

"Promise you won't say anything about me losing my job," whispered Dad.

"I promise."

Chloe shut the door, leaving her dad on all fours in the darkness. Now she had two fully grown men hiding around the house. *What's next?* she thought. *Am I going to find Grandad in the tumble dryer?!*

Slightly Chewed

Being on the political campaign trail meant Chloe knocking on what seemed like everybody's front door in the town and Mother asking people if she could "rely on their vote". Those who said they were going to vote for Mother were instantly rewarded with a big smile and an even bigger sticker to put in their window proclaiming 'Vote Crumb'. Those who said they *weren't* voting for her were going to miss an awful lot of daytime telly. Mother was the kind of person who wouldn't give up without a fight.

They passed the newsagent's shop. "I wonder if Raj would put one of my posters up in his window," said Mother, as she strode towards the store. Chloe clomped behind in her uncomfortable Sunday-best shoes, struggling to keep up. Her mind had been elsewhere all day. Now she was carrying around *two* hot-air balloon-sized secrets in her head – Mr Stink hiding in the garden shed and her dad hiding in the cupboard under the stairs!

"Ah, my two favourite customers!" exclaimed Raj as they entered the shop. "The beautiful Mrs Crumb and her charming daughter, Chloe!"

"It's Croooooomel!" corrected Mother. "So, Raj, can I rely on your vote?"

"Are you on *The X-Factor*?!" said Raj excitedly. "Yes, yes, of course I will vote for you. What are you singing on Saturday?"



"No, she's not doing *The X-Factor*, Raj," interjected Chloe, trying not to laugh at the thought.

"*Britain's Got Talent* perhaps? You are maybe doing a ventriloquist act with a naughty otter puppet called Jeremy? That would be most amusing!"

"No, she's not doing *Britain's Got Talent* either." Chloe smirked.

"How do you solve any dream will I'd do

anything or whatever it's called with Graham thingy?"

"It's the election, Raj," interrupted Mother. "You know, the local election? I am standing to be our local MP."

"And when is this election thing happening then?"

"Next Friday. I can't believe you've missed it! It's all over these newspapers, Raj!" Mother gestured at the piles and piles of newspapers in the shop.

"Oh, I only read *Nuts* and *Zoo*," said Raj. "I get all the news I need from them."

Mother looked at him disapprovingly, even though Chloe suspected she wasn't sure what either *Nuts* or *Zoo* were. Chloe had once seen a copy of *Nuts* that one of the older boys had brought into school, and knew it was rude.

"What do you think are the important issues

facing Britain today, Raj?" asked Mother, delighted with the cleverocity and inteligentness of her own question.

Raj pondered for a moment, then shouted over at some boys who were loitering by the pick 'n' mix. "Don't put the liquorice in your mouth unless you are going to buy it, young man! Oh dear, I will have to put that liquorice on special offer now!"

Raj grabbed a pen and a piece of card. He wrote 'slightly chewed', and put it on the liquorice box. "Sorry, what was the question again?"

Note to self, thought Chloe. Never buy liquorice from this shop again.

"Erm... Now where was I?" said Mother to Raj. "Ah yes, what do you think are the most—?"

"—important issues affecting Britain today, Raj?" chimed in Raj. "Oh, I didn't need to say

'Raj'. I am Raj. Well, I think it would be a great advance if Cadbury's Creme Eggs were available not just at Easter but all year round. They are one of my most popular items. I also strongly believe that Quavers should diversify from cheese flavours to incorporate Asian Chicken and Lamb Rogan Josh varieties. And most importantly, and I know this may be controversial, but I think that coffee Revels should be banned as they spoil an otherwise wonderfully enjoyable confectionery. There, I've said it!"

"Right," said Mother.

"And if you promise to change the government policy on those issues you can rely on my vote, Mrs Crumb!"

Mother had had a mixed response to her campaigning so far, and was eager to secure this potentially crucial vote.

"Yes, I will certainly try, Raj!" she said.

"Thank you so much," said Raj. "Please help yourself to something from the shop."

"No, I couldn't possibly, Raj!"

"Please, Mrs Crumb. Have a nice box of Terry's All Gold, I have only taken out the caramel squares. Mmm, they are delicious. And perhaps Chloe would like this Finger of Fudge? It's a bit squashed as my wife sat on it, but it's perfectly fine to eat."

"We couldn't possibly accept these kind gifts, Raj," said Mother.

"Well, why not buy them then? One box of Terry's All Gold, £4.29, and a Finger of Fudge, 20p. That's £4.49. Let's call it £4.50. Easier if I just take £5. Thank you so much."

Chloe and Mother exited the shop holding their confectionery. Mother held her partially eaten box of chocolates with barely disguised disdain.

"Now, don't forget, Raj. The election is next Friday!" said Mother as she opened the door.

"Oh, I can't do next Friday, Mrs Crumb. I have to stay here as I am expecting a large shipment of Smarties! But good luck to you!"

"Ah... Thank you," replied Mother, looking crestfallen.

"Mrs Crumb," said Raj. "May I interest you in something incredibly special that will certainly become something of a family heirloom to be passed down through the generations? Something your grandchildren will one day take proudly to have valued on *The Antiques Road Show*?"

"Yes?" said Mother expectantly.

"It's a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles stationery set..."

Hair Pulling

"What are you hiding in the shed?" said Annabelle with accusatory glee.

It was midnight and Chloe was once again tiptoeing past her sister's room, this time to tell Mr Stink about Lily's newest adventure with her flesh-eating zombie teachers. Annabelle stood in her doorway in her pink pony pyjamas. Her hair was in bunches. And in case of fire she slept in lip-gloss. She looked sickeningly cute.

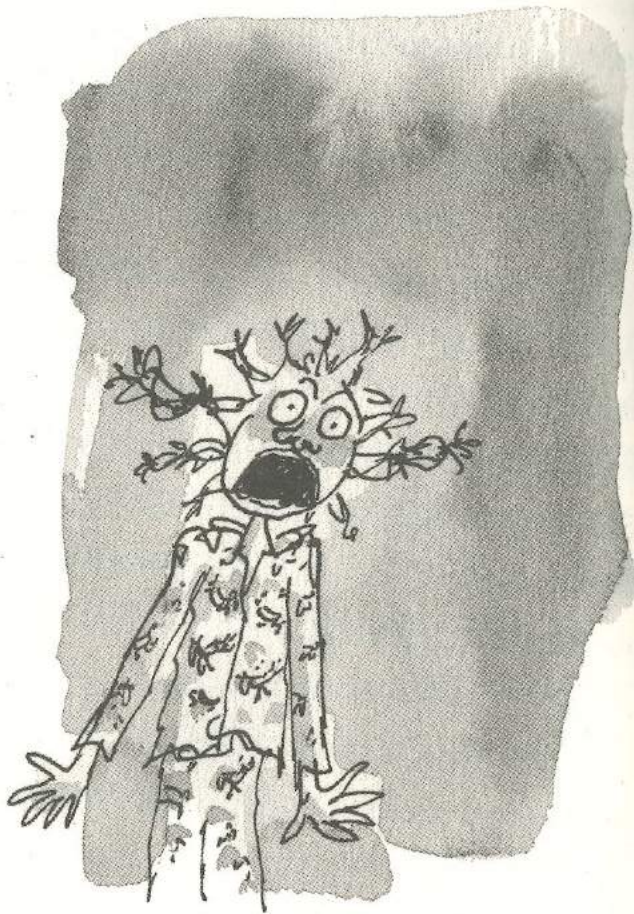
"Nothing," said Chloe, gulping.

"I know when you're lying, Chloe."

"How?"

Annabelle tried to speak, but hyperventilated through her tears.

"Ugh... eh... ah... eh... ah... ughhhh... ah... eh... ugh..."



"What on earth have you done to her, Chloe?" demanded Mother.

"She's putting it on! I didn't pull her stupid hair that hard!" Chloe protested.

"You pulled her *hair*? Annabelle is down to the last thousand for a model casting tomorrow for George at Asda and she has to look perfect!"

"Ugh... ah... eh... ah. She's ah eh got ugh ugh ugh hiding ugh ugh something eh ah ugh in the ugh ugh ughu shed," said Annabelle as she squeezed out some more tears.

"Father," ordered Mother. "Come out here this instant!"

"I'm asleep!" came the muffled cry from their bedroom.

"THIS INSTANT!"

Chloe looked down at the carpet so Mother couldn't read her face. There was a pause. The three ladies of the house listened as Dad got out

of bed. Next they heard the sound of someone passing water into a toilet bowl. Mother's face turned red with fury.

"I SAID THIS INSTANT!"

The sound abruptly stopped and Dad scurried out of the bedroom in his Arsenal FC pyjamas.

"Annabelle said Chloe is hiding something in the shed. Chocolate, most likely. I need you to go down there and take a look."

"Me?" protested Dad.

"Yes you!"

"Can't it wait until the morning?"

"No it can't."

"There's nothing down there," pleaded Chloe.

"SILENCE!" demanded Mother.

"I'll just get a torch," sighed Dad.

He made his way slowly downstairs, and Mother, Chloe and Annabelle rushed to the window of the master bedroom to watch him

walk to the end of the garden. The moon was full, and it bathed the garden in an eerie glow. The torchlight danced around the trees and shrubs as he walked. They looked on breathlessly as Dad slowly opened the shed door. It creaked like a muffled scream.

Chloe could hear her heart beating. Was this the moment that would seal her doom forever? Would she be made to eat only cabbage for every meal from now on? Or get sent to bed before she'd even got up? Or be grounded for the rest of her life? Chloe gulped louder than she had ever gulped before. Mother heard this and shot her a look of dark, burning suspicion.

The silence was like thunder. A few seconds passed, or was it a few hours or even years? Then Dad emerged slowly from the shed. He looked up at the window and shouted, "There's nothing here!"

Pongy Pong

Did I dream the whole thing? thought Chloe as she lay in bed. She was in that place between asleep and awake. That place where you can still remember dreaming. It was 4:48am, and now she was beginning to wonder if Mr Stink even really existed.

At dawn her curiosity got the better of her. Chloe edged down the stairs, and tiptoed across the cold wet grass to the shed door. She lingered outside for a moment, before opening it.

"Ah, there you are!" said Mr Stink. "I am very hungry this morning. Poached eggs please, if it's

not too much trouble. Runny in the middle. Sausages. Mushrooms. Grilled tomatoes. Sausages. Baked beans. Sausages. Bread and butter. Brown sauce on the side. Don't forget the sausages. English breakfast tea. And a glass of orange juice. Thank you so much."

Chloe obviously hadn't dreamed the whole thing, but she was beginning to wish she had. It was all thrillingly, terrifyingly real.

"Freshly-squeezed orange juice to your liking, sir?" she asked sarcastically.

"Actually, have you got any that's very slightly off? I prefer that. Perhaps that was squeezed a month or so ago?"

Just then, Chloe spotted an old dog-eared black-and-white photograph that Mr Stink had placed on a shelf. It showed a beautiful young couple standing proudly next to an immaculate and perfectly rounded Rolls

Royce, parked in the driveway of a magnificent stately home.

"Who's that?" she asked, pointing to the photo.



"Oh, nobody, n-n-n-nothing..." he stammered.
"Just a sentimental old photograph, Miss Chloe."

"Can I see?"

"No, no, no, it's just a foolish picture. Please, pay it no heed." Mr Stink was becoming increasingly flustered. He snatched the photograph from the shelf, and put it in his pyjama pocket. Chloe was disappointed. The photograph had seemed like another clue to Mr Stink's past, like his little silver spoon, or the way he'd bowled that piece of paper into the bin. This one had seemed like the best clue yet. But now Mr Stink was shoo-ing her out of the shed. "Don't forget the sausages!" he said.

How on earth did Dad miss him? thought Chloe, as she went back to the house. Even if he hadn't seen Mr Stink in the shed, he surely must have smelled him.

Chloe tiptoed into the kitchen and opened the fridge door as quietly as possible. She stared into the fridge, and began carefully moving jars of mustard and pickle so they wouldn't clink. She

hoped to find some out of date orange juice that might appeal to Mr Stink's tainted palate.

"What are you doing?" said a voice.

Chloe startled. It was only Dad, but she wasn't expecting to see him up this early. She gathered herself for a moment.

"Nothing, Dad. I'm just hungry that's all."

"I know who's in the shed, Chloe," he said.

Chloe looked at him, panicked, unable to think, let alone speak.

"I opened the shed door last night to see an old tramp snoring next to my lawnmower," Dad went on. "The pong was... well... pongy. It was an extremely pongy pong..."

"I wanted to tell you, honestly I did," said Chloe. "He needs a home, Dad. Mother wants all homeless people driven off the streets!"

"I know, I know, but I'm sorry Chloe, he can't stay. Your mother will go nuts if she finds out."

"Dad, I'm sorry."

"It's OK, love. I am not going to say anything to your mother. You've kept your promise not to tell anyone about me losing my job, haven't you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good girl," said Dad.

"So," said Chloe, glad to have Dad to herself for a while. "How did your guitar get all burned?"

"Your mother put it on the bonfire."

"No!"

"Yes," said Dad sorrowfully. "She wanted me to move on with my life. She was doing me a favour, I suppose."

"A *favour*?"

"Well, The Serpents of Doom were never going to make it. I got the job at the car factory and that was that."

"But you had an album! You must have been

dead famous," chirped Chloe excitedly.

"No, we weren't at all!" chuckled Dad. "The album only sold twelve copies."

"*Twelve?*" said Chloe.

"Yes, and your grandma bought most of those. We were pretty good, though. And one of our singles got into the charts."

"What, the top forty?"

"No, we peaked at 98."

"Wow," said Chloe. "Top 100! That's pretty good, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't," said Dad. "But you're very sweet to say so." He kissed her on the forehead and opened his arms to give her a hug.

"There's no time for cuddles!" said Mother as she strode into the kitchen. "The man from *The Times* will be here soon. Father, you make the scrambled eggs. Chloe, you can lay the table."

"Yes, of course, Mother," said Chloe, with at least half her brain worrying about when Mr Stink was going to get his breakfast.

"So how important is your family to you, Mrs Crumb?" asked the serious-looking journalist. He wore thick glasses and was old. In fact he had probably been born an old man. Plopped out of his mother, wearing glasses and a three-piece suit. He was called Mr Stern, which Chloe thought was pretty fitting. He didn't look like he smiled a lot. Or indeed ever.

"Actually, it's pronounced Croombe," corrected Mother.

"No, it's not," said Dad before his wife shot him a look of utter fury. The Crumb family was sitting around the dining table and not enjoying their posh breakfast. It was all such a lie. They didn't normally sit round the dining room table



eating smoked salmon and scrambled eggs. They would be round the *kitchen* table eating Rice Krispies or Marmite on toast.

"Very important, Mr Stern," said Mother.

"The most important thing in my life. I don't know what I'd do without my husband, Mr Croome, my darling daughter, Annabelle and the other one... whatshername? Chloe."

"Well, then I ask you this Mrs... Crooooooome.
Is your family more important to you than the
future of this country?"

That was a toughie. There was a pause during
which a civilization could rise and fall.

"Well, Mr. Stern..." Mother said.

"Yes, Mrs Croooooooooooooome...?"

"Well, Mr Stern..."

"Yes, Mrs Crooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo
ooooome...?"

At that moment there was a little rat-tat-tat on
the window. "Excuse me for interrupting," said
Mr Stink with a smile,
"but please could I
have my breakfast
now?"



Shut your Face!

"Who on earth is *he*?" enquired Mr Stern as
Mr Stink trudged around in his filthy striped
pyjamas to the backdoor.

There was silence for a moment. Mother's
eyes bulged out of their sockets and Annabelle
looked like she was about to shriek or vomit or
both.

"Oh, he's the tramp who lives in our shed,"
said Chloe.

"The tramp who lives in our shed?" repeated
Mother incredulously. She looked at her husband
with black fire in her eyes.