

Clouded Mind

Louise's eyes were fixed on the crowded fish tank. She'd heard once that goldfish only have three-second memories. Years later, she'd read online that that wasn't true, but as she watched them swim aimless circles beneath white light, she hoped it was. A skinny teen with freckles on his face and arms approached Louise. The apron of his pet store uniform was a size too big and a bit wrinkly, "Can I help you with anything?"

"Do you think the other fish notice when one of them is sold?" asked Louise.

"Uh..." The boy squinted at the tank full of goldfish. "I doubt it. We replace them as fast as we sell them."

"I'll take two of those feeder goldfish. The one with a round belly and the calm skinny one at the back." The boy took a breath to respond as his customer walked purposefully past him toward the cash register. He closed his mouth and prepared to fish her purchase out of the water.

While she waited, Louise admired the advertisement plastered beside a bus stop just outside the pet store window. The image was of a young boy sitting upon his father's shoulders. The pair beamed beneath a perfect spring sky and puffy clouds. *Cloud 9*, read the bold text above their heads. Beneath them, a smaller font continued: *Your loved ones await in the cloud. Let us bring them home to you.*

"Are these the ones you wanted?" asked the freckled boy. He placed the twist tied plastic bag beside the cash register. It was full of water, air, and the two feeder goldfish. Louise inspected them closely and smiled, "Perfect."



Kayla perked up when she heard Louise's crossover vehicle roll into the gravel driveway. She sprung up from the well-worn sofa. As Louise ducked out of her car, Kayla opened the front door. "There you are! I was getting worried."

"Sorry," Louise replied before reaching into the passenger seat. She retrieved the goldfish. "Took longer than I thought."

"Ah, it's fine," Kayla replied, waving away her concern. Louise approached her house slowly, minding the goldfish. "What do you want to do for dinner? I was thinking — what are those?"

"Goldfish, of course."

"Alright..." Louise remained focused on the fish as she brushed past Kayla's knit sweater, passing her at the threshold. Kayla closed the door. "Hey, I don't think you can fit more than two fish in June's old tank."

"Oh, well..." Louise paused at the foot of the oak staircase in the entryway. "The fat one ate the skinny one two days ago and then died from overeating this morning, so... there's a vacancy."

"Jesus."

Louise looked between Kayla's grimace and the feeder goldfish swimming in slow circles around each other in the plastic bag. "June would be sad, so I'll just replace them."

Kayla tilted her head, braids falling over her shoulder. "That's a nice thing to do, especially if it makes you feel better." The doorbell chimed.

"You mind getting that?" Louise ascended the staircase swiftly yet carefully. "I need to let these guys float in the tank so they get used to the water temperature."

Kayla opened the front door as Louise disappeared into her little sister's bedroom.

"I have a delivery for someone named Louise?" A plump man with a somber expression presented a bouquet of white lilies and cream roses.

"I'll bring them to her." The protective plastic crinkled as Kayla accepted the bouquet.

"Please offer her our condolences."

"I will. Thank you."

The man turned back toward the street. Kayla closed the door behind him. She looked closely at the beveled card sticking out from between the lilies. "From Ray..." she read aloud. She called up the stairs, "Ray's your boss, right? He sent flowers. They're nice."

"That's thoughtful of him."

Kayla strode into the living room. The tables on either side of the daffodil-coloured couch were crowded with bouquets, and six larger bouquets covered the coffee table. Lilies, roses, orchids, and irises gave the space a late spring aroma. Kayla had faced loss before. Even so, she was surprised by the number of deliveries. June was the first person whose death she'd seen inspire so many sympathy cards and flowers, but then again, June was also the youngest person she'd ever lost. With a sigh, Kayla left the living room in search of a space for another bouquet. She marched upstairs.

The door to June's bedroom was slightly ajar, inviting Kayla to peek inside. A golden light from an arc-shaped floor lamp looked over the fish tank that partially covered the left side of June's desk. The plastic bag bobbed on the water's surface. The goldfish inside stared at the colourful environment beyond their plastic barrier.

Kayla held the bouquet close to her chest as she quietly approached June's bedroom door. She knocked gently. "Hey hun," she began, slowly opening the door, "why don't I order us something for dinner? What would you like?"

The room still smelled like June — like peonies and pencil crayons. Kayla's lip quivered, but she forced a smile instead. Louise sat on the foot of June's neatly-made bed, facing the fish tank. The room's floral curtains were drawn. Kayla set her sights on an empty circular bedside table.

"Anything you pick to eat will be fine. You have good taste. No pun intended."

"How are your new fish doing?"

"They're June's fish, really... I probably clean the tank more often, but rescuing feeder goldfish is her thing."

Kayla placed the bouquet on the bedside table. "Hey, flowers have been coming all day. There are some beautiful sympathy cards too, if you're ready to take a look at them."

"Maybe while we have dinner."

"Sure." Kayla placed a gentle hand on Louise's tense shoulder. With a tender smile, she looked down at her friend. Shiny paper caught her eye. Against June's rose-motif futon, the picture of a perfect spring sky and puffy clouds stood out. Kayla retrieved the paper.

"What is this?"

"Just a pamphlet. Came in the mail a few days ago."

Kayla read the cover aloud: "Your loved ones await in the cloud. Let us bring them home to you." She flipped the pamphlet open. "What in the..." As she read, her eyes narrowed.

"Yikes. People would need a second mortgage to afford this."

"Well, cutting edge technology is expensive to produce. They offer a lifetime warranty though. I thought that was pretty good."

Kayla scoffed, waving the pamphlet. "For this much, they'd better." She looked down to meet Louise's eye, but Louise remained focused on the fish tank. Kayla looked between the fresh bouquet and where the pamphlet had sat on June's neatly made bed. "Hey, what's this pamphlet doing in June's old bedroom?"

Louise looked up at Kayla. "There's way better info online, you know. They aren't shy about reviews, and you can even watch video testimonies from customers. I looked at third-party reviews too. There are some bugs to work out, sure, but Cloud 9 can be a really good thing." She paused. "I wonder what they think about all day."

"I bet all they think about is *sell sell sell*."

"No, the goldfish."

"Oh. Right." The tank's filter bubbled softly as the friends' eyes met for a moment. Kayla returned the pamphlet to June's bed and broke the awkward silence. "Let's just go downstairs and order dinner, okay? You can tell me more about it while we wait. You still have all those beautiful cards to read too — if you want," she added.

Louise cleared her throat, crossing her arms and looking back at the fish tank. "Sure. That sounds nice."

Kayla and Louise walked slowly out of June's bedroom. Kayla relaxed her shoulders as they descended the staircase. The



feeling of the pamphlet's factory perfect smoothness lingered on her fingertips.

"Do you have the time?" Louise asked from the bottom of the staircase. "I think I left my phone in the car."

"Oh. Sure." Kayla retrieved her phone from her back pocket. "It's just after 4:00."

"Like quarter after?"

"Coming up on quarter after... 4:13."

Louise made her way into the living room, Kayla close behind. "Wow, it really is a lot of flowers." When Louise had left at noon, there were three bouquets. Now she counted about a dozen, all carefully arranged to cover the tables without crowding each other. Relaxing her posture, Louise turned back to Kayla. "I really do appreciate you staying with me these past couple days. Going through everything alone would have been just... Anyway, I appreciate it. If you need to go home, I'll be alright."

Kayla studied her friend's expression carefully. "I really don't mind staying." She wouldn't dare say it aloud, but Kayla hated the thought of Louise living alone in the house she and June had inherited from their parents. "Besides, spending time with you comes naturally to me! It hasn't been that long since we were roommates."

Louise's expression softened. "It's been about five years."

"That long?" Kayla said lightheartedly, leaning against the doorframe. She opened her phone to search for dinner options.

Almost smiling, Louise approached the bouquets. She leaned close to a vase of irises beside the couch and inhaled their earthy sweetness. "I've always thought people just send flowers because they don't know how to talk about sad things."

"Sure, maybe. Would that be so bad?"

"I guess not. Flowers are a fine replacement for words anyway."

"They don't have to replace anything. People sent nice cards with those flowers too. I left them on the coffee table." Louise's tired eyes turned to the pile of sealed envelopes between a pair of bouquets. Kayla smiled softly. "I'll leave you for a minute while I order dinner, okay?"

Louise remained straight-faced as she retrieved the pile of envelopes. The late spring scent surrounding her made her think of rain. She flipped through the pile. An envelope with a rose watermark made her pause. Louise admired her name written in elegant cursive on the front. Slowly, she placed the other cards back on the table and peeled open the seal.

With deepest sympathy the Hallmark card read atop a watercolor backdrop. As Louise opened the card, a glossy sheet of paper fell from inside. It landed face-down on the faded carpet. Louise was expressionless as she looked from the fallen paper to the signature on the card: *With love from the Williams Family*. Hailey Williams was a friend of June's from school.

Louise ignored the card's Hallmark-printed message and skipped to the handwritten footnote: *June had so many beautiful photos on her profiles. We thought printing one would be a special keepsake. She was a fighter with a smile that lit up every room she walked into.*

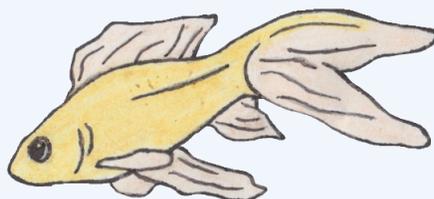
Louise slowly closed the card and retrieved the print from the carpet. She flipped it over to find a photo of June smiling proudly. Louise had taken this photo just a few weeks before the funeral. June had wanted a picture in her floral sundress before her birthday party guests arrived. It was a cloudy day, misty, ideal sweater weather, but June was committed to

wearing that sundress. From her hospital bed, she'd spent hours browsing online for the perfect look: a blush floral sundress and a wig that looked like her natural fluffy curls. Though her face was gaunt after her treatments, June really did look healthy for her tenth birthday. She had seemed like her old self for the first time in a long time — even prettier somehow. The outfit couldn't have accomplished that without June's contagious photo-ready smile.

June had stood in front of the fish tank in her bedroom fixing her curls. "Sis, are you ready? You don't need to get my shoes in the shot, so you can come closer," she'd instructed. She had faced the morning light pouring through her bedroom window, tall and proud, one hand on her hip, the other resting at her side. "Take more than one, okay? I'm going to do different poses!" she giggled.

"Alright, you just let me know when you're done," Louise had said with a laugh. She'd held up her phone and snapped picture after picture: June with a closed-lip smile, full-teeth smile, and convincing fake laugh. June with both hands at her sides and both hands on her tiny waist. June looking toward the window, toward her precious goldfish, and directly at the lens.

"Okay, that should be good! Can I see?" June had rushed to her big sister's side and peered at the phone screen. She'd swiped quickly through her options until she'd landed on the chosen image: a proud smile with one arm relaxed and the other hand against her waist. Her fish had seemed to be watching her from their tank in the background. "That's the one!" June had declared. "That's how I want my friends to remember me."



Louise closed her damp eyes tightly. Quickly, she tucked the photo back into the card, sealed it in its envelope, and placed it back on top of the pile. "Hey Kayla, how close is it to quarter after?" she asked, stepping back into the entryway.

"Just a minute away. Why, what's up? Are you waiting for something or —" Louise ascended the staircase. "Did you leave something in June's bedroom?"

"I just want to make sure the fish tank is properly set up."

As she returned to the bedroom, Louise glanced at the bouquet of white lilies and cream roses on June's bedside table. She approached the fish tank. She inspected it carefully. Golden river pebbles complimented the bushy aquatic plant and pirate's treasure chest in the corner. She examined the glass walls she'd cleaned that morning, lips curving into a smile as she confirmed they were algae-free. Louise's critical gaze narrowed on a spot of algae on the filter's lip.

"Sorry, guys," she said to the patient goldfish bobbing on the surface, opening June's desk drawer full of fish food and tank cleaning supplies. "I was so focused on replacing the charcoal that I didn't get all the algae off your filter." She retrieved a cloth, reached into the tank, and carefully rubbed the spot. Another sliver of algae caught her eye on the filter's side. "Geez, what was I doing?" She scrubbed the side diligently. Finally, she stepped back from the tank to inspect her work. No more algae. Louise almost smiled but realized suddenly that she could no longer hear the bubbler. She peered down the narrow crack between the back of the desk and the wall, trying to inspect the outlet she'd plugged the bubbler into, but the outlet was hidden by shadow. "Come on, Louise. Get it together," she muttered as she

crouched down beside the desk. The view wasn't perfectly clear, but she was sure the plug was loose just a little in the socket.

Louise pulled the desk carefully back, minding the fish tank. It was heavy. She pulled more strongly. Water spilled over the lip of the tank. "Oh — sorry!" she said to the bobbing goldfish, pulling back from the desk. Her elbow collided with the floor lamp.

Downstairs, Kayla heard a sudden crash in June's bedroom. Louise shrieked. Kayla raced up the staircase. The threshold to June's bedroom gleamed with broken glass. A pool of water spread from the desk to Louise's sock-covered feet on the hardwood floor. The iron floor lamp lay on its side where the tank had stood, its golden light still illuminating the plastic bag of goldfish on the floor between the river pebbles, a broken pirate treasure chest, and shards of glass. Louise hurried to retrieve them, barely minding the shards. The fish floated unharmed beside each other as a horrified Louise held them close and turned to her friend.

Kayla swallowed. "I'll get some towels." The doorbell chimed. She jumped. "*More* flowers?"

"No," Louise's expression changed suddenly to something like happiness, "I'll get it!" Her ankle brushed against a bushy aquatic plant as she hurried out of the room. Wet sock footprints marked her path as she rushed down the stairs. Kayla's mouth hung open. She walked away from the aquarium puddle to look down the staircase. The silhouettes of two men waited on the other side of the front door window. Louise opened the door to greet them.



Kayla squinted at the men's matching polos and khakis. Their mint green shirts matched their ball caps. As she approached, descending the staircase, she could make out the words written in fluffy cursive, stitched into their breast pockets and caps: *Cloud 9*.

"You must be Louise!" The man with a bulbous nose had a voice reminiscent of a lottery announcer. "We have a very special delivery for you."

"You're right on time! Please come in."

The short scrawny partner ducked outside the door and just as quickly returned, wheeling a refrigerator-sized container on a dolly in front of him. The container had smooth corners and edges. Its metallic sides shone.

"What's going on here?" Kayla's grip tightened on the railing. "Did you do what I think you did?"

"Yes," Louise replied brightly, "I placed my order the same night I got that pamphlet. Can you believe how quick they are?" The chromed container reflected in her wide eyes. "You can set her in the living room!"

As the man with the bulbous nose entered the house, a few paces behind his partner, Kayla stepped off the staircase to walk beside him. "I'm finding it hard to process that you guys reanimated a little girl in just a few days."

"We can't take all the credit. When their online presence is as strong as little June's here, they practically do the work for us," he replied, motioning to the container with his hand.



Louise pushed aside a few bouquets on the coffee table to make room for her bag of goldfish. The fish peered at Louise through drooping chrysanthemums as she directed the delivery men. The short man set the chrome container in front of the coffee table. His partner hurried to join him. They stood on either side of it like eager car sales reps.

"Are you ready to welcome your sister home?"

Louise nodded, her hands in fists close to her heart. The tall delivery man's hand brushed against a bouquet of lilacs as he reached behind the box to flip a polished brass switch. Like a solid theatre curtain, the front of the container raised slowly upward to reveal a pair of flawless pink ballerina flats on small feet. The curtain lifted further still to reveal boney knees under a blush perfectly pressed skirt. Tears welled up in Louise's eyes. Unable to watch, Kayla looked down at the carpet. The curtain was up. A hush fell over the enraptured audience. Springy curls beautifully framed June's heart-shaped face, not a hair out of place. Her complexion was airbrush-perfect. June opened her mourning dove eyes. For the first time, power rushed to her facial muscles to create a youthful grin.

"Sis, I missed you so much!" she exclaimed in June's voice, emerging effortlessly from the container. Louise bent down to her sister's height. Tears fell from Louise's eyes as she wrapped her arms around June. She squeezed tightly, savoring her sister's warmth, their cheeks pressed against each other. June giggled. "Hey, you're squishing me!"

"Sorry, sorry," Louise replied, pulling back from the hug. She held her sister's hand — every bit as soft as she remembered. "It's just so good to see you!"

"Aw, don't cry. You'll make me cry!" June gently wiped a tear from her sister's cheek with the back of her little hand. She turned to greet Kayla but hesitated when she spotted

Kayla frown. At that moment, a plastic bag caught June's eye. "Hey, why are my fish on the coffee table?"

"Oh, their tank broke!" Louise explained. "Your lamp fell on it. I thought maybe you and I could go buy them a new one together."

"Okay!" June held Louise's hand more tightly, minding Kayla's lingering skeptical eyes as she refocused on her sister. "They can't stay in that bag long. Let me put some new air in there. We should go quickly."

The tall delivery man stepped out from beside the chrome container. "We'll get out of your hair! I'm sure you have lots of catching up to do."

"We just need to sort out that first payment with ya," added the scrawny partner, "and then we'll be gone!"

Louise looked up at the delivery men's politely smiling faces. She stood, maintaining a precious hold of her sister's hand. She turned to her dear friend: "Actually Kayla, do you mind sorting that out? June's right. We've got to hurry and go get the new tank." Kayla's lips tightened as Louise reached into the pocket of her jean jacket. She retrieved her wallet, removed a worn credit card, and tossed it to Kayla. Kayla made a clumsy catch. "You know my pin, right?"

"Louise..." Kayla began, but as she met June's clear, focused eyes, words escaped her. She swallowed. June smiled sweetly.

"We should hurry! I'm worried about my goldfish." June gently tugged her sister's hand toward the door.

"We'll grab dinner as soon as we're back, okay?" Louise assured Kayla, following her sister's pull. "Love ya."

"Love ya, Kayla!" added June. The sisters walked joyfully outside. June closed the door behind them.

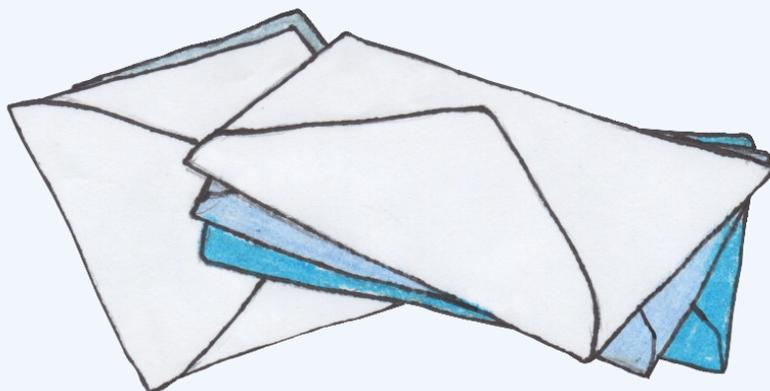
The delivery men watched Kayla expectantly. She allowed the silence to hang. Tapping the credit card against her hand, she looked at the goldfish nestled between bouquets on the coffee table. They looked tired, she thought, just floating there. Tires crunched over gravel as the sisters drove away.

The delivery man with the bulbous nose cleared his throat. "These reunions never get old for me."

Kayla crossed her arms. "I bet."

"I'm just going to share some info with you, and you can pass it along to Louise whenever she gets back. How's that sound?"

Kayla remained straight-faced. The delivery man chose to interpret her silence as his cue to keep talking: "June should handle most of her maintenance herself, but if you notice her getting laggy, just give her a quick charge. She won't mind. You'll find her cables in our welcome package. There's even a solar option." The short delivery man reached into the chrome container and retrieved a shiny shoebox-sized case from the back corner. Puffy cloud shapes and *Cloud 9* were engraved in the top. He proudly handed the case to Kayla. "Her



serial number is in there too. We might ask for that number if you ever call our maintenance line. It's 24-hour service. We're always just a phone call away. Our welcome package also includes some add-ons and upgrades Louise and June might want to consider! The aging upgrade is most popular. Definitely keep that one in mind."

"Oh!" interjected the short delivery man, "the Common Cold add-on is nice if you fancy doting on your loved one, or you might consider conquering a more severe illness together!"

"Finally," continued his partner, "if Louise starts to find her sister a little too... predictable, be sure to let her know about the Touch More Realism add-on. For a small fee, we'll toss in a few of June's less... social media-friendly personality traits." The delivery man winked, but as Kayla frowned skeptically, he quickly regretted it. "Right, I think that's it!" he said, clapping his hands together. "Do you have any questions I can help answer right now?"

"I don't have anything to say to you."

"Alrighty then!" With an artificially white smile, the tall delivery man retrieved a payment cube from the back pocket of his khaki pants and presented it to Kayla. "We'll just settle up and be on our way."

Kayla tapped her friend's credit card against the cube. As she reluctantly followed its payment prompts, the second delivery man closed the now empty chrome container. He pulled the dolly back onto its wheels and pushed the container dutifully toward the front door.

The tall delivery man's eyes wandered, studying the floral scene behind his customer as he waited for the payment to process. "It smells beautiful in here, doesn't it?" Kayla's jaw

tightened. She returned the cube to the delivery man. He secured it in his pocket. "We'll be on our way then. Thank you for choosing Cloud 9!" With a tip of his mint green ball cap, the man joined his partner to wheel their chrome cargo outside.

Kayla watched their silhouettes disappear on the other side of the front door window. She sighed. The feeder goldfish waited on the coffee table like creatures at an Alice in Wonderland dinner party. Kayla crouched closer to their plastic barrier. "So then, you want to come upstairs and watch me clean up that watery mess? We'll have your new home ready soon." She gently lifted the bag off the table and carried it with her to the staircase. "You know, you guys look just like the old goldfish," she said with a rueful smile. "June will never know the difference."

