

A black and white illustration of a young boy with dark, curly hair, wearing a hoodie and pants, sitting on a dog. The boy is looking back over his shoulder with a surprised expression. The dog is a medium-sized breed, possibly a pit bull mix, and is lying down. The illustration is positioned behind the title text.

**AT THE SPEED OF
GUS**

Richard
Scrimger

Cover illustration by Terry Wong

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604 King Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1E1, Canada

Scholastic Inc.

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Scholastic Australia Pty Limited

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“Whatever lifts the corners of your mouth, trust that.”

— Rumi

“You’re only given a little spark of madness. If you lose that, you’re nothing.”

— Robin Williams



FIRST CHAPTER?

My problem is, I don't know where to start. Even a simple story begins somewhere else. Even a nursery rhyme.

*I'm a little teapot
Short and stout.
Here is my handle,
Here is my spout.*

So, how long have you felt like this? When did you first notice? Were you drinking tea at the time? Have you spoken to anyone about it? Body image is a common concern, but most people don't think they're pots. And don't even get me started on *Hey diddle diddle*.

Or take this story — the one I'm telling now. Where to start? It happened to me, but I wouldn't be here at all without my parents and grandparents. And they wouldn't have been around without theirs.

And so on all the way back to cave dwellers and wizards and dinosaurs.

Last week I lost the basketball game for our school. I could start there. But I only went out for the basketball team because Dr. Basinski said I needed to find a focus for my energy. And I only started talking to Dr. B when Zayan Malik called Gale a name and I jumped on him and got suspended from school for a week. And *that* only happened because Gayle got armpit hair before I did and started calling himself Gale. And that was last year. Who wants to start a story so far back? It'd take forever to get to the principal's office, where I am now. No, I'm not in trouble again. Zayan probably still hates me, but he moved away. He lives in Toronto now, four provinces over. And no one else is dumb enough to call Gale names. I'm in the office because it's almost time for morning announcements. I'm supposed to be here.

You know what I'd *really* like — if I could start this story in the future. Like next year, when I go to high school, or in ten years when I'm piloting my own flying car. *Oh, lele!* as my dedo says. How cool would that be?

It's five p.m., a cold November afternoon in Vancouver, city of broken promises and broken finger-

nails. Gus Constantine, Ace Private Eye, is late for his rendezvous with Claudia "The Crutch" Clutterbucket. His jet black aero-Mercedes hovers outside her 148th floor condo.

That's me, by the way. Gus is what my parents called me. Constantine is what the government called my dedo when he came over from Macedonia. Dedo is grampa in Macedonian. And *lele* is my dedo's favourite exclamation. It means *wow* or *holy cow*. I use it because it reminds me of Dedo, who was the first person I remember laughing at one of my jokes. *Gus is much funny*, he told Mom. She sighed.

Sorry, I got distracted away from starting this story. Dr. Basinski says I get distracted because I see things in more than one way. Like, when I see a baby, I don't just think: cute. I see the baby from front and back and inside and out and before and after. Sure she's cute, but she's also stinky. Like a buffalo — that's how stinky. And she's wiggly like a bug. And loud like a siren. And wasn't she a bump in her mom's stomach just last month? That's how I think of the baby from the moment I see her. I think: cute-buffalo-stinky-bug-siren-Mom-bump.

I can't help myself. It's a twitch. My brain twitches in my skull. Like Tabitha Twitchit. Or the Wicked

Twitch of the West. Twitch and shout? Twitch way did he go? Ha, ha.

Ha, ha yourself. No one's going to know who Tabitha Twitchit is.

Really? No one?

No one.

Yeah, I talk to myself. Lots of people talk to themselves. My problem is that sometimes I answer.

Why is that a problem?

And when I get distracted, I drift. That's what Dr. Basinski says. *Your mind moves fast, Gus, but doesn't brake or steer well.* I asked did she think I was like a rocket, or a sled or a tricycle? And did she mean I was really smart or really dim? And she said . . . I forget what she said. Which is another problem.

It's busy, being me. And breathless. And distracting. You have to pay attention, don't you? But imagine — try to imagine — how much attention I have to pay. You're just reading this story. I'm living it.

I guess I've already started. So here I am, Gus Constantine, thirteen years young, with curly dark hair and eyes. I mean my eyes are dark — they're not curly. And I forget things because of my attention span. Dr Basinski has a lot to say about my attention

span. I can't remember it all because I stop listening to her and start to think about something more interesting.

So here I am at 9:08, sitting in a hard chair in the main office of my school, listening to Miss Funn the secretary — yes that's her name, easy jokes there because she has approximately zero sense of humour — answer the phone.

I don't know about attention deficit. Dr. Basinski says I have one. Maybe she knows more about me than I do. I'm me, but she's a doctor. It says so on her door.

The phone rings.

"Pendrell Elementary, *howww* may I help you?"

Miss Funn answers exactly the same way every time: "Pendrell Elementary, *howww* may I help you?" No pause between words, same up-and-down tone, same amount of stretch on the *howww*. I find myself murmuring along, imitating her. I'm getting the timing. Soon I'll have her down pat.

I've always wondered about that expression. Down pat. Does it come from patting something down, like pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man?

Hey that's sexist. Why can't it be baker's woman?

Because nothing rhymes with woman.

Or baker's person?

How is the next line going to go? Bake me a cake before things get worsen?

Or was there someone named Pat who was a good mimic? I'm a pretty good mimic. I'm getting Miss Funn's rhythm here. Maybe if I get really famous, they'll change the expression. People will say they have something down gus.

The phone rings again.

"Pendrell Elementary, *howww* may I help you?"

Nailed it. We say it together exactly.

Miss Funn stares at me. Not amused.

"One moment, please," she says, and pushes some buttons on the phone.

The bell rings. 9:10. Mrs. Gorby comes in from her office, carrying a sheet of paper with today's announcements. She's almost as thin as the piece of paper. When she turns sideways, she's hardly there except for her glasses. She walks over to the far wall and presses the button beside the PA system. The intro to the national anthem starts. Miss Funn stands up right away, straightens her shoulders. I slouch farther down in my chair.

Miss Funn glares. Opens her mouth wide. Sings loudly, right at me.

O Canada. Our home and native land.

She aims the words at me like they're arrows.

Mrs. Gorby shoots me with her finger and mouths, *Get up*. She likes you to follow rules, and the rules say you stand for the anthem. I struggle to my feet. I'm not mad at Canada. But doing something just because it's a rule makes me go *blugh*.

I've had this discussion with Gale, who says it's about respect. I don't know. Respect isn't something you get by insisting. Not from me anyway. Canada doesn't care if I sit down for the anthem. Canada is bigger than that. Am I going to snap to attention every time I see our flag? What about all the other countries' flags? What about the flags on golf greens? Racecourses? Used car lots? What about Six Flags? Are they all worth respect? What about flagpoles, flagships, flagstones, flagrant offences? Imagine stealing a flag while the store clerk is watching.

When the anthem's over — Miss Funn sings loudly all the way through, every one of the standing on guard for thees — Gorby hands me the sheet of paper and speaks into the mic hooked up to the PA system.

"Good morning, Pendrell Elementary. Here, with today's announcements, is Gus Constantine."