

Elon's Sky

(A short story by Kevin Goczeski)

Elon strode through the scruffy rubble of the vacant lot next door, occasionally slowing to pick his way more carefully through a tangle of weeds or a scattered pile of broken concrete. He sat down on a large rock at the edge of the old creek bed. His feet, clad in ragged, untied brown shoes, dangled onto the compacted reddish-grey soil where a cool stream once flowed. Peering up at the torpid, rust-colored monotony of clouds languidly passing overhead, Elon let out a deep sigh. Thunder rolled all around him in the muffled distance, as always, but nothing seemed to be nearby. Elon frowned. He decided to wait awhile, since you never knew when a storm might spin up. His vigil was soon interrupted, however, by his grandfather's shouts.

"Elon! Come quickly! I'm afraid I need some help!"

Elon leaped off the rock and dashed into the house. Inside, Elon's grandfather explained that he might have accidentally turned off the filtration and ventilation system. He was 79 years old, and he struggled to operate many of the house's features, especially if there was any holographic input involved. Elon grimaced as he looked at the display hovering above the counter.

"Wow, you're right, Grandpa. No filtration, no ventilation, no enzymatic disposal. Hmm. I wonder how you did that." Elon touched the hovering display and made a few waving motions with his hand. Then he waved his hand just above the counter to bring up the holographic keypad.

"I tried to do that!" Grandpa objected. "But it doesn't work for me!"

"That's because you're waving too slowly, Grandpa." Elon's back was turned as he worked, so he rolled his eyes deeply. He must have demonstrated the hand-waving move a dozen times or more, already.

In a few moments, Elon stepped back from the keyboard. "OK, Grandpa. That will do it. Good thing we got it going again before dust gets in, and before mom gets home."

"Our little secret," said Grandpa, as he winked at Elon and smiled.

"Our secret," said Elon. He stood there for a moment, apparently immersed in thought.

"Anything I can help you with?" asked Grandpa.

"Yes," said Elon. "I have a question."

"OK," said Grandpa. "Let's hear it."

"Is it true that the sky used to be blue?"

Grandpa's face shifted and took on a somber, almost grave expression. He put his hand to his chin as he considered the question. "Yes, Elon. As a matter of fact, the sky was blue, many years before you were born."

Elon already knew the sky was blue, in the past, but he was using that as a pretext for his follow-up question. "Then is it true that you can see the blue, just for a moment, if you look up into the sky after a lightning bolt hits nearby?"

Grandpa turned to face Elon, putting his hands on Elon's shoulders. "Elon, listen to me. Do not go chasing lightning bolts to see the blue sky. That is a very dangerous thing to do; we've had three people from our own little town killed by lightning in just the last five years."

"But they were out in the fields."

"What does it matter if they were out in the fields, or just out sitting on a rock waiting for it? The lightning is far too powerful these days, Elon. Plus, you cannot see the blue sky after a lightning bolt-- even for a moment. Many studies have clearly proven that. It is a viral myth, Elon. You know we are supposed to be indoors when it is lightning outside."

"But a lot of people watch for the bolts," said Elon.

"They are fools, looking to get themselves killed, for nothing! It is just stupidity!" Grandpa was putting a cup back into a cabinet as he spoke, and since his back was turned, he rolled his eyes deeply as he shut the cabinet door a little more forcefully than was needed. "Just pure stupidity!"

"But how did it all start, Grandpa? The red sky."

"Don't you know the story, Elon? Why do you think your mom and dad named you Elon?"

"They named me after the man who saved the world."

"That's right, Elon."

"But people also say he is to blame for the red sky."

Grandpa locked eyes, quite seriously, with his young grandchild. "I would not use the word 'blame', Elon. He did what he had to do. And he was paid for it; his heirs are still being paid for it. If it wasn't for that red sky, none of us would probably be here today. That red sky saved us from our fool selves."

"Why do you never want to talk about what the sky was like when you were little?"

"What do you mean, Elon? I talk about it."

"But you never talk about what it was like to see the blue sky. Was it as blue as you see in the pictures? And what was it like to see the moon back then? And to see the stars, was that true? Could you really see so many stars, like the pictures?" Elon peered up at his grandfather for a long moment, without blinking, and innocently delivered his final question. "People say it was like heaven. Is that true, Grandpa?"

Chapter Two

Grandpa took a deep breath and thought about Elon's question. With shaky hands, he poured himself a cup of reclaimed water. Pulling up a chair and sitting down at the table, he motioned for Elon to join him. "Water, Elon?"

Elon was not a big fan of the reclaimed water. It had a funny taste, although Mom always said it tasted fine and was the purest water, and that is what they should always drink. "No thanks, Grandpa."

Grandpa nodded in understanding. "It isn't easy to describe what the blue sky was like, Elon. From horizon to horizon, it was the most glorious, beautiful blue sky you could possibly imagine, even prettier than any picture of it you've ever seen. A warm, bright yellow sun would be shining, and there might be some fluffy, cottony clouds drifting along, like pure white puffballs floating peacefully on a crystal blue sea. Back then, you'd see birds of all kinds-- maybe even an entire flock of them. And there'd be airplanes and drones, of course. Plenty of drones. Of course, we still have those." He paused to take a sip of his reclaimed water. "I'm telling you, Elon, the sky seemed like it stretched out into infinity, far overhead and in every direction; you didn't have that closed off feeling like you do with this new sky." Even though the sky had been impenetrably red for nearly 60 years now, Grandpa still referred to it as a "new sky."

"Go on, Grandpa. What about the moon?"

"Well, in its own way, the moon was just as beautiful as the blue sky was, Elon. The crescent moon was like a delicate ivory sculpture dangling up there—it almost looked like it could break if it got hit by something. When the moon was larger, it cast the most amazing pale, ghostly light onto the Earth. The full moon on a cloudless night was always very romantic."

"What does 'romantic' mean?"

"It means it makes people happy and makes them feel good."

"I wish I could have seen the moon like that, with my own eyes-- not just from pictures taken by telescopes."

"I wish you could have also, Elon. And did you know the moon was also visible in the daytime?"

"Is that true?"

"Well, of course it is. How else could it be?"

"I don't know. I've just never seen a daytime picture of the moon, I don't think. Why did people say there was a man in the moon, Grandpa?"

Grandpa chuckled at that. "Well, when you looked at the moon when it was full or almost full, some of the features looked almost like a giant face, so old-time people said there must be a man in the moon. Seems silly, but that's what they believed back then."

"You could see different features on the moon? Like in the pictures?"

"Oh, yes, certainly."

"Wow." Elon whistled. That detail seemed to impress him very much. "What about the stars, Grandpa?"

"I remember, when I was about your age, we went on a family vacation way up North, and every cloudless night we would go down by the lakefront just to look up at the stars. I had never seen so many before; the sky was one vast, shimmering blanket of stars, like an endless field of the brightest diamonds overhead. Just spectacular, Elon. The Milky Way cut right through the middle of the sky like a giant puddle of milk, and the stars were packed so closely together that you could hardly separate one from another."

"Were there hundreds?"

"Millions, Elon. Millions of stars. There was no way to count them all, even if you stood there all night. And there were a lot of satellites, each moving across the sky in a straight line, like a little moving star."

"That sounds amazing."

"It was. It sure was, Elon. And even our own star, the sun, was something to behold. When I was very young, sometimes the smoke would clear away for a day or so in the summer, and that wonderful, gorgeous sun would come shining through and just make everyone feel so happy. I remember laying in the cool grass, enjoying the warm sun on my face, watching the clouds, and feeling like I never wanted that day to end." Elon's grandpa paused to put his empty cup on the counter. "But after the 'Firegeddon Summer' of 2053, I don't know if I ever saw the sun come out in the summer again. The fires were everywhere, it seemed, from early spring through mid-winter, and so was the smoke. I grew up with a grey, smoky sky, for the most part. But at least I do remember what a blue sky was like."

Chapter Three

"Do you remember when the sky first turned red, Grandpa?"

"Well, after the Firegeddon Summer, things just got worse and worse. Our family had to pick up and move, just to get closer to drinking water and reliable electricity. Travel was difficult, too. The power grid troubles made it hard to keep your car charged, and a lot of bridges and roads were closed due to the floods and fires. Also, the airlines had to ground a lot of their planes because of their greenhouse gas emissions. But probably the hardest thing was avoiding the space industry protests. It seemed like the protesters were everywhere. I remember we had to stay in our car for almost an entire day, once, because we accidentally got trapped by a protest when we were trying to find some breakfast."

"Why were people so angry about space travel?"

"Well, here on Earth, Elon, we were all making concessions. We could only run the air conditioning at certain times, run the water at certain times, and charge our cars at certain times or in certain locations. Flying became something only for the very rich. Traveling for vacation became mostly a thing of the past for most folks. Meanwhile, the rockets kept blasting off, taking more and more tourists to Mars. It felt like they were escaping Earth for a better place, taking fancy vacations in space, while their escape vehicles spewed out so much greenhouse gas that each additional trip to Mars only made Earth even

hotter and even more unlivable for the rest of us who were stuck behind. It was seen as particularly wasteful since the primary revenue generators on Mars were tourism and pigment mining.”

“Pigment mining for ‘Mars Red?’”

“That’s right, Elon. That’s where ‘Mars Red’ comes from. Most of the money being made on Mars, other than by the tourist industry, was by collecting ferric oxides from the surface to make pigments. They copyrighted the Mars Red color, which is just rust, basically, and they started shipping it back to Earth in massive amounts. With all the publicity, it became very popular, and before you know it, half the new cars being sold were Mars Red. The big new home redecorating color was Mars Red. It seemed like everybody was wearing Mars Red clothing, hats, boots, hair, you name it. And it is still that way. Look at the color of your own home. And look at Mars City—every street and almost every single building there is Mars Red.”

“And isn’t that how Mars lost most of its red color? Other than Mars City, I mean.”

“Well, yes, that was how it all began. But meanwhile, the Earth was heating up more and more, and people were struggling like they hadn’t struggled for generations. A lot of those people didn’t appreciate all the greenhouse gases being emitted in the name of red pigments and luxury vacations.”

“So, then what happened, Grandpa?”

“By 2056 or so, things had reached a boiling point. Launch facilities were surrounded by angry mobs, and governments all over the world were demanding a stop to all unnecessary spaceflights. And that’s when your namesake, Elon, made his grand bargain to the people of Earth.”

“The red sky.”

“That’s right. You see, Elon knew that the Earth was not able to cool down properly at night, due to the insulating blanket of gases we pumped into the atmosphere for centuries. That meant the only other option was to somehow reduce the amount of sunlight entering our troposphere. Some folks had suggested injecting dust into the stratosphere above, to directly block the sun, but there was no easy or inexpensive way to do it. That’s when Elon had his famous news conference when he suggested that collecting dust from the surface of Mars and injecting it into our stratosphere could save the Earth.”

“And he was right, wasn’t he, Grandpa?”

“Yes, I suppose he was. Within three and a half years of that news conference, the first dust transport mission injected its load into the Earth’s stratosphere. Within a few decades, enough Mars dust was pumped into our stratosphere that global temperatures began to moderate. But there were downsides.”

“Like no longer having a blue sky?”

“Well, yes, that. But also, nobody had realized that the ferric oxides in the dust would have such a dramatic effect on the dynamics of thunderstorms. As Mars dust settled out of the stratosphere and made its way down into the troposphere, meteorologists noticed that lightning increased dramatically in power and frequency, while rain amounts decreased significantly. At first, decreased rain seemed like a good thing, because floods were such a problem before, even while other areas went dry. But as time went by, we switched from struggling with chronic fires and floods to struggling with even more fires,

but less floods. Eventually, though, enough forests burned that the frequency and size of the mega-fires began to reduce. By about 2090, I'd say, it seemed like things finally reached a bit of an equilibrium."

"We live in an area that was already burned."

"That's right. The only safe places to live are very far away from any major fuel sources, like forests. That's why your parents moved out here. Plus, to be closer to water access."

Elon stood up, walked over to Grandpa's used cup, and placed it in the sanitizer. "Mom will be home soon, Grandpa."

"She doesn't like dishes on the counter, does she?"

"No, she doesn't."

"Thanks, Elon. We don't need your mom stressed out even more than she already is."

"Grandpa?"

"Yes, Elon?"

"Do you think the old stream will ever have water in it again?"

"I do think it is possible, Elon. If we can bring down the temperatures enough to start reducing the amount of dust we're putting into the stratosphere, maybe the rain and snow will increase, the forests will come back, and the stream will run again. I think you might even see fish swimming in that stream, someday."

"Fish! Do you really think so?"

"Well, just three or four decades ago, that was a healthy trout stream. I'm sure fish would come back, given a chance."

Elon sat back down and smiled at the thought. "Maybe by the time I am your age, Grandpa, the sky will be sunny and blue again, and I will sit on that big rock, dipping my toes into the cool stream as I fish for trout. Then I will come out in the night to see all the stars, like millions of diamonds."

His grandpa smiled back. "That sounds like heaven, Elon. Just like heaven."