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Fireflies

By

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It's dusk when the RV pulls into the camping ground. It's been a long trip east and this is simply a rest stop for the night, a "We'll be back on the road first thing in the morning." The path is alight with a shadowed glow familiar to dusk. Fireflies begin to appear out of the campground's humidity. The air is moist, though cooling from the day's heat. Rows of RVs parked among gravel paths. Lawn chairs out, the popping of beer cans; laughter erupts from rows away, piercing and full and somehow perfectly aligned with the quiet murmurs of the deepening night. Follow the path through the RVs, a main gravel road leading to an old metal gym set. The swings creak and legs pump back and forth. If it were light enough, the gym set might look dilapidated, the metal might be rusty, the children would still play, but the image would be different. Instead the structure is a shadow, with little shadow bodies frolicking in and around and under, one with the silhouetted portrait of play. The road continues past the playground, opens up to a body of water, probably a wide pond. The humidity descends heavily here and the bullfrogs croak a burping harmony of waterlogged living. Here the fireflies swarm, fairies of the open air. They float and disappear, reappear three feet forward. Disappear. Reappear again two feet to the left. Disappear. Their vanishing acts outweighed by their masses; as one disappears

three more appear nearby. And theirs is a silent floating. If you get really close perhaps they hum, or perhaps their song doesn't reach human ears, our stereocilia motionless in their breeze. Across the pond a large house stands illuminated against the sky. Its windows puncture the aging night, their light stark against to the fireflies' glow. There is a party in the house which can be heard over the bullfrog song. An occasional shout an anomaly of clarity in what is otherwise a din of blurred voices. The kids play, their laughs echo, scattering into the night where they disappear. Parents walk the paths together, getting lost among the RVs, strolling along the pond. They look into the distorted reflection of the moon and a few extra bright stars. They listen to the bullfrogs and the distant party across the pond and feel no need to speak, thinking about how quiet it is here, how uncomplicated. They watch the fireflies blinking along the path. One thinks about his fear of disappearing, of losing sight of something that once felt important and real. He feels like his is an existence fading into night, small bursts of light the only thing slowing his plunge. But he doesn't say it. He has never said it. He looks at the woman walking next to him and barely recognizes her. They keep walking, their hands almost touching but not quite.

It's 2004 in De Pere, Wisconsin and summer humidity suffocates a population already dripping in pool water and sprinkler dancing. But the children don't seem to mind. They live off of popsicles and watermelon, perpetually clad in bathing suits and sticky sunscreen skin. Cheeks and noses glow red with too many kisses from the sun. The bottoms of their feet are stained green from the grass, grayed by sizzling hops across the concrete driveway. But the children don't seem to mind. Here is their whole world, the backyard sprinkler, gymnastics classes in the morning, quick lunches, and afternoons of play. They run from the swing set when they discover the beehive under the slide. One of them is stung. He is allergic to beestings. It is a big deal and

they all want to cry. But mother or father or babysitter or neighbor comes to the rescue, ices the wound, finds the Benadryl, and dissolves the danger in reassuring words.) The children calm down. They resume their play. They stay away from the swing set. Here is their everything.

When evening comes the kids are outside again. Bonfire smoke wafts across the yard, mosquitoes deterred from small bodies dosed in bug spray. Their bathing suits have been exchanged for T-shirts and shorts. Flip-flops slip along the wet grass near the now dormant sprinkler. Now is the hour of the fireflies. They appear quietly, one by one into the backyard. They go unnoticed at first, as there are so many things to preoccupy young minds. But then comes a small shriek, a pointed finger at a dark spot where something has just disappeared. They spin in circles looking for magic, chasing it across the yard laughing. And then the jars come out, with mesh wire covers, *so the fireflies can breathe*, they explain to each other, just as mom explained to them. Last night they employed the butterfly nets stored in the garage, but soon determined the nets were ineffective for the task. Now they grow silent, separating on isolated hunting paths, tracking magic in its flitting journey.

Across the country in a townhouse basement a match is lit in the dim room. The group is hushed, a lull in the conversation. Dark eyes watching the small flame floating. Bodies sprawled together on the floor, sitting in a circle, but not quite. The joint is lit and passed, laced; they too are chasing magic. They lose their eyes to it, images morphing until one of them leans over to another and whispers, "I think I'm like a firefly except I'm not meant to be, and one day I won't be bioluminescent anymore and then I'll just disappear, you know?" They think about disappearing, they spin and in their heads they are children running after fireflies on a summer night; now they are swimming in time as frozen as winter's lakes. As alive as they aren't, they are everything grasping at nothing, sand running through their hands and disappearing on the

drop into something they can't explain. Meanwhile, the children have caught their fireflies, carefully collected in their breathable jars. Before sleep beckons them, the children carefully carry the jars to the garage, eyeing the small creatures with shrieks and giggles at each bug's movement. Three jars aligned on a shelf in the abandoned garage, an occasional glow in the immersive darkness.

In the morning the townhouse is quiet. The air feels real again, limbs and breath and sight have settled into the late morning sun seeping through the basement retaining windows. The morning light holds a magic of its own, but it is very different from the magic of the night before. In a garage elsewhere three jars stand empty. Wire mesh removed in the night after the satisfied magic catchers are tucked safely into bed. Mother, a lover of fireflies, steps out into the backyard and sets them free. She sets the jars back in their places. In the morning she ogles the disappearing act with her children. Her husband stands back, watching the spectacle. They make eye contact over their children's heads and he gives a playful smirk. He has never been able to help her release the fireflies. He has never been able to explain why.

Fireflies don't live on the west coast of the United States. A little girl growing up in Portland used to believe they were creatures of myth. The fairies, the dragons, the fireflies, all the same category of make believe. She read a book once, about a woman relating her childhood in the Midwest. It was her first bout with nonfiction and she understood what that meant until the author talked about catching fireflies and she got confused about reliable narration. In bed at night she'd pretend her nightlight was a firefly, that passing headlights dancing on the ceiling were fireflies, that her belief was strong enough to make it true.

She went to college on the east coast, saw fireflies for the first time on a warm spring night. She met a boy from the Midwest who told her stories of summer nights chasing fireflies in the backyard. They talked about magic and found themselves in townhouse basements finding new ways of discovering it. It wasn't until senior year that he asked her out. Their first date was at a coffee shop with gaudy firefly decals on the front window. She asked him his greatest fear; he said he was allergic to bees. She told him that wasn't an answer. When they left the coffee shop she picked lightly at a green firefly on the window but it was stuck tight. Three dates later she asked the question again, he answered beestings, she left the restaurant and he chased her three blocks and changed the subject.

A couple of years later they got married and bought a house in the Midwest. Some time after they had children who grew up in the backyard with bare feet and butterfly nets. They went on vacations in the summer. They learned what it meant to be a family and eventually they learned what it meant to fall apart. When that happened there was a year of packed suitcases and tears and a confusing explanation of joint custody that left the kids with a shattered concept of home. She finally understood his greatest fear, although he never had told her. Joint custody became sole custody and some days she wondered if he had ever truly been there at all. That was the year she stopped releasing the fireflies from the children's jars. The insects' bodies dark and beady in the morning's brightness, their magic revealed or vanished. The children stared with a different kind of wonder, looking to their mother for a truth she couldn't carry. She remembered waking up as a girl thinking fireflies weren't real, telling herself maybe it had been better then, knowing it wasn't, but still wondering.