



Kobayashi Kiyochika, *Fireflies at Ochanomizu*, 1880.

## AFTERGLOW

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THE BOY CAPTURED A FIREFLY and placed it in the jar my grandmother had provided for just such a purpose. The kind of receptacle she employed mid-August for preserving peaches and blueberries. But it wasn't marmalading time yet, and I suppose she decided the jar had other uses till then.

Earlier that afternoon an unexpected shower dispersed an intricate misting on the grass. It had been an unsettled spring made so not just by the weather. My grandmother and I had been doing our best to adjust—to my mother's passing and our unanticipated proximity. Me to my new living arrangements, she to sudden motherhood—at this time in her life—and rectifying mistakes made the first time around. We were wary of one another. I, armed with unfiltered anecdotes supplied by my momma when her demons invaded. My grandmother, by the little, if any, information about me, a relative stranger to whom she was related. Both of us trying to make sense of pronouns and present tense and adjusting to the unfamiliarity of kindness.

The rain beaded the blades of grass like sprinkles my mother—in one of her manic moments—let me put atop my ice cream or the glitter my grandmother wouldn't allow on my cheeks, no matter how much I protested. But the shower had ended, surrendering to a twilight echoing with Kick-the-Can and Red Rover, played until bodies evaporated like an afterthought on a humid afternoon. The “in-between time,” my grandma called it, when it was no longer day but not yet settled into night. Like us, I suppose. That's when the insects appeared above my grandmother's garden. Bright sparks of illumination hovering in front of me by the hundreds, afloat like shards of fractured memories or lit matches flung into the gloaming. There one second and gone the next. Just like my momma.

I'd never seen a firefly before, living as we'd done in a fifth-floor walk-up among urban sprawl as far away as my mother could run. Where the only things to come out at night were rats or other pests—some on four legs, some on two—or, like my mother's compulsions, things best met by moonlight.

But there were no compulsions that afternoon. No impulses to be controlled or obsessions attended to, there on my grandmother's porch. Only those intermittent bursts of light.

I was dumbstruck at the sight. I ran to my grandmother—animated and electrified—and shepherded her outside to either share in the wonder or deploy our defenses. She thought I'd lost my mind—a not unfamiliar state between us—as I dragged her from the kitchen, through the house, and out the side door. When the woman understood what had incited me to such a state, she smiled. But I could intuit it wasn't out of joy, or nostalgia or reminiscence, but for all the moments we'd missed when I was no more than a mistake made manifest and she a character from the Brothers Grimm. She placed a hand on my arm and retreated, returning moments later with the jar, a hammer, and a nail. She showed me how to poke holes in the lid, then guided me off to “gather some glow.”

I know she watched as I withdrew, not averting her gaze as she'd done when her own daughter had gone off exploring—and my grandfather had followed. There was no one to follow me now except for my grandmother's prickle of contrition. She'd never done anything those years ago to protect her own. Averted her eyes. Ignored, denied, refused to accept or acknowledge. But not my mother. She cataloged and curated her father's every transgression,

then injected each indignity into forearms or thighs.

But this time, my grandmother had the opportunity to make right what had been wrong. I pictured myself through her eyes: a hooded form of indefinable sex or shape, dissolving into the deepening dusk.



I called myself Rory now, though I'd been christened Aurora after being conceived under the Northern Lights by a man almost as ephemeral. Aurora was a goddess or a princess in a fairy tale, though I was anything but, with my short hair and a virgin chin, defiantly desiring a whisker or two. I grew up playing defense. It was my default position, trapped as I'd been in that counterfeit form. Aurora. The impostor.

I walked along a path towards the neighboring churchyard and trees of weathered headstones, still getting accustomed to grass underfoot. The churchyard was shuttered and vacant—a plot of land with no plot or purpose—with an expanse of uncut lawn above which the insects used their language of light to conduct a silent symphony. Most nights, out of our apartment's bedroom window, all I could comprehend behind closed blinds were alternating Rorschachs of reality and remorse. But out here in this new environment, as ghost-lights lured me further, there was an immensity I could barely conceive.

I didn't know if I could catch the creatures; the only thing I caught at home was a cold or the back of a hand from a revolving coterie of men. Then, one appeared in front of me, a flicker of firelight hovering in the gathering dark. I set down the jar and clasped my hands around it. It didn't sting or burn like a cigarette stub on the meat of my hand. It didn't even try to escape, just sat there like a penitent between my two palms.

“If you squeeze, they won't glow.”

I startled at the sound. That's when I first laid eyes on the Boy. He was older than me, though it was difficult to tell by how much, there in the thickening twilight. “Just let them land on you. Once they do, they'll stay for a while.”

I knew my fairy tales. A grandmother at home and a stranger in the woods with a wolfish grin was never a promising combination. But I remained rooted. He approached and, taking my hands in his own, opened them. His hair, probably tawny during the day, was blue gossamer in the light and fell across his pale forehead, almost, but not entirely, hiding a scar that bisected his brow. The mark was a consolation. I had a share of my own—not skin, but Winter's deep—and not so evident as the Boy's.

He let an insect land on his hand, then gestured for me to unseal the container. Once I'd done as he'd requested and the vessel was expectant, he placed the creature inside, and I refastened the lid.

He studied me through the embellished lens of the jar. His eyes were as emerald as the light. The insect inside continued its pulse, though in encouragement or warning, it was impossible to know. The Boy spoke of bioluminescence and attraction as the reason for their display, while the bug we'd captured stalked his container in search of a second. He said when he'd been a child—not the man he was now—he'd fill up a jar and place them by his bed, falling asleep to their rhythmic blaze.

“Afraid of the dark?” I prodded.

“Of what happens in it,” he answered after a pause.

I turned from his directness and towards the insects' incandescence. With those irregular eruptions, it was like they were the paparazzi and I was a star.

He said the first time he'd collected the bugs, no one had taught him to poke holes in the lid; there'd been no one about to teach much of anything—the only thing taut was the strap of a belt. When he woke the next morning, the insects were lifeless at the bottom of the jar.

I didn't respond. Dead bugs used to be my only companions—before my mother and the move and my newly-minted life with a woman I barely knew.

“But now I understand that if you want to keep something, you have to let it breathe.”

There was a silence between us. A hooting interrupted. In the distance, flashes of lightning tried to outdo the moon, mimicking my quickening pulse.



We walked through the tall grass, conjuring and capturing the floating embers. He explained how light pollution was causing the bugs' decline. "Too much and they can't find one another. They need to see a mate in order to mate." I couldn't understand how too much light could ever be a bad thing, knowing the effects of the dark too well. I panicked for the twinkling

phantoms, those constellations of shifting starlight, disconsolate in the knowledge that this wonder I'd discovered could vanish and never return. Was there anything I could do to help? I'd broken my share of streetlamps. Maybe I'd already assisted in their survival. Maybe I could do more, but I was afraid to make any promises, even to myself. My mother had a habit

of promising she'd make things right, but it was impossible to fix what was wrong when all you wanted was a fix.

We gathered more lightning bugs to accompany those first, enclosing a bounty in my receptacle of glass while the night drew tightly around us. He showed me how the females had only one soft set of wings, but the males had an extra hardcover shell.

I wished my mother had borne a second shell. Perhaps a third, and maybe a fourth, and wondered when I might acquire my own. Looking at the Boy, I speculated who had tried to splinter his shell. I wanted to touch his scar, run my fingers along the ridge, trace its byways, burrow inside. My grandmother had warned me against strangers. But nothing about the Boy gave me pause.

He told me how their light can sometimes be a beacon to their prey. "There are birds," the Boy continued, "birds that hunt them. Spiders, frogs. And some females are predators to the males." How could a god let anything bad befall something this magical, I wondered, though all the while knowing that he doesn't exist.

"It's good to know who your enemies are. You should always be aware of what might be after you," he concluded, imparting his lessons with the fervor of one converted.

I did not know what was after me. But I was well aware of what came before: a litany of impediments. Fissures

from family infidelities. Fractures from insatiable addictions. The finality of finding my mother's body.

The Boy and I continued until the world dissolved into outlines of shadow, so different was this dark from the silhouettes of ink in owl-lit alleyways.

We stopped. He told me my eyes were brown pools. I was glad of the dark so he couldn't see me blush. I looked into his eyes. At his intensity and acceptance. Took his scar as invitation.

I'd kissed a few boys and even some girls—on a dare—those times I attended school when not tending to my mother. Our lantern was the only illumination between us, its twinkling stars from a once upon time. I reached for him. He leaned into me. And then we were one, his light and mine comingling beyond soft wings or hard shells, mouths touching, sparks igniting, echoing the shimmering strobe from inside the jar. His lips were the taste of champagne, which, in a fit of mania, my mother once let me enjoy, the lightning bugs, the bubbles.

And then it was over.

He never asked for my name. I didn't ask for his. I left with my prize, and he, with his own, certain there would be another tomorrow.

I eased my way through the warm spring night, back towards my grandmother's garden, buoyed by a kiss from a boy with no name, a jar full of starlight, and an unspoken promise of better days to come. ●