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A Day in the Life of a Carnival Princess

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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CARNIVAL PRINCESS

Working the Pop-Em booth, Ariel can't stop watching the Kamikaze ride
that swings its caged couples high, then dives
straight for the earth, then back
to the clouds again. They survive. They always do.
Dreamers, they are,
like her, a sixth-grade girl just waiting for something to rise, or crash.

Mornings her mother shakes her awake at 8 a.m. in their
aqua and silver aluminum trailer
that never quite gleams in the sun. She wakes
to the taste of deep fried cheese curds. The taste disappears
soon enough, like everything else. She's from a family of
magicians. Her father did a vanishing act, quick and
seamless as any Harry Blackstone.
After that, her mother covered her face with fake veils the color of
happiness.
Every day Ariel volunteers her skinny eleven-year-old body
for The Amazing Child Sawed in Half trick,
and each time she still comes out whole, almost. She always does.

Only four more weeks until school,
four weeks to con the strollers to toss darts at balloons
for a chintzy fluffy toy that squeaks.
Next summer she'll be hawking
this wood cage again. Break
one balloon and you win a keychain. Two
gets you the second row: a sad set of unicorns, out of air,
strangled at the neck.
Pop three and you get the top row.
Whatever the prize, she knows, you lose.

All afternoon tattooed teen boys in tank tops impress their girls with their sharp aim. The girls, mouths smeared with pink giggles, don't know what hit them, little darts deep in their chests. They play and play for the grand prize of stuffed pandas and ponies. She hates to tell them there's only sawdust inside.

Near closing time, the strings of firefly lights flicker, blink and flicker. Hey, people, three for a dollar, she calls to stragglers, flips a dart to demonstrate, the balloon exploding with a gasp, a direct hit. She never misses, not after years of practice, the red shred hanging like a deflated heart. She knows that's how easy it is. Pop a balloon, pop a dream. Across the muddy midway, the Kamikaze swings one last set of screamers straight toward the ground. Somehow they survive. They always do.

An excerpt from *The Mapmaker's Dream*

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