

Clouds

A Short Story by John Benjamin Sciarra

Diamond Grove was a small town with cotton fields white as the clouds on a sunny day. I remember sitting on the ground one such day and watching the clouds. I imagined that the shapes of the clouds were animals: whales, elephants, tigers—things I had never seen in my life. Not yet anyway. I dreamed that someday I would. Thoughts like that didn't come easy to a young colored person living in Missouri. It had been a hard life so far and it didn't look to get any easier. No one knew what happened to my real father. Never even knew what his name was. Mama was taken from me, too—captured during the war—the civil war. Strange name for a war, though. Civil. Don't seem right somehow, but things in life don't always add up. Can't let that stop you from trying.

Now, I'm not one to blame the past on my future. At least I haven't so far. Guess I know how the salmon must feel after that long struggle up the stream. When he gets to the end of the journey, what does he do? He dies. Now that is a hard life! No sir. I can't blame the past on my future.

Some folks, even my adoptive Pa, they are bitter about life. Can't say I blame them none, but I never felt right about that kind of attitude. I had to stop being a cloud. Clouds just look like something they're not. Where they go, only God knows. And how a man ends up, only God knows that, too, but He still lets you make all the decisions. Just because it's hard for a colored man to make something of himself in life, doesn't mean he should stop trying.

I arrived in Newtown County when I was twelve, just two years after sitting in that field, to start school. Didn't have a school in Diamond Grove. In Newtown, being colored and all, I wasn't allowed to go to the schools with the white children. I didn't mind one way or the other, but it seemed to bother them. I figured that was their problem, not mine. I was there to fulfill a dream. In order to do that, I needed an education. That much I figured out and nothing was going to stop me as far as I was concerned. I stayed in a small house where the windows had no glass in them. The curtains were torn and I had to share the bed with two other boys, but it was reasonably clean. Mrs. Merian sure could cook like nobody's business! And I could eat, she said, like a boy with a hollow leg. Mashed potatoes. That was my favorite food back then. Still is, I guess.

Timothy and Benjamin were a bit mean spirited. They had it hard in life, too. No moms or pops either. Died when they were very young. Mrs. Merian adopted them right after her husband was killed in the war. She was the cook, wash woman, and teacher of the small school. Had a firm hand on her I felt more than once. Mostly had to do with Timmy and Ben. At least that was my story. She never bought that. That's what I get for listening to others and not sticking to my own ideas. I stored that bit of advice for myself right up here in my head. Colored folk have brains as capable as any white person does—when they stop and use them. Trouble is, they are usually too busy defending themselves.

Take, for example, Taggert's Grocery Store in the middle of downtown Newtown. There was a big sign out front and it read, "No Colored's." First day in town I went into the store to get a bit of candy. I had the penny my adoptive Pa gave me and, like a typical young boy of any color, I was determined to relieve myself of that burden right away.

After all, seemed to me at the time the candy would be sweeter than anything a penny would buy later on.

I walked into the store without a care in the world and walked up to the counter. I saw a big, huge jar filled with bright red candy balls of some kind. I had only one thing on my mind: eating that candy. I reached up and snatched the top off of the jar and was about to thrust my hand in, when someone picked me clean off the ground by the back of my shirt.

“What’ a we got here, Jed? What say we skin ‘em?”

The owner of the store, a Mr. Jedediah Taggert, walked right up to me and looked me square in the eye. His breath was so bad I wrinkled up my nose. I guess I wasn’t thinking when I said, “Wow, Mister. You sure does smell bad!”

I thought the man’s face was going to explode. He slapped me across the face and it stung real bad. It hurt just like when my pa hit me, which he sometimes did when I didn’t listen. I did listen. I just tended not to hear him from time to time.

As I was saying, the other man threw me across the room and I tumbled to the doorway banging my head on the door. Defiantly, I stood up and said, “Mrs. Merian gonna be mad at you!”

The men burst out laughing and then Mr. Taggert came after me. I was too fast for him and ran out and down the street to my new home. I told Mrs. Merian. I expected she was going to go over there and give those men a piece of her mind. I was shocked when she slapped me, too. “What’s wrong with you, boy? Don’t you know better than to go into a white man’s store? You stay away from there, you hear? Or you’ll have to deal with me. That is, if they don’t tar and feather you first!”

Tar and feather me? That didn’t sound like something I wanted to have happen. I couldn’t imagine anyone doing something like that to another human being. After all, we were all God’s children, weren’t we? Years later I saw just such a thing. That kind of experience just burns a hole in your heart and it never seems to heal. But you have to go on. You can’t let things like that get in the way of your dreams. There are plenty of things that will take dreams away—if you let them.

“To the back of the bus, boy!”

The driver gave me a look of what I can only describe as intense hatred. What caused someone to feel that way about another human he didn’t know was incomprehensible to me. He was a big man with a stomach so large, I was amazed he could even reach the wheel of the bus, let alone turn it. He shoved me down the aisle and I stumbled and fell right into the lap of another man. When I looked up, I couldn’t believe my misfortune. I had fallen right into the lap of Mr. Taggert!

He was none too happy to see me and I can’t say I was all that happy to be breathing his foul breath again either.

“What? Get...off...me...you...little...devil!”

He shoved me across the aisle right into a woman’s bag. My head hit the buckle and it left a large lump. Quickly, I scrambled to my feet and raced to the back of the bus, only to find there wasn’t any room. A big, surly, colored woman stuck out her hand. I thought maybe she wanted me to sit on her lap, but she was pointing to the floor.

“Sit! Before you gets us all into trouble, boy!”

The floor of the bus was filled with garbage: sand, dirt, cigarette butts and tobacco ash from the pipes. The air was filled with the smoke from the white folks smoking and the odor made it hard to breathe. I felt as if I was suffocating.

Realizing I had little choice, I sat down and the bus took off down the dirt-covered road with me bouncing around and hanging on for dear life. We hadn't gone very far when I realized the smoke in the air was becoming darker. A woman screamed. Everyone started panicking and trying to get out of their seat at the same time.

People were stepping on me and crushing me. The large woman, who had told me to sit just a few minutes earlier, fell forward and trapped me. I couldn't see what was happening. It was all I could do to catch a breath of acrid air. Someone yelled, "Fire! He's on fire!" There was more screaming. It was as if I was trapped in a nightmare. I kept trying to wake up.

Then I felt the heat and an odor that smelled more like a barbeque, just like the master of the farm used to have at the end of the cotton season whenever we had done especially well. Seemed to me an odd odor to smell on a bus. I knew I was panicking, too, but I couldn't move. I knew the old woman was either dead or close to it.

I struggled and squirmed like never before. The bus had come to a stop. I jumped to my feet and realized the flames had spread even faster with the door open. My first thought was to run, but something kept me from doing that. Something inside me was more powerful than saving my own life. At the time, I didn't know what that was.

It was years before I understood why I did it, but I forced myself to climb back on the bus in the face of intense heat and fire, and grabbed the first arm I saw. It was the arm of a white man. Without hesitation, I pulled as hard and as fast as I could until I managed to pull him free of the bus just as it burst into a fireball.

The man was on fire, too, and I instinctively rolled him around in the dirt until the flames went out. He coughed and then raised his head and looked at me questioningly. One word struggled from his mouth. "Why?"

Then, he too died.

That moment solidified what I would do with my life. I had a head filled with ideas and notions—ideas that could have made me a fortune. I could never allow myself that luxury, however. The smoke on the bus that day became the clouds in my mind and the last words of the owner of Taggart's Grocery Store were forever emblazoned in my thoughts. I determined then that whatever I accomplished in life, whatever ideas that would help better mankind, I would give freely, because that is what God expected of me. I always wondered if my adoptive Pa had some perverse sense of humor when he named me after a famous white man: George Washington. Yep, old Moses Carver. He was a funny man.

Yep, it don't really matter what the color of your skin is, or what you went through in life. The past is something you can't change. You can only change the future and you can only change yourself. Me? I didn't want to be like the clouds that change and go wherever the wind blows them. I knew that if I gave to others, it wouldn't matter if I was colored or white, cause in God's eyes, we are all the same race—the human race.