

the evil headmistress, who was in fact empress of vampires.

The tale unravelled all night. Chloe finished the story just before dawn as Lily finally drove her hockey stick through the headmistress's heart.

"... Mrs Murk's blood spurted out of her like newly struck oil, redecorating the sports hall a dark shade of crimson. The end."

Chloe turned off the torch, her voice hoarse and her eyes barely still open.

"What an absolutely gripping yarn," announced Mr Stink. "I can't wait to find out what happens in book two."

"Book *two*?"

"Yes," said Mr Stink. "Surely after killing the headmistress Lily is moved to another school. And all the teachers there could be flesh-eating zombies!"

That, thought Chloe, is a very good idea.

A Little Bit of Drool

Chloe looked at her alarm-clock radio when she finally dropped into bed. 6:44am. She had never been to bed that late, ever. *Adults* didn't even go to bed that late. Maybe very naughty rock-star ones, but not many. She closed her eyes for a second.

"Chloe? *Chloeee*? Wake up! *Chloeeeee*?" shouted Mother from outside the door. She knocked on the door three times. Then paused and knocked one more time which was especially annoying, as Chloe hadn't expected her to. She looked at the alarm-clock radio thing again.

6:45am. She had either been asleep for a whole day or a whole minute. As she couldn't open her eyes, Chloe guessed it must have been a minute.

"Whaaaat...?" she said, and was shocked by how deep and gravelly she sounded. Telling stories all night had turned Chloe's voice into that of a sixty-year-old ex-coal miner who smoked a hundred roll-ups a day.

"Don't 'what' me, young lady! It's time you stopped lazing in bed. Your sister has already completed a triathlon this morning. Now get up. I need your help today on the campaign trail!"

Chloe was so tired she felt like she had grown into her bed. In fact, she wasn't sure where her body ended and the bed began. She slid out from under her duvet and crawled to the bathroom. Blinking in the mirror, Chloe thought for a moment that she was looking at her

own nana. Then, sighing, she made her way downstairs and to the kitchen table.

"We are going campaigning today," said Mother as she sipped her grapefruit juice and swallowed the motorway tailback of vitamin pills and food supplements she had lined up neatly on the table.

"It sounds *booooooring*," said Chloe. She made the word 'boring' sound even more boring by making it longer than it really needed to be. On Sunday mornings, Mother would allow the television to be switched on so she could watch programmes about politics. Chloe liked watching television. In a house where viewing was rationed, even an advert for a Stannah stair lift was a treat. However, these political discussion shows – which for no apparent reason were broadcast on Sunday mornings – were bum-numbingly boring. They made Chloe think

that she wanted to be a kid forever if this was what the grown-up world was like.

Chloe always suspected that her mother had another motive for watching: she had a crush on the Prime Minister. Chloe couldn't see it herself, but lots of women her mother's age seemed to find him dishy. To Dad's amusement, Mother would always stop whatever she was doing to watch the PM if he came on the news. Once, Chloe had even spotted a little bit of drool ooze out of her mother's mouth when there was some footage of the Prime Minister in denim shorts playing Frisbee on a beach.

Of course, even the sight of her mother drooling didn't make those politics shows any less boring. But Chloe would have watched a hundred of them if it meant not having to spend the day campaigning with Mother. *That* was how boring it was going to be.

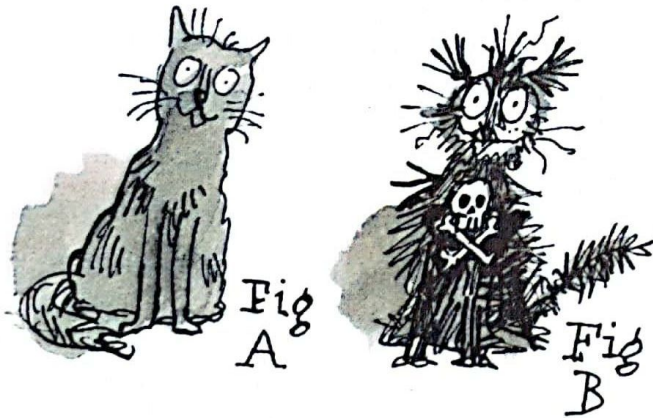
"Well, you are coming whether you like it or not," said Mother. "And put on that frilly yellow dress that I bought you for your birthday. You look almost pretty in that."

Chloe did not look anywhere near pretty in it. She looked like a Quality Street. If that wasn't bad enough, she looked like one of the unpopular flavours that get left in the tin until way into the New Year. The only colour she really liked wearing was black. She thought black was cool, and even better it made her look less chubby. Chloe desperately wanted to be a Goth, but she didn't know where to start. You couldn't buy Goth clothes in Marks & Spencer's. And anyway, you also needed the white make-up and the black hair-dye, and most importantly the skill of looking down at your shoes at all times.

How would she go about becoming a Goth? Was there an application form to fill out? A

committee of super-Goths who would vet you for Gothness, or was it Gothnicity? Chloe had once seen a real-life Goth hanging around by a bin in the high street and become incredibly excited. She really wanted to go over and ask her how to get started in the Goth world, but she was too shy. Which was ironic, since shyness is something you need if you want to be a successful Goth.

In the unlikely event of Elizabeth the cat becoming a Goth, she would look like this.



Let's get back to the story...

"It's cold outside, Chloe," said Mother, when Chloe came downstairs in the horrible Quality Street dress. "You'll need a coat. How about that tangerine-coloured coat your grandmother made you last Christmas?"

Chloe reached into the room under the stairs. This was where everyone in the family kept their coats and wellington boots. She heard a rustle in the darkness. Had Elizabeth the cat got shut in there by mistake? Or had Mr Stink moved indoors? She switched on the light. Peeking out from behind the bottom of an old fur coat was a frightened face.

"Dad?"

"Shush!"

"What are you hiding in here for?" Chloe whispered. "You are meant to be at work."

"No, I'm not. I lost my job at the factory,"

said Dad sorrowfully.

"What?"

"A whole load of us got made redundant two weeks ago. No one is buying new cars right now. It's the recession, I suppose."

"Yes, but why are you hiding?"

"I'm too frightened to tell your mother. She'll divorce me if she finds out. Please, I beg you, don't tell her."

"I'm not sure she'd div—"

"Please, Chloe. I'll sort all this out soon. It's not going to be easy, but I'll get another job if I can."

He leaned forward so that the hem of the fur coat was draped over his head, the thick fur looking like a mess of curly hair.

"So that's what you look like with hair!" Chloe whispered.

"What?"

It was *definitely* Dad on that CD cover. With the fur over his head, he looked just like he did in the photo, with that astonishing perm!

"If you need a job, you could always go back to playing guitar with the Serpents of Doom," said Chloe.

Dad looked startled. "Who told you I was in a band?"

"I saw your CD and I asked Mother, but she—"

"Shh!" said Dad. "Keep it down. Wait... where did you see this CD?"

"Er... I was... um... looking for my old hamster cage in the shed and it was in a box with a load of old junk. There was a burnt guitar with it."

Dad opened his mouth to say something, but just at that moment, a door slammed upstairs.

"Come along, Chloe!" boomed Mother.

Mr Stink

"Promise you won't say anything about me losing my job," whispered Dad.

"I promise."

Chloe shut the door, leaving her dad on all fours in the darkness. Now she had two fully grown men hiding around the house. *What's next?* she thought. *Am I going to find Grandad in the tumble dryer?!*

10

Slightly Chewed

Being on the political campaign trail meant Chloe knocking on what seemed like everybody's front door in the town and Mother asking people if she could "rely on their vote". Those who said they were going to vote for Mother were instantly rewarded with a big smile and an even bigger sticker to put in their window proclaiming 'Vote Crumb'. Those who said they *weren't* voting for her were going to miss an awful lot of daytime telly. Mother was the kind of person who wouldn't give up without a fight.

127