

# The Boy In The Clouds

Fictional Story by Taibat Ahmed

9th Grade  
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When I was four, I told my parents I didn't believe in Santa Clause. After that, they spent years trying to convince me that the North Pole was real and that the coins under my pillow were indeed from a magical lady with wings. Of course, I never believed them, and I always knew that even *they* didn't even believe in them, so I would puzzle over why they were so apt to set me on a course of falseness. My mother would drag me to as many holiday-themed parties as possible, and my father would recount his fake encounters with the jolly man he had as a child. *You know Leo*, they'd start, and I'd finish, *This is ridiculous*, or, *none of this is true*, each time growing more adamant that that was so. Around the time I was nine years old, with my mind filled with equations and tales of history, my parents realized I wouldn't be swayed, and so my distasteful drive along the mystical world of imagination came to a halt.

Three years, five years, seven. Plenty of time has gone by and I feel the only thing about me that's changed is my body and the number of world capitals I can name off the top of my head. In spirit, I am identical, still as gravitated to the earthly ground as ever. And while I used to take this perspective as a blessing, now it just seems like I'm missing something. I have lushed my brain with knowledge, but my heart is barren of any fruit.

Today, the Monday morning starts warm and sunny. I hop onto the slender cushion of my bicycle and push forward, but the bike refuses to roll. I inspect the handlebars, the chain, the wheels, and I see the black rubber of my back tire pooling on the ground, deflating. With a disappointed sigh, I look at my watch on my wrist and know there's no time to try to fix things. I don't want to bother my parents either, so I just take the bus.

There's a special bus for all the volunteers that drives from nearby in town to the

farm. I choose a seat next to people who go to my school and we talk about what we've been up to since break began last month. As the short ride comes to an end, I re-equip myself for stepping outside with a firm, white sun-hat to block against the harsh burn of summer heat rays. Others are ready as well with their shielding glasses, caps, and loose, airy clothing. We all disembark from the vehicle and the buzz of bugs and tiny critters sets in the air as we near the large, awaiting fields.

Almost immediately, an eager, deep-tanned woman addresses us. "Welcome to Summer Grow everyone and thank you for volunteering! I'm sure you've already read up on the schedule, but just in case..."

Her words continue to seep into my brain as I recognize just about everyone in the group of high school volunteers just wanting another good thing to write on their college resumes. I also am one of them. Amidst the familiar faces, there is only one foreign to me, that of a tall, slim boy with a messy heap of thick, dark hair. He stands with his legs crossed, arms spread along the wooden fence he leans on, and his bare face tilts upwards to the sky.

"...The last group will be in the greenhouse..."

He looked oddly content and not at all bothered by the blistering heat.

"...Leomarni, and Nathan."

He looked not bothered by anything.

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The regulated greenhouse was a much-needed retreat from the humid Virginia oven climate. Unfiltered sunlight pours in through the crystal-clear glass and fills the large, rectangle sea of teeming, green plants. Aisles of lush stalks and deep-colored

flowering buds decorate the floor like an organized array of forestry. The air tastes of minty spices, has the richness of damp soil, and that unique freshness that can only be found with nature's vegetation.

The group instructor is a small, pale woman with short-cropped, black hair named Amanda. She demonstrates how to check and cater to the vegetables' specific needs and to put the ripe ones into their categorized crates. Our small group is then told to split into pairs. There are ten of us so there will be a perfect divide of five groups in teams of two. I spot Angie. She was a nice girl in many of my classes last year and we had talked on the bus.

“Wanna partner up?”

I'm taken aback by the deep, soft voice that calls out from right behind me. My body swivels to see the tanned, carefree boy from the fence.

“Uhh...”

My head turns to search for Angie, but she is now standing beside another boy. Disappointed, I look back at him.

“Uh, sure.”

I make small talk as we work our way through the low arrays of greenery. His name is Nathan, he prefers Nate, we're in the same grade, he took the bus here. We reach the row of tomatoes in the very back of the greenhouse, and before I can think of another question to fill the growing silence, Nate says to me, “Look”.

My gaze drifts down to a large, deliciously ripe, lustful, red tomato in the palm of his hands.

“Great,” I say. “We can put it in the basket.”

I raise the sienna brown and intricately crafted wicker weave to him, but he nudges it away with his elbow.

“No,” he repeats, “*look.*”

Our eyes meet for a moment, and I’m briefly captivated by the blue of his which are strikingly light. I look upon the fruity vegetable again and it’s exactly the same as before- round, red, no bugs, clean, and just a few, tiny blemishes.

“Do you see the lines?” Nate uses his right hand to trail over the off-white cracks on the bleeding skin. “Here, there’s a really large fish. It’s swimming upstream.” The tomato slowly revolves in his hand and my eyes intensely follow, searching for meaning in the traces of his long, slender finger. “Now, it sees a bear trying to cross the stream over a log. It jumps out,” the red globe turns, “and eats the bear in one gulp.”

I chuckle at the end of his childish story. “That’s ridiculous. Fish don’t eat bears.”

His lips curve up into the crescent of a small smile. His hand extends to me and I reach to take the tomato.

“Maybe.”

Nate continues down the row with his eyes trailing over the plants as if he were savoring their sight. I look back at the fair tomato in my palm. For just a second, the steady run of rushing water fills my ears.

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Nathan is an interesting person. For two weeks since the end of the first day, I sat by him on the bus rides. I’ve learned that he can convert any word or everyday object into a detailed story solely with his imagination. He once told me that clouds are alive. I

would call him crazy, but there is always this very real and electrifying twinkle in his eyes when he speaks to me. It makes me want to feel what goes on in his head.

Now, on the first day of the third week, I sit at the kitchen table on the edge of my chair scarfing down a bowl of cheerios. My parents are watching me, exchanging looks of amusement, and suddenly growing conscious of myself, I slow down a little.

“Oh no, Leo, don’t mind us,” my dad says.

Across the table, my mom splashes her coffee before she can take a sip. She sets down her cerise mug that is adorned with a white-bold-faced **CONGRATULATIONS ON 5479 DAYS OF MOTHERHOOD** ♡, and asks me, “Leo why don’t you ride your bike anymore?”

My dad stops pouring his bowl of cereal and turns around to me. “You stopped riding?” Behind his thick-framed glasses, his gray eyes widen.

“I know the tire blew that day, but even when you fixed it you kept taking the bus. Did something happen?”

They’re both serious now, and they have that typical ‘concerned parent’ look.

Something happening? No, nothing really happened.

“It’s nothing, everything’s fine,” I assure them and proceed to slurp down the excess milk from my unmeasured bowl of cereal and then walk up to put the empty bowl in the sink. “I just... find public transport more enjoyable now.” I say bye to both of them, and hurry out the door.

Their unsatisfied curiosity doesn't faze me; I don't want to miss the bus.

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Having to be out in the scorching and insect-infected cornfields was a harsh adjustment from our ten day greenhouse sanction. Everyone came heavily equipped with wide hats, strong sunscreen, and bottles of bug spray. I was applying a great deal of SPF 50 sunscreen-bug-repellent to my pale, freckled arms when Nate asks me a question out of the blue.

“Leo, what’s the weirdest dream you’ve ever had?”

I scrunch my face and look sideways at him, my hair dusting in front of my eyes as I shake my head.

“I don’t dream.”

He leans towards me and scoffs in disbelief, but it’s true.

“*Never?* That’s crazy, everyone dreams. Even blind people have dreams.”

Thinking harder, I can recount some experiences I’ve had whilst sleeping, but they’re so unexciting and similar to my life awake that I don’t consider them dreams.

“C’mon,” he gently nudges my foot with his, “there has to be something. It doesn’t have to be anything weird.” His mayan blue eyes are alluring and penetrating. My mouth starts moving before I can think to say nothing.

“Well... this one day I went to the library to check out the first three Harry Potter books. It was my third time reading them. And when I went to sleep that night, I... *dreamt* checking out the three books again, just like how I did before in real life. But in the *dream*, when I got home I only had the first *two* books in my bag.”

Nathan began to laugh.

“Yeah, I know. Pretty boring huh?”

“No, no, it’s not.” As he runs his hands through his hair and dips his head back, I watch the joyful way his cheeks and eyes lift.

I could feel my face blush. It’s because he’s laughing at me.

“I just think that you don’t give yourself enough credit. A dream doesn’t have to be your greatest romantical fantasy, or a Marvel movie come to life. A dream is whatever you want it to be. Leo, you dream.”

His words are oddly moving, I can feel them reaching something deep within me. Our gazes hold each other for many seconds too long, but I don’t mind.

“TEN MINUTES TILL LUNCH!” the instructor’s call pierces the invisible bubble that had formed around the two of us. He stands up, gives me a hand to my feet, and we drop off our corn basket before heading over to the tables where everyone else has begun to gather. As we draw towards the bubbling bodies, I think about the small moment where it had just felt like me and him.

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I go to bed that night, not dreaming, but thinking.

I’d thought that dreams were always the fantastical, the magical, the otherworldly. They were far fetched tales of make-believe that could only exist in the land of disillusioned minds. Yet here I was, in my own way, dreaming all along. The times in elementary school when the other kids would draw ice-breathing dragons and cartwheeling suns, I would stay safe with things like a yellow frog. But for one tiny sliver of a minute, like the missable blink of an eye, I would look at their dragons and think, *it’d be cool if they could breathe fire too.*

Really, I'd been tiptoeing around the facade, scared to jump in, holding onto predictable reality like a coward. My everyday routines and rigid daily schedules kept me tethered to the ground, but my mom and her extravagant Holiday parties, Dad with his love for Santa Clause, and Nate who could craft a silly story out of tiny specks on a log- these things lit twinkles in their eyes and hearts.

Thinking of Nate, an oneironaut probably, yet still the happiest person I've ever met, I wish I can have more of what he does. Not exactly, not overnight, and just a little bit. Because even the tiny things like the excitement of a rogue library book count.

I think I have been wrong.

I do dream.

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July has passed and we're in August now, our final two week rotation- the apple orchards. Of course, apples don't really prime until mid fall, so we've mainly been tasked with small maintenance, like grass trimming, and inventory. But even so, just by wandering through the dozens of rows of blooming trees, one comes across a perfectly ripe macintosh every now and then.

Nate and I had started to wander away from everyone else again. He always seems to be leading me away somewhere. As the laughter and talk completely faded, all that was left was the soft swish of swaying branches.

"Nathan where are you taking me?"

He turns to me for a second and says, "You'll see," a cheeky grin on his face.

“You’re not gonna murder me and leave my body in some secret hiding place, right?”

“Well, I can’t promise you that.”

I gently kick the back of his leg and we both laugh.

Soon, we reach a break in the rhythmically patterned line of perfectly rowed trees. Instead of a rectangle clearing, we’ve come to a place where the barks bend into a curve and enclose around a small, circled area. I slide my way through an opening between two trunks, after Nate, and we lay on our backs right next to each other. The coolness of the ground spreads through my entire body, and my nose is met with the earthy scent of fresh soil as I gaze up at the azure sky that is splashed with fluffs of bright whites.

“Look at those clouds,” Nate sighs in admiration. “Leo, they’re absolutely *gorgeous*.”

“Yeah, they are.” I’m getting caught up in things. Him, the sky.

It’s mesmerizing to watch the slow roll of a cloud, the gradual fade of another in its place. It makes me think of all the things that could happen slowly. That there is hope in knowing, like the clouds, things will keep moving, steadily, in the right direction. My eyes catch on a particular one, with an ever so familiar shape.

“Nate, I see something in the clouds,” I say proudly.

“Really? Where? Show me.”

I don’t know how to tell him to understand the exact place in the sky, so I bring his arm up with mine and point.

“Right there, it looks like it could be a person. Do you see it?”

He searches for only a second and then his eyes latch onto the same part in the sky as mine and he nods. He takes my finger and drags it over a few inches to the middle of the same cumulus.

“Hey, it’s you. There’s your nose,” he swoops our fingers in a curve, “and your big oval eyes.” We move slightly lower down. “Then there’s your chin, though cloud you’s looking especially sharp. And then right below your lips, there’s that cute little dimple you get when you smile.” His comment catches me off guard, but he continues on without hesitation. “And then at the top, we have your hair, wild, wavy, yet always so very tidy.”

Lightly, he lowers our arms back to the soft of the ground and the backs of our hands lay side by side, touching. I watch as the cloud crawls through the sky and I reach up to it again with my other hand. For what feels like an eternity of seconds, I observe it until it’s soft lines begin to sharpen into familiar, defining features. It is me up there in the cloud. And it seems so close that if I jumped, I would land on it.

Fleeting it is, but not forgettable. I pass, disappear from view. The warmth of Nathan’s hand and shoulder presses against mine and his soothing, storytelling voice comforts me. I think I just took a small leap. My heart is fluttering.