

Cloud

Jason Jordan

I'm on my way to take a shower when I realize that the light's on in the bathroom, and the door's cracked. This is weird because: A) I don't leave lights on when I exit a room, and B) I either leave doors wide open or closed. No in between. So, with my towel around my waist as my only cover-up, I inch toward the bathroom. I hear what sounds like the faucet running, but it's different, as if a bunch of guys are pissing all at once.

Through the crack, I see a gray cloud emptying its rain into the toilet. It's a small cloud that meteorologists would probably call fog. The splashing continues for a while, and the cloud begins to lose its grayish hue as more and more rain hits the toilet bowl. I stand back from the door when I sense the scenario is almost at its end, though I lightly knock on the white door, which the cloud now matches, with one of my knuckles.

"Uh...you gonna be too much longer?" I ask tentatively. I hate it when people knock on the door when I'm in the bathroom. I mean, if it's locked, what am I supposed to say? Come in? I do the same thing, too, though.

"Not too much longer," the cloud says. The downpour has lessened significantly, and the remaining drops hit the water like the sound of coffee as it finishes brewing.

"I was gonna take a shower," I say, explaining myself. But, I think, I'm in my own place. Why should I have to explain myself?

"About done!" the cloud says. The androgynous voice echoes like it would in a cave.

Later, after I shower and dress, the cloud is in front of one of my open apartment windows, staring outside at something I can't make out. My place is in disarray, but I can't motivate myself to clean up the piles of clothes on the floor or dishes in the sink.

"Hey, you wanna go for a walk? It'll be a long one, though, since I'll be crossin' the river and all."

"Yeah," the cloud says. We head outside and walk towards the 2nd Street Bridge. The cloud explains that he is indeed fog, and that all clouds, once in their lifespan, are permitted to observe and mingle with other life forms – plants, animals, humans – to see what life is like on the ground. I wonder what difference it makes, but don't ask.

"So you don't live for long?" I ask the cloud. He says no. "Are you a he or a she?"

"I'm neither actually. In fact, clouds are asexual and reproduce accordingly, like some worms. We don't live very long at all. A few weeks at most. You all, however, live like 70 or 80 years – maybe more." For practicality's sake I decide to call the cloud a "he" since I've been doing it anyway.

"That's not that long in the scope of things."

"Maybe you're right." As we near the bridge, I look forward to crossing it. Despite needing a paint job, it's a nice walk across the Ohio River, and the bridge itself leads into the downtown area of Louisville, Kentucky. The sun's out, glittering off the water, reflecting back in the direction it originated.

"River looks clean today," I say. We're on the sidewalk now, crossing one of the many bridges that connects Indiana to Kentucky. The cloud is hovering next to me, over the open water. To the left is the Sherman Minton Bridge, which is being painted light gray as we speak. "Y'know what's funny?" I ask the cloud. "What's your name by the way?"

"No name. Just call me Cloud, I guess. And no, what's funny?"

I say, "What's funny is that Louisville commissioned a company to paint their half of the bridge, but when it was time for New Albany to paint their half, they decided not to because they were too cheap. Kentucky improves its lot while Indiana lets theirs go to waste. Some idiot already fell off it, though. He died."

"Idiot?"

"Yeah." We're standing in the middle of the bridge, on the sidewalk still, while cars, trucks, and motorcycles whiz by as if their passengers all have somewhere important to be. I love being suspended over water, even if I feel unsafe. "If you fall off a bridge, or anything really high, but you don't mean to, then you're an idiot. Simple as that."

"Yeah," Cloud says. "When you hit water from this high up, it's like hitting concrete."

"That's what they say. Hey, guess the place jumpers choose the most out of every place in the world. Or maybe it's in just the U.S."

"I dunno. I don't know many places."

"The Golden Gate Bridge. They have, like, 20 something people jump off that thing every year. I saw it on TV."

"You thinking about jumping today?" Cloud asks.

I laugh.

"No, not today." I resume walking towards land. "Water looks clean."

"It's probably not, though. Say, where're we going anyway?"

"We're headed to Java Brewing Co. When we get off the bridge, we'll turn right and walk a few blocks up. Once we run into the skyscrapers, we're there."

"What're you gonna do at Java?"

"Get coffee, and watch."

"Watch what?" Cloud asks.

"You'll see." We reach Kentucky, and the first thing I think is how much quieter it is on the road than on the bridge. It's midday, so there're a lot of business people out and about. Balding men in suits are walking hurriedly, talking into cell phones, while overweight women stroll casually. Typically, the women'll be in pairs, but the men, for some reason, prefer to be alone. As on the bridge, vehicles are everywhere, negotiating the narrow lanes among the city's downtown district. People cross streets whenever there's a lull in traffic. I wonder how many pedestrians get killed crossing streets each year. A few hundred, maybe. Who knows?

Once we hear the waterfalls outside of the bank building, which rivals most of the other towers in height, I know we're close to Java. Cloud says he's gonna wait outside, where we'll sit, I presume, and I say okay, and then I let the door close behind me. Java's nicely decorated. On the wall above the menu there's a string of white icicle lights that are meant for Christmastime, obviously, but that they leave up all year. Joy is working the register, so before I order I act like I'm perusing the menu to seem more normal, though I already know what I want. I do my best to look her in the eyes, and not below.

"I'll have a grande iced coffee, please."

"Any room for cream?"

"No thanks," I tell Joy, who informs me that my total is \$2.20. "Oh, and a water, too."

"Sure."

"Thanks." I shell out the cash. She puts it in the till, and hands me a nickel for change. I walk to the end of the counter – Java is like a hallway, basically – and wait for my drinks. Outside, I sit in one of the black, metal chairs. Cloud hovers above the other one. I slide the water over to him.

"Thank you," Cloud says. "I *am* thirsty now."

"No problem. Water's free." I sip my coffee, relishing the taste. Cloud hovers over the cup of water, and shortly afterward, I see drops of it ascend before disappearing into his body. They're evaporating. He's absorbing them. It's like it's raining, except backwards. "Hey, by the way, whoever heard of fog in the afternoon?" Cloud doesn't say anything. If he had shoulders, he might shrug.

My cell phone starts vibrating, so I fish it out of my pocket and turn off the alarm, and then shift my vision towards the inside of Java.

"This is the best part of my day," I tell Cloud. At that moment, Joy, wearing her skintight uniform, emerges from behind the counter with a broom and a dustpan. Her brown hair is tied haphazardly into a shape that probably isn't supposed to represent anything. The style probably doesn't even have a name. I've stared at her every day for the past month, which was when Jennifer and I suddenly called it quits. I'm not sad – only numb.

It was Jennifer who suggested we stop seeing each other when she found out I'd be leaving Louisville to take a job in Pittsburgh. I told her that long distance relationships can work sometimes, but she didn't agree, and so I made my plans to

move to the City of Bridges. Bridges follow me, or maybe I just gravitate to them.

Joy sweeps the floor, bending over when the dustpan is needed, and then changes the trash bag Java leaves under the counter for customers' cups, straws, and paper. When finished, she returns to her post behind the register. "I wish I was asexual sometimes, Cloud."

"Why?"

"Did you see that? Did you see her? I want her so bad, but I'll never be able to have her. Never. Ever."

"I'll never be in love, though. I'm incapable of love," Cloud tells me. "What about that?"

"Sometimes I don't think there's a difference between love and lust, Cloud. What's it matter anyway, though, right? Joy'd probably just cheat on me eventually, so I might as well save time and money by not even trying to date her before I leave. I don't know. Maybe there *are* some good people in the world."

"It's about time I get back."

"Hey, hold on a second. Why'd you pick my place? Out of all places?"

"I heard Jennifer was ignoring you."

"How'd you know that?"

"Cell phones."

"Huh?" I ask.

"Your transmissions shoot through the sky, through the clouds, so they can reach the satellites. We can listen in on any conversations we want, at any time, wherever we are. I chose yours. We learn languages quickly, though. We do everything quickly because we don't have that much time."

"So you're telling me that, somewhere in the world, there are clouds that can speak Chinese?"

"Yep. It just depends on where you're stationed."

"Well, Cloud, it's been fun," I say. "It's been cool hanging out. Maybe we can do it again sometime."

"Probably not, but maybe. Listen, I won't be around as long as you'll be, but don't waste your time here, okay?"

I think about asking him to be more specific, but as he's drifting skyward to rejoin his peers, I decide not to. I simply wave, and I don't stop until I've lost the ability to distinguish him from the others.

Dog Versus Sandwich March 2008

Jason Jordan is a writer from New Albany, Indiana, who always says he's from Louisville, Kentucky, because people actually know where that is. His fiction has appeared in The2ndHand, Pindeldyboz, VerbSap, and many other publications. Jordan is also Editor-in-Chief of the literary magazine decomP. He is currently in the MFA program at Chatham University, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he is working on his first novel. You can visit him at poweringthedevilsircus.blogspot.com.