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His Hands Pass Like Clouds
by Rajnar Vajra

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I'll start by telling you about Uncle Joe, the Cloudman.

As far back as I can remember, he was a neighborhood fixture, relentlessly painting his sky-landscapes down at Beck's Beach, only two and a half blocks from the old yellow house I grew up in. Common sense insists that Joe must have sneaked off occasionally to buy a new canvas or sleep or use a bathroom or cash a check; but for the life of me, I can't visualize our beach without the Cloudman. It's easier to picture it without the ocean.

Everyone in our small community pitched in, making sure Joe had plenty to eat and drink (he wouldn't touch meat or milk) and he never seemed sick or even uncomfortable. His chief problem in life seemed to be weather that was either too bad or too good.

Starting when I was six years old, if the summer mornings looked encouraging, Ma would send me trotting down to the seashore with a huge canvas tote slung over my shoulder, straps clutched in my good hand. That is, I'd start out trotting. My burden would soon wear me down until I finally needed to sit on the sidewalk and rest every few yards.

Just thinking about that tote makes my shoulder ache, even after all these years! My brother, who went to a summer school for "gifted" children and was allergic to carrying stuff, once called it "Atlas's Sack" (I don't mind holding the world, folks, but someone get this damn sack off me!). It typically contained four peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (Joe could eat and paint at the same time), two bananas, carrot sticks, a big thermos of overly diluted Juicy Juice, paper cups, a Tupperware jar of filtered water for the Cloudman's atomizer, and four oranges -- one was for me.

If all that wasn't enough weight for a handicapped youngster, the inevitable bottle of sunscreen lurked beneath the sandwiches, cocooned in Ma's ultimate barrier: Reynold's Wrap.

"Good morning, young Gregory," Joe would always announce when I got within twenty feet of his easel, even when I crept up from behind. "I trust that today's glorious sun will reflect off your best behavior?"

"I'll try real hard, Uncle Joe," I'd always respond, lying through my baby teeth.

The "Uncle" was honorary but earned. An understanding had crystallized between the eccentric painter and the local parents that he would act as an unofficial daycare provider in exchange for meals and resident privileges (trust me, the parents got the best of that bargain.)

I always wondered how such an understanding began. When I called the painter "eccentric," I meant it. Just to give you an inkling, the man spent

every day, even in the worst winter weather, outside in the company of the Atlantic Ocean, and he never painted a single wave, sailboat, or seagull. Just clouds. As long as he could see clouds he'd paint them. A big, clear plastic tarp was his answer to rain or snow. On foggy days, not commonplace on Cape Cod, he'd just stand there and patiently study the bland sky.

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I have to admit that Joe was an ugly old cuss. He had a sun-dried tomato of a face and his eyes were undeniably scary. Even my dad, Mr. You-Think-This-Is-Bad-I've-Seen-Worse, once confessed (under pressure) that he couldn't remember a fiercer case of cataracts. Joe's corneas were so thickly encrusted, it seemed impossible for him to perceive anything smaller than an ocean liner, let alone wield a liner brush. Not to mention keep an eye on brats like me.

Yet he did every task gracefully. He watched over us like a faithful hawk and the quality of his art never suffered. Those paintings sold fast too, usually to Martha's Vineyard gallery owners who, like mercantile mountains, were forced to come to Mohammed. Sometimes tourists who were too savvy or insensitive to be discouraged by the "Residents Only" signs would drift over our pathetic few square yards of hauled-in sand (which had to be replaced after big storms) and watch Joe working. Most would soon haul out cash or checks, even while the fast-drying acrylics were still tacky, and to their own astonishment, hand over whatever the Cloudman required without one syllable of bargaining.

Joe's artwork was exquisite. The painted clouds appeared swollen with a ... religious light, and they evoked peculiar feelings that you could almost name. The Cloudman's big secret, or so he claimed, was all in the under-painting.

* * * *

Even discounting the cataracts, it was a mystery how Joe managed to keep track of as many as seven kids without turning his face away from sky, paints, or canvas. Ears like Superman (and a bladder to match) was the consensus. If any of us got overly obnoxious, or took one step past the shallowest waters, that incredible voice of his would come after us like a charging bull.

"GREGORY. COME HERE AT ONCE."

I've never heard anyone else with pipes like his. His voice was suitable for a major angel or at the very least, a galactic emperor -- deep, powerful, and so resonant that if you closed your eyes and listened to Joe, you couldn't tell if he was standing directly in front of you or behind. And his inflection could be commanding. Oh yes! No kid ever ignored or disobeyed the Cloudman when he was issuing direct orders.

And if someone really screwed up, they'd have to stand beside the bizarre old geezer and hold his free hand for awhile as if crossing a dangerous street. Most of us found this experience to be downright sickening. Not because Joe smelled bad as you might expect from someone so old and who never seemed to take a shower or brush his teeth (the Cloudman always smelled faintly of fresh gingerbread). But the man had ghastly hands; they felt like skin stuffed with unshelled walnuts.

It was different for me. When I screwed up, Joe always insisted on holding my left hand (my friends had dubbed it "The Claw" because it used to be all crunched up). I'd stand to his right and he'd simply transfer his brush to his left hand and keep painting. He worked slower that way and I could never figure out why he never held my good hand or made me face the opposite way.

The first time I misbehaved, I found the handholding excruciatingly creepy although I was numb to the texture of his grip. But then, after a few minutes, my bad hand began to feel as if warm water was flowing through it. In those early days, it seldom felt anything, let alone warm. And when Joe finally let go, I could actually wiggle my useless fingers a sixteenth of an inch.

After that, of course, I was the perfect Problem Child at least once a

day. And The Claw kept improving...

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I seldom thought about Uncle Joe after I went to New York City in 1990 to study at Pratt. That same fall, my parents moved to Connecticut ostensibly to be closer to my brother, Tim, and his newly pregnant wife, Dana, but really to lie in wait for their grandchild. So when I went home for breaks, it was to an unfamiliar home.

Joe seemed distant and irrelevant when I finally got my first real job with a big ad agency in Manhattan. In the ten years it took me to work my way up to Graphics and Art Director, I only remembered the Cloudman when I was telling someone how I first got interested in art or on the rare days my hand had a partial relapse.

But you can't truly forget anyone who _shaped_ you.

* * * *

January 3, 2008 was the day of the car crash. I won't sicken you (or myself) by recounting the grosser details, but I was taking a cab to my office and my driver tried to beat out one red light too many. The driver wound up virtually decapitated and I wound up pinned in a crushed taxi for two eternal hours.

According to my doctors, I should have died. Instead, I landed in Mount Sinai with damages: legs whose bones had become 3D jigsaw puzzles, four badly broken ribs, a collapsed lung, and the kind of internal bleeding that makes your closest relatives drive down from New England post haste.

I didn't die, but it took some time before I was grateful about that. If you don't already know, I pray you never learn how much the human body can _hurt_.

After four operations, two months of recovery, and six months of Torquemada-approved physical therapy, I was hobbling around like a hundred-year-old man in terrible shape for his age.

Don't get me wrong: hobbling was an _achievement_. Initially, my prognosis hadn't included standing, let alone walking. But, despite New York's apparently sincere efforts to make life a joy for the ... physically challenged, the city was no place for me until and unless I regained mobility. Or developed a far more accepting attitude.

My brother, bless his heart, suggested I return to the old yellow house on the Cape and get some hired help including a part-time therapist. Every decade or so, like clockwork, Tim demonstrates why everyone calls him a genius. My parents had rented the family home when they moved to Mystic, Connecticut, but luckily the latest renters were eager to escape their lease.

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One nice thing about the Modern Age: it's quite practical to work more than a few blocks from the office. When things go wrong, however, you've got no one at hand to complain to....

If you've learned about the advertising world by watching, say, _Bewitched_, you've might have the wrong idea. On TV, ad agencies are places where creative people sit around brainstorming all day -- when they're not trying to harvest clients using raw ideas with, perhaps, a few sketches as visual aids....

Well, that's not how it works anymore (if it ever did). HDTV time is terrifyingly expensive, so our field is terrifyingly competitive. In the end, every penny we receive is dependent on customer satisfaction. In order to nail down a final contract, our agency has to produce _finished_ products, broadcast-ready, and then sell them to suspicious clients who've been previously wined, dined, and flattered to a turn. There is, as the fellow jumping off the Empire State Building admitted, an element of risk. Finished ads cost real money; making them is essentially making a short movie. SAG actors don't come cheap, and the famous ones swallow the budget whole. Then there's the writers, the crew, the director...

And if you're thinking that computer-generated high-speed graphics must be cheaper, you ought to have a little talk with Tim Burton or Michael Eisner. They can explain in soft voices exactly how cheap it is to do state-of-the-art

computer animation.

The harsh truth is that my agency loses money if the final agreement grosses us under two million dollars. The pressure is nasty and there is always a looming deadline.

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On October 8, 2008, the very night "Team Champ" found the big artifact under Lake Champlain, I was under the gun again. I'd been tweaking this toothbrush commercial scheduled to be unveiled for the client the next day and had run into a problem I couldn't put my finger on. I suspected it had something to do with the voiceover; we'd originally hired David Hyde Pierce for the role, but he'd had to cancel at the last minute and his replacement lacked David's flawless timing.

I liked the commercial's basic concept. The opening was set at ground level in a grand, but alien forest. Suddenly the point of view flies upwards into a pink sky. The "camera" pans downward. The forest is receding through perspective and shiny white patches appear around its edges. Our intention here was for the viewer, for an instant, to think the entire forest is growing in a vast crack in some gargantuan iceberg. But then, as the camera moves even higher, the truth is revealed: the impressive foliage is merely some salad remnants stuck in someone's molar. A dry voice asks, "Ever get the feeling your brush is leaving a little something behind?"

Clever, and creepy enough to grip the attention. Yet, as I said, something subtle was wrong. I put the first ten seconds of the piece on "autoloop" and watched and listened to it at least fifty times, feeling more and more uncomfortable and increasingly unsure why. This is the kind of thing that drives ad people nuts. Finally, I ignored the visuals and studied my editing program's virtual VU meters.

For no good reason, the Hyde Pierce sound-alike had put a tiny extra stress on the word "behind." Odd, but so what?

So I watched the commercial again and froze the picture at the exact moment "behind" was uttered. And then I saw it. If you looked at it the wrong way, the damn molar looked very much like a stylized bare ass. Somewhat jarring in a toothbrush commercial.

I used my software's automated mixdown to soft-pedal "behind" and used the graphics editor to redact the tooth (luckily this section of the animation was a "cloned" sequence so that redrawing the tooth in one cell changed all three hundred images). Then I watched the ad a few dozen more times before reluctantly e-mailing it to my agency. The file was vast and needed to be sent with redundant "shake" demands to confirm that no information was getting lost in transmission. You don't dare compress any file with so much visual detail. Even by broadband it was going to take at least twenty minutes before the transfer was complete. And I couldn't go to sleep until the baby was safely in bed.

With nothing to do for the moment, I leaned back in my chair and caught up with how tense I'd become. My left hand was misbehaving, clenched tightly enough to break a pencil, and my legs were numb.

I forced myself to stand up and went for a long walk, all the way to the back door, partly to stretch and partly to find out how cold the night had gotten. But when I saw the clouds glowing faintly from the gibbous moon ... I remembered Uncle Joe and wondered if he was watching the same clouds from his usual haunt at the beach.

The idea was ridiculous; it was ten past eleven and surely the man slept sometime. Assuming, that is, he was still alive -- no one had mentioned Joe since I'd been back; but then, people tended to take him for granted...

It bothered me that I hadn't asked about the Cloudman. Now, I couldn't stop thinking about him. And the more I thought, the more I wanted to go see if he was still down there. Could I make it the entire two and a half blocks without help? I hadn't walked that far in a single stretch since the accident.

I put on a jacket and pulled the crutches from my closet. My favorite

physical therapist, Ms. Deborah Bloom, had suggested I stop using them. "You'll never fully recover, Mr. Burns," she had told me without a smile, "if you insist on using crutches as a crutch."

The hell with it, I thought. It's only a few stone-throws away, for God's sake. I could crawl there and back if necessary. So I obediently left the crutches behind and cautiously hobbled down my porch steps, determined to show the sidewalk who was boss.

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The final half-block was terrible. It was all downhill, which was much harder for me than uphill. My legs and hips were killing me, and with every step, white-hot needles stabbed into my tailbone.

When I came to the parking lot directly behind the beach, I had to lean on the bike-rack and simply breathe for a minute. I felt like I was six again, recuperating from carrying Atlas's Sack. Looking toward the surf and shading my tired eyes against the weak glare of a distant street light, I grew an instant set of goose bumps. I hadn't really expected to see him but the Cloudman was there all right, facing the sea as always, and also as usual, looking upwards.

His set-up hadn't changed either. The same big easel was tethered to the ground by staked ropes -- in my whole life, I'd only seen it blow over once. The narrow tray that Joe used in lieu of a palette was still clamped to the front of the easel and I wondered if he still rinsed it in brine and scrubbed it clean with salt...

Walking through sand in my condition was no picnic. By the time I reached Joe, my lower body was going into spasms.

"Good evening, young Gregory," he said warmly without glancing in my direction. He raised both arms in a gesture that took me back nearly thirty years and pointed at the sky with fingers and brush, letting his hands hang in the air as if they were floating. "The moon visits the House of Aquarius bringing -- ah! There's one now!" His arms descended and he resumed painting. "Did you see it? The shooting star? How it streaked toward hidden Sagittarius like one of his own arrows in reverse?" The man still had that phenomenal voice and that rococo way of putting things.

"For God's Sake, Joe! You remember me?" I was doubly amazed. He hadn't seen me in eighteen years and not only had he recognized me instantly -- and apparently without looking -- he'd remembered my childhood fascination with astronomy.

"Remember you, my young friend? October's pet, mighty, flighty, Pegasus, watches from above as I watch from below and neither of us ... knows how to forget." The artist shook his head grimly and continued in a more casual tone. "I've been expecting you for weeks."

"Sorry, Joe, I've been meaning to get down here since I got back, but -- did you hear what happened to me?"

"Certainly. Your parents keep in close touch with their friends here, do they not?"

I stared at the Cloudman's homely profile and thought about the absolute trust the neighborhood had placed in him and the countless happy days I'd spent under his clouded but watchful eye. This man was important to me and I'd never fully appreciated it.

"Uncle Joe, I've ... I've missed you. Terribly."

"Bless you for saying so. I've missed you too. You were a delightful child. Intelligent and good-hearted and always so inventive."

"Inventive? Oh. You mean about causing trouble? Jesus! How embarrassing. I never thought about it from your point of -- I must have caused you one hell of a lot of grief."

"Why be embarrassed? I knew you were doing it for your hand."

For the second time tonight, goose bumps sprang to attention. The back of my neck tingled.

"You were aware of the effect you were having? That's ... very interesting."

I stared down at the little water-filled atomizer the painter used to keep his paints moist as they sat on the tray, but found no answers. Children easily accept things adults would find incredible and I wasn't a child any more...

"I don't get it, Joe. What are you? Some kind of healer?"

The old man sighed deeply and the breeze carried a faint scent of gingerbread to me. "These days, I'm only a painter. I have no great aptitude for healing. There are dying singers whose voices are far stronger than mine, but they are elsewhere and I am here. So be it. We have made your left hand into our private channel. Why don't you take my hand now, as you used to, and we will see if your legs will dance to my feeble song."

So I did it, held his right hand with my left and felt awkward and foolish -- until my knees suddenly began to tingle. I couldn't think of a thing to say and wasn't even sure what to think, so I just scratched my legs surreptitiously and watched the man paint.

He'd lost none of his skills, but his art appeared different in the moonlight. Although it was nearly midnight and the moon was getting low, the night was so clear and my vision so adjusted, that the sky was surprisingly bright. There were clouds up there, puffy cumulous jobs, but not too many. They were as still as if they'd been nailed to the stars.

The matching clouds in Joe's painting were extraordinary. They were obviously modeled on the real ones, but the artist had taken liberties. The faint extrusions on the painted billowy edges seemed close to forming recognizable shapes, and the intensity of light in the centers made the clouds suggest distant nebulae or coalescing galaxies.

What most grabbed my eye, however, were the dark spaces between the clouds; in daylight, they wouldn't have been so prominent. Many didn't match the real sky at all. These particular shapes were unfamiliar -- or maybe I'd seen them in Joe's paintings before and they hadn't quite registered. Each shape had the purposeful and simple design usually associated with written letters or numbers. One looked like a "v" with a cloverleaf blob in the middle. As a graphic artist, I know a character when I see one. But if these were letters, I wondered, what was the language?

"Have you left some of your pain ... behind, Gregory?"

For an instant, Joe canted his head and the moonlight glinted slyly off his cataracts. The tiny stress he'd put on the word "behind" put the crowning touch of weirdness on the evening. I was sure the emphasis had been deliberate, as if the Cloudman had somehow known about the problems I'd had with the toothbrush commercial.

"Joe," I began, but then wasn't sure what to ask or how to ask it.

"Your legs? Better or no?"

"My God! I hadn't noticed ... this is incredible ... the pain is gone! I mean completely! I don't remember my hand changing so -- "

"You are an adult now and an adult whose heart remains open can hear much more than a child."

"Hear? What do you mean? Hear what, exactly? How is this possible?"

"There are some things, young Gregory, that an old fool should not hope to explain."

I couldn't get him to say anything more on the subject and I felt too pleased and confused to keep trying. After a long stretch of companionable silence, I said goodnight, promised to return soon, and headed for home. On the way, I tried to glimpse Pegasus through the glaze of the streetlight, but couldn't. My legs felt wonderful. The old punch line, "it feels so good when it stops," kept going through my head.

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I have learned, by trying everything else, that I function best by getting up at the same time every morning no matter how late I go to sleep.

Which didn't make it any easier to force my body out of bed when the alarm sounded. And last night, I'd evidently forgotten to push the timer button on my automatic coffee maker. Only a fellow addict will understand what

a blow that was.

Cursing myself, I switched on the Krups, flopped on the couch, flipped on the TV, and stared at the flatscreen in a caffeine-deprived stupor. The channel was set to one of those morning shows where they rarely scratch more than the gloss on the surface of an interesting story. Truthfully, I was paying more attention to the happy squeals and grunts of my magic elixir brewing ... until the report about "Team Champ" came on.

Since spring, a team of cryptozoologists had been working up near Burlington, Vermont, doing research in Lake Champlain. The team had the latest multi-source sonar equipment, two mini-sub, and one dubious goal: to finally track down (if it existed) the local version of the Loch Ness monster, the ultra-elusive "Champie." It was a big job; the surface area of this lake is over 450 square miles....

Like other such expeditions before them, they found no dinosaurs, giant sea serpents, or even the prehistoric whales some had predicted, but early last evening they located something else, something that made my eyes spring open pre-coffee. One section of Lake Champlain's floor had reflected a unique sonic "fingerprint." There, buried beneath tons of muck, was evidently a large oval object, fifty meters across the narrowest part. The scientists weren't sure what the thing was or what it was made of -- some form of plastic perhaps -- and they sure as hell had no idea how it got there or where it came from. But it was clearly something manufactured. Naturally, the TV hosts tried to make someone on Team Champie use the word "spaceship," but none of the scientists would play along.

From the thickness of silt, one member of the team had estimated that the object had been sitting on the bottom for two hundred years. There was no saying how much longer it would keep sitting there. Champlain gets to 400 feet deep and extracting such a monstrosity and getting it on dry land was a problem nearly as heavy as the artifact itself.

At the moment, scientists and engineers were modifying the mechanical arms on the mini-sub, adapting them for goo-removal and cleaning. With any luck, they'd soon have pictures of the object's surface.

Rich food for thought. Possibly too rich.

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I wasted an hour in useless speculations before remembering some phone calls I'd planned to make. First, I cancelled the scheduled grocery delivery for the day. My legs weren't quite what they'd been the night before, but I could at least do my own damn shopping now (I'd been able to drive a car for months). Then I called Dottie Kierkenbart who was this year's Resident Coordinator, told her my condition had suddenly improved, and asked her to include me in the "food-bucket brigade." She said she was delighted I was better and that, starting in two weeks, I could bring Uncle Joe his lunch on Tuesdays and his dinner on Saturdays if it wouldn't be too inconvenient.

The one person I should have called but didn't was my therapist, Deborah Bloom. I wanted to see the expression on her face when I danced around the room. I have to admit it: I had hopes for a different kind of future relationship with Ms. Bloom.

* * * *

After one last call (to the office to see if the clients had been subjected to the commercial yet -- they hadn't), I strolled back to the beach. This time the trip seemed as short as it was.

The weather was sending mixed messages today. It was warm enough when the wind wasn't blowing, but the frequent gusts seemed to come straight from the Arctic Circle.

The Cloudman owned several extra layers of clothing he would don in subfreezing weather, but a mild chill like this was nothing to him. He was still dressed in the familiar gray pullover that had seen better decades.

In the daylight, I noticed something I'd missed the night before: Joe hadn't changed much, if at all, in eighteen years. Of course, he'd always looked about as old as anyone could get...

"Ah, young Gregory. How are the legs this glorious morning?"

Joe was working on a new painting but I spotted the same negative-space shapes I'd seen the night before. Some were upside-down or sideways to their previous orientation, but I was sure they were identical --

"Gregory?"

"Sorry, Uncle Joe, I got distracted. My legs? You're a miracle worker; that's for sure! I'd still like to learn how you -- "

Joe was shaking his head ruefully, "Yet you are still in some pain?"

"How did you know? It's trivial, really. Absolutely nothing compared to what I've been going through. I figured maybe a few more of your ... treatments?"

"What your legs require now is use. I'm certain your friend will know just the right exercises."

"My friend? You mean Deborah? Who told you about her?"

"People here are interested in each other. Isn't it comforting to live somewhere where neighbors look after their own?"

"Oh, they look all right! Sometimes I think this place is more like a damn fishbowl than a community! Which reminds me ... there was the strangest story on the news. Did anyone happen to mention a big object they found up at Lake Champlain?"

"No. What kind of object?"

"Something huge and smooth and oval although they can only 'see' it with sonar at the moment. It was buried in a deep part of the lake."

Joe actually stopped painting and turned to face me. That might not seem like a big deal to you, but to me it was like the sun suddenly turned blue.

"Please, Gregory. Tell me everything about this." He returned to the canvas slowly. His usual motion, if he had to step away from his work for a few seconds, was closer to a rubber band snapping back.

So I repeated what little I knew and the Cloudman painted as if he wasn't listening. But he was breathing unevenly and his hands were trembling slightly; I've seen rocks less steady than Joe's hands. When I was done, he asked only one question:

"What do these scientists believe they have uncovered?"

"They aren't saying, but the way they're not saying it ... they obviously think they've found a real live flying saucer."

Joe muttered something under his breath and I got such a strong feeling he wanted to be alone, my still-weak legs carried me off almost before I could say goodbye.

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The Cloudman's reaction was so out of character, I found myself starting a major house-cleaning project just to take my mind off all the things I didn't understand.

Having functional legs allowed me to go up into the attic to store away some odds and ends (like my crutches). It may seem odd to you, but this was the first time I'd ever been up there. The attic had been strictly off-limits when I was a kid -- too dangerous, my parents had claimed -- and my dad had even kept the pull-down staircase padlocked to keep my hyper-curious brother out. The door was still padlocked, but now I had the key.

For me, this was something of a rite of passage. I stood on a kitchen chair, unlocked the overhead panel, and tugged on the cord until the old hickory stairs reached the hallway floor. Mustiness wafted down from above. With a strong if meaningless sense of achievement, I climbed.

They say a great deal of house-dust is shed human skin. If so, some giant must've been homesteading my attic for the last few centuries.

My flashlight spotted the chain for a dangling light-fixture and when I pulled, I was surprised that the bulb worked. I took one look around, shook my head in dismay, and started organizing the place. The ocean of time had left vast deposits up here and had apparently left them at random. Fifteen minutes into the chore, I moved an enormous birdcage aside. Who, among my relatives,

had ever owned a peacock or possibly a falcon? Beneath the cage was a gray, nearly flat cardboard box.

Inside the box were old photos of the earliest settlers in this neighborhood, which included my grandparents (on my Dad's side). I suppose that's redundant; there will never be any new photos of any of these people. The pictures had browned with age but they were still clear enough, and the bare bulb overhead bright enough, to show details. It was those details that had me sitting down, my mouth hanging open, on the rough wooden slats of the attic floor.

The photo at the top of the pile, for example, showed my grandfather, Arthur Burns, standing next to the Cloudman. The pair had their arms around each other's shoulders and the Cloudman looked every bit as old and odd as he'd looked two hours ago!

Just how old was Uncle Joe?

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My father wasn't exactly evasive on the phone when I called him up, but he wasn't forthcoming either.

"I'm sorry, Greg," he finally declared. "I see what you're getting at, of course, but any ... secrets up there aren't my secrets, if you take my meaning."

"OK, dad, but at least me tell one thing. Did Grampa Arthur ever tell you why he had such a close relationship with Uncle Joe?"

"What -- whatever makes you think he did?"

"I found some old pictures in the house. Every time Grampa and the Cloudman are together, they've got their arms around each other like long-lost brothers."

My father broke a short but distinct silence with a growl of irritation.

"Damn it! I thought we'd taken all the ... mementos with us."

"Mementos of what, dad?"

"Talk to Joe first, son, then call me back and -- oh hell! Just tell me what he said. We'll take it from there."

* * * *

I wasn't ready to confront Joe; I was having some very troubling thoughts about him. So I drove to the nearest supermarket, shopped, and drove back home with my brain still swirling.

There was a man sitting on my stoop. When I saw who it was, I went into a kind of calm shock.

"Joe. What are you doing here?"

The Cloudman's folded easel was resting against the front wall of my house along with a huge bundle wrapped in Joe's plastic tarp. I stared at the easel and decided that I'd never seen anything look so out of place. Then I looked again at my visitor and realized how very wrong I was.

"Beautiful afternoon to you, young Gregory. May I come in? I've a vast favor to ask."

"Of course, of course. Let me, uh, just grab my groceries out of the car..."

"I would be honored to assist. Your legs are feeling stronger, no?"

"Yeah. They sure are."

I walked into the kitchen, Joe right behind me, and put my bag on the counter as if it were full of loose eggs.

"Can I ... fix you something to drink, Uncle? I don't have any of that Juicy Juice you used to like, but there's some cherry cider?"

"That sounds delicious," he said. "But too much sugar makes me giddy. Would you mind terribly thinning it down with plain water?"

"Not at all." I remembered exactly how Ma used to ruin his juice.

I poured my guest his weak drink, little more than colored water really, and put away the perishables. I was having trouble believing this wasn't all a crazy dream.

"Let's -- " my voice had come out squeaky so I tried again. "Why don't

we, uh, sit down in the living room and talk."

The sight of Joe sitting on the couch opposite my leather chair gave me what my brother likes to call "cognitive dissonance" but I think "the willies" comes closer. The gingerbread scent was stronger indoors and not quite as pleasant....

My guest and I studied each other for at least a minute. Then he noticed the photos I'd left scattered on the coffee table between us. He made a "may I?" gesture with his feathery eyebrows and when I nodded, he picked up the stack and went through them slowly, one at a time. His wrinkled cheeks widened in what, for him, was a broad smile.

"Those were grand years, Gregory, if lonely. Art was my friend and mentor. He set me up here. Did you know that?"

"Joe -- honestly, I don't know anything about anything and that apparently includes Grampa."

"Art was a good man with a surprisingly ... flexible mind. I was lucky that he was the one who found me."

"Found you?"

"I fully intend to explain. I believe you have inherited some of Art's finer qualities and I urgently need an ally. You must understand that we came here initially, my mate and I, to study the intelligent inhabitants of this world and -- "

"This _world_?"

"Think of us as ... in this one case, I think the term "anthropologists" would be apt. My mate stayed in the Craft Major and I took the Craft Minor down to the surface, to explore."

And I thought my mind was spinning _before_ I got home from the supermarket!

"OK, Joe, I get the drift. So that spaceship up at Lake Champlain -- that's _yours_?"

"From the description, I'm certain it's our Craft Major."

Somehow, I wasn't as surprised as I might have been. In the back of my mind, I'd always suspected Joe wasn't quite human.

"So you came here to study us, eh? Must be a long study."

"Far longer than we'd planned, my dear Gregory. When I took the Craft Minor too close to one of your cities, it was terrible! I was unprepared for the _cacophony!_"

"What do -- "

"My people are sensitive to ... certain patterns of nerve impulses. And your people happen to generate precisely such impulses, and with astonishing power, whenever you speak."

"So we're noisy neighbors?"

"Far worse for me is that you generate similar impulses when you think because 'thinking' for your kind is simply talking to yourselves _internally_. None of you are ever silent. When I got too close to Boston, I lost control of my vessel and -- I barely managed to escape the crash alive. Then I simply couldn't adjust to the overall ... noise level. Not at first. And the oxygen here is so diluted. Still, like a fool, I ignored all warning signs and set out to do my work anyway. My ship's communication system was ruined, so I left a visual message at the crash-site and changed into my flying form to -- "

"Jesus! So you read minds and -- "

"You don't 'read' minds, Gregory. A 'mind' is a flowing pattern -- "

"But you _can_ change shapes?"

"Within limits. As I was saying, I assumed my flying form and set out to explore this area from the air."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. Most likely I misjudged the winds or simply flew into something. The trauma erased the memory, but it was your grandfather who eventually found me on the rocks past the beach here. When I awoke, I was in a large, iron cage and Art had evidently been nursing me back to health for days."

"So Grampa thought you were a _bird_?"

"He couldn't imagine anything else I could be."

"My God! I just saw that cage today! You must be smaller in your, uh, flying form. What did Grampa say when you ... spoke to him?"

"As I mentioned, Art had a remarkably flexible mind."

"Come to think of it, I guess a telepath, if that's the word, _would_ have an advantage in learning a, uh, a foreign language? And I suppose that when you changed back into _this_ form, Grampa just took that in stride too?"

"It took years before I could look the way you see me today. I fear that my talents for mimicry are as feeble as my talents for healing. Frankly, I've been surprised this ... vague appearance has sufficed."

"So what happened then? Why didn't your ... mate come down and rescue you?"

"I believe she tried. I suspect she herself encountered the problem that caused me to crash."

"Oh. Do you think she might have survived too?"

"I wasn't sure until today, but yes; I'm certain she did and that she landed more successfully than I."

I frowned. "What makes you so sure?"

"You said the scientists estimated two hundred years of silt on the buried craft?"

"That's right."

"We only arrived seventy-five local years ago."

I stared at my guest stupidly for a few seconds before I understood.

"I see. She ... so this 'mate' of yours is female? She covered up your ship?"

"And this implies the Craft Major is still, at least to some degree, functional."

"Lord! This is going to take some, uh, adjusting to, Joe. And didn't you say you wanted to ask me a favor? What," (I'd nearly said "on Earth"), "do you want me do?"

"A nest of favors, I fear. At least I've already taken care of some lesser matters. While you were shopping, I was visiting some of our neighbors."

"Really?" The thought of the Cloudman strolling along the local sidewalks was inconceivable.

"I had to ask Benjamin Olds to stop stretching new canvasses for me. What? Did you suppose they simply appeared like mushrooms?"

"Maybe I did. Who else did you see?"

"Dorothy Kierkenbart who handles my banking, and Gerald Volleski."

"You needed a _lawyer_?"

"That brings me to the first of the favors I ask. Here in this pocket, I have some papers for you to sign."

I looked over the documents Joe handed me and didn't get very far. What stopped me was seeing the Cloudman referred to as "Joseph Beck."

"Did you take on that last name because of the beach, Uncle Joe?"

"Quite the contrary. Art thought I merited a family name and 'Beck' was his great-grandmother's."

"Don't tell me our beach is named after _you_?"

Joe just smiled and my eyes drifted back to the papers.

"You're leaving your money to _me_? Why? You're not ... going somewhere, are you?"

"I'm afraid that I must. My mate doubtless left instructions for me, telling me where to find her. We are a long-lived people compared to you humans, with a corresponding view of time, but this ... this infinite separation has gone on so painfully long..."

Joe's eyes filled with tears -- I hadn't known he could cry! And the tears made his cataracts (if that's what they were) unexpectedly turn transparent. Underneath, Joe's eyes were a beautiful clear gold with pupils like a cat's.

I was experiencing some pain of my own. The thought of the Cloudman leaving....

"I'll miss you, Joe. Whatever you are, I know you're a good person. I hope you'll..." I'd glanced down at the paper on my lap and the figures finally registered. The Cloudman was giving me a lot of money.

"Jesus, Joe! What am I supposed to do with such wealth?"

"Half of it, I want you to keep for yourself. The rest, I want you to donate to genetic research. I won't be around to heal the crippled young ones but the healing must continue."

"All right. But Joe, even half of this fortune is -- "

"I know you will use it wisely. Look for ways of helping others but always help your neighbors first. I also need for you to make a few phone calls for me. I would do this myself, but I can't use a telephone."

That was a stumper.

"Why not?"

"My people lack vocal chords. This 'voice' of mine is produced by ... induction."

"Seriously? Christ! What else don't I know about you?"

"I don't have time for it, my friend. My heart won't let me tarry. Here is a list of the people I want you to call and what I want you to tell them. But the most important favor remains. Please wait a moment."

Joe left the room and I heard the front door open and close. A minute later, the Cloudman returned bearing one of his paintings. It must have been wrapped in the bundle I'd seen outside. He handed me the canvas, studied my eyes, and smiled.

"If you'd consciously realized you wanted one of these, Gregory, I would have offered one."

"So this is for me, Uncle Joe?"

"Yes, but I'm not giving it to you out of generosity. The biggest favor I'm asking is this: I want you to keep living right here for two more years. And tell every neighbor that if someone ... a bit unusual comes by, asking after me, they should steer her to you."

"And I should show her this painting, right?"

"Yes. Will you do these things for me? Are they too onerous?"

"I'm happy to help. Besides, my legs may be better, but I've gotten used to being back home. Hell, I may never move back to the city. But Joe, what's this last favor all about?"

"Insurance, my friend. In case my mate finally encounters one of my many ... messages and comes here while I'm out following a message of hers. Enough! It would require a million words more for you to fully understand and I wish to leave before this sun sinks. Farewell, my young Gregory, we may yet meet again. If I succeed, I may send you a sign when Orion becomes the darling of your night sky.

* * * *

It's the middle of December now, and Orion is well upon us although I haven't seen any "signs" yet. I also haven't been down to Beck's Beach since Joe left.

The final day of October, the day after the object under Lake Champlain abruptly vanished, my father showed me pictures of Grampa Arthur as a young man, maybe twenty years old, along with pictures of dad himself at the age of six. Both my grandfather and his son had suffered from a crippled left hand.

I began to understand why the neighborhood trusted the Cloudman.

Then in early November, I had an idea. As the Art Director of a major ad agency, it was easy to insert Joe's mysterious negative-space letter-forms (the painting he left was my model) in many of our new commercials. If the Cloudman hadn't found his mate yet, and she spent any time watching TV, she wouldn't be able to avoid seeing his message sooner or later.

So I've been waiting for her; I'm betting I'll be able to recognize her by her white eyes.

Meanwhile our latest clients have received a lot of mail questioning some odd shapes they've seen in recent ads. You wouldn't think people would

notice such things, but they do. A few such individuals have pointed out that the shapes are really letters in a language only known to Satan and his minions. Other inquiring minds suspect a prize awaits anyone who can decode a secret clue. Other people ... you get the idea.

So to all you worried folks out there, I don't have all the answers, but here's what I think: I think Uncle Joe's paintings mostly contain directions, or coordinates, or whatever you want to call them; but I think some of those shapes had an entirely different purpose.

Maybe I'm a romantic, or maybe it's because things are going so well with Deborah and me, but I think Joe spent seventy-five years painting love letters.

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