

The Cloud Eater

Everyone thought that eating clouds made her a giant. Or maybe that she thought she was a giant. But that's not what she meant.

"The wispies, they float and flee down from the sky and into my teeth," she pointed at her mouth, jaw clamped to show them the spaces where the clouds seeped through.

But, they didn't really listen. That was often the problem. Like that time she had escaped the Droolags. She had tried to get the others to follow, leap with her from rooftop to rooftop. But, the other captives didn't hear her, believe her, believe in the quality of heavy air and her ability to find it. So, they were lost.

"Wonna, you must be very hungry, if you're eating clouds. They're so filled with nothing! Water and wisps? That's nothing to grow on," Samin wrinkled her blonde eyebrows and touched her belly button as she spoke.

The others slid their eyes and quirked their lips in response.

"I eat them for snack. I eat regular, like you do, whenever else." Wonna tried not to plead for understanding.

"And, what *about* the growing? I mean, does your neck stretch or your legs? That must get very toirsome," Prent said, mispronouncing the word. He was like that. It was his challenge to the powers that ruled him. Sometimes being the shortest forces you to fight for recognition.

Wonna had explained before that the clouds met her, she did not meet them. They sought her out in times of sadness. The food of fanciful comforting. She thought they might have thoughts and feelings. She wasn't sure, but...

"They like me," she thought out loud.

It was no coincidence that the crowd of children was now gone, giggle and guffaw hanging in the air where their faces used to be. This air wasn't heavy. It was light and

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see-through. Heavy air, like the stuff that cushioned her Droolagian Escape three summers ago, was nearly opaque. She realized no one but her could see it, but she always expected them too, just the same.

She sat down on the bluegrass, not the red. Even though the two grew side by side, she always thought the bluegrass was better than redgrass. It was probably prejudicial thinking, what with her own red hair a source of embarrassment. Maybe it was self-loathing, like Mas always accused her of.

“Listen, Cloud-Eater,” Mas had called her that ever since Wonna had spoken her love of wispy-snacks, “you can’t go around force-feeding other kids’ hate down your own throat. Eat all the clouds you want, but don’t sample the slop Hard People sling at you.”

Mas was a self-proclaimed Soft Person and so was Wonna, she said. Hard People were the laughers-at-you not laughers-with-you types. Like Prent, like Samin. Even though they were younger than her and Mas, which was surprising to Wonna. She always tended to think older people were hard, not young.

Mas was mother, father, sister, brother, home. Had been since they first caught eyes.

Twisting her little fat braid into the inside of her cheek, Wonna Cloud-Eater thought of Droolags. They were Hard People, every one of them. They had proven that when they shoved her from behind, into a beady wagon, pulled by six horses, before she had even registered its existence on the side of the road. She had been cloud-watching, the only thing she had done with the puffs of pink and white high in the sky up until that moment in Droolag prison. Acquiring the ability to cloud-eat must require bad coming to you and sitting with you awhile, she thought.

She had seen Droolags before, but always stayed away from them, never letting her eyes catch theirs. But that day, she blinked one too many blinks, drawing them in with her

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unobservance. Usually, they only took people, young or old, who walked along mumbling prayers to Stum for safety, for power over the Hard People in their lives, for the destruction of life as it had always been, for candy-coated peanuts. Or, whatever they prayed for. Wonna was familyless, so she wasn't exactly sure what the Stumworshippers, no matter their denomination, actually said to it, their god.

She was eleven when the Droolags took her, even softer than now. The wagon was dark and wet, with other moaning and crying kidnappees inside. Their knees knocked into hers as she tried to perch on nothing, staying low to the floor. Her eyes were covered with something whose odor drifted into her teeth, just like clouds would later do, in through her jittering lips. Her nose could feel it, too, slimy air forcing its way in when she drew life that way. Her fingers crunched together behind her back, tied so tightly. When the wagon lurched to a halt, she was thrown forward into a man who cried out, "Stum behold us!" as her nose jammed shut against his rough-hewn rouba.

All of them, seven Sturm and her own self, were dragged out and up a set of stairs. She only started counting after they'd been climbing for a minute, but there were at least three of the set she normally climbed to get to the top of the ladder she climbed every night to the roof where she slept. Winding, zigging up into the sky, they finally were shoved into a room of wood and mud plaster, oranges and browns. She knew because the blindfold was ripped away, leaving her mouth and nose and eyes to themselves. There was one window high on the wall where the suns and green sky could be seen. The Three Sisters were high, medium, and low, their faded white lights drilling through the mid-morning.

The Droolag captain, Frepeen, softly tapped each of them on the forehead and then softly spoke to his second-in-command, Felor, "Tell them."

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Felor, a big woman who towered over the smallish Frepeen, sang out with bluster and flourish. Her dark, swinging, purplish hair beating the time to her cadence. Felor cocked his right ear up, like her voice was music. And, it sort of was.

“Many of you will die, but only if you try. Try to escape, try to lie, try to fight. Live in service to us, and you will live. Live to eat, live to dance, live to give someone a blue dress. Will you promise, Stumworshippers?” She ended with a grand stomp that shook the floor they sat on.

But neither of them expected an answer, apparently. Frepeen, grabbing the hilt of his little picksword on his hip, bowed and flipped on a heel to walk out the door. Felor, in eight quick lunges, moved to flick each of them between the eyes with her very fierce forefinger.

“But, I’m not a Stum...” Wonna let her words trail after them through the closing, locking door.

For ten days the eight of them lived in that room, beautiful in the daylight, cold and miserable in the darkness of night, although the steorra kept winking at her through the open square in the wall. Once each day was done, she would stand under it reaching her hands up to the rounded lip, testing the weight of her against the strength of her. From the first hour she had tried to convince the Stums to hoist her up, to help her see. But they wouldn’t. They only prayed.

They all wore the same rouba, dyed to match their individual flesh tones, and Wonna had to look at them indirectly in order to see them clearly. It just worked that way. There were no women or men in Stumworship, only herms, those with no sex or “all-sex” as they called it. She tried to convince them to eat, to drink, to talk to her. Not knowing what to call them, she just whispered, “Friend,” when she entreated. But, they just mumbled, sometimes in unison,

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sometimes in divergence. They must have had a keen knowledge of the ways of ignoring those not-Stum. It didn't matter what the Droolags did either, beatings, buckets of cold water, harangues; they prayed non-stop. By the seventh day, she was using the hem of her shift to drip water into their mouths, giving turns. She smoothed the skin of their now-stubby heads with her dirty fingers.

Wonna endured her own beatings, harangues, and buckets of water. It made no dent in the Droolags cruelty that she shouted and even sang out her promises to obey, that she ate and drank what they offered her. When she suddenly thought to listen at the door on the sixth day, she heard the guards Folan and Fobeg chuckling to one another. Folan the Wide-One, as he was called, had a screechy voice, even in whisper. Countered by Fobeg's gurgle, it made for interesting hearings. Wonna was bruised, sad, and bored, needed distraction.

"They will be primed and pulled after a few more days," said Folan.

"To be docile?" replied Fobeg in her river-voice.

"To be anything they are told."

Wonna thought that Folan must know something she didn't because the Stums looked like they'd be deader than fishpie in a few days to her.

"But, what about the one with hair? Doesn't she seem unstumlike to you? I mean, she's a *she* for one. Hair for another. No incessant orisons!" Foberg's babble sound incensed itself.

"She's not a Stum! She was just wrong-placed and Frepeen found a bristly haer in his coffee. She doesn't even need a few more days. She's boxed."

Wonna crawled away, over to the box-shaped window. It was cloudy that night. She stood, feeling the blue breeze, cool against her hot, wet face-skin. She was wondering if Stum would show itself, what with all the praying. She had heard Stumworshippers at the markets

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telling people that it would, if only people prayed longly and correctly. Then, quicker than her mind, a cloud moved to meet her mouth, her lips parting as though she had always been a cloudeater, which wasn't true. Well, at least not as she knew her own story. She couldn't remember much before the day she left the Asylum of Abandoned Infants when she was eight. Maybe she had been a cloudeater before and she was only remembering now.

For the next three days, things got worse. The beatings more, the food and water less. She could not make herself understand how the Stum survived. They continued on in the same way, all except one. Wanna had made a friend of a small, furry mijs that came in to steal crumbs on the eighth morning. The Stum seemed not to notice as she perched the round-eared creature on her shoulder and it nibbled crumbs she gently handed it. But as she made her rounds with the water-hem, one of the Stums did notice. They put their hand out, a shriveled finger slowly moving toward the mijs.

“Her name is Mopt,” Wanna croaked. She had stopped talking, mostly, and her voice was almost eaten away by the silence.

“Mopt,” said the Stum. The endless murmurings were dammed in their throat.

“Can you help me, Friend?” Now, maybe the moniker would be true.

She began begging, trying to be polite. She explained how she had finally used three buckets, dumping their contents through a hole in the floor, in a triangle to give her the height to see out the window. She was careful in standing, she told Friend. She could see many roofs, flowing red and away for miles. They were in Droolag territory.

“But,” she whispered triumphantly, “I can see the end of their red. There is green roofs ahead!”

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She continued, telling Friend how she had realized that she could see a path in the night air. She could see the places to step that would hold them!

“There is heavy air and there is light air,” she excitedly explained. “We step on the air that holds us!”

Friend listened, ever so lightly stroking Mopt’s head. Mopt looked sleepy, soothed by the touch. But, Friend didn’t believe. Or, maybe they did, but it didn’t change anything.

“I’ll help you. We will not go.”

On the tenth day, Wonna wasn’t kicked or shouted at. The Droolags gave more food, more water. Even enough to wash, and some clean clothes.

Frepeen and Felor entered after midday. The murmur of invocation from the Stums was so low, Wonna wasn’t sure anyone but she could discern it. They both looked bigger than she remembered. Stronger, too. Jovial. Frepeen gently tapped eight foreheads, touched Felor gently, and cleared his throat.

Felor did not clear her throat, but sang once more, rhyming this time, oracling their collective futures.

“Sweet Stums and Red, you’ve listened to what I said. You never tried to escape, even when we kicked your napes. You will now be split, to lands large or no bigger than spits. You’ll serve to serve, you now know the curve. We’re pleased with you, and so your new lords will be, too.”

Leaving with the same flicks and turns-on-heels of the first day, the Droolag Captain and his second left the room empty only a moment. Behind them came an army of Droolags, with chairs, ropes, and other implements Wonna did not know the use of.

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They forced three Stums into chairs, lashing their torsos to the top. One by one, she saw them tipped back, lips and teeth forced open. As a conical metal object with a hole in the bottom was forced in the mouth of each Stum, she thought of how clouds sweetly floated into *her* mouth, nourishing her heart. This was not that. She closed her eyes as her friends were forced to eat and drink, the terrible sounds of it making pictures behind her eyelids anyway. Clink, muffled shout, wicked cluckings, and slosh.

It took too long to be over.

That night, Friend let her climb on their shoulders. She reached the good, strong sill easily. She could see the heavy places, the stepping flats of air, stretch out before her, all the way to the green. The ground below was far, but she felt no fear. A single, silly cloud was suddenly in front of her. She slurped it in as quietly as she could. It made her feel even lighter. She knew she'd be okay.

She looked back in the room to see all the Stum standing below the window. She begged them one last time to come with her. Friend shook their head and said, "Go." She leapt.

Catching each flat piece of heavy air felt like dancing. Flat, flat, flat, and then jump to a flat roof. Flat, flat, flat, flat, flat roof. Before she knew it, she was twenty roofs away. She turned to look back at the box she had climbed through, hands on hips, feet feeling beestung but her head feeling all the light air around her, triumphant.

She saw a Stum in the window's silhouette.

It was the cream-colored one, so easy to see against the dark night, even in the distance. She started forward thinking, *they need me to see the heavy air!* Her heart sank a little. She didn't want to turn back. But her feet moved her that way anyway. Then, she fell to her knees, smashing her hands over her mouth.

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The Stum had dropped like a stone in a well, but no noise, no ripple.

Immediately, another Stum took Cream's place. It was Gold. Gold dropped.

Wonna was up and running. The dance was a steed race now. Her small, skinny feet felt too fragile for the momentum. She wasn't watching for the heavy air. She fell.

She didn't realize she was screaming until her hands caught on a flat hanging firm in the surrounding light air. The heavy air felt stonelike against the pads of her fingers. She clawed her way up, wiry arms shaking her upward. She slowly, carefully made her way to the next roof. Only five houses away from the Droolags now, she could see that the window was filled with a yelling Foberg. She was looking around, down, forward wildly. Wonna crouched down on the roof and pulled her dark shift over her head, covering the fire colored straw up there. She closed it around her face, too, leaving only her eyes shining. She squinted.

"Stum's piss! They've gone the way of the flesh."

Wonna slowly turned, finding the heavy gingerly, unseen by cloud or Droolag.

When she limped into Marclod proper, it was a three-shiner day, loaded with light across every blade and bludgeon. She was shaking, empty of all things, when she spotted a girl, just her age, eating a medlar, juice dripping down her dirty chin, and staring at her as though she were another sweet fruit to gobble.

It was Mas and she ran up to Wonna as though she knew her, was excited to see her after so long, even though this was their first time knowing each other.

"I eat clouds!" yelled Wonna, throwing her arms around the girl in desperate relief.

Mother, father, sister, brother, home.