

## Paul the Cloud

The Robinson children were getting tired of playing ball. It was nice of dad to spend his one day a week off from work to take them to Desert Meadows Park in their Green Valley, Arizona, community. It was time to spread out the blanket and open up the picnic basket. They did so not far from an older man who was sitting quietly on a park bench watching the world go by and also watching them toss their ball back and forth. You could tell he had his eyes on them as his eyes shifted left to right and right to left with each toss. But he said nothing. He just watched.

A good picnic is often followed by a good nap. Maybe that was on dad's mind, but children have too much energy. It was all papa Robinson could do to get the kids to kick back and look at the clouds. Dad suggested they find the stories that the clouds were telling and share those with each other. It was autumn and a cold front was meeting up with some warm desert air. A good mixture for cloud formation and that mix of clouds presented endless possibilities for those inclined to pareidolia. That's just our built-in bias to find faces and objects where there aren't such things. Like the man in the moon. Or maybe scoops of ice cream in a bowl when there is nothing more than a fluffy white cloud. The children started making up stories about one cloud and then another. They both gravitated to one specific cloud. This cloud hung lower than the others. It moved slower too. It seemed to move with halting fits and starts. One of the Robinson children said it looked like a bunny rabbit hopping along. The other agreed. Their dad said that the sleek, white clouds above that slow one were better. Those clouds were streaking by, and he thought they looked like a speeding freight train. Dad kept trying to interest the children in his "life in the fast lane" clouds.

About this time, the old man on the bench spoke up. He said, "The children are talking about Paul the Cloud. He usually comes around these parts in the fall." This was said with such assurance that papa Robinson was taken aback. First off, he didn't know who this man was. And second, who goes around naming clouds? And a cloud that makes an annual appearance. Come on. This old man must be nuts. So, papa Robinson asked him, "Who are you that you know so much about clouds, and that low-riding cloud in particular? Paul, you say?"

The old man replied, "I guess I may be a little out of line. I'm just a poet and my name happens to be Paul too. It's just a coincidence. I've been coming to this park for more years than I can remember, and Paul the Cloud shows up around this time year after year. You can tell it's him by the way he moves. That sort of stuttering and sputtering you see is his limp. Now, before you go asking me how a cloud acquires a limp, I'm getting to it. It happened back in Japan near the end of the second world war. He was just cruising along like your freight train clouds when the bomb went off and the mushroom cloud swelled up and knocked old Paul clear off his stride. Paul's had a hitch in his get-along ever since. Yes sir, you could just chalk it all up to an old war injury."

Dad looked at his kids and told them that this poet guy was quite a storyteller. Dad didn't know any poets, so he wasn't used to their ways or how they seemed to know things that other people didn't. Dad couldn't just let this whopper of a tale go unchallenged. He asked the poet how he knew the cloud was named Paul.

The poet expected that was coming. He was used to people missing so much of the world around them. He could point it out, but would they listen? Would they understand? Probably not, but he always gave it a go and tried to open eyes and ears to the subtle signs and wonders. Paul said, "Some things go without saying. You've probably heard that. Cloud names are revealed by the clouds to those who spend enough time with them. It might be easier if you just think of it as a form of telepathy. I don't think it can explain the metaphysics of clouds. It's complicated stuff. But if you make the commitment, they will open up to you. Paul told me about his war wound and the mission he's been on ever since. Paul seeks out newly planted gardens, preferably those of children, much like

your own. He waters those gardens daily for a month to make sure that children learn the pleasures of working with nature.”

Dad was still having none of this, but his children now wanted to go home and plant a garden. They keep begging. The poet sat quietly and said nothing. Dad thought about it for a bit and decided that it wouldn't be such a bad thing to let the children have a small flower bed. He said they'd stop off at the garden center at Walmart and pick up some fall flower seeds and a hoe to clear the rocks away for the flower bed. As the Robinsons were leaving the park, a man was coming in carrying a six-foot-long wooden tube. It was too long for a walking stick, so he asked the man what it was or what it might be used for. The reply came, “It's a didgeridoo, mate. I come here to play about this time of day. It helps me feel centered. G'day to ya, mates.” As papa Robinson headed off to his car, the poet heard him muttering under his breath, “I don't know about this place.”

By suppertime, the Robinson flower bed was now a linear garden along their back fence. That night it rained. In fact, it rained every night on that one street in Green Valley for a month. The rest of the area was dry as, well, the desert. This aberration was not lost on papa Robinson. It was exactly as the poet had foretold. Papa Robinson didn't take the children to the park as he wanted to speak with the poet alone. He hoped to find the poet on that same bench as he timed his visit to match his previous encounter. What he found was the didgeridoo player. Robinson asked the musician if he'd seen Paul. The answer came quickly, “Which one mate? You just missed the poet and Paul the Cloud just passed over the Santa Rita mountains. He said his work here was done.” Papa Robinson had such a quizzical look on his face that the Aussie continued. “You're wondering how I knew? The signs are all around. You really need to chill out, you're missing so much.” Robinson turned to walk away but stopped. He came back and sat next to the didgeridoo player and didn't say a word. The Aussie started playing and the sun took on a crimson color as it lowered over the horizon.

Robinson asked the didgeridoo player what his name was. He stopped puffing on his tree stick and said, “Mate, my name is John, and I am Paul's brother.” Robinson was taken aback. “No way,” he said.

John just nodded his head up and down and smiled. “Way,” he said. “And, by the way, what is your name?”

“My name is Robinson,” he answered back.

John smiled again. “You mean like that lost sailor Robinson Caruso? You know, Paul, shows us the way.”

“Wait a minute,” Robinson demanded. “Which Paul are you talking about?”

“Both,” John replied. “Are you feeling lost yet?” John asked Robinson. “Take a walk and look in the boxes along the way. Get it, Robinson? The way is the path to somewhere. I am called the Poets Path, and Paul leaves messages in the boxes along the way to help pilgrims who are lost find their way.”

“This is too much for me. I'm more lost than ever,” Robinson said, shaking his head from side to side. “A cloud named Paul and a Poet that shows us the path to somewhere. John, what have you been smoking with that big old pipe of yours?”

“Robinson, my mate, just take a chance. Find the path, get on the path, and find the way. It is just a short journey away. Look around, smell the clouds, find the boxes, listen hear the sunflowers, and then sit and meditate. Imagine you are a cloud like Paul. Where would you go? How would you get there? How long would you stay? You might even want to stay. I remember the day my brother left. He told me, John, I am going on a journey to find the way.”

He looked up. He found a small, sad cloud that had a limp. Hi put his cane down and went in. This was no spaceship, Robinson, this was a cloud with a view just like he had always dreamed about. True, once in a while, he returns. You saw him today. He just stepped off the bus!"

"Come on, John. There are no buses in clouds."

"Oh, really..." said John. "Then, how do clouds move? Get on the bus and begin your journey. You will be glad you did. Your family will never miss the old Robinson. I know from experience. Just go, get on the way; get on the path and take the bus if you need to do so."

Submitted by Robert Rietschel, Writers Club, March 5, 2023.  
Click here to send your comments to Robert [rrietschel@owl.com](mailto:rrietschel@owl.com).