

A Bit of Dust

by Philip Siddons¹

Gerald was standing on a pile of newspapers in his basement directing the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra as they obediently played along on his record player. He had directed orchestras so many times that he seldom needed to watch the encyclopedia opened before him, showing the various orchestral sections.

About half way through his favorite piece, the record started to skip. Gerald jumped off his director's platform and ran impatiently over to the ping-pong table holding his orchestra. He fixed the machine's arm again, but it continued to skip. In fact, the entire first movement had been scratchy, like the radio during a rain storm. Gerald examined the record and found that it was quite dusty. He wondered how such little particles of dust could ruin the entire Cleveland Orchestra. 'I wonder what it would be like to be so small, that I could walk within the grooves of the record' Gerald thought. He stared into the record grooves.

Just then, everything in the basement started to move. Like magic, the ping-pong table began to grow larger, and the ceiling, with all the heating ducts, rose up away from him, up and up. As the record player grew larger and larger, the blackness of the record spread beneath him as if he had tipped over a bucket of black tar. The grooves of the widening disk grew up beside him like cartoon fences growing up out of the ground.

All of a sudden he was kneeling in a record groove as deep as the drainage ditch behind his house. And the black walls continued to grow until they were as high as the ceiling of his school gymnasium. Everything was dark and Gerald could only see a few feet in front of him. It was like the long dark hallway in his school after they turned out the lights. But instead of the floor being wide and the walls straight up, it

was like the letter 'V.' The floor was just wide enough for him to walk on, and the black walls sloped away from him, like the bottom of his sand truck.

Gerald started walking and noticed the walls and the floor had ruts and scratches in them. The hallway kept curving to the left up ahead and it seemed to be leading somewhere.

Gerald wondered if the rest of his house, the piano, the living room couch and his parents upstairs had grown into giants also. To his further surprise, Gerald heard something up ahead in the curving groove. Around the curve ahead came . . . someone . . . about Gerald's age but he or she or it was dressed rather oddly. She had on a brown suit that had a hood around her head — something like a sleeper. And the suit didn't have any buttons or zippers.

Just as Gerald was thinking that this person would never be able to get out of this one piece suit, the stranger said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Gerald, and what are you doing here, . . . and how do we get out?" he replied.

"What's a Gerald?" she asked.

"Why I'm a Gerald," he said, "and why are you wearing that funny costume?"

The oddly clad character, who at this point seemed to be a girl from the pitch of her voice, replied, "You know, I was just going to ask you the same thing about your clothing."

And appearing to pause enough to reflect on Gerald's question, she continued, "That's what we all wear, but you are the first who ever wore something like that." And in saying that, she bent her hooded head closer to look at Gerald's shirt buttons. She went on, saying:

"Which part of the groove are you from?"

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Gerald said, "I live here, I mean, in our house."

"Oh, you must be another particle," she answered. "I've been here for quite a while. My name is Dust."

Gerald looked puzzled and asked her: "How do we get out of here?"

Dust responded: "You really are new around here, aren't you? Well, as long as you're here, I might as well show you around. Why don't you walk along with me for a while." And Dust began to walk along with Gerald catching up quickly.

As they began to walk down the dark vinyl tunnel, Dust began, "You should know there's one thing you have to watch out for on our walk, and that's the sharp giant pole. It passes through the groove every once in a while."

"What's it like when it passes by?" Gerald asked.

"Well," Dust paused, "it's as big as a telephone pole and it's sharp on the end that touches down here in the groove. It makes a terrible noise because it drags along the floor of the groove all the while. If you don't get out of the way, it will smash you. See the scratches it makes on the walls and the floor?" and Dust pointed out the marks near them.

Gerald looked at the walls and then bent over and examined the floor. "They're all over everything down here," Gerald said, "can't you stop it?"

"No," said Dust, "but you can tell when it is nearby. The groove becomes filled with a horrible sound and the floor starts to rumble. The closer it comes, the louder it gets. And when it comes you have to run and climb into the nearest crevice you can find in the walls. It's best to have an idea where the closest rut is just in case it comes by unexpectedly."

"How often does the giant pole come through here?" asked Gerald, while he felt some

more of the scratches on the wall.

"Oh, its hard to say," said Dust. "Some of the older particles in the groove think they can predict when it will come but usually they're wrong."

They walked on further while Dust explained and imitated some of the sounds the giant pole made.

"Where do you live?" Gerald asked. "Is there a house somewhere down in here?"

"No, I just live everywhere" she said. "Anywhere in the groove that has a place long enough for me to sleep, I stay there. It depends where I am. Look over there, I could sleep in that crevice if I had to."

In the side of the wall was a long cut just above the floor.

"The thing you have to remember when you're sleeping is to keep your arms and legs in the crevice, or you might get hit when the pole scrapes by."

A little later in their walking they heard some voices ahead around the curve.

"Up ahead is where I started out today." Dust explained. "There are about five others living there."

Coming around the bend, they reached the place from where the voices had come. There were five particles lying in their niches in the wall. It looked like they had been there a long time because they filled in all of the niches in which they were lying.

Gerald thought to ask them if they could squeeze out of their places, but he decided against it because it might be impolite. But they reminded him of the little cavities with faces that were imbedded in the foot high tooth that the dental higentist had shown his class.

As Dust and Gerald passed them by they all stopped their talking and look at Gerald, then at Dust, and then back to Gerald again. They

laughed to themselves, whispering to one another quickly returning to their chatter as if the guests were gone.

Dust waited until they were well past them and then turned to Gerald and said:

“They aren’t very friendly. One of them named Lint usually says ‘hello,’ but didn’t even do that this time. Lint and his friends don’t like explorers very much. That’s what I am,” Dust explained, “an explorer.”

“What’s an explorer?” Gerald asked, stopping to look at Dust, and still somewhat amused at her one piece brown suit which reminded him of a toddler’s footed pajamas with a hood.

“There are two kinds of particles in the groove” Dust began, “sitters and explorers.” The sitters are the ones who are afraid to travel very far from their niches. They think they won’t be able to find another one if the metal pole comes by. Mostly they sit and tell stories of what they hear of explorer’s travels. That’s the other kind of particle — explorer.

“I’m an explorer,” Dust continued. “My parents taught me how to find a crevice in the wall quickly. Some say my folks were the greatest of explorers. Some even say they both reached the mystical silver tree which grows within the sacred circle at the end of the groove. The old particles say it is at the end of the grove. Once we reach the sacred circle, we don’t have to walk any further because that’s where the groove ends. When you reach it, you can climb up the branch and look out over all the grooves.

We don’t know for sure if there is a holy circle, and we are not sure which way in the groove to go. All we know is that our ancestors said there is one. That’s who I thought you were when I heard your footsteps, another explorer like myself.”

With some puzzlement Gerald asked: “Where are your parents. Do you know?”

Dust replied with thoughtfulness: “I heard a long time ago that they had reached the

sacred circle.”

“How did you hear that?” Gerald asked in amazement.

“The explorers have an agreement with one another. They call out the latest news down the corridor every once in a while. Here, I’ll show you.”

Dust put his hands to his mouth and called out loudly:

“I’ve met a Gerald. He’s lost but is traveling along like the rest of us.”

Then Gerald heard another voice far down the dark groove repeat the same words. Soon, he heard the message faintly repeated, even further away.

Dust said to Gerald, after they could not hear any repetitions, “You know, sometimes the messages don’t go all through the groove because there are no explorers within earshot. To make matters worse, sitters yell things from their niches that are not true, just to foul things up.”

“That’s not nice,” Gerald said. “Why would they do that?”

“Sitters resent us explorers and because they want to sleep undisturbed in their niches, they find that our walking past them and talking of things elsewhere in the groove is upsetting.”

Suddenly there was a loud noise in the groove. Dust turned to Gerald and said, “Quick, find a crevice to hide in or you’ll be run over by the giant pole.”

Frantically Gerald looked along the walls and ruts for a hole big enough to crawl into. Dust had found one already up ahead about ten feet, but Gerald kept looking.

“Here,” pointed Dust as she hopped out of the one she had secured for herself. “Take this one. I’ll find another.”

Gerald quickly jumped in and tucked his legs in with him. Dust, meanwhile, found

another and crawled in as the noise became louder.

“How much longer until it gets here?” shouted Gerald.

Dust started to reply but her voice was drowned out by the loud scraping sound. The walls and floor shook with an almost unbearably loud rumble and the giant pole, which looked like a pin as tall as a house, scraped past them. The pole dragged down the narrow hallway in the same direction they were going, and disappeared around the curve.

Gerald was shaking with fear in his niche. He listened to the sound fade into the distance until the noise could not be heard at all. The groove finally settled down and Dust signaled that it was safe to come out.

Dust and Gerald walked and walked. Gerald usually was the first to get tired but from time to time, Dust would have to sit down for a while herself.

A message came through the groove. It said: “Follow the voice and keep on!”

Dust repeated the message in a loud voice, calling on ahead. She paused to listen for another explorer to continue it, but the message was not repeated. She waited and called it again, but still no answer.

“What’s wrong,” asked Gerald, “why doesn’t it keep going?”

Dust looked down and said with a sigh: “That’s been happening a lot lately. You shout out the message and there is no one up ahead to relay it. It gets discouraging sometimes, but you know, its those messages that make my day. I get bored and lonely walking the groove. The sitters sometimes try to talk me out of going on. Of course, the greatest hardship is the terrible giant pole. Sometimes I become very tired and discouraged. I feel almost ready to quit walking toward the holy circle. But it’s usually during these times that a message comes echoing through the groove. Sometimes it’s like the one we just heard. Other times it’s simply ‘Keep

on!’ Here, I’ll show you.”

Again Dust put her hands to her mouth and shouted: “Keep On!”

This time there was someone up ahead to answer and very far away an explorer could be heard calling “Keep on!”

From behind, Dust and Gerald heard another message. It reached them and sounded like, “Turn back, rest a while!”

Dust said: “That’s from the sitters. They occasionally yell things like that from their niches.”

“How do you know which one to listen to and relay?” asked Gerald.

Dust walked on thinking for a while, and said, “I’m not always sure. Usually I relay only the messages that would encourage the explorers in their walk.”

Dust and Gerald continued walking along talking and occasionally making up songs about what it would be like if they ever did find the mysterious sacred circle.

Gerald became proficient in hiding from the giant metal shaft. Only once did he stick out too far from his hiding place in a niche, and the pole scraped off his shirt button as it went by. Afterwards Dust laughed and said, “That’s why I don’t wear buttons.”

In the passing of time, the giant pole came along again. Dust found his hiding place first, as usual, and then Gerald found his. While Gerald was lying in his niche waiting for the shaft to pass, he noticed that the groove shook worse than usual. The noise seemed louder. Gerald remembered that the walls had been rather rough lately.

The shaking grew so violent that Dust was thrown out of her hiding spot right into the middle of the groove and suddenly the giant pole came screeching around the bend.

Gerald screamed but Dust looked at him

and said, "Keep On!"

As Dust said that, the pole scraped through where they were in the groove and swept poor Dust away down the corridor.

Gerald remained in his niche and cried out of fear and sorrow. He didn't know what to do. The walk would be so frightening without Dust and he had lost his friend.

After what seemed like forever, Gerald stood up in the middle of the groove and started to walk. The groove was now quiet. He walked and walked and walked until his legs hurt. He was very tired and lonely. He sat down and thought of the good times he had with Dust. He said to himself, "There's simply no point. The groove doesn't change and what hope is there of reaching anything. Besides, how do I know there really is a sacred circle at the end?"

Just then Gerald heard a message come through the groove. The voice calling the message sounded very far back, but it said, "Walk on, for I am with you friend!"

Gerald jumped up and said to himself: "That's it." he put his hands to his mouth like Dust had done and called out as loud as he could: "Walk on, for I am with you friend."

Just when Gerald was about to give up listening for the message to be repeated up ahead, he heard someone, far in the distance, repeat the message. And with that, Gerald began running. He ran and ran and when he got tired, he walked until his legs felt like they were going to fall off.

In a little while he passed a rather large group of reclining particles in their niches. As Gerald walked briskly past them and around the curve one of the sitters replied, "There goes another one. How useless it all is. Why doesn't he stop? He might as well enjoy a place, because you can't take it with you."

Gerald heard the comment just as he was rounding the curve walking away from them. He didn't stop, however, but continued to walk, and walk, and walk.

Not long after he rounded the curve from where the sitters were, he felt something funny happening. Instead of the usual curving, the groove straightened out. Gerald walked further, and noticed that the heel of his right shoe was worn down from walking with the direction of the curve for so long.

Gerald walked faster in spite of his shoe, and then he saw something up ahead. The groove lead right to a stair case going up into the dark. He walked slowly up the staircase, at the top of which was a door. He could see a light under the door and he didn't know what to do. 'Maybe this leads to the sacred circle' he thought, 'or maybe the giant metal pole is up here. I shouldn't go in, but if I don't open the door, I'll never find out.' So Gerald opened the door.

"Gerald, your mother has been calling you for dinner. Where have you been? Now sit down and eat your food. And by the way, how did you get all that dust on you?"

Gerald walked with confusion across the kitchen and quietly to the table and sat down. As he pulled in his chair to the table he said: "Oh, . . . I don't know. You know how dusty it gets down there sometimes."

As Gerald ate his supper he heard the music of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra record softly drifting up from the basement. After he finished eating, he started to go up to his bedroom, but his mother called out, "Gerald, would you mind going down and turning off the record player?"

"Sure mom" Gerald said, but as he turned toward the basement, he slipped but quickly caught himself. He looked down and saw that the heel of his right shoe was worn down and a protruding nail had caught in the rug.

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