

$$\sqrt{\frac{(x^2 - y^2)(3z + 2x - y^3)}{a^2 + b^3}}$$

$$= (a^3 + b^2 + x^2 + y^2)(x^3 - b^2)$$

GEER GIRL



$$\frac{x^3 - y^2}{\sqrt{2}} = 2$$

$$\frac{x^3 - y^2}{\sqrt{2}} = 2$$



HOLLY
SMALLE



**HOLLY
SMALE**



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

For my grandad. My favourite geek.

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geek/gi:k/h noun informal, chiefly N. Amer.

1 an unfashionable or socially inept person.

2 an obsessive enthusiast.

3 a person who feels the need to look up the word 'geek' in the dictionary.

DERIVATIVES *geeky* adjective.

ORIGIN from the related English dialect word *geck* 'fool'.

My name is Harriet Manners, and I am a geek.

I know I'm a geek because I've just looked it up in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I drew a little tick next to all the symptoms I recognise, and I appear to have them all. Which – and I should be perfectly honest here – hasn't come as an enormous surprise. The fact that I have an *Oxford English Dictionary* on my bedside table anyway should have been one clue. That I keep a Natural History Museum pencil and ruler next to it so that I can neatly underline interesting entries should have been another.

Oh, and then there's the word **GEEK**, drawn in red marker pen on the outside pocket of my school satchel. That was done yesterday.

I didn't do it, obviously. If I *did* decide to deface my own property, I'd choose a poignant line from a really good book, or an interesting fact not many people know. And I definitely wouldn't do it in red. I'd do it in black, or blue, or perhaps green. I'm not a big fan of the colour red, even if it *is* the longest wavelength of light discernible by the human eye.

To be absolutely candid with you, I don't actually know *who* decided to write on my bag – although I have my suspicions – but I can tell you that their writing is almost illegible. They clearly weren't listening during our English lesson last week when we were told that handwriting is a very important Expression of the Self. Which is quite lucky because if I can just find a similar shade of pen, I might be able to slip in the letter *R* in between *G* and *E*. I can pretend that it's a reference to my interest in ancient history and feta cheese.

I prefer Cheddar, but nobody has to know that.

Anyway, the point is: as my satchel, the anonymous vandal and the *Oxford English Dictionary* appear to agree with each other, I can only conclude that I am, in fact, a geek.

Did you know that in the old days the word 'geek' was used to describe a carnival performer who would bit the head off a live chicken or snake or bat as part of their stage act?

Exactly. Only a geek would know a thing like that.

I think it's what they call ironic.

Now that you know who I am, you're going to want to know where I am and what I'm doing, right? Character, action and location: that's what makes a story. I read it in a book called *What Makes a Story*, written by a man who hasn't got any stories at the moment, but knows exactly how he'll tell them when he eventually does.

So.

It's currently December, I'm in bed – tucked under about fourteen covers – and I'm not doing anything at all apart from getting warmer by the second. In fact, I don't want to alarm you or anything, but I think I might be really sick. My hands are clammy, my stomach's churning and I'm *significantly* paler than I was ten minutes ago. Plus, there's what can only be described as a sort of... *rash* on my face. Little red spots scattered at totally random and not at *all* symmetrical points on my cheeks and forehead. With a big one on my chin. And one just next to my left ear.

I take another look in the little hand-held mirror on my bedside table, and then sigh as loudly as I can. There's no doubt about it: I'm clearly very ill. It would be wrong to risk spreading this dangerous infection to other, possibly less hardy, immune systems. I shall just have to battle through this illness alone.

All day. Without going anywhere at all.

Sniffing, I shuffle under my duvets a little further and look at my clock on the opposite wall (it's very clever: all the numbers are painted at the bottom as if they've just fallen down, although this does mean that when I'm in a hurry, I have to sort of guess what the time is). Then I close my eyes and mentally count:

10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2...

At which point, absolutely on cue as always, the door opens and the room explodes: hair and handbag and coat and arms everywhere. Like a sort of girl bomb. And there, as if by very punctuated magic, is Nat.

Nat – for the record – is my Best Friend, and we are so utterly in tune that it's like we have one brain, divided into two pieces at birth. Or (more likely) two brains, entwined shortly afterwards. Although we didn't meet until we were five years old, so obviously I'm speaking *metaphorically* when I say we'd both be dead.

What I'm trying to say is: we're close. We're harmonised. We're one and the same. We're like a perfect stream of consciousness, with never a cross word between us. We work with perfect unquestioning synergy. Like two dolphins that jump at exactly the same time and pass the ball to each other at Sea World.

Anyway. Nat takes one step into the room, looks at me, and then stops and puts her hands on her hips.

"Good morning," I croak from under the covers, and then I start coughing violently. Human coughs release air at roughly 60mph, and without being vain, I'd like to think that mine reaches 65mph or 70mph minimum.

"Don't even *think* about it," Nat snaps.

I stop coughing and look at her with my roundest, most confused eyes. “Hmmm?” I say innocently. And then I start coughing again.

“I mean it. Don’t even think about thinking about it.”

I have *no* idea what she’s talking about. The fever must be making my brain swell.

“Nat,” I say feebly, closing my eyes and pressing my hand against my head. I’m a shell of the person I used to be. A husk. “I have bad news.” I open one eye and take a peek round the room. Nat still has her hands on her hips.

“Let me guess,” she says in a dry voice. “You’re sick.”

I give a weak but courageous smile: the sort Jane gives Lizzie in *Pride and Prejudice* when she is bedridden with a really bad cold, but is being very brave about it. “You know me so well,” I say affectionately. “It’s like we have one mind, Nat.”

“And you’re out of it if you think I’m not about to drag you out of bed by your feet.” Nat takes a few steps towards me. “Also, I want my lipstick back,” she adds.

I clear my throat. “Lipstick?”

“The one you’ve dotted all over your face.”

I open my mouth and then shut it again. “It’s not lipstick,” I say in a small voice. “It’s a dangerous infection.”

“Then your dangerous infection is glittery, Harriet, and just so happens to match my new shoes perfectly.”

I shift a little bit further down the bed so that only my eyes are visible. “Infections are very advanced these days,” I say with as much dignity as I can muster. “They are sometimes extremely light-reflective.”

“Featuring small flecks of gold?”

I raise my chin defiantly. “Sometimes.”

Nat’s nose twitches and she rolls her eyes. “Right. And your face is producing white talcum powder, is it?”

I sniff quickly. Oh, *sugar cookies*. “It’s important to keep sick people dry,” I say as airily as I can. “Dampness can allow bacteria to develop.”

Nat sighs again. “Get out of bed, Harriet.”

“But—”

“Get out of bed.”

“Nat, I...”

“Out. Now.”

I look down at the duvets in a panic. “But I’m not ready! I’m in my pyjamas!” I’m going to give one last desperate shot. “Nat,” I say, changing tack and using my most serious, profound voice. “You don’t understand. How will you feel if you’re wrong? How will you *live* with yourself? I might be *dying*.”

“Actually, you’re right,” Nat agrees, taking another two steps towards me. “You are. I’m literally seconds away from killing you, Harriet Manners. And if that happens, I’ll live with myself just fine. Now get out of bed, you little faker.”

And, before I can protect myself, Nat lunges suddenly towards me and tugs the covers away.

There’s a long silence.

“Oh, *Harriet*,” Nat eventually says in a sad and simultaneously triumphant voice.

Because I’m lying in bed, fully dressed, with my shoes on. And in one hand is a box of talcum powder; in the other is a bright red lipstick.

OK, so I lied a little bit.

Twice, actually.

Nat and I are not in perfect harmony at all. We're definitely close, and we definitely spend all our time together, and we definitely adore each other very much, but there are *moments* now we've almost grown up where our interests and passions divide a teensy bit.

Or – you know – a lot.

It doesn't stop us being inseparable, obviously. We're Best Friends because we frequently make each other laugh, so much so that I once made orange juice come out of her nose (on to her mum's white rug – we stopped laughing pretty shortly afterwards). And also because I remember when she slipped on the ballet-room floor, aged six, and she is the only person in the entire world who knows I still have a dinosaur poster taped to the inside of my wardrobe.

But over the last few years, there have definitely been *minuscule* points where our desires and needs have... conflicted a little bit. Which is why I *may* have said I was a little bit sicker than I actually felt this morning, which was: not much.

Or at all, actually. I feel great.

And why Nat is a bit snappy with me as we run towards the school coach as fast as my legs will carry me.

"You know," Nat sighs as she waits for me to catch up for the twelfth time. "I watched that *stupid* documentary on the Russian Revolution for you last week, and it was about four hundred hours long. The least you can do is participate in an Educational Opportunity to See Textiles from an Intimate and Consumer Perspective with me."

"*Shopping*," I puff, holding my sides together so they don't fall apart. "It's called shopping."

"That's not what's written on the leaflet. It's a school trip: there has to be *something* educational about it."

"No," I huff. "There isn't." Nat pauses again so that I can try and catch up. "It's just shopping."

To be fair, I think I have a point. We're going to The Clothes Show Live, in Birmingham. So-called – presumably – because they show clothes to you. Live. In Birmingham. And let you buy them. And take them home with you afterwards.

Which is otherwise known as *shopping*.

"It'll be fun," Nat says from a few metres ahead of me. "They've got everything there, Harriet. Everything anyone could possibly ever want."

"Really?" I say in the most sarcastic voice I can find, considering that I'm now running so fast that my breath is starting to squeak. "Do they have a triceratops skull?"

"...No."

"Do they have a life-size model of the first airborne plane?"

"...Probably not."

"And do they have a John Donne manuscript, with little white gloves so that you can actually touch it?"

Nat thinks about it. "I think it's unlikely they have that," she admits.

~~"Then they don't have *everything* I want, do they?"~~

We reach the coach steps and I can barely breathe. I don't understand it: we've both run the same distance, and we've both expended the same energy. I'm an entire centimetre shorter than Nat so I have less mass to move, at the same speed (on average). We both have exactly the same amount of physics lessons. And yet – despite the laws of physics – I'm huffing and purple, and Nat's only slightly glowing and still capable of breathing out of her nose.

Sometimes science makes no sense at all.

Nat starts rapping in a panic on the bus door. We're late – thanks to my excellent acting skills – and it looks like the class might be about to leave without us. "Harriet," Nat snaps, turning to look at me as the doors start making sucking noises, as if they're kissing. "Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown by Lenin in 1917."

I blink in surprise. "Yes," I say. "He was."

"And do you think I want to know that? It's not even on our exam syllabus. I *never* had to know that. So now it's your turn to pick up a few pairs of shoes and make *ooh* and *aah* sounds for me because Jo ate prawns and she's allergic to prawns and she got sick and couldn't come and I'm now sitting on a bus on my own for five hours. OK?"

Nat takes a deep breath and I look at my hands in shame. I am a selfish, selfish person. I am also a very sparkly person: my hands are covered in gold glitter.

"OK," I say in a small voice. "I'm sorry, Nat."

"You're forgiven." The coach doors finally slide open. "Now get on this bus and pretend for one little day that you have the teeniest, tiniest smidgen of interest in fashion."

"All right," I say, my voice getting even smaller.

Because – in case you haven't worked this out by now – here's the key thing that really divides Nat and me:

I don't.

So, before we get on the bus, you might want to know a little more about me.

You might not, obviously. You might be thinking, *Just get on with it, Harriet, because I haven't got all day*, which is what Annabel says all the time. Adults rarely have all day, from what I can tell. However, if – like me – you read cereal boxes at the breakfast table and shampoo bottles in the bathroom and bus timetables when you already know what bus you're getting, here's a little more information:

1. My mother is dead. That's usually the bit where people look awkward and start talking about how rainy the sky looks, but she died when I was three days old so missing her is a bit like loving a character from a book. The only stories I have of her belong to other people.
2. I have a stepmother, Annabel. She married Dad when I was seven, she's alive and she works as a lawyer. (You would not believe the amount of arguments my parents have over those two facts. "I am living," Annabel will scream. "You're a lawyer," Dad will shout back. "Who are you kidding?")
3. Dad's In Advertising. ("Not in adverts," Annabel always points out when they have dinner parties. "I write them," Dad replies in frustration. "I'm as In Advertising as you can get." "Apart from actors," Annabel says under her breath, at which point Dad stomps off to the kitchen to get another bottle of beer.)
4. I'm an only child. Thanks to my parents, I am destined to a life of never having anyone to squabble with in the back seat of the car.
5. Nat isn't just my Best Friend. She gave herself this title, even though I told her it was a bit unnecessary: she's also my Only Friend. This might be because I have a tendency to correct people's grammar and tell them facts they're not interested in.
6. And put things in lists. Like this one.
7. Nat and I met ten years ago when we were five, which makes us fifteen. I know you could have worked that out by yourself, but I can't assume people like doing equations in their heads just because I do.
8. Nat is beautiful. When we were young, adults would put a hand under her chin and say, "She's going to break hearts, this one," as if she couldn't hear them and wasn't deciding when would be the best time to start.
9. I am not. My impact on hearts is like an earthquake happening on the other side of the world: if I'm lucky, I can hope for a teacup tinkling in its saucer. And even then it's a bit of a surprise and everybody talks about it for days afterwards.

Other things will probably filter through in stages – like the fact that I only eat toast in triangles.

because it means there are no soggy edges, and my favourite book is the first half of *Great Expectations* and the last half of *Wuthering Heights* – but you don't need to know them right now. In fact, arguably, you never need to know them. The last book Dad bought me had a gun on the front cover.

Anyway, the final defining fact that I may already have mentioned in passing is:

10. I don't like fashion.

I never really have, and I can't imagine I ever will.

I got away with it until I was about ten. Under that age, non-uniform didn't really exist: we wore either in our school uniform, or our pyjamas, or our swimming costumes, or dressed like angels and sheep for the school nativity. We had to go and get an outfit especially for non-uniform days.

Then teenagehood hit like a big pink glittery sledgehammer. Suddenly there were rules and breaking them *mattered*. Skirt lengths and trouser shapes and eye-shadow shades and heel heights and knowing how long you could go without wearing mascara before people accused you of being lesbian.

Suddenly the world was divided into the right and the horribly, horribly wrong. And the people were stuck between, who for the life of them couldn't tell the difference. People who wore white socks and black shoes; who liked having hair on their legs because it was fluffy at night-time. People who really missed the sheep outfit, and secretly wanted to wear it to school even when it wasn't Christmas.

People like me.

If there had been *consistent* rules, I'd have done my best to keep up. Made some sort of pie chart or line graph and then resentfully applied the basics. But fashion's not like that: it's a slippery old fish. You try to grab it round the neck and it slides out of your grip and shoots off in another direction, and every desperate grab towards it makes you look even more stupid. Until you're sliding around on the floor, everybody is laughing at you and the fish has shot under the table.

So – to put it simply – I gave up. Brains have only got so much they can absorb, so I decided I didn't have space. I'd rather know that hummingbirds can't walk, or that one teaspoon of a neutron star weighs billions of tonnes, or that bluebirds can't see the colour blue.

Nat, however, went the other way. And suddenly the sheep and the angel – who hung out quite happily in the fields of Bethlehem together – didn't have as much in common any more.

We're still Best Friends. She's still the girl who lost her first baby tooth in my apple, and I'm still the girl who stuck one of her sunflower seeds up my nose in primary school and couldn't get it out again. But sometimes, every now and then, the gap between us gets so big it feels like one of us is going to slip through.

Something tells me that today that person is going to be me.

Anyway.

What all this means is: I'm not thrilled to be here. I've stopped whining, but let's just say I'm not spinning round and round in circles, farting at intervals, like my dog Hugo does when he's excited. In fact, I did two years of doing woodwork *specifically* so I didn't have to come on this textiles trip. Two years of accidentally sanding down my thumbs and cringing to the sound of metal on metal, purely to get out of today. And then Jo eats prawns and does a little vomiting and *BAM*: here I am.

The first step on to the coach is uneventful, just one step, directly behind Nat's. The second step is slightly less successful. The coach starts before we've sat down and I'm thrown sideways, in the process kicking a nice fluffy green bag the way I've never, ever managed to kick a football in my entire life.

"Moron," Chloe hisses as she retrieves it.

"I'm n-n-not," I stutter, cheeks lighting up. "A moron only has an IQ of between 50 and 69. I think mine's a little higher than that."

And then it all goes wrong. On the third step, the driver sees a family of ducks on the road, hits the brakes and sends me flying towards the end of the bus. I instinctively grab whatever will protect me from slamming my face on the floor. A headrest, a shoulder, an armrest, a seat.

Somebody's knee.

"Ugh," a voice shouts in total disgust, "she's *touching me*."

And there – staring at me as if she just sicked me up – is Alexa.

People Who Hate Harriet Manners

1. Alexa Roberts

Alexa. My nemesis, my adversary, my opponent, my arch-enemy. Whatever you want to call somebody who hates your guts.

I've known her three days longer than I've known Nat and I've yet to work out what her problem is. I can only conclude that her feelings towards me are very similar to what I've read about love: passionate, random, inexplicable and totally uncontrollable. She can't help hating me any more than Heathcliff could help loving Cathy. It's simply written in the stars. Which would be quite sweet if she wasn't such a cow all of the time.

And I wasn't totally terrified of her.

I stare at Alexa in total shock. I'm still clinging to her tight-covered leg like a frightened baby monkey clinging on to a tree. "Let go," she snaps. "Oh my God."

I scrabble away, trying desperately to stand up. There are approximately 13,914,291,404 legs in the world – over half of them in trousers – and I had to grab *this* one?

"Ugh," she says loudly to anybody who will listen. "Do you think I might have caught something? Oh, God, I can already feel it starting..." She cowers in her seat. "No...The *light*... It *hurts*... I can feel myself changing... Suddenly I want to do my homework... It's too late!" She puts her hands over her face and then pulls them away, crosses her eyes, protrudes her teeth and pulls the ugliest expression I've ever seen on public transport. "Nooooooooo! I've caught it! I'm... I'm... I'm geeeeeeeeeeeeek!"

People start sniggering and from somewhere on the left I can hear a little ripple of applause. Alexa bows a couple of times, pulls a face at me and then goes back to reading her magazine.

My cheeks are flushed, my hands are shaking. My eyes are starting to prickle. All the normal responses to ritual humiliation. The thing I want to make really clear right now is that I don't mind *being* a geek. *Being* a geek is fine. It's unimpressive, sure, but it's pretty unobtrusive. I could be a geek all day long, as long as people left me alone.

The thing is: they don't.

"*Seriously*," Nat snaps in a loud voice from a few metres in front of me. "Did you sniff wet paint on a child or something, Alexa?"

Alexa rolls her eyes. "*Barbie talks*. Run away and play with your shoes, Natalie. This has nothing to do with you."

I'm trying desperately to think of something clever to say. Something biting, poignant, incisive and deeply wounding. Something that will give Alexa just an ounce of the hurt she gives me on an almost daily basis.

"You suck," I say in the tiniest voice I've ever heard.

Yeah, I think. That should do it. And then I hold my chin up as high as I can get it, walk the rest of

the way down the aisle and sink into the seat next to Nat before my knees give way.

~~I'm in my seat for about three seconds when the morning promptly decides to get worse. I barely have time to open my crossword book first.~~

"Harriet!" a delighted voice says, and a little pale face pops over the back of the seat in front of me. "You're here! You're really, actually, actually *here!*" As if I'm Father Christmas and he's a six-year-old whose chimney I've just climbed down.

"Yes, Toby," I say reluctantly. "I'm here." And then I turn to scowl at Nat.

It's Toby Pilgrim.

Toby "my knees buckle when I run" Pilgrim. Toby "I bring my own Bunsen burner to school" Pilgrim. Toby "I wear bicycle clips on my trousers *and I don't even have a bike*" Pilgrim. Nat should have told me he'd be here.

I'm now following my own stalker to Birmingham.

Imagine you're a polar bear and you find yourself in the middle of a rainforest. There are flying squirrels, and monkeys, and bright green frogs, and you have no idea how you got there or what you're supposed to do next. You're lonely, you're lost, you're frightened and all you know – for absolutely certain – is that you shouldn't be there.

Now imagine you find *another* polar bear. You're so happy to see another polar bear – *any* polar bear – that it doesn't matter what kind it is. You follow that polar bear around, just because it's not a monkey. Or a flying squirrel. Because it's the only thing that makes it OK to be a polar bear in the middle of a rainforest.

Well, that's how it is with Toby. One geek, incoherently happy to find another geek in the middle of a world full of normal people. Thrilled to discover that there is someone else like him. It's not what he wants. It's my social standing. Or lack thereof.

And let me get something straight: I'm not going to have a romance with someone just because they're made out of the same stuff as me. *No*. I'd rather be on my own. Or – you know – in unrequited love with a parrot. Or one of those little lemurs with the stripy tails.

“Harriet!” Toby says again and a little bit of bogey starts dripping from his nose. He promptly wipes it on his jumper sleeve and beams at me. “I can't believe you came!”

I glare at Nat and she grins, winks and goes back to reading her magazine. I am not feeling very *harmonised* with her at the moment, if I'm being totally honest. In fact, I sort of feel like hitting her over the head with my crossword puzzle.

“Yes,” I say, trying to edge away. “Apparently I had to.”

“But isn't this just wonderful?” he gasps, clambering up on to his knees in his unbridled enthusiasm. I notice that his T-shirt says **THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE 127.0.0.1**. “Of all the buses in all the towns in all the world, you walk on to mine. Can you see what I did there? It's a quote from *Casablanca*, except that I replaced the words *gin joints* with *bus* and the word *into* with *on to*.”

“You did, yes.”

Nat makes a snuffle of amusement and I subtly pinch her leg.

“Do you know what I learnt this morning, Harriet? I learnt that the phrase *rule of thumb* came from a time when a man was only legally allowed to beat his wife with something the width of his own thumb. I can lend you the book, although there's a pizza stain on page 143 which you might have read round.”

“Erm. Right. Thanks.” I nod knowingly and then lift my book so that Toby realises the conversation is over.

He doesn't.

“*And*,” he continues, holding it down so he can see me properly. “You know the most *unbelievable* thing?”

It's funny, when Toby behaves like this, I can suddenly see why I'm so annoying.

“Well, did you know that...” The coach swerves slightly into the middle lane. Toby swallows. “That...” he continues and licks his lips. The coach swerves back into the slow lane. “That—” Toby

face goes abruptly green and he clears his throat. "I don't want you to think I'm easily distracted," he finally continues in a little voice, "but I'm suddenly not feeling so well. I don't take kindly to vehicles, particularly the ones that move. Do you remember the ride-on lawnmower in Year One?"

I look at him in horror and Nat immediately stops smirking. "Oh, no," she says in a dark voice. "No, *no*." Nat obviously remembers it too.

"Harriet," Toby continues, licking his lips again and going an even stranger colour. "I think we might need to stop the bus."

"*Toby*," Nat snaps in a low, warning voice. "Breathe in through your nose and out through your—"

But it's too late. The coach makes one more sudden movement and – as if in slow motion – Toby gives me one look of pure apology.

And vomits all over my lap.

In case you were wondering, that's what Toby did on the ride-on lawnmower in Year One too. Except this time he manages to broaden his horizons in the most literal sense and hit Nat too.

She's not happy about it. I mean, I'm not happy about it either. I don't relish being hit by the contents of other people's digestive tracts. But Nat's *really* not happy about it.

She's so unhappy about it that when the coach finally pulls up to The Clothes Show at the NEC in Birmingham – two and a half hours later – she's *still* shouting at him. And Toby's telling both of us how much better he feels now because, "Isn't it funny how it feels OK when all the vomit's gone?"

"I don't *believe* this," Nat is still snapping, stomping across the carpark. We're both now wearing PE kit: luckily two of the boys had football practice straight after the trip, so – after a lot of whining – Miss Fletcher managed to convince them to lend us their kit. We're wearing orange football shirts, green football shorts and white knee socks.

I quite like it. It's making me feel quite sporty. Nat, on the other hand, isn't so keen. We were forced to keep our shoes on, and – while my trainers look quite normal – Nat's red high heels... don't.

"Do you *know* how long it took me to choose my outfit this morning?" she's yelling at Toby as we approach the front doors.

Toby contemplates this like it's not a rhetorical question. "Twenty minutes?" he offers. Nat's face goes slightly puce. "Thirty?" Nat's jawline starts flexing. "An hour and a half?"

"A *really long time!*" she shouts. "A really, *really* long time!" Nat looks down at herself. "I had a brand-new dress and *leggings from American Apparel*, Toby. Do you know how much they cost? I was wearing *Prada perfume*." She picks up a piece of green nylon between her fingers. "And now I'm wearing a boy's football kit and I smell of sick!"

I pat her arm as comfortingly as I can.

"At least my vomit was sort of chocolatey," Toby says cheerfully. "I had Coco Pops for breakfast."

Nat grits her teeth.

"Anyway," Toby continues blithely, "I think you look awesome. You both match. It's super trendy."

Nat scrunches her mouth up, clenches her fists and furrows her brow right in the centre. It's like watching somebody shake a bottle of fizzy drink without taking the lid off. "Toby," she says in a low hiss. "Go. Now."

"OK," Toby agrees. "Anywhere in particular?"

"*Anywhere. Just go. NOW.*"

"Toby," I say in a low voice, taking him by the arm. I'm really, genuinely scared for his safety. "I think maybe you should go inside." I look at Nat. "As quickly as possible," I add.

"Ah." Toby contemplates this for a few seconds and then nods. "Ah. I see. Then I shall see you both anon."

And – giving me what looks disturbingly like an attempt at a wink over his shoulder – he skips off through the swing doors.

When he's gone and I know that Nat can't rip his head off and feed it to a large flock of pigeons, I turn to her.

"Nat," I say, chewing on a fingernail anxiously. "It's not that bad. Honestly. We smell fine. And if you put my coat on over the top, nobody will see what you're wearing. It's longer than yours."

"You don't get it," Nat says and suddenly the anger pops: she just sounds miserable. "You just don't *get* it."

I think Nat underestimates my powers of empathy. Which is a shame because I am a very empathetic person. *Empathetic*. Not *pathetic*.

"Sure I do," I say in a reassuring voice. "You don't like football. I get that."

"It's not that. Today was *really important*, Harriet. I *really* needed to look good."

I stare at her blankly. After a few seconds, Nat rolls her eyes and hits herself on the forehead in frustration. "*They're* in there."

I stare at the revolving doors. "*Who's* in there?" I whisper in terror. I think about it for a few seconds. "Vampires?"

"*Vampires*." Nat looks at me in consternation. "You have got to start reading proper books."

I don't know what she's talking about. Just because I own a lot of books about things that don't actually exist in real life in no way indicates that I'm not connected to the real world. I totally am.

Nat takes a deep breath. "I put the prawns in Jo's dinner," she says, avoiding my eyes.

I stare at her. "Nat! Why would you do that?"

"Because I need you today," she says in a tiny voice. "I need you for support. *They're* in there." And she looks again at the doors and swallows.

"*Who?*"

"Model agents, Harriet," Nat says as if I'm an idiot. "Lots and lots of model agents."

"Oh," I say stupidly, and then think about it. "*Ohhhhhhhh*."

And I finally understand what I'm doing here.

We were seven when Nat decided that she wanted to be a model.

“Gosh,” somebody’s mum said at a school disco. “Natalie. You’re getting gorgeous. Maybe you could be a model when you grow up.”

I paused from filling my party dress pockets with chocolate cake and jelly sweets. “A model of what?” I asked curiously. And then my greedy little hand went out to grab a mini jam roll. “I have a model airplane,” I added proudly.

The mum gave me the look that I was already used to by then.

“A model,” she explained, looking at Nat, “is a girl or a boy who gets paid ridiculous quantities of money to wear clothes they don’t own and have their photo taken.” I looked at Nat and already I could see her eyes starting to glow: the seed of the dream being planted. “Just hope you grow tall and thin,” the mum added bitterly, “because if you ask me, they all look like aliens.”

At which point Nat put her chocolate cake down and spent the rest of the night sitting on the floor with me pulling on her feet to make her legs longer.

And I spent the rest of the night talking about space travel.

It’s finally here.

Eight years of buying *Vogue* and not eating pudding (Nat, not me: I eat hers) and we’ve finally made it to the very edge of Nat’s destiny. I feel a bit like Sam in *The Lord of the Rings*, just before Frodo throws the ring into the fires of Mount Doom. Except in a more positive, magical way. With slightly less hairy feet.

Nat doesn’t look as excited as I thought she would. She looks terrified and as stiff as a board, standing, totally still, in the middle of the NEC entrance. She’s staring at the crowd as if it’s a pond full of fish and she’s a really hungry cat, and – honestly – I’m not even sure she’s breathing. I’m tempted to put my head on her chest just to check.

The thing is: she’s doing it all wrong.

I know a lot about stories and magic – thanks to reading loads of books and also belonging to a forum on the internet – and the most basic rule is that *it has to come as a surprise*. Nobody hopped into a wardrobe to find Narnia; they hopped in, thinking it was just a wardrobe. They didn’t climb up the Faraway Tree, knowing it was a Faraway Tree; they thought it was just a really big tree. Harry Potter thought he was a normal boy; Mary Poppins was supposed to be a regular nanny.

It’s the first and only rule. *Magic comes when you’re not looking for it*.

But Nat’s looking for it, and the harder she looks, the less likely it is to turn up. She’s scaring the fashion magic off with her knowing, waiting vibes.

“Come on,” I say, trying to distract her by pulling at her (or technically *my*) coat sleeve. I need to get her to think about something else so that the magic can do its thing. “Let’s just go and shop, OK?”

“Mmm.”

I don’t think she can even hear me any more. “Look!” I say enthusiastically, pulling her to the nearest stall. “Nat, look! Handbags! Shoes! Hair bobbles!”

Nat gives me a distracted glance. “You’re dragging my coat on the floor.”

“Oh.” I bundle it back under my arm and start tugging Nat towards the next stall.

~~“What do you think?” I say, picking up a small blue sequined hat and plopping it on my head.~~

When we were little, we’d spend hours and hours in department stores, trying on different hats and pretending we were going to a royal wedding.

“Uh-huh.” Nat gets a little bit more tense and looks over her shoulder.

“Come on, what about this one?” I pick up a large floppy hat covered in big pink flowers and put it on. “Look.” I wiggle my bottom at her.

Nat abruptly whips round. “Oh my God,” she whispers and it takes me a few seconds to realise that it has nothing at all to do with my bottom.

“Have you seen one?”

“I think so!” She looks again. “Yes, I think I can definitely see an agent!”

I peer into the crowd, but I can’t see anything. They must be like fairies: you can only see them when they want you to.

“Stay right here, Harriet,” Nat whispers urgently. She starts moving into the crowds. “Don’t move a muscle. I’ll be back in a second.”

Now I’m confused. “But...” This makes no sense. “Don’t you need me with you?” I call after her. “Isn’t that why I’m here? For support?”

“*In spirit will do just fine, Harriet,*” Nat shouts back. “Love you!”

And then she disappears completely.

Is she kidding me? *In spirit?*

I could have done *in spirit* quite happily from my bedroom, thank you very much. I could have texted Nat support from my own fake deathbed. I pick up another hat crossly. Next time Nat wants me to go shopping, I am so throwing myself down the stairs.

“Excuse me?” a voice interrupts, and when I turn around, there’s a lady staring at me with a deep crease between her eyebrows. “Can you read?”

“Umm,” I reply in surprise. “Yes. Very well, actually. My reading age is over twenty. But thank you for asking.”

“Really? Can you read that sign there? Read it out loud.”

Poor lady. Maybe she didn’t go to all of her English lessons at school. “Of course,” I say in a friendly and – I hope – not patronising tone. Not everyone benefits equally from a full education system. “It says, *Don’t Touch The Hats.*”

There’s a pause and then I realise that she probably doesn’t have a literacy problem after all. “Oh,” I add as her meaning sinks in.

“That’s a hat,” she says pointing to the one in my hand. “And that’s a hat.” She points to the one on my head. “And you’re touching them *all over.*”

I quickly put the one in my hand back on the stall and grab the one on my head. “Sorry. It’s, erm, very...” What? How would you describe a hat? “*Hatty,*” I improvise, and then I pat it and put it back on the stall. At which point my chewed nail snags on a flower.

We both watch as the flower separates itself from the hat and throws itself on the floor, like a little child having a hissy fit. And then – as if in slow motion – what was clearly just one piece of thread breaks and, one by one, every other flower on the ribbon follows it.

Oh, sugar cookies.

“That’s a very interesting design concept,” I say after clearing my throat awkwardly a couple of times and starting to back away. “Self-detaching flowers? It’s very modern.”

“*They’re not self-detaching,*” Hat Lady says in a low, angry voice, staring at the pile on the floor. “*You detached them.*” And then she points at a felt-tip sign that says *You Break It You Buy It,* followed by the most inappropriately placed smiley face I have ever seen in my entire life. “And now you’re going to have to pay for it.”

God. She sounds a little bit like someone from the Italian Mafia. Maybe the Italian Mafia has a hat section.

“You know,” I say, backing away a little bit faster. “You are very lucky that hat didn’t kill me. I could have choked on one of those flowers and died. The playwright Tennessee Williams died from choking on a bottle cap. *Then* how would you have felt?”

“I’ll take a cheque or debit card details.”

I take a few more steps backwards and she follows. “Tell you what,” I say in the most lawyer-Annabel-like voice I can find. “How about *I* forget that you tried to kill me if *you* forget that I bro-

your hat? How does that sound?"

"Pay for the hat," she says, taking another step towards me.

"No."

"Pay for the hat."

"*I can't.*"

"Pay for the h—"

At which point fate or karma or the universe or a God who doesn't like me very much steps in. And sends me flying bottom-first into the rest of her stall.

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