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Opening extract from

Monstrous Maud: Big Fright

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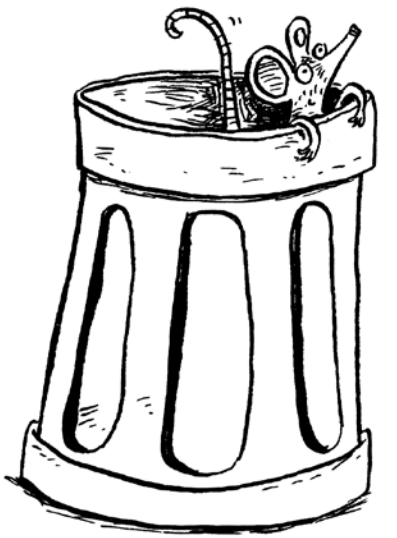
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Big Fright



A. B. Saddlewick

BUSTER





Chapter One

Maud didn't know how much more she could sit through.

It was the last lesson of the day at Primrose Towers, and the girls were showing off their craft projects. Each one was more boring than the last. Sometimes Maud thought her classmates were from a different planet. Or maybe she was the alien one …

Poppy Simpkins had knitted a tiny pink cardigan for her teddy bear. Sarah Wentworth had flipped through endless pages of flower pressings. Daffodils, daisies, bluebells, violets.

She hadn't even collected any interesting plants like poison ivy or Venus flytraps.

Maud Montague patted the top of her ice-cream tub, checking that none of the air-holes were covered up, and waited for her turn. She had something much more exciting to show than tedious teddies or floppy flowers. Something the whole class was going to love.

Miss Bloom glanced around. "Now let's hear from …"

Maud leaned forward.

"… Milly."

Drat, thought Maud. Milly Montague was her twin sister, and you could bet your eyeballs that whatever she'd brought in would be even more soppy than dried flowers and teddy clothes put together.

Milly skipped up to the front, and Maud wondered what she was about to pull out of her pink backpack. She had refused to tell Maud on the school bus that morning. Would it be a fluffy unicorn made from rose petals? A rainbow-coloured friendship bracelet?

It turned out to be even worse. Milly produced a white cardboard box, opened it and offered it to Miss Bloom. Inside Maud could see an enormous pink cake, with the words "Best Teacher Ever" written on it in purple icing.

Her classmates clapped with joy.

Maud frowned. Weren't they supposed to have made interesting things? So where were the wormeries and monster costumes and jars of fungus-sprouting jam?

"Three cheers for Miss Bloom," shouted Milly. "Hip, hip …"

"Hooray!" shouted everyone except Maud.

"Thank you," said Miss Bloom. "Another excellent contribution, Milly. I'd give you a gold star, but you've used them all up."

Maud rolled her eyes. If they thought the cake was so special, just wait until they saw what she'd made.

"Who's next?" Miss Bloom looked around and sighed. "Well, I suppose everyone else has had their turn. It's got to be Maud."

The other pupils groaned.

"Not Monstrous Maud!" shouted Poppy, from her desk at the front.

"I hope this is better than the dead bug collection," said Alice Jones.

"Please don't let her talk about maggots again," said Suzie Singh. "We've just had lunch."

Sarah put a trembling hand up. "Can I go to the toilet please, Miss?"

"Hold on for a minute," said Miss Bloom. "Let's get this over with."

Maud stepped up to the front of the class with her plastic tub. "Today I've brought my pet," she said. "His name's Quentin."

Suzie cowered behind her hands as Maud opened the ice-cream tub.

Inside was a rock, with a tiny scrap of black cloth attached to it.

Poppy stood on tiptoes and peered into the tub. "You have a pet rock? With a cape? Called Quentin?"

"I told you she was a weirdo," said Sarah.

"Quentin's not a rock," said Maud. "He must have escaped."

The girls shuffled around in discomfort.

"It's nothing to worry about," Maud added. "It's only *wild* rats that carry diseases."

All the girls in the class jumped up on to their chairs and began to scream. All the girls except Milly. She was sitting quietly behind her desk, with her pens arranged in neat rows and a spiteful smile on her lips. It was the smile she kept for the times when she got Maud into trouble.

Maud didn't have time to worry about her sister, though. She had to calm the class down and find Quentin.

"Please could you stop screaming?" she asked. "Quentin's very nervous around new

people." It was no use. She couldn't even hear herself above the terrified shrieks.

Miss Bloom stepped forward from her desk and shouted over the din. "Be quiet!" In an instant, the class was silent. "Miss Montague is clearly playing another of her ridiculous jokes!"

Maud noticed that the papers on Miss Bloom's desk were moving. Underneath them she spotted a long, black tail flicking back and forth.

"Er, Miss Bloom …" she began.

The papers moved again, and Quentin scuttled out from under them to the front of the desk, his claws rattling on the wooden surface. His grey fur was even messier than normal where he'd been rummaging; it stood up in tufts all over his body. He lifted himself on to his hind legs and inspected the class with a curious glint in his pink eyes. The girls froze, staring wide-eyed at the rat.

"You've caused quite enough havoc for

one day," said Miss Bloom, who hadn't seen Quentin yet.

"But Miss …"

"But nothing. Stand outside and think about what you've done!" Miss Bloom turned to the class. "And as for the rest of you, get off those chairs at once!"

Maud was about to scoop Quentin up and leave the room when the rat scurried to the edge of the desk and jumped off. He landed on Miss Bloom's skirt, latching on with his claws. The class wailed with a single voice of terror.

"What …?" muttered the teacher, twirling on the spot to get a look. Quentin squeaked in panic, scampered around her back and disappeared up her jumper. Now Miss Bloom screamed too and writhed about, arms flapping in a wild dance.

"Stay still, Miss!" said Maud.

Her teacher froze and a second later Quentin's nose peered out of the neck of the

jumper. Miss Bloom turned her head slowly, eyes widening as they lit on the rat. Maud saw Quentin smile back, his little yellow teeth peeping over his bottom lip.

Miss Bloom opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Her knees started to wobble. Maud rushed forward to pluck Quentin off her shoulder. By the time Maud had him clutched safely to her chest, Miss Bloom had fainted in a heap on the floor.





Chapter Two

Fifteen minutes later, Maud stood in Mrs Fennel's office.

She'd been here a billion times before. Mrs Fennel always sat behind her perfectly tidy desk in her perfectly neat blouse and gave Maud a stern telling off. Then she warned her never to do it again and let her leave. It wasn't that bad, really.

"Maud Montague," Mrs Fennel began. "This is unacceptable! It's worse than the time you poured green food dye in the baked beans. It's even worse than the wolf mask incident."

Maud couldn't believe Mrs Fennel was still going on about that mask. How was Maud to know the caretaker got scared so easily? She hadn't expected him to throw down his mop and flee out of the gates in terror.

"It was meant to be a joke," she explained.

"I'm not sure Mr Carter saw it that way," said Mrs Fennel. "He needed a whole month off to recover. And now this. I shouldn't have to tell you, Maud, that rats are not allowed in the classroom. It's just not … proper."

Mrs Fennel was obsessed with things being proper. Everything in the school, from pens to pupils, had to be in the correct place at the correct time, doing exactly what they were supposed to do.

"Quentin's not a fearsome sort of rat," said Maud. "If anything he's too shy for his own good. It's the rest of the class that should be in trouble. If they hadn't frightened him with their screams, we would have found him sooner."

"I'm sorry, Maud, but I won't listen to any more of your excuses. It's time we faced facts. We've tried and tried with you, but it just isn't working. Miss Bloom is going to have to take time off to recover, and the school can't afford to lose more staff. I'm going to have to ask you to leave Primrose Towers."

Leave? Maud couldn't believe it. She wasn't being told to say sorry. She wasn't being told not to do it again. She was being expelled!

"But …"

"I'm sorry, Maud, but I see no alternative."

Before Maud could say anything more, Mrs Fennel picked up her phone and dialled. "Hello, it's Felicity Fennel here. Yes, from Primrose Towers. I was wondering if you could help me. I'm looking to transfer a pupil named Maud Montague."

Maud listened in disbelief. Was Mrs Fennel allowed to do this?

"Her behaviour?" said Mrs Fennel. "Oh, it's

dreadful. Quite the worst I've ever known. The things she gets up to … well, I'm sure you'll find out. Excellent. Thank you."

Mrs Fennel put down the phone and smiled with her eyes closed as though she was slipping into a warm bath. "Good news," she said. "That was the headmistress at Rotwood School. She says she'll take you."

Maud was puzzled. "I'm surprised she wanted me after that description."

"Nonsense. I think you'll fit in perfectly."

As Mrs Fennel spoke, a smile seemed to be tugging at her lips.

"I'll let your parents know you can start on Monday. The school's in the middle of the forest to the north of Sommerton, and you can get a bus there from your usual stop."

"How will I know which bus to …"

"You won't miss it. I can assure you of that."

Maud thought that a creepy forest sounded like a strange place for a school. Still, it had to be more interesting than Primrose Towers.

"All right," she said. "I'll go."

Mrs Fennel narrowed her eyes as she peered across her pristine desk. "I wasn't offering you a choice."

After that, Maud went back to the classroom to fetch Quentin. "It's a shame the others didn't get to see you in your little cape," she whispered to him. "You would have made a brilliant vampire rat." Quentin's nose twitched, as if he agreed with her.

As Maud was on her way down the corridor to leave Primrose Towers for the last time, she heard a commotion in the staffroom. It sounded like laughing, cheering and … was that a party popper being let off? *They must be celebrating something*, thought Maud … although she had no idea what.



Maud glared at her sister as they sat around the dinner table that night. "You shouldn't have let him out! He was absolutely terrified. He could have been squashed in all the panic."

"I don't know what you mean," said Milly. "I didn't do anything. It's not my fault you got into trouble and ended up getting expelled. Tell her, Mum."

Mrs Montague looked up from the script she was reading and adjusted her large round glasses. "You mustn't say your sister was expelled, cupcake. She was transferred." She looked back down at the script and continued eating her dinner. Spaghetti sauce was splashing all over her cream-coloured jumper, but she was so engrossed in the script that she didn't seem to notice. For the last few weeks, she'd been designing costumes for the local amateur dramatic society's production of *Dracula – The Musical*, and it was hard to talk to her about anything else.

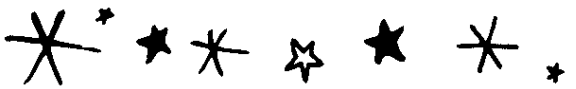
Mr Montague looked up from his copy of *Vintage Car Magazine*, his eyes huge behind the lenses in his glasses. "And you mustn't say your sister was transferred as a punishment. The headmistress simply said that Maud would fit in better at Rotwood."

He pointed at a picture in his magazine. "It's like this Volvo P1800. You could put the engine from a V70 into it, but it wouldn't run. That doesn't make one right and the other wrong. It just means they're different."

Here we go again, thought Maud. Her dad always found a way to bring things round to cars. As he droned on about different types of engines, she glared back at Milly.

Milly smiled sweetly, as though she couldn't understand what the problem was. When their dad was busy reading again, Milly winked at Maud. Her smile changed from angelic to mean.

That settled it. It *had* been Milly who let Quentin out of his ice-cream tub!



Later that night, Maud popped into the garage to check on Quentin. She didn't like him being out here on his own. Her parents let him come in the house during the day, but Milly had kicked up a massive fuss about having 'vermin' in the bedroom while she slept. Although that didn't stop Maud sneaking him in when it was really cold. Maud thought it was very unfair, because Lollipop, Milly's rabbit, was allowed to live in the utility room and sometimes even slept on Milly's beanbag. Maud reached inside and stroked the rat's head.

"Sorry about my sister," she said.

Quentin shuddered, as if he was thinking about Milly.

Okay, so his fur was a bit patchy in places, but that wasn't his fault. When she'd first found Quentin, trapped in one of their bins, he was thin and wet and scared. Maud thought he'd been in a fight with a local cat. She'd fed him up over the next few weeks, and now he had doubled in size and was much more confident.

"Milly was very mean to let you loose like that," she said. "But you're safe now, and that's the main thing."

Maud placed a blanket over Quentin's cage and was just about to leave when she spotted something in the corner of the garage – a caterpillar nest. She watched as the tiny insects squirmed around it, crawling under and over each other. It looked like a huge rotten ball of candyfloss, teeming with activity.

Even better, the caterpillars had spun their nest around a pile of twigs, so she was able to pick up the entire thing and take it to her room. She could even show it to Milly. Perhaps sharing something as cool as this would help them put the Quentin incident behind them. Of course,

Milly had started it. But if Maud was nice to her, maybe she wouldn't do something like this again.

Maud carried the nest upstairs carefully to the bedroom she shared with her sister. It was a strange-looking room, thanks to an argument they'd had while choosing wallpaper. In the end, their dad had decided that Milly should choose the decoration for her half of the room, and Maud should choose the decoration for hers. As a result, Maud's half was covered in spooky black wallpaper, with brilliant glow-in-the-dark spider stickers, and Milly's half was covered in sugar pink wallpaper, on which were pinned drawings of fairies, rainbows and magical castles.

The bunk bed that Maud shared with her sister was against the wall in the middle of the room, where the black and pink wallpapers met. Milly had insisted on taking the top bunk, so Maud had to make do with the bottom one.

But she didn't mind because the gap underneath it made an excellent space for Quentin's daytime den of twigs and branches and old pieces of cardboard boxes.

Milly was lying underneath the frilly pink duvet on her bunk, reading her *Bumper Book of Pony Stories*.

"Look at this," said Maud. "Isn't it cool?" She lifted the writhing nest up to her sister, who jerked upright and screamed.

"Mum!" Milly shouted. "Maud's throwing insects at me again."

"Don't throw insects at your sister, dear," came their mum's voice from downstairs.

"I wasn't throwing them," said Maud, carefully placing the nest under the bottom bunk. "I was showing them to you. I just thought you might be interested."

"How many times do I have to tell you?" asked Milly. "I'm not interested in worms or spiders or creepy-crawlies of any kind.

And even if I was, I wouldn't want the filthy things in my bedroom."

As Milly chattered on about how disgusting it was to bring insects into the house, Maud changed into her pyjamas and threw her clothes on to the floor. On her side of the room, the floor was completely covered with rumpled clothes, spooky books and scary Halloween masks. On Milly's side, the floor was spotless, with all her possessions stowed away neatly in her lilac chest of drawers.

Maud crawled under her black duvet. Above her, Milly was still complaining.

"I can't imagine how many germs you must have brought in. You'd better make sure you don't touch any of my things."

Maud wondered what was wrong with her sister. Didn't she like anything interesting? She closed her eyes. While she waited for sleep to come, her mind kept wandering, thinking about her new school. What was it going to be like? Only the weekend to go, and then she would find out.

