

# NINETY-FIVE PERCENT SAFE

Caroline M. Yoachim

**Caroline M. Yoachim <<http://carolineyoachim.com>> is the author of over two dozen short stories, appearing in markets such as *Lightspeed*, *Interzone*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. The author lives in Seattle and loves cold cloudy weather, which means that she doesn't have to embark on an emigration journey that's . . .**

## NINETY-FIVE PERCENT SAFE

Nicole went to visit her best friend, Grant, the day before his family left for Opilio. She was jealous that he'd be part of the second wave—the first wave had already done the hardest work of establishing the colonies, but the floating cities would be nearly empty, an abundance of unclaimed living space. She'd heard rumors that families had so much space that each person had their very own room—a place that was theirs even if they went out.

"I got you something," Nicole said. She held out a small cube with a mini mint plant inside. The four-inch cube provided everything the tiny mint plant needed to survive a trip through space. Considering how small it was, the plant had been astonishingly expensive. Nicole had traded all her recreation credits for the last three months to get Livvy to give it to her.

He shook his head. "You keep it."

Nicole frowned. "You don't like it?"

"It's amazing, but I don't have anything for you. Keep it, and bring it to me someday in Opilio."

Grant had it in his head that this was a temporary goodbye, but there was no way Nicole's mom would ever let her ride the worm—5 percent of the pods that went into the wormhole never came back out. No one knew why. "We aren't coming to Opilio, Grant. Take the plant?"

"The colony is a better place, a better life. Think about it—floating cities in an orange sky. Jellyfish the size of a space station. Here, I'll pass you the commercial." Grant put his hand over hers, and when she authorized the transmission he copied the data to her storage implant. "You'll be sixteen in a couple of years, but if you get tired of waiting, you can go as a default."

"And then what, I can come live with you?" Nicole tried to think of something else

to say, but thinking about Grant leaving made her want to cry, and talking about Earth stuff seemed pointless now. She hated goodbyes. She shouldn't even have come over today.

"Let's get this over with. Bye, Grant. Don't be wormfood." She tried to make her voice sound light and completely failed. She hugged him and then bolted out of his family's homespace before she burst into tears, barely hearing him call out goodbye behind her. She felt like hurling the mint plant at the wall, but she knew she'd regret it later, so she tucked it into her purse.

The walk home took her past the base of the default elevator, a thin column of metal stretching up to the cavernous ceiling of the city. Baine was gray on gray on gray, an underground city of steel towers where the tallest buildings doubled as supports to keep the roof from falling in. Above the roof was the topside station, constantly bombarded by the raging snowstorms of nuclear winter.

Even the clothes the city provided were gray, although these could at least be programmed to look more colorful if you had the credits to buy overlays. Nicole's jumpsuit was crimson with a scatter of black flowers to accent her waistline. It was prettier than the navy blue student uniform, but Grant hadn't said a thing about the outfit. She wondered if he'd noticed, then reminded herself that he was leaving.

"You lost, sweetheart?"

Nicole flinched away from the voice, a man dressed in a default gray jumpsuit. She shook her head and kept walking. Mom had warned her a bunch of times to keep clear of the default elevator, but it was the fastest route to Grant's building. The area was always crowded. Hundreds of people in default gray lined up each morning to ride the pods to the surface and then onward to the colonies.

A few miles away there was an elevator for people who could afford to pay. That was where Grant's family would go. That elevator had scheduled departures and nicer pods, but the wormhole ate everyone indiscriminately, so his odds of getting to Opilio were the same as the defaults waiting here.

Nicole paused at the entry to her building to reprogram her clothes to basic navy before going in, but before she could manage the change Mom came up behind her.

"Nicole Morgana Blackensmith, please tell me you did *not* go walking around in that outfit."

\* \* \*

When they got inside, Mom programmed their homespace into a single room with an old-style wood table in the center. Nicole suspected that Mom called this particular configuration "family meeting," but Nicole called it "Mom is cranky."

Mom sat across from Nicole. Dad sat at the far end of the table with three-year-old Tommy on his lap. Tommy was fiddling around with a game cube that was programmed way too advanced for him, a racing game with colorful cars on curvy looping tracks. He twisted the cube around, then shook it. When the cars skidded off the tracks and crashed, he laughed.

"Your father and I want to talk to you about . . . well, about a lot of things. The clothes that you downloaded, and that commercial that Grant gave you—"

"Hey," Nicole protested, "I put that on my private storage drive!"

"We can monitor everything you download until you turn sixteen, young lady, and I'm concerned about this ad. It makes the colonies look like some glorious vacation destination," Mom said, "and I don't want you to have such an unrealistic idea of what things are like out there."

Nicole projected the ad into the empty air above the table. If Mom was going to get into her private storage, what was the point of keeping it private? The commercial started with a hazy orange cloud, and then a pair of translucent jellyfish-creatures drifted across the sky. Aureliads. Tommy poked his hand into the projection, trying to

touch a low-dangling tentacle.

The image shifted to show an aureliad next to one of Opilio's floating colonies, domed cities the same size as the massive jellyfish that shared the sky. "Come celebrate the wonders of a better life on Opilio," the recorded voice on the commercial said, "see the aureliads—"

Mom shut down the projection.

"Aureliad!" Tommy yelled, pointing at the spot where the projection had been. "Aureeeeeeliad!"

"No tantrums, please," Mom said calmly. "You and Nicole go play."

The calm quiet voice meant Mom was furious. Nicole took Tommy to the other end of the room. Mom pulled up a sound barrier, but if Nicole didn't get any privacy she didn't see why Mom and Dad should either. It only took her a couple of minutes to hack through.

"Rozy, don't do this," Dad said. "She's upset that her friend is leaving, and if you go down hard about the ad she downloaded it's only going to make the colonies look that much more appealing. She'll go for sure the minute she turns sixteen."

"Don't you Rozy me. You think I'm being unreasonable because I don't want her facing a 5 percent chance of turning into wormfood?"

Tommy pulled on Nicole's arm. "Aureliads?"

"Is it really such a terrible idea?" Dad asked. "We could all go, leave this overpopulated cave behind and live in the clouds. You're only looking at the cost, but what about the reward? There's more space on Opilio. You could have that garden you've always wanted."

"A garden?" Mom asked. "I can't believe you're falling for all this propaganda, too. They send criminals and defaults through that wormhole, and do you know why? Because either they end up on the colonies or they disappear into a collapsed worm. No more problem. And you want that for our family?"

Nicole was surprised at the turn the argument was taking. Her parents were big on presenting a united front. Nicole had known that Mom was against Opilio, but she hadn't realized that Dad was interested in going.

Too bad Mom was more stubborn than Dad. They'd stay trapped in Baine, and even with both her parents working overtime they'd all live in one tiny room that they had to reprogram any time they wanted to eat or sleep or have "family meetings."

"Aureliads, *please*?" Tommy asked.

"Not right now, Tommy," Nicole answered. Projecting the commercial again would make Mom even angrier and remind her to clear it off Nicole's private storage, which hopefully she'd forget to do.

Tired of being ignored and denied, Tommy threw a screaming, kicking, flailing tantrum. Nicole pinged against the sound barrier until Mom and Dad came over to calm him down.

\* \* \*

Saturday morning, Nicole sat in bed with the mini mint cube in her lap, staring at a wall-projected list of pod departures and arrivals. Grant's pod had departed forty-seven minutes ago. Wormhole travel was instantaneous, but it took time to get the pods up the elevator, launched into the wormhole, and unloaded on the other station. News of a pod's safe arrival then had to be brought back to Earth on a returning pod.

The lists updated about every five or ten minutes as pods arrived back at the top-side stations all around the world. Earth's remaining cities shared the updates brought back by each pod. G114 was lost, G115–G122 made it through, G123 was lost. The next thirty-three pods all went through. G149, the pod that Grant's family was on, made it.

Grant sent her a message a few pods later, “Not tasty enough to be wormfood, ended up as wormshit instead.”

Nicole laughed harder than the old joke merited; she’d been more worried than she realized. The sound woke Tommy, and Nicole cursed herself for being too lazy to set up a sound barrier around his bed. Mom and Dad were working the weekend, *again*, leaving her to watch Tommy all day.

She sent a message back to Grant, “Too bad you weren’t worm barf, then we could hang out today.”

She watched cartoons with Tommy while she waited for an answer, but nothing came. Someone pinged the door. Nicole read the ID—space allocation services. Damn. She opened a small window in the top of the door.

“You’ve been reassigned to a new homespace, follow me please. We will ship your personal items separately.” A young woman wearing the lime green uniform of city officials stood outside the door.

“My parents are both at work,” Nicole said.

“You’ve been reassigned. I will wait while you contact your guardian for permission to come with me.”

Nicole called Mom, who double-checked what was going on and told Nicole she’d have to go. It was their fourth reassignment in six months, and every time their room was smaller. At least this time they stayed in the same building. Nicole held Tommy’s hand as they followed the woman down a long corridor and then three floors up on the elevator. A box arrived a few minutes later with the family’s personals—Dad’s ancient paper copy of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, a few old game cubes, a stack of ancient datachips, and a yellowed paper packet of broccoli seeds. Seeds that would never sprout, because Mom wasn’t brave enough to take the risk.

Tommy began wailing that he didn’t like the new homespace. Desperate to get him to shut up, Nicole showed him the Opilio commercial while she studied their new room. She paced the length of the walls, and sure enough, it was smaller than the old one. This had to stop. Mom might not see that life on Opilio was better for the family, but Dad thought so. If she and Tommy went first, her parents would have no choice but to follow, and the whole family would be better off.

Nicole reprogrammed her clothing templates to the default.

Tommy stared.

“Big trouble,” he told her.

“Come here, I’ll do yours.”

“I do it.” He reprogrammed his outfit. Nicole hadn’t realized the little squirt could dress himself.

The default elevator wasn’t quite close enough for Tommy to walk, so Nicole took him on the blue-line moving walkway. The breeze from the moving belt wasn’t enough to sweep away the odors of sweat and perfume. They passed a lot of buildings, mostly academic offices and classrooms by day, residential space at night.

When they got off the walkway, Tommy pointed at the metal elevator tube, extending up all the way to the top of the city. “Up?”

“Yeah, it’s an elevator, like we have in our building,” Nicole explained. “We’re going up.”

Hundreds of defaults stood in a line that spiraled out from the base of the elevator and filled the surrounding courtyard. They huddled together in clumps, periodically trudging forward as the line moved. They didn’t look happy to be leaving Earth, but surely their lives on Opilio would be better than the default gray nothing they had here.

Nicole made her way to the back of the line, dragging Tommy along behind her. A pod filled up and made a low rumbling noise as it accelerated up the elevator tube

toward the surface.

The woman in front of them had a grandmotherly look about her, with hair exactly the color of her default-gray jumpsuit. She leaned heavily on her walker as the line moved forward. When they stopped, the woman looked back at Nicole. "Aren't you a little young?"

"No." Nicole turned away, embarrassed that the old woman had caught her staring.

"I'm three," Tommy said.

"That's a good age to be," the woman told him. Then, to Nicole, "No need to get snippy, I wasn't passing judgment."

Nicole smiled in a way that she hoped was polite without inviting further conversation.

"I'm Sorna, and," she waved to a boy standing in front of her in line, "this is my grandson, Christopher. Fine boy. About your age, maybe. Fifteen, are you?"

"Fourteen," Nicole admitted. Did defaults have to be of age to ride the elevator? The uniformed officials that were milling around didn't seem to be checking anybody's ID. They were busy directing the movement of the line and keeping the peace.

Christopher had his back turned and muffs over his ears. Not muffs, Nicole realized, but headphones. He wasn't wired with implants. Probably most defaults weren't, it was expensive. Sorna was staring at her.

"I'm Nicole. This is Tommy." First names wouldn't be enough for Sorna to figure out they weren't supposed to be there. "You said your grandson is fifteen? He looks older."

"Sixteen. When you get to be my age, there's not much difference between sixteen and fourteen. I got grandkids from three to twenty-two. Lots of family here in line. That's Christopher's dad there at the front end of the family, never could abide that man." Sorna waved toward a surly-looking man about thirty people ahead of them. "Since my daughter Evie died, he's done nothing but drink and piss—excuse my language—and now he's got little choice but to go to the colonies."

"There's so many of you," Nicole said.

Tommy nodded. He liked to play as though he were part of grown-up conversations, even when he didn't understand what people were saying.

"A bigger family means more mouths to feed, more rent to pay, and more medical bills," Sorna snapped.

"Sorry." Nicole hadn't meant to make her angry.

"No, you didn't mean anything by it," Sorna said. "I failed them. I always worked a couple of jobs, sometimes three, but it was never enough. We're a sickly lot, too much medical debt to ever hope to pay it off. It'd almost be a blessing if the worm takes us."

They stood quietly for a while, long stretches of waiting punctuated by occasional bursts of movement. Nicole fished a couple of protein bricks out of her purse and gave one to Tommy while she munched on the other one. It was time for his nap, and after a while he started nodding off every time the line stopped.

"What happens if you don't all end up in the same pod?" Nicole asked.

"We'll go separate," Sorna said. "We tried to count up, but people come and go from the line . . ." Mom would've insisted that the whole family go together. The thought made Nicole pause. Mom would be madder than a topside snowstorm when she found out what Nicole was doing. Why couldn't she see that living in the clouds was better than being buried under the surface? Ninety-five percent safe was good odds and the reward would be worth the risk.

Nicole stared at the gray metal "sky" of Blaine. The upper dome was dotted with yellow lights that illuminated the city for daytime. There weren't any windows to the surface; there was nothing to see up there but snow. She thought about the ad Grant had given her. What a wonderful thing it would be, to live in a floating city with huge viewing windows onto a beautiful sky.

The line moved forward.

Most of Sorna's family got into a pod, but it filled up. The doors closed and the pod accelerated up the elevator shaft. Another identical pod rose up from below. Plain metal spheres dotted with small windows. No point to anything fancy, since eventually all the pods would be eaten by the worm.

The pod doors opened and the line moved forward. The wheels of Sorna's walker scraped on the metal floor inside. Nicole followed her. Christopher was in their pod too. He made no sign of knowing or caring that his father had gone in the other pod.

Following the instructions that blared over speakers inside the pod, everyone strapped themselves into seats mounted in a big circle along the curved walls. Sorna pushed a button on her walker, and it folded up small enough for her to slide it into the bin under her seat. Nicole sat down next to Sorna and strapped Tommy into the seat on her other side. Tommy was only half awake as they got into the pod, and as soon as he was belted in his head drooped over to rest against Nicole's arm. He drooled a big blob of spit onto the sleeve of her jumpsuit.

At first, all Nicole could see through the tiny windows was the inside of the elevator tube rushing by. When the pod reached the surface, the elevator tube opened up into a set of vertical tracks. There was a brief glimpse of snow and a howl of angry wind, and then they were above the clouds.

Tiny points of light appeared against the darkness. Stars. Nicole called up some skymaps and saved them to the not-so-private local storage on her implant, alongside Grant's commercial. She'd seen skymaps before, but she hadn't realized the stars would be so small.

"Shouldn't we have stopped by now for the topside station?" Nicole asked, peering at Sorna through the dim light inside the pod. Her arm was falling asleep from the weight of Tommy's head.

"Oh, child, you got on not knowing? They don't let us off until we're through the worm. Last thing they need is a bunch of defaults clogging up the station."

"Oh." Nicole tried to stay calm. She thought she'd have a last chance to bail out—to cut things off if she'd had enough adventure. Grant had told her how it worked with the private pods, and she hadn't known the default elevator was any different.

Nicole hadn't even sent a message to her parents to tell them where she and Tommy had gone. She'd planned to do that from the station. She started composing something, then realized her connection to Baine was gone.

The interior light went out.

"That's normal," Sorna whispered.

"Quit talking to the stow, Gran," Christopher said. "She got herself into this, and worse, she brought some unsuspecting toddler with her. She's just some rich kid playing default for a free vacation. When we get to Opilio, she'll message her family and they'll send money to ship her precious ass home in a private pod."

"I will not," Nicole snapped. Her parents had enough money for a private pod to Opilio, but they weren't so well off that they could afford the price of a trip back to Earth. Oh wormshit, what had she done? She and Tommy couldn't go back now, even if they wanted to.

Sorna patted her on the shoulder. "Christopher, be nice. Scared is scared."

"It makes me mad, that's all. Serve her right if the worm eats her on the trip home."

"Christopher," Sorna said. "Go back to your music, and leave the poor girl alone."

"She should've left us alone," he said.

The walls vibrated, and the force of the launch pressed Nicole down against her chair. Through the tiny windows, she could see Earth's horizon stretched out in a fingernail crescent of white and blue.

Their pod detached from the shuttle. "Is that supposed to happen?"

Sorna nodded. "Watch Polaris."

"Why?" Nicole found the point of light that was labeled as the North Star in her skymaps.

"That's where they anchored the mouth of the worm."

The star moved.

It jumped to the left of where it had been. No . . . it split. There were six other stars, in a circle around the spot where Polaris had been.

"Lensing," Nicole whispered. She'd learned about it in school, the way the gravity of the wormhole bent light around it to create a ring of stars. Back then she'd thought the ring of stars was pretty. Now they were the teeth of the open-mouthed worm about to eat her.

Everything she and Grant had joked about was real. Would she be wormfood or wormshit? The walls of the pod clanged and rattled. Nicole clutched her purse in her lap. She could feel the corners of her mint-plant cube pressing through the thin fabric. Around her, people joined hands with their neighbors, praying. Sorna reached out and Nicole took her hand. She put her other hand over Tommy's, holding his tiny fingers as he slept.

The pod passed into the center of the circle of stars.

\* \* \*

Discontinuity.

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Nicole stared out the window. Something had happened, an odd sort of blink, but not with her eyes. The view was much the same, except she couldn't make out the worm teeth stars, and her skymaps didn't recognize the constellations.

A cheer went up among the other travelers.

"Smile, dearie, we made it," Sorna said.

Nicole searched the sky for the bright colors of the Crab Nebula, but all she saw was stars in an ordinary black sky, "Are we in the wrong place? Shouldn't it be more colorful?"

"Arrivals go through the space station, rich girl. Those orange skies you saw in all the ads are only once you get to the planet," Christopher sneered.

"But aren't we in the Crab Nebula?"

"Not as pretty up close as it is from far away." Christopher glared at her. "Which is true for a lot of things."

The pod docked with the Crab Nebula's worm station, and the doors opened onto a narrow metal hallway. A pair of station officers came into the pod to make sure everyone got off. Grant was right, everyone was welcome in the colonies, but travel back to Earth was strictly regulated. Earth was overpopulated, and they didn't want colonists coming back home.

This would be their home now. Hers and Tommy's, and her parents' when they came. There was no doubt in Nicole's mind that they would come. The only question was how many years she'd be grounded once they arrived.

The gravity on the transfer station was wrong, too low, but one of the station officers handed her a set of magnets for her shoes, and a smaller pair for Tommy. Tommy wasn't all the way awake yet, so he didn't complain when she put his on for him.

"Please follow me to the immigration area. There are screens with recent arrival information, if you have need to know."

The group moved in a herd, packed together, following the officer. They passed a window, and Nicole caught her first glimpse of Opilio, angry red with swirling storms. Tommy pulled on her hand, he wanted her to lift him up so he could see better, but the crowd pushed them past the portal. He grabbed at Nicole's arms and

dragged his feet and whined until she picked him up and carried him, which actually wasn't too bad in the lighter gravity.

"Miss Blackensmith?"

Nicole turned, then realized that she hadn't told anyone in the pod her last name. A young woman in a dark blue uniform approached her. The uniform was too big, and it bunched up in odd places.

"Miss Blackensmith," the woman repeated. The voice didn't sound female; maybe the officer was male. "We will go to a private waiting area. Your parents—"

"I'm fine staying with the group," Nicole interrupted. "No need for special treatment."

"Me too," Tommy added, finally starting to perk up. "Special treatment."

Nicole walked with the rest of the group, carrying Tommy piggyback. The officer followed her. The hallway opened into an open chamber. A few people gathered near a large window with sweeping views of the planet below, but everyone else went to the arrival screens. The data on the screens was much the same as the feed that Nicole had watched on her implants back on Earth, listing the status of all the latest pods. Nicole tried to establish a connection, but her access codes from Baine didn't work here on the station.

Nicole saw Sorna and Christopher studying the arrival screens. The old woman leaned against her walker with one arm and hugged her grandson with the other. The other pod, the one with the rest of their family, hadn't made it.

It was one thing to know that not every pod went through, but Nicole had seen those people. She tried to call up their faces in her memory, but she only remembered one, Christopher's father. The boy who had been stoic and surly the entire trip was sobbing. She wanted to say something, but she didn't know what to say. He probably wouldn't have wanted to hear it from her anyway, even if she could come up with the words.

"Miss Blackensmith, you must come with me now."

\* \* \*

Nicole spent the night with Tommy in one of the station's private waiting rooms. Her parents had needed time to settle their affairs on Earth, and Mom sent firm instructions that they were not to leave their room. Nicole wanted to explore the station, but given the amount of trouble she was already in, she stayed put.

"I'm bored," Tommy said.

Nicole didn't answer. Tommy had declared his boredom once every two minutes for the last half hour. Nicole gave him a game cube from her purse, but he wasn't interested unless Nicole played too, and she wasn't in the mood to entertain. Mom and Dad were on their way, which was exactly what she'd wanted, but after seeing that the other pod—the pod full of people she'd seen with her own eyes—hadn't made it, she couldn't help but worry.

The waiting room windows were pointed away from the planet, and Nicole could see the region of sky where pods appeared. The tail of the worm, the white hole. The place where the worm would shit out her parents.

Farther in the distance was the mouth of the Earthbound worm. A pod, probably empty since so few people actually traveled back to Earth, disappeared into the black hole.

A few seconds later, a different pod exploded into existence, reentering the Universe in a bright flash of fire. The pod decelerated as it approached the station. The first few times it had been interesting to watch, but a couple of hundred pods had come and they were still waiting.

"Can we go home now?" Tommy asked.

Nicole shook her head. She pulled the mini mint cube out from her purse. It looked much the same as it had on Earth, unaffected by the lower gravity of the station. Somewhere in the red and orange clouds below them, Grant was getting settled into

his new home. Would he want the plant now that she was here? She couldn't believe it was only the day before yesterday that they'd been arguing over the plant back on Earth.

The door to the waiting room opened.

"Daddy!" Nicole and Tommy cried out in unison. She let Tommy down, and he wobbled over to Dad and glommed onto his leg.

"Where's Mom?" Nicole asked, peering into the hallway behind Dad. "I know she's probably really mad, but—"

"Rosaline isn't here?"

Nicole shook her head.

"She said it would be better. With the statistics. We had to come separately. I told her to take the first pod. I should have gone first."

"Mommy?" Tommy asked, hesitant. He started to cry, agitated by Dad's lack of composure. Nicole couldn't process what was happening. They were here to start their better life, with gorgeous sky views of orange clouds and aureliads. Mom would come around to the idea eventually.

"No, Tommy, Mommy can't be here."

Mom had tried to come. She was against the whole thing from the start, but she'd still tried to come, once she knew that Nicole and Tommy were here.

"This a bad place," Tommy said. "I want to go home."

"Shut up, Tommy."

"Nicole—"

"Shut up!" Nicole was frantic, angry. This wasn't how it was supposed to work. Mom was supposed to yell at them, to tell her what a stupid reckless thing she'd done. She couldn't be dead. Mom would never get on a pod and risk becoming worm-food. She was on Earth, she had to be, fretting and worrying like always.

Nicole could almost convince herself, until she looked at Dad's face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I wish you'd been more patient, is all. If you'd given me a little more time I might have convinced her, and we could have all come together." He picked up Tommy, who kept calling for Mom as if he could magically summon her by repeating her name.

They took the shuttle to one of the floating cities. *Dawn Treader*. Mom would have enjoyed the ride, in spite of herself. The orange sky was cut with shifting bands of blood-red aurora, streaks of color where the radiation from the Crab Nebula was blocked by the atmosphere of Opilio.

They descended into the swirling storms, and the shuttle bounced and shook. Underneath the more turbulent layers were the floating cities, hazy in the distance. The shuttle pilot pointed to something, off to the right.

"Aureliad," Tommy whispered.

It was rusty orange like the sky, and as big as the floating cities. The aureliad drifted in the currents of the sky, tentacles trailing behind it for miles. It swept the sky for planktos, tangling its prey in its tentacles like the jellyfish from which it got its name.

Nicole clutched her tiny mint plant, safe inside its cube. She was supposed to give the mint to Grant, but if she could find a place to do it, she would use the tiny plant to start a garden for Mom.