



**The Little Universe**  
A novel by Jason Matthews

Sample - Envy

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**Envy**

When we arrived at work the next morning, the contractor was already digging foundations for the fence and guard shack. Frank Maxwell stood by the heavy machinery with two guys I'd never seen.

He greeted us with a wave of his cane. We got out of the truck and were introduced to Phil and Dave, part of our new team of security guards. He also told us about the people he was bringing in to help with technical research.

Jessica Baxter and Ian Nessen joined us later in the morning. Frank had given them a two-hour notice from their current jobs. When they met us at the front door, each had a look of concern over what could possibly have been so important. Adams breathed a sigh of relief when he saw them. Whitney and I were good help, but Jessica and Ian had professional engineering backgrounds. Adams knew them from projects they had been involved with over the past years, though he had never worked with them directly. I was intimidated by them.

"May we come in?" Jessica asked, standing in front of Ian by the open doors. She was around forty, tall, with dark hair wrapped back in a weave. She wore a beige work suit with slacks and looked to be in fair shape for a corporate woman.

"Of course," Adams said. "Come in, please."

Frank made the introductions in the entry. Jessica had a nice smile and brown eyes. As we shook hands, I sensed that she had good people skills.

Ian hesitated before shaking my hand, out of slight awkwardness.

Ian looked more as I imagined really intelligent people to look. He wore thick glasses and left his hair in a controlled mess. He was a bit round in the middle. He also had what appeared to be a mustard stain

on his shirt from the day before. Ian was younger than I had expected, just a few years older than I was. I imagined he was super intelligent.

We thought it would overwhelm them to walk directly to the lab and show them what was going on. We stood with them in the entry, while Adams explained to Jessica and Ian what they were about to see. Mostly, it was for their protection from fainting, which we thought was possible.

“Are you serious?” Jessica asked Adams. “I mean no offense, but that doesn’t seem possible.”

“Oh yes. It’s a real universe, very much like ours. Only microscopic in proportion.”

“And you have a planet in there, with a society?” Ian asked. Adams nodded. “A futuristic society?”

“That’s why you’re here,” Frank added.

“When can we see it?” Ian asked.

“As soon as you feel comfortable with that,” Adams said.

Jessica looked at Ian. He raised his eyes with anticipation.

Adams said, “It might be wise to follow us in, have a seat and then look at the monitors.”

We walked them down the corridor toward the control room. Jessica looked around as if for hidden cameras, like she wondered if a practical joke was being played on her.

We entered the lab and showed them to the chairs we had prepared. They both sat down. Then they lifted their eyes to the sea of monitors, several of which were focused on activities within a busy metropolis of Alpha 17.

Jessica started to laugh in awe. Ian’s reactions were more subdued.

A slow grin came over his face. I could tell they had no doubt of the project’s authenticity. I pointed out the galaxy and solar system that Alpha 17 belonged to. Then we gave them an overview of the planet and then the society. They were speechless. We showed them the city scenes we had been focusing on. Adams pointed out the varied structures and devices that had caught our attention.

Jim showed off his talents with Monitor One. He adjusted the focus to follow one of the personal flying devices, which we were now calling PFDs. Jim picked a young Alphan driver and buzzed alongside him throughout the city traffic. The young driver flew like a delivery boy. He weaved through the masses of commuters with aggressive turns, quick stops and starts. As Jim followed him, the effect was dizzying.

“Incredible!” they both gasped.

“That’s probably enough,” Whitney advised Jim, sensing it was becoming overwhelming to the arrivals.

Ian became sick first, using the bag we had provided for him. Upon seeing it, Jessica stood and made her way to the bathroom.

Adams reminded us, “We experienced these images over many days. Let’s give them time to feel comfortable with it all. Jim, try to help them ease into this.”

“Sorry.”

Within an hour, they were adjusted, excited and in awe like the rest of us about the prospects of the futuristic society. We showed them everything, continuing the tour of the other planets in our logs and finally back to Alpha 17. Jessica and Ian expressed a deep respect for all of us and especially for Adams.

“Thank you for this wonderful opportunity,” Jessica said to him.

“And thank you, Mr. Maxwell,” Ian said. Frank looked at him sternly, and Ian added, “I mean Frank.”

Jim liked having more people around, as he was getting used to socializing and showing off. Jim began to ask them question after trivial question until we had to remind him to pace himself.

“Hey Ian, what’s that in your shirt pocket?” Jim asked.

“Electronic games,” he answered.

“Can I play?”

“I don’t know,” Ian looked around to Adams and myself.

“You can watch Ian play it for starters, Jim,” I said. “But that will have to wait until later.”

“I can bring a copy on disc tomorrow,” Ian said. “I didn’t expect...”

“It’s okay,” Whitney said. “He’s just excited, meeting new people.”

Ian was an interesting character, unlike anyone I had ever known. Frank sang his praises with an arm around his shoulder.

“Ian left school early to work with us as a video game creator,” Frank told us as Ian hung his head in shyness. “He designed a line of three-dimensional combat games that sat on the shelf for years due to cost, but I loved the creativity. Amazing games. Then we moved Ian to automated machinery and then to the ranks of engineering and design. Then I got him working with Jessica, and the two have made tremendous achievements for my company. But there’s a side to Ian that never grew up, and he keeps a pocket version of his games with him for when he isn’t busy. A boy inside the man.”

“What’s Jessica’s story?” Jim asked.

“Jessica,” Frank continued as he walked behind her, “is like an extension of myself. She’s been with me since she graduated from college.”

“How long is that?” Jim asked.

“Jim, please,” Whitney hushed him.

“Jessica has a knack for problem solving and engineering,” Frank continued. “These two will be valuable additions to our team.”

As Frank spoke of her, I realized Jessica was not only very gifted, she was quite attractive. She wore the slightest makeup, highlighting sharp eyes. Her teeth were especially straight and white.

“I’m really pleased to be here,” she said. “We’ll do whatever we can to help you do what you do.” She spoke with ease and looked each of us in the eye as she did. Her presence allowed Ian to relax. I felt like I could get along with both of them.

In a review of the Alphan people, we buzzed down to a busy street corner to get a look at them up close. The first thing we noticed was that some of the pedestrians were robots. Many of them accompanied real Alphans, but some of the robots were doing their own things.

Some were cleaning the streets and sidewalks, while others appeared to be running errands. As for the Alphans themselves, the people had changed somewhat physically over the last hundred and twenty years.

“They’re a bit taller, more refined,” Whitney explained to our new colleagues. “Their faces are less hairy. They’re larger and probably stronger than their ancestors, and they move more gracefully.”

“How many generations have passed since you did this time leap thing?” Jessica asked.

“Only about five to six,” Whitney said.

“Are the changes more than you would have anticipated?”

“Yes.”

The clothing had changed as well. The basic garments of old had been replaced with a new type of body suit that was tailored to the curves and fit snugly. Solid, striking colors were the norm, compared to browns and grays from the past. Some clothing looked metallic and had a shiny, smooth appearance.

“Don’t know about the colors,” Jessica commented, “but the fabric is interesting.”

“What do you think, Ian?” I joked. “Would you like a revealing body suit like that?”

Ian was less interested in the clothing. “What about all this automation? It looks like robotics are doing everything.”

Modern gadgets were everywhere. Window cleaners used suction cups to scale the skyscrapers and wash the glass. Vehicles retained their shine from tiny cleaners that moved about the cars at certain stops. Auto taxis and pilots made rounds to give pedestrians rides. Much of the traffic in the skies seemed to be automated, though Alphans did fly some devices for themselves.

“This is my favorite,” Frank said, pointing to the air traffic. “Ian and Jess, I want you to focus on these flying things that all these commuters are using. Who would have thought that they’d have personal flying devices?”

Everybody loved watching the PFDs. They gave the individual the ability to fly most anywhere in a dynamic, simple-looking craft.

“This design doesn’t look very complicated,” Ian remarked after watching it for a few minutes.

Adams and Ian discussed the design, and Jessica made sketches to match their description.

Ian saw it as, “A lightweight frame around the pilot. A system of small, rotating turbine engines. The pilot stands with his arms out to the side. The craft is shaped like a cross around him.”

Adams estimated, “Maybe a hundred or two small but powerful turbines?”

They came up with a fairly plausible design for the frame and motors, as well as the changing angles of the turbines. Frank was delighted. One of the early questions from both Ian and Adams was what the crafts were using for power.

Jim attempted to identify any chemicals being emitted from the devices, though it was difficult for his sensors to be accurate with things so small. Plus, air movement around the device scattered any emissions there might have been.

Jessica took a cell phone from her pocket. “Margaret,” she said into it, “schedule a meeting with Bill from Lee Aviation sometime next week.” She looked at Frank, who nodded his approval.

“Not here, of course,” Adams whispered to her.

“In the main conference room,” she said to Margaret. “Of course,” she told Adams.

“That was fast,” I mentioned to Whitney.

Over the next few days, Adams worked with Ian and Jessica on the main monitors on several products, while Whitney and I used secondary monitors to make other observations. I taught Whitney how to adjust the cameras without Jim’s assistance. We updated our maps of the known cities and towns from before. We documented everything we saw that was new or unusual, whether it was a device someone was using, or the way Alphans were doing things, or even how they lived.

One advancement we noticed was the number of people living over the water. Alphans had developed many cities at sea, or aqua cities. They were sizeable floating layouts that included elaborate homes and business complexes and even parks. Every dwelling on the huge barges was close to the shoreline.

“A bit ostentatious,” Whitney observed.

I thought they were gorgeous. For the Alphans who made homes there, it looked like the ultimate in luxury, with lots of playful activities to do in and around the ocean. We found dozens of aqua cities, some permanently fixed in a calm location, others slowly drifting around the planet. Alphans by the dozens could be seen lying in lounge chairs in front of their homes, enjoying the good life.

“Is that what matters most?” Whitney remarked. “Lying around in the sun all day?”

“Sure beats working,” I said, defending the Alphans.

On the mainland we found many interesting types of land-based vehicles. The Alphans had two basic car styles. One looked rather traditional in body with the addition of a flat bottom, while the other looked like a large skateboard design. The latter had two wide wheels that ran before and behind the passenger compartment, and they had excellent cornering abilities. They also had an array of motorcycles that were flat-bottomed, which employed air and magnetic forces that enabled them to hover over the ground.

“Hardly anything relies on conventional tires,” Jessica mentioned.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” I agreed. “So, do you have a meeting planned for this too?”

“I have a few in mind,” she said. “No reason to get ahead of ourselves.”

Whitney and I analyzed the neighborhoods of Alpha 17. Their homes looked like upside-down cones with large round bases and pointy tops, similar to shapes we had seen from the downtown buildings, though not so tall. Some were shaped like pyramids. The neighborhoods were packed with them.

“More units occupy a smaller amount of land,” I realized. “The lots are small, but the homes are quite spacious.”

“Very good, Jon,” Whitney said. “And what do you think these huge, sun-facing windows are for?”

“Tanning rooms?”

“Ha ha.”

We looked through the glass on several of the homes and found plants and fruits growing.

Whitney remarked, “There aren’t any notable wires coming into the homes. I wonder if they’re also getting solar energy from these windows.”

“Why not?” I added. “Food and energy. Sounds like being totally self-sufficient.”

It was in the streets and playgrounds on Alpha 17 where I found two dynamic toys.

One was high-speed roller skates. The skates were long like skis, and they traveled down the road at frightening speeds. The riders wore a puffed-up body suit, with padding from head to toe. They held long poles in each hand for balance as they skated powerfully down the road.

I also noticed several older kids playing with something that, at first look, I thought was just a kite. But as I watched them, I realized that their feet were connected to a board that hovered over the ground. As the kite was pulled by air currents, the kids jumped on their boards and were whooshed away, holding on tightly to the kite handles. They soared along and jumped over things with great distance.

“Sweet!” I said, inserting a disk and getting my notepad for sketches.

“Jim, when you get a chance, I want you to help me make some drawings here for the skates and this hoverkite thing.”

“The board for the kite looks like reverse magnetism,” Jim observed.

This was a concept I had begun to understand through Ian’s discussions with Adams and Jessica. Many of the ground vehicles used this method, which cast a magnetic force onto a surface and then used opposing forces to float over that surface.

“Isn’t it just like a hovercraft?” I asked Ian.

“No. The Alphan devices create a field of energy to float over, instead of creating a force to move. It uses less energy while accomplishing greater results.”

Reverse magnetism was a big topic for weeks, since it was such a large part of ground transportation.

Jessica taught me some of the basics for studying design. The skates were easy. I just had to figure out the method that made the wheels spin so fast.

The hoverkite was a bit tougher. I understood the kite and harness well enough, but the trick would be designing the underside of the board. How did the battery work to cast the magnetic field, and how did the board resist that field? I had no idea. The others would be able to help with that, though I wanted to make

a contribution any way I could. Jim helped me occasionally, as we went over the design and mechanics, and Whitney worked with me from time to time.

Eventually, Ian and Adams made their breakthroughs with reverse magnetism, and to the amazement of everyone, we were beginning to come up with designs for similar products. Frank wanted to have a concise presentation for some of his investors as soon as possible. He was pleased that I had done so much good work on the skates and hoverkites.

As the weeks went by, we had plenty of new information. Frank entertained investors from many different markets. Jessica made presentations at Maxwell Enterprises, and the crew loved hearing from her once she returned. She often came back with stories of huge contracts that were in the works. I couldn't believe that I was a part of a team that was about to change the world in dramatic ways.

I needed a reality check from the lab, so after a long absence, I rode my bike over to the Star Bar for a beer one night. I felt bad that I hadn't seen Sam for so long.

"Well, I'll be," she said upon seeing me. "If it isn't my long-lost friend, Mr. Gruber." She poured me a beer. "We were going to send a search party after you."

"Good to see you," I said, leaning over the bar and giving her a kiss on the cheek. I put some money down on the counter.

Sam replied, "First one's on me." Then she realized how much money was there, and she asked, "Are you looking for change or something?"

"That's for you," I said, hoping she would forgive my absence in light of a big tip.

"I appreciate it, but seeing you is more important," she said as she pocketed the tip with a smile. "You're still working for that scientist, I assume."

"Yep."

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Great," I said, leaving it at that and drinking my beer. Sam knew it wasn't like me not to go into details.

"Can't talk about it?" she guessed.

"Nope," I said.

"Jon Gruber. You're in on something classified?" she exclaimed, as her eyes got wide with interest. A couple of drunks looked down the bar at me before returning to their dull stare at the TV.

"I wish I could tell you about it, Sam. There's so much I wish I could tell you."

"Remember what I said when you first got into this?" she asked me.

"What?"

"Don't forget us little people."

I spent the night chatting with her about the men she was interested in. She caught me up to date with some of the dirty jokes from the construction sites. After a couple of beers, I left her with another tip, and I wondered when I would be in to see her again.

*"Grateful for the addition of Jess and Ian. This project is turning into a gold mine. Who would have guessed? Funny to think I used to wonder if anything would ever come of it."*

- From p. 81 of Webster's journal.

(End of current sample)

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