ROSE, INTERRUPTED

Also by Patrice Lawence:

Orangeboy
Indigo Donut
Snap

ROSE, INTERRUPTED

PATRICE LAWRENCE



HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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To everyone who understands what it's like to be Rose or Rudder or their mum – I hope you can make the rules work for you

Rose's Ten Point Programme for Being a Perfect Worldly Wise Also Known As The Complete, Absolute and Final Decommissioning from God's Pilgrims (Woodford Sanctuary) and All Other Sanctuaries Thereof

1. Worship idols. Actors, musicians and fictional characters are all allowed.
2. Dress immodestly
3. Act immodestly
4. Find out how to vote.
5. Get worldly boyfriend/s
6. Beget immodesty with worldly boyfriend/s.
7. Send Christmas cards to Grandma Yellow, enormous ones that play carols loudly when she opens them.
8. Visit the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum every month until it feels normal.
9. Watch the prohibited films and read the prohibited books (or read reviews if they're boring).
10. Make sure Rudder is completely, absolutely and finally decommissioned too.

1

Rudder hated Central Library. It wasn't the rules pinned to the noticeboards or in plastic covers on the tables. Those were real rules, like the ones they'd had in the Pilgrims. Rules *should* be written down, so everyone knows what they are. It was the secret rules that hurt his head, the rules that seemed to be written in invisible ink everywhere he went.

He didn't even want to be here, but Pitt Academy's library was closed because two Year Nines had a fight in there at lunch time. Why did *he* have to be punished? *He* hadn't been fighting. And why had he given Rose his unbreakable vow that he wouldn't come home until six? Though, two hours in Central Library was better than walking in on her and Kye doing . . . stuff.

Rudder had almost walked straight back out of the library when he saw Bella. That seemed to be another secret rule: if he didn't want something to happen, it did. He hadn't wanted to see her, but there she was, sitting at a table over by the window. He quickly looked away. Rose said that Bella was just an attention-seeker and Rudder should ignore her. Rose didn't know how hard that was. Bella always managed to catch Rudder's eye and mouth wicked words at him. Today, she was staring into space, probably thinking up new

jokes to play on him. If Rose and Kye got married, Bella would be like Rudder's sister. God's Pilgrims should see love in everyone, or else why else would they act to save souls? But when the End of Days came and the Clean Slate tallied the redeemed souls for ascension, Rudder wanted Kye's and Bella's to be right at the bottom of the list.

He spotted a space on a table near the checkout kiosk. Everyone else sitting there was from Merryvale's Academy. Was it against the secret rules for him to join them? If he mucked up again, Bella would be quick to let everyone know. She always was. She hadn't noticed him yet, so he took a deep breath, dodged round the Turkish bilingual shelves and sat down. A couple of the Merryvalers glanced up and then back at their work. This was a good thing to remember: in the library, no one cared where you sat. He breathed out again and pulled his folder of worksheets and pencil case from his bag. He laid them next to each other on the table. He needed his phone too. He found it and switched it on. Yes! Wi-Fi! Suddenly, it buzzed with a message notification. His heart banged. The real rules said he was in the quiet area. No one even looked at him. They were all busy scrolling through their own phones.

He slid the physics worksheets out of the folder. It was weird how being a Pilgrim made physics easier. It was just like the Bible. All he had to do was remember what the words and numbers meant, what order they came in and when to use them. He would never tell Rose that the Bible

still felt more real than isotopes and neutrons. He wished he could talk to Dad about it. Maybe he could write him a letter.

Something soft hit the back of Rudder's head. Rudder touched the spot and looked around. There was a scrunched-up ball of paper on the floor by the table leg. He straightened up and caught Bella's eye from across the room. She didn't make a face at him or do the finger thing. She just kept staring at him. Rudder couldn't see a librarian. There was no special rule about throwing things, but he was sure it wasn't allowed. If Bella did it again, he hoped she'd be caught and thrown out.

The Merryvale boy opposite was staring too. What had Rudder done wrong this time? Then he remembered. Last week the Deputy Head had been yelling at the Year Eights in assembly for fighting with Merryvalers outside the chicken shop by the roundabout. The girl on the bench behind him had whispered to her friend that the beef had been going on for years. Now Rudder was sitting here with his Pitt Academy logo shining from his blazer like leprechaun gold. He must not look at the boy. Looking at people you didn't know was bad, even if you did it by accident. (That was a secret rule he'd learned early.) Rudder's eyes dropped to the table. Someone had drawn a tiny . . . male thing in red ink, bang in the middle of the table top.

The boy was leaning forward. Rudder sensed it. He could whack Rudder and the librarian would be too far away to do anything. Rudder's chest hurt. He'd forgotten to breathe.

The boy rapped the table near Rudder's fingers. 'What happened to your hands, man?'

'My . . . my hands?'

'Yeah.'

The girl next to the boy was looking too. Of course they were. He should have noticed where they were looking. He looked down too, even though he already knew the way the skin puckered on his palm and the lumpy scribble of scars on the back and how the nail on the little finger of his left hand might never grow back.

The girl said, 'Did they get burnt or something?'

'Yes.'

Rudder waited for more questions, but the boy just said 'respect' and went back to scrawling notes over his revision book. No, the burns happened because Rudder *hadn't* respected. It was his rightful punishment.

'Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.' Peter 4:12.

Rudder made sure his mouth stayed closed as the words flickered behind his eyes. That had been another painful lesson. The Worldly Wise weren't impressed when you quoted scripture at them.

Rudder plugged his headphones into his phone and skimmed through his playlists. He'd start with the one Rose called *Rudder's Sound of Silence*. The first track was 'The Boxer'. Rudder's mouth moved silently, his feet tapping and

flexing their dance moves under the table. Gently, though, in case he kicked the girl opposite. He could probably do physics at home. He'd check history. *Summarise the social, political and economic factors that contributed towards the Representation of the People Act 1918*. Mrs Skermidge had told them to construct a detailed analysis of how, why and when some women gained the vote. He'd had to google voting. Pilgrim women didn't do it. Nor did Pilgrim men.

His stomach rumbled. How many times had he told Mum that his lunch account was in debt? Even the nice supervisor had made him take his baked potato and cheese back. He'd decided to use his last coins on two cans of Coke from the vending machine because all those bubbles must take up space. Now he could feel every drop pushing down and his stomach was so full of gas he could make his own universe, if universes were really made that way. He couldn't go to the toilet now or he'd lose his seat. He shifted in his chair and crossed his legs. It didn't help. If he yawned too hard, Coke would probably shoot out of his belly button and knock the Merryvale girl out. If he sneezed . . . He uncrossed his legs. He needed a toilet straight away, because now he wanted to sneeze badly. The library toilets were probably as nasty as the school ones. It was three minutes to five o'clock on the library clock. He could hold on for another half an hour. He could. He crossed his other leg over, but it just made his waistband dig in. No. He couldn't hold on. A loud laugh went up behind him as if everybody knew.

Two whole cans of Coke.

If he concentrated really hard, he might forget about it. He switched to another playlist. Audrey was singing 'Suddenly Seymour'. It didn't help.

'All right, then! I'm going!' A girl's voice.

It sounded like Bella. Rudder muted Audrey. Chairs were scraping and there was another voice, a deeper one. Rudder sneaked a look. Bella was hoisting her bag on to her shoulder. She was with a boy. An older boy. Rudder hadn't been expecting that. He was tall with a shaved head and looked about eighteen or nineteen. He was standing really close to her, like a boyfriend. Bella had a boyfriend? After all the horribleness she'd been giving Rudder about her brother being with Rose?

Bella flounced away from the boy, around the desks between the bilingual shelves. She was coming in Rudder's direction, heading for the exit. He bent over his worksheet, but he could still feel her rage steaming towards him. He let his eyes slip sideways and down as she passed by, black lace up shoes and clean, bright trainers right behind. The rage faded away. Now she was gone, he could relax, but his bladder was starting to hurt. It would be bad enough if he sneezed, but if he coughed . . . There'd be no coming back from that. He turned off his music, popped out his ear buds and stuffed his phone and worksheets into his bag. As soon as he stood up, a Pitt girl slid into his empty seat. After he'd used the toilet, he'd walk home slowly. That way he wouldn't be too early.

There was no queue for the toilet by the stairs, although the lock was turned to red. Rudder could try downstairs, but they might be busier. There were more people down there. Sometimes he imagined the queues were because it was a special type of toilet, one where you stood in the toilet bowl and flushed yourself away to the Ministry of Magic. Or maybe, if he could choose where to go, to Grandma Yellow's. He'd have to make sure Grandma was out, though. And he had to keep reminding himself that magic was evil.

Rudder squeezed his thighs together as he waited. What if he'd had three cans of Coke? He had to think of something else! Anything else! The Old Testament books in order. Genesis. Exodus. Leviticus. Numbers. If the door wasn't open by Judges, he was going to knock. Deuteronomy. Joshua. He strained to listen. He couldn't hear banging or yelling from inside, so they weren't stuck in there. Judges. He wouldn't knock just yet. Ruth. Samuel one. What if they'd fainted? Samuel two. Kings one.

'Are you waiting?'

The man standing at the top of the stairs looked even more desperate than Rudder.

'Yes,' Rudder said. 'Sorry.'

The man glared at him. 'Right.'

He stomped off. At last, though, the toilet door was opening! A boy came out. He was short, probably a couple of years older than Rose. His orangey-blonde hair was scraped back into a topknot. He smiled at Rudder.

'You all right, mate?'

Rudder nodded. Another secret rule. If you're not sure, nod. It must have been the right answer because the boy swaggered off towards the stairs.

Rudder went to open the door, but it was locked. How? HOW? Did one of the Merryvalers have an invisibility cloak? Or the one true ring? It felt like there were four Cokes inside him now. The drink molecules were expanding. He twisted one leg round the other. *Hurry up! HURRY UP!*

The door was opening again. Rudder moved forward, then jumped back. The boy coming out was the one who'd been in the library with Bella. His bald head and lined face made him look like an orc. He stood there, his eyes moving slowly up and down Rudder as if each blink was taking a picture of him. Rudder looked down at his shoes and at the black spot between them and the ice pole wrapper on the floor by the toilet door. Kings two. Chronicles one. Chronicles two. A blur of movement and a hand thumped against Rudder's shoulder, knocking him back. He just managed to stop himself tumbling over. No words, just the slap before the orc moved away.

Rudder frowned. Why were the two boys in there together? He couldn't think about that now. He lunged towards the door, twisted the handle and . . . it didn't budge. This couldn't be happening to him! Oh. Okay. He could feel movement behind the door, the lock was turning and the door was pushing against him. He let go and it swung open.

'Rudder?'

'Bella?'

She was different, all big eyes and whisper. She made a sobbing sound and wiped her eyes.

Bella was crying? Bella wouldn't ever cry, because she was the one who always did the upsetting. It looked like real crying though. She made the sobbing sound again.

He said, 'Are you . . . are you all right?'

She sort of shook her head and nodded at the same time. Her face was shiny, like she'd been splashing water over it. Splodges of make-up were smeared under her eyes and her fringe was wet and stuck to her forehead. Bella was in the toilet with two boys? Even for the worldly world, that wasn't normal, was it?

She tried to flick the damp hair off her forehead. 'You get my note, Rudder?'

Was she was trying to make him look stupid again? 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'You've got to tell Rose. Don't let Kye do it.'

'Bella? You coming?'

The orc was standing at the top of the stairs. His lips were pressed together, eyes taking those slow pictures of Rudder again.

Bella's eyes narrowed and her face settled back into the smile that wasn't a smile. Rudder knew what was coming next. It was a nasty name for him.

'Don't tell Rose I told you. Please, please don't, Rudder.'

He looked from her mouth to her face. Yes, that was her nasty words expression, but she'd said . . .

She glanced at the orc then back at him, straightening herself up. Her make-up looked evil now, instead of sad. 'Now go and pee for God, holy boy!'

She turned away and ran past the orc and down the stairs. Rudder stared after her, even though his body was moving him through the open toilet door. The seat cover was down and all the toilet paper was strewn across the damp floor, dirty footprints stamped across it. Bella had been in this toilet with two older boys. Bella, who'd always made Rudder feel lower than a troll, had been in here *with two older boys!* She'd been crying, though. Or had she? He closed the door, locked it and did what he needed to. Peeing for God. Yeah, that was more like her. She was trying to get in his head. His hands were itching and he tried to run the cold water tap hard, but the flow wouldn't go beyond a dribble. He wiped his hands on his trousers and left.

He went down the stairs to the next floor. It felt like all his thoughts were bashing into each other. Bella was in the toilet with boys. Older boys. What were they doing? Rudder's cheeks were getting hot. Grandma Yellow used to lecture Rose about worldly girls and how they didn't wait for their husbands. Rudder used to think worldly girls were sprinting along the street, too fast for their husbands to catch up. Rose had put him right on that one. His cheeks were getting even hotter just thinking about it. Rose said that the Pilgrims

wanted to take all the fun out of life, but Bella hadn't looked like she was having fun.

He was on the first floor now. Bella had been on at Rudder from the moment he started at Pitt. Since Rose and Bella's brother got together, it had been even worse. But those had been proper tears, the sort of tears that were so big, they blocked up your throat. No one could fake that. Rudder knew. She'd given him a message for Rose. Rose mustn't let Kye do it. Whatever 'it' was, Rudder agreed. Maybe Bella's note said more. Note? He touched his head. *That* note.

Rudder span round and ran back up the stairs to the library, puffing into the study space. The ball of crumpled paper was still on the floor. The girl who'd taken his seat frowned down at him as he scooped it up from by her feet. He went back out on to the stairway and uncrumpled it. The writing was in pencil, light and faint. He squinted at it. It looked like three words. The first two, were they 'HOT DOGZ'? The third sort-of word was just a muddle of letters and numbers and didn't make sense. It was all merged into the paper, which made it even harder to read. It didn't mean anything.

This must be the wrong note, or else Bella was making fun of him again. It was all a big act. She was probably outside, sniggering at him. He shoved the note into his pocket and walked down the stairs. Only last month, she'd got her friend, Jamal, to hide Rudder's shoes in the changing room during PE. Rudder had been late to history because

he'd been trying to find them. They'd been jammed under the lockers.

Rudder didn't care what Rose said. He was going to go catch his bus and go home. She'd just have to tell Kye to go. He stepped out on to the square outside the library. It was like the different benches were reserved for different schools. A group of Pitt Academy girls were grouped near the fountains, shrieking and laughing. On the bench opposite, a Merryvale's boy had slung his arm around a girl's shoulder, both studying his phone. Traffic lights beeped. Cars eased to a halt. Rudder checked down the road to see if his bus was coming. He looked back. There she was, Bella, across the road by the alleyway in a huddle with the blond boy and the orc. Any second now, she'd see Rudder. In school, she'd point at him and laugh. But the way she was stepping back from them, mouth moving like she was shouting . . . She glanced over the orc's shoulder, seemed to meet Rudder's eyes, then look away.

The lights turned green. A bus chugged past, then a cyclist, another cyclist, a van advertising Eskimo Ice. Bella had come out of the library toilet crying. The orc had stared at Rudder like he wanted rip out his soul. Rudder should just walk on.

Except – he was still a Pilgrim. Even if Rose said he wasn't, he was. He had to atone, amend and act to save souls. He couldn't just memorise the scriptures – he had to act on them. When one cheek is smiteth, he had to offer

the other. He had to prove that Pilgrims were better than the Worldly Wise.

A woman with a buggy was waiting by the crossing. These lights always took ages. Rudder could see Bella between the gaps of speeding traffic. The orc and the blond boy were still with her. The lights flicked to amber and then red. Traffic trailed off either side of the lights. The woman with the buggy was halfway across the road. Why wouldn't his legs move? The traffic light timer said eight seconds left. Move! Rudder tipped himself forward and the rest of his body followed. Three seconds. One second. Red man, green light.

Rudder ran across. He looked up and down the street. They couldn't have disappeared that quickly. He moved closer to the alleyway and peered in. They were there, at the far end, their backs to him.

His heart was beating so hard his ears hurt. Now what? Pilgrims fought with prayer, but these boys looked like they'd need the biggest prayer circle in the world to help them. It was just Rudder, and he had to do something. Now. He peered around into the alleyway again. The orc was looking straight at him. He came towards Rudder, with the blond one behind him, both filling the air with bad words.

Bella dodged round them and shot past Rudder. 'Just go!'

The orc froze, his eyes on the road. He held up his hands like a shield. 'Bella! No!'

Bella was still running, looking back at Rudder, calling him. Rudder turned towards the road. He tried to yell but

his tongue wouldn't move and his mouth stayed shut.

Smack the robot! Yellow alert!

It was the most powerful warning ever, the one he and Rose had always used when trouble was seconds away.

Smack the robot! Yellow alert!

A delivery cyclist had overtaken the bus, body raised off the saddle, feet hammering the pedals, too fast to stop for the red light.

SMACK THE ROBOT! YELLOW ALERT!

When the bike hit Bella, it felt like the whole world moved.