

Mr Stink

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

Miss Chloe, thank you," said Mr Stink, smiling broadly. Even the Duchess seemed to bark 'thank you', or at least 'cheers'. "Now," continued Mr Stink, "are you sure your mother and father don't mind me being here? I would hate to be an unwelcome guest."

Chloe gulped, nervous about the lie that was about to come out of her mouth. "No... no... they don't mind at all. They're just both very busy people and they apologise that they weren't able to be here right now to meet you in person."

Chloe had carefully picked the right time to settle Mr Stink in. She knew Mother was out campaigning for election, and Dad was picking up Annabelle from her sumo-wrestling class.

"Well I would love to meet them both," said Mr Stink, "and see what people turned out such a wonderfully generous and thoughtful

daughter. This will be so much warmer than my bench."

Chloe smiled shyly at the compliment. "Sorry there are all these old cardboard boxes in here," she said. She started to move them out of the way, to give him room to lie down. Mr Stink gave her a hand, lifting some of the boxes on top of each other. When she got to the bottom box, Chloe paused. Poking out of the top was a charred electric guitar. She examined it for a moment, puzzled, then rummaged through the box and found a pile of old CDs. They were all the same, stacks and stacks of an album entitled *Hell For Leather* by The Serpents of Doom.

"Have you ever heard of this band?" she asked.

"I don't really know any music past 1958, I'm afraid."



A Bucket in the Corner

Chloe studied the picture on the cover for a moment. Super-imposed in front of a drawing of a giant snake stood four long-haired, leather-jacketed types. Chloe's eyes fixed on the guitar player, who looked an *awful* lot like her dad, only with a mess of curly black hair.

"I don't believe it!" said Chloe. "That's my dad."

She hadn't had any idea her dad had ever had a perm, let alone that he'd been in a rock band! She didn't know which was more shocking – the idea of him not being bald, or the idea of him playing electric guitar.

"Really?" said Mr Stink.

"I think so," said Chloe. "It looks like him anyway." She was still studying the album cover with a curious combination of pride and embarrassment.

"Well, we all have secrets, Miss Chloe. Now what should I do if I require a pot of tea or a round of sausage sandwiches on white bread please with HP sauce on the side? Is there a bell I should ring?"

Chloe looked at him, a little surprised. She hadn't realised she was going to have to feed him as well as shelter him.

"No, there's no bell," she said. "Erm, you see that window up there? That's my bedroom."

"Ah yes?"

"Well if you need something, why don't you flash this old bicycle light up at my window? Then I can come down and... erm... take your order."

"Perfection!" exclaimed Mr Stink.

Being in the confined space of the shed with Mr Stink was beginning to make it difficult for Chloe to breathe. The smell was especially bad

today. It was stinky even by Mr Stink's stinky standards. "Would you like to have a bath before my family get back?" Chloe said hopefully. The Duchess looked up at her master with a look of desperate hope in her blinking eyes. It was the stink that made her blink.

"Let me think..."

Chloe smiled at him expectantly.

"Actually, I'll leave it for this month, thank you."

"Oh," said Chloe, disappointed. "Is there anything I can get you right now?"

"Is there an afternoon tea menu perhaps?" asked Mr Stink. "A choice of scones, cakes and French pastries?"

"Erm... no," said Chloe. "But I could bring you a cup of tea and biscuits. And we should have some cat food that I could bring for the Duchess."

"I am pretty sure the Duchess is a dog not a cat," pronounced Mr Stink.

"I know, but we only have a cat, so we've only got cat food."

"Well, maybe you could pop into Raj's shop tomorrow and buy the Duchess some tins of dog food. Raj knows the brand she likes." Mr Stink rummaged in his pockets. "Here's a ten pence piece. You can keep the change."

Chloe looked in her hand. Mr Stink had actually placed an old brass button there.

"Thank you so much, young lady," he continued. "And please don't forget to knock when you return in case I am getting changed into my pyjamas."

What have I done? thought Chloe, as she made her way across the lawn back to the house. Her head was buzzing with more imaginary life-stories for her new friend, but none of them

seemed quite right. Was he an astronaut who had fallen to earth and, in the shock, lost his memory? Or perhaps he was a convict who had escaped from prison after serving thirty years for a crime he didn't commit? Or, even better, a modern-day pirate who had been forced by his comrades to walk the plank into shark-infested waters, but against all the odds had swum to safety?

One thing she knew for sure was that he did really whiff. Indeed she could still smell him as she reached the back door. The plants and flowers in the garden seemed to have wilted with the smell. They were all now leaning away from the shed as if they were trying to avert their stamens. *At least he's safe*, thought Chloe. *And warm, and dry, if only for tonight.*

When she got up to her room and looked out of the window, the light was flashing already.

Mr Stink

"All-butter highland shortbread biscuits if you have them, please!" called up Mr Stink. "Thank you so much!"

8

Maybe It's the Drains

"What's that smell?" demanded Mother as she entered the kitchen. She had been out all day campaigning and looked stiffly immaculate as ever in a royal blue twin-set – except for her nose, which was twitching uncontrollably in disgust.

"What smell?" said Chloe, with a short delay as she gulped.

"You must be able to smell it too, Chloe. That smell of... Well, I'm not going to say what it reminds me of, that would be impolite and unbecoming of a woman of my class and

Mr Stink

distinction, but it's a bad smell." She breathed in and the smell seemed to take her by surprise all over again. "My goodness, it's a very bad smell."

Like a malevolent cloud of darkest brown, the smell had seeped through the timber of the shed, no doubt peeling off the creosote as it travelled. Then it had crept its way across the lawn, before opening the cat flap and starting its aggressive occupation of the kitchen. Have you ever wondered what a bad smell looks like? It looks like this...



Maybe It's the Drains



Oh, that's a nasty one. If you put your nose right up against the page you can almost smell it.

"Maybe it's the drains?" offered Chloe.

"Yes, it must be the drains leaking again. Even more reason why I need to be elected as an MP. Now, I have a journalist from *The Times* coming to interview me at breakfast this week. So you must be on your best behaviour. I want him to see what a nice normal family we are."

Normal?! thought Chloe.

"Voters like to see that one has a happy home life. I just pray that this foul stench will be gone by then."

"Yes..." said Chloe. "I'm sure it will. Mother, was Dad – I mean, Father – ever in a rock band?"

Mother stared at her. "What on earth are you talking about, young lady? Where would you get such a ridiculous idea?"

Chloe swallowed. "It's just I saw this picture

of this band called The Serpents of Doom and one of them looked a lot like—"

Mother went a little pale. "Preposterous!" she said. "I don't know what's got into you!" She fiddled with her bouffant, almost as if she was nervous. "Your father, in a rock band of all things! First that exercise book full of outrageous stories, and now this!"

"But—"

"No buts, young lady. Honestly, I don't know what to do with you any more."

Mother looked really furious now. Chloe couldn't understand what she'd done wrong. "Well, pardon me for asking," she sulked.

"That's it!" shouted Mother. "Go to bed, right now!"

"It's twenty past six!" Chloe protested.

"I don't care! Bed!"

Chloe found it hard to get to sleep. Not only because she had been sent to bed so ridiculously early, but also and more importantly because she had moved a tramp into the shed. She noticed the light of the torch bouncing off her bedroom window and looked at her alarm clock. It was 2:11am. What on earth could he want at this time of night?

Mr Stink had made the shed quite homely. He had fashioned a bed out of some piles of old newspapers. An old piece of tarpaulin was his duvet, with a grow bag for a pillow. It looked almost comfy. An old hosepipe had been arranged in the shape of a dog-basket for the Duchess. A plant-pot full of water sat beside for a bowl. In chalk he'd expertly drawn some old-fashioned portraits on the dark wooden creosoted walls, like the ones you see in museums or old country houses, depicting people

from history. On one side he'd even drawn a window, complete with curtains and a sea view.



"You seem to be settling in then," said Chloe.

"Oh, yes, I can't thank you enough, child. I love it. I feel like I finally have a home again."

"I'm so pleased."

"Now," said Mr Stink. "Miss Chloe, I called you down here because I can't sleep. I would like you to read me a story."

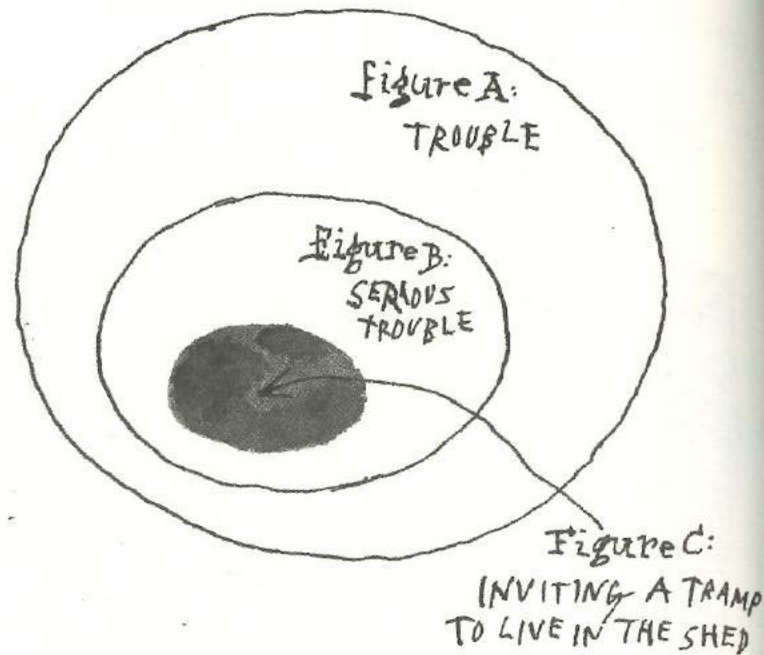
"A story? What kind of story?"

"You choose, my dear. But I implore you, nothing too girly please..."

Chloe tiptoed up the stairs back to her room. Sometimes she liked to move around the house without making a sound, and so could remember where all the creaks were on the stairs. If she put her foot right in the middle of *this* step, or the left side of *this* one, she knew she wouldn't be heard. If she woke Annabelle up, she knew her little sister would relish the chance of getting her into deep deep trouble. And this wouldn't be normal everyday trouble like not eating your cabbage or 'forgetting' to do your homework. This would be 'inviting a

tramp to live in the shed' trouble. It would be off the scale. As this simple graph shows:





Alternatively, if you look at this simple Venn diagram you can see that if figure A is 'trouble' and figure B is 'serious trouble', then this shaded area here, representing inviting a tramp to live in the shed, is a sub-section of figure B.

I hope that makes things clear.

Chloe looked on her bookshelf, behind the little ornamental owls she collected even if she wasn't sure why. (Did she even *like* owls? Some distant aunt buys you a porcelain owl one day, some other aunt assumes you're collecting them, and by the end of your childhood you've got hundreds of the stupid things. Owls, not aunts.)

Chloe studied the spines of her books. They were quite girly. Lots of pinky-coloured books that matched her stupid pinky-coloured room that she hated. She hadn't chosen the colour of her walls. Hadn't even been asked. Why couldn't her room be painted black? Now *that* would be cool. Her mother only bought her books about ponies, princesses, ballet schools and brainless bleach-blond teenagers in America whose only worry was what to wear to the prom. Chloe wasn't the least bit interested in any of them, and she was pretty sure Mr Stink wouldn't be either.

The one story she had written had been torn to shreds by her mother. This wasn't going to be easy.

Chloe tiptoed back down the stairs and shut the kitchen door behind her incredibly slowly so it wouldn't make a noise, and then knocked gently on the shed door.

"Who is it?" came a suspicious voice.

"It's me, Chloe, of course."

"I was fast asleep! What do you want?"

"You asked me to read you a story."

"Oh well, now you've woken me up you better come in..."

Chloe took a last deep breath of the fresh night air and entered his den.

"Goody!" said Mr Stink. "I used to love a bed-time story."

"Well, actually I'm sorry, but I couldn't really find anything," said Chloe. "All my books are horribly girly. Most of them are pink, in fact."

"Oh dear," said Mr Stink. He looked disappointed for a moment, then he smiled at a thought. "But what about one of your stories?"

"My stories?"

"Yes. You told me you like to make them up."

"But I couldn't just... I mean... what if you don't like it?" Chloe's stomach fizzed with a peculiar mix of excitement and fear. No one had ever asked to hear one of her stories before.

"I'm sure I'll love it," said Mr Stink. "And anyhow, you'll never know until you try."

"That's true," said Chloe, nodding. She hesitated for a moment, then took a deep breath.

"Do you like vampires?" she asked.

"Well, I don't know any socially."

"No, I mean, would you like to hear a story about vampires? These are vampires who are teachers in a school. Who suck the blood out of their poor unsuspecting pupils..."

"Is this the story your mother tore up?"

"Erm... yes," replied Chloe sadly. "But I think I can remember most of it."

"Well, I would love to hear it!"

"Really?"

"Of course!"

"All right," said Chloe. "Please can you pass me the torch?"

Mr Stink passed it to her and she turned it on and put it under her face to look scary.

"Once upon a time..." she began, before losing her nerve.

"Yes?"

"Once upon a time... no, I can't do it! Sorry."

Chloe hated reading out loud in class. She was



so shy she would even try and hide under her desk to avoid it. This was even *more* terrifying. These were her words. It was much more private, more personal, and she suddenly felt like she wasn't ready to share it with anyone.

"Please, Miss Chloe," said Mr Stink encouragingly. "I really want to hear your story. It sounds top banana! Now you were saying, once upon a time..."

She took a deep breath. "Once upon a time, there was a little girl called Lily who hated going to school. It wasn't because the lessons were hard, it was because all her teachers were vampires..."

"Wonderful opening!"

Chloe smiled, and continued. Soon she was really getting into it, and putting on voices for her heroine Lily, Lily's best friend Justin who was bitten by the music teacher in a piano lesson and became a bloodsucker too, and Mrs Murk,

the evil headmistress, who was in fact empress of vampires.

The tale unravelled all night. Chloe finished the story just before dawn as Lily finally drove her hockey stick through the headmistress's heart.

"... Mrs Murk's blood spurted out of her like newly struck oil, redecorating the sports hall a dark shade of crimson. The end."

Chloe turned off the torch, her voice hoarse and her eyes barely still open.

"What an absolutely gripping yarn," announced Mr Stink. "I can't wait to find out what happens in book two."

"Book *two*?"

"Yes," said Mr Stink. "Surely after killing the headmistress Lily is moved to another school. And all the teachers there could be flesh-eating zombies!"

That, thought Chloe, is a very good idea.

A Little Bit of Drool

Chloe looked at her alarm-clock radio when she finally dropped into bed. 6:44am. She had never been to bed that late, ever. *Adults* didn't even go to bed that late. Maybe very naughty rock-star ones, but not many. She closed her eyes for a second.

"Chloe? *Chloeee*? Wake up! *Chloeeeee*?" shouted Mother from outside the door. She knocked on the door three times. Then paused and knocked one more time which was especially annoying, as Chloe hadn't expected her to. She looked at the alarm-clock radio thing again.

6:45am. She had either been asleep for a whole day or a whole minute. As she couldn't open her eyes, Chloe guessed it must have been a minute.

"Whaaaaat...?" she said, and was shocked by how deep and gravelly she sounded. Telling stories all night had turned Chloe's voice into that of a sixty-year-old ex-coal miner who smoked a hundred roll-ups a day.

"Don't 'what' me, young lady! It's time you stopped lazing in bed. Your sister has already completed a triathlon this morning. Now get up. I need your help today on the campaign trail!"

Chloe was so tired she felt like she had grown into her bed. In fact, she wasn't sure where her body ended and the bed began. She slid out from under her duvet and crawled to the bathroom. Blinking in the mirror, Chloe thought for a moment that she was looking at her

own nana. Then, sighing, she made her way downstairs and to the kitchen table.

"We are going campaigning today," said Mother as she sipped her grapefruit juice and swallowed the motorway tailback of vitamin pills and food supplements she had lined up neatly on the table.

"It sounds *booooooring*," said Chloe. She made the word 'boring' sound even more boring by making it longer than it really needed to be. On Sunday mornings, Mother would allow the television to be switched on so she could watch programmes about politics. Chloe liked watching television. In a house where viewing was rationed, even an advert for a Stannah stair lift was a treat. However, these political discussion shows – which for no apparent reason were broadcast on Sunday mornings – were bum-numbingly boring. They made Chloe think

that she wanted to be a kid forever if this was what the grown-up world was like.

Chloe always suspected that her mother had another motive for watching: she had a crush on the Prime Minister. Chloe couldn't see it herself, but lots of women her mother's age seemed to find him dishy. To Dad's amusement, Mother would always stop whatever she was doing to watch the PM if he came on the news. Once, Chloe had even spotted a little bit of drool ooze out of her mother's mouth when there was some footage of the Prime Minister in denim shorts playing Frisbee on a beach.

Of course, even the sight of her mother drooling didn't make those politics shows any less boring. But Chloe would have watched a hundred of them if it meant not having to spend the day campaigning with Mother. *That* was how boring it was going to be.

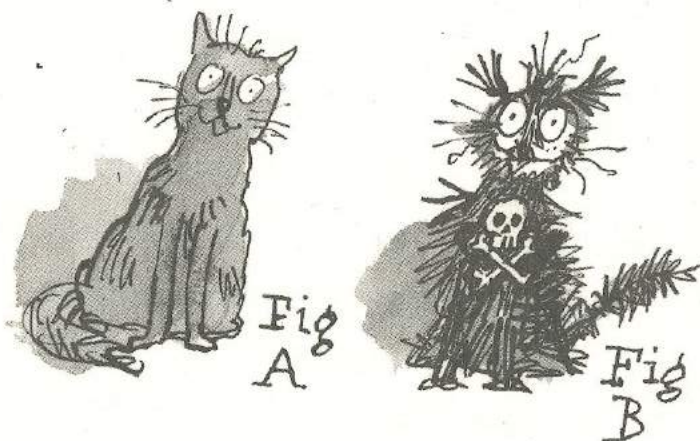
"Well, you are coming whether you like it or not," said Mother. "And put on that frilly yellow dress that I bought you for your birthday. You look almost pretty in that."

Chloe did not look anywhere near pretty in it. She looked like a Quality Street. If that wasn't bad enough, she looked like one of the unpopular flavours that get left in the tin until way into the New Year. The only colour she really liked wearing was black. She thought black was cool, and even better it made her look less chubby. Chloe desperately wanted to be a Goth, but she didn't know where to start. You couldn't buy Goth clothes in Marks & Spencer's. And anyway, you also needed the white make-up and the black hair-dye, and most importantly the skill of looking down at your shoes at all times.

How would she go about becoming a Goth? Was there an application form to fill out? A

committee of super-Goths who would vet you for Gothness, or was it Gothnicity? Chloe had once seen a real-life Goth hanging around by a bin in the high street and become incredibly excited. She really wanted to go over and ask her how to get started in the Goth world, but she was too shy. Which was ironic, since shyness is something you need if you want to be a successful Goth.

In the unlikely event of Elizabeth the cat becoming a Goth, she would look like this.



Let's get back to the story...

"It's cold outside, Chloe," said Mother, when Chloe came downstairs in the horrible Quality Street dress. "You'll need a coat. How about that tangerine-coloured coat your grandmother made you last Christmas?"

Chloe reached into the room under the stairs. This was where everyone in the family kept their coats and wellington boots. She heard a rustle in the darkness. Had Elizabeth the cat got shut in there by mistake? Or had Mr Stink moved indoors? She switched on the light. Peeking out from behind the bottom of an old fur coat was a frightened face.

"Dad?"

"Shush!"

"What are you hiding in here for?" Chloe whispered. "You are meant to be at work."

"No, I'm not. I lost my job at the factory,"

said Dad sorrowfully.

"What?"

"A whole load of us got made redundant two weeks ago. No one is buying new cars right now. It's the recession, I suppose."

"Yes, but why are you hiding?"

"I'm too frightened to tell your mother. She'll divorce me if she finds out. Please, I beg you, don't tell her."

"I'm not sure she'd div—"

"Please, Chloe. I'll sort all this out soon. It's not going to be easy, but I'll get another job if I can."

He leaned forward so that the hem of the fur coat was draped over his head, the thick fur looking like a mess of curly hair.

"So that's what you look like with hair!" Chloe whispered.

"What?"

It was *definitely* Dad on that CD cover. With the fur over his head, he looked just like he did in the photo, with that astonishing perm!

"If you need a job, you could always go back to playing guitar with the Serpents of Doom," said Chloe.

Dad looked startled. "Who told you I was in a band?"

"I saw your CD and I asked Mother, but she—"

"Shh!" said Dad. "Keep it down. Wait... where did you see this CD?"

"Er... I was... um... looking for my old hamster cage in the shed and it was in a box with a load of old junk. There was a burnt guitar with it."

Dad opened his mouth to say something, but just at that moment, a door slammed upstairs.

"Come along, Chloe!" boomed Mother.

Mr Stink

"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?!*

10

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.