

The Cloud

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“Do you have to stand in the middle of the street?” a voice yelled from behind Gary.

It took a moment for Gary to realize the question was addressed to him. He didn’t really want to peel his eyes away from the sky. He turned around slowly, wondering whose voice could pierce through the honking chaos of this city, to face this gentleman who was screaming at him.

“What have I done to you, sir?” Gary asked the man.

In front of him was a tall man named Asher as could be seen from the ID card he wore around his neck. He was dressed in a well-fitted gray suit that even had a vest. He was gaping at him from behind his thin-framed glasses.

Asher crossed his arms, while continuing to stare at Gary, and then continued, “You are disturbing the flow of the city's crowd, man look around, you’re just standing there in the center of everything, looking up at what?”

Gary was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, but people were just walking around him, probably used to the poor traffic flow in New York City. There was always some random person standing or sitting in the middle of the street, so Gary wasn’t acting out of the norm; rather, he was maintaining normalcy.

He looked at Asher and replied, “I don’t believe that my standing in the middle of the street is harming anyone, just look around, no one seems bothered, except you. But here, you might really want to see this,” he pointed directly up.

Asher didn’t believe he was going to let a stranger standing in the middle of the street make him late for work. He let out an unapproving sigh; however, ever so slightly curious, he stepped towards Gary, facing him fully.

“This better be worth it,” he muttered, looking at his watch. He was already a bit late.

“Look up directly upwards,” Gary pointed with his finger.

“Do you see that cloud? See the round head and that long horn? Tell me that isn’t a unicorn?” he added as Asher looked up.

Asher looked up, squinting his eyes as the sun had already gotten so bright, although it was only nine in the morning. His eyes took a bit to adjust, but he saw it, the only cloud in the sky above them. It was a big fluffy cloud that looked somewhat like a horse with little wings if he tilted his head to the left, but where was the unicorn? It was now Asher staring above at the sky rather than Gary, who was eagerly waiting for a reaction confirming his suspicions.

After several head tilts, Asher faced Gary and said, “That isn’t a unicorn.”

“No, look, that’s the body and that is the horn,” Gary pointed at parts of the cloud.

Asher looked back up with more focus, but he still saw the same thing, not a unicorn, it had huge wings. “It’s a pegasus, horse with wings,” he finally decided.

“Come on man, it has a singular horn and looks like a horse, so unicorn it is.”

Pointing somewhere towards the sky, Asher argues, “Right there, see the two wings? A horse plus two wings, that’s the definition of a pegasus.”

Gary didn’t see the wings, he just saw the horn. “Where even are the wings? I mean why can’t it just be a unicorn with wings? Maybe a combination of the two?” he shrugged.

Asher laughed, “Because a pegasus and unicorn are totally different creatures and I actually have a book right here stating so.”

Gary started laughing, thinking he probably said that to throw him off. But, to his surprise, Asher proceeded to open his backpack and take out a red book the size of his palm that had the title—*A Guide to Mythical Creatures*—embossed in gold.

Gary didn’t believe this. What person carries a book on mythical creatures that aren’t even real while on their way to work? It seems a bit too unreal.

“You seriously carry a pocket book on mythical creatures, and here you were yelling at me for just looking at a cloud shaped like a unicorn.”

“Yes, I carry this book for situations like this, in case of emergencies and misidentifications just like this one. Look, that is a pegasus, do not ever call it a unicorn!”

Gary looked back at it and he saw the horn super clear, but now he saw the faint outline of wings if he tilted his head to the right, rather than left. Was he actually seeing them? Or imagining them? Was his mind making him see this since Asher was being so pro-wings? He would never know, he didn’t care that much.

“I don’t know man what you are seeing, but you can’t just call me out for standing here, and then proceed to join me and keep dropping mythical creature lore,” Gary said.

Asher put the book back in his bag and said, “I see wings so it is in fact a pegasus, but I am very late for work, so great arguing with you but I am going to leave now.”

Gary was still standing there, minutes after Asher left. How had Asher not seen the horn? It was right there. He was staring at the sky, confident that he saw a unicorn. Just as he moved to where Asher had been standing to walk to where he was originally going, he looked at the cloud again.

He still saw the horn.

But he also saw the wings.

Asher had made it to work almost thirty minutes late, which he was very annoyed about. Thankfully, his boss was on leave today and he had just quietly snuck into his office, hoping he hadn’t been spotted entering late. Today was also supposed to be a chill day at work, he just needed to read some reports and sign them.

He didn’t like breaking the rules and hated himself for letting some random dude on the street start an argument with him that was the cause of being late, and for actually caring about the argument. Asher didn’t like lies and false claims, he appreciated when all his statements had

evidence to back them up, which is why he carried several little niche booklets about things he was very passionate about, myths being one of them.

He had gotten the mini mythical creature book from his grandparents' house when he was six, and had loved learning about them ever since. Maybe that's why he was so offended when that man claimed the pegasus to be a unicorn. He also kept saying it could be both? A horse with a horn and wings, Asher had never come across something like that. What if there was a combination, some sort of hybrid?

Asher had been staring out the window, deep in his thoughts, when he finally decided to pull out his phone and Google search for a combination of a unicorn and a pegasus. There were a lot of articles covering this dilemma. Some of them described unicorns as creatures with both wings and horns. Others stated a creature called an alicorn, which was said to be just what unicorn horns were called in ancient texts. However, others insisted a pegasus could have horns, depending on the cultural background.

Huh, Asher thought, maybe the cloud wasn't a unicorn or a pegasus, maybe it was both, or maybe it was neither? He glanced back outside and searched the sky, which had gotten a bit more cloudy, and for a second he thought he saw it—the cloud with a horn and two wings.

Later that day, Gary was in his favorite coffee spot, a tiny shop next to the train station. It smelled heavenly in there with the scents of coffee, pastries, and tea mixing with one another. He was waiting for his hot vanilla latte while scribbling on his sketch pad.

He didn't have an idea to go off of for the sketch, he wanted his brain to just take him somewhere. Within the smudged graphite and his very smudged thoughts, he saw the outline of the cloud he had seen that morning, a horse with a horn. He quickly sketched another cloud with just wings that Asher kept claiming he saw and that he himself might have seen a glimpse of. He stared at the horn on the paper in front of him. Why had Asher insisted it wasn't there?

The barista called for his name, and he put his pencil down to go get his drink. While walking back, he saw a little kid sitting on the table next to him, drawing a boat in his notebook with a red crayon. It was then that Gary realized he had had an argument over clouds before. As

a little kid, he would often sit outside and just stare at the sky and draw. He recalled being seven, lying in the grass of their backyard with his little brother. Both of them were staring up at the sky on a cloudy day, when a darker colored cloud appeared. Gary had thought it was a dragon, but his brother had argued it was a boat. They had fought about it for hours, while lying there in the grass, until the wind took the cloud away from them, and it drifted far, far away, before they could come to a joint conclusion about its shape. Even back then, Gary had been stubborn, and he still believed that he had been right; there was no boat, it had always been a dragon. He had drawn that dragon the very next day after school in his old sketchpad.

Gary had always loved art, he liked the imagination that came with it. You could draw anything, you could be anything. His old art teacher used to say that everybody sees something different in artwork; the artist's intentions are not always clearly apparent to the viewer, and they see what they want to see. Maybe Asher didn't want to see the horn? Maybe he didn't want to see the wings? What if they were both always there?

He flipped to another page and drew the outline of the cloud again, this time with both a horn and wings.

That evening, Gary was at a rooftop party, sipping drinks with his friends, the city alive below them. His sketchbook lay open on one of the tables. You could see the unicorn with wings on the page. He was looking at the clear sky. There were no stars visible, and not even a single cloud in sight. He was still thinking about his brother; maybe he was wrong all those years, maybe he had failed to see the cloud from his brother's perspective. He had done the same with Asher, now that he thought about it.

His friend burst his thought bubble by yelling at him to come over to the edge, where he was standing. Gary got up and joined his friend, who proceeded to point out a cloud that had appeared just now since Gary hadn't seen it a minute ago. His friend strongly claimed that it looked like a dragon.

Gary smiled and muttered, "Nah, looks more like a phoenix."

Looking back, he didn't regret arguing with a stranger over the shape of a cloud. It gave him a refreshed look at how people saw the world around them. Sometimes you just need to step in their shoes—quite literally in the situation with Asher, he thought.

And maybe that's what today was really about.

After work, Asher was sitting on his porch, drinking warm chamomile tea, and reading his book, while occasionally looking up at the sky that was very clear except for the few stars scattered here and there. He was re-reading his little book on mythical creatures. He thought of his grandfather once explaining to him what a mythical creature even was. Young Asher didn't believe it at first. Why read about them if they don't exist? His grandfather had responded with "They can be real, you just need to imagine." Ever since, he had been reading books, exploring imaginary worlds that no one else knew about.

Focusing back onto the book in front of him, he started reading it page by page. Usually each creature would have three pages dedicated to it. A lot of folklore was mentioned there. He went through each and every creature in there, but there was no mention of a unicorn-pegasus hybrid creature. Sometimes the world doesn't fit perfectly into the pages of a book, he thought.

And maybe that was the whole point.