1

Scratch 'N' Sniff

Mr Stink stank. He also stunk. And if it is correct English to say he stinked, then he stinked as well. He was the stinkiest stinky stinker who ever lived.

A stink is the worst type of smell. A stink is worse than a stench. And a stench is worse than a pong. And a pong is worse than a whiff. And a whiff can be enough to make your nose wrinkle.

It wasn't Mr Stink's fault that he stank. He was a tramp, after all. He didn't have a home and so he never had the opportunity to have a proper wash like you and me. After a while the smell

just got worse and worse. Here is a picture of Mr Stink.



He is quite a snappy dresser in his bow-tie and tweed jacket, isn't he? But don't be fooled. The illustration doesn't do justice to the smell. This could be a scratch 'n' sniff book, but the smell

would be so bad you would have to put it in the bin. And then bury the bin. Very deep underground.

That's his little black dog with him, the Duchess. The Duchess wasn't any particular breed of dog, she was just a dog. She smelt too, but not as bad as Mr Stink. Nothing in the world really smelt as bad as him. Except his beard. His beard was full of old bits of egg and sausage and cheese that had fallen out of his mouth years before. It had never, ever been shampooed so it had its own special stink, even worse than his main one.

One morning, Mr Stink simply appeared in the town and took up residence on an old wooden bench. No one knew where he had come from, or where he might be going. The town folk were mostly nice to him. They sometimes dropped a few coins at his feet, before rushing off with their eyes watering. But no one was really *friendly*

towards him. No one stopped for a chat.

At least, not till the day that a little girl finally plucked up the courage to speak to him – and that's where our story begins.

"Hello," said the girl, her voice trembling a little with nerves. The girl was called Chloe. She was only twelve and she had never spoken to a tramp before. Her mother had forbidden her to speak to 'such creatures'. Mother even disapproved of her daughter talking to kids from the local council estate. But Chloe didn't think Mr Stink *was* a creature. She thought he was a man who looked like he had a very interesting story to tell – and if there was one thing Chloe loved, it was stories.

Every day she would pass him and his dog in her parents' car on the way to her posh private school. Whether in sunshine or snow, he was always sitting on the same bench with his dog by

his feet. As she luxuriated on the leather of the back seat with her poisonous little sister Annabelle, Chloe would look out of the window at him and wonder.

Millions of thoughts and questions would swim through her head. Who was he? Why did he live on the streets? Had he ever had a home? What did his dog eat? Did he have any friends or family? If so, did they know he was homeless?

Where did he go at Christmas? If you wanted to write him a letter, what address would you put on the envelope? 'The bench, you know the one – round the corner from the bus stop'? When was the last time he'd had a bath? And could his name *really* be Mr Stink?

Chloe was the kind of girl who loved being alone with her thoughts. Often she would sit on her bed and make up stories about Mr Stink. Sitting on her own in her room, she would come

up with all kinds of fantastical tales. Maybe Mr Stink was a heroic old sailor who had won dozens of medals for bravery, but had found it impossible to adapt to life on dry land? Or perhaps he was a world-famous opera singer who one night, upon hitting the top note in an aria at the Royal Opera House in London, lost his voice and could never sing again? Or maybe he was really a Russian secret agent who had put on an elaborate tramp disguise to spy on the people of the town?

Chloe didn't know anything about Mr Stink. But what she did know, on that day when she stopped to talk to him for the first time, was that he looked like he needed the five-pound note she was holding *much* more than she did.

He seemed lonely too, not just alone, but lonely in his soul. That made Chloe sad. She knew full well what it was like to feel lonely.

Chloe didn't like school very much. Mother had insisted on sending her to a posh all-girls secondary school, and she hadn't made any friends there. Chloe didn't like being at home much either. Wherever she was she had the feeling that she didn't quite fit in.

What's more, it was Chloe's least favourite time of year. Christmas. Everyone is supposed to love Christmas, especially children. But Chloe hated it. She hated the tinsel, she hated the crackers, she hated the carols, she hated having to watch the Queen's speech, she hated the mince pies, she hated that it never really snowed like it's supposed to, she hated sitting down with her family to a long, long dinner, and most of all, she hated how she had to pretend to be happy just because it was December 25th.

"What can I do for you, young lady?" said Mr Stink. His voice was unexpectedly posh. As

no one had ever stopped to talk to him before, he stared slightly suspiciously at this plump little girl. Chloe was suddenly a bit frightened. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to talk to the old tramp after all. She had been working up to this moment for weeks, months even. This wasn't how it had all played out in her head.

To make matters worse, Chloe had to stop breathing through her nose. The smell was starting to get to her. It was like a living thing, creeping its way up her nostrils and burning the back of her throat.

"Erm, well, sorry to bother you..."

"Yes?" said Mr Stink, a little impatiently. Chloe was taken aback. Why was he in such a hurry? He *always* sat on his bench. It wasn't like he suddenly needed to go somewhere else.

At that moment the Duchess started barking at her. Chloe felt even more scared. Sensing

this, Mr Stink pulled the Duchess's lead, which was really just a bit of old rope, to encourage her to be quiet.

"Well," Chloe went on nervously, "my auntie sent me five pounds to buy myself a Christmas present. But I don't really need anything so I thought I would give it to you."

Mr Stink smiled. Chloe smiled too. For a moment it looked as if he was going to accept Chloe's offer, then he looked down at the pavement.





"Thank you," he said. "Unimaginable kindness, but I can't take it, sorry."

Chloe was confused. "Why ever not?" she asked.

"You are but a child. Five pounds? It's too, too generous."

"I just thought—"

"It's really kind of you, but I'm afraid I can't accept. Tell me, how old are you, young lady? Ten?"

"TWELVE!" said Chloe loudly. She was a little short for her age, but liked to think she was grown-up in lots of other ways. "I'm twelve. Thirteen on January the ninth!"

"Sorry, you're twelve. Nearly thirteen. Go and buy yourself one of those new musical stereo discs. Don't you worry about an old vagabond like me." He smiled. There was a real twinkle in his eye when he smiled.

"If it's not too rude," said Chloe, "can I ask you a question?"

"Yes, of course you can."

"Well, I would love to know: why do you live on a bench and not in a house like me?"

Mr Stink shuffled slightly and looked anxious. "It's a long story, my dear," he said. "Maybe I will tell you another day."

Chloe was disappointed. She wasn't sure there would *be* another day. If her mother found out that she was even talking to this man, let alone offering him money, she would do her nut.

"Well, sorry for bothering you," said Chloe. "Have a lovely day." As the words came out she cringed. What a stupid thing to say! How could he possibly have a lovely day? He was a smelly old tramp, and the sky was growing gloomy with black clouds. She took a few paces up the street, feeling embarrassed.

"What's that on your back, child?" called out Mr Stink.

"What's what on my back?" asked Chloe, trying to look over her shoulder. She reached round and tore a piece of paper from her blazer. She peered at it.

Written on the piece of paper, in thick black letters, was a single word.

LOSER!

Chloe felt her stomach twist with humiliation. Rosamund must have sellotaped it to her when she left school. Rosamund was the head girl of the cool gang. She was always bullying Chloe, picking on her for eating too many sweets, or for being poorer than the other girls at school, or for being the girl neither team ever wanted on their side in hockey matches. As Chloe had left school

today Rosamund patted her on the back several times, saying "Merry Christmas", while all the other girls laughed. Now Chloe knew why. Mr Stink rose creakily from his bench and took the paper from Chloe's hands.



"I can't believe I've been going round with that on my back all afternoon," said Chloe. Embarrassed to feel tears welling up, she looked away, blinking into the sunlight.

"What is it, child?" asked Mr Stink, kindly.

Chloe sniffed. "Well," she said, "it's true, isn't it? I really am a loser."

Mr Stink bent down to look at her. "No," he said, authoritatively. "You're not a loser. The real loser is the person who stuck it to you in the first place."



Chloe tried to believe him, but couldn't quite. For as long as she could remember she had felt like a loser. Maybe Rosamund and all those other girls in her gang were right.

"There's only one place for this," said Mr Stink. He screwed up the piece of paper and, like a professional cricketer, expertly bowled it into



the bin. Chloe clocked this and her imagination instantly started whirring; had he once been captain of the England cricket team?

Mr Stink brushed his hands together. "Good riddance to bad rubbish," he said.

"Thanks," murmured Chloe.

"Not at all," said Mr Stink. "You mustn't let bullies get you down."

"I'll try," said Chloe. "Nice to meet you Mr... um..." she began. Everyone called him Mr Stink, but she didn't know if he knew that. It felt rude to say it to his face.

"Stink," he said. "They call me Mr Stink."

"Oh. Nice to meet you, Mr Stink. I'm Chloe."

"Hello, Chloe," said Mr Stink.

"You know, Mr Stink," said Chloe, "I still might go the shops. Do you need anything? Like a bar of soap or something?"

"Thank you, my dear," he replied. "But I have

no use for soap. You see, I had a bath only last year. But I would *love* some sausages. I do adore a nice meaty sausage..."

2

Icy Silence

"Mother?" said Annabelle.

Mother finished chewing her food completely, then swallowed it, before finally replying.

"Yes, my darling child?"

"Chloe just took one of her sausages off her plate and hid it in her napkin."

It was Saturday evening, and the Crumb family sat at the dining room table, missing *Strictly Come Dancing* and *The X-Factor* as they ate their dinner. Mother had banned watching television and eating at the same time. She had decided that it was 'awfully common'. Instead

the family had to sit in icy silence and eat their dinner staring at the walls. Or sometimes Mother would choose a subject for discussion, normally what she would do if she ran the country. That was her absolute favourite. Mother had given up running a beauty salon to stand for Parliament, and had no doubt in her mind that one day she would be Prime Minister.

Mother had named the white Persian family cat Elizabeth, after the Queen. She was obsessed with Being Posh. There was a downstairs loo that was kept locked for 'very important guests', as if a member of the royal family was going to swing by for a waz. There was a china tea set in the cupboard that was 'for best', and had never once been used. Mother even sprayed air freshener in the garden. Mother would never go out, and not even answer the door, unless immaculately groomed, with her beloved pearls

around her neck and her hair made stiff with enough hairspray to create its own hole in the ozone layer. She was so used to turning up her nose at everybody and everything, it was in danger of staying that way. Here's a picture of her.



My word, she looks posh, doesn't she?

Unsurprisingly Father, or Dad as he preferred to be called when Mother wasn't around, opted

for a quiet life and usually didn't speak unless spoken to. He was a big powerful man, but his wife made him feel small inside. Dad was only forty, but he was already going bald and starting to stoop. He worked long hours at a car factory on the edge of the town.

"Did you hide a sausage in your napkin, Chloe?" demanded Mother.

"You are always trying to get me into trouble!" snapped Chloe.

This was true. Annabelle was two years younger than Chloe, and one of those children adults think are perfect, but other children don't like because they are snotty little goody-goodies. Annabelle loved getting Chloe into trouble. She would lie on her bed in her bright pink room upstairs and roll around crying, shouting "CHLOE, GET OFF ME! YOU ARE HURTING ME!" even though Chloe was

quietly writing away in her room next door. You *could* say that Annabelle was evil. She was certainly evil to her older sister.

"Oh, sorry Mother, it just slipped into my lap," said Chloe guiltily. Her plan had been to smuggle the sausage out for Mr Stink. She had been thinking about him all evening, imagining him shivering out there in the cold dark December night as they sat in the warm, eating away.

"Well then Chloe, unroll it from your napkin and put it back on your plate," ordered Mother. "I am so ashamed that we are even eating sausages for dinner. I gave your father strict instructions to dispatch himself to the supermarket and purchase four wild sea-bass fillets. And he comes home with a packet of sausages. If anyone called around and saw us eating food like this it would be hideously embarrassing. They'd think we were savages!"

"I am sorry, my darling wife," protested Dad. "They were all out of wild sea-bass fillets." He gave Chloe the tiniest wink as he said this, confirming her suspicion that he had deliberately disobeyed Mother's orders. Chloe smiled at him discreetly. She and her dad both loved sausages and lots of other food that Mother didn't approve of, like burgers, fish-fingers, fizzy drinks, and especially Mr Whippy ice-cream ('the devil's spume', Mother called it). "I have never eaten anything from a van," she would say. "I'd rather die."

"Right now, all hands on deck as we clear up," said Mother when they had finished eating. "Annabelle, my precious angel, you clear the table, Chloe, you can wash up and Husband, you can dry." When she said "all hands on deck", what she really meant was everybody's hands except hers. As the rest of the family all went

about their duties Mother reclined on the sofa and started unwrapping a wafer-thin chocolate mint. She allowed herself one chocolate mint a day. She nibbled so infuriatingly slowly she made each one last an hour.

"One of my Bendicks luxury chocolate mints has gone walkies again!" she called out.

Annabelle shot Chloe an accusing look before returning to the dining room to collect some more plates. "I bet it was you, fatty!" she hissed.

"Be nice, Annabelle," chided Dad.

Chloe felt guilty, even though it wasn't her who had been scoffing her mother's chocolates. She and Dad assumed their familiar positions at the sink.

"Chloe, why were you trying to hide one of your sausages?" he asked. "If you didn't like it, you could have just said."

"I wasn't trying to hide it, Dad."

"Then what were you doing with it?"

Suddenly Annabelle appeared with another stack of dirty plates and the pair fell silent. They waited a moment until she had gone.

"Well, Dad, you know that tramp who always sits on the same bench every—"

"Mr Stink?"

"Yes. Well, I thought his dog looked hungry and I wanted to bring her a sausage or two."

It was a lie, but not a big one.

"Well, I suppose there isn't any harm in giving his poor dog a bit of food," said Dad. "Just this once though, you understand?"

"But—"

"Just this once, Chloe. Or Mr Stink will expect you to feed his dog every day. Now, I hid another packet of sausages behind the crème fraîche, whatever that is. I'll cook them up for

you before your mother gets up tomorrow morning and you can give them—"

"WHAT ARE YOU TWO CONSPIRING ABOUT?" demanded Mother from the sitting room.

"Oh, erm, we were just debating which of the Queen's four children we most admire," said Dad. "I am putting forward Anne for her equestrian skills, though Chloe is making a strong case for Prince Charles and his unrivalled range of organic biscuits."

"Very good. Carry on!" boomed the voice from next door.

Dad smiled at Chloe cheekily.

3

The Wanderer

Mr Stink ate the sausages in an unexpectedly elegant manner. First he took out a little linen napkin and tucked it under his chin. Next he took an antique silver knife and fork out of his breast pocket. Finally he produced a dirty gold-rimmed china plate, which he gave to the Duchess to lick clean before he set down the sausages neatly upon it.

Chloe stared at his cutlery and plate. This seemed like another clue to his past. Had he perhaps been a gentleman thief who crept into country houses at midnight and

made off with the family silver?

"Do you have any more sausages?" asked Mr Stink, his mouth still full of sausage.

"No, just those eight I'm afraid," replied Chloe.

She stood at a safe distance from the tramp, so that her eyes wouldn't start weeping at the smell. The Duchess looked up at Mr Stink as he ate the sausages, with a heartbreaking longing that suggested that all love and all beauty was contained in those tubes of meat.

"There you go, Duchess," said Mr Stink, slowly lowering half a sausage into his dog's mouth. The Duchess was so hungry she didn't even chew; instead she swallowed it in half a millisecond before returning to her expression of sausage-longing. Had any man or beast ever eaten a sausage so quickly? Chloe was half-expecting a gentleman in a blazer

and slacks with a clipboard and stopwatch to appear and declare that the little black dog had set a new sausage-eating international world record!

"So, young Chloe, is everything fine at home?" asked Mr Stink, as he let the Duchess lick his fingers clean of any remnants of sausage juice.

"I'm sorry?" replied a befuddled Chloe.

"I asked if everything was fine at home. If things were tickety-boo I am not sure you would be spending your Sunday talking to an old vagabond like me."

"Vagabond?"

"I don't like the word 'tramp'. It makes you think of someone who smells."

Chloe tried to conceal her surprise. Even the Duchess looked puzzled and she didn't speak English, only Dog.

"I prefer vagabond, or wanderer," continued Mr Stink.

The way he put it, thought Chloe, it sounded almost poetic. Especially 'wanderer'. She would love to be a wanderer. She would wander all around the world if she could. Not stay in this boring little town where nothing happened that hadn't happened the day before.

"There's nothing wrong at home. Everything is fine," said Chloe adamantly.

"Are you *sure*?" enquired Mr Stink, with the wisdom some people have that cuts right through you like a knife through butter.

Things were, in fact, not at all fine at home for Chloe. She was often ignored. Her mother doted on Annabelle – probably because her youngest daughter was like a miniature version of her. Every inch of every wall in the house was covered with celebrations of Annabelle's infinite achievements.



Photographs of her standing smugly on winner's podiums, certificates bearing her name emblazoned in italic gold, trophies and statuettes and medals engraved with 'winner', 'first place' or 'little creep'. (I made up that last one.)

The more Annabelle achieved, the more Chloe felt like a failure. Her parents spent most of their lives providing a chauffeur service for Annabelle's out of school activities. Her schedule was exhausting even to *look* at.

Monday

5am Swimming training

6am Clarinet lesson

7am Dance lesson, tap and contemporary jazz

8am Dance lesson, ballet

9am to 4pm School

4pm Drama lesson, improvisation and movement

5pm Piano lesson

6pm Brownies

7pm Girls' Brigade

8pm Javelin practice

Tuesday

4am Violin lesson

5am Stilt-walking practice

6am Chess Society

7am Learning Japanese

8am Flower-arranging class

9am to 4pm School

4pm Creative writing workshop

5pm Porcelain frog painting class

6pm Harp practice

7pm Watercolour painting class

8pm Dance class, ballroom

Wednesday

3am Choir practice

4am Long-jump training

5am High-jump training

6am Long-jump training again

7am Trombone lesson

8am Scuba-diving
9am to 4pm School
4pm Chef training
5pm Mountain climbing
6pm Tennis
7pm Drama workshop, Shakespeare and his contemporaries
8pm Show jumping

Thursday
2am Learning Arabic
3am Dance lesson, break-dance, hip-hop, krumping
4am Oboe lesson
5am Tour de France cycle training
6am Bible studies
7am Gymnastics training
8am Calligraphy class
9am to 4pm School

4pm Work experience shadowing a brain surgeon
5pm Opera singing lesson
6pm NASA space exploration workshop
7pm Cake baking class, level 5
8pm Attend lecture on 'A History of Victorian Moustaches'

Friday
1am Triangle lesson, grade 5
2am Badminton
3am Archery
4am Fly to Switzerland for ski-jump practice. Learn about eggs from an expert on eggs (TBC) on outbound flight.
6am Do quick ski-jump, and then board inbound flight. Take pottery class on flight.
8am Thai kick-boxing (remember to take skis off before class).

9am to 4pm School

4pm Channel swimming training

5pm Motorbike maintenance workshop

6pm Candle making

7pm Otter rearing class

8pm Television viewing. A choice between either a documentary about carpet manufacturing in Belgium, or a Polish cartoon from the 1920s about a depressed owl.

And that was just the weekdays. The weekends were when things *really* got busy for Annabelle. No wonder Chloe felt ignored.

"Well, I suppose things at home are... are..." stammered Chloe. She wanted to talk to him about it all, but she wasn't sure how.

Bong! Bong! Bong! Bong!

No, I haven't lost my mind, readers. That was meant to be the church clock striking four.



Chloe gasped a
at her watch. Four o
Mother made her do
homework from four until six every day, even in the school holidays when she didn't have any to do.

"Sorry Mr Stink, I have to go," she said. Secretly Chloe was relieved. No one had ever asked her how she felt before, and she was beginning to panic...

"Really, child?" said the old man, looking disappointed.

"Yes, yes, I need to get home. Mother will be furious if I don't get at least a C in Maths next term. She sets me extra tests during the holidays."

"That doesn't sound much like a holiday to me," said Mr Stink.

Chloe shrugged. "Mother doesn't believe in holidays." She stood up. "I hope you liked the sausages," she said.

"They were scrumptious," said Mr Stink. "Thank you. Unimaginable kindness."

Chloe nodded and turned to run off towards home. If she took a short-cut she'd be back before Mother.

"Farewell!" Mr Stink called after her softly.

4

Drivel

Terrified of being late for homework hour, Chloe began to quicken her pace. She didn't want her mother to ask questions about where she'd been or who she'd been talking to. Mrs Crumb would be horrified to find out her daughter had been sitting on a bench with someone she would describe as a 'soap-dodger'. Grown-ups always have a way of ruining everything.

Chloe stopped hurrying, though, when she saw that she was about to pass Raj's shop. *Just one chocolate bar*, she thought.

Chloe's love of chocolate made her one of