

In this life, there is nothing worse than being the only one who lacks something everyone else has. The only thing that comes close is finding out everything you've known is a lie. Experiencing both might then seem unimaginable, but such was the fate of Mira Ipswich, a girl of fifteen years.

Mira had spent every minute she could remember inside the confines of her home and the surrounding grounds, known as Cloud Cottage. From her room on the second floor, she could look out through a large bay window into the backyard and see a healthy garden, a small wood, and nothing beyond.

Thick walls of mist surrounded her on every side, wrapping around the garden and encircling the house. They arched high up into the sky, tickling at the sun. Neither the faintest image of the outside world nor her own hands could pierce it. For Mira, Cloud Cottage was the only thing that existed. Despite loving her home, the sensation of feeling trapped haunted her no matter how busy she kept herself.

She kept herself busy by running and playing among the nearby trees. Alongside her mother, she tended the garden and houseplants. Jeana also spent considerable time teaching, and Mira proved to be quite a bright student. After spending countless hours a day learning with her mother, Mira turned to her own studies, reading through stacks of Flip Widget's Manuals of Science and tinkering with the machines in her basement. Her father, who went out into the mist every day, returned when the sun set, and Mira would spend time discussing her newfound knowledge with him or helping him cook the evening meal. After the day had vanished and she had crawled into bed, Mira's mother gave her a soft kiss that sent her off to sleep.

Although her life was both peaceful and pleasant, some things irked her endlessly. She puzzled over how her father could go out into the mist but she couldn't. She would watch him slip through, but the mist always repelled her when she tried to follow after him. Many times she would beg and plead with her father to take her out when he went exploring, but he made it clear that

was not allowed. It had brought her to tears more than a few times, but she could do nothing more about it than sulk in the garden, surrounded by the tiny world that she lived in.

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Wiping a tear from her eye, on a day like any other, Mira noticed something strange taking shape against the cloud. It was just a curvy line at first, small yet distinct, but it grew longer and met with other lines. Her curiosity distracted her from her sorrows. Bending lines, ovals, and circles imprinted themselves on the soft, wavering surface. She leapt to her feet and looked deeply into the figure forming in the white wall. The lines joined and a face appeared. Within the undulating surface, it seemed to breathe and blink. The moisture collected on Mira's fingertips and dripped down her cheeks when she stared into it from up close. Gazing into the face before her with its ponytail off to the side, she realized it looked an awful lot like hers. Just as she began to wonder if she'd been looking into a mirror, the image in the cloud washed away completely.

"Hello? Is someone there?" She shouted into the wafting mass and waited for an answer. Her heart thumped inside her chest. Keeping her ear against the billowing wall, she waited patiently until the water had drenched her clothing, but only silence came to her.

She began to think it had all been her imagination. She couldn't count how many times she had hoped someone would walk through the mist to talk with her. Perhaps she had only seen what she wanted? But she remembered it, and it was real.

She cast away the last of her doubts and trusted that what she saw was real. Feeling confident and thrilled, she sprinted down the path between tomato plants and cabbages to report the news to her mother. Jeana, busy pruning a large plant, was startled by her daughter's unexpected and sudden appearance. The girl, soaked, flushed, and out of breath, struggled to express what had happened.

"Mom! Mom!" She huffed with her hands on her knees. "I saw something... through the mist. Looked like a face. I...I."

"What? That's impossible." Putting down her clippers, Jeana reluctantly shifted her attention. She brushed the graying hair from her cheek to reveal the faintest wrinkles around her eyes and mouth.

“I saw it though. I swear. Something was out there. It could have even been another person,” Mira said.

But her mother’s steady reaction started to frustrate her, and the disappointment chipped away at her hope that she had stumbled upon something important.

“I’m sorry, but it’s probably just inside your head. I’ve never seen anything through there,” Jeana said.

“Maybe Dad knows something about it. I’ll have to ask him later when he gets back.”

“Maybe it was your father,” Jeana offered, seizing another possible solution. “Did you ever think of that?”

“No, I didn’t. But I don’t think it was. It looked like my own face staring back at me.”

“Do you have any evidence to support what you think you saw? How can you be sure?” Jeana asked.

“I don’t have evidence, but I know it was real. I guess I’ll ask him about it.” A sinking, unsatisfied feeling had replaced Mira’s excitement. Unconcerned that her mother would hear the echo of her vast disappointment, she let an agonizing sigh escape from her lips. Jeana held her face in her hand for a moment, and then shook her head as if to disregard her thoughts.

“I think you should probably just forget all about it. Here, come here.” Jeana motioned Mira to her side, pointing to the pistil and stamen of a nearby flower. “Can you tell me what these parts of a plant are called?” she asked, changing the topic of conversation for good.

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Far from forgetting about it, Mira brought up the news as soon as her father, Kevin, had returned home. He felt exhausted and not a little stressed, but Mira lit up when he walked through the door, proceeding to tell him all that had been occupying her thoughts. Putting his hand to his chin, he assumed a bookish appearance, amplified by the clean part in his hair.

“A face you say? I think you must be mistaken. I’ve never seen anything that can get through the mist. You shouldn’t let yourself get worked up so easily,” he said.

“I really did see it though. The face looked so alive, like it was trying to say something,” Mira conveyed with a silly imitation.

“Oh, it was trying to say something all of a sudden? What did it tell you?” Kevin teased, showing his dimples with a smile.

“I couldn’t make out any of the words, but the lips moved and the eyelids fell, hiding something sad or secret.”

“What can I tell you, sweetheart. There’s just nothing out there for you. I’m sorry. How about we find something interesting to dissect?”

“But, Dad, you have to believe me! It was really there. I could show you where and we could go looking for it together. Maybe it’s someone who needs help or...or maybe even someone my age who’s lost.” A note of desperation crept into her voice, and it reminded Kevin how Mira’s pleadings had become more frequent and more persistent. He searched for a way to tell her it was all for her own good.

“Meerkat, you’ve just got to put it out of your mind. You didn’t hear anything because there’s nothing out there. You might imagine things are bad now, but what if you found something and your life became so much worse. What if it became a painful nightmare that made your present unhappiness seem like bliss?”

His daughter stared into his eyes, searching for the truth. If his words hinted at the existence of another world, then that could only mean one thing for hers.

“I can’t stay trapped in this cloud forever!” Flushed and defiant, she ran away up to her room and slammed the door. After some time, Jeana went up to find her. She offered a few comforting words and saw her daughter off to sleep.

Returning to the kitchen, Jeana met her husband with a distinct look of displeasure. Kevin was saddened to have to stand in the way of his daughter’s wishes. They looked at each other through tired, red eyes.

“Maybe we should reconsider our plans,” Jeana said, biting her lip.

“Why? What has changed from yesterday to today?”

“Do you know what that face could have been? What if someone was trying to get in? Could you be losing your strength? You’re not as young as you used to be.”

“Impossible,” Kevin said. “I don’t know who or what it could be, but it doesn’t sound good. I’ll get to the bottom of this. Don’t you worry.” He attempted an air of finality and turned to leave, but Jeana wasn’t finished.

“I don’t think it’s right of us to keep Mira here any longer. Maybe it’s been a mistake all along.”

“You know how dangerous it would be for her. We might as well be marching her off to her death. And we’d be responsible for it. She might not last a day.” Exasperated, he cast his eyes to the ceiling.

“Don’t be ridiculous. We could still protect her. It would be a difficult adjustment for her, but it’s what she wants. And she could make it.”

Disbelief filled Kevin’s head.

“She could make it? Are you mad? You just said yourself that someone could be trying to get in here, and you want to let her wander about where any accident or villain could strike her? And be mindful of the war. It seems far away from our sleepy little town, but it’s all-consuming. How long could she escape it?”

“She could join the academy. She could learn to defend herself.”

Kevin’s temper fizzled and he laughed heartily.

“I’m sorry, honey,” he apologized, knowing she was serious. He came to her and wrapped her in a loving hug. “You’ve thought it all out, haven’t you? But what could she possibly defend herself with? She’d be candle wax trying to put out a flame.”

Jeana calmly distanced herself from him, looking into his face with solemnity.

“I don’t know, but this is the life that she was born to live. It belongs to her and not to us. She deserves the chance to make from it what she can.”

Kevin found this argument much more difficult to refute. He considered it for a moment, rolling his head around his neck, before speaking.

“You do realize how agonizing it will be for her, don’t you? To say she is different from everyone else glosses over that she is missing something important, something vital. What she lacks will haunt her for as many days as she can muster, overshadowing the miracle that she’s survived every day.”

“We can’t know for sure how she’ll react. It’s true she’s led a sheltered life, but there’s the possibility something bright and courageous will emerge.”

They held each other again, letting the decision they had come to soak in before the words had been said. In their embrace, he unleashed his imagination and peered into his wildest visions of what could happen. It wasn’t long before fear turned the embrace into a terrified clutch. But, in his mind, he stood firmly in the belief that their daughter would have control now, no matter what happened. And Jeana made sure he knew she felt exactly the same way.

“Then it’s decided. We’ll let her flourish or fail under her own power. Her disadvantage is substantial, but we can’t be guilty of stripping her of her freedom any longer. The only thing left to consider is how we should open the blinds.”

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The sound of clanging pots awoke Mira the next morning before the sun came up. Feeling exhausted and not wholly rid of yesterday’s frustration, she dragged herself out of bed to check on the strange commotion. After pulling up her leggings and slipping on her tunic, she took a moment before heading downstairs to lean out against the large window in her room. The white wall rubbed up against the darkness. A slight tinge of anger tweaked her heart. Biting her lip, she chided it with her thoughts.

Shaking her head and feeling the hopelessness of fighting, she turned away from the window and went downstairs. There, she found her father, who was doing little more than lounging in a chair. Her mother, on the other hand, had been very busy. Why they both weren’t still fast asleep at this early hour mystified her.

Delicious aromas tickled Mira’s nose and made her mouth water. Poking her head around to see the kitchen’s hearth, she caught Jeana busily transferring food from pans to plates. A colossal breakfast was taking shape upon the table. Her mother’s cooking and the size of the feast were unusual, but the promise of a delicious breakfast was always a welcome surprise.

“How long have you been up doing this? What is going on?” she asked, with both interest and skepticism. Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she moved toward the basin to start cleaning the dishes when her mother answered.

“Just sit yourself down, dear, and don’t be bothered about that.” Taking a seat at the table, her father, still wearing his pajamas, sat down next to her. He usually began rushing about as soon as he got up. Mira tried to formulate an explanation for his relaxed behavior.

“You aren’t leaving today? Why?” Very few occasions kept him home, and so Mira felt confused since this was neither a holiday nor a birthday. Kevin pulled her in close, preventing her from seeing his discomfort in an affectionate way.

“There’s something we want to talk to you about. Is that ok?”

Mira, shifting in her seat, raised her eyebrows and gave him her full attention.

“Oh boy, this is hard. Now, where to begin?” he said, looking around for reasons to avoid the conversation at hand.

“Spit it out, honey,” Jeana said, rolling her eyes.

“Ok, ok. Mira, we’re going to let you go. But there are some things you need to know first. Can you listen to everything before you make any judgments or decisions?”

She squinted at her parents, struggling to understand.

“What do you mean you are going to let me go?”

“You’ve made it clear that you’re not happy with your life as it is now. We’re going to help you change it, for better or for worse.” Kevin looked at her, and she tried to mask her skepticism of what he was saying.

“Ok, so do it. What do we have to do? Let’s do it.” She leaned forward over the table, eager. Her eyes scanned back and forth between her parents.

“Remember, you’re going to stay here and listen to everything. All you have to do is look out the window.”

Confused, Mira turned around so she could look through the large glass doors that led out to the backyard. Candle and firelight from the house met a swath of the undulating mist. She watched, unsure of what she was looking for.

At that moment, the watery mist thinned and separated. For a second, the water fell in an intense downpour, splashing against the ground. By then enough of the wall had evaporated to reveal bright stars speckling the sky beyond.

Her eyes grew large and her jaw dropped. The shock overwhelmed her and she forgot to breath. Unconsciously, Mira rose from her seat and staggered toward the door. Her eyes remained transfixed on the sight before her, afraid that it would disappear if she blinked. She pulled the door open and stumbled into the open air. Her parents restrained the urge to go after her, letting her soak in the moment.

The first thing she noticed was the morning breeze that brushed against her skin. It felt like a flush or a tingle that swept over her entire body. She took small, measured steps out onto the dark lawn in her bare feet. Holding a trance-like gaze, she stared out in front of her for as far as she could see.

Mira had never seen the stars so clearly before, but something else stretched over the sky that captured her wonder and demanded her attention. Stitched together over the atmosphere, a luminous and sharp web draped high above, embedded in the stars. Marveling at it, she admired its graceful curves and simple elegance.

But before she could even begin to absorb what she saw, the sun peeked above a mountainside in the distance, flooding the air with light and showering it down on the vast and beautiful scenery stretching out before her.

The brilliant rays masked the web but revealed a radiant landscape below. Her small wood sloped down behind the garden and extended outward along a valley. She could see for miles and miles, past a river, a village, all the way to some towering mountains that formed a chain leading down to the fresh morning sun near the horizon. She saw smoke rising from the chimneys in the town, where people must be living at that very moment. Those homes huddled behind a large stone fort, which looked out upon farmland. A large bird of prey, a hawk, navigated the sky, majestically playing in the first light of day. She watched it dive, flap its wings, and rise.

Everything was so new to her, and the wonder and beauty of it all struck her deeply.