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Collecting

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Collecting

The wood from the carousel kit took a long time coming. While Nicky waited, Shane walked her two blocks away from his gravel yard to the house lightning had struck. All that was left on the hill was debris, the concrete foundation, and the charred, curving stairs.

The day before she had found a gold-tassel earring on the bottom step. Now she carried it in a black case. Climbing the stairs, she let the case knock against her knees so she could hear the contents rattling on the inside.

Leaning against the maple tree, Shane waved to her when she reached the top. She didn't wave back. Today was her ninth birthday, and she was waiting for her present. The week before Shane had promised the carousel. She didn't want him to build it, would rather spend her time studying what remained of the burnt house. If she listened long enough, she could hear the ashes scattering over the concrete.

She stood perfectly still for a moment to watch the bright space between his front teeth glinting like a diamond stolen from her mother's necklace. Holding the case over her head, she shook it furiously in the air. She heard a pearl bouncing over the scissors inside.

She was tired of Shane following her to the edge of the ruined house. He was twenty-nine, her father's son but too old to be her brother. He refused to climb the stairs or even set foot on the foundation. He brought along a knife to carve a circle into the maple tree.

"A pregnant lady used to live here before the big storm," Shane called up.

Nicky wasn't surprised to hear the lady was gone. Nicky's parents had also been taken by a storm while driving down the highway, but their house had survived. Shane sold it a week ago. Inside the black case, secrets of their old house remained.

When Nicky held the case close to her head and shook it, she heard the lady's tassel-chain earring drizzling into her father's shot glass inside. The day before Nicky had found the keyhole of an old

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doorknob. Today, the keyhole jangled inside her case like a coin hitting the side of a fountain.

She could see birds landing on the lower housetops. A squirrel jumped onto the chimney of Shane's roof and was frightened away by a crow's circling shadow. Now that Shane was the one who took care of her, she had moved into his painted-wood house. She thought she had stayed with him for at least a month. But in his dingy neighborhood, the days passed by so slowly she couldn't be sure. Nicky looked down at her feet as the crow landed. She saw the gilded handle of a teacup. When Shane wasn't looking, she picked it up, slipping the handle into her pocket.



Nicky kept the silver latch clamped and hung the key from the gold string around her neck like a common charm. At night, she slept with the case clutched in her arms and the blanket draped over the peeling leather.

If she ever had to open the case to add to her collection, she unlatched it in the dark. She hadn't looked inside since she left the land her parents used to live on. She didn't need to. She could see everything in the case with her eyes shut just like she could still see the land unfolding on either side of the river. The sound of the keyhole clacking against her father's glasses assured her everything was still in its place.

The case had belonged to her mother, who threw it away because the red velvet on the inside was wearing back, leaving behind patches of dirty gauze. Round as the dial of the cuckoo clock at the old house, the case had once been trusted to hold her mother's famous jewelry. Now it contained items much more rare. Nicky decided to keep the contents a secret until she was a very old woman.

She never went anywhere without it. As she walked, she heard the contents rolling over the gauze: a gold screw knocking against the white top of a glass flower. In the bathroom, she laid the case beside the old tub and heard a single bead hit the blue bottle filled with water taken from the river on the land her parents used to own.

Like the soap bars in the sink, the case smelled of her mother's dresses. It once sat on top of the wardrobe in her parents' bedroom.

When her mother unlocked the wardrobe doors, her skirts bellowed like carnations strewn upside-down across the floor.

Nicky scraped her fingernails on the lock and heard her mother graze the mirror with the tiny key she held between her thumb and forefinger. She remembered her mother lifting the lid of the case, the shadow of her gloved hands falling dark over the jewels.

The case had been full of gold and silver jewelry, necklaces, pendants, and pins shaped like dancers and noble insects: lady beetles, black monarchs, blue dragonflies, a praying mantis with red-bead eyes. Her mother had picked up the mantis the night of the Scygazers' cocktail party.

"Which one do you want to hold?" her mother had asked. Her parents had been dressing for the party when the summer storm rolled in with a gentle rumbling across the sky. The thunder made Nicky afraid for Canbury Green, her black horse in the barn.

"I really hate this old case," her mother had said, pouring all the jewels onto her pillow. "It's older than I am, and I'm retiring it." Nicky heard the dull thud of the case hitting the wastebasket before her mother slipped the jewelry into a velvet pouch.



Now Shane was tapping his fingers on the case as if it were a toy drum.

"I wonder whatever happened to all your mother's old jewelry," he said.

"What jewelry?" Nicky asked, pushing the case under the rug in Shane's living room.

Nicky pulled the case back toward her and spun it on its string. Inside, she heard her father's after-shave splashing in its bottle. She slapped the string hard against her thighs until it mimicked the taunt sound of her mother's ballerina hair snagging on the brush. Inside the case, one of the loose mantis eyes rolled over her mother's ivory comb. Nicky heard the silver hum of the zipper on the evening dress as it glided up her mother's straight back.

"I didn't mean it that way," Shane said. "Little sister, you know I didn't."

He was drinking ice water out of a highball glass when he began

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talking about the carousel kit. "\$199 in shipping fees alone. It goes from a ship to a plane to a truck on the highway." He flipped through the old carpenter's manual. "Perfect for birthday parties, big enough for all the neighborhood kids to ride on. Think of all the friends you'll have over." When he was finished with the water, swishing and swirling into his open mouth, he spat out the piece of squeezed lemon.

"My birthday was yesterday," Nicky said.

Every time a car passed by the house, he looked out the window. "You'll love it, honey. I'll bet you'll never want to ride a real horse again," he said. "How many girls do you know with a carousel in their front yard?"

"I want to go outside," she said, "to the lady's house."

"That skeleton of a burnt house is no place for a girl to play," he said, laying the manual down, "even if the staircase is in perfectly good condition."

She let go of the case as the hinges of its handle sighed. She heard the sound of her mother dropping a handful of necklaces onto the tile floor of the old house. Nicky held onto the strap, cracking it at Shane like a whip, before twirling the case through the air. She heard her mother's wedding ring graze a bottle of her father's after-shave.

"Quit waving that damn thing in my face," Shane shouted.

"What?" she asked. "I couldn't hear you."

"If you want the carousel, put that case down!"

She held on tighter.

That week Shane scattered lemons all over his house. At night, she heard a clink and saw the glasses glinting when the headlights of a passing car shone on her window. She thought of his Adam's apple bobbing on his throat while he drank. She listened for the heavy, sinking sound of his swallow, which reminded her of a man dropping a child into a lake. Her mattress level with the tabletops, she fell asleep breathing lemon air.



Shane's house was full of books she wasn't allowed to open and trinket boxes he hadn't offered to unlatch. He didn't have much furniture, only a piano that didn't play, a few round tables littered with

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gyroscopes and yo-yos, and a giant, ironwood chair stacked with leather cushions.

Shane said the chair was priceless and weighed over 200 pounds. The legs were carved into lion's paws resting on solid globes. The chair's arms tapered off in two women's round faces. She pinched one of the women's noses. On the crest was a jester crying smooth tears.

She took an empty glass off of the piano and pretended to drink. On the walls were photographs of the moon in all phases of its cycle and a single wagon wheel rolling past a tumbleweed. Shane's knife collection was locked in a glass display, but Nicky wasn't interested in his tools. She flipped through a heavy book next to the carpenter's manual and found pictures of jigsaws and diagrams of windmills and carousels. Her name was written in pencil under the drawing of a lighthouse. She tried to rub it out with her finger.

She felt it was her duty to tamper with possessions that were not her own. The many questions she had wanted to ask her mother should have been spread out across her entire lifetime. Even if she had known her parents' end was near, there would have been no time to ask such questions before the storm.

She put the book down and reached for a pearly trinket box. Opening the latch, she found a steel marble, fish bones, and a wooden doll on a chain. She untangled the doll, gave her case a single pat, and dropped the chain into her pocket. It poured in like a narrow stream of water.

Shane walked into the room and the trinket box fell to the floor. "What are you doing?" he asked, looking at his throne.

"I dropped it."

The fish bones rattled a while after fracturing into scattered shards.

"Where's the doll? I made it as a surprise for you. But you can't keep out of my things, and now you've ruined it," he said, his eyeballs rolling behind his round glasses.

She motioned to the floor by tapping her shoes.

"Bring it here, or you don't get your carousel," he said.

"You're not my mom." Holding the case close to her ear like a

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giant seashell, she heard the river rolling over a tree that had fallen into its water.

"Do it."

"You're not my dad." She clutched the case tighter and listened for the metallic moan of the garage door opening at her parent's house. Instead, she heard the key turning in the doorknob of the burnt house on the hill.

"You think you're so smart with your little case, don't you?"

As she swung around to walk away, she heard her mother's wedding ring hit the handle of the teacup.



The tip of Shane's pencil scratched furiously in the margins of the carpenter's manual. The sound was more terrible than the talons of a hawk on a string clutching a banister. Nicky lay her head on the case and heard her father talking to the fierce birds he used for hunting, the silence of the dust from the owls' wings falling as the barn doors opened.

She held the case over her belly as she crept near to Shane to see what he was writing. He was sitting in his enormous chair.

"What now?" he asked. The pencil stopped moving. She had seen two words written in scrawling letters, *over roof*, before Shane closed the manual gently on his long finger.

Place markers with frayed edges stuck out from between the pages, causing the manual to bulge thick in Shane's hands. The cover was slick and barely blue where the letters of the title had been rubbed away. A photograph fell out of the manual.

Nicky stepped back. Shane opened the manual slowly while keeping his gaze fixed on her. She looked down at the case in her hands and smiled.

"Do you want me to take that away from you?" he asked, reaching for the photograph. "You're tempting me, right? You're so cute with that little key dangling from your necklace."

"Am not." When she tossed the case into the air and caught it, she heard her father's razor snagging on her mother's lace garter, the hands of the old clock clanging against a tiny green light bulb inside.

"What's in there anyway?"

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"Plenty."

Shane kept his right hand inside the manual. With his left arm, he reached down slyly. Nicky saw him reclaim the black and white photograph of a woman leaning over a chair. He put it back inside the manual, unaware that another had slipped out.

Nicky laughed to herself. The other photograph had fallen under the shadow of the piano bench. She tried to look away from where it had landed. Shane watched her with squinting eyes as he straightened in his chair.

"What's so funny?" he asked, the sweat trickling from under the curls of his dark hair onto his forehead.

"Can't say." She was amused by the trembling in his voice. She balanced the case high on her head and curtsied slowly.

"Oh, I think you can."

She started to shiver. The case fell to the floor and rolled away from her toward Shane. She heard a single jingle bell tumbling into a porcelain pepper shaker inside. Shane stopped the case with the shiny, pointed toes of his shoes.

"What did you see?" he asked. "Nicky, who was in the photograph?"

"I didn't see."

He kicked the case across the floor to her. She leaned over it as it slowed down. The glass cover of a small frame cracked against the lip of a wine bottle. The cork was also inside. When the case hit the wall, she heard her mother's violin falling to the floor, the delicate neck breaking in three exquisite places, the strings crossed and bent.



Nicky crawled under the piano bench, holding the case between her ankles to keep her arms and hands free. When she picked up the photograph, she let out a long breath of air, whistling through her bottom teeth. It was black and white, a picture of a boy about her age fishing in a river valley. She thought the boy had Shane's cutting eyes. The boy's river could have been the one she left behind, but in the photograph the trees looked shorter along the bank and the rocks, more jagged.

She scraped the boy's face off the slick paper with her fingernails.

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She ran into the dark closet in the room where she slept and slipped the river photograph into her case.

When she shook the case, she jostled the bottle of her father's after-shave and heard the sound of his skipping a flat rock over the water. In her parents' house, no matter where she stood, she had been able to hear the river rushing over the hills not far away. Her dark horse Canbury Green often leaned over in silence to drink from its edge.

She had seven strands of her horse's mane and shavings from its hooves inside her case. But she would not touch them. She listened for the hoof shavings twanging darkly against a twig from the silver maple that once rustled outside her bedroom window.

It had been her sleeping tree. The thin branches twitched at the slightest movement of an owl landing. The white-gray bottoms of the blown leaves were the last interesting colors she had seen every night before she closed her eyes under the shadow-canopy of her old room. But the night of the storm she watched the leaves thrashing as branches were torn away by the wind, shattering her window. The damaged tree was not what she chose to remember. She remembered the house the way it was, the window before it was broken, and the maple tree while it was still whole.

Thoughts of silver leaves still made her yawn. She had three of them tucked away inside her case. When she scuffed it against the closet walls, she heard the leaves crackling and the static sounds of her mother's long robe picking up electricity on the carpet, her mother's frightened cry when her charged fingertips touched the doorknob.

Nicky didn't have the tree to herself for long. She had been waiting at her window the morning after the Scygazers' party, looking out past the damaged trunk, waiting for her father's car to pull into the driveway. She heard the rumbling of Shane's black truck instead. The silver maple was dying. Too many of its branches had broken off during the storm.

When Shane told her to pack her things, he was holding an ax to the maple trunk. She ran inside, flung the case out of the wastebasket then ran with it all over the house and the land. She pulled tassels off curtains, wicks out of candles, pages out of encyclopedias. Anything

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she admired she broke into small pieces. She took the best of the pieces with her. She gathered her father's clippers, laces from his boots, strands of his beard. She kept her mother's lip-gloss, the glass lids of her mother's perfume bottles. She chose smooth, amber stones from the river, cattails, a tiny bottle filled with its water.

After collecting, she went back inside her parents' house where Shane had been pacing, his breath ragged and strange.

"Was it you?" he asked. "Oh my God, was it you who tore this place apart?"

Before they left, he picked up her mother's violin and threw it across the kitchen tile. Nicky reached for a few of its splinters.



Now there were only two rules for collecting: first, every item had to be small enough to fit inside the case; second, she had to take what she wanted without being seen. Most of the time, the items were of little value to others: a dog's tooth, a feather off of a dead bird, a sliver of Shane's toenail. But if she needed something that already belonged to someone else, the owner was no matter as long as she kept to the rules.

So far, she had taken a barrette out of a little girl's hair, a pair of scissors from an old woman's pocket, the handle off of a toilet, the tag off of a cat's collar. She especially didn't want Shane to discover the pouch of lemon seeds she had gathered from his water glasses. Next summer she hoped to be far away from the carousel, planting a grove of citrus trees by the river.

At the moment, she had her eyes on the one item that would be harder to collect than all the others. Although Shane rarely laughed, he had a nice, bright smile because of the tiny, white diamond glinting in between his front teeth. Once she had slipped the diamond into her case and heard it rolling into the keyhole, she would drop the key inside, leaving the latch clamped shut forever.



After straightening the frames on the walls, Shane paced by the windows with a satisfied expression. He made more frantic notes in his manual, stopping occasionally to sharpen his pencil with a knife he took out of his pocket. Sometimes he would whittle the pencil

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down to nothing then begin a long spell of cursing, as if he just realized what he had done. When he left to search for another pencil, Nicky crept towards the manual. But he was never gone long enough for her to lay her hands on it.

She heard the sputtering of a truck engine shutting off. She ran with the case to the window. She saw Shane signing a piece of paper and three men in yellow shirts unloading wooden boxes from their truck. They carried six trunks into Shane's living room then left without a word. Shane came in with a crow bar. As he began hacking and prying at the lids, Nicky waited for him to unpack intricate painted horses. Instead, he uncovered her mother's dresses drowning in Styrofoam chips.

He threw the dresses aside as carelessly as if he were handling old newspapers. Some of the silk snagged and ripped on the trunk's edge.

"Come on. Come on," he said. "Where is it?"

He tossed away her mother's lace robes and her father's shoes. Bottles of her mother's make-up shattered on the floor. He flung a portrait of her parents in its glass frame at the window. He slowly lifted the lid of the cigar boxes that contained her father's coin collection then let the coins fall gently through his fingers.

Nicky lay down on the dresses and took in the scent of her mother's sachet balls. She began tearing the buttons off the dresses. They were made of cut glass and shell. When the case bounced lightly on her hip, the buttons sounded like hail hitting her mother's open parasol.



The evening light was still warm. The shadow of herself and her case stretched out long and narrow on the road before her. She heard the hard bottoms of her shoes tapping the asphalt softer than the hooves of Canbury Green. Inside her case, the tip of a dart pecked at a yellow pool ball. She heard the pregnant lady talking to her parakeet before the rain came.

A few of the neighborhood dogs had gathered at the burnt house. Two red Chows and a German shepherd were fighting over a can leaking yellow liquid. Nicky raked her fingers through the white-gray powder covering the rubble. The ashes were the color of the sil-

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ver maple but as dull and scattered as the life that remained after the thunder. She found the door of a birdcage, the shell of a small turtle, a paintbrush, a metal ruler, a pacifier on a string. She picked up a jointed bone so tiny it might have been a sparrow toe.

She climbed to the top of the staircase to watch the dog fight die down below her. She saw Shane running up the road, his hair blowing as his head turned abruptly from side to side. He was calling her name.

He came to the edge of the concrete foundation but didn't step onto its surface. "Nicky," he said, looking around at the other houses, "what are you doing up there? Come down."

"Never." She sat down on her case. The buttons spilled over the hoof shavings inside. She heard Canbury Green galloping out of the barn before the summer storm.

"You have to come down sometime, don't you? When you do, I'll be home waiting."

"Come up here and get me. What are you afraid of?"

"I don't have time to play games."

She watched him walk back to his house and shut the door. The wind died down first to a breeze then to silence. The dogs looked at her for an instant and went on fighting.



She walked slowly back to Shane's house. The light was fading fast, and there was no place left for her to go. She expected him to be waiting. But the house was quiet inside. In the living room the shadow of the throne stretched across the floor. She felt afraid until she saw the carpenter's manual sitting by itself in the center of a small, round table.

She picked up the manual and ran with it into the bathroom. She set the manual and her case down beside the tub and turned on the water. She shed her clothes, dropping her shirt on top of the case. She heard the river rushing and her mother dropping bath beads into the water.

She stepped into the tub, reached over its side, picked up the manual by its spine. It was heavy in her hands. She was careful not to drop it as she spread it open on her knees and began to flip through

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its pages. The inside cover read, "To Shane from Grandpa Newly." She couldn't remember much about Grandpa Newly, who had died years ago, only the clicking noises he had made with his dentures to make her smile.

An envelope slipped out from the pages. She opened it and found photographs of a woman polishing a table, painting a picture of a forest, holding a small bird on her finger.

The steam from the bath water was beginning to crinkle the pages. Nicky studied the sketches of watch gears, guitar saddles, oval-backed chairs. Articles had been clipped and pasted onto the pages. She read their titles: "The Carousel, A Thing of Beauty," "On Carving Horses," "Mechanics and Motion." Her name was written under a drawing of the giant water wheel of a steamboat.

She heard footsteps in the hall and dropped the manual into the water. When she tried to squeeze the pages dry, they stuck together. The manual had swollen to twice its size. She heard Shane's breathing outside the door and dressed in a hurry. She stuck her head through an armhole of her shirt and slipped on the slick floor in terror.

The manual was still dripping when she handed it to Shane. The dark ink stained her wrists and palms. She leaned against the case, securing it against her back and the wall. As she shifted, she felt the case slipping and heard the heel of her mother's shoe touch down on the staircase.

When Shane took the manual from her, he held it in silence as if he didn't know what it was. She felt afraid for her case. She began to walk away with it.

"This has been in the family for generations," Shane said, smoothing his hands over the wet cover. "I kept a record of everything, everything." He began to wipe the cover on his pant legs. "How the hell am I supposed to build the carousel without it?"



Shane was smiling the day the carousel kit came in a silver truck. He arranged the cut wood in an arc on his gravel yard. He slit the cardboard boxes with his pocketknife. Inside were more boxes full of sawdust, planks tied with cord, and discs of all sizes.

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"Don't say I never did anything for you, honey. You and that little black case."

"You mind your own business. You're not my daddy," she said. Shane swallowed hard. She put her ear to the case and heard her father in his heavy boots stepping into the river.

"Thank God for that."

She loved the smell of the new wood, like a whole forest had been cut down to nothing. While Shane hammered, she tapped on the sides of her case. The way the carousel was turning out, all splintery and lop-sided, made her want to run to the house lightning had struck. Inside her case, a teaspoon hit the lens of a camera, making a sound like a single drop of rain hitting the tin roof of the barn.

"You stay here, now," Shane said. He dropped the hammer and ran his fingers through his hair. A glossy strand fell away. She walked over the round base. "You're a good girl," he said. When he turned away from her and started hammering again, she picked up the single hair. He turned back to her suspiciously. "I'm not doing all this work for nothing, am I?"

"No," she said. The staircase loomed twisted on the hill, as charred and spare as a backbone after the flesh had been burnt away.

"So you like your carousel?"

✦ He was out in the yard hammering every day that week. She had nothing to do but watch every thundering moment surrounded by unfinished wood and horses impaled on long poles. They were leaning on each other and badly formed. They seemed to her not really horses at all. She threw the case into the air and caught it again and again. From the inside, came the sound of hooves coming down on the meadowland.



"Nothing will ever take the place of my Canbury Green," Nicky said.

Shane spilled a bucket of nails on the circle base. "I should have known better than to start this," he said, picking up a hammer. He had already secured the umbrella canopy. "You were spoiled rotten by the time you came to me, and now nothing I could do would ever please you." He looked down at the new scuffmarks on his shoes.

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"Your daddy should have never given you a real horse to ride."

"Canbury Green," she said, swinging the case over her hair.

"Why don't you name one of the carousel horses?"

"I want to go to the lady's house," Nicky said. She dropped the case to the ground and heard the pacifier hit the metal ruler.

"What lady?"

"The pregnant lady on the hill who left when the storm came."

"What do you want with her?"

"I'll give one of the horses her name."

"Like hell you will. I never knew it anyway."

"So," Nicky said, rocking the case in her arms. She heard the sparrow bone hit her mother's curler.

"Maybe she wasn't even pregnant. She might have been just fat. A rich woman, young and living alone, she had the finest house on the block."

"And it burnt down," Nicky said. Inside her case, the paintbrush fell on her father's clippers. She thought she heard the camelhair bristles swipe over the velvet.

"I only saw her from far away," he said, "high up on her little hill. Serves her right, trying to live above the rest of us."

Nicky put her face on the case and began to shiver.

♦ "That's not what I meant," Shane said, dropping the hammer. "God, that sounded awful. I've been working like a dog these last couple of days. I never really knew her. I shouldn't have brought you to her house."

"I was sorry that night when I saw the fire," he said, sitting down on the carousel. "It had been storming a long time. I thought I heard a baby cry a little before the thunder."



Shane painted the carousel blue, white, and gold. Nicky noticed the horses had no distinguishable manes or tails. He waited for the paint to dry before he put on another coat. Gold enamel flaked over the horses' eyes.

"Get on," he said, but there were no painted saddles and no music. The carousel wasn't turning. He helped her onto the back of what she thought was a blue dog. From where she sat, the neighbor-

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hood was carved up into long sections by the gold poles. In the middle of the carousel was a large, white box with a door. Shane walked into it as if it were a closet.

"It's powered by wind," he said, coming out. "But I have to start the gears turning."

He grabbed onto one of the poles and started running. The carousel picked up speed until the house was a blur. She held on tighter to the black case. The staircase on the hill was just a white streak. She heard the scissors hit the dog's tooth and shouted, "Slow down." Dobermans, not horses, were rushing in on every side.

"I don't know how," Shane was saying as he ran with the pole still in his hands.

The neighborhood eventually stopped turning. The bottle of river water cracked against the bottle of her father's after-shave. As Shane lifted her off the blue dog, splinters cut into her legs.

"What's the matter?" he asked while she was still in his arms. "Don't you like your carousel? That was only the first pony," he said. "You've still got twelve more left to ride."

"I hurt my leg," she said, holding onto her case with both hands. Water began to trickle out of a crease on the lid. As the glass bead skipped over the shards of the broken bottles, she heard her mother singing in the shower.

"Want me to kiss it and make it better?"

She saw the white diamond flare twice before he puckered his lips. Through the dark hole in his mouth, it glinted in her direction like a baby bird's winking eye.

He was laughing hard and trying to cover up the diamond while he smiled. "Did you really think I was going to kiss you?" he asked.

She spat in his eye. Shane dropped her on the gravel. She got up and kicked the horse she had been riding. When its slender leg broke apart, she saw it was as delicate and hollow as her mother's violin.



She tried to run away, but Shane was right behind her. She felt his hand touching her arm. As she ran faster, the case bounced hard on her right knee. Inside, the lemon seeds poured out of the pouch and trickled over her mother's wedding ring, the dog's tooth, the blue

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bottle, and one of Shane's eyelashes. When she lifted the case over her head to put the strap around her neck, she heard the woman who used to live in the burnt house pouring cereal into a bowl before the storm.

Nicky climbed to the top of the stairs and lay down on the case. She could see the carousel below her turning by itself on the wind. Shane hesitated a moment before stepping onto the house's foundation. He towered above her, sobbing until his whole body shook the stairs. When he finally smiled again, Nicky thought she saw the diamond slipping out of his front teeth or a fleck of spittle catching the sunlight as it fell. She almost reached for it.

With one hand, his fingers clutching her hair, Shane lifted her body off the highest stair. The latch on her case broke apart. Her collection fell through the air: her mother's wedding ring, the teacup handle, the glass bead, the white top of the flower, gone. A strand of Shane's hair and a bird's feather blew far past the dog's tooth.

"You're not my mommy. You're not my daddy," she kept saying, the lid of the empty case flapping like the wing of a stunned bird.

He carried her down the stairs. From far away, the carousel looked beautiful, horses, not Dobermans, leaping in a swirl of blue and gold.

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