

Carlos the Cloud

Limits Meet the Limitless

by Jim Gold

Every morning, Father Sun dressed Carlos in a moisture suit and sent him floating across the Spanish sky.

The happy cloud played all day with his black and white friends as they floated between Granada and Cordoba. Evenings, Carlos settled above an olive tree in the province of Jaen to rest and watch the stars pass above him.

Every dawn he drank his moisture breakfast and proudly watched his nebulous muscles bulge. He'd show them off to his friends before bursting. As the rain fell, he was pleased to see the Spanish flowers and trees below enjoy a good drink.

Carlos glanced at Father Sun. Patting the remainder of his nebulae, he announced, "I'm happy and proud to rain. Earth likes me. Flowers are smiling, and trees, rivers, and people appreciate the water. When can I do it again?"

"Whenever you're ready," answered Father Sun.

Carlos continued playing as years, centuries, eons passed.

One day, a passing storm blew Carlos to Seattle. Sitting above the Microsoft building, he rained on a worker. The man looked up and shook his finger angrily: "You stupid cloud," he shouted, "Soon you'll be nothing but a few drops. There's no reason to be proud or happy. The Earth is warming, drying up. Soon you're be an afterthought, a mere transience in the universe." The man fell to his knees, kissed the earth good-bye, and began to cry, "Soon I'll be an afterthought, too," he moaned, "unnoticed and passing through."

Carlos wanted to hear more of this strange man's weather analysis, but a gust of wind had blown him toward Alaska.

Weeks later, hanging over a San Diego beach, Carlos was still considered the angry, hurtful, and frightening words of the Microsoft man. And for the first time in his atmospheric life, the young cloud felt a tinge of dissatisfaction.

He consulted with his father, "Does bursting turn me into a transient?" he asked. "Why bother growing if I end up empty? Am I really nothing?"

His father listened sympathetically. “Transience is a problem for clouds,” he answered. “In fact, it’s a problem for everything and everyone. But watering the soil, helping flowers, trees, rivers, and humans grow heal the world. Making others happy is a good thing.”

“That’s nice to hear, Father, but it doesn’t make me feel any better. I still end up blank, a vacuum, nothing.”

From the kindly, wise, patron of the arts and ruler of the sky, Father Sun’s mood changed. Hammered by the draining complaints of his unappreciative cloud, he rose to his full height, shook his giant finger, and roared, “You dumb, short-sighted, arrogant snot. Your lack of appreciation and gratitude disgusts me. Keep this up and you’ll never make storm category.”

Carlos winced and shrank to the size of a molecule. When Father Sun saw this retreat, he softened his tone.

“Okay, Carlos. Stop shriveling. Keep this up, and soon you’ll be just an element. I won’t hurt, you so don’t worry. No need to fear criticism. I love you. Think of it this way. When flowers and trees grow, you grow as well. You’re a team working together. Without your waters the others can’t exist. And without the others, you have no purpose. Think of raining as a blessing. As your body shrinks, the plants and trees grow. And in the process, you grow in wisdom.”

Carlos was still dissatisfied. “Who cares about wisdom? I don’t care about plants, trees, and rivers. I don’t want to spend my time filling up and emptying all day. I want muscles. I want to be big and strong.”

“Sure you want to be big and strong. Every cloud wants to be big and strong. And you will become that.”

“Great!”

“But there are limits.”

“For me, too? I thought I was your favorite, your favorite cloud.”

“Well, you are, or at least one of my favorites. But there are limits for me, too. Everything has limits, Everyone has limitations.”

“Really? How sad.”

“Not completely sad. Everyone has limits. But no one knows what they are.”

“Do you know?”

“No. Or at least I’m not telling you. But you’ll see that many people believe that I do know. Maybe they’re right, maybe they’re not. Let them think what they like. I’m not telling. In any case, there’s no question that everyone and everything has limits. There’s also no question that, aside from basics, like life and death, no one really knows what their limitations are.”

“So you think I can grow as big and strong as I want?”

“You’ll grow until you burst. That’s the life of a cloud.”

“But I want muscles! I want to be big and strong!”

His father sighed in frustration. “I can see you’re still young and stupid,” He thought a moment, looked down at the earth, then he pointed to a crew of men on Pearl Street loading furniture into a truck. “Those guys down there are just like you. Filling and emptying, loading and unloading, that’s their job. When they’re finished, they go home. After they put in many years of service, I call them home. Then they rest here for awhile before I send them back down for another job.”

“You mean they die?”

“In a sense.”

“Is that what filling and emptying is?”

“You’re a smart cloud,” Father encouraged. “Figure it out.”

Scratching the moisture on his belly, Carlos thought long and hard about transitions. Finally, he asked, “Can raining water ever be a reward?”

Father smiled. “Of course. Raining unburdens you, makes you light and free. Then you fly refreshed and easy through the sky. I’d call that a refreshment. And tasty, too.”

Carlos hovered in place, silently thinking.

“Father, where were you last night?”

“I was asleep.”

“Did you die?”

“Of course. I do that every night.”

“Is it sad?”

“It can be, but only for awhile. I need my rest, so I can travel and expand. But I always come back the next day.”

“Dying must be easy for you. You’re an old man.”

“You can die at any age, Carlos. Yes, it can be painful, but the benefits of travel and expansion make it easier.”

“Where do you go?”

“Mostly to Cycle Rest stops.”

“Really?”

“Yes. They’re a cosmic chain of peaceful lodges in rarely visited corners of the universe. The original lodge was started during the Paleolithic period (or was it the Mesolithic?) by Nan See, later shortened to Nancy, an early shaman-like seer of the polytheistic Order of Bones, and one of the first female Neanderthal entrepreneurs. It started

as a rest home for exhausted Neolithic hunters. When their first client, Baboosh, returned to Earth fully rested and refreshed, other hunters decided they needed Cycle Rest services as well. Due to an increase in mammoth chases in what is now called Siberia, the lodge expanded. Presently, there are hundreds of locations throughout the universe.”

Father Sun relaxed, shone a bit on Argentina, then continued: ”I use them myself. It takes energy to create all my light so I need lots of breaks. After a few hours of rest in my West Lodge, I feel renewed. Then I come down to make fresh dawn.”

“That’s weird.”

“Yes, dying is weird, but it works. But you can’t be reborn unless you die, just as you can’t be awake unless you sleep. Remember what Baboosh said on his first mammoth hunt: “Gogoo possimus porticantius peperkorn lodos” (If you really want to live, you have to die.)”

“Is that what expansion is all about?”

“Yes. Emptying and filling. It’s the only way to go.”

Carlos retreated into himself and thought about this for a long while. “I want to expand, too,” he finally said. “I want to accumulate and become Carlos the Cumulus, biggest cloud in the sky!”

“That’s a healthy attitude, Carlos, although a bit competitive. Nevertheless, every cloud wants to get bigger, stronger, grow, expand, and float across the sky.”

“That’s for me!”

“Okay, but when you burst into rain and vanish, will you still be disappointed and complain?”

“I think I can take it.”

“Good. Who knows but you might even become the biggest cloud in the sky. But rather than dwell on that, better to think about the glorious water you give. It’s the most important part of the cloudy life. Now go play with your cloud friends.”

And Carlos floated across the Spanish sky.