

A CUMULUS IMAGINATION

For Sashie, by Mom

The day that Josh and I were playing in the pool, the sky was filled with cotton ball clouds—cumulous clouds they’re called. They’re just heaps of billions and billions of water droplets; it takes about a million of them, in fact, to form a single raindrop. But that day, there was no rain to be had. The sky was a sharp, pellucid blue, and the clouds, which were flat on the bottoms, swung low. The tattered tops looked like heads of cauliflower, but because their outlines changed shape so frequently, they could really look like anything.

“Throw me!” Josh said, for the 8, 476th time that hour. “Throw me toward that dragon there.” He pointed up at one of the cumulous blobs, and indeed it looked for a moment like a vast, winged beast with vapor-fire coming out of its enormously fanged mouth. “I’ll slay it with my cloud-sword before he can scorch the earth.” I crouched down in the water and hoisted him onto my palms. “Ready?”

“Go!” he shouted. I launched him as high as I could, and he raised his fist as though clutching a scimitar as he flew toward the mythical monster in the sky. But gravity yanked him out of the dragon’s gaping maw just in time, and he fell back down into the water with a crashing splash.

“Again!” he said when he popped back up to the surface, his face stretched into a wide smile. “Look! There’s a ferris wheel. Throw me into one of the seats and I’ll go round and round before I land.” I positioned him onto my hands and crouched down even lower than before, then pushed off the bottom of the pool and extended my arms simultaneously, and he went even higher than before, soaring toward the carnival ride. But a gust of wind at 6,000 ft blew it apart, and Josh fell back into the pool before he could catch a ride.

“That one looks like a bowl of whipped cream,” he said. “Throw me into that one and I’ll eat a belly-full before I come back down.” So I got low down into the water, and readied myself for a full-throttle launch. He sat down on my hands, ready with his cloud-spoon. I shot him out of the water so high I could see his feet getting smaller as he neared his heavenly dessert. But he dropped his cloud-spoon just before he could dig in, and so he left the sky table and returned to the pool. Interestingly, I noticed, he landed with only a tiny splatter.

“You sure do have a remarkable imagination,” I said when he stroked back up to the surface.

“It’s my only limitation,” he said, with a matter-of-fact tone in his little-boy voice. He held my gaze for a long moment, then looked back up toward the sky. “That one. It looks like an alpaca. Can you see its soft hair? Toss me up onto its back and I’ll take it for a ride.”

I wondered aloud if I had the strength to send him that far. “I know you can do it, Mom.” Thus encouraged, I launched him with renewed purpose, high and straight, and he might’ve reached the alpaca had it not taken off in a mischievous gallop toward a pasture of cirrus grass somewhere in the troposphere. Josh descended through the blue with such dawdling grace that I extended my arms to catch him, and he landed in them as softly as though a small cloud had fallen instead of a 60 lb boy.

“That’s simply remarkable,” I said. But rather than answer, he leaned his head back in the crook of my arm and looked up at the ever-changing vista overhead.

“There’s a mirror up above,” he said. “Throw me as high as you can. I want to see my reflection.”

So I did as he asked. I involved every fiber in my musculature in the strongest, most explosive launch I’d ever done, and I sent him flying skyward. He passed a shocked flock of geese that was so surprised, their V formation became a Z. He ascended beyond a Cessna that was practicing figure 8s. It was like releasing a helium-filled balloon; he rose so high that his red swim trunks, which seemed so bright just a few seconds before, completely disappeared into the shifting swarm of clouds.

My astonishment metamorphosed briefly into curiosity and then into fear. *What had happened to him? Where was he? When would he come back?*

I stared at the sky, my eyes stinging from the bright, but I couldn’t bring myself to look away. After what seemed like an eternity, I saw a pinprick of red against the piles of white. It grew gradually larger, but instead of coming straight down, it seemed to meander along a crooked course, like a red balloon with a slow leak. It turned a few lazy figure 8s, then zig-zagged close enough to Earth that I could see that it wasn’t a balloon at all, but was in fact Josh, and he wasn’t falling, he was...floating. He stretched out his body and did a few dolphin kicks, then extended his arms and flapped them, gently, against a breeze. It was mesmerizing to watch him practically suspended in the air, then diving and dipping his slow way back to me. He landed feet first onto the surface of the pool, stopping there with barely a ripple. Then he laughed and let himself drop underwater, then swam to me and put his arms around my neck.

“What...how...?” I couldn’t form a single question from the myriad in my mind.

“I slayed the dragon,” he said. “Then took two turns on the ferris wheel. I ate the entire bowl of whipped cream and I rode bareback on the llama. Then I stood in front of the mirror and looked for a while at my reflection.”

“What did you see?”

“I saw that I’m whatever I wish to be.”

“But how?”

“Mom, you always said I can do anything I want, be anything I want. I’m only limited by my own imagination.”

Yes, I’d said that many times, but I didn’t know he was listening. I hugged him as tightly as I could, and gave him a kiss. “What would you like to do now?” I asked. I imagined he’d suggest we fly to Pluto and offer our condolences on the dwarf planet’s low mass, or unwind all the clocks to travel backward in time, or cast a spell on the school administration so that the entire academic program consisted of recess and lunch. But he didn’t.

He looked up and grinned. “Will you throw me? But not too high? I want to see how big a splash I can make.”