The Taste of Clouds

She lived in a house of clouds. It's hard to describe, though, because it changed every day. The girl moved the clouds around depending on her mood. If she was sad, she would make the house large, so she could build a cloud fort. If she was mad, she would build the house as tall as she could, just so she could knock it back down. If she was happy and content (as she often was), she would make it a good-sized house with many different rooms. She would have fun arranging all the furnishings, trying to get everything *just* right, almost as if she was a normal girl arranging her doll furniture.

This girl loved her clouds, for they took care of her. When she was cold at night, an extra layer of cloud blanket suddenly appeared over her. When she was hungry, the girl just had to scoop up part of the cloud and eat it. Eating cloud is a wonderful thing. It's the best thing you've ever tasted. Imagine the texture of cotton candy, how it's light and fluffy, and melts in your mouth. Except cloud is a tricky thing. It almost never tastes the same. It always tastes like what you are currently craving most.
What the girl hated most was cloudless days, when the sky was clear and blue. There was no cloud for her to eat, play, or walk on. On those days, the last wispiness of cloud left would bring her down from the sky.

One dreadfully nice cloudless day, a boy saw the girl come down from the sky. The cloud carrying her down was so wispy it could not be seen. His eyes widened. He was a practical boy, and couldn't believe what he had just seen. He wanted to run after her, but he was lame in one leg, so he picked up his crutches and did his best to follow her throughout town. It was hard because she was quite fast, and he was quite slow. After losing sight of her, he finally found her lying on her back in a meadow. He hobbled over. "You came from the sky."

"So what? Doesn't everyone?" She didn't sound surprised.

"Uh, no. No one. I mean *absolutely no one* comes from the sky!"

She thought for a moment, then spoke. "Well then, I guess I'll just have to be the first."
The boy was frustrated now. Why was she so impractical? Of course she didn't come from the sky. That was preposterous! He decided to try again. "I'm Thomas. What about you?"

Again, she thought before answering."I'm hungry. The food down here is terrible, and I can't seem to find any light to drink."

Thomas ignored her second sentence. "No, I meant what is your *name*?"

"Name? What's a name?"

Thomas was shocked. "You don't know what a *name* is? The thing people call you to get your attention? The thing your parents gave you as a baby?"

"I don't have parents. Also, I live alone. In the clouds. Well, not *completely* alone. The clouds keep me company."

Thomas was getting frustrated again. "Well, then, what do the clouds call you?"

She laughed. "Clouds don't, silly. Don't you know anything?"

"UUUUUUgggggghh! Why are you so impossible?"

The girl smiled. "Sit down, and I'll tell you a story. *My* story."

"Once upon a time, I had parents. I don't remember them much, but I know I had them. One day I woke up, but I couldn't find them. I wandered around. Wailing and wailing and wailing. They wouldn't come. So I went outside to look for them. Wandering and wailing all over again. At one point I looked around, but couldn't see my house anymore. I was lost. I remember crying myself to sleep.

"When I woke up, there was a hand-shaped cloud reaching out to me. I put out my hand and took it. It pulled me up into the sky. When I looked around, it was a desert of endless cloud. Then I watched the cloud form itself into a house. I went in. I went to the kitchen and sat on the floor. Then a chair appeared beneath me. The legs slowly grew until it was a highchair. A solid-looking bowl appeared. Inside was more cloud. It looked like white cotton candy. When I ate it, it felt like cotton candy, but tasted like strawberry applesauce.

"When I went outside again, there was a cloud lady standing there. I went over and tugged on her dress. "I'm thirsty," I said. A glass appeared in her hand. She reached up towards the sun as if she were holding a ball. She waited for a few moments, then looked as if she were dropping the invisible ball into the glass. She repeated the motion, then handed the glass to me. I did the same thing she did. I reached my hand up, and a tiny ball of golden light started to grow in it. I dropped it in the glass and it immediately became liquid. I drank it. It tasted like cold sparkling lemonade on a hot summer day, sweet and refreshing. I dropped the glass when I finished, and it became cloud once again.

"I ran around the rest of the day, because just the one glass of sunlight had given me so much energy. From then on, I lived in the clouds, only coming down to the ground on cloudless days. The cloud woman showed me what to do, but never spoke. I was fine with that. I soon realized I could drink any light, not just sunlight. They each have a different taste. At night when it gets cold, saved sunlight actually tastes like hot apple cider. Instead of giving you energy, it warms you up and helps you fall asleep. Anyway, does that answer your questions?"

"Yeah," Thomas said. "It actually does." The story had answered his questions, but he still wanted to know what to call her. "You still need a name. What about Skye?"

She looked confused. "Sky? I thought you were gonna give me a *name* not a noun."

Thomas sighed. "Not sky, *Skye*. S-K-Y-*E*. You know. 'Cause you came from the clouds?" She smiled. "Ok. Skye it is. Skye? Skye. Skye! Hi, my name is Skye. Skye? Skye. Skye! Skye is my name. Skye. Skye? Skye! Sssss kkkkkk yyyyy eeeeeeee. I'm Skye, what's your name? Skye. Skye? Skye! Skye? Skye!

"What are you doing?"

"Getting a feel for my new name. Oh! There's a cloud. Gotta go!" She lifted her arm as a cloud hand came down to pull her up. "Nice meeting you, Thomas. Thanks for the name!"

"Wait!" he called out. She turned expectantly. "Could I come with you? I did give you a name after all."

"All right." She stretched out her hand.

"Skye? How am I supposed to bring my crutches up?"

"That's easy," she said. "You don't!" She grabbed his hand. Before he could protest, the cloud hand was pulling them up and he didn't dare let go. As soon as Thomas was standing on the clouds, he fell down.

"Skye! I need my crutches. I can't walk without them."

"Of course you can. Stop being so melodramatic." Then she ran off into a house of clouds, leaving Thomas behind.

"Skye! Don't leave me alone. Please!" He heard no reply. "Uuuugggh!"

A few minutes later, Skye came back with a drink in her hand. She shoved the glass toward him. "Drink," she said. "It's starlight."

He gave her a look, but drank anyway. He smiled. It tasted like sweet, carbonated, raspberry water. She waited till he had finished the glass.

Then she said, "Now get up. Walk around. Your leg should be better by now."

"Ok," Thomas said. "But don't be surprised when it doesn't work." He tried to stand up. He wobbled, but he didn't fall. He walked around, jumped, and ran. There was a big smile on his face. "What? How? Wow."

Skye laughed. "It's starlight. Doesn't *everyone* know that starlight is magical?"

How?" Thomas repeated.

"Well, stars are really, really, *really* far away. So don't you think it's magical that we can still see their light even after they die or explode?"

"Cool!"

Skye took the glass from him. She reached her hand up, and gathered some sunlight. She dropped it in the glass, and handed it back to him. "That'll give you some more energy."

He drank it all in one gulp. "So," he started. "How many kinds of light are there?"

"Well, there's sunlight, moonlight, and starlight."

Thomas looked confused. "That's all?" he asked. "What about lamp light or flashlight light or reflected light, or the light filtered through the leaves and branches of a tree or rainbow light?"

"Thomas, rainbows *are* light. They don't give off light."

He thought for a moment. "Wait. Have you ever tried to eat a rainbow?"

Skye gave him a look. "What crazy person tries to eat a rainbow?"

"Oh, come on! Living in the clouds and drinking light isn't crazy, but eating a rainbow is?"

"Exactly my point." Thomas threw her an exasperated look. "But if you want we can try it tomorrow."

"Yes!" he exclaimed. "Can we try other kinds of light too?"

She was silent for a really long time, frowning. Thomas' face fell. Then Skye smiled and half laughed, "Of course! You should probably go home soon though. You don't want your folks to worry."

"Ok," he said. "Meet me under the tree below us, tomorrow at ten?"

"Sure. See you then."

Thomas felt himself sinking. He realized that the patch of cloud around him was gently lowering him to the ground.

At dinner that night, Thomas's mother asked him were his crutches were. He thought about telling his family the whole story about Skye, but decided they would call him crazy. So all he said was, "I tried walking without them today, and my leg was healed. I don't know how, it just was." His parents were thrilled, but his little sister just asked for his crutches to play with. He told her he'd get them for her tomorrow.

The next day when Thomas got to their meeting place, Skye was already there. She already had a glass in each hand. "Did you go light hunting without me?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I brought some moonlight for you to try." Thomas took the glass and sipped. It tasted like the best eggnog he'd ever had. With cinnamon, nutmeg, and whipped cream, of course. He smiled.

"How do you ever drink anything else?"

She laughed. "Have you forgotten what sunlight and starlight taste like?"

"Good point. Those are pretty good, too." Thomas grinned and drained his glass. "So, sunlight energizes you, and starlight heals. What does moonlight do?"

"Well," she said. "Moonlight makes you braver. Anyway, what new light do you want to try next?"

"How 'bout the light filtered through the leaves and branches of trees."

"How 'bout we call that tree light."

Thomas shrugged. "That works, too."

Skye reached her hand out toward the tree's leaves, and gathered the light around them. She dropped it in one glass, then the other. They both drank. It felt smooth and silky, and tasted like a smoothie made from fat, ripe blueberries. They waited for some kind of feeling to kick in. Skye felt it first.

"I think it makes you calm, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Thomas said. "Let's try lamp light next." They walked to Thomas' house, and he

managed to sneak her up to his room without his parents noticing. She gathered the light from the brass lamp on his desk, and they each tasted it. Almost immediately they each spat it out. It tasted like melted plastic. After that, they tried light from a flashlight. It tasted like spoiled milk. They spat that out, too.

"Why do they taste so bad?" asked Skye.

"Maybe it's because they're artificial?"

"Yuck! Let's go try that rainbow now!" They both smiled, and were pulled up by the clouds after heading outside.

After a long while searching the sky, they finally found a beautiful rainbow. "Skye, how are we supposed to eat this?"

"I guess we just tear a piece off." Skye did the impossible. She ripped off two pieces of rainbow as if it were made of paper. She handed a piece to Thomas. "On three," she said. Together they shouted, "One…two...three!" It tasted exactly like rainbow taffy! It was so delicious, they each stuffed some in their pocket to save for later.

Before Thomas went back down to the ground and his house, he asked Skye what cloud tasted like. "Well," she said. "It feels like cotton candy in your mouth, but tastes like whatever you want it to taste like. Try some." He did. Skye was right. Cloud was *delicious*!

Reluctantly, they said goodbye. In the years to come, Skye and Thomas spent many pleasant days like that one. Trying new light, and collecting more rainbow. Sometimes they would just lie on the clouds and talk. Other times they played hide-and-seek or tag, or made cloud forts. On cloudless days, they hung out around Thomas' house. When Thomas moved away to college, Skye followed with her clouds. They never did tell anyone how they met.

Many years later, there was a girl named Violet. She was curious, and staying up past her bedtime one night. Her mother was away a lot, but would be home in a few hours. She must've dozed off on the staircase, because her parents were already talking in the living room. She creeped down to hear their conversation.

"Honey, why do you have to go away so often?"

"You know they call me, and how else would we get the drinks to sell?"

"I know, darling, but Violet needs you." There was a pause.

"Then how can I make it up to her?"

"You could tell her where you go."

"Are you sure? We've never told anyone."

"Why don't you take her?"

"I *can't* take her."

"Why not?" Violet's father asked. "You took me, and I was younger than her! I think she's ready."

"Fine."

Her father sounded surprised. "You're really gonna do it? Great. Tell her what you *really* sell. Tell her where you *really* go. Show her. No more lies."

Her mother still sounded reluctant. "You sure this is a good idea?"

"Positive. Now get some sleep. I'll mix some sunlight with moonlight." Sunlight? Moonlight? What were her parents talking about? You can't mix light. That's impossible! She should probably sneak back to her room though. She'd find out what they were talking about tomorrow. As she was climbing the stairs, she heard her parents again.

"Thanks. 'Night, Thomas. Love you."

"I'll be right in. Love you too, Skye."

The End