

# Caller ID

by ABBY MERCHANT

“Okay Gerty, we’ll be back in an hour,” says my Mom, grabbing her purse from around the closet doorknob.

“Don’t forget the Red Vines,” I say, opening the door for her and Dad.

“Make sure you listen to your brother,” Dad says, wagging a finger at me as though I were Sammy-dog.

I get mad and puff up my cheeks and say, “Yes sir, and don’t forget the Red Vines!” I wave them through the door like an impatient butler.

Mom and Dad finally step through, but she stops and says, “Be good and we’ll get you the Red Vines.” She gives me that kind of mom-look where I gotta say something nice and convincing so they’ll feel better about leaving me ’n’ Dougie home alone.

I try to push the front door shut on them to get their butts moving, but Dad puts his big old boot in the way. “I’ll be good!” I say finally.

Dad smiles, satisfied, and he and Mom walk down the stoop to the car. “Okay, see you in a bit,” he says and I close the door all the way. I listen for them to start the car, go down the driveway, and out on the street. Now I know it’s safe.

I scream, “Dougie!”

“What!” Dougie screams from downstairs.

I scramble through the kitchen and hang on the basement stairs bannister. I see Dougie playing on the Nintendo in the playroom at the bottom. He has most of the game controller’s extension cord in his mouth, chewing it like gum. Sammy-dog is sitting on the couch, her tail wagging a million miles a minute.

“Mom and Dad’re gone. I’m gonna watch Dragon Ball Z,” I say to him. “Whaddaya gonna do?”

Dougie gasps and bounces up from the carpet, dropping the wet game controller cord from his mouth. “Mom and Dad’re gone?” He switches off the Nintendo. “Then I’m gonna go to Blake’s and we’re gonna go to SuzyQ’s for mini donuts. Wanna come?” he asks, coiling up the chewed up cord around the game controller.

I shake my head and look at the clock in the kitchen. I think it says 3:54. “No way, Dragon Ball Z is gonna be on soon. Don’t you wanna watch? They’re gonna finally beat Cell,” I wrap my legs around the bannister like a monkey and swing back and forth, “I think.”

Dougie shakes his head and rockets past me up the stairs. “Nah, me ’n’ Blake have to hurry if Mom and Dad are just getting groceries. We’ll be back in a bit.”

Sammy-dog and I follow him out to the back porch and watch him grab his bike and take off across the street to Blake’s house. I see Crazy Dave in the yard over,

walking from behind his shed with a newspaper. He sees me and waves, but I just run inside with Sammy-dog. Mom and Dad say to never talk to Crazy Dave, who always poops behind his shed. I make sure to lock the door. Some people are just sickos! One time, me 'n' Maya's basketball flew over into his yard but we never got it 'cause we were sure it rolled into his poop piles. We still see that basketball from time to time, sitting there by his hedge bushes.

Me 'n' Sammy-dog run downstairs and I sit right in front of the television and switch it on. "Are you ready for Dr-Dr-DRAGON BALL Z?" screams the television announcer in tune to raving techno music, and I'm bouncing all over the couch and armchairs. I never ever get to watch Dragon Ball Z! Mom and Dad don't like that the characters swear and that there's a lot of blood.

I jump onto the floor in front of the television screen and hear a crinkle of papers beneath me. On them are my life's work—chapters and chapters of a story me 'n' Maya have been working on for years, it seems like. I think we got twelve pages so far and all of 'em are filled out from the top to the bottom. It's all about her and I fighting the evil wizard Grandondorf to save the princess Bazzelda. Dougie says it's a big rip off of some video game, but I think he's just jealous we don't let him write any chapters. I gather up the papers and sort them into neat little piles.

Dragon Ball Z's theme music comes on and I can't help but go a little nuts. It's all guitar and rock 'n' roll like Mom and Dad's cassette tapes. I jump from the couch to the floor, roll over to the cement drain at the bottom of the stairs, and spin around on my hands and knees till the show begins and I sit myself back down in front of the screen.

But the people are just talking and talking, not gouging out tummies or breaking each other's backs like they're supposed to, like on the commercials. I get bored of the show and decide to draw up a little section of me 'n' Maya's made-up world called Darule. I have a big map on the wall she and I been adding on to for a while now.

We need a lake, I think, a nice big old lake. I grab some printer paper from the computer stand, a blue crayon, and get to work, but just as I put my crayon to the paper, the phone begins to ring.

Mom and Dad always tell me to only answer if it's an emergency or if their cell number is on the caller ID. So I get up to check it and read something I never read on it before.

"Ogden County Prison," I say. My tummy begins to feel like it's doing flips down there.

Who could be calling from prison? What if Mom or Dad got locked in there for some reason? Or even Dougie? I feel my tummy trying to flop over and it hurts.

But I decide to let the phone ring. My forehead sweats and so do my pits. I look over at Sammy-dog sitting on her place on the couch. "Whatcha think I should do, Sam?" I ask her. But Sammy-dog just lifts her head and wags her tail. My voice is

kind of shaky—but that’s only ’cause I’m nervous. Mom says when I get nervous, my voice is all over the place and she can never understand me. It’s how she knows I’m lying, she tells me.

“Wh-what if Dougie got arrested at SuzyQ?” I ask her again. Her tail stops wagging and she exhales real loud. Then, a horrible thought hit my mind. “What if he ran over a kid on his bike or something?!”

I grab the phone and put it to my ear. “Hello,” I say as quick as I can, “Is D-Dougie okay?!”

The person on the other end is breathing real heavy into the phone. It’s like I can almost feel their breath on my neck.

“H-hello?” I say again. Gosh, my heart is beating so hard I can feel it in my throat.

Finally the guy says, “Uh yes, hello. Who is this?”

Well gee, his voice don’t sound too serious. Maybe this was a fluke or something. I turn and look at Sammy-dog and give her a thumbs-up. A good feeling washes over my angry tummy.

“M-my name’s Gerty, what’s yours?”

The guy is breathing hard again.

“Are you a policeman?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, “How old are you, Fergie?”

“*Gerty*. And I’m nine.”

“Right, right, good,” he grunts like a pig. “Anyway, I need you to help me with something.”

I think hard for a moment. I was never real good at problem solving at school, so I wonder why this guy is asking for my help. But it wasn’t every day a policeman asks for help. My tummy began to feel a bit better.

“Well sure, sir!” I say. I hear Sammy-dog’s tail flapping hard on the couch. “What can I do?”

He starts breathing real hard on the phone again. It’s annoying—I have to hold the phone away from my face a couple inches. He sounded sick or something. Maybe he got done running after some culprit.

“Well...” he says.

I hear a crash from the television, alerting my attention. Things were finally getting exciting on *Dragon Ball Z*! I watch a green guy slam his fist through another guy’s tummy. All this blood falls on the ground. The guy falls over and all the characters begin talking again. Boring.

“Are you there?” the policeman’s voice sounds kind of sad.

“Yes,” I say. I feel bad for ignoring him. “I’m sorry, I was watching TV.”

The man makes a sound like you make after you poop in the toilet. “That’s fine,” he says, “Now, I just want you to repeat what I say.”

“Well, why?” I ask.

He starts to say something but he clams up again. For a minute I listen for him, watching the television in case someone decides to rip the green guy in half, but everyone is still talking.

Finally the policeman talks. “Okay, I just need a voice sample to play to a suspect we have to see if he’s guilty of a crime.”

I guess that makes sense. A voice sample? I don’t really know what it is but if it was gonna help somebody, then why not? “Okay, what do I gotta say?”

His voice got kind of gruff sounding. “You just whisper into the phone, ‘Oh, ah, ah, ah, please stop, ah, ah, harder, oh, oh,’. That make sense?”

Gosh did my face turn red. My tummy began to churn again, real painful. “Um,” I kind of squeak, “Do I gotta say that? I don’t think I really want to anymore.”

“Well, you got to.” The heavy, annoying breathing leaves his voice.

I stand there, my body getting really hot and I could feel myself sweating all over again. I could hang up—but then wouldn’t that make the policeman mad? He could get the cops after me or something for not helping...I think.

“Do I gotta say it like that?” I ask, but it came out more like a frog croak because my throat got real dry.

“Yes. Moaning sounding.”

I try to round up some spit on my tongue and swallow it. “Uh,” I say very quiet like, “Uh... ahh...ohh...”

For some stupid reason, I burst into tears. What I was saying sounded real bad, like I shouldn’t be saying it. I hated crying because Dad always got on me for doing it, but I couldn’t help it this time around. I bring my sleeve to my eyes and try to mop them and continue talking, “Ahh...p-p-please stop...oh...h-h-hard...”

The policeman went really quiet on the other side.

“Can I stop now?” I ask, wiping my boogers from my drippy nose.

Nothing, nothing... then I hear his heavy breath. I hold the phone real far from my face this time around. “Sure, Fergie, that’ll do for now. I’ll give you another call if I need any more of your help, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say with my really dry voice.

“Have a good night!”

I slam the phone back down on its receiver. My mind’s real blank for some weird reason. That talk just keeps poking into my brain—ahh, oh, oh, harder, oh, ahh. My cheeks feel like they’re on fire. I see Sammy-dog on the couch and I walk to her and bury my face in her cool fur. Her tail beats against my shoulder and I rub her little head.

I hear the front door open upstairs. “Gerty!” calls Mom. “Doug! Come help bring in groceries.”

“We got your Red Vines, Gert,” Dad says.

I look at Sammy-dog and stand up. “Should I tell ’em, Sam? About who called?” I ask her.

Sammy-dog yawns and jumps down, walks past me, and runs up the stairs to say hi to my folks.

I follow behind her and walk to the front door.

“Did anyone call?” asks Mom.

The pit of my tummy begins to burn.

“N-no,” I say, “N-n-no one called.”

Mom gives me a long look, the kind of mom-look they give when they know you’re lying. But she don’t say no more and puts the new milk in the fridge.

I run outside with Dad and reach into the trunk and grab as many bags as my fingers can carry. I turn toward the porch to carry in the groceries. But I keep thinking about the call. Why would a policeman ask me to do something like that when it didn’t feel so right to do? It doesn’t seem like something they ask others to do. My heart pumps really fast the more I think about it. I look up at Dad as he tries to fit as many bags in his big old hands as possible. I open my mouth to blurt, “Guess what, this policeman on the phone told me to say some real dirty stuff!” But my dumb voice can’t get the words out.

“Gert, you’re gonna hurt your fingers if you carry too much. Where’s your brother at?”

I blink and remember the groceries in my hands. The plastic digs into my fingers; they are so heavy. I run up the steps and into the house and throw them on the kitchen floor and I put my fingers in my mouth to suck out the pain. I see the Red Vines through the clear plastic, but instead of thinking about how delicious they are, my tummy tells me no and I don’t want them.

“Where’s your brother?” Dad says again.

“Oh... he uh...” I wipe my hands on my pants. I see the upstairs phone sitting by the computer. Then I look at the caller ID.

“There he is,” says Mom, pointing out the kitchen window. I look out the window on the door. I watch Dougie throw his bike on the grass and run up onto the porch. “Where have you been?” asks Mom, her voice real high. “Did you leave your sister alone again while we went shopping?”

Dougie shrugs his shoulders, his mouth opening and closing like he can’t find the right words to lie with. He gasps like he is out of breath and full of donuts. “Me ’n’ Blake just went for a little ride,” he finally says.

Before Mom can yell at him, I decide to go downstairs and color the lake for a little bit more. I can hear her up there, with some of Dad’s voice, telling Dougie he should be more careful leaving a little girl home all alone, especially with Crazy Dave across the yard. Dougie keeps repeating “I know, I know. I’m sorry.”

“No, you *don’t* know...” says Dad.

I look at the television and see that Dragon Ball Z has ended but another bad show started. But for some reason, I don’t wanna watch television. I turn it off and start on the lake for me ’n’ Maya’s map instead. As I get to coloring it, I think it’d look

better as a red lake instead. I grab the red crayon and fill it in as red as I can. With volcanoes surrounding it! That would be cool looking. I grab another paper and draw tall triangles with red and orange fire spurting up through their tops.

I finish and take a step back. My lake of fire and volcanoes don't really match the land me 'n' Maya have in mind. Darule is supposed to be a happy, peaceful, and pretty looking place. But I shrug. I grab Dad's tape from his workbench and tape it to the map on the wall.

I stand back again and look at the big map.

"Gerty, who called?"

I whip around real fast. Mom's standing there, touching the caller ID. I didn't even notice her come down.

"Ogden County Prison?" she reads out loud. She looks at me like she's confused. "Did you answer?"

I nod. "Oh yeah," I say, "b-but they didn't w-want anything. I hung up."

"Oh." Mom sits down on the couch and reaches for the remote. She turns on the TV and frowns. She asks with a sigh, "Gerty, what were you watching?"

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I try to forget about that phone call, but in the weeks since it happened, I just can't. Sometimes though, I do forget, but then there's this thought tugging on my brain and I have to think about what it is or the tugging won't stop. "Oh, that," I say to myself when I realize what that tugging thought is, and I feel sick again.

I sink down in my chair in Ms. Ellison's classroom and put my hand over my tummy, hoping it will be cool like Mom's hands when she tries to make my tummy feel better. But no, my hand is very hot. Everything is very hot. In my tummy, there's a hot splash like a swimmer diving into a pool of lava.

My hand shoots up in the air. Ms. Ellison, being the nice lady she is, stops talking about the science of seeds or whatever to point at my hand.

"Yes, Gerty, question?"

"I need to go to the nurse," I say. "My tum—my stomach hurts."

My friend Maya, who sits beside me, puts a nice hand on my desk. Like all best friends, they know when something is wrong, and I never even told her about the phone call.

Ms. Ellison walks to her big desk and grabs the nurse's hall pass and hands it to me. "Are you okay?" she asks real nicely.

I shake my head, and then I just kind of burst into tears for no real reason. I hide my face in my hands because everyone in the class is looking at me and maybe laughing or something. Ms. Ellison pats my arm and hugs me.

"Maya, why don't you take Gerty to the nurse?" she says.

That makes me feel a little better. I hear Maya scoot out her chair and she takes my arm. On our way out of the classroom, she grabs a few tissues from the box

sitting above the coat racks and hands them to me. I wipe my eyes.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Sure,” she replies, “thanks for getting me out of there.” She grins and I try to smile back.

We walk real slowly down the hallway. Maya points at her drawing hung up next to mine in the artist showcase by the art room. I smile a little, but my tummy hurts so bad that I just want to frown.

“So,” says Maya, “What’s wrong, Gert? You sick? You gonna puke?”

I shake my head for a moment but then I shrug. “Maybe. My tummy hurts real bad. It’s been hurting for a while.”

Maya brushes her hand along the wall as we walk, thinking. “Do you want to go home?” she asks.

I nod. But then I remember the caller ID. “I dunno,” I say. I can smell the nurse’s office as we turn a corner. It smells like that funny liquid Dad puts on cuts and makes them hurt a whole lot worse than they did to begin with.

We get inside the nurse’s office and I approach a desk with a big man sitting behind it. “Nurse Quan,” I say, “my tummy hurts.”

Nurse Quan looks up from his busy looking papers and at me ’n’ Maya. He gives me a big smile and motions to this chair beside his. I take a seat and Maya goes and sits on a chair against the wall.

“Why does it hurt?” Nurse Quan asks, “Did you eat something bad? Or do you think you’re just sick?” He opens what looks like a thermometer and points it at my mouth.

I open my mouth real wide and he sticks the thermometer under my tongue. “I dunno,” I try to say.

After a few seconds he takes out the thermometer and looks at it. “It says you’re normal,” he eyes me like I’m nothing but a liar, but I know he’s real nice and he ends up grinning. “Do you think you could wait to go home till the end of the day?” He looks at his watch. “It’s one now.”

“Can I just lay here until it’s time to go?” I ask him. “I don’t really feel like going home. Or going back to Ms. Ellison’s.”

“What about recess?” asks Maya.

I shrug. “I don’t feel like going outside.” She looks disappointed, but she understands and nods.

Nurse Quan sits back in his chair and rubs his chin. “Sure you can,” he finally says. “Why don’t you grab a reading book and sit on the cot back there?” He looks at Maya. “You can go back. Tell your teacher where Gerty is, okay?”

Maya sighs and gets up, taking the nurse’s pass from me. “Feel better, Gert,” she tells me. “I’ll come by after school if you wanna play, okay?”

I nod and she leaves.

I go through Nurse Quan’s pile of picture books while my tummy groans. I

give up, and without a book, I lay on the cot with my horribly feeling tummy.

I wake up to someone shaking me. Dougie is standing there, with Nurse Quan still sitting behind him at his desk. “Wakey wakey!” Dougie says, “Let’s go home.” He holds up my backpack.

I sit up real careful, because the thought of going home made my tummy even worse feeling. I take my backpack and wave goodbye at Nurse Quan.

At the bike rack, I ask Dougie as he unchains his bike, “How’d you know I was there?”

“I got a message saying to come and get you when school let out. Are you sick or something?” He jumps on his bike and waits for me to stand on the back wheel pegs. When I’m standing steady, I put my hands on his shoulders and he pedals off, waving at his friends.

“Yeah,” I say, “My tummy hurts real bad.”

“Did you eat lunch?” he calls over his shoulder as we get rolling down the street.

“Not really.”

We don’t talk again till we get home. I hop off his bike and stand there as he puts it away in the garage. I let him grab the house key hidden in the grill and have him go in the house first. Sammy-dog comes running up to us, her tail whapping my hurt tummy as she runs into the yard to pee.

“Does the caller ID say anything?” I ask Dougie before I even step in.

He glances at the phone and gives me a weird look. “Yeah, it’s red.”

My tummy feels like it is burning. “Who called?” I ask, but real quietly.

Dougie sighs and walks to the caller ID like it’s some big chore. He presses a few buttons. “Aunt Carmen and Ogden County Prison,” he says, and I sit down on the porch with my hurting tummy and begin to cry again.

“Whoa,” Dougie says, and he walks over to me and sits next to me, “What’s wrong Gert? Aunt Carmen’ll call again.”

I shake my head. “I don’t care about Aunt Carmen,” I cry, “I don’t want the prison to call ever again! But I’m afraid he’ll keep trying till he talks to me again!”

Dougie pats my shoulder. “Don’t worry, Gerty, we’ll just ignore it. Why are they calling though? Did you do something bad? Are they gonna arrest you?”

I throw up my hands and wipe my eyes and boogers. “I dunno. Maybe! I picked it up once and the policeman was real weird. He told me to say weird things. I don’t wanna talk about it anymore. And don’t tell Mom and Dad!”

Dougie says nothing as I cry for a while. He just pats my back and stares at the phone. After what seems like a long time, my cries eventually turn into hiccups, and we hear Sammy-dog scratching at the back door.

“Let’s go get some Nutter Butters from SuzyQ,” Dougie finally says. “I got a few dollars.”

I nod, rubbing my eyes and getting to my feet. I go to the back door and let

Sammy-dog in. Nutter Butters are my favorite candy.

“Here, let’s do this,” Dougie announces and I turn to watch him real suspicious-like as he walks to the caller ID. He looks at me and says, “I know how to block numbers.”

My tummy felt lighter. “What? How?” I ask.

“Like this.” Dougie presses a few buttons and like that, the caller ID read, “Caller blocked.”

My mouth falls open. “Wow!” I say. “Wow thanks, Dougie!” I grab him and hold him real close in a bear hug. “How do you know to do that?”

I can tell Dougie feels real proud with his big grin and red cheeks.

“Remember when I had that newspaper route?” he says, “Well, the Martins kept calling me ’cause apparently I never got them their paper quick enough. It made Dad mad and he blocked them. I watched him do it.”

“Wow, wow!” I say, hugging him tighter. The pain in my tummy just melts away like an ice cube in the sun and I let him go to run all around the dining room and into the living room, bouncing off and on the couch. Then, there are a couple knocks at the front door and I know it’s Maya wanting to check on me.

I run to it and throw the door open. “Hey, Maya!” I say to her and she blinks.

“Are you still sick?” she asks. “Do you wanna play if you aren’t?”

I nod with my big smile. “Yeah! I’m feeling way better. Me ’n’ Dougie are gonna go to SuzyQ’s, wanna come?”

“Yes!” Maya says with a big smile. “I’m glad you’re feeling better. Grab your bikes!”

“Dougie!” I scream. “Let’s go!”

Then, the phone rings.

My tummy sinks to the floor. My heart beats real fast. I feel real sick again and my eyes begin to water like I’m going to bawl. I feel no different than I did when I got home. I don’t say nothing as Dougie picks up the phone.

“Hello?” he says.

I wait, each second making my tummy hurt more and more.

“Nah, Dad isn’t here right now Aunt Carmen. I’ll tell him you called though,” Dougie says. He hangs up and joins me ’n’ Maya on the porch.

“Ready?” he asks.

I nod. I give the caller ID one last look before we walk outside and shut the door.

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