

FIREFLY GOD

No rain yet. Purple clouds pile up in slow motion. The green sky underneath wavers with humidity. Fireflies drift in thick trails at the edge of the woods, echoing the occasional muted blast of heat lightning. A bead of sweat arcs down my forehead then crawls over my cheek.

I turn to the green canoe beside me, resting on wooden sawhorses above a patch of dirt, exposed roots, and scattered brain fruit. Dried drip-lines of water have left veins of silt on the hull. I wonder if it would be good shelter when the storm breaks. I remember, at camp, they taught us what to do when you're caught paddling in a thunderstorm and can't get to land. You flip the canoe over and swim underneath, where you can breathe the pocket of air inside the hull. That way you don't get struck by lightning. I remember practicing it, holding the rails in both hands, feet raking slightly against the lake bottom. The lapping of water against the hull had made faint echoes. I wonder how long the air would last – we didn't learn that.

I guess I could probably make it home before the storm breaks.

Everything seems slightly out of focus in the thick, muggy air. A firefly drifts closer. I begin to make out the flurry of miniature limbs. I glance at the clouds again, tasting salt at the corner of my lips. The firefly lands on the hull of the canoe and starts to crawl over the micro-deltas of dirt and scuff marks, every so often releasing a soft pulse of yellow-green.

I crush it with my thumb. It feels wet on the threads of my thumbprint. Below its broken body, a trail of fluorescence is smeared across the curve of the hull, still glowing.

The trees start to bend and the sky loses a little color. I run home.

...

Grandpa's watching baseball in the den. I pause for a moment by the open doorway. Pitching change. The infielders stand around the mound. The manager pats the starter on the back and looks toward the outfield. The closer is jogging in from the bullpen. None of them make eye contact. I start to creep past to the stairs.

"Isaac? That you?" Grandpa doesn't break his gaze from the screen.

"Hey Grandpa," I say to the back of his head.

"You missed the O's win this afternoon. Erickson pitched the whole game."

"Yeah, I was down by the river."

"Yeah? Who with?"

"No one. I just went by myself."

"What about Danny? You guys used to run around down there all the time."

"He moved," I say. He moved this June, right after fifth grade. I told him before, but he keeps forgetting.

"Oh. That's a shame," he says. He twists his head halfway toward me. "School tomorrow?"

"Yep." I just want to go to my room.

"So, second week of sixth grade. Middle school all right so far?"

"Yeah, so far." I don't really get the question. If I don't choose whether I go to school or not, does it matter whether I like it? I just try to get through. "I'm going upstairs."

"All right. Good night, Isaac."

...

My throat is dry. The glass of hours-old tap water on the bedside table tastes coppery. I look at the thin cracks on my bedroom ceiling and crawl my fingers up the wall like a spider. The thunder has broken into a light rain that clings to the windows. Faint bits of the patio lights refract in the tracks made by the drops. In each bead of water I can see the spines of the windows, the angles of the walls, the backdrop of clouds.

Why did I kill the firefly? I keep picturing that smear of light on the canoe. I didn't mean to do it. I can see my thumb reaching out and that feeling again, like I was dreaming. Everything in slow motion like I was underwater.

I didn't expect it to keep glowing like that.

At last, I start to drift off. In the lucid, half-dreaming moments of approaching sleep, I see fireflies filtering into the room. My lens is in long exposure. As they blink along their clumsy flight paths, they leave curled ribbons of light hanging in the air.

...

Clack.

I'm awake. I can't see a thing. Sweat dries cold on my forehead. Must have been having a nightmare. I feel the dregs of adrenaline in my bloodstream.

Clack. Sssssssss.

What was that? Sounds like it was in the room.

Maybe not. Could be a bat hitting the window. The panes are completely dark now, just lightless holes in the wall.

Clack clack. Sssssssss.

“Who’s there?” The question passes my lips as a small whisper. Hearing my own voice calms me slightly. I feel a bit foolish. Who? Really? It’s probably just a bug.

I reach to turn on the bedside light, then my arm freezes. Something, some subtle inflection in the room’s temperature, raises the hair on my neck. There *is* something in here. I don’t know how, but I can feel it. The corner across from me seems too dark. The shadows aren’t empty. There’s too much *stuff* to them.

Someone clears their throat sharply, then draws a ragged breath. A chill washes over me.

I retreat under the covers. One half of my brain is pleading to turn the light on. The other half wants to burrow deeper into the dark.

“I know you’re in here,” I say. “I can hear you.”

Clack. Aaaaaah, it gasps, *Ssssssssss. I can hear you too.*

Its voice is punctuated by small percussives, like the clipping of wet fingernails.

I don’t want to be awake anymore.

Scratching footsteps approach the bed. Then I see it – a large figure, bending over me, and the hint of two round, black eyes. A muddy, slightly oxidized smell seeps into my nostrils.

We need to talk, it says.

I want to yell. I want to thrust my hands out against the dark and tear apart the hissing little voice. I want to run. I remember a night, years ago, when I spied a wasp crawling at the foot of my bed. I had stuck a toe out, just to see what would happen. It had stung so readily, pouncing on my instant regret. I swallow hard, trying to clear out the buzzing in my head. “What are you?” I ask.

I, ssssssss, clack, I am a god.

From underneath the figure, a yellow-green glow swells out of the blackness. I blink against its brilliance. As it fades, I glimpse three pairs of insect arms above me, twitching slightly in and out. Then the light is gone.

“You’re God?” This can’t be God.

Sssssss. Clack. I... The moon surfaces from the clouds. The eyes glance outside then back to me. *I am the firefly god.*

“The firefly god?” Each pound of my heart seems to shed a layer of skin.

I light their little fires. I burn inside each one.

I wonder if I should yell for Grandpa. I wonder if he’d wake up. A feeling, equal parts fear and curiosity, makes me hesitate.

Do you have a brother.

“What?”

A fumbling motion in the moon gleam, like it’s rubbing its mouth with its arms. *Do you have a brother? Or sssissster?* The last word becomes a long hiss.

“No.” I don’t know what else to say. It’s a strange relief, actually, to be answering questions when I’ve got too many to ask.

Then, sssssss... It turns away and shuffles toward the window. I can see its shape more clearly now, the smooth, hunched back, the pale organ at the base of the abdomen.

Then you must sacrifice yourself.

“What? No, wait, I...” I remember the glowing smear on the canoe. The moisture on my thumbprint. “Is this about what I did? To the firefly?”

You took one of my own. Now I take yours. Sssince you have no brother or sister to give, you must give yourself.

“But I,” I splutter, my voice raising, “but it was just a firefly.”

Does your god feel the same about you?

The moon is obscured again by clouds.

“I’m sorry.” I prop myself up on my elbows. “I am. I keep thinking about it. I feel bad.”

Sssssso. It moves closer to the bed.

“You mean I have to die?”

Ssssacrifice. I reach toward the lamp on the bedside table. A coarse, hairy limb curls around my forearm. I freeze.

“What do I have to do?”

The river. It releases my arm and moves slowly backward. Soon, I hear nothing at all. I can feel it’s gone.

I pull the covers up to my chin. I imagine the pale green streak on the canoe, still glowing.

...

The math classroom is down by the seventh and eighth grade classrooms. I have to walk by all the middle school lockers on my way there. The seventh and eighth graders are always full of strange energy. Yelling dumb jokes at each other. Smiles copied from magazines. Groups of boys and groups of girls facing each other like football teams. I can never tell if they’re having fun or not. I don’t think they can either.

I watch one girl walk alone to her locker. She wears a deep red lipstick that clashes with the shock of purple hair at her left temple. I know her. Well, I know who she is. Anna Berman.

“The witch! Anna the witch!” some guy starts crowing. His buddies snigger among themselves. They are all wearing khakis.

Another pulls out a lighter. “Burn her! Burn the witch!” He sparks it and pretends to cast it in her direction. They are all laughing.

“Oh my god, Chase!”

“Chase, you’re crazy, man!”

Anna sneers and flips them off as she turns to open her locker. A dreamcatcher hangs inside the door. I glimpse a small mirror and some bits of what look like herbs.

The boys stumble off down the hallway, giggling and checking for fun in each other’s faces.

I walk up to her.

“Anna?”

She turns to me sharply, a sneer automatically reforming on her face. When she sees me, it changes to a look of surprise.

“Sorry, my name’s Isaac.” I’m about to offer a hand to shake, but think better of it.

Her coolness regains dominion of her expression. “What do you want?” she says flatly.

“I need to talk to you. I think I need your help.”

“Fuck off.”

I wince. “Sorry. But something happened to me last night and I don’t who else to talk to about it.”

“Look, perv. Just because you got your first boner last night doesn’t mean *I* have to deal with it.”

“What? No, I...”

She closes her locker and looks down at me, narrowing her eyes. I feel like an idiot. I look down the hallway, hoping no one's been watching.

"It's not..." Maybe I should give up. I'm not even sure why I feel like *she's* the one I need to talk to. I think about turning back down the hallway. The pit in my stomach hollows to an ocean.

"Yes?" she says, sounding impatient. In her eyes, though, I see spark of something. Curiosity? Amusement?

I lean toward her, lowering my voice. "I saw a god last night. It was in my room."

The spark kindles. She looks up the hallway, then turns back to me.

"I can't talk today. I'm at my dad's and I have to get on the bus. But I'm at my mom's tomorrow night, so I could meet you after school tomorrow." She almost looks excited. "Let's meet at the sycamore at the end of the school lane."

"What's a sycamore?"

"A tree. It's the one with the kind of smooth, splotchy bark. The one we turn back at when we do the mile run in gym."

"Oh."

"After school tomorrow. Okay? If I'm not there yet, just wait."

I grab the straps of my backpack at the shoulders. "Thank you," I say.

"Whatever," she mutters. She walks off to her next class.

I'm left in the empty hallway. All the lockers are closed now. Some have locks, some don't, but otherwise they all look the same.

...

The path down to the river ends up at the foot of a sandbar. At its tip, about thirty yards into the water, the remains of a jetty jut upward like fish bones. I wade into the brackish water. The bottom is slick and sandy, peppered with the occasional clam shell. The trees along the bank are full and round with leaves.

I crouch. My chin is just touching the surface. My fingers sink into the bottom about half an inch.

I take a deep breath and lay back, sinking, arms and legs stretching out. It feels cold at first, but then my skin adjusts. There's a soft ringing in my ears. I open my eyes.

I can see the sky. Its blue filters through as a vague paleness. A floating leaf cuts a wavering silhouette across my vision.

I am practicing. Seeing what it feels like. Just one big inhale, filling my lungs, would be enough. This is what it would feel like, just before.

I sit up quickly, coughing a little. The river water rushes down my face, drips persistently from my hair. My clothes feel so heavy. That's enough for now.

...

It's here again, in my room. I can just see its shape against the opposite wall. It's not saying anything, just breathing, watching. I just lie there, looking back.

...

The branches of what I now know is a sycamore twist above our heads.

“So, you squashed a firefly, and now this giant bug thing is visiting you at night?” Anna says.

“Yeah, basically.”

“Because you killed the firefly?”

“Right.”

“Is that what it said?”

“Yeah.” I plant my palms behind me and lean back a bit. She furrows her brow.

“Did it say anything else?” she asks. I didn’t tell her about the sacrifice. I felt like I shouldn’t. That part feels too sacred. It’s also the part that scares me the most.

“No,” I say after a moment.

She narrows her eyes at me, suspecting, but then she drops it. “I think we should do a tarot reading,” she says.

“Like, tarot cards? Aren’t those for fortune-telling?” The wind picks up for a moment, and a small branch breaks loose, falling to the ground a few yards from the plaid blanket we are sitting on. She had it in her backpack. She seems to have a lot of things in there. Tarot cards too, I guess.

“No. Everyone thinks that but they’re wrong.” She reaches into her bag. “The cards don’t tell the future. They give you *guidance* for the future.”

“Oh, I see.”

She pulls out a small yellow box. *The Rider Tarot Deck* it says, above an image of a man in a robe and a headband holding up a rod. In front of him is a table with a sword, a staff, a disc

with a star on it, and a cup. Well, it's more like a goblet. Above his head is a sideways figure eight.

“What's that?” I ask, pointing to the eight.

“An infinity sign. I guess you haven't gotten to that in Math yet.” She pulls out a deck of large cards. The backs are crisscrossed with diagonal blue lines on a white field. She starts shuffling against her thigh.

“Not yet.” Or ever, maybe. “What's eighth grade like?”

“I don't want to talk about school,” she says bluntly.

“Okay.”

“Oh wait.” She halts. “I forgot to pick the significator.”

“The significator?”

“The card that stands for you.”

“How do you do that?”

“Well, usually you go by how old you are and what your sign is. So, like, you're a kid, so you'd be a Page of something. What's your sign?”

“Uh...”

“What's your birthday?”

“February 2nd.”

“Okay, you're a,” she screws her eyes closed, thinking, “an Aquarius. That makes sense.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we should use the Page of Swords, cause that's an air sign.”

She turns the deck over and starts looking through it. “The four suits are each connected to an element,” she tells me. “Wands are fire, cups are water, pentacles are earth, and swords are

air.” I assume “pentacles” are the discs inscribed with a star like I saw on the box. She slides the cards from one hand to the other with her thumb. I watch the images flit by. One catches my eye. On it, a man with a light shining around his head stands on one foot, the other leg cocked behind his knee.

“Wait, what was that one?” I point to the edge of the card, now covered by a few others.

“What, this one?” She pulls it out and shows me. It’s upside down, which I didn’t realize before. I read the flipped text: *The Hanged Man*. On impulse, I take it from her hand. His face is strangely peaceful.

“I think this should be it. The significator.”

“Hmmm,” she says. She shrugs. “If you feel so, then that’s probably the one we should use.”

She takes it back and places it on the blanket between us. She shuffles the deck a few times then cuts it.

“So how do you do it?” I ask.

“Let’s do a simple spread. Three cards.” She lays three cards out face down in front of her. She points to the first one.

“This one is the past. It’s what already happened that’s led you to this point.”

She points to the middle one. “This one is the present. It shows what is just coming into play. What forces are starting to work in the situation.”

She points to the last card. “This is the future. The outcome.”

“I thought you said the cards don’t tell the future.”

“Well, no. They have to be interpreted. The cards don’t *tell* you the future, but you can learn what the future’s going to be like. Or could be. Or what you should do to make the future how you want it.”

I don’t really know what I want the future to be. I guess right now I’m mostly just scared of it. Maybe I just want her to tell me it’s going to be all right. We’ll see.

“Are you ready?” she asks, seeking my eyes.

I look into hers. They’re strange, hazel with flecks of brown. I’ve never seen eyes like that before. I nod.

She flips over the first card. “Nine of swords,” she announces.

I study the picture. A figure sits up in bed, head in hands, face obscured. Nine horizontal swords cut across the black background.

“He looks sad,” I say. Or guilty.

“Usually this means anxieties or worries. Or nightmares.” She bites her lip.

“So,” I say slowly, “it could be the firefly god. When it visited me, it was just like that. I was in bed, hiding from it.”

“Yeah. It also could mean you’ve been worrying about it a lot. It means both, I think.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, next one.” She flips over the middle card. “Five of cups.”

A man stands hiding his face despairingly in the folds of his long black robe. Three spilled cups lay in front of him, while behind him two cups stand upright. In the distance, a river flows in front of a castle.

“Hmm. Interesting,” she says.

“What?”

“Well, look at the picture. You see how he’s so upset about the spilled cups, but he’s not looking at the two cups behind him? Those ones are okay. This could be a good sign.”

“How?”

“Well, it’s like, even though something bad has happened, there’s still some good, though it may be hidden. It’s like a glass half-full or half-empty thing.”

“Huh,” I say. “What about the river?”

“What river?”

“The one in the background.”

“Oh.” She leans close to the card. “Right.”

“It’s between him and the castle.”

“But there’s a bridge, too. See? Over here.” She points to the right edge of the card. A white arched bridge is indeed there. I must have missed it.

“So it’s really all about the pictures. That’s how you get the meaning.”

“Well, yeah, that’s usually where you start from. I’ve got a book at home I learn from. The tricky part is putting it all together at the end. It’s like reading a poem. You can figure out what the lines mean, but then you have to figure out the whole thing. Do you like poetry?”

“We haven’t read much in school. We read ‘Tyger, Tyger, burning bright.’ I liked that.”

“William Blake, right?”

“Oh?”

“Never mind. Okay. Last card.” She looks up at me. “This is the most important one. The outcome. This tells us about the future. Are you ready?”

In the periphery of my vision, I can sense the sky yellowing toward evening. My eyes remain fixed on the card’s back. I take a deep breath. “Yes.”

She flips the card over. A knight in black armor rides a white horse. He holds a black flag adorned with a white flower and the roman numeral XIII. His face is a skull. Beneath the horse's hooves lay contorted bodies. *Death*, it reads.

For a moment, we both are silent, considering the card.

“Well,” I say, with a weak chuckle, “that doesn't look good.”

“Actually, it doesn't mean like, real death. Not necessarily.” She bites her lip. If so, why does she look so nervous?

“What could it mean, then?”

“It's a symbol for the end of something. The end of a life. Going through a major transformation, like going from one life to the other. You know?”

“Okay.” I can't help but feel it's a stretch, with the skeleton face of Death looking up at me. Two hollow, black eye sockets. Like the ones that leaned over me in my room.

Anna has a straining look. Like she wants to reach out, but can't. She grabs her backpack and starts rooting through it. She pulls out a small, velvet pouch. Loosening its leather drawstring, she reaches in and fetches something. She holds out her hand, presenting a smooth stone, about the size of an egg. Layers of deep green swirl across its surface in varying intensities, in some places almost black, in others nearly iridescent.

“Take it,” she says.

“Really?” I take it from her hand.

“It's malachite. It's a very powerful gem. It's good for warding off negative energy. And,” she brushes some hair out of her face, “protection from evil.”

It's beautiful.

“Just keep it around. In your pocket. Or on your nightstand,” she says. I can sense the effort in her voice to keep her words calm and steady. Worry leaks from her expression.

“Thanks. For all of this.”

She smiles. “You’re so polite,” she teases.

“I should go. My grandpa’s probably wondering where I am.” I get up, brushing the dirt from my hands off on my pants.

“Take care, Isaac,” she says.

I wave goodbye, and start walking away. Just before I would step out from under the shelter of the tree branches, I spin around.

“Those guys in the hallway at school. They’re assholes.”

She laughs and rubs her eyes. “Yeah, they are.”

“See you, Anna,” I say, turning back.

“Bye,” I hear her say. I feel weirdly calm. The image of the Death card is still branded in my memory, but I feel more in control than I did before. Before, I was all alone with my worry. Anna had soaked all that up. I don’t know if the tarot reading was good or bad news, but it gave me clarity. I know what I’m going to do.

In the yellow evening sun, my footfalls are soft but sure. Tonight will be the night.

...

I slip down the stairs, careful to step on the edges where they meet the walls to make as little noise as possible. From down the hall, I hear the murmur of the television, punctuated by Grandpa’s snores. I peek into the living room. Five men at a long desk are discussing a game

that's already been won. Grandpa's head is tilted back. The bushy tips of his eyebrows poke toward the ceiling. I head toward the door and step onto the back patio.

It is cool. The air smells like damp moss. The moon is exceptionally bright, crisply rendering the patio's crumbling bricks and interruptions of grass. I just stand for a bit, bathing in the scene. Then I head for the path down to the river.

I brush aside the cattails at the top of the beach and step onto the sand. I take off my sneakers and socks. I think about taking off the rest of my clothes but decide it doesn't matter. The sand feels good against my feet, the way the grains shift to cradle their exact shape.

I wade into the water. I walk until it is up to my waist. Suppressing the instinct to swim at the surface, I let the waterlogged branches and bits of weed underneath brush against my legs.

The water slips around my torso and shoulders as I crouch. The trees on the shore are now a single, dark mass devoid of detail. I take my last breath and savor the marshy sweetness of the air. Then I lay back and let myself sink to the bottom.

I keep my eyes open. At first, I see only the silver ripples on the surface. As the water calms, I begin to see the pale, round glow of the moon and, surrounding it, small points of starlight. I see the trees on both banks, the cattails, the remains of the jetty. I see the branches of a sycamore. I see the milky way, a long, glowing streak of pale green. I inhale, filling my lungs with water.

There's a spasm of crushing pain in my chest, which then subsides into a weightless cold that floods into my limbs and up my neck. I can still see the sky, but it is fading. The nerves in my skin are firing their final shots, inverting my sensations. I am less and less the body, more and more the river pressing on it from all sides.

I feel three pairs of long, wiry arms wrap around me. They lift me up, back into the cool night air. I splutter and cough against the river water still drowning my lungs. It holds me close. I lay a hand instinctively against its thorax. A glow swells beneath us, like a cloud lit by lightning. I don't know if I'm dying or not. What I do know is it would be all right, in this moment, to give up my ghost, held in the arms of the god.