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Opening extract from

Araminta Spook
Ghostsitters

Written by

Angie Sage

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For Charlie Denchfield



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SLUGS

My uncle Drac says some funny things. Last week he said, "There is always a slug in the lettuce sandwich of life, Minty."

I had to think for a while until I understood what he meant. You see, Uncle Drac loves lettuce sandwiches, but even he does not like slugs. I reckoned he meant that just when you are enjoying something—like eating your favourite kind of sandwich—something yucky

always happens (like finding a slug in it) to stop you from enjoying it.

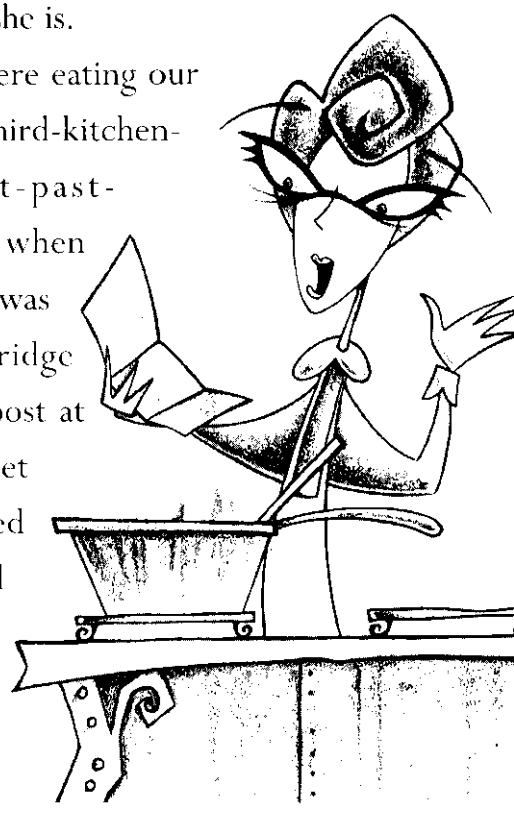
Sometimes Uncle Drac is a little bit gloomy, so I do not always take notice of what he says— but last week I could see exactly what he meant. I kept thinking really good things were happening and then they turned out to have a great big fat slug in them.

Last Monday was the beginning of half-term, which Wanda and I had been looking forward to. And in three days' time it was going to be my birthday, which I was *really* looking forward to—although I am not sure if Wanda was.



Wanda is Wanda Wizzard, and she lives with me in Spook House. She didn't always live here, but it is much more fun since Wanda, her mum, Brenda, and her dad, Barry, moved in. Of course there is also my uncle Drac, who can be quite fun sometimes too, and then there is my aunt Tabby, who is never fun—even though she thinks she is.

Wanda and I were eating our breakfast in the third-kitchen-on-the-left-just-past-the-boiler-room when Aunt Tabby—who was stirring the porridge and opening her post at the same time—let out an excited shriek. Wanda and



I both nearly jumped off our chairs, as Aunt Tabby does not usually shriek (unless Uncle Drac drops a wardrobe on her foot). In fact Aunt Tabby was so excited that she dropped the rest of the post in the porridge and all the ink ran off the envelopes and turned it blue, so we were allowed to have Brenda's Choco-Drop Krackles for breakfast instead.

Aunt Tabby threw the letter on the table and squeaked, "I've *won*!"

"Won what, Aunt Tabby?" I asked.

"The competition!" said Aunt Tabby.

I was surprised, as it is Wanda's mother, Brenda, who enters tons of competitions, not Aunt Tabby.

"Drac will *love* this," said Aunt Tabby.

Although this did not exactly answer my question, it did narrow it down a bit, as Uncle

Drac does not like many things. Basically he likes bats, the dark and sleeping, although not necessarily in that order.

"Have you won a new sleeping bag?" I asked.

"No, Araminta," said Aunt Tabby. "It's *much* better than that."

"*Two* new sleeping bags?" said Wanda, who does not have a great imagination. "Or three new sleeping bags or maybe even *four-* "

"No, Wanda," said Aunt Tabby very patiently.

"So what *have* you won?" I asked very *im*patiently.

Aunt Tabby gave me her wouldn't-you-like-to-know look.

"Tell us, Aunt Tabby--*please*," said Wanda, who is very nosy and can't stand not knowing things.



"Here you are," said Aunt Tabby, handing Wanda the letter. "Good reading practice for you, Wanda."

I was a bit annoyed that Aunt Tabby had given the letter to Wanda, as she takes for ever to read anything and it meant that I had to look over Wanda's shoulder to read it.

"Stop breathing down my neck, Araminta," moaned Wanda.

"I'm not breathing, I'm *reading*," I told her.

"You *are* breathing," said Wanda. "You are *always* breathing, Araminta. It is very annoying."

"Well, I am *so* sorry, Wanda. I will try not to in the future."

"Araminta, Wanda," said Aunt Tabby, giving us one of her looks. "*Stop* it."

So we stopped it and Wanda read the letter, which was very interesting.

BATTY ABOUT BATS!



The magazine for bat lovers everywhere

Dear *Mrs Tabitha Spook*,

Congratulations! You are the winner of our competition!

You, *Mrs Tabitha Spook*, are the only person who answered the following question correctly:

Which of these bats does not sleep upside down?

1. a lesser long-nosed bat
2. a Mexican long-tongued bat
3. a ghost-faced bat
4. a baseball bat

The correct answer is number 4!

We are delighted to inform you that you

have won our star prize: a trip for four to explore the caves of the giant vampire bats of Transylvania!

Our Batty About Bats! limo will pick up you, *Mrs Tabitha Spook*, and your three lucky companions, from *Spook House* at 6 p.m. on the 10th of this month. Please be sure to bring biteproof clothing, boots and a sturdy umbrella.

Once again, we at Batty About Bats! offer our warmest congratulations and hope you will have a wonderful bat-spotting trip.

Yours sincerely,

Reginald Noctule

P.S. Prize taken at own risk.



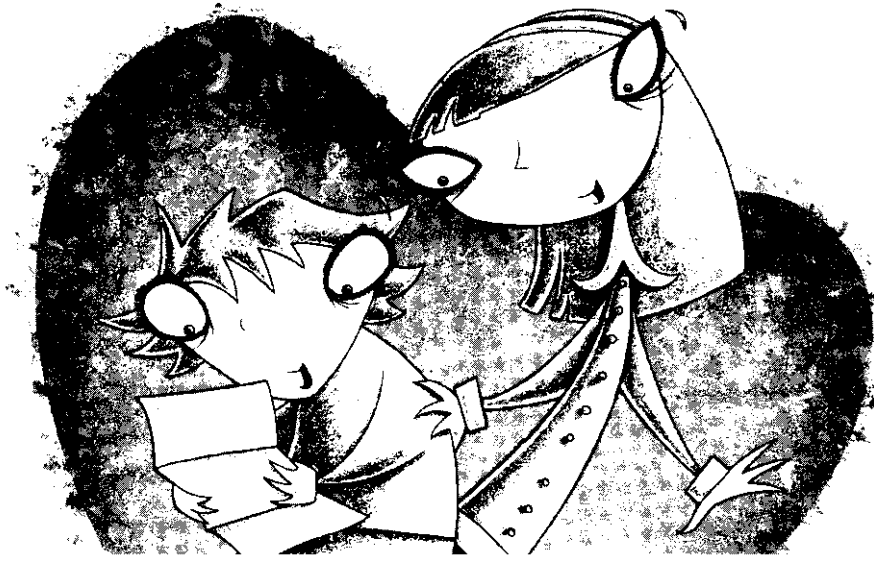
I was impressed. What an amazing prize! "That is *fantastic*, Aunt Tabby," I said. "I have *always* wanted to see the giant vampire bats of Transylvania."

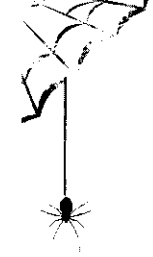
Aunt Tabby looked surprised. "Have you?"

"Yes! It will be *so* exciting. What a brilliant way to spend my birthday!"

Aunt Tabby looked a bit embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Araminta," she said. "I told Brenda and Barry that they could come if I won."

"Brenda and Barry!" I couldn't believe it.





Brenda and Barry didn't even like bats. Brenda always screamed when one flew at her and Barry never stopped moaning about shovelling up bat poo. It just wasn't fair. I *love* bats.

Aunt Tabby tried to explain. "Brenda showed me the competition," she said. "It was in one of her magazines. I wouldn't have seen it otherwise. So it is only fair, Araminta."

"What about my birthday?" I said.

Aunt Tabby looked a bit flummoxed. If you ask me, I think she had forgotten about my birthday. "*Well*, Araminta," she said in the extra-chirpy voice she uses when she is trying to make you not notice something. "You and Wanda will have a *lovely* time together and then we will *all* celebrate when we get home. Won't that be nice?"

No, I thought, that will not be nice.

Because when they get home it will not be my birthday any more—it will be just another day.

And that was the first slug in my lettuce sandwich—but not the last.

Wanda was still staring at the letter. "But the tenth is *today*," she said.

Aunt Tabby let out another shriek. "*Today?* Oh, goodness, I must go and tell Drac!" And she rushed out of the kitchen.

"Araminta . . ." said Wanda in a thoughtful way.

I smiled, thinking that Wanda was going to say something nice—like how I shouldn't be upset because she had lots of exciting plans for my birthday.

"Yes?" I said.

"Pass the Choco-Drop Krackles."

I left Wanda to scoff all the Choco-Drop Krackles, because it is not a pretty sight watching Wanda Wizzard slurping her breakfast. As I was stomping up the stairs to our Monday bedroom, I realised that things were not as bad as I had thought—in fact they were pretty good.

If Aunt Tabby, Uncle Drac, Brenda and Barry were all going away, then Wanda and I would have Spook House all to ourselves—apart from Sir Horace, Fang, and Edmund, of course, who are our three resident ghosts. Sir Horace is a knight who lives in a suit of armour, Fang is his faithful wolf, and Edmund is Sir Horace's weedy page. And the more I thought about it, the better it got, because I suddenly realised I could have a birthday party! I have

always wanted to have a birthday party, especially with ghosts, but Aunt Tabby does not approve of birthday parties. She says, "A birthday party will make you overexcited, Araminta, and you are quite overexcited enough as it is."

I felt so excited that I went and offered to help Aunt Tabby pack. She was not at all grateful. "No thank you, Araminta," she said. "I do not want a goldfish in my washbag again."

I thought that was unfair, as I was *much* younger when I had filled Aunt Tabby's washbag with water and put my goldfish in it—and I would not have done that at all if Aunt Tabby had let me take the fishbowl on holiday with us.



I decided to help Uncle Drac instead. I knocked on the little red door at the end of the landing that leads into Uncle Drac's bat turret and a gloomy voice said, "Come in, Minty."

I carefully pushed open the door. "How did you know it was me?" I asked.

"No one else comes to see me," said Uncle Drac, sounding very sorry for himself.

Aunt Tabby does not like it when I go into the bat turret because, she says, it is dangerous. I suppose it is, really, but I am used to it. Uncle Drac has taken out all the floors so that his bats can fly all around the turret, and he sleeps in his old flowery sleeping bag that hangs from one of the rafters. He was sitting on a rafter next to his suitcase—which was flowery just like his sleeping bag—and his



favourite bat, Big Bat, was sitting on his hand.

"Hello, Uncle Drac," I said in a cheery-uppy kind of voice. "I bet you are really excited."

"No," said Uncle Drac.

"But you are going to see the giant bats of Transylvania," I told him. "You *love* giant bats."

"Do I?" asked Uncle Drac.

"You know you do," I told him. I crawled carefully along the rafter. "Come on, Uncle Drac," I said, "I'll help you pack."

"Sometimes, Minty," said Uncle Drac, "you remind me of Tabby."

I asked Uncle Drac what he wanted to put in his suitcase.

"Bats," said Uncle Drac.

"How many?"

"All of them," he said. "I can't leave any

behind; it would not be fair."

You would be amazed at how many bats you can squeeze into a suitcase, and I thought we had done really well, but Uncle Drac did not agree. There were still loads of bats flying around his turret. "I'll get you another suitcase," I said.

"Tabby says we are only allowed one each, and she won't have any bats in hers."

Well, that did not surprise me, given what she felt about goldfish. "Maybe Barry would let you use his," I said.

"I already asked him," said Uncle Drac gloomily. "He said he hasn't even *got* a suitcase. Brenda needs at least two for all her stuff, so she's taking his." He sighed and looked really miserable.

It was time for some straight talking.

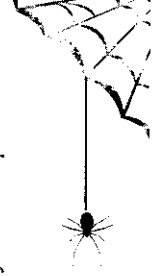
"Look, Uncle Drac," I said. "You know what you told me about slugs?"

Uncle Drac looked puzzled. "I don't think I need any slugs in the suitcase, Minty," he said.

"Oh, *you* know what I mean, Uncle Drac—the slugs in the lettuce sandwich of life. Well, not being able to take all your bats is the slug. And like you said, there always is one."

"So where's the lettuce sandwich?" asked Uncle Drac miserably. I sighed. Sometimes Uncle Drac is hard work. Suddenly the little red door flew open and Aunt Tabby poked her head into the bat turret. She was so excited that she did not notice me hidden behind the bulging suitcase of bats.

"Good news, Drac!" said Aunt Tabby. "Your



mother has agreed to come and look after Araminta and Wanda for the week."

I was so shocked that I nearly fell off the rafter straight down on to the bat poo far below. Uncle Drac's mother—the dreaded Great-Aunt Emilene—for a *whole week?* Half an hour was bad enough. I couldn't think of anything worse. It would be *horrible*—and I could say goodbye to any birthday party plans. It was the biggest, ugliest, slimiest slug in my lettuce sandwich of life *ever*.