

Cloud-Stained Jeans

The back screen door slams an hour before Mom would even care he'd gone. The day can't start quick enough because it won't last long enough. There's only two days left before school starts and Mark's got a long way ta' go.

There he is, flying down Fulton Street. See him? On his brother's old BMX tilting it back and forth between his knees to the rhythm of his sneaks. Speed waters his eyes and tousles his dirt-curl'd hair, his favorite laundry-faded t-shirt ripples across his thin frame and a pair of frayed grass-stained jeans completes a picture eight years in the making.

Eight years crush into eight seconds as he jukes between two on-coming cars, and then with a quick handle-bar yank, he's over the curb, past the log fence and down the hill into the playground. The angry car horns fade behind him as he stands high on pedals, tracking a silvery line in the grass as he glides toward a lone swing set.

Ditching the bike with a spoke spinning rattle, Mark goes to work on the center swing.

Stepping back he pulls the chain taut and along with kicked wood-chips swings toward the sky until the ground snatches at him, dragging him down and backward, but with kid-instincts, he tucks himself into the rubber-jack pressed into his back pockets until the ground loses its grip and once again he's tilting away to vertical reaching to scrape the sky.

Skyscrapers.

It was bad, that last yelling. Mark hadn't realized how bad it was until the next morning when he went to brush his teeth and found Dad's razor was gone, taken with him to the skyscrapers, leaving Mom crying in their wrecked bedroom. Dad lives hours away now, 'cept for one weekend a month, some months, not last month, or the month before, or all a' summer, really. Birthdays don't count. His brother says Dad's a douche bag. He wouldn't say that in front a' Dad, but he says it in front a' Mom all the time and doesn't get in trouble for it. Douche bag. Douche bag.

Skyscrapers, hundreds of 'em, lined up, one after the other, like an army, Dad's supposed to take Mark to see 'em. He'd said so, "One of these weekends." But there's only a few days left in summer to do it so that's not gonna' happen.

He hangs suspended between cloud and grass, then comes the fall, so Mark tucks.

Can you imagine clouds gettin' scraped by buildings? Wonder what it sounds like? What it looks like? There's Dad sittin' at his big desk, in front of a big ol' window. Just watching clouds scrape on by. Does he even look? He's probably too busy.

Higher, higher! The ground rushes passed his head, brushing his hair as he leans straight back into it, his feet pointing up to the clouds inches away.

Up there, beyond Dad's window, the clouds tearing on skyscrapers' like thorns on jeans. Wonder if it hurts? Wonder if someone's gonna get yelled; coming home, all torn up like that, needin' a Band-ade for sure, and Mom needin' ta' buy an ironing patch for the hole? Someone oughta' be more careful. I'm so disappointed in you.

But Dad's too busy workin' ta care, right? He doesn't give a douche about the sky scraping by his window. What it looks like, or if it hurts.

And he won't see Mark flyin'. Stupid, jerk, dumb, stupid, higher!

Mark's sneaker scuffs something...but the sky falls away, so he tucks. So close. Press and kick. Stretch out. Come on!

His stupid Dad, jerk Dad, sittin' there scrapin' the clouds, doing stupid work. Not lookin' out the window. Not carin' about nothin'.

Again Mark's feet hit something, like a sheet billowing on a clothesline.

Just sit there, Dad. Do your jerk-work. You can't get away long enough to see Mark out here, pushin', reachin'.

Scraping, tearing, his foot punches through the clouds, jean cuffs soaked through as Mark loses a sneaker to the white, and then he falls away once more in a tuck.

Look, Dad. Look out your window! Do you see it? Do you a sneaker up there in the clouds? Do ya' even care, stupid?

Come on, let go!

Mark pulls hard against the chains, and he's up again, up, through, into the white!

There he is, flying across the clouds. See him? Up among the skyscrapers? Tilting back and forth to the rhythm of a swing? Tears fall from his eyes while the wind tortures his hair. His favorite T rippling across his frame while his frayed cloud-stained jeans complete a picture eight years in the making.

Eight years crush into eight seconds, but Dad isn't looking as the ground reaches up to snatch Mark. He doesn't care when his son let's go instead of tucking into the rubber-jack.

The empty swing dances in its chains, an empty sneaker lands among wood-chips, and Mark lands on the ditched bike, falling among the handlebars with a spoke splintering rattle.