

“The Thing,” Sarah tells me, “is about Bubble O. Bill. “We are all writing a paragraph, just a paragraph, describing him. It is for Father’s Day.”

Sarah is clever. She sells me my assignment by making it seem simple. She doesn’t want to hear (again) all the reasons why I don’t have time, energy, inclination, motivation to write a Thing. Secretly, though, I think she doesn’t want me to write (again) about Sarah and why she pisses me off when she asks me to write a Thing. She thinks the parameters of a paragraph will reign in my typical digressions. But Sarah has not considered two things: (1) in my lawyer mind, paragraphs are a function of the return key. If I don’t hit it, the paragraph continues. (Exhibit A: Gabriel Garcia Marquez.) So Sarah is not safe. This Thing is unpredictable and may travel in any direction, paragraph or no paragraph. I can’t be responsible. (2) Sarah didn’t need to sell me on simple. This is the easiest Thing theme to date. I know the answer. I know what Bubble O. Bill looks like. To describe him is to do child’s arithmetic. I feel relieved and smug, like a student who knows all the answers on exam day.

Bubble O. Bill was a Lysol Scrubbing Bubble, oxygen activated for extra cleaning power. He lived among the other Scrubbing Bubbles in our water pipes and – from all outward appearances – blended with the other bubbles. He had the same happy little Scrubby eyes and mustache as all the other Scrubbing Bubbles. He was translucent and soapy and handsome. He had more oxygen activation, however, than any other bubble. This gave him an extraordinary ability to become any size, shape and texture. He could become sticky, like bubble gum, hard, like a beachball, or weightless, like a balloon. He could grow to the size of a house or fit on the head of a pin. He moved silently and with amazing dexterity and speed. But his biggest superpower was his amazing intellect. He knew everything. He could out-think, out-smart, out-wit anyone who dared cross his path.

By day, he was an ordinary, average bubble. He bubbled up through the pipes with the other Scrubbers, swishing playfully over basins, tubs and tiles. By night, however, he was Bubble O. Bill, the Superbubble. Each night, Bubble O. Bill left the other Scrubbers to fight bad guys, vampires, dinosaurs, wasps and the streptococcus bacteria often found on bathroom fixtures.

Sarah and Jesse may have different renditions of Bubble O. Bill. They may not know about his day job. They may not know he had a mustache and unexplained fear of bleach. They may not know Bubble O. Jill was his best friend and absolutely, positively not his girlfriend. But I can’t fault them for that. They didn’t know the original Bubble O. Bill. Just the eighties re-make.

BOB was the result of dad’s storytelling and the strange workings of my six year old mind. Until I was six, I had no siblings or friends who survived our many moves in the migration from Boston to Seattle. Instead, I had a community of tie-dyed adults to adore

me and imaginary creatures and characters to keep me company. My make-believe world was real and magical and busy. There was Marcia and Dan, the miniature couple who lived behind the toilet in St. Paul. There was the tiny bear family who performed circus acts on the faded patterns of our oriental rug in student housing. There were the baby fairies in Oma and Opa's backyard. There was the all-knowing, all-seeing, somewhat intimidating Mr. Doyle who lived in the sky and hovered above me. And there were countless other nymphs and trolls and dwarves and animals (all, for some reason, miniature) who would talk to me and play with me and ride about in my backpack as mom, dad and me did the daily shuffle back and forth to our different schools.

Dad did not discourage this. Instead, he wrote tribute songs. I still remember riding on his shoulders as we crossed campus, singing "Hey Mr. Doyle, You Mr. Doyle, How are you? He Mr. Doyle, We Mr. Doyle, She Mr. Doyle too." And at night, if he wasn't studying or playing softball or going to poker parties, we would lie down on his enormous bed, my head uncomfortably cradled in the crook of his arm, and he would tell stories about my friends, the toilet people, the tiny bears, Mr. Doyle.

He would also let me pick things to include in the story. "Name three things" he would say, "any things in the world." That moment was a thrill, a challenge. Trying to find the impossible combination of three things (any three things!) that would make dad give up and say, "why that is an impossible combination of three things. I cannot go on with the story. You are entitled to candy." But he would invariably craft the stories around the three things. And it was comforting, knowing that he would. Knowing that his familiar low voice and cigarette breath would lull me to sleep. Knowing he would carry me to bed. Knowing he knew everything.

Pre-school and kindergarten were a blur of U-hauls, second-hand clothes packed and unpacked and packed again into garbage bags, the excitement of choosing another new bedroom, and the smell of fresh paint, Rainier beer and Winstons. When we finally landed in our second house in West Seattle, Aki and Paulette moved in downstairs and I was in heaven. There were kids on my block. Real kids. And there was Paulette, who would make me special lunches and brush my hair and let me try her coral pink lipstick and matching nail polish. And there was the TV. Not ours, but Aki and Paulette's. I would sit on Paulette's lap to watch fuzzy black and white soap operas and wait patiently for the cartoons. Like the Lysol Scrubbing Bubbles. That was my favorite.

Sometime during that year, dad asked me about Marcia and Dan and Mr. Doyle and I had lost track of them. I thought perhaps they had been left behind at the house with the swings or maybe in the car. They were fine, I assured him, and might someday come to visit. But I didn't want to have a story about them. I just wanted a regular story. Maybe one from a book. He insisted, though, on the story with three things. Three things, he said. So I thought, hard, and came up with my best combination ever: A cowboy, a dinosaur and a bubble.

This was the night Bubble O. Bill was born. He quickly became a running story, a nightly ritual, replacing my old miniature make-believe friends and taking on a life of his own. He was my own personal hero, saving the world with scrubbing bubbles and miraculous oxygenated powers. I loved my dad's stories so much, I would beg for them, trading Aki rubs and grainy ghosts for extra-long renditions.

Years later, as I hit my adolescent stride, I watched dad and Sarah and Jesse pile into a narrow bed to tell stories of BOB. They lay on either side of him, propped uncomfortably upon each of his arms. They are shouting answers to his questions, "What does BOB eat?" (Soap!) What does he drink?" (Shampoo!)

There is no room for me on the bed. Even if there was, I wouldn't go. I am somewhere between child and teenager, and Bubble O. Bill was everything I was leaving behind in my quest for breasts, bonnie bell lip gloss and awkward silences on the school bus with Andrew Brusletten. Besides, they did it all wrong. The Kids gave him superpowers that were not part of the original version. They gave him a lightsaber. They turned his girlfriend, Bubble O. Jill, into his sidekick. They had him eating dishwasher fluid and rinse aid. Worse, dad did not correct them. He did not set them straight on who BOB was and how the story should go. It was all strange and sad and heartbreakingly embarrassing and boring. And further proof that my dad did not know everything.

Now I am the mother of boys the age of Sarah, Jesse and me when we were introduced to BOB. But I won't recycle my version of the BOB story for them. It would be a little like showing them the Lysol commercial and expecting unbridled enthusiasm. Instead, they will have to make their own stories reflecting their own voices in their own time. Of course, their stories will be synched to soundtracks on Opa's computers, animated with digital graphics and burned to DVDs. But each will have to spend that familiar evening crunched uncomfortably in the crook of dad's arms, picking three things to include in the DVD plot.

More importantly, I understand Carson and Mitchell's sweet voices talking in the other room. I hear their conversations with animals and babies and miniature creatures and their songs without rhythm or melody. I do my best to keep my distance and preserve the magic. And I do not listen to the Experts who tell me to worry about children with imaginary friends. Instead, I listen to my dad and am grateful that he knew everything.