

Kimberly Newton Fusco

Chasing Augustus

By Kimberly Newton Fusco

1

My grandpa Harry says vinegar runs through my veins and I am too impatient for my own good.

He says I stomp around like a moose half the time and I am proud, prickly, and rude.

Also, I am thin as an eel and, come to think of it, not much better to look at, either.

Hornets whirl up in me when my grandpa talks like this, I can tell you that. I read in my encyclopedia of facts—The World Book of Unbelievable and Spectacular Things—that if you wanted to cuss someone out in the Middle Ages, you called him a clay-brained boar-pig, so that’s what I say to Harry.

“What?” he sputters. “Where in the name of Pete did you pick that up?”

I let my grandpa think about it as the afternoon train rumbles into town and shakes our skinny apartment beside the tracks. Grit from the sandpits sifts like sugar through the window screens. Harry swallows the last of his sardines and crackers with a big gulp of black coffee, pushes the newspaper away, and grabs his fishing hat. “Don’t you dare go anywhere on that old bike,” he growls. “I don’t care if school just let out for the summer. Thunder’s rolling in.”

When he stomps out, his gruff Marines voice marches right after him. He slams the door and the picture of me, my dog Augustus, and my papa flips on the floor. I pick it up, swipe off the grit. Of the three of us in that picture, I am the only one left.

I call Harry a loggerheaded maggot and about a thousand other cusswords as he walks up Main Street to the donut shop, which he took over after my papa’s stroke or else we would lose our shirts. I throw my report card in the trash and shove it to the bottom under all the coffee grounds. Then I rush in my room for my goggles and check the map of our town that I hung in the

Kimberly Newton Fusco

back of my closet, where Harry never goes. Each day I pick a new road to hunt for my dog, keeping track with a trail of stickpins.

Harry says you can't keep a big sloppy dog like Augustus in our skinny apartment, so it's best to forget him. A year is too long for a dog to remember a kid anyway—so put a lid on it.

My grandpa forgets how much you can love a dog or he would never say that. My dog slept on my bed and I fell asleep to his heart beating. He was the true-blue friend of my soul until that awful day my mum gave him away and flew back to California, where she is a lawyer now.

That's when I learned the true way of things: When you lose your dog, there's a hole in your heart as big as the sun. Your head aches all the time and you are so empty inside because you are half the girl you used to be.

For this reason, I swoop down our steep steps, past Eddie's Barbershop on the first floor (where there's always a bowl of M&M's waiting for me), and out onto Main Street, my goggles flapping and clapping behind me.

And I do not let the thunder inside Harry get in my way.

2

I call my bike the Blackbird.

It has one gear that works and rust spots the size of silver dollars and brakes that clamp only when they feel like it—but you don't really need to stop when you fly. You just need to land.

The Blackbird was my papa's bike when he was a boy, and the wire basket in the front is rusted through, the fenders are crunched, and the front wheel squeals and wobbles like an old washing machine off balance, but if you knew my papa, you'd keep fixing it, too. He had what is called a listening ear, and my bike does, too—you can tell the Blackbird anything when you ride and things start feeling better. Plus, it has a bell that sounds like an old goose honking, and folks tend to get out of your way.

I pull the Blackbird out of the toolshed behind our apartment building and lean it against the fence. Already the wind from the storm coming bends the thin maples on Main Street until they are looking at their feet. They could use a pep talk.

Kimberly Newton Fusco

I hurry with the worst wheel first—the front—but Harry’s old wrench won’t grab hold because I’ve tightened the nut so many times I stripped the threads. Each time I try, the wrench slips.

My head pounds. The wind sends grit from the sandpits pling-pling-pling into my face. Our neighbor Mrs. Salvatore rushes out to the clothesline and pulls a bleached sheet off and tosses it in her wicker basket. I am careful to keep my eyes straight on what I am doing without any wavering at all because Mrs. Salvatore has a sixth sense about things. She can smell something fishy the way an old hound dog can smell mackerel in a can. Just one whiff of something out of place and she’ll badger you until she gets to the bottom of things.

My headache roars. Grizzlies gnaw behind my eyes. I get the wrench to twist a quarter of a turn before it slips off.

“Rosalita!” Mrs. Salvatore yells, snapping sheets behind me.

I force the wrench, but I do it too hard and it slips again. God’s bones, I snort, which is another good cuss from the Middle Ages. My papa and I discovered this one when we read my World Book together, which has a full list. After that we made up our own—cow-pocked rogue (my papa’s), cockroach-breath (mine).

There is a loud crash in Mrs. Salvatore’s apartment and one of her foster girls screams at one of the boys for changing the channel, and since we live in such an old apartment building with rattling windows, thin walls, and hardly any insulation at all, you can hear everything—even when somebody pees.

Mrs. Salvatore yells, “You stop that, Francesca, you hear?” and when she catches me looking up, she snaps, “Night and day that girl is going to be the death of me. What did I ever do to the good God in heaven to deserve a girl like that?”

I don’t know. I have no idea why she keeps all these foster kids when she already raised a bunch of her own.

My head throbs. My World Book recommends ice for headaches, so I rub my brow with the plastic baggie I filled with cubes from Harry’s freezer.

Kimberly Newton Fusco

Another train rumbles in, shaking the toolshed, the apartment building, and the ground beneath my feet. I pinch my lips in a straight line, squeeze the wrench, and turn, but not too hard this time. This is not easy when your heart is a rubber band snapping back and forth and you are in such an awful rush to find your dog.

I breathe in, twisting the wrench very slowly, and—bingo—the nut turns, the wheel tightens. I breathe out.

There is still a little wobble, but that is bound to happen with a bike so old. My papa had me when he already had gray hair, and the Blackbird is no spring chicken, either. This is why Harry says it belongs in a museum.

I pull on the swimming goggles I snuck into my pocket at the Church of Our Risen Lord thrift shop. I am riding out by the sandpits today, one of the last places on my map without a stickpin, and without the goggles I couldn't see through the whirling grit. I strap on my helmet and wheel my bike across the yard.

The clothesline pulley screeches like an oiled pig. “Rosalita Gillespie, I want you to come over and meet my new foster boy, Philippe.”

When pigs fly.

I climb on my bike and test the gear lever, but it is stuck on third, the hardest to pedal, the one that forces me to stand when I ride uphill, and sometimes I even have to walk. I test the brakes, but the pads freeze before they clamp the wheel.

Mrs. Salvatore tells me how the new boy loves Monopoly, which I hate. God's bones. When she yells that my grandpa wouldn't want me going anywhere with this storm coming on, I shake my head and point to my helmet like I can't hear, but I can hear just fine and what I am really hearing is my dog's heart beating, I can tell you that.



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