

Issue #225 • May 11, 2017

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CARNIVAL NINE

by Caroline M. Yoachim

One night, when I was winding down to sleep, I asked Papa, “How come I don’t get the same number of turns every day?”

“Sometimes the maker turns your key more, and sometimes less, but you can never have more than your mainspring will hold. You’re lucky, Zee, you have a good mainspring.” He sounded a little wistful when he said it. He never got as many turns as I did, and he used most of them to do boring grown-up things.

“Take me to the zoo tomorrow?” The zoo on the far side of the closet had lions that did backflips and elephants that balanced on brightly colored balls.

“I have to take Granny and Gramps to the mechanic to clean the rust off their gears.”

Papa never had any turns to spare for outings and adventures, which was sad. I opened my mouth to say so, but the whirl of my gears slowed to where I could hear each click, and I closed my mouth so it wouldn’t hang open while I slept.

* * *

What Papa said was true. I have a good mainspring. Sometimes I got thirty turns, and sometimes forty-six. Today, on this glorious summer day, I got fifty-two. I'd never met anyone else whose spring could hold so many turns as that, and I was bursting with energy.

Papa didn't notice how wound up I was. "Granny has a tune-up this morning, and Gramps is getting a new mustache. If you untangle the thread for me, you can use the rest of your turns to play."

"But—"

"Always work first, so you don't run out of turns." His legs were stiff and he swayed as he walked along the wide wood plank that led out from our closet. He crossed the train tracks and disappeared into the shadow of the maker's workbench. Tonight, when he came back from his errands, he'd bring a scrap of fabric or a bit of thread. Papa sewed our clothes from whatever scraps the maker dropped.

The whirl of his gears faded into silence, and I tried to untangle the thread. It was a tedious chore. The delicate motion of picking up a single brightly-colored strand was difficult on a tight spring. A train came clacking along the track, and with it the lively music of the carnival. Papa had settled down here in Closet City, but Mama was a carnie. Based on the stories Papa told, sneaking out to the carnival would be

a good adventure. Clearly I was meant to go—the carnival had arrived on a day when I had more turns than I'd ever had before. I gathered up my prettiest buttons and skipped over to the brightly painted train cars.

It was early, and the carnival had just arrived, but a crowd had already formed. Everyone clicked and whirred as they hurried to see the show. The carnies were busy too, unfolding train cars into platforms and putting up rides and games and ropes for the acrobats.

I passed a booth selling scented gear oil and another filled with ornate keys. I wondered if the maker could wind as well with those as with the simple silver one that protruded from my back. A face-painter with an extra pair of arms was painting two different customers at once, touching up the faded paint of their facial features and adding festive swirls of green and blue and purple. “Two kinds of paint,” the painter called to me, “the swirls will wash right off with soap.”

It was meant to be a reassurance, but it backfired—the trip from the closet to the bathroom took seven turns each way, so soap was hard to come by. Papa would be angry if I came home painted.

“Catch two matching fish and win a prize!” a carnie called. He was an odd assemblage of parts, with one small brown arm and one bulky white one. His legs were slightly different

lengths, and his ceramic face was crisscrossed with scratch marks. He held out a long pole with a tiny net on the end, a net barely big enough to hold a single fish.

“Don’t they all match?” I leaned over the tub of water to study the orange fish. They buzzed quietly and some mechanism propelled them forward and sent out streams of bubbles behind them.

The man dipped the net into the water and caught one of the fish. He flipped open a panel on its belly, and revealed a number—four. “The fish are numbered one through ten, and you’ll get to pick three. Any two of ‘em match and you win!”

I eyed the prizes—an assortment of miniature animals, mostly cats, all with tiny golden keys. Keys so small that even I could turn them, so there’d be no need to wait each night for the maker to wind them up.

“Take these buttons in trade?”

The man laughed. “No, but if you didn’t buy any tickets I’ll let you work for a play—a turn for a turn, as they say.”

Unlike Papa, he could see how tight I was wound, and he put me to work hauling boxes from his platform to a car on the far end of the train. The work was satisfying, and it let me gawk at the rest of the carnival. When I was done, he handed me the net. “Any three fish that catch your fancy. Good luck!”

The net was long and hard to handle, but I dipped it into the water. It came up empty and dripping. Fishing was not as easy as the man had made it look. I tried again, and this time brought up a fish that whirred loudly as it came out of the water. The man pushed in a pin to stop the gears and flipped open a panel to reveal the number 8.

My next two fish were numbered 3 and 4.

“Do *any* of them match?” I handed back the net, frowning and studying the pool. There were easily a hundred fish. “I guess with so many they must.”

“You have to look closer at the fish.” A freckle-faced kid climbed up onto the platform. He scooped up a fish, checked the number on the bottom, then studied the pond. “This one’s a six, so I just have to find a match.”

With a smooth practiced motion he dipped the net back in, and pulled out another fish. He showed me the number on the bottom—another six.

“How did you—”

“One of the 6s has a busted tail, swims in circles.”

“But the other one, what if you’d gotten something else?”

“This one has a chip of paint missing.”

“I’m Zee.”

“Endivale,” he said, but added quickly, “You can call me Vale. Hey Pops, okay if I take my free turns to show Zee around?”

The man running the fish game studied us for a minute, then nodded.

Vale took my hand. “Come on, you gotta hear the nightingale sing, she’s amazing.”

So off we went. The nightingale turned out to be a woman with brown-feathered wings that matched her dark skin. Vale wasn’t lying. She sang beautifully, any song that the crowd shouted to her.

For twelve turns we explored the carnival—we watched the acrobats, and lost the ring-toss game, and rode on the backs of the dancing bears. Then Vale had to stop, because he didn’t have so many turns as me.

“You seem to know everyone at the carnival,” I said, when we sat down on the edge of an empty platform. “Do you know my mother? She’s very distinctive—a woman with eight spider legs.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of her—Lady Arachna, right? She’s Carnival Four.”

“Carnival Four?”

Vale gestured down at the platform below us. “You can’t see it with the platforms folded down, but the train cars are

numbered so they stay matched up. All the cars in this train are marked nine, so we're Carnival Nine. Pops and I are here because they had an empty platform for him to run his game. My other dad is at Carnival Two because he's an acrobat, and nine already has more acrobats than we really need."

"So you never see him?"

"There's only one track through here, but the trains run the whole house, with cities along the route where we stop and entertain folks. Some places there are clusters of tracks where the trains pass each other, or turn around. I've seen him a couple times."

We talked a bit more, and he snuck me in to see the bearded lady and a snake man whose skin was covered in iridescent green scales. The carnival was amazing, and I never wanted to leave, but I could feel the tension leaving my spring. I only had a few turns left, barely enough to get home. "I have to go."

"I'm almost out of turns anyway."

I hopped down from the platform. Vale put his hand on my shoulder. "I lied about some of the fish looking different. There's no missing paint or broken tails. The fish have more than one number, depending on which way you open the panels. Don't tell Pops I told you."

Something passed between us then, in that moment where he trusted me. Somehow it meant more than all the marvels I'd seen. It didn't even occur to me to get angry that the game was rigged until I was more than halfway home.

"You didn't untangle the thread," Papa said when I came in.

The multicolored jumble of thread was on the table where I'd left it.

"I had so much energy, and the train brought the carnival —"

"Go to bed, Zee. We're out of turns."

* * *

I spent my days untangling threads and learned to sew scraps of fabric into clothes. On my 200th day, Papa took me into town and we swapped out my child-sized limbs for adult ones, and repainted my face. Trains came and went, but I never had enough extra turns to visit the carnival. Then one morning Papa came back from the city early, pulling a wheeled cart. "What happened?"

"Granny and Gramps wound all the way down."

"But the maker can wind them again tonight, and—"

Papa shook his head. "No, there comes a time when our bodies cannot hold the turns. We all get our thousand days,

give or take a few. Then we wind down for the last time. It is the way of things.”

I knew we didn't go on forever, because some of my friends were made of parts from the Closet City recycling center. The recycling center melted down old parts to make new ones. So, I knew. But at the same time I'd never known anyone who was broken down for parts before. Granny had painted my face and Gramps always told the best stories about the maker.

“I wish I could have visited them before they wound down.”

“I didn't know they'd go today. They were only in their early 900s.”

“Are you going to take them to the recycling center?”

He shook his head. “The recycling center is well stocked, but the carnivals are often hurting for parts. When the next train comes, we'll take them there.”

I knew it wasn't right to be excited on the day that Granny and Gramps died, but while I waited to wind down and sleep, I couldn't help but imagine all the marvels we would see.

* * *

The next train turned out to be number nine. I was a little disappointed because I'd already seen most of Carnival Nine, but then I remembered Vale and how he'd shared the secret trick with the fish. I didn't see him as I followed Papa to the

platform at the front of the train, or while we laid Granny and Gramps out on the red-painted wood. One of the carnival mechanics knelt next to Granny, and Papa leaned over and whispered, “I’m going to stay to watch them disassembled, but you don’t have to. You did your turns helping me pull the cart to get them here.”

The mechanic peeled away the fabric that covered Granny’s torso and unscrewed her metal chest plate. I wanted to remember her whole, not in tiny pieces. I squeezed Papa’s hand, then let go and walked along the length of the carnival.

Vale found me about halfway down the train. He had swapped out his childhood limbs too, and when they repainted his face they’d gotten rid of his freckles. His hair was darker now, which suited him. He put his hand on my shoulder. “Sorry about your grandparents.”

“How did you—”

He shrugged. “Pops saw you come in. He said I could have some turns off, if you want to watch the acrobats.”

There was a mischievous gleam in his eyes when he said it, and it sounded like a grand adventure. Vale took me to a huge green-and-white striped tent next to the train tracks and we held hands and watched as acrobats walked tightropes and leapt between swings suspended high above the ground.

I loved the show, but halfway through Vale stopped watching.

“Seen this show too many times?” I asked.

“No. Well, yeah, but mostly it reminds me of my dad. Pops is great, but we don’t always get along so well. He wants me to take over the fish someday, but I hate that the whole thing is a cheat.”

I wouldn’t have minded staying for the rest of the show, but I didn’t want him to be sad. We snuck out and headed back to the train. “Can you switch carnivals?”

“I’m not built to be an acrobat like Dad. My parts aren’t that good. Really all I’m built for is running a game, and if I’m going to do that, I might as well stay here.”

“You could leave the carnival and stay in Closet City,” I said, suddenly aware that we were still holding hands. “It’s... Well, it’s terribly boring actually.”

He laughed. It was getting late and he was nearly out of turns. “I was thinking I might come up with a different game, one that’s hard, but doesn’t involve any cheats.”

I couldn’t quite keep the disappointment off my face. I almost wished I hadn’t said anything about Closet City being boring, but it was the complete truth. “Yeah, I guess it’d be hard to give up the adventure of the carnival to stay in a place like this.”

He pulled me closer and spoke softly in my ear, “Why don’t you come with me when the carnival moves on?”

Papa could take care of himself, and I was old enough to go. I told him on our walk home, and the next morning I packed up my things and said goodbye. It was a sudden shift, an abrupt departure, but Papa understood that I had always been restless. He loved me enough to let me go. When the carnival moved on, I went with it. With Vale.

* * *

Five trains were at the grand junction when we arrived, and Vale helped me find Carnival Four so that I could look for my mother. He would have stayed, but Carnival Two was at the junction as well, and I told him to go and visit with his dad. Vale and I would have plenty of time together later, and I wanted some time alone with my mother. I hadn’t seen her since I was new.

She was easy to find, her train car clearly labeled “the amazing spider-woman,” with pictures of her painted large on the side of the car. I knocked on the door and she slid it open, staring down at me and tapping one of her forelegs. “Yes?”

My gears whirred tight in my chest. She didn’t recognize me, and why would she? My limbs were different, my face was repainted. She had left a child, and I was a woman now. “I’m

Zee. I came with Carnival Nine, and I wanted... well, to see you, I guess.”

“Oh, my daughter, Zee.” Her foreleg went still, and she tilted her head, studying me. “What is it you do with Carnival Nine?”

“Vale is teaching me to run one of the games,” I admitted, knowing that it was one of the lowest jobs in the carnival. Being an acrobat or a performer required more skill, but the games were mostly con jobs. Nearly anyone could do it, with enough practice.

Mother didn’t say anything, and the silence stretched long and awkward between us.

“Papa is still in Closet City,” I told her, more to fill the silence than anything. “We lost Granny and Gramps, a few weeks back.” I tried to think of more news from Closet City, but since mother had stayed with the train she probably wouldn’t know most of the people I’d grown up with. It was a strange feeling, my strong desire to bond with someone who was a complete stranger. In my mind, the meeting had gone differently. She had loved me simply because I was her daughter, and we’d had an instant connection.

“I’m sorry to hear they’ve wound down.” She paused for a moment. “Look, I’m really not the maternal sort—it’s why Lars took you to Closet City to raise you. I’m—well—I’m not very

nice. I'm selfish. I like to use my turns for myself, and I never spared a lot of turns for my relationship with Lars. Certainly I never had enough for you."

I didn't know what to say to that. I wanted to be angry with her, but she was a stranger, she'd never really been a part of my life. That was how things were and I was used to it. Mostly I was disappointed. Sad that my dreams about reuniting with my mother had died. We talked a little longer about nothing of importance, and then I went back to Carnival Nine, home to Vale. I vowed that I wouldn't be like my mother. I was blessed with a lot of turns, and I would use them for more than just myself.

* * *

The train took us in slow circles, stopping to perform at the cities. I settled into the routine of carnival life—collapsing the walls of our train car to make our platform, setting up the dart game that Vale designed, packing everything away again when it was time to move along. The days blurred one into the next, obscuring the passage of time. Then one day I realized that I was over 400 days old, which meant that I had been with the carnival longer than I'd lived in Closet City.

I wasn't old yet, but I was no longer young.

"You sure you're ready to do this?" Vale took me to the front car where all the parts were.

I nodded. Our train's next stop was the maker's workbench; this was the right time for us to make our child.

He started picking through the gears, laying out everything we'd need to build a child. "My half-sister has these great pincers, like lobster claws—"

"I thought maybe he could look more like us." Carnies came with a wide variety of parts, which was fun for shows, but the more outlandish ones all reminded me of my mother. "Hands would be more versatile if we ever settle down in a city. What if he doesn't want to be a performer?"

Vale frowned. "He could change his parts, I suppose. But what happened to your sense of adventure?"

When I'd lived in Closet City, the carnival had been exciting for the brief time it had stayed. But being a part of the carnival—well, the obligations of life and livelihood sucked away the wonder. It was the novelty that had drawn me here, and half a lifetime later the novelty had worn away. But I couldn't bring myself to say so to Vale.

"So if he wants pincers when he's older, he can swap out his limbs that way too." I kept my voice calm, but worry gnawed at me. We had agreed on building a boy, but we hadn't talked much about the details. I rummaged through the pile until I found an arm, dark-skinned like the nightingale lady, but smaller, child-sized. It didn't have a match, but there was

another that was only slightly paler. Would anyone notice? Probably someone had already taken the other half of each set. “What about these?”

“Okay.” He was less enthusiastic now, and I felt bad that I’d shot down his first suggestion so quickly. I looked for parts that would be a compromise, interesting enough for him, but nothing as extreme as my mother’s spider legs. Nothing that would evoke memories of a woman who thought it’d be a waste of turns to raise me.

We worked quietly for a while, the silence awkward. Finally he pulled out a face, an ordinary shape but painted with streaks of black and white. He held it up. I hated it, but it was only paint. Paint could easily be removed and redone, later. It was less work than swapping out parts. The structure of the face underneath was good. I nodded. It broke the tension.

“Dad said there might be a place for us at Carnival Two, working the show with the dancing bears.” He kept his gaze firmly on our son, focusing his attention on attaching the black-and-white streaked head to the still-empty torso. “It’d be a step up from running a dart game, a better position for our son.”

Thinking about our son working a show at the carnival made me remember my own childhood. I had always wanted adventure, but now dancing bears seemed more dangerous

than glamorous. Life on the tracks was harder, even for me with all my turns. Carnival folk almost never made it to a thousand days. Their springs gave out when people were in their 800s, sometimes even sooner. “I want what’s best for him.”

Vale took my hand and smiled. “Me too.”

The train took us to the maker’s bench, and we laid out our son’s body, chest open. Tonight the maker would give him a mainspring and wind him for the very first time.

“Should we name him now, or after we’ve gotten to know him?” My parents had waited to name me until my second day, because they wanted to be sure the name would fit.

“It’s good luck to name him before he goes to the maker. He’ll get a better spring that way.” Vale answered. “What about Matts? That was my grandad’s name.”

I thought about my Grandad, and all the stories he’d told about the maker. “My grandad was Ettan. What about Mattan? We could still call him Matts for short.”

Vale nodded, slowly, his spring winding down. “I like that.”

* * *

The maker gave me forty-three turns the day that I met my child. My darling Mattan got only four. Something was wrong with his mainspring. I was definitely no mechanic, but I could

hear it, a strained and creaking noise like metal bending to its breaking point. What could you do with four turns? How could I teach him the world if that was all he had to work with?

I picked up my son and carried him to meet Vale. My mind churned with worry for my son's future and guilt at having more than my share of turns, but at the same time I was grateful to be wound up enough for everything that needed to be done. I saved Mattan a turn of walking by using an extra one of mine to carry him, and he could see the world that way. Light from the ceiling reflected off the white stripes across his face, and I admired the contrast against the black. I had been too hasty in condemning Vale's choice, it was unusual, but striking.

"This is your father, Vale," I told Mattan. He nodded happily but made no attempt to speak. The mechanics of speech were complex and used more turns than a simple nod. Even now, newly made, he was aware of his limitations. It made sense, I suppose. I'd always been able to feel how tightly wound my spring was, even when I was young.

"Why are you carrying him?"

I showed Vale the mechanical counter above our son's key. There were two dials of numbers, enough to show two digits, which made Mattan's tiny number of turns seem even smaller, if such a thing was possible. "He only has four turns."

Vale put his hand out, not to take Mattan but to rest it on my shoulder. “So few?”

“I’ll make my turns stretch to cover both of us,” I promised. “We’ll make the best of it.”

And I kept my promise. I made a sling and carried Mattan on my back as I ran my dart game and did our errands, and tried to show him some of the fun and adventure I had so desperately wanted in my childhood.

It was too much, even for me. On Mattan’s third day I wound down in the afternoon, right in the middle of my shift working the darts. Vale took Mattan home in his sling, but he didn’t have the turns to carry me to bed, so I stood there, right where I stopped, and the carnival-goers clustered around me, gawking. A grown woman, wound down in public like a child who had not learned to pace herself.

At the end of Mattan’s first week, our train was at the junction, and Mattan spoke for the first time. “I want to see the acrobats.”

Vale had gone out that morning to spend a few turns with his dad. I was supposed to repair the dartboard, covered in painted bulls-eye targets. It had cracked, and we needed it for our game, but Mattan had never asked for anything before. He’d heard Vale talking about his dad and the acrobatics he did for his show. I didn’t have the turns, but he had made the effort

to ask, and I didn't have the heart to tell him no. I carried him to Carnival Two, and we watched the acrobats practice their trapeze act.

We didn't see Vale in the audience, and his father wasn't practicing with the others. We sat as still as we could and watched, saving our turns for the trip back to train nine. Vale was already there when we returned. He stared at the broken dartboard. It reminded me of the day I'd left the tangled threads, and Papa had chastised me for not doing my work first.

"Mattan asked to see the acrobats," I said. "He spoke for the first time. He's never asked for anything, and I couldn't tell him no."

"Mattan doesn't have the turns for these things," Vale said. His voice was cold, angry. "You don't have the turns for this either. You have to pull your weight with the carnival if you want to stay. You know that."

"And what about our son?" I demanded. "He can't fix dartboards or run carnival games, but that doesn't mean he has nothing to contribute."

Vale shook his head. "Maybe not, but he can't pull his own weight, and he's cost us the chance to move to Carnival Two. They might have taken *us*, but they refuse to take Mattan."

It was only then I realized that for all this first week, Vale had never once called him Matts. This was not the child he wanted, and he was refusing to bond with him, trying to protect himself from the hurt. Or maybe he was simply being selfish, unwilling to use his turns on his own child. He was certainly disappointed at losing his chance to move to Carnival Two.

The train made its slow circuit from the Attic City to the brightly painted Children's Room and down the long hallway to Closet City, and I used my turns to help Mattan get through his days. When the train stopped in the shadow of the maker's bench—the place where I'd grown up—I left the carnival and took Mattan with me. Vale didn't argue; he was relieved to see us go.

* * *

Papa was delighted to see me, and to meet Mattan, and he welcomed us into his home. I began to fill the role that had once been his—taking him to get his gears tuned or his paint retouched—and everywhere we went I carried Mattan. I had turns enough to care for Papa and Mattan both, so long as I did nothing else. I tried not to think of adventure, or freedom, or even the future. If I kept my focus on the present moment, I could do everything that needed to be done, but only barely.

There weren't any trains at Closet City on Mattan's 200th day.

“We can wait for a carnival to come, or we can get your adult-sized limbs from the recycling center,” I told Mattan. We’d talked about both options beforehand, a conversation that had spanned several days because he couldn’t always spare the turns to ask questions.

“I want to go today,” Mattan answered immediately. There was a good selection of parts at the recycling center, and he didn’t want to be a performer, so it made sense to get parts here in town... but I think Mattan also knew that getting new limbs would be an exhausting day for both of us, and he didn’t want to make it even harder by adding the long walk out to the tracks of the carnival trains.

Being at the recycling center reminded me of the day Vale and I built Mattan, although here the parts were organized neatly on shelves, not piled high in a disorganized heap on the floor of a train car. These parts were more uniform. There were no spider legs or pincers, and while the faces were painted with a wide variety of features, there were none with bright garish colors or distinctive patterns. None that looked at all like Mattan.

“I’ll hold up limbs one at a time,” I told him. “When you see something you want, nod.”

Mattan sat perfectly still, his painted-black stripes cutting across his face like harsh shadows. He had three turns today,

enough for us to do everything we needed if we were careful. I moved around the room, holding up arms and legs for him to see.

The limbs he picked were neither the biggest nor the smallest, painted the same deep brown as his child-sized arms. I brought them over. Mattan's fingers curled, a movement that mimicked the way he squeezed my shoulder when he was excited, but before I could attach the new limbs he asked, "Will these be too heavy?"

The question broke my heart. Yes, these limbs were heavy. All the added weight meant that it would take more turns to carry him. I had selfishly hoped he would choose smaller limbs, but they were his limbs, and this was his choice. "These are beautiful, and I have a lot of turns. I can still carry you."

It was the right thing to say, and Mattan was so happy with his new limbs, but when I carried him home from the recycling center his weight stole the tension from my mainspring more quickly than before. We lived by our turns, and my son—now fully grown—couldn't spare enough to walk across town. I was furious that the world was so unfair, and my heart broke thinking of all the things he didn't have the turns to do. But if I was being honest, my heart also broke for me. Vale had abandoned us and Papa was old, so I would be the one to carry Mattan everywhere, always.

That thought was in my mind when Carnival Nine came to town, an ever-present weight that I could not shake away. My love was endless, but my strength was not, and I longed to escape the unrelenting effort of taking care of Papa and Mattan on my own. I wanted to see Vale, to have some turns all to myself, to do exactly as I pleased for once.

I didn't wake Papa or Mattan. I left them in their beds—did not ask permission to go out or even explain what I was doing, simply left and walked to the trains. They wouldn't be able to do much today, without my help, but between the two of them they'd be able to manage.

"It's good to see you," Vale said when I arrived. "Where's Mattan?"

"With my father." I didn't know what to say after that. I'd wanted to see Vale, but what could I really talk about with someone who wouldn't help raise his own son? He was like my mother, too selfish to share his turns. And here I was, at the carnival, wasting my turns on a foolish whim instead of taking care of my child. "I shouldn't have come."

Vale frowned. "I owe you an apology. I didn't... I mean, I wasn't prepared for how things went, and you've always had more turns, so it seemed to make sense for you to take him. I've missed you."

“It’s been lonely. Difficult.” I admitted. Once I started, the words came pouring out. In Closet City I’d felt like there was no one I could talk to—Papa had always been so good at taking care of everyone around him, so responsible, there was no way I could complain to him. But I could pour everything out to Vale. If nothing else, at least he would understand my selfishness. “I have the turns to give Mattan a good life, but only if I never do anything for myself. I take care of Papa, I try to let Mattan see some of the world, and it is so rewarding but I want something for me, some little bit of the adventure I was always chasing as a child.”

“You’re here today,” Vale said. He took my hand. “Let’s have an adventure.”

And we did. It was like seeing the carnival for the first time, the animals and the acrobats and the games. Vale was kind and attentive and we planned out possible futures and talked about the time we’d spent apart. It would have been a beautiful day if not for the constant gnawing guilt of having left Mattan and Papa behind. The worst was that I hadn’t even told them. I had been so sure that I did not deserve time for myself that I had made things even worse by stealing the time instead of asking for it.

“This was nice,” I said, painfully aware that I needed to leave soon if I wanted to have enough turns to get back home.

Despite the guilt, it had been reinvigorating to have the break. “Maybe tomorrow I could come back with Mattan? I think he would love to see you.”

Vale hesitated, then nodded. “I would like that.”

I walked home, and I was nearly out of turns by the time I walked in the door. Papa was in bed, but Mattan was up, sitting perfectly still at the table, obviously saving a turn to tell me something. I walked directly in front of him, so he wouldn't have to turn his head.

His eyes met mine, and he said, “Grandpa never woke up today.”

* * *

It had always been Papa's wish to have his body taken to a carnival when he wound all the way down, so I rented a cart and pulled him to the train, all while carrying Mattan. The work was hard, and I wouldn't have the turns to get us back home today.

I unloaded Papa into the same train car where he had once unloaded Granny and Gramps, the car where Vale and I had later assembled Mattan. I stayed while they took Papa apart, by his side now when it didn't matter, instead of yesterday when it might have. No. It wasn't Papa I had abandoned yesterday; Papa had never woken up. He would never know. It was my Mattan who had spent the entire day alone, knowing that Papa

was gone, having no way to call for help or do much of anything at all but wait for my return. And now he waited again, resting in the sling on my back as Orna, one of our train's mechanics, carefully opened Papa's chest and removed the gears, sorting them into bins as she worked. Her movements were practiced and efficient, she wasted no turns. All too soon Papa was gone, nothing but a pile of parts.

"Thank you," I told Mattan as we left to find Vale. "I needed to see that."

Mattan didn't answer, saving his turns.

"I did a terrible thing yesterday," I continued. "I wouldn't have gone if I had known about Papa—I thought he would be there to help you—but I shouldn't have done it even so. I'm sorry."

"You can't do everything, always," Mattan said, choosing his words carefully, not wasting more of his turns than was absolutely necessary. "I forgive you."

"Some good might even come of it—I asked Vale yesterday if he wanted to see you, and he said yes."

Mattan squeezed my shoulder ever so slightly through the fabric of the sling, a sign of his excitement at seeing his father. I carried him to the train car with Vale's dart game set up for anyone who had the tickets to play.

Vale studied us for a time, saying nothing. Was he noticing that I still carried our son, even now that he was an adult? Or was he simply studying the black-and-white striped face he hadn't seen for hundreds of days? My guilt was for a single day, a single slip. What did he feel, abandoning us for most of his son's life?

"Say something," I said. "Mattan has to save his turns, so he doesn't talk much, but he is so excited to finally see you again."

"Mattan," Vale began. He shook his head and started over. "Matts. I know I haven't been a father to you, but I'm ready to help now, if you want me to. Join me on the train?"

The question was for both us, Mattan and me. I had no tie to Closet City now that Papa was gone, and with Vale's help we would have enough turns for a better life for all of us. I wavered, undecided, the weight of Mattan pressing down on my back. He didn't speak, waiting for my decision. Would Vale really help take care of our child, or would he go back on this promise?

Vale had called our son Matts. His heart was in the right place.

"Yes," I answered. "We'll join you on the train."

Mattan squeezed my shoulder, pleased with the decision. I was excited that we might be able to be a family again, but

another thought haunted me, something that had been eating at the edges of my mind—what would happen to Mattan when I wound down? For hundreds of days I'd pushed this thought from my mind—I was healthy and full of turns, and Mattan, well his mainspring was bad. I had convinced myself I would outlast him.

Day after day Vale took nearly even turns with me, carrying Mattan on his back as he worked our game or hauled boxes of prizes to and from our platform. I used as many turns as I could spare helping all the newest additions to the carnival—always a turn for a turn, trading endlessly into the future, extracting from everyone I helped a promise to pay that turn forward to Mattan after I was gone. Was it enough? Did it erase that selfish day when I abandoned my son?

* * *

I've heard it said that every hundred days passes faster than the previous hundred. In childhood, the days stretch out seemingly forever, and we spend our time and turns freely on any whim that catches our fancy. But at the end of our lives, each day becomes an increasingly greater fraction of the time we have remaining, and the moments grow ever more precious. A hundred days, a hundred more, time flits away as we make our slow circuit on the train.

Vale winds all the way down, hard-working and supportive to the end. On his last day, he apologizes again and again for abandoning us. We've already forgiven him, but he cannot forgive himself. The other carnies start giving back the turns they borrowed from me, helping Mattan through his days. I have no turns to spare—there have never been enough turns, even for me, and I've always had more than my share.

An acrobat named Chet, a man with stripes on his arms that match the stripes on Mattan's face, comes more often than the others. I thought at first that he was trying to fulfill his obligation quickly and get it over with, but no, he lingers even when he isn't working off his borrowed turns, keeping up a constant stream of chatter, unbothered by the fact that Mattan rarely answers. Chet shares bits and pieces of his past mixed in with gossip about everyone else in Carnival Nine.

My spring is on the verge of breaking, I can feel it. The maker gave my son and me the same number of turns today. Ten turns. Fewer than I've ever had, and the most my son has ever been given. For a moment, I am filled with regret at the harsh limitations of his life. His days are already short, and his spring is so bad that he won't get the thousand days that I have gotten. He will be lucky to live another 100 days, and he is only in his 600s now. I comfort myself with the knowledge that at least he has Chet. He won't be alone.

I asked Mattan a while back what his favorite day was, his favorite memory, and he'd answered without hesitation—the day that we snuck out together to see the acrobats. So today we ignore what little work we might have done and walk to the tent where the acrobats perform, both of us side by side because I no longer have the turns to carry him. We sit perfectly still and watch the acrobats twirling and flying through the air.

I tell Mattan what Papa told me, “There comes a time when our bodies cannot hold the turns. We all get our thousand days, give or take a few.”

I think back on my thousand days, on what I've done with my life. The way Papa had taken such good care of me, and how in the end I'd chosen to follow his path, and done my best for Mattan. My life has been different from the adventures I imagined as a child, but I made the most of the turns I was given, and that's all any of us can do.

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Caroline M. Yoachim lives in Seattle and loves cold cloudy weather. She is the author of dozens of short stories, appearing in Fantasy & Science Fiction, Clarkesworld, Asimov's, Lightspeed, and previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, among other places. Her debut short story collection Seven Wonders of a Once and Future World & Other Stories was released in August 2016 by Fairwood Press. For more about Caroline, check out her website at carolineyoachim.com.

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A PLACE TO GROW

by A.T. Greenblatt

Lillian was wearing one of her uncles' old suits again. Her family always wore suits when they were going to tear down a world.

Trouble was that this world, unlike the dozens before it, had started to feel like home.

You don't know that for sure, Lillian reminded herself, as she strode through her dying garden, fists clenched at her side. *You never had a home.*

Trouble was, her uncles got bored of the worlds they built so quickly. So now the last of her daisies, tulips, and lilies surrounded her like sickly, wilting walls, praying for once last glimpse of sunlight before they died.

A useless prayer. Her uncles had dismantled the sun two days ago.

I'm not going to let them gut this world and put it on a shelf, Lillian thought as she weaved her way through the garden. *Not this time.* She didn't bother picking up the hems of her pants dragging through the dirt or tucking in her arms so that her baggy sleeves didn't catch on the yellowing leaves. She

let her garden cling to her like her uncles' hopes and plans that one day she would be like them and build worlds of her own.

Her uncles' suits never had fit her well.

Lillian stole a quick glance back at the house in the middle of her sprawling garden. With a bit of luck, Uncle Simon and Uncle Arthur wouldn't notice that she wasn't packing. By now, they should be so consumed with their own preparations, they would forget to look out the window. They would miss her oversized clothes and her telltale face and hands, which even from a distance looked like a quilt made from many different skins. They wouldn't see her walking away.

And if they did... well, they'd be furious. They'd tell her she was wasting her time. Her energy. Her abilities, on a flawed, doomed world.

Which might be true. But that didn't mean she wasn't going to try.

You need to understand the risks first, she reminded herself.

The Wall. She needed to see the Wall, or rather, what was beyond it now. She needed to understand what it was like to be without a world.

Her uncles' town surrounded the house and garden in a perfect circle. So did the Wall, except that surrounded the town. The flaws in this world became more visible the farther

she walked. There were deep cracks in the road, air temperature fluctuations every few steps, places where the water main broke so frequently that the glass foundation gleamed through the patches of eroded earth. A few townies stood on their lantern-lit porches from the homes that lined the road, raising a hand as she walked by. Worry and hope mixed in their expressions. Her uncles had promised to build everyone a new, better home, but right now, the world was being dismantled around them and no one knew what would come next.

The vast, stone Wall seemed to rise up out of the pile of rubbish at its base, collected there as if all the things that weren't needed in the next world had just rolled downhill and settled at the boundary of this one. Old furniture, dented pots, broken light bulbs. The ladder was still there though, braced against the lip of the Wall, where the stonework met the glass. So, Lillian placed a patchwork hand on a rung and started climbing.

This wasn't her first time up. Four days ago, when she'd pressed her hands against the smooth glass barrier of this world, she'd seen wildflowers. Endless fields of color rushing out to meet the horizon.

It wasn't real, of course, the flowers beyond the Wall. Unlike the ones in her garden, this was just an illusion. Something Uncle Arthur had created to keep everyone sane.

For good reason, Lillian realized now as she bit back a scream. Because now... now beyond the Wall there was *nothing*. Only a vast, terrible, consuming emptiness. It was as if she was falling, failing, losing, and she would never find herself again.

Her knees shook, banging against the ladder's rungs, and she squeezed her eyes shut. They were right. Her uncles, the townies. It was better to have a world, despite the flaws, despite her uncles tearing it down and rebuilding it every year or so, than to face that infinite nothingness.

If you make a mistake, this is where everyone will end up, she thought. *Completely lost.*

She knew what the rational decision was. She understood that letting this world go was the safer choice.

But.

There was a small, insistent part of her that wouldn't let her give up so easily. The tiny part of her that had put down roots outside of her uncles' laboratories and workshops. She'd poured hours into learning how to make things grow, how to keep them alive, and she had succeeded. She could spend an

entire day in her garden with Marci and Gil, weeding, watering, laughing and it never felt like wasted time.

Before this world, she didn't think it was possible for someone like her to feel at home. An orphaned world maker who couldn't even remember the world she came from. Not until she discovered she could coax something in her uncles' rigid creations to grow. To change.

She couldn't let them take that away.

* * *

She'd been lingering in the garden again. Arthur could smell the honeysuckles on her, dying though they might be.

"We could live our lives within glass bottles and it would be the largest place we'd ever know," Arthur muttered to himself, though he made sure to be just loud enough for Lillian to hear.

"Except we do live in a glass bottle, Uncle."

Her voice carried, reverberating off the shelves of beakers, delicate instruments, and boxes of things that didn't have names. Arthur turned and saw his niece in the doorway, her mismatched hands tightening, her scarred and bricolage face full of impending stubbornness.

"You should be packing," he said as he corked the beaker he was holding. "Not puttering around in that ridiculous garden."

“You didn’t think it was ridiculous when we first made this world.”

“That was before I realized how unpredictable and stubborn flowers are,” he said. *Like nieces*, he added silently. “Why are you here?”

“I saw what’s really beyond the Wall today.”

Arthur nearly dropped the beaker he was holding. Of course, he’d intended to show her what the illusion was hiding, though it wasn’t something you showed too soon. Except the woman standing in the doorway wasn’t a patchwork child anymore. She’d grown into all her skins.

He could see that she understood now. There was fear on her face, the fear of what she could lose.

“Good,” he replied, and hesitated. In some ways, he was proud of her initiative. But what had she thought of the emptiness beyond the Wall? In that terrible void, had she found the hunger to create, to defy, like he and Simon and her mother had done?

Arthur opened his mouth to ask, but the words caught. He couldn’t quite meet her eyes. She couldn’t quite meet his. Their silent questions hung in the space between them.

“Where are we going this time, Uncle?”

This wasn’t the right question. But Arthur was grateful. He knew how to talk about worlds.

“Mountains. With real snow. Come see.”

He beckoned Lillian towards the center of the laboratory, where resting on a table between the shelves and benches, a large glass bottle glowed. Nestled within its body, the hazy mountains looked conquerable. Of course, they weren't really miniatures, just like the world in the bottle wasn't really on the table. It was an illusion, a trick of perspective. Even the grandest mountains could appear as small as your thumb from the right distance. It was just a matter of getting the math right.

“It always seems so far away, when we're looking at them from the outside,” she said, peering at the bottle.

“I know,” he replied, smiling. Arthur could hear the new world calling him. This was the home they'd been searching for. This time he was certain. “We always did love the snow as children.”

But Lillian wasn't listening. Her gaze had drifted to the shelf behind him. The one full of large, dusty bottles. Remnants of all the worlds he and Simon made before this one. Flaws, flaws, and more flaws. And there was an empty space on it, ready for this world of flowers.

“The next world will be perfect,” he said, raising his voice. “It'll be the last one we make.”

“Except you said that about this world.”

“Lillian—”

“And the one before that.”

“Lillian!”

He glared at her and she returned the expression. Neither of them willing to lower their gaze, their stance.

How could he explain that *something* was missing here? His careful calculations for happiness, once again, hadn't added up.

Arthur scowled and turned away from his stubborn niece. “Well, if you're going to stand there, you might as well be useful.”

“Why? What are you packing?”

“The stars.”

A small, sharp frown appeared between her eyebrows, but wordlessly, she rolled up her sleeves and Arthur relaxed. She was still his lab assistant, first and foremost.

Together they measured, stirred, distilled, and measured again. Their hands working in parallel to refit a handheld lamp. With infinite care, Arthur lit the wick, and in an instant, the flame was burning as bright as a beacon. Seconds later, the first star arrived with a *clink*.

“It's working. Excellent,” Arthur said, pleased.

Together, they wandered out to the balcony, lantern in hand. Arthur studied the sky, noting the frequency of arriving stars. He began to explain the art of the nightscape, but after a

minute or so, he realized Lillian wasn't watching the sky. She was staring at her garden instead.

Arthur sighed. She'd done good work with the flowers and plants. Making them thrive after he and Simon had given up on them. But the garden wasn't the same as the one he, Simon, and Aster had in the world they once called home, before... well, before. Besides, it was Aster, Lillian's mother, who'd loved that garden. Without her, this place felt like a bitter mockery of the home they had lost.

"Your mother was excellent with growing things too."

"I know," she replied. "Uncle Simon told me," she added in reply to his surprised expression. "I think we can fix the flaws here. I have some ideas."

Arthur scowled. Absurd; the flaws ran too deeply and it wasn't worth the effort. How could she not see that this world was a cheap imitation of what it was supposed to be?

But then, Arthur saw her expression and he understood. She'd fallen in love with this world. She still hadn't learned how the things you love most can be snatched away on a whim.

"You need to go," he whispered.

"Now? Why?"

Because everything's too fragile, too fleeting.

"Because the laboratory always moves first," Arthur snapped. He turned his back on the garden and hurried

towards the balcony doors. “And I’m going to move it now. Get out.”

* * *

Damn it, damn it, damn it. Really, she shouldn’t have been surprised that Arthur wouldn’t change his mind. She should’ve known. Well, she had known...

From the pocket of her secondhand suit, Lillian pulled out two large, beautiful bottles. World-making bottles. They should have been too bulky, too obvious, to fit in her pockets, but Lillian was her uncles’ student. She knew their tricks.

Honestly, that was almost all she knew. It was all she had been taught. Before she learned how to make things grow.

She didn’t have her uncles’ nostalgia. Forests and islands, and all the other worlds that came before this one, were meaningless to her. She couldn’t remember their first world, the one they hadn’t made. The one that was grand enough to have beaches, cities, and mountains all in one container. But the smell of honeysuckles, the act of sticking her fingers into the rich soil reminded her of... something. It helped that Marci and Gil had joined her. She’d learned how to make friends in this world, too.

Lillian paused for a moment in the hall. Wondering if Arthur had noticed the missing bottles. If he’d come storming

after her. A small part of her wished he would. Then they could have this fight out in the open.

But the laboratory doors stayed shut.

So, Lillian tucked the bottles back into her pocket and started down the hall again. She couldn't go back to being just her uncles' apprentice. She didn't want to be just a world-maker anymore.

Don't do anything drastic yet, she reminded herself. You still have one more uncle.

Through one of the hall's many windows, she saw there were no stars left in the sky. Lillian hurried.

* * *

If we want to change the world, we must rebuild it around us.

Simon smiled as he tightened another bolt. This was his workshop and this was his simple tenet. It fit neatly among the panting engines and spinning axles.

He'd never admit this to his brother, but his workshop was the only place Simon felt some measure of happiness: His hands were covered in grease as he engaged pistons, meshed gears, and built the machines that ran the world. Here, he could lose himself for hours in the work. Here, the memories didn't haunt his every breath.

The smell of honeysuckles wafted in and he knew, without turning, who was standing behind him.

“Lillian.”

“And I thought I was being sneaky,” she said.

Simon chuckled. But then he saw the expression on his niece’s face, and his smile died.

“What’s wrong, dear?”

“I saw the void today.”

Inwardly, Simon’s heart ached at this loss of innocence. Outwardly, he nodded. “It’s an emptiness that’ll haunt you.”

“How do you and Arthur deal with it? How do the townies we fish out of the void? Some of them were adrift in it for days.”

So were we. Simon thought. But she was too young to remember that. Or rather, young enough to forget. “We save what we can. Fix what we can. And when we can’t, we build new worlds.”

She nodded and wandered over to his workbench, picking up his failed attempt at a small mechanical wren. “There’s still so much we can fix here,” she said.

“Your uncle thinks this world is ugly and flawed.”

“Do you?” Lillian fiddled with the bird. A wing flapped awkwardly and Simon hunched his shoulders. Those birds were supposed to have been a gift to Aster, her mother, back

when they weren't in the business of building worlds. Back when they had a world more exquisite and complex than anything they could create.

"I always welcome the chance to redesign." He turned back to the engine he was working on. "Look at this improvement."

Simon reached up and began cranking one of the dozens of handles on the machine. At first, nothing happened. Then, there was a faint whistle from the hundreds of brass pipes overhead and a white vapor began to grow. Slowly, it blossomed and condensed, pressing up against the water-stained ceiling. A perfect cloud that grew darker and denser. Then, without warning, it began to rain.

Lillian gaped as raindrops began trickling over her face and palms. Simon grinned, pleased with the effect. He'd finally recreated another small piece of what was lost, and the next world would be better for it.

"In the mountains, this will become snow," he explained.

"I've only ever read about snow," she said, awed. Then her shoulders straightened. "But I think we should stay in this world."

"What? And let all this work go to waste? Don't be absurd, dear."

"But we can use this here. The flowers—"

“Are too thirsty. It would overtax the system. Best to leave them behind,” he said. “Besides, you won’t have to spend hours watering anymore.”

“I like watering. I like all of it.”

Her quilted face was full of fierce determination. And Simon understood then, the love Lillian had for this world.

He understood it all too well.

When their world had shattered, the one they’d called home, he, his siblings, and his young niece escaped only by luck. Lillian was in poor shape; her mother, even worse. He’d managed to sew Lillian back whole, but Aster... Simon always tried to fix what he could, but some days, everything was a reminder of what he couldn’t save.

“And what do Marci and Gil think?” he asked, and regretted it instantly. He’d seen how the three friends worked shoulder-to-shoulder in the garden.

Lillian was kind enough not to answer. Instead, she said: “Can I help you with your work?” She ran a patchworked hand over the tools on the workbench. Hers were good hands, world-building hands. She had that much, at least.

Simon shook his head. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to be alone. “You better get back to your rooms. The workshop will be moving soon.”

For a moment, Lillian looked as heartbroken as he felt. She turned to go but paused with a hand resting on the doorknob. “Do you really want to leave, Uncle?”

Simon gave her a sad smile. “If I have nothing new to build, what will become of me?”

* * *

Lillian burst into her own small workshop like a storm, brimming with frustration and sadness. Marci, who’d been waiting for her, jumped when the door slammed open, making her drop the book she’d been reading. Across the room, Gil looked up but otherwise didn’t react as he continued to knot and unknot a piece of rope.

“They didn’t listen,” Lillian said.

Her friends’ expressions fell. No one was exactly surprised, but that didn’t mean they weren’t disappointed.

“What will you do?” Marci asked.

Lillian pulled out the two bottles from her pockets. “Stop them.” She tossed the bottles to Gil, who caught them in one swift, neat motion. “Ready?”

“It looks just like these?” Gil hefted a bottle in each hand.

“Yes.”

Gil smiled that smile that Lillian knew spelled mischief. He placed the bottles on her desk and slipped out of the room.

“This might be a terrible idea,” Lillian admitted as soon as she was sure Gil was out of earshot. “If I get this wrong, I might ruin this world *and* my uncles’ new one, and we’ll all end up in the void. You should probably be trying to convince me not to do this, Marci.”

“Probably.” Her friend shrugged. “But I’m tired of saying goodbye to places I like. Besides, we put too much work into the garden to just abandon it.”

Sometimes, Lillian wondered how she’d survived without friends for so long. Marci had washed up on her uncles’ beach world when they were both eight or nine, and though they had always been friendly, they’d never really become friends until Marci wandered into the garden as Lillian was planting her first tulip bulbs and offered to help.

Yet another thing she was grateful to this world for.

But who was she to risk everything because she’d found somewhere that made her happy? Or that sometimes, but only sometimes, when the light was just right, her flowers brought back a few patchy memories of the world she and her uncles had lost?

“This is selfish,” Lillian whispered.

“No,” Marci said, with surprising force. “It’s not. There were always rumors, you know. People in town are banking on you saving this world.”

“They should’ve told Arthur and Simon they wanted to stay here.”

“They did. A few times, actually. But you know how your uncles are.”

Yes, Lillian knew quite well. Marci put a hand on her shoulder. “Give us a world, Lillian. A permanent one.”

One glance at her friend’s earnest expression told Lillian that she wasn’t the only person who’d started to think of this place as home.

“Okay,” she said as she took a seat at her desk, the two bottles in front of her. From a pocket of her secondhand suit, she withdrew the toolkit she’d stolen from Simon’s workshop. “Okay.”

And she set to work.

* * *

Yes, this was infinitely better. Arthur could feel the change as soon as he transferred his laboratory into the new world. The air was colder, fresher, and the view from the windows would be stunning once they reassembled the sun. The mountain lodges they’d built were simple yet idyllic.

He stepped out of his laboratory and onto the balcony of the lodge, into the unfinished world. There were still vast swashes of gray space, and only the dusky outline of mountains

were visible in the distance. But the shape of the world was here. The potential.

The world was so unfinished that if Arthur looked closely, he could see the glass walls of the bottle, its neck tapering in the distance. And beyond the glass, he saw the world he'd left behind, far away and minuscule below him. The perspective, after all, had changed. The house and the garden were still visible, though. Still within his reach.

Arthur withdrew a pair of thin, delicately curved tongs from his pocket, designed to pass through the illusion of perception. With the care of a glass blower, he reached through the narrow neck of the bottle of this world that was not as far away as it looked and into the neck of the world he was leaving behind.

Slowly, gently, he grasped the edges of the balcony of Simon's workshop with the tongs and pulled. His brother's workshop disengaged from the house, as it was designed to do, with a *click*, and carefully Arthur began to draw it through the narrow neck of each world. The workshop grew larger, heavier, more unwieldy as he pulled it closer. But Arthur's practiced hands didn't shake as he set the workshop down into the adjacent mountain lodge Simon had designed for himself. When the workshop was set in place, his brother came out onto the balcony of his new home and waved.

Arthur smiled. There was nothing quite like finally assembling your creations after so much planning and design.

Maybe he'd move Lillian's rooms next. For all her stubbornness, she was a good assistant. Sharp. One day, she'd build worlds of her own. He didn't fault her for falling in love with her work, only for not learning yet that nothing ever stayed the same.

Resources were going to be scarce, but maybe he'd create some asters and columbines for her here.

But first, where had he put those stars?

* * *

Gil knew himself. He knew he wasn't nearly as clever as Lillian and Marci. He could not make worlds. He didn't even realize he was living in a vast but breakable world until his home had shattered like a ship against a reef. He knew he was no match against the void.

He had two talents, though. The first was fishing, and that came in handy. He was a master at finding valuable things beyond the Wall, among the torn newspaper clippings, bent cutlery, and the infinite amount of other junk that floated in the blossoming fields cleverly hiding the void. Standing on the Wall, in front of a window cut in the glass, Gil could spot where a good pair of shoes lurked or a packet of seeds. With a quick flick of his wrist, hook and sinker would vanish into the

endless, flowering meadows, and when he reeled them back in, he would always have a prize. This skill had kept him well-fed and honest back when he was just a sunburned sailor looking to catch the biggest fish. Back when he didn't know other worlds existed. But here, it made him indispensable.

His second talent was thievery, what he used to rely on before he mastered the art of fishing. But he hadn't used it since Simon pulled him through one of those windows in the glass and over the Wall. Out of the void.

He owed Simon his life.

And yet.

Gil still dreamed of being lost in the void. Some nights he woke up shaking, too terrified to scream. He'd made himself irreplaceable for a reason. And the thought of losing yet another world...

So, he snuck into the gray and empty place that had been Arthur's laboratory and found the glass bottle that held the new world sitting alone on the vacant floor.

His fingers hadn't forgotten their old craft. He scooped up the bottle with practiced nimbleness and began retracing his steps to Lillian's rooms. Each stride was a balancing act, so that not even the slight tremor touched the bottle in his hands and tipped the hats of the two men inside.

He felt guilty for the deception but not enough to make the slightest mistake. Gil didn't care about the flower garden, like his friends did, but he had a place here. A purpose.

For that alone, this world was worth saving.

* * *

Despite what he'd told his niece, Simon did regret the necessity of destroying this world of flowers. But he needed the parts.

So while his brother fussed in his laboratory, Simon began pulling his equipment through the bottlenecks of the worlds, using greasy but still lovely world-making tongs of his own.

While Arthur created beautiful templates and models, Simon made them possible. Lillian had a knack for this too. At night, when worry and guilt gnawed at him, it was a comfort to know that this last surviving part of Aster could endure on her own, no matter what happened.

Simon's workshop grew cluttered with his creations. For now, he placed them where he could fit them, more focused on getting the basics up and running than tidiness.

Still, he couldn't help smiling as he worked. All the things he was going to create for this new world, all the upcoming improvements, would keep him busy for many days to come.

* * *

Lillian didn't have Arthur's skill to move entire rooms while she was standing in them, or Simon's knowledge to build weather-changing machines. She was just herself, with her own ideas.

So, she picked up one of the two bottles she'd filched from Arthur and crossed the room to the workbenches and shelves full of the materials and spare parts that she, Marci, and Gil had collected over the months. All the parts that were needed to start a world. Worlds.

Using needle-nose pliers, delicate and sharp, Lillian gently grasped the bottom of a shelf. Then, with an infinite amount of care, she did the impossible: she lifted the laden shelf with only the pliers and a steady hand. As she drew it closer to the mouth of the bottle she held in her other hand, the shelf began to diminish, until it was tiny enough to push through the opening of the bottle and into the world she'd built within the glass. She repeated this process over and over, until all the shelves were gone and her workshop felt strangely roomy. She bit back a laugh when she saw Marci's amazed expression.

"Well, it's all about perspective," Lillian said as she placed the now-filled bottle on her desk. Her friend nodded wide-eyed.

But like a tempo that picked up speed, her uncles started working quickly. She could hear the *clicks* when they moved

vital pieces out of this world and into theirs. Though Lillian couldn't see them or what they were transferring, she could feel her world begin to wither and shrink.

She didn't hear Gil slip in and set the bottle with the new world on her desk, but Lillian swore when she saw how much progress her uncles had made. They would be moving her rooms soon.

"I need your help," she told her friends. "Now."

Marci became her second pair of hands, delivering tools when she asked, and Gil another set of eyes, quick to spot when Arthur or Simon removed a critical piece of this world. Lillian extracted what she could from their new world, moving machines like the generators and the water pumps into the second stolen bottle, also sitting on her desk. If she wanted to keep this world, the trick was to make their new creation collapse before this one did.

This will work, she thought. *This **will** work*. She ignored the exhaustion creeping into her fingers and refused to allow her hands to shake with doubt.

The strongest pangs of guilt hit her when she stole back the dismantled sun. She would've built her own from the scraps left behind, but her flowers would be long dead by then. She hoped Simon would understand.

Lillian dared to look up, just for a moment. From her window, she saw the crumbling stone Wall drawing closer as her world was emptying, disappearing. She wasn't working fast enough.

"Get everyone from town in here, now," she told Gil through clenched teeth. She kept her hands steady, but inwardly she was cursing, cursing, cursing.

Her home was slipping away.

* * *

Marci struggled to keep up with the urgent orders and swift hands of her friend. It was like when her older brothers used to play chess; frantic and calculating, removing some pieces while adding others back on. It set her teeth on edge, even though she knew they were making up the rules and no one was actually being sacrificed.

Lillian and her uncles were playing chess with the world around them.

Witches. That's what her mother would've called them. *Destroyers of worlds*. But it wasn't true. Marci had seen that aching look in Simon and Arthur's eyes. The look you wore when you'd lost everything and found yourself floating in an endless void. She knew she wore that expression too, though she was only nine when she'd lost the world she called home. Still, she would never walk down the city streets she loved

again, the smell of fresh pears and even fresher bread chasing her every step. Her home was gone for good.

The thing was, everyone in this little world wore that same expression. Everyone had that same ache. Except Lillian

Marci had originally offered to help the quiet, strange-looking world-makers' niece because she and the other townies realized that Arthur and Simon would never listen. They would never be satisfied with any world they made. The townies all agreed they needed a new strategy.

At first, Marci just wanted to convince Lillian to help them, but over the last few months, her motives had changed, slightly. It wasn't just this world that she needed to save. Marci never wanted to see that pained expression of loss in her friend's eyes.

* * *

Something was wrong. Arthur could feel it. He'd finally found the stars tucked under a stack of papers. But when he stepped out onto the balcony again, the world had become inexplicitly smaller. The mountains crushed up against the edge of town; the walls of the bottle were far too close. The world was losing mass somehow.

Swearing, Arthur began thinking through the math again.

No, stabilize this world first. He'd find the mistake when he was certain this world wouldn't come crashing down.

Maybe, just maybe, he could transfer the entire house from the old world into this one. That should offer some mass balance, though it would be tricky to move such an enormous object between worlds. But if it worked...

Arthur ducked inside to retrieve his tongs.

* * *

Simon realized something was wrong with this world. The clouds he made refused to float out onto the balcony and into the open sky. He stepped out of his workshop only to discover that the glass boundary of this world was inches away. Their new world was on the verge of collapse. Arthur must have made one of his rare errors in calculations.

Simon wiped the engine grease from his hands. Once again, it was up to him to fix his brother's mistakes. He strode through his workshop searching for the largest machine he had: the sun.

Only to find it was gone.

* * *

Lillian transferred the bottle that held her uncles' world into the glass bottle she'd painstakingly filled with bookshelves and tools. She set the world down on the floor there among the rows and rows of shelves. Her uncles would notice the world had moved without their permission.

But she hoped they could forgive her for it.

* * *

“What the hell is going on?”

Simon heard Arthur slam through the doors of his workshop. “I think... I think we’ve been betrayed, Arthur.”

“Impossible. By who?”

Simon didn’t answer. Instead, he walked out onto the balcony, the hammer heavy in his hand, the ache in his chest more so. With the gentlest of strikes, he reached out and tapped the boundary of the world.

The glass cracked, and the world of mountains and snow fell away.

“She stole our world,” Arthur said, his hands tightening into fists, as the glass crumpled and fell, shattering at their feet, and they found themselves in a world they didn’t recognize.

“Arthur... look.”

The new world was little more than just a room. But it was stuffed with workbenches and tables, and rows and rows of shelves full of empty bottles and spare gears, valves, and hundreds of other materials collected from the void. Most of the bottles weren’t as large or clear or beautiful as the ones they normally used to build worlds. But this place was a treasure trove, the heart stuff of hundreds of new homes, waiting to be born.

The note on the closest shelf read: *“Thank you for all you taught me. Build new worlds for all the people still lost in the void.”*

The workspace appeared to stretch into eternity. It was an illusion, of course. But it was a good one.

“We can’t just abandon her,” Arthur said. “Aster would never forgive us. We should go back.”

“Could we do that without destroying this place?” Simon asked, running his hands over the gleaming workbenches.

Arthur opened his mouth but then caught sight of the immaculate laboratory Lillian had designed for him. “We could create so much here. Think of the possibilities, Simon,” he said, eyes shining. “Do you think she’ll be all right on her own? Until we design a world large enough for all of us, that is.”

Simon didn’t trust himself to speak, so he just smiled. He would miss his niece terribly, but with her gift, he could do so much, save so many.

For the first time in years Simon felt the faint tugging of a world he could call home.

* * *

Her world was a mess. And when Lillian stepped out of the house in the middle of the garden, she was wearing one of her uncles’ old suits again. Except this time, she’d altered it to be patchworked like her. After dozens of long days of work, the

sun was bright and her flowers were flourishing again. This time she wore her suit because it fit.

Her irises and foxgloves had grown tall and wild in her absence, and Lillian brushed the petals with her fingers as she walked through the garden, towards town.

There were still cracks in the road and the water main was dripping again, but she had some new designs in progress. The townies were busy rebuilding too, sweating but smiling as she passed, and she waved to them but didn't slow her pace. She didn't hesitate when she reached the ladder leaning against the Wall and swiftly climbed to the top.

Beyond the Wall, her illusion needed work. It wasn't much to look at, just damp earth and pale skies that stretched out forever. But the promise of spring lingered in the air, like untapped potential.

I can work with this, Lillian thought, nodding. She was home now. She had time to learn how to make this world grow.

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A.T. Greenblatt is a mechanical engineer by day and a writer

by night. She lives in Philadelphia where she's well acquainted with all four seasons and is known to frequently subject her friends to various cooking and home-brewing experiments. She is a graduate of Viable Paradise XVI and her work is forthcoming or has appeared in Strange Horizons, Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and Mothership Zeta, as well as other fine magazines and anthologies. You can find her online at atgreenblatt.com and on Twitter at @AtGreenblatt.

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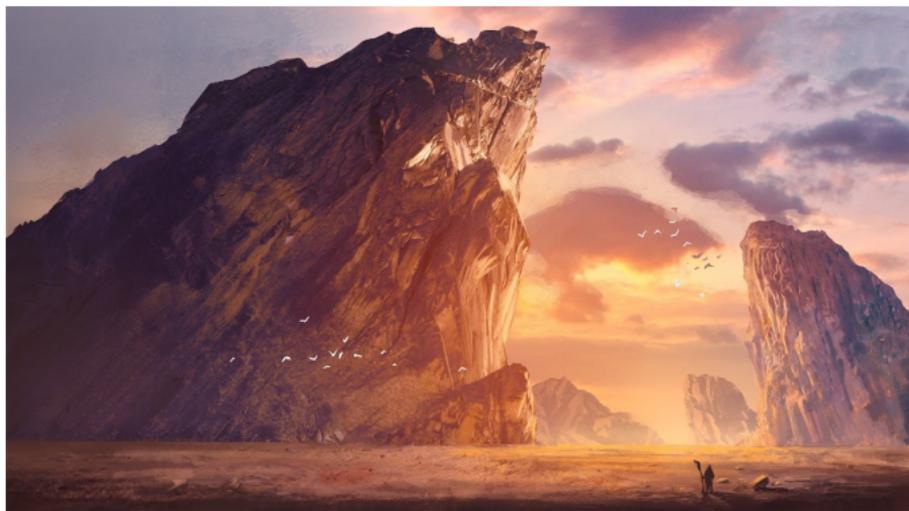
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COVER ART

“Land of Giants,” by Ashley Dotson



Ashley Dotson is a professional fantasy artist in the game industry who specializes in illustration and concept art. Her keen sense of atmosphere and mood lends her to aim to create a strong feeling in the viewer with everything she paints. She has an art streaming channel on Twitch where you can watch her paint live. Her artwork and a contact for work inquiries can found at www.artstation.com/artist/ashleydotson.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1076

Published by Firkin Press,
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

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