Various Animals, Enthralled by Gravity

*“… spread your tiny wings and fly away  
and take the snow back with you  
where it came from on that day….”*

The car radio crackled out an old classic, as the Morgans’ station wagon wound its way through farmlands and slowly upward toward the forested hills of their latest home-to-be.

In the backseat, her forehead pressed morosely on the cool passenger-side window, curls jumping about in the car’s interior air turbulence, Maeve marveled at how her life always seemed to progress in rather disorienting fit and starts. No smooth transitions for her – last week, she was just another hard luck student at Edgar P. Hillary Memorial Junior High, and now she was, once again, a piece of living luggage, on route to some new and probably confusing adventure, most definitely *not* of her choosing.

Norm, the family’s ageless pet tortoise, relaxing on a brightly checkered, scratchy blanket next to her, chewed idly on a page from the latest issue of Popular Science for Kids, which Maeve had handed over a while ago, after trying in vain to read while in motion, a thing her mother could do, but she never could. Norm seemed to prefer eating articles about biodiversity, anthropology, and occasionally clean energy. His own way of digesting the information, she imagined.

Norm was forever trying to solve mankind’s problems on his own terms, since mankind was being kind of slow about it, as far as he was concerned. That was all he would have had to say about that, had anybody thought to ask, but nobody did.

*“…The one I love forever is untrue*  
*And if I could you know that I would*  
*Fly away with you…”*

*Seriously,*thought Maeve, wiping her eyes quickly with her shirt sleeve, as she continued to count the trees gliding by. They were syncopating now, an effect she normally enjoyed well enough, but not today. She looked down at the Letter for the hundredth time and read it over again, searching for new clues and meanings. It was the note Gary Rickels wrote to her on graph paper, with a blue sharpie, two days before she and her mom packed up everything they owned in the world, and left town, without a look back.

The Letter was his way of saying goodbye forever, and have a great life, and we’ll always be friends, and keep in touch, OK? It had become fairly crumpled by this point, and was taped back together in several places.

“Mom. Can you turn the radio off or something? And maybe close your window? It’s windy as hell back here.”

Ani Esther Morgan was absently humming along with the radio, window down, her beautifully tattooed forearm dangling casually over the door. The open road was her living room – she claimed everything she drove past, over, and through, and just as quickly released it all back to the Universe once it was no longer in her peripheral vision. Anything she wanted or needed to take with her, she had always kept in the car (Maeve did appreciate that this had always included her and the animals) to facilitate important, impulsive life choices.

It was the way she had always sorted things in her life – things to leave behind, and things that can’t be – from the moment she got her driver’s license. Technically, the sorting began the year before she got her driver’s license. She was quick to start sorting and moving at an early age.

“Too hot, Love, got to keep the breeze going for Norm”. Ani addressed Maeve in the rear-view mirror with a faint smile and a wink, as she turned the radio down.

“Norm doesn’t want breezes, he wants to be warm”, mumbled Maeve, not wanting to get into another discussion with her hippy mother about tortoise biology. It felt like her hair, face, and neck were fully saturated with seven-hundred Kilometers of road grit. She folded a free corner of the scratchy blanket over Norm, who kept chewing on his article about tide mills.

In front of her, riding shotgun next to her mother, was Dooley, the fourth member of the current Morgan clan. He had his head stuck dangerously far out of his own window, and was, as always, trying to catch all the air, insects, and odors on his tongue and face as he could possibly manage, being that it was, to him, all an elaborate, important message from God.

Dooley was, as Ani liked to proclaim, a canine of average intelligence and exceptional character. He had accidentally taught himself last year to operate the automatic car window, which was a thing Maeve’s mother had found both hilarious as well as convenient, given the car’s driver-side window controls hadn’t functioned properly in years. All a person had to say was, “Dooley, window up!”, or “Dooley, window down!”, and at least half the time, it worked, more or less, just like an automatic window should.

Dooley of course had the final say in whether or not the window actually needed to be opened or closed, but he was usually pretty gracious about it.

“Why the gloomy face?” Ani’s eyes in the mirror showed appropriate concern, though not enough directed at the road in front of them, for Maeve’s liking. “It’s a new chapter for us, kid. That school wasn’t big enough for you anyway. Am I right?”

“Mom. The road, please. Precious cargo here.” Maeve just wanted to get back to her self-pitying. She knew once they reached their destination – wherever that was – she wouldn’t have enough space to do it properly for a while. Her mother always over-compensated for these surprise, permanent road trips by hovering for several days afterwards.

Dooley’s head whipped around enthusiastically, tongue launching a line of drool evenly across the backseat. *Are you seeing this?? We’re driving to someplace new, again! Can you believe our luck?!!*

“Dooley! Jeebus. Cut it out”. Maeve wiped dog spit from Norm’s magazine. The tortoise’s head angled upward slowly, possibly in thanks. His inner life, aside from the science research, was largely a mystery to her.

Ani turned her attention back to the road, “Maevis, you’re going to have an entire room to yourself, at Aunt Gilly’s. Did I tell you that already? We’ll just spend the week all doing our thing when we get there, promise.” There were low hills rising ahead of them now, and the trees were beginning to thicken somewhat. Dooley seemed desperate to smell every single one of them as they went by. A road sign flew past, uncomfortably close to his thick, sturdy head.

“Mom, you’re driving on the shoulder again. You’re going to kill the dog.”

“I hear they have a tire swing”, Ani added, as an oncoming pickup truck shot past. She paused briefly, wondering whether that would mean anything to her almost-teenager at this particular moment. “And an old barn, I think. Lots of space to go exploring”. She fiddled needlessly with the radio knob for a bit, then, remembering they weren’t listening to the radio anymore, wiped some dust off the buttons with her finger. “Lots of alone time, time to read, time to think…. It’ll be great, I promise.”

Maeve wished she wasn’t constantly surrounded by women who knew what she was thinking all the time. It seemed like an unfair disadvantage to have to go through life with, really. Was she that bad at broadcasting her thoughts and feelings, or did was she just destined to be surrounded by wiccans her entire life? It was a worrying notion.

She was actually pretty mad at her mom this time around. Maeve had sort of gotten used to making new friends every couple of years, but she had finally met a professional this time who hadn’t immediately tried to fix her with some novel technique or medication. Dr. K. was different, but now she was gone too. Did her mom even know about that? Would she even care if she did?

Maeve read Gary’s letter again. *Bad penmanship, Gary*. They had met in the first month of grade seven, at a school short fiction writing competition. He was from a different homeroom, and it had been rivalry at first sight.

Gary won that competition (she had placed second, which was almost worse than not placing at all), and had made a pretty big deal out of it after that. He had bragged in the library – quietly, of course – about his Aunt being some famous novelist, and obviously felt it was genetic, or something. Maeve couldn’t exactly bring herself to hate the boy though, even though she tried hard to for about two and a half weeks.

By December, they had held hands in the lunchroom, in front of at least five witnesses, and that made them girlfriend and boyfriend, as far as she could tell.

Well, it turned out Gary had held hands with a lot of girls that year. Then everything got super-dramatic and Maeve made a stupid scene near the ancient tetherball pole one day, and basically mortified herself forever. No more men, for at least ten, maybe twelve years. A good rule. They couldn’t be trusted while their brains were still developing anyway. Plus, who writes a goodbye letter on graph paper?

Norm had dropped the magazine corner from his mouth and slowly made his way from under his scratchy blanket cover, and was now gazing up in her general direction with what she imagined might be mild concern. Or perhaps he just wanted to be placed back in his box, it was hard to tell. Maeve’s throat had tightened a bit. *Stupid*.

“Dooley! Window up!” Ani prompted. Dooley pretended not to hear – he was busy low-growling at a tree full of crows that regarded them silently as they drove toward a faded roadsign that read,*Five Corners Rest Stop, 6km*.

“It’s okay, Mom. I’m fine, really.” Maeve lied a little.

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Wimpernel was a kitten, who lived in the Old Blue and Green Barn, which was nestled in the treeline at the back of an unkept field overlooking Gillys Vale. The youngest of many sisters and brothers, she had been given her name for the pitiful mewling sounds she would often make at dinner time, during her first early weeks of life. She had always been hungry then, and always the last to get her way, being the smallest.

The moment she could venture out on her own, she certainly did so, and had soon adopted, to the disapproval of the other barn cats, the name she had been given by the Old Grey Woman who still lived in the Grumbling House at the far end of the field: *Whimsy*.

From the barn, Whimsy could foray into the grassy field that was the House’s backyard, and practice how to hunt mice. From there, if the kitten looked toward the House, the barn was on the right side of the property. If she wandered through the tall grass and wildflowers, all the way up to the back porch of the House – a thing kittens were certainly *not* supposed to do – and looked back from there, the barn was (magically, to her) all the sudden on the left side of the yard.

Whimsy had always been fascinated about how both Left and Right were not fixed directions, but directions you brought with you wherever you went. She was the only barn cat that ever thought of the barn as being both on the left side of the yard, and also the right side. Up and Down were a completely different story – which was apparent whenever she chose to jump onto or off of something. It didn’t seem to matter what direction she was looking, the ground (or floor, or puddle) always seemed to be Down, and she seemed perpetually drawn in that direction, whether she wanted to go there or not.

The gentle slopes of the Vale sometimes reminded Whimsy a bit of a very large saucer of milk, on those early mornings when the fog from the low mountain far across on the opposite side would come rolling slowly down into it, from wherever fog came from.

Overlooking the Vale, at the back corner of the field (which was always on the same side as the Old Barn, no matter where she looked at it from) an ancient, Scarred Tree stood and watched everything, as he always had, since before any of these other things were built here. He had been enormous, healthy and vibrant the day she first caught sight of him, from between the planks of the Barn’s slightly sagging walls, and was now becoming more beautiful every day, showing his best colors for the whole valley to see.

From the grand old tree’s strongest branching arm, someone had hung a most curious hoop. It was dark, close to the ground, and twisted slowly this way and that, in constant conversation with the wind. Wimpernel had been forbidden to go close to it – the others said it was dangerous, and possibly even sinister. Their father, who had no name of his own, aside from the one the Old Grey Woman had given him, which was Bill, had gone there one evening in the Spring (so the story went) and had never returned. When Whimsy met the Old Grey Woman, and acquired her own, real name, she reasoned the law about avoiding the tree no longer applied to her, having been given to a young kitten named Wimpernel, whom she was no longer. Names were powerful. That’s what the Old Grey Woman often told her.

So now, on her 100th morning as a kitten, Whimsy had formulated a plan.

*Greyspot! Psst!*

Whimsy tapped her minutes-older brother on his spot, which was on his forehead, between his closed eyelids. His spot was white, not grey – the rest of him was grey. She found his name slightly ambiguous, but of course had not been there yet to help name him, since he had wrestled past her while they were still in their mother’s womb. So many benefits were awarded the ones willing to start struggling at such a young age. She intended to get him a better name from the Old Grey Woman, as soon as she could convince him to follow her to the House. She had not succeeded so far.

The others were all off hunting, or asleep, hidden among the haphazard junk piles which filled the barn from floor to ceiling.

*Brother! C’mon, get up.*

Her brother’s eyes scrunched tighter, and he rolled left-wise to his side, swatting absently at her paw in his sleep. He was a very good sleeper. Lots of practice.

She walked around to where his face had ended up, and tapped his nose. Sometimes his nose was the thing she needed to tap, to wake him up. She had a number of methods.

*Brother. I need you. I have a plan!*

A sleepy kitten growl emerged from her sibling’s throat. His nose twitched, and he turned the intrusion into a dream about chasing a fly. His hind legs kicked twice, while his mouth opened slightly, enough for his pink tongue to peek out. One of her older cousins shifted in the rafters above. The morning sunlight was beginning to peek through the leaves outside. It would not be long before the whole place was bustling and the morning meeting would commence. She needed to act quickly. She stuck her paw in his mouth, and waited.

Greyspot took about three sleepy breaths, and then began to have a hard time breathing properly. His mouth began to open and close, but not very successfully, since his sister’s paw was now stuck in there. With a sudden, slight sneeze, his eyes opened, more or less at the same time.

*What? Where are…. Wimp? What… whyyy?* Spot’s mind started to return to the waking world, where Whimsy sat waiting for him, having pulled her paw away from his face.

*Spot*. Whimsy let her brother squirm and stretch while she patiently continued. *I need your help. I have a plan. I need a distraction.*

Greyspot scrunched his eyes at his little sister, as his sight came into focus. Was it morning already? He was so sleepy. Why did she wake him up every single day? Hadn’t they discussed this? He was a growing kitten, he needed lots of sleep.

*Wimp, what the hell?* He let out a short, irritable hiss. It’s still dark outside. It wasn’t exactly dark, but close enough.

*Language, brother. And my name is Whimsy now, I told you that three days ago.* She sometimes wished her barely-older sibling – the one she should, by definition, trust the most – took her issues a little more seriously sometimes.*It’s Whimsy, okay? I need your help, now.*

Spot rolled slowly onto his back, a trick he learned early, and one not every cat managed to master, or even thought to. *Your name is Wimpernel. You have a plan, but it’s a terrible and dangerous one.*

Whimsy indignantly stamped her front paws on the dusty newspaper Spot used as a bed. *How do you know that?*

*Because your plans are ALL terrible and dangerous. You’re not even a hundred mornings old yet, and you’re not going to make it to two hundred mornings at this rate.* All his short legs were sticking up, somewhat comically, for balance. He gazed wistfully at the ceiling. He had been having the most amazing dream about chasing a fat, juicy fly. He would never get it back now. His sister was the bane of his young existence.*I’m not helping you*, he added, for clarity.

Whimsy put her face right up to Spot’s. This was not up for discussion. Time was of the essence. *I AM one hundred mornings old, as of this morning, actually. So are you. Did you know that? And my name is Whimsy. I’ve told you that seven times now.*

Greyspot stretched dramatically, twisting away from her onto his flank again, but did not offer to get up. He could tell Wimpernel was in one of her moods. He wasn’t getting back to sleep this morning. He needed time to come to terms with that sad fact. *Wimp…*

*No, Spot. You’re my brother, and I’m going outside because I have a plan, and you need to help me. Now.* She was around in front of him again. Their various siblings, aunts, uncles, and extended family – there were about twenty of them in all – were going to start converging here soon, for the morning meeting. She needed her plan to take effect before then. Otherwise, she’d have to wait a whole other day, and that was unacceptable.

*If you don’t help me now, Whimsy batted at his wayward feet for effect, I’m going to chase you all day and bite your tail, all day. I swear I will.*

*Ughhhh*. Spot could not take another day of that, again. He closed his eyes for a moment, tried to imagine that he had had way more sleep, and was now ready to get up and go hunt something, and then, reluctantly, flipped onto his feet. *Fine. What’s your plan?*

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Not long afterwards, the morning meeting commenced, and Greyspot announced that he had seen Wimpernel wander into the woods behind the Old Green Barn – a place young kittens were certainly *not* allowed to wander. The adults quickly went out to scour the woods, and the eldest of them stayed behind to keep the youngest from getting into trouble.

Greyspot was annoyed at having to stay in the Barn, on top of having his sleep interrupted. He was going to have to figure out how to deal with Wimpernel’s crazy plans. She was going to get herself killed one of these days – there were *real* dangers along the fringes of the field. Some lived just beyond the treeline, and some would fly in from across the Vale, circling overhead in search of small, careless creatures wandering where they shouldn’t be.

He sat next to a stack of old newspapers, peering through the wall planks, out toward the tall grass of the field. His sister’s tail popped up from the grass now and then, as she wound her way toward the Old House – her favorite, forbidden destination.

*Keep your tail down, dummy*. Spot really could not understand how his sister had survived one hundred mornings already. It’s like she was born just to give him worries. As if in response, Wimpernel’s tail disappeared, and did not re-emerge. She had not really learned to stay in stalking mode outside for very long, but his lessons were maybe starting to pay off. When Greyspot wasn’t sleeping, he was quite exceptional at hiding, and hunting beetles, for such a young cat.

*Is Whimsy off to visit the Old Grey Woman again?* Mister Boots asked casually from behind the young cat.

*Jeebus, Boots!* Spot twitched reflexively. How did the old barn cat move around so silently? Greyspot twisted his head about briefly to give his elder an annoyed look.

*Language, son*, said Mister Boots, sitting calmly on his haunches, regarding the kitten with mild amusement. Or something.

The older cat was, as far as Wimpernel and he could recall, distantly related to their father Bill’s second cousin, or maybe third. He was somewhat fat, and had a lot of orange in him, which nobody could really trace back properly, so his lineage was a bit of a mystery to them.

*Thinking of chasing after her? She’s got danger on her mind, that one.*

Spot did not know how to respond to Mister Boots most of the time. Unlike the others, the old barn cat had long ago made friends with the woman in the Grumbling House, and visited her from time to time, whenever he felt like eating cooked food and sleeping inside, near Human-stoked fire. The others thought of him as not quite right in the head, for this and many other reasons, but his seniority in the barn was without question – he came and went as he pleased, and weighed in on things as his whims dictated.

Presumably, he had not fallen for the morning’s ruse – while the adults scoured the treeline for the missing kitten, Boots had decided to watch Whimsy’s brother instead.

*I’m not going anywhere, don’t worry*. Greyspot went back to peering through the crack in the wall, but his sister was now invisible among the tall grass. Perhaps she was at the back porch by now. *Be careful, dummy.* He settled in for a long wait. Mister Boots groomed himself, and did the same.

Whimsy was not, in fact, anywhere near the back porch by this point. Her plan had two phases, one she had shared with her brother, and one she had not.

The first was to enlist help distracting the adults, so she could make her way into the field, toward the House, without being seen. Ever since her last foray into the field, they had all been keeping a rather close eye on her.

The second phase of her plan was to convince her brother that she was simply making another trip to the Old House, so when Mister Boots eventually questioned him about her whereabouts, that’s where *they* would assume she was.

The older cat would understand her interest in going there – they had both formed a relationship with the Old Grey Maid, and even though they never went there together, they shared an understanding, of sorts. He enjoyed the comfort of the den and kitchen, while she enjoyed exploring the house’s nooks, as well as listening the Old Grey’s stories, of which there were many.

Halfway to the House, Whimsy dropped her tail and changed direction, toward the Scarred Tree, and the mysterious dark hoop hanging from it. None of the others really knew of her growing interest in it – even Boots avoided that place, ever since Bill had wandered there and not returned. None of them would think to look for her there.

Whimsy had never met her father. The others all told stories of how he tempted the Fates too many times with his far-ranging adventures, and must certainly have met his own, that evening he went to visit the Scarred Tree for the last time. The kitten did not think any father of hers would do something stupid, or get caught by a predator. She knew it in her spirit, in fact, for she knew herself, and he had been her father, so she knew him too, in a way.

What else could she do, but go there and see what might have happened to him? What did the others expect of her, now that she had been given her true name?