

Chapter 2 Mr Wormwood

Matilda's father bought and sold cars, and he seemed to make quite a lot of money from doing it.

'Sawdust,' he said proudly. 'That's the secret. And it costs me nothing. I get it from the wood shop.'

'How can sawdust help you to sell cars, daddy?' asked Matilda. 'I don't understand.'

'That's because you're a stupid little girl,' her father said. He turned to his son. 'I'm always glad to buy a car with an old gearbox, one that makes a terrible noise. I get it cheap. Then I mix a little sawdust with the oil in the gearbox and it goes beautifully - for a day or two.'

'How long will it go like that before it starts making noises again?' asked Matilda.

'Long enough for the buyer to get a long way away,' her father said, laughing.

'But that's not honest, daddy,' said Matilda.

'Nobody gets rich by being honest,' he said. He was a small ratty-looking man with a thin moustache. He liked to wear brightly coloured jackets with yellow or green ties. 'For example, anyone who buys a car asks "How many miles has it done?" Right, Michael?'

'Right,' said his son.

'So, I buy an old car that's done a hundred and fifty thousand miles, and get it cheap. Then I ask myself, "How can I change the clock so that it reads ten thousand?" If I run the car backwards, the numbers will go backwards. But who's going to drive a car backwards for thousands and thousands of miles?'

'Nobody,' young Michael said.

'Right,' said his father. 'Now this clock thing runs off one of the front wheels. So I use an electric drill on it, and when the drill turns, it turns the clock backwards — very fast! I can take fifty thousand miles off the car in a few minutes! And by the time I finish, the car's only done ten thousand, and I tell the customer, "It belonged to an old person who only used it once a week for shopping.'" He laughed loudly.

'But daddy,' said Matilda, who was listening carefully, 'that's terrible. It's not honest, and -'

'You're just a stupid little girl!' he shouted.

'That's right, Harry,' said his wife. 'Keep your ugly little mouth shut, Matilda. We want to watch the TV!'

They were in the living-room, eating their supper with their plates on their knees in front of the TV.

'Mummy,' said Matilda, 'can I eat my supper in the diningroom so that I can read my book?' Her father looked at her. 'Supper is a family meal,' he said angrily. 'Nobody will leave the table until we've finished.'

'But we don't eat at the table,' said Matilda. 'We always eat with our plates on our knees while we watch the TV'

'And what's wrong with watching the TV?' her father said. His voice was suddenly soft and dangerous.

Matilda didn't answer. She was too angry.

Now it was time to do something.

Task 1 Answer the following questions.

1. What was Mr Wormwood's business?
2. How did sawdust help Mr Wormwood to sell cars?
3. What else did Mr Wormwood do to cheat his customers?
4. Where did the family usually have dinner?
5. Why couldn't Matilda leave the table and eat alone?

Task 2. Are these sentences right or wrong?

1. Matilda's father buys and sells cars.
2. Matilda's father is an honest man.
3. Matilda's father puts sawdust in the gearboxes of cars.
4. Matilda's father drives cars backwards for thousands of miles.
5. Matilda is angry with her father because he is not honest.
6. Matilda wants to watch TV with her family.

Task 3. Discuss these questions. Write down your ideas in the exercise-book.

1. *"And what's wrong with watching TV?" her father said. His voice was suddenly soft and dangerous.'* Do you think these sentences are funny? Why/why not?
2. In your opinion, is there anything wrong with watching TV? Give reasons for your answer.
3. The last line of this chapter is: *'Now it was time to do something.'* What do you think Matilda could do?

Task 4. Write down your ideas in the exercise-book.

What is unusual about Matilda's parents and her life at home? Is your home like this?