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Abandon Starbucks!

Monday morning. The first proper day of the Christmas holidays. A day Chloe had been dreading. She didn't have any friends she could text or email or SMS or Facebook or Twitter or whatever, but there was *one* person she wanted to see...

By the time Chloe got to the bench it was raining heavily, and she wished she'd at least paused to pick up an umbrella.

"The Duchess and I weren't expecting to see you again, Chloe," said Mr Stink. His eyes twinkled at the surprise, despite the rain.

"I am sorry I ran off like that," said Chloe, "Don't worry, you are forgiven," he chuckled. Chloe sat down next to him. She gave the Duchess a stroke, and then noticed that the palm of her hand was black. She surreptitiously wiped it on her trousers. Then she shivered, as a raindrop ran down the back of her neck.

"Oh, no, you're cold!" said Mr Stink. "Shall we take shelter from the rain in a coffee shop establishment?"

"Err... yes, good idea," said Chloe, not sure if taking someone quite so stinky into an enclosed space really *was* a good idea. As they walked into the town centre, the rain felt icy, almost becoming hail.

When they arrived at the coffee shop, Chloe peered through the steamed-up glass window. "I don't think there's anywhere to sit down," she said. Unfortunately, the coffee shop was full to

Mr Stink

bursting with Christmas shoppers, trying to avoid the cruel British weather.

"We can but try," said Mr Stink, picking up the Duchess and attempting to conceal her under his tweed jacket.

The tramp opened the door for Chloe and she squeezed herself inside. As Mr Stink entered, the pleasing aroma of freshly-brewed coffee keeled over and died. His own special smell replaced it. There was silence for a moment. Then panic.



Abandon Starbucks!

People started running towards the door, clutching serviettes to their mouths as makeshift gas masks.

"Abandon Starbucks!" screamed a member of staff, and his colleagues immediately stopped making coffees or bagging muffins and ran for their lives.

"It seems to be thinning out a little," announced Mr Stink.

Soon they were the only ones left in the shop. *Maybe smelling this bad has its advantages,* thought Chloe. If Mr Stink's super-smell could empty a coffee shop, what else could it do? Maybe he could clear the local ice rink of skaters so she could have it all to herself? Or they could go to Alton Towers together and not have to queue for a single ride? Better still, she could take him and his smell into school one day, and if he was particularly stinky the headmistress would

have to send everyone home and she could have the day off!

"You take a seat here, child," said Mr Stink. "Now, what would you like to drink?"

"Er... a cappuccino, please," replied Chloe, trying to sound grown-up.

"I think I'll have one too." Mr Stink shuffled behind the counter and started opening tins. "Righty-ho, two cappuccinos coming right up."

The machines hissed and spat for a few moments, and then Mr Stink pottered back over to the table with two mugs of a dark, unidentifiable liquid. On closer inspection, it appeared to be some kind of black slime, but Chloe was too well brought up to complain and pretended to sip whatever it was that he had concocted for her. She even managed an almost convincing, "Mmm... lovely!"

Mr Stink stirred his solid liquid with a dainty little silver spoon he pulled out from his breast pocket. Chloe stole a glance at it and noticed it was monogrammed, with three little letters delicately engraved on the handle. She tried to get a better look, but he put it away before she could see what the letters were. What could they mean? Or was this simply another item Mr Stink had purloined during his career as a gentleman thief?

"So, Miss Chloe," said Mr Stink, breaking her train of thought. "It's the Christmas holidays, isn't it?" He took a sip from his coffee, holding his mug elegantly between his fingers. "Why aren't you at home decorating the tree with your family or wrapping presents?"

"Well, I don't know how to explain..." No one in Chloe's family was good at expressing their feelings. To her mother, feelings were at best

an embarrassment, at worst a sign of weakness.

"Just take your time, young lady."

Chloe took a deep breath and it all came flooding out. What started off as a stream soon became a rushing river of emotion. She told him how her parents argued most of the time and how once she was sitting on the stairs when she heard her Mother shout, "I am only staying with you for the sake of the girls!"

How her little sister made her life a misery. How nothing she did was ever good enough. How if she brought home some little bowl she had made in pottery class her Mother would put it at the back of a cupboard, never to be seen again. However, if her little sister brought any piece of artwork home, however awful, it was put in pride of place behind bulletproof glass as if it was the *Mona Lisa*.

Chloe told Mr Stink how her mother was

always trying to force her to lose weight. Up until recently, Mother had described her as having "puppy fat". But once she turned twelve, Mother rather cruelly started calling it "flab" or even worse "blubber", as if she was some species of whale.

Perhaps Mother was trying to shame her into losing weight.

In truth, it only made Chloe more miserable, and being miserable only made her eat more. Filling herself up with chocolate, crisps and cake felt like being given a much-needed hug.

She told Mr Stink how she wished her dad would stand up to her mother sometimes. How she didn't find it easy to make friends, as she was so shy. How she only really liked making up



stories, but it made her mother so angry. And how Rosamund ensured that every day at school was an absolute misery.

It was a long, long list, but Mr Stink listened intently to everything she said as jolly Christmas songs played incongruously in the background. For someone who spent every day with only a little black dog for company, he was surprisingly full of wisdom. In fact, he seemed to relish the opportunity to listen and talk and help. People didn't really stop to talk to Mr Stink – and he seemed pleased to be having a proper conversation for once.

He told Chloe, "Tell your Mother how you feel, I am sure she loves you and would hate you to be unhappy." And, "...try and find something fun you can do with your sister." And, "...why not talk to your dad about how you feel?"

Finally, Chloe told Mr Stink about how

Mother had ripped her vampire story to shreds. She had to try very hard not to cry.

"That's terrible, child," said Mr Stink. "You must have been devastated."

"I hate her," said Chloe. "I hate my mother."

"You shouldn't say that," said Mr Stink.

"But I do."

"You are very angry with her, of course, but she loves you, even if she finds it hard to show it."

"Maybe." Chloe shrugged, unconvinced. But having talked everything through she felt a little calmer now. "Thank you so much for listening to me," she said.

"I just hate to see a young girl like you looking sad," said Mr Stink. "I may be old, but I can remember what it was like to be young. I just hope I helped a little."

"You helped a lot."

Mr Stink smiled, before letting the last sludge of his volcanic gloop slip down his throat. "Delicious! Now, we'd better leave some money for our beverages." He searched around in his pockets for some change. "Oh, bother, I can't read the board without my spectacles. I'll leave six pence. That should be enough. And a tuppence tip. They will be pleased with that. They can treat themselves to one of those new-fangled video cassettes. Right, I think you'd better be heading home now, young lady."

The rain had stopped when they left the coffee shop. They sauntered down the road as cars hummed past.

"Let's swap places," said Mr Stink.

"Why?"

"Because a lady should always walk on the inside of the pavement and a gentleman on the outside."

"Really?" said Chloe. "Why?"

"Well," replied Mr Stink, "the outside is more dangerous because that's where the cars are. But I believe it was originally because in the olden days people used to throw the contents of their chamber pots out of their windows and into the gutter. The person on the outside was more likely to get splattered!"

"What's a chamber pot?" said Chloe.

"Well I don't wish to be crude, but it's a kind of portable toilet."

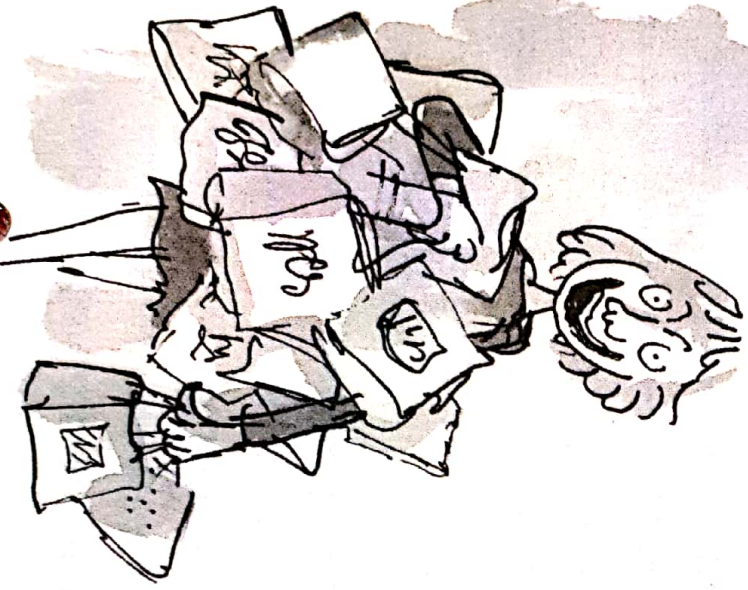
"Ugh! That's gross. Did people do that when you were a boy?"

Mr Stink chuckled. "No, that was a little before my time, child. In the sixteenth century, in fact! Now, Miss Chloe, etiquette demands we swap places."

His old-world gallantry was so charming it made Chloe smile, and they changed places.

Mr Stink

They strolled side by side, passing high-street shop after high-street shop, all trying to herald the approach of Christmas louder than the next. After a few moments Chloe saw Rosamund walking towards them with a small flotilla of shopping bags.



Abandon Starbucksi!

“Can we cross the road, please? Quickly,” whispered Chloe anxiously.

“Why, child? Whatever is the matter?”

“It’s that girl from school I just told you about, Rosamund.”

“The one who stuck that sign to your back?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

“You need to stand up to her,” pronounced Mr Stink. “Let her be the one to cross the road!”

“No... please don’t say anything,” pleaded Chloe.

“Who is this? Your new boyfriend?” laughed Rosamund. It wasn’t a real laugh, like people do when they find something funny. That’s a lovely sound. This was a cruel laugh. An ugly sound.

Chloe didn’t say anything, just looked down. “My daddy just gave me £500 to buy myself whatever I wanted for Christmas,” said Rosamund. “I blew the lot at Topshop. Shame

Mr Stink

you're too fat to get into any of their clothes." Chloe merely sighed. She was used to being hounded by Rosamund.

"Why are you letting her talk to you like that, Chloe?" said Mr Stink.

"What's it to you, Grandad?" said Rosamund mockingly. "Hanging around with smelly old tramps now, are you Chloe? You *are* tragic! How long did it take you to find that sign on your back then?"

"She didn't find it," said Mr Stink, slowly and deliberately. "I did. And I didn't find it amusing."

"Didn't you?" said Rosamund. "All the other girls found it really funny!"

"Well, then they are as vile as you," said Mr Stink.

"*What?*" said Rosamund. She wasn't used to being talked to like that.

Abandon Starbuck!

"I said 'then they are as vile as you,' he repeated, even louder this time. "*You* are a nasty little bully." Chloe looked on anxiously. She hated confrontation.

To make matters worse, Rosamund took a pace forward and stood eye to eye with Mr Stink. "Say that to my face, you old stinker!" For a moment Mr Stink fell silent. Then he opened his mouth and let out the deepest darkest dirtiest burp.

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Rosamund's face turned green. It was as if a putrid tornado had engulfed her. It was the smell of coffee and sausages and rotten vegetables recovered from bins all rolled into one. Rosamund turned and ran, hurtling down the high street in such a panic that she dropped her TopShop bags on the way.

"That was so funny!" laughed Chloe.

"I didn't mean to belch. Most impolite. It was just that coffee repeating on me. Dear me! Now next time I want to see you stand up for yourself, Miss Chloe. A bully can only make you feel bad about yourself if you *let* them."

"OK... I'll try," said Chloe. "So... see you tomorrow?"

"If you really want to," he replied.

"I would love to."

"And I would love to too!" he said, his eyes twinkling and twinkling as the last golden glow

Mr Stink

of the sunlight splintered through the sky.

At that moment a 4x4 thundered past. Its giant tyres sloshed through a huge puddle by the bus stop, sending up a wave that soaked Mr Stink from dirty head to dirty foot.

Water dripping from his glasses, he gave Chloe a little bow. "And that," he said, "is why a gentleman always walks on the outside."

"At least it wasn't a chamber pot!" chuckled Chloe.

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Soap-Dodgers

The next morning Chloe pulled open her curtains. Why was there a giant 'O' and a giant 'V' stuck to her window? She went outside in her dressing gown to investigate.

'VOTE CRUMB!' was spelled out in giant letters across the windows of the house. Elizabeth the cat pattered out with a rosette emblazoned with the words 'Crumb for MP' attached to her jewel-encrusted collar.

Then Annabelle came skipping out of the house with an air of self-congratulatory joy that was instantly annoying.