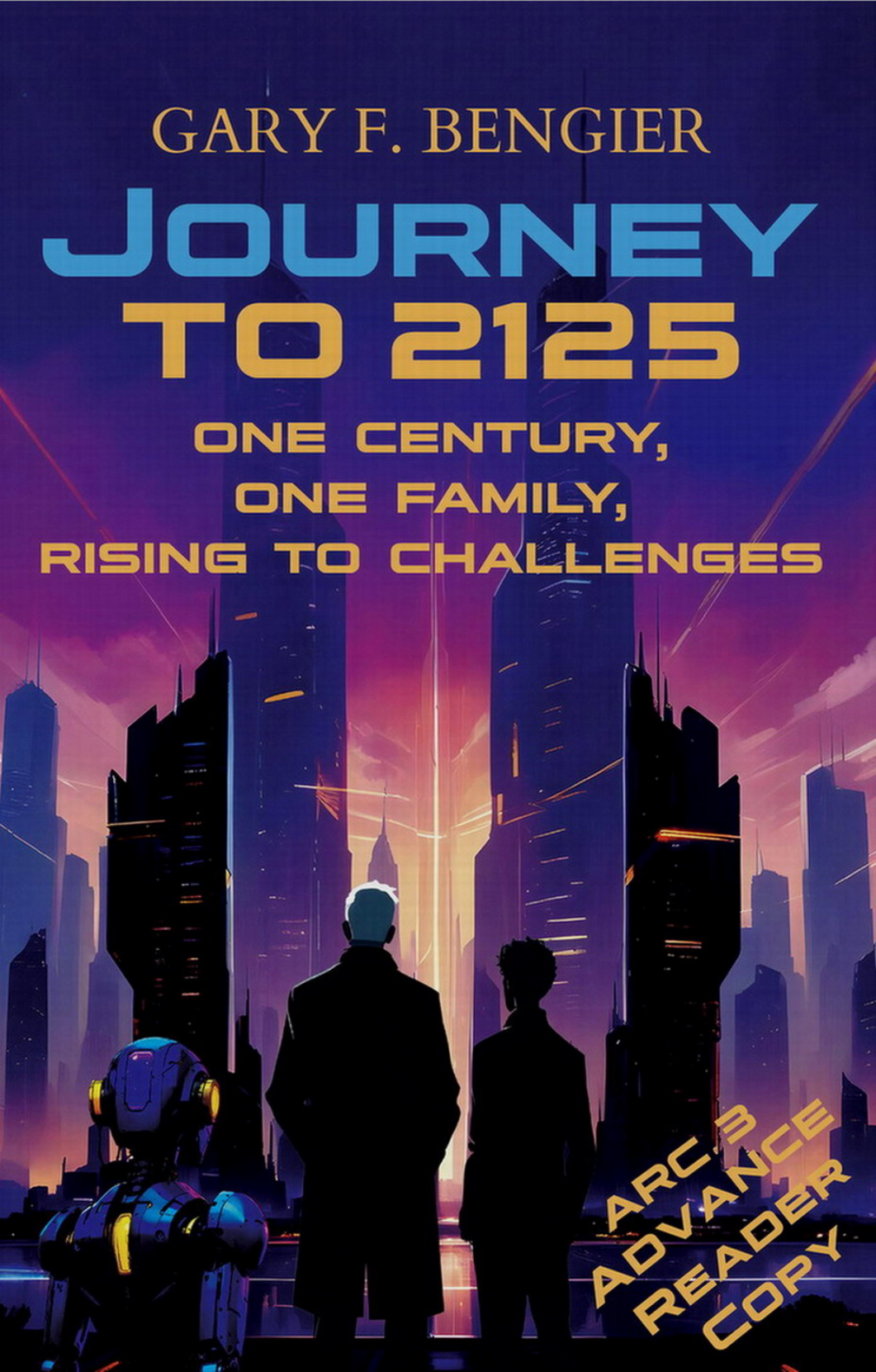


GARY F. BENGIER

JOURNEY TO 2125

ONE CENTURY,
ONE FAMILY,
RISING TO CHALLENGES



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JOURNEY TO 2125

One Century,
One Family,
Rising to Challenges

Gary F. Bengier

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Of the many challenges ahead this century,
a few matter.

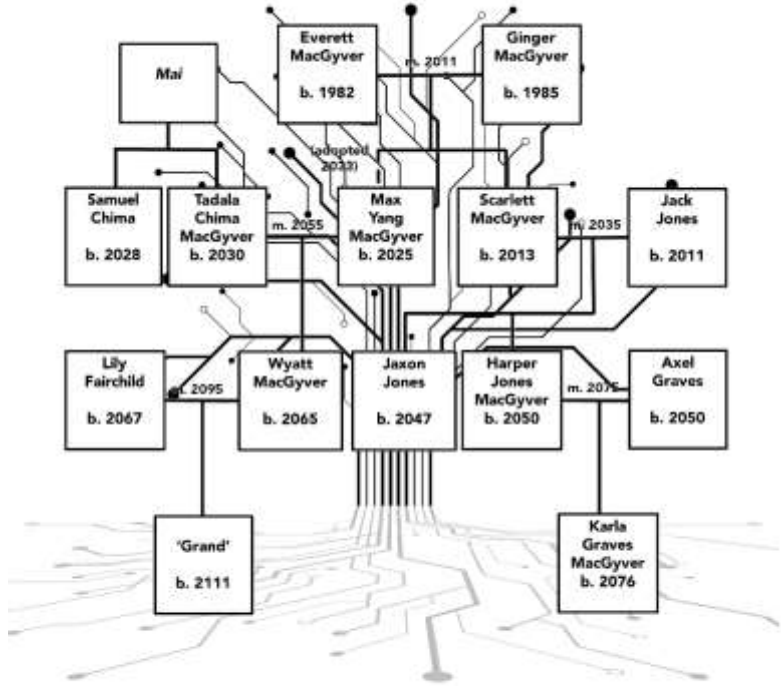
Focus on and overcome those few,
and you, yours, and the world
will survive, and perhaps even thrive.

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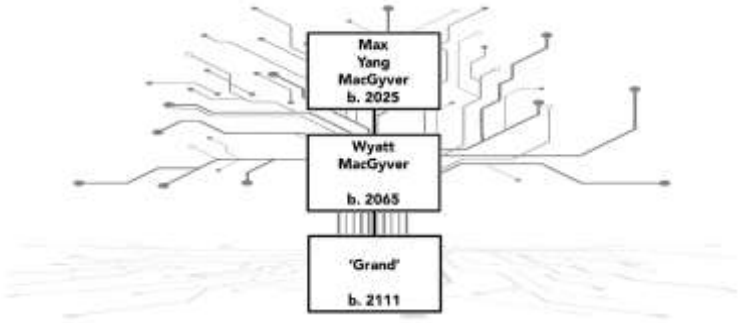
The ebook edition contains links to the [glossary](#) for the first appearance of many technologies (and complementary links to return to the previous spot in the novel). For the print version, please rely on the twentieth-century technique of flipping to the back pages.

MacGyver Family



1

Max Yang MacGyver —2033 | Present , 2125



It begins with a splash, then rushing down the unknown river of life, each unique as Heraclitus said, around and through each oxbow and rapids, no doubt ending at an astonishing waterfall.

That visceral memory still wakes me after all these years, a recurring nightmare of bone-chilling cold water. Salty, in my mouth. The big man behind me pushes me up and I dog-paddle toward the white ship with the big red cross. People surround me in the water, crying, swimming. My life vest is too big, the straps loose, and the big man lifts me when a swell splashes over. I am tired and my arms are heavy. I swallow salty water with each wave. Some people are sinking, and their heads disappear. He hollers at me in Chinese, his hard face close to mine. “Help me help you; swim!” We reach the ship and he boosts me up to the hanging thick rope net and I grab hold and pull myself out of the cold water. It is like the playground bars, and I climb to the top.

I sit shivering on the deck next to the big man, as a nice woman in white dries me with a towel and wraps me with a blanket. He tousles my hair, then he looks at me and tears come from his eyes. I can tell he is thinking of someone else. I am glad that his muscled hand is not too rough, though I flinch when he reaches out. I lose track of the big man, and when the ship fills with so many people, I **don't** see him again until days later.

The nice woman points me to a doorway to descend into the ship, but I duck to the side and stay by the railing to watch everyone else come up the net. I am short and it is noisy and crowded and I can hide by the rail. The tiny boat now is empty. It drifts away from the ship. Its sail flaps in the wind and it bobs **sideways as the ship's engines vibrate** the deck and our big ship turns away.

I forgot to mention the fast jet that roars over our boat just before the white ship pulls nearby. Everyone screams and many are praying. But the ship is near and people on its deck are watching, so nothing bad happens.

When everyone is on board and the fishing boat grows smaller behind us, the jet returns. It flies low over the little boat. Fire shoots from the jet and there is a huge explosion, and the boat is gone. I watch the pile of drifting wood where it had been. The jet streaks away. Then I hear my heart beating in my chest like a drum. The woman in the white dress is back and she takes me inside the ship.

“How old were you when this happened?”

I am suddenly brought back to 2125. To my grandson. To my story. Grandson sits at the table, eating eggs and bacon. He has a full head of black hair, as much as I ever had, but his is curly. He has an oval face with an attractive chin, like so many in our family. Do his cheekbones resemble me? Sadly, I can see few signs of his grandmother in him, except for a softness around his mouth and fullness to his lips. His arms are tanned and muscular, more than expected for a fourteen-year-old boy, like he spends time outdoors doing heavy labor. His eyes are alive for the first time since he

arrived near sunrise. Some of the trapped expression he wore then has disappeared. I'll tell him stories for a while and let him decide when to tell me his story.

"I was eight when we were rescued by the Americans."

"And the big man again? Who was he?"

"Someone who kismet placed on that fishing boat, and then swam for safety, like me. I know he was separated from his family because he was alone. I reminded him of someone close. I last saw him at the refugee center, but never learned his name. Afterward, I never saw him again."

"He saved your life. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be here." A shadow passes through Grandson's eyes. Good. My story has become personal to him.

"We make choices that affect other people, sometimes in profound ways. Sometimes they notice, but often they never know."

The [allbook](#) is on the end table. It feels solid; books, an old technology, the antithesis of most of our tech which passes by voice and blinks through our [AIs](#). I call up an old 2D photo on it to help me remember. Momma Ginger must have snapped this one a few months later, in Berkeley. Grandson looks at it with interest. **"You were a cute little kid."**

"Yes. It didn't hurt my chances." So long ago I had an angelic face, looking up hopefully in the photo, dark brown eyes framed by straight hair; a face of pure unwrinkled skin, as I sat on a playground swing. As if through a distant mirror, I see the boy separated from me by a century, minus eight years.

"Is that an earliest mem'ry?"

"No. Of course, I remember my birth mother and father. I recall vivid details of growing up in Keelung City outside Taipei. I was their only child. We'd go to the night market, with colorful stalls and people milling around, and the aroma of food. Mama loved the crab soup. Baba—my dad—liked the stinky tofu." Like a sprite floating in the air, the pungent smell is in my nose.

"What were your parents like?"

“Baba was tall, a bit gruff. He was a research chemist and spent long hours at work. I have this memory, sitting in the kitchen, of him making me memorize the periodic table of elements, however unsuccessfully.” Grandson snickers at this. “Baba had a job with a global company, and used English there, so we spoke both Mandarin and English at home. I’ve lost most of the Mandarin. Mama taught school, so she was home early every day. I remember her tucking me into bed.” Her voice comes softly to me, singing the lullaby:

Jìntiān wǒmen chéngzhǎng zài yángguāng xià,
Míngtiān wǒmen qù chuàngzào qī cǎi shìjiè.

Today we grow under the sunlight,
Tomorrow we will create a colorful world.

There she is again, standing next to Baba, both dim ghosts, their faces not sharp like the allbook photo of me. I have no photos of them since I brought nothing with me, and everything was lost in the rubble.

Was the memory of Mama from that last morning when they sent me off to school? It could be, because she looks worried, as they were for weeks before the attack. Everyone held their breath, waiting, but life went on as before. My class took a field trip to the museum downtown.

Recollection of the day comes back sharp, ahead of his questions, and my heart is beating hard again. We are walking back when the bombs start to fall. The noise hurts my ears. Everyone runs, like a spooked herd of animals, and I am by myself and running. I see the ocean, and the two fishermen pulling people onto the boat at the pier.

Grandson crunches on the bacon. His eyes are curious now. “How did you land in a boat alone?”

“The Chinese were bombing the town. I got separated from my school friends. I was afraid of the explosions and ran away. I jumped on a fishing boat.”

“That’s terrifying.” Grandson reaches for the photo again and studies it. “So young. Pa never told me this story. Well,

besides getting wet and cold, it sounds like that experience didn't traumatize you too much. You were lucky to find the boat, and lucky the American ship picked you up."

The rest of the story comes brutally to mind. I'll not share this with Grandson. The part when the big man saved me, shoving me off the boat and into the water. It's the same then as now, that in times of acute distress most worry first about survival; humanity and our fellow men are a distant abstraction. A few big men and women don't forget everyone else.

The man puts an adult-sized life vest on me. There are not enough vests to go around. I paddle beside him, the life vest hanging loose. "Too big for him anyway," yells the other man in the water as he tries to steal my vest. My head goes under, my mouth full of salt water. I can't breathe. I'm drowning. Then my head is up and there's air again. The big man hits the other man on the head, and wrestles with him, both shouting. The smaller man fights desperately, pulling me under water when he pulls on the vest. More saltwater. The big man holds him down until he stops struggling. "It was never yours, it belongs to the kid," he says then to no one. I see the smaller man's limp hand disappear under a wave. The big man tightens the vest straps on me and begins towing me away from the boat. Everyone else swimming pretends not to see anything.

"Yes, lucky."

"Pa had told me I was part Chinese, and part other things, read from my DNA. He and Ma never mentioned the details."

"The details are missing because your mother later led a simple life, without modern science. Your Pa followed her."

Grandson pursues his and my roots. "What was your original family name?"

"My name was Max Yang. Max, because Western first names were already popular then. But I left Yang behind. At age eight, I became Max MacGyver. With no regrets." It's been my name for so long, and I'm proud of the name. It's who I made myself.

I look him in the eye now over my eggs and smile. “It’s good to see you, Grandson. My only Grand. Do you mind if I call you that? It’s grand to have a Grandson.”

His dark brown eyes stare back. “I’m not so sure what could be grand ‘bout me. But you can call me that. Though I’m proud to be called a MacGyver. Pa said to never be ashamed of your name.”

“That’s a fact.” Though he doesn’t know how some people resented that association, that he’ll learn about in due time.

“Shall I call you Grandpa?”

“Let’s go with Grandfather. Then we’ll both be grand.” I prefer to leave that ‘Pa’ in the Piney Woods, or in whatever century that it belongs. I like the grand and proper. So one should live one’s life.

The robot comes from the kitchen carrying a tray with drinks. Robert’s oval head swivels toward Grand, the eyebrows raised in enquiry mode. “Coffee, tea, cappuccino, or salakorange juice, young sir?”

Grand seems confused and I help him out. “Salakorange juice is from a bioengineered fruit, popular these days.”

“Salakorange juice, please. And a glass of water.” Grand finished breakfast before anything to drink arrived. He likely hasn’t eaten since before stepping on the train. Robert sets down the two drinks, then serves me my usual cappuccino. I begin to eat the eggs and toast on my plate. Robert moves to stand at attention near the wall. Grand tastes the juice. His eyes light up, and he sips again.

How sheltered is his life there, deep in the woods in East Texas? And why does he choose to leave now? It’s time to find out. “Did you come here to wish me a happy birthday? That was last month.”

“I heard that you turned one hundred. No, that ain’t the reason. But happy birthday, Grandfather.”

I learned to fish a long time ago in Yosemite, and now I dangle a line to find what he is hungry for, and to begin to find out what he knows. “So why the sudden mysterious message? I didn’t know that you had my contact ID.”

“I’m pretty good at figurin’ out ‘lectronic stuff. I got it from Pa’s contacts.”

The robot’s lenses move back and forth between us. Robert is recording all this.

Grand cradles the juice glass and bites his lip. Was he going to tell me anything? I eat the eggs and wait. “It was disheartenin’ living there. I had some ideas about how to make life a bit easier, but they wouldn’t listen. Not much patience with any new idea. I didn’t like everyone telling me what to do. Everyone was repeatin’ the same things that the Commune leadership said.”

“So you got fed up, and decided to leave?”

Grand’s face hardens. The trapped expression returns. “I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“Understandable. Well, glad to have you here.” It has been too many years since Grand visited with his father, Wyatt. How did I allow that to happen in the family? The hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico that pummeled the Commune kept them busy with cleanup. That was followed a year later by the fire and further rebuilding. They weren’t encouraging visitors. I should have pushed more to see him. But the real reason was because Lily, Grand’s mother, wanted to forget the real world, to keep him a child, to shield him from the truth. “It seems you had no trouble traveling here.”

“I stole a com unit to message you first. Thank you for sending the money, pass, and train ticket. I put ‘em in the com unit. A big robot stopped me at the Commune south gate, but it let me by when I showed the pass. I got to the train station on foot, a good hike. I figured out how to hop on the right train. And the robot here met me with the [auto-car](#) at the station.”

“Very enterprising.”

At the word ‘stole’, Robert’s lenses flick back and forth again, and a metal eyebrow raises toward me. “Sir, perhaps the boy’s parents should be informed of his whereabouts?”

“The young man is fourteen. I can decide when to tell them. There are no reasons under the law to report

anything, correct?” I can’t disguise a glare. Robert has been acting presumptuous since the last software update. But the robot nods yes and stands against the wall.

Grand leans closer at the bot’s question, making his rumpled clothes and dirty face obvious. He traveled all night, no doubt with catnaps on the train. “Grand, I’m sure you’d like to shower and change into clean clothes. Then we can talk more. I’ll sit here and enjoy my cappuccino.” He smiles gratefully, and Robert leads him to the guest suite and bathroom. The robot returns.

“Robert, I asked you to order some new clothing for Grand. It looks like we guessed his size about right. Did those arrive?”

“Sir, the drone will deliver them in seven minutes. I will go outside now to await the landing.”

“Thank you, Robert.” I sit back with my cappuccino and gaze out the window. Robert walks into view outside, and soon a delivery drone is visible against a blue sky, the black shape gliding like a raven. It approaches and settles on the lawn.

The ocean sparkles in the distance, too far away to hear. It will be a good day for a walk. While we walk, I need to figure out what he wants to do next. But first, I must learn what he already knows. Given all that has happened these last five years, maybe they’ve kept him more in the dark than I might have imagined possible.

Now that he is here, the task feels paralyzing. Once I discover how much of the family story he’s missing, I need to disclose some parts. This is the conversation that I long contemplated having, both wished for and dreaded.

My hand quivers as it grips my cup. There’s a bitterness in my throat, not from the cappuccino, but rising from my very soul, an angst from holding these secrets inside. What should I share? What dark secrets should be left buried for his own good?

We will start the story from the beginning. I’ll round up to call it a hundred-year story: the story of the MacGyver family, over this challenging century.

2

'GRAND'—Present, 2125

The shower feels warm against my skin, but I get a chill thinking about Grandfather's story, swimming for his life. He was younger than me. I'm having a hard time being away from home for the second time in my life. I reckon knowing hard times is relative. No one has threatened to kill me yet, though that big robot at the gate didn't look friendly. Ma said never to trust 'em.

Now I feel another chill, recollectin' the robot surprising me, appearing out of the gloom like some animal, ready to attack. I can't run because its head is shining a bright light in my eyes. I manage to raise my trembling hand, showing it the pass flashing on the com and holding my breath. Then its voice deep and rumbly saying, "Young sir, you may go," and moving out of my way.

The bathroom door opens and the robot Robert barges in. "Your new clothing, young sir." I feel naked, 'cause I am naked, and 'cause there's almost no one in the Piney Woods to spy on you skinny-dipping in the river except the drones. But it doesn't bat an eye, it just leaves the stack of folded clothes. Seems this Robert is programmed the same way as that first one, which was too dumb to think that the com unit was stolen.

The towel feels good. It's fluffy material providing comfort in this new place. Natural stone covers this bathroom, smooth and shiny. I peek into the bedroom. It's beautiful too; huge with a big bed, soft light streaming through the windows, and the ocean in the distance. Grandfather has a nice house, all to his self. By comparison, the Commune

houses are tiny with furniture we make ourselves in the wood shop.

Now I'm rememberin' Rocky standing there, telling me to be careful with the saw. He always hung by my side, like a cautious little brother. I got to be leader and he followed behind, out into the forest until he got scared and said we had to stop. We'd hide in the tall grass above the lake and wait for deer to come by to drink. I heard him making a noise and they run off and he looked at me sheepish and sorry. But I taught him not to utter a sound so we could watch all the animals living there. Rocky found allbook articles about how to track animals and we practiced and learned about all of 'em.

Rocky came to the door every day asking for me. Ma was not too sweet on him, but Pa defended him. "Babe, he needs friends, and there aren't many kids here. Home schooling only goes so far, and he needs an education, so having a friend like Rocky is essential."

"But he's learning that accent. Another insidious oppression for me."

Pa says, like it's an explanation, "It's the local dialect in the Piney Woods." Then Ma clenches her hands and storms off, while Pa rolls his eyes at me and shrugs his shoulders. I feel sorry for Pa at times like that when Ma gets distraught and into her head.

Hardly anyone visits the Commune; just drones unloading supplies on the landing pad. We went off into the forest every day without the adults saying much. I'd tote my allbook and we would go to the creek, and I'd read to Rocky and we'd talk about the stories. I like telling tales.

My chest feels tight and I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye to Rocky when I left, but it's best because he couldn't have come with me. It's hard leaving your best friend.

I always thought that when you got older, everything would make sense. But it's the opposite. Ma is more jumpy, looking at me with her eyes anxious, like she's afraid to lose me. Pa used to give advice, knowing all sorts of things about the forest and life, but lately he worries about Ma. Now

without Rocky too, I'm alone in the world, without their voices to tell me anything.

The jeans fit nice and comfortable. There's a new blue shirt that fits too. I comb my hair. I'm dressed and now can find Grandfather.

He can tell me about the family, and I can figure out why Ma and Pa decided to join the Commune. Is there some deep dark secret that Ma and Pa haven't told me? That's what I got to find out today. Then I can decide what to do next.

Grandfather is sitting, drinking his cappuccino. I've never had one and it might be an interestin' experience. "I'll try one of those too."

Grandfather nods to the robot, who returns to the kitchen to fetch me one. "You don't mind spending the day with me?"

"No. That'd be fine. I haven't thought too far ahead."

"We can walk around the property a bit later. I need to keep the body moving. Or else." Grandfather's words shake me, but he has a wry grin sayin' it, so he's joking. Now I see him in full, how ancient he is. He's tall but he stoops over, his gray hair combed neatly across his brow. I didn't see gray hair like his around the Commune. Ma and Pa use some sort of medicine to keep their hair regular, but Grandfather doesn't seem to care. He's gruff to the robot but he looks at me with big kind eyes surrounded by deep wrinkles, making them look farther away like he's seen a lot.

The bot returns with my cappuccino. I take a little sip. It's more bitter than I expected, but it might perk me up. Back to hearing stories. "What happened next, after being rescued?"

"I know now that it was a hospital ship. Those were the only American ships that came close to Taiwan during the invasion, and they carried away many thousands of refugees."

"Is that why the Chinese jet didn't attack?"

“Yes. It would have been a war crime to attack the fishing boat filled with civilians or the hospital ship. I was lucky to find both.”

“That’s how you came to America.”

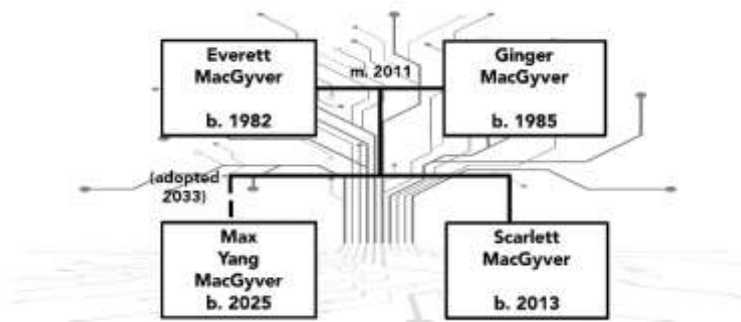
“Yes, a refugee arriving in California. I don’t remember much about the crossing except that the boat was crowded, and it was rolling during some high seas. I got sick. I think we went to Okinawa and then they put me on an airplane to California, to a refugee center in Berkeley. That is where I met Momma Ginger. Ginger MacGyver.”

The cappuccino rolls creamy on the tongue. “So this is how you and all of us became MacGyvers. No one ever told me the tale before.”

An expression comes over Grandfather’s face, like he’s been aching to tell someone these last years. “Since you have the day, relax, and you’ll learn the story of our family.”

3

Ginger MacGyver—2033



Ginger walked down the hill towards Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. She always strode with purpose, though her head was miles away, envisioning the refugees crowding the sanctuary offices. It would be a full day's work to register information from a throng of people, followed by a frantic search for sufficient housing. The immediate effect of the war in Taiwan was this first wave of displaced souls washing the US shores. Northern California was the favored destination. The nonprofit organization where she worked was one of many managing triage processes to help in the humanitarian crisis.

Cars moved on the street. The ubiquitous self-driving vehicles glided empty and ghostlike, their rooftop sensors swirling, showing some signs of life. She reached the corner to cross, pausing as a fire truck a block farther down, its lights flashing, abruptly turned the other direction, its siren's piecing wail dropping an octave and breaking the silence of the street. The pedestrian walk sign changed to the familiar walking man. Another fire vehicle followed the first, also heading away, so no danger from it, she thought. A small

boy was pedaling a bike into the crosswalk from the opposite side, with a strobing light on the handlebars, wobbly when he left the curb.

They met mid-street when the self-driving car waiting second in line jerked to the left and began to accelerate. She saw it sideways, bearing down. Adrenalin pumped through her veins.

Ginger grabbed the boy, wrenching him backwards off the bike, and with two steps jumped toward the curb. Though he was lightweight, pain shot through her shoulder, **and then hurt again when they tumbled together.** The car's brakes screeched in her ears. She looked back at it, halted into the pedestrian way just where she had been walking. **Why had the car done that? Was it confused by the bike's light?** These questions shot to mind as she picked herself and the boy up from the pavement.

The boy was perturbed, but not yet shaken because he **hadn't noticed** how close the car had come to running them down. Then he saw the car a few feet behind him. It sat in the road for several seconds, then returned to the right lane and continued **as the light changed.** "It would've hit us," he muttered, his eyes wide.

"**Be careful. You can't always trust those self-driving vehicles.**" Or the programmers who write the code, and the inscrutable AIs at the heart of so many systems, she thought. Ginger watched the vehicle disappear down the street, leaving the scene of its near crime. She patted the boy on his head and watched him peddle away. She thought of Scarlett, off to college in New Hampshire now two years ago. No more little girl in the house. She rubbed her shoulder and was hyper-vigilant for the rest of her walk to the office.

The refugee center was jam-packed, worse than she feared. People lined the walls, some standing; the elderly on the few chairs, many sitting on the floor. Their meager belongings sat in piles near each family. The inadequate staff were collecting information and attempting to identify housing and services. Two colleagues who spoke Taiwanese and Mandarin were working the counter. Other staff

members had spread out to corners of the room. Ginger took a desk and chair in an empty corner and motioned for refugees to line up, then got to work. When the first person in her line, a woman holding a baby, began speaking, she tapped the AI [HASP](#) on her lapel, and it translated from Taiwanese to English. She saw her colleague Debbie, looking flustered, nodding in appreciation from across the room as the lines of refugees became manageable. She thought again of the near accident with the self-driving car, then put it from her mind. She had her reputation to uphold as the calm one in the office.

Ginger processed her line, moving from one huddled refugee to another, responding to their concerns and looking to erase the apprehension that laced every face. Her AI HASP switched effortlessly between English, Mandarin and Taiwanese, without delay between each spoken sentence and the audio translation. There was no advantage to learning a language, she thought. The translation software broke verbal barriers, and she forgot that her AI HASP was even being used.

She came to a big, stocky man sitting on the floor with a beautiful small boy beside him. “What is your name? And please tell me your story. I am here to help you find what you need.”

Her HASP translated the man’s answer, although garbling the pronunciation of his Chinese name. “I am here alone. I know no one here in America. I have nowhere to go.”

She raised her eyebrows. “And the boy?”

“He’s a stranger, but I helped him leave the boat that we escaped on, before the Chinese sank it.”

She knelt next to the boy. He had dark hair, almost black, an angelic face, and he looked about age eight. His brown eyes revealed a warm soul. Her heart missed a beat, thinking again of Scarlett. “Can you tell me if any of your family came with you?”

He didn’t need the translation software. His English had a slight accent but was clear. “My Mama and Baba didn’t come. I was with my school class when the planes came. I

don't know what happened to them all." A tear creased one eye.

Ginger gave him a hug. "Don't you worry. We'll take care of you. We'll try as best we can to find your parents."

The big man nodded and managed in broken English, "Thank you." But he said nothing to signal the boy should stay with him. She checked them into the system separately.

The day proceeded in a blur. Half the refugees that day were placed in acceptable housing. The rest were herded to a nearby school gymnasium, where they organized a make-shift soup kitchen, and found sleeping bags for the exhausted, frightened refugees to settle into marked spaces on the floor. She saw the small boy in the gym before she left and tucked him into his sleeping bag. "Everything will be okay. I'll see you tomorrow." His eyes look tired but not fearful. He was resilient, a good sign.

The staff slumped into chairs in the rear lounge as the sun set outside the office window. Debbie, face exhausted, sat across from her. "What a day. And there'll be more of the same tomorrow."

"War sucks," Ginger said. She reclined in the comfy chair for a few minutes, massaging her shoulder. "I am reminded of how lucky we are to have homes; to have family." She sighed deeply as she pulled herself to standing, overcome with a quiet sense of security as she made her way home to her husband.

Ginger came into the kitchen, where Everett was sitting at the table, wolfing down a sandwich in his big hands. His arms and broad shoulders hinted at some Scottish ancestor who might have tossed the caber. Everett's hair was wind-blown above strong eyebrows and a thin, well-trimmed beard. Her handsome engineer. He mumbled through a mouthful of ham and cheese, "Sorry. I couldn't wait any longer."

A loaf of bread past its prime lay cut in half on the counter, bread that he had made three days ago. When he baked bread, a way to unwind, she liked to watch as his hands worked the dough. That breadmaking diversion was one of the few escapes from the unease that permeated every conversation. The shots fired on one side of the globe circled round and no one knew who they might find or what might happen next.

He stood and pulled her into his embrace with a moist kiss. She flinched when he squeezed her. Looking surprised, he said, “What’s wrong?”

“A sore shoulder. A self-driving car nearly hit me, in the crosswalk. And it almost hit a little boy next to me. I wrenched my shoulder jumping out of the way.” She didn’t mention grabbing the boy.

“I’m glad you’re not just giving me the cold shoulder,” he said with a wink. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, and the shoulder will heal.”

“Did you report the car? That so seldom happens, but it’s important that they fix the glitches, something in the AI’s training data.”

“No. I didn’t have time to persevere about fixing annoying machines.”

“But remember that plane crash a month ago, blamed on the autopilot. Yes, it was irresponsible to use it already with people aboard. Some companies are pushing the technology too fast. Irritating and sometimes deadly. Still, we should do the right thing.”

“You’re always worrying about everyone.”

His eyes revealed that he caught the emphasis on the last word. Ginger could visualize the gears turning in his head, she had known him so long. Everett’s expression changed to concern. “There was real risk of being run over? You were so flippant, I missed that.” He gave her a delicate deep hug, avoiding her shoulder.

“I’m fine, and stopped thinking about it right away, because of the work. We had a building overflowing with refugees waiting for me. We don’t have enough rooms to house

them. So many of the cases are heartbreaking. Especially the children.” She thought about the boy with the angelic face and hoped he would be able to fall asleep in the gym among strangers.

“Everyone losses in this war.” He finished the last bite of his sandwich. “And why now? To humor an old man on his birthday.”

“And for what gain? They didn’t even save the chip factories.” Every major electronics company had ordered all the chip-making photomasks stored in Taiwan to be destroyed. The rest of the chip manufacturing equipment probably was damaged in revenge for the invasion. Western companies no doubt had copies of the masks in the US but would need months to restart factories. Global electronics production had collapsed, the reason stock markets had nosedived, taking with it their investments. It seemed an odd time to worry about their retirement savings, and Ginger brushed the thought away when it came unbidden.

Everett worked the espresso machine. “I would have waited for you, but I’ll be on a plane tonight for Tokyo. The company decided that we need a core team closer to Taiwan, to do what we can. It’s imperative that we help them shut down the test reactor without any leaks. We can’t risk a release of radioactivity, nor any unwarranted bad press about fission power plants.”

She used the rest of the bread loaf to make herself a sandwich as they discussed his trip and her day processing refugees. She sat across the table, eating as he drank his espresso. “You’re sure you’ll be safe in Japan?” She waited for his logical response, which often dispelled her worries.

He scratched his beard. “I presume so, as safe as here. China was smart strategically when they launched the Taiwan invasion. The announcement that they would not attack the US nor anyone else beyond Taiwan, that China was recovering their rightful rebel territory, put the ball into our court.”

“Then the US looks like an aggressor too if we jump in.”

“Exactly. It was a gutsy bet that the US wouldn’t start a nuclear war, and that they had the conventional military force to fight at their doorstep. They simultaneously announced the naval blockade, except passage of humanitarian aid, daring the US to try to resupply the Taiwanese military. That move reminds me of Kennedy’s naval blockade during the Cuban missile crisis.” He sipped the espresso, leaning back in the chair.

“But there is some sort of treaty. How far are we obligated to help Taiwan?”

“Yes, the Taiwan Relations Act. That says that we will provide Taiwan ‘with arms of a defensive character’ and that we will ‘maintain the capacity to resist force’ from mainland China. It doesn’t say we would ever send troops.” He finished his drink. “A good thing, too. The US mainland is six thousand miles away, and there’s no equipment stockpiles in the western Pacific to stop them. If our ships approach, they’ll be sitting ducks for their hypersonic missiles and drone swarms. We don’t have a strategic response, short of a direct attack on China.”

She tapped her fingers nervously on the table. “Could it still come to nuclear war? Could it hit here?”

“That’s possible if someone miscalculates. It’s a fear gnawing at my gut. But neither side wants that.”

“And short of nuclear war, you think China will win?” She didn’t care about military tactics though she knew Everett was always following that news.

He predictably launched into his analysis. “The Taiwanese have already lost any chance of reversing the landings with conventional weapons. Beginning with a massive cyberattack to take down communications, command, and control, followed by hypersonic missiles, China destroyed their air force in the first few days. Their army lost a hundred thousand with the amphibious landings but got ashore. Now they have secured beachheads and are methodically expanding control of the island. They hit the Taiwanese command and control hard, so organized resistance is already weakening.”

“And our Marines that rumor has it are fighting?” Like everyone else, she was addicted to the news feeds reporting all the facts and speculation.

He furrowed his brow. “No doubt our littoral Marine forces that were pre-positioned in Guam were landed in Taiwan and are there hiding and fighting. And dying. China is not discussing that for strategic political reasons, and neither is the Administration. That’s one reason I think both sides are still rational and avoiding nuclear war. There simply are not enough American conventional forces to swing the outcome now.”

He tilted forward, finishing the espresso. “China has been preparing for this invasion for a decade. We had hoped they learned the downside shown by the Russian experience in Ukraine. But the aging leadership saw their chance slipping away. Why reunification with Taiwan became so important to them is a psychological mystery. But we see that crazy things happen.”

Ginger sat close to him and held his hand, the touch reminding her that she’d be alone for a few days, the first time since this surreal war began. “How much longer do you expect it will last?”

“I’d give it a month or three. The weapons today are terrifically lethal, and China can resupply easily now. The Taiwanese will fight, but they will be rooted out of their underground bunkers and mountain hideaways. There might be a million people dying from this war. But I don’t see it ending another way. China will control the island.”

She squeezed his hand. “Be very careful. It isn’t logical, but I worry about you being closer to the fighting. Text me when you can.”

Everett glanced at his watch. “I need to pack and go. It will be a tough week. And for you too. I’ll call whenever I have a break.” He stood and gingerly wrapped her in his arms and kissed her.

About the Author



Gary F. Bengier is a writer, philosopher, and technologist.

After a career in Silicon Valley, Gary pursued passion projects, **studying astrophysics and philosophy**. He's spent the last two decades thinking about how to live a balanced, meaningful life in a rapidly evolving technological world. This self-reflective journey infuses his novels, *Journey to 2125: One Century, One Family, Eight Challenges* and *Unfettered Journey*, with insights about our future and the challenges we will face in finding purpose.

Before turning to writing speculative fiction, Gary worked in a variety of Silicon Valley tech companies. He was **eBay's Chief Financial Officer and led the company's initial and secondary public offerings**. Gary has an MBA from Harvard Business School and an MA in philosophy from San Francisco State University. He has two children with Cynthia, his wife of forty-seven years. When not traveling the world, he raises bees and makes a nice Cabernet at the family's **Napa vineyard**. He and his family live in San Francisco.

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