

Chapter One: In which Patsi has a Birthday and Three Bad Things Happen

This is how Patsi Zipping woke up on the morning of the day she turned eleven.

When she first became aware of herself being awake, she lay very still with her eyes closed, wondering if she was still in her room on Planet Earth, and whether the Earth had rolled all the way around into Day again. She could tell the answers without opening her eyes, because she could feel her old crazy-quilt twisted around her and the lumps of her toy cats on her head and in her left armpit, and she could hear the familiar squeaky clucking of Lickety the gecko that lived in her ceiling and the lazy morning warble of the butcher birds in the Forest. Also she could see some light through her eye-lids, right greater than left and still pale. All in all, enough to know that it was about six o'clock on a Kelvin Grove autumn morning, and that she was in her usual bed in her usual house.

Still with her eyes closed, she stretched out tentatively with her feet and her fingers under the sheets. She felt to see whether her cat, Best, was still asleep on her bed, (No) and where her emergency compass-whistle and her torch had got to (the whistle was stuck in the twists of her blanket and her torch was under her pillow). She listened for her Dad's presence in the office next to her room (not there), and then, concluding that she was the First One Awake (Midge got in bed with her mother and had a second sleep every morning), opened her eyes.

It was her birthday, and great things were going to happen. This would be the day she would finally get to meet the Flying Cats. She was sure of it.

Twice she had seen them now, down in the Lilly Pilly Gully by the Pond. The first time, as she had been lying on her stomach on the sandstone, gazing into the Pond, there had just been a glimpse of something alive, black and white and fire-streaked, rummaging about in the palm frond reflections- but she had turned around to look up into the actual trees and the vision had disappeared.

The following Sunday, early in the morning, she had definitely seen two cats wearing green crop-tops and flight goggles. There was a lanky one: a black cat with a long, flame-tipped tail, who wore a black cape and had a sort of a plastic bread-box on his back. The other one was plumper: a calico cat, white with brown and orange spots, and she had tiny wings. Patsi had seen them scampering down to the Pond, and then they had suddenly disappeared and she hadn't been able to find them anywhere, for all her Powers of Observation. But what were they doing? Where were they going? How had they disappeared so suddenly from the Gully? They had both been wearing a sort of a pendant around their necks, which had flashed as though it was set with jewels, but she hadn't been able to make out the details...

Patsi jumped out of bed, landing on scissors, and coloured paper, and knocking over the cardboard pillars from the previous night's Temple of Bastet re-construction¹. She got dressed in a yellow, close-enough-to-uniform T-shirt, bike shorts, a gym skirt,

¹ The Temple of Bastet, a cat-worshipping sanctuary in the Lower Nile, as described by Herodotus, in *The Histories*, ~54 AD

odd socks, and her well-worn runners. Then she took her own black tail from her third drawer down, and pinned it onto her bike shorts under the skirt. She stepped over the fermenting leaf potions lying in bowls beside her desk. She pinched off a piece of bread from a loaf in the kitchen and, standing on a chair, popped it up on the top of her window frame for Lickety.

[picture]

Then she climbed out of her window and dropped onto the path that led down to Lilly Pilly Gully and the Pond in the Forest.

Patsi padded down Flowering Alley full of excitement, picking a few bush cherries from beside the path. She ducked under a broad low branch and went round the bend into Lilly Pilly Gully, and leaped quickly over the Billy Goat's Gruff Bridge (just in case). She twitched a few sandpaper fig leaves for good luck, and then lay down on the big flat rocks at the Pond's edge.

This was her very favourite occupation. First she would lie on her back with one foot propped up on the other knee, and watch the clouds skitting across the sky between the waving tops of the trees and the palm fronds. Sometimes a pair of rainbow lorikeets would dive, screeching, across the space, coming within inches of her knees, or a blue triangle butterfly might pop in and out of the tangled vines in the Gully.

Then she would roll over onto her stomach, prop her head in her hands on the edge of the stone, and gaze into the Pond. In the quiet early morning it was like a mirror, showing stripes of silver sky across the web of reeds and rushes on the edge. The reflected trunks of the palms and the tall hoop pines stretched down, down, down to an oval of light blue sky-water. A few fragments of cloud like tiny fishes could just be seen drifting. The changing pattern of reflections and shadows was so magical. Was it indeed the same world down below as the one above her, or was it different? Patsi felt sure that under the water lay the Home of the Flying Cats, and that today, her Birthday, she would see them properly.

[picture]

She kept very, very still and looked down at the hoop pine reflections. She could see the condensations of green where some pine cones were developing on the upper branches, but that was not what she was looking for. A magenta dragon-fly came and rested on the rushes beside her: she could see both him and his reflection almost perfectly and tried to feel within her own body the lightness with which he poised on the reed. She lay as still as a lizard gathering early morning energy from the sun and gazing into the pool. A real lizard, a stripy skink, emerged from the pond onto the rock quite near her, its head aquiver with alertness. Patsi felt that he had come straight from that life within the water, where the flying cats lived, and that he was puffing out little puffs of it which she too could inhale if she could just keep still long enough. She tried to breathe as quietly as she could, still peering into the edges of the hoop-pines and palm fronds against the blue Pond-Sky, where she had seen the vision of the cats the first time.

She held stiller, stiller, and stiller, until she felt as though she had been gazing into the world beneath the pond for a year, for a century, for a geological era. Then at last, she heard a rustle through the trees to her left, and saw a flash of black and cream appear on the bank of tree ferns on the other side of the pool. Yes, it was one of the cats! It was carrying the bread-box thing on its back, and in that there was something red and green: it looked to be bandaged. The second cat was there too, the calico, she **did** have wings, very delicate cream-coloured folded wings with orange and brown markings in the mid-sections. The pair was debating something in loud miaow-whispers. Patsi could see the pendants on their chests distinctly: they were round and looked like they were made out of coloured glass. It was a kind of a crest, divided in half and half again, with lightening on one side and a cat's face and a spiral on the other. As Patsi gazed, the calico cat turned to look across the Pond. Instantly, her eyes locked onto Patsi's. Patsi felt as though the whole forest was standing still. The cat opened her mouth as though she were about to speak.

Suddenly there was a breathy clumping on the Gully path, a tearing of leaves, and a familiar voice called out, "What is it Patsi, what can you see?!"

The two cats dived into the water and were gone; only rippling sky and clouds could be seen, closing over them...

It was Midge, Midge of the Poor Timing, Midge who must have escaped from the tyranny of the jobs on the School Morning List and come looking for her. Patsi's jaw dropped in disbelief as she stared at the widening ripples. So close, so gone, how could it be! Her heart hurt.

"*Midgerie, Mudgerie, toil and drudgery*", thought Patsi, and she scowled. She scooped up her long legs, and dashed off the rock into the Forest. Inside her chest, her heart was thumping painfully with the broken-off vision of the calico cat. She thought about how Midge had broken the head off Bee, her favourite toy, when Midge was one and she was four.

She didn't want to give Midge a chance to catch up to her. (Midge copied everything that Patsi did). So she ran further down into Lillypilly Gully and hid among the tree ferns. She waited there a few moments. Then she climbed back up to the path and went the long way round back to the Lodge.

But just as she was about to tuck her tail back under her skirt and run into the kitchen, she heard a splash and the sound of crying coming from the Pond.

Patsi's first impulse was to climb the window into her bedroom and pretend to be still asleep, or to be doing homework, or practising her violin so loud that she couldn't Hear, and to let someone else rescue Midge. But she found her legs turning around and going back as if of their own accord. Midge drove Patsi crazy, but she was her sister, after all. Patsi looked beneath the bananas, under the bridge, and beside the Pond, but she couldn't see Midge anywhere. Then there was a scuffle in the cherry bushes beside her and, before she knew what was happening, a little wet hand had inserted itself into Patsi's.

“I wanted to see what you SAW!”, snuffled Midge. She had got herself out of the Pond, but had scraped her knee in the process, and it was bleeding very slightly. Even though Patsi knew it was really Midge’s own fault for copying her and following her everywhere, Patsi felt just a tiny bit responsible for Midge’s Accident, so she took her under the house and put a plaster on her knee. However, as they traipsed drippily through the kitchen, Patsi’s mother frowned at her.

Patsi’s mother’s frown meant, “I am disappointed in you”.

Patsi sighed. She realised that with One Very Bad Thing happening already, her Birthday was not going to be a Great Day.

Suddenly Patsi remembered a riddle that her friend Lucia had told her:

I found it in the Forest.
I didn’t want it.
I looked everywhere for it.
I couldn’t find it.
I brought it back in my hand.
What am I?

So she decided to tell Lucia that the riddle had TWO answers, and that both the old and the new answers began with S and ended with TER².

² The original answer was, “a splinter”. What is Patsi’s new answer?!