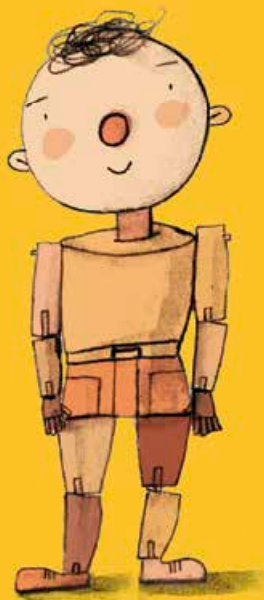


# PUPPET



Carnegie Medal winning author of *Skellig*  
**DAVID ALMOND**

*illustrated by Lizzy Stewart*

PUPPET

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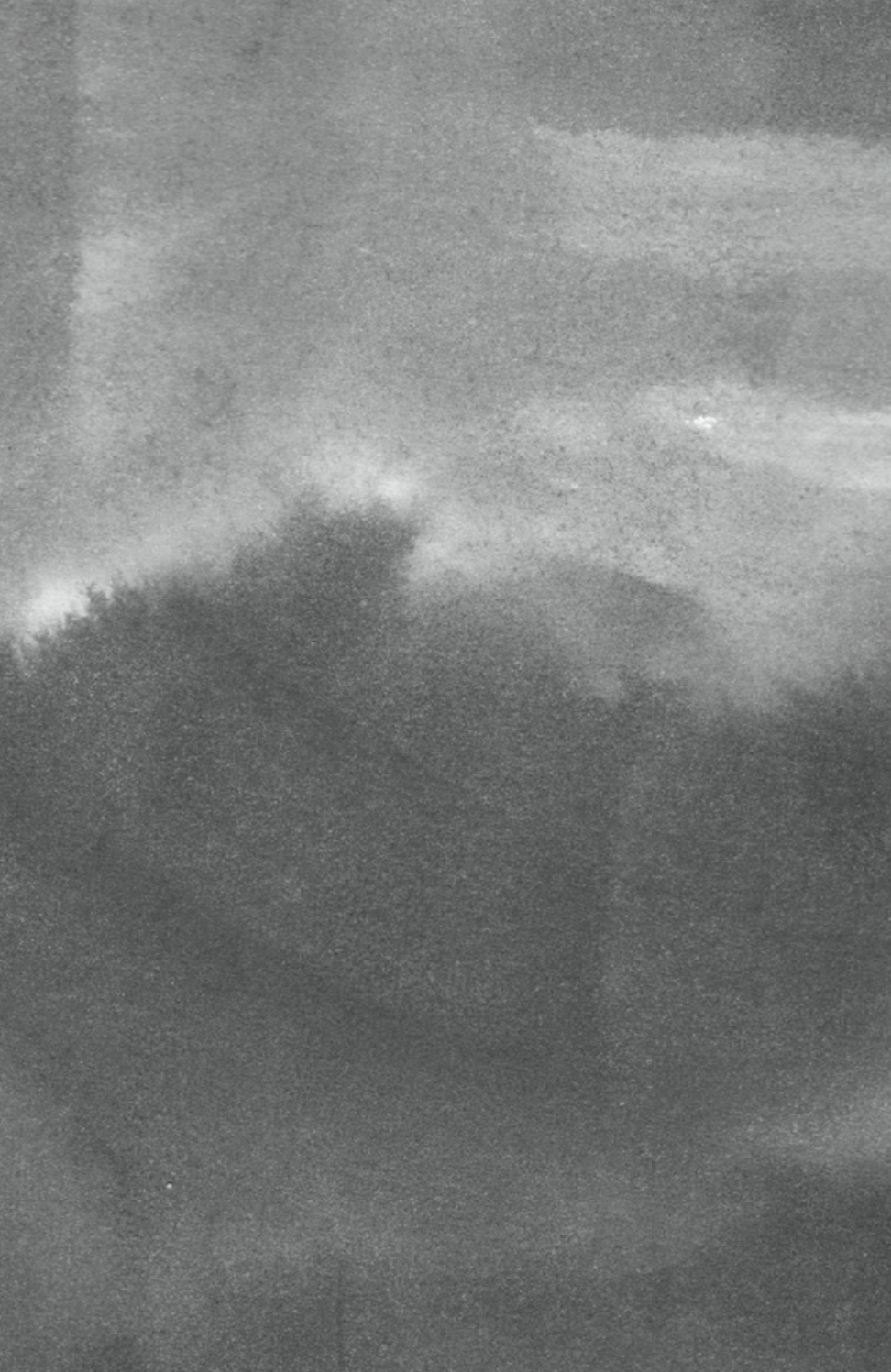
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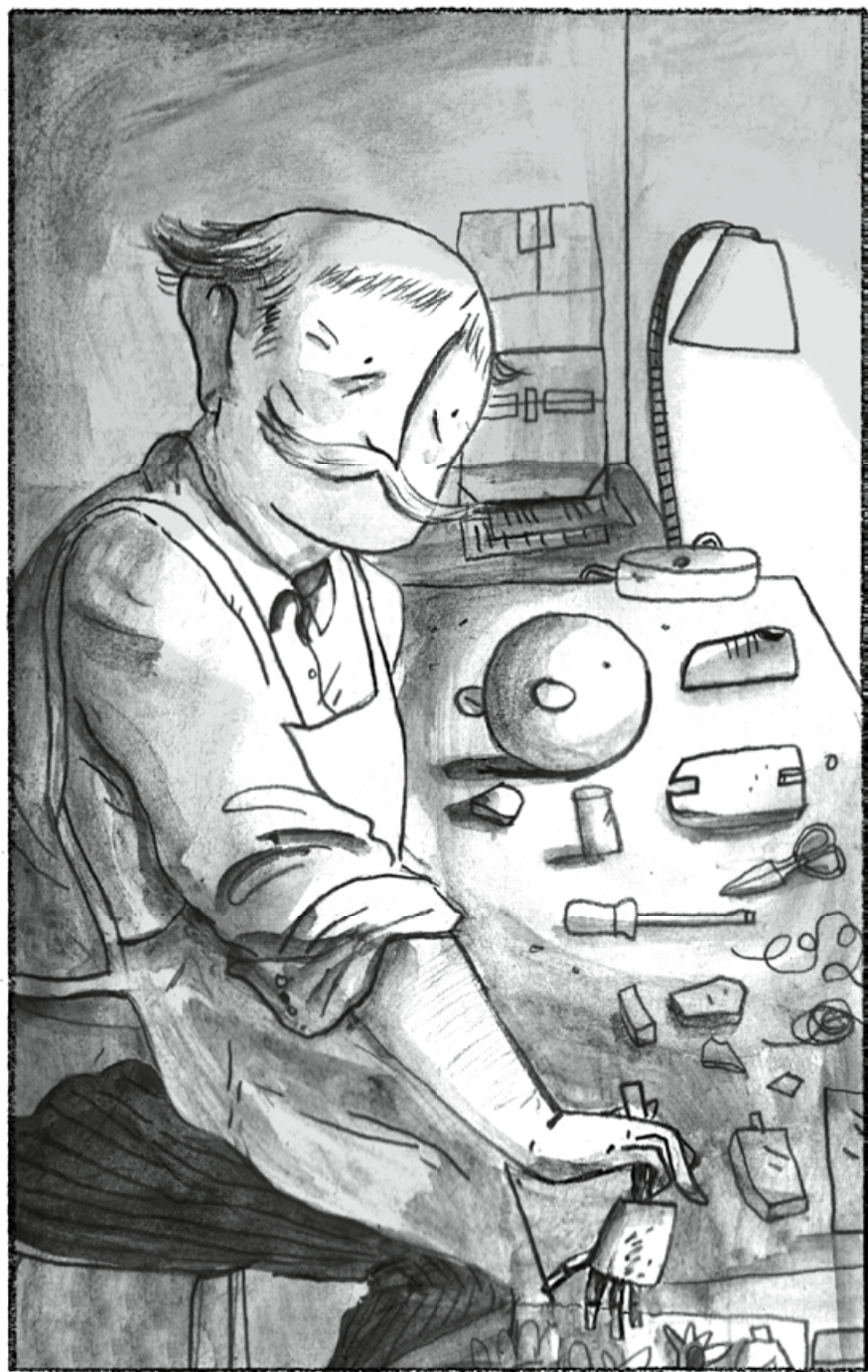


1

Silvester woke from his dreams. He climbed the steep stairs to his attic. He hadn't been up here for years. An owl hooted somewhere near by. There was night-time traffic, not too far away. The moon shone brightly through the window to the sky.

There were posters on the walls from ancient times. Posters that told of performances by Silvester's Magical Puppet Theatre all around the globe.

Silvester was the puppet master who hadn't put on a puppet show for years, who thought he'd been forgotten by the world. But in the past few weeks, everything had begun to change.



He sat down at his workbench, brushed away some dust and cleared the cobwebs. He switched on the little lamp there, and sat for a while, his hands in its pool of light.

He seemed to be thinking hard, or maybe he was still dreaming.

On the workbench, bits of puppet lay in the dust. There was a box of half-made upper legs and lower legs, a box of half-made arms. Bits of wood that had turned into nothing yet. Dark wood, pale wood, heavy wood, light wood. Half-carved hands, a few misshapen feet. Lumpy torsos, skinny torsos. A few unfinished heads dangled on strings from the ceiling. There were old tubes of paint and pots of glue. Tweezers and needles and drills and bits of sandpaper and tiny saws. Curly bits of wire and lengths of string. A box full of clothes.

Just bits and pieces. Fragments.

Silvester sighed. How wonderful to be among these things again, to be in his attic again, to be at his bench again.

It was like coming to life again.

Spiders spun on strings in the moonlight and woodlice crawled over the bench. Down by the skirting board, a little mouse squeaked.

“Hello, spiders,” said Silvester. “Hello, woodlice. Hello, little mouse.” He let a spider run across his hand, and he smiled at the tiny tickling it made.

“Hello, owl,” he said to the owl that hooted outside once more.

Somewhere a baby started to cry, and then was calmed again.

“Night-night,” Silvester whispered. “Sweet dreams, little one.”

He stared into the moonlight, then set to work.

He used thin wire and tweezers to put together a leg and then another leg. One was longer than the other; one had a very wobbly knee joint. One was dark wood; one was light. He added feet: one with a black boot, one with a brown. He found a pair of arms, one of them with powerful-looking muscles. One hand had the full four fingers, the other only three. He found a skinny torso and wired the arms and legs to it. He took one of the dangling heads from its string. It was pine wood, yellowy brown. He attached it to the body.

His hands moved swiftly.

“Be brave,” he whispered to himself. “Be as good as you ever were.”

He laughed at the puppet taking shape in his hands.

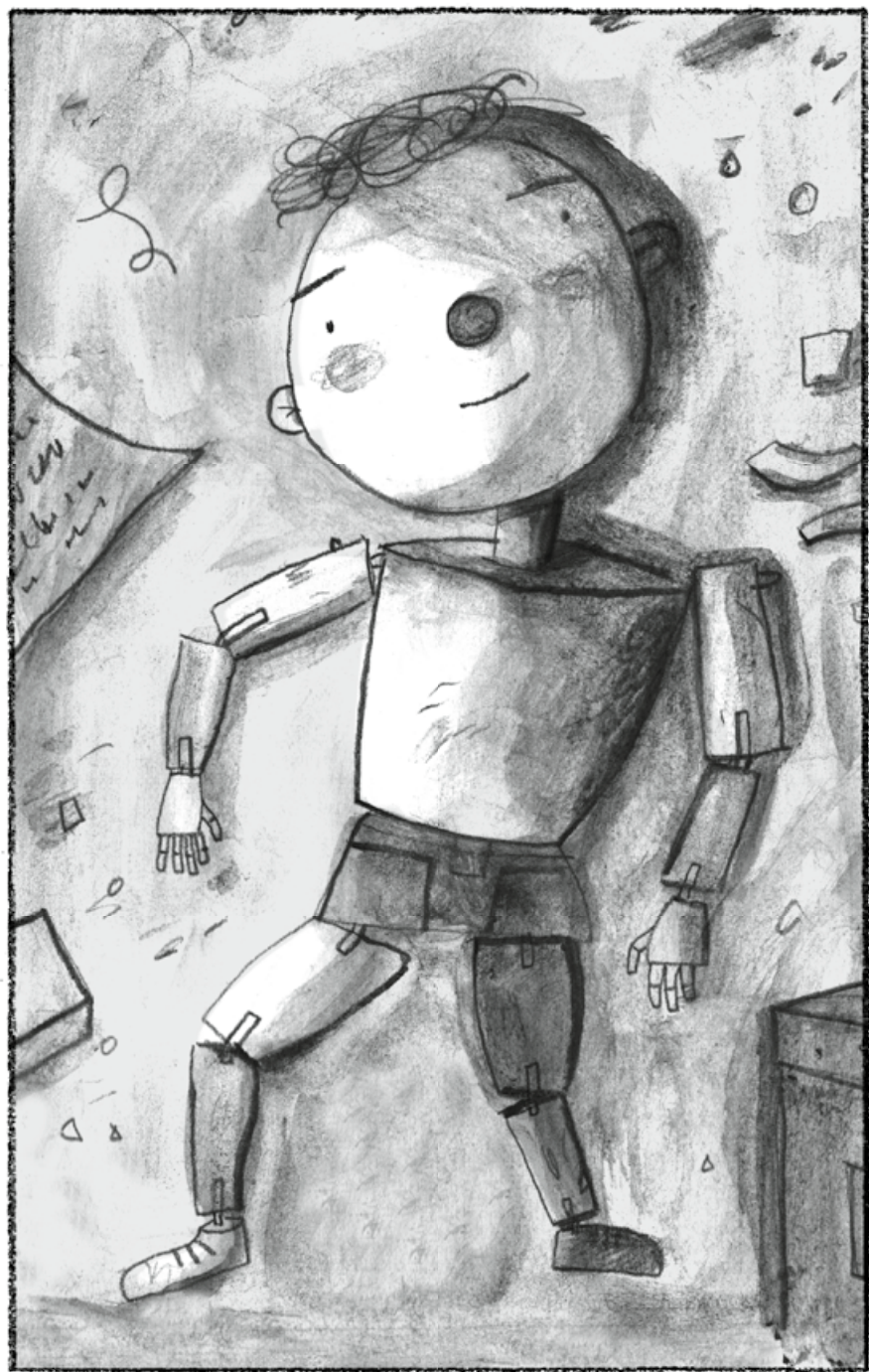
“What a funny-looking thing you are!” he said.

He sandpapered its cheeks then waxed them. He coloured its eyes green. He glued a few strands of black wool to the head for hair. Much tidier!

He stared into its eyes.

“Hello, Puppet,” he said.

Inside him, memories were moving. He had made his first puppets long, long ago, when he was just a little boy, living





just a few streets away. He made them from clothes pegs and ribbons, from sticks and stones, from folded paper, from buttons and thread.

He used to give them names and make them move and he had conversations with them. He used to make up stories where the puppets flew to the moon or battled with dragons or travelled through time.

He used to take them to his mam and say, "Look at the thing I made, Mam!" He made them talk to her.

*"Hello, madam,"* they said if they were being polite.

*"Hello, you nitwit!"* if they weren't.

Mam would join in. She'd pretend to be delighted or mortally offended. And she'd always say, "Silvester, what a clever lad you are!"

He smiled to imagine himself as a boy again, to hear her voice again.

"Was it really so long ago?" he whispered to himself.

He took a green shirt and a pair of brown trousers from the box of clothes, and he dressed the puppet. He put a little brown cap on its head.

He held the puppet up before him. It was as tall as a young child.

He held the puppet's arms out wide.

"I wonder," he said, "what strange kind of story you might be in?"

He moved the puppet back and forth across the bench.

He made it march; he made it leap; he made it fly.

He made it roar as if it was angry or wild.

He made it sing and giggle and laugh.

“A very serious story,” he said in a very serious voice.

“A very silly story,” he said in a very silly voice.

“Maybe a tale where you fall in love,” he said, “or a tale filled with perilous adventures. Or maybe you’ll fly to Mars, or get eaten by tigers, or...”

He laughed and laughed to himself.

How wonderful it was to be making a puppet.

He looked into the puppet’s eyes again. “Hello, Puppet,” he said.

And the puppet said, “E-O.”

Silvester stared.

Puppet stared back at him with green eyes that were flat and empty.

Ah, it was just a dream. It had to be.

“Hello,” Silvester said again.

No answer.

“Silly Silvester,” he said to himself.

He laid the puppet in the dust and gently touched its cheek. He yawned. It was very late. Time to sleep.

“Night-night,” he whispered. “See you in the morning.”

He switched off the light and went back down the steep stairs.

Yes, he needed to sleep.



## 2

The past weeks had been rather busy, rather strange. It started with a letter from a museum. It seemed Silvester hadn't been forgotten after all. They wanted to make an exhibition of his work. His puppets, his costumes and his stages would be displayed for all the world to see. And of course Silvester said yes. He'd be so proud to have his work on show for evermore. So it was all arranged. And one morning when Silvester was in his kitchen having breakfast, there came a knock at the door.

Two men were standing there.

"Hello, Silvester," said one. "My name is Francis, and this is Sol. I think you're expecting us."

Silvester smiled and stepped aside and welcomed them in.

Francis and Sol had a load of boxes and bags and packing cases and labels. They hauled them inside.

"You're hard to find!" said Sol. "I didn't even know this lane existed."

Then he stood dead still and gasped in amazement.

“Goodness gracious me!” said Francis.

There it all was, spread around the living room, the remnants of Silvester’s Magical Puppet Theatre. There were dozens of puppets, some of them as big as a child, some no bigger than a toddler’s hand, some as small as a finger. They were lying on the sofa and sitting on the chairs. They hung on strings from the walls. There were kings and queens and witches and wizards and ghosts and demons and wide-eyed little girls and boys. Animals and dragons and monsters and fairies.

Scenery and costumes and curtains were laid out on the furniture and spread out across the carpet.

“A lifetime’s work,” Silvester said.

For a time, the men from the museum just looked at these things in wonder.

When they set to work, they were nervous, and Silvester saw that they were worried about how he was feeling.

“It’s all right,” he told them gently. “Do what you have to do.”

The men relaxed, but they were careful and gentle with everything. They kept saying how beautiful it all was, how wonderfully well made.

“I saw you,” said Sol. “I saw your show.”

Silvester smiled. “You did?”

“Yes. When I was a boy. You came to our school in South Shields. It was...” He suddenly reached out and lifted a

particular puppet and laughed out loud. “And *he* was in it!” he exclaimed. “It was a play about the dark, dark forest!”

“Aha!” said Silvester. “How wonderful! This is Jack, and that was one of his very best shows.”

“It was *fantastic!* I remember him tiptoeing deeper and deeper into the dark!”

“And do you remember how he ended up?” asked Silvester.

Sol chewed his lips and closed his eyes and remembered.

“Yes! Oh heck, the wolf got him. The wolf got you, Jack! You were eaten up by the *wolf!*”

Silvester nodded. “That’s right! But he came back out again, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” said Sol. “I was just a little boy – I was scared stiff! You came back out again, Jack, and I laughed my head off!” He held the puppet up before his eyes. “Hello again, Jack,” he said. “Remember me?”

The puppet said nothing, of course.

“I really believed you got eaten up!” Sol said. “I *saw* it happen! The wolf got you, its jaws opened ... and gulp! Down you went.”

He mimed being the wolf. He mimed eating up Jack.

“How on earth did you *do* it?” he asked Silvester.

Silvester laughed and shrugged. “Years of practice.”

“It was magic,” Sol told him. “It was like the puppets were really *alive!*”

Silvester smiled again. “That’s what everyone said. Magic.

But it was just hard work and clever tricks.”

He touched Jack’s wooden brow. “Everybody wanted it to be real, didn’t they, Jack?” he said softly. “That’s what made it easy to fool them.”

“I guess that’s right,” said Sol. He started to wrap Jack in tissue paper. “Sorry, Jack,” he whispered. “Got to be done.”

“Goodbye, my friend,” said Silvester. “Thanks for all the shivers and the laughs. See you in the museum.”

Sol laid Jack in his box.

He carefully wrapped more puppets. He handled them tenderly, as if each one were alive.

“Goodbye, my friend,” whispered Silvester to each and every one. “Thank you, old pal.”

“No kids to pass it all on to?” asked Francis.

“Sorry?” said Silvester.

“You’ve got no children to take over the puppet theatre?”

“Ah, no.” Silvester shook his head. “There was just me and my Belinda, and now she’s gone.” He pointed to a photograph on the wall. “There she is,” he said.

And there she was, his wife, looking at them, smiling at them from years ago when she was young.



Francis and Sol stayed all day.

They put the puppets into their boxes.

They folded costumes and slipped them into bags.

They wrapped sheets of scenery in bubble-wrap.

They folded curtains and laid them into cases.

Everything was carefully labelled.

Much of it was worse for wear, faded, snapped, cracked.

Francis said there were experts at the museum who would clean and restore what they could. But Silvester also heard him whisper to Sol that some of it might just have to be chucked away.

When everything was packed up, they left Silvester on his own again.

They said they'd be back with their van later in the week.

### 3

Soon afterwards, there was another visitor, a young woman called Louisa. She was from the university and she was writing a little history of Silvester's Magical Puppet Theatre. It would be on sale in the museum when the exhibition opened.

She asked lots of questions about his shows and his travels. Which was his first show? Which was his best? How many places did he perform in? What were his craziest experiences?

Silvester answered many of the questions, but he struggled with some.

He checked in old notebooks and scrapbooks.

“There’s so much to remember,” he said. “Sometimes the exact places and dates slip from my mind.”

Louisa patted his arm. “That’s OK,” she said. “Memory plays tricks, doesn’t it?” She scribbled lots of notes. “There’ll be info on Google, I expect.”

“Did *you* ever see one of our shows?” Silvester asked her.

“Me?”

“Yes. Maybe when you were a little girl.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. No.” She scribbled more notes. “To be honest,” she admitted, “my parents didn’t really approve of puppets.”

“Didn’t *approve*?”

“No. They said they were rather silly things.”

“Poor you,” murmured Silvester. “Poor parents.” He shook his head at the thought. “Did *you* think they were silly?” he asked.

She pondered. “I think I did, for a little while. Then I started to grow up, and I realized they were rather wonderful.”

He smiled. “That’s good,” he softly said.

Then he told her about a journey he and Belinda took to the Scottish islands. How they performed for families on a beautiful beach while a pod of dolphins leaped and leaped through the sea close by.



# 4

It was so strange that week to have the boxes stashed in the living room, and to think of all those puppets tucked up inside.

Sometimes Silvester leaned down to them, as if he expected the puppets to be whispering together or crying out to be set free.

Sometimes he tapped on the lids.

“Everything OK in there?” he asked. “Everybody happy?”

Sometimes he was filled with doubts. Was he right to give so much away, to let the museum have everything? But he knew he was. He wouldn't be creating any more shows, not at his age. And it was good that people could see it all, even though there'd be no stories, even though the puppets would be so very still.

And he had his memories. He had all the scrapbooks that he'd filled over the years, crammed with cuttings and photographs. There were fan letters from people of all ages, from all around the world. Photographs and posters hung on the walls of every room in his house. They were pictures of his theatre, of his puppets, of himself and lovely Belinda, when they ran the very best puppet theatre in the whole wide world.

# 5

Sol and Francis came back with the van a few days later. There was hardly room for it in the narrow lane. They parked just outside the house.

Silvester wanted to help them but Sol said no.

“It’d be awful if you fell and hurt yourself,” he said.

“Make yourself a cup of tea,” suggested Francis. “Won’t be long till everything’s done.”

Silvester wanted to stamp his feet and tell them that he wasn’t a feeble old man, that he was still a little boy at heart, but he didn’t. They were just being gentle and kind, after all.

The two men carried everything out through the front door and carefully loaded it into the van.

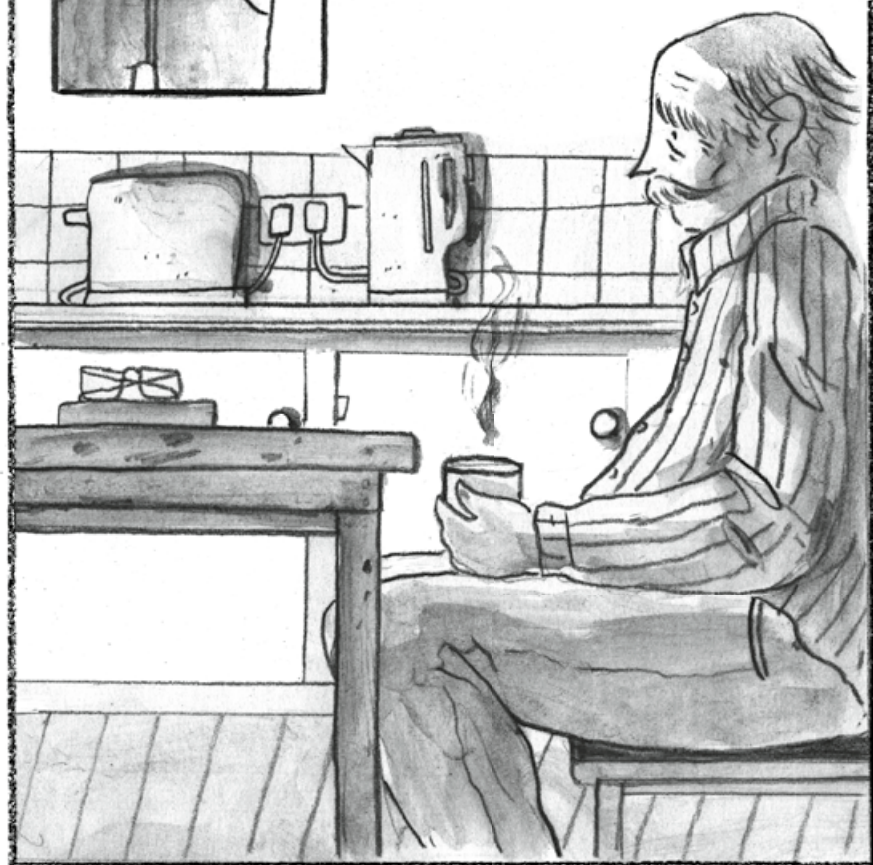
“Goodbye, my precious friends,” Silvester whispered. “Thank you for everything.” Then he nodded. “You can close the doors now, Sol,” he said.

Sol slammed the doors and locked them.

They all shook hands. They said they’d see each other again at the museum.

Silvester watched the van creep out of the lane towards the square, until it turned a corner and couldn’t be seen again.





A few tears slid down his face.

“Never mind,” he said. “It’s for the best.”

Back inside, he stood in front of the photograph of Belinda on the wall. He gazed into her lovely smiling face, her lovely brown eyes.

“That’s it, then,” he told her. “Everything’s gone.” And he smiled back at her. “But the book is being written, the museum is waiting, and we’ll be remembered for evermore.”

He went into the kitchen and made a cup of tea and a Cheddar cheese and pickle sandwich, his favourite.

“It’s a new life, Silvester,” he said to himself.



The day passed by.

An owl hooted somewhere.

“So what will you do now?” Silvester wondered to himself.

He wasn’t really sure.

What *should* a puppet master do when he’s getting old and his puppets are all gone? He pondered. Nothing came to mind, except the images of puppets and the fragments of stories that always came to mind. Maybe they would never ever stop.

Sometimes he laughed as he walked through the empty rooms. Yes, so much had been taken away, but he felt weirdly free. He felt young again.



More days passed by. He cleaned and tidied the house. He slept so well, better than he had for years. Night after night of deep, deep sleep.

Then there came a moonlit night when he woke from his dreams, and the attic seemed to be calling him.

He hadn't been up there for ages.

He looked at the steep stairway.

And he climbed.

And he sat at his workbench and made the new puppet.

And the puppet said, "E-O."

And Silvester didn't believe it.

It must have been a dream, mustn't it?

So he came back down again to sleep.

And again he slept well.

And so another night passed by.

6

It was the laughter of children that woke Silvester. It seemed to come from far away. He'd slept such a long time. Already it was the middle of the morning.

He made a pot of tea in the kitchen. He ate toast and marmalade. Marmalade. So delicious. He licked his lips. He laughed.

“Good morning, my lovely,” he said to Belinda on the wall.

He looked at the living room. So empty and strange.

A church bell started ringing. Then he remembered the puppet that he had made last night. He laughed again.

“Of course I made a new puppet,” he said to himself. “Did I ever *really* think I’d stop?”

He climbed back up the steep stairs to the attic.

“Good morning, Puppet,” he said.

Puppet lay on the workbench just as Silvester had left him. A little black spider crawled across his chest. A pigeon goggled in through the window to the sky.

Silvester sat at the bench. He let the spider crawl across the back of his hand then he held his hand to the wall and watched it crawl away towards the ceiling.

“Spider!” he murmured. “What a strange and lovely thing you are.”

He lifted Puppet up. He stood him on the bench and looked into his eyes. He stretched Puppet’s arms out wide.

“Maybe I should call you Jack and send you like him into the dark, dark forest,” he said. “But no. You’re not a Jack. You are just yourself. Puppet.”

He made Puppet flex his muscles. He made him stamp

his feet as if he was ready to walk or to run. He made him raise his fists as if he was ready to fight off an attacker.

“What a quick and strong puppet you are!” Silvester exclaimed.

He glanced up at the window to the sky.

“And look who’s come to see you!” he said. “Hello, pigeons! This is Puppet. And look, here are the dangling spiders. And there are the woodlice crawling. And do I see you, little mouse? There is such an audience for you, my Puppet.”

He made Puppet skip and dance across the bench then made him bow. Then he carefully laid him down again.

“Now it’s time to put some strings on you,” he said.

He reached for a box full of lengths of wire and string. He held a piece of string between his hands to check its length.

“This one?” he said. “We could fasten this to your left leg.”

He searched the boxes for the little screw-in fasteners to attach the strings.

Puppet moved.

His left leg moved, all by itself.

Silvester blinked. “No!” he whispered to himself.

He found one of the fasteners. He pressed it to Puppet’s left knee and began to twist. The puppet flinched.

Surely not.





Silvester pressed again. Again the puppet flinched. No!

The spiders dangled closer, closer.

Silvester put the fastener down. He didn't dare look properly. He didn't dare think. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Puppet's left leg move, ever so slightly.

"Don't be scared," Silvester whispered to himself. He could hardly breathe.

He held Puppet by the shoulders and lifted him up. Puppet helped. He shifted his feet. He *did*. Silvester could feel him rising from the bench.

He made Puppet stand straight. He looked into Puppet's bright green eyes.

"Maybe we won't need strings after all," he said softly.

Puppet looked right back at him.

"Shall we try to get you to stand?" Silvester said. "I'll hold you steady and then let you go. OK? Just keep your legs strong and straight and you'll be standing."

He held Puppet straight.

"Ready?" he asked. "Steady?"

Puppet said nothing.

Silvester let go. Puppet toppled to the bench.

"Whoops!" said Silvester. "Are you OK?"

He tried again.

"Imagine there are strings," he said. "Imagine that I'm holding you, even when I let go."

He held Puppet up, let go, and Puppet fell again. He did it again, and Puppet fell again. There were more spiders now, and more woodlice, and another pigeon, and another little mouse.

Silvester picked Puppet up. "They're all watching," he whispered. "We'll do it for them, shall we?"

He held him up.

"Now," he urged.

When Silvester let go, Puppet did stand for one second, then two, then he tottered, and he fell.

"Well done, little Puppet."

Silvester picked him up again. "You can do it!" he said.

He held him; he let go. Puppet didn't fall. There were at least five long seconds when Silvester stared very hard and willed Puppet to stay standing.

"You *did* it!" he cried.

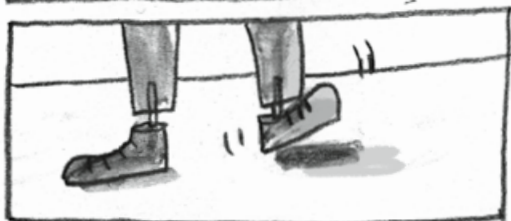
He looked around the attic at the spiders, the woodlice, the pigeons, the mice, the dust, the air, the sky.

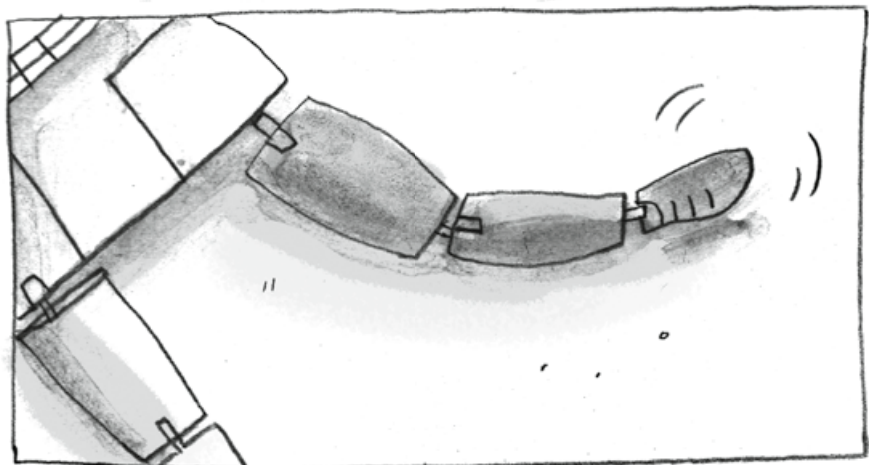
"He *did* it," he said.

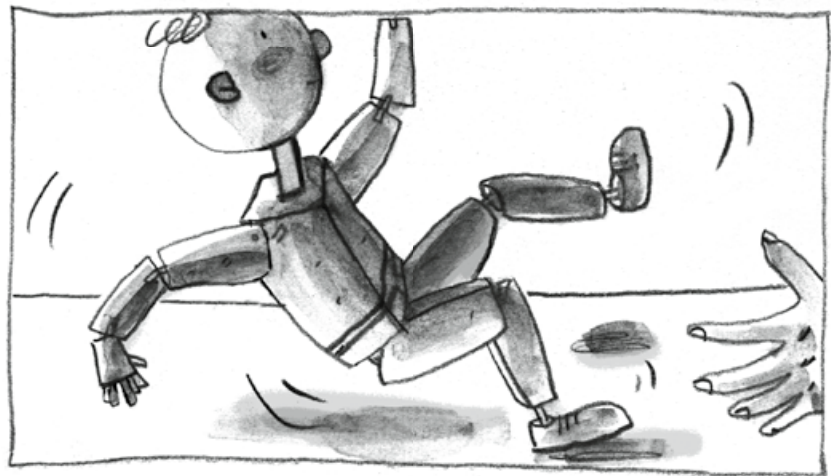
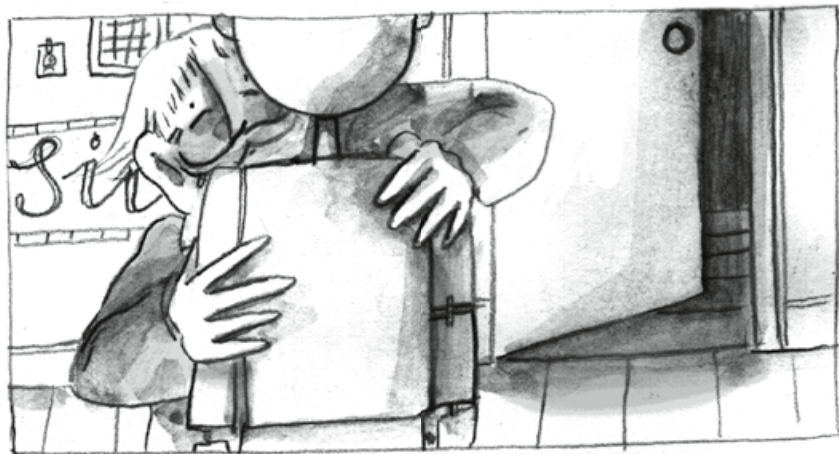
Then he stood Puppet up again and let go, and Puppet stood on his own.

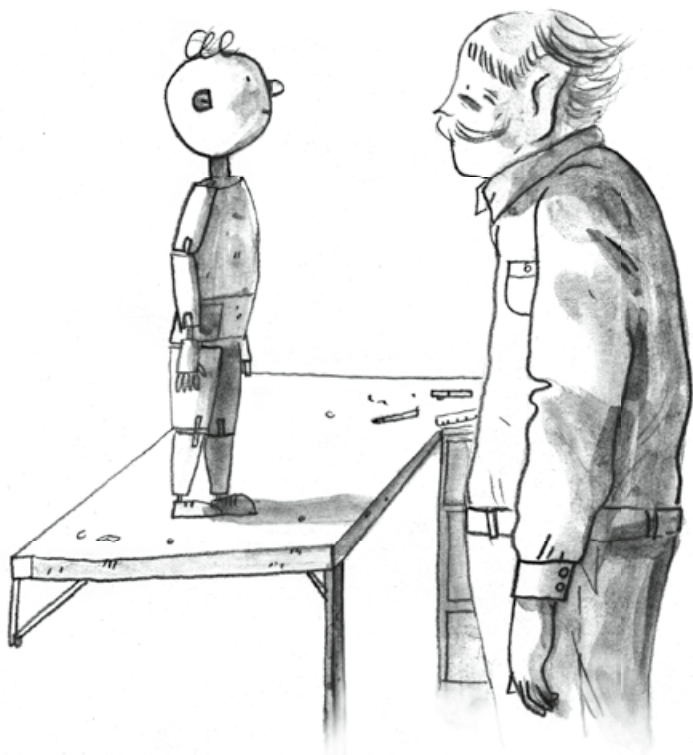
And Silvester whispered, "Hello, Puppet."

And Puppet answered, "E-O."









# 7

What a morning! Puppet learned so fast.

He stood all by himself several times before falling.

Pretty soon, Silvester said, "It's time you tried to learn to walk."

He lifted Puppet down from the bench and stood him on the floor. He held Puppet's shoulders and moved him gently forward, shifting him from side to side so that Puppet's legs swung forward one at a time.

"Get the idea?" said Silvester.

Puppet looked down at his feet.

"You move your feet one at a time," explained Silvester.

Puppet looked up at him.

"Watch me," said Silvester. "I'll demonstrate."

He sat Puppet on the edge of the bench, then he walked step by step across the room, swinging his legs and arms very slowly and deliberately.

"See?" He did it again. "Left, right," he said. "Left, right. One step then another. One step then another."

Sometimes he stumbled. He had to laugh at himself. It was weirdly hard to walk when he thought too much about it.

"Maybe I need strings myself!" he said.

But he kept on, and Puppet seemed to watch very carefully.

“Let’s try again,” said Silvester.

He lifted Puppet back down to the floor. He held Puppet’s right shoulder with his left hand, reached down and lifted Puppet’s right foot forward. He held Puppet’s left shoulder with his right hand and lifted Puppet’s left foot forward.

He let go, and *whoops!* Puppet fell.

They tried again.

Silvester held both Puppet’s shoulders and eased him forward. He could feel it starting to happen. He could feel Puppet starting to move his legs and feet.

“Yes!” said Silvester. “Go on, Puppet. You can do it.”

Puppet tried very hard.

“Imagine there are strings,” said Silvester.

Puppet moved his left foot. He moved his right foot. Silvester took Puppet’s hands and held them out above Puppet’s head. Puppet swung his left foot forward; he swung his right foot forward.

“Shall I let go?” asked Silvester.

Puppet said nothing. He seemed to be concentrating.

“I will,” said Silvester. “Ready?”

He let go, and *whoops!* Puppet tumbled to the floor.

They tried and tried, and Puppet kept on tumbling as the morning passed by.



