

## There's a Girl in the Clouds

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A CLOUD ROSE FROM BELOW with a girl on it. Not a whole girl ... just a tiny face peering up from otherwise vague fluff.

Rex dismissed the vapory vision for a trick at first, his thirteen-year-old brain making up junk. But the elements were there—two eyes, a nose, and a mouth—embedded in the top of a fast-moving cumulus. The pale features stared in his direction while her white hair drifted around as though floating in a pool of water.

He mashed his forehead against the airplane window to gain a better view. This wasn't like any picture in a cloud he'd seen before, the usual cartoon snails morphing into whales as they skimmed across the upper atmosphere. This was boring brume except for a strange bit in the middle. The fog pimple mesmerized him. If he could reach her, Rex believed he'd touch milky skin and billowy strands.

After a few seconds, instead of scudding away, the celestial being grew larger, sailing right for him. The foremost fringe of the approaching haze met the wing's metal edge, and the face turned, her gaze locking with his own.

*She looked at him.*

Was he dreaming? Had he lost his marbles? Rex marveled out the porthole, certain the noxious fumes from Stinky Feet, the shoeless guy seated in front of him, had damaged his optical nerve. He grabbed his mom's sleeve to say, "There's a girl in the clouds!" but found her asleep, her dark brown hair covering one temple and spittle gilding her chin.

His mom had to see this. If he told her about it later, she'd assume he was punking her again like when he said he had seen a mountain lion in the backyard. But she'd been awake all night packing their suitcases and mumbling to herself. This on top of how tired she seemed nowadays.

*My camera.*

Rex recovered it from behind the book he had brought and an in-flight magazine in the seat pocket then swung back. But Cloud Girl was gone. A regular, innocent-looking cloud sat in her place.

"Whatcha doing?"

The Goldfish cracker breath brushed Rex's nose before he noticed the juice-stained face of its owner. The toddler spied on him from the space between the plane's wall and seat.

Busted by a preschooler. Heat crept up Rex's cheeks as he slouched back in his spot.

He resumed scouting out the window like a normal person, Cloud Girl's face haunting his thoughts. Too bad he didn't get a photo before she slipped away. He had the next best thing, though, his notebook. Filled with drawings from the last couple of years, it was the perfect spot to reproduce Cloud Girl and show his mom when she awoke.

The notebook bunked with his gear under the seat in front of him. Before wrangling his backpack, Rex removed his glasses since he wasn't looking at the patchwork land 15,000 feet below or enchanting sky nymphs anymore.

He leaned forward to seize the carry-on. The space between him and Stinky Feet's reclined backrest gave no room to bend over, his body too tall and his arms too short. Wishing he could detach his head, Rex pressed his

cheek against the chair fabric, which smelled of old sneakers and pickles. His fingers still ended several inches above the floor.

Few options left, Rex hooked his red Converse through the strap and coaxed the backpack from its hidey-hole.

His friends never mentioned the discomfort of sitting with the other airline passengers packed in rows, a kernel on an ear of corn. Odd, considering Ethan and Zach flew all the time to warm, exciting places for Spring break, Christmas, or just because. And now, finally, it was Rex's turn. Sure, this wasn't Cancun or Hawaii, but Rex's heart had attempted to thump out of his chest when his mom announced this trip to visit Uncle Dan and Aunt Annie. *A real vacation.*

Rex searched for free space within the pages of his battered red notebook. He spotted a two-inch square area and sketched Cloud Girl. Her misty edges proved difficult; his pencil refused to portray the wispieness of her hair or the luminescence of her skin.

It didn't matter. Although he'd seen the apparition for only a few seconds, he'd never forget her. And now he had an image to show—

Rex closed the notebook. What was he thinking? Never in a thousand years should he tell anyone about her. They'd call him bonkers and lump him in with people who insisted their potato resembled Elvis or Jesus turned up on their grilled cheese ... a Cheesus. Besides, mentioning nutty stuff landed him in trouble before. Bullies loved an excuse for a beating.

For the second time, he told himself a girl wasn't hanging out in the sky then pushed the weird-shaped cloud from his mind.

Rex sat back in 19F and reflected on what else he would remember from his first trip by air. Like takeoff. The diagonal screech to cruising altitude blew him into his chair like a hurricane. And how the seat cushions lay flat in their centers suggesting invisible people already sat there, a gaggle of ghosts along for the ride. Can specters take vacations? Then there were the creaking and rattling noises. The aircraft consisted of a bunch of plastic and metal pieces muttering constantly that they might give up and fly apart at any moment.

Two flight attendants inched down the aisle, collecting garbage. Rex hoped the crew member who smelled like fruit candy would get to him and his mom first. Skittles had been so nice at the beginning of the flight, giving

him a pin like what the pilots wore on their lapels. Yes, Rex was way too old for the kiddie wings, but he didn't care. It came from Skittles.

If the grouchy flight attendant, the one boasting orange-manicured nails capable of making a neon sign jealous, ended up at their row, who knew what might happen. Rex shuddered remembering how Too-Tan-Ann opened her big, red, greasy beak and croaked, "Half a can!" when his mom asked her to give him a whole soda. His mom gave up after that, though she usually put up a fight for him. She must've sensed evil hiding within Too-Tan-Ann's sun-dried features, too.

With another confrontation looming, Rex snatched the cups and peanut snack wrappers from his mom's tray table and waited. Skittles and Too-Tan-Ann crisscrossed their way toward him at a snail's pace.

As soon as Skittles arrived with the bag, Rex handed her the cups.

"Thank you!" he said as though she'd aced a test for him. He passed her the wrappers. "Thank you!" shoved its way out of his mouth a second time. He couldn't stop being an idiot. His relief in getting Skittles instead of Too-Tan-Ann had commandeered his jaws and made him sound like Winston, the animated kid who got all the school play leads. "Thanks!" There it was again. Rex grabbed a magazine to pretend to read and conveniently hide his embarrassment. As Skittles moved to the row behind him, he looked down, relieved, only to find the vomit bag in his hand instead of the magazine. Great. Just great.

His mom slept through the whole thing.

Rex rolled over and rested his brow on the window. Vapor generated from the jet's wingtip. Without his glasses, Rex couldn't see anything that subtle much farther, but his gut told him no cloud-form curiosities would appear again anyway.

He balanced his arm on the skinny armrest and detected a square piece of metal where his fingers touched. Based on the dent and scrapes, somebody had tried to pry open the little screwed-shut compartment.

His mom woke up yawning. "It's an ashtray."

"For what?"

She chuckled. "Cigarettes. You know ... smoking?"

When someone laughed after he spoke, Rex didn't know whether they considered him stupid or what he said funny. Even his mom. "People smoked on the plane?" Rex averted his eyes as he awaited a verdict.

"Back when I was a kid, people smoked everywhere. Weren't many places you couldn't. Look." His mom pointed to the illuminated "No Smoking" sign on the panel above them. "That light was on only during takeoff and landing."

Good thing "Fasten Seat Belt" wasn't lit. Rex needed to go. He'd have to hold it for a while though, because five people waited for the restrooms ... well, *lavatories*, according to his mom. That's what you called them on airplanes, which made him wonder what lava had to do with it. Rex kept his eye on the line, weighing the possibility of taking a whizz into a volcano.

"You found your journal," his mom said, even though he'd told her a hundred times it was for drawing. "I thought someone took it."

Rex surveyed the red, doodle-filled cover. He zeroed in on the skate store sticker adhered to the upper right-hand corner and thought about what lay beneath. It hid what Connor, the biggest jerk of them all, had written before leaving it in a drinking fountain. Luckily, Rex discovered the notebook before the water turned it into mush. He'd scratched out the embarrassing words, then drew Connor's head over the white spot, strapped with a bomb, face encrusted with zits, and the entire lot encased in a gruesome fart bubble. Oh, and a butt inches from his nose. Pleased with his work, Rex deemed it a huge improvement over Connor's normal face. His satisfaction dissolved however when he contemplated Connor's reaction should he spot it. That's why Rex had covered the graphic with the Bruised Bones Board Shop decal.

Rex stuffed the notebook between his backpack and the bottom of Stinky Feet's seat, and said, "I'd be fine if I never saw Connor again."

His mom smiled while scratching peeling polish from her thumbnail. "You know, someone probably bullied him when he was younger. Not an excuse, but it's a cycle."

Rex saw Connor's dad pick him up once when they were in elementary school. Connor released a shrimpy fourth grader from a headlock and rushed to Mr. Stone Face. "Get your stuff," the dad said, his mouth barely budging, and Connor ran off to collect his backpack. Rex remembered it because

Connor never followed orders the first time nor moved fast. That, plus the way Connor turned white as a sun-bleached bone spelled a kind of fear beyond anything Rex had known.

Rex's mom cleared her throat. "I should tell you something about my brother. Your Uncle Dan likes to badger people and—"

"Uncle Dan's a bully?" Holy crap. Rex's eagerness to meet him died. He didn't need a bigger version of those Neanderthal classmates in his life.

His mom's forehead wrinkled, which meant that whatever came out of her mouth next would be worded carefully. Rex readied himself to listen for what she didn't say. "Dan can be abrasive and likes to tell everyone what he thinks. He's a nice guy ... deep down. Take whatever he says with a grain of salt."

No question: she sugar-coated a bully.

Why'd she wait until Rex was trapped on a plane to tell him his uncle was a donkey's behind? Well, now it made sense she never said a whole lot about Dan and lived a thousand miles away from him.

Rex's bladder reminded him of the important matter at hand. Four people waited in the aisle, but he didn't want to join them. Lurking. Rex laughed to himself—the last adult in line was definitely doing a potty dance. Employing his best defense (concentrate on something else but avoid visualizing waterfalls or dripping faucets), Rex turned his attention back to what his mom was saying.

"... been a long time since I went home. I guess I should've ..."

It took a second for Rex to understand she meant where she grew up, Bright Farm.

While he listened, he looked over his seat back and saw someone vacate the restroom. The line moved. A teenager wearing a black hoodie pulled over his pimples, face all shadowy like a middle school grim reaper, took a step. His other foot refused to go anywhere. Arms waving around as his top half kept going forward, he sang, "Whoa-oh-whoa-oh!" and fell into the lap of an old lady in a cat sweater. Potty Dancer must have stepped on Hoodie Reaper's trailing shoelace and stopped him in his tracks.

Rex didn't have to check to confirm his own shoes remained tied because his invention kept his red Converse sneakers cinched nice and tight. But he looked down anyway. Yep. The grippy bicycle-tire inner-tubing sewn around

the laces held the bows in place. He reckoned others found them geeky, but the black rubber's squishiness and scent of the road appealed to Rex.

The pilot's voice crackled throughout the plane's interior. "Folks, we've begun our descent and will arrive in Denver in 10 minutes, where it's 78 degrees and partly cloudy. Flight attendants, please ready the cabin for arrival."

On cue, Rex's ears popped from the change in pressure and a baby cried.

Rex couldn't wait any longer to urinate; his eyeballs were floating. He checked and lucky for him, the line was gone. When Potty Dancer exited the lavatory, Rex squeezed past his mom and sprinted to the back of the plane, ready to brave a volcano or any other surprise installed in the cramped compartment.

"Young man! Please return to your seat."

Rex glanced over his shoulder. Too-Tan-Ann came at him, eyes bugged out, vivid nails clicking together like castanets, and arm flab swinging to-and-fro.

"The aircraft will land soon. Return to your seat immediately," her gloppy yap said.

Rex wanted to look away, but the lips held him there, hypnotized. A biology lesson on the Dana octopus squid sprang to mind. The sea creature disorientates quarry with a bioluminescent light show then swallows the victim before it knows it.

*Wake up*, Rex told himself, *you are the prey*, but his muscles failed to work. He stood there, right by the door.

Normally Rex stuck to the rules. Now, a gross version of the angel and devil sat on his shoulders, each trying to persuade him to their point of view. His brain (gray matter glistening, halo askew) whispered he should do what the flight attendant said. Meanwhile, his bladder (full to bursting, sporting a sinister mustache) screamed, "Give me a break!"

*Just zoom in and lock the door*. Yeah, he needed 45 seconds tops. And once he got inside, Too-Tan-Ann wouldn't be able to do anything about it—

Rex jumped when Skittle's voice filled the cabin, referencing tray tables and carry-ons. She noticed him and winked. Thrilled, Devil-bladder said, "She's obviously telling you to ignore the old bat!" Rex opened the door, his body tingling from defiance.

“Young man, did you hear me?” Too-Tan-Ann, three seats away, extended her arm. The prospect of her beef jerky skin touching him settled it.

Rex hurried back to his row, cringing as he passed her and trying not to think about meat snacks or his insides exploding.

“That was fast,” his mom said.

He mumbled the flight attendant wouldn’t let him go but regretted it as soon as the sentence left his mouth. His mom stood.

“Ma’am, ma’am! My boy needs to—”

“Mom, no!” Rex seized her arm and pulled until she bumped back into her seat. As tough as his mom could be, he doubted she’d survive a mash-up with Too-Tan-Ann. “It’s fine. I can wait.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve been cleared for landing.”

“Well, Monkey, here we go,” his mom said, her voice low yet taut like a bungee cord. “You’ll hold my hand, right?”

This didn’t bother him—she’d made the same request when the plane took off—although, Rex checked for signs anyone noticed his mom call him “Monkey.” Now that he was old enough to have a mustache (in the right light), she needed to retire the pet name or change to something that didn’t sound like he still wore diapers.

Everyone was sleeping or reading—dang ... or smiling at him. Skittles had heard it.

Then again, it could have been worse—his mom might have used his real name. Monkey was problematic; Bert, a Sesame Street character, was a different situation entirely. Rex never ever wanted to be identified with the yellow, bowling-pin-shaped pigeon-lover. Silently, he said sorry to his grandfather’s spirit, doubting he much appreciated it either.

Rex grinned and grabbed his mom’s hand. “I like flying. I’m glad we’re staying with Uncle Dan and Aunt Annie for the summer.”

“Me too, Monkey, me too.”

Rex peeped out the window and watched as lines became roads, ants mutated into cars, and the ground came to meet them.

As they touched down, metal strips flipped up from the wing. Did those thin pieces help the aircraft *stop*? It didn’t seem feasible, the plates so small

compared to the Boeing 737. Perhaps the flaps worked as bird deflectors, like an old steam engine's cow catcher.

No matter—Rex had no time to ponder the principles of flight—his body rushed forward while the jet glommed onto the tarmac. Nothing except the seatbelt kept him from smashing into Stinky Feet's seat.

He tuned out the voice in his head whispering they were all going to die and embraced the wild, bumpy ride.

The plane rolled to a halt.

"That wasn't so bad," Rex's mom said.

She let go of Rex's hand, leaving him with a row of crescent-moon indentations where her fingernails had been. Rex hated the flight ending, air travel more fun than he'd ever imagined. But on the bright side, soon he'd be able to make his bladder gladder.

Rex grabbed his backpack, and his notebook fell open to Cloud Girl. He peered at the drawing. Was that what her eyes looked like? No. Well ... maybe. And the lines meant to be floating hair only made her look like she was on fire. It was the worse drawing he'd ever done—worse even than the fart bubble. Never mind trying to fix it. He'd never get her look right without seeing her again.