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### 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.

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'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.