

STIFF IS UGLY AND HAS GOT FLEAS

EVEN BEFORE WE saw him, we hated him. You would too. How could you not hate someone called Reuben Beardsley? When Byrne, our form teacher, told us that Reuben Beardsley was joining our form, we went crazy.

Then Byrne talked about the problems of being new. Everyone was quiet, they were trying to imagine Reuben Beardsley. Surely he couldn't be as bad as the name sounded. He was worse!

He was a sort of teenage Elephant Man - only not so good-looking. He was 4' 7" short and thin - a pair of mega-thick glasses on legs. He was soon called 'Stiff' because of the way he moved: all slowly and carefully.

But looking and walking and sounding like an idiot were not enough: everything Stiff did made him the most hated boy in the school! He lost two marks for his trousers, two marks for always doing his top button up. Four for his hair. Ten for talking to a teacher after school and looking as if he was enjoying it. Fifteen for asking a teacher, 'If I've already done the homework, can I give it to you now?' And twenty for his voice. Because when Byrne said to Stiff on the first day, 'I hope you'll be happy here', and he replied, 'Thank you very much, sir' in a 'I'll lick your shoes if you like' voice - Stiff was already finished.

At first Stiff asked us where the rooms for lessons were and we always carefully sent him to the wrong room. So then he walked round the school on his own and drew himself a beautiful map, which we quickly stole.

Stiff was never alone. We'd all wait for him in the morning, and as he'd get nearer, we would all sing one giant chorus of 'Stiff! Stiff! Stiff!' as if Stiff was a football team and we were his supporters. And all day seven hundred eyes never left Stiff - not for a second.

AND THEN someone had a great idea.

Why couldn't Stiff have fleas? Probably, if you touched Stiff you'd get fleas, too. So began one of the school's most popular games, 'No returns'.

All you had to do was 'get' someone - throw them against Stiff and shout, 'No returns'. Then you couldn't be 'got' and that person had to grab someone else and throw them against Stiff - and so on. Stiff was of course the key player. Wherever he was, the game was.

'No returns' soon spread to not touching anything Stiff had touched. If you had to collect books up, you wouldn't pick up Stiff's. The biggest joke was in Science: there were only two long benches - each for fourteen. Only we'd all sit on one side while Stiff would sit all alone on the other.

And while we gave Stiff all this aggro, what did he do? Nothing. He just sat there and accepted it. That's what made it worse. I mean, if he'd got mad or even tried to fight someone, we'd have respected him. But he didn't. He'd just lower those big, empty eyes - and go on with his book.

ONCE - ONLY ONCE - I remember he became a little angry. He said, 'You're not getting to me. You're not.' It was when we put this dirty magazine in Stiff's bag. Andy Horne's idea. Then Andy went over to Stiff, all friendly, and said, 'Have you seen my dirty magazine anywhere, mate?'

Stiff shook his head.

'I thought you might have borrowed it,' continued Andy.

Stiff shook and lowered his head.

'May I just check your bag?' said Andy, like a police officer.

Stiff knew he couldn't stop him - especially as Andy had a large audience now. Andy threw all the books out of Stiff's bag, then said, 'Hey, look at this.' He held up the dirty magazine. 'Oh, Stiff, what were you doing with it?'

'Didn't know it was there,' Stiff said quietly.

'Oh, Stiff, that's not good enough.' People started laughing. That's when Stiff said, 'You're not getting to me, you're not. But even as he said it, he seemed to get smaller and smaller before our eyes. Cruel? Yes. Do I feel ashamed now? Sometimes. And yet at the time it didn't seem anything too bad, just a laugh, a way of making school more fun.

Anyway, Stiff wasn't human. I mean, Stiff was everything you didn't want to be: he was a short, thin, hard-working bum-licker. He also made us feel good.

After all, nobody's perfect. Take me. I'm only 5' 6", just OK at most sports, I've got ears like Mr Spock and spots all over my face ... I used to worry about all these problems a lot. But since Stiff arrived, I've hardly worried at all. Because whatever problems you and I might have, Stiff has got far more.

NONE OF US guessed how it would end. It ended one Wednesday - I'll never forget it. Stiff was at the first two lessons. But some time during break he disappeared.

Then, before lunch, a new 'Stiff' rumour went through the school. Gaz had gone to the toilet for a cigarette and came back very excited about something.

Whispers spread around the classroom.

Andy Horne tried to tell me the news - but he couldn't. He was laughing too much.

'Come on, Andy, tell me.'

'Sorry, mate, it's just ...' he started laughing again,

'it's Stiff, he's locked himself in the toilet. Gaz noticed one of the toilet doors was locked and knocked on it. He says he heard Stiff say "Go away". Gaz thinks he's been there since break.'

By the end of the lesson all of 3B were excited. Everyone - girls too - ran out of the class and straight to the toilets.

The girls waited outside. A couple did their 'Oh, poor Stiff' act but they were as excited as we were. We ran inside. All the doors except one were open.

'Stiff, you in there?' called Gaz.

No answer.

'What's the matter, run out of paper?' I said.

Laughing and a slow chorus of 'Stiff, Stiff...'

But then I shouted, 'Shut up and listen.' Finally everyone shut up and listened to Stiff crying.

It sounded very quiet, very strange. It really worried us. It wasn't normal somehow. Typical of Stiff - he couldn't even cry properly.

Soon everyone was shouting, 'Shut up, Stiff', but the crying went on. This wasn't funny any more - it was scary.

'Stiff, come out now,' shouted a 6th- former who had joined the crowd.

Next was one of the 'Oh, poor Stiff' girls: 'They're all really sorry for what they've done. So open up, Reuben, please.' It was quite shocking to hear someone call Stiff 'Reuben'.

But Stiff didn't answer. Did he even hear her? Perhaps he had stopped listening to us.

'Shall I get a teacher?' whispered another girl.

A shocking suggestion - but Andy, our leader, said very quietly, 'Go on then, get Byrne.'

Byrne came and went. He tried everything but Stiff's tears continued. Not even the headteacher could get Stiff out. We were all sent away.

At 3.35 the toilets were open again.

Next day, no Stiff.

A WEEK LATER. Stiff returned: just the same, perhaps a little older. As he walked down the corridor to hang up his sensible coat, all eyes were on him. Just like before. Only now the teachers had warned us to leave Stiff alone, and this time I agreed with them. But would everyone else?

Suddenly Russell Bryant called out, 'Want to borrow a hanky, Stiff?'

I hoped Stiff would say something but his face didn't change. I knew he wouldn't do anything. But someone else did.

Andy Horne jumped forward and grabbed Bryant and shouted, 'Leave Reuben alone, all right?'

Then Andy put his hand on Stiff's back and said, 'All right, mate?' First time anyone had touched Stiff without saying 'No returns' for months.

Then Andy turned to us. 'We'll all leave Reuben alone. OK?' Last week Andy was one of Stiff's main tormentors, now he was his champion.

Everyone started saying 'All right, Reuben?' and 'Nice to see you back, mate.' Even me. While Stiff, sorry Reuben, seemed to be trying to press his head down into his neck. I think all this show of friendliness hurt him as much as all the Stiff crap before.

Not sure though. The friendly attitude towards Reuben didn't last long. The 'All right, mate?' quickly melted away and a week later Reuben was ignored. No one laughed at him, no one spoke to him - you could say Reuben disappeared.

And did I feel sorry for Reuben?

Actually I didn't.

Because in a funny sort of way I think Reuben finally got what he wanted - he became invisible.

Adapted from:

Stiff Is Ugly and Has Got Fleas' by Pete Johnson

a First impressions

Explain why you enjoyed or didn't enjoy reading the story. Here is some help:

/felt sorry for/angry about/...

It was/seemed sad/surprising/... that...

/couldn't believe...

/loved/hated it when...

b A closer look

Look through the story and make two lists:

1. the reasons why the narrator and the other students hate Reuben Beardsley

name sounds funny,...

2. how the students make his life hell.

call him 'Stiff'...

c Write a summery