

Poppylion and the Cloud People

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A Cat Amongst The Clouds.

Poppy blinked heavily and tried to focus on the book in front of her. But the long words blurred as she tried to read them, and the diagrams of water cycles and rain patterns seemed to jump and dance on the page. She yawned and looked longingly over at her bed, wondering if she could stop, if she'd done enough work to make it through the test.

A sound from downstairs made her jump. She reached out and switched off her desk lamp in case it was her mother coming upstairs to check on her. But the footsteps headed away from the stairs and into the kitchen instead.

Poppy breathed a sigh of relief and tapped her phone, which glowed brightly in the darkness. It read 11.30 pm. Poppy groaned. If she didn't get to sleep soon, she would be so tired at school tomorrow. And she'd look awful. She glanced again at her bed but as she did so, another wave of worry struck her. Her stomach twisted as she thought about what would happen if she failed this test. She pictured the look on Aimee's face and imagined what her teacher and her parents would say. Rubbing a hand across her eyes, she decided to have one more look through the chapter before she went to sleep. Just to make sure she had it all right.

She didn't switch her lamp back on but stood up to open her curtains, planning to read by the light of the streetlamp outside her window. She often did this, although usually for books more interesting than her year seven science textbook.

To her surprise, she didn't need the streetlamp. The moon was out, and it was so full and bright that light flooded into her room. Poppy gazed out of the window at the silent streets below, clearly lit in the silvery moonlight. She saw a cat slinking its way up the pavement,

off on a nighttime wander. She watched it for a while, putting off returning to her book. But as the cat strolled past Poppy's house, she noticed something that made her forget her test completely.

Where was her dad's car?

Poppy scanned the rest of the street to see if he'd parked it somewhere else, but she couldn't see it. She leaned forward to peer straight down as though she could have missed it but, no. There were the neighbours' cars, parked in the same spots as always. The Thompson's blue one on the left, and on the right the sleek black one that belonged to Ms Lenghi. In between the two was her mother's battered little Toyota parked as far forward as possible to leave space for her father to squeeze in behind. But where her dad's car should have been, there was just a space. Empty, except for the cat, who now sat there methodically washing its whiskers with its front paw.

Frowning, Poppy glanced at her phone again, 11.45 pm. Where could her father be on a Monday night at a quarter to midnight? She thought back to dinner earlier that night. Had her mum said anything about dad not coming home? Had she said he would be going somewhere after work?

No, Poppy decided, she definitely hadn't.

She hadn't mentioned him at all, and Poppy had just assumed he was working and would be home later. But now it was later. Much later. And he still hadn't returned. Poppy's stomach gave an unpleasant churn.

Maybe he was out somewhere fun, thought Poppy. Maybe he'd come back with an exciting story. But she doubted it somehow. Her dad didn't have many fun stories these days.

Poppy sighed and was about to turn away from the window when something else caught her eye, and she stopped in surprise.

There, in the moon bright sky above the house opposite, hung a cloud shaped exactly like the cat that she'd been watching earlier. Poppy looked back down at the empty parking space. There was the cat still sitting washing its whiskers. And there in the sky was its double, made of dusky grey clouds outlined in silver moonlight. A cloud cat, perfect from the tip of its ears to the end of its tail, one cloud paw raised in the act of washing its wispy cloud whiskers. It even had darker grey patches where the real cat had black markings.

Poppy looked from one to the other and laughed. Then she froze. Her laughter had sounded loud in her midnight bedroom, and she shot a guilty look towards her door. There was another noise from downstairs, footsteps on the stairs this time. Poppy dived away from the moonlit window and back into her bed.

She pulled her duvet up high and squeezed her eyes shut in case her mother looked into the room. As she lay there, as still as possible, she forgot to worry about her father or her school work. Instead, she thought of cloud cats wandering through the sky on nighttime adventures. And after a few moments, she drifted off to sleep.

Three Broken Rules.

The next morning, Poppy was no longer thinking about the cloud cat. She was too busy worrying about everything else that was going on. When she woke up, the sun was streaming in through her open curtains and her stomach lurched as she realised she must have overslept after her late night. But when she reached for her phone to check the time, she couldn't find it. Confused, she hunted on her desk and under her bed, but it was missing.

Wondering if her parents had taken it, she headed into their room. They weren't in there, but the clock on their wall told Poppy she was about to be really late for school. Abandoning the hunt for her phone, she rushed downstairs. She ran her hands through her hair as she went, trying to untangle the mess of bed hair. There definitely wasn't going to be time to shower or straighten it this morning. There probably wasn't even time for breakfast, and eating breakfast before school was one of her mother's unbreakable rules.

Poppy found her mother sitting alone at the kitchen table, clutching a mug of coffee. Forgetting about her hair, Poppy stopped dead in the doorway and stared. Her mother drank coffee at the kitchen table every morning, so that part wasn't unusual. But why was she still sitting there now? By eight-thirty, she should have been rushing them out of the door, checking they had everything, hurrying them along.

Poppy lingered in the doorway, waiting for her mother to notice her and jump into action. But she didn't. Instead, she just sat and frowned at the table.

'Mum?' said Poppy eventually, taking a cautious step into the room.

Her mum looked up with a start.

'Oh, morning, love.' she said with a smile that didn't hide the worried look on her face.

When she didn't say anything else, Poppy asked,

'What's going on, Mum? We're late for school.'

'We're not going to school today,' said her mum with another attempt at a smile. 'We're taking the day off.'

'Why?' asked Poppy at once. Her mother barely let them miss school even when they were ill. Skipping a day for no reason would definitely break another golden rule. She didn't answer, so Poppy asked, 'did you take my phone? I can't find it.'

'Oh yes, I needed to borrow it.' her mum answered.

'Why? What's wrong with yours?' again, her mother didn't answer. 'Well, can I have it back?'

'I just need to... morning love.' said her mum as John appeared in the doorway beside Poppy.

'What's going on, Mum?' he asked, rubbing a knuckle into one bleary eye.

'No school today!' repeated their mum brightly.

'Why not?' asked John with much more excitement than Poppy had shown. 'Is it a snow day?' he turned eagerly to the window.

Poppy rolled her eyes, 'yeah, right. In May? Don't be dense!' The second the words were out of her mouth, Poppy felt bad. She hadn't meant to snap at her brother, but she was worried and really, a snow day? Ok, he was only nine, but how clueless was he?

'Shut up!' John snapped back.

'Well, don't ask stupid questions Johnny!' said Poppy in frustration.

'Don't call me stupid! And my name's John!'

'I didn't call you stupid, I said don't as-'

'Stop it!' said their mother in a high pitched voice that made them both freeze and look at her with alarm. 'Both of you, stop! No fighting!' she said and then in a voice that sounded a

little more normal, added, 'we're taking the day off! All three of us. We'll get some fresh air. Have a picnic. It'll be lovely!'

Poppy stared at her. It didn't sound lovely. It sounded strange. Why didn't she just tell them what was really going on? John was staring at her too,

'Where's Dad?' he asked, clearly hoping their father could provide some explanation for their mother's weirdness. 'Is he coming for a picnic?'

'No. Your father went to work early.' she said, but she didn't sound convincing, and when John opened his mouth to ask more questions, she stood up abruptly. 'Come on, both of you! Upstairs and get dressed. I'll get some breakfast ready.' She turned to the fridge and began pulling things out at random: yoghurt, cucumber, a bottle of ketchup.

'Ok, but Mum, can I have my phone?' asked Poppy wanting to let her friends know that she wouldn't be at school today.

'Later love, later.' said her mum, placing a tub of leftover lasagne on the counter.

Poppy and John exchanged a wary look and left the kitchen together.

'What's going on?' asked John as they reached the landing.

'How should I know?' snapped Poppy and then felt bad again as John flinched. She sighed and spoke more kindly, 'I don't know Johnny. Mum's definitely being weird. But we get a day off school, right? So that's good!'

's'pose,' said John, but he didn't sound sure.

Poppy wasn't either. She didn't want to miss a day of school. She'd probably miss something massive happening, and then the others would talk about it all the time, and she'd be left out again. Plus, she'd miss the science test she'd been working so hard for.

'Why did dad leave so early?' asked John.

Poppy shrugged. 'Work is busy right now.' she said, repeating the words they'd both heard a thousand times. 'Isn't he always going on about those new bosses wanting loads of extra stuff doing?'

John nodded, but Poppy felt a knot tighten in her stomach. She remembered her father's parking space, empty at midnight last night, and now he was already gone again. What if he hadn't come home at all?

Poppy swallowed hard. She didn't like to think what that might mean. Her friend Sophie's dad had stopped coming home last year, and now Sophie spent every other weekend in Leeds with him and his new girlfriend. She always came back from those trips subdued despite her stories of theatres, amusement parks and shopping trips. Poppy hoped that wasn't about to happen to them.

'You're not supposed to scratch that.' said John, and Poppy realised she was rubbing at the eczema on the crease of her elbow. She dropped her hand quickly.

'I wasn't!' she said. Then, seeing how worried he looked, she said, 'Look, go get dressed, and we'll see if mum's lost it enough to make us chocolate pancakes for breakfast.'

John perked up at that and ran off to his room. Poppy followed him slowly, stopping to look again into her parents' room. All her dad's things were still there, and she told herself that this was a good sign. But the unmade bed was saying something different.

That was the third golden rule to be broken today. Poppy's mother always made her bed. She said a tidy bed led to a tidy day. Poppy looked at the twisted, knotted sheets in front of her and wondered what kind of day they would lead to.

An Uneasy Week.

It wasn't a good day. They went to a park in the middle of Chetleigh, their little suburb of Manchester. It wasn't a bad spot, really, but on that strange and windy day, it wasn't a fun place to be.

Poppy took her science book with her so she'd be ready if she had to sit the test when she went back to school, but she didn't get much work done.

'It's supposed to be a day off!' said her mother, trying to get her to put her book down and run around with John.

'I don't want to get behind.' said Poppy, annoyed that her mother, who would usually have celebrated Poppy doing school work, now wouldn't leave her alone to get on with it.

'One day won't hurt, will it?' asked her mother with a false, bright smile.

But Poppy had had enough of her mother's false cheerfulness that morning. She didn't like it, and it was starting to worry her.

'You're the one who said I had to try harder in secondary school!' she said, her voice coming out higher and louder than she expected. 'You're the one who said year seven was really important!'

'Yes, I did say-'

'But it's not true, is it? Now that you want to sit in this crappy park in the cold, school's not important anymore?' A lump was rising in Poppy's throat, and she swallowed hard. She didn't want to be shouting at her mother, but she couldn't help it. None of this was making any sense.

‘Listen, love.’ said her mother in a calm voice, and she didn’t tell Poppy off for shouting or saying crappy. ‘It’s still important, and I’m sorry you’re missing today...but... well, some things are more important than school.’

Poppy stared at her, more important than school? That was something her mother had never said before. Was she about to tell her what was going on? But no, she just sighed and said,

‘You’ll understand one day.’

Poppy rolled her eyes. That one, she had heard before, “You’ll understand one day”, “I’ll tell you when you’re older”, “you’re too young”. Poppy loved how adults always wanted you to grow up, be responsible, act like an adult. Until it came to treating you like one, and all of a sudden, you were a child again.

‘Fine.’ she said, turning away from her mother and back to her book. ‘Whatever.’

Things just got worse from there. Their mum didn’t let them go back to school, nor did she give Poppy her phone back, no matter how much she begged and pleaded. On top of that, she banned them from going online and watching tv. And their dad didn’t come home.

After several days, their mother finally gave up pretending that he was at work. Instead, she sat Poppy and John down and, over an unpleasant dinner of overcooked sausages and watery mashed potato, told them that their father was ill and had been taken to hospital.

This news worried Poppy even more than not knowing anything, especially when her mother wouldn’t say what was wrong with him. She would only say that he was in the best place he could be and that the doctors were working hard to make him better. And she told them that the hospital didn’t allow visitors.

John thought this meant that their father was contagious, that he had some exotic disease and was in quarantine while they searched for a cure. Poppy told him he’d been watching

too many crazy tv shows. But she couldn't come up with a better explanation herself. And whenever she begged for more information, her mother got a terrible look on her face. She went all tense and brittle like she was made of glass and was afraid she might shatter if she tried to speak. Soon Poppy gave up asking.

And if all that wasn't enough, a few days later, their mum announced that they wouldn't be going back to school. Instead, they were going to go and stay with their grandparents.

Sent Away.

It wasn't that Poppy minded visiting her grandparents, she usually loved it. They didn't have a house but lived on a canal boat called The Magic Window. And they never stayed in one place either but cruised up and down the waterways of England. Normally, Poppy would have been thrilled to hear that they were spending the whole summer on board. But this trip wasn't normal. They'd been pulled out of school, their mother was sending them away, and their father was ill in some hospital somewhere. And even though they weren't allowed to visit him, Poppy couldn't help feeling like she was abandoning him by leaving the city. But she didn't have a choice, and now they were in the car on the way to the countryside.

Poppy stared out of the window as they drove. She was in the back seat. John had been awarded the front because their mother had caught Poppy throwing a trainer at him earlier to get him out of her room. He'd deserved it though! He'd been mocking her for packing her hairdryer and straighteners. He'd said she wouldn't be able to spend hours 'grooming herself' on the boat. Grooming! Like she was a horse! She was glad she'd hit him with her trainer.

The annoying part was he was probably right. Their grandparents had limited electricity on the boat, so they probably wouldn't let her plug her straighteners in every day to tame her hair.

The fight with John had also reminded her how closely they'd be living together on the boat. There would be no use telling him to get out, because they shared a room. And it was barely a room at all, just two small beds on either side of a narrow walkway. They had a drawer each under their beds and a small shared wardrobe. Poppy wondered how she would

cope with him invading her space all summer. She scratched at her elbow and wondered if she could convince him to go and camp on the canal bank like they used to when they were little.

She heard a bleep from the front seat and saw her mother glance at her phone. Her fingers itched with the urge to check her own phone and she felt a wave of irritation at her mother's refusal to give it back. Didn't she care that Poppy hadn't told anyone she was leaving? Didn't she know Poppy's friends would be worried about her?

Although, if she was honest, Poppy wasn't sure that they were worried. She couldn't help noticing that none of them had tried very hard to get hold of her. They must have seen that she wasn't getting her messages. But no one had come round, or called her on the house phone. They all had the number. But the only people who had rung the house this week were people who made her mother speak in the high, posh voice she usually used at the bank and the doctors. Not Poppy's friends.

She couldn't help thinking that they weren't missing her. They were probably using this time to talk about how she didn't fit in with them anymore since they'd moved up to the big school.

'It's high school Poppy!' Aimee had told her again and again. 'Not big school, don't be so childish!'

And she'd tried not to be. She'd practised being all mature like the others. She'd copied the careless way they wore their uniforms, taken their advice about sorting out her hair and wearing the horrible, sticky lipgloss. She didn't complain about sitting on the steps every day, talking instead of running around at playtime.

Break, she corrected herself quickly. Not playtime, break.

She stopped putting her hand up in lessons and didn't show any excitement when she made the sports teams. She'd even started skipping team practices after Aimee had a word

with her about it being uncool. She had tried. But it was obvious to all of them that she just wasn't getting it. Now they probably realised how much cooler their group was without her.

Poppy's eyes prickled with tears. She blinked hard and looked up at the sky, hoping to see another cloud cat like the one she'd seen before everything went wrong. But the sky was disappointingly clear, with no clouds in sight.

The Magic Window.

Poppy cheered up when they reached the boat. Her gran and grandad were waiting there, waving and smiling, beside the green and gold narrowboat. They squeezed Poppy and John into tight hugs and said they couldn't believe their luck at getting them for such a long visit. Poppy felt her spirits lifting at once. And even more so once they climbed aboard the boat and settled into the cosy little lounge for mugs of hot chocolate and freshly baked welsh cakes.

She even managed a smile when John said earnestly,

'It's not Johnny anymore, Gran. It's John. Because I'm nine now.'

'A fine name for a grown-up lad.' said Gran just as seriously, winking at Poppy as John reached for his fourth welsh cake.

Poppy bit into a buttery, sugary cake of her own and felt happy for the first time since their dad had stopped coming home. But then their mother stood up and began gathering her things to leave.

'You're going already?' said Poppy. 'You're not even staying the night?'

Her mother shook her head, 'no love, I've got to work tomorrow. I told you that.'

She hadn't, and Poppy knew it. But she didn't argue, she just stood stiffly as her mother hugged her goodbye.

'Thank you for having them.' she called as she climbed off the boat onto the canal bank.

'Ah, they're no bother at all!' said Grandad cheerfully.

'We're a bother to her.' muttered Poppy, annoyed by how eager her mother was to get away from them. She looked up quickly to make sure her mother hadn't heard but caught

her gran's eye instead. Gran's look was full of pity, and Poppy turned away, tears pricking her eyes again.

Life on The Magic Window was a simple one and Poppy and John settled into it quickly. The boat cruised slowly along the canals, mooring up somewhere new every night. At each new stop, they hopped off the boat to explore the area, running ahead to check if there were any bridges or locks coming up. Those were their favourite days when they could take the heavy winch handle off its hook and wind the lock gates open to let the boat pass safely through.

They spent hours watching the other boats and people passing by and looking for wildlife on the canal banks and hedges. They collected wild berries and fruit for Gran and helped her turn them into delicious jams and chutneys in the tiny galley kitchen. They spent the evenings reading or playing cards. Munching on home-baked biscuits whilst Grandad's wild old music played in the background.

There was no TV on the boat because there was no room on the tiny walls, but there was usually good internet, and on other visits, they had sometimes watched films on the iPad. But this time Grandad said the internet wasn't working, and the iPad stayed safely packed away. Poppy assumed this was her mother's doing and didn't question it. Even John, who usually couldn't go a day without playing his video games, seemed not to mind. He contented himself with the old board games where they built empires and battled each other for treasure.

Mostly, Poppy enjoyed herself and was able to forget for whole hours at a time the friends she'd left behind, the things she was missing at school, and her father ill and alone back in Manchester. But, at night, when she was lying in bed, or when it was raining, and they

couldn't go out, she would find her worries creeping back to her. And then she would rub anxiously at the itchy skin on her elbows and wonder when things would go back to normal.

But something was about to happen that would make sure her life was never normal again.

The Voice In The Tree.

It happened on a windy day when the clouds were shooting past in the sky, and the leaves danced merrily on the trees. John sat on the boat's roof, kicking his heels against the wooden door and watching another boat mooring up across the canal. Poppy sat nearby, wrapped up in a thick jumper. Her long legs crossed over the arm of her camping chair. She had a book open in her lap, but the wind kept ruffling the pages, making her lose her place. Eventually, she gave up and joined John in watching the water. It was a pleasant day, warm enough despite the wind, but it didn't feel particularly special. Not like a day that was going to change their lives forever.

Then, a noise from a nearby tree made them both start and look around. It was a flurrying noise, as though a large bird had tried to take off amongst the leaves and gotten itself tangled. Poppy and John jumped from their seats and raced over to the edge of the towpath. Climbing quickly through the brush and undergrowth, they emerged into the woods on the other side and came to a stop under the tree.

Peering upwards, John said quietly,

'What do you think it was?'

'I don't know,' said Poppy. 'A bird? Something big.'

'Maybe a falcon!' said John, forgetting to whisper in his excitement. 'Or an eagle!'

Poppy fought the urge to roll her eyes, but before she could say anything, someone else said,

'Not likely. There ain't many eagles round these parts.'

Poppy and John looked at each other in surprise. The voice had come from up the tree.

‘Eagles, they like their cliffs and tall forests, not so much the fields and canals.’

‘Um.’ said John, baffled by this flood of information coming from a tree.

Poppy squinted up through the thick leaves, trying to see who was speaking. The voice had sounded strange somehow, but she wasn’t quite sure why.

‘Excuse me,’ she said. ‘Are you alright? Did you fall?’

‘I did take a tumble right enough. I was racing, and I got too close to this tree. A branch swept me right off my cloud!’

‘Cloud?’ mouthed John. Poppy shrugged, thinking whoever it was must have hit their head when they fell.

‘Do you need help getting down?’ she called into the branches.

‘Down?’ came the voice, ‘I need to get back up!’

‘Up where?’ asked John, finding his voice.

‘To the race, of course! I gotta catch another cloud... oooff’ there was another fluttering noise.

‘I really think you should come down,’ said Poppy, trying to sound firm. ‘You might need your head looking at.’

‘Why in a blue sky would you want to look at my head?’ asked the voice. ‘I mean, you can if you want to, but...’ there was a long sigh that merged with the sound of wind rushing through the nearby trees. ‘Well, I’ll have lost the race now anyway.’

There was more rustling, and then from amongst the branches emerged the strangest person either of them had ever seen.

At least, Poppy thought it was a person because it had to be. But there was the small problem of him not really being a person at all.

For starters, he didn't climb down from the tree, he sort of slid out of it, not holding on to anything, just sort of floating. And, when he left the tree, he didn't land on the ground but hovered a few feet above it, staring at them.

Poppy and John stared back, open-mouthed. He looked like a boy. He had the shape and features of a boy, but he just... wasn't one. He wasn't made of skin and bone like they were. Instead, his hair, face, hands, clothes, even his boots, everything was made of the same, well, stuff. Pearly grey stuff that didn't look quite solid and seemed to be moving before their eyes. Rolling and swirling and blurring at the edges yet somehow remaining in the shape of the boy.

The more Poppy looked at him, the stranger he seemed. He was, Poppy felt silly even thinking it, but he looked as though he was made of clouds. But there couldn't really be a cloud, shaped like a human boy, floating in front of her. Could there?

John made a strangled sort of noise beside her.

'Howler!' said the cloud boy. Then added, 'didn't expect you to be grounders!'

After a moment's stunned silence, Poppy managed to say,

'Sorry?'

'Grounders.' repeated the boy. 'I thought for sure you was clouders. Since you spoke to me an all.' he shrugged good-naturedly and grinned, showing teeth made of the same pearly substance as the rest of him. 'Well, well ain't you two as strange as a heatwave in winter.'

Poppy just stood there. She knew she was being rude, but she couldn't stop staring and she could not think what to say. She had barely understood anything the boy had just said, except that somehow he, this cloud boy, had said that it was them, Poppy and John, who were strange, and not him!

The silence stretched between them and might have continued all day if a gust of wind had not blown through the trees at that moment. It whipped Poppy's hair across her face,

and she pushed it back in time to see the boy being blown backwards. He moved with the wind, his cloud body drifting and stretching out into wisps before somehow pulling back together into the shape of the boy.

‘Whoa!’ said John, ‘Awesome!’

The boy laughed. ‘The name’s Gus.’ he said. ‘Pleased to meet ya.’