

Below the Cloud

By A. C. Zito

"You didn't see it?"

"I *did* see it!"

"There is nothing beyond it."

"I saw an opening; an opening, my friend, an opening!" Sandy listened in on the conversation of the two women sitting on the bench as he left the market with his bag of groceries. They always sat on the exact same bench every morning next to the market where he came to get his fresh pick of the best vegetables and fruits.

Taking a bite of his apple, he stood nearby as he listened in:

"The cloud never dims, never gets heavier, and never changes! It always stays the same; always has, always will!"

"But it moves!" One of the women snapped back. The slightly older lady shook her head at this.

"So *what* it moves? It floats up there! But that's because it's moving around everywhere beyond us! Everywhere! Beyond the cloud is more cloud. It is the only thing beyond where we sit, and it is the only thing that keeps us living, keeps our plants growing, and provides us with a way to breathe. It is the cloud, Mary, the cloud!" Mary shook her head and gave up with the argument. But as Sandy took another bite of his apple, he gazed up into the great, green mist that hovered all over the little town of Sepula.

From as far as the eye could see, everywhere anyone walked, the cloud was always there and always has been. Since the beginning of time, the cloud has been above them, and, until the end, the cloud will stay. Some even believe that the end of days is when the cloud will sink lower and lower towards the ground until it'll covers us all.

But as Sandy looked at the swirls and ripples of the dense fluff floating above him, he thought... just for a second... just for a *wee* second... he saw something. Just like what Mary saw— but it wasn't a gap or a hole. It was thinness; a slight change in the heavy thickness he had grown used to ever since he was a little boy. And it made Sandy gasp.

"Mary, you're right!" He muttered. The two women looked at him from their bench, Mary replying:

"Sandy I didn't see you there. No. No, Arlene is right. That is *all* cloud up there. Don't get your hopes up." But Sandy shook his head and took one last bite into his apple before chucking it.

"Let's see what's up there, Mary! Let's see what's beyond that cloud!" Arlene and Mary looked at Sandy in states of shock mixed with fear.

“Let’s get out of here, Mary! Sandy is going a little crazy on us!” Arlene and Mary helped each other up, scuttling away while Mary called from behind:

“Stop thinking like a *dimple-hogger*, Sandy; thinking such absurd things will get you strange looks from all the townspeople!” And that’s all Sandy began getting. From that day on he couldn’t stop looking up at the cloud and thinking about how there *had* to be something beyond it. It all couldn’t be just a green cloud that loomed over the small town each and every day, day in and day. No, it had to be more!

During lunch breaks at the diner, he would always bring his food outside so he could look up at it, and at night before he went to bed he would always go outside so he could lie down on the ground and stare up at it, dreamily.

“What’s up there, Marlene?”

“Sandy, I can’t take this anymore!” His wife looked at him with her hair sticking out and her temple stamped with a look of distress.

“I bet it’s another cloud above that one! Maybe it’s yellow— or purple!”

“You’re making *my face* purple, Sandy Diliker! I don’t *care* what’s up there! I just know that I *am done* with your silly dreams! My husband’s turned *crazy* on me! Forget about that cloud! It is *just* a cloud!” And that night Marlene left Sandy. But as much as Sandy was deeply saddened by it, it only made him all the more curious; curious about the future; curious about the dreams that Marlene hated so much.

So, the next day he didn’t go to work. The next day he began his *own* work. Sandy went to work at gathering as much wood as he could muster to find. Wood that was supplied at the store passed the post office, wood that kept the fireplace going, and even wood out of his own *furniture*! Clamping down panels of wood to the little bungalow where he lived, he began working his way up. Farther and farther he went, as he stacked boards on top of boards, his vision began taking form. Nailing the panels on top of each other, it slowly began to form into the ladder he always hoped and dreamed it’d become. And slowly the ladder began to take form until it got to a point where all across town it could be seen by all. Crowds began to form and then disperse as day by day he worked on it.

“Nut!” Some would call.

“Goof!” Others would spit out.

But through it all, he kept building. At times it would waiver and slant, but he would always find a way in fixing it and making it sturdy once more.

Then the day came. The cloud could almost be touched. He was so close yet so far away. And as he became inches from it, wood slowly depleted. And right when he got to the point where his fingers were barely able to get a hint of a touch from the cloud, he ran out. All of the wood was gone and every possible scrap had been used. His furniture was gone, and he didn’t feel comfortable anymore taking

boards from the little bungalow he called his home. And all of his money was gone so he couldn't buy from the store anymore. So as he climbed back up to the top, he looked at what was right there in front of him. His breath steadied, his fingers felt sweaty, and a feeling began to surge all throughout his tiny body. He decided he'd go for it. Sandy pushed back and then, feeling he had enough momentum to go through with it, he lunged forward. Lunging forward, he reached into the wispy cloud for something, *anything* to grasp onto; nothing. But then— all of a sudden, a misty hand reached out and *grabbed* onto his wrist. Sandy was pulled passed the green cloud and before him was beautiful land that went farther than the eye could see.

“Welcome,” A voice rang out, sweeter than the heavenliest drop of honey you've ever tasted in all your life. A woman with wings brought him to his feet; “You climbed and have been found.”