

GRACE

by Daily Florence

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The Greatest Race in the Universe
The End of Longtails: The Madmin Caves

CHAPTER 1

I stopped briefly to reduce the searing pain of the carpet burns on my knees before reaching my desk at the back of the room.

Since starting my job two weeks ago at the call centre, I had already been caught twice leaping from my crawling position on the floor and into the seat at my desk.

Mr John, the office manager, regularly spied on us through the large glass windows of his office at the front of the main call centre office. Today, however, I was in luck.

In one well-rehearsed (because I had pretty much done it every day since I'd first arrived), stealth, and might I say graceful move, I sprung upwards from the floor, slamming my bum into my seat and throwing on my headphones. I then, very swiftly, high-fived the call button, let my fur coat drop from my shoulders by doing tiny shudder movements and sat bolt upright, with wide-eyes, staring straight ahead—success.

Mr John hadn't noticed a thing.

The ringing in my headphones faded into the background as I scanned row after row of tightly packed losers (a.k.a: phone operators) in front of me, that I had the terrible misfortune of calling my co-workers.

The thing is, with these lazy idiots, and probably lots of other lazy idiots out there, because—let's face it—lazy idiots are everywhere, that they all dream about achieving lazy, stupid stuff, like living in a tiny cottage or getting their hands on a non-government funded pension.

They also dream about having two point four kids—whatever that bloody means—or owning a pair of undersized dogs so they don't have to walk them too far, or owning a set of chickens so they don't have to walk to the shop, or even growing their own vegetables—as if the world doesn't have enough vegetables, chickens or ruddy dogs for that matter.

People are so lazy: I'm sure it's an epidemic.

Take this office, for example, where everything has to be in reaching distance: the printer, the pens, the bin, the out tray, the in tray, the rubbers. With every new piece of equipment to arrive, there's a guaranteed inter-office-kick-off about who should be within arm's reach of it. I swear if management walked in with a bunch of colostomy bags the lazy sods would pull up their Burberry jumpers in unison and shout 'Already got one' with cheesy smiles and pointy fingers.

Anything for an easier life. No wonder they have stupid, easy-to-achieve dreams like that. Not me. I don't fit in here at all. I've got big dreams, ones which will blow the socks off these no-good losers—when I get around to it.

The type of dreams so big that important people will make a documentary about me after I die. Like that autopsy one: The Last Hours Of, or something like that. In it there will be tons of famous people mourning my death, followed by a red herring discovery of four aspirin in my blood, which everyone will temporarily think killed me, and then Dr. Jason Payne-James will blow everyone's minds by concluding that my death was a result of a squirrel addiction—the first recorded case ever.

Can you really die if you love squirrels too much? I should change that.

First on the agenda, I've really got to move out of my council flat; nobody's going to take me seriously in that dump. And get another face peel too. Ohh, and get a manicure at a proper salon. That'll be nice. Definitely got to do that. Hold on, maybe I should think about a pension; Gladys at fifty-five looks permanently hungry and she's got a state pension. Or maybe she's paleo? I should definitely ask her next time I see her. Whatever happens, I don't want to end up looking like her.

I don't know about you, but every once in a blue moon I really surprise myself. Normally, I rise out of bed and develop narcolepsy but this morning I seemed to be firing on all four cylinders. It was only five minutes past nine, no, wait, nine thirty-two, dammit, and I'd practically sorted my life out already.

As I listened to the continuous ringing in my earpiece, I suddenly spotted Denise and Rodney chomping on something suspicious. 'Two in one,' I said to myself as I reached for the end call button. Only before I had a chance to raise the alarm, a sharp voice bellowed through the earpiece.

'What?'

'Hello, Sir. My name's Grace and I'm calling today because I've calculated that I can save you £15,000 on your heating bill this year. Would you like to save £15,000?'

My eyes darted back and forth between Denise and Rodney as I spoke. I really needed to hit targets, so it was essential that I went through with the call, however, at the same time, there was no way I was letting the lazy sods get away with it.

'£15,000? What calculator did you use?'

I furiously rummaged around the papers on my desk, ripping out a laminated "standard questions and appropriate answers" training card from underneath a banana skin and scanning it with laser-like precision.

Shouting, nope, death threats, nope, high-pitched screams, nope, illness, nope, no money, hang up on them, really, I must have missed that one, calculators, calculators, calculators, calculators. There was nothing. I couldn't believe it. Nobody in the history of telephone sales had ever been asked this question. I was going to have to wing it because I couldn't remember the last time I saw a calculator.

'Calculator. Well, Sir, I use a small calculator with buttons that are round ... square, ish, a roundy square button calc—'

'I mean, £15,000, how exactly did you arrive at that figure?'

I looked back down at my notes. '£15,000, no Sir, gosh, where on earth did you get that figure from? £1,500. That's what I can save you. Would you like to save £1,500 per year on your heating bills?'

After a few short breaths down the phone, the potential customer replied, 'I would. Just hold the phone, I have to answer the door.'

I stroked my chin. Was he doing that age-old trick where he keeps me hanging on the phone for ages and then never returns? Would Denise and Rodney run out of food whilst I was waiting for the potential customer to answer the door?

There was simply no way I could chance it; I turned my multitasking skills up a notch and slammed my finger into my manager's extension button.

'What is it, Grace?'

'Mr John, they're at it again. See. There. Denise is eating grapes and Rodney is stuffing something in his mouth. Now will you sack them?'

All I heard was a slight moan down the phone and then Mr John's line went dead.

Of all the things. I wonder if he heard me?

I could hardly walk away from the phone. The guy who founded the call centre was such a legend that he'd burnt to death on his first shift. I had a lot to live up to, meaning there was only one thing left to do. I turned my multitasking dial up to full, rose to my feet and did huge giraffe waves in the direction of Mr John's office.

Mr John stood up and looked through the enormous glass office windows in my direction, and then, using both hands whilst squat jumping, I pointed to Denise and Rodney simultaneously.

But Mr John still did nothing, he just stood there with his arms crossed.

Clearly, he didn't understand what I was saying which meant I was going to have to shout. So, with a belly-busting roar, I screamed across the office. 'They're both eating, Mr John! Sack the pair of them now!'

Before I even had so much as a chance to duck, a grape, doing the speed of a rocket ship, smashed into my eye. I screamed as the pain seared down my face. Was I blind? It was so bad that I could feel my false eyelash slipping down my cheek.

I looked up with my one good eye to see Denise and the rest of the staff sniggering into their sleeves.

Then I did something my career advisor would call a "bad step". He says that our own bad situations are the ones which we create for ourselves. That we all have steps that lead up to the bad situations that we find ourselves in and that we are in total control of everything that happens to us. He says that we are not victims.

Honestly, my career advisor is so full of shit sometimes.

Anyway, it's probably best if I don't repeat what I screamed out so loud that the hard of hearing charity managed to hear it on the floor above, it's too rude, plus Mr John, Denise, Rodney and the dog in the ground floor pet shop are still alive, so potentially I could get sued. I will say at that very moment in time that they deserved it. Every single last bit of it. Maybe not the dog.

Afterwards was a blur. Mr John took me into his office and proceeded to call me names like "gross" and "Miss Duct", whilst the rest of the lazy sods stared at us through the window.

Even on the bus on the way home, people were staring at me. The pain had subsided but I was missing an eyelash so I had no choice but to travel the whole way home with one hand covering my eye.

I was glad to spot Gladys as we passed the shops though.

Remembering my earlier thoughts, I tried to shout to her through one of those tiny yet ridiculously high excuses for a window but, judging by the confused look on her face, she obviously didn't recognise me flying past with only half an eye.

After sitting down, however, I almost immediately regretted shouting that out, and swiftly concluded that maybe my career advisor was onto something because everyone on the bus was gawping at me so much that I had to spend the next five minutes explaining to the bus morons what "paleo" meant. People are so uneducated.

At home, I used my diamante telephone in my hallway to phone my career advisor, Dennis.

'Hello, I'd like to speak to Dennis...I don't know his second name...that's not possible. He's worked there for years...well, he's much older than me and I'm forty-nine. And he has a certain sense of been there, done that. Not the irritating kind of been there, done that, like new mothers or priests, the kind that you can really relate to. Saying that, once, when I found myself out of work due to a fish

allergy, he said these five nuggets of wisdom to me, Grace, you can do better. And I take those little nuggets with me always. Oh, and I tend to forget much of what he says due to concentrating far too much on his eyebrows when he tal...thanks...hello, Dennis, it's Grace. I've been sacked again...a grape assault...no police, I just plan on bouncing back quickly...tomorrow. Lovely, see you then.'

I then carefully pencilled my appointment with Dennis in my brand new 2019 ultimate squirrel wall calendar, which I love, and then I sat down very, very carefully on the end of my couch and stared at my surroundings.

The apartment looked different, felt different. Like when you're at home and skiving from school and everyone else is out and you've got the place to yourself. I shouldn't be here; I'm not supposed to see the apartment in this light. I mean, I do get Saturday and Sunday off but the place felt different on a Thursday.

I noticed things I'd never seen before, like how much dust there was when the rays of sun burst through the window, like how dirty the windows were, like how the windows were so dirty that the sun had trouble bursting through the window, like how I should probably stop hoarding fairy lights cause there's every chance I could get tangled up in them one day and die, like how my handmade (by me) sparkly mirror was actually a magic colour-changing one, like how it's probably a good thing that I don't have visitors because there was absolutely no way anyone could sit down, like how I'd forgotten what material my two sofas, recliner and rocking chair were made out of, like exactly how beautiful all of my squirrel teddies were ... 1, 2, 3 ... 145 ... 147 ... like how many stuffed squirrel teddies I had, like how I should probably stop filing unopened mail down the back of the recliner, although I reckon there's some space behind the couch I'm sitting on. Yes, yes, there is!

What on earth was I going to do with myself?

I decided to spend the next five minutes quietly immersing myself in my Thursday apartment, and after that I would choose to have either an early Saturday or an early Sunday. According to my diamante Elvis/squirrel clock, I lasted three minutes and four seconds—which was a personal best—before opting for an early Saturday.

My Thursataday started off with a couple of solid hours' squirrel spotting in the local park, followed by an overpriced coffee in a nearby caff, a rummage around a couple of charity shops, where I found a sparkly pair of gold trousers for £2 (fools), a set of fairy lights and a very useful ship captain's eye patch, a spot of pigeon chasing on the way home, where I pretend to be running for a taxi when I see a flock of birds so that they poo on strangers, and finally, I stopped at my favourite house, the one with the blue door, and spent ten minutes inspecting the new flowers in the garden and peeking in the windows when no one was looking—they'd bought a new microwave, show-offs. What a great day.

I ended it all with one of my famous macaroni cheese dishes out of a convenient packet, topped with a questionable yet palatable block of cheese that I found at the back of my fridge, and served it with an oversized glass of red which had been interestingly named "Dog's Breath". The young lad at my local-ish garage said that my new favourite wine, Dog's Breath, is from either China or Brazil, which he assures me is a sign of quality. Which is pretty fab really, considering it only cost £1.29 for a huge bottle. Thursataday had been such an adventure that I turned in early and slept like a dead person.

* * *

What the hell is wrong with people? I hated waiting for my career advisor; the waiting room was always full and he was always running late. A burly man who smelt like sweat, beer and dogs squashed himself into the seat next to me, leaving me no option but to lean further into the less smelly woman on my left so that my fur coat wasn't touching him. To add a layer of complexity, I then had to carefully reach into my handbag, which was crumpled in my lap, with no elbow room, and spray a few blasts of my Jimmy Foo, which helped.

Despite the misery of the waiting room, I was always glad to see my career advisor, Dennis. Usually I find people annoying but Dennis I could just about tolerate.

Suddenly, a set of eyebrows popped their head around the door and ushered me inside.

'Hello, Grace, how have you been?'

'Oh, you know, so, so, thanks.'

'Take a seat.'

I reviewed the seat for any signs of people dirt then sank into the chair. Dennis took a seat in front of me and studied my face.

'So, Grace, that looks sore.'

'Yes, well, a few weeks and it will—'

'Is that a skull and crossbones?'

'Oh, yes, well, the hospital had run out so I had to make do with their emergency supply of eye patches. Not ideal, you know, but as long as I keep away from the light.'

'Right, well, we've only got ten minutes so I'm glad you're okay but let's move on. So, where to start? Right, I know, how about you tell me what your plans are?'

'Plans for what?'

'Getting a job.'

'Well, I. Well, I didn't really ...'

I watched as Dennis stood up and walked over to the window and rubbed his temples. Call me Dirk but something didn't seem right; Dennis was usually much happier, nicer, more helpful. He usually came up with the plan, not me. Maybe I should have thought of a plan rather than leaving it all up to him? It's not like I ever paid him for his services. 'Sorry, Dennis, should I come back with a plan? I just thought that you could give me some money again until I get another job, like we always do.'

Dennis walked quickly back to his desk and sat down firmly.

I did everything I possibly could to ignore his eyebrows as he spoke.

'Why did you lose your job, Grace?'

'Which one?'

'This last one.'

'Because Mr John doesn't follow his own rules he set, because everyone in the office is a lazy sod, because—'

'No. You lost your job because you constantly complained about everyone in the office and then shouted something totally obscene across—'

'I was assaulted!'

'By. A. Grape.'

'And your point is?'

'You shouldn't have done any of it. Okay then, what about the ticket inspector job. Why did you lose that one?'

'Because I followed the rules?'

'No, no you didn't. You managed to give five cop cars, three police vans, two turned over articulated lorries, a minibus and a motorbike a ticket each on the M62, moments after a major road incident. You even managed to give three ambulances who attended the scene a ticket each.'

'Well, it's not my fault I'm bad with directions. They could have at least given me a map or something.'

'Bad with directions. You started out at the Albert Docks. Okay then, so what about the fish factory job?'

'You can't blame me for that. I was allergic to the fish, what was I supposed to do?'

'You filled a dump truck and emptied them all back into the sea.'

'Yeah, but I was allergic to them. I'm pretty sure, by law, they should have made provisions for me.'

'What, by not being in the fish business?'

'I think that would have been the politically correct thing to do.'

'Then how about throwing up over the fish yard owner?'

'He smelt like fish and set off my allergy. He believed me then.'

'For the love of ... Grace, not being able to stomach the smell of fish is not an allergy.'

'That's not what Google said.'

For a moment, Dennis just sat there and stared at me. I was sure his eyebrows had grown since I last saw him but that was beside the point. I had to concentrate.

'On the bright side, I saved a lot of fish from the slaughter that day,' I said with a wry smile.

'Grace.'

'Yes eyebro ... sorry ... Dennis.'

'They were already dead.'

'Ahh.'

'Okay, Grace, last one. There are so many to choose from, so which one shall I pick? Oh yes, that's right, then whose fault was it that you got sacked as a security guard at John Lennon Airport?'

'Give me a second,' I mumbled. I twiddled my fingers and thought very carefully. I knew that Dennis wanted me to say that the security guard one was my fault but there was simply no way. I shook my head. 'Sorry, I just can't see it.'

'So, who's fault was it?'

'Either Mr B. Omb's or his parents.'

'How?'

'Well, it's hardly my fault that I returned a briefcase to a man in an easily confusable suit on a plane that suddenly took off, is it? I was just trying to help the badly dressed idiot out.'

'He hadn't even had his bag scanned. You just picked up his briefcase when he bent down to remove his shoes and took off.'

'If you've got a second name like Omb, why would you call your kid Barry, anyway? What, did they think, like, he'd only ever travel by boat?'

Dennis faceplanted the desk in front of him. He'd never done that before but I was sure he could get away with it safely with those two face bushes of his.

'Not my fault for Barry's choice of suit either, is it?'

Dennis let out a moan before sitting up and resting his face in his hands.

'Grace.'

'Yes.'

'Did you read my letter?'

'Which one?'

'All of them.'

'Yes, what were they about?'

'About how you're being evicted. Your rent hasn't been paid for the last year. What were you thinking?'

'Not paid? No way. I have. It's going out by some standing order thingy. My bank sorts it out.'

'No, it hasn't. I spoke to the Council and nothing has been paid. They said that they have been writing to you over and over again, that you won't answer the door to them and every time they phone that you say 'I've just got to answer the door' and then don't come back to the phone.'

'Ah.'

'You did that to me when I phoned. Twice.'

'You phoned me?'

'You need to speak to the bank as a matter of urgency. You're being evicted tomorrow. How don't you know this information, Grace?'

'What?'

'And the other thing, if you answered my calls you would know, if you're sacked by gross misconduct then you're not entitled to Jobseeker's Allowance. The rules have changed. I can't help you with money this time.'

'Gross ... mis ... conduct. I've heard that before. Where did I hear that?'

'That's what you were just sacked for.'

'I thought you said I was sacked for complaining too much and shouting stuff. What are you saying?'

'I'm saying that I can't help you this time.'

'But ... but ... you're my career advisor. You always help me.'

Dennis rubbed his temples again. 'Grace, I am not your careers advisor. We keep going over this. I'm your benefits officer. I work for the Government.'

'But you always help me.'

'I know, that's because I like you and I want to help you. I help you much more than I should. I'm only supposed to hand out benefits but you're in here so much over the last twenty years or so. Grace, we've been going around in circles for years. I got you that job at the call centre as a favour. You promised me you wouldn't mess it up.'

'Then help me. I need your help now and you're not helping me.'

'I can't, Grace. The rules have changed since we last spoke. You have to go find a job immediately and sort your bank out. Do you have any family? Anyone that can help?'

'No. You help. You're the only person that helps me and now you're not helping me. How can you do this?'

'Listen to me, you must find a job and keep it. You've got to stop blaming everyone else for your own problems and stick at a job.'

'But you said I could do better. How am I supposed to do better when you won't help me?'

'I meant, to do better at holding a job down.'

'What, better at holding a crappy job down? I thought you meant I was too good for those crappy jobs and that I could do better, as in I could do better. How could you?'

'Grace, we're the same age—'

'Seriously, you're forty-nine?'

'And I've been in this one job since I was sixteen and you've had more jobs than I've had hot dinners.'

I stood up and kicked the chair I was sitting on. It hurt like hell but there was no way I was letting him see how much. 'You're just like everyone else. I bet you won't help because you're too lazy just like everyone else.'

'Don't turn this into my fault, Grace. You have to take ownership of ...'

I wasn't listening to another word more from that idiot. I stomped towards the door and shouted, 'Up yours, Dennis Eyebrows!' before slamming the door and stomping past the waiting room full of sniggering degenerates.

Outside, I felt like the world was crashing down on me; I gasped for breath and gripped onto the rusty handrail outside the benefits office and wailed, 'What's happening to me?'

I'm being evicted. No job, no money. Is that ... eugh, chewing gum. I was terrible at organising stuff too; I had that down as one of my weaknesses on my résumé. Dennis said I shouldn't put it but I insisted on being honest. And now I had no choice but to go visit the bank bitches—as if it couldn't get any worse.

* * *

'Hello, Madam. How may I help you today? Are you here to pay some money in or would you like to speak to an advisor?'

The first bank bitch, with a name tag that read "happiness delivery specialist", sprang out of the shadows and pounced on me before I'd barely put two feet in the door. Were they not busy or something? The place looked busy. Or had they somehow known I was coming down and lain in wait? I swiftly deduced that I was really going to have to stop telling Google so much about myself but then quickly realised: obviously they would have known they'd not paid my rent so they must have been expecting me.

'You should know,' I said in a demonic murmur, followed by an icy stare from the tops of my eyes.

Nothing fazed her and she continued to smile at me at an alarming rate. I was sure if I'd have walked in and said, 'I'm here to rob the place', she'd have shown me to the cash register. That is exactly why I call them "bank bitches"—because there ain't no way they don't go home at the end of the day and slag us all off after the crap they take. Although I think that meant I could get away with anything in here.

'I'm sorry, Madam. Our only psychic "happiness delivery specialist " is off today,' she said, with a high-pitched giggle. 'You will have to give me a better clue.'

'You've not paid my rent. Who do I kill?'

'Ahh, right then, you're going to need an advisor for that. If you could just take a seat over there with the rest of our valued customers and someone will be with you in a few minutes.'

She lied. I took a seat and waited five minutes and thirty seconds with only banking material to read and no biscuits. Valued nothing.

Finally, I was ushered into a partitioned-off stall and took a seat in front of a teenager called Coco, whose badge described her as a "banking evangelist". This was never going to end well.

'So, Madam, how may I—'

'You didn't pay my rent.'

'Well, now, if you can just give me your details.'

I proceeded to give her my name and address and she typed my details into her computer.

'Now, I can see that you have a standing order set up for the Council but you haven't paid them anything for the last year.'

'That's my point.'

'Because the day before you have a standing order for five hundred pounds going out to the Californian Squirrel Reserve. Every time you pay them you don't have enough to pay your standing order to the Council.'

I took a sharp intake of breath. 'Fraud. That's fraud.'

'Oh dear, Madam. I am very sorry. So, you don't know who the Californian Squirrel Reserve are? I will have to get in touch with our fraud department and get—'

'No, I know who they are, but they were only supposed to take five pounds once. Not five hundred every month.'

'I see. Well, that complicates things ...'

And then everything went blurry. Coco's underdeveloped, teenage vocabulary began swimming around my mind with words like: 'can't help', 'you will need to phone them', 'check what you signed', 'I'm a bank bitch', 'speak to the police', 'if you signed it then it's legal', 'I'm so annoying', 'there's nothing we can do', 'please leave', 'Madam, you must go', 'I'm calling the police'.

I can't really remember what I said, or how I got across the road, but next thing I knew I found myself shaking inside a red telephone box with the receiver in hand. I searched my handbag and took out a bunch of loose change and found the number for the Californian Squirrel Reserve in my 2018 ultimate squirrel address book, which I still love, and dialled the number.

'Hello, did you say the Californian Squirrel Reserve? My name's Grace and I ... you know me ... yes, yes, that's me. How did you know ... who ... I can hold.'

I shoved more coins into the phone as I waited.

'Hello ... well, thank you, thank you very much. It's just that you were supposed to only take five pounds but you've been taking five hundred a month and I ... well, yes, I do love squirrels ... yes, yes ... really ... wow ... a whole nature reserve, just for squirrels, that's incredible ... all because of me ... it's just that the money ... a plaque, in my honour, well that's very kind ... but the money, you see, my rent ... extinction, that's terrible ... no, no we can't have that ... of course, I completely understand, it's just that ... I can visit ... it would be an honour. It's just I thought I was paying you five ... the president has ... wow ... incredible ... only that the rent ... a Nobel Peace Prize, oh my God, that would be amazing ... of course ... no totally ... absolutely, we can't let those poor squirrels down. I'm really glad I could help, it's just that I've run out of money ...'

Say whaaat? Had BT exploded? I dialled again but the line was dead. What now? I swapped my six-inch platforms for my spare set of sparkly running trainers with night lights, which I conveniently kept in my bag, and legged it up to the pee-stained phone boxes outside Lime Street Station, but there was nothing, the line

was still dead. I decided my only option was to go to the Council and tell them all about the terrible mix up, but it was already 5:15 pm and the place closed at 5:30 pm.

As I ran to the offices of the Council, I noted that it had been approximately ten years since I had last run anywhere. The last time I had taken to my heels was when I walked into the garage for a Mars bar and accidentally ended up nicking a load of condoms.

I'd paid for the Mars bar just fine, but when I was halfway across the courtyard I heard somebody shout 'Thief!'. I immediately stopped in my tracks to identify the no-good lowlife but realised that everyone was looking at me. I then held up my left hand only to discover, to my horror, that I was holding two ribbed, one XL, four glow-in-the-dark and a 'kiss of mint'. I'd been checking them out as I queued up and forgotten to put them back down. It was an easy mistake to make but judging by the serial killer expression on the garage owner's face, he didn't think so. So rather than chance not being able to eat my Mars bar, which I had really been looking forward to, I decided to run. I do regret that now because the only other garage is another half a mile away so it has really complicated things over the years. Nevertheless, I enjoyed my Mars bar and water-bombing the neighbourhood kids.

I arrived at the Council offices like a single streak of light—the dark winter nights had already drawn in and I worked out that if I hadn't been so unhealthy then I could have genuinely been mistaken for Flash Gordon.

However, as I approached, I saw, through the large reinforced windows, that the lights were being turned off and the staff, who were wearing their coats, were making their way across the foyer to the door. I landed in a dead fly position on one of the windows and screamed at the top of my lungs: 'Nooooooooooooo! It was the Californian Squirrel Reserve! I can prove it to you when I get my Nobel Peace Prize!'

As I slowly slid down the window, I noted that all of the staff had come to a standstill with their arms folded. Now, I know this might surprise you, but I'm no genius; even I know that folded arms are never a good sign.

* * *

Afterwards, I didn't know what to do except stagger home in a blur of disbelief. It was so bad that I walked around four sets of pigeons.

My hands shook as I rattled the keys in my front door lock, and waves of indescribable pain swept through my body as I lovingly ran both my hands along the walls of my corridor and into the front room. I gripped my chest as I entered, realising that my squirrel teddies were about to be homeless too, their adorable little faces staring back at me in total innocence. What sort of a cruel, cruel world did we live in?

I stumbled over and stood in front of my glitter mirror and stared at myself. I looked terrible. With a toll of pure desperation steeped in every line, a torturous glaze in my eye, I raised my hands and cupped my face just as a deeply disconcerting scream, which I was sure had been festering inside me since I was a child, burst out of my mouth.

Eventually, I let my hands drop to my sides and stared at myself in silence.

After about thirty seconds though, I began to notice something ... something bubbling up and boiling over into my face ... a spark, a glimmer, a ray of hope that meant they weren't going to beat me.

Finally, I let out a smile as I realised that my entire life had been building up to this very moment. What was I thinking? I had listened to more than enough Beyoncé songs by now to know that I was a bottomless pit of fierce and I wasn't running out of that any time soon.

Nobody, and I meant nobody, was going to make me or my squirrel teddies homeless—this was war.

So that evening, I set my plans into action, devouring the entire collection of Home Alone films back to back for inspiration, and by 3 am on Saturday morning, I had barricaded my front door with one hundred and forty-eight squirrel teddies (I found another one), strapped a glitter bomb to the toilet seat, planted a stapler underneath the cushion on my couch nearest the door, put a spider in the fridge, carefully scattered some cornflakes on the floor underneath the windowsill, captured two pigeons and trapped them in the bedroom, squirted nail glue on the bathroom taps, hung my GHDs on the front door handle, and, as I couldn't find a spade, left a feather duster and a set of strict instructions with the weird guy in the flat next door.

Eventually, I fell asleep in a bolt upright position on the couch, holding a toilet brush and passionately reciting what I know to be meaningful quotes: "This is my house, I have to defend it", "Beat that you little trout sniffer" and "I made my family disappear".

It was exactly 9:05 am when they knocked on the door. I woke with a jolt, leaping from the couch and screaming, 'Keep the change, ya filthy animal!' as I tore down the hall towards the front door. Then I switched my GHDs on—which I still feel was well remembered considering I'd just woken up—and ninja crawled very quietly into my kitchen hiding place.

'Grace, Grace, let us in. We do have a key, you know.'

'Dammit.'

Eventually, they opened the door and, almost immediately, switched off my GHDs, which they noted could have been extremely dangerous. There was four of them: three big burly men and one woman who just stood there with her arms crossed.

I just slumped onto the floor of my hall and watched as they emptied the contents of my life onto the communal walkway outside my door. As they were hurling stuff out they kept telling me things that I was doing wrong, like keeping pigeons and hoarding squirrel teddies, something about dusting too. Not that it mattered now.

Finally, I found myself rocking back and forth, buried deep amongst my squirrel teddies in the communal walkway outside. I watched with tear-stained eyes as they coldly locked the front door and walked away. I can honestly say that it was the worst day of my life.

The only upshot, if there was even possibly one, was that one of the burly men walked out of the toilet covered in glitter after being glued to the sink for ten minutes. I did laugh. But that was the only funny thing about it.

Just to make matters worse, my useless neighbour, who only came out after they'd gone, handed me my feather duster back and declared that I was probably going to need it more than him. I think he was being sarcastic so I threw a squirrel teddy in his face.

CHAPTER 2

'Grace, is that you under there?'

The first thing I felt when I came around was someone poking me. I pulled a squirrel teddy away from my face and saw Gladys inspecting my mascara-stained cheeks.

'Grace, what happened? Why are you out here in the dark, asleep?'

'They kicked me out.'

'The Council?'

'Yes, them.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Well, I only found out yesterday.'

'Yesterday? They're supposed to give you six months' notice. They can't do that.'

'They did. It's just that—'

'You never read their letters, did you?'

'No.'

'Or answer their calls?'

'No.'

Gladys went very, very quiet and began further inspecting all of my belonging that were strewn all over the communal walkway.

'It was the Californian Squirrel Reserve. They've been taking all this money and I—'

'Get up, Grace,' Gladys said in a slow voice.

I threw my teddies off me and stood up straight, watching as Gladys turned her back to me and shuffled towards her apartment.

'Well, I suppose I will see you around,' I said, whilst pressing my light-up trainers into the concrete floor.

Gladys stopped and turned back to face me. 'Pick up your stuff and follow me.'

'Are you not going to—'

'No, I am bloody well not!'

It was worth a try.

Inside Gladys' apartment, I sat hanging on the edge of her couch, squeezing my bum in and doing my absolute darndest to look as comfortable as possible amidst all of my crap which I had piled high on the couch.

From the living room, I could hear the clatter of pots and pans and the boiling of water as Gladys made tea in the kitchen. I loved it when Gladys made a cup of tea. I'm a no-nonsense tea maker: wham-bam-tea, that's how I make it. Not Gladys. Oh, no, I swear she's been trained by Buddhist monks in the art of tea making. It arrives in a pot with a body warmer, there's sugar in a separate bowl, separate spoons for sugar and stirring, a milk jug, flowery cups with—would you believe it—saucers, and my favourite bit of all, Jaffa Cakes. It always feels good when Gladys makes a cup of tea.

As I drank my tea and chomped on Jaffa Cakes, I told Gladys all about my disastrous few days and how she came to find me asleep on the communal

walkway with all my belongings. She listened quietly and intently, reserving her right to devour Jaffa Cakes in favour of paying attention to every last word that I had to say. She was such a great listener and by the time I had finished, I was sure that my epic tale of sorrow and unfortunate circumstances had pulled on a few heartstrings.

'... and so I glitter bombed one of the guys and glued him to the bathroom taps. As for the other nine, well, I gave them all a good shouting at and hurled a couple of pigeons at them. But, well, they had the keys and I couldn't hold them off, and I'm just a small, small-ish, woman. I didn't stand a chance. In the end, I was just so tired and I didn't know what to do.'

Gladys remained stoic.

'Em, Gladys, did you hear me?'

'Yes.'

'Then, well ...'

'So, let me get this straight.' Gladys sat her cup down on the small tray which was clipped to the arm of the chair. 'You've been breeding pigeons?'

'No, no, I just enlisted them to fight off the bad people. Should have stolen a cat though, now I think about it.'

'So, is the bad guy still glued to your sink?'

'No, Gladys. He escaped.'

'And who's Macaulay Pulkin? Where does he come into all of this?'

'He's just the kid who gave me all the good ideas.'

'Ahh, now I get it.' Gladys took another swig of her tea and placed it back down. 'So there are teenagers running the bank,' she said whilst rubbing her chin. 'That explains everything.'

'No, Gladys, that's not the point of the story, the point is—'

'You have nowhere to live. I get that point.'

'Oh, right.'

'And the Californian Squirrel Reserve ...'

'Yes, them. Can you believe it? There's a bunch of squirrels in California living like the Kardashians because of me.'

'But you love squirrels, right?'

'Yeah, but not all my wages ...'

'It could have been worse.'

'How, how could this be worse?'

'You know, gorillas, apes, monkeys—'

'Oh, oh, you know what, it so could be. Imagine if I had been funding a rockstar lifestyle for a bunch of gorillas, that would have been terrible. Have you seen that Planet of the Apes yet?'

'It's on my list.'

'We will so have to watch that together, Gladys. Honestly, I know I keep saying this but you will never feel the same about gorillas or apes ever again. They're so clever, like scarily clever, they are so going to evolve and take over the world one day. Did you know, if we left a bunch of monkeys with some typewriters that they would eventually be able to type up the entire collection of Harry Potter books. Rowling would be seething. We seriously need to stop them. And keep them away from typewriters.'

'Grace.'

'Yes.'

'Don't we descend from apes?'

'Do. We. What?'

'I know, let's talk about what you're going to do for work.'
'Gladys. You haven't seriously been watching that TV show again, have you? That, what's it called, "Unbelievable Animals on This Planet".'
'Once.'
I threw my hands in the air. 'Are you crazy?'
'But, Grace—'
'No, Gladys, I am telling you, you have to stop that. Saying there's like blue fish in the sea, ones that light up under water, things with eight legs. I mean, come on, the title has got to give it away.'
'Let's move on. So, what are you going to do now?'
I grabbed another Jaffa Cake and shoved it into my mouth. 'A bumeless swhelter, mabeesh.'
'What did you say?'
'A hummshi ...'
'Finish what's in your mouth first.'
I chewed fast and swallowed. 'A homeless shelter, probably.'
There was a long silence before Gladys next spoke, so I grabbed a squirrel teddy and hugged it to kill the awkwardness.
'Grace, how about you stay here?'
'Really?'
'Just till you find a job.'
'That would be amazing.'
'But you have to find a job and then find somewhere else to live.'
'But where am I going to put all my squirrel teddies?'
'But you have to find a job, right?'
'Yes. But what about my squirrel teddies? Your flat is tiny. Do you have any spare cupboards?'
'We could give some—'
'No, absolutely no way.'
'Just a few.'
'No way!'
'Grace, they're piled up everywhere. How many do you have?'
'One hundred and forty-eight, no, hang on, one hundred and forty-seven. I threw my favourite one with the red bow tie at the weird guy next door. Damn, I need to get that back.'
'Could he keep it?'
'Never.'
'Okay, here's what we will do. You can sleep on the couch but you are going to need to sort through those teddies otherwise you are not going to have anywhere to sleep. Grace, honestly, I don't think I can cope with that amount of teddies around here. This flat is a tiny one bedroom and you've already filled half the front room. You need to deal with them.'
I sank backwards into my squirrels. 'A Nobel Peace Prize though, eh. Just think of all the things I can do with that.'

I don't know about you, but night time is when I feel like I come alive. It's like a wave of powerful electricity surges through my body, firing up my brain into a super-sharp thinking machine and rendering my body the most efficient, highly-organised vessel on the planet. Not Gladys; she was asleep before Planet of the Apes

was even halfway through. Not that I hold it against her, of course. It had gone 9:30 pm and she did say she went to bed at 9 pm. So, when she finally turned in for the night, I got straight to work—right after I finished Planet of the Apes.

First on the agenda, I had to deal with the squirrel teddy issue. Gladys had spent the entire evening sporadically making it perfectly clear that my squirrels were a major issue: 'I've just tripped over one. Am I sitting on one? Is that one staring me out? I'm never going to sleep tonight. I don't care what you named them. Don't tell me'. She was very cold about the whole thing and, quite frankly, I didn't think I could take another night of her whining: I needed a plan.

Two hours later, I slammed my bum back down on the couch and admired my handy work. And it was impressive, even if I say so myself.

Overhead, I had wired in two million fairy lights and formed a web pattern across the entire front room ceiling which hung down to about halfway down the room. You had to duck to walk but Gladys was pretty short so that wasn't going to be an issue. Then I managed to dangle approximately sixty squirrels overhead and it was beautiful. I could have fitted more in but there were too many lights.

Next, I set to work strategically planting stuffed squirrel teddies in the most unobvious places, making sure that they blended in with Gladys' belongings so that she wouldn't notice them.

I got five on the mantelpiece, two of which fitted straight into her peach vases from the eighties, and three hugging a scary doll each, a load on the bottom level of her drinks trolley, three in her chequered folding shopping trolley with wheels, two underneath her rocking chair, two in her bathroom cabinet, two in her washing basket, some around the bath, one tied to the hoover, one to the mop, one hanging off the long light switch in the bathroom, four on top of her wardrobe (thank goodness she was a heavy sleeper), forty on her bed (thank goodness she was the size of an Alsatian and had a double bed), three in her dresser drawers and then scattered the rest inside the cupboards in the kitchen. My couch bed was finally clear and I began to really look forward to sleeping like a dead person in it.

Despite the lateness of the hour, however, there was still one last squirrel teddy who I simply couldn't forget about, my favourite one of them all: the one with the red bow tie that I had thrown at my weird neighbour's face. His name was Mr Nutty McNutnut and his favourite place was next to Miss Bushy McBushbush on my couch.

I hated to think of him out there, all alone, with my weird excuse for a neighbour. I cursed myself for giving him that feather duster. I should have known not to get that layabout loser involved and now I had gone and got Mr Nutty McNutnut into a terrible situation. There was nothing for it—I was going to have to save him.

The stars and moon were out as I crept towards the weird bloke's apartment along the open communal hallway. The emergency light had gone so I used my trainers in a gentle tapping motion to light the way as I made my way through the dark. It wasn't far, only a few doors away, a ten-second walk at a fast pace, but the shadows seemed to loom as I gripped the metal railings along the edge of the walkway and heel tapped my way forward. On the other side of the railings, there was nothing but a vast blackness of night which looked poised to consume me.

I had rather expected to see Mr Nutty McNutnut sitting on the doorstep of weird guy's flat looking happy to see me, but as I approached there didn't seem to be anything in front of his door. It was difficult to see through; the moon was helping a bit but I still struggled.

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