

Gus and the Very High Room

By Kim Batchelor

When anyone asked Gustavo Fledermaus where in the world he'd like to visit, he always said he wanted to go to a faraway place—the jungles of the Amazon, the mountains of Tibet, an island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. He'd read about all those places in the many books his parents gave him, and it's true he'd like to travel to all of them someday. But the one place he wanted to go to above all the others was one he saw from a distance every holiday and family gathering—a flicker of reflected sunbeam through a web of very high branches, or a set of tiny squares of muted light filtered through the black net of those same branches after dark. The highest part of a narrow and tall house in a neighborhood of houses just as narrow but not quite as tall.

One morning, very early, Gustavo followed his parents up the path to that house behind the crowd of trees, so many trees that their shadows made the front yard still seem like evening instead of the bright beginning of a new day. "Come in, little Gus!" Aunt Marigold said as she swept the little boy through the open door. Just before going inside, Gus glanced up and saw a glimpse of the window again as he made his way through the door.

Aunt Marigold moved him just into the entrance of the house. "Your room is all ready for you." When she looked down at him, she grinned. "The one at the very top of the stairs."

Gus's mother, standing behind him, rested her hand on his shoulder, a gleeful tone in her voice. "The one at the top of the stairs, Gus." She grasped his shoulder tightly.

Gus's father patted his head with a tap, tap, tap. "The one you always said you wanted to stay in."

Gus' mother knelt down to be at his height and fixed her violet eyes on his. "I know you will be a good boy while you're staying here with your Aunt Marigold." She straightened his collar with light tugs on each side. "This adventure shouldn't take too long. You'll hardly know that we're gone." And then she gave him a hug.

"Yes, mama."

Gus's father crouched down next. "And your Aunt Marigold will take very good care of you." His father handed him a crisp twenty dollar bill that Gus carefully folded while watching both his parents rise to their full height. He was not so unaccustomed to their going off on adventures, but they hardly ever went together and even then they were only gone for an hour or two and left him in the care of their nice neighbor, Constantina. Gus tucked the bill into his pocket and turned just as his parents each kissed Marigold on the cheek and walked through the door, both of them waving back at him.

"Goodbye!" Aunt Marigold fluttered one hand in response and placed the other on Gus's shoulder where his mother's had been. Gus managed a slight wave as he watched the sleek red car with tail fins pull away from the curb.

Aunt Marigold took his backpack containing his clothes and most important objects that he'd never leave behind, slipped it over her shoulder and handed him a blue and yellow box with a handle. "I'll carry your things to your room and you can carry our lunch."

"Our lunch?"

"Of course. It's been a while since I took the walk to the highest floor and we'll need to stop for lunch along the way. I expect we'll be just below the halfway point by noon. Are you ready my sweet little nephew?"

"I think so." Gus clutched the box to his chest. When he did, he took a whiff of something he couldn't quite identify but that smelled delicious. His stomach churned its approval.

Aunt Marigold widened her eyes. "I almost forgot. Have you had your breakfast?"

He nodded. "My mother made me scrambled eggs and my father made me a smoothie."

"That sounds delicious. I ate a marvelous cranberry omelet. Very good then. You're ready for the climb."

Gus followed Aunt Marigold to the foot of the stairs just beyond the narrow front room bursting with books and velvet covered furniture and filled with the smell of cinnamon and orange and, most unexpectedly, soccer balls. "It's a good thing that it's the weekend and you don't have school for two days. We'll need to pace ourselves but we should reach the room well before then."

Gus stopped. "Aunt Marigold, are you sure this is a good idea? Mama and papa may be back before we get there."

"It will take them several days to get to where they're going," Aunt Marigold told him. "And, besides, this will give you enough time to really experience what it's like to sleep so close to the stars." She took her first steps up the staircase, spiraling in the middle of the round room around its giant globe in the center and maps of the world affixed to its walls.

Marigold stopped and turned around. "Ready?"

For a moment, Gus wanted to say, 'No, I'm not ready,' but he remembered what she had said about sleeping so close to the stars, and he really was ready for his own adventure. He nodded.

"Good. Upward to the top!"

Above him, Gus saw a stairway that curved up and around and over and up again, rising as if it almost had no end. At the very top, he saw what looked like the smallest square patch of blue that seemed to be their destination. He took one step, then another, and not too long after he decided it would be wise not to look down.

Aunt Marigold suddenly stopped. "I forgot to tell you, let me know if you see anything unusual." She peered down at him. "Anything at all." She directed her gaze upward as she resumed the walk.

The higher they climbed, the darker the stairwell grew until it became very difficult for Gus to see where to put his small feet. Sometimes it felt as if they were going back down again, then upward sometime after.

"Don't worry, Gus," Aunt Marigold whispered. "It's darker in this part because this is where I normally keep the nightfall. Here, let me push it aside." And as she moved her arms like shadows in front of him, the darkness made room for more light from the windows up above.

Gus stopped. "Wait. You keep nightfall here?"

"Of course. You have to store it somewhere. And this is where I keep it in my house."

"Okay." Gus didn't understand it, but he did consider where the nightfall might be hiding in his own much smaller house.

At just that moment, something ran down the bannister and jumped over his hand. Gus drew his hand back and pulled it very close to him. "What's that? Is it a rat?"

"No rats in this house. They've all agreed that the house out back is suitable for their needs, so they promised not to come inside. Isabella the cat makes sure of it. I wonder if..."

Aunt Marigold turned her face toward something just below where they stood. "Randy? Is that you?"

A small voice came from down the stairs. "I tried to stay away, but I couldn't."

"Of course not," Aunt Marigold said. "You're a creature who cannot resist being curious about visitors."

Gus looked around at all the thick shadows that surrounded them. He made out a dark smudge climbing up the stairs and stepped aside to avoid it walking over his foot.

"Is this your nephew that you're always talking about?" The smudge reached up with a long arm that extended a small hand. Gus reluctantly took its hand and felt its slightly fuzzy and prickly skin against his palm.

"Yes, it is. So nothing for you to be concerned about. Randy, can you be a dear and walk in front of us and clear the way. I don't want Gus to be startled by any other curious creatures, especially you know who."

"Yes, I know who. Of course, I'll keep watch. Follow me, Mr. Gus. I'll show you to your room."

"Oh, and Randy," Marigold added. "We'll be stopping for lunch at the overlook, as always."

"That will be very nice," Randy's smudgy body appearing larger as he moved ahead of them. "What flavor is the fountain today?"

"Theodore chose cherry. You do like cherry, don't you Gus?"

"I love it very much." Gus puzzled over what the overlook might be, where it might be, and what the fountain was that Aunt Marigold's butler Theodore had flavored with cherry.

Gus wished that Marigold had perhaps taken him for shorter trips in preparation for this one. And part of him was glad that she hadn't before he was old enough not to be too afraid.

Gus and Aunt Marigold continued their winding journey. Gradually the darkness gave way to a muted light colored as if it were filtered by stained glass. The steps, though, became increasingly narrow and steep and Gus had to walk sideways to climb them. He felt as if he were scaling a very high hill and he could tell that something was at the top of the hill, above where they trudged. Just as Gus believed he would have to give up, he heard a few sounds as if they came from a bell just below their feet. He counted, and the bell sounded twelve times.

"Oh, my," Marigold said, sounding a little winded herself. "I miscalculated. It's the noon hour and we've still a few more steps to go. Randy, is everything all right up there?"

"Just fine. And it's cherry, just like you said," Randy's voice echoed. "No sign of anyone."

"Come, come, little Gus! This is the hardest part. We can take a well deserved rest and the remainder of the journey will go so much more quickly."

"I'm just behind you." The box that had seemed so light felt terribly heavy in his arms as he finished the climb. When he took the last step, Gus couldn't believe the abrupt change—the bright light, the flat area filled with plants that surrounded a very ornate fountain. Just beyond it, a narrow spiral staircase waited for them, but Gus ignored it, so happy to be able to set down the heavy lunch box onto a red checkered cloth that had been laid out for them. He noticed Randy slinking back behind one of the plants.

Marigold took the box from him and opened it to unleash a wisp of steam and a wonderful aroma. "I hope you like my special stew, the one I always bring to holiday dinner."

"I do." And Gus didn't think it would ever taste as good as it did then.

"Here's fresh baked rolls and a nice piece of pie—plum and raspberry and a touch of cardamom. There's plain water on one side of the fountain and sparkling cherry on the other." She handed him two cups. "Would you be so kind as to bring me some of the plain water? And here's a glass for whatever you'd like to drink."

"Yes, ma'am." Gus happily took the glasses while Marigold assembled the food on the checkered cloth. As he got nearer to the fountain adjoining a wall, he noticed that it wasn't like any fountain he'd ever seen before, but more like a trickling stream coming from the wall that split to fill two

troughs. On one side, the water ran through a clear bowl filled to the brim with fruit that turned it a pale pink.

As he filled the glasses, a familiar voice came from a cluster of ivy near his feet. "I can stand outside the door."

Gus startled and sloshed some water onto the floor. "What?"

"I can stand guard outside your door while you're up there. I've done it before. Keeps everything safe and sound."

"From what?" He set the glass down to keep it from spilling due to his slightly trembling hands.

"From you know who."

"But I don't know who."

"And you won't know who if I stand guard. Best that way."

"Gustavo!" Marigold said, clapping her hands. "Come here and eat so that we can make it the rest of the way before it gets too late."

"Yes, Aunt Marigold." He picked up the two filled glasses and brought them to her, setting his own down by his food which he ate without mentioning Randy's offer.

After the food was gone and the plates and forks and glasses wrapped up and set aside, Gus and his Aunt Marigold rested for only a few minutes before she urged him up and onward to the spiral staircase.

The rest of the trip went much easier for Gus, in spite of the fact that the stairs always went up and were sometimes difficult due to the steepness of the winding staircase. It helped that he no longer had to carry the lunch box and he could concentrate on scaling the steps and staying close to the railing that he used to move more quickly to keep up with Marigold's pace, using the other hand to hold onto the center pole as he rotated around the staircase's center.

Gus finally looked up and noticed that above his head the very small patch of blue became a dark blue ceiling as he approached it, and at first he thought he was staring at the sky even though clearly the stars weren't like regular stars but were painted on. And he began to see a railing at a small balcony that overlooked the stairs and soon a door appeared little by little as he scaled each step. Behind him he made out the clatter of tiny clicks against the steps he left behind, and he glanced around as he remembered Randy's offer.

"And here we are!" Aunt Marigold removed the backpack just as she threw open the door and strands of muted light greeted Gus as he followed her inside. It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust but when they did, he made out a cozy room painted cornstalk blue, the walls lined with bookshelves filled with books and toys. "Now what do you think?"

Everything in the room wanted to command his attention. "It's very nice."

"Why it's more than nice, Gus. It has everything a boy or girl, or two girls growing up, might need." She walked over to one wall and turned a knob on a small door in the wall. "This is the dumb waiter. I've asked Theodore to prepare a nice supper for you and send it up here very soon."

Gus felt uneasy. "But what about you, Aunt Marigold. Where will you sleep, and what will you eat?"

She knelt down in front of him. "Now, Gus, it would be no adventure if I stayed around. You'll have everything you need here—food, books, things to play with, even music from the special music boxes."

"And what if I wanted someone to talk to?"

"Well, there's Randy and all you need to do is open the door and summon him or any of a number of others like him into the room."

That fact did not settle Gus' disquiet. "What about school?"

"It's only Saturday, but come Monday morning, you'll be expected to continue your studies. I've made all the arrangements. Now give me a kiss and a hug as I need to make my way down before bedtime."

Gus accepted her kiss and embrace but reluctantly as he did not believe that she understood his concerns.

She stood. "Ah, there's one more thing I need to show you before I go, one thing that I think will take your mind of any fears that you have at being on your own." She took his hand and lead him to the window, pulled back the gauzy curtains.

His Aunt Marigold then revealed to him a view as he'd never seen before, a sky so deeply blue it was almost black, stars like scatterings of glowing salt crystals, some white, some golden. Below the window, a carpet of treetops as far as his eye could see. And darting through the skies a myriad of nightly glowing creatures like lightning bugs, but he knew that they weren't bugs at all but other beings like he'd never seen before. They popped into view, appeared, disappeared, emerged and faded. And in the midst of it all, the most beautiful and hugest moon he'd ever seen.

Gus' attention so fixed on the view outside the window that he barely noticed the footsteps moving away from him and the door closing just as his aunt said, "Goodnight, my sweet little nephew." And he barely perceived the low sigh just on the other side of the closed door as his little unusual protector curled up to sleep there all the rest of the night.