

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 decided that she was going to make it to the clouds. There was no uncertainty in her heart. She knew she would make it. She spread her wings as wide as they could be, and she took off running toward the edge of the cliff as fast as she could. *I hope she's right. She'd better make it, or this would be a terrible story.*

The girl leapt from the edge of the cliff, and her momentum carried her into the sky. She soared above the forest and the land and the sea, and she glided into the clouds, who were waiting for her with open arms. I made it, she said. Of course you did, the clouds agreed, we knew you would.

Weaving her arms through the clouds, the girl was the happiest she had ever been. She had waited for so long to hug her best friend, and now that she was here with them, she never wanted to leave. Can I stay here, she asked the clouds. For as long as you would like, said the clouds. What about forever, she asked. Forever is fine with us, they said. *Thank goodness, a happy ending.*

So the girl stayed in the sky with the clouds. They kept her safe when she slept, and the clouds were full of rain that she could drink. She never went hungry because the birds who had given her the feathers would fly up to check on her, and they would always bring her favourite snacks.

She lived a long, happy life with all of her friends, until eventually her time was up. You see, for people, forever has an expiration date. When she died, the clouds cried for days, and days, and days. They missed the girl, and they missed Turtle, but

the girl had helped them to make lifelong friends with the birds. They mourned for their losses, but they rejoiced for the love they had gained along the way.

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 can die? Yes, and she did. 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. Now get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning.