

## Martians Come in Clouds by Philip K. Dick (1952, originally called "The Buggies")

Ted Barnes came in all grim-faced and trembling. He threw his coat and newspaper over the chair. "Another cloud," he muttered. "A whole cloud of them! One was up on Johnson's roof. They were getting it down with a long pole of some kind."

Lena came and took his coat to the closet. "I'm certainly glad you hurried right on home."

"I get the shakes when I see one of them." Ted threw himself down on the couch, groping in his pockets for cigarettes. "Honest to God it really gets me."

He lit up, blowing smoke around him in a gray mist. His hands were beginning to quiet down. He wiped sweat from his upper lip and loosened his necktie. "What's for dinner?"

"Ham." Lena bent over to kiss him.

"How come? Some sort of occasion?"

"No." Lena moved back toward the kitchen door. "It's that canned Dutch ham your mother gave us. I thought it was about time we opened it."

Ted watched her disappear into the kitchen, slim and attractive in her bright print apron. He sighed, relaxing and leaning back. The quiet living-room, Lena in the kitchen, the television set playing to itself in the corner, made him feel a little better.

He unlaced his shoes and kicked them off. The whole incident had taken only a few minutes but it had seemed much longer. An eternity -- standing rooted to the sidewalk, staring up at Johnson's roof. The crowd of shouting men. The long pole. And. . .

. . . and *it*, draped over the peak of the roof, the shapeless gray bundle evading the end of that pole. Creeping this way and that, trying to keep from being dislodged.

Ted shuddered. His stomach turned over. He had stood fixed to the spot, gazing up, unable to look away. Finally some fellow running past had stepped on his foot, breaking the spell and freeing him. He had hurried on, getting away as fast as he could, relieved and shaken. Lord. . . !

The back door slammed. Jimmy wandered into the living-room, his hands in his pockets. "Hi, Dad." He stopped by the bathroom door, looking across at his father. "What's the matter? You're all funny looking."

"Jimmy, come over here." Ted stubbed out his cigarette. "I want to talk to you."

"I have to go wash for dinner."

"Come here and sit down. Dinner can wait." Jimmy came over and slid up onto the couch.

"What's the matter? What is it?"

Ted studied his son. Round little face, tousled hair hanging down in his eyes. Smudge of dirt on one cheek. Jimmy was eleven. Was this a good time to tell him? Ted set his jaw grimly. Now was as good a time as any -- while it was strong in his mind.

"Jimmy, there was a Martian up on Johnson's roof. I saw it on the way home from the bus depot."

Jimmy's eyes grew round. "A buggie?"

"They were getting it with a pole. A cloud of them's around. They come in clouds every few years." His hands were beginning to shake again. He lit another cigarette. "Every two or three years. Not as often as they used to. They drift down from Mars in clouds, hundreds of them. All over the world -- like leaves." He shuddered. "Like a lot of dry leaves blowing down."

"Gosh!" Jimmy said. He got off the couch onto his feet. "Is it still there?"

"No, they were getting it down. Listen," Ted leaned toward the boy. "Listen to me -- I'm

telling you this so you'll stay away from them. If you see one of them you turn around and run as fast as you can. You hear? Don't go near it -- stay away. Don't. . ."

He hesitated. "Don't pay any attention to it. You just turn around and run. Get somebody, stop the first man you see and tell him, then come on home. Do you understand?"

Jimmy nodded.

"You know what they look like. They showed you pictures at school. You must have --"

Lena came to the kitchen door. "Dinner's ready. Jimmy, aren't you washed?"

"I stopped him," Ted said, getting up from the couch. "I wanted to have a talk with him."

"You mind what your father tells you," Lena said. "About the buggies -- remember what he says or he'll give you the biggest whipping you ever heard of."

Jimmy ran to the bathroom. "I'll get washed." He disappeared, slamming the door behind him.

Ted caught Lena's gaze. "I hope they get them taken care of soon. I hate even to be outside."

"They should. I heard on television they're more organized than last time." Lena counted mentally. "This is the fifth time they've come. The fifth cloud. It seems to be tapering off. Not as often, any more. The first was in nineteen hundred and fifty-eight. The next in fifty-nine. I wonder where it'll end."

Jimmy hurried out of the bathroom. "Let's eat!"

"Okay," Ted said. "Let's eat."

It was a bright afternoon with the sun shining down everywhere. Jimmy Barnes rushed out of the school yard, through the gate and onto the sidewalk. His heart was hammering excitedly. He crossed over to Maple Street and then onto Cedar, running the whole way.

A couple of people were still poking around on Johnson's lawn -- a policeman and a few curious men. There was a big ruined place in the center of the lawn, a sort of tear where the grass had been ripped back. The flowers all around the house had been trampled flat. But there was no sign whatsoever of the buggy.

While he was watching Mike Edwards came over and punched him on the arm. "What say, Barnes."

"Hi. Did you see it?"

"The buggy? No."

"My Dad saw it, coming home from work."

"Bull!"

"No, he really did. He said they were getting it down with a pole."

Ralf Drake rode up on his bike. "Where is it? Is it gone?"

"They already tore it up," Mike said. "Barnes says his old man saw it, coming home last night."

"He said they were poking it down with a pole. It was trying to hang onto the roof."

"They're all dried-up and withered," Mike said, "like something that's been hanging out in the garage."

"How do you know?" Ralf said.

"I saw one once."

"Yeah. I'll bet."

They walked along the sidewalk, Ralf wheeling his bike, discussing the matter loudly. They turned down Vermont Street and crossed the big vacant lot.

"The TV announcer said most of them are already rounded up," Ralf said. "There weren't very many this time."

Jimmy kicked a rock. "I'd sure like to see one before they get them all."

"I'd sure like to *get* one," Mike said.

Ralf sneered. "If you ever saw one you'd run so fast you wouldn't stop until the sun set."

"Oh, yeah?"

"You'd run like a fool."

"The heck I would. I'd knock the ol' buggy down with a rock."

"And carry him home in a tin can?"

Mike chased Ralf around, out into the street and up to the corner. The argument continued endlessly all the way across town and over to the other side of the railroad tracks. They walked past the ink works and the Western Lumber Company loading platforms. The sun sank low in the sky. It was getting to be evening. A cold wind came up, blowing through the palm trees at the end of the Hartly Construction Company lot.

"See you," Ralf said. He hopped on his bike, riding off. Mike and Jimmy walked back toward town together. At Cedar Street they separated.

"If you see a buggy give me a call," Mike said.

"Sure thing." Jimmy walked on up Cedar Street, his hands in his pockets. The sun had set. The evening air was chill. Darkness was descending.

He walked slowly, his eyes on the ground. The streetlights came on. A few cars moved along the street. Behind curtained windows he saw bright flashes of yellow, warm kitchens and livingrooms. A television set brayed out, rumbling into the gloom. He passed along the brick wall of the Pomeroy Estate. The wall turned into an iron fence. Above the fence great silent evergreens rose dark and unmoving in the evening twilight.

For a moment Jimmy stopped, kneeling down to tie his shoe. A cold wind blew around him, making the evergreens sway slightly. Far off a train sounded, a dismal wail echoing through the gloom. He thought about dinner, Dad with his shoes off, reading the newspapers. His mother in the kitchen -- the TV set murmuring to itself in the corner -- the warm, bright living-room.

Jimmy stood up. Above him in the evergreens something moved. He glanced up, suddenly rigid. Among the dark branches something rested, swaying with the wind. He gaped, rooted to the spot.

A buggy. Waiting and watching, crouched silently up in the tree.

It was *old*. He knew that at once. There was a dryness about it, an odor of age and dust. An ancient gray shape, silent and unmoving, wrapped around the trunk and branches of the evergreen. A mass of cobwebs, dusty strands and webs of gray wrapped and trailing across the tree. A nebulous wispy presence that made the hackles of his neck rise.

The shape began to move but so slowly he might not have noticed. It was sliding around the trunk, feeling its way carefully, a little at a time. As if it were sightless. Feeling its way inch by inch, an unseeing gray ball of cobwebs and dust.

Jimmy moved back from the fence. It was completely dark. The sky was black above him. A few stars glittered distantly, bits of remote fire. Far down the street a bus rumbled, turning a corner.

A buggy -- clinging to the tree above him. Jimmy struggled, pulling himself away. His heart was thumping painfully, choking him. He could hardly breathe. His vision blurred, fading and receding. The buggy was only a little way from him, only a few yards above his head.

Help -- he had to get help. Men with poles to push the buggy down -- people -- right

away. He closed his eyes and pushed away from the fence. He seemed to be in a vast tide, a rushing ocean dragging at him, surging over his body, holding him where he was. He could not break away. He was caught. He strained, pushing against it. One step. . . another step. . . a third --

And then he heard it.

Or rather *felt* it. There was no sound. It was like drumming, a kind of murmuring like the sea, inside his head. The drumming lapped against his mind, beating gently around him. He halted. The murmuring was soft, rhythmic. But insistent -- urgent. It began to separate, gaining form -- form and substance. It flowed, breaking up into distinct sensations, images, scenes.

Scenes -- of another world, *its* world. The buggie was talking to him, telling him about its world, spinning out scene after scene with anxious haste.

"Get away," Jimmy muttered thickly.

But the scenes still came, urgently, insistently, lapping at his mind.

Plains -- a vast desert without limit or end. Dark red, cracked and scored with ravines. A far line of blunted hills, dust-covered, corroded. A great basin off to the right, an endless empty piepan with white-crust salt riming it, a bitter ash where water had once lapped.

"Get away!" Jimmy muttered again, moving a step back.

The scenes grew. Dead sky, particles of sand, whipped along, carried endlessly. Sheets of sand, vast billowing clouds of sand and dust, blowing endlessly across the cracked surface of the planet. A few scrawny plants growing by rocks. In the shadows of the mountains great spiders with old webs, dust-covered, spun centuries ago. Dead spiders, lodged in cracks.

A scene expanded. Some sort of artificial pipe, jutting up from the red-baked ground. A vent -- underground quarters. The view changed. He was seeing below, down into the core of the planet -- layer after layer of crumpled rock. A withered wrinkled planet without fire or life or moisture of any kind. Its skin cracking, its pulp drying out and blowing up in clouds of dust. Far down in the core a tank of some sort -- a chamber sunk in the heart of the planet.

He was inside the tank. Buggies were everywhere, sliding and moving around. Machines, construction of different kinds, buildings, plants in rows, generators, homes, rooms of complex equipment.

Sections of the tank were closed off -- bolted shut. Rusty, metal doors -- machinery sinking into decay -- valves closed, pipes rusting away -- dials cracked and broken. Lines clogged -- teeth missing from gears -- more and more sections closed. Fewer buggies -- fewer and fewer. . .

The scene changed. Earth, seen from a long way off -- a distant green sphere, turning slowly, cloud-covered. Broad oceans, blue water miles deep -- moist atmosphere. The buggies drifting through empty reaches of space, drifting slowly toward Earth, year after year. Drifting endlessly in the dark wastes with agonizing slowness.

Now Earth expanded. The scene was almost familiar. An ocean surface, miles of foaming water, a few gulls above, a distant shore line. The ocean, Earth's ocean. Clouds wandering above in the sky.

On the surface of the water flat spheres drifted, huge metal discs. Floating units, artificially built, several hundred feet around. Buggies rested silently on the discs, absorbing water and minerals from the ocean under them.

The buggie was trying to tell him something, something about itself. Discs on the water -- the buggies wanted to use the water, to live on the water, on the surface of the ocean. Big surface discs, covered with buggies -- it wanted him to know that, to see the discs, the water discs.

The buggies would live on the water, not on the land. Only the water -- they wanted his

permission. They wanted to use the water. That was what it was trying to tell him -- that they wanted to use the surface of the water between the continents. Now the buggie was asking, imploring. It wanted to know. It wanted him to say, to answer, to give his permission. It was waiting to hear, waiting and hoping -- imploring. . .

The scenes faded, winking out of his mind. Jimmy stumbled back, falling against the curb. He leaped up again, wiping damp grass from his hands. He was standing in the gutter. He could still see the buggie resting among the branches of the evergreen. It was almost invisible. He could scarcely make it out.

The drumming had receded, left his mind. The buggie had withdrawn.

Jimmy turned and fled. He ran across the street and down the other side, sobbing for breath. He came to a corner and turned up Douglas Street. At the bus-stop stood a heavy-set man with a lunchbucket under his arm.

Jimmy ran up to the man. "A buggie. In the tree." He gasped for breath. "In the big tree."

The man grunted. "Run along, kid."

"A buggie!" Jimmy's voice rose in panic, shrill and insistent. "A buggie up in the tree!"

Two men loomed up out of the darkness. "What? A buggie?"

"Where?"

More people appeared. "Where is it?"

Jimmy pointed, gesturing. "Pomeroy Estate. The tree. By the fence." He waved, gasping.

A cop appeared. "What's going on?"

"The kid's found a buggie. Somebody get a pole."

"Show me where it is," the cop said, grabbing hold of Jimmy's arm. "Come on."

Jimmy led them back down the street, to the brick wall. He hung back, away from the fence. "Up there."

"Which tree?"

"That one -- I think."

A flashlight flicked on, picking its way among the evergreens. In the Pomeroy house lights came on. The front door opened.

"What's going on there?" Mr Pomeroy's voice echoed angrily.

"Got a buggie. Keep back."

Mr Pomeroy's door slammed quickly shut.

"*There* it is!" Jimmy pointed up. "*That* tree." His heart almost stopped beating. "There. Up *there*!"

"Where?"

"I see it." The cop moved back, his pistol out.

"You can't shoot it. Bullets go right through."

"Somebody get a pole."

"Too high for a pole."

"Get a torch."

"Somebody bring a torch!"

Two men ran off. Cars were stopping. A police car slid to a halt, its siren whirring into silence. Doors opened, men came running over. A searchlight flashed on, dazzling them. It found the buggie and locked into place.

The buggie rested unmoving, hugging the branch of the evergreen. In the blinding light it looked like some giant cocoon clinging uncertainly to its place. The buggie began to move

hesitantly, creeping around the trunk. Its wisps reached out, feeling for support.

"A torch, damn it! Get a torch here!"

A man came with a blazing board ripped from a fence. They poured gasoline over newspapers heaped in a ring around the base of the tree. The bottom branches began to burn, feebly at first, then more brightly.

"Get more gas!"

A man in a white uniform came lugging a tank of gasoline. He threw the tankful of gas onto the tree. Flames blazed up, rising rapidly. The branches charred and crackled, burning furiously.

Far above them the buggy began to stir. It climbed uncertainly to a higher branch, pulling itself up. The flames licked closer. The buggy increased its pace. It undulated, dragging itself onto the next branch above. Higher and higher it climbed.

"Look at it go."

"It won't get away. It's almost at the top."

More gasoline was brought. The flames leaped higher. A crowd had collected around the fence. The police kept them back.

"There it goes." The light moved to keep the buggy visible.

"It's at the top."

The buggy had reached the top of the tree. It rested, holding onto the branch, swaying back and forth. Flames leaped from branch to branch, closer and closer to it. The buggy felt hesitantly around, blindly, seeking support. It reached, feeling with its wisps. A spurt of fire touched it.

The buggy crackled, smoke rising from it.

"It's burning!" An excited murmur swept through the crowd. "It's finished."

The buggy was on fire. It moved clumsily, trying to get away. Suddenly it dropped, falling to the branch below. For a second it hung on the branch, crackling and smoking. Then the branch gave way with a rending crackle.

The buggy fell to the ground, among the newspapers and gasoline.

The crowd roared. They seethed toward the tree, flowing and milling forward.

"Step on it!"

"Get it!"

"Step on the damn thing!"

Boots stamped again and again, feet rising and falling, grinding the buggy into the ground. A man fell, pulling himself away, his glasses hanging from one ear. Knots of struggling people fought with each other, pressing inward, trying to reach the tree. A flaming branch fell. Some of the crowd retreated.

"I got it!"

"Get back!"

More branches fell, crashing down. The crowd broke up, streaming back, laughing and pushing.

Jimmy felt the cop's hand on his arm, big fingers digging in. "That's the end, boy. It's all over."

"They get it?"

"They sure did. What's your name?"

"My name?" Jimmy started to tell the cop his name but just then some scuffling broke out between two men and the cop hurried over.

Jimmy stood for a moment, watching. The night was cold. A frigid wind blew around him, chilling him through his clothing. He thought suddenly of dinner and his father stretched out on the couch, reading the newspaper. His mother in the kitchen fixing dinner. The warmth, the friendly yellow homey warmth.

He turned and made his way through the people to the edge of the street. Behind him the charred stalk of the tree rose black and smoking into the night. A few glowing remains were being stamped out around its base. The buggy was gone, it was over, there was nothing more to see. Jimmy hurried home as if the buggy were chasing him.

"What do you say to that?" Ted Barnes demanded, sitting with his legs crossed, his chair back from the table. The cafeteria was full of noise and the smell of food. People pushed their trays along on the racks in front of them, gathering dishes from the dispensers.

"Your kid really did that?" Bob Walters said, across from him, with open curiosity.

"You sure you're not stringing us along?" Frank Hendricks said, lowering his newspaper for a moment.

"It's the truth. The one they got over at the Pomeroy Estate -- I'm talking about that one. It was a real son-of-a-gun."

"That's right," Jack Green admitted. "The paper says some kid spotted it first and brought the police."

"That was my kid," Ted said, his chest swelling. "What do you guys think about that?"

"Was he scared?" Bob Walters wanted to know.

"Hell no!" Ted Barnes replied strongly.

"I'll bet he was." Frank Hendricks was from Missouri.

"He sure wasn't. He got the cops and brought them to the place -- last night. We were sitting around the dinner table, wondering where the hell he was. I was getting a little worried." Ted Barnes was still the proud parent.

Jack Green got to his feet, looking at his watch. "Time to get back to the office."

Frank and Bob got up also. "See you later, Ted."

Green thumped Ted on the back. "Some kid you got, Barnes -- chip off the old block."

Ted grinned. "He wasn't a bit afraid." He watched them go out of the cafeteria onto the busy noonday street. After a moment he gulped down the rest of his coffee and wiped his chin, standing slowly up. "Not a damn bit afraid -- not one damn bit."

He paid for his lunch and pushed his way outside onto the street, his chest still swelled up. He grinned at people passing by as he walked back to the office, all aglow with reflected glory.

"Not a bit afraid," he murmured, full of pride, a deep glowing pride. "Not one damn bit!"