

## A Good Night for Fireflies

A moose between you and the bathroom is not what you expect. But there she was, almost close enough to touch. With the sun just setting behind the mountains, it was hard to see darkish shapes. And it didn't help that my glasses were back in the kitchen.

She had found the salt lick someone had placed here last year. I stopped just as she reared her head, staring at me with huge brown eyes. I started to back away. "Pretty girl," I whispered, and she really was, like deep brown velvet.

Just the other day Zach said never raise your voice to a moose. I giggled and asked if they got their feelings hurt. Now I get it. How could you shout at a sweet giant like this? She was only here for a taste of salt.

Her soft eyes said *let's each be on our way*. She turned just as I blinked. I opened my eyes to an empty space in the dusk. I looked out toward the split-rail fence to spot her stepping over it like it wasn't there. The next second I couldn't tell her from the forest.

Back at the cabin the gas lamps were on in the kitchen. The night was cooling down, but it was toasty in here, thanks to Great Majestic. You wouldn't normally call an appliance by name, like GE or Kitchenaid, but if you saw this huge cast iron wood stove, you'd give it that kind of respect. It's pretty much the queen of the kitchen.

Just then Zach came in and threw one leg over a bench. He had a mostly-gone Dos Equis in his hand. "Come on Jo, sit down. You want a beer?"

"No thanks...hey, guess who was just at the salt lick? A moose."

"A moose? No kidding?" He looked out the window like he expected her to still be there.

"She's long gone now, silly. I got really close before I even saw her."

"Good thing she didn't have a calf. They get protective."

“She was sweet. Once she knew I was friendly, we got along fine.”

“So now you’re the moose whisperer.” He drained the last of the beer. “That was super-cold. I’m gonna go grab one more out of the creek. Sure you don’t want one?”

“No, I’m good. Hey, when you come back in, let’s look at this old scrapbook.”

When Zach came in, I had the book open to a faded snapshot of a man troweling what looked like cement between the logs of the cabin.

“Oh,” he said, “that’s Great-Grandpa chinking the logs, to seal them. In 1929.”

“You know, you look kind of like him. Only with dark hair.”

“Maybe a little. He was skinnier.”

“*Wyoming’s Bighorn range*,” I read on an old yellowed brochure. “*Cloud Peak Wilderness*. Is that what this area is called?”

“Yep. Cloud Peak’s the highest mountain in the Bighorns.”

“Well, it’s wilderness, for sure. When I was begging to come out here, I had no idea.”

“I warned you it was rustic, right? I was afraid you’d hate it. I mean, where have you lived except an apartment in Florida? But hey, you talked down a moose. And,” he counted on his fingers, “you’ve used the two-holer, lugged in firewood, stoked the Great Majestic...”

“Don’t forget the mouse.”

“Yeah, he never saw you coming. So, how about some Rummikub? You set it up, and I’ll go start the generator and get more light in here.”

“All right, I guess...but I always lose that stupid game.”

“Who knows, you might win this time. It’s just for fun. And there’s not a whole lot else to do after supper.”

“Fine.”

“Can’t get your ASMR videos...” He pulled a fake pout.

“Don’t start—”

He began tapping on his beer bottle and whispering.

“Very funny.” He would never get it. Sometimes the videos calm my brain when it goes haywire. But best get off that subject. “Okay, go turn on the generator, and we’ll play.” I pulled out the Rummikub box and started flipping the numbered tiles face down on the table.

I heard the gas generator rumble up. I switched on one of the two electric lamps.

Zach came back in and we started the game. “Meld,” he said, laying out four tiles, then knocked on the table. A weird rule.

“How many points do you need to meld again?”

“Thirty.”

“Do they have to be different colors?”

“Not if they’re consecutive.”

“Huh?”

“*Consecutive.*” He shot me an eye-roll. “You know, in a row, like 5, 6, 7...”

“Sorry. Forget it.” I dumped my tiles back in the box. “I’m gonna get a flashlight and go read in the bunk room.”

“Come on JoJo...you know I didn’t mean—”

I knew he didn’t *mean* it. But I know him pretty well by now. He gets annoyed if I don’t know a word, or don’t get some joke. He knows about my learning challenges, but he forgets. He used to say how much he loved my “simple” way of thinking, but sometimes I swear he just thinks *I’m* simple.

So I read for awhile, but it’s hard with a flashlight. Then the light attracted miller moths.

When one almost flitted into my mouth, I gave up. I got up and looked out the window. Zach was outside in his favorite folding chair.

He spotted me and called out “JoJo...come out and look at the sky, it’s phenomenal.”

I put on my glasses, threw on a jacket and went out. Sometimes I think I forgive a little too fast. I don’t know.

With pine forest all around and no city lights, the stars popped out of the black sky. The Milky Way stretched across like a heavenly bridge. I thought maybe that *was* heaven. Or maybe not. No one really knew, did they?

One star twinkled in front of Zach’s face, then disappeared. He sat up and looked around, but the twinkle was gone.

“That looked like a firefly,” I said.

“A firefly? Huh. I never saw one up here before.”

He paused for a second. “Listen JoJo, about the game...”

“It’s all right. I guess I’m too sensitive. It’s just...I know I’m no genius, but sometimes you make me feel like some sort of *retard*.”

“I know. I was a jerk.” He took my hand. “So how can I make it up to you?”

“Hmm. Carry my water bottle on the hike tomorrow?”

“Jeez, you drive a hard bargain. Okay, you got it.”

Something caught my eye. “Look—over there, by the creek!”

A bluish flame was dancing over the water.

“Whoa.”

“What is it?” I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

It shimmered white, then blue again.

“I don’t know. Might be a will o’ the wisp. Grandpa used to talk about those. Ghost lights that appear in the woods, around bogs or creeks.”

“Ghost lights?”

“Yeah,” he made an evil face that reminded me of the Joker from Batman. “They enchant unsuspecting travelers and lure them to their doom.”

I swatted his arm. “Quit it, you’re scaring me.”

“Okay,” he laughed. “I’ve heard it’s light released from rotting vegetation. But nobody really knows. Look...there it goes again. Let’s go check it out.”

“What if it enchants *us*?” I followed him down to the creek anyway, half scared, half curious. But the light show backed away like a mirage.

Just as they flickered out, the lights flashed on something in the middle of the creek. I edged closer and saw tawny fur and white spots. “Zach...it’s a fawn!”

On an island in the stream, curled up in the bushes, was a tiny mule deer.

“Hey, so it is. Bambi.”

“Look at those ears, almost as big as he is. He seems so helpless,” I said. “But his mama will come back for him. Or her. Right?”

“Yeah. If he’s still there tomorrow, I’ll try to get hold of the ranger station.”

“Should we go back inside?” I asked. “What if the mama doe knows we’re out here and is afraid to come around?”

“You’re totally right,” he smiled. “How’d you get to be such an expert on hoofed mammals?”

I shrugged. What I really wanted was to get away from those weird lights. Honestly, I was a little worried about the fawn. But then I felt kind of satisfied too. Maybe because Zach was giving me a little credit.

We had a two-day hike planned for the morning. I hadn't been camping since Girl Scouts, but I figured I'd get back into it, the way you do riding a bike. Zach joked around about pooping while sitting on a log. I'd just pray the bark wasn't too rough and watch for poison ivy.

I woke up early and found him in the kitchen, Majestic stoked. The coffee smelled amazing.

"Morning," I yawned. "Ooh, it feels good in here. What time is it?"

"Six-fifteen, time to hit the trail!"

"Come on, Zach. I need some coffee at least."

"Just giving you a hard time. I have some eggs scrambled, so I'm making you breakfast, your highness."

"Oh, that's more like it." If he felt a little guilty for last night, I could play that one. "Be right back, I just have to go see if Bambi's gone."

He was.

By 7:30 we were on our way. My backpack didn't feel too heavy, maybe because Zach was carrying my water bottle. He had the tent too. It would take six or seven hours to reach Devil's Lake.

The day was perfect, no clouds in sight. We hiked through fir forests and grassy meadows

blue with lupine. I had a little book on mountain wildflowers back at the cabin, and I found some I recognized—harebells, Indian paintbrush, shooting stars. I thought I spotted a lady slipper, but they're rare, so maybe it wasn't one.

The trail followed a rushing creek for a while, until it went *through* the creek. There was no bridge, so we had to ford it. That meant wading through icy water. When you're from Florida you don't just leap into this. You have to think about it a minute.

My hesitation irritated Zach. "Come on, Jojo, no biggie. Look, I'm almost across."

I held onto my shoes and did a sprint through. It was freezing, but I made it without wetting my jeans. I was never so glad to put my wool socks back on.

Just after noon we came to a clearing with picnic tables. A sign said *Coffeen Park*. I saw a bigger sign several yards away. "Look, this shows the trails. Here's the one to Devil's Lake. How much further is it from here?"

"Well, I could say it's just around the next bend," said Zach, "but you might be skeptical."

"What?"

"You would suspect I was lying after, like four hours," he laughed.

"Four hours? Seriously?"

"Actually, it may only be two or three. It's not bad. Come on, let's eat."

The afternoon hike was steeper, and the trail got rockier. We didn't see one other hiker. I had to ask Zach to stop a few times while I caught my breath. It wasn't for long, though, because swarms of mosquitos went on the attack. Finally the forest opened up to a sparkling expanse of deep, deep blue.

"Wow, it's beautiful!" I had never seen anything like it. You could even see some snow

capping the peaks beyond the lake and the firs.

“It is, isn’t it? I almost forgot how pretty Devil’s Lake was. Worth the hike. And look, over there at the far edge of the lake—a willow bog. Guess who loves those?”

“Who?...Oh no, not those—what did you call them? Willow wisps?”

He laughed. “Will o’ the wisps. But no, I was thinking of moose.”

“Oh. I’m cool with moose.” I threw down my backpack. “So can we set up? Where do we put the tent?”

Zach spotted an old campfire site. “How about there? It’s kind of sheltered in the trees.”

The tent was an easy setup. Zach got a fire going, and by sunset we’d finished off our foil-packed chicken. I was surprised how good it was. No one else was camping here tonight, so the stars were all ours. The lake was like rippled glass reflecting the silver-white moon and black fir trees. As the nighttime chill set in, we doused the embers and snuggled into the tent. I was asleep almost before I got my sleeping bag zipped.

A few hours later I woke up with a semi-urgent need to pee. *Bad idea, that extra cup of water.* I freed my arms and groped for a flashlight. I unzipped the sleeping bag, found my shoes and crawled outside. It was colder than I expected. And darker. Clouds were covering the moon and stars, making everything inky black except for the little circle of light from the flashlight. I couldn’t even see the lake. But I’d only be out here a minute. I walked out several yards from the tent and looked for a good place to squat.

After I finished and pulled my long johns back up, I reached for the flashlight. The light blinked, dimmed and went out. *No way.* I switched it on and off, shook it, but no luck. I hit the butt of it one last time, only to have it fly from my hand and roll on the ground.

*This can’t be happening.* I was getting that dread in the pit of my stomach. I looked



around and saw...nothing. And it was a blurry nothing, if that's even possible. I was wishing I'd put on my glasses, but then, what good is a sharper nothing?

I got down on my knees and scrambled around, feeling for the flashlight. When I touched the cold metal and got my hand around it, I let out a sigh of relief. Then I remembered it would do me no good with dead batteries.

I wasn't that far from the tent, but after my crawl on the ground, I had no idea which way I was facing. And one of my issues happens to be a terrible sense of direction. Sometimes I'm not even sure which is right or left. If I just started walking, it could be the wrong way. I kept hoping my eyes would pick up a hint of light. If there was a bear six feet away, I'd never know.

*Okay, no, don't think about that.*

Why did some freaky thing have to happen every time I went out to pee?

I was going to have to yell for Zach. *Great, then he'll have to come rescue me. If he hears me.* He sleeps through everything.

By now my jaw was shaking with the cold. I peered into the darkness again. I thought I could see silhouettes of trees. Was there a faint light, or was I imagining it? I took two steps in that direction. There *was* something.

*I froze. Will o' the wisps.*

Pools of white light were floating in the trees. They seemed to be flickering in patterns. I squinted and almost imagined the light was in pixels, like on a computer. I held my breath. I could feel my heart pounding. These ghost lights weren't backing up like the ones at the cabin. They were coming closer. Just as they got close enough for me to make out the pixels, one brushed my cheek.

*Fireflies!* I let out a huge breath. Lightning bugs, thousands of them. It was like being

inside the Milky Way, only it was a galaxy of tiny lanterns with wings. I was shivering with the cold, but in that instant I felt warm, almost like being surrounded by love.

I squinted again. There was a red dome just beyond the flickering light. *Thank God... but how do I thank fireflies?* I hurried to the tent, whispering “thank you” into the air. I looked behind me as I zipped up the tent door. Pitch dark. They were gone.

In the morning I told Zach the whole thing.

“Jesus, Jo, why didn’t you just yell and wake me?”

“I was going to, but then I saw the ghost lights—”

“...which turned out to be fireflies. You sure you didn’t dream this?”

“No, of course not. Look.” I picked up my flashlight and clicked it. “See? Dead.”

“JoJo, fireflies don’t live way up here. Maybe the moon came out from behind a cloud. Anyway you found the tent. That’s what matters.”

“They *were* fireflies, Zach. They came for a reason, I know they did.”

The hike back home was easy. There was a lightness to it. And Zach was treating me a little differently. Not like I was crazy. More like he was seeing *me* for the first time. And if that was true, maybe there was something to see. Something real. Maybe not, but...

I had touched a will o’ the wisp. The lightning bugs, the smell of pine and moist earth, the moose, even the mosquitos—it was all as it should be.

When we finally got back to the cabin, we were exhausted, but thanks to Great Majestic, we got dinner made and washed it down with some wine.

Afterward we sat outside. “No clouds tonight,” I said. “Wow, look at that moon.

“JoJo...I just want to say—”

“You don’t have to.”

Zach nodded. He took my hand.

I asked him if he wanted to play Rummikub.

“No, let’s stay out here a little longer.” He smiled. “Who knows? Might be a good night for fireflies.”

