

Climbing on the Clouds

*"It's the place where the clouds meet the desert sand
It's the place where my heart longs to see
Its the place where my spirit is forever free
I am going to climb on the clouds."*

2023

I sat at the dining room table watching Kareem playing on the floor in front of me. He is a rambunctious four-year-old with a vivid imagination that always amazes me. I closed my eyes just for a minute, and the time of my own childhood came rushing back to my mind.

1981

I tsked my lips and wrinkled my brows wishing I had some water or better yet sweet milk from Ummi. I had been walking for some time. It might have been ten minutes or perhaps two hours. To one so young, time loses relevance. I looked down at the desert floor to see the tiny footprints of a four-year-old disappearing as soon as they were made. I smiled and continued my journey.

"I'm coming. I'm coming," I exclaimed, loud enough that anyone in earshot would wonder who I was talking to. Who indeed? But— I proceeded on through the desert sand – my quest seemingly within reach.

I was a curious child with a rich imagination. This vivid memory started when I was looking at the sky from our front door. There was limitless sand with no houses in front of me. For as far as my vision could see, there was nothing ahead but a clear blue sky that seemed never-ending. I thought there was an area ahead where the sky would meet the earth. So, I went on an adventure to find it.

My plan was that once I found where the sky and earth collided, I would climb onto the clouds. I would use those clouds as my own personal passageway. A passageway to where? Perhaps one to wherever my young mind's eye might take me. My wild imagination had no limits. Of course, I didn't think through how I would ever exit the clouds. I certainly never considered getting lost and never seeing my family again.

I started walking, looking for that area where the sky and earth meet. I don't remember how far I walked or for how long. Fortunately, some farmers from a nearby village were passing by on their donkeys and saw me wandering in the desert and stopped me.

"Little one... where are you going?" one of the farmers asked. I just pointed off into the distance, smiled and said nothing.

“But, you have no water. The desert is not a kind master, child. Where do you come from?” I just pointed back towards the city.

Finally, I spoke, “I’m going there where the blue sky meets the sand. When I get there, I’ll climb onto the clouds. I’ll ride them across the sky.”

At the age of four, I had no idea of the dangers of walking alone in the desert could have brought to me. I smiled sweetly as if being alone in the desert was the most normal thing for a four year old to be doing. I folded my arms, extended my chest with pride and gave them a confident look – one way beyond my years. The farmers gave a knowing laugh and just shook their heads.

“Who is your father child?” one asked as he reached out his large, calloused hand and took mine firmly but gently.

“My father is Elhakeem,” I said, sticking out my little chest with great pride. The villagers adored my father whom they deemed “Elhakeem” which translates to “Doctor” in Arabic and also means “the wise man”. In reality, he was the equivalent of a Physician’s Assistant, a well educated medical person who was critical to the survival of the people of this outlying area. The farmers were kind men who took me back home on their donkey. When I reached home my father opened the door and asked, “Hagir, where have you been?”

He breathed a sign of relief when he was assured I had not been hurt. The kind farmer did his best to explain to my father where he found me.

“Elhakeem, perhaps she can explain it better, but I found her wandering several kilometers out in the desert west of the city. You have quite the child here. She told us that she wants to find the place where the sky meets the sand. She told us she was going to go climbing *on the clouds.*”

My father chuckled and thanked the farmer, told him he owed him a favor that would be repaid, and sent him on his way. He looked at me and smiled. My father was a gentleman who never laid a hand on any of his thirteen children. I was the youngest and to his account the most imaginative.

“So, I can’t climb on the clouds?” Why?” I asked with the innocence of a four-year-old.

He took me by the hand and brought me to my mother, knowing that she would also have gentle words for me. With my eyes still closed, I can still hear his gentle voice.

“Come little one; perhaps your mother can explain it better.”

He gathered me in his arms and carried me into the kitchen where my mother nervously waited for the return of her youngest, most adventurous child.

“Buthina, here is your runaway baby, home again from another adventure,” he said, laughing and handing me over to my mother.

“Child, what have you done now?” she asked, with tears pooling in her warm eyes. She took me from my father’s arms and tenderly kissing me on the forehead.

“This little one was out chasing the clouds,” my father told my mother, wiping the tears from his wife’s eyes. For years to come my parents would talk about this day; reminding me that

the world was full of things that could bring me harm. Never once did they tell me not to venture into the world. I was taught to be fearless.

This was the day of my calling as a future rebel for the cause. A true rebel has to move through the world without fear. Fear will cause you to second-guess yourself. It will hold you back and make you hesitant. Fear will make you believe the cause is not worth the fight. It was funny how I instinctively knew I would come back unharmed that day. I think my parents realized they were raising a child with a spirit that could never be harnessed.

*Unharness me, let me be free
there are no restraints that keep me
riding on a cloud, seeing the world
soaring beneath me and calling to be free*