

Dizzy Fantastic

and Her Flying Bicycle



by Andy Hueller

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DO NOT DISTURB

THE ANGRY

RED BEES!

THIS IS NOT

YOUR LAWN

STAY OFF!

PASS QUIETLY AT

YOUR OWN RISK.

★ ★ ONE ★ ★

Easy, T-Rex. Easy, boy.”

Debbie felt the dog’s wet nose and hot breath on her calf, and she pushed down harder on her bike pedal. The canine beast growled behind her, his tags tinkling menacingly, his big paws thumping.

“Easy, T-Rex,” Debbie said again. “Easy, boy.”

But the slobbering dog kept after her.

All Debbie had going for her was her bike—the shining white Thunderstrike her parents had given her for her birthday over the summer. Since then, she’d gone everywhere on the bike. Up the hill to school five days a week. Over eighteen blocks to Cone On In! Ice Cream Parlor for a scoop of peppermint bon-bon and to say hello to her parents, who owned the little shop. Down (*thunk! thunk! thunk!*) Plaintown’s tall, twisting, cement staircase. Past the Costellos’ elaborate and trellised front garden—marvelous mysteries surely waiting inside. And past Mean Mr. Wilson’s front curb on the way to school. Mr. Wilson had a sign out front that said, “THIS IS NOT YOUR LAWN. STAY OFF.” Another sign, closer to the front porch, said, “PASS QUIETLY AT YOUR OWN RISK. DO NOT DISTURB THE ANGRY RED BEES.” There was always a buzzing noise coming from the screened-in porch, and under the porch door there was a red glow. Of course, Mr. Wilson didn’t need the signs or the bees; he had tethered T-Rex the Slobbering, Growling, Murderous Dog to the front step. Whenever Debbie rolled by, she would turn to read Mr. Wilson’s strange signs. She couldn’t help it. And that’s when T-Rex would rise from his water bowl and pounce. The green rope connecting him to the front

stoop would go taut and yank him back into the yard, away from the curb. Debbie thanked her lucky stars every day for the green rope that tethered T-Rex to the house and kept him away from her.

The tether had worked every day for as long as Debbie could remember. Until this afternoon. This afternoon, as Debbie rode by, T-Rex rose, pounced, and— *snap!*—the line broke. He bounded after her, looking to tackle and kill, like how the lions tackled the gazelles in that video the substitute teacher had shown them.

“Easy, boy.” It was the only thing she could think to say.

All she could do was pedal—harder and harder. Debbie was four blocks from her house at the bottom of the hill. Usually she took her feet off the pedals, rested them on the frame of her bike, and glided down to her home. But usually she didn’t have the town’s biggest dog slobbering after her, fangs bared.

So downhill she pedaled, willing her bike to go faster and faster. Soon she’d need to slow down to make the left turn onto her street, then another left into her driveway. By then, she would need to create enough distance between her and T-Rex so that she could get off her bike and sprint into her house before he caught and devoured her. She thought again of the lions from the video. Those poor gazelles.

She flew by the Costellos’ garden on her left. She was almost home.

She pedaled harder. She was going faster than ever before.

She looked behind her and saw T-Rex inches from her bike’s back wheel, claws and fangs leading the way. Debbie whipped her head around and burrowed her forehead into her Thunderstrike’s pink handlebar cushion. “Faster,” she said. “Come on—*faster!*” She felt the great strain on her calves and hamstrings but kept pedaling.

She somehow pushed down even harder on the pedals. Faster and faster her Thunderstrike bike went, with Debbie pedaling with all her might.

When she looked back up, she was, to her great horror, heading straight for the curb at the bottom of the hill. Debbie had overshot her house and was only moments away from crashing into her across-the-street neighbor’s front door!

She was going so fast, trying to stop her bike would have been pointless. Not that she’d want to with T-Rex right behind her. She didn’t know what to do, so she closed her eyes and kept pedaling. It’s what felt right. If she

was going to die today, splatting into the neighbor's house was a better option than being torn apart by a rabid dog.

She kept pedaling, pedaling, pedaling. She didn't dare open her eyes.

Ten seconds later, still pedaling, she thought, *Shouldn't I have hit the house by now? Shouldn't I be, like, dead?* She cracked one eye open—and she didn't see a house. Instead, she saw blue. Nothing but blue.

She opened up her other eye. More blue. Confused, she looked behind her. Even more blue.

She looked down. There, she saw the roof of her house on the corner. And across the street was the roof of the neighbor's house she should have run into. And in front of the neighbor's house, way down below, was T-Rex. He was small down there, but she could see that he was jumping up and down. She thought she heard his faint barking.

Debbie Fine, fourth grader, had flown on a flying bicycle over the neighbor's house.

★★ TWO ★★

An hour later, Debbie was sitting in her bedroom. She was trying sunglasses and capes she'd cut out of old T-shirts on one of her Barbies. "Dangerous Debbie," she said. "Debbie Danger. Danger Girl. Biker Girl. Miss Thunderstrike. The Flying Cyclist."

Debbie just couldn't think of a good superhero name for herself. Truthfully, she didn't even know if she was a superhero. What did it take to be a superhero? Did having a flying bike make her one?

She decided she'd better consult an expert.

★★ ★★

Her older brother's room was the next door down. Debbie heard noise coming from inside. Music and people talking. She pushed the door open and found James sitting in an armchair. Only his curly hair could be seen over the back of the armchair.

"Mmm," her brother moaned. He was in sixth grade, two grades ahead of her, and he was always too busy to talk to her.

"James, can I come in?"

"Mmm," he moaned again.

Over the armchair, Debbie could see a movie playing on the black-and-white TV against the back wall. It could have been *Spider-Man* or *Spider-Man 2*. Debbie had never paid close enough attention when they watched movies with her parents. On movie nights in the Fine household, she

always dragged the Barbie house her grandfather built for her mother out to the family room and kept busy staging scenarios: Barbie's friends coming over for dance parties or the whole gang hanging out in the pool, which was a small wooden drawer Debbie filled at the kitchen faucet. Sitting in her family's cramped living room, she couldn't help feeling a bit jealous of Barbie, her many friends, and her luxurious mansion with a pool.

"James, I have a question," Debbie said, entering his bedroom.

James didn't acknowledge her at first. She tried to wait patiently. She watched him glance up at the TV and then return his attention to the comic book he held in front of him. Debbie saw pictures of gray and blue and yellow and maroon costumed characters punching and jumping and kicking in the pages of her brother's comic book. She recognized the music now too: It was the *Superman* soundtrack he'd gotten for his birthday when she got her bike. Neither of their birthdays were actually in the summer—his was in September, hers in February—but their parents hadn't had the money to buy them presents in the fall or winter. Business at the ice cream shop was always a little better in the summer, so that's when James and Debbie got their birthday presents.

"James!" she tried again. This time he turned around.

"Whattaya want, Debbie?"

Debbie composed herself. Her question might give James a heart attack. "I want to know, like, what a superhero is. I mean, what makes someone a superhero?"

Five full seconds of silence.

Finally: "What do you care?" James asked.

"I—I just do, okay? So can you tell me?"

James kept reading his comic book. Debbie didn't understand how he could do this—watch and read and talk and listen to music at the same time. By now he had a lot of practice, at least. This was how their conversations in his room always went. Now he said, "Fine. A superhero is someone who can do out of the ordinary things. You know, like fly—"

"Fly?" Debbie muttered. "I thought so."

"Yeah, fly. Or breathe under water or be in more than one place at the same time."

Kind of like Mom, Debbie thought. That's what everyone's always saying about her. That she's in a thousand places at the same time—working with Dad

at the shop, bringing James to Brad Bemon's house, cooking dinner—

“Plus, a superhero's got to protect some people or some place,” James continued, “like a city.”

Debbie didn't know who she could ever protect. Her Barbies? She thought she'd better change the subject. “Well, what's a good name for a superhero?”

“There's lots of them.” His attention dropped to the comic book. “Wolverine, Cyclops, Dr. X.” He looked up at the movie playing on his black-and-white TV. “Spider-Man. Superman. Anything with ‘man’ in it seems to work.”

“So what if I was a superhero? What would you call me?”

“What?” James asked.

“What would you call me if I was a superhero?”

“You could never be a superhero.”

“Why not?”

“First off,” James said, facing the TV as Spider-Man swooped low, swinging on a web, “you're only in fourth grade. And you're a girl.”

“There aren't any girl superheroes?”

“Only lame ones. Now get out of here, Debbie. All of your questions are making me dizzy.” Without looking away from his comic book, he snagged a pillow off his bed and chucked it over his shoulder at his sister. She stepped to the left as it flipped past her through the doorway and settled on the hallway carpet.

Dizzy? Debbie thought. *I like that. Dizzy.*

★ ✨ ★ ✨

Debbie plopped down on her bed and thought about what it had been like to fly that afternoon. She hadn't been up there long—just enough time to figure out that she could go faster by pedaling harder, turn using the handlebars, go up when she leaned back, and down when she leaned forward. After a minute or so of basking in the sun way up there and relishing the sight of T-Rex barking like mad, she'd angled her Thunderstrike bike down to her driveway, parked it in the garage, and run into her house before the rabid dog still across the street knew what had

happened. A part of her wished now that she'd flown around a bit more, so she could really feel the exhilaration of defying gravity. But she'd been too afraid someone would see her and tell her to come down or scream or call her parents. And that wouldn't do. No—this was something she wanted to do on her own terms. That's what appealed to her about being a superhero: if she wore a costume, who she was would be her secret.

The last thing she wanted to do was tell anyone about flying high in the air on a bicycle. Not even Diana, her always well-dressed and forever popular imaginary twin sister. The school counselor, Tabby, told Debbie she'd hung onto Diana for too long. Debbie knew Tabby was right. School was hard without friends. No one ever said hi to her when she got to school. No one wanted to be her partner during activities or group projects. Not that she could blame them. She was always daydreaming in school, and she never knew what she was supposed to be doing. Some of her peers were meaner than others, though.

Tony Tompkins and Richie Riggles said she was chubby. Alexis Alden and Nicole Nelson made fun of her clothes, which usually came as gifts from her relatives. Her bangs, cut straight across by her mother, didn't help her fit in either. Alexis Alden and Nicole Nelson looked like Debbie's Barbies—thin, with form-fitting jeans, sparkly flat shoes, and trendy tops. They were the only fourth-graders who wore eyeliner and blush to school.

A knock on her bedroom door pulled Debbie from her thoughts. "James?" she called. Her brother rarely knocked before entering.

"It's me, sweetheart." Oh, it was her dad—home late, as usual. Most nights he stayed at Cone On In! well after closing going over the books, taking inventory, and preparing for the next day. Making a living as the owners of a small ice cream parlor would have been hard enough. And then Dairy Queen opened on the same block only four months after Cone On In! welcomed its first customers. By the time DQ announced it was moving in, the Fines had already bought their property, had nearly finished painting it, and certainly couldn't afford to shift plans. "I would have switched it to a tool shop," Debbie's dad liked to say. "Oh, Nuts! always appealed to me as a store name. Heck—that's what we call our praline pecan. But when it comes to fixing things, I can't tell a whatchamacallit from a thingamajig."

Still lying on her bed, Debbie said, "Come in, Dad."

Dennis Fine was a short, squat, round-shouldered man with tufts of hair on the sides of his head and none on top. Like his daughter, Debbie, he had wide feet. Really, all the Fines had the same build. They were healthy, active people, but they were also, according to Dennis, “soft and stout like marshmallows, and everybody loves marshmallows—Rocky Road is one of our most popular flavors.” He often said that he in particular looked the way he did because he had the weight of the world—or at least a small business and a precious family—on his shoulders. And yet, in spite of the money problems he and his family faced, Dennis Fine always had a gleam in his eyes.

“Whatcha doing, sweetheart?” Debbie’s dad asked her.

“I guess I was lost to the world again,” she said.

“Ah, yes,” her dad replied with a smile. “And how is the World According to Debbie these days?”

“Fine, Dad.”

“Full of ponies and princesses and rainbows. That’s what girls like these days, right?”

Debbie grinned at her father.

“All right, all right. I was just making the rounds to see if you and your brother were up for a game of Jenga with the family.” Jenga was the Fine family’s favorite game. “But I can tell you’re busy. I’ll just say hi and good-night.”

“You too.”

Debbie’s dad began to close the door and leave. Before closing it all the way, though, he popped his head in and said, “You’re fantastic, Debbie. You know that?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she replied.

After he left, though, the word wouldn’t go away. *Fantastic*, Debbie thought. *Fantastic*. She looked down at her carpeted floor and saw her Barbie with the sunglasses and cape.

“Fantastic Debbie,” she said, leaning off her bed and plucking the Barbie off the floor. “Debbie the Fantastic. Fantastic Dizzy,” she added, remembering her brother’s word.

And then she had it.

“From now on,” she said, “they’ll need to keep the skies clear for . . . for Dizzy Fantastic!”

★★★ THREE ★★★

Of course, nobody else would call her Dizzy Fantastic. Nobody else knew Dizzy Fantastic existed. In school, two boys had a different name for her.

“Chubby Debbie needs to go to the bathroom again,” Richie Riggles taunted. Tony Tompkins laughed. She had raised her hand and asked for the hall pass. It was the fourth time she’d asked that morning.

“We know she’s not going to put on any makeup,” Alexis Alden said to Nicole Nelson. “I don’t think she even knows what makeup is.” The popular girls’ faces were painted prettily, and they had matching shoulder-length haircuts.

“Yeah, but she really should change her clothes. What is that—a cow on her sweatshirt?” Nicole said. Nicole wore a stretchy purple v-necked shirt. Alexis’s shirt was similar but blue.

“It’s a moose,” Debbie said, looking down at her sweatshirt and pointing to the illustration. “It has antlers.” The girls looked at each other and giggled.

“I like your shirts better than mine too,” Debbie said. She felt bad after she said it. Her Aunt Laura had given her the moose sweatshirt.

“That’s enough—all of you,” said Ms. Pawn. “Of course you may have the hall pass, Debbie.” She followed Debbie as she left the classroom. She said to her student in a low voice, “Is everything all right, dear? You’ve left the classroom on several occasions already.”

“I—I’m fine, Ms. Pawn. I just need to use the bathroom.” Debbie hated lying and almost never did it, but she didn’t know what else to tell her

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