

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

Mr Stink

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.

Scratch 'N' Sniff

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

Mr Stink

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.

"Ern, 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

Scratch 'N' Sniff

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.