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The White Clouds

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Six-year-old Hamartia Adams was confused.

She wasn't confused about the small sterile white room that smelled like antiseptics and made her nose itchy, or even why she was taken away at dusk when the chimneys burned black against the scorched sky, while Mamma screamed at the Collectors to have mercy. She wasn't even puzzled by the computer screen that took up an entire wall of the room. No, Hamartia was confused by the Nice Man who wasn't saying hi.

"Hi, I'm Hamartia Adams! Remember me?" she yelled to the Nice Man as he opened the white door. Hamartia couldn't look directly at the glaring white door because it made her head hurt. Mama said it was because her right eye was sleepier than the left. The Nice Man gave Hamartia a little wave and started writing on a clipboard. Hamartia wanted to ask him where he had taken Mama, but Mama said that it wasn't nice to ask too many questions. The Nice Man looked at Hamartia's special eye, scratched something on his board, then quickly left the room. Uncomfortable by the sudden silence, Hamartia kicked the white plush chair with her small chubby legs. She was used to people staring, "My left arm is three centimeters and eleven millimeters shorter than the right. And I got one lazy right eye," she had told Mama proudly one day after she was measured at school to check for flaws. Mama's hands shook when she said this, but Hamartia didn't mind. It made her extra special.

"Maybe they're sad," Mama said as she stroked Hamartia's hair when classmates bullied her at school.

"About what?" she would ask.

"Maybe they're missing the clouds," Mama would answer.

Mama must've missed the clouds, Hamartia thought; sometimes she caught Mama staring at her with wet cheeks that tasted like salt when she kissed her forehead. Hamartia kicked the chair again, the sound was muffled by the plush chair. She imagined that she was a princess in a cloud palace; the clouds would be pure white with no streaks of grey or even chimney smoke. She had never seen a white cloud before. The sky was always a dark grey with a sickly yellow yolk for a sun.

"It wasn't always like this," Mama would exclaim angrily as she made a feeble attempt to hang their clothes. "When I was a little girl, the sky was blue, not this greyish muck color, but a pure deep blue, the color of an ocean." Hamartia had never seen an ocean, they had dried up long ago, but Mama said that she would have loved the cool, salty water, filled with rocks-things called shells. "Oh and the clouds! Oh the clouds, Hamartia! They were birds of pureness against a sea of blue! They weren't streaked with dirt or pouring acid rain from the factories, it was even before the fires and earth tremors. Clouds were soft and snow white, swollen with sweet warm rain. The city didn't get to play god! Didn't decide who stays!" Mama would say.

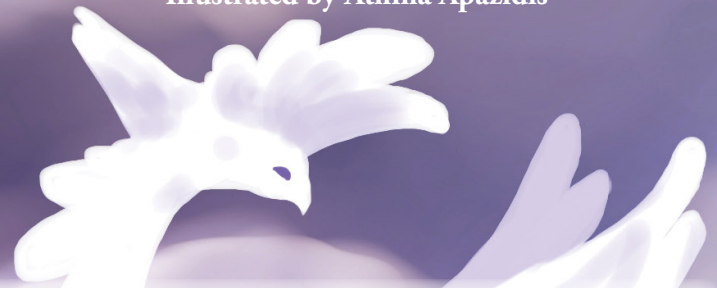
Then she would smile at Hamartia and swing her up into the air, to where the cloud princesses lived and ate mooncakes and drank sweet cola all day. And in the cloud palace, no one cared that Hamartia looked

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different.

Hamartia thought about the Collectors who took Mama when she wouldn't let go of her. Mama wasn't expecting the Collectors, at least that's what Hamartia thought. Mama screamed as they tore down the doors. "It ain't right! It's not fair! She's only six, she's only six!" she pleaded, throwing herself at one of the Collectors, it was the Nice Man. The Collector, a middle-aged man with a friendly face and greying hair let out a jolly laugh of amusement. He gently placed a pair of cold metal bars around Mama's wrists, and pushed her against the door. "We're just doing our jobs ma'am." He paused and waited for Mama to stop shaking. "It's for our future, we aren't doing anything wrong." Mama screamed again, and tried to claw at the man, but he simply grabbed her arms and shoved her towards another Collector. He placed a comforting hand on Hamartia's shoulder who was hiding silently behind the couch. The man gave Hamartia a doll as they dragged Mama to their car.

She was a pretty doll, with soft curly locks and blue glassy eyes and a small silver cross decorating her neck. She even had painted little cheeks, the color of fresh roses that were sometimes sold in the market. Mama always said that she shouldn't trust the Collectors, their job was to take away children like her, but she was sure now that it was just another tale, just like white clouds.

Hamartia refused to hand over the doll when they got to the car. "Please. Please. Pleease!" she begged. Tears welled up in her eyes, and her belly felt like it had a cold hard lump in it. Mama would've made it go away, but she wasn't here anymore. The Nice Man took one of her small clenched fists, wet with tears, looked into her red, puffy face and began to sing. He had a deep, dark voice that carried each word like a river, the words trickled into her ears. She felt the sudden urge to take a nap in the sunlight.

"Gone they go/ Gone they go/ To the place of no return/ For those who hinder/ For those flawed/ The church bells ring/ Gone they go."

She began to suck her thumb, swaying slowly to his voice.

"Tell me about the white clouds," she suggested, as she handed over the doll. The Nice Man paused, and his face broke into a grin.

(... To Be Continued)