

## The Catalogue of Clouds

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I used the key Bill's lawyer gave me to open the door to his apartment, pausing with my hand on the knob. I expected a bad smell. Bill was a stingy bachelor for whom housekeeping was likely last on the list. For all I knew, he had two dozen cats, untended now for two weeks. But, after getting out of the elevator three floors too soon and climbing the rest, I had to catch my breath before I could hold it.

The apartment smelled dry musty, like old books in an attic, not sharp moldy, like old books in a basement. It was absolutely dark. The flickering light of the landlord's halo from further down the hallway revealed that the apartment was crammed full. My knuckles rapped against a piece of cheap metal furniture before I found the light switch behind it.

Bill's one-room apartment was monkish and cluttered at the same time. The metal file cabinet blocking the wall switch, with two more stacked atop it, was one of hundreds, floor to ceiling, around the room. They blocked the windows. More cabinets filled the center space in a maze-like pattern of narrow passages among which I twice got lost. On the third pass, which I attempted to map, I discovered a niche among the endless file drawers. Only three cabinets wide, and one drawer high and deep, the alcove served as his sleeping quarters. He could only have assumed a tight fetal pose. The thin, tattered quilt and flattened pillow attested to his parsimony. One other drawer space held a dorm-room hotplate with a stack of "Cup-O-Soup" in one corner, and a large bottle of Tabasco sauce in the other. The bathroom was down the hall, shared by the other divided apartments.

Bare fluorescent tubes glared down above the narrow aisles. There was only enough room to crouch down and glimpse the labels on each drawer. Wherever I opened one of them, I found it crammed tight with sketches and watercolors of clouds, few with any horizon or other detail to anchor the beholder in time or place. Each sheet of paper or parchment had a catalog entry of letters and numbers. The last drawer, at the bottom of the cabinet in front of the light switch, was marked ZVL-S26A10. It was only three-quarters full. Bill pegged out in the nick of time: before he ran out of space.

The building, on Riverside Drive near Columbia, was solidly pre-war. Still, it was a wonder the apartment didn't pancake onto those below, all the way down to the basement. The high ceilings allowed taller stacks of drawers and cabinets, and more sketches than were probably in the collections of The Museum. I started in the middle row and skipped around at random. I found four drawers containing mostly photographs and fuzzy Internet print-outs. All the rest of the sketches, a million or more, I'd guessed—assuming all the drawers were full—were drawn and colored by hand.

Bill never tired of talking about his "collection." He was a genius at connecting his interest to whatever conversation was circulating *The Gripevine* over on Broadway. The tavern

was a bastion for codgers and curmudgeons who still read New York's, indeed the country's, last remaining newspaper. Being a weekly, it got picked to the bone before the vultures circled around the next issue, and the watering hole brimmed again with collegial cheer and a bounty of booze and loud colloquy.

A bunch of young bikers gathered now at what they called *The 'Vine*. They were leaving out the most important part: the *Gripe*. They came for the cheap beer, mostly just on weekends. I was pretty sure a couple of them were homosexuals. They all behaved themselves, which is all that mattered. But they were not versed in unimportant stuff like we older fellows. It was hard to carry on a conversation with them, but I kept trying.

Never would any of his fellow *Gripers*, new or old, have suspected such an astounding accumulation as I discovered in Bill's apartment. Singly, Bill was the Collier Brothers of clouds. And the weight of this collection was now my burden, having been named primary beneficiary in his will. I was his drinking buddy, no more nor less than the dozen or so other regulars of the old tavern's Old Guard. I puzzled over his singling me out as the one onto whom he foisted this honor. Why not one of the younger fellows?

My mind turned with little effort to speculating on how much such a collection might be worth. Could it contain da Vincis and Dürers among the unsigned detritus? There were brittle scraps of very old sketches in clear plastic sleeves, and others that had been reduced to brown flakes and powder in plastic bags. Yet everything was labeled. The only section of wall that did not have a cabinet in front of it was behind where the front door opened. I pulled open the nearest drawer and withdrew a handful of sketches, marking the place with my handkerchief.

Creakily, I got down on the floor and, knees up, I cradled the sheaf of drawings in my lap. The artistic endeavors ranged from crude to sophisticated, yet each had a degree of abstraction any modernist would envy. At times I lost myself in those clouds, adrift among childhood summers and strolls with sweethearts along the shore at Orchard Beach. Other recollections were less sunny: storms gathered and I found myself in a labyrinth of threatening Rorschach creatures pointing the way to madness, of horrors buried beneath terrors. Each time I returned a handful of sketches to their drawer, vowing to call it a night, I caught myself pulling a few more out for inspection. I shut my eyes for only a moment, and the mists engulfed me.

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I awoke sprawled on the floor among the sketches and drawings, a few of which I'd crumpled or creased. I was sore and stiff, and grabbed the drawer handles to pull myself erect. Without any light from the blocked windows by which to gauge, it felt as though a couple of hours had passed. But a glance at my watch informed me it was a few minutes short of noon. I had no way of telling how much of that time I'd been asleep and how much I'd spent floating among my friend's collection of clouds.

Famished, I went straight for lunch: a beer and a sandwich at *The Gripevine*. None of the regulars were yet in attendance and the daytime bartender, whose name I didn't remember, asked if I'd had a rough night. I mumbled a noncommittal answer. Fearing conversation might ensue, I asked him to wrap up the rest of my lunch and to make me a second sandwich, with a little less mustard. I downed the last of my beer and headed back to Bill's apartment.

Deciding to finish my lunch on a bench in Riverside Park, I found my gaze drawn to the clouds overhead and their slow parade in the changing light over the Hudson. It reminded me of one of the older sketches from when the city was known as New Amsterdam and the river was called the North River. How many clouds had formed and dissipated on the wind in that time? How many of them were now fading specimens in Bill's collection?

A security guard, sporting a tinhorn sheriff's tin badge and an array of colorful embroidered patches, stopped me before my finger reached the elevator button. At one point, he had me turning all my pockets inside out and reciting the Preamble to the Constitution. He followed my recitation by looking at a laminated copy of the document taped to the counter of the front desk. He never asked what was in the brown paper bag.

"You said it correctly. No one ever does. Please wait here."

The guard opened a door, blended almost perfectly into the wainscoting and paneling behind the front desk, and disappeared. Several other people, mostly old and, if not quite decrepit, at least in need of a fresh coat of paint, came and went. I followed one stooped woman into the elevator and rode with her up to the ninth floor. She turned left and I right.

"Have a pleasant afternoon," I offered.

"Go fuck yourself," she returned, and slammed her door shut.

No doubt my nervousness had caused my breach of etiquette by making small talk in the elevator. Still, the old woman's caustic reply stung more than it should have. My hide was becoming as thin as one of the onionskin sketches.

For now, I decided, I could dispense with any organized sampling of Bill's cloud collection. No point poring over color swatches before the surveyor sets up his transit. I counted the number of drawings per inch, averaged across several drawers, times thirty (a drawer's depth in inches), times the number of cabinets, times the number five (the number of drawers per cabinet), and arrived at the astonishing figure of 2,450,000 sketches. Many of the sheets had drawings on both sides and some contained more than one drawing per side.

On this pass, I paid more attention to the writing on the backs and margins. There were remarks and dates in English and what I took to be Dutch, Latin, German, and Italian. I never gleaned more than a single phrase or half-familiar word. I noted as well that many more drawings than I originally thought contained horizons and landscapes and the occasional

surviving landmark beneath the overpowering, more substantial cloudscaapes. I began to enjoy them as works of art, admiring the skill and finesse of the artists. I was drawn in. It was not long before I was again at sea among the gathering clouds, enthralled and thrilled, exhilarated and overwhelmed—and, finally, fast asleep.

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Annoyed with myself for again frittering away a whole night and half the morning, I determined to go back to my own apartment, shave and shower, and change clothes. But I was eager to return to my survey of the cloud collection, so I skipped the shower. I still had yesterday's ham-and-cheese sandwich in my coat pocket, so I didn't bother to change.

Halfway down in the elevator, I went back to retrieve the letter from the lawyer granting me access to Bill's apartment for the remainder of his lease. I hoped it would satisfy the lobby guard. I stopped at a dollar store on the way and bought a lined notebook and a package of multicolor Post-it notes.

I made a dash for the elevator in Bill's building as soon as the guard entered the room behind the front desk. I was startled to encounter the old woman from down the hall standing right in front of the ninth floor elevator doors, waiting to go down. She wore a flowered house dress and a pair of dirty pink slippers, no doubt on her daily excursion to the mailroom.

"May I wish you a good afternoon," I asked, "or should I just go fuck myself?"

"You got it, buster." The doors clamped shut with the plosive force of an expletive.

I was surprised and chagrined to find I had not locked the door to Bill's apartment. Though doubtful, for all I knew, several of the most valuable sketches were now missing. The oversight impressed on me the urgency of determining what the collection contained and what it might be worth. I spent the next six hours locating what I considered the most beautifully executed cloudscaapes from earlier passes. I stuck colored Post-its on both the drawer and the place in it from which I had removed one or more drawings, putting the same color on the back of the sketch with a penciled remark to myself. I gathered a sheaf of over fifty drawings. I chewed distractedly at the edges of my sandwich as I flipped through them.

Though I did my best to remain focused, I again came under the spell of the clouds. I remembered thinking it might be chemicals in the old parchments and inks and hand-ground pigments, combined with the stale air and nonexistent ventilation, that created some odd intoxicant. They were not merely drawings of not merely clouds. The more I tried to look away, the more I was drawn in. The air grew impossibly thin and cold, and I felt the roiling mist on my hands and face. The clouds meant something. They took shape, verging on meaning, and then dissolved. My head grew light trying to enclose the thought of a cloud. One of the clouds, I realized, was my own brain, puffed out to fill the sky and endlessly folding in on itself, convolving and evolving without ever becoming substantial.

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Again I awoke stiff and disoriented, but had at least not crushed any more drawings. I crawled on hands and knees to the front door, where I pulled myself up by the doorknob. The door was unlocked.

I wanted to go home, shower, and crawl between fresh sheets. But I promised myself that I was going to take the sampled drawings down to an antiquarian book and print dealer on Maiden Lane. I was not looking forward to the long ride on the 1 train down to Rector Street. Gathering up the clouds and my notebook, I looked for something in which to protect them. Maybe because I was also famished, I thought of a pizza, in a pizza box, and that led to my thinking of *ESPizza* over on Broadway.

No sooner had the thought entered my head—or escaped it, I wasn't sure which—than the apartment buzzer went off. My hand already on the knob, I opened the door to the pizza delivery guy. The aromas of cheese and onion and sausage, just as I'd imagined, set my stomach to growling. *We know what you want*<sup>TM</sup>. Boy, did they—better than I knew myself.

I patted my pockets. “I forgot my wallet,” I said.

“Not to worry. We knew that was going to happen.”

The deliveryman flipped open his device and showed me the bill. “The tab was picked up by Shakti Pat who said you'd be meeting him one day and you could settle up with him then.”

Too hungry to argue, I waved off the delivery guy and closed the door. I pulled open one of the drawers as a table and sat down on the floor to enjoy my pizza. The box felt disappointingly light. It was indeed empty, except for a note on a Post-it: *Hunger is free*.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? And who in hell is Shakti Pat?”

I had the impulse to smash the cardboard pizza carton, but realized it was what I *really* wanted: a clean carton for the sketches. The cheese and sausage would have left grease spots on them, instantly diminishing their value. I placed the sketches and my notebook in the pizza box and set off on my errand.

During the long ride downtown, I kept the box horizontally on my lap. It proved an unwanted conversation starter. Each fellow passenger smelled the ingredients he or she had a taste for, no two alike. It was an olfactory Rorschach test, from roast barbecue pork with pineapple, to fermented kimchi with okra, to calamari with mustard. I realized my own choice wasn't any more normal, just more ordinary. I hated to admit the talk shortened the ride.

I hadn't been that far downtown since they blew up the Second World Trade Center. They were still bringing in unused parts of New Jersey by the truckload to fill the crater. The

back end of the Federal Reserve was about the limit of the blast damage, and was now restored. The remaining streets were crowded with tourists who had come from around the world to get a first-hand look at something that wasn't there. Vendors by the dozen sold aerial photos of a large hole filled with water, like a reverse island.

The shop turned out to be almost at the end of Maiden Lane. The name, *The Prints and the Popper*, made more sense to me when the proprietress introduced herself as Zelda Popper. Her wrists tinkled and jingled with multiple bracelets, a merry sound that matched her wide white smile and dancing blue eyes which she drilled into you with absolute forthrightness and confidence.

“Show me whatcha got,” she said, making no attempt to mask her eagerness.

I lifted the lid of the pizza box.

“I don't know you, but you look like hell. If the collection you inherited is as big as you told me, you're gonna have to get help cataloging. I can make recommendations.”

Ms. Popper slipped on white cloth gloves and lifted the first sketch from the helter-skelter pile, cradling it gently with both hands. What I thought was merely the headband intended to complete her flapper outfit, was an optician's visor, from which now descended a jeweler's loupe. She bent over the drawing, tilted her head, and peered at the lower right corner. She looked up at me.

“You've got a Dürer here, or at least a worthy forgery.”

She showed me the stylized initials with a magnifier: a capital D nestled beneath the crosspiece of a capital A. After sandwiching it between sheets of white paper, she lay the first drawing aside and picked up the next, which she gave a quarter turn and squinted at before the loupe was engaged, I wasn't sure by what mechanism.

Zelda, which she invited me to call her, set the sketch atop another sheet of paper, removed her gloves, and consulted a picture volume from one of the laden bookshelves behind her. She perused the book with the magnifier, the eyepiece now tucked inconspicuously like a twinkling ornament in her flip of hair.

“Appropriately, this one appears to be by the hand of Luke Howard.”

I shrugged.

“Howard was the first to suggest a classification system for clouds. Early 1800s. Taxonomy was all the rage. Anything that could be classified and catalogued could be understood. Howard gave them their descriptive Latin names: *cumulus*, *stratus*, *cirrus*: heaped

and layered and curled—and the panoply of prefixes and suffixes that meteorologists still employ.”

“Are they valuable?”

“Rather. The bulk of his original watercolors of clouds are in various British collections, public and private. Based on what you’ve shown me, I think we might both retire to a warmer climate.”

“And what’s your cut again?”

“My customary finder’s fee is fifty percent.”

“What? Half? For what?”

“My dear man, one could have a trove of Picassos from auntie’s attic, but without a buyer, they are sketches in auntie’s attic. First, I authenticate the work, contact potential buyers around the world, all of whom are vetted, and then arrange financing, if necessary.”

My heart sank, and it must have shown in my expression.

“You’re free to try selling them on the Internet, but I guarantee, the fee will be more like a hundred percent. You’ll be scammed out of them and wind up with neither the drawings nor the moolah. It’s your choice.”

“Do you come to see the collection?”

“I do not make house calls. I can recommend an appraiser. Leave these with me and bring me a few more—and not in fricking pizza box, if you please.”

She retrieved an acid-free marbleized portfolio with individual pockets and ribbon ties from beneath the buffed wooden counter. The entire shop smelled of lemon oil.

“And don’t get dollar signs in your eyes. We’ll have to bring these to market on a carefully planned schedule so as not to devalue them. It will take years. Give me a moment and I’ll draw up a receipt for the ones you’re leaving with me today. I suggest you enlist an attorney. I can recommend someone.”

“I have an attorney,” I said. Well, at least Bill had one.

“Good. First things first—and last.”

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On the subway ride home, I didn't quite know what to do with my hands. I felt I had forgotten something important, or lost something I would never lose. I untied and retied the cloth ribbons on the empty portfolio. As eager as I was to get back to the collection, I needed to unwind, and stopped at *The Gripevine* first. I wanted to share my good fortune with my buddies.

"The prodigal returns. Man, you look like hell. Where you been? You don't smell so good, either. What d'ya got there? Don't you ever answer your phone?"

The badgering and questions came at me in a torrent. It seemed easiest to answer just the last. I signaled to Wesley to set me up. The bourbon washed a lot of dust and cobwebs away.

"I haven't been home in a couple days. I've been at Bill's, sorting through stuff."

"How long did that take—stingy old bastard?" Artie remarked. "Forty minutes?"

"Someone from your old job came by... uh... I wrote it down somewhere," Wesley told me. "Said you hadn't answered your e-mail in over two weeks."

"Well, she's mistaken, and so are you, Wes. It's only been a couple of days."

"So what day do you think it is?"

"Middle of April, the fifteenth maybe? Damn. I gotta file my taxes. How much time I got?"

"Uh... it's May first, Charlie. You..."

"Mayday! Mayday!" Artie blared.

"You can cut the commie crap," Wesley warned.

"Not that May Day. I mean the distress call. What's going on with Charlie?"

I tapped my empty glass. Wes squinted hard at me before pouring a second. I laid a twenty on his side of the bar.

"Listen up, guys," I said. "I wanna tell you about the stuff at Bill's place." No one came within six feet of me. "Come on."

"We're not kidding. You smell pretty bad. When's the last time you showered?"

"A couple of days ago."



“The same couple of days?” Wesley asked. “No more tonight, Charlie. Go home. Get cleaned up. Then you can tell us all about it.”

I looked around in disbelief. They were all in on it. Fuckers. I’d be damned if I was gonna cut them in on Bill’s collection now. I slammed the door shut behind me. My good will vanished like mist in the sun.

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It was another couple of days before I gathered up a second sheaf of drawings to take to Zelda Popper. I became convinced the apartment was infested with rats, some of which must have died inside the walls or, worse, inside one of the drawers, where the female was chewing up the drawings to make her turd-filled nest. She may as well have shredded a hundred thousand in cash.

The nauseating odor followed me everywhere, even out into the hall. I tried to remember when I last changed clothes. Maybe I needed to do a load of wash before visiting Zelda. I wrapped myself in the thin quilt from Bill’s sleeping alcove and headed down to the laundry room. The crabby woman from 9F said not a word to me. She scurried past, pinching her nose and holding her head high.

While waiting for the dryer to finish, I decided to take a shower in the shared bathroom on my floor. It was unoccupied and I took my time. I’d left my toothbrush at home and I had no towel or washcloth, but someone had left behind a bar of scented soap. I’d forgotten what a blessing water was, how it washed away cares as well as odors. Even sins could be washed away with holy water. I closed my eyes and felt the thrumming droplets pelt my skin. Cumulonimbus: heaped with rain. By the time I stopped, my fingers had turned pruney, and the water as cold as the cataract unleashed on a cloud-scraping mountaintop.

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I caught sight of myself in the full-length mirror at the entrance of Zelda’s shop: clean but shabby, a vagrant minstrel who’d just pawned his saxophone for a couple weeks of three-square a day. All that was left of the sad affair was the portfolio of auntie’s drawings under my arm. I’d soon be trading those for a Cup-O-Soup.

“Let’s see. Let’s see.”

Zelda was no less enthused than the first time. She untied the portfolio with the flourish of a magician and, as if by a sly trick, produced a magnifying glass out of nowhere.

“*Stratus translucidus*, right on top. Marvelous. Fog reminds me of Magritte, my favorite surrealist. Style’s more like Caspar David Friedrich, though. Look here. In the foreground: a

naked man washing himself in a mountain waterfall. That water must've been freezing. Gives me the shivers looking at him.”

It sent a shiver into me, too, but for a different reason. Though it might have been a smudge, it looked like the naked figure had the same scar across his lower back as I received in a knife fight in my youth. I lay on my back on the broken bricks in one of the empty lots that would become Lincoln Center. I remember the clouds: high wispy, with red along their lowest edges. A jab of pain returned. I no longer heard what Zelda was saying—until she mentioned a sum of money that nearly convinced me I was dreaming.

“I will call my dear friend Habib to recommend someone to help you begin cataloguing. No, you must. And you must ask your attorney whether there are stipulations on how the collection must be treated. Often, a collection must remain intact, though one of this size... We'll see.”

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After runaway speculation deprived me of another night's sleep, I called the lawyer. Reluctant at first, he magically managed to fit me in that very afternoon—once I mentioned Zelda's estimate of the value of the collection.

The lawyer's office was in Washington Heights, upstate Manhattan, as some call it. The building was a pre-war gem with white terra cotta embellishments like the arabesques of frosting on a wedding cake. A sign at the end of the marble lobby and hallway indicated the basement once welcomed sixty people to its fallout shelter.

Mr. Juan de Crisco, Esq. began speaking even before shaking my hand. His rate of speech was well above the speed limit of comprehension. Sitting across from him at his juggernaut of a desk, I was transported out the window to the cumulus drifting over the George Washington Bridge. Until he slapped his palm on the desk, I did not hear a thing he said.

“Are you listening to me? There is money stipulated in the will for your hiring cataloguers and appraisers and archivists. Any help you need. Even a dry cleaner. But you must continue the collection and it must remain intact—undivided.”

I returned to earth with a thud.

“That's why I think you may want to create a trust, a museum trust. Museums create a good many expenses. Large expenses. Peculiar expenses. They're whatever we say they are.”

“But couldn't that sort of 'creative accounting' cause the trust to go bankrupt?”

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll have milked the cow long before the farmer gets up. And he’ll get to pay the milk tax, too. We’ll call you an art museum. Private. Very private. Absolutely no one admitted. I can recommend an excellent accounting firm. My brother owns it.”

I nearly slipped out of the slick vinyl-covered chair. “Are you suggesting...”

“Yes, I am. And here is the notebook Mr. Norville left you concerning his collection, the... uh... How about *The William Norville Museum of Meteorological Illustration*?”

His fully extended arm reached only halfway across his desk and I had to stand and close the distance by leaning forward on tiptoes. I flipped through the notebook and saw it was closely packed with longhand script, though no more than a couple pages in Bill’s hand.

“This might have come in handy a couple of weeks ago, you know?” I told him.

“A codicil states you must have engaged an appraiser before the notebook is released to your possession.”

“But I haven’t yet.”

“But I am sure you will do so soon. Look. I want to be your friend here. I’m assessing a paltry five-percent fee to release the notebook to you now so we can get going on the trust documents and enlist a realtor to find a suitable property to house the collection. I have a brother in commercial real estate—no, not the same brother—and...”

“Five percent? Where’s your black eye-patch?”

“OK. Ten percent.”

Mr. de Crisco, Esq. pulled the notebook away from me. I tottered over the marble and brass mementoes on his desk. He smiled and put his finger to his lips.

Reluctantly, I nodded. The notebook slipped into my hand. It was all *Monopoly* money to me anyhow. I had to admit Mr. de Crisco did his homework. He was set to make us both rich—me and him and his whole clan of Puerto Rican pirates.

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Back in Bill’s apartment, I cracked the old notebook, a leather composition book, all of it filled with writing and drawings except for the last half page. *Index Nebularum* it called itself. I learned that it had been transcribed several times and revised. The collection that towered over and surrounded me had traveled back and forth among Europe, North and South America, and North Africa, when a considerably smaller version of it, on scrolls, resided in the library at

Alexandria. This was its second time in New York, though the last time she called herself “Nieuw-Amsterdam.” Nothing explained how Bill had come into possession of the collection.

I discovered that the guide book explained everything I needed to know regarding the collation of cloud pictures. I sat engrossed, but not ensnared. I found that so long as I refrained from looking at any cloud pictures, I could pore over the notebook without losing myself. The line drawings and mathematical and algorithmic tables and charts and maps showed me how to use the *Catalogue of Clouds* to... predict the future.

Except for some of the recent strange goings-on, the time mix-ups and so on, I might have put it on the shelf with the work of L. Ron Hubbard. Instead, I decided I’d give it a chance before I sold its ass to the highest bidder. Knowing the future might be worth a couple of bucks, too. I went home and slept in my own bed. I took a shower in the morning and went to the soup joint on Broadway for lunch. I felt decent for a change.

My youthful summers at Orchard Beach with a sky chart prepared me for finding the local sidereal time from an ephemeris. I wasn’t very adept with the Internet, but I learned to pinpoint locations from modern atlas coordinates. But often both measurements were too precise for the examples in the notebook. The other co-ordinate required knowing when the thing was “born.” I tried unsuccessfully to foresee the direction in which a stock was headed, but the Vorax Corporation was “born” only after devouring all its children. No one seemed to know precisely, or even imprecisely, when it had come to life. Other companies’ origins were just as murky and racehorse owners were not inclined to share any information with me, either. Nothing I tried to predict worked. I may as well have thrown darts while blindfolded.

I thought perhaps people might be easier to predict, if only because their birth dates and places could be known. I knew my own birth date down to the hour, but I was afraid to try it, afraid what I might learn about what was waiting for me. But there was not another human being whose birth time I knew. I’d written the birthdays of a couple of the guys from *The Gripevine* in my calendar book, but I didn’t feel comfortable pressing any of them for the *time* of his birth. This sounded both weird and suspicious—rather how the racehorse owners responded to my queries. I began to think it was time to set the *Index* next to *Dianetics* and forget about it.

Feeling glum, I headed to *The Gripevine* in the hope of raising my spirits—or at least raising a couple of beers. The crowd seemed way too exuberant to suit my mood. But I wasn’t going to turn around and walk out. I had only recently been readmitted into the fold. The bartender acknowledged my entrance. I had apparently passed his sniff test.

The occasion was one of the young biker’s birthdays. He was one of the homosexual ones. He talked about meeting his lover on his nineteenth birthday and that they had now known each other for as long a time as they had not, making him all of thirty-eight. I thought it strange that I’d remember this fellow Kevin’s birthplace, too, but I did. He came from New Berlin, Wisconsin, pronounced “BER-lin.” It’s how an old Brooklynite would talk about water “berlin’ on the stove.” That’s why I remembered, I guess. I don’t hear the accent much any more.

I decided I'd buy the fellow a beer. They were all right, as long as you didn't think about what they did when they went home.

Kevin glanced up at the only clock in the place, an old beer company sign whose plastic face was brown with years of cigarette smoke from another age.

"I guess now I've been with Mitch twelve hours longer than I haven't been with him," he said. It was 6:19.

He put his arm around his buddy and kissed him on the lips. Maybe they did that in France, but here it just looked out of place—wrong. There, I said it. And then I realized he had just handed me a birthdate, birthplace, and birthtime. Bingo! How could I refuse?

I stuck to my schedule of two beers and said good-night to the happy crowd. They were all busy with the birthday boy and barely acknowledged my departure. I wanted to try my luck with the "Index of Clouds" once more and couldn't wait to get home.

My shoes had more sense of what I needed to do than I did. I walked in a fog and absentmindedly found myself at Bill's place, though my intention had been to go to my own apartment. Again I faced the tinhorn security guard who had no memory of our previous encounters and discussions, or my perfect recitation of the Preamble to the Constitution. The letter from Mr. de Crisco, which the guard read aloud, at last granted me access. Only one hellhound remained: the old woman with the nasty tongue.

Getting off the elevator on the eighth floor and walking up one flight to avoid her, I was startled to find the harridan waiting for me outside Bill's apartment.

"Not that it's any of my business..."the woman began.

"You're right," I told her. "It's not."

I got behind the door and locked it, breathing easier. A letter lay on the floor at the threshold. It was from some fellow recommended by Habib, who had been mentioned to me by Zelda Popper. He was the one who was going to help me catalogue the collection of cloud pictures. "I am very organized," he wrote. Good. I'm glad somebody was.

A rumble in my belly, an augur of hunger, was easy to ignore. I took out my pocket calendar in which I had jotted the biker's information and got to work with the almanac and ephemerides and tables. I hoped my earlier dead-ends were at least not wasted instruction. I decided to try a modest forecast only one day into the young man's future.

I took my time and did my calculations three times to be sure I hadn't made a mistake. At last I'd reduced my pages of figures to a single reference, the number of a single sketch. My hands trembled.

By then I was familiar enough with the catalogue numbering system and Bill's warren of cabinets, to find the proper drawer in a few minutes. I had my fingers on the drawing but hesitated before withdrawing it. There was no going back. One can forget, but you can't unknow a thing once you know it. You can get dried out, but you can't get unwet once you're soaked.

MPL-A19K42 was easily the most beautiful watercolor I'd yet encountered in the collection. I scouted for any of the well-known signatures or names to which Zelda had drawn my attention. I tried to guess its style and period, but could not.

Their outlines illuminated by the last rosy rays of sunset—or perhaps it was dawn—a range of dark-bellied clouds stretched from edge to edge across the heavy paper. At the left forked a streak of lightning, like a river of fire in the sky. It shone so brightly it seemed the ink must still be wet. I pulled my left hand back instinctively, as though that corner of the sketch might be hot. The sky flashed again. A river of pain coursed through the veins in my arm. The room spun. The clouds converged. The brilliant effulgence stunned me, blinded me. There was only light, a searing whiteness. Then, nothing, not even darkness.

\* \* \*

Repeating a familiar pattern, I awoke in the middle of the following afternoon, stiff and sore, my cheek pressed against the floor. Every limb and joint creaked and groaned. The memory of the watercolor and the fainting episode it precipitated came to me only slowly, seeping into me like a chill. I turned the drawing over before I located my glasses and focused on it. I no longer doubted the hypnotic power of the clouds. Whether they could tell the future remained to be seen.

After washing up at the communal sink down the hall and trying to straighten what remained of my hair, I retrieved the leather notebook and, this time, locked the door to Bill's apartment. I stopped at the soup joint, which was uncrowded at that hour on a Saturday. I took my time, and pored over the notebook.

The power of the previous night's experience told me I had hit a nerve. But what did it mean? What should I say to the young biker? Should I tell someone else? What should be my advice: that he stay away from all electrical devices? I'd wish him good luck with that one. That he stay away from anything that made fire? That he not take a shower?

When I looked up, it was raining—not hard, but it seemed it was just winding up for the pitch. I decided to wait it out. A couple hours disappeared down the rabbit hole of my attention to the notebook. The owner flashed the restaurant lights. I thought it was lightning. I paid up, making off with one of his crappy plastic menus to cover my head.

I decided I'd say nothing at *The Gripevine*. I'd reconnoiter, keeping my ears open and my mouth shut for once. The mood was quite different than the night before. It was a pretty good

crowd, but they were quiet. Everyone gathered at the far end of the bar, speaking in hushed tones.

“Where’s the black crepe?” I asked. Wes, the bartender, dashed down the bar faster than I’d seen him move in a while. He put a finger to his lips and looked over his eyebrows at me.

“Kevin was killed tonight. Crashed on the Sawmill. Struck by lightning someone said.”

“What?” I asked, not sure any part of what I’d heard had sunk in.

“He’s taking it awfully hard. You mind your tongue,” Wes admonished.

I motioned for a whiskey. Wes understood to leave the bottle with me. I drifted down the bar to where the bikers and a lot of the old regulars had gathered. Two fellows had a hand on each of Mitch’s shoulders. He was Kevin’s... uh... whatever he was. His face looked like he’d been beaten up: red and splotchy. His eyes were swollen with tears.

I raised the bottle of house whiskey in Mitch’s direction, but his chums shook their heads at me.

“Why didn’t I go with him?” Mitch moaned.

“Sure. That would’ve helped,” Artie told him. “You’d both be dead.”

“But I wouldn’t have been left behind.”

Mitch hunched forward as though having stomach cramps. He heaved with deep sighs, but at least I didn’t hear a sound from him. Crying makes me uncomfortable, especially when a man does it. It’s just wrong. There. I said it.

I didn’t know what to say to anybody. I got into a private conversation with myself and the bottle of whiskey. I can’t say I ever missed anybody that badly, certainly not my ex-wife, especially not when we were still together. I had a best friend in college, but I can barely picture his face these days. It was touching that these two guys cared about each other, but you can overdo a good thing.

The whiskey perked me up a little at first, but then it made me glum. More than anything, I was sorry I hadn’t warned the biker. But what would I have said? “Be sure to attach a lightning rod to your motorcycle before you go for a drive tonight. You never know.”

Why had the collection been entrusted to me? To play the horses? To beat the stock market? Maybe I’d never figure out how to save the whole world with the prognostications of the *Catalogue of Clouds*, but it must at least be good for doing the people I knew a good turn or two.

I felt so bad I'd failed my first time out. It cost a young fellow his life because I hadn't figured out that a bolt of lightning meant he was going to be struck by a bolt of lightning. Who would have figured? If the heavens were going to be that literal, why not pictures of skywriting, with everything all spelled out? Why leave the future to chance?

I decided to go home. After settling up with Wes, I turned back to the group and waved. I may as well have been invisible. Thank God no one knew my part in the whole business. They'd have banished me for good.

\* \* \*

This time I took the elevator to the tenth floor and walked down. The crabby neighbor was nowhere to be seen. Another note lay on the floor. I kicked it aside and locked the door.

Returning to the open drawer where I'd found the watercolor, I picked it up from the floor and flipped it over. I examined the drawing more closely, searching for some detail I'd overlooked. Did it lightning in the picture once more, or was the fluorescent tube blinking its death throes? I waited for it to happen again.

The dark clouds blossomed, their shapes forming, deforming, and reforming, becoming whatever I was thinking about. Was I making this happen?

A black paladin reared his horse and thrust his lance toward the lightning. A meandering stream of fire snaked from the tip of his spear up to the cloud, connecting the two and unleashing an explosion of light. Horse and rider merged with the clouds, becoming shapeless mist once again. It grew darker than any night I had ever seen, moonless and starless—empty.

\* \* \*

I did not awaken so much as regain consciousness. The tragedy of the previous night remained clear in my mind, though I was hoping it might be a dream, pretended it *was* a dream.

The cloud hallucinations, on the other hand, appeared all too real. Only the lower half of the lightning watercolor remained, and what was left was singed along its edges. I returned the fragment to its drawer. The whole place could have gone up in a fireball. Maybe I'd get a fire extinguisher, except there was no place to put one. I'd have to rely on the coiled hose in the hallway. I wondered when it was last tested.

Stumbling and sleepwalking through the rest of the afternoon, I determined I was going to help my friends. I'd find a way. I would not let another disaster befall a single one of them.

I didn't like the idea of a homosexual, but I hadn't yet met any homosexuals I didn't like—any I knew about, that is. The ones that hung out at *The Gripevine* were OK. There. I said it. Even if I didn't like somebody, that didn't mean I wanted something bad to happen to him. I



was going to think of somebody else for a change. Besides, I was sure I'd make plenty of dough from the cloud collection. I didn't need to charge my friends for telling their fortunes, for a little nebulomancy for their benefit. I could afford to be a nice guy.

Seeing the New York State lottery sign in the window gave me the idea that I could get the guys' particulars by suggesting there was a friend of mine who cast lottery horoscopes. They'd each get his lucky numbers. And they really would be just as lucky as any other random numbers I could assign them. I'd keep an eye on them from a distance and figure out how to give them a heads-up if I saw any signs of danger on the horizon.

The mood was still a bit somber, but I overheard a couple subdued chuckles. I thought it better to tell them about my "psychic friend" in a day or two when the novelty of the young fellow's death had worn off. I had my customary two beers and bade my buddies a good night. They acknowledged me with a nod or salute. I turned to leave.

On the short wall by the front door was a print of enormous cloud ships over a turquoise sea and white beach. It was an overly glossy photograph, a slick travel poster, and not my taste. I didn't recall having noticed it before. Maybe it was a new addition. From where? I turned to ask Wes, and the room kept turning. Everyone at the bar raced past, and did it again, faster. I reached out for the bar rail. The spinning came to an abrupt stop, but the Tilt-A-Whirl seemed to have jettisoned most of the crowd that stood there a moment earlier. I could not focus on Wes' face or understand what he was telling me.

"You heard me, Charlie. This was your last time."

"What are you saying?"

"That you're not to come in here again. Look at this place. There should be two bartenders on the weekend. But you're scaring everybody away. Nobody wants to be here when you're around."

"Me? What did *I* do?"

"Do we have to go through that again? You got the bikers afraid to ride their motorcycles and the Old Guard won't get on a bus. And we're all afraid to cross the street. OK. I'll grant that you hit a couple lucky guesses, but most of your predictions are horse shit, Charlie. Jobs have been lost and divorces filed over your advice. You have no friends here. Go home."

"You bastard. I try to help and this is my thanks. You're all bastards," I shouted, waving to the rest of the room even though I didn't recognize anybody. I didn't recall making any more predictions, either, but that seemed beside the point.

The instant I let loose of the bar, Dorothy's house resumed its whirlwind tour of Oz. I could not pick out a single object or face. The entire barroom was a single unrelenting blur. I hadn't felt this bad in years. I thought I was going to be sick.

\* \* \*

I did not awaken so much as regain consciousness. I ran my mind up and down my body and could tell I was naked and tumescent. There was the weight and texture of a cotton sheet lying upon me. Was I dead?

The notion of motion was far away. With all my focus and strength, I opened my eyes. The sheet was not covering my face. I was not dead, or at least no one else had found out yet.

I realized something was pricking in my left forearm. A white square hovered over my head, surrounded by a field of pastel. It was a ceiling, perfect, unblemished and, therefore, neither my place nor Bill's. The corners and edges of the four walls sharpened. The color was an indeterminate sky-blue pink. A cool light glowed just above my toes. I could not move my head, nor anything else.

A calloused and gritty pair of hands cupped my right hand. They were like potatoes just out of the ground, and warmed by the sun. A voice equally gnarled and sandy hushed me.

"Not to stir yourself. This is Shakti Pat, come to collect a debt."

"The p-pizza," I sputtered.

"A good man remembers his debts. I came for the money before you went to the checkout."

"Am I ch-checking out?"

"Not so much now. You will be OK, instead of KO." He laughed at himself.

"My wallet's in my p-pants, wherever..."

A cheap metal door squeaked.

"Ah, yes. Ten dollars, 98 pennies. Two pennies back from ten and one."

"Now we're square?"

"No. I must have the notebook, too."

"What..." I closed my eyes again. It hurt to think.

“Why do you want to know the future? Do you not have enough to do to keep busy with today? You must forget.”

“How can you forget what you already know?” I asked Shakti Pat.

He remained indistinct, the haloes of light all around him blurring the edges and washing out his face.

“That is easy, to forget. You pretend everything happened to your friend, an imaginary friend, a good friend, and you send him on a long cruise because he has had a very bad time. Your friend so loves the Kingdom of Amygdala—or wherever you have sent him—that he never wants to come back. He sends you a postcard with beautiful stamps, and a loving, forgiving message, but it is lost in the mail. Good-bye.”

Shakti Pat placed his rough hand on my forehead. It struck me as a blessing.

\* \* \*

I sat on a bench in Riverside Park facing Bill’s gracefully curved apartment building. With so few leaves left on the planes and the elms, and so little hair left on my head to shield me, I was happy the day was so thickly overcast. There was no sky at all, just gray in every direction: so homogeneously cloud-filled it was cloudless.

Yellow tape and a police order cordoned off the street in front of Bill’s building. The first dumpster screeched and clanged to a halt, and instantly three Mexicans rushed to it with three laundry carts laden with cloud pictures. Three more workers—Dominicans, I think—joined them at the curb and helped them, two to each cart, to tilt the canvas laundry baskets into the open gate of the dumpster. One more fellow, standing inside, pushed the drawings to the back and piled them up with a snow shovel. As the first three men returned to the service entrance, three of their companions emerged and exchanged the three empty laundry baskets for three loaded ones.

Their relay was efficient and it seemed they’d be done in an hour. But it took them the rest of the day. The gate of the steel dumpster was clanged shut before the piles and bundles of clouds could topple out. The final loads for the day had to be flung over the top. The workers grunted and sweated with the effort.

The crew chased after every stray or windblown cloudscape. None escaped them and, at the end of the day, they stretched a heavy gray tarpaulin over the top of the dumpster and tied it. I made certain no drawing found its way into any of the workers’ pants or shirts or jackets. I still held the one that the doorman had found caught in the revolving door of the lobby. He gave me a curious look and went back to his post.

The watercolor that he handed me looked like a drawing of the Twin Towers of the First World Trade Center after the attack by Moslem terrorists, its two horizontal bands of thick black

smoke drifting towards Brooklyn. But the illustration could have been old enough to depict the burning of “the topless towers of Ilium.” I did not know and did not want to know. I wanted only to be rid of it all.

I scrunched the drawing in my hand and stuffed it under the tarp. It had made me think of my ex-wife, Helen. After putting in a brief appearance at *The Gripevine*, where the chill was again beginning to thaw, I went home. My sleep was as untroubled as a cloudless sky.

\* \* \*

On Friday, the last dumpster was delivered and the previous day’s hauled away by the same huge truck. The sounds resembled the slow failure of a bridge, crashing girder by girder into the river. I was happy my long watch was coming to an end.

I spent the early afternoon writing a short note to my ex-wife Helen. The second letter under the front door had been from her. It was gracious and forgiving, and she suggested we have supper together some time. I hadn’t seen her in nearly ten years. Having only enough postage for a card, not a letter, I decided that was likely better. I would not have enough space to say more than I should. The picture on the postcard, not too surprisingly, was an old cityscape with blue skies and towering clouds. I quickly affixed the stamp and tucked it in my pocket.

The empty container was dutifully filled to the brim with the last of the drawings and watercolors from the collections of the stillborn *William Norville Museum of Meteorological Illustration*. There was not a thing for which Mr. Juan de Crisco could fault me. The collection had remained together to the very end. And he’d reaped considerable financial reward as Bill’s executor. And I wound up only about ten dollars in the hole.

I pictured the clouds being dumped into a landfill in Westchester, swirling around a smelly, garbage-filled pit until the rain splashed them with mud and filth, plastering them to the mounds of trash beneath them. Then new strata would be unloaded atop them and, slowly, they would decompose and return to the earth.

I felt a tinge of regret for the fortune that had been lost and the opportunities missed, but “money often costs too much.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, I felt little sorrow over the destruction of something that very nearly destroyed me and my friends. In the end, I did not know whether it was I who was making things happen—or the clouds. Perhaps—and it may be true—I had spared the world the awful fate of knowing its fate.

A slow rain began. I turned my collars up. I dropped the postcard in the mailbox and headed home.

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)