"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

Raj's best customers. Raj ran the local newsagent shop. He was a big jolly jelly of a man, as sweet and colourful as his slightly over-priced confectionery. Today, though, what Chloe really needed was some advice.

And maybe some chocolate. Just one bar, of course. Maybe two.

"Ah, Miss Chloe!" said Raj, as she entered the shop. "What can I tempt you with today?"

"Hello, Raj," said Chloe smiling. She always smiled when she saw Raj. It was partly because he was such a lovely man, and partly because he sold sweets.

"I have some Rolos on special offer!" announced Raj. "They have gone out of date and hardened. You may lose a tooth as you chew into one, but at 10p off you can't really argue!"

"Mmm, let me think," said Chloe scouring the racks and racks of confectionery.



"I had half a Lion bar earlier, you are welcome to make me an offer on the other half. I'll take anything upwards of 15p."

"I think I'll just take a Crunchie, thanks Raj."

"Buy seven Crunchie bars you get an eighth Crunchie bar absolutely free!"

"No thanks, Raj. I only want one." She put the money down on the counter. 35p. Money well spent considering the nice feeling the chocolate would give her as it slipped down her throat and into her tummy.

"But Chloe, don't you understand? This is a unique opportunity to enjoy the popular chocolate-covered honeycomb bar at a dramatic saving!"

"I don't need eight Crunchie bars, Raj," said Chloe. "I need some advice."

"I don't think I am really responsible enough to give out advice," replied Raj without

a hint of irony. "But I'll try."

Chloe loved talking to Raj. He wasn't a parent or a teacher, and whatever you said to him, he would never judge you. However, Chloe still gulped slightly, because she was about to attempt another little lie. "Well, there's this girl I know at school..." she began.

"Yes? A girl at school. Not you?"

"No, somebody else."

"Right," said Raj.

Chloe gulped again and looked down, unable to meet his gaze. "Well, this friend of mine, she's started to talk to this tramp, and she really likes talking to him, but her mother would blow a fuse if she knew, so I – I mean, my friend – doesn't know what to do."

Raj looked at Chloe expectantly. "Yes?" he said. "And what is your question exactly?"

"Well Raj," said Chloe. "Do you think it's

wrong to talk to tramps?"

"Well, it's not good to talk to strangers," said Raj. "And you should never let anyone give you a lift in a car!"

"Right," said Chloe, disappointed.

"But a tramp is just somebody without a home," continued Raj. "Too many people walk on by and pretend they're not there."

"Yes!" said Chloe. "That's what I think too."

Raj smiled. "Any of us could become homeless one day. I can see nothing wrong with talking to a tramp, just like you would anyone else."

"Thanks Raj, I will... I mean, I'll tell her. This girl at school, I mean."

"What's this girl's name?"

"Umm... Stephen! I mean Susan... no, Sarah. Her name is Sarah, definitely Sarah."

"It's you, isn't it?" said Raj smiling.

"Yes," admitted Chloe after a millisecond.

"You are a very sweet girl, Chloe. It's lovely that you would take the time to talk to a tramp. There but for the grace of God go you and I."

"Thanks, Raj." Chloe went a little red, embarrassed by his compliment.

"Now what can you buy your homeless friend for Christmas?" said Raj as he scoured around his disorganised shop. "I have a box full of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles stationery sets I can't seem to shift. Yours for only £3.99. In fact buy one set, get ten free."

"I'm not sure a tramp really has any need for a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles stationery set, thanks anyway Raj."

"We all have use of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles stationery set, Chloe. You have your Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pencil, your Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles eraser, your Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles ruler, your

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pencil case, your Teenage Mutant—"

"I get the idea, thanks, Raj, but I'm sorry, I'm not going to buy one. I've got to go," said Chloe, edging out of the shop as she unwrapped her Crunchie.

"I haven't finished, Chloe. Please, I haven't sold one! You also have your Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pencil sharpener, your Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles notepad, your Teenage Mutant... oh, she's gone."

"And what's this, young lady?" demanded Mother. She was standing waiting in Chloe's room. Between her thumb and index finger was one of Chloe's exercise books from school. Mother held it as if it were an exhibit in a court case.

"It's just my maths book, Mother," said Chloe, gulping as she edged into the room.



You might think that Chloe was worried because her maths work wasn't up to scratch. But that wasn't quite it. The problem was, Chloe's maths book didn't have any maths in it! The book was supposed to be full of boring numbers and equations, but instead it was positively overflowing with colourful words and pictures.

Spending so much time alone had turned Chloe's imagination into a deep dark forest. It was a magical place to escape to, and so much more thrilling than real life. Chloe had used the exercise book to write a story about a girl who is sent to a school (loosely based on her own) where all the teachers are secretly vampires. She thought it was much more exciting than boring equations, but Mother clearly didn't agree.

"If it is your mathematics book, why does it contain this repulsive horror story?" said Mother. This was one of those questions when you aren't supposed to give an answer. "No wonder you did so poorly in your mathematics exam. I imagine you have spent the time in class writing this... this *drivel*. I am so disappointed in you, Chloe."

Chloe felt her cheeks smarting with shame

and hung her head. She didn't think her story was drivel. But she couldn't imagine telling her Mother that.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?" shouted Mother.

Chloe shook her head. For the second time in one day she wanted to just disappear.

"Well, this is what I think of your story," said Mother, as she started trying to rip up the exercise book.

"P-p-please... don't..." stammered Chloe.

"No, no, no! I'm not paying your school fees for you to waste your time on this rubbish! It's going in the bin!"

The book was obviously harder to rip than Mother had expected, and it took a few attempts to make the first tear. However, soon the book was nothing more than confetti. Chloe bowed her head, tears welling up in her

eyes, as her mother dropped all the pieces in the bin.

"Do you want to end up like your father? Working in a car factory? If you concentrate on your maths and don't get distracted by silly stories, you have a chance of making a better life for yourself! Otherwise you'll end up wasting your life, like your father. Is that what you want?"

"Well, I—"

"How dare you interrupt me!" shouted Mother. Chloe hadn't realised this was another one of those questions you're not actually meant to answer. "You'd better buck your ideas up, young lady!"

Chloe wasn't quite sure what that meant, but it didn't seem like the best time to ask. Mother left the room, dramatically slamming the door behind her. Chloe slowly sat down on the edge of her bed. As she buried her face in her hands,

she thought of Mr Stink, sitting on his bench with only the Duchess for company. She wasn't homeless like him, but she *felt* homeless in her heart.

5

Abandon Starbucks!

Monday morning. The first proper day of the Christmas holidays. A day Chloe had been dreading. She didn't have any friends she could text or email or SMS or Facebook or Twitter or whatever, but there was *one* person she wanted to see...

By the time Chloe got to the bench it was raining heavily, and she wished she'd at least paused to pick up an umbrella.

"The Duchess and I weren't expecting to see you again, Chloe," said Mr Stink. His eyes twinkled at the surprise, despite the rain.

"I am sorry I ran off like that," said Chloe,

"Don't worry, you are forgiven," he chuckled.

Chloe sat down next to him. She gave the Duchess a stroke, and then noticed that the palm of her hand was black. She surreptitiously wiped it on her trousers. Then she shivered, as a raindrop ran down the back of her neck.

"Oh, no, you're cold!" said Mr Stink. "Shall we take shelter from the rain in a coffee shop establishment?"

"Err... yes, good idea," said Chloe, not sure if taking someone quite so stinky into an enclosed space really *was* a good idea. As they walked into the town centre, the rain felt icy, almost becoming hail.

When they arrived at the coffee shop, Chloe peered through the steamed-up glass window. "I don't think there's anywhere to sit down," she said. Unfortunately, the coffee shop was full to

bursting with Christmas shoppers, trying to avoid the cruel British weather.

"We can but try," said Mr Stink, picking up the Duchess and attempting to conceal her under his tweed jacket.

The tramp opened the door for Chloe and she squeezed herself inside. As Mr Stink entered, the pleasing aroma of freshly-brewed coffee keeled over and died. His own special smell replaced it. There was silence for a moment.

Then panic.



People started running towards the door, clutching serviettes to their mouths as makeshift gas masks.

"Abandon Starbucks!" screamed a member of staff, and his colleagues immediately stopped making coffees or bagging muffins and ran for their lives.

"It seems to be thinning out a little," announced Mr Stink.

Soon they were the only ones left in the shop. *Maybe smelling this bad has its advantages,* thought Chloe. If Mr Stink's super-smell could empty a coffee shop, what else could it do? Maybe he could clear the local ice rink of skaters so she could have it all to herself? Or they could go to Alton Towers together and not have to queue for a single ride? Better still, she could take him and his smell into school one day, and if he was particularly stinky the headmistress would

have to send everyone home and she could have the day off!

"You take a seat here, child," said Mr Stink. "Now, what would you like to drink?"

"Er... a cappuccino, please," replied Chloe, trying to sound grown-up.

"I think I'll have one too." Mr Stink shuffled behind the counter and started opening tins. "Righty-ho, two cappuccinos coming right up."

The machines hissed and spat for a few moments, and then Mr Stink pottered back over to the table with two mugs of a dark, unidentifiable liquid. On closer inspection, it appeared to be some kind of black slime, but Chloe was too well brought up to complain and pretended to sip whatever it was that he had concocted for her. She even managed an almost convincing, "Mmm... lovely!"

Mr Stink stirred his solid liquid with a dainty little silver spoon he pulled out from his breast pocket. Chloe stole a glance at it and noticed it was monogrammed, with three little letters delicately engraved on the handle. She tried to get a better look, but he put it away before she could see what the letters were. What could they mean? Or was this simply another item Mr Stink had purloined during his career as a gentleman thief?

"So, Miss Chloe," said Mr Stink, breaking her train of thought. "It's the Christmas holidays, isn't it?" He took a sip from his coffee, holding his mug elegantly between his fingers. "Why aren't you at home decorating the tree with your family or wrapping presents?"

"Well, I don't know how to explain..." No one in Chloe's family was good at expressing their feelings. To her mother, feelings were at best

an embarrassment, at worst a sign of weakness.

"Just take your time, young lady."

Chloe took a deep breath and it all came flooding out. What started off as a stream soon became a rushing river of emotion. She told him how her parents argued most of the time and how once she was sitting on the stairs when she heard her Mother shout, "I am only staying with you for the sake of the girls!"

How her little sister made her life a misery. How nothing she did was ever good enough. How if she brought home some little bowl she had made in pottery class her Mother would put it at the back of a cupboard, never to be seen again. However, if her little sister brought any piece of artwork home, however awful, it was put in pride of place behind bulletproof glass as if it was the *Mona Lisa*.

Chloe told Mr Stink how her mother was

always trying to force her to lose weight. Up until recently, Mother had described her as having "puppy fat". But once she turned twelve, Mother rather cruelly started calling it "flab" or even worse "blubber", as if she was some species of whale. Perhaps Mother was trying to shame her into losing weight. In truth, it only made Chloe more miserable, and being miserable only made her eat more. Filling herself up with chocolate, crisps and cake felt like being given a much-needed hug.



She told Mr Stink how she wished her dad would stand up to her mother sometimes. How she didn't find it easy to make friends, as she was so shy. How she only really liked making up

stories, but it made her mother so angry. And how Rosamund ensured that every day at school was an absolute misery.

It was a long, long list, but Mr Stink listened intently to everything she said as jolly Christmas songs played incongruously in the background. For someone who spent every day with only a little black dog for company, he was surprisingly full of wisdom. In fact, he seemed to relish the opportunity to listen and talk and help. People didn't really stop to talk to Mr Stink – and he seemed pleased to be having a proper conversation for once.

He told Chloe, "Tell your Mother how you feel. I am sure she loves you and would hate you to be unhappy." And, "...try and find something fun you can do with your sister." And, "...why not talk to your dad about how you feel?"

Finally, Chloe told Mr Stink about how

Mother had ripped her vampire story to shreds. She had to try very hard not to cry.

"That's terrible, child," said Mr Stink. "You must have been devastated."

"I hate her," said Chloe. "I hate my mother."

"You shouldn't say that," said Mr Stink.

"But I do."

"You are very angry with her, of course, but she loves you, even if she finds it hard to show it."

"Maybe." Chloe shrugged, unconvinced. But having talked everything through she felt a little calmer now. "Thank you so much for listening to me," she said.

"I just hate to see a young girl like you looking sad," said Mr Stink. "I may be old, but I can remember what it was like to be young. I just hope I helped a little."

"You helped a lot."

Mr Stink smiled, before letting the last sludge of his volcanic gloop slip down his throat. "Delicious! Now, we'd better leave some money for our beverages." He searched around in his pockets for some change. "Oh, bother, I can't read the board without my spectacles. I'll leave six pence. That should be enough. And a tuppence tip. They will be pleased with that. They can treat themselves to one of those new-fangled video cassettes. Right, I think you'd better be heading home now, young lady."

The rain had stopped when they left the coffee shop. They sauntered down the road as cars hummed past.

"Let's swap places," said Mr Stink.

"Why?"

"Because a lady should always walk on the inside of the pavement and a gentleman on the outside."

"Really?" said Chloe. "Why?"

"Well," replied Mr Stink, "the outside is more dangerous because that's where the cars are. But I believe it was originally because in the olden days people used to throw the contents of their chamber pots out of their windows and into the gutter. The person on the outside was more likely to get splattered!"

"What's a chamber pot?" said Chloe.

"Well I don't wish to be crude, but it's a kind of portable toilet."

"Ugh! That's gross. Did people do that when you were a boy?"

Mr Stink chuckled. "No, that was a little before my time, child. In the sixteenth century, in fact! Now, Miss Chloe, etiquette demands we swap places."

His old-world gallantry was so charming it made Chloe smile, and they changed places.

They strolled side by side, passing high-street shop after high-street shop, all trying to herald the approach of Christmas louder than the next. After a few moments Chloe saw Rosamund walking towards them with a small flotilla of shopping bags.



"Can we cross the road, please? Quickly," whispered Chloe anxiously.

"Why, child? Whatever is the matter?"

"It's that girl from school I just told you about, Rosamund."

"The one who stuck that sign to your back?"

"Yes, that's her."

"You need to stand up to her," pronounced Mr Stink. "Let her be the one to cross the road!"

"No... please don't say anything," pleaded Chloe.

"Who is this? Your new boyfriend?" laughed Rosamund. It wasn't a real laugh, like people do when they find something funny. That's a lovely sound. This was a cruel laugh. An ugly sound.

Chloe didn't say anything, just looked down.

"My daddy just gave me £500 to buy myself whatever I wanted for Christmas," said Rosamund. "I blew the lot at Topshop. Shame

you're too fat to get into any of their clothes."

Chloe merely sighed. She was used to being hounded by Rosamund.

"Why are you letting her talk to you like that, Chloe?" said Mr Stink.

"What's it to you, Grandad?" said Rosamund mockingly. "Hanging around with smelly old tramps now, are you Chloe? You *are* tragic! How long did it take you to find that sign on your back then?"

"She didn't find it," said Mr Stink, slowly and deliberately. "I did. And I didn't find it amusing."

"Didn't you?" said Rosamund. "All the other girls found it really funny!"

"Well, then they are as vile as you," said Mr Stink.

"*What?*" said Rosamund. She wasn't used to being talked to like that.

"I said 'then they are as vile as you'," he repeated, even louder this time. "*You* are a nasty little bully." Chloe looked on anxiously. She hated confrontation.

To make matters worse, Rosamund took a pace forward and stood eye to eye with Mr Stink. "Say that to my face, you old stinker!"

For a moment Mr Stink fell silent. Then he opened his mouth and let out the deepest darkest dirtiest burp.

"BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB

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!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Rosamund's face turned green. It was as if a putrid tornado had engulfed her. It was the smell of coffee and sausages and rotten vegetables recovered from bins all rolled into one. Rosamund turned and ran, hurtling down the high street in such a panic that she dropped her TopShop bags on the way.

"That was so funny!" laughed Chloe.

"I didn't mean to belch. Most impolite. It was just that coffee repeating on me. Dear me! Now next time I want to see you stand up for yourself, Miss Chloe. A bully can only make you feel bad about yourself if you *let* them."

"OK... I'll try," said Chloe. "So... see you tomorrow?"

"If you really want to," he replied.

"I would love to."

"And I would love to too!" he said, his eyes twinkling and twinkling as the last golden glow

of the sunlight splintered through the sky.

At that moment a 4x4 thundered past. Its giant tyres sloshed through a huge puddle by the bus stop, sending up a wave that soaked Mr Stink from dirty head to dirty foot.

Water dripping from his glasses, he gave Chloe a little bow. "And that," he said, "is why a gentleman always walks on the outside."

"At least it wasn't a chamber pot!" chuckled Chloe.

6

Soap-Dodgers

The next morning Chloe pulled open her curtains. Why was there a giant 'O' and a giant 'V' stuck to her window? She went outside in her dressing gown to investigate.

'VOTE CRUMB!' was spelled out in giant letters across the windows of the house. Elizabeth the cat pattered out with a rosette emblazoned with the words 'Crumb for MP' attached to her jewel-encrusted collar.

Then Annabelle came skipping out of the house with an air of self-congratulatory joy that was instantly annoying.

"Where are you going?" asked Chloe.

"As her favourite daughter, Mother has entrusted *me* with the responsibility of putting these leaflets through every door in the street. She's standing to be a Member of Parliament, remember?"

"Let me see that," said Chloe, reaching out to grab one of the leaflets. The two warring sisters had long since dispensed with 'please' and 'thank you'.



Annabelle snatched it back. "I am not wasting one on you!" she snarled.

"Let me see!" Chloe pulled the leaflet out of Annabelle's hand. There were some advantages to being the older sister; sometimes you could use brute force. Annabelle huffed off with the rest of the leaflets. Chloe walked back into the house studying it, her slippers moistening with the dew. Mother was always going on and on about how she should run the country, but Chloe found the whole subject so dreary and dull that her imagination would float away into la-la land whenever the subject came up.

On the front of the leaflet was a photograph of Mother looking incredibly serious, with her finest pearls around her neck, her hair so waxy with spray that it would become a fireball if you put a lit match to it. Inside was a long list of her policies.

1) A curfew to be introduced to ensure all children under 30 are not allowed out after 8pm and are preferably in bed with lights out by 9pm.

2) The police to be given new powers to arrest people for talking too loudly in public.

3) Litterbugs to be deported.

4) The wearing of leggings to be outlawed in public areas, as they are 'extremely common'.

5) The national anthem to be played in the town square every hour on the hour. Everyone must be upstanding for this. Being in a wheelchair is no excuse for not paying your respects to Her Majesty.

6) All dogs to be kept on leads at all times. Even indoors.

7) Verruca socks to be worn by everyone attending the local swimming pool whether they have a verruca or not. This should cut down the chance of verruca infection to less than zero.

8) The Christmas pantomime to be discontinued due to the consistent lewdness of the humour (jokes about bottoms, for example. There is nothing funny about a bottom. We all have a bottom and we all know full well what comes out of a bottom and what sound a bottom can make of its own accord).

9) Church-going on Sunday morning to be compulsory. And when you do go you have

to sing the hymns properly, not just open and close your mouth when the organ plays.

10) Mobile telephonic devices to have only classical music ringtones from now on, like Mozart and Beethoven and one of the other ones, not the latest pop songs from the hit parade.

11) Unemployed people not to be allowed to claim benefit any more. Dole scum only have themselves to blame and are just plain idle. Why should we pay for them to sit at home all day watching or appearing on *The Jeremy Kyle Show*?

12) Giant bronze statues of royals Prince Edward and his fragrant wife Sophie, Countess of Wessex, to be erected in the local park.

13) Tattoos on anyone but visiting sailors to be banned. Tattoos can to be dropped off anonymously at police stations without prosecution.

14) Fast food burger restaurants to introduce plates, cutlery and table service. And stop serving burgers. And French fries. And nuggets. And those apple pies that are always too hot in the middle.

15) The local library to stock only the works of Beatrix Potter. Apart from *The Tale of Mr Jeremy Fisher*, as the sequence when the frog, Mr Fisher, is swallowed by a trout is far too violent even for adults.

16) Football games in the local park are a nuisance. From now on only imaginary balls to be used.

17) Only nice films to be offered for rental in Blockbuster. That is to say films about posh people from the olden days who are too shy even to hold hands.

18) To combat the growing problem of 'hoodies' all hooded tops to have the hoods cut off.

19) Video games rot the brain. Any video games (or computer games or console games or whatever the stupid things are called) to be played only between 4pm and 4:01pm daily.

20) Finally, all homeless people, or 'soap-dodgers', are to be banned from our streets. They are a menace to society. And, more importantly, they smell.

Chloe slumped down on the sofa when she read these last sentences. There was a loud squeak as she did so. Mother had insisted on keeping on the plastic covers the sofa and armchair had arrived in, so as to keep them immaculate. They were indeed still immaculate, but it meant your bum got really hot and sweaty.

What about my new friend Mr Stink? Chloe thought. *What's going to happen to him? And what about the Duchess? If he is banned from the streets where on earth is he going to go?*

And then, a moment later, *Wow, my bum is getting incredibly hot and sweaty.*

She chaffed her way sadly back up the stairs to her room. Sitting on her bed, she stared out of the window. Because she was shy and awkward, Chloe didn't make friends easily. Now her newest friend Mr Stink was going to have to leave the town. Maybe for ever. She

stared out through the glass at the deep blue endless air. Then, just before her eyes lost focus in the infinite sky of nothing, she looked down. The answer was at the end of the garden staring back at her.

The shed.

7

A Bucket in the Corner

This operation had to be top-secret. Chloe waited until darkness fell, and then led Mr Stink and the Duchess silently down her street, before slipping through the side gate to her garden.

"It's just a shed..." said Chloe apologetically as they entered his new abode. "I'm sorry there's no ensuite bathroom, but there is a bucket in the corner there just behind the lawnmower. You can use that if you need to go in the night..."

"Well, this is unimaginably kind, young