

# **Cloudy Skies over Miami**



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Tex Ware  
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## Chapter One

Mom thinks that paying a whole lot of money for a birthday card is not practical. So it comes as no surprise to me when she hands me a birthday card with a picture of two skunks holding two red balloons. Cool, don't you think? OK, so between you and me, I display the card on my desk for about seven minutes. Then I put it in the third drawer of my desk along with the other things I don't know what to do with. Truth is, the card came from a half price store on Victory Blvd. Mom and I were together when she bought it along with shoelaces for Dad – brown ones.

I don't much care about cards, or for that matter, skunks holding red balloons. As far as brown shoelaces, I never knew they existed until that day in the half price store. Now, when I think about it, Dad's brown shoes and laces always do match. So I guess brown shoelaces have always existed. Anyhow, the whole point of explaining about the card is to give you the details leading up to the gift inside. It is a roundtrip airline ticket for one to Florida.

Now this does come as a surprise – a big one. After all, it isn't every birthday that I get a vacation for a present. This sure beats last year's flannel pajamas.

"Mom, Dad, are you guys for real?"

Both of them nod their heads, as if to say, "Yes." This nodding of the head thing they do, I've seen before. It's like they are in perfect sync. Up. Down. Up. Down. Until one of them gives in and speaks. This time it's Dad.

"Josh, we think you're responsible enough. That's why we're not going with you."

Now, this has me wondering. Me? Responsible enough? Only last night, I bit into a cookie that was actually a refrigerator magnet.

Mom continues talking to Dad. "Many children fly alone."

Dad agrees with her. "Honey, it's done all the time."

I'm thinking, *Helloo – I'm here. Talk to me.* But hey, who am I to complain? We're talking Florida!

Mom looks confident when she says, "I'm sure you'll enjoy the experience of flying alone."

"You mean by flapping my wings, Mom?"

She laughs aloud. "The flight attendant will take good care of you."

I turn to Dad. "How will I get to the hotel?"

Dad looks confused. "The hotel?"

"Umm – yeah, like I'll need to sleep somewhere."

Mom giggles. "Sweetie, you don't think we would let you stay by yourself, do you?"

"Well, uh –"

Dad becomes serious. "Josh, we'll explain. Grandma and Grandpa purchased a lovely condo in Miami. It has three bedrooms, and one is a guest room. They'll meet you at the airport and you'll go back to their place."

"So, I'll be staying with them all week?"

Mom can tell that I seem concerned.

"Uh, for an entire week? I don't know about this."

"Sweetie," she says. "You'll go to the beach and to the pool. It's not like they'll be right next to you every second of the day. Besides, you haven't spent time alone with the two of them in a long while. You'll have a blast!"

I start thinking to myself. Miami in the winter is kind of cool. My own room. A pool. The beach. The sun. White sand. I'll be the envy of all my friends. Besides, what else would I do this winter break? Go with Evan bowling, or play computer games with him. I'm twelve now. Yep, one week in the sun is just what I need.

"Mom, Dad, how much did the airfare cost you?"

I wait for an answer, but they're both shaking their heads sideways, as if to say, "No." Left side. Right side. Left side. Right side. This time it's Mom who gives in.

"We're not going to tell you. It's a birthday gift. We just want you to have a great time. Now come on, let's get your summer clothes out from under your bed."

Both of us go to my room. Mom bends down and from underneath my bed, she pulls out my storage bin. As she opens the lid, I tell her, "I can still smell last summer on my clothes."

“Go ahead, sweetie, take out whatever clothes you’d like. I’ll bring the luggage up from the basement.”

So here I am, packing my shorts and tank tops, when outside it’s twenty degrees.

## Chapter Two

It's a few minutes after five in the morning when my alarm clock buzzes. Getting up at this hour is like torture. Outside, it's still dark and inside, the house is cold. I drag myself out of bed and force my way down the hall. Two feet away from the bathroom, I launch my first morning burps. They sound the same each morning, but usually they begin two hours later, after breakfast. I can't explain the sound, but if I really had to, I would say they sound like a scared chicken. Mom is already in the kitchen and she hears me.

"Sweetie, is that you?"

"It's the dog, Mom."

She laughs, because we don't have a dog. "What do you want to eat?"

"Nothing, Mom, I'm not up yet."

"You should eat something."

"Why?"

"Because it's not good to fly when your stomach is empty, Josh."

"Mom, my stomach is not empty. Last night before I went to sleep, I ate the four leftover slices of pizza that were in the fridge."

"Oh my! Then you must have indigestion."

I walk into the bathroom, close the door, and turn on the shower. Ah! This feels good. I wonder how Mom could think I'm old enough to board an airplane by myself, but not old enough to understand my own burps. Go figure!

By the time I finish showering, Mom and Dad are dressed and speaking to one another in low voices. It's difficult to hear what they're saying through the door, but I can tell they are nervous whispers. Ever since I can remember, they did that.

When I'm dressed, I walk out of the bathroom, and then I notice Dad reading and re-reading my flight schedule. He looks pale, as though he himself would benefit from the sun. Mom looks equally nervous, and that makes sense because they always feel and do the same thing at the same time. She's holding a blueberry muffin from Holterman's Bakery in her hand, "Sure you don't want anything to eat?"

"Nope."

"But Josh, these are your favorite muffins."

"Not at this hour, Mom."

Dad clears his voice. "Uh hum – we're very proud of you, Josh."

"For what?"

He shrugs his shoulders, but I know what he is thinking. He's thinking that I'm brave enough to go on an airplane by myself.

"Dad, I'm only a passenger. It's not like I'm the pilot."

Mom asks him if he has the boarding pass.

His smile is odd. It looks like he's about to go in his pants. "Sure do. Here it is," he says as he taps his shirt pocket.

"I'll hold it, Dad."

He looks at Mom and she looks back at him, but that's it.

Dad has this serious look on his face. He looks as if he were about to decide whether we should move to Mars. I have seen him look this way many times. Just the other night Mom asked him if he wanted mashed or baked potatoes and he took this question very seriously. So, it doesn't come as a surprise to me that he would need to put a lot of time into deciding if I should be able to hold my own boarding pass.

"Hey, you guys, if you think I'm responsible enough to go alone on a plane, then I also should be responsible enough to hold my own boarding pass."

They start the head nodding again. Up. Down. Up. Down. Obviously, they both agree with me, and of course with each other. Mom gives in. "He's right. He should be the one to hold his own boarding pass."

Here they go again, talking to each other about me when I'm standing right in front of the two of them; not like it matters, because this is Florida we're talking about!

I watch Dad as he reaches his hand into his shirt pocket. His movement is slow and I can tell he's hesitant. "Here you go, Josh. Put it somewhere safe."

"Yep."

I turn around and head back to my room. They follow me and stare at me as I unzip the outside compartment of my luggage on wheels. The only sound that's heard is the zip-zip-zippering. As I slip the boarding pass down inside, they both say, "Good." I'm thinking they are getting too weird, and the sooner I'm outta here the better off we'll all be.

"I'm ready."

Mom asks, "Do you need the bathroom?"

"Why? Isn't there one in Miami?"

She laughs that forced laugh that I've heard many times. Dad checks his watch and then looks up at the clock on my dresser. I wonder if he expects to see a different time.

"OK Josh, let's go."

The second we walk outside, the freezing air bites my face and immediately my nose begins to run. Wiping it with my hand, I say, "I won't miss this. That's for sure."

We make a mad dash for our car, and as Dad clicks the trunk door open, I lift up my luggage and place it inside; then we all get inside the car and we're off to the airport. The huge thermometer on Richmond Avenue reads nineteen degrees. Dad says, "Do you believe how cold it is?"

I wonder why he always asks such obvious questions, but I am way too preoccupied thinking about the Florida sun, so I don't answer his question.

Neither does Mom. In order to pass the time in the car, I turn on my iPod and listen to my music. Listening to music makes the forty-five minute trip to the airport go fast and before I know it, we arrive.

Let's face it. The details of what happens in between arriving at Newark Airport and the actual boarding are boring. Nobody ever wants to hear about that part of the trip. Except, I have to say that Mom and Dad acted as if I were going to a foreign country for ten years. I think I should cut out telling you about all the things they were both saying and how they were both talking at the same time telling me the same things over and over again. Come to think of it, I'm not going to bother telling you about the "goodbye Mom and Dad" part either, because if I went into it, well, then I'd be forced to talk about how strange the two of them sounded. So, here is where I skip to the actual part when I take off my sneakers and place them, along with my luggage, inside this plastic crate. The crate begins to move down a conveyor belt, and it's being x-rayed just like my left foot the time Mom thought I broke my ankle attempting to skate. It turned out to be a bad sprain.

Anyhow, I walk through a metal detector and as I look down at my feet, I notice the big toe on my left foot sticking through my sock. It looks like an alien and the truth is I forgot the last time I actually used toenail

clippers. I start to think about removing both socks so that the one sock with the hole isn't visible, but then I notice a man in a white shirt wearing a badge.

"I'll be assisting you onto the plane," he says.

"Oh, yeah. All right. Thanks." I get the feeling he's noticing my toe through the sock and I don't know whether or not to say something or act like it isn't there. I decide to say, "Oh wow! I have a hole in my sock."

He gives me a half grin and then says, "Not a problem, young man. You'll still be allowed to fly."

I don't know if I should laugh or not because he looks so serious. Then, in a matter of seconds, I see a woman at the end of the conveyor belt opening my luggage. Her hands are working quickly, and she already has the main section open. I don't say a word. Instead, I watch as she goes through all of my stuff. The man, who is there to assist me, tells me that metal was detected inside my luggage.

Now I have to say something. "Metal. What kind of metal?"

"Looks like we'll soon find out, young man."

And then, right there in front of lots of people, I see the woman lift a silver frame out from inside my luggage. Oh no! Please tell me I am not seeing this! It's a photo of me with Mom and Dad. Mom must have sneaked it in between my clothes when I wasn't watching. I'm telling you she really thinks I am going to a foreign country for ten years. Besides, I'm going to my grandparents. They have plenty of pictures of all of us. I feel my face get hot and I know I must be red. What next? First a hole in my

sock and now this. Luckily, the woman didn't make too big a deal about it, she just stuck the frame back in between my clothes and zipped up the case.

I don't know who is following who, so I continue to walk next to the man with the badge, as if I knew where I am going.

"You can wait right here on this line, young man. You will be boarding shortly." Then, almost immediately, he takes off.