

Faith, Hope and Fiction

A Lighter Load

By Patricia Crisafulli

Augustine Swift wrote in her carefully slanted letters, each one as precise as the one before; the l's and f's rising to the same height, and the g's dipping no lower than the y's. It was the same handwriting she had used on the blackboard at Mason Junior High, where she taught social studies and English. The Revolution, the War between the States, Ivanhoe, Romeo & Juliet... She still remembered all the lessons, even eighteen years after her retirement.

She re-read what she had written, smiled with satisfaction to herself, and brought it over to Oscar, who was hunting and pecking on the keyboard with fingers that bent at the joints. A machinist by trade, his hands were once as steady as a surgeon's as he worked cutting tools and grinders; he could tell by eye differences measured in thirty-seconds and sixty-fourths.

A couple of relics, she thought tenderly, as she looked at Oscar, no longer the tall and handsome boy who had asked her to dance at the mixer in the church basement sixty-one years ago; his frame now stooped at the shoulder, and the brown hair had gone snowy white. She was no longer the petite girl of nineteen, who quite frankly had been a little frightened of the idea of a boy putting his hand at her waist as they danced together. Her sister had taught her the foxtrot

and the two-step, but never had she danced with a boy until Oscar. It had helped that he was as nervous as she.

“See what you think.” Augustine handed him the piece of paper.

Oscar pushed his glasses back in place and read Augustine’s words. A smile spread across his face. “A masterpiece, my girl,” he announced.

Augustine chuckled when he called her such things: my girl, my bride, my one-and-only. Fifty-nine years of being married to a man who still thought she was the prettiest girl at the dance kept roses in her cheeks. “People always like the ones that mention baby furniture, and we don’t have a stick of that,” she fretted.

“Can’t advertise what we don’t have to sell. This will do the trick.”

With her hand on his shoulder, Augustine read the words that Oscar typed slowly into the online classified ad form for the local newspaper: *Help us lighten our load. It’s time to let our treasures go—good furniture (like your mother used to have), china, bric-a-brac...*

“Is that a word?” Oscar paused on the last one.

“Of course it is.” Augustine patted his shoulder, *...and linens. Limited amount of outerwear and clothing. Saturday 9 to 5, Sunday 10 to 3 or until sold out, 127 Birch Lane.*

“We’re over the word count,” Augustine sighed.

“We’ll pay the extra.” Oscar hit the “finish” button at the bottom of the screen.

“Oh, Oscar, it’s cost of two ads. I wrote too much.”

“Well worth it. It’s a masterpiece, I tell you. I feel sorry for anybody else having a yard sale because everyone is coming here.”

Oscar typed in the credit card numbers that Augustine read and finished the form. “Now we’ve got two weeks.”

Day after day, Augustine walked through the house, sorting and tagging. Each time she’d put a small sticky note on a bookcase or chair, indicating she was willing to sell it, Oscar would ask, “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” she assured him. The pain of letting go was brief, and the feeling of freedom that followed was a powerful salve.

On the Friday night before the big yard sale, their grandson, Ernie, came by with his friend, Doug, to move the biggest pieces out of the house and into the garage. Oscar had parked their Toyota Corolla parked at the curb, and put the lawnmower behind the house with a “NOT for sale” sign on it. Now the garage was an empty space, waiting to be filled with everything Augustine had tagged.

Twenty-two and fresh out of college, Ernie was their favorite grandson if Augustine would have admitted to having such a thing. Not that they didn’t love all five of their grandchildren, and now three great-grandchildren, but there was just something about Ernie. He had his first job at a bank and a college sweetheart from Michigan named Doreen, who was getting her master’s degree in elementary education. They planned to marry the following year.

Augustine held the back screen door open as Ernie and Doug carried an empty china cabinet. “You sure you want to sell this, Grandma?” Ernie asked.

“Positive. I’ve owned it for fifty years, and I can’t take it with me.”

Ernie ran his arm across his sweaty forehead, mussing his short blond hair. “Don’t even say that, Grandma. You’re one of the youngest people I know.”

Augustine chuckled. “Help yourselves to something in the cooler. We have iced tea and soda, probably some bottled water, too, although I don’t know what’s so bad about drinking from the tap.”

“Me neither, Gram.” Ernie took a bottle of iced tea from the cooler and handed Doug a Pepsi. “So what’s next?”

“We’ll probably sell the china cabinet if we put the dining room table out, too,” Augustine told him.

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

By six the next morning, Oscar and Augustine were up and dressed, drinking their coffee outside where their possessions were spread out on long tables. Their son Bob promised to come by later to see how things were going, but he had a golf tournament at the club where he belonged. Their daughter Penny had called from Atlanta the night before, saying they should have waited until she could come up to help them. Augustine thanked her kindly, but knew that waiting for Penny was like waiting for spring; there was always a delay.

By seven-thirty, Ernie came by with Doreen, bringing bagels and doughnuts.

“Who’s going to eat all this?” Augustine exclaimed.

Oscar lifted the lid and extracted a chocolate doughnut with sprinkles.

“Looks like you are, Gramps,” Ernie replied as he elbowed his grandfather playfully.

Augustine looked over at them from the “everything one dollar” table. Standing there, Ernie could have been the younger version of his grandfather.

“Can I help you with something?”

Augustine turned and found Doreen behind her. “I put all the little things here.” She pointed to an egg timer, a cheese grater, and a set of new wooden spoons still tied with the ribbon they came with when she received them as a grab bag gift at the senior center Christmas party last year.

“Why don’t we put some of these colored dots on them to show that they belong on this table—you know, just in case things get moved around?” Doreen took four pages of stickers from her purse. “I saw these at the stationery store and thought they might come in handy.”

“That’s a marvelous idea!” Augustine watched as Doreen dotted everything with the little round stickers, thinking what a wonderful teacher she’d make—and a good wife for Ernie, too.

At quarter to nine, the first cars pulled up, and the dining room set was the first to go to a young couple who had just bought their first house. “We put all our money on the down payment. We’ve been sitting on milk crates,” the young man said.

Augustine scurried over to a bookshelf where she had a silk arrangement in a pretty china bowl marked \$6. She gave it to the young woman to put on the table. “My gift,” Augustine told her.

The TV tables, four boxes of books, and a reading lamp went next, and then the bookshelf was angled into a minivan. At noon, Oscar sent Ernie in to get the extra TV, and at three o’clock, they let another young couple into the house to look at the bedroom set in the guest room. The furniture sold on the spot; the couple promised to pick it up the next day.

At four o’clock, their son, Bob, stopped by and inquired how the sale was going.

“Like it was a land office,” Oscar assured him.

Bob fingered a price tag. “You could probably charge more. This is good stuff.”

“Your mother took good care of everything, but there is no getting around that it’s old—like us.”

“Hey, Dad,” Ernie piped up as he carried a potted plant for a woman.

“They got you working here?” Bob laughed. “Make sure you get minimum wage.”

“Oh, we’ll take care of him.” Oscar winked at Ernie.

Ernie set the plant on the floor of the back seat of a car at the curb. “I don’t want anything. This is more fun than work. You should see all that we’ve sold.”

“Yeah? Like what.” Bob pushed his golf hat back from his forehead.

“Just old odds and ends,” Oscar assured him. “You know what they say about one man’s trash.”

At five o’clock, as the last of the shoppers lingered, Bob said he had better be getting home. At six, as Doreen and Augustine started packing up the smaller things, Ernie suggested they go out for pizza. “My treat,” he insisted.

Augustine protested, saying she could put a meal together for the four of them.

Oscar wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “We’re going on a double-date, so get your saddle shoes on.”

“Oh, listen to you, as if I ever wore saddle shoes.”

“You had a pair, as I recall.”

“They were my sister’s, and I only borrowed them that time we went on that picnic.”

Augustine turned to Doreen to explain. “We didn’t wear sneakers back then. You had flat shoes and heels, and I certainly wasn’t going to wear my good pumps to a picnic.”

“Go get yourself ready, because the men are starving.” Oscar stood next to Ernie, arms folded across his chest. Augustine felt a lump in her throat as she looked at her husband, thinking fifty years had fallen away.

Augustine ran a comb through her short gray hair and put on a fresh coat of lipstick. She heard a soft step down the hall.

“You’re not too tired, are you?” Doreen asked gently. “This was a lot of work today.”

“Not at all,” Augustine assured her with words that were more energetic than she felt. “Besides, Oscar and I haven’t been out like this since Mother’s Day.”

The little pizzeria across town was a favorite with the college crowd. The music was loud and the light was dim. Ernie asked the waitress for the quietest table. She led them to a booth in the back.

“They have chicken parmesan,” Augustine pointed to the menu, which she turned toward Oscar. “You like that.”

“Ernie says the pizza here is the best in town.”

They ordered an extra large with sausage and mushrooms, with a soda for Doreen, who was driving, beer for Oscar and Ernie, and a glass of wine to which Augustine had reluctantly agreed at her husband’s insistence. They left full and tired, and reminded each other that they didn’t have to start quite so early the next day.

They didn’t stir until almost eight o’clock the next morning, and even though Augustine said they could still get to church at eight-thirty if they hurried, Oscar rolled over and told her the Good Lord knew when a man was tired. At nine, they were dressed and downstairs when Ernie and Doreen came with a feast from the gourmet deli in town: a cheese plate with fancy crackers,

diced fruit, and slices of roast turkey and cold ham. They could nibble all day, Ernie assured them, taking the first bite. Oscar followed suit.

The morning clouds that had threatened rain departed by nine-thirty, and ushered in a day in the mid-seventies with a steady breeze. Oscar put out the extra garden hose for sale and even the lawn chair he had been sitting on. When a family inquired about furniture, Oscar explained that they had sold most of everything the day before. Seeing their disappointment, Augustine suggested that he let them inside and look around.

“You’re sure?” Oscar asked. “Our house is going to be pretty empty.”

“Isn’t that the point?” Augustine replied. “It’s time, Oscar. Otherwise, we’ll never go.”

The living room furniture went out the door and into two pickup trucks.

“I didn’t know you guys were going to sell just about everything,” Ernie said cautiously.

“We need to lighten the load,” Oscar explained. “We’ve got too much and some folks don’t have enough. They need a bargain, and we want to clean house.”

“But where are you going to sit?” Doreen asked.

Oscar winked at Augustine. “Shall we tell them?”

“Why not?”

Oscar brought a brochure outside and spread it on an empty space across the “everything one dollar” table. It was an RV, a smaller model, with a tiny kitchen, a combination eating area and living room, and a slide-out platform bed. “Took a test drive and loved it,” Oscar said.

“So you’re going to live here?” Ernie pointed to the brochure.

“No, we’re going to live here.” Oscar jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Least until a grandson I know gets married and maybe wants to buy the house for a pretty good deal.” He winked at Doreen.

“Wow, Gramps, I don’t know what to say. What about the other kids?”

“Oh, fair is fair, and we’ll make sure everything comes out even. But you’re the only one who lives here.”

By the end of the day, they had sold most of everything. What was left behind would be donated. Doreen and Ernie offered to take them out for dinner, but Augustine said she was too tired to budge. They made sandwiches and sat on the stools at the kitchen counter, with a completely empty dining room behind them.

“So when are you getting this RV?” Ernie asked.

“Probably next weekend or so,” Oscar replied.

“Can I come along to check it out?”

“That you can.”

Later that night, the house echoed strangely as Augustine walked down the hall from the master bedroom in her nightgown and robe, her hair damp from the shower. Suddenly the emptiness frightened her with a sense of foreboding.

Oscar sat on one of two chairs that they’d kept, watching the small television in the kitchen. When he looked up, Augustine tried to rearrange her expression, but knew it was too late to fool his keen perception.

“What’s wrong?” Oscar asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Augustine forced a little laugh.

“Now, listen, my bride. You know and I know that something is wrong, only you know what it is and I don’t. So why don’t you just tell me.” Oscar clicked the TV off.

Augustine ran her hands up and down the sleeves of her robe as if trying to get warm.

“Oscar, does this mean we’re going to die?”

He reached for her hand and pulled her on his lap just like he'd done when they were going steady and they sat in the back of Oscar's brother's car when six of them piled in to go to the movies. "No, it does not. It means we're going to live. I figure we have at least one or two more adventures in us before we have to settle down."

Augustine rested her head on his shoulder. "Life is better with a lighter load."

"That's a fact, my girl," Oscar agreed. "That is a fact."