

ANCHORBALL · LOW ORBIT CITY

NOT FROM HERE

Book One — The Factory Transmission

CHAPTER ONE

Every Morning, Everything, Rearranged

A free chapter from the Low Orbit City trilogy
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Every Morning, Everything, Rearranged

If we're in a simulation, one thing one will notice about the patterns we see is nothing repeats itself.

General things of course seem to repeat themselves — like seasons, or your dog's behavior, asking for treats when they come in.

But each season is different in so many ways.

Each time your dog comes in from being outside it's a different dog.

A person could observe these patterns for eternity and they will not repeat.

It's creation in every moment.

Never repeating, always observed.

Perhaps that's the point. To be here and observe — but not just observe, participate.

Me and Sol Joon, the Princess Queen of Low Orbit City.

And the undercurrent of it all is deep.

Deep. Abiding. Joy.

Here is the first thing you need to understand about Low Orbit City, and it is the sort of thing that sounds like a metaphor right up until it lands on your foot: the city is a cloud. Not a city in a cloud, the way Earth keeps building damp little towns up the sides of mountains and then acting surprised about

the fog. A cloud that is a city. A cloud hundreds of miles wide, and thousands of miles long, and a depth nobody has ever satisfactorily measured, because every committee assembled to measure it has gotten distracted partway down by something genuinely lovely and never filed the report.

It floats. It has always floated. It will, barring an unusually persuasive argument, go on floating.

And every single morning, without fail, without warning, and without anything you could reasonably call a reason, everything in it rearranges.

The boulevard you fell asleep beside is, by breakfast, a lagoon. The lagoon, by lunch, has politely become a library, and the library is embarrassed about it. Streets that ran east-and-west now run inward-and-up. The flowers — and this is true, and documented, and still nobody likes to talk about it at parties — the flowers dream, and you can tell what they dreamed about because they wear it: a tulip that dreamed of the ocean comes up faintly salty and blue at the edges and weeps with happiness if you mention boats. The streams sing, mostly in keys that haven't been invented, occasionally taking requests. The buildings nestle down into the cloud at dusk like enormous tired animals, and then, at some point in the small hours, they simply drop through it — the way rain does — and reassemble themselves somewhere new and considerably more interesting by dawn.

If you are now thinking, that sounds completely unliveable, how does anyone find their dentist, you have correctly identified the central genius of the place. In Low Orbit City you do not go to things. Things, broadly, arrive when you are ready for them, which is a far more efficient arrangement and only occasionally fatal to one's sense of self.

There are no maps. There was, once, a map. It is now a small, apologetic pond.

The morning we are concerned with began, as all mornings there begin, with LULU — a goldendoodle of suspicious intelligence, for whom arriving-first is not so much a thing she does as a thing she is. She is the punctuation the universe sets down before a sentence, so you know one is coming. She trotted across the fresh-laid morning, gave the air three professional sniffs, judged the day structurally sound and emotionally welcoming, and sat. This is the all-clear. Civilizations have run on less reliable signals.

A heartbeat later, a door appeared.

It is worth pausing on the doors, because the doors are the whole trick of the cosmos and almost everyone gets them wrong. They are keyhole doors, they open both ways, and they are the masterwork of a being named Captain Halftone von Lumen — though we should be careful with that name, because Von Lumen is also, depending on the minute, a smallish enthusiastic fellow called Willy. Willy is what Von Lumen relaxes into when he forgets to be a Professor, which is often, and a great relief to everyone.

The doors mean travel is easy. This cannot be overstated, and the universe has spent enormous energy understating it. You may go from a café here to a moon you're fond of to a Tuesday you'd like another crack at, and back, and no one is ever stranded. The entire concept of being stuck is regarded across forty thousand worlds as a quaint and faintly morbid local Earth custom, like taxidermy.

There is precisely one passage in all of creation that is genuinely hard, that costs something real and does not give it back. It is the door marked born human. Go through that one and you arrive perfect and screaming, and you forget everything — the cloud, the doors, the singing streams, the whole shimmering apparatus of where you came from. They call it the Forgetting. It is the most expensive ticket there is, and the queue for it, inexplicably, is enormous.

Through the door that morning stepped Willy, in full Willy mode: small, round, vibrating gently with the specific joy of a being who has just remembered that breakfast exists. He looked at the rearranged morning — the boulevard-now-lagoon, the bashful library — and said, in the local language:

"Mwrrp. Blubble-eeek. Hff hff."

We are going to render their speech in English from here on, as a courtesy, and you should know this is a tremendous and ongoing lie. Nobody in Low Orbit City speaks anything you would recognize. Their actual voices sound like dolphins arguing tenderly underwater, like frogs reading poetry, like a cartoon being gently inflated. What Willy emitted was closer to a happy plumbing noise. Translated, generously: "Oh, good. They moved the lake. I love it when they move the lake."

He was not alone for long, because nobody ever is, because that is rather the point. Bunni B Danny came round the corner of a building that had, overnight, decided to be mostly staircase. Bunni B Danny is the one you'd want — everyone's everyman, big-hearted and bigger-grinned, fiercely loyal, helplessly funny, with the rare and genuinely useful talent of making any room, lagoon, or rearranged catastrophe of architecture feel like somewhere you'd belonged all along. His ears were up. His ears are usually up. Down ears, on Bunni, are a galactic emergency, and have happened twice.

"You know what I've decided this morning, freshly, on no evidence whatsoever?" he said, surveying the lagoon as it lapped hopefully at the staircase-building like a dog that wants in.

"Tell me," said Willy.

"That the trouble with most beings is they keep trying to remember where they put things — when the whole entire point" — he gestured at the city, which had spent the night enthusiastically not staying where it was put — "is to keep being surprised by where things turn out to be."

It is the sort of thing he says forty times a day. It is the sort of thing that sounds like a joke. It is, in fact, one of the truest things anyone in this book will say, and it has snuck up on you disguised as a rabbit being cheerful — which is exactly how the important things prefer to travel.

What happened next happened loudly, because it involved Gnash. There are quiet arrivals in Low Orbit City, and there is Gnash, who announces himself the way a foghorn announces fog, if the foghorn were also delighted to be the foghorn. A magnificent disaster of a creature: pink all over, swaddled in a hooded jacket of multicolored camouflage strung end to end with small rubber ducks that squeaked in approximate harmony, olive cargo trousers, sneakers in four arguing colors, two enormous brown clawed feet, and a mouth — a mouth, friends — a glossy pink cathedral around a wall of white teeth and a joy so total it had no room left over for an indoor voice.

He threw the horns with both hands. The ducks squeaked. A stream changed key to match him.

"GOOD! MORNING! CITY!" announced Gnash, and three buildings woke up, and the lagoon got excited and tried to be a fountain.

This is the other thing about every morning rearranging itself: it has to be re-loved into shape. The flowers will dream, but somebody has to be glad about it. Gnash's whole vocation — which he takes as seriously as anything has ever been taken, which on Gnash registers as not seriously at all — is to be the first one glad, at volume, before the day has finished deciding what it is. A big enough Gnash-laugh, it's said, is one of the things that helps the city settle into its new arrangement, the way one confident handclap can convince a room of strangers it's a party. He laughed now, hugely, at nothing, at everything, and a half-built plaza three streets over relaxed and finished itself.

And high at the center of it all, on the cloud's highest and quietest cloud, where she stays and has always stayed and never once descends, Sol Joon caught the light of the new morning and turned it, very slightly — the way you'd tilt a mirror to land a warm patch of sun on someone you love who hadn't yet noticed they were cold.

Down in the lagoon-that-was-a-boulevard, Willy looked up for no reason at all, into a window that hadn't existed yesterday, and saw — just for a second, only ever a second, only ever a reflection — a face he knew better than his own. He didn't wave. You don't. You just keep going up.

Not from here, he thought, with the oldest and best feeling there is. Just visiting.

— END OF CHAPTER ONE —

Not From Here continues in Book One: The Factory Transmission.
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