

It was raining in the Great City of the South. Though, it always rained. Cynthia maneuvered her way through the puddles and flooded sidewalks, having done so all her life. It wasn't that difficult, today was a lighter drizzle. It wasn't always like this either, her Ma and her teachers told her. Long ago, hundreds of years really, the weather was a lot less consistent. The temperatures were getting higher, and the people were getting desperate. So the scientists, under the guise of then-President Bartleby, had launched a plan.

Cloud seeding, they called it. Supposedly, they would launch some chemicals into the air, stimulating rain production. Cynthia didn't really know how it worked, but she could look up and see the rain. It worked nevertheless, and the scientists were thrilled. Temperatures started dropping as the world started to cool. By week two, however, people were starting to get nervous. The streets had started to flood, and there was no sign of the rain actually stopping. The group in charge of the seeding, the Rain Commission, stammered out a response stating that it was technology that hadn't really been experimented with.

By week three, there were already riots occurring in the streets. Cynthia always thought that the people back then were pretty quick to raise Cain, though her Pa always told her that they just weren't used to the rain back in the day. The furious citizens across the world demanded answers, demanded a fix. There wasn't a solution, at least an easy one, so then-President Bartleby announced a new initiative. The Great City movement, a way to prevent flooding and ensure that everyone stayed alive while the grand nation could flourish. It was simple, really. There was just no way to update every city across every state to survive the rain, so they'd simply construct new cities over the flooded streets.

It hadn't actually been difficult, everyone worked together to create the Great Cities. Four of them in total across the continental country, spread across the north, south, east and

west. High above the ground, the circular Great Cities were a marvel of anti-flooding architecture and water management. Enough houses for every citizen, the effort of decades of hard work had paid off. Spanning hundreds of thousands of miles each, and split across three rings for convenience of mapping, every citizen started to move in and get used to their new home. It wasn't a utopia, like what was promised. No idyllic golden paradise, and the Great Cities certainly weren't a magic fix to the greater issue. But they weren't a dystopia like so many feared. The Great Cities were shockingly normal. And so, life moved on.

Cynthia Rogers-Moore made her way down the empty street, the rain falling on the hood of her jacket. In the puddles, she could see the neon lights of the signs and street lamps all around her. She passed by a greenhouse on her way to the Ellis Tower, shielding her eyes from the bright fluorescent light emanating from the building. Named after President Ellis, the woman who successfully moved everyone into the Great Cities, the Ellis Tower was the tallest building around. You could see it from almost anywhere in the Middle Ring, even though it was dead-center in the Inner Ring thousands of miles away. Cynthia wanted to go to the top, to see if the rumors she heard were true. It was an imposing sight though, seemingly piercing the thick layer of clouds that remained stagnant above the Great City, almost going up eternally. But it was always a ways away, at least a day's trip on the train between the Rings. With her schooling and her part-time job, she never had the opportunity to make it.

But, well, she had graduated. She quit her part-time job working one of the many water processing plants. It was grueling work, hard labor carrying gallons of water that gave her some defined muscles on her arm, but it paid extremely well. Enough to go to college, and enough to splurge and take a train. She hadn't actually consulted with her Ma or Pa about it, just leaving a single note. "Dear Ma," it started, before she scribbled it out and started over again. "Dear Parents," she tried, before wincing at the formality.

“I’m disappearing for a day, going to Ellis Tower. Will return soon, call if ya need anything!

Love,  
Cynthia.”

It hadn’t been the most elegant of notes, she’d be the first one to admit. But it got the point across, and helped explain her mysterious disappearance. She couldn’t ask for much more, and helped her head to the train station with a clear conscience while the street lights were still on. There wasn’t much of a difference between the day or the night, the sun and moon covered by the murky gray clouds either way, but the street lights helped illuminate the path when the sky was darker than usual. So there she was, wandering the cold street making her way to the nearest inter-Ring train station. It would take a while even with the train, the Great City of the South was too large to make travel anything more than long and inconvenient.

She arrived at the train station, a tiny building at the end of the Middle Ring. There wasn’t a lot of travel between the Rings, since your home and career were almost always located in the same part of the Great City. Each Ring was big enough, bigger than multiple states that existed before the flooding, and they were packed with enough stuff to last a lifetime. Simply put, there was no real reason to explore beyond your Ring. The train station was never busy enough to warrant having a larger space than the one it currently did. Cynthia walked up to the bored man working the counter, setting a pile of credits on the counter. She didn’t need to say anything, the ticket man merely nodded once and handed over a small slip of paper. She had a few hours before the train would even arrive, Cynthia read on the ticket, so she sat in one of the uncomfortable wooden chairs and pulled her phone out. The signal wasn’t

great, and Cynthia was worried that the phone wouldn't start. The cell companies had sworn up and down that it was a safety measure to make sure that a phone was connected to one of the towers before it could turn on, but Cynthia had always figured that was a load of crap.

Sure enough, her phone didn't turn on. She grumbled under her breath, putting the piece of junk back in her pocket. There weren't any magazines on the rack to her left, and the cramped space of the station started to trigger her claustrophobia. Cynthia closed her eyes, and started to meditate. She let her mind wander, eventually settling on reliving the memory of the day two years ago that had started this journey.

It had been another boring day of school. The rain was worse than normal, torrential and too dangerous for anyone to leave their house safely. So, school was virtual. She had put her virtual reality headset on, a middle of the road quality device she bought from the school itself for days like then. She knew most kids in her class had the fancier kits, using them to play games or watch movies in an immersive quality. Cynthia didn't care, all she bothered using her set for was school. She logged on to the program used to host lessons, watching herself materialize into her assigned digital classroom seat. She had set her avatar to a model of herself exactly as she was. Long brown hair, moderately tall, and a small amount of freckles on her pale skin. Most, actually almost all, of the other kids had made adjustments to their online avatars. Small adjustments usually, making themselves taller or shorter or just generally more attractive. It wasn't strictly allowed, but an avatar code was harder to maintain than a dress code, so it was accepted in moderation. Cynthia just never bothered to change her avatar.

As always, before their teacher had logged on, the class engaged in some small discussion. Cynthia was a quiet kid at school, having a few friends and generally liked enough, but not someone her classmates could usually pick out of a crowd. One of the more well-off

girls in class was talking about a trip she had just recently been on, and the class was listening with rapture.

“Yeah, the elevator was like, super long, but the sights were totally worth it!” Her voice was sweet, but Cynthia didn’t pay her much mind. The girl brushed some of her short blonde hair from her face, as she continued. “I mean, I had never seen the sky before, but it was so beautiful!”

Instantly, Cynthia paid more attention to the girl. Katie, she thought the girl’s name was, kept talking. “If you all ever have the chance to go, you absolutely should. I don’t think I’ll ever forget what I saw up there.”

Cynthia opened a small notes tab in the software, and started writing. “Ask Katie(?) about sky.”

Unfortunately, class started as she was writing her note. She didn’t have a chance to ask Katie about the experience until late in the evening, long after class was over and Cynthia finished her homework for the day. She had shot the girl a message, instantly getting a response.

*“Hey, I know we haven’t talked much, but I wanted to ask where you had gone to see the sky?”*

*“omg, of course!! it was at Ellis Tower! you should totes go, it’ll be great!”*

It wasn't uncommon for teenagers, especially the ones around Cynthia's age, to use slang before the Great Cities were built. But it was still a bit odd to see, a snapshot into the time before the rain started falling. Cynthia always found it hard to imagine a world so different.

And so, the whole idea started because of a single story told in a classroom. Truth be told, Cynthia had always wanted to see the sky. It was always blanketed in the clouds, and no signal could ever reach to get a good enough picture. Plus, she was always busy with something. So one day she decided that before she went off to college, she would achieve a lifelong goal. It wasn't fancy, nor was it anything major, but it was something that Cynthia wanted to say she did.

Cynthia woke up to the ticket man clearing his throat, pointing at the train that had entered the station. She nodded at him in thanks, boarding her train. It wasn't her first time on a train, she had visited some of the Moore side of the family in the Outer Ring when she was younger, but it was still unfamiliar. It started to depart not long after she had gotten settled in a small cabin, startling her.

Cynthia stared out the window in awe as she passed above the large water reservoirs that surrounded the Rings. The sheer scale of the Great Cities was hard to understand from the ground, but this was something that helped illustrate it. She remembered working in the processing plant, filtering the water out to make it safe to drink. The chemicals used to start the rain weren't exactly healthy to drink, but they were easily filtered out of the drinking water. Well, easily in concept. Working the plants gave her a new appreciation for the work done.

After almost ten hours, the train finally pulled into the Inner Ring's station. It was exactly the same as the one she had entered, Cynthia noted, as she got off the train. The Inner Ring itself wasn't much different, the same geography and design as the other two Rings. Cement roads, well illuminated sidewalks, and buildings with neon advertisements were all familiar to Cynthia as she made her way to the Ellis Tower. Supposedly, the other Great Cities were all different, but there was no feasible way to get to the others. Supposedly there were planes, but Cynthia had never seen any.

The way to Ellis Tower was, thankfully, pretty clear. From the outskirts of the Ring, she could see it looming in the distance. It would be a few hours to get there, but it would all be worth it to see the sky. Cynthia set off, one foot in front of the other, walking with purpose. She'd go to the bus stop, head to the center of the Ring, and then go up the elevator. A perfect plan.

The bus was late, and slower than Cynthia wanted, but after a few hours of passing by the bright advertisements pasted on the sides of buildings, she made it. She didn't even have to look up to see the Ellis Tower, it was large enough to see from the ground. The base of it was supposedly miles wide, extending upwards for hundreds of floors. It was impressive in a way that Cynthia had never seen, the sheer scale of the building was almost intimidating. She steeled her resolve, and started to make her way inside the skyscraper.

It was a confusing maze of offices and hallways, as Cynthia tried to maneuver her way to the center elevator. She did some research, having seen that the roof is only accessible from one elevator by the reception desk. Unfortunately, there were no directories that Cynthia could see, leading to her stumbling around a few different businesses. After a while, it seemed like she found an actual hallway unconnected to the businesses, and started walking with more

confidence. Passing by a hair salon, she entered the central plaza of the Ellis Tower. Walking up to the desk in the center, Cynthia Rogers-Moore smiled at the woman sitting there.

“Hi! I was wondering if I could take a tour of the roof?”

The woman nodded once. “Of course,” before listing off the price.

Cynthia blanched slightly, but it was still within her budget. Setting the large pile of credits on the desk, she watched as the woman got up and walked to the back, swiping a keycard on the elevator’s door. She gestured for Cynthia to follow.

“Is this your first time heading up to the roof?” the woman asked.

Cynthia nodded as she entered the elevator. It was smaller than expected, a bit more cramped than she would normally like.

“Oh, you’re in for a treat. It’s a beautiful view up there! You’ll only have five minutes, though. The air up there is pretty thin, and anything more is a safety risk. Sorry.”

“That’s fine,” she responded in almost a whisper.

“Oh! And you won’t be able to take any pictures, either. No signal reaches that high, so nothing will turn on.”

Cynthia nodded again, watching the elevator’s doors close. It started moving up, as she closed her eyes. She had never been a fan of enclosed spaces, and the elevator was worse than



she had anticipated. The lift music started playing, a light jazz that did nothing to actually calm her down.

The elevator ride seemed to last a lifetime, the cold metal ascending the hundreds of floors with only soft music to denote a passage of time. The tour guide remained in silence, as Cynthia tried to maintain some sort of composure. Eventually, the elevator slowed to a stop, as the doors opened. Stepping out of the elevator, Cynthia instantly felt the cold breeze on her face. She looked around, seeing the metal walkway extend around her in a small circle. Below her, she could see a thick blanket of clouds. And above her, she could see the stars.

The sky was more beautiful than she could have ever imagined. Rows and rows of multicolored stars in the distance, like the paintings before the flooding. Even the darkness, the space between the stars, served as a perfect frame for the image she saw above her. It was hard to breathe, the air too thin to stay up there for long, but it didn't matter. She stood up there for what felt like an eternity, merely soaking up the sight.

The tour guide tapped her on her shoulder, as Cynthia got back into the elevator. The ride down didn't feel as long as it did before, the image of the stars still in her mind. She got off the elevator, and left the Ellis Tower.

Cynthia Rogers-Moore made her way down the empty street, dodging the puddles and flooded sidewalks as she had done all her life. Every so often, she would stare up at the clouded sky and smile.