

# The Day Kiki the Kangaroo Came to Kiddush

By Wendy Ungar



It must have been the kugel. Kiki picked up its sweet aroma wafting in the air and started to follow -- stopping and sniffing, sniffing and stopping. Of course Kiki couldn't be sure what the scent was, she only knew it reminded her of home far away from here -- of the tall sweetgrass swaying in the meadow by the eucalyptus grove where her family lived. Kiki pictured her father, tall and muscular, ears pricked forward, scouting the perimeter of the meadow, ever on the lookout for intruders. Her mother stayed close by tending to her and her younger sister Kloey, her baby brother Joey occasionally peeking out from the safety of their mother's pouch. Tears started to form in the corners of Kiki's large brown eyes as she thought about her mother, father, sister and brother. She missed them so badly it hurt.

Leaving home hadn't been difficult for Kiki. She was "special," or so her mother always told her, because she had one white foot and one brown. None of the other 'roos had two different coloured feet -- a fact which they were constantly reminding her of. "Never mind them," her mother would say to her. "You just stick close to home."

But Kiki did mind them. She minded them a lot. And what's more, she longed to see what lived on the other side of the eucalyptus grove. It had to be better than this, she thought. Of course there had been rumours among the animals that lived in the meadow about strange beings lurking beyond the grove -- puffy pink beasts that had no fur and that moved from place to place in boxy metal containers instead of hopping or running or flying like normal creatures.

I'm not afraid of them, Kiki thought to herself, and realized what she had to do. She had to find Old Echabod. Old Echabod the echidna lived deep in the forest, a place that was off limits to Kiki. He was hardly ever seen in the meadow. But on the rare occasion that he crawled into the neighbourhood looking for a little company, he was soon surrounded by all of the meadow's youngest inhabitants who sat mesmerized by his stories of faraway places and strange beings. Echabod would help her, she felt sure of it. At the very least, he would know how to escape from this place.

Early the next morning, before the sun had risen over the grassland and the sky was still a deep turquoise-blue, Kiki left her sleeping family without making a sound. She hopped to the edge of the grove where it bordered the forest and stopped. Was she doing the right thing? Kiki held her breath and took a large leap into the bush. Her heart was pounding but still she kept

going. Soon she found herself in the middle of a dense forest. Although the dawn was breaking and the sun rising, it seemed only to get darker the deeper into the forest she ventured. The trees were so close together their branches intertwined with each other. Strange hoots and yowls filled her ears and Kiki was frightened. Suddenly she heard a voice call from above.

“What are you doing here, little ‘roooo? Are you lost?” a powerful owl asked from his perch high overhead, his head swiveling down in her direction.

“Um, I’m looking for someone,” she responded meekly.

“Whoooo?” he asked. “Maybe I can help you.”

“I’m looking for Echabod. I need to ask for... for a favour.”

“A favour, eh? What kind of a favour? Maybe I can help you.”

Kiki stayed silent. She wasn’t about to divulge the reason for her visit to a strange owl.

“Oooh, I see,” said the owl, as if Kiki had actually said something. Was he so wise that he could read her mind?

He continued, “Well, I can show you where he lives, but I must warn you. He’s not often in the mood to grant favours. If you want his help, I suggest you bring him a gift.”

“A gift? What kind of a gift?”

“Well, I’ve heard that old Echabod has a fancy for honey.”

“Honey? Where am I going to find...” But before Kiki could finish her question, the powerful owl started stretching its wings.

In order find honey, Kiki would have to find bees. There were plenty of bees in the meadow, attracted by all the fragrant flowers, but she wasn’t about to retrace her steps – she had barely begun her journey.

“I think I’ll take my chances without a gift. Please, Mr. Owl. Can you show me where he lives?”

“Alright, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.” And with that the owl sprang from the branch he was perched on and flew deeper into the forest. “Follow, follow, little ‘rooooo.”

Kiki had no trouble keeping up with the owl, hopping over fallen trees, around rocks and under low hanging limbs. After a little while the owl stopped, settling on a branch overlooking an enormous anthill.

“Well, here we are,” he said.

“But where is here? And where is old Echabod?”

“Goodbye, little ‘roooo, and good luck!” he called as he sprang off once more and disappeared into the forest canopy.

Kiki tried her best not to be frightened. She thought about calling out, but didn’t want to reveal herself to any creatures that might be looking for their breakfast. She looked closely at the enormous anthill. A thin cloud of dust seemed to hover all around it. It was almost as tall as she. She hopped around and around it, careful not to disturb or touch it. Who knew how big the ants were who lived in it, or if they had wings, or huge fangs, or... or.... Kiki stopped her runaway imagination. She was here for a reason. She would just have to wait until Echabod showed up. Just as Kiki turned to circle the anthill in the opposite direction, a deep voice startled her. “Hello, Kiki. What brings you here?”

Kiki, jolted to a standing position, saw Old Echabod crawling slowly out from around the giant anthill, wiggling his long snout in front of him. She couldn’t understand where he came from, since she had just hopped round and round the anthill without seeing any sign of him.

Before she could answer, he continued, “Do me a kindness dear, and give my snout a little scratch. As you can see, I can’t really reach it and nothing feels better than to have someone scratch your snout.”

Without saying anything, Kiki slowly reached down to scratch his long snout.

“Ahh, that’s better. Thank you. So -- how did you find me? And more importantly, what is it you want?”

Once again, before Kiki could say a word, Echabod interrupted (echidnas had a habit of asking and answering their own questions). “Wait, don’t tell me, let me guess. The owl showed you the way. I must say, you’re pretty clever. Most animals that come looking for me fall for that owl’s trick and end up right back where they started from! Although he isn’t wrong about one thing. – I do love honey!” And with that Old Echabod began to chuckle in a way that only echidnas do – through their long schnozzle.

Echabod’s warmth calmed Kiki and gave her some courage. “I.... I was wondering about how to leave this place... to you know, go away, to --”

"Go away? But why, my dear. Aren't your parents taking good care of you? Don't you get enough to eat?"

"Yes, but --"

"Don't you feel safe in the meadow? Is there someone threatening you?"

"No, not exactly --"

"Well, I can think of only one reason why a little 'roo like you would want to run away."

"I just want to see what's on the other side. You know, see how other animals live, see what they look like, see what kinds of places they live in --"

"Curiosity. You just want to see. Yes, I understand. I understand completely," nodded Echabod. "I know all about being curious and wanting to see. It's a vast world out there, my dear. Full of surprises. Are you sure you want to explore it?"

"Oh yes! I do, I do! Can you help me?"

"I can. But you must be very sure, for where you end up may not exactly be where you wish to go. And where you wish to go may not exactly be where you end up."

Echabod wasn't making any sense to Kiki, although he sounded like he was, so she kept listening.

"And I must also warn you, little Kiki. Once you leave this place, I cannot guarantee that you can ever come back."

Coming back was not something that Kiki had thought about. She only knew that she wanted to run away.

"But you come and go all the time."

"It's true, I do," said Echabod. "But I'm just an old anteater, nobody cares about me. It doesn't matter if I return or not. You must be very sure."

"I'm sure!" Kiki said without hesitation.

"Alright, alright. I believe you are sincere. In order to leave this place, you must first find the giant anak-anak tree."

"The giant what?" Kiki giggled at the funny sound of the tree's name.

"It's nothing to laugh about, my dear. And don't let the anak-anak tree hear you laughing."

Kiki tried really hard not to laugh at what Echabod was saying. "But don't *you* know where it is?"

"No, not at any given time. This tree has special powers. It has enormous roots that crawl over the ground like anacondas, wriggling and twisting on the forest floor. That's how it moves from place to place. So no one ever knows exactly where it is."

"What happens when I find the tree?"

"Between the roots that are connected to the trunk is a secret entrance that will take you directly to the magical land of Upover."

"Upover?"

"Yes, Upover."

"Where is Upover? What's it like there?"

"Ahhh," said Echabod, whistling slightly as he exhaled slowly through his snout. "Therein lies the true magic of the anak-anak. Upover is whatever place you dream it to be. Let me ask you, Kiki, if you could go anywhere, anywhere at all, what kind of place would you like to go to?"

Kiki never really thought about it before. She just knew that she wanted to go away. As far away as possible. To the other side of the world.

"Well, I guess I'd like it to be the opposite of here. A place where it's not so hot and dry, where it rains, and everything is lush and green. Where there are tall mountains, pebbly brooks that flow and gurgle, and lakes of sparkling blue. Where the animals are all friendly and nobody teases you because you're different."

The best Echabod could do was point Kiki in the general direction. He sent her away with a wave of his snout and crawled back behind his anthill. Kiki peeked around the anthill but there was no sign of Echabod. He had just disappeared. So she moved in the direction his snout had pointed to and ventured further into the forest. The deeper she went the larger the trees grew, but she couldn't tell if any one of them was the giant anak-anak tree. Kiki stopped for a moment to rest. She closed her eyes and listened, but all she could hear was her own breathing and the pounding of her heart. She sniffed the air. Nothing but the scent of eucalyptus all



around. Kiki stood very still, like a tree. And as she did so, she became aware of the gentlest of tingling under her feet. She lifted one foot off the ground, put it back softly and lifted the other. It was undeniable -- the ground was vibrating. Kiki took a gentle step backward -- the vibration was weaker. She took a step forward -- the vibration was stronger. Kiki hopped slowly forward, landing as softly as possible, and continued that way with the vibration getting stronger and stronger, until she could barely put both feet on the ground.

Kiki had been so focused on the feeling in her feet that she barely noticed what was around her. She looked up and there before her was a tree so gigantic, she couldn't see the top of it. The shimmering red roots towered over her head and were nearly as high as the surrounding trees. And just like Echabod had said, there between the roots connected to the base of the trunk, Kiki could make out a dark entranceway.



Kiki approached cautiously. She ducked down and took a little hop between the roots. For a moment everything went dark -- she was surrounded by total blackness. Kiki took another small hop forward and was instantly propelled into a transformed world. Above her the sky was

a deeper blue than she had ever seen before and a few yards in front of her a sandy beach embraced the shores of a beautiful lake with water that sparkled like diamonds. The trees lining the beach were emerald green with pointy needles instead of leaves. They stood tall and straight and beneath her feet the forest floor was a soft carpet of golden needles. And it didn't vibrate, not even a little. The air tasted fresh and cool, and smelled of balsam earthiness. It was delectable.

"Hi there!" A friendly voice sang out. Kiki saw an animal approaching that had a head very much like her own, but four delicately shaped slender legs with paws instead of feet, and a short white tail.

"Um, hello," Kiki meekly answered. "Where am I?"

"Welcome to Dine-a-Morra," a deep bruising voice answered from behind her. Kiki spun around to see an enormous cat with a river of drool dripping from his razor-sharp fangs.

"Pay no attention to him," the doe said. "He's just a mean ol' bobcat looking for somebody to tease. You, my dear, are our first kangaroo. Everybody will be so excited to meet you!"

It soon became clear that Kiki was in a friendly community of all kinds of animals. There were the 'locals' such as deer and foxes and bobcats and bears, as well as those that were visiting from someplace else, including orangutans and hippos and elephants and zebras, and all kinds of colourful birds. Some were striped, and some spotted, some brown, some gold, some black and some grey. And each animal had a den or nest somewhere near the lake. Many had brought their entire families. Apparently they all loved to congregate on this sandy beach and enjoy the sun and each other's company. Kiki had never seen a community like this before.

Kiki enjoyed getting to know her new friends, visiting with them and listening to each tell their own fascinating story of where they came from, how they came to this magical place, and the adventures they experienced here. Some were recent arrivals like herself, while other had been coming for generations. As Kiki became more comfortable with her new chums and they with her, they confided in her that there was one kind of beast she would need to be careful to steer clear of – puffy pink furless creatures that travelled around in boxy metal containers. Just like she had been warned back home!



For many weeks, Kiki couldn't be happier exploring her new surroundings – the lakes and rushing streams, the lovely forests, the rolling hills. She even found what appeared to be a meadow with all kinds of wild grasses and wildflowers, and many saplings sprouting from the ground. She occasionally came across the strangest looking eggs she had ever seen -- small round white pocked things. Kiki left them untouched, in case they were ready to hatch. Other than that, Kiki liked this new meadow so much that she began to sleep there under the blanket of the star-filled sky instead of the protection of the forest canopy as her new friends had advised her to do.

One day as Kiki was happily exploring the edges of her new meadow, she smelled a sweet aroma and followed it to a small log cabin with a fenced-in yard. She couldn't believe her eyes - there in the yard several pink furless creatures were playing and running and swinging, just like she used to do in her meadow back home. They didn't look scary at all, and they were smaller than her -- how could they possibly hurt her?

Feeling brave, Kiki hopped over the fence right into the middle of the yard. The little creatures immediately stopped their playing and at first just stared at her. Then a few approached slowly and cautiously reached out their arms. Kiki let the children pet her and while she did so, she became aware of strange singing coming from inside the cabin. She didn't recognize the songs or even the language. Then the singing stopped and all the children ran inside. All except one. A dark-haired girl with brown eyes with long lashes that reminded her of her little sister Chloey stayed behind.

"Don't be afraid," the little creature said. "It's time for Kiddush. I'll get you some yummy food. But first I better hide you from the grown-ups."

The little girl led Kiki up a small hill into the woods behind the play area where she wouldn't be seen. Kiki hid behind some tall trees. As promised, a few minutes later the girl returned with a plate piled with all kinds of food, nothing Kiki had ever seen or smelled before. There was a slimy silvery fishy food cut up in small square pieces which she didn't like at all, and long green things that looked like cucumbers which tasted even worse. But there was also a kind of food that had the same sweet aroma that she'd sniffed in the air. She took a close look at it -- it was a noodly concoction but it stuck together, and the top had a golden brown crust.

The little girl saw Kiki's reaction and threw all the food on the ground except for the noodly pie. She fed it to Kiki from her small hand – it tasted even sweeter than it smelled. The little girl giggled as Kiki licked every crumb from her fingers.

“Boy, do you ever like kugel!” she said as she ran back into the cabin to get some more. But before the little girl came back out, much larger furless creatures started wandering out of the building and into the yard. Kiki moved further back into the woods. She could hear the little girl's voice calling, “C'mere little kangaroo, I have some more kugel...” But she could also hear the sharp tone of an older creature saying, “Stop being silly, Maya, there are no kangaroos in Loon Lake, or in all of North America for that matter. You probably just saw somebody's lost dog or maybe a deer. Put the plate of kugel down and come; it's time to go home.”

After all the voices faded away Kiki made her way out of the woods and back into the yard. The nice little girl – Maya -- had left her a plate piled high with kugel. She emptied the plate into her pouch and bounded back into the forest.

But the more Kiki ate the kugel, the more homesick she became. Images of her old meadow filled her head. The ground of her new meadow was soft but unfamiliar beneath her feet. And there were no eucalyptus groves. No eucalyptus trees of any kind. The summer was ending and she was feeling cold. After a week, Kiki went back to the little hill above the yard with the playground by the log cabin, and sure enough there was Maya. She held in her little hands a plate teeming with kugel. Kiki inched out of the woods, and as she did she saw that Maya had a grown-up with her. It wasn't the same creature who had rebuked her the week before. It was a different one – one with pinker skin.

“A kangaroo, you say? Well I find that highly unlikely Maya, but this is Loon Lake, where crazier things have been known to happen.”

As soon as Kiki heard the creature speak she pricked up her ears – he spoke exactly the same way as the animals that lived in her meadow back home. She hadn't heard that accent in a long time.

Kiki wanted to approach the little girl but was afraid. She didn't know if the adult furless creatures would treat her as nicely as the little ones, so she stayed in the woods, listening. It soon became clear that this was a special celebration. Everybody was telling stories about this

place, greeting old friends who had come back after many years away. It was obvious that this old cabin was special to these people, just as her old meadow was special to Kiki, and that they had missed it, and that everyone was glad to see them return. So maybe her mother and father and sister and brother wouldn't be angry with her if she returned, Kiki thought. Maybe they would even be glad because they missed her as much as she missed them.

Kiki watched the creatures for hours from her hiding place behind the pines as they ate, and laughed and sang. It put her in a happy mood. Kiki got hungrier and hungrier looking at the food and smelling its sweetness until she couldn't stand it anymore. Just as all the creatures in the yard started dancing in a large circle she hopped out of the woods, right over their shoulders into the middle of the circle. All of the creatures stepped back in shock – all except for little Maya.

"See, Uncle Abie," she said, pointing. "I told you I found a kangaroo!"

Two weeks later Kiki boarded a huge flying contraption with Uncle Abie, only she was in a large cage. The trip seemed to take forever. When they finally landed and she was freed from the cage, she couldn't stop hopping around in glee. It felt so good to feel the embracing warmth of her home's sun on her fur again, and to smell the scent of eucalyptus in the air. Abie rented a large boxy metal container and personally drove Kiki into the countryside. He seemed to know exactly where to take her. From her very special one-of-a-kind fur pattern, he had explained.

After a few hours of driving they arrived at the meadow. It was exactly as Kiki had remembered it. Kiki hopped off the back of the container. The smell of the sweetgrass was strong here. She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes. When she opened them, she thought she could see her mother and father in the distance peeking out from the edge the meadow.

Kiki turned back toward Uncle Abie in a show of gratitude.

"Don't go yet, little 'roo. I have something for you." And with that Uncle Abie gently placed a small package in her pouch.

"To remember us by, from your friends in Loon Lake."

