

A Curious Boy

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The wind screamed its snowy breath as The Stranger opened the door, approached the front desk, and asked Deacon's mom if they had any rooms vacant. Deacon peered between the railings at the top of the stairs to get a look at The Stranger's face, but his splotched fedora attracted shadows like metal filings to a magnet. "I'm sorry, we're all full up. Perhaps The Ivory Arms in Hilltop will have some rooms. I can call them if you wish."

The Stranger shook the snow from his hat, revealing a moon of a bald head, craters and all. "My automobile has unfortunately found itself stuck in a snow bank a half-mile up the road."

This was a lie. Deacon knew. He had seen The Stranger emerge from the woods behind the B&B, not from the road, as he would later claim. He saw all this from the attic window while he was rummaging through the young couples' baggage. The attic had been converted into a small cozy guest room. The slant of the roof made it feel like a tent. Near the bottom of young couple's suitcase, under a pile of pants, Deacon found a small midnight blue velvet box with a diamond ring inside. He held the ring up to the window and let the light split into a million colors.

Deacon had a game. His parents called it a troubling habit. The game was Treasure Hunter. His parents called it snooping through their guests' luggage. Deacon didn't mean to be a snoop, it's just that he was a curious boy. Deacon was marooned in his parents' Bed and Breakfast. He didn't go to school like the other kids and that made it tough for him to know anything more than what the grounds had to offer. He wanted to see and touch and discover. Each vacationer that resided at Snowy Valley B&B brought with them treasures

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locked within chests from the world outside. His parents would call it private belongings inside suitcases. But to Deacon, these were his to explore. The treasures he would uncover were never that interesting. Clothes, shaving kits, lady stuff, and pills.

It wasn't the contents that made his imagination swirl. It was *the moment*. That magic moment, achieved only once he crept passed his parents to sneak a spare room key. Hiding the key. Sneaking off when the coast was clear. Slowly walking up the stairs, avoiding all known creaky spots. Opening the locked guest room without making the lock make any noise at all. Tip-toeing to a bag. Opening his ears to hear if his parents were a safe distance; cooking in the kitchen or making calls at the front desk. Then, and only then, did *the moment* arrive. Just before he unzipped, unhooked, or unlocked his treasure chest. Lifting it ever so gently, letting the shadows keep their secrets a second more. What could be in this one? Deacon had to know. His eyes would open wide. He'd stick his tongue in the gap between his teeth. Every hair on his head would lift. Then he'd flip the lid fully open to reveal... nothing much. The moment would pass, the adventure at an end. He'd put everything back, he'd return the key and a slight feeling of guilt made him promise to never play Treasure Hunter again. But when a new guest would arrive with their treasure chests in tow, his curiosity awoke. *What secrets could this one hold?* Deacon would toss and turn until morning when the new guest would leave to ski the paths and a new game of Treasure Hunter would begin.

He had been caught on more than one occasion and the consequences went as so: His father would yank him out of the suite and march him to their quarters. Then father would

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yell and yell some more. He would make him sit in his room for a day without supper... well, a little supper, but no ice cream. Then father would explain that going through people's private belongings, especially our paying guests, is not only forbidden but is not a moral thing to do. This only made Deacon want to see more. Instead of stopping, he got better at being quiet, better at sneaking, better at knowing what times to go and how to look and touch, but also how to put back, so that it would seem no one had ever touched anything at all.

The large bay window in the attic had the best view of the grounds. The pool was an icy pillow, the field a white duvet, and the woods, with its cross-country ski paths was the baseboard climbing high. Deacon lost interest in the diamond when he saw The Stranger appear from the trees and made his way around the baseboard of trees towards the front. Deacon squinted, summoning his hawk-vision. He could see the stranger carried a curious box under his arm.

"Perhaps we can call Jim Little, he runs the tow in Hilltop." Deacon's mom went for the phone.

"That would be very kind 'mam, very kind indeed." Said The Stranger.

She plucked the phone and clicked the receiver three times then hung up. "Storm must have taken out the lines. Well, we can't turn you out in this. It's only going to get worse. Not that we're complaining. Almost thought cross-country skiing would be cross country mudding this season..." The stranger received the joke with a pursed smile that looked painful. Deacon's mom blushed because her joke went sour. She adjusted her heavy wool

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sweater with an embroidered deer with Christmas lights hanging from its antlers and politely announced, "We can set a cot in the lounge. You'll have to wait till the other guests go to bed to get some privacy, but it's better than the snow."

The Stranger set down his box and looked to the top of the stairs, straight at Deacon. His face was sharp and ugly. His wind burnt nose and chapped cheeks glowed red, while his eyes seemed to live in deep dark caves. He smiled. A toothy grin not filled with teeth, but perfect white wood squares.

The storm still shrieked, but inside the lounge it was warm and orange, courtesy of the fireplace. The Hershfield family, who had brought the matching luggage for all five of its members, sat around a table playing Monopoly. The young couple who came with the matching neon snowsuits and the hidden diamond ring, snuggled on the sofa in the corner. Deacon's father, as usual, played the old piano. Everyone sipped warm cider and enjoyed the music and ambiance, everyone except The Stranger. He sat in the big chair in front of the fire, stroking his box as if it were a cat.

This box was not luggage. This was not a duffle bag or a suitcase. There was no way socks, shirts, pants and toiletries resided within. This was a chest. Deacon's heart raced. He wanted to get a better look. He wanted... no, needed, to see what was inside. He crept closer. He could see that the box was sided with old tin-plating, embossed with children playing. Its dark cherry wood drank up the glow of the fire. Deacon reached out...

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“Deac!” his father didn’t miss a note. “Help clear some of the mugs please.” Father continued a soft rendition of Moonriver as Deacon collected the mugs without taking his eyes of the man by the fire.

Washing mugs in the kitchen would earn him enough to buy some comics and candy when his parents would head into Hilltop each week. When he had finished drying and placing each mug back in its place, he heard his father finish the last of his songs on the piano. Soft clapping of applause followed a louder clapping of feet as the guests climbed the steps to their warm quilts. His Father was pleased with Deacon’s cleaning job. He mussed his hair and told him to go to sleep sooner rather than later. Deacon had other ideas.

The main floor was dark and quiet. Only fire light from the lounge lapped into the foyer like a slow tide. The Stranger hadn’t moved. His shadow reached well past the foyer and into the dining room. Deacon crept closer... was he asleep?

“A curious child aren’t you?” The Stranger whispered. “I like curious children.”

Deacon’s gut said run, but the box by The Stranger’s leg beckoned him. He came before the fire. The glow made the man’s face look like it was shaped from a tallow candle.

“Children have always been curious about my box. Are you curious, child?”

Deacon nodded, keeping his eyes on the box rather than The Stranger’s ugly tallow-face.

The embossed children on the tin plating had shadows that danced in rhythm with the flickering of the fire.

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“Inside are wonders and marvels. Wondrous wonders and marvelous marvels. But you wouldn’t be interested in that. It’s not for you.”

“Why did you lie to my mom?” His hands shot to his mouth. Why did he say that?

“Clever and curious. Very good, child. Verrrry good. But some things are best left unknown, no?”

Deacon felt uncomfortable. He searched for something to say when his father’s stern voice called him.

“Deacon! Leave this gentleman to get his rest. We need to have a talk.”

Father put his hand on his shoulder and guided him to his room like a prisoner. He knew he was in trouble and boy was he ever.

Deacon’s parents sat him on his bed and began a furious rant. Trying most unsuccessfully to be quiet as not to disturb the guests.

“We’ve told you time and time again, don’t go through the guests’ belongings. They’re not for you.”

“I didn’t!” Deacon lied as his tears welled up and betrayed him.

“Mr. Singer said he found his engagement ring on the window sill.”

Deacon had forgotten to put back the ring. If only he hadn’t been sidetracked by The Stranger.

“Mr. Singer’s girlfriend found it, and while she said “yes” you ruined his surprise.

Tomorrow you will apologize to both of them.”

“I didn’t.”

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“Stop lying! How would you like it if our guests went through your things?” His mother said through clenched teeth.

“I don’t have anything, there’s nothing here. I just want to see other stuff. I’ve seen nothing.”

The tears flowed.

His parents gave each other a concerned look. They moved in closer to console. Deacon pushed them away.

“Don’t. Maybe *I’ll* go away. Then I can see anything I want. Then you’ll be sorry.”

Father stood up.

“We’ll talk about it in the morning. Until then, you will stay in your room.”

His father marched out. His mother went to give him a hug and kiss, but Deacon turned away. She left without saying goodnight.

Deacon had not stayed in his room as his punishment dictated. If his parents were going to keep him cooped up for the rest of his life in this small little house surrounded by nothing, then Deacon felt it was his right to get to experience whatever he wanted to. What could his parents really do, send him away? That’s exactly what he wanted anyhow. He wasn’t thinking of that now though. His anger towards his parents had been pushed out of his head by The Stranger’s box. If his curiosity normally whispered than tonight it was shrieking with the storm.

He peeked in the lounge. It felt lonely without the piano, roaring fire, the guests, the smell of cider, and laughter. The room was just shadows, screaming winds, embers struggling to glow and *Him*. The Stranger had not moved from the big chair, his hands no longer rested

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on the box. His breathing was shallow and harmonized with the wicked storm outside. He was asleep to be sure. The images of the children pressed from tin called to him to play. *Play Treasure Hunter. See the Marvelous marvels. See the wondrous wonders.* And that was exactly what Deacon meant to do.

As a rule, Deacon never peeked in someone bag while they were still in the room sleeping. But this box was exceptional and exceptional things called for exceptions. The howling wind and shadows aided him with being unseen and quiet. Deacon peeked his head around the chair. The Stranger's face was slumped. Deacon's *moment* was here. And what a moment it was. His chest felt like a sea galley, a drummer pounding beats as oars pushed blood through his body, propelling him closer.

He placed his hand on the wood. It felt warm from the fire. He took another look at The Stranger, then lifted the lid ever just so, not realizing The Stranger had opened one eye, smiled, and closed it again.

Finally he lifted the lid and peered his head over, looking down. The bottom of the box seemed to open up to a dark cavernous space lit with an orange glow. Beyond where the bottom of the box should have been, beyond where the floor should have been, sat crystals staring back at him. They looked familiar. Deacon knew those crystals, they were the chandelier, the one that hung right above his head. At first Deacon thought the bottom of the box was mirror, but where was his reflection? Then he realized he was not looking

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down anymore, he was looking up from the bottom of the box. The Stranger's face was as big as a rising harvest moon as it crested the towering cherry wood walls.

"A curious boy." He said as he shut the lid allowing the absolute darkness to mute Deacon and the other curious children's cries.