

Saviors

The sun's rays tickled the water's surface, and the ocean arose. Bleary-eyed and, as had been the case for awhile, in pain. Bursting at the seams, filling, overflowing. Lost, confused, dazed. Hazy—lots of silt. Empty and hungry—lots of fish gone. The cars roared on the bridge above. Their oils seeped downwards, their dirt drifted down, their gases rising to the sky. The ocean got mad, and it threw itself against the bridge's pillars. Nobody on the yellow buses noticed.

One hundred and fifty high school seniors, and the liveliest teachers the school could offer, on their way to Grand Isle, Louisiana.

Most students listened to music or were talking with their friends. Facing inwards. Ms. F— stared out of the window—longingly, lovingly—and nobody paid her any mind. It was only because of her distinctive voice, always wheezy and croaking and somewhat piercing, that her words rose above the ambient chatter. “So that's where we would go... and that used to be...” She was in the middle of the bus, among the high schoolers. She looked around, hoping to lock eyes with someone and secure at least one audience member. Still, nobody listened.

“Guys, this is an important place to Ms. F—. She has a lot to share. Sit down. Pay attention. Okay?” The other guidance counselor, dressed for the occasion in a khaki vest with at least six pockets and knee-high rain boots, stood up from the front of the bus. “Oh, uh, thank you,” lisped Ms. F—. It was as if the words were projected from her mouth prematurely, before they could fully form. She heaved herself to the front. The students snickered cruelly.

It was all marsh outside the window. Sparse grasses and thick water, some trees. A house here and there, always tilted or missing part of its roof.

“So, I grew up here,” she began. The bus kept rattling. The students kept their hands on their phones. Some slept. They already knew it all: the rising water, the sinking land, the barrier islands forsaken, the levees. They lived within the levees. The woman continued to start and point, relishing in her moment to be a tour guide. She seemed so happy up there. The students cringed.

Onwards, the buses went. Finally the end, a rallying cry: “Who's ready to save Grand Isle?!”

The students filed out of the buses and stood in circles facing each other. The ground was wet and smushy. They chattered, happy to be out of the classroom. The teachers tiredly disembarked, too. They were happy for this day of standing around, enjoying the good weather instead of plopped behind cheap metal desks.

“Okay, guys, I'm gonna need your attention.” The environmental studies teacher who had organized all of this had bags under her eyes. She'd made soup from scratch yesterday, and filled her new glass Tupperware set with her evening's labors. She'd frozen it all, save one Tupperware which she'd brought with her on her hour-long commute to work, then on the two hour-long field trip. Well-traveled, both her and the soup, her stomach rumbled loudly. No students were paying attention, though, so that didn't matter.

Somehow, as if materialized beneath her feet, were crates of small baby reeds housed in conical yellow plastic sheaths, deteriorating five gallon buckets salvaged from hardware stores, hand shovels. “What we're gonna do is separate into teams. Find a buddy.” The air smelled like salt-fish-plants, and the students moved like tar, slowed by their conversations and boredom. Everyone shifted back and forth on the smushy ground. The mud squelched. The wind picked up. Girls twiddled with their hair, some boys adjusted themselves.

The sun rose a couple more inches in the sky, the waves churned the sandy shore. By the time the students had their instructions, nearly an hour had passed. The students blinked intelligently, stuck standing but letting their minds wander.

They walked away from the buses, fat and dull, and trekked the five minutes to the shoreline. The students talked the entire way. Fragments of their conversation floated in the wind and fell onto the water's surface. It soaked up their words.

"I got this one from Buffalo the other day. It's from Free People!... Yeah, tags still on and everything..."

"...which told me about the birds. They're supposed to be migrating but they just aren't anymore..."

"That's what the Google Classroom said! That's so unfair of her. Like we're literally trying our best, I just don't get it..."

"Bro get the fuck off of me you fucking..."

"and I oop—hahahaha I'm kidding"

"Yesterday my entire room was flooded. Like the carpet and everything... like a full inch."

"Did you hear back from financial aid?... oh my god that's so cool!"

The water kept lapping, feigning ignorance.

Their voices rose and fell but didn't lull until the five minutes had passed and they were nearly in the water. The students could have stopped and looked out: the southernmost point of Louisiana, practically. The wind carried whispers from the Caribbean and Mexico, those naively happy peoples who had so, so, so little but were so, so happy. The poor, sad, underserving recipients of once-in-a-century floods, who had to get toilet paper donations because they couldn't—just couldn't—get any with their infrastructure. Instead, their corrupt, corrupt governments built oil refineries and factories, filling the air with noxious chemicals that gave all those poor, poor people terminal diseases. Not that having infrastructure would help when everything is going to shit, climate-wise, and all. The students could have started out and listened to the winds' whispers, could have thought *oh, my god, we are soo lucky, we are soo, soo lucky*, but they forgot to because the water was the same color as the Mississippi, and they saw the Mississippi every day.

Thick, muddy, savage, ordinary. They looked away.

So the students stood with their backs to the water, and, instead, they looked at their tired environmental studies teacher. Her heart was racing from the walk, and she suddenly remembered that she'd forgotten a couple crates of the baby grasses in her classroom. She'd gotten in a fight with her family yesterday and stayed up all night thinking about them. The students looked at her, expectant and entitled. *Well now what?* she thought their irises yelled at her. The ocean, watching, was bemused. It inched closer to everyone's feet, it sent up more water through the dirt. The teacher refused to let them get the upper hand—no fucking weakness. She raised her voice—she's mad at *them*: "Guys I really don't have time for this today. Get into your groups of four and let's get started."

The students stirred, but it took a couple minutes for them to gather and act. They squeaked along. Some group aimlessly walked with the plastic cones of baby grass and shovels, their hands in mismatched gardening gloves, stooping to stick them in the ground. They'd shove the grass into a tiny hole, gossiping, and cover it back up with loose sand. The grass blades would droop downwards as the students stood to find another barren spot. As time passed, the students realized they'd really have to slow down in order to fill the two hours the itinerary allocated for planting—the crates were already pretty empty.

Other groups wandered with trash bags and gardening gloves. Their eyes on the ground, roaming for the glimmer of foil or the sheen of plastic. They stooped often, and, conversely, felt the pressure of time. And, hopeful and energized and young, they turned it into a competition. "Look at all this!" They yelled across the beach at each other. They rushed to capture it all. They were needed! Heavy, fast footfalls. The grass blades covered with mud, sometimes splitting. The ocean spluttered up the mud some more, and everything became muddier, dirtier.

In what seemed like a blink, the environmental studies teacher called them back. She started talking-teaching. Some of the groups who were supposed to be planting gave up the pretense and were climbing on the rubble on the shoreline. The waves would smash against the concrete, and the students would laugh at their peers who were touched by the spray. The ocean became angry, hurt, and it started to swell.

“It’s been two hours?!” one of the students interrupted the teacher. It didn’t seem like she minded, though, because she answered. She’d called them back early, after just an hour, because they’d run out of plants. Plus, she silently acknowledged, she was pretty hungry. She gathered the plastic crates and the plastic cones, and the students threw their gloves into a plastic box she’d brought.

The group slowly made its way back to the dually administrative and welcome building, which had a long pier that was high and extended far out into the water. They grabbed their lunches—everyone had packed one today, except for the forgetful ones, the ones secretly on diet-anorexia, and some of the poor ones. They sat. They talked. Some of them opened metal containers with matching silverware filled with pasta and sauce and a couple of vegetable sides. Some had baby carrots—a little slimy—and hummus and Doritos. Some opened their ziplock bags and withdrew smushed PB&Js. Nobody knew what the teachers brought, because they sat, superiorly detached, on wooden benches in the shade many yards away from the closest student.

Everyone sat for a long time, maybe an hour, and talked and ate. Eventually, though, the students realized that they had more time, perhaps enough time to fuck around.

So they got up and threw their trash away, their wrappers and plastic bags and cans, and wandered some more.

Down the wooden stairs to the shoreline where they tossed rocks into the water and watched the satisfying splash. Around the pier, looking down and around. The biggest attraction was a decapitated fish that had been sitting on the pier for, some of the boys estimated, a week. Some students touched it. Some gagged. Everyone laughed. It smelled like salt and rot.

Still, they didn’t look at the ocean, didn’t see its angry tears, didn’t fucking look! The ocean was now furious. It crashed and thundered, it muddied itself more and thrashed against the shore. Nobody took notice because that’s what it always did anyway. Its mind oozed. Its body bloated.

Finally—finally!—enough time had passed that anyone who hadn’t gone on the trip would assume that it was travel time well spent. They students, now a little sweatier and almost as tired as the teachers, climbed the bus steps. What do bus drivers do during the field trips? Stay in the bus? Who knows, but as the students filed in, they sighed with relief because the air was all chilly and crisp. The sun had really beat them down.

A lot of the students just plopped into their seats. They breathed pretty deeply. They were happy. This was their last trip together. In a couple months they’d all be in college. Already, they were heaving under the weight, and they liked to talk about it often. Student-adult, play-philosophize, work-study.

The ocean listened. The teachers did too. “I just can’t go,” a girl with short brown hair and Hunter rain boots murmured to her friend. Their shoulders brushed, and her friend reached around and hugged her tightly. “My parents didn’t save up enough, I don’t know...” she fought back tears. A couple of benches away, another student was talking about his major. Bio-engineering. It’s the future. Another was urban design. A couple said environmental studies. The tired teacher, holding her empty Tupperware of soup, smiled.

The buses started up, sputtering and spraying like the ocean. The air smelled like gasoline. The students talked more about their futures, about their jobs, about their hopes. Spent, their minds woozy from endorphins and nostalgia, they spoke vulnerably. Fears, hopes dreams—that stuff. Very different from their parents. The teachers eavesdropped sadly. Not shamefaced or guiltily, not repentant or responsible, but sad nonetheless.

The bus drove across the bridge, the first of two and a half hours begun. Ms. F— stared out the window. The grasses drooped some more. The wind pushed a Cliff bar wrapper out of the trash can. The ocean fell back into its coma, even more bloated than before. The students blinked intelligently.