

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.

Mr Stink

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

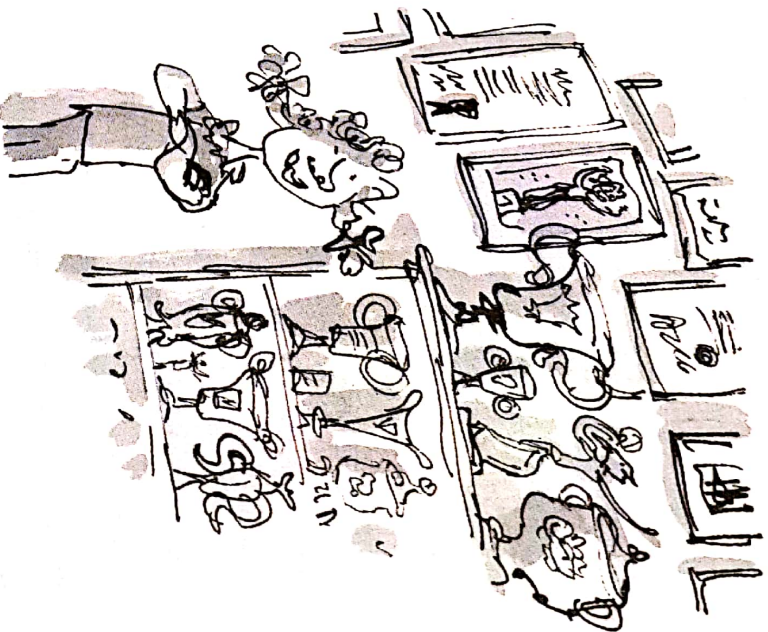
The way he put it, thought Chloe, it sounded almost poetic. Especially 'wanderer'. She sounded love to be a wanderer. She would wander all around the world if she could. Not stay in this boring little town where nothing happened all hadn't happened the day before.

"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.

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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.)

Mr Sunk

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

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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

Mr Stink

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

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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).

Mr Stink

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.

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Chloe gasped and looked
at her watch. Four o'clock!
Mother made her do her
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."

Mr Stink

"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.

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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