

CIGGIES IN THE CLOUDS

By Ryan John Arnold

FIGHT

The darkness fell quickly and shrieking sounds were the first on the scene. In no time green light arrived, emanating from behind the closed door as it began rattling to reach a constant hum that vibrated the bed on which she sat like a tuning fork. As she stared ahead at the hinges and knob that were readying to burst like grenade shrapnel across the room, nine-year-old Victoria Xu eyes maintained their focus on the foe --- oblivious to the excessive length the ash on her cigarette had grown. It fell and landed on her trusty companion, a grey sloth missing an arm, littered with tattoos and cigarette burns alike. The sloth, Giuseppe, didn't flinch at the searing sensation brought on by the ash as he was well used to it by now; and secretly enjoyed it. Licking the ash with pleasure he looked up at Victoria.

"Are you ready 'Seppe?" she asked to which he nodded.

With that, Victoria thrust him into her black leather, bullet studded YSL bag along with all her other specialty items then took the final drag of her cigarette. Wearing

the large handbag like a backpack, 'Seppe head rested gently on her shoulder. He loved the sensation of the crushed velvet doll dresses Victoria wore backwards because they were too small to do up the front and her non-existent bits would be revealed for the entire world to see. Pulling on her clear eight-hole Dr. Martin's and sliding on her Tom Ford sunglasses in preparation for the eclipse of light, she bounced a couple of times on the bed like a boxer in the ring, timing the moment perfectly. With the moment upon her Victoria leaped from the bed, screaming like a warrior into battle as she raced toward the door...

With the force of Ram in heat she blasted the door into pieces, sending them flying in all directions. The light was so much brighter than she could have imagined, but she didn't stop and continued into the blinding green-hued light until she smashed through the glowing wall at the back of the closet, pushing as fast and as deep into the light as possible. There was no floor beneath her feet, neither ceiling nor walls --- just light. Warm light, that brought with it an ease of breath and physical tension with every step taken. Victoria swore she heard the light speak --- *the worst is over.*

Slowly, the brightness softened itself and both Giuseppe and Victoria could make out a faint trace of blue through the white, steadily growing in size until they discovered they were drifting on a queen-sized cloud through the sky. Looking back Victoria saw no trace of the dark, menacing territory from whence she came. Screaming with exhausted excitement she fell to the cloud, which was covered in dozens of cloud pillows of all shapes and sizes. She fluffed a few for herself and Giuseppe who was crawling at the only speed a sloth knows to be by her side.

"I think that deserves a little sleepy nappy, don't you?" Giuseppe suggested.

"Hell yes it does! Get over here!"

They nestled up close together, and before they knew it the cloud was rolling a fresh blanket of warm fluffy condensation over them, putting them to sleep in no time at all with smiles from ear to ear.

FLIGHT

They awoke to a ubiquitous gentle tremolo of violins. Both pleased the sun was still shining, they nonetheless took their time emerging from beneath mist with Victoria rummaging through her bag for a ciggy and a drink.

Menthols and dry gin had never tasted better as they gazed toward the infinite happiness that lay before them. Giuseppe carefully licked the ash from Victoria's cigarette while she had her head tipped back to drink from the flask.

"Don't you get it wet!" she joked.

"Never," he replied then asked, "where are we going on this cloud?"

"Nine I suppose."

In an instant, they both heard the sound of gusting wind coming from behind them. Turning back, they couldn't see anything but the wall of cloud that obstructed their view, when suddenly a mass of cranes came flying through the fog as though birthed right from it. Within minutes' hundreds --- possibly thousands --- of Whooping Cranes flapping their monstrous wings in unison, surrounded them. They took little notice of the pair who sat completely mesmerized drifting on their cloud. The cranes had all but passed them by when Victoria noticed one bird that wasn't flapping its wings to the unifying beat. It appeared to be struggling, though didn't appear to be injured merely tired. Without warning, it broke its long gaze to turn to notice them and abruptly break from the pack to join them.

Reaching the cloud, it made no efforts to fold its legs to sit, instead it simply allowed them to fall through the mist until its body came to rest comfortably on top. Victoria looked over the side and could see the crane's legs just dangling below. *'Fantastic!' She thought.*

The crane picked at a few of its feathers before settling its neck into its body for what was clearly a much-needed rest. Victoria, never one to keep her hands to herself couldn't resist touching the bird, despite Giuseppe efforts and fear of the bird reacting violently. She expected the feathers to be oily and grimy with sand, however to her surprise they were soft like the coat of a 6-month-old puppy. Giuseppe was equally amazed to see the crane so tame to her touch, appearing to even enjoy it. A brief and understandable surge of jealousy coursed through the threads of his corpse at the joy on Victoria's face as she stroked the cranes feathers. Reaching his one paw forward, he too immediately fell prey to hypnotic soothing softness of the crane.

Entranced by the appearance of a new traveling companion, neither Victoria nor Giuseppe realized that they had slowly been losing altitude. They failed to see the snowcapped peaks of the mountains they'd barely missed colliding with,

or sense the tips of the tallest trees passing their highest branches through the base of their cloud like fingers through smoke.

Down, down and down they descended in bliss until to their surprise the crane stood-up. Released from their trance they found themselves seated at the edge of a moderate river, in a large valley teeming with white asphodel sprinkled with odd patches of cypress trees. Before taking off with similar difficulty to the abilities he demonstrated while mid-flight, the crane focused their attention downstream. Content in their acknowledgement, he hobbled, tripped and skipped until finally he overcame the physics of flight to climb beyond their sight.

WATER LIGHT

Wandering down river as suggested to them by their hitchhiker 'Mr. Crane', the water twisted and turned, splashed and crashed over rocks and sticks at every turn. They came upon a natural damn of sorts, with enough rocks spaced close enough to venture out to the center of the ever increasingly wide river. Sitting with their feet in the water, they were amazed at the warm temperature. It didn't take long for Giuseppe's genetic make-up to absorb entirely the tepid liquid. Victoria laughed with tears

rolling down behind her Tom Ford sunglasses and messy bed headed hair, as his soaked core couldn't support itself under the weight the water now added to it --- collapsing over in half like a strung-out heroin junkie in the middle of Skid Row at noon on a Tuesday. She let him lie there, with his torso glued to his thighs, his head dangling between his legs while dirty water dripped constantly like a coffee machine from the crown of his head to strain down.

"Giuseppe you're fucking filthy! Look how gross that water is dripping from your head! The water coming in at your feet is clear but the filtered coming out your head looks like the water of a billion smokes!"

Victoria couldn't stop laughing and despite his appeal for her to wring him out, she insisted it was a good cleansing that he was much overdue for.

"What about you!" Giuseppe cried for equality.

Beside him, Victoria exhaled a large cloud of green menthol smoke that lingered in front of her face for a few seconds, and then raced ahead like a jet stream being sucked in by a vacuum. She froze, trying to sense the breeze but found none. The ash on her cigarette wouldn't fall to the ground either, as it was pulled away like flakes of iron to an

invisible magnet. With her smoke dangling between her lips, she lifted her fuzzy-wuzzy and wrung him out like a dishcloth then threw him in the YSL bag over her back and started dashing down the center of the river from stone to stone.

"We're so close! Can you feel it! The island is ahead. Can't you feel its magnetism?"

"I can, I can! It's re-arranging my insides, sliding all them all around like the plasma inside a cockroach!"

"Exactly. Mine too! It's like we don't need them anymore. This is it. Giuseppe. This is it!"

Victoria stopped on the last rock she could, perched atop a massive silent waterfall. Very little mist hovered at the base, making the island in the center of the lagoon as clear and inviting as she imagined it. Below were the cries of a thousand other geriatrics and their one-armed companions calling for her to join them. Giuseppe reached slowly over her shoulder to place his paw over her heart.

"It doesn't beat anymore," he said with sheer pleasure.

"It doesn't beat anymore," Victoria replied exhaling the final drag from her menthol and watched the last cloud of

smoke zoom directly to island, through the canopy toward the bottomless sinkhole lagoon at its center.

Giuseppe licked her face and took a little bite of her ear.

"Eeeow!" she reacted.

"Some things are still gonna hurt for us," Giuseppe reminded her.

"I know. Some things always will. But not this."

The lagoon was filled from wall to wall with the sound of a thousand voices just like hers and she felt home once again.

Back in her room, the door sat quiet in the frame no longer flush with light and she in her bed snuggled tight.

END