

Kimberly Newton Fusco

The Wonder of Charlie Anne

By Kimberly Newton Fusco

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Go do this, the new mama tells me, and I do it, just because.

Look in that cupboard because maybe there's something in there, maybe a mouse. Or maybe not, maybe it's just a shadow from that old pee pot in there, the new mama isn't sure. But I better do it, just because.

I know just because. Just because means I am a girl, and a girl needs to know about things, like keeping whites from colors in the washbucket and why you sweep before you mop, and about keeping your legs crossed all the time and how to rub a skinny little chest with Vicks while you're wiping a nose. Two things at once, that's what you do. Keep your cow from running in the road at the same time you're trying to get all these peas shelled for supper. And do be quiet while the new mama talks, on and on.

"You better listen when I'm talking because I'm not going to say it twice, Charlie Anne. Put on some beans, and why don't you mix up some biscuits, nice and high like your papa likes them, and how come these underpants aren't ironed right? They're rough as shingles. Don't you listen to a thing I say?"

I turn and look as far as I can see. No, ma'am. The new buttercups bloomed this morning. Can't you hear them? They are singing, and I can hear their tiny voices calling out to me, and the bees are buzzing inside that apple tree so loud I can hardly think about the laundry that still needs hanging.

But the loudest voice is the river that races right across our fields. It says, *Hurry, Charlie Anne, hurry*. It says it all the time.

This is how we got so many babies around here.

One morning when I am small I walk out to check on our cow, Anna May, and nestled up against her is a new little calf with eyes as dark as a full jar of molasses. I pull my milk stool over and sit and watch Anna May and how happy she is nuzzling her first baby calf and I get to thinking about how I would like to have little babies in the house for me to play with so I will have more than just Thomas, who is too old, and Ivy, who tells on me all the time. So I pray to the angels that they will bring my mama a baby. I pray awfully hard because Anna May's calf is so gosh darn cute and he just about splits my heart like an old melon and before I know it we have two babies in our house, split,

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splat. First Peter and then before I know it another baby, Birdie, who will not eat anything but biscuits, blackberry jam and lemon drops. Mama gets all tired and worn out from her new babies and she gets a cross look when I ask if she wants to go to our favorite spot by the river.

My prayers keep on strong as rock because, before I know it, there's another baby, the one who takes Mama straight to heaven as soon as she is born. I stop praying to the angels after that. Prayers are powerful things.

After lunch I stomp outside because the new mama says I have to go get all the laundry I just hung up. It is going to rain and I have to take it all down and hang it in the barn. I don't want to take down everything I already hung up. The sun will dry it all over again tomorrow, and besides, I want to go to the river, I tell her. I have already been doing chores since I woke up. The new mama tells me to get the laundry or else.

The new mama is the cousin Mirabel from two towns over. Papa did not ask her, she just showed up one day after the funeral with her suitcases, all strapped up tight, and her shoes that snap when she walks. After Mama left us, Papa walked around like a horse kicked him in the belly, so he did not say much when Mirabel told Peter and Birdie to move up to the attic with Ivy and me. Since Thomas was already fifteen, he could sleep in the barn. I asked why couldn't I do that. Why couldn't I sleep with Anna May and our chickens, Minnie and Olympia and Bea, instead of Peter, who still wets the bed.

Mirabel told me right then and there that I was going to learn some manners, or else. None of us like Mirabel, me especially. I think she has her eyes on Papa in a bad way.

I stomp outside.

Actually, I am afraid of me dying from all my chores. I reach up and check my heart. It is all skittering and I sit down on the clothes basket and let it rest. Mirabel tells me not to worry, I am strong as an ox. I hear the screen door bang, and before I know it, she is out on the porch with her hands on her hips yelling for me to help her with the lunch. I jump up and start pulling down all the laundry I already hung up, and when I do, I hear the river calling me again: *Hurry, Charlie Anne, hurry.*

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