

Heat Lightning

Fireflies die when they are two months old. They spend those two months lighting up hot August nights, sometimes flickering in a special way to attract a mate, sometimes just glinting in the dark like earth-fallen stars.

But the fireflies were gone this summer night, leaving only the August heaviness in the air and the faint scritch of cicadas in the oak trees. Jess leaned against the porch railing, waiting for Johnny to say something. Her pink seersucker playsuit stuck to her skin, and humidity pressed against her chest. It felt hard to breathe.

“Hot night,” Johnny said, finally. He shifted his feet. In the white light from the porch, his blonde hair stuck straight up like dandelion fluff.

Jess frowned, her wide mouth twisting to the side of her face. The cicadas screeched louder.

“That’s a nice dress,” he added, running his fingers through his hair. He was starting to look desperate.

“You should just say it, whatever it is that you came here to say,” Jess whispered, afraid to wake up her father inside the house. Maybe afraid, too, that Johnny would actually say it. She didn’t look at him, keeping her eyes fixed on the heat lightning flashing in the distance. They needed rain.

Johnny cleared his throat. “I might not be coming back next time.”

“Oh, is that all?” Jess asked, looking up at him suddenly.

His brown eyes widened with surprise. “Jess, when I say ‘not coming back,’ I mean dead,” he said, carefully. “Dead. Like blown-to-pieces by the Germans or the Japs or whoever else decides to - Jess, why are you laughing?”

She reached over and kissed him to make him stop talking. “You could’ve just said that to begin with,” she said, brushing her hands through his hair. “And all tonight you let me think you were going to leave me. You aren’t going to die, I won’t let you. You’ll sing three lines of our song every time before you fly and that will bring you good luck. You do remember our song, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” he said.

The heat lightning blazed in the sky, so bright they didn't see the last firefly flicker in the night.