

ALMOST
NOTHING
HAPPENED

Books by Meg Rosoff from Bloomsbury

The Great Godden
Friends Like These
Almost Nothing Happened

Jonathan Unleashed

Also by Meg Rosoff

How I Live Now
Just in Case
What I Was
The Bride's Farewell
There Is No Dog
Picture Me Gone

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NOTHING
HAPPENED**

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ROSOFF**

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1

Eurostar was showing a twenty-minute delay, which was perfect because if I didn't get something to eat before I boarded the train I'd have to eat my own liver.

I joined the queue for a sandwich with my mate, Moe, and texted home that we were running late. They were picking me up at St Pancras and might want to leave later.

Immediately the text went through, my phone rang.

Dad.

Moe clocked my expression and raised an eyebrow. It was incredibly noisy in the terminal, but he could see something was up.

I let it go to voicemail. Whatever it was, I didn't want to hear.

My dad knows I can't stand talking on the phone, so a phone call must be something completely urgent, like MI6 just got in touch to say there's a bomb on your train. If that were the case, I figured he'd follow up with a text.

Maybe I was overreacting. I stared at the phone, wishing technology had advanced enough to send a precis of whatever topic the person on the other end was planning to raise. It would be good for avoiding break-up calls, or rejections of any sort. Moe once told me that all bad news comes by text, so maybe I shouldn't have worried.

We squeezed on to a low table between seats to eat our sandwiches in peace, an impossibility given Moe is six-foot-two and we were surrounded by the whole European Adventures Abroad team all muttering into headsets like they were running security for Taylor Swift. Just now, they were distributing UK

passports to the younger kids, threatening that if anyone lost theirs, they'd have to stay in France forever. Some of the kids seemed to consider this a good thing. I guess you never know what's going on in someone else's family.

My phone rang again. I ignored it with mounting dread. What was so important that he had to talk to me before I got on the train?

I was prepared for bad news thanks to extensive life experience. And although I made light of my depressing summer because what else can you do when kids your own age are risking death crossing the Channel on inflatable bath toys, still, it was dispiriting. Not that I felt sorry for myself in the wider scheme of things, I'd just hoped it might have gone better.

My phone rang again. Oh God. No way!

Three calls in ten minutes? Someone had definitely died. Or maybe my parents were getting divorced and he wanted to break it to me slowly – he'd tell me in

France that they weren't getting along too well, and by the time I got to London, Dad would be running off with a girl my age or Mum wanted an open marriage. Or maybe he'd taken that job in Dubai (what job in Dubai?), where the temperature made life impossible and drinking was punishable by flogging. Or wait. Could Mum be pregnant? At fifty-six? Please God, no.

I knew this sort of thing would happen if I let them out of my sight for a whole summer, but honestly, I cannot keep watch over the elderly twenty-four hours a day. Do you have any idea how depressing it is not to trust your parents to act normal for one short month?

Shit. Shit. Shit. I switched the phone off and dropped it in my pocket.

Moe looked at me. 'Do not seek misfortune,' he intoned, quoting his Tai Chi master. 'It will find you in its time.' And then he smiled beatifically.

'So, if my Dad's planning to take a job in Dubai and sign us up for an international school famous for

the execution of homosexuals, I should just chill because I'll get the news eventually?'

'Live, laugh, love.'

'I can't live-laugh-love if I'm being stoned to death.'

Moe frowned. 'You're not gay, are you?'

'Not at the moment.'

Moe was off again. 'Knowledge speaks. Wisdom listens.'

'And anyway, you are. What if you want to come visit me?'

'Not happening. Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened.'

'How have I lived without your crappy wisdom all summer? Let's go to Duty Free.'

'For what?'

'Distraction.'

I took the last bite of my sandwich and tried to reckon with the weird feeling in my head. Suddenly I couldn't chew because I couldn't catch my breath

and my jaw ached and I was pretty sure I was having a heart attack. Oh Lord, breathe, breathe. I was going to suffocate any second. Shit. A panic attack. Why now, particularly? Though panic attacks often hit me in airports and train stations. Maybe it was the word ‘terminal’ that set them off.

Moe stared at his phone, oblivious. Was there a bag I could breathe into? Was there a friend I could depend on?

We got to Duty Free, me sweating, swaying, unable to catch my breath.

Moe drifted over to perfume to douse himself in Chanel No. 5.

Would they let me buy a bottle of vodka if I claimed a medical emergency?

Bonjour mesdames et messieurs, l’Eurostar numéro neuf zero trente-et-un, départ à 13:12 à destination de Londres St Pancras, est prêt pour l’embarquement, voie six.

Across the waiting area, EAA camp counsellors

with CIA headsets had started to corral everyone on to the train. Checking for bags left behind.

‘You OK, man?’ Moe looked concerned at last. He smelled like Marilyn Monroe.

I told him I needed the toilet and he said he’d meet me on board.

What a car-crash of a summer. And how appropriate for it to end in a full-blown outbreak of existential distress.

I moved like a zombie towards the toilets, locked myself in a cubicle and dropped my head between my knees. My heart clanged in my ears. Oh God oh God oh God. Make it stop.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.

Time passed. The waves of nausea began to subside. I heard another announcement.

Attention please, Eurostar number 9031 to London will depart from platform six in ten minutes. If you are in possession of a ticket, please board the train immediately.

Ten minutes? Oh Christ. I lurched to my feet and ran back to the gate, where the last few stragglers were hurrying down the ramp. I arrived just as the bored train attendant reached to clip a rope firmly across the entrance.

‘*Allez vite. Dépêchez-vous.*’ She imbued the words with the same urgency she might have used to say, ‘Nice hat, Grandma.’

I stopped. Stared. At her. At the rope. At the train below on the platform. At all the happy returning language students exchanging stories of brilliant achievements and memories that would last a lifetime.

And then I hitched my backpack over my shoulder and reversed my trajectory. At the bottom of the ramp, I could just about see Moe gesticulating wildly, saw him drop his arms in astonishment as I turned away from the ramp, away from the train, away from the boarding gate, away from the waiting area, away from customs, away from my miserable summer,

away from whatever new challenge my parents had planned for my welcome home ceremony, away from everything I couldn't stand about my life and myself, down the stairs, away from Gare du Nord and out on to the streets of Paris.

Behind me, the train pulled out of the station.

Ping. A text from Moe.

‘What the hell, man? What happened?’

Almost nothing happened. That was the point.

2

I didn't have the time of my life on my French exchange. I didn't learn fluent French. I didn't develop a passion for French culture or cuisine. I didn't make lifelong friends. I didn't lose my virginity.

What did I do? I worried. Sulked. Fell in love with a girl who cared nothing for me. Avoided human contact, pretended to be bored. Took interminable walks with the family dog – a small hairy mutt who liked me about half as much as I liked him.

It was not my finest hour. Not that I blamed France.

It all started with me asking the best student in

class to write an introductory letter to my French family. Mediocre language skills had made my own letter *indéchiffrable*. Indecipherable.

This was, of course, cheating, but it did teach me a valuable life lesson, one you might want to take on board for your own future: faking a foreign language is not sustainable over time.

The photo I enclosed with the (outsourced) letter captured my best angle and unaccountably made me look almost cool, when in real life I was anything but. And compared to Florian and Élodie (my glamorous teen counterparts), I was about as glamorous as a chip butty.

They greeted me with a gentle torrent of French, the usual sort of ‘Hello, how are you, we’re so pleased to meet you, we hope your trip was pleasant’, etc. etc., and I greeted them back with a few stumbled phrases that I tried to imbue with gratitude and goodwill. But it felt as if I’d been struck by lightning and somehow couldn’t remember even basic

Year 7 French, the ‘*Bonjour Madame Thibault, bonjour Monsieur Thibault*’ level that guaranteed you’d be able to ask with confidence if the croissant was gluten-free.

I did my best to keep up my side of the relationship, but had to admit I knew nothing about jazz, with which Florian and Élodie were obsessed, or sex (ditto), or French literature or politics. Their tiny town in south-west France hosted a world-famous early music festival every year, and much time was spent discussing the virtues of Monteverdi vs Handel; at least, that’s what I think they were discussing, it was hard to tell. Another conversational blind spot.

Once the dynamic settled, I tried to make myself invisible – hanging back with a book until everyone had gone out and then having breakfast by myself in an empty apartment and slithering out *avec le chien*, Titou, for a walk in the quiet countryside. I simply didn’t have the confidence to speak French and try to improve, which kind of defeated the whole exercise.

Don't roll your eyes, I couldn't help it. Maybe you don't remember a time when you barely had the confidence to ask where the toilet was. Maybe you were never that insecure. If so, congratulations. I envy you still.

I tried being easy to have around. I worked really hard at it. What is it that people want to feel when they meet you? Does he laugh at my jokes? Is he *sympathique*? Sparky? What team does he support? But in the case of me in France, I didn't speak, so how would they know?

During the first week, the beautiful Élodie invited me to a picnic at some gloriously handsome young man's grand home where a select group of beautiful, educated young French people talked (too fast and in incomprehensible slang) about – presumably – cinema, politics, music, literature and sex, while I gazed off into space trying desperately to look as if I might be thinking about something amusing. It was agony.

Titou was a pretty good companion, once I got

my head around the fact that not all dogs spoke English. He had a passion for hunting rats along the edge of the vineyards where the grapes were just starting to ripen. This made our walks a lot more interesting. I learned to shout ‘*Viens ici!*’ when he strayed too far away and ‘*Laisse!*’ when he showed signs of eating the rat he’d caught. Sometimes his battle with a rodent lasted longer than I was strictly happy to watch, sometimes the squeaking was awful to listen to, and usually I found myself sympathising with the rat. My French family clearly thought Titou and I were intellectually compatible, though I’m pretty sure he was smarter.

Luckily, I’d brought along *Crime and Punishment*, because Moe said it was a laugh, which, strictly speaking, it wasn’t, though even I had to acknowledge that Raskolnikov’s existence was marginally worse than mine, which helped. Particularly once he was sentenced to eight years hard labour in Siberia.

On the first day, dinner was a stilted affair of everyone talking around and over me, me entirely failing to get the hang of sophisticated phrases like ‘Please pass the butter’, and the specified goal of strengthening international relationships falling very flat. What, in short, is more boring than a charmless foreigner, too nervous to take the risk of speaking, plonked into a middle-class family whose earnest politesse barely conceals the wish that he wasn’t there?

In short? Nothing.