

2050

By Shannon O'Shea

Prologue

Before everything happened, I am told there were still beautiful things. But 2040 came, and it brought with it a wake of destruction like no other, started by us but never recovered from. Beyond that fateful year, nothing would ever be the same. We thought it was bad when the fuel ran out, when the crime rates doubled, when the amount of people on Earth became larger than the amount of food and housing. But then 2049 came, and our misery reached new heights. With the arrival of 2050, everything was truly, irreparably broken. But no one sees that, because it was made to look fixed.

Beep. Beep. Beep. I'm woken by the shrill, steady chirp of my digital alarm clock at exactly six-thirty a.m. I sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed, lingering for a second with my feet on the cold tile as I wipe the sleep from my eyes. The lights are already on, of course – they are on a schedule too, just like everything else in this city. I walk to the kitchen for breakfast. On my way there, I pass my mother, and we nod politely to each other before continuing on our separate paths. I pour myself some cereal and eat it in a chair facing the window. When I look outside, I don't see the bright, cheerful, modern city the government presents Miami as. I see a decrepit bunch of skyscrapers whose residents only leave if they absolutely have to.

They say *efficient*; I say *deeply flawed*. The schedules were implemented as a way to promote productivity and reduce wasted time, but in reality all they are doing is separating us from each other and from freedom.

For the full duration of breakfast, I see not a single person outside. They are all following their schedules, which for different people means different things. For most adults, six forty-five means starting work, probably from home on a computer. For me and the other teenagers, it means getting ready to start school.

Normally all this would involve is waking up, eating, and putting on my government-issued clothes, the same ones everyone else wears. They are simple, plain, and unflattering, but no one really minds because after all, why does it matter how you look if no one sees you?

But today is different. Instead of logging on to my school account and accessing my online classes, I quickly run a brush through my wavy black hair and wash my face. I examine my appearance in the small mirror on the wall before I leave the room. I do all this because today is very special – everyone enrolled in my online Environmental Science course is taking a field trip. I will meet my classmates. I will talk to people other than my family. Maybe I will even make friends. I would love that, since I don't really have any. Most people don't. Not these days.

I grab my laptop and my phone and put them in a bag before heading out the door. I walk through the deserted streets to the bus stop, a place I have hardly ever needed to go before. My heart beats fast and hard behind my ribs, and my breathing has gotten quicker and shallower. I don't know if this is what excitement is supposed to feel like, or if it's the feeling of fear. Maybe it's a little of both.

I only have to wait a few minutes for the bus to arrive. It's new enough to be electric, of course, but still very old – so old that it is operated by a real live person, not a computer chip.

There isn't much of a need for buses, so they aren't where our tax dollars go. I admit I'm not exactly sure where they do go, but certainly not to public transportation.

I take a deep breath as the doors swing open. I climb the steps and turn towards the aisle. The bus is long, narrow, and cold – they didn't bother installing a heating unit. It's not too bad, though – with global warming, even December gets only about as cold as about 60 degrees Fahrenheit in Florida.

The sides of the bus are lined with seats that are clearly old but still in decent shape from the lack of use. The middle has metal poles for those without seats to hold. There are about twenty teenagers in the bus, all sitting silently in their seats. No one stands, and I don't either. I sit down in a seat with empty spots on either side and stare straight ahead. Without even looking at the other passengers, whom I suppose must be my classmates, I know they are nervous too. I can feel the tension in the air, thick and heavy and foreboding. No one wants to be the first to break the silence.

Within half an hour or so we are past the residential skyscrapers, the medical center, the shiny chrome walls of the technology complex. In the dim light I can just barely make out the metal walls that keep the rising ocean out of the city as we glide silently past them. The bus seems to drift along the sea of asphalt for an eternity, the veil of darkness that cloaks the sky thinning to make way for the rosy hues of sunrise. The bus is flooded by a soft orange light, and I can't stop looking at the sky. It's the color of grapefruit and sweet perfume and a long-forgotten thing called seafoam, all of these at once, with warm, gentle rays of golden light pushing through buildings and low clouds and stretching towards the sky. I have never seen the sunrise before, never had a reason or desire to be outside at this hour. Looking around the bus, I can tell from the faces of my classmates that I am not the only one who has never witnessed this before. Their

faces betray them, their placid expressions melting away to reveal awe and wonder. We all stare at the lightening sky, and though not a single person speaks, I feel closer to these people than I have ever felt to anyone before. We are united by this phenomenon, by the fact that we're all on this bus together, by our amazement and our pure, simple joy. For a second everything stops, and I think I could live here forever, existing just in this moment for all eternity.

I wonder if we all feel this way.

I wonder if a few decades ago this is how every moment used to feel.

I wonder if anything will ever feel like this again or if this is the first and last moment of its kind, a rarity, a hidden gem of a softly lit minute on a deserted road in the rural part of Miami that will never come to pass again.

A small building comes into view in the early morning light, a lone structure on the side of the deserted road. As we approach it, the bus slows, eventually grinding to a halt. No one moves, because we don't know where to go, what to do. But then I see a figure emerge from the building. She motions to the bus driver. It's a gesture I don't see often, one called a wave. I always thought it was a strange application of this word, as I have been told that a wave is a surge in the water of the deserted place called the ocean. It seems as though the people who named this gesture felt that they were somehow connected to the water, connected to the natural world around them.

It's a strange thought, one I don't really understand.

But the person approaching us seems to get it. The figure slowly comes closer to the bus, and I am finally able to discern it. It is a woman of about sixty years of age. Her graying hair is draped across her shoulders, and I can see the kindness in her eyes even from this distance. But as she gets closer, I see something else—a deep sadness, and something like disappointment.

She steps onto the bus and walks to the front, looking at each of us individually as if we mean the world to her, as if we are the future. She opens her mouth to speak, but then she hesitates and closes it again. I see a little light leave her eyes as she begins to recite a standardized speech, her face taut and unsmiling. The kindness is still there, but so is the hopelessness, and the latter is the more prominent.

“Hello. My name is Mrs. Teresa. Today I will be taking you on a tour of the Everglades Historical Site.”

There’s clearly something else she wants desperately to say, something all her own, and yet the only words she lets escape her lips are the words of another, the words that don’t matter.

She tells us about the site, and it’s actually very interesting – it’s so different from everything I know. As she talks, I notice that her voice is stronger, clearer, more practiced than most. She must speak more than most of the people I know.

When she finishes, she tells us to exit the bus and follow her. It’s bright outside now, but the brisk December air still stings my cheeks as I walk with my classmates. Mrs. Teresa leads us to the small building on the side of the road. No one speaks; no one even looks at each other.

Mrs. Teresa holds the door for us as we walk inside silently. The building appears to be a small museum dedicated to the history of the Everglades. It’s just one room, completely filled with displays. Glass cases with artificial animals and plants with little information plaques fill the room. Yellowing posters and maps are taped to the pastel yellow walls. Mrs. Teresa gives us a tour of the little room, explaining the displays and telling us about the history of the Everglades. She says it used to be an enormous area, filled with plants and wildlife. Everyone wonders what it’s like now, but no one wants to be the first one to speak. But we don’t have to wonder for long. Mrs. Teresa leads us out the other door of the building.

At first, all I see in front of me is a large stretch of dry brown soil. It looks like the area was bulldozed a while ago back to make room for construction, but nothing has been built yet. And then I see it. We all see it, and we step closer, forming a half-moon shape around it so we each have a clear view. It's a small patch of tall, muddy grass, like a little marsh. The area is about two feet by two feet, separated from us by four short wooden poles, one at each corner, connected by fraying ropes. We can see it, but we can't reach it. My eyes drift to the small sign staked into the ground in front of the tiny marsh. *Florida Everglades*, it says.

And I'm upset. I'm upset and I want to turn my back, to close my eyes, to run, anything to stop seeing what I'm seeing. It's wrong, it's so wrong, it's terrible, it's both everything that's wrong with the world and something tiny and utterly insignificant at the same time. More than anything else, it's not fair. But the funny thing is, I'm not mad because it isn't fair to nature, not bitter because I know thousands of animals have lost their homes, but upset in the most selfish way, for the most selfish reasons. I'm angry to the point of tears because it all has finally come crashing down on me, the great revelation, the awakening, the understanding. The realization that my generation has lost. Those before us had so much, and it was so beautiful, and they tore it all down, stripped it all away and made it ugly, and we'll never even be able to see what our world used to be, what our world is supposed to be. Everything was taken away from us before we even had a chance to experience it. We are the ones to pay for the sins of our forefathers. We are the ones who must take the hit despite never having done anything wrong. We are the ones to get the short straw, the last pick, the smaller end of the wishbone, and not even because of bad luck or chance, not because of our choices, but because of the choices of those before us. I'm sad for my generation, and I'm sad for all the ones to follow. And I'm sad for myself. I will never get to live a life with nature and serenity. I'll never hike through a forest, or swim in an oil-free

ocean, or travel to somewhere far away and be amazed by how different it looks from home. Because everything is the same now. It's all just computers and buildings and people rushing around prioritizing schedules and screens over other humans. I feel like I'm going to scream, or break down sobbing, or be sick.

"I have to go," I choke out, the last word catching in my throat as I turn and run. A few others echo my words and start running too.

We run as fast as we can, as far as we can, for as long as we can, sweat on our brows, cool wind in our hair, sun in our eyes, tears on our cheeks. We run until we find somewhere deserted – an empty construction site that, miraculously, still has real trees surrounding it. No one has to say anything, but everyone has the same idea. We fly into the safety of the trees and collapse, melting to the ground, weeping, because although no one has said it, we all know that it's never going back to how it was, and it will only get worse from here. But after a while, as we start to calm down, our bitter, despairing sobs are slowly reduced to quiet tears and then to nothing. We sit there in silence, motionless, expressionless, waiting expectantly for something to happen but desperately hoping nothing will, hoping we can just stay here until we learn how to change the world.

Finally, a girl breaks the silence. "This is the way it starts," she says. "This is the way change starts. With people taking a stand." She looks at each of us. "And that's what we're doing, in a way, isn't it? It might seem like we're hiding, but anything that goes against the system is an act of rebellion. So we're rebels. We're the ones who can change things; we're the ones who can make a positive difference, one that means something."

A boy sitting near me rejects this. "It's not like we can change the world. There are four of us here. Four teenage rebels who only took a stand because we were too scared to face

reality.”

The girl stares at him, contemplating something. Again looking at each of us in turn, she says, “No. We can’t change the world. That’s not pessimism, that’s just the fact. But we can change our own lives.”

And she’s right. She’s absolutely right, and it’s sad I never thought of what she's saying before. We don’t have to go back. Not now, not ever. We can live how we want to live. We can be real people, not the blank, emotionless mannequins who sit in front of screens all day to make enough money to be able to eat so they can live another week and keep typing on their screens, this over and over again, every single day until they die.

So we make a pact. We won’t go home. We’ll survive somehow, but even if we don’t, we will die on our own terms, not on the government’s. We will never go back. And when we say it out loud, something changes.

We are free.

And no one misses us.