A Kingdom in the Clouds

This essay describes my life in Eureka, CA. and how that experience taught me to be creative and use my imagination.
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The early years of my childhood were spent in Eureka, California: a small rural town of redwood trees, run-down homes, and raging tree-huggers. It was beautiful there – in Humboldt County on the northern California coast, with breathtaking beaches and forests – but that beauty had a way of attracting some interesting people. As a child, I distinctly remember the rusted 1988 Toyota Corolla that drove around town, its surface dominated by hundreds of plastic dinosaur toys. I had neighbors who smoked marijuana and gardened naked, and who genuinely believed eating meat was a more severe crime than using psychedelic drugs. Dreadlocks, beads, and tie-dye shirts had been in style since the 1960s.

My family never quite fit into the free-spirited community of Eureka. My father was a youth pastor, while most Eureka residents shuddered at the thought of organized religion. My older brother and I were raised by my mother, who managed our home. That house leapt out against the overgrown yards and degenerate shacks of our neighbors, just as my family did in the nonconformist Humboldt county culture. It was a cramped but quaint home on Sunny Avenue, though on most days the sun was choked out by a blanket of thick fog. The baby blue paint and stark white trim were blatantly obvious against the cracking, colorless paint of those houses next to ours.

I have many fond memories of that house on Sunny Avenue, but none are as significant as the ones I created in my backyard. In the few short months of summer, when the fog burned away to reveal the gentle rays of sun that seemed to caress my skin, that yard became my home, my kingdom, my domain. There, blossoming apple trees cast jagged shadows in the tall, uneven
grasses, defended by unpainted wooden fences on the right and left and by a dense forest of deeply rooted redwood trees in the back, whose tops pierced the sky like vigilant watchtowers. At its center was my most guarded treasure: a giant trampoline, four feet tall and as wide as my imagination could make it. My brother and I would spend hours on that rickety trampoline, pretending to be Jedi Knights or superheroes as we bravely fought against the overwhelming forces of evil. However, there were days when we would simply lie there, staring at the bright blue sky, as the smells of apple blossoms, mildew, and freshly cut grass filled our noses. There, on our backs, as the outstretched branches of apple trees danced in the corners of our vision, we would watch the clouds meander through the sky, describing what we saw to each other. We could see anything in that endless sky, my brother and I, the kings in a land of our own imaginations.

Sometimes, these memories seem like nothing more than that; I was only five when my family moved from Eureka to the flourishing LA suburb of Santa Clarita, a mysterious land of sweltering heat, big businesses, crowded streets, golf courses, and master-planned communities. It’s been eleven years since I lived in that house on Sunny Avenue. I am now in twelfth grade, drowning in a frantic world of homework assignments, Eagle Scout requirements, and college applications. My brother has just started college in San Diego. Nowadays, I usually feel that relaxation is a thing of the past. But I remember one time on my school campus, when my brain was bursting at the seams faced with the mounting stress of choosing a college major, I decided to lie down in the grass for a moment of rest. As I lay there, surrounded by chaos, I stared up and saw a single cloud, wandering through the empty expanse of the bright blue sky, shaped like a crown. Suddenly my mind returned to the memory of my childhood backyard, to lying on that old trampoline, watching the sky, in my kingdom. As I watched, the wind began to twist the faint
cloud, until its original shape could no longer be recognized. I thought of how my own situation had changed, how I had traded my own crown for a life of slavery to anxiety and expectations. In that moment, lying in the cool grass on my school campus, I decided that I wanted my kingdom back. Change is inevitable, but no matter where I go, I have the power to maintain control, and I aspire to do so in every situation. My life is a kingdom of my imagination, and I am the king.