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Opening extract from

The Daring Escape of Beatrice and Peabody

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Kimberly Newton Fusco

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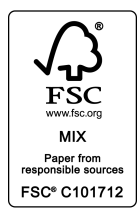
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1

The way I got the diamond on my face happened like this.

I was sleeping in the back of our hauling truck one night after Pauline shut down our hot dog cart and Ellis closed the merry-go-round and the Ferris wheel, and then, after every one of the stars had blinked out for the night so no one could see, that is when an angel came and kissed me on the cheek.

That is the way Pauline sees it.

Other folks say different things, like 'What a shame, what a shame.' I hear them when I am chopping onions and Pauline is frying hot dogs. 'Now there's a heavy load for a little slip of a thing to carry.' They make it sound like I am lugging coal.

I hear one lady tell her girl I must have done something horrid to be stained all over my face like that. Or maybe my mama is the one who did something awful, or maybe my daddy, and I am the one being punished.

'Stay away, stay away,' the big girls say. But they come up to our hot dog cart for a closer look. And they poke each other and whisper, as if I am not standing right in

front of them, 'Careful or you'll catch it,' like I have the flu. And the boys ask did I get burned all over my face, or am I marked by the Evil Eye, and they holler at each other: 'Run or you'll get it on you.'

But Pauline holds me and whispers they are not right. Otherwise, why would I have a beautiful jewel on my cheek the colour of a rose at dusk and they do not?

I do so like Pauline's way of looking at things.

2

When you have a diamond shining on your face, you have rules about things.

First, I keep it hidden. There is a hose outside every place where we hook up, because we need water to run our travelling show. Pauline and I keep a bucket and a sponge in the back of our hauling truck. Water from a hose is cold as cherry Popsicles but if you let the bucket sit in the sun all day it heats up and at night Pauline pours out her apple shampoo and we take turns washing our hair.

Pauline has a big towel and she wraps my hair and then combs it out and I don't yell out much because she is mostly gentle. Then she braids my hair and when it dries she lets it loose and it falls all soft in twists and curls and hides the diamond on my cheek. Because when you have a jewel on your face, some days you might not want to show everyone who feels like looking.

Second, I make sure I am always close to Pauline so when somebody comes up asking for hot dogs, I can turn my cheek toward her, where it is safe. I am always out of harm's way when I am near Pauline. I spoon onions and

sauerkraut on hot dogs and wrap everything in squares of wax paper, all the time keeping my cheek turned to her.

Third, I make Pauline buy lemons so I can squeeze the juice on my cheek before I go to bed. The lemon juice stings as it slides over my diamond, and sometimes I scrub a little. I have not noticed it working yet, but Pauline says keep trying because you never know how things will turn out. Life is just full of surprises.

3

Hot dogs are Pauline's job. We park our cart right between the merry-go-round making its *dee-dee-da-dee* racket and the Ferris wheel playing 'The Farmer in the Dell' so many times you start wondering if maybe the rat should eat the cat, just once. You really do.

Ellis runs our travelling show and says hot dogs make a lot of money when folks know they are there. So he wants us right where folks can see us and he makes Pauline and me paint the cart with red and white stripes every spring and hang balloons all over it until it is as bright as the sun on your face.

This is especially important since President Roosevelt declared war last December and young men are getting shipped overseas. This has got Ellis barking at everyone all the time. Business is dried up. Pauline fries up a whole crate less of hot dogs now, but children and mamas and grandmas and grandpas still buy a few, and they smother them with the onions I chop every day until my eyes hurt so much I am sure they are bleeding, and the tears are dripping down, rolling right over my diamond.

Those are my jobs. Chopping onions and lining up the

bottles of mustard and ketchup and scooping one tiny spoon of sugar into everyone's coffee because this spring sugar rationing started. Folks are greedy like pigs. They always want more. When you can't have something, you want it awful bad.

My other job is making sure there is enough celery salt, because somebody who likes celery salt gets in an awful tizzy if you do not have any left. They poke their finger at you and say what is the matter with you, girl, there is no celery salt, and I might get so bothered I could forget to keep my hair pulled tight across my cheek to hide my diamond.

We also serve honey buns. They are big and fat and we buy them from bakeries in long cardboard boxes. They are made with honey and corn syrup, not sugar, of course, and they sit like a flat tyre in your belly, but I love them. I eat them by the bucketload and Pauline wonders why I am still small as a chickadee. My job is to keep the honey buns beneath a little screen. They look nice under there and flies do not get at them. We do get a lot of pests around here.

My other job is to find me and Pauline a home. I told Pauline I would take over this job because she is not so good at it. She keeps forgetting what she is supposed to be doing. 'Pauline, look at that one with all the flower boxes,' I point out when we pull into Trenton, or into Springfield. 'Pauline, we would be so happy here. Look at

that swing on that front porch,' but she is always writing poems in one of her little notebooks and not paying attention. 'Oh, Bee, it's not so easy to leave.'

I don't know why. It would be easy as pie, one foot in front of the other. So I keep watching in each town we roll into, the whole caravan of us. I am always sitting up in the cab of the hauling truck between Bobby, who runs the Little Pig Race, and Pauline. I look out the window for our new home. I will know it when I see it.

4

The warning light inside me goes on and off, on and off, as soon as I hear the creeping around outside and the whispering. I am in the john doing my business. The hairs on my arms stick up. I hold my breath.

'I think she went in here,' says a low girl's voice.

'You're not sure?'

'I saw her coming this way but I didn't see where she went. You were the one who was supposed to be watching.'

'No, you were. I gave you one job and it was to watch her while I was getting a strawberry pop. And you messed it up, you little dummy.'

I hitch up my overalls and pull my legs up and wrap my arms around myself, making myself as small as I can without falling in.

'Kick it.'

'Me? I don't want to kick it. You kick it.'

'Oh, forget it, you baby,' and then there is a loud thump against the door. 'What you doing so long in there? Some of us have to go, you know.'

I hold my breath. I wonder how long the lock will hold. I think it is the two girls with the shined-up saddle shoes

who were watching me chop onions. I kept turning my cheek to Pauline, but they hopped from one end of the hot dog cart to the other, poking each other and giggling and asking me are there any onions on the hot dogs because they don't like onions and are there any pickles left and is there any new mustard because this one is all gone. I know what they were up to. They wanted to have themselves a look.

'Buy something or scat,' Pauline told them, waving her hot dog fork in angry circles.

There is more kicking and I whisper a little prayer the lock will hold. There are hushed voices and then somebody kicks on the door again.

'When you coming out?'

I don't answer. I pull my legs up tighter. I hold my breath deep inside my chest. I wait.

'We know it's you in there. Some of us want a turn, you know.'

'Maybe she's trying to scrub it off. Do you think she got burned?'

'No. Mama tells me when you have one of those you are born with it. Mamas want to cry when that happens.'

Do not, do not, do not. I pull my legs even closer to my chest.

'Will I get one?'

'No, I said you are *BORN WITH IT*. Why are you such a retard? If you don't have one by now, you're not going to get one.'

'Good, because I would just want to die if I looked like that.'

I reach up and touch the diamond on my cheek. I trace my finger along the place where my face ends and the mark begins. The girls are kicking again. They are kicking hard. The door buckles.

I pull my legs tighter and hide my face in my knees. My tears are sliding over my diamond.

'Hey, what's going on in here?' It is Pauline. Her voice is low and hard, mixed with the kind of dare you feel when you want to give somebody a taste of their own medicine.

'Forget it.'

'She's too ugly for us anyway.'

Am not, am not, am not.

'Get out of here, now. Bee? Bee, are you in there?' Pauline knocks on the door. 'Don't listen to them, Bee. Bee?'

I reach for the lock and unhook it. Slowly I open the door. And then I am up and I am in Pauline's arms. I let her hold me and I feel her breath on me and her heart beating. I smell the apple shampoo in her hair and I feel the aching in my heart. I know you should not judge a book by its cover, but most folks do. I am trembling and then the tears are rolling all over my diamond and I am wondering what to do about all that is wrong with me.

'Don't listen to them, Bee.' Pauline runs her fingers

through my curls. I wrap myself tighter around her and bury my face in her neck.

I won't, I won't, I won't.

It is a whisper only I can hear.