

Melanie Gates was different. As are all girls read about in fourteen-dollar books featured on “New York’s Best Seller List.” She listened to music constantly always making sure it was loud enough to drown out the noise. Her parents found it funny the paradox Melanie trapped herself in. If the news channel was too loud, she made a rock song louder. When too many people were talking, she listened to musicals to make more clutter. It was all about control and if she didn’t have it, then she wasn’t there. Her mind would drift into fantasy’s her reality could not penetrate. She called it her bubble. Melanie Gates lived this way for fifteen happy years blurring in and out only coming back to her body when it was convenient, or she couldn’t stand hiding anymore. The key was, she could always come back. No matter how stressed or sad, she could break the glass pane in her mind and feel all the good waiting for her on the other side.

Then it stopped. The day Melanie became trapped flows through her mind like the streams she would play in with her brother. Soft and soothing yet uncontrollable. In the beginning she was sitting on the carpet with her mother and father watching the nightly news. Poppy the pug was snuggled in her lap dreaming what only dogs can deem paradise. Her mother suddenly turned up the volume on the tv as the newscaster began frantically reading a headline running across the bottom of the screen.

Deadly Covid-19 Virus Has Started Spreading Around the Globe.

Melanie looked at her mom frightened.

“Mom, I’m scared.”

“Don’t worry sweetheart, you are not likely to get it. You are safe.” She responded grasping her daughters’ hand reassuringly. *“Nothing is going to **change**.”*

But everything did change. Her small, sheltered bubble had popped and instead of revealing the beautiful world she imagined it shattered into chaos. The evenings she had previously spent shopping in her small town with friends had been confined to boxes on a computer screen. All the hugs from grandparents had turned into distanced smiles and hidden tears. When it rained, she stayed outside just to feel something other than the glow of the tv and imprint of her body on the same spot of the couch.

This is where Melanie becomes lost. This where she puts up the glass for good and becomes selfish. On this night, she cried and for the first time, when she dried her eyes, realized the pain wasn’t gone. In the middle, Melanie would sit on the couch for hours lost in the space of her mind reaching out, grasping for help that would never arrive. All the things she had done the year prior teased her soul threatening to never come back. This caused Melanie to become uncomfortable as herself. Every part of her body began to feel different. Her hands were that of tree trunks and feet of sticks. Her stomach was the size of a watermelon and she stood taller in the mirror. One time while washing her hands Melanie caught a glimpse of herself in a reflection. She gasped and backed into the wall behind her. The person she saw was unrecognizable. Their lips were too perfect, and their eyes too round. This made no sense to Melanie. *How could I look so put together when I’m broken?* She thought and for days on end

she carried herself this way. As if she there was nothing to do but go from the dining room table to the bathroom. For eight months this went on. Here to there. Back and forth. No place to be. Nobody worth talking to. No hope it would end. She finally decided her energy would be put to better use elsewhere doing simple happy things like playing the guitar or cleaning her room. This went on for another two months. Or three. Or maybe four. Till the day she decided to make it okay. She tried to remember who she was deep down underneath all the noise. Her new mission was to bring that little girl back.

At the start of what people said was the end Melanie realized it was only the beginning. All the sadness in her body had resurfaced only this time as anger after her father walked into the kitchen on a Tuesday night to announce that Melanie and her little brother would be going back to school. *No*. She thought. *This isn't happening. They can't make me*. Oh but they could. She tried to take down the glass wall this time only to realize it would not move. Melanie started banging and banging day and night in hopes it would let her back into the outside world. It didn't budge. So she blamed it on the masks. *It's the virus' fault I'm like this. It took everything from me. Nobody has a right to blame me for what my life has become*. These three sentences circled through her head every waking moment. Sometimes she would scream *STOP* so loud in her head that a migraine would come. These were the worst nights. The ones she couldn't imagine getting up from. Yet somehow, she always did. Melanie would carry herself to the shower, and to the treadmill, and to work. This is when she realized the most important thing in life is that it goes on. Her grades would not stop plummeting because she didn't care to fix them. The sun would not stop shining because of tears cried by those filled with loss. Melanie's world would continue to circulate no matter how much she tried to slow it down. So she decided to stop fighting it. Instead Melanie sat like a boulder in the wind and let it pass over. This gave her strength. Strength she hadn't seen since the beginning. One night while putting on the sloth slippers from a Christmas past, Melanie closed her eyes and thought for the first time that *this too shall pass and* broke the glass. Never had such tears of joy been shed or such tightly enveloped hugs been shared. This is because Melanie could feel again. This is because she was finally free.

So when it comes down to it, Melanie Gates is in fact different from the girls you read about because this time the main character saves herself. This time she doesn't give in when the fire surrounds her. Instead she becomes one with the smoke and floats freely into the sky destined to prosper in a universe full of stars.