

# Futures

## The foolish man built his house upon the sand

The ties that bind us. By Marissa Lingen



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

**T**here were so many concrete warehouses we weren't using, parking lots with no cars, roads going nowhere. We needed so much, but we had so many of the wrong things.

It was all in the way.

All our elders told us we were supposed to be dreaming big dreams, making grand plans, but there was no room for that, not when every tree we tried to plant was stunted by the looming, abandoned, big box stores.

I don't know why everyone blames me for seeing concrete as the villain. The way we all talked, it was. It *was*. Look at pictures of a demolition site sometime, or read the accounts of walking through a concrete meadow. Even the toughest grasses could barely get a foothold, and nothing deeper could grow. It was going to take centuries for them to break it down, millennia even. No forests would take

their places, and the winds that would blow across them – we couldn't wait, we couldn't deal with the erosion, we couldn't deal with the tornadoes, we couldn't deal with the inability to sequester carbon.

We needed the concrete gone.

You would have done the same. Maybe you were trying to do the same, too. Some of your labs were trying. We talked about it at conferences. We all gave those talks; you had your heads next to mine in the bars after hours. We didn't whisper sweet nothings; we talked about how to get rid of that goddamn concrete.

I'm not the mad scientist just because I'm the one who succeeded.

'I thought I could control it' is the cry of the mad scientist, I know, I know. I thought I could control it. But I did think, I did. A dissolving compound for the cement in the concrete, to make it break down in a non-toxic way, so that

we could have that land back again, so that we could till that soil, plant it, work the land there.

And we can. I won. We all won.

No, I know. I know. It's just there was no reason to think it would replicate. It's not alive. It still isn't, it never was. It just ... auto-catalyses, is all. It's fine, it's a normal thing for chemicals to do. There's just a nice little chain reaction that really anything might do because it's got the silicate groups hanging out being more or less inert over there, and then the oxygen does its thing because *oxygen*, you know how oxygen is, you could hardly expect it not to, the little devil, and –

Well, you know. You do know.

How much was made of concrete.

That is now made of sand.

People got really upset about the hospitals, foremost. And the schools, and – OK, really most modern buildings, most

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modern buildings have concrete somewhere or another. But the hospitals were the part that really seemed to get under their skin the most, because they had nowhere to take the injured people from other building collapses except for tents outside.

I can see why it bothered them. I didn't expect it either, and my sister was in one of those tents, yelling and trying to get a generator up so she could save as many people as she could. I was proud of the work she did. She hasn't had the time to talk to me about the big picture ever since. She's mostly sleeping in one of those tents near the hospital. Says they need all hands. She was a clinic paediatrician before, but she's all emergency all the time now, she says.

It'll settle out soon. We can talk about it later.

Lots of nice things to eat like sandy soils, root veg like carrots and parsnips and potatoes. We can make this work. If we can get the

seeds to grow them – greens and strawberries and tomatoes, all of them will grow in sandy soil, they always have.

The polymer concretes seem to be doing alright, too, so we can just ... make more of those. And not the asphalt and cement ones. So we'll just get right on that when we have the building facilities and the communication facilities and ... all of that. Stuff. To make polymers.

I still think concrete was a huge problem, and remaking the world is not easy. The skies are quieter now, have you noticed? The large jets can't taxi on runways that don't exist. I suppose most of their hangars had substantial concrete in the construction as well.

May take a minute for the birds to come back, but all things in life need patience and –

No, I suppose the concrete solution was a rather fast one, but we'd had it for ages. Did you know the Romans built with it? That's

why we couldn't get rid of even some of their ruins. Well, that's settled now, just piles of rocks, they're much easier to move. Even the Pantheon – you can do whatever you like with that, just as you could with any abandoned superstore. Stuck together with concrete, until now.

Don't tell anyone it was me. They do seem upset, and I'd just rather not go into it for now. Not until they've readjusted.

Isn't it nice, though? To just ... take your shoes off, and dig your toes into the sand? No one ever said that about concrete. No one ever looked forward to tying their shoelaces together, slinging their shoes around their neck, and setting off down a long, winding road of concrete ...

**Marissa Lingen** has published more than 100 short stories in venues such as *Analog*, *Lightspeed* and *Tor.com*.