worrying possibility that his plans have somehow been exposed, Frank looks down at the floor. And there, easing its way out of the confines of Kirsty's carry-all, is a small green pig with a smug expression on its face. Frank grins.

"Mr Loop, I might have guessed. Are any secrets safe from you? But I think for now you've said enough."

The pig takes in Kirsty's questioning look, glances over at a now dramatically glowering Frank, before returning its attention to the child. Offering what passes for a porcine shrug and a forlorn my-lips-are-sealed wrinkling of its snout, the little animatronix bounces on to Kirsty's lap and snuggles down for the ride.

After a painless drive through the 'burbs, they are out in the foothills. Shortly after-

wards, they pull up alongside the transfer station — no magtrak beyond this point.

Timecheck. The sun still hovers over the island of glass and concrete that they have left behind, but the sky has already lost its familiar ochre tint. Sunset is little more than an hour away.

"OK kiddo, wrap up warm."

Frank climbs swiftly into his weather-proof and hands a miniature but more colourful version to an oblivious Kirsty. For the past 20 minutes her face has been pressed up against the window, gazing wide-eyed at the surrounding countryside. And now, free of both the car and



the claustrophobic air filter, she stands transfixed by the row-upon-row of four-wheeled antiques parked all around them. (Mr Loop on the other hand gives the impression of being fast asleep, but — as befits a miniature replica of the comically self-important children's entertainer — is probably still sulking.)

A gust of chill mountain air snaps Kirsty out of her reverie. Thermals donned, backpacks stowed and inert pig pocketed, the two slide into a brilliant-red, open-topped barchetta. Now it is Frank's turn to shiver with anticipation. The last time he drove one of these he was barely out of his teens, yet he still remembers the thrill of opening up the throttle and hearing the throaty roar of a real engine. And roar it does, right on cue, eliciting a squeal of excitement from the diminutive passenger — and the sweet taste of long-forbidden fruit for the driver. From here, the only way is up.

Final destination: Look-See Point. After a jarring drive up rough mountain tracks, Frank parks beside one of the crumbling domed structures scattered across the high plateau. He gathers a couple of folding chairs and strides hurriedly towards some clear ground. Kirsty only just keeps up and

can barely hide her disappointment when she finally settles herself into a chair and looks around.

"Aw, they're just ruins."

"Never mind those old stones, kiddo. I promised to show you the heavens, and I will. But for now just watch...and wait."

A glance at his watch again: ten minutes to go. Frank smiles in relief. The number of favours he had to call in to pull this off — not to mention the cost of getting a prime-time slot — will not have been wasted.

With the sky now darkened to an inky black, Kirsty spots the first tiny pinpoints of light. 'Stars', her uncle had called them. Sure, they seem to map out some pretty shapes, but she still can't see what the fuss is all about. To cover her mounting gloom, she returns to playing with the pig.

Then the heavens explode with splashes of light and colour. One after another, familiar and unfamiliar objects parade across the sky: items of food, items of clothing, items of...well, just about anything a young mind can imagine, and a lot, lot more. Faster and faster the images race by until all that remains is a pulsating emerald sheet. The rippling edges of this

curtain of light then start to bend and twist, turning in on one another, transforming, transfixing, becoming...

"Mr Loop!"

Frank beams down at his niece. Kirsty, now on her feet, has one hand clamped over her mouth, the other outstretched as if trying to grab the sky itself. About her, the animated toy frolics, uttering decidedly un-pig-like yelps as it flings itself repeatedly into the air. And its luminous namesake responds in kind, leaping nimbly from one celestial point to another, and leaving in its wake a glowing contrail that resolves into the words 'HAPPY BIRTHDAY KIRSTY'. Fade to green. Commercial services will resume shortly.

Frank sweeps his now-exhausted niece into his arms and carries her slowly back to the jeep, the miniature Mr Loop trotting contentedly in their wake. But Kirsty's tired eyes remain locked on the heavens as assorted consumer items recommence their endless auroral display.

"Show's over kiddo. That's enough 'rory for one night."

K. Erik Ziemelis wishes it to be known that he is almost (but not quite) entirely unrelated to the physical sciences editor of *Nature*.

JACEY