

The City of Clouds

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EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET, PLEASANT PRAIRIE, WI - DAY

A wide tree-lined street. Sprinklers judder on front lawns in front of modest box houses. A paper airplane sails through the air.

EXT. MAYSUN HOOPS' HOUSE/FRONT YARD - DAY - TRACKING

The plane settles in front of a small yellow house. No sprinkler here. The lawn is brown with patches of pale, spring-green grass. A set of wind-chimes jangle near an overgrown garden. A wild cherry tree grows to one side. It's in full bloom.

MAYSUN HOOPS (10), or May for short, is a skinny slip of a girl with shaggy bangs and dark, angular eyes. She's young enough to still enjoy pretending, but old enough to know that grownups do not see, or know, all.

May snaps a pair of WW1 flying goggles over her eyes and pops up into a crouch. She looks side to side, surveying the landscape for potential enemies. Safety assured, she scoops up the plane and presses her lips together.

Whining and buzzing, May sends the plane down through a burst of imaginary gunfire. She speaks into a plastic Walkie-Talkie with an exaggerated Texan accent.

MAY

This is dog-fighter alpha-alpha-six.
Do you copy?

She makes static sounds as she dramatically falls.

MAY (cont'd)

Cshh... Mayday! Mayday!

Moaning, May rolls down a small slope towards the cherry tree. She lands underneath and tucks her arms under her head. She squints up into the canopy of blossoms. Through the goggle's golden lenses, the blooms appear sepia-toned.

She shoves her hair out of her face and closes her eyes.

MAY (cont'd)

(whispers)

Please let me fly, please let me fly.

She holds her breath. Nothing happens. She opens one eye. Nope, still nothing. Deflated, she lets her breath out in a loud burst. Birds chitter. Distant lawnmowers chug. May listens, thinking.

A silver, nondescript car slowly glides up the driveway. Gravel crunches under its tires. May's head snaps around just as the doors swing open. Two men emerge in gray, off-the-peg suits. They look official. Shined shoes, briefcases, somber expressions.

May shoves her goggles up on her head and inches forward on her belly, commando style. She ducks behind a bush.

STEEK (28), a beanpole of a man with an apologetic stance, glances nervously towards the house. GRIMM (55), compact and bulldog-squat, nods sharply. They share a look, then walk purposefully towards the front door.

May cups her hand over her mouth and whispers something to an invisible second in command. The two men glance over their shoulders and spot May.

Grimm jerks his head, indicating to Steek that he should deal with the girl.

Steek crouches down until he and May are eye level. He smiles and points at her goggles.

STEEK

Neat. Where'd you get them?

May stands at attention and clicks her heels.

MAY

World War One, sir. First division.
Champion dog fighter, sir.

Steek salutes her and suppresses a smile.

STEEK

Very good, officer. At ease.

MAY

Um, I'm just pretending y'know.

STEEK

Yeah, I got that.

Grimm rolls his eyes and makes a 'move it along' gesture.

STEEK (cont'd)

Anyway, uh, is your mom home?

MAY

Are you here about my dad?

The men look at each other. Grimm's mouth flattens.

GRIMM
We need to speak to your mother.

EXT/INT. MAY'S HOUSE/DOORWAY - DAY - TRACKING

May marches forward and pushes through the men. She shoves the door open and shouts.

MAY
Mom! There's some men at the door!

INT. MAY'S HOUSE/SAKU'S STUDIO - DAY

SAKU HOOPS (45), sits at a large illustrator's desk, painting. She's surrounded by several book illustrations in various stages of completion. She looks younger than her age, striking rather than pretty, and slightly unkempt.

She paints a shadow on an orange harvest moon. Startled by May's shout, she slips and drops the brush on her apron. It leaves a blood orange streak.

SAKU
(whispers)
Dammit.

MAY (O.S.)
Mom!

Saku sighs and dunks her paintbrush in a glass of water.

INT. MAY'S HOUSE/DOORWAY - DAY

May stands in the doorway and eyes the men suspiciously, arms crossed.

Saku appears behind her daughter. She pushes a couple of stray hairs behind her ears with paint-streaked fingers.

SAKU
Can I help you?

Saku gently lays her hands on May's shoulders. Grimm shifts his weight between his feet.

GRIMM
Mrs. Hoops?

Saku takes in the men, their suits, their unease.

SAKU

Yes. I'm Saku Hoops. What is it? Is there news about my husband?

Saku shows a flash of fear. Sensing this, May crab-walks around her mother until she is partially hidden.

Steek clears his throat.

STEEK

Ma'am, we...is there somewhere we can talk that's a little more...private?

His eyes flick towards May. Saku turns towards her daughter.

SAKU

May, I think these men would like some coffee.

(she looks at the men)

Wouldn't you like some coffee?

Grimm nods. Steek smooths his hair.

STEEK

Yes, thank you, that would be very... yes, please.

MAY

But mom-

SAKU

May.

Saku cocks her head and gives her a stern look. May sighs and slopes off.

INT. MAY'S HOUSE/KITCHEN - DAY

May clumsily places cups and saucers on a tray. A low murmur of conversation bubbles in the background.

As she switches on an old drip coffee maker, she catches her warped reflection in the toaster. She pushes her bottom lip out. Crosses her eyes. The coffee machine gurgles and puffs.

INT. MAY'S HOUSE/LIVING ROOM - DAY (DUSK)

Steek and Grimm perch on the edge of a worn-out sofa. Saku sits opposite, holding a sheet of paper.

SAKU

And if I sign, you'll stop looking?

GRIMM

Ma'am, it's been two months. And our radars haven't picked up anything. Not even a low level signal. Obviously, Swift Air Cargo is deeply-

SAKU

-but he's still missing?

GRIMM

Uh, well, officially, yes but-

STEEK

-we haven't found any wreckage yet, so there's still a chance...

Grimm gives Steek a sharp look.

GRIMM

Usually, in these...circumstances, it's just a matter of time until we find-

May enters the room with the clacking tray.

MAY

Have you found my dad?

Grimm stops talking and gives May a tight, worn-out smile. Steek reaches for a cup as Saku slides the paper towards Grimm, unsigned.

INT. MAY'S HOUSE/BEDROOM - NIGHT

Saku pulls the covers up to May's chin. A mobile of model airplanes turns in lazy circles above her head.

MAY

Mom?

SAKU

Mm, hm.

MAY

You remember that time at Kimballs when I wanted to look at the toys and you said no and I wouldn't leave so you left me, but you didn't really leave, and when you came back,

MAY (cont'd)

I wasn't there 'cause Tony from down the street found me and took me to the customer service desk?

SAKU

Uh, huh.

MAY

So, I wasn't lost, was I? But you thought I was. So, maybe that's how it is with dad?

Saku sighs and brushes May's bangs to one side. She kisses her on the forehead.

SAKU

Maybe. Or, maybe your dad's like... Alice. In Wonderland. You remember that story right?

MAY

Sure, it's the one where the girl follows the white rabbit and meets lots of weird people and cards and animals and stuff.

SAKU

That's right. And all the nice cards and animals eventually help Alice find her way home, right?

MAY

Uh-uh, not all of them. The Queen of Hearts wanted to chop of her head! And anyway, dad's up in the sky, not down a rabbit hole.

SAKU

That's true. Well, maybe he followed a white...airplane into a tunnel of clouds? A tunnel of very soft clouds.

May rolls her eyes.

MAY

Come on mom, I'm not a little kid. I know that clouds aren't soft. They're just teeny tiny drops of water all pushed together.

SAKU

Ah. Did you learn that in school?

MAY
No. Dad told me.

May picks at a loose thread on the bed covers.

MAY (cont'd)
He's not coming home, is he?

Saku looks sad, but quickly papers it over.

SAKU
So, what have you been reading?

May's eyes flick towards her mother. A beat. May accepts the change of subject and reaches under the bed. She pulls out a large hard-bound book. It has a photograph of an early Wright Brothers aircraft on the front. Saku eyes the book.

SAKU (cont'd)
Really? Don't you want a story?

MAY
This is a story.

Saku settles on the bed next to May and opens the book.

SAKU
Okay. Let's see. On December 17, 1903, Orville Wright piloted the first powered airplane 20 feet above a wind-swept beach in North Carolina.

INT. MAY'S HOUSE/BEDROOM - NIGHT (LATER)

MAY'S FACE, asleep. A male voice.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
May? Wake up. Maysun!

May opens her sleepy eyes. She rubs them and sits up.

MAY
Dad?

In the corner of the room, a ghostly figure, like a hologram, flickers. It's May's father, JOHN HOOPS (45). He wears a pilot's uniform with a "Swift Air Cargo" logo on the front. His hat's missing and his hair is askew. He looks tired. He glances over his shoulder, then back at May.

JOHN
We've got to hurry. I can only make
this work for a few minutes.

MAY
Where are you?

JOHN
Do you remember the story I used to
tell you when you were little? About
the city of clouds?

May nods.

MAY
The one with the flying people that
got turned into birds?

JOHN
Yes, that's right. Well, I think
I'm...in that city. Or somewhere like
it. But I'm not sure...

John glances over his shoulder again.

MAY
Mom says you're lost. Like Alice in
Wonderland. But I don't believe her.

John smiles, a weak, tired smile.

JOHN
Well, maybe she's right. Anyway,
listen, May. You have to remember the
story, all of it. And then you have
to find me. You're the only one who
can.

MAY
But everybody's already looking for
you and I'm still a kid and...how?
How can I find you?

John looks at her, his face urgent. The image flickers.

JOHN
When you wake up, you'll see.

MAY
When I...wait. Dad, don't-

JOHN

-Sorry, I have to go. I can't hold it, it's running out. It's...

The image shudders and cuts out.

MAY'S EYES, asleep. They snap open. May is curled up in a ball. She looks around and realizes that she is suspended mid-air, right above her empty bed. Surprised, she windmills her arms frantically and-

-THUD. She lands on the bed with an almighty bounce. The bed-springs squeak in protest.

Still foggy with sleep, May sits up. She looks around the room, disoriented. Outside the window, the sun is just beginning to peek up over the horizon. Determined, May swings her feet out of bed.

She shoves the Wright Brothers book in a bag along with socks, underwear, her collection of origami airplanes, some markers, a raincoat, an umbrella. The sorts of things you'd pack if you were ten years old and thinking fast.

INT. MAY'S HOUSE/KITCHEN - DAY

May slathers peanut butter on a slice of bread and shoves it in her mouth. She slams her bag on the counter and slides a bread-bag filled with copious sandwiches into it. She unplugs a cell-phone from the wall and slips it in her pocket. Then slops coffee in a mug.

INT. MAY'S HOUSE/SAKU'S STUDIO - DAY

Saku sits at her desk and stares out the window. She looks tired and disheveled. May plunks the coffee next to her and kisses her on the cheek.

MAY

Bye mom.

Saku rubs her eyes, and forces a thin smile.

MARY

Do you have your phone?

May slaps her back pocket and hurries out.

MAY

Yup.

SAKU
Hey! Straight home after school,
okay?

May pokes her head back in the door.

MAY
But mom, I'm s'posed to stay at
Feya's this weekend.

SAKU
I know, it's just with everything...

MAY
But you promised! And you said you
wanted me out...so you could finish.

May points to the incomplete painting. Saku considers this.

SAKU
That's true, but...

Saku looks at the painting. She rubs her lip. Picks at a dry
flap of skin.

SAKU (cont'd)
Okay, fine, you can stay. But call me
as soon as you get there. And make
sure you eat something other than
crackers for dinner!

MAY
I will. And, don't worry mom, I'll
find him.

Half-listening, Saku squeezes a blob of paint onto a pallet.

SAKU
Mm, hm, okay honey. Have a good day.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL CORNER/SCHOOL BUS STOP - DAY

May shuffles to the end of the street. A group of kids laugh
and chat. A couple of boys tussle. She seems much shyer now.
Quiet in the face of all this boisterousness.

Two hands cover her eyes. It's May's friend, FEYA (10), a
cherubic looking girl with a mess of dark, kinky hair. She
wears a T-shirt with a startled cat on the front.

FEYA
Knock, knock.

MAY
Who's there?

FEYA
A bird with a wolf on its head.

May pulls Feya's hands away from her face.

MAY
What? That doesn't even make sense.

Feya laughs. May looks serious. Feya's face falls.

FEYA
Is it your dad?

MAY
Listen, I'm not going to school today. Can you tell Mrs. Pearson that you saw me at the bus stop and I looked really sick so you told me to go home?

FEYA
Okay but...what's going on May?

MAY
I'm going to find my dad.

Feya touches May's arm.

FEYA
May, look, you know he's probably-

MAY
-He's not dead Fey. I saw him. Last night. I did, I swear.

Feya looks dubious.

MAY (cont'd)
Just...tell my mom I'm with you if she calls, okay?

FEYA
I don't know...

MAY
Promise you won't tell. Please?

May holds up her pinkie. Feya loops hers through. Squeezes.

FEYA

Okay. But if you're not back by
Sunday night...

MAY

I'll be back. I promise.

The school bus appears. May cranes her neck towards it. The kids form a line. May ensures she's last. As the bus pulls up, she slows and lets the line move away from her. The door cranks open. Feya boards and gives May a worried look. May waves, then slips behind the bus and walks swiftly across the street towards the waiting woods.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

May trudges along a narrow path that snakes through a forest of yellow birch. Shafts of mid-morning sunlight pierce the thin canopy of leaves above her. The path ends near a copse of chokeberry trees.

May stops and looks around, unsure how to proceed. She sits on a rock and shakes a stone out of her shoe. Her bangs are stringy and wet with sweat. Birds go tweet-twoo. A distant brook goes whoosh.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)

The losts, you ares its. Yes, yes,
the very losts.

A black GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE hops along the ground towards a fallen berry. It pecks sharply at the fruit, sending bits flying. May ignores the bird and calls into the trees.

MAY

Hello?

The bird cocks its head towards May and fixes her with a black beady eye. He opens his beak.

GRACKLE

Path kaputs. See? The end of the
roads, it is its.

May wrinkles her forehead. Is a bird really talking to her? She stands and steps around the creature. She pushes her hands into the trees. Rattles the branches.

MAY

Hey! Are you like a ventriloquist or
something? Come on, come out.

GRACKLE

Watch out! On mees, you'll steps its.

The grackle scuttles out of the way. May crouches down until she's eye-level with him.

MAY

Birds don't talk.

GRACKLE

Parrots talk. Birds, they ares its.
The mees, I talks, a bird, I ams its.

The bird's beak moves as it speaks. The voice is definitely coming from him. Shocked, May pulls back.

MAY

Uh, okay, so...you're like a...
talking bird. A weird black...parrot
or something.

GRACKLE

Bleugh! Not Parrot, no! Say words,
yes, but know words, no. Hrumph.
Squick, squawk, stutter, mutter.
Stupid birds, they ares its. Not the
smarts, not like Crickshaw.

May eyes the bird warily.

MAY

Crickshaw huh. Is that your name?

CRICKSHAW

Yes, yes. Best in business, Crickshaw
is its.

May stands up, brushes dirt off her knees.

MAY

What business?

CRICKSHAW

My business.

MAY

I see. Well, you talk funny.

CRICKSHAW

What? Hrumph! The niceness, I talks
its. The silver tongues, I has its.

CRICKSHAW picks up a chokeberry and side-shuffles closer to May. He drops the fruit on the ground and pushes it towards her with his beak.

CRICKSHAW (cont'd)
See? Crickshaw friend. The goods, I
ams its. The helps, I gives its.

Crickshaw bows and makes a little circular flourish with his wing. May looks at the berry and narrows her eyes.

MAY
Friend, huh? Why should I trust you?
I mean, you're a...bird. A suspicious
looking, and talking...bird.

May pushes the fruit away, crosses her arms, and puts her back towards Crickshaw.

CRICKSHAW
Hah, says little girl lost. Little
human at end of roads. With noheres
to goes but ups.

MAY
(nonchalant)
Who says I need to go up?

CRICKSHAW
Who? Hah! Crickshaw says, Crickshaw
knows. The city, you wants its, the
city of clouds yes?

May slowly turns to face Crickshaw. He ruffles his feathers.

MAY
What do you know about the City of
Clouds?

CRICKSHAW
I has been toos. Knows it well, I
doos.

May narrows her eyes.

MAY
Really? Then where is it?

CRICKSHAW
Up, up. The ups, it is its.

MAY

Well, yeah, it's not called the city of clouds for nothing.

CRICKSHAW

Tsk, tsk. The wings, you do not has. The shames, it is its. But the wings, Crickshaw has.

Crickshaw spreads his wings and in a flurry of dust and feathers, he glides upward and lands on a chokeberry branch. It bows under his weight.

MAY

I don't need wings, thank you very much. I can fly all on my own.

Crickshaw chortles and folds over laughing. He slips on a branch, and flutters up to stop himself from falling.

CRICKSHAW

Ha, ha, ha, ha. Pshaw. You not fly. The floats, maybes. But then, the splats.

MAY

Yeah, well, you don't know anything about me or...what I can or can't do.

May slings her bag over a shoulder and picks her way through the dense thicket of trees. Crickshaw swoops down and lands on her backpack.

CRICKSHAW

The helps, I gives its. Show girl tricks, I doos its. The soars, you wills its. Into the clouds, we goes its. Yes, yes?

Crickshaw steps from foot to foot and slyly cocks his head.

CRICKSHAW (cont'd)

The deals? We has its?

May looks sidelong at the grackle. Her mouth flattens as she considers the bird.

MAY

Okay. Deal. But, before we shake on it. What's in it for you?