

# Chapter 1

## Who Is Stinky Mog?

Stinky Mog was a kid at my school. There's a Stinky Mog at your school, too, I bet. You probably don't call him Stinky Mog, but he's there, on the edge of things, in the shadows.

At my school, just like yours, there were groups and gangs and cliques. Kids who were in, and kids who were out.

You could see the school as a circle, with some kids at the centre, like the sun, and some at the outer rim, like Pluto, going around alone in the cold and the dark. Or you could see it as layers. Like a cake, maybe. No, not a cake. More like a pond, with the fast and beautiful fish swimming around at the top, near the light, and then the duller and weaker fish further down. Finally there was the slime and the filth at the bottom, where the dead

things were, and the things that might as well be dead.

That was Stinky Mog. He was puny planet Pluto, freezing his nuts off in the outer dark. He was the slime-dweller, slithering in the filth at the bottom of the pond. He didn't have any friends. Because to be friends with Stinky Mog would make you stinky, too. And who wants that? It's a stink you can't wash off.

How did Stinky Mog become Stinky Mog? Or was he always Stinky Mog, born into the slime?

No, there was a time when things were OK for Stinky Mog. Before his mum lost it. Before his mum lost herself. Stinky Mog remembered birthday parties with other kids and cake and presents, and his mum laughing, her hair golden in the sunlight. But gradually he drifted into the darkness.

What happened?

Stinky Mog didn't know. He was only a kid. Grown-ups are complicated. But first his mum stopped picking him up from school and he had to walk back alone. The other mums and dads at the school gates would look at Stinky Mog and then at each other as he began the walk back in the rain. But they never said anything.

Stinky Mog's mum couldn't walk very well any more. For a while she had a stick. And then she got a mobility scooter that lived in the downstairs hall of their block of flats. Stinky Mog hated that scooter and was terrified the other kids at junior school would see his mum on it. He knew what they'd say. He knew they'd laugh at her and him.

Stinky Mog's mum went out less and less, and then she stopped going out at all. She just sat on the settee all day, watching the telly. Soon she stopped changing out of her night clothes. Or rather her day clothes and her night clothes became the same thing. Stinky Mog was only a kid, still just seven or eight years old, but he had to go to the shop on the corner to buy food with the money his mum put into his small hand.

The man in the shop always looked at the money, shook his head and put some things in a bag: bread and milk and tea and margarine and sometimes ham and cheese. And one special time the man put in a bunch of grapes that were going bad – a kind, not cruel, act. He patted Stinky Mog's greasy head and said, "Get some vitamins in you so you can do some growing." Stinky Mog's mum was never unkind, and she let him eat all the grapes.

They went off like hand grenades of happiness in his mouth, the nicest thing he'd ever tasted.

And when Stinky Mog grew, his clothes stayed the same size, as they weren't magical clothes like in a fairy tale. The clothes were not clean. That was when the other kids at his junior school started to call him Stinky Mog. And by naming him this, they made it real. There was no Stinky Mog before the name. But after the name, there was only Stinky Mog. The kids even made up a song:

*Stinky Mog  
Stinky Mog  
He looks like a tramp  
And he smells like a bog.*

*Stinky Mog  
Stinky Mog  
I'd rather snog a skunk  
Or a smelly dog.*

The song, and the laughter, followed Stinky Mog around for a few days until the teachers stopped it. And then it lived on as a whisper, a memory, a threat.

The teachers at the school were nice. One of them brought Stinky Mog some old clothes to wear. And the dinner lady gave him second helpings, as she saw how he gazed at the food with such longing, even when it was only dry fish fingers or grey cottage pie or rubbery pizza.

So in term-time at least, Stinky Mog didn't starve.

But he did stink.

There was a washing machine in their flat, but it didn't work. Stinky Mog had a memory of his mother putting clothes in the round glass door, like a window on a ship, and pressing buttons. Once he tried to do the same, but nothing happened. No lights came on, and the drum inside did not turn. He took the clothes out again and wore them the next day.

People came to see Stinky Mog and his mum. Men in suits. Ladies in suits. When they came, his mum changed, snapped out of it. She became more like the mum he remembered. Before they arrived she would comb his hair and wipe his face and say, "Right, let's make you smart for the council."

But after they had gone, his mum would lie down again on the settee.

“Make us a cup of tea, love,” she’d say, and he would, because there was always tea and often milk, even when there was nothing else.

The less that Mum did, the more Stinky Mog had to do. As well as the shopping, he was soon doing the cooking. Not that he was any good at it. His cooking was mainly toast. And he did the cleaning. Well, he tried to make the place look tidy at least. After a time, the Hoover broke, so the carpet was basically just dust held together with fluff.

There were still some days when Stinky Mog’s mum was nice. They’d sit together and watch the old telly, and she’d put her arm around him and stroke his greasy hair.

And once his mum said, “Poo, you need a bath,” and she took him to the bathroom and ran the water, but the water was cold. So then she boiled kettle after kettle until the water was warm, and she put some washing-up liquid in the water because there wasn’t any soap or shampoo. Stinky Mog got in and washed away the dirt and the smell, and it felt really nice.

As he grew older, Stinky Mog learned how to get by. The water was nearly always cold, but he would wash his hands and face in the sink. And

sometimes he would put his dirty clothes in the cold bath, squirt washing-up liquid in the water and stamp about on them until the water turned grey.

But still, it was hard for Stinky Mog not to be dirty and not to be stinky. And still, when the teacher left the room, the other kids would sing the Stinky Mog song, especially if he had done something stupid, like getting noticed. The pain of it and the shame of it burned him, and shrivelled him, and made it so that the only thing he wanted in the world was to be invisible.

And then Stinky Mog came to the end of junior school, and he was scared and hopeful at the same time. His mum came out of her secret world, briefly, to somehow buy him the basics of the secondary school uniform: a sweatshirt and a pair of black trousers. She bought them, sensibly, in sizes far too big. (Though in time Stinky Mog outgrew them. Then he would tug at his sleeves so that his grey-white wrists might not be exposed, and pull at his trousers to encourage them over his ankles.)

Stinky Mog's first two days at secondary school were fine. The great thing was that none of the kids from his year at junior school had gone on to

this school. It was a miracle, almost. It meant he could start again. Stinky Mog knew that all he had to do was stay below the radar, not get noticed.

At lunch he sat at a big table, close enough to some other kids in his class so he didn't seem completely on his own. Stinky Mog was too shy to talk to anyone, but that didn't matter. He didn't look too different to the others. He was just one kid in a mass of kids. They were all shy and a bit scared.

On the second day a boy asked him to pass the salt and said, "Thanks." It was a small thing, but Stinky Mog let himself hope. Maybe he would have a friend here.

And then, on the third day, he heard it. Stinky Mog was in the schoolyard, sitting on one of the concrete benches. He was reading a book he'd got from the school library. It was about rabbits. Sounds stupid, but it was a good book. The rabbits lived in a warren that was going to be destroyed, and so some of them escaped and tried to find a new safe place to live. It was exciting. And there was a kind, clever, brave rabbit who looked after the others – the crap rabbits. Stinky Mog was thinking it would be OK to be a rabbit, even if you



had to watch out for foxes and weasels and men with guns.

It was then that he heard it, when he was still inside his own head, thinking about the rabbits and their adventures. It was quiet to begin with – just one voice, hardly more than a whisper. But then it grew louder, first that one voice, but then others joining in, until the sound of it in his head was like a football crowd.

*Stinky Mog*

*Stinky Mog*

*He looks like a tramp*

*And he smells like a bog.*

*Stinky Mog*

*Stinky Mog*

*I'd rather snog a skunk*

*Or a smelly dog.*

So, it had happened. The song had come with Stinky Mog to secondary school, clinging to him like the old stink.

He looked up from his book. There was a kid there, a small one – more weasel than fox. The kid had a joyous light of evil shining in his eyes. Stinky Mog recognised him. This kid had been in the year ahead of him at junior school.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair.