

ALEX LINDQUIST

FLICKERS

The grass is cool and dew-wet, clinging to their bare feet as the two girls chase flickers of light from fireflies. The summer nights have taken longer to settle down and darkness hasn't blanketed the sky quite yet. The moon hangs low under tree branches. A man sits in the lawn chair watching them. He is their father. Occasionally he leans down to the small bucket at his feet and scoops ice into his fist. He tosses a few cubes into his mouth and chews. He swallows and then puts the bottle of bourbon to his lips and lets the amber liquid burn down his throat.

The girls dance in the dusk shadows. Cotton white night dresses billow around their small bodies, they are raptured in the fireflies. Their laugh is a soft, comfortable sound made by sisters. The dark curtain of trees at the back of the yard resonates a steady chorus of crickets. They skip towards where their father sits. Huddling close, they show him the creature cupped in the hands of the oldest. Her small delicate fingers woven around palms turned up, a firefly in its center. The insect, striped and long, shifts its wings to the shriek and delight of the youngest girl.

Watch daddy, she whispers, he turns on.

The father watches, not the insect, but the shadowed faces of his daughters intent on the fluttering of light from their palms.

He twists the lid of the large jar on his lap and offers the opening for the girl to slide her hand in. She lets the insect drop into the grass clippings lying at the bottom. They turn and run back to the yard. The man seals the jar and tilts it to see inside. The jam jar, found on the side of the yard and cleaned of dirt, is still yellowed by weather and time. A remnant of a label still sticks to the front and with a thick finger he uncurls the crisp corner to see the letters AM and a small strawberry flower, white petals, yellow center. His wife liked this jam. Not on bread though. She would pour it on vanilla ice cream, swirl the two together and lick the spoon. Back in those days life was sweeter to him. Before she had to work at Ted's diner, because he had been laid off from the factory. Before she had to drive home after closing, late at night on Route 74, where trucks always drove too fast.

The bourbon bottle comes to his lips again and he swallows long, letting its presence be felt all the way down.

He watches his daughters. Their hair catches the moonlight in silver streaks. The oldest crouches down, her hands caressing the grass in search of a flicker of light in its tangle. She is gentle, he thinks. The youngest is spinning in circles, delighted in her nightdress and how it twirls around her. She is playful, he thinks. And he sips the bourbon again followed by dropping a few ice cubes into his mouth. They bring him another firefly. In the jar, lights flicker and he shakes it gently to dislodge the ones clinging to the side as they climb up. He does not want them to escape. The bug is

placed in with the others and they watch a small world of star-flickers ignite the dirtied glass jar.

He will let them put it on their nightstand later, he says, so they can fall asleep watching the lights, as if they had captured stars from heaven in an old jam jar.

Is mommy in our heaven jar? the littlest girl asks. And the oldest says no don't be silly. And he drinks again from the bottle. And tries not to be angry with them, but he is finding everything so hard.

Go on and get a few more, it's getting late, he says. And they run off again, trying to find little lights on grass and leaves and on the wide-faced petals of the flowers from the dogwood tree. They chase small stars that flicker over the dew-covered grass. And their father drinks bourbon and chews ice.

And then the littlest girl cries out and her sister comes to her. The father sits up in the chair. Together in cupped hands they bring their father a firefly that she has crushed.

It was an accident, she cries.

And the father, who is tired of tears, says he knows. But watch, he says, and then with his wide finger he presses down on the bug and lifts off the iridescent glow. It is like liquid light on his finger and he smears his youngest's face with it. She stands blinking tears back, yellow glowing streaks on her cheeks.

There, he says, now you have the magic. And he settles back into his chair with the bourbon bottle.

The oldest daughter watches as the glow on her sister's cheeks begins to fade. She sees that night has come and that the flickers in the grass have dwindled down. She sees her father asleep now on the chair. The old jam jar lying on the grass next to him. She picks up the jar and takes her sister's hand, bringing them both inside. Here she will wash her sister's face, place the jar on the nightstand in between their beds. She will tuck her sister in bed without brushing the grass off her feet. She will climb in bed herself. She will watch the fireflies' light flicker and glow. She will watch their lights fade as she falls into dreams.

And when she wakes in morning's sunlight, she will see the dirty, yellowed jam jar. She will pick it up and carry it outside. She will open the lid and set free last night's magic.