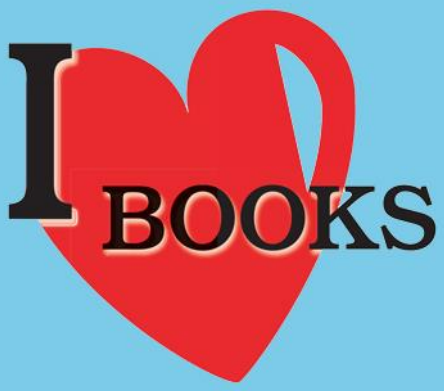


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Opening extract from

Help: My Cat's a Vlogging Superstar!

Written by

Rae Earl

Published by

Walker Books Ltd

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First published in Great Britain 2017 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2017 Rae Earl
Cover design by Walker Books Ltd
Cute modern cat in blue glasses © 2016 Volantherist / Getty Images
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This book has been typeset in Bembo, Bokka, Avenir, Dina's Handwriting and Courier

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-6797-3

www.walker.co.uk

#ROBOTWARS

You know you've had a bad Saturday when your cat is sulking and trying to eat your shoe at the same time. My pet hates me. My phone hates me. My mum's boyfriend hates me.

Things are looking bad right now. But before YOU start hating on me too, let me try and explain what really happened this afternoon.

Firstly, I am NOT a murderer. I did not try and kill a machine. It was just a simple misunderstanding between a very angry feline, a desk and my foot. But it's all got completely out of hand and the situation is being exploited by Mr Neat Freak and his zombie pack of dusters.

And I don't want to blame anyone for the accident, but it WAS Mum's fault. She wanted me to spend the afternoon doing my homework and had turned the Wi-Fi off. I KNOW. So I was forced to find a desperate way to get signal so I could send a message to Lauren. It was an important message that would cheer the gorgeous Laurenmeister up. A best friend who is very fed up and in need of some love.

And it should be a simple thing to message your friends. It's

a human right. It is not in this house. This is a mobile black spot. Not this area. Just my house.

To try and get my message to send I had to hang out of the window with my arm waving in the air. That didn't work. Our neighbour thought I wanted to speak to her. *There is no problem, Mrs Milner. I am just living with two unreasonable control dictators.* Then I used the shower in the bathroom as a massive aerial thing. This also failed. The shower is for washing. The shower knew it was not a phone mast and would not play along.

Instead, I used my cat, Dave, as a mobile roaming device. I learnt some valuable lessons here. A phone will not balance on a cat's back, and the cat will then try and eat the phone in anger. Then try to eat the contents of your wardrobe.

Once Dave had deserted me for my socks, I had no choice but to stand on top of my desk, flex my leg and point my toes and hold my phone up in the air as high as I could. Getting a decent signal to text your best friend should NOT involve ballet, but it was worth trying for Lauren. I was pirouetting by my laptop when Dave decided she wanted to get involved. There was a huge feline leap with full claw extension onto my knee. I lost my balance and fell off the desk. My heel planted itself firmly on my mum's boyfriend's best friend.

His robot vacuum cleaner. It had come into my bedroom for a feed of dust.

As I landed on the machine, it beeped in distress. It stopped eating dirt and switched to a random programme of confusion. Dave then attempted to kill the robot vacuum cleaner by jumping on top of it. It did sort of look like an out-of-control pigeon.

At that moment, the neat freak boyfriend rushes into my bedroom and sees MY cat surfing on top of HIS robot vacuum cleaner. The Neat Freak yells at Dave, then yells at me that I've had it in for him and his "superior cleaning methods" for ages!

He then starts nursing his best friend like it's a massive soppy Labrador, reassuring it that it will all be OK. He takes it downstairs, muttering about its delicate micro-brush technology, and I haven't seen him since.

So me and Dave are now sitting in my bedroom. I still haven't managed to text Lauren and I think I am in big trouble. Which doesn't seem fair, because I've tried to get on with this man. He's my mum's boyfriend and a neat freak but I've tried. That's me, I suppose. I try to get on with everyone because things are just easier that way, aren't they? But you cannot live with a man who puts his relationship with a cleaning device before his relationship with living things.

He's even given the robot vacuum cleaner a name – McWhirter.

And McWhirter follows me everywhere. He's like my rotating, sucking-everything-up shadow. When I eat my toast at breakfast, you hear the Neat Freak saying, "There, boy! Get Millie's crumbs!" When I eat dinner, he's at his master's side. Sitting. Waiting. Staring. I know he's just a machine, but his on/off switches look like eyes. Glowing, red eyes full of tidy, hungry for a treat of some of my mess. McWhirter the cleaning robot dog has become my bossy, buzzing stepbrother. He is terrorizing me with his automatic settings and full-view sensor.

He? I'm calling McWhirter "he" now! I can't stay here. I'll go mad. I'll start talking to the dishwasher. Neat Freak does that too.

He hasn't given it a name yet but it's only a matter of time. He congratulates it when it's finished a cycle.

It's not normal, is it?

All this non-stop trauma over stupid stuff like fluffy balls on wood floors makes me think…

It makes me think I need to go and live with my dad.

I know that sounds a bit "Drama Queen". But I don't seem to belong here any more. Maybe if I just moved out for a time, Mum might miss me and realize I'm actually nice to have around. And one great thing about having parents who don't live together is that I actually have somewhere else I could go.

It's telling Mum that is going to be SO hard.

My mum isn't evil, but she's strict and tough beyond the belief of any normal human being or even a parent. Living with her is a bit like being in the army without having to wear camouflage trousers or getting the opportunity to squash people you don't like with a tank.

And yes, when I say that, I am thinking of rolling over her boyfriend. And McWhirter.

When it was just me and Mum, we slotted together more. I could cope with her rules. Obviously, her turning off the Wi-Fi at eight EVERY night apart from Saturday wasn't great, but we were at least partners in crime – or "grime" as the Neat Freak called it when he first arrived with his stupid Lycra shorts and power mop. No, Mum didn't clean much and there was an inch of furry-based mess on the top of the widescreen – but who cares?

She works at the hospital. She's not a surgeon or anything, but she has to order all the swabs and bandages. She's basically

responsible for stopping people from bleeding to death on a global scale. She saves lives! She doesn't need to DUST. And she isn't keen on me cleaning too much either. She doesn't want me to become a domestic slave tied to an oven baking my signature-style Black Forest gateau for some man. She would much rather I came with her to her boxercise class or was doing my homework or BOTH. At the same time. Mum does multi-skilling like no other women dare.

I haven't got a signature-style cake by the way – mainly because Mum and me aren't big on baking. Mum says if you can get a perfectly decent apple turnover from the supermarket, why would you bother spending two hours making one? Just watch them do it on TV. I agree. We agree on most things. Or we did until Gary turned up and hoovered all of our love away.

Gary. Gary "Neat Freak" Woolton.

Do you know that only twenty-three babies in the WHOLE of this country have been called Gary in the past two years?! This is because Garys CAUSE TROUBLE. And they polish everything at the same time.

Every Friday me and Mum used to slum it together on the sofa in our pyjamas and watch a box set till one in the morning. Now Friday night for me is YouTube on my own, and Friday night for her is date night with a man who smells like Cillit Bang. I can't even watch Netflix as they're too busy watching something about the Tudors. He's ruined everything.

Since we've been back at school, Mum's insisting I start following a strict homework timetable. And don't even get me started on Gary's cleaning rota. The oven does not need cleaning daily. Before he came along, we hardly used it.

I have to get out of here. Especially now Gary thinks I'm a robot vacuum cleaner murderer. It's for Dave's protection as much as mine. Even if it's just for a few months. That's all. Nothing too drastic.

I need to think about how to tell Mum that I want to go and live at Dad's, though. But my phone is beeping like mad. Finally, I've got signal. Oh. It's Lauren.

Oh no.

No. No. NO!

It's...

This isn't good. Oh prawning HELL.

I need to get round there. Trust me. This is bad. BAD. Everything about me can wait. Lauren is in TROUBLE. THIS could go viral.

#STYLESHAMED

Lauren's mum lets me straight in. She likes me. She thinks I'm a "good influence". This is because I make Lauren live on Planet Earth for at least some part of the day. The rest of the time, Lauren is on Planet Lauren. It's a fantastic place to be, but lots of adults seem to struggle with it. I love it though. She's the opposite of me. She does, THEN she thinks.

There's no sign of Lauren's dad, which is probably why her mum is looking so cheerful. Lauren's parents don't get on. They're a soap without the funny bits.

When I get to Lauren's bedroom, she's under her duvet like a very shy and sad quilted tortoise. I can hear her sniffling.

"Go away," she moans, until she realizes it's me.

She pokes her head out. "Oh, Mills – it was just terrible. Unbelievable. Remember those new heels? My first proper pair? You said…"

I know what I said. I tried them on too and I said they should come with crutches as breaking your ankle was almost guaranteed.

"Oh no, Lauren. Have you hurt yourself?" I say to her. "They

are hard, Lauren. It's like balancing on really drunk giraffes. The struggle is REAL."

"I know. So I thought I'd practise just by walking to the shop. It's only three minutes away in normal shoes. Actually, it was more like twenty in these heels, but … I was doing OK until I had to go up the kerb, and then..." Lauren pops back into her blanket shell. "I heard giggling. I think someone might have been –" Lauren gulps – "following me. What if it's Mr Style Shame?"

The Mr Style Shame Instagram account has a massive number of followers. We don't know who runs it, but he's a big name round here. His logo is the outline of a guy wearing dark glasses. He's probably some Batman genius who lives in a bitter den of sass. People WE KNOW have been featured by him. He is constantly on the prowl, like a fashion lion, hunting for people who aren't looking their best. THEN he pounces. And his attacks are FATAL. He blurs your face, but everyone at school still knows who you are, and no – the adults can't stop him. They've got NO idea. They think life begins and ends with Facebook.

If you're unlucky enough to be featured, there's a very good chance you could be an online sensation nightmare in under an hour.

And now he may have a photo of my beautiful best friend tripping over in a pair of pink stilettos while carrying a can of Sprite and a Kit Kat. You see what I mean? This isn't good. And Lauren knows it.

"Have a look for me, Mills. See if I'm on there."

I pick up my phone and yes, of course I follow Mr Style Shame. Don't hate me. We all do. You need to check to make sure you're not on there. He can strike at any time and…

Yes. Sure enough, there is a photo of my beautiful best friend in mid-air with a filter to maximize her completely wonky going-all-over-the-place body. One very pink high heel is in the gutter. The other one is flying beside Lauren's shoulder like a very embarrassed parrot.

If the photo wasn't bad enough, he's written:

Look at this modern-day Cinderella leaving her crystal slippers behind! Remember if you're going for #glam, practise first, girls, or you're very unlikely to find your own Prince Charming #fail #heels #MrStyleShame

"Is it there?" Lauren whispers.

"Er … yes."

"How many likes?"

Do I lie?

I take several hundred likes off the actual figure.

Lauren pulls the duvet so far over her she looks like she may be planning to hibernate for ever. I think she's trying really hard not to cry. Her face collapses when she's upset and she doesn't want me to see. When she sobs, I sob. That's how we are.

I hate this. Lauren is my BFF. One of the sweetest, loveliest people you will ever, EVER meet. And Mr Style Shame makes so many people feel totally, trollingly BLURGH about themselves. He does that CLASSIC evil thing of pretending to be funny so he can get away with it. I'm sick of him.

But right now, I need to work out a way to make my best friend feel better.

And I think I have an idea.