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Opening extract from

The Legend of Spud Murphy

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CHAPTER 1

Ugly Frank

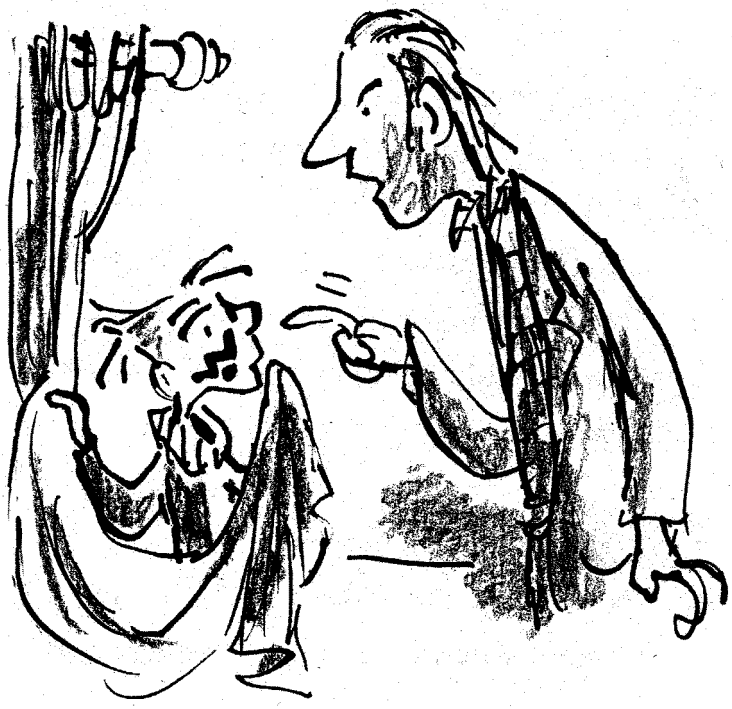
I've got four brothers. Imagine that. Five boys under eleven all living in the same house.

On wet summer days, our house gets very crowded. If we all bring two friends home, then there could be fifteen of us crammed into the house. At least eight will be roaring like lunatics, and the rest will be dying to go to the toilet. The flusher in our toilet snaps off about once every three months.

When my dad came home one day and

found three sons and four strangers covered in warpaint, swinging on the bedroom curtains, he decided that something had to be done. It didn't help that the warpaint was stolen from Mum's make-up box.

'No more bringing friends home!' Dad declared after the warriors' parents had collected them.



'That's not fair,' said Marty, the biggest brother, mascara streaking his cheeks. 'That punishment really affects me because I'm popular, but Will's best friend is his Action Man.'

Will. That's me. I love that Action Man.

Donnie, Bert and HP started complaining too. But only because they're little brothers, and that's what little brothers do for a living. I know that technically I'm a little brother too, but I'm in the big brother half of the family.

Having one little brother is bad enough, but having three is too much punishment for one person. That's enough punishment for an entire housing estate. The trouble with little brothers is that they are never blamed for anything. All Donnie, Bert and HP have to do is bat their blue eyes and let their bottom lips wobble a bit and they are forgiven for everything. Donnie, Bert and HP could stick

an axe in my head and they'd still get off with ten minutes' no TV and a stern look. The only things that Marty and I ever agree on is that our three younger brothers are spoilt rotten.

'This house is a madhouse,' said Dad.

'And he's the chief lunatic,' I said, pointing to Marty.

'I'm not the one talking to dolls,' retorted Marty.

That hurt. 'Action Man is not a doll.'

'Quiet!' said Dad through gritted teeth. 'There must be something we can find for you to do during the holidays. Something to get you out of the house.'

'Not my babies,' said Mum, hugging the younger brother squad tightly. They gave her the full baby treatment – big baby eyes, gap-tooth smiles and HP even sucked his thumb. That kid has no shame.

'Maybe not those three. But Will and



Marty are nine and ten now. We can find something for them. Something educational.'

Marty and I groaned. Educational hobbies are the worst kind. They're like school during the holidays.

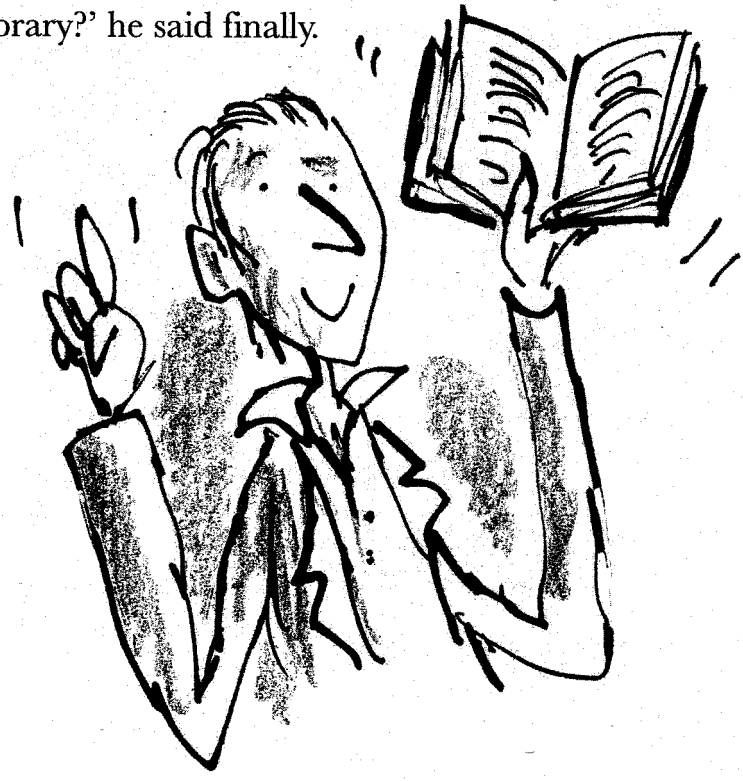
Marty tried to save us. 'Remember the last educational hobby? The art classes? I was sick for days.'

'That was your own fault,' said Mum.

'I only had a drink of water.'

'You are not supposed to drink the water that people use to wash their brushes.'

Dad was thinking. 'What about the library?' he said finally.



'What about it?' I said, trying to sound casual, but my stomach was churning.

'You both could join. Reading. It's perfect. How can you cause trouble reading a book?'

'And it's educational,' added Mum.

'Yes, of course, it's educational too,' Dad agreed.

'How is it educational?' I asked, terrified by the idea. 'I'd much rather be outside riding a horse than inside reading about one.'

My mother tousled my hair. 'Because, Will, sometimes the only horse you can ride is the one in your head.'



I had no idea what that meant.

'Don't make us join the library,' Marty begged. 'It's too dangerous.'

'Dangerous? How could a library be dangerous?' Dad asked.

'It's not the library,' Marty whispered. 'It's the librarian.'

'Mrs Murphy?' said Mum. 'She's a lovely old lady.'

The problem with grown-ups is that they only see what's on the outside. But kids know the real truth. People forget to be on their best behaviour around kids, because nobody believes a word we say. Every kid in our town knew about Mrs Murphy. She was one of those people that kids steer clear of. Like Miss White, the teacher with the evil eye, or old Ned Sawyer, the tramp with the dribbling dog.

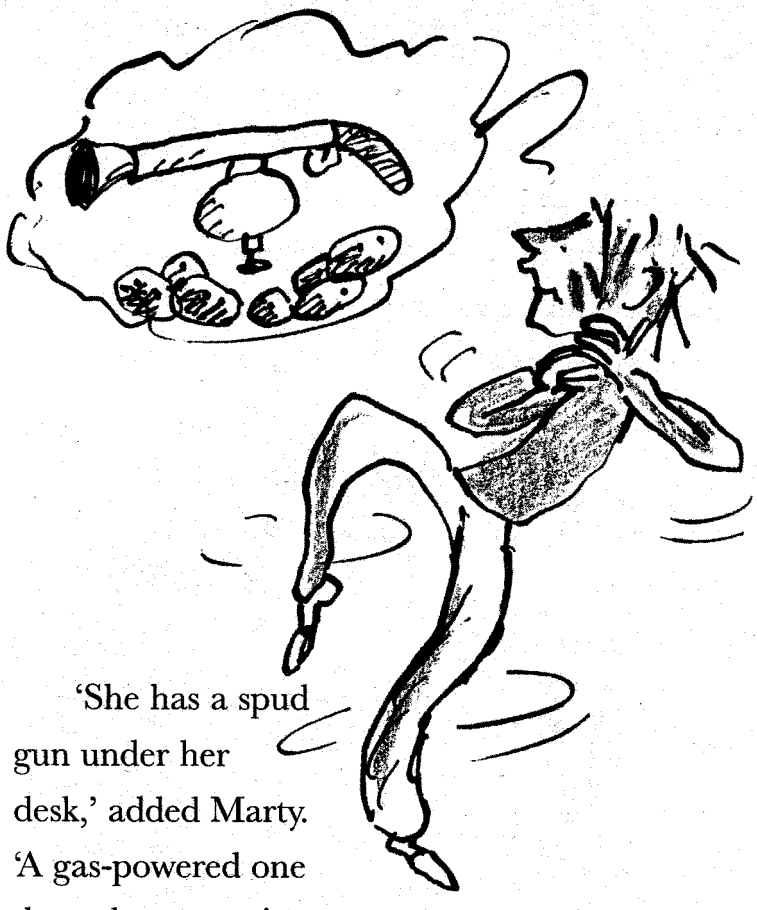
'She's not a lovely old lady,' I said. 'She's a total nut.'

'Will! That's a terrible thing to say.'

'But she is, Mum. She hates kids and she used to be a tracker in the army. Tracking kids from enemy countries.'

'Now you're being ridiculous.'





'She has a spud gun under her desk,' added Marty. 'A gas-powered one that takes an entire potato in the barrel. She shoots kids with it if they make a noise in the library. That's why we call her Spud Murphy.'

My mother thought this was all very funny. 'A spud gun! You'll say anything to avoid

reading a book.'

'It's true!' Marty shouted. 'Do you know Ugly Frank from number forty-seven?'

My mother tried to look stern. 'You shouldn't call poor Frank ugly.'

'Well, how do you think he got that way? Spud Murphy spudded him.'

Mum waved her hands as if two annoying birds were flapping around her ears.

'I've heard enough. You two are going to the library for the afternoon and that's it. We'll make some sandwiches.'

We stood in the kitchen glumly. Sandwiches wouldn't be much use against Spud Murphy and her gas-powered spud gun.