The Skywriter’s Daughter

1936.

Dear Santa. Those two little words were so heavy; I found it hard to lift my pencil and write. The other children sat, scribbling madly, with tongues poking from pursed lips and foreheads crinkled in thought. They listed comma after comma of toys—dolls, trucks, baseball bats, ponies, trains and planes. I felt as if a hand had opened wide the door to all my dreams, and asked, “What would you like, little Samantha?” I searched my mind, wrung it dry like a towel, and tried to single out my truest wish. And there on that sheet, already warped by sweaty palms, I wrote:

Dear Santa,

I wish I could touch the sky.

Your Friend,

Samantha Hughes

I folded that letter snug, and sealed the envelope with two licks. On the dusty walk home, I let it peek from the brim of my pack; I let the N and a half-crescent of the O stand out. North Pole. It was my secret, but I let it shine. Because next week was Christmas, and next week Santa would come.

It was that Christmas morning on which I snuck down the stairs and out front. Although it was morning, it still chilled like night. Daddy and Ma still slept. Cassy watched from behind the screen door. I could hear her hushed, curious whines and the pat of her tail on the plank-boards. The yard looked as if the ground beneath was holding its breath—the swell in the center made the Hupmobile tilt, and weeds grew fuller in the low
I rumpled back my red sleeve (tattered ones faded nearly colorless) and reached. I stretched to touch it, groped the air to feel the sky. I thought for sure I would be carried up and be able to sweep my fingers across it. Would it feel cotton-candy soft, and puff when I press it? Or bumpy like the peanut-covered candy apples Daddy used to bring home. Would it ring a tinny ding if I tapped it? Or crumble and shatter under my fingernails?

I reached up, and thought myself to be at least several miles high, but found I hadn’t moved. Nothing happened. Maybe the magic needed a kick, I thought, a spark like when Daddy used to pat the Hupmobile before he twisted the key and puttered off. So I jumped. Where are you Santa, I thought.

On the morning of my seventh birthday, Daddy drove me in the Hupmobile to a place I hadn’t yet been to; a place where Daddy said people come for the very same reason as I—to touch the sky. I grew antsy, but I kept it inside, bubbling within. I needed something to focus on while riding in that seat; otherwise I thought for sure I would explode. The dry lands out the window didn’t calm me. Smoke rose and children chattered from the shacks along the road. An Apple Annie sat by the roadside, with a dusty box of fruit and a tired arm. The knob of the window crank had been twisted one too many times so it spun loosely; I twiddled it the whole way there.

We passed through an office, and Daddy spoke with a pudgy woman behind the desk. Her auburn hair worn up in bundles didn’t make her look any prettier. And she smelled of flowers. Too many flowers. The chalk-white walls were dotted with push-pin
posts and hanging calendars. A man and a boy sat across the room, the man with his
dustless jacket and sharp shoes, the boy flying with his pretending fingers. The man
stared at Daddy and me as we passed, with a crinkly forehead like those I’d seen at
school when the other children were fumbling with a puzzle in their minds. His eyes
shrunk as he looked at Daddy, and his nose wiggled a bit, probably sniffing the dust we’d
trailed into the room. His eyes pressed on me and something about that look, and the curl
of his lip, hurt just a little. A plant yellowed in the corner. Daddy scribbled something on
a paper, and said goodbye to the flower lady. I followed him along a row of buildings
with tall arching roofs that curved like our dirt-yard. We came to hanger seven. Daddy
flipped on the light.

One bulb, two, then the rest buzzed and woke. A pearl-white biplane stood in the
center of the room, with lights trained on it from all sides. *Loopin’ Lilly* ran along its
body in long, yellow cursive. A painted blonde lady with flushed cheeks tilted her head
and winked. Those wings it held, shooting out from the fuselage, arched proudly to catch
the wind; the tension in its bars, so wild and alive. I nearly expected it to take off right
before my eyes. Daddy disappeared into a dark, windowed room. I heard him shuffle
through some lockers until he emerged from the door with a pair of flight goggles and a
small duffle.

“Button up your jacket, Samantha,” he said to me, “It gets a bit nippy up there.” I
was still staring at that propeller, with its edge stealing the spotlight and loving every
gleam. I looked over at Daddy, and fingered my buttons into their slits. His face tensed as
he fastened the goggles over his head. He glanced at me with inflated eyes, distorted
through bottle-bottom lenses.
I don’t remember much of climbing into that plane, or sitting while Daddy twisted and poked buttons up ahead. All I remember was how the wind rushed over me when the wheels left the ground. We were suddenly floating, cut free from the runway and the ground’s grip. I could hear the faint rumbling of the engine up ahead. I knew it was supposed to be loud, but all I heard was the wind singing in my ears. I forgot about my tattered pants and I no longer felt the rub of Ma’s patches. Everything fell away and we were free, climbing up towards the sky with Daddy’s hands to guide.

The sky that was once so far away was now just beyond my reach. I would touch it. Today, I would. I knew it. Daddy flew higher and cut through cloud after cloud, until the town below was just a spatter of gray-brown patches and rolling white lines. I stuck my hand out and reached. The sky would be mine today, and I would feel its secret.

But I didn’t get to touch it that day. It seemed the higher Daddy flew, the farther the sky was from my fingertips. It was running, always, pulling its toy from me and snickering.

I never knew my Grandpa. He died when I was two, back when my only concern was not plopping to the floor. But Ma had told me stories about him, how he would sit the afternoons away, making the porch boards creak as he rocked.

Daddy would come home with wind-blasted hair, a dusty face, and spent nerves. Grandpa would rock on his loose boards and curse under his breath at the far hills, watching the dust retreat for the night.

“Diggin’ dirt-rows. That’s a man’s work. Lumpin’ hay and sweatin’. That’s work,” his sunken eyes would glare, “Go tunnel them black mines up north, and they’ll
work ya good. But flyin’ them tin planes at the carnival, that’s a fool’s work!” Grandpa would say, and swat the air, “Pish-posh!”

Grandpa kept on rocking. His rhythm was a pulse to keep time through the house. It was steady and tuned to remind Ma of the hours remaining in the evening, as she minded the dusty clothes. And the dish-water. And the patches. And the flour-chips on frying.

I don’t remember much—I was too busy taking careful steps and clinging to head-high edges. Until the day he stopped rocking.

That afternoon after the plane, Cassy came to visit me. I sat hunkered on the plank-steps, while my mind trailed somewhere else—somewhere high. I heard her breaths and stuttering sniffs as she sidled up beside me, making Grandpa’s loose boards sing once again. She aimed her snout at the stick I held, and watched with tracing eyes as I scratched lines in the dirt. The ground was frosted in a brown powder—enough to keep my masterpiece for a few hours, until the evening winds came to wash it away. One day I could get real paints, Daddy always said. One day.

I heard the screen door clap as Daddy stepped out.

“What’cha drawin’?” he asked, whispering in his tin cup to cool the coffee.

I tilted my neck and looked over my work. Arched lines of the hanger-buildings sat atop the straight solid scratches of the runway. Dimples and swirls hovered above, and a deep, prominent loop-de-loop snaked its way across the dirt.

Daddy smiled and knelt to sit beside me. His coffee steamed in the air; the dry breeze seemed to eat it up as it rose. Cassy trailed off around the corner.
“These are tough times, Samantha.” he said. *Say no more,* I thought, and tossed the stick away.

“But it’ll all get better soon.” He looked out over the hills and to the clearness of the far sky. A rumpled smile came over his face. “It will. The fair’ll be coming soon. We’ll get some meat soon enough when the money comes. And after we get a few things settled, things’ll be gettin’ better.”

I looked up from my etching. The wind came early; it swept the ground smooth, exposing the angles and blemishes below. *Take it, take it all,* I thought.

“Maybe we can get you out of those rags and find you something pretty,” he said. I tugged my pant-leg to straighten it. Patches weighed it down. “I got a friend,” he continued, “about twenty miles down from here. Son owns a shop. Said he’s got a full stock of goods and nowhere to sell them now that the school’s closed.”

Ma called from inside. Daddy rose.

“Soon enough, Samantha,” he patted my shoulder as he turned, “Soon enough.”

The screen door clapped behind me.

The third weekend of October was Daddy’s day to dance. The crowds at the fair were thicker than the years before. Cars marched in rows across the dirt fields, with shiny fenders that put the Hupmobile’s rusted body to shame. Families filtered in through the gates. Mothers in dresses, fathers in sport coats, children in pressed shirts and caps. They dressed in many colors—a refreshing sight against our gray-brown world. Word had spread of Daddy’s talent. People didn’t come to toss a nickel at the ball-toss or hear the dart-game boy ramble and yap. They came for him. They came to see Daddy paint the
It was the first time I’d seen so many mismatched people—Mr. Kay, the sharp-suited man from the Wellford Bank; Mrs. Green, the widow from two streets down, in her floppy sun hat; Mr. Stanwood, the farmer with pumpkin-freckled cheeks and dirt-blackened nails; and the Melvin brothers from school, who terrorized all who set foot on their side of the sandbox—sitting together on those bleachers like a tight box of Crayolas. They ate Coney Island Chickens and sipped Coca-Colas. They fingered and squeezed mustard packets. Mr. Stanwood dripped some yellow, Mr. Kay offered a wipe.

Daddy led those people to applause when he emerged from the hanger. He patted Lilly’s wing and waved a hero’s wave.

The propeller stuttered to life, the engine teetered between low and lower and finally rested on a constant whir. Daddy shot across that runway and rose.

Chatter filled the bleachers. People murmured to each other, their words hushed as to not spill their secrets to those beside them. But they all wondered the same thing, as did I. What would he write today? Even I didn’t know. That was the magic.

Soon Daddy’s first streak was visible. Then a curve. He marked the sky with his brush, making nimble passes, weaving his trails into letters. The first word floated, and Daddy spun around for another pass. GRACE, it read. Daddy worked his magic just below, while Grace hung, suspended in the sky with the sun and the tucked-away stars. The crowd sat, hypnotized, with up-turned eyes, waiting, holding their breaths for the next word. Another swoop. Daddy jerked the plane around and rocketed straight down. The crowd gasped, their attention clutched by the man dancing high above. He let out a long, slender puff, and whipped the plane up, scooting dangerously close to the ground.
Daddy always gave them something to look at.

The second word revealed itself. MARRY. Then a final twist of smoke. ME.

Silence turned to whispers as a young couple up front leapt into a hug. He spun her like they did in the movies. She cried. Claps rang—a patter at first, then a full roar of applause.

Faces turned back to the sky, to the man with one last trick. A wispy heart hung. He became the tip of his brush; the artist became his art. Daddy aimed for an arrow. He dove. He kept Lilly’s wings straight and shot an arching white line across the heart. This was what people came to see. A man with amazing tricks—always one more left hidden until the end. He sped closer to the ground. The crowd waited for the swoop. They wanted to feel the chill, the awe of something greater than themselves. They wanted the grand finish. They wanted it all. Daddy swept so close, I was scared he would run right into the ground and crash himself across the fields.

And he did.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to blink it all away. I hoped for Daddy to climb out of that plane and brush the black off his jacket. I hoped he would rise and bow and toss his hands high with a hero’s smile. I hoped the crowd would cheer him like they had done after every show. But the flaming wreck still burned, and the crowd didn’t cheer this time. Black air tumbled high and washed the blue over with a haze of gray. I was suffocating. The smell of celebration was gone, the moment ripped and left to wither.

*This must be a trick,* I thought. *It must be.* Anything for the show, Daddy used to say. *He must be pulling something.*
Only the Hupmobile remained. We’d sold most everything else, or as Ma put it, had let it all get stolen for some dollars and change. The backseat was stacked roof-high with boxes. I shuffled some things to clear room for Cassy. She hopped in, trotted in a circle, and found her place to lie.

Ma took the keys in hand and climbed in. I sat beside her while my fingers found their place on the knob—my twiddling knob. For a moment, Ma sat still and looked across the hood at the house. I’d never seen it so empty before. It used to hold a family and hear laughter and bickering. Now it stood, empty planks standing, whose sole purpose was to prop the roof. Weeds had gotten the better of the floorboards, but the curve in the dirt-yard still rose. She lowered the keys and turned to me.

“Before your father—,” tears rushed, but her words came slowly. “He… he saved this for you. Wanted to surprise you, but—,” she handed me a small box, “he wanted you to have this.” Its loose lid wanted to be opened.

As the seat rumbled and the Hupmobile rolled forward, I lifted the lid with gentle fingers. Black, brown, orange, yellow, blue, green, red, and white—a tube of each kept cozy with a slender Sable brush.

I smiled and looked up. Ma watched the road while her eyes puddled and occasionally opened. The far hills were gray-brown, and the land behind us was swallowed in a wall of rising dust whipped up as we sped along. The sky up ahead was clear, a good day for painting, and bluer than I had ever known it to be.