HOW TO BE A REVOLUTIONARY

To Alma and Ada,
Who fill me with awe.

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HOW TO BE A REVOLUTIONARY



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PART ONE



1

What Even is a Revolutionary, Anyway?

How to be a REVOLUTIONARY:

1) Wear big boots.

2) Love the colour red.

3) Stomp around other people's houses like you own the place.

4) Always carry big stacks of shiny paper.

5) Listen to boring talking on the radio ALL THE TIME.

6) Be loved by my dad.

'The Revolutionaries are here again.'

I whispered it at the ceiling, clutching my duvet tight. Then I swung my head and shoulders down from my bunk to stick my face behind Lily's curtain. 'Did you hear me?'

Lily whined and shoved her head under her pillow, burrowing like a rabbit.

'I heard the door go. Twice.' I pulled her pillow off

and tugged at her T-shirt as she tried to nestle deeper. 'Listen!'

There was a general sound of banging and scraping from downstairs. The low rumble of adult chat. Then Lily flinched at a sudden high, ringing peal of laughter.

'I've never heard a Revolutionary laugh before!' I said. It was true. They were normally here when we weren't. We just saw the mess they left, followed their trail, picked up the clues. But, when something BIG was happening, they streamed in and out of the house at all hours, mumbling and shuffling, as I hid behind doors trying to catch glimpses. It was *years* since that had last happened, but in the past few weeks they'd been here more and more: calling out to each other, checking their phones. If they did catch sight of us, dashing from room to room, they ignored us completely. I'm not even sure they knew we lived here.

'I don't like that word.' Lily was using her sulking voice. 'And give me back my pillow.'

I hugged it to me, rolling back into bed and staring at my plastic star stickers on the ceiling. 'What word?

"Revolutionary"? It's what Mum calls them.'

Mum used to say it with a laugh, but these days she made it sound sarcastic and usually added an eyeroll. *I* thought they seemed magic. They were such a *team*. And the word rolled around in my mouth – Revolutionary, Revolutionary, Revolutionary – I loved it.

'I don't like it. I don't know what it means.'

Lily doesn't know what most things mean. That's because she's just seven.

'It means they have big muddy boots. And wear red coats. And always need to pop in for a loo break.'

'Oh.'

I tried to lie so still that there was no sound coming from me at all. Not a rustle; not a breath. I wanted to hear what they talked about. Words through the floorboards. But I could just hear my heartbeat echoing in my ears, and I couldn't hold my breath for long enough. Maybe I should sneak downstairs? If there was no one in the hallway, there was a great spot in the coat cupboard. I'd made a seat in there out of stacked boxes, and there was a broken bit in the wooden door I could see through.

The front door slammed again and Dad's voice rose in greeting – there goes my hidey-hole plan! I held my breath again. Ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom. Heart echoes ringing loud. Giant boots stomping through my head. Then a sticky-sounding little sob. *Lily.* I swung down again, head through the gap.

She sniffed. '*Please* can I have my pillow back?'

'*Ugh*, seriously? Are you crying for your *pillow*?' I threw it at her and she grabbed it and held it over her head, sobbing faster now. Wet little snuffles.

'Oh, come *ON*!'

I'd forgotten I had it, to be honest, but really. It was just a pillow.

'I wasn't crying for my pillow, Nat. I'm *scared*. OK?'

'Oh.'

Whoops. Poor Lily. A door slammed downstairs again and her whole body quivered. *Little rabbit.* All the stomping and booming – I could see why it might be scary. If you were little.

I slid down the side of my bed's ladder and climbed under the covers with her. She curled into me without a second's pause, her warm face sticky in

my armpit. *Ew, Lil!* I stroked her hair gently.

'There's nothing to be scared about, Lil. They're just Dad's friends. You know they come and go.'

'But why are they here *all the time* again? Why can't Dad just hang out with *us*?'

Or with Mum, I thought, but didn't say it out loud.

When I'd been about Lily's age, the Revolutionaries had swarmed all over the place until I thought they'd never leave. Then one day they'd all just disappeared. *Poof!* And now they were back.

Mum seemed to be avoiding them this time, but back then, Mum and Dad had *both* been swept up in it; right here, and gone at the same time. Like, they were in the house but barely talked to us. Lily was only two then but Mum had still asked me to watch her – a LOT. So this time, I knew the drill: we had to look after ourselves, which meant me looking after Lily. I could do that.

I carried on stroking Lily's head.

'It's exciting though, don't you think? Something big is happening.'

Lil unpeeled her face from under my arm and looked up at me, a bit uncertain.

'Don't you want to find out more about them?' I asked her.

'No, thank you.'

She was shaking her head now, grinding it uncomfortably deeper into my armpit.

'Lily, chill out with the burrowing, OK? You're going to make a hole in my side!' I always expected her to be softer! I shuffled her down the bed a bit and carried on stroking.

'We should. Tomorrow.' I nodded into the darkness. 'Find out what's really going on. Why they're all here.'

I looked down, but she was asleep.

***

'Ouch!'

My hand shot to my suddenly sore eye and met warm, sticky flesh that wasn't mine. '*Urgh*, Lils, can you not?'

I must have fallen asleep in Lily's bed, and now her podgy little elbow was right in my eye socket.

'*Hurumph-a-snuflle-iff.*'

It was getting light. I removed her arm from my face and unfolded myself from her bed to see the clock.

6:55.

'C'mon.' I gave her a little shake. 'We have *investigating* to do.'

She rubbed her eyes and blinked at me. 'Choose me an outfit?'

'What are you talking about?'

She sagged.

'It's *school,* Lil. It's Monday. Put your uniform on.'

At least it was the right colour. Revolutionary Red.

We crept downstairs like mice. The radio was still droning from the corner, but the room was completely empty of people. I'd wanted to catch a live one . . . pin one down – tie them to a chair and demand they tell me their secrets. But all the bangers and stompers from last night had gone, leaving behind them a huge catastrophe of *mess*.

It literally looked like there'd been a natural disaster! Like Pompeii or something, and all the people had evaporated in the middle of a party. There were mugs on every surface, most of them still half-full of scummy-looking tea. All the inside doors were open. Stuffed plastic bags were hooked on the backs of chairs, and the breakfast table was piled high with stacks of glossy leaflets.

I gathered some up to clear a space. Most of them had photos of people's faces on. Boring-looking old white people with fake grins and smart clothes. A few of the leaflets had graphs on, or lists. I picked one up:

"Ten Reasons to Vote . . ." it said, then listed what looked like facts. *Voting, hmmm.* I scanned down the leaflet past 'homes' and 'nurses' and 'jobs', not reading the actual sentences. Surely voting was exciting, but this made it all look pretty dull – like part of a maths lesson: percentages and numbers. Disappointing.

'All the cornflakes have gone.' Lily shut the cupboard door to show a sheet of A4 paper taped to the front with 'HELP YOURSELF!' scrawled in biro.

'Is this from Dad?' Lily asked. 'We always help ourselves! But how can we if it's empty?'

'No, it's for *them*. Don't you remember last time?' I grabbed her sleeve and dragged her to the downstairs toilet. 'LOO' was taped to the door.

'They don't know what a *toilet* is?' Lily was shocked.

'Maybe it's safer to just not take the risk?'

She wrinkled her nose.

There were other signs too: 'CUPS', 'UMBRELLAS'.

I grinned. 'Maybe they're learning English?'

Lily flicked another sign. 'Do they need to learn: "Wifi password: Cle–*mmm*, At–something". Whatever that says.'

'Maybe not . . .'

We trailed about the house. There was no sign of Mum, or Dad either. There was another sign on the front door saying 'SHOES' and an arrow, which just pointed down to the start of a muddy trail leading right back to the kitchen. Me and Lily looked at each other and burst into giggles. For some reason, I could just imagine shoes walking without their owners, carefully following the arrows.

The clock in the hall bonged. Half-past seven.

School. We'd have to carry on the investigation later. Where were Mum and Dad?

'C'mon, Lily. I thought you were finding breakfast?'

The bread bin was as empty as the cornflake box. I slipped into the utility room where Mum sometimes kept spare boxes of stuff. My rat lived there too: Mum and Dad wouldn't let me keep him in my room.

'Mornin' Captain!' I crooned, as I ran a finger down his super soft back before checking his food. He butted my finger with his nose.

His home had been left nice and tidy.

I found a spare box of cereal and shook it like a musical instrument as I danced back into the kitchen.

'We'll have to have it dry,' called Lily from the fridge.

'Or tea-flavoured!' I picked up a mug of dregs.

'*Ew*, Nat! Gross.'

After our rubbish breakfast, it was eight o'clock. If Mum and Dad planned to go AWOL again, there was *some* stuff I could do to help – but I still needed to go to school, and so did Lily. Last year, I could have just walked her in, but I was at secondary now. Opposite direction. Lily was going to need a lift.

We tapped tentatively on Mum and Dad's bedroom door. Nothing. I stuck my head in. Dad's mouth hung open and his arm was flung over his eyes. Mum's side of the bed was empty and neat. 'Dad!'

He started, then noticed us in our uniforms – then glanced at the clock by the bed. '*Ugh*.' He flopped his arm back over his face.

'*Dad*.'

'Yes, yes, school. Give me a minute, OK?' His voice sounded thick, and he lay there for a million years before rubbing his face and blinking at the clock again. Finally, he pushed himself to sitting. 'Let me just . . .'

'Where's Mum?'

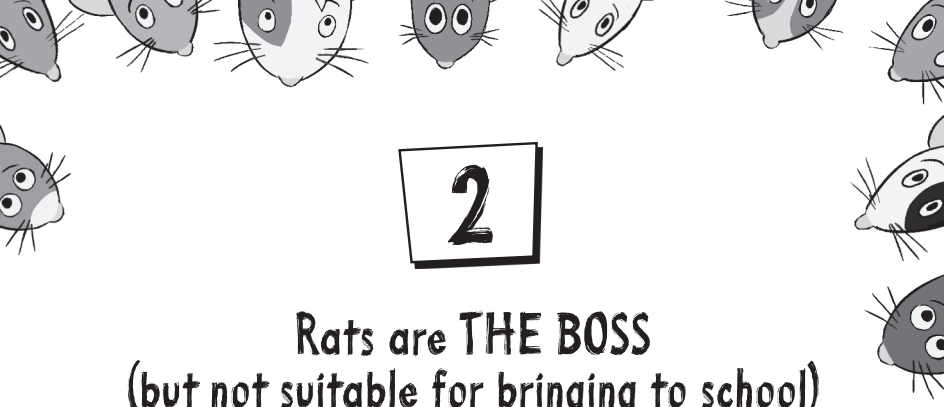
He looked at the empty space beside him as though he'd not seen a bed before.

'Er . . . she stayed at your grandma's last night. I was supposed to . . . Look, let me get up. I'll be down in a minute.'

He rubbed his face again and then seemed to re-focus on a worried-looking Lily. He leant forward to ruffle her neatly brushed hair. 'OK, Lils? Don't worry, I'll get you there in time.'

Lily nodded solemnly and retreated.

What on earth was Mum doing at Grandma's?



2

Rats are THE BOSS (but not suitable for bringing to school)

One of my favourite things about being on the bus is leaning my head against the window and letting all the vibrations judder me until my face feels all funny. I also like being a little bit late. Then I can get the bus with all the old people, instead of the one with every single other person from my school all jumping around and crowding over their phones. Sensory overload!

'Is this your bag, dear?'

The old lady hovering over me now was wearing an actual rain poncho. Love it. I grinned at her and yanked my bag on to my lap.

'Sorry!'

She crackled as she settled down next to me, and then rustled herself into a comfortable position.

I faced towards her for a bit in case she wanted to make bus chat, but she took out her mobile phone and started prodding at it with a single finger, so I settled back against the window.

As the bus jolted down the high street, I kept catching sight of people in red and spinning round to see their faces in case I'd seen them lurking around the house. Once you started looking for red coats, there were tons of them. Like a secret society. Were they all Revolutionaries? Or did they just like bright colours?

My phone buzzed. Weird. I was only allowed it for emergencies. *Mum.* She was sorry. She wanted to pick me up from school so we could have 'a cup of tea and some cake'. *A cup of tea?* Had she forgotten I was eleven, not one hundred and eleven? 'Fine'. I put my phone back in my bag.

First, Dad being all over-the-top jokey as he finally bundled Lily off this morning, now Mum offering cake. It made me nervous. I wasn't sure I wanted to know why she'd been at Grandma's last night. She'd been staying over there every now and again recently, but never without telling us first.

I closed my eyes and pressed back up against the window again.

The closer I got to school, the more something nudged at the edge of my brain. And it wasn't only window rumblings. I just wanted to lean here and vibrate and not think about anything, but I was starting to remember.

It was homework.

That I was supposed to have done.

I felt a bit sick. *What was it? Ugh*, that weird presentation! On an 'issue of social importance'. I didn't even know what that meant, and I hadn't prepared anything. The idea of standing up in class was bad enough, but without anything to present, it was an actual, living nightmare. I wished I was one of those kids who could wow their classmates with something inspirational, but no amount of wishing would EVER make that happen.

This was Mum's fault. Was I supposed to have a last-minute panic all by myself? That was her job.

I flicked through my folder to find the handout we'd been given and scanned the examples, looking for anything I might vaguely have something to say

on. Nothing. I slumped back in the seat and shoved my hands in my hoodie pocket, before pulling them back out with a yelp loud enough to make the crinkly lady beside me jump.

Captain Furry! How could I have forgotten I'd brought the Fur-meister?

I reached back in gently and stroked his white fur, feeling his tail wag happily against my finger.

Captain Furry is my rat. I named him that because rats are THE BOSS. Plus, he has a little black splotch around his beady little eye that looks a bit like an eye patch.

Anyway. Sometimes it just felt a little bit comforting to have him close by. I'd taken him to school once or twice before, and he'd always been ever so good. I just sneak him little bits of food and he curls up and sleeps, mostly. No one even notices. Rats are pretty lazy in the daytime.

After Dad and Lily had left this morning, it had just been me and the Captain in the house together, with all those weird signs up making it not feel like home. So, I'd scooped him into my pocket.

I picked the handout back up – 'animal welfare'.

That meant looking after animals, right? Maybe Captain Furry was the answer? I could do my presentation about him. Phew! I yanked my pocket up to my face and kissed his whiskery little nose through the opening.

'Thank you,' I whispered. 'You've just saved school!'

He ignored me, but the lady next to me didn't. She shuffled noisily away from me as though I was contagious. Probably because it looked pretty strange – I bet she couldn't see the Furry One.

'Don't worry,' I told her. 'I'm not kissing my pocket . . . my pet rat's in there.'

'Oh!' Her cheeks seemed to puff out as she spoke. She picked up her bag and stood up in a fluster. Then she paused and leant back towards me.

'I wouldn't think that's very hygienic, dear – kissing a rat.'

'Actually,' I said. 'Rats are very, very clean. You'd be surprised.'

'Yes,' she said.

I gave Captain Furry a little stroke. I would definitely include that in my presentation.

***

'Rats are very, very clean.' My nerves were making me shout. 'You'd be surprised.'

'Hang on a second, Natalie.' Mrs Maincroft was holding up her pen. 'Give us a bit of an introduction. You *are* talking about a social issue, aren't you? I assume you read the question.'

'Yeah, "animal welfare"!'

That was, like, the second choice on the sheet or something. Surely Mrs Maincroft knew that?

'Right, OK then. Off you go.'

The Triple Threat girls clustered round the front table were already whispering to each other, and I hadn't even really got started. Today they each had a set of pin badges on their lapels with eye designs on, so it looked like I was being watched *extra*. Although seeing them scooched together reminded me of a happy rat pile.

'They're actually very sociable animals. It's not good for a rat's *welfare* to live on its own.'

That's why I'd had to bring him in today. Rats like company. Although ideally that company would be another rat, not me, but that was something

I'd been pestering Mum and Dad about for months. Neither of them had shown any signs of listening yet.

I scanned the hasty notes I'd made on the bus. But everything looked boring.

I needed to make this more interesting. So far this morning, each presentation had been duller than the last. At least half the class had prepared little PowerPoint things to go with them . . . either zooming graphics and 'hilarious' captions, or loads of graphs and quotes and *facts*. The only one I was vaguely interested in was brainbox Annalise's.

Her presentation was called 'Too Young to Vote', which I copied into my book from one of her slides. Apparently, there is another General Election coming up in a month, where everybody in the country – except us kids – gets to vote on who is in charge. As soon as she'd said it, I felt like an idiot. That was exactly like the last time the Revolutionaries had taken over; but Mum had talked about nothing else then, and this time Mum and Dad hadn't said anything to us at all. I just hadn't joined the dots.

I listened carefully to Annalise in case she revealed what exactly the Revolutionaries' role was. Had some

clues. But her talk mainly seemed to be about how clever kids were, and how we knew better than adults.

No help with *my* talk.

'My rat is called . . . Captain *Furry*!' I grinned, but only Percy Hagerton smiled back. *Seriously . . . ?* Percy was a given. He was one of the few kids I'd been in class with since Reception, and for as long as I'd known him he'd doodled superhero shields on every available surface. In fact, there was still one on my bedroom wall from when we were about seven. But I thought I might win over some others too. 'Er . . . things he needs in his cage are—'

I stopped. The Captain was awake. His little paws were scratching my belly through my pocket.

'Yeah. Bedding, obviously. He likes straw and . . . *Ow*!' I jumped as he scrabbled at me again. *Bad timing, Captain.* 'And you have to put fresh . . . Stop!'

I shoved my hand in my pocket and gave him a little stroke, but he was trying to climb out.

'Miss! Nat's pretending to be a rat! Rat Nat!' A low, gurgly chuckle.

My face flamed red before I even had a chance to see who said it.

'She's gone all twitchy. She's got a dirty rat disease!'

Ugh! That boy with the really short hair. *They're* not *dirty!* I didn't even know his name, but his cropped hair made his head look like a pea. *Pea-Brain*.

'That's enough, thank you. *Are* you quite all right, Natalie?'

'Yeah, I just . . .'

'Is this all going to be about your pet, or are you planning to broaden it out a little?'

This was going wrong. It was boring. That horrible boy thought I was a rat. Mrs Maincroft hated it.

The Captain nudged my palm. Why not? That would shut them all up! I cradled him gently and lifted him out of my pocket.

'This is the best way to hold a rat!'

But the sight of Captain Furry didn't shut them up at all . . . quite the opposite! Within ten seconds, it was chaos.