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The Last Page: A Map of Here

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When I was younger I learned of fireflies from books—pictures of children with their hands cupped tight, the creases between their fingers glowing red. But I put these magical-seeming bugs on a mental list of animals I expected never to encounter, like walruses or unicorns. It’s possible that, if asked whether fireflies really existed, I might have hesitated before answering—just for a slice of a second, as I combed through my own experience. I have seen a number of miraculous things—a lizard shedding its skin, say, or the reflection of a sunrise on water—but a firefly was not one of them.

Last summer I went to the Perkins Arboretum at dusk. The woods were crackling with small noises: mice and insects stirring the surface of the soil, or maybe they were snakes. I had recently passed a snake on the same trail, a dark cord winding over the ground until it vanished into a patch of grass; it looked like water flowing downhill. It had been hot then, and now, days later, it still was. Through openings in the trees I could see Miller tower piercing an orange sky and, behind it, torn fragments of cloud over the horizon. I was tired from the day and thinking of heading home.

In previous summers I had traveled—I worked as a wilderness guide in Norway and Alaska, and as a naturalist in Colorado—but this year, my last summer as a student, I chose to stay on campus to do research. I spent hours each day before a computer, sorting data and making maps of places like South Africa and the Yukon. Sometimes I would find myself gazing at the screen, trying to imagine the feel of each place. Hot wind blowing off the Kalahari. The sharp, muddy smell of northern tundra. It was good work, research was, but I missed the magic.

And so I often found myself doing this at the end of the day: slipping into the woods, walking the trails. I was trying to learn the flowers; it seemed embarrassing to pass them without knowing, as if I had neglected to learn the name of a friend. I knew some of the trees, but not all. I touched their bark, noting the thick ridges of the white pine, the pale dust left on my fingers by an aspen. I enjoyed watching the fiddleheads unfurl, the violets blush purple, the yarrow bloom in white clusters. I wanted to remember that wilderness wasn’t far away: that if I reached out my hand, or closed my eyes and listened, or leaned back and looked at the sky, I could find it.

That night I was walking slowly on the trail, passing through as silently as I could. I liked to think I wasn’t disturbing anything, that the woods could go on just as they pleased despite my presence. And so when I saw the first flash—down by the stream, in a patch of aster—I only blinked, and blinked again, and wondered if I had drunk enough water that day. It was an odd light in the deepening shadows. With night settling, I kept walking.

But then it happened again, the odd light, and I bent and saw a beetle on the side of a leaf, right where the light had been coming from. It spread its wings and there—there—a soft glow pulsed at the end of its abdomen, just as it lifted up and was gone. Laughing now, I followed one light after another as they flickered in the darkness, and as the stars spread out overhead I came to a clearing, a pond, and stopped before the cattails and watched the night light up. There were hundreds of fireflies, it seemed; thousands. From the water came the voices of frogs, croaks and hiccups as they called to each other, and I stood on the bank and listened to them in the warm air, which was sweet with the smell of things growing.

Tiny fireworks rose and sputtered and lived their lives around me, as if determined to prove the richness of the world, or else the wonder of it, and I watched them fill the trees in every direction, watched them spread out through the forest, like points on a map of here.

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