

Rilke Thimble Story

How the Thimble Came to be God

When I stepped away from the window, the evening clouds were still there. They seemed to be waiting. Should I tell them the story too? I proposed it and they didn't even hear me. To make myself understood and to diminish the distance between us, I called out: "I am an evening cloud too." They stopped still, evidently taking a good look at me and they stretched toward me, their fine transparent rosy wings. That is how evening clouds greet each other. They had recognized me.

"We are lying over the earth," they explained, "more exact, over Europe. And you?" I hesitated.

"There's a country here...."

"What does it look like?" they inquired.

"Well, I replied, "twilight with things."

"Europe's like that too." Laughed a young girl-cloud.

"Possibly," I said, "but I have always heard that the things in Europe are dead."

"Yes, of course," said another cloud scornfully. "What nonsense that would be—living things!"

"All the same," I insisted, "mine are alive. So that's the difference. They can become various things, and one that comes into the world as a pencil or a stove, it does not have to despair of getting beyond that. A pencil might become a stick or, if all goes well, a mast, a stove, or at least a city gate."

"You seem quite a simple-minded evening cloud to me," said the young cloud that had expressed itself in such an unrestrained manner earlier on. An elder cloud, fearing that it might have offended me, tried to smooth things over:

"There are all kinds of countries, very different from one another. I once found myself over a small German principality, and to this day I still don't believe it was part of Europe." I thanked him and said, "I see that we're not going to have an easy time agreeing on this. With your permission, I'll simply tell you what I have been seeing beneath me recently; that will probably be the best way."

"Please do," agreed the wise old man-cloud in the name of all the rest.

I began: "People are in a room. I am fairly high up, you must know, and as a result of this they look like children to me. For that reason, I would prefer simply to say "children." So then, there are some children in a room. Two, five, six, seven children. It would take too long to ask them their names. Besides, they seem to be having an earnest discussion, so there's a good chance that a name or two will be given away in the course of it. They must have been at it for some time already, for the eldest (I observe that they all him Hans) is saying in a tone of finality:

'No it certainly cannot remain like this. I have heard that parents used always to tell their children stories in the evening—or at least on evenings when they had been good—till they went to sleep. Does anything like that happen now?' A short pause, then Hans answered himself: 'It doesn't happen, anywhere, I for my part—and also because I'm fairly grown up—would gladly let them off those few wretched dragons that would bother them so, but still, they should by rights tell us thee are fairies, brownies, princes, and monsters.'

'I have an aunt,' a little girl remarked, and she sometimes tells me...'

'Oh, go on,' Hans cut her off, 'aunts don't count, they tell lies.' The whole assembly was much taken aback by this bold, but uncontradicted assertion. Hans went on: 'Besides, we are above all concerned with our parents, for it is their duty, in a way, to instruct us in these matters; others do it more out of kindness, we can't expect it of them. But just listen now: what do our parents do? They go around with cross, annoyed faces, nothing suits them, they shout and scold and yet they are really do indifferent that if the world came to an end they would hardly notice it. They have something which they call "Ideals." Perhaps those are some sort of small children that may never be left alone and that make a lot of trouble; but then they shouldn't have had us! Well, I think it's like this, children: that our parents neglect us is sad, certainly. But we would put up with that if it were not a sign that grown-ups generally are growing stupider, deteriorating, if one may say so. We cannot hinder their decline; for all day long we cannot exert any influence on them, and when we come home late from school, nobody will expect us to sit down and try to get them interested in something sensible. And it really does hurt when one has been sitting and sitting under the lamp and Mother cannot even understand the Pythagorean proposition. Well, that's how it is. So the grown-ups will be growing stupider and stupider...no matter: what can we lose by it? Culture? They take off their hats to each other, but if a bald spot comes to light, they laugh. Anyhow, they're always laughing. If we hadn't sense enough to cry now and then, eve these matters would get entirely out of balance. And they're so arrogant: they even declare that the Emperor is a grown-up. I've read in the newspapers that the King of Spain is a child, and it's the same with all the kings and emperors—don't let them talk you into anything! But apart from everything superfluous they've got, the grown-ups have something that most certainly cannot be indifferent to us—I mean, God. I've not seen him with any one of them yet—but that's just what looks suspicious. It has occurred to me that in their distraction and fuss and haste they may have lost him somewhere. But he is something absolutely necessary. There are various things that can't happen without Him. The sun can't rise, children can't be born, and also there would be an end to bread. Even though it comes out at the baker's, it's the dear Lord who turns the big millstones. Many reasons can easily be found why the dear Lord is something indispensable. But this much is sure: the grownups don't look after Him, so we children have to do it. Listen to the plan I've worked out. There are exactly seven of his

children. Each one of us must carry God with us for one day; then He will be with us the whole week and we'll always know where He is at a given moment."

Here an awkward problem emerged. How could this be done? Was it possible to pick up God in one's hands or stick Him in one's pocket? In this connection, one of the little ones recounted: "I was alone in my room. A little lamp was burning near me, and I was sitting in bed saying my evening prayer—very loudly. Something moved in my joined hands. It was soft and warm like a little bird. I couldn't open my hands, because the prayer wasn't over yet. But I was very curious and prayed terribly fast. Then when I got to 'amen' I went like this"—the little boy stretched out his hands and spread his fingers—"but there was nothing there."

This they could all imagine. And even Hans didn't know what to do. Everybody looked at him. And all at once he said, "This is really dumb. Anything could be God. You just have to tell it." He turned to a red-haired boy standing next to him. "It can't be an animal. It would run away. But a thing, you see, will stand still. You come into the room day or night, and it's always there. That could be God." Little by little the others were convinced. "But we need a small object that you can carry around everywhere with you. Otherwise the whole thing doesn't make sense. So empty all your pockets."

Only very odd things appeared: scraps of paper, pen knives, erasers, feathers, lengths of string, small stones, screws, whistles, wood shavings, and much else that couldn't be recognized at a distance or that I don't have a name for. And all these things lay in the children's shallow palms as though terrified at the sudden possibility of becoming God, but those among them that were able to shine, a little bit shone, so that they might find favor with Hans. The choice hung in the balance for a long time. Finally, in little Resi's possession was found a thimble, which she had once taken from her mother. It was bright as though made from silver, and because of its beauty, it became God. Hans himself took it, for he was the first in line, and the whole day the children followed him around and were proud of him. It was not easy to agree who would have it the next day, so Hans judiciously then and there set up the schedule for the whole week, so that there would be no disputes.

On the whole, this arrangement proved to be quite practical. It could be seen at first glance who had God at any moment, for the child in question walked in a somewhat more stiff and formal fashion and had the kind of expression on his or her face hitherto reserved for Sundays. The first three days the children spoke of nothing else. At every moment one of them was asking to see God, and though the thimble had not changed at all under the influence of its great prestige, the thimbleness of it now seemed to be only a humble covering over its true form.

Everything proceeded according to plan. On Wednesday, Paul had it, on Thursday, little Anna. Saturday came. The children were playing catch and tumbling about breathlessly

when Hans cried, "Who has God" Everybody stood up. Everyone looked at everyone else. Nobody remembered seeing Him for two days. Hans counted out whose turn it was, and it came out to be little Mary. And then everyone unceremoniously demanded God from little Mary. What to do? The little girl scratched around in her pockets. Now at last she remembered that she had received Him in the morning; but now H was gone. Probably she had lost Him here while playing.

And when the children went home, the little girl remained behind in the meadow and kept looking. The grass was rather high. Twice people came by and asked what she had lost. Each time the child answered, "A thimble," and continued her search. The people helped her look for a while, but soon got tired of bending over, and one of them called to her as she was leaving. "You're better off going home, you can buy a new one." But little Mary kept looking.

The meadow became more and more alien as the dusk fell, and the grass began to get wet. Then another man came. He bent over the child and asked, "What are you looking for?" Now little Mary, who was not far from tears, answered bravely and defiantly, "God."

The stranger smiled and simply took her by the hand, and she let herself be led along as though everything was now fine. As they were walking alone, the strange man said, "Now look what a pretty thimble I found today."

The evening clouds had long since become impatient. Now the wise elder cloud, who had become fat in the meantime, turned to me and said:

"Excuse me, but may I not hear the name of the country over which you –"but the other clouds ran off laughing into the sky and dragged the old man cloud after them.