

Title: Clouds

Author: Kanita Ridwana

Level: Intermediate to Upper Intermediate

Genre: Fiction (Children, Family ties, Human emotion)

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“Look! Look, *Nanu!* Look at the clouds coming down! They're flying all around the room!”

Little *Alina* cried out **loud**. Hearing the **tender** joyful words, *Juhi Mumtaz*, a warm, **confident** lady in her late fifties opened up her eyes and **slowly woke** up from her hot summer's day, after-**lunch** sleep. In the **terrible** heat of this “*taal paka*” summer **afternoon**, the old **fan** above her was moving around at a great speed making a low sound. With great **eagerness** to see what the three-year-old had been up to, *Juhi Mamtaz* opened her eyes and looked around the room where she was lying, fully **stretched** out on the old “*palanka*,” the same bed she had used since her marriage years ago.

In her half sleepy state, she **imagined** soft shining clouds **floating** around her. Her bedroom was filled with the joyful sounds of innocent laughter of the little child who was her only **granddaughter**, *Alina*. *Alina* pointed her little hands to the slowly moving clouds in the room, and cried again, “Look, LOOK, *Nanu!*”

*Juhi Mumtaz* was truly **astonished** to see the beautiful sight of the cloudy waves floating around the room. “What had her little **devil** done this time?” she wondered.

*Alina*, who was the only granddaughter of Mrs *Juhi*, stayed all day long with her *Nanu* when the little one's mom was **busy** at her work place. **Apart** from the terrible business of big family **management**, *Juhi Mumtaz* loved the **responsibility** of taking care of her little granddaughter. Though many of her relatives questioned her as to why she had to take this extra responsibility onto her own shoulders, she just laughed at their **complaints**. She didn't think of caring for her little granddaughter as a heavy responsibility at all. In fact, she loved to play her part, along with her responsibilities as the oldest member of her big family.

These days the mothers of working women often take on this **extra** responsibility of caring for their grandchildren, as a kind of child care system. Their daughters, now working mothers, were so busy, and often had no choice but to depend on their own mothers to help them out. *Juhi Mumtaz's* daughter dropped her little girl off early in the morning at her house and went on to her office from there. Before this daily **practice** began, *Juhi Mumtaz* only had to **manage** her usual everyday duties around her own house, but now she had something far

more important to do. The truth was, she really enjoyed watching her sweet little granddaughter growing up day by day.

As the little girl grew, she had learned how to say many new things. The newly learnt words of the little girl appeared to her as fresh as the newly flowering “*sheuli*” flower.



*Juhi Mumtaz* thought of her own age, and then went back in her mind to those long-passed days of her own early motherhood, the days when she was so young, and when she had her two daughters and then a son, so **quickly**, one after another. It seemed that her little granddaughter was bringing back those **charming** golden days of her early married life. With the company of her daughter’s new little one she could travel back in her memory to the old good days that she had left behind nearly forty years ago.

Sometimes, when she caught herself thinking of those wonderful days, she found herself asking whether she could now **guide** her granddaughter with the same kind of strictness that she had used with her own children. Now, she would be forced by her older, wiser self to be more gentle, and to often allow the sometimes foolish but lovely acts of the little one to pass. Perhaps, on thinking further, she understood the **mistakes** she had made years ago were now being **corrected** by the **grace** and experience of her entry into old age.

Suddenly, *Juhi Mumtaz* found her thoughts **interrupted** by *Alina*’s demanding voice, “I want to go to beauty **parlour** with you.” Unable to refuse, she was forced to rise from her bed and take the little one out of the house to the beauty parlour. *Alina* loved the *rickshaw* ride from home to the parlour. There, *Alina* was surprised to see all the new and funny things that happened. A beautiful **aunty** went behind a curtain and into a **hidden** room. Soon afterwards she came out again, but her face was as white as a **ghost**. Her two eyes looked wide and dark against her face-**mask**, almost like the eyes of the **panda** she had seen in one of her picture books. *Alina* was surprised to see that the aunty failed to **frighten** everyone in spite of her

**disturbing** appearance. Alina wondered if perhaps that was the reason she then went off and **washed** her face and soon appeared again, as pretty as she had been before.

*Juhi Mumtaz* asked the girls in the parlour to put “*medhi*” into her hair. When she was finished, her hair looked beautiful, and shone with gold light. *Alina* was so happy to see how beautiful her “*nanu*” looked.



*Medhi* plant, made into paste and used for colouring hair

In another part of the parlour, an older girl pressed white **thread** onto the **forehead** of some other aunties to clear up their **hairy eyebrows**. Other aunties had their hands painted with the shapes of beautiful flowers.



Still more aunties put big white helmets on their heads, and sat on a chair with nothing to do while the helmets **steamed**. They looked like the **astronauts** she had seen on TV, who wear big white space suits when they travel far out into deepest darkest space.

Some women were wearing *saris*, putting flowers on their “*khopa*” and were soon transformed into red coloured beautiful “*bou*”, but to *Alina*, the most fascinating thing was the cutting of the women’s long **hair** with sharp **scissors**, and watching all that cut hair dropping, dropping, dropping, so **gracefully** onto the floor! When she saw the beautiful **brides**, *Alina* demanded, “I want to be a bride too!”, but after *Juhi Mumtaz* explained that little girls should wait until they were grown up before becoming a bride, she changed her mind.



Next she cried, “I want to have my hair cut, I want a haircut too.” Finally, after an hour-long effort of the child’s **begging**, *Juhi Mumtaz* agreed to let *Alina* have her hair cut while she sat as still as she could on the back of a toy horse.

To begin, *Alina* was happy as her hair was **sprayed** with **cool** water before the cutting began. But then, when she saw that all her lovely long hair had been cut away, she cried and cried and cried. She couldn’t understand why her hair could not be joined back onto her head again, and look the same way as it had before. Nothing *Juhi Mumtaz* could say or do would **comfort** the little girl, and she continued to cry, all the way home.

Once they had returned, *Alina* held tight onto her *Nanu*’s neck, and at last, completely worn out from crying so hard, she lay down and fell into a deep sleep. *Juhi Mumtaz* was also **tired** out, after trying to manage all that crying. At this age, it was not easy to keep a little one happy, whose mother was far away. Being so tired herself, *Juhi Mumtaz* fell asleep on her “*palanka*” beside her little granddaughter.

In her dreamy state, she imagined the soft movement of tiny **tender** hands playing with her hair. She heard the tender joyful sound of her granddaughter’s voice, “I am playing parlour, *Nanu*. Lie still, *Nanu*”. She imagined the little hands moving in her heavy **bunch** of hair. She saw the beautiful golden lights shining among the black and grey colours of her hair, after the layer of “*mehdi*” had been added.

*Juhi Mumtaz* continued to dream. Again she heard the little voice. “I am shaping your hairy eye-brows. I’m going to make you a beautiful bride”, the little voice said. *Juhi Mumtaz* slept, and dreamed in the summer afternoon heat. The fan above her **spun** around and around, blowing gentle cool air onto her face.

Suddenly, she heard *Alina’s* voice calling her again, more loudly this time. She woke from her dream with a start. “See, *Nanu?* See? Look at all the clouds, flying, flying, flying!”

*Juhi Mumtaz* sat up suddenly, and looked around. Oh my goodness! What was this? *Alina’s* parlour game was no longer just a dream.

*Alina* had taken her “*Nana Bhai’s*” scissors, which were normally used for cutting his grey **beard** and had cut off *Juhi Mumtaz’s* beautiful waist-length hair. *Juhi Mumtaz* had tried to cover the grey by putting “*mehdi*” into her hair to shoulder level, in a manner that looked a little strange. But now, as the fan moved the air in her room, her beautiful golden “*mehdi*” hair was floating everywhere, around and around and around. As it flew around the room, it looked like soft clouds floating in the evening sky.

*Juhi Mumtaz* was shocked beyond words. “Take control of yourself.” she thought. At last, like a strong swimmer, fighting the pull of the river, she managed to calm herself down. Instead of speaking with **anger** and **sadness**, a voice within her told her it was better to simply accept what had happened. “There is no way to **replace** the hair that has been cut off”, she thought, “Little *Alina* has only done what she has seen done today. I shall have to forget this loss and accept the change. After all, I am **lucky** to have such a happy, lively granddaughter to keep me company. How can I be angry with such a little one? What better way can I show her that I understand her own sadness at the loss of *her* hair, than by cutting my own? In any case, no matter my age, it is good for me too, to show her I can also accept change.”

In this way, by replacing her shock and sadness at the loss of her hair with acceptance, and with a strong will, she **held** her **precious granddaughter** closely in her arms, welcoming in her joyful childish laughter. With calmness and solemn coolness, she addressed *Alina* tenderly, “What *are* you doing my little **angel?**”



## Glossary of Bangla Words

- a. *Taal paka*: hot plum; *taal paka* is a term usually used to mean extreme hot weather which is suitable for the ripening of plum and other summer fruits.
- b. *Palanka*: traditionally designed bed
- c. *Nana bhai*: maternal grandfather
- d. *Nanu*: maternal grandmother
- e. *Sheuli*: seasonal white colored flower that can be seen in the early winter season. (Called 'Jasmine', in English)
- f. *Khopa*: traditional sub continental hair style for women
- g. *Bou*: bride
- h. *Mehdi*: henna

## Learning Activities

### Vocabulary Lists:

Learn all the words (that you do not already know) from the following list...

### 1. High Frequency Words from the 2nd 1000 General Service Word List

afternoon	confident	gracefully	mistakes	stretched
anger/angry	cool	grandchildren	neck	strictness
apart	coolness	granddaughter	piles	suddenly
asleep	corrected	grey	practice	swimming
astonished	curtain	guide	precious	tender
aunty	devil	hair/hairy	quickly	terrible
beard	disturbing	hidden	replace	thin
begging	eagerness	honest	responsibility	thread
bunch	extra	imagined	sadness	tight
busy	fan	interrupted	scissors	tired
calm	floating	loud	shock	toy
chair	foolish	lucky	slowly	waist
charming	frighten	lunch	solemn	warm
comfort	funny	manage / management	spun	washed

complaints

grace

steamed

woke

Do you know the meaning of the words below? These are not high frequency, or common, words in English, so **only learn these words and expressions if you already know ALL of the words in the list above, very well.**

angel  
astronauts  
bride  
eyebrows

forehead  
ghost  
helmets  
mask

panda  
parlour  
sprayed

### Comprehension Questions (find the answers in the reading)

1. In the story, *Alina* is called both a little **devil** and a little **angel**. What do these two words mean?
2. Why was *Juhi Mumtaz* caring for *Alina*?
3. What does *Juhi Mumtaz* tell us about the kind of mother she used to be when her own children were small?
4. What kind of person is *Juhi Mumtaz* now, now that she has grown older and become a grandmother?
5. What, really, were the clouds that were flying around the room?
6. After she sees that *Alina* has cut off her hair, what reason does *Juhi Mumtaz* give for not becoming angry with *Alina*?

### Critical Thinking Questions

Think of your own ideas and answers to these questions. Explain your answers to others in English. (Everyone will answer these questions differently.)

1. **Applying:** If you were in the same situation as *Juhi Mumtaz*, and your hair was cut off, what would you have done? Give some reasons for your answer.
2. **Analysing:** Why do you think did *Juhi Mumtaz* said that *Alina* was both an **angel** and a **devil**? What do you think of these descriptions of a child? Can a child be both an angel and a devil at the same time?
3. **Analysing:** Do you think some people put too much time, money and effort into making themselves look outwardly attractive? How much is too much? How much is OK, and how much is not enough?
4. **Evaluating:** Do you think it is ever OK to punish a young child for doing something foolish? Give some reasons for your answer.

5. **Creating:** If you had to care for a young child for a day, what kind of activities would you organize to keep the child busy and happy? Make a list of your ideas and explain them to someone in English.
6. **Predicting and Creating:** Go to the end of the story again. What do you think happened next? Write a few more paragraphs of your own and finish the story completely.

**Roleplay:** Work with one or two other people in a small group. Each group should take part of the story and turn it into a script for a short play. Aim for about 10 lines of dialogue.

After your teacher has checked your script, practice the dialogue with your co-writers until you can say it without looking. Think of ways to make your dialogue really interesting. (Use a lot of intonation, body language and emotion.)

Perform your part of the story to others in your class, but don't cut anyone's hair for real!