

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, where everything seems to happen, there was a beautiful city.

A city filled with flowers and flags and fountains that gurgled up clean, fresh, sparkling water filled with more minerals than a bottle of Buxton.

A city that flowed with bubbling canals of ice cream and raspberry sauce and screwballs and that had a fish and chip shop on every street corner.

A city where babies and children could play freely in the roads –protected from the oncoming traffic and safely escorted to and from home by giantswans.

A city called StratefoodOopunahvin where a little girl called Annabelle was born.

Annabelle's parents ran a chocolate truffle shop on Truffle Street called 'Pack Up your Truffles in Your Old Kit Bag' and were lucky enough to be ranked as one of the top ten truffle shops in the district.

Annabelle had a very naughty older sister and a very loud baby brother.

Her very naughty older sister used to tease Annabelle by hiding truffles in their very loud baby brother's nappies before slowly pulling them out with delight and eating them in front of a very disgusted Annabelle who had to rush straight to the loo to throw up.

It tricked her almost every time. Until one day Annabelle got the better of her sister. She waited to see when her sister hid a fresh batch of truffles and then quickly swapped the new nappy for an old one.

This time it wasn't Annabelle who had to rush to the loo.

She got into a lot of trouble with her parents over that one, who did their best to raise their children to be good.

They taught Annabelle to share and to be kind and to be patient and to be fair and to be loving and be forgiving and to care and she tried to live up to these standards, although sometimes she'd still eat a whole jumbo bag of Maltesers by herself. But, I mean, who hasn't.

Her naughty older sister was very annoyed by Annabelle's attempts to be good and tried to point out her flaws whenever she saw them showing. She felt it was far more prudent simply to keep up the appearance of being good, without wasting the effort on being so.

Thanks to a booming tourist truffle trade, Annabelle's parents had plenty of money to send their children to the very best preparatory schools where they had to wear a different uniform for every day of the week. Mondays, they wore brown blazers and purple ties, Tuesdays they wore purple blazers and brown ties, Wednesdays they wore mini velveteen tuxedos, Thursdays they wore full military dress, and on Fridays they dressed up as various breeds of dogs and were made to compete in a Crufts-style showcase where the winners were presented with a big bowl of pedigree chum. Annabelle usually went as a miniature bull terrier.

Her young life went by with relatively few major incidents. She grew up feeling happy and secure and loved her smiling sunny city of StratefoodOopunahvin. Her parents were good and generous

people and although her siblings left something to be desired, there was very little else she wanted other than to help those around her who might be less fortunate in any way she could, just as her parents had always taught her.

But slowly, over time, as she got older, she began to notice a subtle change in the advice they gave her.

Instead of telling her to share her things with other people, they told her to share with certain people.

Instead of telling her to be fair, they told her that life wasn't fair.

Instead of telling her to care, they told her to look after herself.

It's a dog-eat-dog world and she would need to watch out for her own needs before the needs of others, otherwise she'd get stepped over. Everyone's got to take care of number one. We're all in this together, but that's why we have to push past each other to get to the top. Community spirit is great and should be encouraged but there's no such thing as society. If you want to make it, you have to work hard. Nothing gets handed to you on a plate. Some people get what they deserve. Some people don't deserve anything.

Annabelle was confused, but they explained that they were just being realistic, just being practical, just trying to prepare her for the real world, they said, as they ate their fillet steaks in truffle sauce.

They told her that some people want to take away what they have, what they've worked for, some people want to destroy their values, their happiness, their lives. Some people can be so selfish, they said.

Annabelle didn't know what to make of this, so she just nodded and kept quiet.

Then one day, on a perfectly ordinary beautiful day, Annabelle looked out of her window and gasped. It wasn't entirely clear what was different, but there was definitely something unmistakably smaller about the world outside.

She ran downstairs and out of the front door to find many of her neighbours standing and staring in the same blank way as she was.

No one could put their finger on what had happened, so they went back inside and carried on with their lives.

A month later, the same thing happened, but again, no one could quite figure out what had changed and no one wanted to be the first person to say something and end up looking stupid so everyone said nothing and simply glared at each other through squinted eyes and pursed lips before they all went back inside and carried on with their lives.

A week after that, the same thing happened once again, but this time they could actually feel that things had shrunk. Some woke to find their feet hanging over the edge of their beds, or their pyjamas had split or their front doors had grown so small that they had to squeeze through them like a catflap. Something had to be done.

A central meeting was called and representatives were summoned, many of them wearing makeshift togas out of curtain fabric because their clothes were too small to fit. City Hall had somehow shrunk faster than everything else and was now the size of a Wendy house and the mayor's children were having a tea party in it, so they met together on the market space outside instead.

The rest of the people waited anxiously for the news, for some explanation, for any solution.

Finally, there was a city-wide announcement. 'It has emerged,' the tinny message echoed through the streets via speakers, 'that the city has too much...too much...stuff in it, really. It's reached full capacity and can no longer hold it all and so it's squashing everything to make it easier to encompass. We have reached the only viable conclusion, which is that we need to...to 'lighten the load' so to speak. It is hereby proclaimed that the outer districts of the city will be demolished so as to make more room for the centre to expand. This ruling is absolute and final, ok, yes, I think that's everything, ok bye, yep, bye'.

The people of Truffle Street were stunned.

But they lived relatively close to the centre of the city, so they shrugged their shoulders and muttered a few words of 'well, what can you do' and went back to their houses.

Annabelle couldn't believe their willingness to accept such a decision and ran to her parents, knowing that they couldn't possibly feel the same way and would certainly act to help the families about to lose their homes. But when she reached them, they wouldn't look her in the eye and simply told her not to cause trouble. 'But these people haven't done anything', she cried, 'They just live in the wrong place!'

'There's nothing we can do, Annabelle. Besides, the edges of town are the roughest parts anyway. Graffiti everywhere. There's no consideration. And you wouldn't want to walk there after dark'. And with that, they went back to their shop and carried on with their lives.

Annabelle couldn't just go back to normal like that though and ran as fast as she could to the outskirts of the city only to find that the work had already begun. The families there had barely enough time to remove their most precious possessions before their homes were knocked down in front of them. The dust settling over their memories. 'Where would they go?' She thought. She watched as policemen came and encouraged the people to leave by patiently shoving them forwards and gently hitting them with batons before generously offering to arrest them as an alternative. 'But where will they go?!' Annabelle found herself shouting.

'That's not our problem, love', they replied, 'Our job's just to move them away from here'.

The plan worked at least. The city breathed out and stretched into the space that had been made. Everything returned to its normal size.

'See, you shouldn't have worried. Things have worked out this way. If we'd had things your way then where would we be? Crushed to death probably' said Annabelle's parents.

But it wasn't long before the city filled up again and once more the people woke to find everything was a little too cramped. The decision came and passed even quicker than before as another outer ring was reduced to rubble.

'They were all foreigners anyway. Trying to force their ways on us. They didn't belong. They'd be better off elsewhere'.

Annabelle sulked in her room, while her naughty older sister smirked and felt pleased that things were finally being seen her way.

'Annabelle just didn't understand how things were', she thought.

Frustrated, Annabelle walked through the city towards the giant statue of some balding gent in the centre. She didn't know who he was or why he got to sit on such a grand old seat watching everyone, but she didn't care. She sat at his feet and cried bitterly.

After a while, she suddenly heard the sound of hammers and drills nearby. She stood up and followed the noise until she came across a fresh construction site. 'What are you doing?' she yelled at the nearest worker. 'Building new homes' they told her.

'Who for?' she asked, feeling hopeful.

'That depends. This one's going to be a set of luxury flats. Some big hotel manager commissioned them. Wants to attract big business. And then that one down the road there's for some rich bloke in Kent. Wants a second home for the missus. It's going to be real nice actually. Huge garden'.

'What?! But what about the people who've lost their homes?'

'What about them?'

'Aren't you going to build anything for them?'

'They got the cash?'

'No, but...'

'It's not economically viable then. Hasn't anyone taught you that?'

Annabelle ran back home to her parents and breathlessly explained what was going on. They'd have to agree with her now. They couldn't sit back and do nothing. Not when it was so obviously unfair.

'You don't understand, Annabelle. This is how the world works. It rewards good hardworking people. If you don't work hard enough then you've no one to blame but yourself. And if you've got the money, why shouldn't you want a second home or a nice apartment? They've earned it. This is what it means to be British. Anyone can achieve things if they just want it enough. We're not going to reward people who don't help themselves. I thought we taught you better than that'.

Of course, it wasn't long before things started shrinking and shrinking and more and more of the city had to be demolished as newer and bigger houses were built in the centre.

No one really liked to talk about what happened to the people that used to live there. It wasn't the sort of conversation that polite and proper people had. They did like to complain about the increase in vagrants and vandals and beggars that now 'littered the streets' though. They were such a nuisance that some were secretly glad to hear that one of them had stabbed a couple of the others to death in the night, or when they saw them with black eyes and broken noses, or when winter came and culled a few with pneumonia. 'Good riddance', they'd think and they'd feel a little safer and a little less burdened. 'I do buy the Whopping Topic, though, you know, the magazine they sell. I mean, I don't read it, I use it as bedding for my guinea pigs, but you have to do something don't you. Still, it's a bit embarrassing when you've already bought a copy and then you have to walk past another seller, but that's how the market works'.

As the months went by with little respite and the city borders continued to contract and expand, finally it was the turn of Annabelle's family. Her parents couldn't bring themselves to accept the news, so they persuaded each other that really it was time to go, they'd had enough of all the swans and the flowers and the fountains and the big man in the centre and they'd wanted to move for ages so it was all good timing really. They left long before the demolition men came, but Annabelle stayed and watched as their little truffle shop and their little truffle house came tumbling down. She and her family would be ok, they had people to stay with until they found a new place, they had money, they had options.

When she returned to the city a year later, all she found was one colossal mansion that looked more like a monster than a home, with its gaping doors and windows, devouring everything around it, continuously spreading and engulfing like an unstoppable swamp. She couldn't tell who lived there. All she could see inside was the big statue man sat on his big statue seat that had once marked the centre of the city.