

## Rule Britannia

Mother sniffed. And sniffed again. Her nose wrinkled with disgust.

"Are you sure you had a bath, Mr Stink?" she enquired, as Dad drove all the family and Mr Stink to the television studio.

"Yes, I did, Madam."

"Well, there is a funny smell of pond in this car. And dog," pronounced Mother from the front seat.

"I think I'm going to puke," pronounced Annabelle from the back seat.

"I've told you before, darling. We don't say

'puke' in this family," corrected Mother. "We say we are feeling very slightly nauseous."

Chloe opened the window discreetly, so as not to hurt Mr Stink's feelings.

"Do you mind if we keep the window closed?" asked Mr Stink. "I am a little chilly."

The window went up again.

"Thank you so much," said Mr Stink. "Such unimaginable kindness."

They stopped at some traffic lights and Dad reached for one of his hard rock CDs. Mother slapped his hand, and he put it back on the steering wheel. She then put her favourite CD on the car stereo, and the old couple in the next car looked at the Crumb family strangely as 'Rule Britannia, Britannia rules the waves' came blaring out of their car.

"Mmm, no no no, that won't do at all..." said the

TV producer as he studied Mr Stink. "Can we put some dirt on him? He doesn't look trampy enough. Make-up? Where's make-up?"

A lady with far too much make-up on appeared from around a corridor, scoffing a croissant and holding a powder-puff.

"Darling, have you got any grime?" asked the producer.

"Come this way, Mr...?" said the make-up lady.

"Stink," said Mr Stink proudly. "Mr Stink. And I am going to star on the television tonight."

Mother scowled.

Chloe, Annabelle and Dad were led to a little room with a television, half a bottle of warm white wine and some stale crisps, to watch the show being broadcast live.

The thunderous title music started, there was polite applause from the audience and the

pompous-looking presenter, Sir David Squirt addressed the camera. "Tonight on *Question Time* it's an election special. We have representatives from all the major political parties, and also a tramp who goes by the name of Mr Stink. Welcome to the programme, everyone."

Everyone around the table nodded, apart from Mr Stink who proclaimed loudly, "May I say what a delight it is for me to be on your show tonight?"

"Thank you," said the presenter uncertainly.

"Being homeless I have never seen it," said Mr Stink. "In fact, I have absolutely no idea who you are. But I am sure you are wildly famous. Please continue, Sir Donald."

The audience laughed uncertainly. Mother looked displeased. The presenter coughed nervously and tried to continue.

"So the first question tonight..."



"Are you wearing make-up, Sir Declan?"  
enquired Mr Stink innocently.

"A little, yes. For the lights of course."

"Of course," agreed Mr Stink. "Foundation?"

"Yes."

"Eye liner?"

"A little."

"Lip-gloss?"

"A smidge."

"Looks nice. I wish I'd had some now.  
Blusher?"

The audience chuckled throughout this  
exchange. Sir David moved on rapidly. "I  
should explain that Mr Stink is here tonight as



he has been invited to live with Mrs Crumb..."

"Crooommmbe," corrected Mother.

"Oh," said Sir David. "I do apologise. We checked the pronunciation with your husband, and he said it was Crumb."

Mother went red with embarrassment. Sir David turned his attention back to his notes. "Later on in the programme," he said, "we will be discussing the difficult topic of homelessness."

Mr Stink put his hand up.

"Yes, Mr Stink?" asked the presenter.

"May I just pop to the lavatory, Sir Duncan?"

The audience laughed louder this time.

"I should have gone before we started, but I asked the make-up lady to do my hair and it took forever. Don't get me wrong, I am thrilled with the results; she gave me a wash and blow-dry. They even put something called gel in it, but I didn't get a chance to go to the little boy's room."

"Of course, if you need to go, go..."

"Thank you so, so much," said Mr Stink. He rose to his feet and started to potter off the set. "I shouldn't be too long, I think it's just a number one."

The audience howled again with laughter. In the little room with the stale crisps and the television Chloe and Dad were laughing too. Chloe looked at Annabelle. She was trying not to laugh, but a smile was definitely creeping up her face.

"My apologies!" exclaimed Mr Stink as he crossed the stage again in the opposite direction. "I am told the lavatory is this way...!"

## Collapsed Bouffant

"And that's why I feel that there should be a curfew on all people under thirty." Mother was in full flow now, and she smiled as she received a smattering of applause for this comment from the people over thirty in the audience. "They should all be in bed by eight o'clock at the latest..."

"Sorry I was a while," said Mr Stink as he ambled back on to the set. "I thought it was just a number one, but while I was standing there I suddenly got the urge to have a number two." The audience erupted into laughter, some even

applauding in delight as this serious show descended into a discussion of an old tramp's toilet habits. "I mean, I usually do my number twos in the mornings, between 9:07 and 9:08, but I had an egg sandwich backstage before I came on the show tonight. I don't know if you made the sandwiches, Sir Derek?"

"No, I don't make the sandwiches, Mr Stink. Now please can we get back to the question of curfews for young—"

"Well, it was a delicious sandwich, don't get me wrong," said Mr Stink. "But egg can sometimes make me want to go. And I don't always get that much of a warning, especially at my age. Do you ever have that problem, Sir Doris? Or do you have the bum of a much younger man?"

Another massive wave of laughter crashed on to the stage. In the stale crisps room even Annabelle was laughing now.

"We are here to discuss the serious topics of the day, Mr Stink," continued Sir David. His face was redder than red with anger as his serious political programme, a programme he had presented for forty tedious years, was rapidly turning into a comedy show starring an old tramp. The audience was enjoying it immensely though, and booed Sir David a little as he tried to steer the show back to politics. He shot them a steely stare before turning to the new star of the show. "And my name is Sir David. Not Sir Derek, or Sir Doris. *Sir David*. Now, let's move on to the question of homelessness, Mr Stink. I have a statistic here which says that there are over 100,000 homeless people in the UK today. Why do you think so many people are living on the streets?"

Mr Stink cleared his throat a little. "Well, if I may be so bold, I would venture that part of the

problem stems from the fact that we are seen as statistics rather than people." The audience applauded and Sir David leaned forward with interest. Perhaps Mr Stink wasn't the clown he had taken him for.

"We all have different reasons for being homeless," continued Mr Stink. "Each homeless person has a different story to tell. Perhaps if people in the audience tonight, or out there watching at home, stopped to *talk* to the homeless people in their town, they would realise that."

The audience were applauding even louder now, but Mrs Crumb leaped in. "That's what I did!" she exclaimed. "I just stopped to talk to this tramp one day and then asked him to come and live with my family. I've always put others before myself. I suppose that's always been my downfall," she said, tilting her head to the side



and smiling at the audience as if she were an angel sent down from heaven.

"Well, that's not really true is it, Mrs Crumb?" said Mr Stink.

There was silence. Mother stared at Mr Stink in horror. The audience shifted excitedly in their seats. Dad, Annabelle and Chloe all leaned forward closer to the television. Even Sir David's moustache twitched in anticipation.

"I don't know what you mean, my very close friend..." squirmed Mrs Crumb.

"I think you do," said Mr Stink. "The fact is, it wasn't *you* who invited me in, was it?"

Sir David's eyes gleamed. "Then who *did* invite you to stay with the Crumb family, Mr Stink?" he enquired, back in his stride now.

"Mrs Crumb's daughter, Chloe. She's only twelve but she's an absolutely fantastic girl. One of the sweetest, kindest people I have ever met."

These words fell on Chloe like an enormous YES. Then everyone in the stale crisps room looked towards her and she was overcome by embarrassment. She hid her face in her hands. Dad stroked her back proudly. Annabelle pretended not to be interested, and helped herself to another stale crisp.

"She should really come out here and take a bow," announced Mr Stink.

"No, no, no," snapped Mother.

"No, Mrs Crumb," said Sir David. "I think we'd all like to meet this extraordinary little girl."

The audience applauded his suggestion. But Chloe felt glued to her seat. She couldn't even speak out loud in front of the class. She didn't want to be on television in front of millions of people!

What would she say? What would she do? She

didn't know any tricks. This was going to be the most embarrassing moment of her life, even worse than when she threw up her macaroni cheese all over Miss Spratt in the language lab. But the applause was getting louder and louder, and eventually Dad took her hand and gently pulled her to her feet.



"You're feeling shy, aren't you?" whispered Dad.

Chloe nodded.

"Well you shouldn't. You're a fantastic girl. You should be proud of what you've done. Now come on. Enjoy your moment in the limelight!"

Hand in hand they raced down the corridor towards the set. Just out of sight of the cameras Dad let her hand go, and smiled supportively as she stepped out into the light. The audience applauded wildly. Mr Stink beamed over at her, and she tried to beam back. Mother was the only person not applauding, so Chloe's eyes were drawn towards her. Chloe tried to meet her gaze, but Mother turned her head sharply to look the other way. This made Chloe even more uncomfortable, and she tried to do a curtsy but didn't really know how to, and then



ran off the stage, back into the safety of the stale crisps room.

"What a charming child," said Sir David. He turned to Mother. "Now I have to ask you, Mrs Crumb. Why did you lie? Was it purely to further your own political ambitions?"

The other guests from rival political parties looked at Mrs Crumb and tutted. As if *they* would ever dream of doing anything so immoral! Mother started to perspire. Her hair lacquer began to melt and her make-up ran slowly down her face. Dad, Chloe and Annabelle sat and watched her squirm, unable to help.

"Well, as if anyone would want that old tramp in their house," she shouted finally. "Look at him! You lot watching this at home can't smell him, but take it from me, he stinks! He stinks of dirt and sweat and poo and pond and dog. I wish that great stinky stinker would just

stink off out of my home for ever!"

There was shocked silence for a moment. Then the boos started, getting louder and louder. Mother looked at the audience in panic. At that moment her bouffant collapsed.

