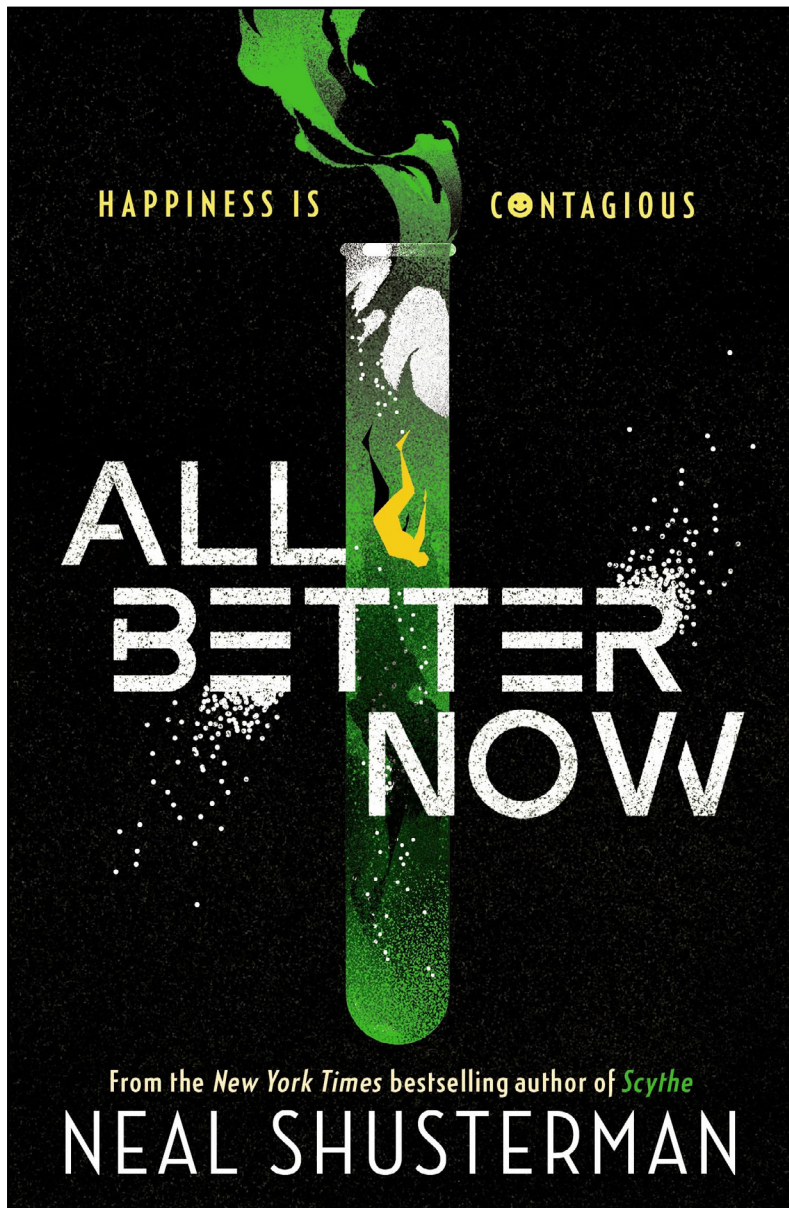
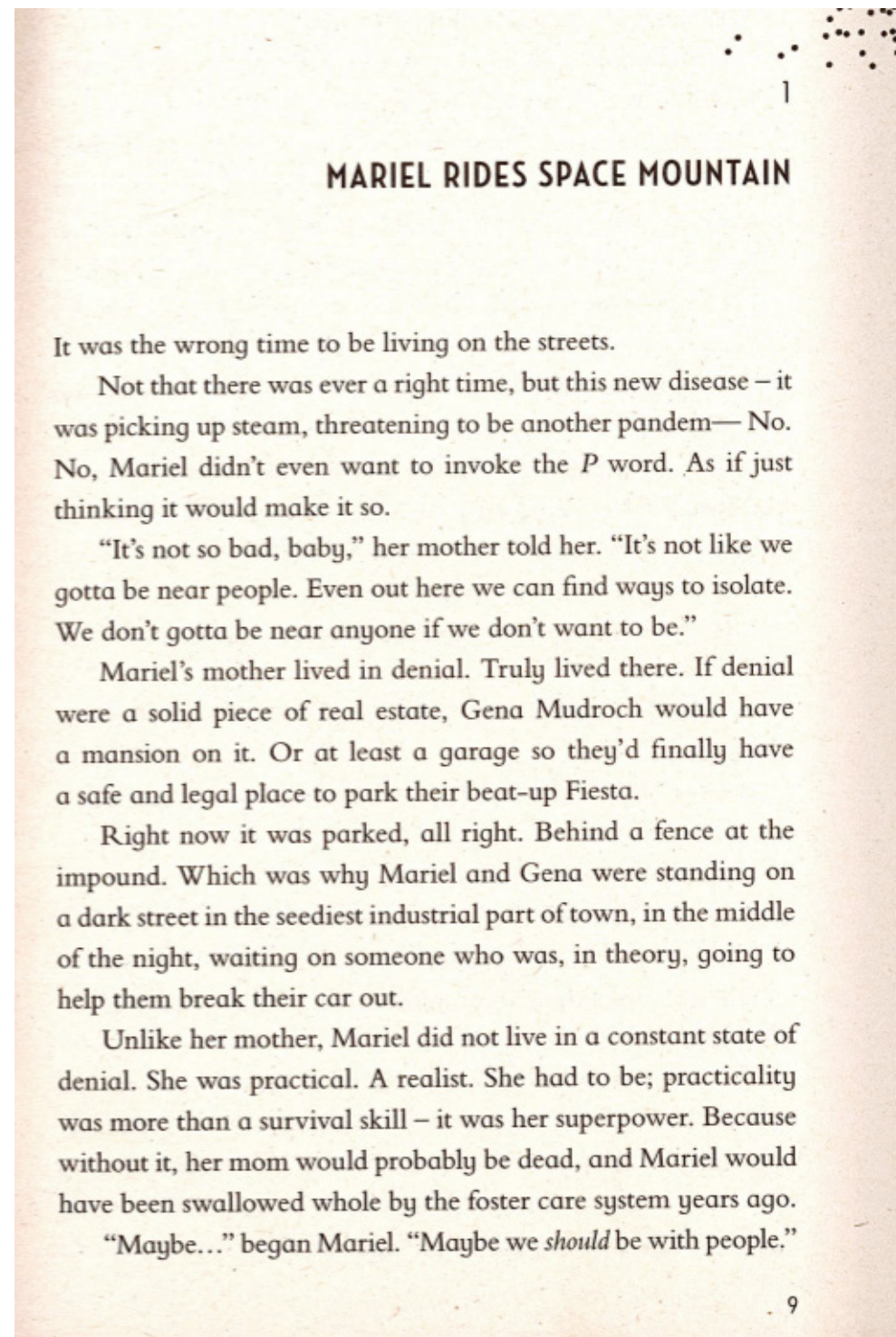




[Buy this book here.](#)

Copies are available from the library to loan.
library@whitleybayhighschool.org



"What, and catch this thing? No way!"

"But maybe we should get it over with quick. You know – before the hospitals get full, while there are still services for us."

Her mom brushed her straggly hair out of her eyes. "I know what you're thinking," she said, giving Mariel her suspicious look – the one she usually reserved for anyone and everyone else. "You can't really believe what the nuts out there are saying?"

"I know it sounds ... *out there* ... but there's always a chance it could be true."

"Since when do you listen to rumors, huh? You, who's gotta have scientific proof of everything under the sun!"

Her mother was right – rumor was the currency of ignorance. But anecdotal evidence had to count for something. "I've seen interviews with people who've had it," Mariel told her mom. "They seem ... I don't know ... different."

"How can you know they're different when you didn't know 'em to begin with?"

Mariel shrugged. "There's something in their eyes, Momma. Something ... wise."

Her mother guffawed at that. "Trust me, no one gets smart from getting sick."

"I didn't say 'smart.' I said 'wise.'"

But "wise" wasn't really the word for it either. "Centered" was more like it. Being at home. Even if you don't have one.

"You're dreaming," her mother said. "That's okay, you're allowed."

As practical as Mariel needed to be to survive life with her mother, she wasn't immune to the occasional flight of fancy. Especially when it gave her hope. She told herself that hanging on to hope was nothing like her mother's perpetual state of denial, but deep down, she knew hope and denial were reluctant

neighbors. They glared at each other from across the same silty river of circumstance.

Across the lonely street, a man walked with a purposeful gait, which also seemed a bit loose, like his joints were made of rubber. Although he was mostly in shadow, Mariel could tell he glanced over at them. Was this the guy? Or was this just someone who was gonna bring them trouble? Turned out he was neither; he just continued on his merry way toward whatever place a rubbery man goes at two in the morning.

"That's not true, you know," she said to her mom, who had already forgotten the conversation and needed to be reminded. "People do grow from being sick. What about Grandpa – he changed. He had a whole new perspective after he beat cancer."

Her mother gave a rueful chuckle. "I wouldn't want to go through *that* just to get some perspective. And besides, a heart attack got him not a year later, so what good did that perspective do?"

Mariel had no answer for that one. Now it was her mom sounding like the realist.

"We'll be fine, baby," she said. "We'll find a place where we can park safe and legal, and then we'll hunker down and wait it out, once we get the Grinch out of impound." The Grinch was their green Fiesta. Mom had a thing about naming inanimate objects.

The guy who was coming to help them was late. Her mother had said "*two-ish*," but that was from the guy who knew the guy that knew her mom. Three degrees of separation from a nameless man who already had their money.

Realism told Mariel he wasn't coming. Hope told her that maybe something better was.

Mariel always did her best to align her need for hope with

her practical nature. In this case, both told her that maybe it was best to lean into this pandemic – and yes, she used the *P* word, because clearly that's what it was becoming. But a different one. A *very* different one.

The previous one, of course, was devastating. Millions dead worldwide. People fighting science, grasping at absurd conspiracy theories, hearsay, and random social media posts, even as they lay dying. While people who *did* follow the science and the rules wished death upon those who didn't. *That* pandemic exposed the very worst of human nature on all sides.

Her mom, of course, was one of the deniers, and went out partying during the worst of it. She caught it early, and although Mariel never did, it seemed her mom had it bad enough for both of them. Bad enough to land her in the hospital. They still had insurance back then, but it didn't matter, because there were no ventilators to be had. Her mom made it through – but it took forever. She had the long syndrome – not technically sick anymore, but not actually better. She couldn't work for months, and once she could, her job was gone. The restaurant she had worked at, like so many restaurants in San Francisco, went permanently out of business.

After that, it was Space Mountain.

That's what Mariel called her mother's tumultuous downward spirals – which her mom always rode with her eyes firmly closed and in the dark. And although her mom managed to get occasional work here and there when the world opened up, the damage had been done. Damage on too many levels to count.

So now they were here. On a deserted street, where nobody in their right mind should be, at an hour nobody in their right mind should be there, waiting for a guy who probably wasn't coming.

More books by Neal Shusterman:

