

JAMES MORGAN

Bertie's Brain

"No, I won't come in," she said.

Lucinda's face loomed in the open passenger window. Her crimson lips were turned clownishly down. Her face was over-powdered and crumpled like a tearful child. Like all such women, Selina pondered stonily, she was tough as nails.

"Oh darling, you must. I won't do it on my own. I shan't know what to choose. I need someone to bounce off."

"Oh for God's sake," thundered Selina, deep in her bosom.

She hauled herself out of the car. Somewhere there was a cacophony of dogs.

"If this is going to be dismal Lucinda, I'm out of here. I don't need it."

They signed in and were told to go to the end of a corridor behind reception. Selina was pleasantly surprised. All smart vinyl flooring and white walls. The cats were in individual units behind glass-panelled UPVC doors. Beyond these were outdoor runs with climbing logs and litter trays.

"You see," Lucinda reproached. "It's all quite modern and professional these days."

Why don't you just call me a sad old dear and be done with it, Selina thought.

They drifted along. Some of the cats, the younger ones, came hopefully to the front of their pens. One or two pawed at the glass. The older ones stayed resigned in their beds, pretending to sleep. Hopelessness threatened to sweep up and engulf Selina. It may have been smart but this sense of desperate optimism would kill her if she stayed more than half-an-hour.

"Oh *look*, Selina. Aren't they sweet?"

It was a litter of kittens. A ginger, tortoiseshell muddle.

"Everyone wants kittens I bet," snapped Selina. "You should go for an older cat."

Lucinda pursed her lips and didn't answer. The deal was done, of course. The meander to the end of the corridor was a token effort.

"Those kittens are for me," pronounced Lucinda. Her mouth was set sulkily. "One of them came right to the front and looked me in the eye."

Selina could have remarked they were too young to know any better but refrained.

“I’ll see if I can find someone,” she said.

There was somebody working beyond another door in a sort of back room. She popped her head round.

“Could you possibly help? My friend would like to adopt.”

The girl was putting food into a pen. She closed the door on it.

“Why are these cats in here?” demanded Selina.

“I’m sorry but this isn’t for public access.”

Selina had a propensity to appear hostile when she was uncomprehending. The girl shifted uncomfortably.

“They’re the unhomeables, you see.”

Selina advanced. She peered into the pen. The cat was astonishingly handsome. A sort of ragbag pedigree job with a web of stripes to the face and legs, white paws and pale fawn blending to beige and peach and sudden flares of deep cinnamon on the body. The eyes were wide and dreamy and blue as sapphires.

“What’s wrong with him? Or her?”

“Him. He’s brain-damaged. We think it’s congenital. He has very poor co-ordination.”

The cat swayed on his legs, staring at her. A sense of her own uselessness grabbed Selina by the throat.

“What’ll happen to him?”

“We have a non-euthanasia policy for animals that aren’t suffering.”

“He’ll fester,” said Selina.

A preposterous panic gripped her.

“I’ll take him,” she said.

The manageress was sought. Like the walls and floors and the glass-panelled units she too was professional.

“Are you experienced with cats?” she asked.

“Not in the least.”

“He’s special needs,” the woman said sceptically.

“Aren’t we all?” Selina retorted.

Her details were taken, a carrier purchased.

“We should do a home-check really,” said the manageress. “But your friend’s been assessed and she vouches for you.”

“Then I’m a safe bet. What she doesn’t know about me would fit comfortably on a postage stamp.”

Selina had intended the remark frivolously but its unsettling truth suddenly struck her. She had extended a hand to bestow an affectionate pat on Lucinda’s arm. Instead it rapped out an alarum on her surprised wrist.

“Come and check on him any time you want,” she invited breezily. “What’s his name, by the way?”

“Biscuit.”

Awful name, conveyed Selina’s eyes.

“It can always be changed. It’s unlikely he recognises it.”

Know-it-all bitch, smiled Selina.

The woman returned the smile. Her mouth formed a perfect crescent over a row of cut diamond teeth.

“You might want to borrow a holding pen to use in the house for a while,” she advised briskly. “He’ll be all over the place at first. You can bring it back in a few weeks.” She threw Selina a snappish glance. “If all goes well, of course.”

“Oh Selina you are *brave*,” Lucinda simpered as the car swept out of the gates. “It’s so like you to go for the hopeless ones.”

In the driver mirror Selina saw Lucinda’s two perfect kittens prettily flouncing.

“I shall call him Bertie,” she said.

They stopped at Pets at Home to buy bowls, tray, litter and bed. She dropped Lucinda off. The *woebegone*, pitying look had fastened on Lucinda’s face.

“Call me,” consoled Lucinda. “If you want to talk.”

“Oh, I will,” Selina assured her. “If I do.”

The house was silent as a nailed coffin. The music deck was only allowed free rein in the evenings. She had no idea if the television was even working.

“No radio today,” she said into the cat’s beautiful, vacant eyes. “Just you and me, Bertie.”

She kept him in the carrier while she set up the holding pen. She could see the

sense of it, as a standby. She opened the carrier. Bertie lay unmoving on his side. His head inched forward like a flower bobbing on a stalk.

“Come on, old boy,” Selina said.

She eased him out. He tottered uncertainly for a moment and sank down on his haunches in dismay. Selina filled food and water bowls and placed them nearby. Bertie’s head moved vaguely. It was no good staring at him. She closed the kitchen door. She sensed it would not do to overwhelm him with unlimited space. She pottered about, finding things to busy herself, glancing round occasionally to check on him. Just as she began to lose momentum, Bertie found his. He paddled aimlessly around the kitchen, each of his four legs seemingly flying out in different directions. Occasionally he would pause and teeter uncertainly, unable to move. His neurocircuitry spun like wild tops. Like a prancing horse he pulled up one foreleg into his chest and froze mid step, tottering on the other three with a crippled grace. Then he collapsed onto his flank.

Selina’s heart was rapidly folding up. What had she been thinking of? A bleak vista opened in her head. She realised, grudgingly, that the woman at the rescue centre was right. This was too much for him. He needed the security of a small space. She filled his tray and placed it with his bed and food and water in the pen. In Bertie went. His head bobbed over the food. He dipped his nose in then attempted to lick it off. He looked about, perplexed, and eventually sank into the bed and slept.

Selina wrote a letter. She gardened. She had a bath then made herself a meal. Still Bertie slept. Once he woke and gazed at her despondently. Selina drank quite a lot of red wine. She wanted to sleep. She checked on Bertie last thing then went to bed.

She woke early and remembered what she’d done. Everything behind her eyes was grey. She went downstairs. Bertie was staggering in his pen, disorientated. The water had been upset, he had walked in his food. She realised he had attempted to use the tray and missed. He’d managed to pee through the bars of the pen. A stream of urine was progressing slowly across the kitchen floor. His back legs were soaked with water and urine.

Right, you arrogant cow, Selina muttered. *Cope.*

She took Bertie out, washed him and dried him off. She put him in his carrier while she cleaned the floor. The bottom of the bed was also soaked and stank to high heaven. She drove quickly to Pets at Home, bought a plastic bed and discovered they sold incontinence pads for puppies. She set up the pen again, with a pad under the tray. Then she got through the day. In the evening she tried him again in the kitchen. He floundered, crashing into things. He fell over. She struggled to steady him on his feet. Bertie’s eyes dilated. As she raised him up Selina saw her own face floating in their dark-smelted ore.

Oh Christ, she thought. *You weren’t meant to live.*

She managed to get him to eat a little. His head probed about and found the dish at last. Later he shat in his bed then peed and missed the tray again. She cleaned up and changed the pad. By the time she went to bed the horror of what she must do had crystallised in her head. She would not return him to the centre where he would rot away slowly and die one day despairingly in his sleep. She would take him to the vet. No, she would insist the vet came out. She would give him that, at least. He would slip away gradually in her arms, his beautiful, fluid eyes would mist, the last flutter of his inchoate, uncomprehending mind would be extinguished. Then she would deal with herself.

Sleep was impossible. The night passed, an endless rising and sinking in black semi-consciousness. *It's so like you to go for the hopeless ones.* Oh yes, Lucinda had an unerring ability to pluck the flinty truth from the crassness of her superficial mind. Why, why, why did she allow Lucinda that power to diminish her? She, Selina, served only to confirm Lucinda's certitude, the security her inane materialism fostered. But Lucinda was right, for all that. Why else had Selina ever let Trevor into her life? He spent all her money, sat around claiming to look for work while she slaved as a health visitor in one of the most deprived areas of London and only when she caught him servicing the cleaner up against the living room wall had she summoned the sense to banish him, though not before he had swiped nearly half of everything, because she had been grateful and witless enough to marry him.

In the desperate final hour before dawn her father's ghost visited her. *Look at that face, he said. It's got character. Still, you'll be all right, my girl. Some men like a good laugh.* And behind him, shrinking back, the grey, careworn spectre of her mother. Was it her Selina hated most? *Some things you have to put up with, my pet. You'll learn that soon enough.*

Selina's eyes snapped open. There were endless people one could blame. *It's down to you,* she thought. *Everyone knows most people are assaulted, raped or murdered by people they allow through the front door.* But now it had to end.

She got up. She could not go into the kitchen. She had a little kettle in her room and made tea. She dressed. She looked up the vet's number and made a note of it. She sat listening to the boom in her head. Finally she steeled herself and made for the kitchen. She had to look Bertie in the eye.

He sat upright in his pen. The food was eaten. There was a wet clump in his litter tray. His eyes were limpid and still. *It's only time, and the chance,* said his mute little soul. She lifted him out. His wayward body flailed, but an unsuspected determination took him on rapid circuit of the room. He stopped at the back door. She opened it.

The sun was like strewn glass. Glittering purple refracted from a mass of aquilegia. Bertie wavered on the step. The phone rang. Selina gathered Bertie up to answer it.

"How is that *poor* cat?"

Lucinda's maudlin, chilly-hearted intrusion.

"Moving on," informed Selina. "As might I, if only you would mind your own business."

She replaced the phone. In the garden, Bertie's head lolled in her arms. His eyes gushed with light, reflecting a tilting, limitless sky. She stood him on the path. He swayed. He garnered his bearings. Selina heard the phone ring again. She did not need to hear Lucinda's wheedling admonishment, did not want her appropriation of the mess she would be in no doubt Selina had made, nor her subsequent solicitous condescension before the final triumphant commiseration with Selina's mortifying but predictable failure. She let it ring.

Bertie clambered down the path. She fancied he acquired a gambolling gait. He stopped once and turned to look at her. She would have to monitor him for the rest of his days.

"Oh no you don't, Bertie," she said. "Not without me."

She hurried after him down the path, beyond the glancing columbine.

***A. J. Morgan** was born and brought up in Essex of Welsh and East End parentage. He trained at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London and worked for many years as an actor. He is also a qualified animal behaviourist and now lives just outside Carmarthen where he runs his own pet care business. Writing is a major component of his life and he is a graduate of the MA Creative Writing course at Trinity College Carmarthen. He is currently working on a five-novel sequence for young adults set largely in West Wales.*