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"Fireflies," by Jacqueline Doyle

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Fireflies

A hot summer afternoon. Steven and I run in circles around the rotating sprinkler, laughing, heads flung back in joy. The water spray is cold on our skin. It makes rainbows in the sun. Rusty, just a puppy, scrambles after us, and we shriek every time he nips at our heels. The wet grass is slippery under our bare feet.

Our father might spank us. Does spank us sometimes, with the broad-backed pink plastic hairbrush on the back of the toilet in the bathroom at the end of the hall. He's often angry, especially at my mother. Every night at the kitchen table they fight. We don't understand the words, only their voices rising, the clatter of silverware on their plates. May I please be excused, we're taught to say. We need to wait until we've finished all the food on our plates. May I please be excused? Tonight he's angry at us. We've disobeyed. Instead of taking a bath after dinner we've been jumping on our mother and father's twin beds. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth between them. The corded white bedspreads are messy and rumped. We are breathless with laughter when our father comes upstairs. We lie, compounding our transgression, and our father strides dramatically into the bathroom to feel the dry bathtub. Now he sits at the foot of my mother's bed holding the pink plastic hairbrush, ready to spank us. My brother waits his turn, stoic. I run shrieking through the halls, my father chasing after me.

I'm the one who will get away. My brother will continue to hide his feelings.

Twilight on a summer night. Steven and I are running around in the back yard clutching glass jars with holes poked in the metal lids to our chests. We're catching fireflies, which wink in the dark around us. Here a point of light. There a point of light. We turn in circles in the darkness, and then look! Another! And another! The yard is silent and magical as they light up all around us. They wink in jars by our beds as we fall asleep, their lights dimming.

Rusty lies on a blanket in the dark coatroom at the top of the cellar stairs, whimpering. Steven and I hover nearby, crowding to see. Our father shoos us away. Don't touch him. He might bite you. Why would Rusty bite us? But he's hurt, we don't understand that. We don't understand that pain can lead to unpredictable, aggressive behavior. So unexpected, Rusty's yelps outside, the sound of the doorbell at night, our neighbor at the door in the dark. Rusty fell on his side jumping over the stone wall, she tells us. You'll need to call the vet. I think he's broken his hip. And now he's curled up on a blanket in the alcove by the kitchen, amidst the piled up coats on hooks and jumble of boots. The small space smells of wet dog. I don't see any blood. I want to pet Rusty. I want to put my arms around him and bury my face in the fur at his neck, I'm astonished to hear that he might bite us.

Steven and I escape my father's rules and extra credit assignments in outdoor adventures. We crouch by a small stream down the street, dipping our hands in the ice cold water to catch crayfish, like tiny pale lobsters. Roam farther through the woods behind Laurie's house, kneeling to look at praying mantises and jack in the pulpits. We ride our bikes to Birchwood Lake, where we catch small fish that we sometimes cook on campfires, and frogs and painted turtles that we bring home and keep in a large metal tub of water in my brother's room. We find a box turtle with only three legs in the road. He thumps through the house.

When our teenaged aunt Maddy lives with us in the bedroom on the third floor, we put the box turtle into her bed for her to discover when she comes home from her date. She shrieks with surprise. It's fun when Maddy lives with us. I want to be Maddy. She has boyfriends and makeup and madras skirts and a real Japanese kimono. She wears rollers with brushes inside them to bed.

Maddy has put beautiful pink nail polish on my nails and my father is in a rage. He wants her to take it off. Now. She doesn't have nail polish remover so she has to scrape the polish off my fingernails with a metal nail file.

Rusty can't hear me. I call and call and when I go upstairs to fetch him for his dinner, he's curled in a ball at the foot of my mother's bed, already stiff, rigor mortis setting in. We live in the new house on the lake now. It's been more than ten years since he broke his hip.

My father is angry again, white faced with fury. What have we done now? Will he stop speaking to us? Is he mad at my mother? Has she been talking too much? Is he mad at my brother for his grades? No more sports, he tells him. You're grounded. Or mad at me? I love the extra credit reading. But there's so much extra credit math. I start to cry.

I'm four when my father teaches me to read from the Phonics book, red leather with a clown on the front and pictures inside for every letter. A is for Apple. B is for Bear. I sound out each letter to make a word, and climb ladders of words at the back of the book. Ladder after ladder. I am proud of myself.

Before I learn to sound out words, I pretend to read *The Little Engine That Could* to Steven. "I think I can. I think I can." Over and over. We sit on the orange couch in the drafty living room, feet stuck out in front of us, and I turn the pages as I read each aloud, even though I can't read the words, just know them from hearing them.

My mother smokes and watches the soap operas and reads romance novels. She doesn't like housework or cooking. She says the stove gives her hives. She's on the phone with the other mothers a lot. My father thinks she talks too much. They have drinks before dinner and he's always telling her to be quiet. Will you be quiet, Peg? I'm trying to read the paper, he says.

After a while she does *New York Times* crossword puzzles during their cocktail hour. Words march up and down and across the page in orderly lines. I can't seem to shake this cold, she finally says. My allergies are acting up again, she says. My father turns a page in *The Wall Street Journal* and doesn't say anything. They haven't started fighting about who's making dinner yet, but it's still early.

At night my father and I lie on the couch in the darkened living room and listen to Night on Bald Mountain on the hi fi, wooden with a nubby cloth front, as large as a TV. He asks me what pictures I'm seeing in my head. I see skeletons dancing on the mountains, I tell him, witches like Irish banshees swooping through the black skies. We're close. He likes me more than Mom and Steven. At night I jump clear across the room so the tigers under the bed don't bite my feet and then I scurry down the hall to climb into my father's bed. Once on Christmas Eve I tell him I hear reindeer on the roof. We lie in bed and look at the ceiling. He says he hears the reindeer too.

We sit and look at art books together—Calder, Cezanne, Picasso, Klee. He offers money if Steven and I will memorize *Fifty Great Moments in Music* off an LP. Ten cents for each short excerpt. Da da da dum. Beethoven's Fifth. A swarm of little notes. Flight of the Bumblebee by Rimsky-Korsakov. The unfamiliar syllables roll off my tongue. Five dollars is a lot of money, and I work hard to earn it. Steven doesn't try.

My brother and I are planning to run away. We've packed a large olive green Army duffel bag with provisions. It's leaning against the wall by Steven's bedroom door, and butter is melting out of the bottom when our parents spot it and stop us. We've never spent the night in our fort by the railroad tracks and we're disappointed. The fort is a makeshift area between huge boulders that we've turned into a structure by piling tree boughs between them, both roof and camouflage. Chinks of sunlight stream through the branches above. Sometimes we put pennies on the tracks, which are flattened by the trains. We were planning to live in the fort. It's quiet and peaceful there, not like home.

Steven is two years younger than me. He tags along. We play hide and seek with Laurie, who's his age and lives next door. Sometimes with Cathy, who has pale blonde hair and lives in the house behind us. Sometimes we invite Peter, a school friend of my brother's, to our fort. Later I spend all my time with Leslie, who sucks two of her fingers even though she's in fourth grade. We want to be ornithologists, and we have binoculars and red wooden bird call whistles. We keep notebooks with lists of every bird we see. Robin, blue jay, redwing blackbird, chickadee, titmouse, starling, sparrow. Sometimes a flicker or woodpecker or sapsucker. I collect feathers, tape them into shallow rectangular stocking boxes, and label them. My favorites are the red cardinal feathers, and the iridescent peacock-blue feathers from male mallard duck wings. I am fascinated by flight.

We've cleaned and cleaned to get the Morris Avenue house ready to sell. My room with its dark turquoise walls and travel posters of Mont St. Michel and Paris is sparkling. There's a hyacinth plant in a pot wrapped in pale green foil on the radiator cover and I love the overpoweringly sweet smell. A stack of *Seventeen* magazines is fanned out like the display at the dentist's office. Maddy is a real estate agent now. She says that people can tell that the house is not usually so clean. People can tell.

The new house is smaller but nicer because it's on the lake, with a bridge to its own little island. Our half is just untended woods. The neighbor's half is a rose garden. My brother chooses a tiny bedroom downstairs with its own bathroom. On Morris Avenue our bedrooms were right next to each other, and there was an open outdoor porch connecting them. We used to sneak into each other's rooms by way of the porch. His room usually, with the dank metal tubs of frogs and turtles, the curtains with rocket ships on them. Sometimes we shimmied down the tall hemlock tree at my end of the porch and roamed the neighborhood, eerie in the moonlight.

But we're in high school now, in the lake house on Fernwood Place. I read all the time, or listen to The Doors and Jimi Hendrix, shut in my room with headphones on. He's become one of the popular kids. He hangs out with boys who drink all the time. He and his friends drag a case of beer into the woods—where else is there to go in Mountain Lakes?—and get drunk. It's the cool thing to do. That, or go to someone's house while their parents are away, get plastered, and trash the house.

I was always just as smart as you were, he said to me, when I finished my PhD.

One night a friend of Steven's is wasted, that's what my brother and his friends call it, and he drives his sports car so fast on the Boulevard that he plows into a large stone pillar and dies. His parents invite all of his friends to their house after the funeral to get drunk. Steven and some others have to go to court when they try to destroy the pillar with a sledgehammer.

Steven still drinks too much, and smokes, and now he's dying of kidney cancer at 60.

He broke your father's heart, Mom said, over and over, after Steven didn't finish college. You were the apple of his eye, she often said about me, long after it wasn't true, after we'd clashed over my boyfriends, my politics, my marriage.

For years we talked long distance on Sundays, really just my mother and me. Dad listened in, hung up abruptly before the conversations were over. Then he was partially deaf, and couldn't hear well on the phone. Then the tumor in his mouth prevented him from speaking.

Steven and I rarely talked.

After Dad died, nothing left but money, money, money. Anger, greed, recriminations. You're not my sister, Steven said, when I asked for an accounting of the Trust he'd been managing. We communicated through the lawyer after that, finally through terse emails.

Now he writes me sometimes about the estate. How's your health, I write back. Okay, he answers. I'm off the chemo now, he says, which can only mean the end. I want to ask him if he remembers Rusty, our days in the woods at Birchwood Lake, our fort by the railroad tracks, the three-legged box turtle, the bats in the eaves, the fireflies in the back yard. Good luck, I write instead.

A window opens in memory and I'm looking out the window over the sink where Mom must have stood many years ago. It's cool in the kitchen. She can hear her husband upstairs in his den. The darkness and silence of the house press against her. Outside her two children are running through the spray from the rotating sprinkler. It chugs each time it turns. Their dog Rusty chases after them, nipping at their heels. She can hear a lawnmower in the distance and smell new cut grass. The sunlight is dazzling, and rainbows are dancing in the mist of water.

It must have seemed to all of us that dusk would never fall.

The doorbell would never ring in the dark, with bad news of the dog. We'd never be afraid that Rusty could turn on us. The fireflies in the jars by our bedsides would never wink and go out.