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From I Met a Lovely Monster

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from *I Met a Lovely Monster*

Author's Note

What follows is an excerpt from my unpublished children's novel *I Met a Lovely Monster*. The opening chapters of the book introduce us to Murray Teeter, who lives with his mom and his brother Bernard in the town of North Mellwood (also the setting for my two earlier children's novels, *City of Names* and *Grooves: A Kind of Mystery*). One night, shortly before Halloween, Murray discovers that many of the rocks in North Mellwood turn into monsters after the sun goes down and that one of them lives in his backyard. This monster's name is Kevin Squigglesby, and aside from his third eye, he looks much like Murray: a regular sixth-grader, albeit on the short side. As this excerpt commences, Murray has agreed to accompany Kevin Squigglesby to a meeting of the North Mellwood Monster Society's biweekly reading club, where some of the other monsters in town wish to meet him so that they can determine if he's worthy of their trust.

CHAPTER FOUR

It turned out that the North Mellwood Monster Society Reading Club was holding its meeting just down the street from my house, in the service garage of the Ford Madox Ford Dealership. The dealership was closed for the night, and I guess the garage was one of the few places in town that was big enough to fit all the monsters. I pulled Kevin Squigglesby aside as we were walking through the last row of cars. "I'm not so sure about this. Up until a few minutes ago, I wasn't one hundred percent convinced that *you* really existed, and now you want me to meet the entire North Mellwood Monster Society?"

"That's right."

"But they're monsters! What will happen if they freak out and get mad at me?"

Kevin sighed. "You need to relax, Murray. Monsters can sense it when you're afraid. They're kind of like bears that way."

"Monsters are like *bears*?!"

He tried to reassure me. “Well, yes, they’re like bears. But in a good way: *they* won’t try to eat *you* if *you* don’t try to eat *them*. Now hurry up.”

Kevin Squigglesby had to give a complicated secret knock before the garage door would open. It rolled along the ceiling, paused for a second, and then dropped back to the floor. Kevin and I walked through just as it was closing.

I could hardly believe my eyes. There were monsters everywhere I looked. They were standing all around the garage, leaning against stacks of tires and clutching books in their hands or their tentacles. They hardly seemed to notice us. I figured that the meeting must not have started yet, because a few of the smaller monsters were riding one of the big metal lifts that mechanics use when they want to look at the undersides of cars. One particularly large, hairy monster was trying to fish a gumball out of the gumball machine. Another was sucking blasts of air out of the air compressor. Most of the others were just chatting with each other. Some of the monsters resembled Kevin Squigglesby—normal-looking people with a few extra legs, maybe, or a hand sticking out of their forehead—but many of them were much more unusual. There was one monster, for instance, whose skin was entirely green. He was wearing a green shirt and a green tie, smoking a green pipe, and his green hair was neatly parted on his green head.

“That’s Green Graham,” Kevin Squigglesby told me. “And over there, those are the Wolf kids.”

He pointed to a group of four werewolves, each of whom had a single long fang poking out of his or her mouth. One of the Wolf kids was named Virginia, one was named Tobias, and the other two, Kevin Squigglesby said, were named Thomas.

“How can *two* of them be named Thomas? What if you wanted to tell a story about one of them? How would anybody know which one you were talking about?”

“The one in the white suit goes by Tom,” Kevin Squigglesby explained.

“Oh, that makes sense,” I said. Or at least I guessed it did.

The strangest monster of all had to be Whitman’s Haircut. Whitman’s Haircut was called Whitman’s Haircut because he looked like the haircut of a poet all the monsters liked named Walt Whitman. He didn’t look like Whitman himself, mind you—just his haircut. He started off on top as a shaggy mane of thick white hair. Then he became two heavy sideburns. Finally he developed into a big round beard and a woolly mustache. I think there must have been a couple of feet buried inside the beard somewhere, too, because he was able to move around without too much trouble.

I was staring at all the different monsters and wondering how I had managed to live in North Mellwood for so long without realizing they existed when a gigantic three-headed dinosaur lumbered into the middle of the room. The dinosaur was a girl. I could tell she was a girl because she was wearing a plain brown dress with three stiff white collars around the necks.

Everybody fell quiet.

“Who on earth is that?” I whispered to Kevin Squigglesby.

I had never seen a creature so big before.

Kevin pointed to each of the heads. “The one on the left is called Charlotte, the one in the middle is called Anne, and the one on the right is called Emily. They’re the Brontësaurus.”

The three long necks of the Brontësaurus swayed back and forth between the metal rafters of the garage. I kept expecting them to get tangled up with each other like a bunch of kites, but they never did. I suppose if you live with three heads for long enough, you learn how to keep them apart.

The first head, Charlotte, announced, “I call this meeting of the North Mellwood Monster Society Reading Club to order.” The second head, Emily, said, “We will begin with our traditional Reading Song.” The third head, Anne, hummed a little note so that all of the monsters could find the right pitch. Then everybody started to sing.

It was the same song Kevin Squigglesby had been singing the night I found him on my swing set, the one that sounded like “Great Green Globes of Greasy, Grimy Gopher Guts.” These were the lyrics:

The North Mellwood Monster Society Reading Song

(to the tune of “Great Green Globes of Greasy, Grimy Gopher Guts”)

All we read are Madeleine L’Engle books,
Stories like “The Overcoat,” novels that Calvino wrote,
Great big books with golden stickers on the front
And sometimes on the back.

All we read are books from the best-seller lists,
Books you never want to shut, Faulkner and Kurt Vonnegut.
Sometimes we read books made into blockbusters
And then back into books.

All we read are mysteries and comic books,
Lots of self-help quackery, William Makepeace Thackeray,

Everything by Pinkwater and Malamud
And nothing by Ayn Rand.

I have to say, they harmonized surprisingly well for a bunch of monsters. After the song was finished, the Brontësaurus told them all to open their books to chapter one, and they began their discussion.

The book they were talking about was called *The Thnigs They Carried*. From what I could gather, it was the middle volume of a trilogy about a race of aliens called the Thnigs. In *The Thnigs They Carried*, the Thnigs conquered the Earth and enslaved all of humanity. They forced the humans to carry them around on their backs and sing calypso songs, which was the only kind of Earth music they enjoyed listening to. They whipped the humans and made them wear saddles and old straw hats. I wasn't sure what the Thnigs were supposed to look like, since I hadn't read any of the books, but for some reason I kept picturing them as little white gloves with cartoon faces, like the Hamburger Helper mascot on the old TV commercials. As I said, though, I hadn't read the books, so I might have been wrong about that.

Most of the monsters had liked *The Thnigs They Carried*, but a few of them said that it wasn't as good as the first volume had been.

"I just feel like the Thnigs didn't make for very sympathetic characters this time around," a monster with a long yellow horn said. "For instance, when that one Thnig was punished for saying he thought calypso music wasn't as good as surf music, and the other Thnigs made him watch MTV for an entire day, I just wasn't *moved* by it. I hope the writer does a better job with the third book."

I lost track of the conversation after a while. I spent some time looking at the various monsters in the garage and counting to see how many of them had tails. I came up with eleven definite tails and eighteen possible tails. The possible tails included several tails that were attached to unlikely places on the monsters, such as their chins or their elbows, and several others that might have been tentacles instead. I must have been lost in thought for a while, because the next thing I knew the Brontësaurus was calling my name.

"Murray Teeter!"

All of the monsters were staring at me.

"Um, that's me," I said.

"We would like an answer from you, please," Charlotte instructed. "Will your answer be yes—" said Emily, "—or no?" said Anne.

Because I had missed the question, I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to say. I looked to Kevin Squigglesby for help. He gave me a tiny, almost imperceptible nod of his head.

I cleared my throat and said, "I guess my answer would have to be yes, then."

There was a moment of silence, and then the Brontësaurus smiled.

"Good," said Emily. "In answering yes, you have promised to keep secret—" said Anne, "—the existence of the North Mellwood Monster Society and all the monsters therein—" said Charlotte, "—under penalty of gobbling up," finished Emily.

Everybody applauded. Kevin Squigglesby chucked me on the arm. I felt a little queasy at the idea of being gobbled up, so I hung back as the monsters began to make their way to the buffet. There were a couple of washtubs filled with bottles of Banjo Brothers Ginger Ale there, along with ten or eleven silver platters stacked high with finger sandwiches. You might be thinking that finger sandwiches are sandwiches made out of fingers, like I was, but if you are, don't worry. These particular sandwiches were made out of cucumbers, tuna fish, and pimento cheese. The only reason they were called finger sandwiches was because of how small they were.

I don't care for cucumbers, tuna fish, or pimento cheese myself, but the monsters must have loved the stuff. They devoured the sandwiches in a matter of seconds. First the platters were full and then they were empty—it happened just like that.

Everybody seemed much more relaxed when it came to the Banjo Brothers Ginger Ale. I was surprised to see some of them blowing the mist out of the bottles after they cracked them open. I had never imagined that anybody else even *knew* about the mist, but there were a few monsters who were so skillful at mist-blowing that they could make it form into rings and spirals and ladders as it rose into the air. They made me look like some kind of amateur.

"So are you enjoying our little conclave?"

Kevin Squigglesby had disappeared somewhere. The monster who was talking to me now was Green Graham.

"I'm surprised by how friendly everybody is," I admitted, "but also by how odd everybody looks."

"That's because of the principle of asymmetry," said Green Graham.

"The principle of what?"

"Asymmetry. It's when the parts of something aren't balanced. Take your face, for instance. You have one eye on each side of your face, which is called symmetry. Your friend Kevin Squigglesby, on the other hand,

has one eye on one side and two eyes on the other. That's called asymmetry. Monsters always exhibit asymmetry. Otherwise we would just be regular people who happened to turn into rocks during the day."

What he said made a lot of sense to me. All of the monsters I could see had one sort of asymmetry or another, whether it was a horn on one of their temples, a few too many fingers on one of their hands, or, as in the case of the Wolf kids, a snaggletooth on the left side of their mouth. Even Green Graham had a white mark the shape of a moth on the back of his hand.

I was about to thank him for telling me about the principle of asymmetry when somebody gave the secret knock on the outside of the door. One of the monsters pressed a red button on the wall, and the door clattered open. A small furry monster wearing a bandage over his ear came dashing into the room. He looked like a cross between a squirrel and a monkey. He was in some sort of panic.

"It happened, it happened," he said. "But it wasn't—grrr—wasn't my fault."

The Brontësaurus plodded across the garage on her four enormous feet, her tail swinging slowly behind her. "What is it?" Anne asked. "Calm down—" said Emily, "—and tell us what happened," said Charlotte.

"It's—grrr—it's Dickens," the monster with the eyepatch said. "He's been deconstructed!"

CHAPTER FIVE

I could tell right away that the other monsters were upset by the small furry monster's revelation. They started shaking their heads and pulling at their hair. Some of them collapsed against the wall. A few of them even started crying. One of the monsters who had been clearing the buffet table was so stunned that he dropped a stack of silver sandwich platters. The platters rattled around on the floor like enormous coins. The noise seemed incredibly loud in the stillness of the garage.

Everybody was waiting for the small furry monster to finish telling his story. "Why don't you start—" said Charlotte, "—from the beginning?" suggested Anne.

"Grrr—okay, I will. Dickens and I were planning to walk to the Reading Club together. You know how scared he was—grrr—how scared he was of the dark, how he hated to go anywhere alone at night. Well, I stopped by that field where he lives, the one in back of the

Mellwood Lanes Bowling Alley. I knew something was wrong—grrr—something was wrong as soon as I called his name and he didn't answer. But I made myself wade through the grass just to make sure. I don't have to tell you what I saw. It was the same scene you all remember from Victor just a few—grrr—Victor just a few weeks ago. And from Mister Whitehead before that. And from all the others before that. A few bits of gravel scattered in the grass and a pair of tire treads leading away through the—grrr—through the—grrr—through the dirt. Horrible.

"I brought one of the pieces back with me." He fished a pebble out of his pocket and dropped it onto the floor. "Gray beetlestone. Just like Dickens. The Deconstruction Company got him."

This Dickens fellow must have been a very popular monster, because by the time the small furry monster had finished telling his story, everybody was even more upset than they had been before. All around me, monsters were wiping away tears and murmuring sadly to each other. Kevin Squigglesby had been out of the room for about ten minutes. I spotted him zipping his pants as he came back in from the sales floor of the Ford Madox Ford Dealership. He had finished off three bottles of Banjo Brothers Ginger Ale, so I wasn't surprised he had been in the bathroom for so long. He took a look around at all the crying monsters, and a confused expression came over his face.

"What did I miss?" he whispered to me.

I filled him in on the story the small furry monster had told.

"Poor Dickens," he said. His voice was flat, and his body seemed to sink toward the floor.

"One thing I don't understand, though: why does the small furry monster keep going *grrr*?" I asked.

"What? Oh, that's just a speech impediment. We call him John Growly."

"And why does he have that bandage over his left ear?"

"Because that's his smelling ear. It's part ear, part nose. He puts the bandage over it so that he won't have to go around sniffing his hair all the time."

I knew that a person's feet could smell bad because of my brother, Bernard, but it had honestly never occurred to me that a person's hair might smell bad, too. The only thing I could figure was that if you spent all day as a rock, you might not get the chance to shower very often.

The monsters had formed a huddled sort of line leading up to John Growly. One by one they were walking over to him and offering to share fresh bottles of ginger ale with him to console him. Some of the monsters who had already consoled him once were returning to the end

of the line to console him again. I had the feeling that the line could go on all night.

It was the Brontësauros who finally decided what to do next: “We have no choice in the matter,” said Emily. “We will have to call—” said Charlotte, “—the Monster Queen,” said Anne.

If anybody had asked me, I would have said that the Brontësauros was the leader of the monsters. Apparently, though, I was wrong. The leader of the monsters was the Monster Queen.

The Brontësauros borrowed a cell phone from Whitman’s Haircut and dialed the Monster Queen’s number. “It’s ringing,” she told us, and then, “Hello? Monster Queen? Yes, it’s me, the Brontësauros. I’m afraid I have some bad news.” She recounted John Growly’s story about Dickens and the field behind the bowling alley and the tire tracks and the bits of gravel. “The Deconstruction Company,” she kept repeating. “The Deconstruction Company.”

There was something familiar about the words, something I felt very close to figuring out. Suddenly it all came together in my head. I remembered the man with the clipboard I saw wandering around on the playground when I was supposed to be playing basketball. I remembered the sign on the side of his truck, the one that said “A-1 Deconstruction Company.” Could a sign like that have been a coincidence? I didn’t think so. The A-1 Deconstruction Company my school had hired to work on the playground was the very same Deconstruction Company that was breaking North Mellwood’s monsters into pieces! And if I was right, I realized, it could mean only one thing: the Deconstruction Company was smashing the town’s monsters for one reason and one reason only—to collect the gravel they needed to fill my playground!

The Brontësauros said to the Monster Queen, “I understand, Your Majesty. We’ll get to work on it right away.” I was getting used to the way she switched from head to head as she spoke, and now I hardly noticed it anymore. She hung up the phone and announced, “The Monster Queen says that we have delayed long enough. We must find a way to stop the Deconstruction Company from destroying any more monsters. Are there any suggestions as to how we might proceed?”

The monsters were quiet for a few seconds, just long enough for somebody’s stomach to make a loud, creaking gurgle. Then they all began to talk at the same time. As far as I could tell, none of them had any suggestions to make—they were just babbling to each other. I wasn’t sure whether I should tell the Brontësauros what I had figured out about the Deconstruction Company. I mean, maybe it was no big secret, and I

would end up looking like a gigantic idiot. But I took a deep breath and raised my hand anyway.

“Yes? Murray Teeter?” the Brontësaurus said. All the monsters got quiet again.

I wasn’t used to speaking to so many people at once. The largest number of people I had ever spoken to before was about twenty-three, the number of kids who were in my class at the very beginning of sixth grade, before Tommy Williams got bumped back a year and Michelle Ridelhoover moved to California. I was so nervous that it took me a minute to get my voice working. Eventually, though, I managed to tell the monsters everything I knew about the business going on at my school playground. As it turned out, I had quite a bit to say. I ended up talking for almost five minutes. I finished by telling them, “Anyway, I doubt the guy knows that the rocks he’s using are really monsters. He’s probably just trying to do his job.” Then I waited to see what would come next.

Nobody seemed to think I was a gigantic idiot. The monsters were practically spellbound. They couldn’t believe I knew so much about the Deconstruction Company. Keep in mind that most of them had never seen even the smallest sign of the deconstruction taking place in North Mellwood—and the few who *had* seen something had rarely seen anything more than the usual tell-tale tire treads and leftover pieces of gravel. In fact, the only reason the monsters knew that the Deconstruction Company was responsible for the missing rocks at all was because of one particular rock, Helen, who had turned into a monster just as the truck that stole the rock who lived next door to her was driving away.

Green Graham was still standing next to me. He was visibly impressed. He said, “Kevin Squigglesby was right about you. You have a pretty good head on your shoulders for a kid with such a weird-looking head and such oddly shaped shoulders.”

“Thanks...I think.”

The Brontësaurus cleared each of her throats and said, “Murray, we will need your help. You must find out everything you can about the man with the clipboard. Will you do that for us?”

“Of course. I would be happy to tell him that the rocks are really monsters, too, if you want me to.”

She frowned and thumped her tail on the floor. “You have promised to keep our existence a secret under penalty of gobbling up. I suggest you remember that.” Then her voice softened. “We will decide what steps to take next, Murray. All we ask is that you do a little investigating for us.”

Quite frankly, I was proud that the Brontësaurus had decided to entrust me with such an important mission. I told her that I would do my best. Soon after that, the biweekly meeting of the North Mellwood Monster Society Reading Club came to an end.

Kevin Squigglesby and I made our way home through the darkness. There weren't any cars driving around my neighborhood so late at night, so we were able to walk right down the middle of the road. When I pressed the glow-in-the-dark button on my watch, I saw that it was nearly one o'clock. I had been out past midnight a few other times in my life, when I had gone on sleepovers or camping trips or things like that, but never on a school night before. It made me feel important—like a police officer, or the manager of an all-night grocery store—the type of person who got to stay awake while normal people were sleeping.

We were heading across my driveway when Kevin Squigglesby came to a dead stop. He pointed to my front porch. "Look," he whispered.

There was a figure creeping around up there. I could see the beam of a small flashlight slicing through the darkness. It reminded me of Darth Vader's lightsaber in the second half of *Return of the Jedi*. I knew right away who it had to be: Mark David Guffey.

"That's the juvenile delinquent who lives up the street from me," I whispered to Kevin Squigglesby. "He's probably just here to bust open my family's pumpkin again."

Kevin Squigglesby made a fist and popped his knuckles.

"Not this pumpkin," he said. "Not today."

I followed him as he stole across the yard onto the front porch. I've already told you about my fear of juvenile delinquents. My feeling is, when you're dealing with the kind of person who goes around stealing cars and shaving dogs all the time, who knows what he might try next? I wasn't so sure that what we were doing was a good idea. I hoped that Kevin Squigglesby had a plan.

By the time we climbed onto the front porch, Mark David Guffey had found our latest jack-o'-lantern and was standing there with some sort of mallet raised over his head. It made me think of that comedian whose big act is smashing watermelons open with a giant hammer. I think his name is Gulliver. I've never thought he was funny at all. Anyway, Kevin Squigglesby crept up behind Mark David Guffey, said, "Hey, you!" and yanked the mallet out of his hand.

Mark David Guffey was so shocked that he almost fell over. He dropped his flashlight and began windmilling his arms around to keep his balance. If somebody snatched Gulliver's mallet and Gulliver reacted the same way, I thought, it would be the single funniest thing he had

ever done. The darkness was too thick for Mark David Guffey to see us very well—or at least too thick for him to make out Kevin Squigglesby's third eye—but I guess he could tell that both of us were kids. After he regained his balance, he said, "You two little twerps scared the hell out of me. You'd better get out of here before I beat you senseless."

"I don't think so, buddy," said Kevin Squigglesby, and he smacked his palm a few times with the mallet. "Go and find a different pumpkin to smash."

"Give me back my hammer," Mark David Guffey said.

He lunged at Kevin Squigglesby, but Kevin dodged out of the way and started swinging the mallet in big circles. It went around and around and around. Mark David Guffey danced back on his feet a few steps to avoid getting whacked by it. I have to say, Kevin Squigglesby was whipping the thing around pretty hard. I was a little afraid of getting hit myself. A couple of times, Mark David Guffey tried to grab the mallet as it hooked through the air, but he was too slow to take hold of it. I made the most of all the commotion and pocketed his flashlight.

It could have gone on like that all night, I suppose, with the mallet spinning this way and that and Mark David Guffey reaching out to grab it every so often. Finally, though, Kevin Squigglesby started making what I think of as ninja noises—little yips and hai-yahs that came from somewhere deep in his stomach. The noises must have freaked Mark David Guffey out, because he backed off the porch with his hands in the air. He said, "Fine, keep the hammer. I stole the stupid thing anyway. But you little psychos better watch out."

He started to run off, collected his nerves, and slowed to a walk. He turned back around when he was at the edge of my yard and flipped his middle finger at us. Then he slouched away up the street until we couldn't see him anymore.

I turned to Kevin Squigglesby as he was putting the mallet down. "How did you learn to do that stuff?" I asked.

I was actually talking about the ninja noises he had made. But he must have thought I was talking about the crazy way he swung his mallet around.

"A monster doesn't get to be my age without learning a little something about hand-to-hand combat," he said.