

Just Cats

Morgan Dick

You tell yourself they're just cats. Not cougars, not tigers—house cats. Fluffy, whiskery, and what, ten pounds apiece? Yes, their claws could decimate your eyeballs, and yes, their furry bodies could smother you in the night. But what's the likelihood of that actually happening? Mom is always telling you not to overthink things.

Lingering in the hall with a bulging suitcase and a sore neck from the five-hour bus ride, you open your palm and stare at the key nestled there. It will open the door to Mel's apartment, your home for the next two nights. You get a free place to spend the weekend, she gets a free cat sitter while she's away skiing with her boyfriend. Perfect trade.

Tomorrow's journey to the university will take you twelve minutes on foot. You know because you looked it up on Google Maps, even printed out the directions in case your phone randomly dies. It's March, and this is Alberta, so you have an umbrella in case it rains and winter boots in case it snows. After everything it took to get here—four years of undergrad and a two-year master's degree, most of it spent titrating solutions in a basement laboratory—you aren't taking any chances.

The key glides into the lock. You turn it until the mechanism clinks.

Inside, the smell of ammonia makes you flinch. You breathe through your mouth and feel around for the light switch.

The five of them are waiting. They sit on their haunches in rows on the kitchen floor, a small but formidable platoon. The two in the back are longhaired and reddish, with squashed noses and white mustaches, while the two in the middle are shorthaired and calico, with broad faces and dappled coats. The one in the front, a hairless cat, might be the ugliest non-CGI creature you've ever

seen. Wrinkled and bug-eyed, it is so ugly you almost gag. But you don't. You don't because, barring any hiccups at tomorrow's interview, you're going to be a doctor, and doctors never gag.

You set down your backpack noiselessly. "Hello."

The cats look taxidermied in their stillness.

Should you bow? Make a speech? Offer them something? This was rude. You should've brought a gift as a sign of goodwill. Fish jerky or a pork chew. Do cats eat those things? You don't know anything about cats. You are so unprepared for this.

"Thanks for letting me—" You stop yourself. You're being ridiculous.

To prove it, you say the words aloud: "You're just cats."

The hairless one narrows its eyes at you.

"I'm not wrong," you say.

They're blocking the path through the kitchen, which is just as well. You ate at the pit stop in Red Deer. Two hours later, the ham sandwich has wadded in your intestine.

You take your suitcase and backpack and follow a hallway to the left, passing a small living area. Festooned with candles, tiny cacti, and foldable exercise equipment, the apartment looks much as it did in Mel's FaceTime tour. But the videocall didn't capture the nitrous odour in the air or the way it prickles in your nose. And the hair. God—the hair. It's everywhere, drifting around your ankles in soft tumbleweeds as you walk. This, among other reasons, is why you're a dog person.

Mel's bedroom is small, so small that when you stand in the middle and stretch your arms wide, your fingertips graze the walls. The décor is classic Mel: wall clock in shape of crescent moon; Buddhist prayer flags; cloth tapestry of Monet's *Bouquet of Flowers*. You sometimes wonder why the two of you are friends.

You lie down in bed then sit back up. You're exhausted but can't relax. You aren't capable. Relaxation is for ordinary people, people with book clubs and yoga memberships and streaming services. They can crochet and chitchat and downward dog all they want. Not you. You turned from that path long ago.

You find tomorrow's outfit in the suitcase (wrinkle-free blouse with pencil skirt and oversized blazer) and lay it on the bed. It's perfect. You don't need to study, but you do anyway. You brought the cue cards, so why not flip through them one more time? *How do you feel about medical assistance in dying? How do you think the field of medicine will change in the next ten years, and how do you see yourself fitting into that change? What's your biggest weakness?* You pace back and forth, reciting the answers under your breath.

Panic spears up through your diaphragm when you turn back toward the bed. The hairless cat has sprawled across your interview outfit.

The cue cards flutter to the floor. "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God."

Lying on its side, the cat more closely resembles a pig, meaty and pink. It perks up and examines you, then sets its head back down.

"Could you... could you move? Please? Off. Off, please." You clap. You whistle. Nothing works.

Your phone rings: an incoming FaceTime call from Mel.

"Hey!" she says. "Any troubles getting in?"

"Hey! Not at all." Your appearance on screen is blotchy, pudgy, and altogether horrifying. "Jesus God. I think I might be allergic to the cats."

"Oh no. There should be some Benadryl in the bathroom." Mel clears her throat. "How are my babies doing?"

"In fact—" When you look away from the phone, the cat is gone. "Uh, just give me a sec. I'll find them."

You've wanted to be a doctor since that day in ninth grade when Anya Klein came up to you in the hall after class wearing a righteous expression and one of the four TNA hoodies she had on rotation. Was it the lavender? Maybe it was the baby blue.

"Why did you do that?" she asked. Her boyfriend, a towering,

lanky basketball-type, waited back.

“Do what?”

“You tattled on me to Mr. Wong.”

Ah, yes—the chem exam, the formulas you’d seen scribbled on Anya’s wrists.

“It’s your problem for cheating,” you said. And for being so obvious.

“Nobody likes you,” she said. “Literally, nobody.”

When you returned to your locker that same day after lunch, someone had smeared pearly goop on the combination lock. You didn’t know what it was until an eleventh-grade boy, a football player, walked past and exclaimed, “Look, somebody jizzed!”

You examined the goop again, this slime full of microscopic fish, and almost retched.

At home that night, Mom soothed your hurt with reruns of *Charmed* and promises of a kinder future: “Kids like her grow up to be porn stars or junkies. Kids like you grow up to be doctors.”

The idea stuck with you.

The cats laze on the living room sofas, each curled into a doughnut shape. You flip the camera so Mel can see.

“Hello, babies,” she says. “Mama misses you. Yes, I do. I miss you. Hi. Hello. Oh, my babies. My smushy baby prince cats. You sweet babies. Hi.”

You flip the camera back.

Mel looks nonplussed. “I wasn’t—I wasn’t finished.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

You tap the screen again, and she resumes cooing.

“Where’s Bella?” she asks.

“Sorry—which one is that again?”

“Bella is my hairless baby.”

“I don’t know where she—”

A meow pings through the air. You turn to find Bella perching atop the cat tree in the corner. She has a proud appearance, nose tilting upward, eyes shrinking to amber sickles.

You creep toward the cat and aim the phone at her face.

“She’s got some goop,” Mel says.

Yes, she does. A greenish gob nestles in the corner of her soulless eye.

“Can you get it for her?”

“You want me to... What do you want me to do?”

“Scoop it out with your finger.”

“What?”

“Just do it real quick.”

Bella yawns. The pink slope of her tongue, the points of her teeth.

“Can’t we leave it for now?” you ask.

“What’s the problem? It’s just eye gunk. Aren’t you planning to be a doctor?”

She has you there.

“Fine,” you say. “I’ll do it when we get off the phone.”

“Do it right now. I’ll wait,” Mel says.

Fucking Mel.

You set the phone on the coffee table, get some Kleenex from the kitchen, and wrap it around your index finger like a tiny glove. You worry the cat will bite you, but she doesn’t, and the goop comes off easily on the tissue. For a moment, you aren’t sure what to do with it. Bile crawls up into your throat.

“That’s better,” Mel says, after you’ve dropped the tissue in the garbage and lifted the phone to Bella’s face again. “You should pet her. She looks like she wants attention.”

You reach out with your free hand and pat Bella twice on the head.

“No—not like that. Stroke her back.”

Your palm travels the length of Bella’s spine, from the folds of her neck to the base of her tail. Bella’s eyes pinch shut, luxuriant.

“Exactly,” Mel says. “Look at that. She loves it.”

When you finally manage to end the call, the sun has slipped away, but Bella has stayed put on the top perch of the cat tree.

You bring your nose an inch from hers. “I am going to be a doctor. You are just a—”

Bella pounces off the tree and slinks away, and you are alone.

You were jogging along the reservoir last week, passing through the section of park behind the hospital, when you saw a guy in blue scrubs smoking a cigarette and crying. Staring out at the water, he roosted on the backrest of a park bench with his feet on the seat, his face awash with orange light from the low sun.

After weaving through the loose mass of people—patients with walking frames and wheelchairs, mostly—you pulled the headphones off your ears and sat beside him. He was gaunt and generic-looking. Exhaustion had overwritten his facial features. His nametag had only the words INTERNAL MEDICINE RESIDENT.

“Are you okay?” Had there been an aortic dissection? A ruptured ulcer? Undiagnosed colon cancer? The possibilities multiplied: different permutations of blood and suffering and entrails.

He gave no indication of having heard you.

“Doctor?”

He started. The cigarette slipped from his fingers and tumbled to the ground. “Shit.”

You plucked it out of the dirt for him and asked again: “Are you okay?”

“What? Oh—yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks.” He accepted the

cigarette and carried on smoking it, alternating puffs with heaving sobs. The coordination was impressive.

“Can I... call somebody for you?”

“No, no, no.” He sniffled. “Tough day at the office, that’s all.”

“I have a med school interview next week.”

He regarded you with something like pity. “Where at?”

“U of A.”

“I went there.”

He said nothing else. You took this as your cue to leave.

He piped up as you were walking away: “It’s harder than I thought it would be.”

Turning to look at him once more, this sad little man with his tears and his nicotine, you felt something noxious sprouting inside yourself. It had always been there, but now it had air and water. “Worth it, though, isn’t it?” you asked, a tremor in your voice.

He took another drag of his smoke and looked out at the reservoir again, at the ducks and sailboats and sunlight skimming the surface.

You’re half-asleep, coasting down into a dream, when you hear a thump on the bedroom door.

You sit up and peer through the darkness. The door is still shut. You shut it as a precaution before crawling into bed. However smart, however sly, cats can’t open doors. You are pretty sure of this fact.

“Hello?”

No one answers because no one is there. Of course, no one is there. You must’ve imagined the noise. It was a fragment of a dream, a neuron misfiring.

You lie back down. You need to sleep. Tomorrow is the most important day of your—

There it is again: a thump. Dread lodges beneath your sternum. It’s

them, you realize. They're throwing themselves at the door.

You fold the pillow around your head. It does nothing to muffle the noise, which comes every minute or so. They're teasing you. Mocking you.

Sometime around four or five, you throw back the sheets. Catapult out of bed. Reach for the door handle.

The hallway is empty. You look left and right to make sure. No cats.

Which makes you wonder. What if the cats needed your help, and that was why they banged on the door all night? What if they're dead? What if you killed them? You climb back into bed and shut your eyes, but the silence is deafening and seems to say, *Nocatsnocatsnocatsnocatsnocatsnocatsnocats*.

You give up on sleep and dash into the kitchen. Not there. The bathroom? Not there. The hall closet where Mel keeps the litter boxes? Not there.

That does it—you've murdered them. They've died and somehow decomposed already. Reduced to cat dust and blown away. And it's your fault. Why are you even here? You aren't the type of person who should care for living things. Life, in all its gooiness, disgusts you. This has always been the case.

Tears spill over your cheekbones as you shuffle into the living room, where five sets of eyes shine like pearls in the dim light.

"Thank God. I thought you were dead."

They're lined up in rows again. Same formation as before—two in the back, two in the middle, and Bella up front. She smiles at you. Can cats smile? You never used to think so.

They won't stop looking at you.

They know.

You haven't acknowledged the truth to yourself, let alone spoken it aloud, but somehow, they fucking know.

You sink to the floor, to their level. It's a relief. "You're right. I know you're right."

Bella leaves the ranks and strides toward you, her long legs like wisps. She sweeps herself against your leg, and a sigh rushes from your lungs.

Before you leave for the bus station this morning, you'll empty the litter boxes and fill the bowls with enough food for the whole weekend. The cats will be okay. They don't need you.

You rise and turn to the window.

Skyscrapers glitter in the dark, the slightest hint of pink cropping up on the horizon. Tomorrow hovers just out of reach. There will be a long ride home and then... you're not sure what.



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Morgan Dick is a writer and physical therapist from Calgary. Her non-fiction has appeared in *The Globe and Mail* and *CBC News*. You can find her on Twitter (@jmdwrites). Her work has appeared in *Grain*, *Geist*, *CAROUSEL*, *The Prairie Journal*, *Vagabond City Lit*, *Cloud Lake Literary*, and elsewhere. She won honourable mention for *The New Quarterly's* Peter Hinchcliffe Short Fiction Award, was shortlisted for *Room Magazine's* Fiction Contest, and was also a finalist for the *Alberta Views* Short Story Contest. She recently took part in the Writers' Guild of Alberta Mentorship Program, with Vern Thiessen (who is one of Canada's most produced playwrights) as her mentor and she is now revising a novel.