

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.

4

Drive!

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

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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 "They have gone out of date and hardened.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.



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"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

Daniel

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

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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,

Drivel

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.