

NATE YU'S BLAST FROM THE PAST



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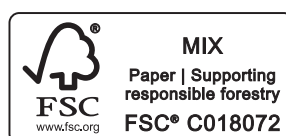
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*This book is dedicated to children everywhere
affected by war*



Meet Queen Elizabeth III

Ant fact: Ants have a nomadic phase after their queen lays her eggs. They move to a new area and attack its inhabitants, taking resources for themselves.

I'm an amateur myrmecologist. That means I love to study ants. I find them fascinating. When I got an ant farm kit for my birthday last year, I started a journal called 'The Secret Lives of Ants'. Every day I write down a new ant fact and note any changes in the colony. I haven't met another person who loves ants as much as I do – I tend not to share my love of ants with other people, because the one time I did, it ended badly. Maybe that's why I find it hard to make friends.

A couple of days ago, the parentals and I moved one hundred and fifty-six miles to Liverpool from Sheepstone, the village where I grew up. The ants were not thrilled

about it, and neither was I. My old bedroom had a view of a field with cows in it, but the houses on my new street all look the same. Today, when I opened my curtains, I saw wet pavements, overflowing bins and cars parked on kerbs. It's just another reminder that we're not in Sheepstone any more.

Mum and Momo (aka the parentals) said this was the perfect place for a 'new beginning'. I silently disagreed with them. The only thing I'd unpacked so far were my clothes and my ant farm tank from the cardboard boxes that had NATE'S ROOM scribbled on them.

I drew the curtains shut to block out the dreariness, switched on my desk lamp and angled it at my most prized possession: my ant farm. Peering through the glass of the tank, I searched for Queen Elizabeth III, aka Betsy, the queen of the colony. Her Royal Highness hadn't appeared since we'd left Sheepstone. Two days of not seeing my favourite ant was making me anxious.

'Betsy, where are you?' I yawned. 'I want to see you before I leave for my new school.'

I tapped the glass, hoping she would emerge. What if she was dead? If Betsy died, then the colony was toast. An ant colony can't survive without its queen.

I picked up my magnifying glass, slowly moving from the top to the bottom, trying to catch a glimpse of her. Usually that was easy, because she was three times bigger than the other ants. Momo called her 'Big Momma Ant', which I suppose was accurate. She was big AND she was a momma – her only job was to lay eggs. She didn't do



much else, unlike real-life kings and queens, who mainly do funny hand waves and open libraries.

A group of worker ants huddled like a rugby scrum at one end of a newly formed tunnel, crawling all over each other. I hoped they weren't gathering for an ant funeral. A few shifted to the side, and then I saw her in all her splendour – Queen Betsy! She wasn't moving, but then her antennae twitched, so I knew she was alive. The worker ants were protecting her with their bodies, like secret service agents. I observed the rest of the colony. Other ants got on with their various jobs, but Betsy remained a snoozing monarch.

'You didn't want to move to this city either, did you, Betsy?' I said.

Two of her assistants washed her face and then they started shoving her bum, trying to wake her up. I saw one of her legs stretch out. Then she moved another one. Slowly, her head turned from side to side at the two ants cleaning her – she was obviously giving them the stink eye.

'Hey, leave her alone! Let her lie in for a bit longer,' I said, then I yawned again. 'I know how you feel, Betsy. I was tossing and turning till three this morning. Last night Momo told me it was going to be grand, but she says that about everything. The world could be ending, and she'd still say, "It'll be grand."'

In my opinion, ants are the best insects you can have as pets. Stick insects, in comparison, just want to camouflage themselves and pretend they're twigs, which I totally get. Sometimes I want to blend in and hide too. But deep down I'd want to be an ant. They're tiny but powerful and





definitely underrated as a species.

All right, I'll come clean. Ants weren't my first choice of pet. I didn't let Betsy know that, otherwise she'd be really upset. I actually wanted a dog. One of those massive Saint Bernards. Sure they're slobbery, but they're also kind-hearted. However, it was a firm no from the parentals when I'd asked for one. Ants were the next best thing. They don't take up much room, they're easy to look after, and they don't drool all over your bed.

I pulled out the chair at my desk, then sat down and opened my ant journal. The latest ant fact I'd written was about the nomadic phase. I am in a nomadic phase too, obviously without the pillaging and coldblooded murder, of course.

Chatting with Betsy before I went down for breakfast was a habit from Sheepstone. It was the only familiar routine I had now.

'Do you know what I love about you lot?' I said to her. 'It's that you all rely on each other. Everyone knows their place and what job they're good at.' I peered into the glass tank. Betsy was lounging in one of the left side tunnels.

'You know what I'm going through, don't you, Betsy?' I said. 'We're pals for life. The whole world revolves around you, and sometimes a lot of pressure comes with that. It's sort of the same for me too. My parentals are like your bodyguard ants that protect you.' Betsy was now alert. Her antennae were standing upright, as if she was listening to what I was saying. 'Mum said that this move was because she wanted to advance her career as a midwife, but I know





that's not the real reason. She and Momo think I don't know that they moved here for *me*. I wish they wouldn't always try and protect me from things. OK, maybe I should have told them why I *really* couldn't go back to my old school, but I'm fine now. We could have stayed in Sheepstone.'

One of the worker ants brought Betsy her breakfast. A globule of honey. She squished it into Betsy's face, and she began eating it.

'What if I can't handle my new school and don't make any friends?' I asked as Betsy's mandibles went in and out a few times. 'I miss our village – people are louder here. Apart from Momo, who's loud everywhere.'

I wasn't sure if Betsy understood or cared, but I was happy to have someone to talk to.

'Speaking of Momo . . . I think she's outside.'

I could hear Momo on the landing. She walks heavier than Mum, and the floorboards make a crunching sound. She knocked and opened the door before I had a chance to answer. When she looked in, I noticed her short brown hair was wet.

'Who're you chatting to, Nate?' Momo asked in her booming Yorkshire accent.

'Betsy,' I replied, looking back down at my journal. I scribbled a diagram of the new tunnels that I'd seen this morning.

'You're talking to the ants again?' Momo said, coming over to the desk. 'You know you can always talk to me, and Lou too. We're real-live human beings – look!' she chuckled, pinching the skin at the top of her arm. 'What's





that Betsy lass got that we haven't, eh?'

'For one, she's royalty. Two, she's a good listener,' I said. 'And three, she can carry fifty times her own body weight.'

'Ah, you got me – I can't beat that!' Momo laughed, and I smiled.

She peered at the tank. 'Can she really hear you? Do ants even have ears?'

I shrugged, then I wrote 'Do ants have ears?' in my journal.

'Excited about your first day?' Momo asked, changing the subject. 'Want us to come with you?'

'I can walk by myself,' I told her. Showing up with the parentals in tow wouldn't be a good look, especially as I was starting Year 7 halfway through the school year.

'Are you sure? It's no problem. Lou's first shift at the clinic isn't until this afternoon.'

'Nope, I'm fine,' I said, closing my journal.

'Lou's making your sandwiches – come down so I can take a photo of you in your new uniform. It'll be grand!'

I held in a groan. Not *more* photos. Momo was always taking photos of me and making little books documenting what she called my 'developmental stages'. I guess it was like what I was doing with the ants, making notes of changes, but this was more annoying! I often closed my eyes in the photos, which made Momo even more determined to get a good shot of me.

'Well, hurry up and get dressed.' With that, Momo left my room and shut the door behind her.

I glanced at the new school uniform that was hanging on





the back of my door, then I picked up the magnifying glass to find Betsy again.

‘Where are you now, Betsy?’ I wondered aloud.

I scanned near the bottom of the tank. At last, I found her and felt a sense of relief. Like me, Betsy just wanted to hide away this morning. The ants stood to attention for a split second as I tapped the glass, but then began scurrying about again.

Before I could start talking to Betsy, Mum shouted up the stairs: ‘Are you ready? It’s twenty to nine!’

‘Come on, Nate – you don’t want to be late!’ Momo added. ‘Hey, that rhymes!’

‘I’m ready!’ I called as I scrambled into the uniform of black trousers, white shirt and black jumper. I grabbed the red tie and quickly wound it into something that resembled a knot.

‘I’ve gotta go, ant pals.’ I sighed. ‘Take it easy on your queen – she’s been through a lot,’ I told the colony. ‘Wish me luck. I’m gonna need it.’

The worker ants rubbed their antennae together, as if they were applauding me. Betsy wiped some honey from her face.

I took in a deep breath, then pursed my lips, leaving a small gap. I released the breath slowly, like Mum had taught me, as if I was one of the pregnant ladies she helped when they were giving birth.

I jogged downstairs. Mum was in the kitchen and Momo was unpacking a cardboard box in the hallway, searching for something. I grabbed the black school shoes from





the rack by the front door and slipped my feet in. They reminded me of an ant's exoskeleton. I peered at the right shoe. There was a stain on the toe. Then I remembered the last time I'd worn these shoes. It was at my old school. The one I attended for exactly one week before I left. The stain was Pepsi. I walked a few steps and one of the shoes made an eek sound – like a fart. These were unlucky shoes.

'Mum, I can't wear these. They're rubbing my little toe,' I said, pointing at the side of my right shoe. 'Can I wear my trainers instead?'

'Just wear them for a couple of days to loosen them up,' Mum said, smiling as she came over to me. 'You didn't get much use out of them last time.'

Momo shot her a look. I could tell Mum immediately regretted what she'd said.

'I'm sorry, love. What I meant to say is that this time will be different,' Mum added quickly. 'It's going to be much better. I promise.' She hugged me tightly and disappeared into the kitchen.

Momo nodded. 'We can get you more shoes. Oh, and it's perfect timing too. I read somewhere that buying new clothes for the first day of the Chinese New Year represents a fresh beginning – it's coming up soon. Try to wear them for now, eh.' She patted my arm.

'All right,' I said, and then Momo started welling up. I wasn't sure if I'd upset her by saying the shoes were a bit tight. 'Oh . . . No, don't cry, Momo – the shoes are fine.'

'I'm not crying about the shoes. I'm being a big sappy duck. It's just seeing you in your new uniform, that's all.'





You look grand, Nate, proper smart.’ She bent over and tried to straighten the tie. ‘And Lou’s right – it’s going to be brilliant here. You wait and see. And I bet you’re glad you don’t have to do any more homeschooling with me!’

Mum came out of the kitchen with a plastic box with sandwiches and crisps in it. She put it in my navy JanSport backpack, which was hanging on a peg by the front door.

‘Doesn’t he look fab, Lou?’ Momo said. She pointed the back of her phone at me, motioning for me to stand by the door.

‘He does look dapper!’ Mum said, then she locked eyes with me. ‘Are you all right, Nate?’

‘I’m fine,’ I lied. I didn’t want her to know I was anxious about being in a huge school in a city where I knew no one. I wish I’d told them that I liked living in our little village, that it was home. But we’d moved and that was it.

‘If the school lunches look all right, then you can have those instead of sandwiches if you want,’ Mum said.

Momo pointed at the clock. It said eight fifty-five. ‘Love, we need to drive you.’

‘I’ve got to go!’ I gasped.

‘Come on – get in the car,’ Mum said, grabbing her handbag.

‘All right!’ I said, getting my backpack and coat. ‘But I’m walking by myself the rest of the week.’

I could feel my jaw tighten as we got into the car.

When we pulled up outside Castleton Academy, the school bell was ringing. I’d just made it. Kids were already rushing inside, but both of my mums got out of the car too. Momo



began to take photos of me with her phone.

‘OK then . . . This is totally not awkward,’ I muttered.
‘Bye.’

‘Have a good day, love,’ Mum said. ‘Change is good.’

Change is good when it’s like *metamorphosis*. That’s what ants go through when they’re in the pupa stage.

‘Yeah,’ I replied.

The big grey building in front of me loomed tall and uninviting. I reluctantly gave them both a little wave, hoping no one else would see. Peering down at my squeaky shoes, I noticed a single ant scurrying near a crack in the pavement.

Hello, ant. Where are your friends? I asked silently.

It disappeared down the gap. I wished I could disappear too.