Opening extract from

Milrose Munce and The Den of Professional Help

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CHAPTER

ONE

MILROSE MUNCE WAS ON FINE TERMS WITH THE DEAD. SOME OF HIS BEST FRIENDS WERE, IN FACT, LONG DECEASED. THEY WERE MAGNIFICENTLY REPULSIVE, AND DID THEIR BEST TO KEEP HIM ENTERTAINED.

Milrose did sometimes wonder whether his school produced more dead students than the average. Perhaps it did. On the other hand, adolescence was hilariously perilous on the whole, and it was a wonder those idyllic years failed to claim even more lives. Milrose himself was lucky to have survived numerous death-defying acts of everyday youth. So perhaps other schools were equally stuffed with vile wandering ghosts. It would also make sense if this were not a well-known fact—Milrose could imagine the staff doing their best not to emphasize fatality

rates in meetings with parents. Certainly, precise figures regarding the prematurely departed never seemed to make it into the brochures.

Not that Milrose Munce was the least distressed by the impressive population of hideous wraiths in his own school. Life would be so much less interesting without death.

Milrose was on especially fine terms with the disgusting apparitions on the third floor. Other floors were less friendly, true: the ghouls in the school basement, for instance, were a touch wary of him. Milrose sympathized. He knew that his mere presence served to make them feel inadequate and uncomfortable. Milrose Munce was, you see—through no fault of his own—intelligent. Basement ghouls, who liked to lurk in lockers, were generally athletes who had done something exceptionally stupid on the playing field and had died a gruesome death as a result. They were not always pleased to be confronted with a boy who was, unfairly, still alive at fifteen and who was—even worse—a dire athlete and not at all dense.

Milrose was not particularly well loved on the second floor, either. The ghosts on that floor were not precisely hostile, but they were just as full of themselves as dead athletes, and possibly even less talented. Milrose, who did not take many things very seriously (himself, especially), found these pompous phantoms unbearable.

Poisoned Percy was typical of the second-floor ghosts. Percy had died while attempting to fake suicide. He had hoped that this performance would make him famous as a poet: that once he were revived in hospital, the literary world would take his suffering seriously and recite his verses at funerals. In fact, the only funeral at which his poems were ever recited was his own, where the audience ground their teeth throughout the ceremony in an attempt not to grimace. The sound of grinding teeth occasionally drowned out the reader.

Percy, typically of the second floor, had no sense of humour regarding his life's unpleasant conclusion. He had been careful to leave a bottle marked "Poison Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*)" beside him, after swallowing pills secretly removed from an entirely different, less poisonous bottle marked "Vitamin C." No, he had never been the sort of boy to laugh at his own shortcomings, and when the pellets he dramatically swallowed turned out not to be Vitamin C but instead expensive first-class rat poison, he was deeply annoyed. His mother always felt kind of awful about her decision to store rodenticide in a vitamin bottle, but these things are not easy to remedy after the fact.

When Milrose encountered Percy, the pale poet would only sometimes condescend to take notice of the living boy. "Oh, Munce . . . there you are. How's life?"

Milrose would shrug. "Fine. How's death?"

"Droll, Munce."

Milrose insisted upon calling the ghost Percy, which was short for his given name, Percival. Percy insisted that his real name was Parsifal, but nobody believed him.

Yesterday, Milrose had run into Percy on the way to Math, and—against his better judgment—decided to chat. Being late for Math was something Milrose occasionally enjoyed, and yesterday had felt like the right kind of day to be irresponsible.

"So, you working on stuff that's fresh, Poisson?"

"Always. A poet is always working. Even when I sleep, I am at work. It is my whole being. I am now writing an epic poem, if you must know. It will be . . . epic."

"I forget. Does epic mean 'long,' or 'dull'? Or both?"

"It means deeply moving. And my theme in particular will move even the coarsest soul to tears."

"Even mine, huh." Milrose sighed. "Um, all right. What's the theme?"

"Digestion."

"What?"

"Digestion. And its enemy: indigestion. I'll read you what I have so far."

"Kind of busy today, Perce."

"It's only seventy-two pages. And the name's Parsifal."

"Decent of you to think of me. But I'm no critic. And I'm *really* busy, in fact."

Percy had removed a thick, ominous manuscript from his prissy school bag. While he was arranging the pages, however, and clearing his throat, the bell had rung.

"Sorry, Perce. Never been late for Math. Famous for it: never being late. Gotta run."

Percy barely had time to utter the words "The Flavour of Indigestion, An Epic Poem in Twelve Parts," before his victim had achieved safe haven in the stairwell.

The dear decayed on the third floor were nothing like the dull dead on the floors below. These were most often the victims of science experiments gone wrong, and they had a sense of humour regarding their untimely mistakes.

Cryogenic Kelvin, for example, had assumed that a cup of liquid nitrogen would make for a refreshing cool drink. His professor had been too busy dissecting a giant carnivorous slug to notice that Kelvin was turning an interesting shade of blue and was growing wet with condensation. When Kelvin began to emit a crackling noise, Professor Pointell finally noticed him. "Kelvin, you're not looking well. Why don't you take a seat."

Kelvin bent to sit down, and immediately shattered into ice cubes, which melted mournfully all over the floor.

Cryogenic Kelvin, dead and cheerful, had a good attitude towards his final mistake. "Yeah, well . . . it's because Caroline Corduroy broke my heart. I mean, she also broke my liver, my kidneys, my eyeballs, and my spleen. But whatever. I thought she was pretty hot." Kelvin would pause, like a professional comic. "Guess she found me kind of cold."

This joke was a riot the first time Milrose heard it. The next time it was a touch less riotous, and by the fourth time it was getting a bit stale. Still, Kelvin was a fine ex-fellow, even if his jokes were a bit repetitive and his eyes were frozen in their sockets and his skin was cadaverously pallid.

During biology class, these days, Kelvin would park himself beside the skeleton at the front of the room, his dead blue arm around its bony shoulders. Milrose was the only one who could see this; in fact, Milrose was fairly sure that no one else was even *aware* that the school was bulging with the posthumous.

"Why are you snorting, Milrose?" the teacher would ask him, suspiciously.

"Nervous habit, sir. Family thing. Can't be helped. My great-grandfather used to snort, even at funerals . . . tragic, really."

On a tedious Monday a few months back Kelvin had been particularly inspired. Yes, as always, he had stood for a minute with his arm around the skeleton. Yes, Milrose had snorted. Then, however—probably to see whether he could elicit something more poignant than a snort—Kelvin decided to take the skeleton dancing.

The class, who were uniformly bored, perked up to see the skeleton unhook itself from its glorified coat rack. Some of them more than perked up: ten giggled, fourteen squealed, six of them screamed, and the entire front row passed out.

Mr. Shorten knew full well that he was not the sort of teacher to make students squeal, scream, and faint. Giggle, yes. But Mr. Shorten was a dull teacher—he had always been dull—so he wondered what was the cause of all this excitement. He did not have to wonder long. For the skeleton wheeled gracefully into his vision, as if waltzing with an invisible partner. Which, of course, it *was*.

Milrose was impressed to note that Kelvin was a competent ballroom dancer. This was a side of his friend that he had not yet witnessed. He wondered whether Kelvin might also be able to tap dance, and whether he might be willing to give Milrose lessons. Milrose Munce had never had the slightest desire to become, say, a good soccer player, but he had always wanted to learn tap.

Mr. Shorten was not having anything like these casual thoughts. He in fact sympathized, greatly, with the front row of the class, and considered passing out cold himself.

"Stop that!" said Mr. Shorten, feebly, probably aware that he did not have much authority over a waltzing skeleton. And this proved correct, for the skeleton did not stop that at all.

The gigglers became squealers as the skeleton whirled daintily in their direction. The squealers screamed, and the screamers fainted. Milrose was thrilled at the escalating excitement. Now *this* was a performance.

When Kelvin and the skeleton had completed their magnificent tour, they returned to the steel mount. Before hanging the bones up and calling it a day, however, Kelvin arranged to have the skeleton perform a gracious curtsy: a truly revolting gesture.

Milrose Munce had provoked suspicion when he stood at the end of this spectacle to applaud loudly. It was noted. Nobody *else* had enjoyed the dance.

Mr. Shorten in particular looked very, very suspicious. This was not the first time he had experienced Milrose behaving in peculiar and inappropriate ways. For instance, just a couple of days before, Kelvin had been telling his Caroline Corduroy joke for the seventeenth time, and Milrose—though not enjoying it quite as much as the first, or even the twelfth time—

had made sure to laugh and slap his dead friend heartily on the back. (He was careful to remove his hand quickly, however, as warm skin would often stick to Kelvin, and frostbite was an issue.) Mr. Shorten had witnessed this: Milrose Munce giving a hearty slap on the back to someone who—as far as Shorten could determine—wasn't there.

The science teacher was not the only staff member who was beginning to take note of these peculiar incidents: how Milrose seemed to have a cheerful relationship with, well, empty space. Milrose, however, being carefree and irresponsible, had not taken note that note was being taken.

The other ghouls on the third floor were an equally fine group, and many could match Kelvin in terms of dramatic flair. Ghosts had a life of their own, which consisted mostly of not being alive: lazing about, telling stories. When Milrose joined them, however, they were often moved to dramatize these stories in sensational ways.

Stuck Stu, for instance, would masterfully re-enact his own sad demise: how he had accidentally jammed his thumb into an Erlenmeyer flask full of a complex substance that was on the verge of exploding.

After failing to rescue his thumb, Stu had politely addressed his fellow classmates: "Um, you guys, I think you better leave the room." And, acknowledging his situation, they had regretfully done just that.

After which the flask—and Stu with it—had exploded in a truly dazzling fashion, with pieces of both flask and Stu embedded so deeply in the walls and desks and blackboard that students even today were occasionally finding shards of glass or bone emerging sharply from odd places.

The moment of the re-enacted explosion itself was most fun to watch, as Stuck Stu would in fact explode (an easy enough thing for an unwhole ghost), so that multiple bloody bits of him would hang jiggling from objects all about the room.

After collecting himself, Stuck Stu would bow dramatically, to an enthusiastic ovation.

Deeply Damaged Dave was, next to Kelvin, Milrose Munce's closest friend among the dead. They had bonded in their mutual love of unstable chemicals: in particular, substances (like Stu) that could be made to explode in exciting ways. Dave, had his life not been cut woefully short, might have made a brilliant scientist, or criminal.

Dave's demise was a consequence of his desire to test the reputed powers of rubidium, a substance said to be capable of producing truly exquisite eruptions. This was not something students were encouraged to test in the school lab, so Dave—and this moral error cost him his life—had quietly put a glass ampoule of rubidium in his pocket, intending to do the experiment in the quiet of his own living room.

Rubidium does indeed explode in breathtaking fashion. And it is easy to set the stuff off: all you have to do is soak it in water. Which is why it was so very sad that Dave got caught in a torrential downpour on the way home from school with that stolen rubidium in his pocket. In his anger at becoming thoroughly soaked, Dave had punched himself in the hip—a peculiar but typical gesture, usually harmless, which in this case broke the glass ampoule. And the rest is, as they say, history. As was Dave.

Milrose was also fond of Toasted Theresa and Floating Phil, lovebirds who had died, as lovebirds do, within minutes of each other. What was peculiar—and adorable—was that both had died by accident, at opposite ends of the building, without either being aware of the other's passing: Theresa caught fire in the chemical storeroom, just as Phil was swallowing much of the pool.

And then there was Bored Beulah, who had fallen asleep and into a vat of hydrochloric acid. She was an amusing if deadpan ghoul. Beulah was not the sort to put on a show, but she was nevertheless entertaining, in a bored sort of way. "You're too lively for me, Milrose. You should learn to be cool. Study Kelvin. He's a cool dude."

Milrose had always suspected that Beulah's studied ennui was in truth a facade for a complex and probably fascinating personality, but he had never had any

success in piercing that surface. People who practise cool tend to be deeply shallow, but Beulah gave the occasional indication of being very much the opposite. It was the look she would give Milrose sometimes, when he said something perceptive (which he did more often than he recognized). Beulah, although her own person was impenetrable, seemed capable of seeing right to the hidden centre of others—even people like Milrose, who still had flesh.

The dead were not entirely sure why Milrose could see them. Ghosts are of course capable of making themselves seen or heard by anyone—this is necessary in the ordinary process of haunting—but they reserve this talent for special occasions. Even the dimmest dead thing understands that if everyone were haunted on a regular basis, it would reduce the impact of the experience. In fact, ghosts generally choose to reveal themselves only to people who do not believe in ghosts. This tends to be the most effective way to inspire handsome hair-whitening panic.

After years of study, certain living humans can learn to see ghosts—professional exorcists, for instance. Milrose, however, had simply been born with this peculiar capability. Some people can put a leg behind their head; some can extend their tongue halfway up a nostril; Milrose Munce could see ghosts.

Not that these ghosts were much to look at. What little flesh Beulah retained, for instance, was

not *healthy* flesh. And Toasted Theresa was even less likely to win any beauty contests, as the chemical fire she had chosen to ignite had been impervious to fire extinguishers, and it had taken a couple of hours to put her out. Floating Phil was probably as fetching as any bloated corpse, but Deeply Damaged Dave was simply not enjoyable to look at; after all, he had damaged such an intimate and necessary part of his person. Milrose did not require his friends to be all that good looking, though, and he had quickly grown accustomed to the collective appearance of this crew—a sight that would have sent less tolerant boys screaming for the horizon.

Milrose, in fact, preferred these appalling spectres to living students, and confined most of his social activity to the third floor. And he was as happy there as any boy might be in the company of loyal, unpresentable companions.

A day in the life of Milrose Munce was like a day in the life of any ordinary sarcastic youth, if you discount the ghosts and explosives. School began every morning with homeroom, during which the class was told things that Milrose almost never needed to know, generally involving sports.

When homeroom ended with a vicious bell, students were ejected to wallow through a carefully

scheduled morning of higher learning. The majority of these students would rather not learn—and the majority, as a consequence, did not. Milrose Munce, however, enjoyed school. He tried not to admit this to anyone but his friends on the third floor, most of whom had also enjoyed school until it cut their lives bitterly short. But among the living, it was not considered admirable to find school anything but a hideous burden.

His fellow students could tell that learning was not much of a burden to Milrose Munce. He did it far too easily, and never looked nearly miserable enough. And his misbehaviour in class—which was prodigious—was clearly a result of having mastered all of the work much too quickly, thus triggering an episode of intolerable boredom.

The lesson being thrust upon the first class today, for instance, concerned the Azores. Now, Milrose might easily have been fascinated by the discussion of a Portuguese community stuck on a sprinkling of tiny, lonesome islands in the very middle of the Atlantic Ocean, except that he had already gone through a short Azores obsession, and knew far more about them than Mr. Colander, the geography teacher. Hence, Milrose was bored out of his brainpan.

Because he was in an especially evil mood, Milrose put up his hand to announce this.

"Yes, Milrose?"

"I'm bored."

It was difficult for Mr. Colander to respond to this. Milrose had made the announcement so politely that it was not easy to identify it as misbehaviour.

"Thank you for your contribution, Milrose."

"You're welcome, sir."

The second period of the day—nominally devoted to Phys. Ed.—was usually a good time to laze about the third floor. After years of dire school rankings in Physics and Chemistry, the school had decided to hold science classes only in the afternoons, after the students had fully woken up. This left the labs open all morning for Milrose to lounge uninterrupted with his friends. Phys. Ed. class, which Milrose rarely attended, lasted an hour and a half, after which his classmates would spend fifteen or so minutes removing their sweaty clothes in the dim grim locker room, showering briefly in the fungus-bearing shower room, then dressing for a dose of poetry in the English room. Today, that gave Milrose plenty of time to assist Deeply Damaged Dave, who was always keen to further his investigations into the complex art of blowing things up.

It must be stressed that Milrose was not evil. He did not have any desire to blow *people* up—not even the

people he truly disliked. Nor did he have anything in common with those boys who set buildings on fire, or take assault weapons to school, or torture small animals. He despised these types. He simply had a healthy interest in watching objects fly violently into random pieces.

Deeply Damaged Dave had devoted a great deal of his life—and pretty much all of his death—to the study of this art. Meeting Dave was, for Milrose, a life-altering event. Dave was his mentor. His guru. Deeply Damaged Dave knew the kinds of things that eager young villains like Milrose were desperate to know.

Dave himself was eagerness personified. In fact, if Dave had one flaw, it was this: that his great lust for swank combustibles and glorious catastrophe often resulted in displays somewhat more dazzling than he had in mind. "Why don't we add just a pinch more of this," Dave would say, with scientific glee. "Just to see what happens."

And what happened was always predictably unpredictable.

Today, Dave—not satisfied with what he had learned so dramatically about the properties of rubidium—was keen to investigate the effects of potassium when combined with water. Milrose already had some knowledge of these extraordinary effects. The Chemistry teacher used to be Mr. Juan

Perdido, one of the few teachers with a genuine sense of humour. One gorgeous day he had devoted a lesson to the properties of this nicely dangerous metal.

Now, potassium tends to go bad when combined with air, so it's necessary to keep it at all times immersed in mineral oil. It doesn't like water, however. Like rubidium, potassium—when dunked in water—explodes. During the course of his lesson, Mr. Perdido had pretended to accidentally drop a large chunk of potassium into a beaker of water. He stared at the beaker for a moment with a look of exaggerated terror. "I thought that was mineral oil. Duck!" Upon which the students had hurled themselves beneath their desks. There was a long silence, which Mr. Perdido brought to a close by saying: "Boom." The teacher had enjoyed a good laugh; among the students, however, only Milrose had joined in the merriment. The rest complained to their parents, who arranged to have Mr. Perdido deported.

Milrose had been the only student not to duck, and he was disappointed when deprived of what had promised to be an excellent explosion. Today he hoped to remedy that.

Being the careful, philosophical soul that he was, Dave began by investigating the effects of very tiny amounts of potassium. Quickly, however, this proved tiresome: the potassium would sizzle, but nothing truly *interesting* happened. And so, as he usually did,

Dave caused the experiment to rapidly escalate, until they had fractured a test tube, atomized a small flask, and—for the grand finale—conveyed an impressive beaker to that place into which glassware disappears when it departs this life. Milrose had fully observed this time, but had taken the precaution of doing so from the back of the room. For Dave, being stuck full of shards of beaker was hardly an issue (after all, he had damaged himself in far more serious ways in the past).

"And now," said Deeply Damaged Dave, "we shall fill the entire sink full of water." He turned on the tap, disappeared into the storeroom, and emerged with a giant container of potassium.

"Brilliant," said Milrose.

"This will be true science," said Dave.

"We shall learn from this," said Milrose.

"We shall become wise," said Dave.

Just as he was about to uncap the container in preparation for dumping a massive chunk of potassium into the filled sink, the doorknob rattled. It turned as well, but the door was stuck, so Dave had a moment to spirit the potassium into the storeroom, with great regret.

The door finally popped open, and in peered Mr. Shorten. Mr. Shorten was perpetually furtive, as if he expected an assassin around every corner. Milrose suspected that Mr. Shorten had been a spy

during some war or another, and had in fact survived numerous attempted assassinations. How then, pondered Milrose, could this man have become so tedious? If Milrose had been a spy, always one step ahead of murderous enemies with accents, he would surely have become even more interesting than he already was. Of this he was certain.

When Mr. Shorten spied Milrose Munce standing awkwardly at the rear of the class, the teacher released a tiny "eep" and instantly retracted his presence from the doorframe. A moment later he was again peering—perhaps now half convinced that Milrose was not a trained assassin. He squinted. No, this was clearly Milrose Munce: obnoxious, ill behaved, but hardly murderous.

"Munce, what are you doing in the lab? Chemistry isn't for three hours."

"Oh, uh, just . . . doing some extracurricular experimentation."

"Some what?"

"Adding to my education. Private boy-genius stuff."

"If you are a genius, Munce, I am a monkey."

"Well put, sir."

Mr. Shorten stopped for a moment in an attempt to determine whether he had been insulted. He decided that he had, but then it was necessary to determine whether Munce had insulted him or

whether he had inadvertently insulted himself. Mr. Shorten could not make up his mind, so he decided to let it pass.

"And your experiment, Munce? What have you been discovering about the mysteries of nature?"

"Well, sir. I filled the sink full of water. As you can see."

"Yes, I can."

"Amazing, isn't it."

"Isn't what?"

"The sink, Sir. Observe how it holds the water."

"Yes?"

"Well, I find it fascinating."

"You find *what* fascinating?"

"How the water remains in the sink, sir. How the sink does not melt, despite being thoroughly soaked. Now, if this were a paper bag, sir, it would accomplish no such thing."

"Munce, if you are a genius, I am an eel."

"Nicely argued, sir."

After this exchange, Milrose Munce excused himself, as he had only moments until English class would begin. He glanced back to see Mr. Shorten gazing thoughtfully at the sink.

Milrose, given that he very much liked to talk, and saw language as a useful weapon of sorts (if not quite as effective as potassium), should have been utterly

thrilled by the subject of English. Unfortunately, the subject was taught on the second floor, whose residents had given Milrose an allergy to all things poetic.

Nevertheless, Milrose did enjoy reading literature, as long as it wasn't—strictly speaking—poetry. Shakespeare, for instance, was too much fun to be poetry. This week they were studying *Macbeth*, which featured astonishing amounts of gore and culminated in a fine beheading. A couple of weeks ago it had been *King Lear*; Milrose had been especially impressed by the scene in which Gloucester's eyes were forcibly removed. Yes, Shakespeare was a genius, concluded Milrose Munce (which was not his most original conclusion).

Even more exciting than English was Lunch. Lunch, though not technically a class, was educational.

Milrose considered himself something of a political scientist, and he loved to analyze the class structure of the school. How the Popular ruled over the merely Tolerated, and how these disdained the Unwanted. Over lunch, these differences were easily studied, as the lunchroom was fully segregated: the Popular sat on one side, the Unwanted on the other, and the Tolerated occupied the middle, thus protecting the aristocracy from encounters with the disdained.

Milrose generally sat with the Unwanted, as they tended to be more interesting. This was a mystery

to the Popular, who considered Milrose fully capable of being Tolerated, and perhaps even Popular if he made the effort. Milrose, however, considered himself extremely Popular: he was very much liked by the Unwanted. All of this was confusing for everyone but Milrose Munce.

Today, Milrose decided—as an experiment—to talk loudly and happily to Kitty Muell, who was as a result of her shyness pretty much useless in society, and therefore Unwanted. Kitty was a fine girl, and Milrose got a real kick out of talking to her. It was always fascinating to converse with a girl who generally never spoke to anybody, as she was just dying to share all sorts of thoughts and observations.

The Unwanted were expected to speak quietly, as they were presumed to have nothing thrilling to say. Speaking loudly was reserved for the Popular, who almost never had anything thrilling to say but said it with such boisterous conviction that it seemed thrilling, as long as you didn't listen too carefully. And so it was extremely unusual to have someone on the Unwanted side of the room yammering away with gusto. And doubly unusual that Milrose was doing so with a girl who was meekness itself.

It was a superb experiment. The results were almost as interesting as the interaction of potassium and water. The Popular fell into a confused silence, distressed to think that something thrilling was

being said on the wrong side of the room. The Tolerated, who of course were dying to be Popular, followed suit. Very soon Milrose was the loudest person in the lunchroom. The Unwanted, heartened by this reversal, began to speak with more confidence. And so began something like a revolution: by the end of the lunch period, great peals of wild conversation consumed the Unwanted side, and completely eclipsed the uncomfortable whispering amongst the Tolerated and the Popular.

If only the rest of the day had been as amusing.