



## CLOUDS



## Clouds

"Put your glasses on," Margaret said to her son. He touched his neck wet with sweat and wiped his hand on his tee shirt. The back window was down a few inches for ventilation and gave a steady breathy growl at highway speeds.

"The glasses, Ben."

He picked up the thick lenses from the seat and with a couple of missed tries, pulled down the temple straps over his head.

"We'll play a game, Ben," she said. "You want to play a game?"

"Play game," he said. She passed an eighteen-wheeler leaving plenty of room when she tucked back into the slow lane. The sun was mid morning and wavy lines of invisible heat from the road were already distorting the view. Ben rocked back and forth; she let him go on for a while.

"Can you see the clouds?" she asked. There was a line of cars slowed in the fast lane . . . and bumper to bumper. She kept a good distance to let them sort it out. Ben stopped rocking and was shaking his head from side to side.

"Look up," she said. "In the sky. Clouds are in the sky, Ben. Next to where God lives."

"God live," he said. He strained against the seat belt to lean forward and look up through the windshield.

"Can you see them?"

"See them," he said.

"Well, we'll find one and we'll name it. Tell what it is. There are all sorts of things up in the sky."

"I do good," he said.

"Of course you will."

"I do good," he said again.

"Find one up there. Keep looking. Tell me what it is."

He put his hand on the glass.

"You can't touch them, Ben. They're far away."

He took his hand down. "Far," he said.

"What does it look like, Ben? Does it remind you of something?"

Ben stared. Finally he said: "Weekie."

She didn't respond for a long moment. He was looking at her, grinning.

"She's gone, Ben."

"Gone," he said. He continued to look. "Story?" he said to the cloud.

"She's gone, Ben. She's in heaven with the angels. She won't be here to tell you stories anymore."

"I love you," he said to the cloud. Sorrow altered his usual smile and his eyes were moist.

"It's okay," she said, talking to herself as she often did these days. What if he did believe Weekie was a cloud? There was no harm.

He slept a while. So as not to wake him, she passed the rest stop where they would have exercised. A truck horn blast woke him. She said, "Look, Ben. More clouds."

In less than an hour she drove into the closest city to their small town. She found her ex-husband sitting in the park near the museum where he usually was in the mornings on the rare days she had to find him. She parked at the curb on a yellow line and honked a few times. He folded his blanket into a long rectangle and

wrapped it around his neck. He stuffed gloves and two long scarves into a laundry bag, then put on a woolen ski cap that he pulled down over his ears. She couldn't tell if he was sober. She hadn't seen any bottles near him as he packed up. He came to the car, opened the back door and climbed in.

"It's Daddy, Ben."

"Daddy," Ben said.

She made no effort to greet her husband. Her intense aversion had turned to dispassionate distaste a couple of years ago. Even from the front seat she could smell the sweet acrid breath of bad booze and indigestion.

"Hey, my little man," he said.

"Lil' man," Ben said without looking around, and he started rocking backward and forward.

She pulled to the side of a street and took a city map from a folder in the side door pocket. She studied the map on the steering wheel.

"He's no better," her ex-husband said. "He seems worse."

"Weekie died," she said, following a street on the map with her finger. "There's no one." She looked up in time to see her ex-husband shrug in the rearview mirror. She pulled back into traffic.

"You got the money?" he said.

She didn't answer.

"All three hundred?"

"Three," Ben said.

"I ain't doing this if you ain't got it all," her ex-husband said.

Ben looked up, but they were in the city now and it wasn't easy to find clouds.

"You got it all?"

She paused at stop sign looking up the street for the office building.

The lawyer was not in today. But the receptionist was a notary.

"Won't a lawyer need to sign?" Margaret asked the receptionist. The receptionist looked at the papers. "He's already signed," she said. She looked up. "I'll need identification."

She knew her ex-husband wanted the money first, but the presence of the receptionist kept him quiet. She handed his expired driver's license that she kept for him so he wouldn't lose it to the receptionist who studied the picture intently for a few seconds and then looked at him. "Sign here," the receptionist said. Her ex-husband wrote his name. Then she let go of Ben's hand and signed below her ex-husband's scrawl.

Outside her ex-husband grabbed her arm.

"Don't touch me," she said. She backed away and reached into her purse. She gave him the money and waited as he counted.

"I'll drop you at the bus station," she said.

He seemed more subdued now that he had the money. She thought he was probably on his way to the Carolina coast for a while before he headed South for the winter. But she could never be sure.

She let him out at the bus station. He said nothing as he left. She turned off the motor. She took Ben's suitcase from the trunk and opened it on the back seat. She got a clean shirt and changed it for the already damp one he had on. She left the suitcase on the back seat. As she slid in the front, she checked her folder again. She had the signed papers with her now, thank God, and the health records from the doctors and the hospital. She strapped Ben back into his seat. She drove following the route signs out of the city where she rarely came for business or pleasure. In twenty-five minutes she was back on the freeway.

"Look again for clouds, Ben. See what you can see."

Ben stared and after a while he said, "See."

"That's good, Ben."

"I did good."

"Yes."

She paused before she said, "Always look for clouds Ben, and think about me coming to visit."

"Whizit," he said.

"Visit means come to see you. Come to be with you." But she knew she could rarely get off work to make this long drive.

She drove well under the speed limit for another two hours. The signs marking the distance to Gowanda were now interspersed every few miles. Ben had been looking out the side window; for the last few miles his attention had been still on the sky.

"Cloud," Ben said excitedly.

She glanced up. "It looks like a cow."

"Mommie!" he said.

She laughed. "Mommie doesn't look like a cow," she said. But she was deeply touched.

She patted the side of his head with the palm of her hand while keeping her eyes on the road. She put her hand back on the wheel.

She wished she could feel better about his new accomplishment. But he'd forget her soon enough and she'd be lost in the sky with Weekie. Her heart ached so that she frowned and took her eyes off the road for an instant to look at him. When she looked back to the road, she could just make out the sign for Gowanda--34 miles.

She tried not to think of the relief she hoped would come when he had caregivers. But an unformed dream of future normalcy had invaded her heart and mind, and it brought on ever-present pain of guilt.

She pulled into a rest stop and took him into a stall in the ladies restroom. After he finished, she bought him Goldfish from a vending machine and opened the bag for him when they were back in the car.

He'd finished the Goldfish and she gave him a Mars Bar with the wrapper off. He ate it slowly but took big bites. She wiped stray chocolate off his hands and mouth with a tissue from a box she had under the seat behind her feet.

"What is it, Ben?"

He pointed to the sky. He turned. "Mommie." He grinned.

She followed the signs. The road was two-lane now. She wanted to stop the car and take him in her arms, envelope him with a hug he'd never forget. But it would only confuse him, scare him. She saw the three-story institute, its main building with a clock tower and a wing on each side, like open arms, the grounds not well tended. She pulled up a long drive that curved to the front entrance. She could see paint peeling on the windowsills, and the brick walls pocked with holes from lost mortar and crumbled bricks. A door to the side of the main double door had two pieces of white typing paper tacked side-by-side at eye level and "Reception" written in black marker.

"I did good?" Ben asked as she unbuckled his seat belt.

"Yes, Ben. You did real good."