Waterways and Dreamscapes

By Lannah Marshall

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It had been a long summer, back in 2099. Grandpa offered to take me off Mum's hands while she did extra shifts in the OR. We stayed in his narrow boat on the canal that ran through the city's west side.

Grandpa called himself a merchant, but for me, it was magic. I'd never had the chance to see the canals properly before. From the ground, they looked like free-flowing water streams that wove between buildings and underneath motorways. They shone rainbows down during the day and glistened at night.

Riding one didn't destroy the magic quite like Mum said it would. Instead, I felt like I'd been taken to a different world.

I saw forests atop skyscrapers, with willows that bowed into the passing water. Bamboo, ivy, and ferns were strung across streets, well above the denizens below.

"For the birds," Grandpa told me as we travelled by. It wasn't until later that evening when I saw the murmur of starlings take flight that I understood.

"For the insects," Grandpa said with a wink. He'd been watching me all day. I thought I'd have spent my whole day staring at the fish, but instead, I was gawking at birds, drooping foliage from balconies, and solar sails that powered the density below.

Grandpa took me to the floating market between the Ingo Tech offices and the Marla Grand hotels. We took a route called the Silicon Steps, locks in the waterways that filled with water to lift us even higher. At nine, I wasn't very useful. Twelve steps in all, and by the third, I was sat in the boat, watching the rise and fall of water and fish that were enjoying the ride.

Below, through the clear base of the canal, I saw the fountain that I walked past to get to school and, a few years later, would climb into to impress a girl at college.

Grandma was waiting for us at the barge, and she started opening shop as soon as we arrived, pulling up the walls of the narrow boat and hanging up vegetables for display. Grandpa helped me over to his stall of spices, vegetables, and fruits of various shapes and sizes. Some I still struggle to name, but I could never forget the taste.

Each stall sold the weird and wonderful, from succulents to trinkets, to blankets and wines. Within the hour, the place was so full of boats and barges people walked from stall to stall with the same enthusiasm and balance I had on the ground, and if it weren't for the unsure, wobbling tourists, I would have forgotten where I was entirely.

We sold bags of spices. I managed to sell the ugliest apple I'd ever seen, and Grandpa rewarded me with a pick of pineberries. Umbrellas came out at midday, and the rain lasted mere minutes without relinquishing any of the heat.

Grandma had disappeared for a time, travelling up and down the canals, selling food to tourists on the communal levels of hotels, apartments, and offices that looked on the waterways.

"Curry later," he said as he nudged me. "Hard work is always rewarded."

"Will I work up here one day?" I asked.

"Sure!" He cleared fruit, but his eyes didn't leave me. "You like it up here?"

"It's magic."

"Sure is."

The umbrellas stayed up for the afternoon, with the heat welcoming insects. Grandpa slathered me in citrus and had me sit on the counter to sell more produce.

Once the rush hour finished, the sellers started packing up their wares. A few bits were traded between the merchants, with Grandpa selling a small jar of saffron for a beautiful blue quilt. Grandma returned, grinning with empty cupboards and a tin full of cash.

I smiled. Mum got her quick thinking from somewhere, and while it was quiet, I started to wonder why she hadn't brought me up here before. Maybe it wasn't as important as saving lives—that's what Mum did. Grandma and Grandpa were just merchants on a fancy canal.

The fish followed my finger as I dragged it along the water, and I felt a pang of frustration, flanked by two dreams.

Between the thin algae and the artificial pebbles that lined the bottom, I counted fish, mostly bottom feeders that Grandpa said were the best cleaners up there.

"What about that one?" I asked him as I caught sight of a distressed fish. It was in the centre of the floating market—or rather, where the market had been. The water so clear I could see the bright, red plastic it was caught in. Before I could finish asking, Grandpa was calling out to the other sellers as he climbed aboard a kayak. Noise erupted, and a net box was sent out to trap the fish.

Grandpa went in and under, emerging with a small, struggling catfish. Assisted by the clothes merchant, he cut the plastic from the creature's neck and released it back into the water. It swam away, looking giddy with relief.

"See this," said Grandpa as he swam up to me, waving the red plastic for all to see. "These used to be clear, and the whole world could turn a blind eye to them. That's why they're red now. No more 'out of sight, out of mind' ignorance."

He tore it up and threw it in a compost bin as I swallowed a lump that had risen in my throat. It felt like I was being scolded, but then I saw the belly of the canal and the city below. I'd never wondered why the waterways were see-through.

I'd always thought we were just showing off our lovely clean water and neat engineering tricks.

Then it hit me. Sure, Grandma and Grandpa weren't surgeons, but there were different ways to save lives.

I knew what I was going to be.

And I didn't even have to wait to start.

As an aspiring author, Lannah Marshall enjoys creating fantasy and science fiction that challenges pessimistic predictions of the future. Inspired by the impacts of technology, as well as innovation influenced by nature, she hopes to write fiction that portrays a greener, more optimistic future that offers answers to our contemporary fears.