

Romancing the Clouds

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Conrad, Montana — They still think about the rainmaker, still remember him fondly, especially when a beautiful cloud rolls by.

They still talk about the rainmaker, over cups of coffee at the Home Café or beers at the Ryegate Bar. They can't help it — they miss him. They wish he would return. They would give anything to see the rainmaker drive up in his dusty old truck, setting forth his grand theory of life and promising to wring a few good storms from their dried-out sky.

But there isn't any money for the rainmaker right now.

After another year of drought, most farmers in Montana are broke, many are beyond broke, hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt. Whatever mad money that had stashed away for an unrainy day, they gave the rainmaker when he last came through town.

The rainmaker isn't cheap. He charges \$10,000 — sometimes \$15,000 — cash on the barrel, and farmers think he ought to be paid promptly, same as the man at the feedlot. Even if he is a holy man, able to shuffle the clouds and shift the jet stream and lure the moist winds up from the Gulf of Mexico, the rainmaker has to eat.

Since they can't afford to bring back the rainmaker, the farmers phone him now and then, for advice, for comfort — and for something else they don't readily admit. They phone the rainmaker at his little house in Mount Shasta, deep in the woods of Northern California, where he often sits in his backyard, gazing at the clouds and talking to the trees.

The rainmaker is a 50-year old man formerly from New York named Matthew Ryan, who says he has a gift. Call it a rapport with the planet, he says. A way with the sky. It's more romance than science, he insists: he doesn't seed the clouds — he seduces them.

"He's a genius," says his wife, Gigi, a real estate agent from Seattle, who fled that city years ago after a record stretch of rainy days left her feeling depressed.

Turns out, she says with a laugh, her future husband was the cause of all that rain.

Matthew Ryan has been making rain for years, but professionally for just the last decade. (He pencils "Rainmaker" each April on his tax return). He claims a 99% success rate and hundreds of satisfied customers. "If I come in," he says, "the rains will come."

He works mostly in the West, lately often in central and eastern Montana, a vast stretch of the Great Plains where an epic five-year drought has farmers on the brink. Nearly half of the United States is enduring some degree of drought in 2003 according to the National Weather Service. But Montana's drought may be the worst, because it's dragged on the longest.

Typically, Montana's prairie averages 13 inches of rain each year. Since the late 1990s, many parts have been getting 3. Crops are gone. Topsoil is gone. Snow fences are gone, buried under drifting dunes of dust.

Drought is a cumulative disaster. It's two years of poor rain, followed by one year of some rain, then two years of no rain, and one morning the barley fields are dust and the banker is knocking on the screen door.

Unlike twisters or earthquakes, drought kills slowly, by attacking life at its deepest levels — the root, and the heart. First the water evaporates. Then the hope. In the arid West, drought is just another word farmers use for death, and statistics support their lore. Montana's suicide rate, routinely among the highest in the nation, has crept even higher with each year of this drought.

The one break in the despair was when Ryan first arrived, in February 2001. And again when he returned that May. Even before he brought a drop of rain, he brought a ray of hope. He caused a kind of hysteria, an outrageous joy, which may have been the most accurate measure yet of Montana's pain.

But the awe and nostalgia that linger long after Ryan left tell a story too.

Canvassing a vast triangle of Montana, traveling hundreds of miles a day, Ryan stirred the state like nothing in recent

memory. People clutched at him. They threw open their doors and took him into their homes. They hung on his every word, and repeated his words as if he were a prophet.

In one-stoplight towns Ryan drew large crowds and delivered memorable talks, which many farmers can still quote word for word. He mixed basic science with old-fashioned faith and newfangled mysticism. He patched together a dazzling variety of subjects — the hydrological cycle, the greenhouse effect, the Tao De Ching, the Cold War — into a cohesive worldview, which certainly wasn't airtight, but at least seemed solid and sturdy, like a well-carpen-tered barn.

Everyone recalls with particular clarity the way Ryan talked about clouds. He reintroduced the farmers to clouds, used the beauty of the clouds to revive farmers waning faith in the sky. Some say they never really saw the sky until they met the rainmaker.

Look at those clouds, Ryan said in town after town. No, for God's sake, really look at them. Like all living things — your cows, your kids, -- those clouds want attention, see?

Ryan often finishes sentences with, "See?"

Ask yourselves how those clouds make you feel, Ryan said. Now folks, how do you suppose you're making those clouds feel?

Ryan often emphasized his point with a spurt of expletives, which caught the strait-laced farmers off guard. Then, in the next breath, he'd tell them to pray. He would need their fervent prayers to make the rain. "I don't make the rain," he told them all across the prairie. "God makes the rain."

Farmers normally don't need coaxing to pray. They pray for rain all of their lives. And Montana farmers prayed that much harder when this drought started. Only when their prayers seemed to waft aimlessly into their famously big sky, only when that sky began to look more empty than big, did they stop. Only then did they reach out to Ryan.

Some thought he might be the answer to their prayers. Others were more cynical. Tried paying for rain, they said. Maybe we can pay for it.

It worked. And it didn't. Since drought is cumulative, the remedy must be cumulative. More was needed than a few good soakings from the rainmaker.

Still, none of the 250 Montanans who have paid Ryan wants a refund. The man did what he promised, they say. He made it rain. He whipped up the sky as if beating a bowl of egg whites, turned the clouds frothy and produced a series of heartening storms.

They saw. They swear.

And data from the National Weather Services confirms their belief. Records show that rain or snow fell on every little town Ryan visited, around the time he was there.

As Old as the Rain

There have been stories of rainmakers captivating the West for centuries, from the shamans of the Plains Indians to the charlatans who preyed on farmers during the Great Depression. Charles Hatfield, the self-proclaimed "Moisture Accelerator," wowed drought-stricken Los Angeles in the early 1900s, becoming a cult figure to hundreds of clients — until he was blamed for flooding San Diego .

Hatfield may have inspired N. Richard Nash's hit Broadway play "The Rainmaker," which became a popular film in the 1950s.

"I wasn't lying," Nash's wily rainmaker tells one skeptic. "I was dreaming."

Rainmaker stories are more than common. They are archetypal, old as the rain, because they are about that mirage-filled desert between belief and make-believe.

Rainmaker stories are about people putting their faith in something, anything, with all their hearts and not much evidence, whenever the alternative to belief is despair.

Rainmaker stories are less about the need for rain than the need for keeping faith in a dry season. Even Ryan acknowledges as much. "This job isn't just about making rain," he says. "It's about lifting people up."

Like the rain he was credited with making, Ryan seemed to fall from the clear blue sky in February 2001. But in fact he'd been to Montana before, four times in nine years, working quietly for a farmer named Phyllis Furman and a group of people she'd gathered together.

A 72-year-old daughter of homesteaders, Furman farms 3,000 acres north of Glasgow, near the Canadian border, hard by the spot where her in-laws first broke sod in 1907. She was first Montanan to hear about Ryan: she read about him in a farm journal and sent for him straight away.

Farm's dying, she told him. No rain, record heat, dirt blizzards blotting the daytime sun. We were burning up alive here, "Furman says.

It was 1992. Ryan set up camp near a stream on Furman's land, fiddled with his rainmaking equipment and chatted with the clouds. Hours later, Furman says, rain.

She paid him \$5,000, considered it a bargain, and put him on her permanent payroll. She and her group have summoned him five times since, paying him as much as \$15,000 for his services. No one in Montana has given Ryan more money, or more unqualified praise, than Furman.

Wondrous things happen when the rainmaker comes to town, Furman says. Nature bolts awake. One night, she recalls, Ryan was working in the fields and the sky suddenly looked like the Fourth of July. "Whole valley lit up with fireflies," Furman says. "We didn't even know we had fireflies up here."

Ryan likes to pitch a tent outdoors when he works. "Strange dude," Furman says. He sleeps on the ground to soak up the earth's energy, and sometimes, when weary from rainmaking, he lays hands on one of trees, drawing out its strength like sap. He favors oaks.

Furman takes a fair bit of grief around town about Ryan, whom she likes to call "my rain man." Neighbors say she's made a pact with the devil. The local minister says she's going straight to hell. Still, she reserves her deepest contempt for skeptics. "Disbelievers," she calls them, spitting the word off her tongue like a sunflower seed.

Can't they see, she asks, that her area of Montana is the only part spared by the drought? (It's true: Drought maps make Glasgow and the vast northeast region look like a new dollar bill on a bed of dirt.)

Ryan's work with Furman was always well known in Glasgow. But word travels slowly across country this rugged, where a family's mailbox can be 20 miles from the front door. Ryan didn't become a statewide sensation until the Billings Gazette wrote about Furman's incongruously green area. Suddenly everyone in Montana was talking the rainmaker, and looking for him, none more desperately than Gary Gollehon, a 56-year-old wheat and barley farmer near Conrad, north of Great Falls.

Gary phoned Ryan and pleaded with him to drive 900 miles up from Northern California and see about saving Gary's 6,000 acres. They negotiated a fee of \$10,000, which Gary would raise among his fellow farmers in the wide region north of Great Falls that stretched to the Canadian border and used to be called more accurately the Golden Triangle.)

When Gary broached the idea with his wife, Becky, she just stared. "I thought Gary had lost his mind," she says.

And yet, she also knew something needed to be done. People were walking around town in a trance. Businesses were boarding up their windows every other day. Five families had lost their farms that year — who knew how many more would go bust before the next seeding?

A friend told Becky about overhearing a conversation between one local farmer and the pastor: The farmer was vowing to kill himself, and the pastor was exhorting him to hang on.

"We were desperate," Becky says. "The situation was as desperate as we've ever been."

So she gave Gary her blessing, and Gary took up the collection. He didn't need the hard sell. "Everybody for 90 miles around contributed," he says.

City people think farmers do fine on government handouts, Gary says, but government help is bare subsistence for Montana farmers. Besides, he adds, farmer doesn't farm for money. A farmer considers himself a caretaker of the earth. A farmer coaxes life out of the ground, and when the ground dries out, the farmer loses more than money. He

loses his purpose. Not to mention his heritage.

“Nothing has ever humbled me like this drought. Gary says. “My great-great grandfather homesteaded a mile and half from where I live. Our daughter and son-in-law live on that place now. And they have kids. So that’s six generations on that land.”

His normal baritone drops an octave deeper.

“To lose that would be a pretty disgraceful thing.”

Giving Guarantees

The first time Ryan came to Conrad he stayed with Gary and Becky, using their farm as his base of operations, and Gary and Becky couldn’t have been more delighted. The rainmaker was the most fascinating house guess they ever had.

Becky enjoyed the way Ryan stepped outside for private confabs with the Almighty. Gary marveled at how Ryan bubbled with facts and ideas and theories. Some nights they would all sit around the table after supper and listen to Ryan talk. “He was better than the radio,” Gary says.

Gary and Becky also liked Ryan’s wife, Gigi. She seemed to have a calming influence on him, and sometimes she was able to simplify his complex monologues on natural phenomenon.

It was February, often 20 degrees below zero, too cold for Ryan and Gigi to sleep in a tent, which is what Ryan prefers when he’s out rainmaking. So Gary and Becky tried to make Ryan as comfortable as possible in their home, even though many things seemed to make him uncomfortable.

Fluorescent lights, for instance. He couldn’t stand them. Also, the microwave. He fled whenever it was turned on. Working with the natural elements, Gigi told Becky, made him ultrasensitive to electronic appliances.

One day Gary gave Ryan a tour of the area. He drove Ryan to the brown fields, to the bone-dry wells, to the Knees, two knobby buttes rising improbably from the flat prairie. He drove Ryan to the grammar school for an assembly with the entire student body — all four children.

Gary likes to talk, but with Ryan in the truck he mostly listened. Besides primers on nuclear physics, comparative, religion, lost civilizations and meteorology, Ryan gave Gary a bit of his bio. He told Gary how he left New York when he turned 30 and lived with a Chippewa medicine man named Sun Bear, outside Spokane, Washington. He talked about sitting in sweat lodges and ceremonies with Sun Bear and learning how to heal the earth.

Ryan fell silent when Gary drove past a nuclear missile silo west of Gary’s farm. Ryan said the silo gave him an ugly feeling. Gray. Dead. He said that the silo, and the two hundred others like it around central Montana, was contributing heavily to the drought.

After Ryan had been in Conrad a few days, Gary organized a town meeting. Farmers drove from 100 miles around to meet the rainmaker, who floored them with his opening line:

“I was talking to God this morning,” Ryan declared, “and God told me to tell you — ‘this drought is over for you people!’”

There was a gasp. Or maybe a sigh of relief.

“He can pick and choose in a moment,” Gigi says, “what his audience is and what they need to hear.”

Ryan might have checked the forecast that day. Or not. Nobody seemed especially curious. Besides, the forecast was an educated guess — Ryan was giving guarantees.

As always, Ryan talked at length that day about clouds. He fell into a rhapsody about clouds. He reminded the farmers that, as children, they saw faces in the clouds. That’s proof, he cried, that clouds are alive — and all living things have relationships with other living things. See?

He didn’t go too deep into the mechanics of rainmaking. He’d spent decades learning his craft, he said, and couldn’t explain it in one hour. He simply promised the farmers moisture, and soon, and they grumbled their approval.

One woman took Gary aside and gave him \$100 to give to Ryan. She couldn't afford it because her husband had just died and money was scarce, but she insisted when Gary tried to return it. She wanted to contribute.

Days later snow blanketed the woman's fields. She called Becky: Bless you. And please thank the rainmaker for the best wet we've had this year.

Ryan didn't like anyone to watch him work. Except Gary. He showed Gary his equipment — several 8-foot-long steel tubes and a wooden sawhorse — and explained how it functioned. Flowing water attracts flowing water, so flowing water on the ground attracts flowing water in the sky. The tubes, he said, act like antennae once you know how to tune them.

Gary thought the tubes gave off an awful hum, a vibration that made his back fillings ache and his arthritis flare. It was odd — and inexplicable. Still, there was no arguing with the results. Days after Ryan arrive, snow fell. Then came sheets of rain.

People practically danced in their yards. They held open their mouths and let the raindrops tickle their tongues. Gary and Becky slept with the windows wide open, no matter how cold it got. They lay in bed and listened to the rain pattering their metal awnings — the ultimate lullaby.

Becky, taking her morning walk, noticed the sky. It did look different. Crisper. Fresher. The clouds too. They snapped in the breeze like sheets on a line.

When she mentioned this to Ryan, he nodded. Besides making it rain, he'd cleansed the toxicity from the atmosphere, he said. He'd rid the air of a residue he called "dor," not only making the sky brighter, but paving the way for ferocious spring downpours.

As February ended Ryan said goodbye to Gary and Becky and everyone in Conrad. They thanked him profusely for the snow and rain.

Just wait, he told them. The big stuff is yet to come.

He would come back in May and finish the job.

Brace yourselves, he said as he drove away — it's coming.

Flakes the Size of Nickels

Before returning to Mt Shasta, Ryan swung 250 miles southeast to see Viola Hill, an 86-year-old rancher in Roundup.

Please, she said when she phoned him at Gary's — help us.

She offered him \$10,000, and like Gary she called a town meeting to raise the money. Nearly 60 desperate farmers attended, including Hill's husband, who was frail and confined to a nearby nursing home.

Ryan gave his usual talk with a twist. He announced that snow would fall later that night. Not just any snow, he said. Flakes the size of nickels. Pay close attention. Nickels.

Charlotte and Tony Zinne attended the meeting, hoping Ryan might be the salvation of their 12,000 acre ranch in nearby Ryegate. Driving home that night they were debating whether or not to give Ryan money when snow suddenly appeared in their high beams.

Tony stopped the truck and Charlotte jumped out. She held her hand up to the sky and watched a snowflake waft onto her palm — the size of a nickel.

Charlotte decided at that moment to do more than give to the rainmaker fund. She would help Hill run it. She signed up strangers. She signed up the local bank — and even the church. In a few months she helped grow the fund to \$16,000.

If fear drove Tony to trust the rainmaker, love drove Charlotte to throw herself into raising money for the rainmaker fund. Poor Tony, she says. He worries all of the time about losing the ranch, which makes her worry, and sometimes even the goats and cats and dogs frisking in the front yard look worried.

The Zinnes' ranch sits on a pretty — but lonely — piece of land, which was famous in the 1800s. Their yellow house was once the headquarters of John T. Murphy's "79," a legendary cattle ranch that ran from the Musselshell River — now almost dry — to the Crazy Mountains. Growing up a few miles

from the 79, Tony didn't figure the world itself could be much bigger.

Through the years, farming other people's places, Tony saved enough to realize his boyhood dream: He bought 6,000 acres of the 79, and rented another 6,000, the proudest day of his life.

He loves that land, Charlotte says tenderly. And he used that land shamelessly to make her love him. Days after they met at a cocktail party, Tony invited Charlotte for a picnic. They sat in a prairie meadow listening to the lowing cows, and Charlotte fell for Tony on the spot. "It was the cows," she often says, trying to get a smile out of Tony.

They were married months later. United in a holy bond of love and worry. The newlyweds would sit each night and watch the Weather Channel, hoping for good spring rains, which would carry them through the summer, or big autumn snows, which would melt into their fields in winter, when the warm Chinooks blew.

Hope got them by — until the drought hit. "It was like someone turned off a spigot," Tony says.

Now the Zinnes often sit at their kitchen window, a different kind of Weather Channel. It faces Locomotive Butte, a long rock formation that resembles an old-time steam engine. Rain clouds once furled like black smoke from the locomotive's funnel, but lately it's just blue sky trailing in the wake of that damned train.

"I'm scared," Tony says. "Scared my reality has caught up with my dreams."

When Ryan came back in late May 2001, there was even more excitement, Tony says, and more need. It was the rainy season, but rain hadn't fallen in weeks, and everyone was on edge. Another town meeting was called.

Relax, Ryan said. Rain will fall right after this meeting.

As the meeting broke up, the farmers walked outside to their trucks and felt something prickling their hands and faces.

"It'll be, they said, looking up.

Well, would you look at that?

"It rained," Tony says, shrieking with laughter, like a cow pissing on a flat rock.

Days later came the hot winds, screaming across the prairie, threatening to evaporate the rain before it could do any good. So Ryan went around, Tony says, "and he stopped that wind."

Ryan spent much of June shuttling between Glasgow and Conrad, Roundup and Ryegate. Clouds seemed to follow him, Charlotte says, and people started to believe. Guess he really is a rainmaker, they said. Made good on his promise, didn't he? Rains wherever he goes.

Whatever the reasons, Becky says, whatever the amount of rain he brought, Ryan worked a miracle. Up their way he didn't end the drought, permanently, but he interrupted the despair. He got people talking, especially the men. He opened minds, and lightened hearts, and made tight-lipped farmers acknowledge they were sad and afraid.

That alone, Becky says, saved some lives.

Gary is one of the farmers who still phones Ryan, for advice, for comfort, for something he doesn't like to admit. Late at night, after supper, Gary shuts himself into his office, just off the kitchen, and sits at his desk, sometimes gazing at a photo of himself as a young farmer — full head of hair, bulging biceps, chest-deep in a field of ripe winter wheat. Then he picks up the phone and dials the rainmaker. Sometimes he asks Ryan for rain.

After hanging up with Ryan not long ago, Gary went to the window and saw a tower of nimbus clouds forming on the horizon. He feasted his eyes on those clouds — vast and spongy and full of delicious water — and experienced a surge of wonder.

Also, gratitude.

He felt sure Ryan had blown him a storm, as if blowing him a kiss.

Seeing God in Clouds

He still thinks about the farmers, still remembers them fondly, even though they haven't brought him back.

He would love to return to Montana , to roar again into those little towns like an avenging angel, ready to do battle with the stubborn clouds and the dried-out sky.

But the farmers tell him there just isn't any money for rainmakers right now.

He sits at his kitchen table, drinking a glass of water. Snow-topped Mt. Shasta looms in the window behind his head. With his strawberry red hair, unruly red eyebrows and striking blue eyes, the rainmaker looks like a cross between Donald Sutherland and Donald Trump. But dressed all in white — white sweat pants, white tube socks, white T-shirt that reads, "Relax, God is in Charge" — he also looks like a 6-foot cloud.

He talks about his life. Growing up in Albany , NY , he always felt destined for something different. He tried college, did well, but it didn't feel right. He drove a cab through his twenties, tried a dozen different jobs, but knew there was something more.

In the mid 1970s he borrowed a book from the Albany Public Library, a portrait of different Native Americans, with a chapter on Sun Bear. Inspired, he hitchhiked west, not only finding Sun Bear, but moving in with him.

Sun Bear called the primal forces of nature "The Grandfathers," and taught Ryan to speak their language. After years of practice, the dialogue comes quite easily.

And then there was Wilhelm Reich's work, the controversial scientist whose discovery of "orgone energy" led to, among other applications, a device he called the cloudbuster which he used to make rain on many occasions.

"I was unaccountably fortunate," Ryan says. Within a few months of meeting Sun Bear, he met Jerome Eden, a natural scientist with a deep and abiding knowledge of Reich's work who took Ryan under his wing. After years of study with both men, Ryan assimilated the two different points of view: one scientific, one mystical.

"For someone who had never even thought about making rain, I ended up with the greatest set of teachers possible. Today, I've altered the weather more times than I can remember, not just rain, but changing humidity, shifting winds, dropping the barometric pressure. It's become so second nature, I don't even think about it."

He must be careful, however: rainmaking takes a terrible physical toll.

"You are dealing with a lot of energy," he says. "Using Reich's approach, you have to deal with the toxic energy in the area first . . . what you notice in drought areas is that there is a buildup of stagnation. The clouds don't form well, they don't get robust and puffy. The sky looks whitish. So you have to deal with this stagnation and it has effects on your body. Makes me very sick at times. I've gotten very, very sick."

He stares into his glass of water. "It's all just simple science, he says. Some rainmaking is mystical, beyond words, but much is predicated on one bedrock fundamental rule — for every action there is an equal reaction.

"Simple," he says, sipping the water.

"If weather acts upon you," he says, "it only stands to reason that you can act upon the weather. After that, it's all about technique."

But most of the techniques that Ryan uses he doesn't talk about publicly.

"It was years before I attempted to do anything on my own. It was nine years before I felt comfortable doing it. Yet people call me on the phone and ask me to tell them how to make rain right then . . . as if I could. "The one thing that everyone can do is learn to pray for rain. You learn how to do that, it never fails," he says.

Ryan never stays on the subject of weather very long. Weather invariably leads him to long, often lyrical digressions. Politics and history. Literature and philosophy. Music and art.

He loves poetry, especially William Carlos Williams. He can recite quantities of Williams, including his most famous lines: So much depends

upon

a red wheel barrow

glazed

with rain water

beside

the white chickens

His favorite subject, however, is clouds. Again and again he returns to clouds. He loves clouds, reveres clouds, sees God in clouds, especially in the West, where clouds stand out more, defining each day's sky as features define a face.

He tugs on his ponytail.

It's disappointing, he says, that Gary and Becky, Charlotte and Tony, all the farmers with them didn't learn the full lessons of the clouds.

He recalls that first trip in February 2001, when they believed. "You make it rain," he says, "they want to marry you to their daughter and give you the farm."

Now, he says, they've started losing their knowing, their faith. They plead poverty and still phone him for help, but he's seen this before.

"They start to think nothing happened back then, they start to think I didn't do anything. They start to think there's nothing more to do."

"The Fuhrmans and their group up around Glasgow went through that too. But Phyllis kept after them, and now I've been up there five times in 10 years. They haven't had a bad drought in all that time and that whole region is now a green oasis in an otherwise very dry state."

He pauses, looks out the window at the snow-capped Mt. Shasta .

"It's getting drier and drier in a lot of areas out West. Climate change is a real thing and part of that change is drier conditions. So you have to keep working with it . . . and if it gets real dry again up in Montana , those folks will remember what to do. "

At Home

A few years ago Ryan was able to buy 24 acres of land on a hillside outside of Mt. Shasta . He hopes to build a house there soon. He loves his land just as the farmers in Montana love theirs; in fact, he recently planted a row of cottonwoods he brought back from their prairie.

He visits his land every day, to talk to the oaks, watch the clouds, see what the mountain lions have been up to. Today, late in the afternoon, he goes and sits by his creek, where he's carefully arranged the rocks to make a range of different notes as the water hits them.

Listening to the creek's splashing xylophone music, he surveys the sky. A flawless sheet of blue. A real Montana sky.

What would happen if he started working right now?

He smiles.

"Let's find out," he says.

He walks downstream half a mile. There, lying in the tall grass, are his rainmaking tubes. They look like spare parts for the Tin Man.

He wades into the creek, up to his shins, up to his thighs, and rubs cold water all over his arms and face, as though performing a rite. Only when thoroughly wet does he reach for the tubes.

After positioning several tubes in the creek bed in a manner making sense only to him, he climbs out of the creek.

He rakes his hair. He rubs his jaw. He studies the tubes.

Now he lifts his gaze. His sky-blue eyes grow wide. His fluffy cumulus eyebrows float above them. He peers at the rim of the hills, then higher, into the deep purple iris of the sky.

Still not a cloud. But also not a trace of doubt in his face: It's coming.

A strip of cloth tied to one of the tubes suddenly begins to flutter.

He points.

"The wind's picking up," he says. "See?" [Back to Top](#)