

Fireflies

It was a southern summer night, and the people up and down the quiet streets of Echo Creek were sitting on their front porches drinking lemonade and tea, making casual conversation, and watching fireflies. They had no idea that life was not nearly as safe as it seemed.

The fireflies looked like thousands of little light dots coming from the sky. They were flying low to the ground, which meant, according to local weather lore, that rain was coming soon.

Hannah Claiborne was spending the night with Lily Tanaka, and they had brought out glass fruit jars with holes punched in the lids so they could catch fireflies.

When the jars were full enough, the girls would walk down the street beyond the streetlights and let the fireflies light the jars like little lanterns to drive back the dark—if only for a very short time. After a little while, they would open the jars and let them go.

“Aren’t the fireflies beautiful, Momma?” asked Lily.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Tanaka replied. “We used to call them lightning bugs when I was a little girl. I think I like fireflies better.”

“Be sure that the holes in the lid are big enough for air to get in,” said Mr. Tanaka. “We wouldn’t want the fireflies to die.”

“We made the holes big enough, Mr. Tanaka,” said Hannah. “My friend Theo says that fireflies are very important. We mustn’t kill them. He says they light the way for little elves to find their way home in the darkness to the hollow trees where they live. And they light the way home for fairies who love to dance under toadstools.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” smiled Mr. Tanaka.

“Wonder why they don’t burn themselves when they light up?” asked Hannah.

“I think the light comes from some chemical combination that can produce light with almost no heat,” said Mrs. Tanaka. “I don’t think our scientists produce light that way.”

“Come on, Hannah,” said Lily. “Let’s go see how many we can catch.”

The girls ran about the yard catching fireflies and putting them in their jars. They had such fun that nobody thought about how the fireflies felt. Nobody ever wondered what those flashes of light, like little cameras, really meant. And on this southern summer night, the people of Echo Creek and the rest of the world took life for granted.

The two girls finished collecting fireflies and headed down to the darkness beyond the streetlights as they often did on summer nights.

The fireflies settled down in the jars to wait for their release. They were frightened at first when they were captured,

but they had learned that after a few minutes, they were usually released. They rarely suffered a casualty now.

Hannah and Lily sat on the curb and held up their jars to watch them light up.

"You know, Hannah," said Lily, "sometimes, when I see the fireflies light up, I think I see stars way up in the sky flash back!"

"Maybe they do," said Hannah. "I sometimes wonder if fireflies come from another world."

Hannah and Lily would never know how close they were to the truth.

Inside the jars, the fireflies were getting restless. They had a lot of work to accomplish, and they needed to be free to do it. The girls noticed that they were more active than usual.

"They are flying against the glass," said Hannah. "They don't usually do that. Do you think they need to get out?"

"I don't know," said Lily. "They are acting funny."

"Maybe we should go ahead and let them go," suggested Hannah. "I've never seen them act so anxious."

"Yeah, I think we should release them," said Lily.

She opened up her jar and let them go. Hannah did the same.

"Did you ever notice that their flashes make some kind of pattern?" asked Lily. "Maybe they are sending messages?"

"Who would receive a message from a firefly?" laughed Hannah.

"I don't have an answer for that," laughed Lily. "Let's go back to the house. I have a new game I want to show you."

The girls walked from the darkness, under the streetlights, and back to the front porch of Lily's house.

“Dad, do you think fireflies send signals?” Lily asked.

“I think they send signals to find mates,” he answered.

Lily didn’t pursue the subject. She and Hannah went inside to play a new game.

Mr. and Mrs. Tanaka sat on their deck, sipped their sweet tea, and watched the stars twinkling far, far away.

“I know it sounds crazy,” said Mrs. Tanaka, “but sometimes I think the stars look like they are blinking a message.”

“I wouldn’t go around saying that to anyone,” laughed Mr. Tanaka. “People will think you’re batty.”

“I suppose so,” she replied, “but I get the feeling that some catastrophe is coming that we ought to know about.”

“Well, if it is,” he said, “it is probably too late to do anything about it now. Let’s forget about it and go to bed.”

While people all over the world slept like those in Echo Creek, the fireflies frantically flashed their little cameras and transmitted pictures across the vast universe to their base planet. The pictures were received, analyzed, cataloged, and carefully stored.

“Hurry!” said the leader to the other fireflies. “We need to get as many pictures transmitted as we can before the rain comes in.”

They hurried as directed.

“Do you think we can complete our mission in time?” asked a young firefly.

“I hope so,” replied another. “We can only recreate what we photograph and send back to our base. And it’s common knowledge that these earthlings will destroy their planet very soon.”

The little fireflies fell silent, but their camera flashes filled the night, trying to complete their assignment before the hate, weapons of destruction, and all the violence erupted to end the world.