



MY FATHER AND HIS HOUSE

Sometimes I wonder if my father loves his moustache more than he loves me. He's had it longer. He grew the thing before he met my mother. I know because I've seen it in the pictures that she used to show me when I was smaller and not as shy about asking awkward questions.

My father doesn't brush me with a special comb twice a day, or anoint me with a specialist pomade that he orders off the internet. (Not that I'd want him to. Because *eww*.)

My dad's house – the house where I live now too – is big and old and fancy. The people that he bought it from must have spent a lot of time restoring it – this is what my father says anyway – so that modern people who like to pee indoors could live in it. They must have really loved it, those people; all the walls were beautifully coloured, with stencilled silhouettes and little painted flowers, wild and hothouse; really, really beautiful to see.

'Girly,' declared Captain Moustache, and immediately he hired a team of men to sit around drinking tea I'd made and eating breakfast rolls in between spurts of painting everything in various shades of white, with names like 'Lily of the Valley', 'Ermine', 'Baby Teeth' and 'Miscellaneous Clouds'.

I made the men leave the walls of *my* room alone. I threatened them with biscuit withdrawal

and then cried down the phone to my dad, who was in the middle of an important meeting (I checked his appointment diary before I made the call), as leather sofas and glass-topped coffee tables replaced cosy rocking chairs and furniture with claws instead of stumps.

My room is gorgeous – in an old-fashioned kind of way. It makes me feel like a ‘domestic’. (You know, a little olden-days servant girl straight out of a novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Someone who gets up at five in the morning to light the fires for ‘them upstairs’. Although I suppose ‘them downstairs’ would be more accurate, because my room is upstairs at the very tip-top of our house, in the attic.) It is stuffed with bits of furniture left behind by the people who used to live here. I like this. It feels like I have company. Company apart from Roderick, that is.

Glossary: List that explains words that are new or hard or spelled funny. Often boring and not worth reading as it is fun to make up your own slightly cheeky (oh my!) meanings for new words; for example *assonance*, which does not mean ‘behaving like a bottom or a donkey or the glorious marriage of both: a donkey’s bottom’ but I would be happier if it did and so that is what it means to me, and anyone who dares to disagree is being totally assonant. Like an ass. I am too lazy to write a proper glossary but I do like explaining words so that is what

POMADE: An oily mix between gel and cream that some people like to put on their hair. I've heard (and stop me if this disgusts you) that some poor idiots even put it on their stupid little moustaches. Isn't that hilarious? The world surely is a crazy place!

I will do now and then. It will be a sort of glossary, or 'lip-glossary', if you will, where words are explained and my father is insulted where applicable. Like now!



RODERICK

Roderick's house is in my room. It balances easily on my big sturdy bookshelf, halfway between floor and ceiling. It's more of a cage than a house really, but I always call it his house because I don't like to think

of Roderick living in a cage. Even if it is a purple and white two-storey rat paradise, with a small fleecy hammock and a chewable wooden tunnel where he can go for privacy, to scheme his ratty schemes and plan his ratty plans and ... um ... poo. I also keep a box of tissues cage-adjacent, because he loves to pilfer them greedily. (It stops him nibbling other more valuable things like my CD cases.)

He is a terrible scamp. Mum called him 'the inimitable Roderick', or sometimes 'Señor Roderigo' when he was being particularly dashing.

We got Roderick from this guy my mum was seeing last year, when he was only a small and baldy

fellow. Roderick, I mean. (My mother's boyfriend back then, Dave, was man-sized and had lots and lots of hair.) Roderick was only tiny the first time I saw him, wriggling like a maggot into his mother's warm tummy. There were lots of little rat babies, but he was definitely the boldest one, and I picked him out as mine on that very first day.

Me and Mum went to the pet shop together and got all kinds of fancy rat-paraphernalia for when we were allowed to take him home. He was an absolute terror right away, all courage, staging complicated breakouts and nibbling his way right into one of the sofa cushions. Mum wasn't sure we could handle such a criminal mastermind in our lives, but I thought he was only fantastic, and he soon melted Mum's heart by balancing on things that were very high up, wearing what Mum called his 'You'll never catch me, copper!' face. He always came down eventually, especially after we learned to ignore him and eat delicious food pointedly until his inevitable surrender. 'They always come crawling back,' Mum would drawl, in a fancy-pants British accent. I'd roll my eyes at her and happily scratch my little rat-man's ears.

My father is not gone at all on my furry roommate. He doesn't like Roderick, and for that reason he will almost never venture into my room. Which is one more thing I love about having a pet rat. Initially I worried that my father's negativity would have a dreadful effect on poor Roderick's self-esteem. But he seems happy enough to chomp

DASHING: An attractive feature in a man; a way to describe someone who would sweep you off your feet in the good way, not by tripping you and then pointing and laughing with all his stupid friends. Handsome pirates are dashing, but none of the boys in my class are.

PARAPHERNALIA: Stuff that relates to other stuff. Like Dad has lots of *Star Wars* paraphernalia, and I mock him because of it. Dad hid all of it before Hedda came over for dinner. Mum always kept her cycling paraphernalia in the hall for me to trip over on my way out the door.

down all the rat food and fancy two-ply tissues that the moustachioed one's money can buy, and that's the main thing, I suppose. Anyway, the old man doesn't seem to care much about me either, and I'm absolutely grand.

Moving house can be difficult for an animal, but I suppose his little house is still the same, just in a different location. I'm keeping an eye on him, though, in case he gets rat-depression, which I read about online one day when he wasn't touching his food. I think we'll be okay.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

I don't know if I'm ready to go all the way to 'big girl school' yet. I don't have all my books and Mum isn't around to get them for me. Plus my hairy-faced father is always working, except when he is out for dinner with his stupid,