

TITLE PAGE

Tom and the flying sofa

The surprising world

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FLYING AGAIN

What was that sound? Was it the engine? There it was again, this low, rumbling noise. The flying sofa was trembling and losing speed, and suddenly I could feel my heart beating and my hands shaking. This is not going to end well, I thought, and tried to pull the sofa up by jerking the stick towards me. Unfortunately, that didn't help at all, and the sofa was hurtling faster and faster to the ground.

A few hundred yards from impact, I suddenly felt a strong pull. The sofa was going up and down, turning left and right, but once the chaos subsided, I felt we were descending much more slowly than before. Relieved and excited I looked up, and was pleased to see that I'd somehow managed to press the right button, because our parachute had opened beautifully.

The sofa was slowly winding its way down now, giving me time to realize that I'd forgotten to charge the engine's batteries overnight! I promised myself to be a bit more careful in the future, as there were too many things that I still wanted to see and do....

Luckily the winds weren't very strong, and our final landing spot wasn't too far from Grandpa's place. The landing itself was a bit bumpy, but I survived with only a few scratches, and decided it was time to head home for a break. Grandpa wasn't up yet, so I went back to my room and collapsed on my bed.

That's when I remembered how my day had begun. I'd woken up early; excited about the adventures to come. The flying sofa had been waiting for me since my last visit, and she looked better equipped than ever.

I had quickly started her up and steered her through my open window. The weather was beautiful and the sofa carried me higher and higher. A few large clouds floated above me like snow-covered mountains. Below I could see Grandpa's house and his vegetable garden; the same garden in which Zara, the hare, had eaten so much cabbage a few months earlier.

The nearby orchard still looked the same too, except for the blossoms, which had finally given way to bright, red apples. I remembered Nana and Kiri, the geese, who I'd met among the fruit trees. They didn't seem to be there today, but perhaps I'd meet them in the air somewhere!

As I was flying around the forest and meadows near Grandpa's place, I remembered all the other characters I'd met last time: the exotic tree stump, which sadly had been cut down; the wise worm, with its hidden, underground ways; the brave herons, who leapt off branches like pros on their very first flights, the....

Suddenly I was pulled back into the present by something hairy that jumped onto my bed. 'Hello, Tom!' the cat meowed.

'Hi, Kit!' I said. 'How are you?'

'I'm fine, Tom,' she said. 'Just a bit tired from last night, so I thought I'd join you here on the bed.'

'Please do!' I said. 'I was just thinking about you and everybody else I met last time I was here.'

'Did you have a good time then?' Kit meowed.

'Yes, it was great!' I said. 'I met so many interesting characters; each one of them had an amazing story to tell, and they were all so different!'

'Really?' Kit said.

'Yes,' I continued, 'it was fascinating to discover that every animal has its own way of living; its own way of seeing things.'

'So what did you learn about me?' Kit asked.

'I learnt that cats do exactly what they feel like; they follow their dreams and don't worry too much about what other cats or humans think.'

'You might be right!' Kit meowed. 'I definitely don't like to be told what to do; I can only be persuaded, and then only with plenty of love and attention!'

'Hmm ... thank you for that piece of information!' I laughed while rubbing Kit under her chin.

'That feels very good,' Kit purred, cuddling up beside me.

'Don't worry,' I said, 'I'll be cuddling you a lot this morning, especially if that will persuade you to join me on the sofa again!'

'You're making it very hard for me to say no,' Kit meowed, 'but I really don't want to get attacked by herons again!'

‘Well, I was planning a completely different adventure anyway,’ I explained, ‘and I’d love for you to be a part of it!’

‘Let me dream about it,’ Kit purred, and together we drifted off to sleep.

In my dream, Kit and I were flying again. I wanted to see if I could reach the end of the sky, so I pushed the sofa to its limits, making her climb higher and higher. The clouds were far below us now and looked like they could catch us if we crashed. I wished it were possible to roll around in them and bounce from one cloud to another....

A few minutes later, the sky ahead looked darker than I’d ever seen it before, and the Earth was quickly disappearing out of sight. When Kit realized how far we’d traveled, she shrieked and asked me to go back. I happily complied and enjoyed myself immensely on our way down. To see the oceans, mountains, forests and deserts from such a distance was amazing. ‘The Earth is so beautiful!’ I shouted to myself as we raced around the globe.

‘We’re going to crash if you’re not careful!!!’ Kit meowed anxiously.

‘Don’t worry, Kit,’ I cheered, ‘the clouds will catch us!’

Passing through the white and hazy vapours, I realized we weren’t slowing down at all, so I quickly tried to open the parachute, but it was too late....

For a moment I was convinced that we’d died, but somehow the Earth had opened up below us, and we were racing down a dark, hot tunnel, going deeper and deeper into the planet’s core. Just when I thought I couldn’t stand the heat anymore, I woke up, and slowly realized I was still alive. I felt relieved but also a bit anxious; Grandpa should really check that parachute once more....

Just when I’d had that thought, I heard his voice traveling up the stairs: ‘Breakfast’s ready!’

‘Thanks, Grandpa! Kit and I will be down soon!’ I shouted back.

‘Ah, yes, the cat,’ Grandpa said. ‘I need to put her nappy on. Would you like to learn how to do that?’

‘Why not?’ I said. ‘But don’t you need to empty her bladder first?’

‘You’re right, Tom, I almost forgot. You see, I didn’t sleep too well last night; I had this awful dream about the flying sofa; we need to make sure she’s absolutely safe to travel with today.’

I nodded while Grandpa took Kit in his arms and positioned her above the sink.

‘I’ve had to empty her bladder like this ever since she had the car accident,’ Grandpa explained. ‘Kit doesn’t enjoy it, but she knows that it allows her to carry on doing the things she likes.’

‘It doesn’t smell great though!’ I said.

‘But it’s worth it,’ Grandpa smiled while stroking Kit’s back.

‘Yes indeed!’ Kit meowed.

‘Alright then,’ Grandpa said, ‘let me show you how to put her nappy on; it might come in handy one day!’

After we’d finished with the nappy we all looked forward to breakfast. Kit enjoyed her special cat food, and Grandpa and I sat down for some fresh bread, boiled eggs, cheese and orange juice.

‘It’s delicious!’ I said, and told Grandpa about the scary ride and daring dream I’d had earlier that morning.

‘I’m glad I told you about the parachute last night,’ Grandpa said. ‘But I wish it hadn’t been necessary for you to try it out like that! Sometimes we only remember the importance of things when we forget to look after them. I’m sure you won’t forget to charge the sofa’s batteries ever again!’

‘I don’t think so!’ I said.

‘Well then, Grandpa continued, ‘before you’re allowed to do any more flying, we should take a look at the sofa together; I’ve tweaked quite a lot since your last visit, and some of it needs explaining.’

‘That sounds good!’ I said with excitement. ‘I’d like to travel much higher and further this time, and maybe I’ll try out some new flying tricks, but part of me is quite scared; what if I really do crash the sofa?’

‘It’s quite normal to be a bit scared when you’re about to do new things,’ Grandpa said. ‘You need to be daring enough to try something for the first time, like heron chicks taking their first flights, but a bit of anxiety can prevent you from risking too much at once. “Step by step” is the best way forward, I think!’

‘Thanks, Grandpa, I’ll try to remember that!’

‘I’m sure you will, Tom, and I’d like you to remember a few practical things as well, so let’s go and take a look at the sofa together.’

We made our way to the field where I’d landed the sofa that morning. ‘Ah,’ Grandpa said when he saw the sofa, ‘I think the first thing to do is to check if the parachute still works.’

I watched him disentangle all the ropes and check the fabric for tears. ‘It looks pretty good to me,’ he said. ‘I think we can use this one again; do you want to give me a hand with the folding?’ he asked.

As we were carefully stowing the parachute away, Grandpa explained some of the changes he’d made to the sofa. ‘I don’t want you to run out of fuel too quickly,’ he said, so I decided to build solar cells into the back of the sofa. If you press this yellow button here, the batteries will charge through the solar cells.’

‘I wish I’d known that this morning!’ I laughed.

‘Yes, that would have helped,’ Grandpa said, ‘but ideally you should have them fully charged to begin with! Anyway, you can charge the batteries whilst you’re flying by using sunlight, or – when you’re on the ground – by using electricity wherever you have an outlet available.’

‘I’m guessing I won’t be too close to an outlet this weekend!’ I said.

‘Well, if you’re that serious about exploring the world, I better tell you about one of the other changes I’ve made,’ Grandpa said. ‘The solar cells will definitely keep your batteries charged when there’s plenty of light, but what will you do if the sky darkens and you’re far away from any outlet whatsoever?’

‘Can’t you send a few refuelling planes?’ I joked.

‘Not a bad idea,’ Grandpa laughed, ‘but I’m afraid I’ve chosen a more practical solution; methanol fuel cells. The problem with those cells though is that they won’t last forever, because carrying extra methanol would make the sofa too heavy, so I’d use them only when the batteries run out, like this morning.’

‘But how will I know when that happens?’ I asked him.

‘Do you see that tiny red light?’ Grandpa said. ‘That’s your warning signal. When that comes on, you should either go and land the sofa somewhere immediately, or, if that’s not possible, you can use the methanol cells to take you to a safe place.’

‘Thanks, Grandpa! I think I’m fully prepared now!’

‘I hope so indeed!’

‘Don’t forget me!’ Kit meowed behind us.

‘I’m glad you’re joining me again, Kit!’ I said. ‘Let’s go and get ready!’

I raced back to the house to get my tent while Grandpa prepared some food for our journey. ‘When will I see you two again?’ he asked.

‘Tomorrow night, if that’s OK?’ I said.

‘That’s fine, Tom, but be careful, and call me when you’re in trouble.’

He helped me to secure everything on the sofa, and then it was time to leave. ‘Enjoy your new journey, Tom!’

‘Don’t worry, Grandpa! I’m loving it already!’

IN THE AIR

‘Where are we going?’ Kit asked me after a while.

‘That’s a very good question!’ I laughed. ‘To be honest, I haven’t thought about that in too much detail! All I know is that I want to explore the world.’

‘The whole world?’ Kit said with disbelief.

‘If I could!’

‘But we need to start somewhere, don’t you think?’ Kit meowed.

‘Hmm, you might be right,’ I sighed, and tried to come up with a plan. ‘Would you like to go to the ocean?’ I asked Kit.

‘I have no idea,’ Kit shrugged. ‘What’s an ocean?’

‘Just wait and see,’ I said, and steered the sofa towards the coast. The sky was still clear except for the odd cloud, and our batteries were charging nicely.

About half an hour later we were flying over the water. Suddenly the air felt cool and moist, and we couldn’t see very far anymore.

‘I’m afraid it’s too misty to show you the ocean right now!’ I said. ‘You’re going to have to wait a bit longer.’

‘That’s OK,’ Kit said. ‘I’m not too sure I want to see it anyway!’

‘Did I hear that correctly?’ a foggy voice whispered around us. ‘Is it true that you like me?’

‘Well, I didn’t say I liked you *that* much!’ Kit meowed. ‘I’m almost shivering with cold!’

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ the fog whispered. ‘You must be one of those creatures who prefers the sun.’

‘Yes indeed!’ Kit meowed. ‘Who wouldn’t prefer those warm rays of sunshine?’

‘Well, you might be surprised to hear that the grasses and shrubs along the coast are very happy to see me,’ the fog explained. ‘Without me, they wouldn’t get enough water during dry summers like this.’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘Do you hang around that often?’

‘If you ask me personally, I have to say no,’ the fog replied.

‘Can’t you be a bit more specific?’ I asked. ‘Because that’s the vaguest answer I’ve ever heard!’

‘Perhaps it’s the way you pose your questions!’ the fog replied. ‘I suppose you haven’t realized that tomorrow’s fog will not be “me”?’

‘What do you mean?’ I said.

‘I’m just a random collection of tiny drops of water; when the sun rises higher and its rays start warming the air, my molecules will vibrate away from each other and travel to many different places. It’s unlikely that the exact same molecules will ever meet like this again, so “I” only exist now.’

‘How wonderful and amazing to see you then!’ I said. ‘How long have you been around for?’

My water molecules were carried here by a parcel of warm air,’ the fog explained. ‘When we passed over the cooler air above the ocean, we lost some energy and clustered together around tiny salt crystals.’

‘Fascinating!’ I said. ‘And will you be here all day long?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ the mist replied. ‘Just look behind you and you’ll see what I mean.’

I turned around and watched the sun break through the mist. When I looked back at the remaining fog in front of me, a beautiful white bow had appeared.

‘That’s so beautiful!’ I cheered.

‘A sign of my ending,’ the fog whispered slowly, before evaporating into thin air.

‘Ah! Finally some sun on my fur!’ Kit meowed happily.

‘We’re glad you like us!’ a voice vibrated above us.

Kit and I looked at each other with surprise. ‘Don’t tell me that that awful fog is coming back after all!’ Kit sulked.

‘I don’t think so,’ I said. ‘All I can see are some new clouds forming above us.’

‘Can’t you see us?’ the voice continued. ‘We’ve been sent here by the sun!’

‘Oh, but of course!’ I said. ‘We love sunshine! Please stay a bit longer!’

‘We’re always around,’ the solar rays vibrated. ‘You just need to know where to find us.’

I steered the sofa higher through the developing clouds. ‘There you are!’ the sunshine sang when we appeared on the other side. ‘Now you can enjoy us to the fullest!’

‘That’s very good news!’ Kit meowed. ‘When will we get to the sun?’

‘I hadn’t thought about going that far,’ I admitted. ‘Do you really want me to take you there?’

‘Well, I could do with a bit more warmth still!’ Kit meowed. ‘A snooze near the sun would be great!’

‘Are you sure?’ a fiery voice resounded in the background. ‘I’m yet to meet something or someone that can stand my heat as well as I can!’

‘Aaa...aa...are you the sun?’ I stuttered.

‘I don’t know what you mean by “sun”, but you can call me that if you wish,’ the voice continued. In essence I’m a star; a maturing star.’

‘A star?’ I said with surprise. ‘I thought stars existed much further away, like those tiny white specks against the dark night sky.’

‘Oh, I can see that you’ve got a long road ahead of you,’ the sun sighed. ‘If you were to be watching me from a far away place right now, I’d look like a tiny white speck myself!’

‘Do you mean that some of those twinkling white specks I see at night are boiling hot like you?’ I said with amazement.

‘Yes indeed! Or even hotter!’ the sun spewed.

‘How hot are you then?’ Kit meowed.

‘There isn’t just one answer to that,’ the star explained, ‘but my core is the hottest.’

‘Can we go there please?’ Kit purred.

‘You wouldn’t want to,’ the sun laughed, ‘unless you’re hydrogen gas wanting to become helium.’

‘Is that what’s happening in your core?’ I wondered.

‘Not just that.’ the star continued. ‘When the centres of hydrogen atoms fuse together in my core, part of their mass turns into energy, and that’s what reaches you as light and heat.’

‘You see, Kit?’ I said. ‘Why travel to the core of the sun when sunshine travels to us?’ But Kit didn’t respond, and was snoozing happily on the seat next to me.

I closed my eyes and enjoyed the warmth on my face. ‘I wish I could do this every day for the rest of my life,’ I thought to myself.

‘That shouldn’t be a problem!’ the rays sang. ‘The sun will be around for quite a while longer!’

‘What do you mean?’ I said.

‘Well, what do you think?’ the sun radiated.

‘I thought you’d be around forever!’ I shouted.

‘Me?’ the sun repeated. ‘I’m afraid that’s not the case.’

‘Are you sure?’ I said with desperation.

‘I only need to look at my sister stars to know what will happen to me – eventually,’ the sun sighed.

‘But I thought we could live here forever!’ I said. ‘Even if it is a bit cold in certain places....’

‘Do you mean on that planet of yours?’ the sun asked.

‘Yes, of course!’ I replied.

‘The Earth should be a good home for you for quite a while yet,’ the sun explained. ‘But at some point, you’re going to have to move, because if you don’t, you’ll get scorched by my rays.’

‘By the sunshine we’re enjoying right now?’ I said with disbelief.

‘I’m afraid so,’ the star continued, ‘because I’m slowly getting brighter and hotter.’

‘How slowly?’

‘Very slowly,’ the sun explained. ‘It will probably take about a billion years before my solar rays will evaporate the Earth’s oceans and make life on Earth impossible.’

‘Really?’ I said, and paused for a moment.

‘If life on Earth becomes impossible, does that mean that “Life” in general will end?’

‘That’s a difficult question,’ the star radiated. ‘Unfortunately I can’t help you with that one.’

‘Well, thanks anyway,’ I said.

‘What for?’ the sun asked.

‘For making our lives possible for now,’ I said. ‘And for charging my batteries!’

‘Oh, don’t you worry,’ the sun shone, ‘it’s what I do best. ‘And I’m sorry to have disappointed you; I really wish I’d be around forever, too, but my source of energy is limited.’

‘Your hydrogen?’ I said.

‘Yes indeed,’ the star explained. ‘In a few billion years from now, when I run out of hydrogen in my core, I’ll switch to the hydrogen in my outer shells. But that will only be a temporary solution. Eventually my core will heat up so much that helium will fuse to carbon and oxygen. My outer layers will be released and form a

massive cloud, while my inactive core remains and slowly loses its energy.'

'So you'll become cold?'

'Ahh, yes,' the star shivered. 'But let's not talk about that right now. I've still got plenty of hot years ahead of me.'

'Hot indeed!' I said. 'I think I might be getting sunburned!'

'Time to fly a bit lower then,' the solar rays sang before hitting my skin.

I took their advice, and slowly descended through some clouds until I could recognize the ocean again. Seeing nothing but water in all directions, it seemed hard to believe that this entire body of salty liquid would one day disappear into space because of the sun's intensifying rays.

'Even now, the sun is a powerful force,' a voice sighed behind me. 'It makes us travel from one place to another – all over the world.'

'Who are you?' I wondered.

'We are the gases,' they whispered around me. 'Have you ever heard of nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide and water vapour? That's the air you're flying through right now.'

'Wonderful!' I said. 'Thank you for allowing me to travel around the world!'

'No problem,' the gases hissed, 'and if you're ever in a hurry, make sure to fly along in the direction of our flow.'

'Do you mean the wind?' I asked.

'Yes indeed,' the air explained. "'Wind" is just a lot of gas moving from one place to another – fuelled by the power of the sun.'

'I'm starting to realize how powerful the sun is,' I said, 'but how does it possibly create wind???'

'Well, when our molecules receive energy from the sun, they absorb it and vibrate away from each other. That means that a volume of warm air contains fewer molecules of gas than the same volume of cold air.'

'So it will be lighter?' I said.

'Very good!' the air murmured. 'When air becomes lighter, it rises upwards, whilst elsewhere, where it cools down, it sinks downwards. The wind flows from areas of higher density to areas of lower density; it restores the difference.'

‘I can feel that you’re blowing towards the shore right now,’ I said, ‘but when I was flying higher up in the sky, you were blowing in the other direction; towards the ocean!’

‘Yes, our circulation is more complex than you think!’ the wind roared. ‘The shore heats up more quickly than the water, which means that the air above the land becomes lighter and warmer than the air above the ocean, so it rises. The colder, denser air from the ocean flows towards the shore, where it heats up again and rises. But, higher up in the sky, the risen air cools down and becomes denser, whereas high up in the sky above the ocean, the air cools down even more and sinks downwards, leaving space for the risen air above the shore to flow into.’

‘Pheww, these looping airflows are getting too much for me!’ I laughed. ‘Can we change topics, please?’

‘What else would you like to know,’ the wind whistled.

‘You said you are a mixture of different gases,’ I continued. ‘Where do they come from?’

‘They each have completely different histories and cycles,’ the wind explained. ‘Free oxygen gas wasn’t always part of the atmosphere for example. It first appeared several billion years ago, when it was released by a new kind of bacteria. The new bacteria were able to use the energy of sunlight to make sugar and oxygen from carbon dioxide and water. And these days, plants are doing the same!’

‘So the bacteria and plants, using the energy from the sun, allow me to breathe!’ I said with amazement.

‘Isn’t it wonderful?’ the wind roared. ‘But don’t forget the carbon dioxide and water; sunlight alone isn’t enough!’

‘You’re right,’ I laughed. ‘I’m starting to give the sun too much credit!’

‘I think you do!’ the air swirled. ‘You seem to think that sunlight is all it takes to feel nice and warm.’

‘Sunshine seems enough to me!’ Kit purred next to me.

‘Well, you’re both wrong then!’ the wind howled. ‘Because without water vapour and carbon dioxide in the air, the Earth would be freezing cold!’

‘Are you serious?’ I gasped.

‘Of course!’ the wind continued. ‘The rays of the sun may heat the Earth, but all that heat would leak back into space if it weren’t for my greenhouse gases.’

‘Greenhouse gases?’ I said.

‘Yes, the gases that keep the Earth nice and warm; like a greenhouse,’ the air said proudly.

‘I’m sorry, but you’ve lost me there!’ I admitted.

‘Ok, we’ll explain it to you,’ the gases hissed. ‘Some of us, like water vapour and carbon dioxide, can absorb part of the heat that is lost by the Earth and radiate it back into the atmosphere; keeping you nice and warm.’

‘Thank you!’ I said. ‘I’ll try to treat you with more respect from now on!’

‘Don’t worry!’ the greenhouse gases beamed. ‘We know that people like us a lot; they’re creating more of us all the time!’

‘We do?’

‘Yes, didn’t you know? Every time you burn old plant material, like coal and oil, you create more carbon dioxide.’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘How does that happen?’

‘Remember how plants make oxygen and sugars?’ the gases whispered. ‘They incorporate carbon dioxide, water and sunlight. When you burn dead plants, the opposite happens. Sugars and other carbon molecules react with oxygen to give carbon dioxide and water.’

‘Amazing!’ I said. ‘Does that mean that the Earth will get warmer still?’

‘It looks like it,’ the wind howled. ‘I can feel I’m getting stronger in certain places already!’

‘Perhaps that’s one of the reasons why Grandpa gave me solar cells to charge my batteries!’

‘Why, what’s wrong with a bit more warmth?’ the wind roared.

‘Oh, I’d love a bit more warmth on a cold day,’ I said, ‘but I don’t like flying through hurricanes!’

‘That’s a shame,’ the wind sighed. ‘Because it’s a most powerful experience!’

‘Well, I’ll leave that to you!’ I said. ‘I enjoy you most when you’re a bit more relaxed, although I wouldn’t mind an adventure every now and then!’

‘Really?’ the air hissed. ‘Then I’ve got an idea for you. Do you see that cloud over there? I think it will soon be growing quickly and rising high into the sky. When that happens, my flows get really exciting; you’ll be going all over the place. Would you like to go for a ride?’

‘Hmm, yes, sure,’ I said, ‘but I’ll need to get out before it rains.’

‘Why’s that?’ the wind complained. ‘Don’t you like the fresh water I carry around with me everywhere?’

‘For drinking, yes! And I don’t mind swimming and showering in it either, but not with my clothes on!’

‘Ok, let’s be quick then!’ the wind roared excitedly. ‘I’ll carry you inside.’

The wind picked us up and blew us into the centre of the enormous cloud. It felt misty and moist, like the fog earlier in the day, but not as quiet and peaceful. The wind took us higher and higher, sometimes dropping us for a moment before carrying on. Kit was getting seasick and had to throw up. ‘Thank you, that’s enough!’ I shouted loudly, but the wind didn’t seem to care.

The higher we got, the colder it felt. Kit was huddling beneath her pillow while I got lashed by rain, snow and hail. ‘Please, get me out of here!’ Kit meowed anxiously. I’d been trying to steer the sofa downwards, but the wind was much, much stronger than our engine. ‘I’m sorry, Kit; we need to hang on for a little bit longer!’

‘Are you enjoying yourselves yet?’ the wind roared wildly.

‘Not anymore!’ I shouted angrily. ‘First we got wet, and now we’re starting to freeze! Look at the sofa! There’s snow and ice all over it!’

‘Don’t you worry,’ the wind howled dangerously, ‘I’ll be done very soon....’

And sure enough, a few minutes later, the wind suddenly reversed and pulled us down again. ‘Oh no!’ I shouted when I realized how fast we were falling.

‘Do something!!!’ Kit shrieked from below her pillow.

The obvious thing to do was to release our parachute, but the button I needed to press was covered with ice and snow. With my frozen hands I managed to find a knife and frantically hacked away at the lump of ice. When I finally pressed the button, we had left the cloud and were dangerously close to the water. The parachute slowed us down a bit, but not quite enough. We held onto the sofa tightly when

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