

What Comes After

A story by Julia De-Andrade

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I'm writing this now so that it'll live on even when I'm gone.

My grandma told me a story today. She sat me down on that old, wooden stool in the living room (the one that creaks when you shift just enough). She grabbed my hand, squeezed it so tight, until the only thing I could feel was the chill of her fingers and the stiff night breeze waltzing in from the window. She gave me a small smile, the one she only ever gives when she's remembering a distant past, and then she began. And now I'll begin too.

It was near the end of 2019. Things at that point already looked bleak. The hurricanes got larger and stronger every year, and every year the people would turn their heads away even further. Avoidance became a hobby and dancing around the future became an olympic sport. People busied themselves with politics and social media and who to cancel and who to "stan"—except for 4 million people worldwide. They would protest outside of government buildings and talk to public officials, straining to open the ears of those with greater power than themselves. And my great grandmother was there too. She was only a teen at that time. She focused on her friends, her family, and what college she would go to; But she also paid attention to the news and to how the wind got colder and how the sun seemed to be so far away, but felt like it was in her palms, burning her skin till they were the deepest red. She knew that things weren't going well.

One day, however, she was given a chance to try and change things. That year her school was given the opportunity to plant over a thousand mangroves, an opportunity granted to them by a local artist. The hope was for these mangroves to be planted in yards to provide some sort of support and to start a conversation about the impending sea-level rise that would come with climate change, and for a few months, it worked. However, like every topic to grace a news article, it faded out of popularity and people quickly moved back to ignorance and avoidance. After all, habits die hard, and nothing is harder to escape than one's own mistakes.

Then the hurricanes arrived.

First came Dorian, a category 5 behemoth who's big claim to fame was drowning the Bahamas. 4 years later came Samantha, who put the nail in the coffin, and what was known as the Bahamas became just another drop in the ocean. Things didn't get much better afterwards. Florida sunk soon after, killing thousands of people who had said 'it's just another hurricane. We'll survive this one too!'. The rest fled to higher land and the abandoned buildings soon became the homes of fish and manatee. However, the mangroves stayed strong and in the dampness, they grew.

About 40 years after that, land was found again. Florida had seemingly resurfaced out of nowhere, carried by the beds of mangroves that were planted so long ago. The first visitors were government officials, people who knew of the danger of the terrain and were there to ensure the safety of those who may come after them. Once security was established, a flood of people arrived, eager to stake out some land in the concrete island that lay before them. My grandparents were one of those people. They had found a small run-down building, barely standing on its stony feet, and decided it was home. It was in that home that my mother grew up and it is where I am growing up now.

The new Florida (aptly named Renacida) brought with it a new culture, an amalgamation of the various cultures of the newcomers who had arrived there. My grandma tells me of the fresh fish she and my grandpa had eaten their first night home. They had never tasted anything that delicious before and it had become a staple in our home ever since. It's become my favorite dish as well, alongside the traditional Brazilian food my family had passed down through the ages. But it wasn't just the food that was new. My great grandmother had spent her teen years in the comfort of her home, a small apartment building, complete with a variety of books to read and games to play. Now, we live in a small boat house, tied to a decrepit building, complete with only a small, deflated soccer ball and a sense of adventure. She spent her days lazing around and daydreaming. I spend my days traversing the murky waters and hunting for fish and frogs with my friends. The places she had grown up with are gone, and in their place came the small restaurants and empty concrete parks that I have grown up with. And yet, the spirit of the old Florida lives on in its residents. Many of us are descendants of the children that had lived on a peninsula so long ago, and we continue their legacy by continuing to thrive and survive. "Florida" may be gone, but in its place is a bright, hopeful future.

So, to anyone who may be reading this, keep that spirit alive because without it, the ma
wouldn't have been planted, the conversations would not have been had, and I may not have been
standing here now. That drive is what has sparked change and saved us and our planet, and now
me and my descendants will eat the fruits of our ancestors' labor.