

## Chapter 5: Mr Coombes

*Boy: Tales of Childhood by Roald Dahl*

1. The flush of triumph over the dead mouse was carried forward to the next morning as we all met again to walk to school.
2. 'Let's go in and see if it's still in the jar,' somebody said as we approached the sweet-shop.
3. 'Don't,' Thwaites said firmly. 'It's too dangerous. Walk past as though nothing has happened.'
4. As we came level with the shop we saw a cardboard notice hanging on the door.
5. We stopped and stared. We had never known the sweet-shop to be closed at this time in the morning, even on Sundays.
6. 'What's happened?' we asked each other. 'What's going on?'
7. We pressed our faces against the window and looked inside. Mrs Pratchett was nowhere to be seen.
8. 'Look!' I cried. 'The Gobstopper jar's gone! It's not on the shelf! There's a gap where it used to be!'
9. 'It's on the floor!' someone said. 'It's smashed to bits and there's Gobstoppers everywhere!'
10. 'There's the mouse!' someone else shouted.
11. We could see it all, the huge glass jar smashed to smithereens with the dead mouse lying in the wreckage and hundreds of many-coloured Gobstoppers littering the floor.
12. 'She got such a shock when she grabbed hold of the mouse that she dropped everything,' somebody was saying.
13. 'But why didn't she sweep it all up and open the shop?' I asked.
14. Nobody answered me.
15. We turned away and walked towards the school. All of a sudden we had begun to feel slightly uncomfortable. There was something not quite right about the shop being closed. Even Thwaites was unable to offer a reasonable explanation. We became silent. There was

a faint scent of danger in the air now. Each one of us had caught a whiff of it. Alarm bells were beginning to ring faintly in our ears.

16. After a while, Thwaites broke the silence. 'She must have got one heck of a shock,' he said. He paused. We all looked at him, wondering what wisdom the great medical authority was going to come out with next.
17. 'After all,' he went on, 'to catch hold of a dead mouse when you're expecting to catch hold of a Gobstopper must be a pretty frightening experience. Don't you agree?'
18. Nobody answered him.
19. 'Well now,' Thwaites went on, 'when an old person like Mrs Pratchett suddenly gets a very big shock, I suppose you know what happens next?'
20. 'What?' we said. 'What happens?'
21. 'You ask my father,' Thwaites said. 'He'll tell you.'
22. 'You tell us,' we said.
23. 'It gives her a heart attack,' Thwaites announced. 'Her heart stops beating and she's dead in five seconds.'
24. For a moment or two my own heart stopped beating. Thwaites pointed a finger at me and said darkly, 'I'm afraid you've killed her.'
25. 'Me?' I cried. 'Why just me?'
26. 'It was your idea,' he said. 'And what's more, you put the mouse in.'
27. All of a sudden, I was a murderer.
28. At exactly that point, we heard the school bell ringing in the distance and we had to gallop the rest of the way so as not to be late for prayers.
29. Prayers were held in the Assembly Hall. We all perched in rows on wooden benches while the teachers sat up on the platform in armchairs, facing us. The five of us scrambled into our places just as the Headmaster marched in, followed by the rest of the staff.
30. The Headmaster is the only teacher at Llandaff Cathedral School that I can remember, and for a reason you will soon discover, I can remember him very clearly indeed. His name was Mr Coombes and I have a picture in my mind of a giant of a man with a face like a ham and a mass of rusty-coloured hair that sprouted in a tangle all over the top of his head. All

grown-ups appear as giants to small children. But Headmasters (and policemen) are the biggest giants of all and acquire a marvellously exaggerated stature. It is possible that Mr Coombes was a perfectly normal being, but in my memory he was a giant, a tweed-suited giant who always wore a black gown over his tweeds and a waistcoat under his jacket.

31. Mr Coombes now proceeded to mumble through the same old prayers we had every day, but this morning, when the last amen had been spoken, he did not turn and lead his group rapidly out of the Hall as usual. He remained standing before us, and it was clear he had an announcement to make.
32. 'The whole school is to go out and line up around the playground immediately,' he said. 'Leave your books behind. And no talking.'
33. Mr Coombes was looking grim. His hammy pink face had taken on that dangerous scowl which only appeared when he was extremely cross and somebody was for the high-jump. I sat there small and frightened among the rows and rows of other boys, and to me at that moment the Headmaster, with his black gown draped over his shoulders, was like a judge at a murder trial.
34. 'He's after the killer,' Thwaites whispered to me.
35. I began to shiver.
36. 'I'll bet the police are here already,' Thwaites went on. 'And the Black Maria's waiting outside.'
37. As we made our way out to the playground, my whole stomach began to feel as though it was slowly filling up with swirling water. I am only eight years old, I told myself. No little boy of eight has ever murdered anyone. It's not possible.
38. Out in the playground on this warm cloudy September morning, the Deputy Headmaster was shouting, 'Line up in forms! Sixth Form over there! Fifth Form next to them! Spread out! Spread out! Get on with it! Stop talking all of you!'
39. Thwaites and I and my other three friends were in the Second Form, the lowest but one, and we lined up against the red-brick wall of the playground shoulder to shoulder. I can remember that when every boy in the school was in his place, the line stretched right round the four sides of the playground – about one hundred small boys altogether, aged between six and twelve, all of us wearing identical grey shorts and grey blazers and grey stockings and black shoes.

40. 'Stop that talking!' shouted the Deputy Head. 'I want absolute silence!'
41. But why for heaven's sake were we in the playground at all? I wondered. And why were we lined up like this? It had never happened before.
42. I half-expected to see two policemen come bounding out of the school to grab me by the arms and put handcuffs on my wrists.
43. A single door led out from the school on to the playground. Suddenly it swung open and through it, like the angel of death, strode Mr Coombes, huge and bulky in his tweed suit and black gown, and beside him, believe it or not, right beside him trotted the tiny figure of Mrs Pratchett herself!
44. Mrs Pratchett was alive!
45. The relief was tremendous.
46. 'She's alive!' I whispered to Thwaites standing next to me. 'I didn't kill her!' Thwaites ignored me.
47. 'We'll start over here,' Mr Coombes was saying to Mrs Pratchett. He grasped her by one of her skinny arms and led her over to where the Sixth Form was standing. Then, still keeping hold of her arm, he proceeded to lead her at a brisk walk down the line of boys. It was like someone inspecting the troops.
48. 'What on earth are they doing?' I whispered.
49. Thwaites didn't answer me. I glanced at him. He had gone rather pale.
50. 'Too big,' I heard Mrs Pratchett saying. 'Much too big. It's none of this lot. Let's 'ave a look at some of them titchy ones.'
51. Mr Coombes increased his pace. 'We'd better go all the way round,' he said. He seemed in a hurry to get it over with now and I could see Mrs Pratchett's skinny goat's legs trotting to keep up with him. They had already inspected one side of the playground where the Sixth Form and half the Fifth Form were standing. We watched them moving down the second side . . . then the third side.
52. 'Still too big,' I heard Mrs Pratchett croaking. 'Much too big! Smaller than these! Much smaller! Where's them nasty little ones?'
53. They were coming closer to us now . . . closer and closer.

54. They were starting on the fourth side . . .
55. Every boy in our form was watching Mr Coombes and Mrs Pratchett as they came walking down the line towards us.
56. 'Nasty cheeky lot, these little 'uns!' I heard Mrs Pratchett muttering. 'They comes into my shop and they thinks they can do what they damn well likes!'
57. Mr Coombes made no reply to this.
58. 'They nick things when I ain't looking,' she went on. 'They put their grubby 'ands all over everything and they've got no manners. I don't mind girls. I never 'ave no trouble with girls, but boys is 'ideous and 'orrible! I don't 'ave to tell you that, 'Eadmaster, do I?'
59. 'These are the smaller ones,' Mr Coombes said.
60. I could see Mrs Pratchett's piggy little eyes staring hard at the face of each boy she passed.
61. Suddenly she let out a high-pitched yell and pointed a dirty finger straight at Thwaites. 'That's 'im!' she yelled. 'That's one of 'em! I'd know 'im a mile away, the scummy little bounder!'
62. The entire school turned to look at Thwaites. 'W-what have I done?' he stuttered, appealing to Mr Coombes.
63. 'Shut up,' Mr Coombes said.
64. Mrs Pratchett's eyes flicked over and settled on my own face. I looked down and studied the black asphalt surface of the playground.
65. "Ere's another of 'em!' I heard her yelling. 'That one there!' She was pointing at me now.
66. 'You're quite sure?' Mr Coombes said.
67. 'Of course I'm sure!' she cried. 'I never forgets a face, least of all when it's as sly as that! 'Ee's one of 'em all right! There was five altogether! Now where's them other three?'
68. The other three, as I knew very well, were coming up next.
69. Mrs Pratchett's face was glimmering with venom as her eyes travelled beyond me down the line.

70. 'There they are!' she cried out, stabbing the air with her finger. 'Im . . . and 'im . . . and 'im! That's the five of 'em all right! We don't need to look no farther than this, 'Eadmaster! They're all 'ere, the nasty dirty little pigs! You've got their names, 'ave you?'
71. 'I've got their names, Mrs Pratchett,' Mr Coombes told her. 'I'm much obliged to you.'
72. 'And I'm much obliged to you, 'Eadmaster,' she answered.
73. As Mr Coombes led her away across the playground, we heard her saying, 'Right in the jar of Gobstoppers it was! A stinkin' dead mouse which I will never forget as long as I live!'
74. 'You have my deepest sympathy,' Mr Coombes was muttering.
75. 'Talk about shocks!' she went on. 'When my fingers caught 'old of that nasty soggy stinkin' dead mouse . . .' Her voice trailed away as Mr Coombes led her quickly through the door into the school building.