

## Where the World Began

The story takes place at the edge of the forest where the land meets the sky and the sea. *Why are you telling the story like that? Hush. lay down, close your eyes, and listen.* The story takes place at the edge of the forest where the land meets the sky and the sea. This is where the world began.

At first there was only sky. Some would call it heaven, but they are not the same thing. *What do you mean? If heaven isn't in the sky, where is it? Heaven is not a place, child. It is a state of mind.* The sky was everywhere. *Were there clouds?* Yes. There were clouds in the sky, and the sun, and the moon, and the stars. *But there was no earth? No, not yet. What about Mars? Or Jupiter? Was there a Pluto?* *In due time. Have patience, child.* The clouds got lonely, for their friends the sun, the moon, and the stars lived very far away. The clouds cried, and they cried, and they cried, until their rain grew so heavy and fell from them with such depth of sorrow that it became the sea. *You're telling me the sea is made of tears? Yes. That is why it is salty.* Then, when the clouds felt lonely, they would look down at the sea, and they would see themselves in its reflection, and they were not quite as alone anymore.

It was a very long time before the clouds noticed that their reflections were no longer the only thing in the sea. Over time, life had grown in the sea. Seaweed, and starfish, and stingrays. Whales, and turtles, and fish. *Jellyfish? Yes, there were jellyfish. There were other creatures too, ones that lived and do not live any longer.* Those who lived in the sea could not survive in the sky. The clouds were still by themselves way up there. They were content to watch from above most days, but some days the loneliness overcame them, and they wept for friendships that might have been.

On the one such day, Turtle decided to leave the sea to comfort the clouds. She swam up and up and up until she broke through the surface of the sea and breathed in the sky. The clouds looked on hesitantly. No one had ever entered the sky from the sea before. Are you alright, they asked. Yes, said Turtle, I am alright. I came to tell you something. *Turtles can talk to clouds? Of course. Everything in this world can speak to each other. You just have to listen.* What is it, they asked. I just wanted to tell you, Turtle said, that even though I live in the sea, and I cannot fly into the sky to give you a hug, I will always be here to keep you company. The clouds began to cry. Just a little bit. And Turtle worried that perhaps she had said something wrong. I am sorry, she said. The clouds stopped crying and smiled. Do not be sorry. These are tears of joy. And so Turtle became friends with the clouds.

After seeing Turtle break through the surface of the sea, other creatures began to do the same. They were all polite to the clouds, often waving their fins in greeting, but they never stayed long to talk, as Turtle did. The creatures went to the sky to breathe in the fresh air and bask in the sunlight, not to keep the clouds company.

Turtle spent as much time as she could with her friends the clouds, but eventually, she always had to leave and return to the sea. This went on for thousands of years, until finally, Turtle found a way to stay with her friends the clouds above the sea. When she told them, they were upset. You must not do this, they said. Turtle smiled softly. I must, she said. *What? Why don't the clouds want her to stay with them? Patience, child.*

That night, instead of returning to the sea to sleep or to eat, Turtle lay atop the surface of the water, and there she stayed. For days and days, Turtle stayed until eventually, without food or drink or sleep, she died. *What! What do you mean she*

*died? This story sucks.* After Turtle died, her body began to grow. It grew, and it grew, and it grew, and on her body sprouted trees and flowers, nourished by the love Turtle had carried in her body. This is how the land came to be. *You've got to be kidding me. That's how it ends? No, dear child, that is how it begins.*

Over time, Turtle's shell cracked, and the sea flowed through those cracks, and those became lakes and rivers and streams. With the water came the creatures, and with a place to plant their feet, some of them came out of the water to live on the land. Some of the creatures grew wings, and they would fly up into the sky to spend time with the clouds. The clouds were very happy that they finally had friends who could get close enough to touch, but they missed Turtle very much.

More time passed, and people came to be. Then people came to forget where the world began. They forgot that Turtle had given her life so that they might one day live. The people were vibrant, full of life, and excitement. The clouds watched over them, but the people were more fascinated with the sun and the moon and the stars. They just liked to look at the clouds sometimes, point at them, and laugh. *That's not very nice. No, it's not, is it?* Sometimes this made the clouds cry, and sometimes they cried so much that they ran out of tears, and there was a drought across the land.

After a long, long, long time, there was a girl. The people were not paying attention to the clouds, but the girl was. She wanted nothing more than to be able to reach them and to give them a hug. *But she can't, right? Right.* When the rest of the people were busy dancing, the girl snuck away and ran through the forest toward the clouds.

As she made her way through the forest, night fell, and she emerged in darkness. Back home, on the other side of the forest, the girl had never known

darkness. The people loved light. They loved fire, and parties, and dancing, and they would keep the light shining through the night. The girl had only ever known the dark to be illuminated by the warm glow of flames, and street lamps, and LED light bulbs. But there, on the other side of the forest, where the girl had chased the clouds, there was true darkness. She could see only faintly when she looked up at the sky and at the stars so very far away. It was just enough light with which to see the clouds.

The girl waved at the clouds, but in the dark, they did not see her. *Why can't they see her?* They were watching the people on the other side of the forest dance around in the light. The girl thought that perhaps she needed to get closer, and then they would see her. She walked forward until her foot in front of her met only sky. *Oh no! She didn't fall, did she? No, she did not fall.* She had reached the edge of the forest where the land meets the sky and the sea. She could go no further. She stepped back, just one step, and sat down on the ground. Hello, she said. She hoped that the clouds could hear her, even though they could not see her.

Turtle, the clouds said, is that you? It is not, said the girl, I am me. It is nice to meet you, said the clouds, much time has passed since anyone has spoken to us. I did not come to speak with you, said the girl. Oh, said the clouds. I came to give you a hug, the girl continued, but I am afraid I cannot. The girl began to cry. The girl reminded the clouds a great deal of their friend Turtle. It is alright, they said to her, if you just stayed for a little bit and talked to us, that would be enough. The girl stopped crying. Then I will stay, she said.

And she did. The girl stayed with the clouds all night. They talked about everything. *Everything? Everything.* Until the girl fell asleep there, where the world began, and the clouds watched over her.

The girl awoke with the sun, and she watched as its light changed the colours of the sky and the sea, dressing them in glorious gowns of the finest quality. With each passing second, they were transformed. These temporary clothes were the most beautiful she had ever seen. *Do you think the sun would make me clothes like that? You will have to ask the sun.* Does the sun loan you these beautiful dresses every day, the girl asked the clouds. The clouds looked down at the sea, and in it they saw themselves in all their finery. They had forgotten these gifts that the sun gave to them, for despite living very far away, the sun was one of their first friends. Thank you, said the clouds, for staying and talking to us, and for reminding us that we still have friends. You are welcome, said the girl, I will come back again tonight.

The girl kept her promise, and she came back that night. She and the clouds talked about everything else. *Everything else? Didn't they already talk about everything the night before?* She returned the night after, and the night after that, and they talked about everything and more. Each night, the clouds were elated to see the girl, and each night the girl became more determined to find a way to hug the clouds.

One day, when the girl was not a girl anymore, but a woman, she arrived at the place where the world began wearing odd contraptions on her arms. What are those, asked the clouds. These, said the girl, are my wings. Wings, the clouds said, people don't grow wings. I did not grow them, said the girl, I made them. Each day, while the girl returned to the other side of the forest, she would speak to all of the birds that she encountered. She would ask them how to fly, and she would tell them about her friendship with the clouds. Moved by the love in her heart, each bird she encountered gifted the girl a single feather. When she had spoken to every bird and had been given more feathers than she could count, the girl stitched them all together with her heartstrings and tried the wings on for size. They were a perfect fit.

*You can't make wings like that! She could.* The clouds were fascinated, but they were worried. Will they work, the clouds asked her. I do not know, said the girl. The clouds were reminded of what had happened so long ago with Turtle. You must not do this, they said. I must try, she answered.

The girl stepped toward the edge of the land where it dropped off in a cliff to meet the sea and the sky. She looked up at the clouds, and she smiled. The girl took another step forward over the edge of the cliff. *What! She dies too? Do not worry, she is not dead.*

She spread her wings wide and flapped them with all of her strength. Flying was much more difficult than she could have ever conceived of. All of her weight was being lifted by the movement of her arms. If she stopped for even a moment, she would fall. Flight required the strength to fight against gravity. The girl was not physically strong, but she had a strong heart, and she hoped that would be enough.

The clouds held their breath as the girl pushed against the sky, climbing higher and higher, closer and closer to them. They feared that if they were to breathe, they might blow her away by accident. When they could not hold their breath any longer, the girl reached for them, and they wrapped her up in a hug, and she did not blow away. *Good! I thought this story wasn't going to have a happy ending.*

The girl stayed with the clouds for some time. In the safety of their embrace, she was able to rest her arms. She would need to regain strength in order to return to the ground once again. *Return to the ground? What do you mean? She had to return. She did not get to choose.* She did not want to return. She wanted to stay in the sky with the clouds forever. She did not tell them, at first, that she had come to say goodbye. *Goodbye? What do you mean?*

The girl could only delay the inevitable for so long. There is something I have to tell you, she said. What is it, asked the clouds. I am to be married tomorrow, she said. Does he make you happy, asked the clouds. He does, she said, but he does not understand why I speak to you. He has told me that I need to stop talking to clouds and keep my feet on the ground. I am sorry. I will not be able to visit you anymore. We understand, said the clouds, if he makes you happy, then that will be enough. *What? No way! They have to tell her not to marry him! But he makes her happy. She cannot have both.* I have to go back now, said the girl, I will not forget you. And we will never forget you, said the clouds, you have given us what we thought that no one ever could. Go now, and live your life.

And so the girl flew back down to the cliff where the edge of the forest where the land meets the sky and the sea. She had given the clouds one more hug before she came back down, and she dared not look back, for she knew that if she did, she would cry, and she wanted her last memory of them to be a happy one. *Happy? But she said goodbye! Yes, child, she did. Goodbyes can be bittersweet because there is both joy and sadness. Joy? Yes, the girl has joy in her for the past they shared together, and for the future she will have.*

The clouds watched as the girl disappeared into the forest. They would miss her dearly.

*And? What do you mean "And"? What happened next? That was the end of this story. What! No way! Who was that girl anyway? What was her name? Her name was Compassion. You're telling me Compassion just left and never came back? Yes. That's ridiculous! It is what happened. Really? Maybe. Maybe? What do you mean maybe? Did it happen that way or not? I don't know. What do you mean you don't know? Isn't it your story? It is not. This story belongs to the clouds. They are the*

*ones who told it to me. Are you messing with me? The clouds told you this story? The clouds have told me this story many times. It does not always end the same. Stories change every time we tell them. That can't be true! Of course it is. Every time a story is told, different parts are emphasized, things are remembered differently. Especially when you are as old as the clouds. They have seen where the world began. You cannot expect them to recall all of history so easily. I still think she should have stayed. Maybe in another telling of the story, she did. Now get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning.*