

THE CLOUDS

Part One: A Question [By Tay Vaughan]

"Dad, where do the clouds come from?" asked Jamie. Up above, the sky was peppered with white puffs drifting slowly to the east. Some were fearsome dragons and dinosaurs, others were giant feather cats ready to pounce on fat little mice clouds that skittered around nearby. "The clouds are different on some days," thought Jamie, "I wonder if they all come from the same place?" He watched a big furry tiger chase after a delectable white rabbit with only one ear.

"Way out west in the high mountains," his dad said, "that's where the clouds come from. I've been there, you know, and those mountains are so high that even in the middle of summer there is still snow on the peaks. When I was a kid, Uncle Jonathan and I spent three days camping up there, so high in the mountains that even trees couldn't grow. We had a snowball fight in the middle of August!"

Jamie and his dad were driving along the curvy road which led back home from the town dump, where they had unloaded at least twenty big plastic bags of leaves and grass. It was springtime, and he and his older sister, Elizabeth (everyone called her "Beth") had helped mow the lawn and rake up all the dead stuff in the backyard that was left over from winter. Jamie shifted position in the front seat of the old pickup truck, and put his feet on the dashboard. Beth was at her violin lesson, so he didn't have to fight over who got to sit next to the window.

"I've been thinking," said his dad as they rounded the curve by the old train station and crossed over the bumpy tracks, "Now that you and Beth are grown up some, maybe it's time we went out there to the mountains. You could see for yourself where the clouds come from!" Dad thought for a while and smiled. "Hey, you know, that really IS a great idea! When we get home, I'll talk to Mom about it. Maybe we could go this summer."

Just then, they passed old Mr. Farnham, the postman, who was delivering Saturday's mail to all the boxes on his route. Dad honked the

horn and waved. Jamie waved, too, because he liked Mr. Farnham. He especially liked Ralph, Mr. Farnham's cocker spaniel, who always rode in an empty mail tray in the front of the little red, white, and blue truck. When he stopped at Jamie's house, sometimes Mr. Farnham would let Ralph carry a newspaper or a small package all the way up to the front porch, just to show off and prove that Ralph was pretty smart. When that happened, Jamie always gave him a biscuit from the package Mom kept in the cabinet next to the stove, and he was careful to say "Thank you, Ralph," as if Ralph were a real person. Jamie thought that Mr. Farnham was a little strange, though. He lived all alone (except for Ralph, of course), and in every room of his house he had newspapers stacked right up to the ceiling so when you went from the kitchen to the living room it was like walking through a tunnel. Last summer Jamie and Beth had secretly explored the neighborhood near Mr. Farnham's house and had peeked through the windows when he was away. That's how they knew.

When they got home, Dad parked the truck in its special place behind the garage, and Jamie put their work gloves and the broom away in the tool shed. Saturday's were always fun when they worked on projects around the house or out in the yard. As he went into the house, he watched the last of the mice clouds get eaten up by a camel with a funny hump, and he noticed some thin, wispy mare's tails high up in the sky. "The clouds are changing again," he thought, and he knew that mare's tails meant it might rain tomorrow. He hoped his dad wouldn't forget about going to the mountains in the summer.

It didn't rain the next day. It got very cold, and to everyone's surprise, it snowed! The radio said that this was the most unusual weather in the last fifty years. But it only left a few inches of wet slush on the ground, and by ten o'clock it was all melted and the sun was out.

"The yellow daffodils that always poke through the ground next to the driveway have just had a drink of ice water," thought Beth, "but I'm sure they will be ok." She was in charge of making breakfast, but Jamie was supposed to help, too. They were mixing pancake batter in the big stainless steel bowl. It was really pretty easy because all they had to do was add water to the pancake mix and stir it with a big fork and pour

the batter onto the hot frying pan. They had done it before. Mom was still in bed, but they could hear Dad in the shower, so they knew there was about ten minutes until everyone would be ready for breakfast. Jamie set the table while Beth turned the pancakes with a spatula; she was careful that there were bubbles on the top before turning them the first time and that they didn't burn on the bottom.

"Do you know where the clouds come from?" asked Jamie as he loaded a plate with the pancakes Beth had already made. "Dad says they come from the mountains out west. He said we could go there this summer and see it, if Mom says it's alright." Just then, probably because he was thinking more about the clouds than what he was doing, Jamie dropped one of the pancakes onto the floor next to the stove at exactly the same time as Beth turned around to get more pancake batter. And wouldn't you know it, Beth stepped right on top of it and squished it with her slipper!

She was thinking about the clouds until she suddenly felt the pancake squish under her foot. "Yuck, Jamie, can't you do anything right!" she snipped at him and stamped her foot, trying to get the pancake off. Her brother was already getting the sponge from the sink to wipe it up. "I'm sorry," he said, "It just fell off the fork."

Beth thought a trip out west would be neat, especially if they could discover where the clouds were made. Nobody else she knew at her school had ever been on such a trip, and Beth could make an interesting report to her friends when Mrs. Marble, her teacher, asked everyone to tell about special things they did during the summer. Mrs. Marble had a big wart on her nose and always smelled like flowers because of the perfume she wore, but she knew about things like insects and trees and fish and the stars and planets. She would be interested in hearing a report about where the clouds come from, too, Beth was sure.

Just as Jamie cleaned up the last of the squished pancake, Dad came in and poured orange juice for everyone. Beth didn't say anything about the pancake accident. "Looks like it's time to eat," Dad announced, "And, boy, does it smell good. I'm starving!" Mom came in, too, and everyone sat down at the kitchen table near the big windows where you

could look out into the back yard. All the snow from last night was melted, now, except in one place along the edge of the woodpile next to the driveway where the ground was still shaded from the heat of the sun.

"I heard you talking about where the clouds come from," said Mom as she reached for the plate with the pancakes. "Dad tells me that you'd like to see for yourselves how they are made. It's a long trip out west to those mountains, you know, and then it's a long and hard climb up the slippery mountain trail to where they are actually first born. There aren't any roads, and you have to walk around boulders and rocks big as this house. I've never been there, but I've heard about it. That's where the side-hill gougers live, too, and they are sometimes wild and mean, living in caves at the top of the mountains and eating the thin, stubby grass that grows there. Nowadays, there are more of them than when your dad and Uncle Jonathan went there! So you would have to be very careful. And it's cold and wet and rainy, and sometimes it snows, even in summer! We would have to do a lot of careful planning to make a trip like that."

Both Beth and Jamie were excited. What an adventure!

Everyone had finished their breakfast, and they were cleaning up the kitchen table when Dad looked over at Mom and asked "What do you say, should we go to the mountains this August? We could stay in Snowflake with Aunt Mary and Uncle Bill. And we could hike up to Slippery Pass with the kids to watch the clouds being born!" Jamie and Beth held their breath.

Of course it would be ok! Mom thought it would be a great vacation! It would be fun to take the train, too, or maybe fly in an airplane to the mountains instead of driving all that way. Beth could help make a list of the camping things they would take. Jamie could write a letter to the Geological Survey and get some special maps showing the route up to Slippery Pass past the caves. There was plenty of time for planning. And it would be nice to see Aunt Mary and Uncle Bill, she thought. "Sure," she smiled, "Let's go!"

That night as they went to sleep, Beth and Jamie thought about the clouds and how they came swirling across the sky from the mountains in the west.

Part Two: The Dream [By Steve and Susanna Lewis]

It's odd, thought Jamie, how a person feels lighter and lighter when he falls asleep. He felt almost as if he were floating...

In fact, he was floating! When he looked down at his toes and held out his hand in front of his face to be sure that he was still who he thought he was, he saw that he had suddenly become a pile of marshmallows as big as a blimp. "I'm a cloud!", he shouted.

Now I'm as big as a polar bear and have whipped cream instead of hair. It's ever so lovely up here in the air floating along as a cloud.

Where did I come from? Where's my lair? off in the mountains over there. I'll take you along, if you aren't too scared to the place where clouds are born.

Like a big white ocean of jiggly jello. Or perhaps a scrumptious fluffy white pillow. It's just quite different from the land below in the place where clouds are born.

There's my sister a tiger king, now she's a bunny jumping through a ring. Clouds are funny changeable things, all the ways they can grow.

Sometimes little like a fuzzy-wuzzy mouse. Sometimes big like a monster's house. A cool babycakes or a gray feathered grouse all piled up in the sky.

Jamie liked being a cloud. Now, if only he could talk to some of the other clouds nearby (maybe the pretty one with the sparkling rainbow in her hair), he could learn where they came from. Then when he got back to being his natural self, he would become a famous cloud expert. As far as he knew, nobody in the whole world had ever talked to a cloud!

Because he was so high up in the sky, the people on the streets below looked tinier than bits of sand on a lettuce leaf. But even so, he thought he could see Mr. Fahrnam and Ralph. From his lofty vantage, their mail truck looked like a red, white, and blue garden beetle moving from house to house. It's certainly easier to recognize people when they are your friends.

Jamie shouted to Mr. Fahrnam. And he whistled to Ralph. "Look at me," he cried, "I'm a cloud!"

Jamie noticed a strange thing begin to happen as he tried harder and harder to attract the attention of his friends. The louder he yelled, the darker the sky became. And it got foggy, too. But he wanted very much to show off his high-altitude cloud tricks, so he kept trying.

As he yelled and yelled, the friendly clouds around him began to melt away and the sky slowly turned darker than the blackest night. Mr. Fahrnam and Ralph never did look up.

Jamie became tireder and tireder from his thundering attempts to communicate with the people below, until finally he was so feeble and exhausted that he couldn't yell anymore. By this time he had shrunk to the size of a raindrop, anyway, and he could no longer see his friends through the dark mist. After a while, he began to fall gently toward the ground.

"Maybe clouds can't really talk to people," he thought to himself, "but if we go to the mountains this summer, I will listen very hard. Maybe it's just that clouds speak a different language, like French or Spanish. Maybe I could learn to understand the clouds!"

The raindrop landed on the roof of Jamie's house precisely above the corner where his bed was, and it plummeted plop! onto the pillow, making a small wet spot about the size of a dime. This was the last sound that Jamie heard before he drifted into a warm and dreamless sleep. In the morning, the wet spot was gone.

Part Three: Anticipation [By Tamar and Ron Cohen]

Jamie woke up just after sunrise because it was Friday. Every Friday morning (except during special holidays, of course) a growling green garbage truck painted with purple stripes would clank and hiss its ponderous way down Jamie's street like a hungry mechanical dinosaur, stopping at each house. Four burly men in blue overalls always walked behind and fed it the trash which everybody put out at the end of their driveways. Garbage trucks, as you probably know, have a huge appetite, especially very early in the morning. The men yelled at each other from house to house and they told loud stories while they worked. Sometimes, too, the truck would burp when its hopper got too full with loose stuff which needed to be compacted. And all the dogs would bark and chase after the burly men. Jamie had a special place at window in the hallway where he could get a good view of all the commotion.

When the garbage truck turned the corner and the dogs were quiet again, Jamie had already forgotten last night's dream. Actually, that's the way dreams are, isn't it? He still remembered that he had dreamed something interesting, but now his memory was cloudy and vague, and he couldn't recall what the dream was about or who was in it ... By the time he poured milk over his bowl of Rice Crispies (Jamie liked the snap, crackle, and pop sound), the dream was entirely forgotten. Now he couldn't wait to tell his friends on the school bus about the trip they would make to the mountains during summer vacation.

Beth was also excited, and she put on her special tee shirt and the hiking boots which Aunt Mary and Uncle Bill had sent for her birthday. The tee shirt had a picture of Slippery Pass on the front with the words Visit Snowflake written just below. After breakfast, they kissed Mom and Dad goodbye and gathered up their lunch boxes and books, and walked to the corner where all the kids waited for the school bus.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky.

"Will Dad cancel the trip if there aren't any more clouds?" they asked each other at exactly the same time. Then they started laughing.

Sometimes they would think exactly the same thoughts; when this happened they usually just looked at each other and started giggling. One time, and this is a secret that nobody else knows, they both giggled so hard that they wet their pants, and even then they couldn't stop giggling. Jamie and Beth were not only a brother and sister, they were best friends, even though sometimes they would fight over things like who got to give Ralph his biscuit or who got to sit next to the window in the car.

During the next few weeks at school Jamie and Beth studied the maps on the wall outside their classroom. And they looked in the atlas at home. They asked Mrs. Marble and their parents many questions about mountains, rivers and lakes, and wild animals like side-hill gougers. And, of course, they asked about the clouds. At home, when Mom and Dad were too tired to answer any more questions, Jamie and Beth would look things up in the encyclopedia. There was a lot of information about Slippery Pass, because one time a wagon train got stuck there during the winter and a lot of people actually froze to death. Jamie and Beth read so much that Dad joked that they were certainly getting cirrus instead of serious. Cirrus, they already knew, is the technical word for wispy clouds very high in the sky, like mare's tails.

When there were only two weeks of school left, Mom and Dad decided it would be best to take the train to Snowflake instead of driving the car. Snowflake is where the big railway tunnel through the mountains starts, and there are always a lot of locomotives and freight cars moving around on the tracks, getting ready for the long ride under the peaks. The tiny passenger station has a huge pot-belly stove in the waiting room and the wooden floors creak when you walk on them. "That's the place," Aunt Mary had told them, "where three little birds who didn't fly south in time for the cold winter built comfortable nests in the cabinets near the ceiling and stayed toasty and warm until the snow melted. They chirped and sang to the passengers who waited to go through the tunnel and they ate popcorn which people fed them from the vending machine. The old station master didn't have the heart to shoo them away. "

When school ended and summer vacation started, Jamie and Beth

decided to practice for the trip by camping out in a tent in their backyard for a few days, all alone. Mom and Dad helped them set up the tent and pound the stakes into the ground. The first night of this camp-out, Mom cooked hamburgers for them on the grill and they roasted marshmallows over the hot charcoals on long, pointed sticks that they cut and whittled all by themselves using Dad's Swiss Army knife. But they would have to fix their meals inside the house in the regular kitchen, even though they were camping out, because they weren't allowed to use the special gas camping stove.

Before sunset, Mom and Dad wished them good luck and said good night. As they got into their sleeping bags, the sky slowly changed colors: first it was orange like a peach, then a little bit red like a nectarine. Then it got deep purple like a ripe plum. After a while, the sky was the completely dark except for a few twinkling stars and just a thin slice of moon. It was a beautiful sunset. Lightning bugs (some people call them fireflies, you know) flashed their cool lights everywhere in the backyard, especially around the lilac bush. Jamie and Beth watched them through the mosquito net which covered the front of the tent. Jamie tried out the flashlight. Its narrow beam was like a laser sword, and he said "If we had another one, I could be Luke Skywalker and you could be Darth Vader." Beth said she would rather be the beautiful Princess Leia, but it didn't matter, anyway, because they only had one flashlight.

They decided to sleep in their clothes because they figured if an emergency came up, they should be ready. Even though they thought about the scary ghost stories they heard at last year's summer camp, Jamie and Beth fell asleep on the lumpy ground.

Grrrr! Hiss! They woke up with their hearts beating fast. What's that out there! **Grrrr! Chit-Chit! Scree!** Something moved in the bushes behind the tent! It was big! They buried their heads inside their sleeping bags and got close to each other. They were wide awake. Was it a bear, or a wolf, or a snake as big around as your leg and longer than a pickup truck? Or a ghost? Maybe it was the little boy from the church graveyard, the one who fell through the ice and drowned and whose body was never found, coming to get them! Even the tiny sliver of

moonlight was gone, now, and inside the tent it was darker than the darkest dark. The crickets were scared, too, because they had stopped chirping.

It was getting closer! They held their breath and were absolutely still, even inside their sleeping bags. Closer! And it snarled again. And suddenly the side of the tent shook! They had to do something! Beth carefully reached outside of her sleeping bag and found the flashlight. She pointed it outside the tent and turned it on. And she screamed!

Six pairs of beady red eyes glowed in the dark, and moved slowly back and forth, looking straight at her! It was the raccoons!

But before she could scream again, a black shape bounded out of nowhere and flew across the beam of her flashlight to jump in front of the red-eyes. **Grrrr! Tissssssss! Grrrrr! Chit-Chit-Chit!** It was their friend Ralph! He had come to protect them.

Well, at night when you shine a flashlight into the eyes of a raccoon, two things happen: First (and this happens with other animals like cats and dogs and even alligators, too) if the raccoon is looking straight at you, the light will reflect off its eyes with a strange bright color, like two jewels suspended in air. The second thing that happens, though, might be even more important. With the light directly in its eyes, the raccoon can't see you anymore; all it can see is the bright spot of your flashlight, not who's holding it. Sometimes this scares the raccoon, and it goes away (but not always, so people still have to be very careful)!

The combination of Ralph's growling and Beth's flashlight finally was just too much for the raccoons, and the whole gang of masked bandits slowly backed away, turning and skulking off at last as if to say that they had just as much right to prowl about at night as anybody!

When they were gone, Jamie went outside and put his arms around Ralph and hugged him. Ralph wagged his tail and licked Jamie. Ralph really was a true friend! Then Beth and Jamie crawled back into the tent, and held the front flap open for Ralph so he could come in, too, if he wanted. Ralph loved Beth and Jamie, so in a single leap he was inside,

and he snuggled down between the two warm sleeping bags with his friends inside, who were as snug as bugs in a rug. Jamie and Beth petted and hugged Ralph until all three fell soundly asleep.

In the morning they raced to their bedrooms in the house to mark off one more day on their "countdown" calendars which showed how many days were left until they would actually start the trip to where the clouds come from. The anticipation was becoming unbearable!

Part Four: The Train Ride [By Steve and Christine Hayes]

Finally they were going! On the night before, it was like waiting for the Tooth Fairy: Jamie and Beth couldn't fall asleep. Try and try, the harder they tried, the less they wanted to sleep. And if they didn't sleep, the Tooth Fairy wouldn't come to put a surprise under the pillow!

Thoughts about the trip ran around like a lot of chipmunks making noise in Jamie's and Beth's heads. Where do the clouds really come from? Do the clouds have the same shape when they are born as when they float past our house? Do they get bigger when they get older? Do they get gray in their old age? What will the hike up to Slippery Pass be like? After a while, the chipmunks got tired, and Beth and Jamie slept.

The alarm rang at six o'clock on Saturday morning. Early, but not really too early for a Saturday. While they were brushing their teeth, Jamie started laughing because Beth couldn't keep her eyes open and was swaying back and forth in front of the sink. She was still pretty tired, but the laughing made her mad. So what if she still had sand in her eyes! Just getting mad made her wide awake.

Downstairs they saw that Dad had already packed the camping equipment in the pickup truck under a blue tarpaulin. The truck looked like when they went to the dump, but under the tarp were sleeping bags, a camping stove, a tent, packs, and even a rubber boat! Mom decided to have a light breakfast of fresh fruit and orange juice. Jamie and Beth helped do the dishes, and finally, with a last look around for things they might have forgotten, they closed up the house and everybody squeezed into the truck.

It was a slow and bumpy ride to the train station. Jamie told Mom a joke he had heard at school. Then Dad told one, too. And slowly the cab of the old pickup started bubbling with laughter, like when you open a can of Coke and the fizz just has to get out. Dad wiped a tear of laughter from his eye as he pulled the truck into the train station.

Mom, Jamie, and Beth went to the ticket window while Dad unloaded the camping gear onto an old porter's wagon. The gray-haired ticket agent was looking at his gold pocket watch. Jamie asked him, "Will the train be on time?" "Yep, it sure will, young feller" the clerk replied, "Just checking that now." With tickets in hand, they went out to meet Dad on the train platform. They could see him opening up a big crate with handles on the side. A note had been stuck onto the top:

'Dear Jamie and Beth: I hope you have a wonderful vacation. Here is a surprise which should make your trip even more fun. Your friend, Mr. Farnham.'

Well, Jamie and Beth were real curious! What could be in the box from Mr. Farnham? As they started to undo the latches, they heard a very familiar bark. "Oh!" exclaimed Beth, "it's Ralph. What a neat surprise!" Ralph bounded out of the box and they hugged and petted him.

The old coal-burning train with its black engine and faded green cars chugged and hissed its way into the station. When the engine stopped, it snorted a loud cloud of steam and started hissing. Water leaked from hoses onto the tracks between the cars. The train stopped only for a few minutes, long enough to take on a few passengers, some freight, and the two sacks of mail which Mr. Farnham had collected the day before. So they hurried aboard and found their seats. Then in no time, the conductor called out "All aboard," and they jerked ahead a little and the metal wheels squealed.

The station moved slowly past the window and then fell behind as they picked up speed. After a while, the rhythm of the wheels clacking on the tracks became hypnotic and they started daydreaming. Beth remembered the cowboy movie where all the ladies were in fancy dresses and wore big hats. Jamie thought about the band of desperate

train robbers who would ride their horses along side the train and jump on board.

Gradually the clackety-clack of the wheels lulled them to sleep. Ralph sat in Dad's lap and pressed his wet nose against the window. Mom stared straight ahead and was deep in thought. Dad asked her what she was thinking about. She didn't answer. Then Dad grinned and told her not to worry, they didn't forget anything (he knew Mom pretty well). She nodded with a smile and said "All right." Soon they were all dozing off to sleep.

Jamie, Beth, and Mom and Dad woke with surprise as the conductor yelled out "Snowflake, this stop Snowflake." "We're here so soon," Beth spoke up, still groggy. "Well, it seems we slept for almost three hours," said Dad, "I guess we needed it." The train came to a jerky stop, and Beth, Jamie, and Ralph scrambled to be the first people to get off.

It was a bright sunny day and a lot colder outside than in the cozy passenger car. So Jamie, Beth, and Mom waited next to the pot belly stove in the train station while Dad and Ralph made sure that all the camping stuff was unloaded from the freight boxcar. Standing near the stove, Beth noticed that her feet were getting a lot warmer than her face. Jamie could smell popcorn, which reminded him of how hungry he was. Both kids looked up at the ceiling for the birds nests which aunt Mary had told them about, but they weren't there anymore.

Soon Dad and Ralph joined them next to the pot belly stove. "I rolled all the stuff out in front so it will be easy to load onto Uncle Bill's pickup," he said. Just then, there was a loud honking from outside. "That's probably Bill, now," he continued, "I'd know that sound anywhere."

As they went through the front door, they saw that Uncle Bill was already loading their gear over the tailgate and he was pretty excited. He was throwing things into the back of the truck like a crazy person. "Hurry up!", he cried, before they even had a chance to say hello. "You won't believe what just happened! Climb in! Can't waste a minute! Got to get going!"

