

A Bead Was Lost

by marci stillerman

Katy was a sturdy girl, with a round freckled face and the kind of lank hair that wouldn't hold a curl

Angelica's hair hung in blond curls to her shoulders and framed the perfect face of a porcelain doll.

To Katy, she was as beautiful as an angel.

Angelica was tall, thin, and very serious. She came to kindergarten dressed like a princess. Her lovely pastel dresses were as fresh at the end of the day as in the morning when her father brought her to school. Her mother must be very pleased with her, Katy thought, for taking such good care of her clothes. Katy, like the other girls, wore denims or rugged play clothes that always had stains or paint smears when the day was over.

Katy loved it when Angelica laughed, which was not often. How she would put her hands over her mouth and laugh behind her hands as if she were trying to hide the laugh.

Angelica was delicate, like a fairy princess. If she played rough games like Tag or Tug of War, she'd fall and get hurt. She had accidents at school that made her cry, like spilling milk or juice on the snack table or closing a drawer on her finger. The other children thought it babyish to cry about such things.

Miss Murphy said Angelica was accident-prong. Katy thought of an invisible fork hovering over Angelica's head, the prongs forever threatening to descend upon her and pierce her lovely face. Maybe Angelica knew about the fork and was afraid, and that's why she cried so easily.

Accidents seemed to happen to Angelica at home too. One day she came to school with her arm in a sling----it had been broken falling down the steps, she told Miss Murphy. The teacher frowned. Angelica often wore Mickey Mouse Band-Aids on her arms and legs. Once she had a bruised eye and a cut lip. Miss Murphy looked worried when Angelica brought a new injury to school.

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Katy ached for all Angelica's hurts. If she fell or bumped herself during playtime, Katy was the first to call a teacher or to offer what help she could.

Angelica didn't pay any more attention to Katy than she did to any of the children. But if she happened to say something to her like hello or thank you, Katy glowed all day. She would have loved to be her friend. But Angelica didn't seem to want a friend.

One morning, Angelica wore her hair gathered into a ponytail and secured with a pink barrette studded with diamonds. That barrette was the most gorgeous thing Katy had ever seen. She couldn't stop looking at it.

Angelica had a whole wardrobe of clips and necklaces and bracelets that she wore to school, but that barrette was the first thing Katy had ever coveted. She was sure that if she could fasten it in her hair, magic would happen. Her face would become pale and beautiful and her stringy hair would curl softly like Angelica's. She usually didn't give a thought to her appearance but the barrette changed something in her.

At rest time the children got their mats from the closet, arranged them on the floor, and curled up on them. Katy put her mat near Angelica's where she could see the barrette. She was close enough to touch it if she reached out.

A stray sunbeam caught one of the diamonds and it sparkled.

Most of the children, including Angelica, had fallen asleep, but Katy could not take her eyes off the barrette. Angelica turned her head in her sleep and the barrette slipped off her ponytail. Katy reached over, picked it up and put it into the pocket of her jeans. No one saw.

The mats were back in the closet and the children had formed a circle for story-time when Angelica, her curls tumbling about her shoulders, noticed that her barrette was missing.

"My barrette," she screamed, startling everyone. "It's gone."

Katy reached into her pocket and burned her fingers on the stolen barrette. But she didn't take it from her pocket.

Everyone spent the next half-hour looking for the barrette. Angelica darted about the room, tears streaming down her cheeks, hiccupping sobs, searching frantically.

She has a hundred barrettes, Katy thought. Why is she so upset? She was upset herself to see Angelica so distressed, but Katy did not return the barrette. She could have pretended to find it under a book, and be the hero of the day, and even deserved a kiss of thanks from Angelica, but she had no intention of returning it. She just couldn't make herself do it.

"Daddy will kill me," Angelica sobbed. "He doesn't like it when I lose things."

"I'll explain to your daddy," Miss Murphy offered. "He will understand that it wasn't your fault."

Angelica spent the rest of the afternoon on Miss Murphy's lap, sucking her thumb. Just before it was time for her daddy to come, Miss Murphy washed Angelica's face and brushed out her curls.

"What happened to your hair? Where is the barrette?" her father demanded before even saying hello. Everyone heard him. No one made a sound.

Angelica, her face pale as drawing-book paper, tears spilling from her eyes, was silent.

"Answer me," he commanded. Angelica's daddy was as dark as she was fair, and loomed enormous in that room full of children and a lady teacher.

Katy was afraid. Would the diamonds on the barrette shine through the pocket of her jeans?

"It got misplaced," Miss Murphy hurried to answer for Angelica. "Perhaps it will turn up."

"You lost the barrette?" His voice was ominous. "You stupid girl! Haven't I warned you not to lose things?" He whacked her bottom, almost knocking her off her feet. Miss Murphy gasped.

Katy had never seen anyone hit a child. She was shocked.

Before Miss Murphy could say anything, Angelica's daddy grabbed her hand and dragged her from the room.

That night before Katy got into bed, she dug the barrette out of her jeans pocket and examined it carefully. It was just a piece of pink plastic with glass beads that shone like diamonds pasted on it. A bead was missing. She didn't care for the barrette at all. She stuffed it back into her pocket and threw the jeans into the laundry hamper. She thought, by tomorrow everyone will have forgotten about it. Angelica had so many barrettes. Why was her daddy so mean about losing that one?

Next day, Angelica was absent from school.

"Her daddy called. She has 'flu," Miss Murphy said.

She has flew, Katy heard. Could Angelica fly? Where had she flown? Would she come back? An invisible knife pierced Katy's heart, hurting it bad. She knew Angelica had flown away because of the barrette. Katy was bereft.

The barrette must have meant far more to Angelica than Katy had imagined. Maybe it was magic and only her father knew it. Or very old and valuable. What had he done to her for losing it?

Would Angelica get hit again, like she had been at school, maybe even worse, for losing the barrette? Katy hadn't thought such a thing before. Angelica had had to fly away to save herself from her father or he might kill her for losing the barrette.

Katy promised herself to get the barrette out of her jeans pocket and return it to Angelica as soon as she flew back to school, even though she, Katy, would be punished for stealing it.

Angelica never returned to school. Miss Murphy had the children say prayers for her.

