

Firefly Graveyard

Every night, in late October, I walk the graveyard path, drinking the sky between monuments and stones left by surviving relatives for strangers to stumble upon. On these nights the sky tastes like cold apple cider pressed from September's summer days. The stars seem brightest and closest when I am in the graveyard in October. Dad thinks it's because the sky is a graveyard for fireflies.

"So," Dad says, his hand shaking as he points upward, "the stars become brighter each October as cold nights spirit the blinking insects onto the dark sky."

He finishes the story with an eloquence bought from years of practice. We sit in lime green plastic lawn chairs on the front porch of our house, listening to dead leaves scrape and patter on the street.

"The skies are lifeless," I tell him, "and firefly corpses rot like anything else."

"You don't need to get angry. It's just a story."

He closes his eyes and I watch his wrinkles smooth and the skin sag on his face as he relaxes.

"Is that really what you think?" I ask.

"If it makes you happy."

"It doesn't."

"Well then, suppose I think it's true."

He opens his eyes and smiles at me. Please Dad, enough stories about death.

"Let's go inside," I say, "it's unhealthy for you to be out here."

One October night, years later, the stars vanish from the sky, leaving only the thin outline of a new moon. All starlight dies at once, without warning, without sound. Dad sleeps in his lawn chair, breathing in small gasps. I think about shouting at him, "Where are your fireflies?" But I leave Dad to dream and I rush to the graveyard hill on the south-east edge of town. Small shop windows and streetlamps shed enough light to give the blacktop its own glow. Houses hug the road, two-story buildings made of oxblood red brick and large single pane windows. A gray haired woman grins at me from her front porch, her teeth, yellow as dead dandelions, dully glow beneath her shadowed eye sockets. I remember Dad's face, his deep wrinkles, his sagging skin, and I shiver.

Dressed in black with musty gray tombstones peppering its garment like flecks of dandruff, the hill looks like a quiet librarian hording secrets. The dirt path mutes my footsteps as I walk between the graves. A dull wind rustles the dry leaves on a sycamore tree partway up the hill. The sky tastes as plain and dry as coal.

Then, I hear the soft click of wings and a small firefly bobbles out of the ground. Blinking white light, the firefly drifts away. It hangs like a will-o'-the-wisp, just out of reach, just beyond the next gravestone. The firefly stops at the top of the hill, burning against the black sky as I creep up towards it. So close! But its wings cease clicking, cease pulling the air, and the firefly falls into the sky, still blinking starlight.

Countless more fireflies bobble from the ground, hover, and fall into the sky. They look like a river in reverse, each firefly pulling together up the final waterfall, cutting into separate shining rivers, swashing into luminescent streams, trickling into glowing brooks, and dividing into blinking drops. The sky, respeckled with light, tastes like apple cider again.

Dad is awake when I return home.

"I think that October nights are the last toast, an apology for the gray winter ahead," he says.

"I know," I reply as I ease into the empty lawn chair beside him.

He tells me again how the sky is a firefly graveyard, and I listen.

Broadside

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