

Ghost of Make-Believe

by Pete Barry

CHARACTERS

MADGE WORTH, mid-thirties, pants suit, no-nonsense.

ELAINE, an impish, gravelly-voiced sock.

In darkness, piano music: the Trolley Theme from Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

Lights. MADGE WORTH, mid-thirties, pants suit and briefcase, enters an empty television studio. She speaks into her cell phone.

On the floor, an old sock.

MADGE

I'm going to bury these people. They know their only leverage is to stall so they're making me jump through hoops. I'm at QED, the TV station. No, on the set. Of course it's deserted it's the middle of the night! Oh don't worry I've got mace and a brown belt. They said - oh, Jesus, they're serious. They texted me and said look for a sock. Yes, it's right here. You don't want to know what it says to do next. Oh, I'll do it. I hope there is a hidden camera. Because it'll be evidence when I take them to court. See who's laughing then. I don't run scared.

(Madge picks up the sock and begins to slip it onto her hand.)

Put the sock on my hand. That what the text said, put the sock on my hand. Obviously it's insane. Maybe their representative has some kind of sock fetish or secret handshake. But he has no choice. This deal will be made.

(She holds up the hand with the sock.)

All right. What am I supposed to say again? - oh, right. Look, just because they're the living heirs to the most famous dead man in children's television, they can't make people do whatever they want. I'm NOT proving their point. I'm going to meet this guy, and he'll sign, or I'm going to hand him his own stomach. Look, I'll call you back.

(She hangs up the phone. She raises up the sock-hand again.)

Here we go. BOOMERANG, TOOMERANG, ZOOMERANG!

The sock speaks to Madge.

ELAINE

Say it with some flair, toots.

Madge shrieks and falls to the floor. There is no ventriloquism; the scratchy voice of Elaine comes from Madge's own lips, and the sock opens and closes its "mouth" in time. It "looks" at her.

Madge tries to pull the sock off her hand. She can't do it.

ELAINE

Ow. Ah. That's not gonna work. Toots? Madge? Is that your name?

Madge slaps a hand over her mouth, but she keeps mumbling in Elaine's voice.

MADGE

(uncovering her mouth)

Stop talking!

ELAINE

You called me, sweetheart, you can't-

Madge slaps her hand over her mouth again. The sock mumbles, then mumble-sighs, hanging her "head". Madge fishes for her phone. She jams the touch-screen with her fingers.

MADGE

Nine-one-one. Nine-one-one-

(She realizes she can't work the phone with the sock over her fingers.)

Crap!

The sock grabs the phone and throws it away. Madge squeaks in fear.

ELAINE

Listen. I thought you came here to talk business with the Fred Rogers Company.

MADGE

I...did?

ELAINE

Well, then. Welcome to the inner circle. I am Lady Elaine Fairchilde, and any financial or business arrangement with the Fred Rogers Company must go through me.

Stunned silence.

MADGE

I've gone crazy.

ELAINE

There's a much simpler explanation.

MADGE
Such as?

ELAINE
You're possessed!

MADGE
What? By you? Lady Elaine Fairchilde is a puppet!

ELAINE
And you have a problem with that, toots? Are you a puppet-racist?

MADGE
No.

ELAINE
I once flipped the Eiffel Tower upside down. Puppets can do anything.

MADGE
They can't be ghosts!

ELAINE
Of course we can.

MADGE
Why am I possessed by a puppet ghost?

ELAINE
Hey, crabcakes, be grateful it's only me. For now. There are lots of us in this sock.
(Elaine affects an ominous tone.)
Tonight, you will be visited by three puppet spirits. The Ghost of Make-Believe Past, The Ghost of Make - no, I'm just kidding you, toots. You just have to deal with me.

Madge scrutinizes the sock. She puts on her game face. She pulls a folder and pen out of her briefcase.

MADGE
OK. I need this contract signed. So if you really are representing The Fred Rogers Company from beyond the grave -

ELAINE
I am.

MADGE

-then I'm not talking to any underling.

ELAINE

Underling?

MADGE

I want the man himself. Send Fred Rogers down here. If death won't even stop him from giving up creative control, I want to talk to him.

ELAINE

First of all, the afterlife isn't Netflix, crabcakes. It's not an on-demand service. Secondly, Fred's beyond all this pettiness. He's earned his rest. The Company knows I'm the only signature you need. I'm a part of Fred. I was created by and performed by Fred.

MADGE

And you're, what, comfortable with that? That you're nothing but a puppet?

ELAINE

Of course. I'm the right hand of a great man. Are you comfortable being the puppet of a corporate machine?

MADGE

You have no idea who you're dealing with.

ELAINE

You're a puppet who thinks she's a master of the universe. Just like Friday. He couldn't handle the idea when he was alive, and now he haunts an empty, howling castle. Unlucky Thirteen.

MADGE

You don't frighten me. You're going to sign this contract.

ELAINE

Don't underestimate me. I've made stock traders cry, toots. My voice is Fred's voice. My kingdom is make-believe. Companies come and go, but I'm unassailable.

MADGE

Sign the contract! Sign it!

Madge sticks the pen in the sock's "mouth". She wrestles her hand towards the paper. She loses the fight.

A short recovery.

MADGE

OK, sock. Here's the deal. Your new show is in trouble.

ELAINE

The new show? It's not mine. They went ahead and did it without me.

MADGE

Well, a few of your grants are talking about pulling the plug. Bad economy, you know. There's a good chance PBS isn't going to renew. So I'm your knight in shining armor.

ELAINE

You're going to have to be a little more specific, toots.

MADGE

My network is offering you a second chance at life. A third chance, really. You of all people should be on board.

ELAINE

Why?

MADGE

Because I'll take Lady Elaine and her Museum-Go-Round off spotty runs on PBS and put you on the real networks. We'll increase your budget, triple your market share, and release whole lines of toys. Every kid in America will want a Lady Elaine for Christmas. I can offer you more than a ghostly existence as a piece of dirty clothing.

ELAINE

So...you mean fame.

MADGE

Bingo.

ELAINE

I can get into that.

Madge tentatively puts the pen back in the sock's possession.

MADGE

Sign here and here, and you'll be number one on kid's prime time.

The sock reads the contract. It puts the pen back in Madge's hand.

ELAINE

You know, they never did tell me anything about the new show.

MADGE

It's good. And we'll make it even better.

ELAINE

Well tell me about it. Who's the new Fred?

MADGE

They don't do the part in the house. It's just the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.

ELAINE

Oh. Well, what does the set look like? In Make-Believe?

MADGE

There is no set. It's a combination of 2- and 3-d animation. Here, I've got some video on my phone.

ELAINE

Oh, I'd like to see that.

MADGE

(fishing for the phone)

I grew up watching Mister Rogers, you know. Trust me, this show's going to be in good hands.

Madge shows the phone to the sock.

ELAINE

Hm. It looks kind of. Fake.

MADGE

Fake? That shit looks great. State of the art.

ELAINE

Really? It looks like a cartoon.

MADGE

It's animated! In your day, cartoons were Woody Woodpecker! Look at that. Those objects have depth, and texture. It looks like you're actually there!

ELAINE

When I was on TV, I *was* actually there.

MADGE

You weren't walking around like that! Jumping! Opposable thumbs! Your freaking mouth didn't even move! Why is your mouth moving now?

ELAINE

It's too bright. Real colors are muddy and mixed. Those colors don't exist in real life.

MADGE

It's not REAL LIFE. It's the Neighborhood of MAKE-BELIEVE.

ELAINE

Do you imagine colors like those? When you make-believe?

MADGE

I'm thirty-five years old!

ELAINE

Well, I don't understand what that has to do with anything.

MADGE

I'm an adult and one of the most powerful figures in the children's television entertainment industry!

ELAINE

And you're talking to a sock on your hand.

(Furious silence.)

Are you going to get a new Fred? When you "improve" the show?

MADGE

It wouldn't be the same. Fred Rogers wouldn't settle for less than perfection, and neither will I.

ELAINE

You already have settled. You've cut the important part out of the show. Children live in the real world. There are backers and plumbers and mailmen and marketing executives. Fred showed videos of factories and how things are made. But you can't show that anymore, can you? Everything would be made by impoverished workers in Indonesia.

MADGE

Now you listen to me, Punch and Judy. When Fred was still alive, he could have passed the torch to any of his fellow cast members.

We could have had *Betty Aberlin's Neighborhood*. Or *Chuck Aber's Neighbordhood*. Or *Mr. McFeeley's Neighborhood*. But Fred Rogers said no. So now, you're stuck with *this Neighborhood*.

ELAINE

Why not just make your own show?

MADGE

Because kids want Mister Rogers!

ELAINE

Oh, I see. You don't want a *show*. You want a *brand*. That why you're stealing the old Neighborhood, instead of making your own.

This stops Madge cold.

MADGE

I'm not...stealing Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. I meant...people want Mister Rogers back. Not the show, the person. I want Mister Rogers back.

ELAINE

And is this show doing that? Bringing back Mister Rogers?

MADGE

No.

ELAINE

Then I'm not signing anything.

Silence.

ELAINE

Nobody ever listens to you, do they?

MADGE

What are you talking about? Everyone always listen to me.

ELAINE

They *do your bidding*. But it's been a long time since you had anyone actually listen to you, hasn't it? Otherwise someone would have told you a long time ago to forget about that show.

MADGE

Like King Friday. Doomed to his howling castle.

ELAINE

Oh, I made that stuff up about Friday. But he took Fred's passing hard. X and Henrietta were sad at first, but they got used to it. Poor Daniel still doesn't really understand. But at least Friday has Sara, his strength, and she's sweet but she's tough as nails. You seem very lonely.

MADGE

It's lonely at the top. That's a real world.

ELAINE

Not true. Fred was the top.

MADGE

He was unique. I'm. Not.

ELAINE

Of course you are. There's no one else like you.

MADGE

There are hundreds of thousands of executives in this world and they are all exactly like me. I am living proof that Fred Rogers' entire philosophy was wrong. He would hate me.

ELAINE

He didn't hate me. Do you know he named me after his sister?

MADGE

I know.

ELAINE

Fred Rogers so loved the world. He breathed life into me. I don't know much about God. Fred never convinced me that guy even existed. But Fred Rogers was real. They got him on videotape.

MADGE

Can I. Can't I talk to Fred?

ELAINE

No, Madge. I'm sorry. Puppets are puppets and dead is dead.

Madge begins to cry a little.

ELAINE

He's proud of you, though. I can tell you that because I'm part of him. He's proud of you.

MADGE

Why on earth would anyone be proud of me?

ELAINE

Just remember this: you were a child once too.. Bye, toots.

The life of the little sock is snuffed out.

MADGE

Lady Elaine? Lady Elaine? Thank you. Can I. Maybe. Keep the sock? Talk to you again sometime? Sometime when I'm lonely?

Long pause.

MADGE

Lady -

The sock leaps into motion, and rapid-fire voices pour out of Madge's mouth:

FRIDAY

Madge Worth, I presume?

X

Well I'll be a -

DANIEL

Oh, a new friend!

HENRIETTA

Meow meow legal department meow?

CORNFLAKE

Oop, I think you broke it!

TROLLEY

Ding ding!

Silence. Madge tears the sock off her hand and drops it back on the floor.

MADGE

Never mind! Never mine. I'll be going now. "Toots".

Lights down. In the darkness, the trolley song.

