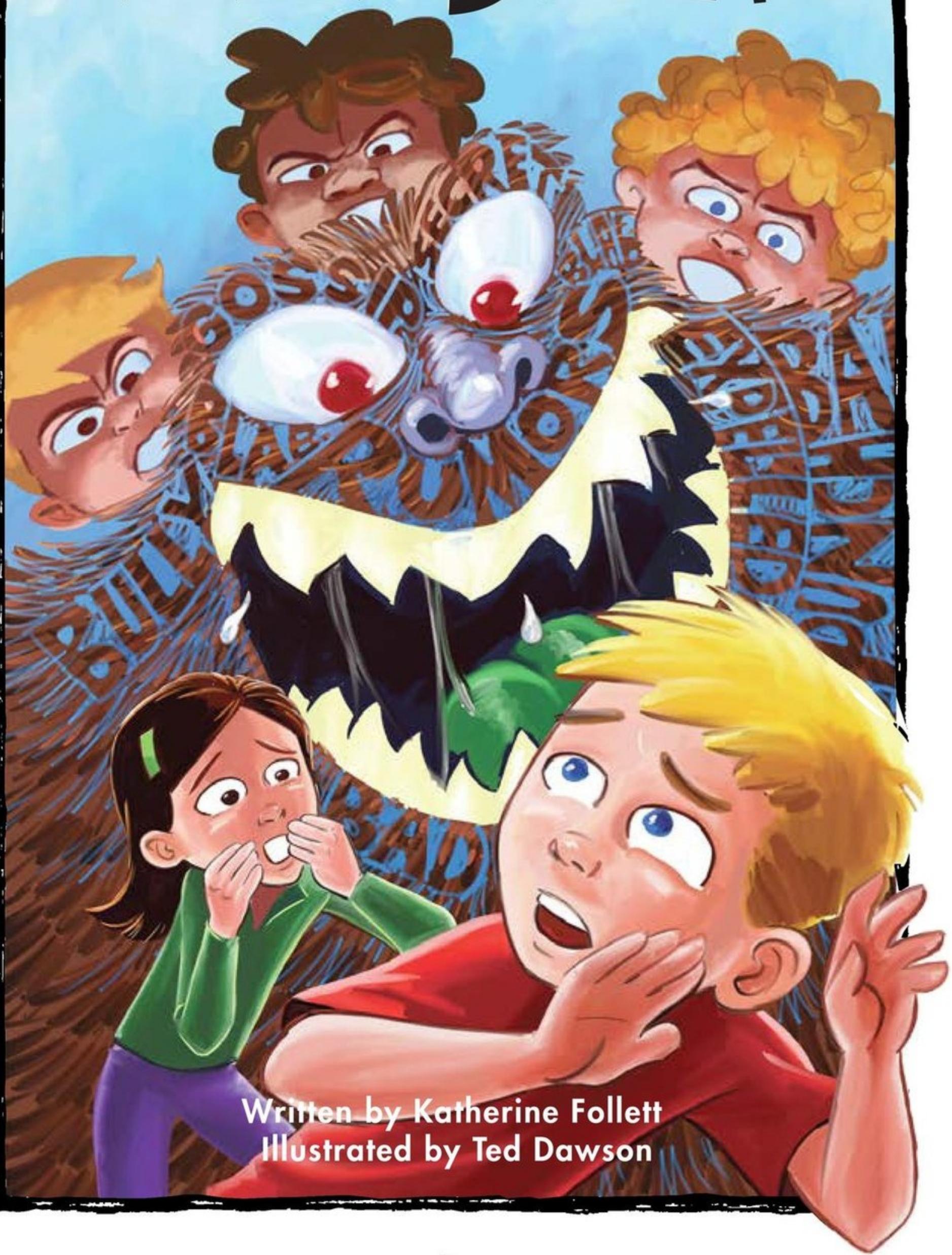


LEVELED Book • V

# THE GOSSIP MONSTER



Written by Katherine Follett  
Illustrated by Ted Dawson

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## Table of Contents

A Quick Glimpse.....	4
The Big Story .....	7
Playing Telephone.....	11
Doing What's Fair .....	16
Telling the Truth .....	21
Glossary .....	24



## A Quick Glimpse

I know it isn't a good excuse for what I did, but Del had never been very nice to me. He didn't talk a whole lot, and when he did, he was usually telling mean jokes. Just that morning, he'd called me "Germy" instead of "Jamie" when I got on the bus. The name-calling was a long and **humiliating** story. Last summer, I ended up in the hospital with a really bad flu, and a few kids started a **rumor** saying I'd gotten sick by crawling through garbage. I don't know who came up with the nickname "Germy," but Del still hadn't let it go. Try as I might to ignore him, it still bothered me.

So when our principal, Mrs. Cosgrove, poked her head inside our classroom and quietly asked Del to come to her office, I naturally thought that he'd done something mean to someone. After all, it wouldn't have been the first time.

During morning recess, I hung out with some other girls in a sunny corner near the building. Through the window, I caught a **glimpse** of Del sitting in the principal's office. A woman I didn't recognize stood between him and a smaller boy in another chair. The boy was crying, and the woman was trying to comfort him while Del scowled.

"Do you see that?" I asked my friends, but just at that moment, Mrs. Cosgrove snapped the blinds shut.

"What?" asked May.

"Del was in Principal Cosgrove's office, and he and the principal both seemed angry. A little kid and a woman were in there with them, but I've never seen them before."

"Del's constantly in Principal Cosgrove's office," May said.

"Maybe he said something mean to that poor little guy," I said, thinking out loud.

"Sounds like Del," Cassie said as she shrugged.

The longer I thought about what I saw, the worse the situation seemed. The crying kid couldn't have been any more than a first grader, or maybe even a kindergartner. I thought of all the mean things Del had said to my friends and me, and it made me angry.

At the end of the day, I realized that Del had never returned to class. On my way to catch up with my friends, I peeked through the principal's window again, but the office was deserted. I spotted Cassie and ran over to her.

"Del never came back to class today. He must have been sent home," I whispered, jumping to my first **conclusion**. Cassie's eyes widened. It felt good to see her so interested in what I said. "I bet he did something really terrible to that poor little kid. Now that I think about it, I remember the kid's face looking puffy, like maybe Del hit him!"

Cassie looked even more shocked. Just then, May ran up behind us and asked what we were talking about.

"Jamie thinks Del might have beat up a kindergartner because he was sent home and never came back," Cassie said. May's mouth fell open, and without thinking, I nodded in agreement.



## The Big Story

My friends and I were at our usual spot around the swings before the first bell the following day when a ball rolled by from the nearby kickball game.

“Hey,” my friend Matt said as he jogged over to pick up the ball, “have you seen Del?”

I realized no one had called me “Germy” on the ride to school that morning and said, “No. Why?”

Matt stepped closer to whisper. “I heard Principal Cosgrove **expelled** him for beating up a kindergartner,” he said. “I guess he punched out the kid’s teeth and gave him two shiners.”

Everyone gasped, and I buried my feet into the sand beneath the swings. That couldn't have been what actually happened—I hadn't seen any black eyes or missing teeth. Del wasn't at school, though, so maybe he had been expelled.

"Where did you hear that?" I asked.

Matt shrugged and said, "The whole school's talking about it."

"Jamie, you were right!" Cassie said, and everyone nodded.

I loved the feeling that came with knowing so many people had heard my **assumptions** and passed them on. It didn't really matter that they had changed parts of the story because we were all having fun, and I couldn't imagine that Del would even care.

By the time we sat down for class, everyone was whispering about Del's expulsion, so we were surprised when he walked through the door. All the kids fell silent and stared as Del made his way to his seat at the back of the classroom. He looked at the ground till he sat down, and the kids next to him shifted their desks away.

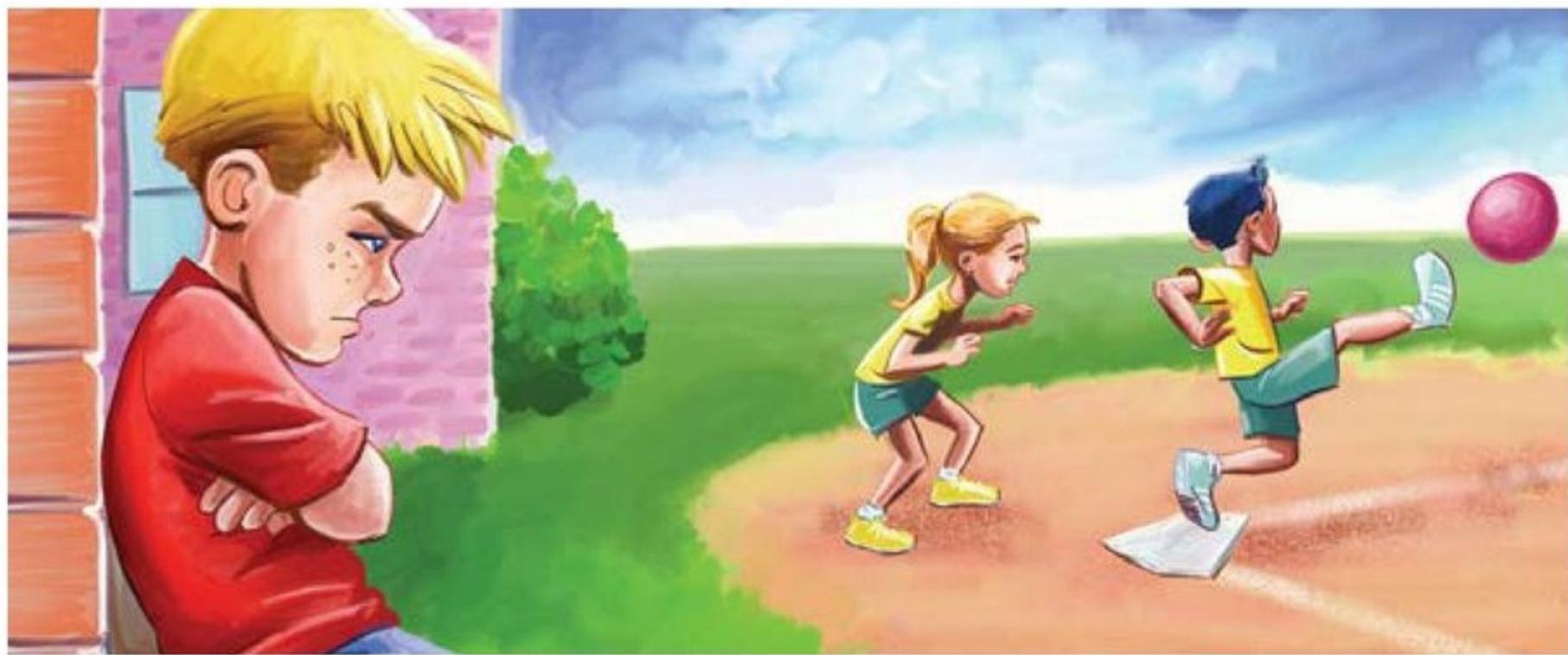


"What's your problem, dork?" Del snorted at the boy next to him.

"I don't want you to attack me," the kid taunted. A few people laughed.

"Yeah, I might," said Del. I could tell he figured it was a joke, but some students gasped in horror, as if he was admitting he did beat up someone.

For our science lab, we had to split up into groups, but no one wanted to work with Del. Mr. Sanchez eventually had to force a group to include Del, but they looked uneasy about it. I peeked at them a couple of times during class, and the rest of the group was completely ignoring Del, who just sat there tapping his pencil against the desk.



At morning recess, Mr. Sanchez asked Del to stay and talk for a moment. Some of the kids laughed at him on their way out. “Did he put someone else in the hospital?” one of them asked.

When Del joined recess a few minutes later, he immediately tried to join the kickball game.

“Neither team wants you,” one of the players said.

“What are you talking about?” Del asked, looking confused. “I always play kickball with you guys.”

They ignored Del and started playing again. As he walked away, **sulking**, someone called, “We don’t want you to lose and start a fight.”

Del sat by himself on a bench against the building while the rest of the school enjoyed their recess around him.

I didn’t want to, but I was starting to feel sorry for Del.



## Playing Telephone

When we returned to the classroom, everyone could see that Mr. Sanchez was in a serious mood.

"Everyone arrange your chairs in a circle," he said. We did, but there were big spaces on either side of Del. Mr. Sanchez frowned. "We're going to play Telephone. I'm going to write down a sentence on this card. I'll whisper the sentence into Sayid's ear, and then he'll whisper what he hears to the next person. Remember to pass on exactly what you believe you hear."



Mr. Sanchez wrote something on the card, turned the card facedown, and then whispered into Sayid's ear. Sayid whispered to the next person, and she whispered to the next. By the time it came around to me, it sounded like "Double leaves everything in your ear."

"What? That's ridiculous!" I exclaimed.

"Just repeat exactly what you hear," Mr. Sanchez instructed. So I continued, and eventually the message made its way around to Mr. Sanchez again. He announced what he had heard.

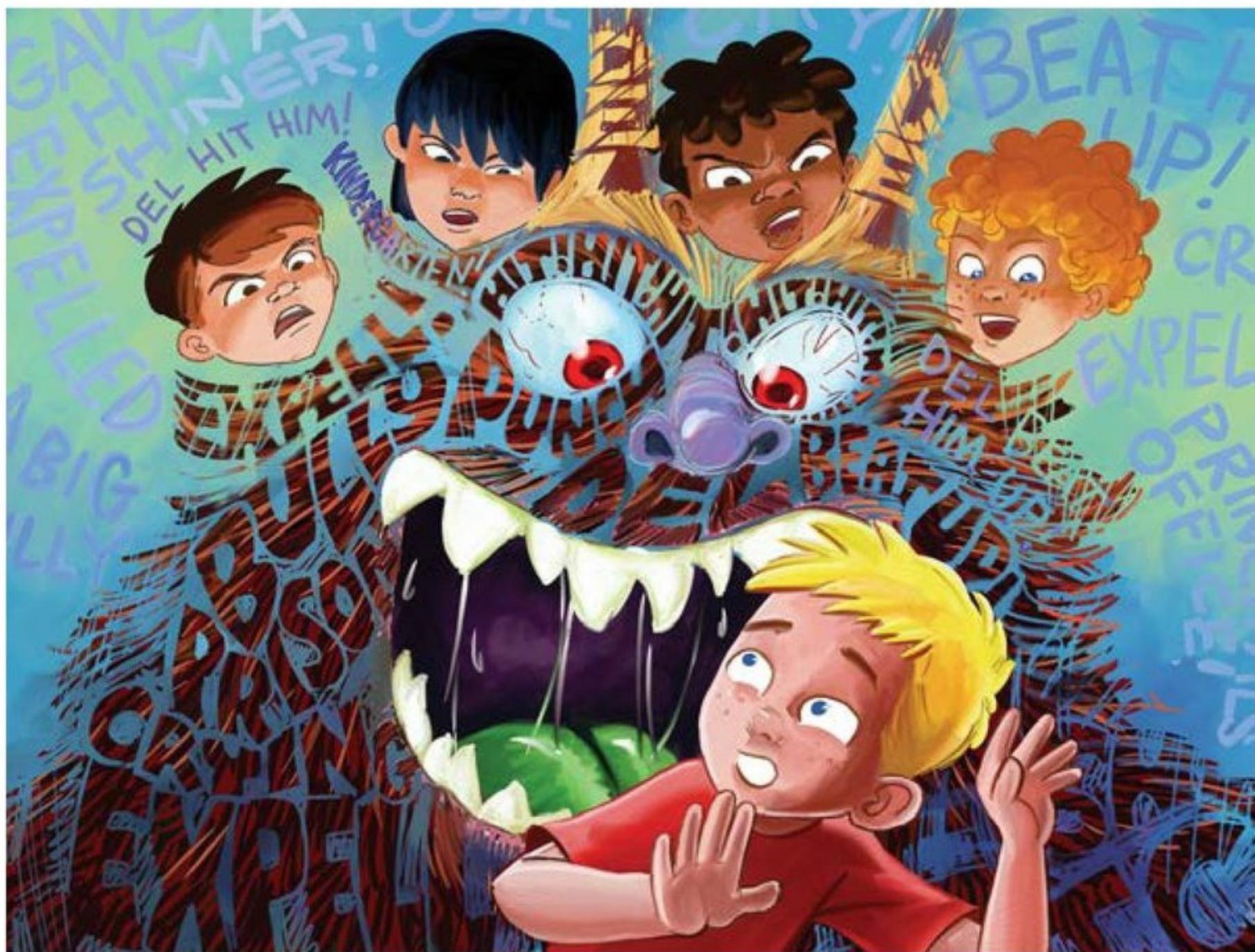
"Dope leaning ringing in your ear," he said, and everyone burst into giggles.

"Now, here's how the message began," he said, turning over the card and showing the group. It read, "Don't believe everything that you hear."

"This is a good lesson to learn," Mr. Sanchez began, "since it seems as though rumors about one person or another are always buzzing around the hallways. I hope this game makes you see that passing on a rumor, or starting one, is like feeding a monster—it **mutates** a little and gets bigger until it's completely different from when it started. It usually gets meaner, uglier, and more hurtful to the person everyone is **gossiping** about. Words have **consequences**, and once a gossip monster has started, it's almost impossible to stop."

The whole class knew what Mr. Sanchez was talking about, even though he didn't mention it specifically. A few people glanced at Del, who looked pretty embarrassed. Although Mr. Sanchez couldn't have known my role in the rumors about Del, it felt as if he were speaking to me alone. I swallowed, feeling the red-hot guilt all over my face.

"I hope that my students wouldn't feed gossip monsters because I've taught my students to treat each other with **respect**," Mr. Sanchez said with finality.



He was right, and I knew it, which made me feel horrible. I thought my friends would feel just as bad and that they would blame me. All I could think about until lunchtime were the awful things they would say to me.

I slunk to my usual table in the cafeteria with my head low, but despite Mr. Sanchez's lesson, Del was still the center of every conversation.

"My mom's a nurse, and she saw the kid in the hospital looking as if he'd been hit by a truck," someone said.

"Why haven't they expelled him already? Aren't they concerned that he'll keep beating up kindergartners?" someone else asked.

“Maybe they’ll send Del to prison,” said another.

“They’re sending Del to prison?” a kid at another table hissed.

The rumor was growing completely out of control. I pictured each statement joining, growing, and mutating with each assumption into a gross beast that nibbled on Del. Meanwhile, my friends and I sat around and talked as if there were nothing wrong, and Del ate lunch alone. Someone threw a roll that hit him in the back of the head as he was about to take a drink of his milk. Everyone laughed—except me. I felt worse than I had ever felt, even worse than when people started calling me “Germy.”

I had to do something, but I wasn’t sure what. I could explain to everyone what I had really seen, but would they even listen to me? Maybe if I just ignored it, the rumor would disappear as it almost had with people saying I liked crawling through garbage. Doing nothing didn’t seem right.

I left my lunch—I wasn’t hungry anyway—and went to talk to the one person I thought would know what to do.



## Doing What's Fair

"What can I help you with, Jamie?" Mr. Sanchez asked when I sat down in front of his desk.

I tried to think of a way to describe what happened without making myself look like a terrible person. Then I realized that trying to make myself look good was how the whole mess had started.

"Yesterday during recess I looked in Principal Cosgrove's window, and I saw Del and a little kid in there with a woman," I began. Mr. Sanchez's expression quickly changed from kind and interested to worried and tired.



"I hope you aren't going to tell me that you heard something awful about Del," he said. "Too many rumors are going around already."

"No, and I know they aren't true," I said, taking a deep breath and steadying myself, "because I started them."

Mr. Sanchez's eyebrows shifted way up.

"I saw a kindergartner crying, and a woman trying to comfort him. I told my friends that maybe Del was in trouble for beating him up, and now the rumor has spread all over the school."

"Rumors tend to spread like wildfire," Mr. Sanchez said before he sighed and folded his hands on the table. "Why would you say something so awful about Del?"

"Del and I aren't friends," I began. "He teases me a lot, and he's constantly in trouble. I just figured that he was in trouble this time, too."

Mr. Sanchez looked at me for a moment, and I thought I was really in trouble. Then he said, "I bet that game we played today really sparked something inside your head."

I nodded.

"Now you know that in real life it only takes one person jumping to a conclusion, making an assumption, or telling a little white lie to start a rumor that becomes really hurtful."



I thought about what he had said, and he was right. The rumor about me crawling through garbage probably began as a joke between some people and just continued to grow.

"I talked about Del without knowing what had really happened," I said. "That's not fair, or nice, but I loved the feeling when it started because I felt really popular. People were interested in what I had to say, and I was getting back at Del for being mean."

I hated to admit it, but explaining how I felt made me feel as if I had become a real monster. I had truly hurt Del for completely selfish reasons. I'd been assuming that Del was a bully, when really I'd been the bully—not by beating up anyone, but by gossiping.

"Does it still seem so enjoyable now that you've hurt Del's feelings?" Mr. Sanchez asked. I shook my head, and I think he could tell that I felt terrible.

"It's normal for people to jump to conclusions, Jamie. We see something happening, and our minds start to build stories. We have to realize that the assumptions we make aren't really the truth. The same goes for when you hear someone else gossiping—you shouldn't believe every story you hear."

"What do you do when you know for a fact that something is true?" I asked.

"It's usually best not to gossip about people when they're not around—unless you're saying nice things," he said. "Let people speak for themselves, and let other people decide what they want to believe."

"So why was Del really in Principal Cosgrove's office?" I blurted out before Mr. Sanchez's words had sunk in. I blushed, and he smiled. This whole not-gossiping thing was going to take some work.

"If you really want to know the truth, it's always best to find the source," he said. "You should probably ask Del, but I think an apology might be in order first."



## Telling the Truth

Outside, Del sat alone and watched the kickball game. I was so nervous that I could hardly talk.

“Hey,” I said as I walked up to him.

“What do you want, Germy?” Del snapped without taking his eyes off the game. I almost retreated, but something in his voice sounded more hurt than angry.

“I want to apologize,” I said simply. Del refused to look at me, but he was paying attention. “When I saw you in Principal Cosgrove’s office yesterday, I told people that she sent you home for beating that kindergartner up.”

“Beating up a little kid?” Del said, disgusted. “That was my mom and my little brother.” I didn’t even know Del had a little brother, and now I felt even worse.

“Oh,” I said, “I just want to apologize for saying something so mean.”

“My dad got hurt,” Del said, finally looking at me as if he was challenging me. “He was deployed overseas in the Army. Mom was telling us that they’re going to send him home.”

"Will he be okay?" I asked quietly. Del's angry face softened a bit.

"Yeah. My brother was just scared." He shrugged. "Not that anyone will believe the truth, now that they think I beat him up." Anger crept back into his face.

"I'm really sorry to hear about your dad, and I'm glad he'll be okay."

"Okay, Jamie," he said with a shrug. It was the first time he'd used my real name in months. I almost smiled. He returned to watching the game as my friend pulled me away.



"Why are you talking to him?" May asked. "You don't want to be friends with a kid beater."

"None of that's true," I said, "and we shouldn't keep gossiping about it."

"You said the kid looked like he'd been beaten up," May retorted.

"That's what you told us," Cassie said.

"I did," I said, "and that was wrong. I shouldn't have made those assumptions because none of them were true. I was talking to Del because I was apologizing for gossiping about him when I didn't know the truth."

Cassie, Matt, and May all looked at each other sheepishly, and I could tell they were thinking about the assumptions they had made about Del.

"What did happen, then?" asked Cassie.

"If you really want to know, ask Del," I said, feeling much better. "I'm done talking behind other people's backs."



## Glossary

<b>assumptions</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	things that are believed to be true without proof (p. 8)
<b>conclusion</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a decision resulting from careful thinking (p. 6)
<b>consequences</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	results of an action or actions (p. 13)
<b>expelled</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	forced someone to leave a school, organization, or country as a result of bad behavior (p. 7)
<b>glimpse</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a quick look at something (p. 5)
<b>gossiping</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	spreading information that may or may not be true about a person who is not present (p. 13)
<b>humiliating</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	extremely embarrassing (p. 4)
<b>mutates</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	changes into a different form (p. 13)
<b>respect</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a feeling of admiration; an understanding that someone or something should be treated in a proper way (p. 13)
<b>rumor</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a story passed from person to person that has not been proved true (p. 4)
<b>slunk</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	moved in a sneaky way, often because of embarrassment, sadness, or fear (p. 14)
<b>sulking</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	being in a bad mood due to disappointment or annoyance (p. 10)

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