

TITLE PAGE

Tom and the flying sofa

Magical Encounters

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THE DREAMY CAT

I woke up covered in sweat. Even though it was dark, I knew that something was there. The silence in my room was paralysing; my arms felt like lead, and all I could sense was my rapidly beating heart.

Then, suddenly, I heard a rasping sound. I hadn't imagined it after all; something was hiding below my bed!

My thoughts were racing now. If I could manage to shout loudly enough, perhaps my grandpa would wake up. But what if the creature were to attack me before he arrived? I couldn't think of anything to defend myself with, so I dropped the idea and pretended to be asleep.

After it had been quiet for a while, I felt myself relax a bit more. What was I actually afraid of? Maybe it was only a vivid dream? I tried to see if I was awake by pinching my arm; it hurt so much I could barely suppress a scream!

I needed to find out more about this intruder, but how? What could I do to trigger a response? Perhaps I could snore! That way he wouldn't know that I was awake! I thought this was a great idea, and pretended to snore as loudly as I could. A few moments later, something jumped onto my bed, and slowly made its way towards my face. All I could do was lie still, unable to move, until I heard purring sounds close to my ear.

It was my grandpa's cat! I couldn't believe it! She must have climbed up the tree to get to my open window! I felt relieved and started to breathe normally again. The cat greeted me by pushing her wet nose against mine.

'You smell good,' she meowed.

I was about to reply, when I suddenly realised that I was able to understand her!

'Are you sure I'm not dreaming?' I asked the cat.

'Many things are possible here,' she declared, 'as long as you are interested.'

'Oh,' was all I could say.

'Well, young man, shouldn't we finally introduce ourselves?'

'My name is Thomas,' I said, 'but you can call me Tom.'

‘Nice to meet you, Tom, I’m Kit.’

‘Is that short for something, too?’ I asked.

‘Yes, Tom, but it’s a bit hard to explain. You see, my real name is actually Kitty, but Grandpa’s first cat was also called Kitty, so he changed it to “Kitty the second”. Then, a few years ago, I was chased and bitten in my leg by an awful cat. I can’t tell you how much that hurt. Since then they’ve called me Kitty Bit.’

‘That doesn’t sound very good!’ I said.

‘No,’ the cat sighed, ‘but that’s not the end of the story. Soon after that horrible cat stopped chasing me, I got hit by a car one day while crossing the street. My hips and back were broken, and I thought I would never be able to climb trees again! After six weeks of resting, the vet finally let me go home, where Grandpa looked after me very lovingly. But now I’m paralysed from the waist down.’

‘Really?’ I said.

‘Yes, when you look carefully, you’ll see that I can’t move my tail anymore; I’m just dragging it around.’

‘How sad, Kit.’

‘You could say so, but it’s not as bad as my other problem, which is that I can’t pee anymore!’

‘Are you serious?’

‘Of course I am. Grandpa has to empty my bladder twice a day in the kitchen sink. Obviously I’d much rather pee outside the house; to mark my territory!’

‘Why you poor cat...!’

‘That is what Grandpa felt too, so he started calling me Poor Mite instead!’

‘Come here, Poor Mite, and I’ll give you a hug.’

‘I really don’t feel sad anymore, Tom. Just call me Kit, or think of something else.’

The cat lay down next to me and I tickled her under the chin. ‘Can you do the same behind my ears please,’ she purred, ‘it feels really good.’ After a while she disappeared underneath the covers and placed herself at my feet. I wasn’t sure what she was doing down there until I felt her licking my toes. It tickled so badly that I had to pull up my legs.

‘Kit! Please stop! Why are you doing that?’

Slowly she crawled back up and buried herself between my arm and chest. Then, at exactly the same time, we both said together: 'I think you're sweet.'

The sun had come up and was revealing the golden red colours of Kit's fur. 'You look quite relaxed and happy, Kit,' I said.

'Why wouldn't I be?' the cat purred.

'Well, you know, you can't do certain things anymore.'

'That's true, Tom, but my nose, ears and eyes are in perfect condition, which means I'm still able to enjoy a good game of "cat and mouse" every now and then!'

'Really?' I said, 'Did you hunt last night?'

'Yes, that's when I'm awake for a few hours. Unfortunately there aren't that many mice and birds around these days, but I always explore the fields behind the house, just to see if I'm lucky! Then, during the day, I dream of everything I couldn't do at night. Dreaming is my favourite activity; I can't get enough of it!'

'What do you dream about?'

Kit was staring dreamily in the distance, before looking at me again. 'In my dreams I climb the highest trees, win fights with terrifying cats, jump over deep canyons, and catch hundreds of mice and birds. What about you, Tom?'

'I don't know, Kit, I'm more into swimming and skiing, but I can't ski around here; the mountains aren't high enough!'

'You could try skiing in your dreams! If you do, you'll be better at it next time you go down a real mountain.'

'Are you sure, Kit? Can I really decide what I'm going to be dreaming about?'

'I believe in it myself,' Kit said wisely. 'You can believe whatever you want, of course, but why don't you try it?'

'Maybe you're right,' I said hesitantly. 'Can you dream about dogs for example?'

Kit looked less than amused. 'Let's change the subject, please! I never dream about those despicable creatures, but, yes, I'm sure I could do it if I really wanted to.'

'So, how would you do it then?' I continued.

'Practice makes perfect. You have to do it over and over again, until it becomes second nature. When I wish to dream about a dog, I close

my eyes and imagine a long and winding road. Looking in the distance I picture a large, healthy German Shepherd. As soon as he's there in my mind's eye, he starts rushing towards me. I wait until he gets closer, and, just before he tries to grab me, I quickly disappear among some prickly shrubs. There I keep quiet and wait, trying not to listen to his deafening barks. Every now and then he pushes his nose further into the bushes, hoping he can reach me, but the thorns hurt him too much, and so he has to retreat again. Finally, when he is getting tired, I wait for my chance and then bury my claws in his nose.'

While Kit was talking she suddenly stretched out one of her claws and scratched my arm. 'Ouch!' I squealed, 'you're mean!'

'Sorry Tom, I think I got carried away a bit. Let me lick it for you.'

'I appreciate the offer, Kit, but I think I'll do it myself!'

'It just shows you how well this method works, Tom. Before you fall asleep, you think of something you'd like to dream about, and imagine it as well as you can. With time, you'll start noticing that you've really dreamt about those things. It is very important to try to remember your dreams when you wake up. Think about what the dream means to you. Sometimes I dream about the past for example, which later helps me to explain it more. Other times my dreams help me shape the future.'

'Really?' I said with surprise.

'Yes indeed,' Kit continued. 'When I was staying with the vet, I was having a horrible time, so I tried dreaming that I could walk, jump and run again. As you can see now, I'm not doing so badly. I can't run as fast as I used to, but my climbing is still excellent; even if I can't use my tail anymore to balance myself.'

'That is very impressive!'

'Thank you Tom, and, talking of balance, I'll go back down the tree now to let Grandpa empty my bladder!'

Kit disappeared through the window and I was alone again in my room. The cat had made me think about my dreams. Every now and then I remembered one of them, but perhaps I could try to dream more often. I liked the idea of having more adventures, and practicing things while being asleep. What would I like to dream about? What

would be important to dream about? I often feel excited about so many different things. It seems too difficult to choose!

Maybe I could ask Grandpa to pick something. I'm sure he would come up with a fantastic adventure. He has such a vivid imagination; he can tell you stories for hours! He claims we are very much alike, but I don't notice anything just yet!

What dreams do I want to realise during this weekend at Grandpa's place? My mum used to have so many adventures around this house when she was young. She once lit a fire in the forest with her brothers, and Grandpa had to send in the fire fighters to put it out! I definitely want to visit the forest during the next few days! It will be fun to see if I can recognise anything from my mum's stories. She has asked my grandpa to look after me while I'm staying with him. Ridiculous! I should be keeping an eye on him instead!

I tried to keep thinking about my plans for the weekend, but couldn't. My thoughts began to wander in unexpected directions. A dog tries to bite Poor Mite, but I scratch his nose. He howls so loudly that the windows crack. Moments later, the sound of shattering glass reaches my ears. Kit laughs, because now she can jump into the house without wearing her nappy. 'Watch out Poor Mite! The dog is behind you!' Grandpa tells her. The cat decides to jump onto the roof instead, meowing nervously. I want to comfort her and find myself flying towards her. I'm rising higher and higher, leaving the house below me. The feeling of floating through the air is amazing; I don't want it to stop!

When I next opened my eyes, my room was even lighter. I realised I must have snoozed for a while and spent some time trying to remember my dream. It was then that I noticed a peculiar sofa across the room. I decided to get up and take a look at it. The sofa had two separate seats, and between them a stick and some buttons. One of them was red and looked like an alarm button. Should I try pressing it? Why not? It was probably a fake anyway!

I sat down in one of the seats and moved my hand towards the button. Just before I was about to touch it, I hesitated. What if an alarm went off in Grandpa's bedroom? Well, he was probably awake anyway - emptying Kit's bladder or making breakfast!

Still, I couldn't possibly know what the button was for; anything could happen once I pressed it. I decided to use the buttons on my pyjama shirt to help me decide what to do. Yes, No, Yes, No, Yeeeeeees. The last one was yes, so I had to do it....

I quickly pressed the red button and waited. Nothing happened. I pressed again, and again. Still nothing. I kept on pushing the button repeatedly, and after a while the rhythm of my fingers started to match the rhythm of a song that was playing in my head. It was a song that Grandpa had taught me the night before. Suddenly I heard a low buzzing sound coming from the sofa. It worked! My grandpa had used his song as a code!

I didn't celebrate for very long, because the sofa had started to move. I got thrown to one side, but managed to hold onto the stick for support. If the sofa could move, perhaps I could steer it in a certain direction! When I pulled the stick towards me, the sofa slowly lifted off the ground. Typical Grandpa, creating a sofa that flies!

The sofa kept on rising higher, and at first I really enjoyed it, but then I realised that I didn't know how to stop it. When it got closer and closer to the ceiling, I quickly lay down and pushed the stick away from me, which took the sofa back to the ground. I played around with going up and down for a while, and then, in mid-air, I practiced flying in circles by shifting the stick to the left and right.

I was very impressed with Grandpa's creation, but shouldn't there be a way to make it go backwards and forwards? I decided to try the other buttons, and eventually found the ones that did the trick.

Now that I had some control over where the sofa was going, I felt ready to go outside. I carefully steered the sofa through my open window and circled around the house for a while. Looking down, I spotted Grandpa on his balcony. 'Grandpa!' I shouted, 'I'm flying!'

'That's great Tom! Have fun today! Oh, and when you get hungry, look in the space underneath your seat; I've prepared some sandwiches for you!'

I waved at him and took myself higher and higher. My dream had come true; I was flying!



THE LOYAL GEESE

The sofa was flying along nicely and I was enjoying the wonderful views I had of everything below me. The huge trees surrounding Grandpa's place now looked like cabbages in a field. Thinking about food, my stomach started to rumble, so I headed to the other side of the house, where I knew Grandpa had his orchard. The fruit trees looked like a pattern of dots from where I was, and as I lowered the sofa, the dots got larger and larger. I picked the largest one and steered towards it.

When I got close enough to see the tree's leaves, I braked for a soft landing in the canopy. With the sofa safely resting on some branches, I looked around to see what was on offer. I had expected the tree to be full of fruit, but all I could see were beautiful blossoms. Bright, white blossoms with centres of pink. I realised it was still too early in the year for apples, so I decided to have Grandpa's sandwiches instead. It tasted very good, especially with the blue sky and white blossoms surrounding me. Some of the petals were fluttering down, covering me like snowflakes. After I finished eating, I followed the petals down to the ground, and walked through the rest of the orchard.

When I reached the last trees before the fence, I noticed a shelter from which a large, grey goose appeared. It approached me with its neck extended and low to the ground, honking along the way. Right in front of me it stood up and hissed while spreading its wings. I got scared and walked backwards, not knowing if it would attack me. Luckily the goose retreated as well, so I relaxed and looked around. Next to the shelter I spotted a second goose on top of a large nest. She was obviously a female, incubating her eggs, so I realised that the first goose must have been a male trying to protect her from me!

I decided to sit down and watch them quietly.

When the geese were convinced that I wasn't a threat, they calmed down as well.

'Hello,' the male goose honked after a while. 'I don't think I know you. What's your name?'

I wasn't at all surprised to understand him. Anything seemed possible at Grandpa's place. 'My name is Tom,' I said. 'What's yours?'

'Kiri,' he said, 'and that is Nana over there,' his beak pointing at the nesting goose.

'Where are you from?' Kiri asked.

'I am visiting Grandpa for a weekend,' I replied. 'I'm his grandson.'

'Really?' Kiri said, 'we know Grandpa very well. He is a great friend of ours!'

'Yes indeed,' Nana nodded in agreement. 'Grandpa fixed my leg when it was broken. A few months ago I landed on it in an awkward way and afterwards I couldn't put my weight on it anymore. Grandpa managed to catch me one day. I had no idea what was about to happen, but I soon realised that he was trying to help me by splinting my leg. Grandpa then built this shelter for me to recover in, and now I'm back in action, as you can see!'

'Well done!' I said.

'I should have been nesting in the Arctic Tundra though,' Nana continued, 'but my broken leg prevented us from flying there this spring. It's usually fantastic up there; a warm sun just above the horizon, a few lakes here and there, lots of grass to eat, the humming sound of mosquitos, and no human beings, except for a few who stare at us and seem to think we're very special!'

'I wish I would be one of those people!' I joked. 'It would be amazing to see so many birds together!'

'Yes indeed,' Nana honked, 'thousands of us are nesting together every year. It makes the whole experience very cosy and entertaining for us, and pretty safe as well, although sometimes we are chased by Arctic foxes. If it's just a single fox the male geese can usually scare it away, but last year we were visited by a group of them, and they snatched all of my chicks,' Nana choked.

'I'm really sorry...', I said.

'We decided to leave early,' Kiri explained, 'because we live down here during the winter months anyway; it's much warmer than up North in the Tundra!'

'It may be warmer than in the Arctic, but I don't think many people from around here would agree with you!' I said. 'A lot of us go even further south for the winter.'

‘To nest?’ Nana asked.

‘No, we don’t need to nest! I came straight out of my mother’s belly, but I did spend a lot of time sleeping in a cot during the first few months.’

‘A cot?’

‘I guess you could see it as a kind of nest inside a house,’ I explained.

‘I see,’ Nana said.

‘When I’m lying in bed, I love watching the blue sky,’ I continued. ‘Quite often I see geese fly by in V-formation. It always looks so amazing; why do you fly like that?’

‘It makes flying so much easier,’ Kiri said. ‘Each time we flap our wings we move quite a bit of air, which then pushes the bird behind us upwards, so together we can fly for a lot longer. That is very important on our long journeys, such as our trips to the Arctic and back, which are over a thousand miles.’

‘Sometimes, during the night, I can’t see you fly over our house, but I still know you’re there because of your honking.’

‘That’s right, Tom, it’s a way for us to keep in touch. As we always say, “One goose is no goose.” Without other geese we are nothing.’

‘Don’t you get upset about that idea?’ I asked them.

‘No, not at all!’ they honked at the same time. ‘We love it!’

Nana had got up from her nest. I could count six large, white eggs. ‘They are hatching,’ she said. ‘You can take a closer look if you like, but be careful not to get too close. If the gosling sees you when it appears from its shell, it will start following you around, and that way you’ll become its mother! Grandpa made that mistake once, and he ended up sleeping and eating with all the goslings in tow! He said he enjoyed the experience, but I don’t think he was very happy at night, when the goslings would wake him up every hour! He managed to look after them until they were mature though,’ Nana said with admiration.

‘How do you know that the eggs are hatching at the moment Nana?’

‘Well I have been sitting on them for a whole moon, which should be enough, and I can hear the goslings moving around inside, so they should be coming out very soon.’

‘I don’t hear anything,’ I said.

‘Put your ear against this one,’ Nana honked.

I listened carefully and understood what she was saying; soft peeping sounds and some rumbling and crackling reached my ear from inside the large, white egg.

I put the egg down again, and shortly afterwards we saw a small opening appear at the base of it. ‘I think it’s time for you to move away now,’ Nana said.

More and more tiny holes appeared, together forming a ring at the base of the egg. Then, suddenly, the piece of shell fringed by the small openings was pushed away and a new, young gosling appeared. ‘Do you see that pointed tip on its beak?’ Nana asked. ‘That is called an “egg-tooth”. As the gosling turned around inside the egg, it used the tooth to create a ring of tiny holes. Isn’t that impressive?’

‘It’s amazing!’ I said.

The gosling looked ugly and wet, with her feathers still stuck together. After a while she left the remainder of the shell and walked a few steps towards her mother. She rubbed against Nana and got rid of the sticky substance on her feathers. All of a sudden the small goose looked beautifully soft and fluffy, and seemed much larger than before. With her neck extended she greeted her mother for the first time: ‘PeepPeepPeepPeep.’

‘HonkHonkHonkHonk,’ Nana replied.

‘Tom, I would like to introduce you to my new gosling,’ the new mother said proudly.

Soon afterwards, the other five goslings appeared from their eggs. All six of them were now crawling around the nest, and Nana decided it was time to settle in with them. The little ones calmed down slowly, and buried themselves among her feathers, peeping softly until they fell asleep.

‘Within a moon they will be almost as large as us,’ Kiri said.

‘That quickly?’ I said with surprise.

‘Yes, because if the frost arrives early in the Arctic Tundra, the young geese have to be strong enough to fly back to warmer areas like this. Since we didn’t travel to the Arctic this year, we will worry less about how quickly our brood grows.’

‘And we don’t need to be afraid of foxes either!’ Nana added.

‘We know there are foxes hiding in the fields nearby, but Grandpa built a strong fence around this orchard,’ Kiri explained, ‘so I think we are well protected.’

‘Let me just check if the fence is still intact,’ I said, and started walking along it. I couldn’t see any major damage, but at one point it was obviously bent, with reddish hairs sticking to the wire mesh. They could only be from a fox, I thought, and when I looked around, I saw one trotting nearby. It seemed to be chased by two black crows, and when the reddish-brown fox realised that I had spotted him, he raced away.

‘Leave those geese in peace!’ I shouted. ‘Their eggs have just hatched!’

‘But those goslings are the best!’ the fox cried.

‘You’re not allowed to come here! Grandpa didn’t build this fence for nothing!’

‘I don’t care for that Grandpa of yours,’ the fox growled. ‘These are my hunting grounds. My cubs are hungry, because at the moment we can only eat snails and beetles. Most of the rabbits are behind this fence of yours,’ he said while smacking his lips.

‘Maybe Grandpa will let you in next year, when the geese aren’t here,’ I offered.

‘That won’t help me now,’ the fox howled. ‘Please, please, let me in. I promise not to hurt the geese and their goslings.’

‘Typical fox tricks,’ I thought, and decided to chase him away with some rocks.

‘Thank you, but I don’t like those very much,’ the fox sneered.

I kept hurling stones, but the fox didn’t stop mocking me. ‘I wouldn’t bother with that, there are enough of those over here,’ he jeered.

‘Maybe you’d like to meet Grandpa’s dog,’ I shouted back. ‘I expect he’ll be here soon enough!’

It wasn’t true, but still seemed to do the trick, as the fox loped off through the grass.

When I returned to the nest, Nana was walking around with a string of goslings following her closely. Every now and then, one of them would get too far behind, only to race towards her with its wings spread widely and peeping frantically.

‘I was getting tired of sitting down,’ Nana explained. ‘Have you ever sat down for a whole moon, Tom?’

‘No I haven’t, but we often spend half a day sitting down at school, which I think is far too much!’

‘What do you mean by “school”,’ Kiri asked.

‘It’s a place we visit to learn all kinds of things,’ I explained. ‘Things like writing, algebra, geography, biology ... you know?’

‘We’ve no idea what you’re talking about,’ the geese said.

‘Well, writing, for example, is like talking on a paper surface or a screen, and algebra can be used to count goslings. In geography class we learn where the Arctic Tundra is, and because of biology I know that geese are related to swans and ducks.’

I thought that I had explained it quite well, and the geese seemed to agree. ‘Oh, we don’t need to go to school then,’ they exclaimed. ‘We learn everything from each other!’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘Can you count your goslings?’

‘Of course we can!’ the geese replied. ‘One ... two ... many.... There! You see? You probably didn’t expect that ... did you?’

I was indeed surprised. ‘But what do you during the day then, if you don’t go to school?’ I wanted to know.

‘We spend a lot of time eating grass,’ they explained. ‘We digest it while we sleep, but we also find time to fly around and enjoy the views.’

‘People seem to be a lot less relaxed than geese,’ I said. ‘I wish I could be a goose for a while!’

‘Or a gander, perhaps?’ Kiri joked.

‘Sure! A gander would be good too!’

‘Would you like to live with us Tom?’ Kiri proposed. ‘It would be very cosy, the three of us together, and you’d be able to protect us at the same time.’

‘It sounds attractive Kiri, but I already have a home.’

‘Ah, of course! You’re living with Grandpa!’

‘Well, at the moment I am, yes, but the rest of the year I’m living with my parents.’

‘So you’re still a bit of a gosling yourself then!’ the geese honked.

‘I suppose you might put it that way!’ I smiled.

‘Perhaps you’d like to live with us instead,’ I suggested. ‘Do you like people?’

‘If your parents are as nice as Grandpa and yourself, we’d be happy to join you Tom! The problem is that a lot of people are really nasty to us.’

‘Go on...,’ I said.

‘It’s an extremely hard topic for us to talk about. The things people do to us are just incredibly horrible. Some tame geese, for example, are kept in tiny cages and force-fed until their livers become very enlarged. People will then eat those livers. Do you eat goose liver Tom?’

‘Not that I’m aware of Kiri.’

‘Other geese are kept for their soft, warm down feathers; sometimes they are even plucked alive! Isn’t that a form of abuse, Tom? And that’s just the start of it,’ Kiri continued sadly. ‘In the past, tame geese would be hung upside down with their feet bound together. People would walk by with wooden sticks, trying to knock their heads off! They thought it was a fun game to play!’

‘Really?’ I said embarrassedly.

‘Yes, I’m afraid so, and wild geese like us aren’t safe either. When we arrive in these parts of the world, exhausted by our long flight back from the Arctic, we are often ambushed by hunters. They shoot at us with lots of tiny bullets, which will kill some geese in flight and hurt many others, leaving them full of metal. You may think it would be safer for us to live with people who would look after us, and who would appreciate us for protecting their property and eating their weeds, but at the end of the day....’

‘What do you mean,’ Kiri?

‘At the end of the day, they still see us as food, so we’ve decided to live wild and free, even if it is dangerous,’ Kiri explained.

‘How long do wild geese live for, Kiri?’ I asked after a while.

‘We often live for thirty years, but that’s only if we don’t become seriously ill, hit wires and windmills with our wings, or get killed by hunters. And if we’re lucky, we can live to be fifty years old.’

‘That old?’ I said with surprise. ‘It’s not as old as Grandpa is, but much older than I thought! If you know that you’ll live that long, what would you like to do during the rest of your life? What would be the most precious thing that you could want for your future?’

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