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Opening extract from

Monstrous Maud: Horror Holiday

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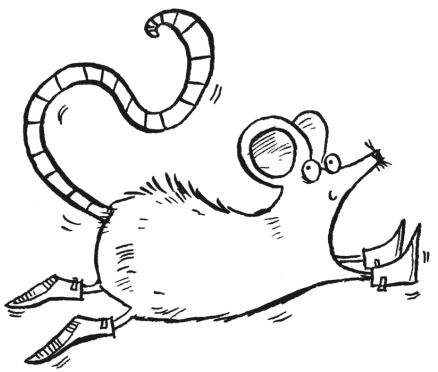
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Horror Holiday



A. B. Saddlewick

BUSTER





Chapter One

Bump! The car bounced and clanked along. "Ow! Slow down, Daddy!" grumbled Milly Montague. "That's the third time I've banged my head!"

Maud wished her sister would stop making a fuss. She travelled down this road in the school bus almost every day, and that was a hundred times bumpier.

"Sorry," said Mr Montague. "I thought the suspension could handle it, but this road isn't up to much. Look at the size of those potholes! The council should do something about it."

Maud smiled as she remembered the day a group of workers had been sent to fix the road. They'd hardly got their tools out before Mr Quasimodo, the school caretaker, tried to offer them a cup of tea. They'd run away screaming.

Maud looked down at her blazer pocket, where her pet rat Quentin was bobbing up and down like a baby kangaroo. He peered up at her and squeaked with fear.

"Don't worry, Quent," she said. "It'll be over soon."

Not soon enough, though. Maud had been dreading tonight for weeks. She'd tried to stop her mum and dad from coming to parents' evening, but they'd insisted. They were bound to find out that Rotwood was a monster school! And if they did, they'd forbid her from ever going back.

The aroma of rotting leaves and stagnant puddles drifted into the car.

"Put the windows up!" shouted Milly, lifting her pink blouse up over her nose. "Maud's school is already making me sick. I don't know why you had to bring me."

"Sorry, petal," said Mrs Montague, "but we've found it very difficult to get babysitters since the incident with Tracy."

"The poor girl is still convinced she was attacked by a flying hamster with fangs," said Mr Montague. "All her friends think our house is haunted now. Won't even come for double pay!"

Maud felt a little guilty that Tracy had been so scared of the vampire hamster she'd been looking after. But she couldn't tell her parents what had really happened that evening. Not without revealing the truth about Rotwood.

"I just don't understand why I'm being punished," said Milly. "Shouldn't I be rewarded for getting straight As in my report?"

"This isn't a punishment, dear. What about our holiday?" asked Mrs Montague. "Doesn't that count as a reward?"

"I suppose so," said Milly. "Though it will have to be pretty flipping amazing to make up for this pong."

"Watch your language, young lady," said Mr Montague. "We don't use words like 'flipping' in this family."

"Very flipping sorry," muttered Milly under her breath.

"And it just so happens that I have some good news on the holiday front," Mr Montague went on. "You know how I said we might be going to Corfu?"

Maud pricked up her ears.

"Yes?" asked Milly, leaning forward.

"Well, all the flights were fully booked," said Mr Montague. "So we're going to the Classic Car Show instead. Isn't that fantastic?"

Maud's heart sank, and for once, her sister was speechless.

"No need to thank me," said Mr Montague. "It'll be fun for everyone! After all, who'd want

to lounge around on a beach when they could be learning about the history of motoring? And it was cheaper, too, if you can believe it."

Milly rolled her eyes and slumped in her seat.

The car's headlights picked out a sign ahead:

ROTWOOD SCHOOL
BECAUSE WE SCARE

"Some practical joker has added an 's' in front of 'care'," said Mr Montague, chuckling to himself.

"Er … yes," said Maud. "Great joke, isn't it?"

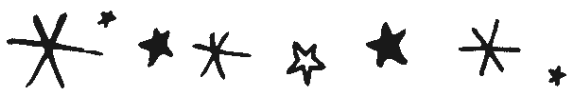
The thick trees on either side fell away and the bumpy road turned to gravel.

Rotwood loomed ahead of them. The sky was growing dark, and Maud thought the building's spiky stone towers and arched windows looked more bleak and forbidding than ever.

"What a disgusting dump," said Milly. "It's even more rubbish than I was expecting."

"Well, I think it looks very cosy," said Mrs Montague cheerfully. "Though a few lights wouldn't go amiss."

Maud winced as she looked at the weird array of vehicles parked outside. There was a horse and carriage that looked as if it had ridden in from Victorian days; a row of rusty penny-farthing bikes with huge wheels at the front and tiny ones at the back; and a couple of broomsticks perched against the wall.



As Mr Montague parked, Maud noticed that a hearse with a wooden coffin in the back had just arrived. Her half-vampire friend Paprika got out, straightened his cape and opened the back door. The coffin creaked open and his mum rose from it, shaking the soil from her ballgown.

"Our playing fields are over there," said Maud quickly, pointing in the opposite direction. "That's where we play totally normal games like netball and tennis."

Mrs Montague squinted into the darkness. "I can't really see anything, petal. But I'm sure they're very nice."

Maud glanced over her shoulder and saw that Paprika and his mum had gone into the school. She sighed. They hadn't even gone inside yet, and already it was proving difficult to keep the truth about Rotwood hidden.

They all got out of the car and crunched across the gravel. As Maud glanced up at the hulking grey school, one of the stone gargoyles winked at her.

It was going to be a long night.





Chapter Two

Mr Montague headed towards the front steps. "Look at this monster!" he said.

Maud stopped dead in her tracks. She couldn't believe her dad had discovered the truth already.

"I bet it didn't have any trouble at all on that dreadful road," continued Mr Montague.

Maud turned and saw that her dad was admiring a huge red truck with massive wheels and a gleaming chrome grille.

Maud wondered whose truck it was. It seemed way too cool to belong to any of the teachers.

"Come along, dear," said Mrs Montague. "You'll have plenty of time for all that at the Car Show."

Milly scowled.

Maud climbed the large steps into the gloomy entrance hall. Hundreds of pupils and parents were milling around in the flickering light of the wall-mounted torches.

Mrs Montague paused to look at a display of paintings by some of the school's youngest monsters. There was a giant spider with a row of yellow eyes, a three-headed dog, and a lion with wings.

"These are very vivid," said Mrs Montague. "Was the theme 'nightmares'?"

"Yep, got it in one," said Maud. The theme had actually been 'favourite pets'.

The caretaker, Mr Quasimodo, stomped towards them with a clipboard. He had made an effort to dress up for parents' evening, but Maud didn't think it was quite working. His

black trousers stopped just above his ankles and his jacket was stretched so tight over the hunch on his back that it was splitting at the seams. He was wearing a clean white shirt, but it only made his skin look greener.

"Wh … what's that?" asked Milly.

"Ssh! It's who, not what," whispered Maud. "Mr Quasimodo is the school caretaker."

Paprika's mum stepped over to the caretaker, jabbing her finger into his chest and scolding him about the state of the poison ivy garden.

"I know he looks a bit strange," said Maud. "But he's alright really."

"Yeah, he's harmless," said Paprika, who had appeared behind them. "He hasn't eaten anyone in years."

Maud stamped hard on Paprika's foot. "No monster stuff," she whispered.

"Oops," muttered Paprika. "Sorry." They took a few steps away, leaving Milly to gape at the terrifying caretaker.

"I don't know if I can keep this up," said Maud, once they were out of earshot. "I just want to have my appointment and go."

"I know how you feel," said Paprika. "Mum goes spare if I get a bad report. Once I got such a bad mark in history that Mum made me fly to school with one wing tied behind my back."

Maud glanced over at Paprika's mother. She was waiting impatiently for Mr Quasimodo to find their appointment on his clipboard. Finally, she snatched it off him and scanned through it herself.

Paprika sighed. "She said that if I don't do well this year, she'll take me out of Rotwood and send me to a boarding school in Transylvania."

"She wouldn't!" said Maud.

Mrs Von Bat swept past and seized Paprika by the arm.

"Gotta go!" he said miserably.



Mr Quasimodo shuffled over. "Names," he grunted.

"Mr and Mrs Maurice Montague," said Maud's dad, holding his hand out.

Mr Quasimodo stared at Mr Montague's hand and licked his lips. His stomach let out a loud rumble.

Mr Montague pulled his hand sharply back.

"Room 3B," said Mr Quasimodo. "At top of staircase. Hurry."

"Thank you, my good man," said Mr Montague.

They all turned towards the spiral staircase, but before they could go, Mr Quasimodo plonked his fat green fingers on Milly's shoulder.

Milly shrieked and squirmed out of his grip.

"My wife has set up crèche in dungeon," he said. "You go there. Have fun."

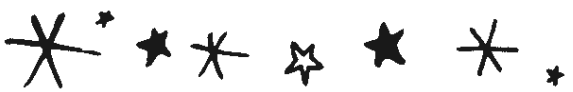
"D-dungeon?" Milly stammered. "You can't send me to the dungeon. I've done nothing wrong!"

"Oh, it's not a real dungeon!" said Maud. "Don't be silly. That's just a name we give our games room as a joke. You'll love it!"

"That does sound like a good idea," said Mr Montague. "Why would you want to listen to Maud's report anyway?"

"So I can laugh at the bad bits," said Milly. "Obviously."

Mr Quasimodo escorted Milly to the steps leading down to the dungeon. She turned back to look at them, her face turning as green as his. *She'll be fine,* thought Maud. *There's nothing dangerous down there. Well, there is, but hopefully it'll be asleep.*



Maud led her parents up the staircase to her classroom. Flaming torches cast long shadows along the curved walls. They passed an arched window overlooking the playground, which

was a mess of crumbling headstones.

"Is that a graveyard down there?" asked Mrs Montague.

"Ha ha! Of course not," said Maud, thinking fast. "That's just … where they store the spare flagstones for the entrance hall."

As they made their way up, Quentin popped his head out of Maud's blazer pocket and squeaked.

"I know how you feel," whispered Maud. "This could be awful."

They reached the top of the stairs, and Maud led her parents along the stone corridor. This place was murky enough in the daytime, but with just the inky evening light seeping in through the windows, it was hard to see anything at all.

"Are you sure this is the right way?" asked Mrs Montague. "Has there been a power cut or something?"

"Mr Quasimodo believes in saving electricity," said Maud. "For the sake of the planet."

"Oh," said Mrs Montague. "That's very green of him."

And that's not all that's green about him, thought Maud. They reached the door to Class 3B, and Maud took a deep breath. All it would take was for Mr Von Bat to let the truth slip, and her Rotwood days would be over. No more Fright lessons, no more Monsterball and no more hanging out with Wilf and Paprika.

She lifted a hand and knocked on the door.

