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## Landscaping

Raquel A. Delgado  
*Gettysburg College*

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## Landscaping

### Author Bio

Raquel Delgado (class of '23) likes stories so much that she decided to try and make a living off of them. That's all there really is to say on the matter.

# Landscaping

RAQUEL A. DELGADO

Ninety couldn't understand humanity for the life of her.

The most obvious example as to why was their use of beds for sleeping. Sure, she'd understand if they only used them for naps, but nope. She had to spend her eight hours of interrupted sleep on a rickety amalgamation of foam and springs. And she had to rely on herself to get up! The fact that some planets didn't even have stasis sleep was inconvenient.

She could've used stronger words than inconvenient, but she didn't want to talk down to her host.

"It could be a lot worse." Jackie laughed, cracking open a can of Sprite at an hour way too late for a human to be needing its effects. "You could be sleeping on the dirt."

Ninety's wings shuddered at the thought. They were already tattered as it was. She could only imagine what a planet covered in rocks would do to them.

The guest room wasn't completely pitch black. There was a machine on top of the ceiling that regularly flashed red. The window was open to the land-road, and Ninety could hear the roar of the land-cars making their way across them. The wallpaper was cream, the type of white that, even in a room that has no light, still manages to make itself brighter. It was one of the strangest things that she'd ever experienced, being alone with the white.

Sometime in the tossing and turning and trying not to think about the white, Ninety fell asleep. It wasn't a perfect sleep, but it was the best sleep she was going to manage for a while.

...

Ninety couldn't leave Jackie's apartment. This was clear just from a glance; no one would take a look at a near six-foot tall beetle person the night after a small meteor crashed in the local park and not immediately call the cops. Therefore, she was tasked to keep put until Jackie got back from her desk job. It was probably gonna be boring as all hell, but if it meant Ninety was gonna be okay, it was gonna be worth it.

It wasn't all boring, though. Ninety's favorite part of her new home were the paintings that littered the walls. She didn't think that

organic art would look that good. Heck, she didn't think she'd see organic art in person at all. It always seemed to her like a relic of a bygone era, only seen on the digital pages of the Galactica Curricula—and even then, only on the first few pages as a notebook on pre-federation history. That was the biggest flaw with the Galactic Federation; they were so consumed with their future that they had a tendency to overlook the past.

Her favorite was a landscape painting, though Ninety wasn't sure that the cascading waterfall pictured was anywhere near this urbanized patch of land. If her ship wasn't broken, she'd probably take the time to look for that waterfall herself, instead of just looking at the painting on the wall. But the painting provided its own sort of beauty to it.

If she squinted in just the right way, she could see the pigments clump together, and form their own landscapes on the canvas. It was two works of art at once; the depiction and the craftsmanship. And, in the hours in the house that she spent alone, hoping desperately that no one on the highway could see the strange creature through the pull-down curtains of the apartment, it felt like the only thing on Earth that would give her comfort.

...

Ninety gave Jackie a spare translator over her lunch; it was unfair that she was kind enough to keep her in her house without anything in return. The least she could give her was someone to talk to.

Jackie fiddled around with the brooch the translator was being held in while Ninety formally introduced herself. Her face grew puzzled.

“Yo, is this thing broken?”

Ninety blushed as much as someone with a carapace could. “Oh god, these things aren't supposed to break so soon! I'm so sorry, am I just speaking gibberish right now?”

Jackie chuckled nervously, the sight of a weird beetle alien fervently apologizing being the weirdest thing she saw all week. “If you were speaking gibberish, I wouldn't have been able to hear you apologizing. It's just that when you say your name, it just comes out as numbers. Is that normal?”

Ninety breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, that. When my planet first joined the Galactic Federation, we were never able to come to a consensus on how to translate our names. The G.F. decided that as a placeholder, they'd translate names literally, and they just come out as numbers. It stuck after a while.”

“...Weird.” The little kitchen fell silent for a moment, before Jackie tried to jumpstart the conversation again. “Makes me wonder what sort

of hell the G.F. is having collecting all the languages on Earth and putting them in the translaty thing.”

“They’re just doing that as a precaution. Once Earth joins it, they’re gonna pick a language and they’re gonna stick with it.”

Jackie scoffed. “What would a Galactic government want with this hellhole? We’re all probably gonna die before we join.”

Ninety made a double take at the comment. “What?”

“How much do you know about Earth?”

“As much as I’ve learned from my scouting missions. We’re trying to find out whether or not Earth’s worthy to join the Galactic Federa-”

“And it won’t. We’re probably gonna be thrust into Nuclear War, and if we don’t, we’ll die from climate change. Everyone’s gonna die in ten years, and nothing of value will be lost.”

Ninety’s heart broke. “That’s not true! There are a lot of things on Earth that are cool!”

“Name one.”

“I mean, Earth’s the only place in the Galaxy with physical art left.”

Jackie paused, almost shocked at Ninety’s words. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, the paintings across your walls. They’re some of the best art that I’ve ever seen.”

“Then you must’ve seen some pretty shitty art. Why would these be seen as the reason why Earth should be saved? Why would anyone think they’re anything else but mediocre pieces of trash?”

“So why do you have them? You must like them a little bit for them to be hung up everywhere.”

Jackie couldn’t think of a response that didn’t make her seem like a hypocrite. The conversation ended there, and Jackie left the table with her food in her hand.

...

Ninety wasn’t going to sleep anyway, so why wouldn’t she investigate the commotion downstairs?

Jackie had a picture of a babbling brook on her TV, and an easel with blotches of paint scattered around it. Ninety could almost see the smoke coming out of her head as she tried to put her brush to the paper. Yet she wasn’t moving. She didn’t even notice her coming down the stairs.

Jackie sighed. She picked up the canvas and tossed it to the side. Ninety got a chance to pick it up.

The sky was cotton candy colored, and cut through the bottom was a river. Touching it, the paint had dried, and was able to feel the texture of

the river. From what little was there, it looked beautiful.

“It’s wonderful.”

When she looked up from the painting, Jackie was red as a beet.

“It’s not that wonderful. It’s not like you’d see this thing in a museum.”

“Did you make the ones around the house?”

“Shut up.”

“I mean it, they’re really great! How do you even make these?”

“It’s not even that hard, stop making a big deal out of this.” Jackie realized she was yelling, and tried to quiet down before continuing. “You haven’t seen any other paintings, of course you think this junk’s a masterpiece.”

Ninety sighed. “They’re not junk. They’re special.” She paused. “This is exactly why I think Earth’s worth saving.”

“Not like the Mona Lisa or anything?” She remembered. “You... know what the Mona Lisa is.”

“What I do know is that there’s nothing like this anywhere else in the universe. And I think that...”

Ninety looked at Jackie in her eyes. She looked like any word wasn’t going to be enough to improve the painting in her eye. She looked like every word of praise was going to be followed with a ‘but’. She tried something else instead.

“I want you to teach me.”

Jackie looked shocked; more shocked than when she got the compliments. “Me?”

“Yeah. These are gorgeous, and I wanna learn how to make these when I get home. Can you teach me?”

Jackie looked to the side, conflicted. “I’m sure there’re better people that you can learn from.”

“You said it yourself. Earth might not be long for this world.” Ninety sighed. “But if painting was to survive, if painting is the one thing Earth’s remembered for, I’d like for your name to be right beside it in the history books.”

Jackie couldn’t believe her. “But why me?”

Ninety smiled. “Because you’re the one that found me.”

Jackie didn’t know what to say. She shifted in her spot on the couch before sighing. “One lesson, okay? And if it isn’t good, you can quit anytime.”

Ninety beamed. “It’s okay. It’s gonna be worth it.”

...

Ninety still couldn't sleep that night. A combination of the bed, excitement for her lesson and the passing cars kept her awake for longer than she thought was necessary. Jackie was right, in a sense. There was a lot that was just plain annoying about Earth.

But, holding the unfinished river by her bedside at least gave her a little peace. The planet wasn't all bad. She could make this place a home.