



“Soapy’s World”

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Soapy’s name isn’t really Soapy – that’s just what people call her because more than anything else in the world, she loves blowing soap bubbles. Soapy got her very first bubble-blower when Mom came home from her job abroad for a few days. Dad had already left home by then – Soapy and her little brother are cared for by their grandmother. Whenever she blows bubbles, Soapy forgets that Mom and Dad no longer live together, that Mom is always sad and far away, and that no one has the time to notice her problems anymore. Blowing bubbles is great, because the soap bubbles you blow only take from the real world what you like and what gives you joy.

Award:

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Reading sample

[pp 5–25]

Soapy sat on the back stoop of her grandma's house. It was a good place for being alone, because others didn't wander there very often. Soapy wanted to be alone so she could blow soap bubbles.

Actually, Soapy's name wasn't really Soapy. She'd just gotten the nickname over time: at first, it was for fun and just to tease her a little, but later on, it stuck, and that's the way it stayed.

People called her Soapy because she liked to blow soap bubbles. Soapy didn't just blow bubbles every now and then like any other kid does, but almost all the time – as long as she wasn't supposed to be doing anything else! Blowing bubbles was her favorite activity. Soapy would use up at least four bubble-blowers per week (sometimes even five or six), and if she couldn't get her hands on a new one right away, she'd take a juice straw out of her grandma's drawer and some shampoo from the bathroom, mix the shampoo with a splash of water, and keep on blowing.

Soapy received her first-ever bubble blower one time when Mom came home to visit

From that day on, Soapy blew bubbles. Nearly non-stop. She blew ever-bigger, ever-prettier, and ever-more-colorful bubbles with the utmost care and affection. Soapy would watch the way they tore away from the bubble blower, rose into the air, and floated around her, shimmering, until they burst and disappeared without a sound, as if they'd never even existed.

No one could understand why time and again, she would slink away and blow bubble after bubble somewhere all alone. Some people thought it was abnormal because in their minds, blowing bubbles was pointless. One way or another, the bubbles would always end up popping and left nothing behind except a soapy blob that plopped onto the ground.

Even so, Soapy herself was well aware of why she blew so many bubbles. She had to practice because more than anything else, she wanted to learn how

to blow bubbles that would never break. On the day that she finally mastered it, she'd enter that bubble and fly far, far away; thousands of happy hues of color glittering and glistening all around her in the sunlight. No one would ever find her and then, Soapy would be happy forever and always.

Dad hadn't been home in a very long time – several days, Soapy reckoned. Or even a whole week. Soapy had already grown tired of waiting for him.

"Where's Daddy? When's he coming home?" she asked her mother one morning as she ate her breakfast sandwich.

Mom couldn't look straight at her. Instead, she stared out the window with a strange look in her rounded eyes, although she seemed to be focusing on nothing at all.

"Daddy left us," Mom said after considering what to say for a moment.

Soapy couldn't wrap her mind around what that meant.

How can someone leave their own home and their own kids?

"For good?"

"Yes, for good."

Soapy couldn't believe it.

It simply wasn't possible. It couldn't be true.

It couldn't be true because Soapy didn't know how she'd get by if Dad really was gone for good and was never coming home again. And Mom was still staring off at nothing with such a weird look in her eyes. And Soapy didn't know how to stop waiting.

One day, Soapy finally blew a bubble that was the color of waiting for Dad. She blew it very carefully so it wouldn't pop too soon – and lo and behold, it didn't! So, Soapy entered the bubble.

Inside was their home and their yard and summer. Soapy skipped impatiently on the paving stones in



the grass with her eyes locked on the front gate, because she could hear the sound of a bus approaching from the distance and now, at any moment, Dad would finally be coming home!

And he did. With a tall man's swagger, he walked in through the gate – in a flash, Soapy swooped up and wrapped herself around his neck like a bird. Dad scooped her up high in his arms and laughed with his whole mouth and eyes and voice. Then, took her hands and spun her around in the air. Soapy squealed with joy and excitement, as well as with the slightly uneasy feeling spinning like that caused.

Mom peeked out the open kitchen window and giggled. Dad's eyes swung in her direction, and he gently set Soapy down on the grass. He said: "I'm going to go say hi to Mommy, too," and went inside.

Soapy watched through the window as they joked and laughed.

Later, they had dinner, and afterwards Dad went outside with Soapy to romp around and play in the yard.

But then, a bee flew up and buzzed its way under Soapy's shirt oh-so-unexpectedly! She nearly screamed in fright, but Dad told her quickly and firmly: "Don't move!" He rolled her shirt up high and let the bee out so Soapy didn't get stung!

Then, the two stretched out on the grass. The summer sun was low enough in the sky that they were able to stare up without squinting.

"It's endless, you know," Dad said. "That blue sky. It's endless. It just goes on and on and on."

Knowing that put Soapy on cloud nine with happiness.

The bubble popped, but Soapy kept on thinking about the blue sky that never ended.

Soapy was sitting in the back corner of Grandma's closet. Hanging above her were Grandma's skirts and blouses, and by her feet were loads of shoes – some in boxes, others not. The closet was packed. Soapy literally had to wiggle her way in to fit be-

tween them. Once inside, she pulled the door shut behind her so no one would know she was there.

Inside of Soapy was a sadness that wanted to wriggle its way into dark, narrow places – into places where things were crammed tight around her, muffling the sound of her sobs. Closets were the best for crying, because they had doors that could be shut. Soapy had also crouched behind curtains, had worked her way into the gap between the stove and the wall, and had even wormed her way under the bed – yet even when she curled up into a ball down there, there was still too much space around her.

Soapy would sometimes stay alone in her hiding place for a very long time when she was afraid her sadness would show, otherwise. If someone called out her name, she wouldn't respond. She might not even emerge from her hiding place when someone started looking for her. She'd get into a lot of trouble for it later, of course, but that only made her try to burrow into even tighter and darker spaces.

Now, if Dad had come and called for her – well, Soapy would obviously appear then! But he didn't. Soapy hadn't seen him once since he left home.

Even worse, Mom and Grandma had already figured out all her hiding places and found her.

With a loud screech, the closet door swung open and Grandma's bad-tempered, wrinkly eyes pierced straight into the back corner – straight at Soapy.

"What are you doing? These clothes will get all wrinkled with you fooling around in here!" Soapy couldn't just turn off the tears immediately as she clambered out of the closet, her grandma's piercing stare following her every movement.

"You're a big girl already and here you are, blubbering all the time! Don't you go getting your mother sad, too – she's got it hard enough as it is!" Grandma scolded.

Soapy was shamefaced as she trudged past Grandma to go outside, her eyes locked on the ground in front of her.

Soapy blew a bubble the color of the safest hiding



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place imaginable, and went inside. In that bubble, Soapy, her mom, dad, and little brother had their very own home where they were free to be in whatever mood they found themselves in and never had to be afraid it might make anybody else's life harder.

Soapy's very own home was warm and bright and filled with lots of soft things she could curl up between to be alone with her sadness. At the same time, there was more than enough room for jumping around in joy or stretching out in pride or running around those soft things as she played.

In their very own home, Mom and Dad had made up and Dad moved back in and they all lived together again: Soapy, Mom, Dad, and her little brother. This made Soapy so happy that she skipped and twirled several circles around the room, squealing as she did – all around the nice soft things and Dad and Mom and her little brother! Soapy's brother ran around the room just like she did, right on her heels, and Mom looked like she was on the verge of lecturing: "No running around inside – you'll get everything all messy!" However, she didn't say anything – she just looked over at Dad, who laughed and said: "Let them have fun. Kids aren't couches that should sit still and be quiet, you know!"

Later, Soapy and Mom made oatmeal cookies. The whole family munched on them as they played Old Maid at the kitchen table. Soapy's little brother was nearly stuck with the Old Maid, but it ended up being in Dad's hand, who luckily didn't mind losing at all!

They wrote letters to Santa together to wrap up the day, because Christmas was coming soon and Santa wanted to know what presents boys and girls wanted. Soapy reckoned she'd never want any more presents ever again, because now, she had everything she truly wished for. Still, she gave it a little more thought and decided she'd actually like to get ice skates (and to learn how to use them), a gigantic stuffed animal (one just as big as her!), to be able to go to school already, and for the older neighbor-girl to play with her as well.

She listed all these things for Santa in big block letters, because she didn't know how to write in lowercase yet. Her little brother couldn't even write in big letters, so Mom wrote his wishes for him.

When they were finished, they folded the letters, put them in envelopes, and sealed them. Dad promised to drop them into a mailbox on his way to work the next morning. Soapy felt she just couldn't wait for Santa to come already!

Then, the bubble burst, so the little girl wasn't able to wait for Santa anymore inside of it. But at least she now knew what to write to him for real this year.

Translated by Adam Cullen