

Kimberly Newton Fusco

Tending to Grace

By Kimberly Newton Fusco

1

We drive out Route 6 on a silent day at the end of May, my mother, the boyfriend and I. We pass villages with daisies at the doorsteps and laundry hung in soft rows of bleached white. I want to jump out of the car as it rushes along and wrap myself in a row of sheets hanging so low their feet tap the grass. I want to hide because my life, if it were a clothesline, would be the one with a sweater dangling by one sleeve, a blanket dragging in the mud, and a sock, unpaired and alone, tumbling to the road with the wind at its heel.

But I don't say anything as we head east.

My mother is a look-away.

2

My teacher is a look-away.

I am a bookworm, a bibliophile, a passionate lover of books. I know metaphor and active voice and poetic meter, and I understand that the difference between the right word and the almost right word, as Samuel Clemens said, is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

But I don't talk, so no one knows. All they see are the days I miss school, 35 one year, 27 the next, 42 the year after that. I am a silent red flag, waving to them, and they send me to their counselors and they ask me, "When are you going to talk about it, Cornelia?" I wrap myself into a ball and squish the feelings down to my toes and they don't know what to make of me so they send me back to this class where we get the watered-down *Tom Sawyer* with pages stripped of soul and sentences as straight and flat as a train track.

We read that the new boy in *Tom Sawyer* ran like a deer, while the kids in the honors class read he "turned tail and ran like an antelope."

I know, because I read that book, too.

Kimberly Newton Fusco

3

Sam finishes reading; Allison begins. Up one row and down another we go like a set of dominoes, each kid taking a turn at reading aloud and me waiting for my morning to collapse.

“It was Monday morning and Tom Sawyer was miserable,” Allison reads. “He was always miserable on Monday mornings because it meant he had to go to school.”

The copy of *Tom Sawyer* they use for this class sits open on my desk. The one Mark Twain wrote sits on my lap. I match paragraphs to keep my mind on something other than my approaching turn:

“Monday morning found Tom Sawyer miserable. Monday morning always found him so – because it began another week’s slow suffering in school.”

Allison finishes and Betsy begins. We read aloud in this class because the teacher doesn’t believe we read at home. And so I wait, my stomach rolling, a lost ship at sea. We may be reading *Tom Sawyer* for babies, but Betsy’s voice, as strong and supple as a dancer, hardly notices. She skips along the tops of passive verbs and flies over the adjectives and adverbs that stack and pile up like too many PlaySkool blocks. When Betsy finishes, the teacher looks over at me and her eyes widen just a bit.

“Cornelia, will you be reading today?” Her voice pitches too high, too singsong. Kids turn around. Everyone knows she gives no one else a choice.

I shake my head and look at my feet.

4

I am a shadow. I burrow deeper within myself and pray that if the other kids don’t see me, they won’t talk to me. I pretend I am the desk, the book, the pencil, and we all expect less of me each day. I try not to lose myself, but the shame of always looking at my feet beats me deeper and deeper into the earth, planting me as surely as my mother planted tulip bulbs one summer, facedown.

Excerpted from **Tending to Grace** by Kimberly Newton Fusco Copyright © 2004 by Kimberly Newton Fusco. Excerpted by permission of RH Childrens Books, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.