

Foogcloos Escape

When Tinny awoke the island was smothered by fog. He could barely see Tommy and Aly a few feet away. When he walked away from the tree they had been sleeping under, he was surrounded by whiteness in every direction. His eyes struggled to pick out the blades of grass beneath his feet, and even sunlight had trouble penetrating the blanket around him.

Tinny took out the bottle of magic dust from his backpack. The Pungercclam had told them to cover their bodies with it when the fog came... Why? He opened the bottle, poured some on his hands, and rubbed them together. It covered his hands like wet dough. When he moved his hands he suddenly felt like he had plunged them through water... He reached towards a particular dense patch of fog, and felt like he had thrust his hand into a tub of cotton candy... He swung his arm around and cleared out a swathe of fog before him. His feet lifted clear off the ground and his body rotated with his arms.

Suddenly Tinny understood. With the magic dust they could swim or climb through the clouds... They could even *ride* the clouds home!

He had wandered away from the tree and couldn't find it anymore.

"Tommy, Aly, Betty, Mom, Dad, wake up!" he called, and followed their sounds back to the tree.

As they woke up and had breakfast, Tinny explained what he had learned.

"This is too dangerous," Brody said. "We can't get home just by climbing the clouds. We can't just walk several hundred miles over the ocean. What if the clouds evaporate?"

"Maybe we can't go home by riding clouds," Tommy said. "But I want to try it!"

Tinny passed the jar of dust around, and the family lathered it on like suntan lotion, both on exposed body parts and under their clothes.

As they did, they started to *feel* the clouds—strings of cotton slithering around them, currents and eddies pushing them. It was harder to move; they felt like they were walking through water, though they had no trouble breathing. Tinny shrank his hand around a random spot, and felt the softness shrink like wet cotton candy.

"It goes both ways," he said, "We feel them, and they feel us..."

Suddenly, he pushed down hard with both arms, a vertical breast stroke, and found himself propelled into the air.

"Woohoo!" he yelled, and found Tommy besides him, swimming upwards as well. The rest of the family followed. Most of the condensed fog was just slightly less dense than water—making it easier to travel through but slightly harder to keep afloat. However, Tommy found that the some patches of fog were denser, and could act well as handholds to propel them upwards. They were rising above the trees now, each with a different combination of pushing, leaping, and climbing.

Tinny had always dreamed about flying, but this felt more like swimming...

After some work, they were two hundred feet up. Tinny's heart gave a lurch when he looked down and saw his legs moving on nothingness. The fog had become too thin for them to climb any higher, so all he could do now was tread air.

“Now what?” Brody asked, “we’ve had our fun, we can’t just walk over the ocean.”

But something was happening. The fog was *compressing* itself, until the family was hovering in a clear boundary between fog and sky. A clump of fog started to swirl around, pulling the wisps around it into a solid mass like a cotton candy machine.

“Over here too!” Betty shouted from a few feet away, where the same thing was happening. As he looked around, Tinny saw that it was happening everywhere.

A puffy white cloud burst from the translucent web of fog holding it in place and leisurely started rising up into the sky. Other puffs of cloud followed.

“Quick! Grab one!” Tinny shouted, and started trying to walk across the sky towards one of the cloud eggs. But he was falling, while the thinning fog was pouring away into the whirlpools. He kicked hard and suddenly was being sucked near one of the eggs. As the cloud broke free, Tinny lunged on it, hugging it for dear life as his legs swung free. Tommy and Aly followed, then Betty and Brody. They lost sight of Al but just when they thought he might have fallen away, there he was, on a mattress-sized cloud.

Tinny’s cloud was a baby cumulus about four feet across. It was stereotypically puffy, though he suspected that even small clouds he saw in the sky were a lot larger than this one. He tried to pull himself up, but as he did, the cloud sagged alarmingly under pressure from his hand. He eased himself on slowly until he was crouching on the cloud in an awkward position.

He looked over his shoulder to see Betty’s cloud float above his. She was riding saddleback and waving at him.

Suddenly, a peach-colored nose unfolded from the puffy depths of her cloud, and two puffs parted to reveal two large black eyes.

“Your cloud—it has a face!” Tinny shouted at her but she was too far to hear now.

He positioned himself in a better position—which was now easier since his cloud seemed to have grown bigger—and took out the camera from his bag to take a picture. *CLICK!* His own cloud stuck out its face for the first time, and unwrapped two floppy ears.

Everyone was drifting farther away from each other. Brody was shouting something but Tinny couldn’t hear, and he was started to get worried.

They must be a few thousand feet up now—it was colder and the air was thinner. Above, a large number of cumulus clouds rolled in like a herd of elephants lumbering across the sky, and the baby clouds surged upwards even more purposefully. Before the clouds filled his vision, Tinny caught a sight of massive mile-wide faces.

CLICK! Tinny laughed. The clouds were moving west together, away from the island. Towards home!

But as he looked around he found the others were nowhere to be seen. They were probably separated by a few clouds, which could easily span twenty miles...

Tinny’s cloud darted away from its mother cloud, into a gap between the elephants. A stream of wind swept it along the “street,” shooting him past the white canyons. It exited the stream and Tinny saw the others, all perched on their clouds, amazed beyond words.

“We should all jump on to a big cloud,” Brody said above the wind, “So we won’t get separated.”

Brody and the children leapt off nimbly. Al's cloud darted away just as he stood up, knocking him off balance. He ended up more falling rather than jumping, but landed safely.

The baby clouds spiraled in from all directions, knocking into the humans playfully before chasing each other into the snowy landscape, disappearing as quickly as they had come, leaving only the roar of the wind and an incessant, low rumbling drone as the clouds cruised onwards.

They watched the puffs of the cloud rise and fall; sometimes an overhang would ooze off from a cliff and fall daintily before melting with the hills below. The wind tugged at the edges, unraveling swirls like threads off a sweater.

"It's so cold up here," Brody complained, "We're all going to freeze before we get anywhere." She rubbed her arms with her hands furiously.

Al looked over the side of the cloud. Pleasant Island was a speck in the distance, barely visible.

"We'll be home soon," he replied, "We'll finally be home again."

"Have you realized that we're thousands of feet above the ground?" Brody's voice rose, "How are we going to get down from the clouds when we get back to Massachusetts? With magical cloud parachutes?"

"We'll find some way," Al said, "Maybe those baby clouds will help us again..."

"Yeah, and where are they?" She gestured to the emptiness around them, "They've abandoned us!"

"Brody, calm down."

"No! It's like this every time! We see something cute and magical and then we wander off after it, and next thing we know, someone's in trouble! Do you think I enjoyed watching Tinny fly off on the Umbrie?" Tears leaked out of her eyes but she refused to wipe them away.

"It's going to be all right," Al said, letting his eyes wander.

Puffs of cloud continued breaking off and sticking together like some sort of magical factory. Tommy and Aly were bounding away over the cloudtops. Betty was nearby, sitting on a gray-streaked boulder, clutching her hands around her knees and shivering as she stared at an empty spot in the air behind her parents.

"Betty, look after Tinny, Tommy, and Aly for us," Al ordered.

She nodded and slowly got off the rock. Al glanced forward again; rather than the welcoming sight of coastline, he saw a mass of gray-black clouds on the horizon. Brody followed his eyes.

"We're probably not even going to make it to Massachusetts," Brody said. "Just look at those storm clouds! You all think that just because some magic creature gives us some sort of magic dust that we should do everything it tells us to do! What sort of magic creature is going to save us this time?"

Al had nothing to say.

Betty looked around frantically. Tinny had disappeared again! He was always getting himself into trouble, and she had to help save him. Why couldn't he be more responsible? She had to find him before Brody noticed. In this kind of mood, Brody was bound to find someone to blame for Tinny's disappearance.

She saw Tinny in the distance, jumping between two cloud pillars. How could he have gotten so far so fast? She started to call out for him but thought Brody might hear and become more worried. Tommy and Aly were now sitting on a cloud pillar twenty feet up, dangling their feet off the side.

She ran towards Tinny, but the cloud came up to her knees and sucked at her shoes like mud. Dampness slithered around her ankles like wet seaweed. A wall of warm, humid air assaulted her nostrils. She looked down and saw that she had walked into a mass of gooey, swirling cloud; the cloud-swamp stretched for several hundred feet, blocking her from Tinny. With difficulty, Betty unstuck her shoes and clambered over to Tommy and Aly's pillar. Steam wafted up from her shoes.

"How'd you get up there?" she shouted up to them.

"Just bounce on the cloud!" Tommy shouted back down.

"Bounce?" Betty planted her two feet on a swirly patch of cloud and pushed off. She jumped a foot in the air before landing clumsily.

"You need more oomph to it," Tommy said, "And do it repeatedly."

Betty tried again. When she landed a second time she pushed off harder and was surprised to find that she jumped several feet higher the second time. Losing her embarrassment she continued and after five jumps grabbed on to the top of the twenty-foot-high pillar.

"There you go," Aly said, helping her up.

From this height she could see Tinny several hundred feet away. He jumped from another pillar to a hilltop and vanished into a valley.

Several large pillars, each separated by twenty feet, led from Betty's pillar to the hilltop. They seemed too perfectly placed to be natural...

"How did Tinny get over there?" Betty asked, looking at the distance between her pillar and the next.

"Bouncing on the pillars," Aly said.

"Aren't you going to go after him?" Betty asked.

"Mom will be worried if we all disappear," Tommy said, "You should go after him and we'll wait here for you."

"We'll be lookouts," Aly said.

"You two are useless," Betty grumbled.

Oh well, no one else was going to save Tinny, so it was her responsibility again. But it was a full twenty feet to the next pillar... The cloud-swamp below her bubbled.

"Come on, if you don't make it you'll fall on cloud. Cloud can't hurt you," Tommy said dismissively.

Betty took a deep breath and made a running leap. The pillar of cloud wobbled and leaned away from her like jelly, and she was flying through the air... The air rushed by her and she landed on the next pillar, which wobbled as she tried to stand up.

Tommy clambered over the edge of the pillar—the force of Betty's jump would have sent him tumbling off had he not grabbed on to an overhanging piece of cloud. Aly was staring at Betty on the next pillar, now waving at them. He tore off a piece of cloud with his hand and studied it.

"I wonder what's in this thing," Aly said, "It can't be just water..."

"Tinny, wait up!" Betty called.

A mountain range of cloud stood before them, dotted with caves and arches.

"It's the palace of the cloud fairies!" Tinny exclaimed, eyes brimming with excitement.

"What are you talking about? They're just mountains," Betty replied.

But then the cloudpuffs seemed to shift in the corners of her eyes, just outside her range of focus, and the caves became doors and windows, the arches morphed into bridges, and the peaks and ridges turned into roofs. Before she had time to take it all in, Tinny had run in the main entrance.

A staircase shaped like a long bunny tail spiraled up in the center. Odd pieces of cloud piled up around it haphazardly; several extended up from the mess to the ceiling high above to support the sagging ceiling. Except for the curiously orderly staircase, it looked like it was constructed by huge whipped cream can filled with cloud. Betty followed Tinny up the staircase, which bounced unsteadily as he bounded over it.

The next landing was similarly messy; Tinny maneuvered his way between piles of cloud gunk to get to a balcony, and Betty followed. As she exited the building a sudden piece of cloud enveloped her head, blinding her. Desperate to breathe, she tore the cloud away from her head.

"Sorry about that; she's just saying hello," Tinny giggled, holding his camera.

The creature had a wide ellipsoid head about twice the width of her own, but its two wings must have spread five feet in either direction. They were translucent blue-green and shaped like leaves but curved like two huge scoops; a network of turquoise-colored veins pumped water into its head. It wore a red turban, with two rotating sky blue antennae and a volcano-shaped cloud-pump sticking out. Its cheeks were white and fluffy like clouds, while its face and body were transparent. She could see the water swishing around in its half-filled head. An assortment of tubes led from its head-sac to various other organs and pores; several floppy pipes jangled on its cheek. Its body, small in comparison, wisped out in the back like cirrus clouds. Behind its wings was a massive backpack of cloud.

"Say hi to Circum," Tinny prodded, and Betty waved.

Circum landed with his back towards them, and Tinny climbed on its fluffy cloud pack.

"Tinny, we're supposed to go back to Mom and Dad, not go around flying," Betty said sternly.

"We can fly back to the others," Tinny said.

That sounded reasonable. She grabbed on and Circum lifted off. Her heart lurched as the cloud pack sagged under her weight. As Circum flapped her huge wings, Betty felt the cloud pack expand. It crept along the back of the wings and billowed behind like a phoenix tail.

A huge fin-shaped mound towered before them, hung with thousands of pouches. Many of them were occupied by cloud fairies with their wings spread open wide.

"What are they doing?" Betty asked.

"Collecting water," Tinny answered.

Some of the cloud fairies would detach themselves from the mound with large clumps of cloud tied to their backs. Hundreds were at work at the city below; they would bow their heads, and a stream of puffy cloud would issue from their cloud-pumps, or wispy streams would flow out from their cheek-tubes, or flat, gray sheets would seep from a vent on their back; friends nearby would caress the clouds into round, beautiful puffs with their wings or carve it with their small, shovel-like hands. Here one was constructing a temple with minarets made of long continuous spirals of cloud-tails and its buddy was carving out windows right behind; there several were making a hundred-foot tall statue of a cloud fairy, a constant stream of them traveling between the fin and the statue, depositing large packs of cloud on the still-being-constructed wings. A small group was rolling large cloud-balls and wrecking havoc by throwing them randomly, before they were ambushed by some angry builders. Another bunch was hard at work trying to make a replica of Pleasant Island. It was such a pity that they didn't have paint...

The black, towering mass of stratocumulus was approaching fast. It was an animated cloud too—Al and Brody could see two large eyes, blacker than the cloud around it, and a huge nose puff below it, rhythmically expanding and contracting. A huge roar filled the air around them.

"Where's Tinny and Betty?" Brody shouted.

"I don't know! I told Betty to look after Tinny..."

"See, I told you! We're going to be eaten by this storm cloud! What should we do, wait for a magic parachute?"

"I think we should run!"

The space between the fore of their cloud and the stratocumulus closed to zero and the clouds collided. The cloud undulated under them, throwing them off balance.

"Tommy, Aly, get down from there! RUN!"

"What is Dad shouting?" Tommy asked.

"I don't know but I think we should get out of here!" Aly shouted.

"They're running right into the swamp!"

A hooked talon unfolded from the towering stratocumulus and touched the pillar.

"Jump the pillars!" Aly said, but it was too late.

Darkness spread from the talon over the white pillar. The cloud turned from white trampoline cotton into brittle gray plaster; Aly fell into the cloud-swamp below, far short of the next pillar. With Tommy still on it, the pillar toppled over. He fell into the swamp behind Aly. The pillar hit the next one, and the infection spread, toppling it as well.

The four of them waded through the swamp as best as they could while the blackness swarmed after them like locusts. The round puffs deformed into jagged tips. The blackness enveloped Al and Brody, congealing the mush around them into solid steel lumps and stopping them in their tracks.

"Mom, Dad!" Tommy called. The blackness threatened to engulf them.

"Jump on the wave!" Aly shouted.

As the wave came he pushed hard against the mud of the swamp and leapt clear for a split second. When he landed, it was on the hard, black substance. Tommy did the same, though he had to pull his shoe out. They ran over to their parents, who were stuck up to their thighs. Aly realized that their journey had backfired: normally clouds were harmless, but now that they could feel clouds, they could also be hurt by clouds...

Spiked claws extended from the mile-high mass of stratocumulus and lifted Aly away. It washed over Tommy, dropping a three-dimensional web of iron bars that locked him into a standing position.

"Waaaaahhhhhh!" Circum called. Tinny and Betty looked forward and saw the approaching stratocumulus cloud.

"Waaaaahhhhhh!" The other cloud fairies took up the cry. Most dropped what they were doing. Cloud packs plopped onto the surface below. The fairies leapt away from their pouches on the fin, their wings forming a massive tree. Several troublemakers took this opportunity to unleash a barrage of cloudballs.

"The clouds are going to destroy the cloud fairy city! We have to save it!" Tinny shouted.

Some of the small fairies clutched desperately at their creations, water gushing out of their tubes, before being pulled away by their parents.

A cloudball hit Betty.

As she wiped it away, she responded, "That's not important! The others are up ahead; we have to save them!"

Just as the tree of wings caught up with them, they saw the black mass washing over their parents.

The flock of fairies surged towards the stratocumulus.

The iron claw wrapped around Aly's waist, choking him. From his vantage point he could see the darkness wash over the cloud fairy city. When the darkness hit them, the delicate creations sagged into amorphous lumps and hardened. The fairies were abandoning it and flying towards the stratocumulus—why? He thought he saw Betty and Tinny flying towards him before he blacked out.

The fairies withdrew their wings and swung skillfully through the jungle gym. They trickled in through the network before settling down.

Circum started towards an opening in the web but hesitated. Tinny pointed towards where Aly was trapped.

"Help us save our family!" he said, and Circum obligingly flew towards Aly.

She landed on the iron claw and pounded at it to no avail.

"WAAAHHHHH..."

Betty took out a glass vial from her pocket.

"This is the antidote the Pungercclam gave us," she said as she unscrewed the cap, opened Aly's mouth, and poured it in.

Suddenly Aly gasped and dropped like a stone. He dropped straight through the iron web and through the cloud, disappearing from view.

"NOOO!!!" Tinny cried.

He reached to grab the vial but instead his watch hit it, shattering it into pieces. A fine red spray and a pungently warm fishy smell washed over them. Suddenly he could no longer make out the iron bars, could only see a foggy gray around him. He was sinking through Circum's cloud pack. Shocked, Circum suddenly jolted and they were falling off her back. She reached her hand for them but Tinny's hand went right through hers when she tried to grab it.

The spray hit Al and Brody below and they felt the metal around them turn into air.

They were all falling through the gray mist...

The clouds no longer clutched at Aly; how wonderful that the only prints that a cloud could make were a blanket of silvery droplets on the skin! He opened his eyes and saw lightning dance between pairs of yellow balls dotting the sky around him; whenever it hit one of them it would give rise to a skeleton of yellow light. The electricity sizzled in his ears and tugged at his hair.

Solid water hit him, knocking him awake. He struggled to the surface, coughing up water—real water that turned the journeys in cloudland into a dream and the formerly real texture of the clouds into the touch of a ghost.

The others fell around him, gasping for air, as thunder shook the sky above. It was just like the day of their shipwreck, all over again. They grabbed on to each other and huddled together until...

...a familiar voice sounded.

"Hullo!"

"It's Fellin Whalin!" Tinny shouted.

Fellin butted into Tinny, lifting him onto his back. It felt so warm and furry...

"Help me, Ben and Sam!" Fellin shouted, and several seconds later the other two Whalins had hauling the others out of the ocean and were speeding back towards land.

They left the storm behind them. The herd of cloud elephants continued barreling into the wall of stratocumulus and being devoured.

"It's so sad," Tinny said, "They're all being eaten by the big cloud and they can't even turn around."

"It's all water vapor, lad," Ben said. "Clouds might form and dissociate, but they're nothing but masses of water vapor, and water cycles through the air and land indefinitely. They stick together to give birth to clouds, the clouds turn into rain clouds, and the water comes back to the sea before it evaporates again. That's how life is."

"What about the cloud fairies?" Tinny asked.

"What cloud fairies?" Ben asked.

"The ones with big wings and puffy backs."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about sky creatures," Ben said.

Tinny and Betty recounted their experiences with the cloud fairies.

"Their whole city got destroyed, and they all got swallowed up by the big cloud," he concluded.

Aly thought about this. It didn't seem quite right; according to Ben, clouds were formed and destroyed all the time, so no elaborate cloud city could last very long. Plus, the fairies looked like they were purposefully flying towards the big cloud.

"They actually live in the pouches on the cloud-cliffs, and they can always construct more of those. It sounds to me like they were building the city just for fun," he said.

"For fun?"

"There's only so much cloud... to build something new they have to recycle it and start all over again."

"Just like Legos," Tinny said knowingly.

"Lego?" Betty asked.

"We only have so many Legos," Tinny said, "so to make something new I have to take apart what I've already made."

"Yes, and we would go on destruction rampages to destroy the cars and houses we built," Tommy contributed, "it's always bittersweet..."

"And the fairies need the thunderclouds," Aly pointed out, "They use the energy from the electricity as food. After all, there isn't any other food so high in the sky."

"So that's what their yellow cheeks are for!" Betty said, "To conduct the electricity!"

"And the cloud fairies collect water with their wings and turn it into cloud," Tommy contributed, "And they have fun while doing it, too."

"Clouds and cloud fairies, it's just like with Whalins and sailbirds," Aly said, nodding his head sagely.

A rainbow climbed into the heavens, painting the cloudtops.

Back on land, they waved good-bye to Fellin, Ben, and Sam. The setting sun tinted the sea with gold.

"Thanks for saving us!" Tinny said.

"We should all thank Tinny and Betty as well," Al said, "If they hadn't run away we might all have been trapped in the cloud."

That doesn't make sense, Brody thought, It was Tinny who got us in the mess in the first place.

But what she said was, "I'm just glad that everyone is alright," as she gave them a warm embrace.

