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Head in the Clouds

by Casey Reiland



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She arrived in this world bald and slick as a cherry pit. That is to say, she was like any other baby. Ten fingers, ten toes, normal to any obstetrician who might peek in her crib.

Later, her parents would wonder if they had done something wrong, perhaps encouraged her to pretend too much. But it didn't matter. They scrubbed their five-year-old daughter's scalp, took scissors to her corkscrew ringlets, but the abnormality was still there. A bit of white fluff, cool and misty, resting just above the top of her ears.

Their pediatrician examined the fluff, which had spread into a ring of cotton throughout her head. He told her parents that she had her head in the clouds. “I see this often,” he said. “She’ll grow out of it. But for now, it’s precious, no?”

And it was, at first. For many years, the little girl would make strangers stop in their tracks and gasp. Adults loved her clouds because they could easily track her mood. If the little girl was angry or frustrated, the clouds would darken into a dense cumulonimbus. Happy, and the clouds would bloom with shimmering silver linings. Other children were mystified. They’d circle her while waiting for the bus and count the rainbows in her hair. Sometimes, she would close her eyes and take a deep breath, and the clouds would shift into different shapes, animals, monsters.

The girl’s clouds blossomed as she did in age. She began her thirteenth year believing this billowing part of her was special, a way of spreading light and fresh air to the pockets of gray around her.

Everything changed with a phone call. Her math teacher, a man who had a voice like an organ and a passion for putting his students on the spot, rang her parents to inform them that their daughter refused to pay attention in class.

“But I *am* paying attention,” explained the girl. “It just looks like I’m not because the clouds cover my gaze.”

Her father scolded her for being disrespectful. So, the girl sat up straighter in class. She began to sketch in her notebook instead of playing the silly cloud-shifting game with peers, losing herself in intricate patterns and charcoal shades.

That was when the gossip started.

“Thinks she’s too good for us now, huh?”

“Mrs. Parker says she’s a distraction.”

“Bimbo-stratus.”

During this time, her parents suggested surgery. They’d heard about a specialist who’d been conducting a successful procedure for cloud removal for the past twenty years. They were worried. The doctor had said the clouds would disappear and they hadn’t. A sinister mammatus curled along the girl’s fringe. “Don’t you love me for me?” she yelled.

They tried to show that they did. They kissed her on the side of her cranium and commented on how lovely the fog near her eyebrows looked in the morning. They went to her spring showcase and gaped at her paintings, smears of grays, whites, and blues that swirled depending on where they stood. They wondered if they had been too harsh, if maybe the clouds were a gift for seeing things others could not.

There was an awards ceremony after, and the girl won first place for her painting. Students would talk about how the girl’s clouds were like those from fairytales that day: silky enough to fall asleep in. Someone claimed they’d even seen swallows dart in and out of her curls as she waited to walk the stage. But, in the end, everyone would mostly remember the guttural scream, then the faltering whimper.

“She shocked me!” screeched Miriam Keen, the runner-up for the painting award (whom some students would say they heard muttering envious daggers at the girl with the clouds). “There was lightning—it struck me.”

The silence only lasted long enough for the room to gain a kind of electricity. Parents ran for their students. Someone grabbed the girl away from Miriam. People were yelling about lawyers, about how the girl should be locked up. In the administration office, the art teacher revoked her trophy. The principal asked the girl why she had done such a thing.

She was so close to calling Miriam a liar. Her clouds hadn't even brushed her arm while they stood in line to the stage. But she met her father's eyes, bloated by puffy skin. She could tell he was tired of the explanations, the excuses. The girl apologized.

"I want the surgery," she said.

The procedure was so quick and easy that the girl slept through all of it. When she woke, not a ripple or feather of cloud on her head, her mother squeezed her by the shoulders, and her father experienced something that felt like a walnut lodged in his throat. It vanished when he swallowed.

"How do you feel?" her mother asked. The girl shrugged. She wasn't hiding the truth. The simple act of lifting and releasing her shoulders, something that took no thought at all, was exactly how she felt.

The rest is like any other story. The girl would become a woman, graduate high school, receive a degree in something that could pay the bills, marry, have children who would sit on their grandparents' laps and listen intently to tales of their mother when she was young, with her head in the clouds. Her parents would make jokes about how absentminded she was, how they could never seem to bring her attention to the world around her.

But there were moments, late at night, when a hungry presence would awaken in the woman and lift her into a dream. There, her mind was not malleable, not soft like a downy pillow. Her mind created, frescoed a world she'd forgotten. Roaring hurricanes stripping down trees, unafraid to announce their presence. Sunsets blazing cirrus trails of red and magenta, stringy as jellyfish tentacles. Blizzards so thick that the woman would see shapes, animals, monsters dancing among the snowflakes.

Casey Reiland's work has appeared in *On the Seawall*, *Stirring: A Literary Collection*, *The Puritan*, *Sweet: a Literary Confection*, *CausewayLit*, *After Happy Hour*, and elsewhere. She received a BA in English writing from the University of Pittsburgh and lives in the Washington, DC area.



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