

Bumble the Storyman

'Hello, Bill Bumble speaking.'

'Hi Bill, it's Marcia, you know from Writers. So, are you free then, Bill, next Thursday afternoon?'

'Ye-es, eh, what for?'

'Great, I've already told them you'd do it!'

'Do what, Marcia?'

'Read the children one of your stories of course, what did you think I meant!'

'Ah, what children are these?'

'The kids at St Greg's, of course.'

'St Greg's?'

'Yes Bill, where did you think you were going?'

'Marcia, sorry, I'm completely out of the loop on this.'

'Did you not read my email?'

'What email?'

'Never mind. But you are free? You will do it?'

'Ye-es, eh, but where is St Greg's?'

'Ah, tricky that. You'll never find it. So, meet me at Asda, at one o'clock, like the email said, OK? Have to fly. Thanks Bill you're a star. I told them you would do it! And I'm making you a story-telling corner! Wait till you see it! Bye-bye.'

'But Marcia, which Asda?'

But his bird had flown, no doubt off to do good deed ninety-nine for the day, Bill thought.

ooOoo

Bill Bumble trawled his in-box. No email from Marcia. He checked in Junk mail - nothing. He emailed her. Two days went by. Only six days to go and still no reply.

He turned to his wife Tilda for help.

'I thought I might read "Dominic the Donkey" to the children.'

'What age are they, Bill?'

'Ah, no idea.'

'What school is this?'

'Ah, not sure really.'

'We'd better try to find out, don't you think?'

Tilda was a retired teacher, primary, early years.

She cross-questioned Bill because, after forty two years of marriage, she was aware that he often knew more than he realised. During her interrogation she established:

- He did not have a telephone number for Marcia.

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- Her surname was MacDonald, giving hundreds in the telephone directory to choose from.
- He had seen her one time in that old church, now a pub, at the top of Byres Road.
- She was in a choir at Wellington Church, near the University.
- He thought she lived in the West End.
- Marcia had called the school St Greg's, so it was St Gregory's, Tilda reckoned.
- She had asked him to meet her in the car park of Asda, location of the store unknown.

Using her iPad Tilda found St Gregory's Primary within two minutes. It was buried deep within a labyrinth of narrow streets in a council estate, with an Asda Superstore close by.

'Bill, try this number. Try to explain yourself properly without going into every detail.'

She listened as he rang the school and spoke to the Secretary. He told his tale. It took far too long.

'Well, what did she say?'

'I've to send her an email. She will forward it to her Head Teacher. She sounded a bit odd - wary, I think.'

No wonder, Tilda thought, the school Secretary had received a welter of confusing information including how well Craigallion Loch was fishing and an invitation to her to come and try fly-fishing for herself. Bill had advised that he had plenty of gear and a spare life-jacket she could borrow.

Tilda coached Bill, making sure the email did not turn into one of his famous 'epistles'.

The next day a return email arrived, from the Head Teacher. This email 'Forwarded' a copy of an email that Marcia had sent to a William Bundle at the Africa Desk of the "Save the Children Fund".

All was now clear - well almost. Bill sent these emails to Tilda.

'Well Bill, Primary One, Two and Three.'

'Yes. What do you think, Tilda?'

'Not "Dominic". Too complicated, too long.'

'But it says I will have two hours.'

'Look at me Bill, and try to listen. NO! Not Dominic the Donkey, not for five and six year olds.'

'How about the "Terror of Braemar" then?'

'No, something shorter, simpler. How about that story you wrote for Molly?'

'Ah, yes, "Frederica the Frog". Yes.'

'How long does it take to read?'

'Ah, sorry, no idea.'

'Try reading it.'

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'Now?'

'Yes, and time it.'

The first rehearsal was full of Tilda's interruptions and took an hour. Modifications were made. After five rehearsals it was slicker, just over thirty minutes. As always happened, Bill resisted, while Tilda slashed words and phrases mercilessly, offering shorter simpler alternatives. But after a few hours Tilda was happy and so was Bill. It was quite good, he thought.

'Bill, when is it again?'

'Next Thursday afternoon.'

'Did you know that next Thursday is World Book Day? In most schools the kids will be dressing up as characters from books and films.'

'Ah, do you think I should wear my Bumble Bee outfit?'

'Why not? It's what you got it for, is it not?'

'I know, but, well, but I've never worn it in public, only for our own wee ones.'

'Cometh the hour, Bill, cometh the Bumble, as you are always so keen to tell us.'

'But, I don't have "Frederica" in booklet form yet, I was hoping that Nick would get around to illustrating it but...'

Tilda watched as he left on another of his out-of-body excursions. She could hear his mind think.

I'll phone Helen, another Saint of Good Causes, and ask for an emergency Desk Top Publishing session to get "Frederica" ready for printing in booklet form. I'll email Marcia to ask how many copies to bring. It could work. I'll speak to Susan at Purple Edge Graphics, to emphasise my deadline. If only I could have illustrations to back up my words.

'Earth to Bill, calling Bumble the Storyman.'

'What?'

'Leave the illustrations to me, Bill, I'll get cartoon images online. You concentrate on cutting down on the words. Try for twenty minutes maximum, including stops for questions and a better introduction, right?'

'Right.'

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The great day arrived.

Bill felt very odd driving in his Bumble Bee outfit. At traffic lights he saw people looking and laughing. It had been a struggle. The problem was that it was held together with rather complicated Velcro and he needed help to get in and out. His friend Jo, Granny of Molly, had made it for him, but this had been some years earlier, when he was younger, slimmer. It had taken Tilda nearly an hour to get him fixed securely inside, with the help of a few safety pins. He hoped he could last out without a loo stop, not easy at his age.

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He sat in his car in the Asda car park, beside the re-cycling centre, as directed by the original Marcia email. His throat was raging, as it had been for the last two days. That morning he had been to Lloyds Pharmacy, pleading for help. The helpful lady pharmacist had explained that his high blood pressure prevented other medications, limiting her advice to: "Suck on these honey and menthol sweets and take two paracetamols an hour before your performance."

Bill had discovered that miracles still happen. Fifty copies of "Frederica the Frog" had been produced, just in time, with two hours to spare. He would give them out at the end of the reading. And he had two copies of each of his other stories to leave for the school library. Bill was ready, well-rehearsed and primed by Tilda with suitable "Stop for Question" marks on his copy of "Frederica".

Bumble the Storyman was ready and excited. In fact Bill was buzzing.

Marcia arrived at five past one. She had been at a different school nearby, taking various choirs. Thursdays was her schools day, she explained.

'I've made a story-telling corner for you Bill. Wait till you see it! I'll use it myself next week, but you are the first. Wait till you see it. Brilliant, even if I say so myself. Paddy helped me, my husband. We did it last week. Wait till you see it. Just wait.'

Bill eased himself into Marcia's car and closed the door.

'Oh, and you look great, Bill, really great. You're meant to be a wasp? Right?'

'No, a Bumble Bee, actually. As in Bumble the Storyman.'

'Oh, right. I get it! Brilliant. Brilliant.'

ooOoo

They arrived at St Gregory's and signed in. Marcia led him to the library where the story-telling corner was. It had been made by arranging a piano and various filing cabinets pushed together at right angles. These were draped with old curtains held up by plant pots and bric-a-brac, including an impressive bejewelled Eiffel Tower on a heavy onyx base.

The fourth wall was of dark wooden panelling decorated with fairy lights stuck on with lots of sticky tape. The floor was covered with assorted pre-loved rugs in a mixture of styles including shaggy, loop pile, rag-rug and sheep skins reminiscent of the late sixties and early seventies. With the overhead lights switched off, it had a Santa's Grotto atmosphere.

Marcia had provided a very low stool. Bill knew that he would have required medical assistance to rise from it. An alternative higher, normal height seat was provided. Marcia

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came and went several times, fussing over him. Did he need water? Was the lighting level alright? Before she finally went to take her own story-telling group, she left a timetable. It showed.

Mr Bundle: Story-telling

1.00 to 1.30 Primary One: Miss Kemble

1.30 to 2.00 Primary One: Mrs Travis

2.00 to 2.30 Primary Two: Ms Whitelock

2.30 to 3.00 Primary Three: Mr Bulloch

The library clock showed 01.21. Bill was alone with his sore throat and his bottle of water which he dare not drink, in case it might overload his bladder. Perhaps his sore throat was psychosomatic, as had Tilda asserted, but it did not make it any less painful.

In the distance he heard the sparrow chatter of excited voices. The chirping grew to cacophony level and a worried face showed itself at the small entry gap between the piano and the filing cabinet.

'Oh Mr Bundle, I'm so, so sorry. I missed our time slot. I don't know what I was thinking about. So, we've brought both Primary Ones together. Do you think that would work?'

'Yes, if you think we can get them all squeezed in. It's a bit small in here. How many are you?'

'Oh great, thanks.'

Bill had not expected so many Ninja Turtles, assorted Superheroes and Princesses. The small space in front of him was packed to overflowing.

A Ninja Turtle with large oval bright purple spectacles attached himself to Bill's leg and declared: 'I like you. I do, I really, really, really like you.'

To reinforce his undying affection the child kissed Bill's knee and began to stroke his ankle, making the striped tights ruffle. This seemed to take the child's attention and he proceeded to ping the material mercilessly. This was to continue intermittently throughout the first reading. Bill looked to Miss Kemble for help but she just smiled and shrugged. Bill knew from Tilda that many Primary Ones were clingy like this and decided he must soldier on.

'Well boys and girls, I am honoured to be here today among so many superstars and superheroes. My name is Bumble the Storyman and I have one of my stories to read to you.'

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Bill began his spiel, all in accordance with Tilda's directions at the rehearsals. He did not feel any pain in his throat but his ankle was tickling. At the bottom of page one Bill reached the first "Stop for a Question" red pen mark on his copy:

'Why do you think Frederica looks sad?'

Before anyone could answer a largish pot plant teetered then fell towards a small Batman, brushing past his shoulder and smashing itself to smithereens, showering a cohort of Ninja Turtles with damp compost and daffodils.

'Aaaah!' wailed mini-Batman, and, after a short pause to inhale a super-breath, Aaaaaaaaaaah!'

'Oh James, are you all right', said Mrs Travis.' Out you come, that's it everyone, move over and let James come out, please.'

In the centre of the group of Ninja Turtles, safely remote from the incident, an emotional responder stood to add his contribution.

'Please, Miss Kemble, I feel very unwell. I think I might vomit, actually.'

'Yes, Colin, you come too. That's it everyone, let Colin come with James and we will get it all fixed.

Set free from the Story Corner, and sure that they were now the centre of attention, both boys wailed off into the distance. Bill became aware of the remaining eyes peering into his face, looking for signs of weakness, he thought.

His leg tickled. 'I really, really like you,' said the child in a quiet voice.

'Well, that was exciting. Do you agree?'

A few heads nodded and purple specs said quite loudly this time: 'I still like you. I really, really like you.'

'Well, I think we should start again boys and girls, at the beginning. Do you think that would be best?'

A few heads nodded and he took this as common agreement.

'Frederica the Frog was ...'

Half way down page one the Eiffel Tower decided to wobble.

This caught Bill's eye and he cried out: 'Look out, The Eiffel Tower!'

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But he was just too late. The edifice toppled, then nose-dived, pointed end first, to sail past the skull of a boy dressed as Harry Potter, missing him by millimetres.

'Malcolm, are you all right?' asked Miss Kemble.

Harry Potter brushed off his dice with death by shrugging his shoulders, 'I knew that could happen, but I managed to wave my wand just in time!'

A kafuffle followed during which the more dangerous pieces of bric-a-brac were removed to be replaced with cushions and soft-backed books.

'Well, boys and girls, we seem to be making our own story here. Shall we try again?' Heads nodded.

One Princess said, suspiciously, 'Is Frederica a real frog or not?'

'Yes, Princess, thank you for asking, yes, Frederica is a real frog and Gilbert the Gander is real too. All the animals in this story are real. Now shall we begin again?'

'Frederica the Frog was ...'

At the end of the session Miss Kemble had to physically remove Thomas the Ninja Turtle by prising his fingers gently from Bill's leg.

'I really, really, really like you Mr Bumble. I really, really do!'

ooOoo

The Primary Two class filed in and took their seats.

The message had got through about the curtains and cascading bric-a-brac problem and a safe exclusion zone was immediately established between small backs and the curtain drapes, helped by the much smaller numbers of children.

Bill launched into his opening routine wondering what more could go wrong.

Half way down page two, just as Gilbert the Gander was about to start shouting, something whacked off the other side of the wooden partition only inches from Bill's head. This created a small cloud of dust and loosened the sticky tape holding the fairy lights which took on a life of their own and slithered down slowly, watched by children and adults alike.

This cannon-ball-like impact was accompanied by a loud whistle and screeches of encouragement from adults and pupils alike. Bill later learned that a group of PE Student

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Teachers had just started a six week "Introduction to Netball" class in the gym hall on the other side of the partition.

Bill looked for help to Ms Whitelock who stared steadfastly over his left shoulder and refused to acknowledge that there was a problem. He was alone against this "assault" on his literacy brilliance. He refused to submit to the bombardment and raised his voice level.

The Netballers, quite unaware of the disruption that they were causing to his Story-telling, soared high on the adrenaline of competition and raced up the decibel scale. Bill responded with higher volume, occasionally stopping to wait for relative calm.

The explosions continued at random intervals, creating a fog of dust in the now dimly lit space. The fairy lights had been switched off for safety reasons.

So ended the Primary Two session in abject failure.

Bill's throat was throbbing anew.

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Bumble the Storyman had completely lost track of time. Mr Bulloch in charge of Primary Three immediately advised, forcefully, that Bill was running late, that it was already 2.38 and that the final bell was 'upcoming' and quickly. The Net-ballers were quite a bit quieter. Bill later surmised that this had probably been at the behest of Mr Bulloch.

Bill surveyed the assembled Princesses, Superheroes and Ninja Turtles. There was another Harry Potter and an Alligator. This could be a bonus, Bill thought, as there was a phantom alligator in his "Frederica" story.

'Ah, are you an alligator?'

'No!' said the boy.

'Ah, are you a crocodile?'

'No!'

'Sorry, eh, what are you then?'

'I'm a Dinosaur!'

'Of course, yes, a Dinosaur, yes, of course you are, very good.'

'I'm a Princess!' added a voice from left field.

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'So am I!'

'I'm a Princess too!'

'I'm Spiderman!'

'I'm Batman!'

'No, I'm Batman! I had the idea first!'

Bill realised that since he had so dismally failed to identify a Dinosaur these kids felt he might need help.

'Ah, and you, how about you,' Bill asked a tall serious girl wearing dark grey school trousers and a blue tee shirt. 'So, did you decide not to dress up?'

'No, I am dressed up, look, I'm a Director!' she exploded, pointing to the words "I'm a Director" twinkling on her blue top.

Bill retreated into his well-rehearsed routine.

'This is a story that I wrote for a little girl called Molly who is about your age. She asked me to write her a story about a real frog, not one that turned into a Prince or a Princess. This story is called "Frederica the Frog". In the story there is a very noisy goose called Gilbert the Gander and a mother duck called Deirdre. There is also a little Duckling called Daisy. The story begins...'

'Excuse me, sir,' said a thin earnest-faced boy with a very proper accent, 'but this is a story with which I am already familiar.'

This Ninja Turtle, or, The Genius, as Bill immediately labelled him, stared in triumphant defiance at Bumble the Storyman, as if accusing him of some subterfuge in passing off a story written by someone else as one his own.

Bill could feel the heat of Mr Bulloch's eyes boring into the side of his head. The kids picked up on this and were also watching Bill warily, waiting for his response to the gauntlet that The Genius had thrown before him, with his perfect grammar. A random cannon-ball thwack from the net-ballers rattled the partition breaking the deadlock. Mr Bulloch sighed heavily and stomped off to deal with the miscreants.

Bill regained his poise. Later he blamed himself for a rather off the cuff and perhaps high-handed retort to The Genius. 'Well, actually, that's truly amazing because, you see, I just had this this story first published earlier today. Let's all listen to it, check it out and see, shall we?'

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Reluctantly The Genius resumed a cross-legged Buddha pose, keeping his eyes closed, no doubt waiting for an error of syntax or grammar, Bill thought.

Another of Tilda's 'Stop for a Question' marks swam in front of Bill's eyes. The pressure of time did not feature in his thinking. He took a deep breath. 'What good idea do you think Frederica had when she closed her eyes?'

Immediately a tall girl with a teenage hairdo rose to her feet and threw her hand up, waving impatiently.

'Yes, Princess?'

The reply came in a very definite American accent.

'Frederica has thought of a good way to teach Gilbert manners.'

'That is a perfect answer, well done.' He had no idea why he kept going but often his tongue did this, went off on its own. 'Have you ever thought of taking up darts, you might score a bulls-eye with every throw.'

The Princess beamed to her classmates then flounced down onto her imaginary throne.

Bill saw a quiet smile flit across the face of the genius Ninja Turtle but still his eyes remained closed, keeping his thoughts to himself, still reserving judgment, Bill thought.

As the story reached its climax, with a frightened Daisy the Duckling alone, in the dark night-time pond, being supported from below by the hand of the unseen Frederica, Mr Bulloch signalled furiously from the side-lines, pointing at his watch and making the cut-throat sign, while mouthing, "Two minutes!".

Bumble the Storyman needed to improvise an abrupt but happy ending by winding things up by making sure that Daisy was returned to safety. As if to emphasise that the final curtain had fallen, a cannon-ball thundered into the partition, a whistle blew loudly and two deep male voices announced in unison, 'That's it for this week Primary Seven. SIT DOWN NOW!'

As the Primary Three class filtered out The Genius approached:

'Actually, sir, I was mistaken. The story I was thinking of was a different one, and, to be honest, that story had a much better ending.'

The American Princess, still in character, pronounced, 'I'm actually not American, really. It's just that I'm going to play Annie in my 'Stagestruck' performance next month at the Paisley Arts Centre. Do you think you might come to see it?'

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The Director in the blue top lingered until the others had left. 'Actually, in some bits you were quite good. Are you thinking of coming back to do this again another time?'

Bill was left alone with his misgivings, and a very full and urgent bladder.

ooOOo

With Marcia's help, Bill was extricated from his Bumble Bee outfit. Now fully relieved, Bill sat with Marcia in the Staff Room sharing a much needed cup of tea.

'Well, Bill, how did it go?'

'Great, yes, good. Or, well, actually, Marcia I think maybe I should have rehearsed a bit more.'

'So, will I say you're available for another time?'

'Ye-es, eh, but, no, yes. Yes, definitely, yes. It was brilliant fun, thanks, yes.'

'Thanks, I knew you would say yes. I've already told the Office.'

'There is just the one thing, Marcia, could we do it next time without the parallel Netball class, please?'