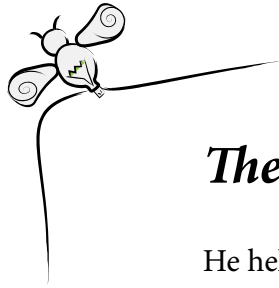


r.l.wicke
the last *firefly*



The Last Firefly

He held in his hands the very last firefly in the world, as far as anyone knew.

Summer had shown him a picture of a tiny beetle with a glowing backside in one of her mother's fairytale books, and they'd both been captivated by the little bug. Half of Summer's art since that day had been populated by swarms of the little lights, and together they wondered what it must have been like to see the lights dancing around them in the old days. He wanted to know more. Grant couldn't read; Summer's mother Anna was the only person he knew who could and she didn't have time to help them find books about it. Made research tough, but he started by asking questions of the old folks.

"Yes, I remember fireflies. No, we called them lightning bugs. We used to drive upstate to see swarms of them hiding in the low hanging branches of the willows. We'd fly through the velvet dark in our bare feet and catch them in our fingers. We let them go right away of course."

"Firefly? Yes, I asked for one for Christmas but it was too salty for my dad. I got a new pod instead. Wish I still had that pod, though."

"No, no, we smushed them against the pavement to make a glowy goo."

"If you watched one in your hand for a time, you'd start to notice a kind of Morse code. It was calling to its friends to come and save it."

"My neighbor had three of them, and she let me borrow one, on its chain. My uncle caught me with the light on and I had to give it back. I never forgot that."

"We caught a million of them in ball jars to make lanterns for the tree house."

All Grant knew sure was what he and Summer had learned from the book - fireflies were bugs. With lights in their bums. It wasn't much to go on. For sure they had once flocked out in the country, dancing with trees in the dark, but people must have domesticated them or android-ized them or something.

Two weeks later, he got the best description while trading with Jerky Joe. Jerky Joe's Pa had bought him one and he had had broken his within a week of purchase, but he remembered it in great detail. Jerky Joe was only in his fifties and he had the best memories of the world before. He described the silver filigree and the swamp green light. He told Grant how he trained it to follow

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him around in the woods and it helped him light his way home. His eyes lit up while he was speaking, as if the memory of the firefly was casting its warm glow over his face even now.

Grant had to find one. Had to. He was growing tired of traipsing through shadowy tunnels, pointing the assist light of his pod into spidery corners, never knowing for sure what was crawling around his feet. Grant Hill loved exploring, but he hated the dark.

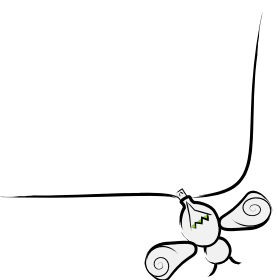
He started by asking around about a small velvet box with a winged light bulb on the outside. No one had seen one. He paid a few of the tunnelrats to start scouting around in some of the farther out apartment buildings. He hand-picked the richest building that had big enough apartments that kids might've lived there once, and he started hunting, one tenement at a time. This particular building hadn't been rolled yet. The prospect of searching it was gruesome but full of promise. Every bed he found with a skeleton about the same size as him, increased his chances of finding one of the fireflies.

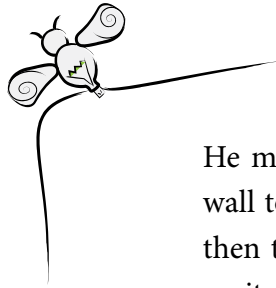
In the meantime, he found good stuff. Great stuff, trade-able stuff. Christmas? Done. Art supplies for Summer, a couple of legible books for Mrs. Layce, a beautiful cameo brooch for mom. And when he had to sell the brooch to feed the family for a month because mom was laid up with a stomach sickness? Didn't faze him.

Then one dark blue, nose-nipping December evening he found it. He hadn't believed he would, not in the first building that he tried. And if he had, he didn't believe it would still work after sitting in a box (or worse: around the neck of its owner) for thirty years.

But now he held it in his hands. He loosened it from the clasp and it hovered in the air before him. He took a step away and it followed him. He wanted to dance. He wanted to leap. Instead, he scrambled down eight flights of stairs - the glowing silver bug whipping around his shoulders; the black velvet box clutched tightly in his fingers - and flew toward the subway tunnel. He took the stairs two, three at a time. Out of breath, he slowed to a fast walk and the firefly caught up with him. It passed him, hovered in the air about three feet in front of me, at eye level. His pod was tucked safely into his pocket. The glow of the firefly was twice as bright as the assist light and he didn't need to point it. When he made a turn, he simply had to quietly direct it with his voice. It obeyed him better than that mutt he'd taken care of last year.

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He made it home in half the time, running his fingers along the dull stone wall to find the end of the door. He tapped the safety knock - five short taps then two more deliberate ones. Faster than usual, his fingers trembling with excitement. He couldn't wait to show her. He almost didn't bother knocking again, he wanted to bust in and shout his discovery all over the house. On the other hand, he didn't want to give her a heart attack. So he knocked.

No answer.

He tapped again.

Nothing.

"Mom?"

He pushed the door open, jiggling it slightly to get over the rough patch of carpet. Mom wasn't in the living room. He walked through the archway into the dark bedroom. The firefly followed ahead of him and lit the whole room.

"Grant... Oh, thank you, Jesus.... Grant..." she said. She was lying with her face pressed into the plastic rug. Her nightgown was scrunched all around her indecently as though she were tossing and turning.

"Mom? Mom, what's wrong?"

"Get Anna."

He threw the firefly into the backroom and it landed on his pillow. Anna was fetched and herbs were administered, but the fever didn't go down. Not with the first dose of hot, sweaty tea, nor the second, nor the third into the next day. There was nothing else Anna could do - Mom needed antibiotics and she needed them fast. They hauled her up to the city hospital. The medicine was administered immediately - no one in the Bronx would ever be turned away due to lack of coin - but she wouldn't be allowed to leave without paying - or being bonded into employment. Mom was proud of her unbranded arm.

It took three long days to find a buyer for the firefly. The rich man paid him enough coin to get Mom out of the hospital and home with a month's worth of medicine that would clear the sickness right out of her body. Everything would be fine. There were a few coins left to buy a sack of colorful glass beads for Summer and a new pod for himself, one with a brighter assist light and music

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he liked. He bought a better dog, too, one that would chase ahead of him and keep spiders away.

Summer took the beads and gave him the warmest of hugs. He couldn't bring himself to tell her about the firefly - how he'd been so close to having one for himself. Maybe she would have understood. Maybe she would've helped him search another building. There were always more apartment buildings. Some were cleaned out, some were as full of promise as that one had been. But he didn't have the heart. Besides, he had more work to do with Mom recovering. Somebody had to keep food on the table. She fussed at him to get out and have fun more often, but as long as Summer traveled with him, hunting for food was fun enough, anyway. Always had been, always would be.

That Christmas, Summer presented him with a gift. The loose bundle was wrapped in crinkled brown paper and tied tightly with twine. He pulled it out and gasped. It was a beautiful, wool-lined cloak - the kind you needed to go treasure-hunting in January in the Bronx. And Summer had embroidered it all over with beautiful silver and yellow-green glass beads in the shape of tiny fireflies.

She passed him a little folded piece of paper. He opened it. She had drawn a picture of the two of them, on fine, thick paper with good charcoal, walking through some dark tunnel - it could have been any tunnel, dark and mysterious. He was wearing the new cloak, she was standing beside him holding her pod and pointing the assist light into the darkness. The light was pointed at a box with the lid open the tiniest bit. The contents of the box were shadowy and concealed - and that was the point, wasn't it?

He squeezed her hand. "Want to go looking for treasure?"

She smiled.

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"Want to go looking for treasure?"

