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### Inspiration from *Foe*

What I loved most about *Foe* was Iain Reid's ability to create a futuristic setting and yet one that still resembled the present. People can easily relate to making coffee every morning, straining jobs at the mill, and relationships full of history and hard work. But people cannot as easily relate to no more actual farms, being sent up to space for temporary resettlement, and, oh yeah, being replaced by a robot. Taking inspiration from the opposing ideas in *Foe*, I was able to explore this balance between present and future on my own and write the short story titled "Cloud of a Bird."

## Cloud of a Bird

Teacher Dorren looked up at the clear blue sky and shuddered. At the back of his class, Lucy sat with a textbook cradled between her thighs, *Nephology: The Comprehensive History of Clouds* written in bubbly letters across the cover.

“Water droplets would form from the condensed water vapor! That’s how the clouds used to form!” she whispered to a boy named Rocky who was seated next to her and who only wore an impressed expression for the sake of not ruining Lucy’s excitement. “I think a cumulonimbus cloud would be fun to draw,” she said to herself. The children were young, but they knew the importance of what the day held.

“Can we go outside now, Teacher Dorren?” Francis, who always sat at the front of the class, asked. “When can we start? Can we go outside now?”

Teacher Dorren held out his hand in an attempt to gesture, *Please have patience*. He felt like his lips were those of a balloon’s. If he were to open them to speak, he would deflate; become an old man of wilted rubber clinging to the ground, although the ground didn’t seem all that bad of a place to be clung to at the moment. “We will wait for the announcements,” he managed.

Above the door, the intercom crackled and then cleared, and a voice sounded. “Mistmill Elementary,” said a woman’s voice. “As we all know, Mistmill Junior and Senior High has been generous enough to share some of the responsibilities for this week’s Meteor-Act with our school as it is our last day before the summer break. For the sixth graders going to Mistmill Junior and Senior High next year, you will be able to get a taste of what duties you will have to perform weekly in order to keep the environment flourishing. It is an honor for our young students to be given such fundamental tasks, and an honor that shows just how much Mistmill Junior and

Senior High trusts you all as members of this town. In order to prove that their trust is not going to be wasted, I want everyone to treat their responsibilities with the utmost respect. I will go over each class and their selected tasks, and when this announcement is done, you may go to the station assigned for your grade when your teacher says so. Teacher Connor and his first-grade class have been given wind and are assigned the center of the playtime field. Teacher Maggie and her second graders will be teaming up with Teacher Lance and his sixth graders for grass; their setup is at the school's back entrance. Teacher Ronald and his third-grade class as well as Teacher Cecelia and her fourth-grade class have sunlight; please go to the end of the playtime field, where the canola field begins. Lastly, Teacher Dorren and his fifth-grade class have clouds and are assigned the opening in the canola field. I wish you all a pleasant experience and remind you to enjoy your last day of school."

The intercom shut off with a few more crackles, and then 18 pairs of eyes looked up to Teacher Dorren. These were the eyes of students that Teacher Dorren had taught all year, and yet in this moment he recognized none of them. He trusted none of them. The glimmer of excitement in them now seemed mechanical. And what they were excited for was their role in the Meteor-Act; they had to draw the clouds. Clouds had once been an uncontrollable force of nature, but now they were a weekly art project for children. And although drawing clouds was necessary for the environment, it was something Teacher Dorren would never agree with, never support.

Teacher Dorren turned to face the chalkboard to face away from the children. He brought the chalk up to write with, but his hand was shaking so terribly he felt as if he were trying to make a cloud of chalk dust. He would just have to speak his announcements.

"When I say so, we will line up and walk to the canola field," Teacher Dorren explained slowly. "I have been told to remind you of the. . . *importance* of today. How *important* it is to

continue this fabrication of nature. Without mankind's aid in giving the environment a boost, it would not be able to produce the proper ecosystem for us to live in. This is a good thing we are doing," Teacher Dorren concluded. It was a good thing that the children were already excited because his speech would not have lured anyone over from the side of uncertainty.

"Can I grab the pen?" Francis asked.

"I wanted to grab it!" another child argued.

The other school children joined in arguing, but the dispute quickly turned into a united plead towards Teacher Dorren, and the children performed a chant impatient enough to force Teacher Dorren out of his hesitation in starting the day. "I will grab it," Teacher Dorren said.

He walked over to the corner of the room, his legs feeling as if they were beginning their transition to rubber, and stopped so that he was looking down at the large pen. It resembled a telescope, in a way, with its cylinder shape, but there were far more buttons and a small lever to fumble with for it to be as simple as a telescope. When he picked it up, the cold, metallic feel was one so foreign to Teacher Dorren; it could have been a magic wand in his hand for all he seemed to know. Magic or not, he still knew it defied all facts of logic.

The cheers each child produced as he turned the pen in his hands made Teacher Dorren's old ears feel as if they were being drilled into and as if the bald spot on the top of his head was spreading. The only thought that could get him through the day was the idea that the sooner they began, the sooner they could end. There was no point in stalling now.

"Line up," Teacher Dorren said. There was a clatter of moving chairs as the children stood from their desks and rushed to stand by the door.

The children walked in a straight line behind Teacher Dorren through the school hall and out the back door. He felt as if he, holding the weapon in hand, were leading these children into battle, though what they were going up against he did not know.

At the school's brick wall, a mixture of short and taller children from grades two and six waited clumped together, watching their teachers set up the machine that would dispense enough grass for the entire town. It was a large black metal box with a handle on one side that Teacher Maggie was pumping. From the other side, long green strings poured out like spaghetti which Teacher Lance cut into small pieces and gathered into large baskets to be distributed across town. People would toss the grass onto their lawns or onto their fields and the strands would plant themselves into the soil, a soil no longer fertile enough for grass seeds once used in the past. As Teacher Dorren continued walking, he saw that in the center of the field, the first graders all stood facing the canola field with what looked like bubble wands in their hands. Teacher Connor guided them to inhale and exhale so that they would all blow out the wind at the same time. Past the school playground and where the canola field began were the third and fourth graders, calling the sun. They each had a set of orange glowing batons. Teacher Ronald was teaching them how to move the batons to direct the sunlight onto the canola, and Teacher Cecelia stood at the side with a crying boy who had waved the wand across his arm, attracting not only the sun to it but a deep burn. Finally, Teacher Dorren reached the opening in the canola field, a small circle patch of brown surrounded by yellow. The children sprawled apart onto the dirt and waited eagerly for the activity to begin.

The pen weighed boastfully in Teacher Dorren's hand, and he was anxious to pass it off to one of the students. He cleared his throat to speak until someone else spoke first.

“Did you draw clouds like this when you were little, too, Teacher Dorren?” Lucy asked, her gentle voice like a shy tap on Teacher Dorren’s shoulder. Her eyes were as clear and content as the sky.

Teacher Dorren laughed softly and answered, “No, I did not.” He was from the better time when clouds would come to be naturally. But as Teacher Dorren looked up to the sky, expecting a cloud to be there waiting, a familiar feeling came back to him. He let the feeling float around in him for a moment as only a thought and not a concrete memory before hesitantly grabbing it and examining it between the hands of his mind. “Once when I was younger,” Teacher Dorren began to remember out loud, “My grandfather took me to on a trip to the mountains because I had only ever grown up around the prairie. And we settled down on a little patch of grass with an open view of the sky, and we waited for the clouds.”

“You mean you drew the clouds?” Rocky asked.

“No,” Lucy answered for her teacher. “Back then, people didn’t need to draw clouds. They were made by themselves. Please tell us about the mountains, Teacher Dorren!”

As Lucy pleaded, Teacher Dorren was reminded that these children, just like him, had also only ever grown up around the prairie and had never seen the mountains. “Mountains can’t be moved,” Teacher Dorren began. “Think of the stairs, how you keep walking higher. On mountains, you could walk all of the way up, and when you reached the top, you could see the entire world.” The children let out a gasp. “But my grandpa and I never climbed that high, we only wanted to see the clouds.”

“Why did you want to see the clouds?” Rocky asked.

“Well, to see if we could make any shapes of them. If we could make out an animal or a plant.”

“And did you see anything?” the children asked.

“Only once,” Teacher Dorren said. “I saw a bird. Its wings were spread out wide and with white cotton wisped behind it, looking as if I had caught a frozen frame of it soaring. I could make out fine details on the bird, like its feathers, an outer layer of protection for such a delicate wonder. And what would have been its beak and eyes were directed forward, aiming towards the future and unafraid at that. The bird did not look back, I remember thinking. It was beautiful, but eventually soared away in its patient float, off to study other mountains, every mountain, from its place in the sky. I never saw another cloud like it.”

The children watched as their teacher reminisced, an intensity they did not yet understand, until Rocky interrupted the moment. “Teach us how to draw the clouds!”

The memory drifted away from Teacher Dorren and he remembered the task of the day and he cleared his voice. “The instructions are simple, but you will all need to listen closely. This here is the safety switch, and it should be kept on at all times until the moment you have the pen aimed at the sky. This here is the main dial; turn it three times to the right to ignite the machine once you have it aimed. Finally, press the blue button. To turn it off, press the blue button once more. Does everyone understand?” There was a unanimous nod from the group, and then Teacher Dorren added, “Rocky, you may go first. Come stand apart from the other children, and then repeat my instructions.”

Rocky stood, rising slowly as if he were a flower being given a pressure to bloom. He walked to Teacher Dorren and accepted the pen in his tense hands. And then he fumbled with the pen until he managed to point it straight to the sky. Not one gaze left Rocky as he switched off the safety switch, turned the dial three times to the right, and pressed the blue button. The pen jerked and white powder spiraled from the tip of the pen. Rocky slapped the offswitch just as the

powder hit the sky, and then laughed as his blotchy dots now decorated what had just been an empty blue canvas. Receiving a second hit of confidence from his giggling classmates, Rocky turned the pen on again, this time not letting its power intimidate him. He aimed the utensil and did his best to draw a shaky version of his name; his name written in a font only his. When his word was complete, Rocky hit the blue button and admired his creation. His eyes were so glossed over with wonder, Teacher Dorren could make out the white letters reflecting in them.

“Good job, Rocky,” Teacher Dorren said, although he spoke only for the sake of expectation. “Now go sit back down and we will continue.” Rocky strutted back to his spot, his head practically touching the cloud he just drew, and Francis jumped up to take his place. Her reaction to first using the pen was similar to Rocky’s although a little shakier, and eventually she drew a heart. The next child drew a smiley face, and the one after drew only scribbles. One attempted to draw the face of their mother, and then another tried to draw her own self. Many more letters and shapes and faces clouded up the sky as if the angels were making their own version of alphabet soup. The children began to relax, satisfied with their work on display for everyone to see, but there was still one child left.

“Lucy, you may come up now,” Teacher Dorren said. The little girl stood and walked over at an even pace. She accepted the pen, flicked off the safety, held it up, but then flicked the safety back on and lowered it, looking up at her teacher.

“Teacher Dorren,” she said, “Would you like a turn?”

Teacher Dorren’s cheeks flushed and he stammered from the unexpected question. “Oh, I, well- It’s your turn, Lucy.”

“Yes, I know that, but you can go before me, if you like?”

“No, Lucy, that’s ok. I am fine without having a turn.”



“Are you scared?”

Teacher Dorren laughed, although it was a sound only heard in uncomfortable situations.

“No Lucy, I am not scared. I only do not want a turn. These clouds are not what I am used to. Now, you go. Draw something that you feel belongs up there for everyone to see.”

Teacher Dorren stepped back and away from Lucy before she could ask him any other questions or cause any other discomforts, and a mild wind from the first-grade class blew and cooled his hot face. He looked up at the sky so as to look away from everybody. Lucy hit the button and was not fazed by the power the pen held. Her concentration was unbreakable, and she did not shut off the pen until her drawing was complete with every detail. Once the pen was shut off, she took a step back and tilted her head, trying to admire her drawing from a different angle. Her cloud was a mountain. The pointy peak was detailed with specks of snow and there were deep crevices along the sides. The edges of the mountain were rough and yet soft with their cloud exterior. It stood tall and stared down at the group in the open patch, a group stunned with silence and fascination. Lucy turned to Teacher Dorren.

“It’s the mountain from my textbook.”

“I see,” Teacher Dorren said, though his voice was quiet, and his eyes were up at the sky.

“Are you sure you do not want to draw anything?” Lucy asked once more. Teacher Dorren only smiled and shook his head.

In a rare moment of unified fulfillment, every child stood to go back to the school with an obedience that had not been demanded. Teacher Dorren looked from the colorfully white sky to the serene and satisfied children, and then the group made their way past the canola and the playtime field and the outside of the school. Teacher Dorren followed behind the children, glad this point in his life was over, but then he stopped and peered back over his shoulder at the

clouds. In a moment overwhelmed with wandering thoughts, Teacher Dorren wondered where that cloud of a bird was now, with its wings wisped back behind it and its beak and eyes directed forwards. And in his wandering thoughts, Teacher Dorren thought it should be up there with the rest of the clouds. Why wasn't it up there? But then Teacher Dorren hurried to catch up with the class. He did not want to keep the children waiting as it was their and his last day of school.