

Everything is Connected

By Lindsay Fischer

Listen.

The night is like a symphony. Quiet chords of croaking toads, throaty sopranos. Grasshoppers humming along to the notes. The buzzing is the labor of hundreds of tiny violinists poised underneath dewy blades of grass. Silent, the fireflies carry candles in a nightlong vigil. They flit through the air lethargically, almost as if they know the world sleeps around them. Little light glowing softly, one lands on the chipped paint of my windowsill.

“Hey,” I whisper to the candle-carrier. “Whatcha doin? This is my room, do you like it? It's not much to look at, is it?” The firefly doesn't even look up, or if it does, I can't tell. “This whole farm isn't much,” I add, breathing out, that endless frustration.

There's a winding road that leads away from my farm, and I trace that path in a circle around the firefly. I know it by heart, the slim and dusty thread that could carry me away. I've always wondered what would happen if I left. Not to run away, exactly, but to start walking and just never stop. To get on the road and let it steer my course. It doesn't twist and wind the whole way, you know. After a mile, it uncoils, a straight shot, like an arrow in the dark.

I watch the path for a moment longer before reaching up and curling my fingers around a nail protruding from the faded rosebuds on the wallpaper. Then I hoist myself up onto the sill. The firefly closes its wings and the candle is extinguished. Grimy shoelaces trailing, I ease into a sitting position, legs dangling over the edge and pointed into darkness. I scoop the firefly up in cupped palms and blow gently on the wings, coaxing the tiny flame back. The wings shift and the glow lights up my palms red, *there*. Nothing is lost forever.

My radio crackles to life, which it always does when the DJ plays “Strawberry Fields Forever.” I don't know why it does that, but it must like the Beatles. I grab the radio and turn the knob down to a dull hum, the buzzing of the grasshoppers, little violinists, humming in my ears along with the humming pulse of my heart. I shove a bent box of cards into my pocket along with the crackling radio. My heart is about to leap out my ears. I slide out onto the roof, clutching the window frame like a drowning girl

clinging to a lifeboat. The waves of impermeable darkness lap against my shoes as I leave my room behind, that tiny square of light. My flashlight sits in the center of the wooden floor, pointing towards the sky and giving me a pinprick of light to steer by. I don't think I'll be coming home again, but you never know. It's always good to have options.

I gingerly climb down over the edge, the waiting branches of our golden maple tree folding me up. When I reach the bottom, it isn't as dark as I imagined it would be. The moon is hazy behind the clouds, like a big frosted glass marble.

Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see. The strains of the music crackle and pop like a fire, the warm air hitting my face like a blast of desert heat. I almost expected sand to hit my eyes, squinting them shut as I stole over my front lawn. The minute I step out onto the road, it ceases to be—the road ceases to be, anyway. It has become a dip between two dusty sand dunes, and I am traveling a path beaten into being by thousands of travelers leading caramel camels. My neighbor Finn's house is an oasis for me to rest, or perhaps a shimmering mirage. I thrust my walking stick into the crumbling sand, the dunes graceful and rambling like whitecaps beating against a shore. The hot Egyptian sun scorches my neck, eating through my thin clothes. I know I have to make it to the oasis before I run out of water and crumple into the sand, the desert swallowing me up . . . but I am a seasoned traveler, and I can beat the desert.

“Libby? What are you doing?” The camel is sitting on an oddly-placed tree trunk in the sand. He holds out a dirty canteen of water to me, and I take it eagerly. But the spell has been shattered like glass, the hot sun fading until it is a pale glass marble moon once more. The sand melts, becoming brown dirt covered with sparse grass. I shake off the rest of the sand as the daydream flits away. Then I sit down next to Finn—he's my neighbor, but he'd also my best friend. He's nineteen, pale, and he's all sharp angles—his limbs stick out like bent straws. He's always wearing a deep frown on his brow, like he has to concentrate hard to keep his limbs from flying apart in every direction. I think we all feel that way, but Finn's expressive, and you can see the struggle of staying grounded plainly written on his face.

"I'm leaving," I answer solemnly. Then I inspect the amber glass bottle he's handed me. "Aren't you a little old to be nicking from your parent's cupboards?" I peel at the blue label absently.

"It's root beer," he retorts, rolling his eyes. "And what do you mean, leaving? You're running away?" Finn always knows what I'm talking about, so I think it's weird that he has to ask me. Like the root beer thing, how he knew when to be waiting for me in his backyard. Even though I didn't plan on leaving, he acts like it's something I've had written on my calendar in bold black sharpie for months.

"No, I'm not *running away*," I answer in disgust. "That makes it sound so primitive. I'm just . . . leaving. I'm going to start walking, and hopefully I never stop."

"You're the only 13-year-old I know who uses the word primitive," he answers in amazement, shaking his dark head. He takes a big swallow of the copper liquid in his bottle. "And you aren't going to get far. What've you got, a box of cards? Unless you've managed to stuff in a blanket, clothes, food, and a wad of cash, I don't see how that's going to help you."

"I don't recall asking for your help." I wipe dust off my knees and stand up, glaring. I prop my bottle up in the soft grass and curl my fingers around my card box protectively. "I'll see you around, Finn." *But hopefully I won't.*

"Hang on, you're leaving already? Does that mean I can drink your rootbeer, or do you want me to save it for next time you come over here?"

"I'm *not* coming over here again. Didn't you hear me? This is goodbye. I'm gonna go now..." I back away, taking a mental snapshot of my friend perched on the tree trunk, hunched over, eyes staring straight into me.

"Libby . . . okay. See you around." He shakes his head and looks away from me, and part of my clenches up, wants to revolt. Why doesn't he take a mental snapshot of me? Maybe he's mad. But it's a taste of his own medicine. Now he knows why I threw eggs at his garage door the night before he left for college last summer. Why I stayed in my room, buried under the covers, when he tried to say goodbye. The thought propels me forward, onto the dusty street again. I lapse into daydreaming, but not of Egyptian deserts or violin-playing grasshoppers.

Finn was the first person to call me Libby. The first time he saw me, he was six and I'd just been born. It was the Fourth of July, and fiery light shows bloomed in the dark velvet sky outside the window. The fireworks weren't celebrating my birth, something I have to remind myself every year. Finn leaned over my mother's arm, frowning perplexedly like I was a puzzle to be solved. I had hair the color of a mud pie, a round nose like a button. Finn says I was pretty, but I wasn't. I was there. I should know.

"Elizabeth sounds too formal. Can I call her Libby?" He did, even though my parents thought it sounded silly.

It stuck.

As I continue down the road, I slip my fingers into the bent card box, taking out a photo of a little girl. She has copper curls, shiny like a new penny, and she smiles angelically at the camera. The photo is faded with age and too much sunlight. But I can't bear to keep her anywhere but my windowsill—her big smile sparkles in the sun, and sometimes I imagine I can hear her laugh on the wind, a little tinkling bell. Looking down on the world, sparkling in the sun, I try to make myself believe that she's happy. I really hope she is.

I hear a honking horn and look up, seeing the car roar down the dark street towards me. I jump to the side, stumbling into prickly weeds, but I'm not fast enough—the photograph slips from my fingers. As the dust clears, I rub my eyes and fall to my knees on the dirt, tripping on a pothole. The car disappears around a bend, a rusted blue pickup truck that belongs to some of Finn's friends.

"Dammit!" The picture is lying partly buried, the girl's smile obscured by dust and a long tear. Here I was trying to make myself believe she was happy, and a second later she's falling apart. The truth is, the rip was there long before the car ground it into the dust. I was trying to cover it up, but the girl in the picture is broken and faded, nothing but a quickly vanishing memory.

Her name was Mary, and she would have been my older sister. She died before I was born, so I never knew her, but Finn tells me she was a fairy child. Always smiling, almost too beautiful for this world. She was Finn's age, and they were friends, so he's the only one who ever tells me about her. My parents don't talk about her—they have me now,

and I slid in to fill her place. Maybe I'm the only one who remembers. I know one thing, and that's that Mary would have done far better things for this world than I can ever do. I spend half my time daydreaming about impossibilities and the rest of the time trying to get away from what I've got.

I want to be an archaeologist. I want to travel the world—swim in the turquoise waters of the oceans, walk the deserts in Africa, climb mountains in Asia. And once I've reached the top of the highest summit I can find, I'll sit down in the snow and watch the whole world spin. I'll walk straight to the edge of the earth and look down over the edge, and I'll take Mary with me in a box of cards in my pocket.

My feet are walking of their own accord, and I feel like I'm on autopilot. I don't know exactly how long I walked, but I knew exactly where I was going. And you want to know the odd part? I've never been to the creek where Mary died before, but somehow I knew that's where I'd end up.

It took a long time, an hour or more, I don't really know. All I know is that my feet are numb by the time I turn off the main road. I push over tall grass, and I hear the creek before I see it. Soft and tinkling, the waters are deep but clear as glass. I can see stones, weeds. It's nothing special. It doesn't look like it can kill. The wind blows through the trees, rustling the leaves, and it's an unhappy sound. I step closer to the bank unwittingly, the more reasonable part of me asking what I'm doing. I wasn't supposed to come *here*, I was supposed to be finding my destiny! Escaping my dusty, silent farm . . . dusty, silent life.

My feet are unsteady on the bank, and before I can stop myself, the dirt comes loose and I lose my footing. I slip, the world tilting forward as I fall slowly towards the water. The surface is like a plate of glass, and I don't want to slam into it. But I'm frozen stiff—the weeds are like black, skeletal fingers reaching to me. The black waters could swallow me up . . . I could let them.

I don't. When my nose is just close enough to the glass surface to pass a feather in between, I put out my arms. The heels of my hands slam into the sharp stones, cutting my palms. But worst of all is the black weeds, like slimy fingers wrapping around my hands—I gulp in water before standing up again and stumbling back onto the muddy bank.

I don't know when I started crying, but they weren't sad tears. As I sit in the dirt, I take my sister's picture out with shaking fingers, and I realize something I never noticed before. The girl in the picture might be a fairy child, but she's strong. She's still smiling, even though there's a rip tearing her face in half—she isn't taking notice of it at all, nor does she care that she's fading from the world. Really, she's not fading. She's becoming a part of this world, making the sun and sky and stars more beautiful for the people she loves. Each day that passes, she grows stronger, and so do the people she left behind.

I prop the picture against a tree, along with the box of cards, and I can't help smiling through my tears when I hear the wind again—a little girl's tinkling laugh, she's happy.

I leave the picture behind and walk back towards the road, and I don't notice the headlights of Finn's car until they're almost blinding me. Then I open the door and slide in. Finn doesn't say anything about the scratches on my palms or my wet clothes or even the traces of tears left over. He just turns the car around, pointed towards home, a straight shot in the dark.

“Hey,” I say.

“I'm glad you're back,” Finn answers. “And I'm glad you left the cards behind. You didn't need them . . . you've know them by heart.”

I crawl into bed as the sun's rising, and I've decided I can save conquering the world for another day. I don't trace the path of the road anymore, because like Finn says, I'm not going to get very far. Someday I will, but I'm fine with conquering this little patch of the world I've got already, to start off.

Sometimes I hear a little girl's voice laughing on the wind, in the rain dancing on my windowpane, a sparkling smile in the sun. These things might not be important to everyone, but they are to me. Every little twig, every blade of grass, every tiny firefly is affected by things that seem completely random to humans. Even so, they change you more than you will ever know—we're all a part of this world, and we all have a stake in it.

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