

The Boy Who Disappeared Clouds

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938–

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Jeremy's desk was at the left end of the fifth row. Alphabetical order had put him in precisely the desk he would have selected for himself, as far back as you could get without being in the last row. The last row was no good, because there were things you were called upon to do when you were in the last row. Sometimes papers were passed to the back of the room, for example, and the kids in the last row brought them forward to the teacher. In the fifth row you were spared all that.

And, because he was on the end, and the left end at that, he had the window to look out of. He looked out of it now, watching a car brake almost to a stop, then accelerate across the intersection. You were supposed to come to a full stop but

hardly anybody ever did, not unless there were other cars or a crossing guard around. They probably figured nobody was looking, he thought, and he liked the idea that they were unaware that he was watching them.

He sensed that Ms. Winspear had left her desk and turned to see her standing a third of the way up the aisle. He faced forward, paying attention, and when her eyes reached his he looked a little off to the left.

When she returned to the front of the room and wrote on the blackboard, he shifted in his seat and looked out the window again. A woman was being pulled down the street by a large black and white dog. Jeremy watched until they turned a corner and moved out of sight, watched another car not quite stop for the stop sign, then raised his eyes to watch a cloud floating free and untouched in the open blue sky.

„Lots of kids look out the window,“ Cory Buckman said. „Sometimes I’ll hear myself, standing in front of them and droning on and on, and I’ll wonder why they’re not all lined up at the windows with their noses pressed against the glass. Wouldn’t you rather watch paint dry than hear me explain quadratic equations?“

„I used to know how to solve quadratic equations,“ Janice Winspear said, „and now I’m not even sure what they are. I know lots of kids look out the window. Jeremy’s different.“

„How?“

„Oh, I don’t know.“ She took a sip of coffee, put her cup down. „You know what he is? He’s a nice quiet boy.“

„That has a ring to it. Page five of the *Daily News*: *He was always a nice quiet boy, the neighbors said. Nobody ever dreamed he would do something like this.* Is that the sort of thing you mean?“

„I don’t think he’s about to murder his parents in their beds, although I wouldn’t be surprised if he wanted to.“

„Oh?“

She nodded. „Jeremy’s the youngest of four children. The father drinks and beats his wife and the abuse gets passed on down the line, some of it verbal and some of it physical. Jeremy’s at the end of the line.“

„And he gets beaten?“

„He came to school in the fall with his wrist in a cast. He said he fell and it’s possible he did. But he fits the pattern of an abused child. And he doesn’t have anything to balance the lack of affection in the home.“

„How are his grades?“

„All right. He’s bright enough to get C’s and B’s without paying attention. He never raises his hand. When I call on him he knows the answer—*if* he knows the question.“

„How does he get along with the other kids?“

„They barely know he exists.“ She looked across the small table at Cory. „And that’s in the sixth grade. Next year he’ll be in junior high with classes twice the size of mine and a different teacher for every subject.“

„And three years after that he’ll be in senior high, where I can try teaching him quadratic equations. Unless he does something first to get himself locked up.“

„I’m not afraid he’ll get locked up, not really. I’m just afraid he’ll get lost.“

„How is he at sports?“

„Hopeless. The last one chosen for teams in gym class, and he doesn't stay around for after-school games.“

„I don't blame him. Any other interests? A stamp collection? A chemistry set?“

„I don't think he could get to have anything in that house,“ she said. „I had his older brothers in my class over the years and they were monsters.“

„Unlike our nice quiet boy.“

„That's right. If he had anything they'd take it away from him. Or smash it.“

„In that case,“ Cory said, „what you've got to give him is something nobody can take away. Why don't you teach him how to disappear clouds?“

„How to—?“

„Disappear clouds. Stare at them and make them disappear.“

„Oh?“ She arched an eyebrow. „You can do that?“

„Uh-huh. So can you, once you know how.“

„Cory—“

He glanced at the check, counted out money to cover it. „Really,“ he said. „There's nothing to it. Anybody can do it.“

„For a minute there,“ she said, „I thought you were serious.“

„About the clouds? Of course I was serious.“

„You can make clouds disappear.“

„And so can you.“

„By staring at them.“

„Uh-huh.“

„Well,“ she said, „let's see you do it.“

He looked up. „Wrong kind of clouds,“ he announced.

„Oh, right. It figures.“

„Have I ever lied to you? Those aren't individual clouds up there; that's just one big overcast mess blocking the sun.“

„That's why we need you to work your magic, sir.“

„Well, I'm only a journeyman magician. What you need are cumulus clouds, the puffy ones like balls of cotton. Not cumulonimbus, not the big rain clouds, and not the wispy cirrus clouds either, but the cumulus clouds.“

„I know what cumulus clouds look like,“ she said. „It's not like quadratic equations, it stays with you. When the sky is full of cumulus clouds, what will your excuse be? Wrong phase of the moon?“

„I suppose everyone tells you this,“ he said, „but you're beautiful when you're skeptical.“

She was sorting laundry when the phone rang. It was Cory Buckman. „Look out the window,“ he ordered. „Drop everything and look out the window.“

She was holding the receiver in one hand and a pair of tennis shorts in the other, and she looked out the window without dropping either. „It's still there,“ she reported.

„What's still there?“

„Everything's still there.“

„What did you see when you looked out the window?“

„The house across the street. A maple tree. My car.“

„Janice, it’s a beautiful day out there!“

„Oh. So it is.“

„I’ll pick you up in half an hour. We’re going on a picnic.“

„Oh, don’t I wish I could. I’ve got—“

„What?“

„Laundry to sort, and I have to do my lesson plans for the week.“

„Try to think in terms of crusty french bread, a good sharp cheese, a nice fruity zinfandel, and a flock of cumulus clouds overhead.“

„Which you will cause to disappear?“

„We’ll both make them disappear, and we’ll work much the same magic upon the bread and the cheese and the wine.“

„You said half an hour? Give me an hour.“

„Split the difference. Forty-five minutes.“

„Sold.“

„You see that cloud? The one that’s shaped like a camel?“

„More like a llama,“ she said.

„Watch.“

She watched the cloud, thinking that he was really very sweet and very attractive, and that he didn’t really need a lot of nonsense about disappearing clouds to lure her away from a Saturday afternoon of laundry and lesson plans. A grassy meadow, air fresh with spring, cows lowing off to the right, and—

A hole began to open in the center of the cloud. She stared, then glanced at him. His fine brow was tense, his mouth a thin line, his hands curled up into fists.

She looked at the cloud again. It was breaking up, collapsing into fragments.

„I don’t believe this,“ she said.

He didn’t reply. She watched, and the process of celestial disintegration continued. The hunks of cloud turned wispy and, even as she looked up at them, disappeared altogether. She turned to him, open-mouthed, and he sighed deeply and beamed at her.

„See?“ he said. „Nothing to it.“

„You cheated,“ she said.

„How?“

„You picked one you knew was going to disappear.“

„How would I go about doing that?“

„I don’t know. I’m not a meteorologist, I’m a sixth-grade teacher. Maybe you used math.“

„Logarithms,“ he said. „Cumulus clouds are powerless against logarithms. You pick one.“

„Huh?“

„You pick a cloud and I’ll disappear it. But it has to be the right sort of cloud.“

„Cumulus.“

„Uh-huh. And solitary—“

„Wandering lonely as a cloud, for instance.“

„Something like that. And not way off on the edge of the horizon. It doesn’t have to be directly overhead, but it shouldn’t be in the next county.“

She picked a cloud. He stared at it and it disappeared.

She gaped at him. „You really did it.“

„Well, I really stared at it and it really disappeared. You don't have to believe the two phenomena were connected.“

„You made it disappear.“

„If you say so.“

„Could you teach my nice quiet boy? Could you teach Jeremy?“

„Nope. I don't teach sixth graders.“

„But—“

„You teach him.“

„But I don't know how to do it!“

„So I'll teach you,“ he said. „Look, Jan, it's not as remarkable as you think it is. Anybody can do it. It's about the easiest ESP ability to develop. Pick a cloud.“

„You pick one for me.“

„All right. That one right there, shaped like a loaf of white bread.“

„Not like any loaf I ever saw.“ Why was she quibbling? „All right,“ she said. „I know which cloud you mean.“

„Now let me tell you what you're going to do. You're going to stare at it and focus on it, and you're going to send energy from your Third Eye chakra, that's right here—“ he touched his finger to a spot midway between her eyebrows „—and that energy is going to disperse the cloud. Take a couple of deep, deep breaths, in and out, and focus on the cloud, that's right, and talk to it in your mind. Say, *Disappear, disappear*. That's right, keep breathing, focus your energies—“

He kept talking to her and she stared at the loaf-shaped cloud. *Disappear*, she told it. She thought about energy, which she didn't believe in, flowing from her Third Eye whatsit, which she didn't have.

The cloud began to get thin in the middle. *Disappear*, she thought savagely, squinting at it, and a hole appeared. Her heart leaped with exultation.

„Look!“

„You got it now,“ he told her. „Keep on going. Put it out of its misery.“

When the cloud was gone (*gone!*) she sat for a moment staring at the spot in the sky where it had been, as if it might have left a hole there. „You did it,“ Cory said.

„Impossible.“

„Okay.“

„I couldn't have done that. You cheated, didn't you?“

„How?“

„You helped me. By sending your energies into the cloud or something. What's so funny?“

„You are. Five minutes ago you wouldn't believe that I could make clouds disappear, and now you figure I must have done this one, because otherwise you'd have to believe you did it, and you know it's impossible.“

„Well, it is.“

„If you say so.“

She poured a glass of wine, sipped at it. „Clearly impossible,“ she said. „I did it, didn't I?“

„Did you?“

„I don't know. Can I do another?“

„It's not up to me. They're not my clouds.“

„Can I do that one? It looks like—I don't know what it looks like. It looks like a cloud.“

„That's what it looks like, all right.“

„Well? Can I do the cloud-shaped one?“

She did, and caused it to vanish. This time she could tell that it was her energy that was making the cloud disperse. She could actually feel that something was happening, although she didn't know what it was and couldn't understand how it worked. She did a third cloud, dispatching it in short order, and when it fell to her withering gaze she felt a remarkable surge of triumph.

She also felt drained. „I've got a headache,“ she told Cory. „I suppose the sun and the wine would do it, but it doesn't feel like the usual sort of headache.“

„You're using some mental muscles for the first time,“ he explained. „They say we only use a small percentage of the brain. When we learn to use a new part, it's a strain.“

„So what I've got is brain fatigue.“

„A light case thereof.“

She cocked her head at him. „You think you know a person,“ she said archly, „and then you find he's got hitherto undreamt-of talents. What else can you do?“

„Oh, all sorts of things. Long division, for example. And I can make omelets.“

„What other occult powers have you got?“

„Thousands, I suppose, but that's the only one I've ever developed. Oh, and sometimes I know when a phone's about to ring, but not always.“

„When I'm in the tub,“ she said, „that's when my phone always rings. What a heavenly spot for a picnic, incidentally. And private, too. The ants didn't even find us here.“

She closed her eyes and he kissed her. *I have psychic powers*, she thought. *I knew you were going to do that.*

She said, „I'll bet you can make inhibitions disappear, too. Can't you?“

He nodded. „First your inhibitions,“ he said. „Then your clothes.“

The hardest part was waiting for the right sort of day. For a full week it rained. Then for two days the sky was bright and cloudless, and then it was utterly overcast. By the time the right sort of clouds were strewn across the afternoon sky, she had trouble trusting the memory of that Saturday afternoon. Had she really caused clouds to break up? Could she still do it? And could she teach her Jeremy, her nice quiet boy?

Toward the end of the last class period she walked to the rear of the room, moved over toward the windows. She had them writing an exercise in English composition, a paragraph on their favorite television program. They always loved to write about television, though not as much as they loved to watch it.

She watched over Jeremy's shoulder. His handwriting was very neat, very precise.

Softly she said, „I'd like you to stay for a few minutes after class, Jeremy.“ When he stiffened she added, „It's nothing to worry about.“

But of course he would worry, she thought, returning to the front of the room. There was no way to stop his worrying. No matter, she told herself. She was going

to give him a gift today, a gift of self-esteem that he badly needed. A few minutes of anxiety was a small price for such a gift.

And, when the room had cleared and the others had left, she went again to his desk. He looked up at her approach, not quite meeting her eyes. He had the sort of undefined pale countenance her southern relatives would call po-faced. But it was, she thought, a sweet face.

She crouched by the side of his desk. „Jeremy,“ she said, pointing, „do you see that cloud?“

He nodded.

„Oh, I don't know,“ she said, thinking aloud. „The glass might be a problem. You used to be able to open classroom windows, before everything got climate-controlled. Jeremy, come downstairs with me. I want to take you for a ride.“

„A ride?“

„In my car,“ she said. And when they reached her car, a thought struck her. „Your mother won't worry, will she? If you're a half hour or so late getting home?“

„No,“ he said. „Nobody'll worry.“

When she stopped the car, on a country road just past the northern belt of suburbs, the perfect cloud was hovering almost directly overhead. She opened the door for Jeremy and found a patch of soft grass for them both to sit on. „See that cloud?“ she said, pointing. „Just watch what happens to it.“

Sure, she thought. Nothing was going to happen and Jeremy was going to be convinced that his teacher was a certifiable madwoman. She breathed deeply, in and out, in and out. She stared hard at the center of the cloud and visualized her energy as a beam of white light running from her Third Eye chakra directly into the cloud's middle. *Disappear*, she thought. *Come on, you. Disappear.*

Nothing happened.

She thought, *Cory, damn you, if you set me up like this to make a fool of myself—* she pushed the thought aside and focused on the cloud. *Disappear, disappear—*

The cloud began to break up, crumbling into fragments. Relief flowed through her like an electric current. She set her jaw and concentrated, and in less than a minute not a trace of the cloud remained in the sky.

The other clouds around it were completely undisturbed.

She looked at Jeremy, whose expression was guarded. She asked him if he'd been watching the cloud. He said he had.

„What happened to it?“ she asked.

„It broke up,“ he said. „It disappeared.“

„I made it disappear,“ she said.

He didn't say anything.

„Oh, Jeremy,“ she said, taking his hand in both of hers, „Jeremy, it's easy! You can do it. You can make clouds disappear. I can teach you.“

„I—“

„I can teach you,“ she said.

„I think he's got a natural talent for it,“ she told Cory.

„Sure,“ he said. „Everybody does.“

„Well, maybe his strength is as the strength of ten because his heart is pure. Maybe he has the simple single-mindedness of a child. Whatever he’s got, the clouds of America aren’t safe with him on the loose.“

„Hmmm,“ he said.

„What’s the matter?“

„Nothing. I was just going to say not to expect miracles. You gave him a great gift, but that doesn’t mean he’s going to be elected class president or captain of the football team. He’ll still be a basically shy boy with a basically difficult situation at home and not too much going for him in the rest of the world. Maybe he can disappear clouds, but that doesn’t mean he can move mountains.“

„Killjoy.“

„I just—“

„He can do something rare and magical,“ she said, „and it’s his secret, and it’s something for him to cling to while he grows up and gets out of that horrible household. You should have seen his face when that very first cloud caved in and gave up the ghost. Cory, he looked transformed.“

„And he’s still a nice quiet boy?“

„He’s a lovely boy,“ she said.

The window glass was no problem.

She’d thought it might be, that was why they’d gone all the way out into the country, but it turned out the glass was no problem at all. Whatever it was that got the cloud, it went right through the glass the same way your vision did.

She was in the front of the room now, thrusting a pointer at the pulled down map of the world, pointing out the oil-producing nations. He turned and looked out the window.

The clouds were the wrong kind.

A tree surgeon’s pickup truck, its rear a jumble of sawn limbs, slowed almost to a stop, then moved on across the intersection. Jeremy looked down at the stop sign. A few days ago he’d spent most of math period trying to make the stop sign disappear, and there it was, same as ever, slowing the cars down but not quite bringing them to a halt. And that night he’d sat in his room trying to disappear a sneaker, and of course nothing had happened.

Because that wasn’t how it worked. You couldn’t take something and make it stop existing, any more than a magician could really make an object vanish. But clouds were masses of water vapor held together by—what? Some kind of energy, probably. And the energy that he sent out warred with the energy that held the water vapor particles together, and the particles went their separate ways, and that was the end of the cloud. The particles still existed but they were no longer gathered into a cloud.

So you couldn’t make a rock disappear. Maybe, just maybe, if you got yourself tuned just right, you could make a rock crumble into a little pile of dust. He hadn’t been able to manage that yet, and he didn’t know if it was really possible, but he could see how it might be.

In the front of the room Ms. Winspear indicated oil-producing regions of the United States. She talked about the extraction of oil from shale, and he smiled at

the mental picture of a rock crumbling to dust, with a little stream of oil flowing from it.

He looked out the window again. One of the bushes in the foundation planting across the street had dropped its leaves. The bushes on either side of it looked healthy, but the leaves of the one bush had turned yellow and fallen overnight.

Two days ago he'd looked long and hard at that bush. He wondered if it was dead, or if it had just sickened and lost its leaves. Maybe that was it, maybe they would grow back.

He rubbed his wrist. It had been out of the cast for months, it never bothered him, but in the past few days it had been hurting him some. As if he was feeling pain now that he hadn't allowed himself to feel when the wrist broke.

He was starting to feel all sorts of things.

Ms. Winspear asked a question, something about oil imports, and a hand went up in the fourth row. Of course, he thought. Tracy Morrow's hand always went up. She always knew the answer and she always raised her hand, the little snot.

For a moment the strength of his feeling surprised him. Then he took two deep breaths, in and out, in and out, and stared hard at the back of Tracy's head.

Just to see.

