

The Game

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Just as she had done ten years ago, the laughing children shrieked and chased one another round and round in circles increasing in distance but finally growing smaller and smaller, until an invisible barrier was broken and they all collapsed against one another, panting and happy. There are no winners or losers in this game, she thought as she stood watching, just equal participants. Pressing against her from all sides were the sights, sounds, and smells of people preparing for a good time. Finally, she too relaxed and allowed the pleasant feeling to wash over her. She turned her face up to the warm sun, thinking how lucky it was to have predicted good weather for the upcoming big event: the parade and much-anticipated Golden Leaf Celebration.

The autumn festival never changes, she thought. The same booths are always in the same places, the sickly-sweet cotton candy always smells the same, the thick smoke from the barbecue always clouds the air and stings the eyes, the parade marches exactly the same distance year after year. In fact, this year will be just like last year and the year before, except . . . startled, she looked around at the familiar scene that immediately became unfamiliar and different.

Yes, things have changed. Alec is gone. Alec, teasing practical joker, winner of all games, protector, brother, best friend. Alec, forever seeking adventure, had run away from home, not because of any family argument or the usual reasons for leaving, but, as he always said, “. . . just because.” She was jealous, angry, admiring, and hurt, and still unused to the emptiness and aloneness. He’s been gone, what, almost a month now? And still, she thought a little ashamedly, I still find myself talking to him.

. . . she didn’t notice the first tap on her shoulder, but the second more painful one caused her to turn quickly, an irritated look on her face. Annoyance quickly gave way to disbelief and

surprise as she found herself staring at the face she had memorized, willing her mind to remember every expression.

Alec! I can't believe it's you! Where did you. . . . No, he said, no, no questions. That'll spoil the game. But . . . she stopped, exasperated. Already he was teasing. Here, for you, and suddenly from behind his back he pulled balloons. Three of them, pink, purple, and yellow, with silky blue streamers that were lifeless until the breeze blew. She accepted this peace offering and his invitation to explore the festival.

The afternoon passed as the sun began to dim and melt pink and blue and gold across the sky, charring the distant trees as it went down reluctantly and unwillingly. A stealthy chill had crept into the breeze, and suddenly she felt it and shivered. But the chill was forgotten as Alec, feeling pleased with himself, said something funny and began to laugh. She joined him. Laughing and laughing. . . .

She sat up in bed, the early morning quietness startled by her laughter. Just a dream, she thought, and you did it, she accused the masculine grinning face on her desk. That was mean, Alec, unfair! Outside was dull and drizzly, most unpromising for a festive day. She stared unseeingly out the cool window, and unhappily shrugged the remaining traces of the dream from her mind. After going through the motions and routine of showering and dressing, she went out into a day as bleak as her mood.

The Golden Leaf Celebration passed in a blur. The morning sky, without a hint of sunshine, had turned spiteful by noon and drenching rains began and continued steadily for the remainder of the afternoon. The fair grounds were dismal, the people moody and short tempered. Cotton candy quickly became a beaded sticky mess in the dampness. Crowded people huddled under booths and tents and glared out at the dark sky. "First time it's rained in years on this day. . . ." Mutterings spread throughout the crowds, and by early evening the booths were deserted. She was relieved to return home and to fall into a deep and dreamless sleep. No Alec.

The next day was restless, with an uneasy wind outside, one minute holding back and waiting, then bursting through the bedraggled leaves. She felt the same way. During a sudden rush of anxious energy she busily cleaned her room, but suddenly found herself too tired to continue. Stop and start, off and on, the day seemed a mixture of frantic activity or weary listlessness. Unable to look at the worried frown creasing her mother's forehead, and tiring of her mother's complaints of "moodiness" and, "What am I going to do with that girl?" she found her feet moving toward the door.

Kick a rock, walk three steps, kick a rock, walk three steps, she slowly made her way down the muddy road. The slender stick she scratched along the road made a pattern in the muddy layer. She concentrated on this pattern rather than allowing the thoughts about Alec tumbling in her mind to slow down, to become comprehensive, and to become worrisome. Is he cold, lonely, afraid . . . no, she stopped herself, I cannot worry. This is probably another one of his games, a trick. He will be back. In fact, she brightened at the thought, he's probably on his way home now, sorry he missed the festival, sorry he. . . .

Abruptly she stopped, and stared. Tangled in a tree, colors vivid against the pale sky, were three balloons, pink, purple, and yellow, with blue streamers silky and flowing in the wind. The wind stopped and the streamers and balloons fell limply against the imprisoning branches. She turned and walked slowly toward home. ■