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Opening extract from

Call Me Drog

Written by

Sue Cowing

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CALL ME DROG


CALL
ME
DROG
Sue Cowing
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For Ced and Jim Cowing – S.C.

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Part One:

The Opponent

Chapter One



Wren and I spent Sunday at Ferrisburg Salvage and Iron, rummaging through piles of car doors and broken chairs for treasures to load onto our bikes. We had just promised ourselves that next time we'd bring a wagon for the iron birdcage and were about to go home to get warm when Wren pointed at something sticking out of the trash can.

"Look, Parker. A doll."

I let go of my bike and pulled the thing out by the head. It felt light. Just a head, arms, and a hollow shirt. "It's a hand puppet," I said.

It smelled like a damp basement. Its painted eyes stared right at me.

Wren looked closer at it and a shudder went through her. “Creepy,” she said. “Let’s leave it.”

It *was* weird-looking. Bald green head, crackly skin, and a shirt made out of old-time couch material. But I didn’t want to just throw it back.

“We could repaint it or something,” I said.

Wren gripped her handlebars and kicked up her kickstand. “*You* can if you want, Parker. Just put it away, will you?”

Why was she being so bossy? About an old puppet? I stuck it in my backpack.

If I’d listened to Wren that day, maybe I’d have just gone on being the same old pretty happy, pretty ordinary kid.

We pedalled down Main Street, which was so empty on Sunday afternoon that a couple of pigeons fought over something in the middle of the street, and we could see all the way down to the square. Two men were carrying a ladder and paint cans into the building with papered-up windows where the furniture store used to be. The tall one had straight black hair and looked Japanese or something. Suddenly the shorter man turned to say something, knocking into the tall one with the ladder. He fell forward and a paint can flew out of his hand, but he did a kind of somersault

and came up under the can, catching it before it could hit the ground. The two men laughed and bowed to each other.

What was that all about? Any other time, we would have gone down to see, but Wren’s mom was having people over for dinner, and she had to get home.

We turned at the Illinois Feed Store, got off our bikes and bumped them across the railroad tracks, then headed down Prairie Street to my house, because I had more space for stuff. A whole room, in fact, that used to be my dad’s home office. Mom let me keep anything in there that didn’t smell bad or explode.

Wren rode on home while I brought in our day’s haul and dumped everything out on the floor: pram wheels, some smooth blocks of pinewood, a dented trumpet. If I half-closed my eyes and looked at them, they might tell me what they wanted to be.

But I couldn’t stop thinking about the puppet. What if I invented a huge wind-up toy with the puppet playing the trumpet? I hauled my backpack up to my room to make some sketches.

Sweeping the Lego off my desk, I got out a pencil and paper and pulled the puppet out of my pack. I couldn’t seem to get it to go on my right hand, so I tried it on my left. Perfect fit. Funny, I never thought there were left- and right-hand puppets.

I cleaned the dirt off it with my T-shirt. The minute

I wiped its face, it said, "You will call me Drog."

Whoa. I whipped my head around. Nobody else in the room.

"Zounds, Boy!" the voice said. "You actually live in this hovel?"

That had to be coming from the puppet.

"Hov— hovel?" I guess he meant the unmade bed and the towels on the floor. I loved my room, actually. The wall of drawers with handles I could climb to the ledge on top to read or draw. The old iron radiator that clanged on cold mornings. The window that opened out into the crab-apple tree. With the leaves gone for the winter, I could see through the backyards all the way to Wren's house.

I swallowed and shook my head to clear it. Was this puppet really talking? Was I really answering? Weird.

"To think that I once enjoyed a whole wing of my own in the emir's palace," Drog said, "and dined with him on ice cream sprinkled with gold dust."

Huh? "What's...a emir?"

Drog sighed. "What is an emir? An emir, dear boy, is the ruler of a *civilized* country in the Middle East. Like Oh Man. Or Cat-man Doo."

"Like a president?"

"Certainly not! A president has to worry about what other people think. A *ruler*, I say! A prince! A man of power and wealth!"

I checked him over to see what was making him talk, but I couldn't find a switch or button or anything. Must be inside somewhere, but then wouldn't I feel it?

Little thrills shot through me. *Wait'll I tell Wren*, I thought to myself. If we figured this talking puppet out, maybe we could make one.

I pulled him off to have a look inside. I mean, I tried to. I tugged on his head and hands, but nothing happened.

"You waste your time," he said.

I pulled some more.

Drog laughed. "Give it up, Boy. Wherever you go, there go I."

Suddenly I really wanted him off. I stuck my thumb inside and pulled, but he squeezed tight on my hand and wouldn't let me budge him. I tugged again, harder. He squeezed again.

"Ah, you see?" he said.

I pulled on him again.

He squeezed.

I yanked.

He squeezed.

This is not happening. It can't be.

"Cut it out! Let go!"

Mom called up the stairs. "Parker? Is Wren up there with you?"

My mouth opened.

"Parker?"

"No, Mom." I croaked.

"Well, come on down. Supper's ready."

"*Now* what?" I moaned. "I can't—"

"Not a problem. Put me in your pocket."

"Oh. Yeah."

Once he was out of sight and quiet, I calmed down some.

I ate supper with one hand, pretending I was keeping my other hand in my lap like you're supposed to. Between bites I focused on the two patches in the kitchen floor so Mom wouldn't look at me and ask if something was wrong.

I made those patches from some linoleum scraps Wren's dad said I could keep. One patch I cut into the shape of a squirrel and the other one into an acorn. Mom couldn't get over the great job I did, and the next time Dad came to pick me up for the weekend, she made him come into the kitchen and see.

Dad.

Mom shook my arm. "Hello? Parker? You're daydreaming. Aren't you hungry?"

I forked some macaroni into my mouth with my right hand, but it turned to gravel going down.

After supper, Mom curled up on the living-room couch to read her latest mystery, so I shut the door and grabbed the phone.

"Wren! You'll never believe what's happening!"

"What?!" I could hear adults laughing and talking in the background.

"You know that puppet I found at the junkyard?

"Uh...*you* found?"

"Well, his name is Drog."

"Frog?"

"No, Drog. And guess what, he talks all by himself, and I can't—"

"It talks? That's incredible!"

"I know. His face stays the same and his mouth doesn't move, but he talks, and I can't—"

"Wow! Wouldn't it be great if we could make our own?"

"That's what I thought, but—"

"Hmmmm. Must have a memory chip or something. You checked inside?"

"No, I...I haven't told you the weirdest part. Could you just come over?"