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Short Story: *What Olivia Knew*

Content Warnings: mental health issues, loss & grief

Fireflies die when they are two months old. They spend those two months lighting up hot summer nights, sometimes flickering in a special way to attract a mate, sometimes just glinting in the dark like earth-fallen stars.

The fireflies were missing tonight, leaving only the August heaviness in the air and the faint scritch of cicadas in the oak trees. Olivia pressed her face against her bedroom window, breathing in the earthy smell of mildew on the frame. She stood barefoot, shivering in the darkness of her room where the shadows of unfamiliar furniture loomed like ancient devouring beasts. She wasn't cold, really; she shivered because she could feel them watching her. She tried not to look at them. Better to keep her eyes fixed on the darkness beyond her window. Better to wait for the tiny pinpricks of light to appear.

But there was only darkness beyond the window. The fireflies were gone. Maybe they were already dead.

"Olivia."

Her brother's voice. Tom stood in the doorway, a dark silhouette against the brightness of the hall. "Why are you awake?" he asked.

There were too many reasons, so she said nothing.

He walked a little further into her room and glanced between her and the bed in a helpless way. "Did you have a bad dream or something?" he said. "Is that why you're still up?"

"The fireflies are dead," she said.

He blinked at her. He had a starey look on his face, a look she'd seen in photos of soldiers in her WWII book, after they came back from the war. He had that look a lot these days.

She ran her tongue over her back molars, exploring the empty place where her tooth used to be. It always gave her a sick rush, feeling the hollow in her gums, the emptiness that reminded her another piece of her childhood had fallen out of her mouth. Just fallen out. There was no way to stop it, growing up—she would be ten next month and it would probably change her in all sorts of ways. She would no longer be child Olivia, she would be grown-up Olivia, a completely different person who might not like stuffed animals or collecting bottle caps or watching for fireflies. It was such a terrifying thought that she shut her eyes and began to count by four's.

Four, eight, sixteen . . . twenty, twenty-four . . .

“Olivia.”

She didn't hear Tom's footsteps as he crossed the room and knelt before her. But when she opened her eyes again, he was there. She took a breath and felt something loosen inside her chest, a tightness that had held her all night long. Tom was safe, the only safe thing in this new apartment, the only link back to all the safeness of her past. He smelled like laundry detergent and Old Spice—that's what their dad had smelled like, too—and when he knelt in front of her the hulking shadows became her bed and dresser again, and they no longer wanted to devour her.

“You're okay, Olive,” Tom said. “You're okay.” He stretched out his hand towards her, then withdrew it again. He knew she didn't like to be hugged anymore, but he didn't understand why. She'd tried to explain. She had hugged her mother that morning, and then it had happened. The two things were connected. If she let Tom hug her, he might go away too.

“Do you think you can go to sleep now?” he asked her.

Olivia nodded and climbed back into bed. Tom tucked the blanket around her knees, then sat beside her, not saying anything. “Dad’s in Arizona,” he said finally. “We got a check, and the postmark said Arizona, so I guess that’s where he is now.”

“Is he coming back soon?”

“I don’t think so,” Tom said. “But at least we know where he is.”

Olivia explored the sheets with her legs. They felt soft and cool.

“Did you get your homework done for tomorrow?” Tom asked.

“Where is Arizona?” Olivia said.

“It’s another state.”

“Is it far?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty far.”

“Is it farther than where Mom is?”

There was no answer except for the cicadas outside the window and the swishing of her legs under the sheets.

“Tom. Is it farther than where Mom is?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

Then he was quiet. He was quiet for such a long time, she yanked the sheets over her head in frustration. When she finally peeked at him over the covers, he was gone. The things in her room noted his absence and stirred, turning themselves back into monsters. *I am safe*, she whispered. *Tom is safe*. Her lips formed the words over and over, the words to keep them safe, until she was too tired to remember why they needed protection.

In the morning she woke shaking, her nightgown stuck to her back with sweat and her body tangled in the sheets. That was okay. She was used to nightmares.

Her eyes focused on the morning light that seeped through her window—it was a thin light, as if it had trickled through so many other houses it had used up all its brightness. The apartment buildings here were so squished together, that’s what you got: secondhand sunlight, faded like a pair of hand-me-down jeans. Olivia was careful to never mention this to Tom. This was the only apartment they could afford, and inferior sunlight was just part of the contract.

Maybe her window would look better with a wind chime.

“Tom,” Olivia said as she walked into the kitchen, backwards, because it would keep Tom safe today. “Can you help me make a wind chime?”

“What?” Tom said. He was pouring cornflakes into two bowls.

“A wind chime.” She knocked into the kitchen counter and bit her tongue to keep from yelping. “Out of bottle caps. Like the one in my old room.”

But Tom was busy looking in the fridge for the milk carton.

Every day, it was Tom’s job to make breakfast. It was Olivia’s job to keep them safe. On a morning like this, after a nightmare, it was particularly important to perform the rituals right. She shut her eyes, counted by tens, made sure Tom wouldn’t die. Then she ate her cornflakes.

After breakfast, she sat cross-legged on the kitchen floor while Tom rushed around, like always. Tom hated mornings. But this morning he would be proud when he saw she’d tied her shoes all by herself. He would see how she’d knotted the pink laces just enough times to keep her sneakers from slipping off, which they almost always did, and he would say—

“God, Olivia, bunny ears. You should know that by now.” He skidded to a halt in front of her, one hand clutching her backpack. “It’s ten till eight! It’s ten till eight, Olivia, we have to go.”

She felt her face turn hot and looked down at the shoelaces, hanging limply between her fingers. He took a breath.

“I’m sorry,” Tom said. “I shouldn’t have You’re doing good, you almost had it.”

He crouched before her and looped the laces around, his fingers quick and capable.

“See?” he said. “That’s how you make the bunny ears.”

“I know,” Olivia said.

“And then you make the bunny ears tight so they don’t fall off. Right?”

“I know,” Olivia said.

He looked up at her and gave her a quick, crooked half-smile, his fingers squeezing her foot through the shoe. “You’ll get it next time.”

Olivia sighed. “No, I won’t.”

Tom chewed the inside of his cheek, like he was trying to think of something that would cheer her up. Finally, he said, “I’m thinking of an animal. It lives in the jungle. What is it?”

Olivia shrugged. Games couldn’t fix things. And Tom, who went to college, ought to know that by now. But he had such a pleading look on his face, like he wanted to make things all right and didn’t know how.

So she started guessing.

She guessed tree frog while she put on her red coat and shouldered her backpack. Then, as they walked down the five flights of stairs, she changed it to poison dart frog. Tom said no.

She guessed mamba when they passed the abandoned brick factory on Seventh Avenue—the one with shattered windows and a wooden sign that advertised, Bablin Brothers Cigars.

No again.

She stopped guessing when they reached the streetcar tracks because she liked tight-rope on them, liked balancing herself on the glistering steel veins that crisscrossed the city. She wobbled on the tracks, felt sweat drip into her eyes, wiped it away on the sleeve of her coat.

Tom, walking beside her, cast a worried glance at her flushed cheeks. He exhaled. “Olivia, you should take your coat off.”

She shook her head.

He opened his mouth like he was going to say something else, then changed his mind. He reached over and lifted her backpack off her shoulders, carrying it as they walked along. The school was only eight blocks from their apartment, so they always walked together in the mornings. At least until they saved up enough money for a car. Olivia hoped they wouldn’t save up enough money for a long time. She liked walking. With Tom. She liked walking with Tom.

By the time they reached her school, she guessed bullet ant, and Tom said yes. But now it was time for him to leave. He handed her the backpack and crouched down to eye-level with her. “I’ll pick you up when aftercare is over,” he said.

In the seconds before he left, Olivia studied his face—filing away every detail so she would not forget. His dark brown hair, cut extra short this time because his hand had slipped with the electric razor. The scar over his right eyebrow from playing baseball when he was her age. And the way he stared at her as if he really saw her—when most people just passed her by without even noticing. She existed when Tom looked at her. She was Olivia.

When he walked away, she shut her eyes to cement the memory. She might not have done the rituals right this morning; she might not be able to keep him safe.

She fingered her red coat as she walked up the steps into the brick school building. It was way too hot for coats—Tom was right about that—but this wasn't to keep her warm. It was a talisman. It meant that she could walk inside the classroom and come out again alive.

She kept tracing patterns in the soft red wool as she pushed through the hordes of students in the hallways and slipped into her classroom. Then she took her seat, third from the front, just like always. And just like always, Miss Small gave her the special Olivia-smile. Olivia felt sorry for Miss Small. She was young and pretty, in a perfect sort of way, like a porcelain doll that had never been played with. But she didn't know very much. She was always trying to say comforting things that weren't true. *Your mother will be with you forever*, she told Olivia last month. *You'll feel her presence all the time, because you'll carry her in your heart.*

She wondered if Miss Small had ever known anyone who'd died. Because it didn't feel like that at all. There was no presence of her mother. There was nothing. It was like the black holes in space. A cosmic emptiness so great it would consume you if you got too close, a nothingness that sucked spheres into its vacuum and swallowed up the light. Tom's science book said black holes form after a star dies. And it made sense to her—the image of that collapsing star, that one last flash of brilliance before it left an unending absence behind.

Olivia pressed her pencil into her lined paper, hard, so that it made one permanent black hole. Then she drew lines around it and turned it into a sun.

Aftercare came too soon, like always. She dragged herself out to the small, mulched playground and sat on her favorite red swing. She'd found a bottle cap at recess—Blue Moon Brewing Company—and she was so absorbed in looking at it that she almost didn't notice when the girl on the other swing began talking.

“Olivia!” the girl said. It was Loni, she realized. “I *said* I'm having a party.”

She stiffened. Nobody ever talked to her on the playground. But Loni must have forgotten. “I’m turning ten,” she continued. “I just wanted to let you know, I can’t invite you. My mom says I can’t play with you because you’re weird.”

Olivia closed her eyes and pretended Loni wasn’t there. And eventually, the swing next to her was empty again. Most of the playground was empty, she realized—it was just her and Sam Spencer left. She pushed up the sleeve of her coat and checked her Minnie Mouse watch. It was after 5:30 p.m. Where was Tom? He *always* came at 5:30.

But at 5:40, she was still waiting. Even Sam Spencer had gone home.

At 5:45, Olivia crossed the playground and picked up her backpack, where it had been leaning against the side of the school building. It was the only one left.

At 5:50, Olivia clutched the straps on her backpack and watched for Tom to come walking up to the playground gate. Her shoes kicked at the mulch under her feet and she took deep, shuddering breaths, but it did nothing to dispel the growing panic in her stomach. Tom never forgot her. He was never this late.

On the other side of the playground, Miss Sarah was beginning to check her phone.

At 5:53, Olivia knew that Tom was not coming. Her mind shied away from the words but she forced herself to think them. *Tom was not coming*. She gripped the straps of her backpack harder, as if to ground herself to the earth, because if Tom was not coming then she might drift away into the outer atmosphere with nobody to call her back. It was the same feeling of weightlessness, of being un-tethered, that she had in her nightmares. It was the same feeling she’d had when her mother had died in the car accident.

She knew now, just as she had known then, that something bad had happened. She could see Miss Sarah walking across the mulch towards her, walking as if in slow motion, to tell her

the news. It would be like before, when they told her about her mother as if she didn't already know, as if she had been too stupid to understand. She wasn't too stupid now. She knew.

She had done the rituals wrong, and now Tom was gone.

A shudder ran down her spine when she thought the word. Gone. And with Tom gone, she felt herself begin to disintegrate, to disappear. She was not Olivia without Tom. She did not exist. Nobody else knew her, not really, and so nobody would care whether she lived or died. She pressed her tongue hard against her front teeth and felt one of them loosen. There it was. Already she was falling apart, her body splintering into a hundred pieces that she could never put back together. But maybe that was all right. She no longer avoided the black hole on the edge of her consciousness, she leaned into it, letting herself become absorbed into its nothingness. There was nothing in the center of black holes, no time, no space, no gravity to pull you down to earth and force you to remember. She could feel it beginning to swallow her up—and not just her but the whole school, until the swing set crumpled and the metal monkey bars flattened and the red brick building compressed and there was nothing left but the void.

She began to cry, to sob so hard that her whole body shook and she choked for air. She couldn't seem to stop. Miss Sarah was kneeling before her now, her lips forming words that Olivia couldn't hear. She didn't want to hear them. Hands picked her up, carried her into the nurse's station and laid her on the exam table. They unbuttoned her coat and gave her a pill to swallow and wiped the sweat off her face as if this would bring Tom back. Didn't they know?

Her vision turned gray around the edges. She let it wash over her, a pleasant tingling in her arms and legs, a gradual drift into nothingness.

“Olivia.”

Her brother's voice. Impossible. Tom was dead.

“Olivia.”

It sounded exactly like his voice. Olivia opened her eyes, just a slit, and peeked through the shadow of her eyelashes at him. Tom was sitting there, right in front of her. Not a ghost, because ghosts do not stare at you and bite their lip like that. Only alive, not-ghost brothers do that. He leaned forward when he saw her eyes open, every muscle tense under his gray T-shirt. “Olivia,” he said, in a careful voice. “What happened?”

“You were dead.” She sat up on the exam table so fast that the room spun. “You were!”

“No, Olivia—I wasn’t dead, I was late. Those are two completely different things,” Tom said. “But I’m sorry—I’m sorry I was late. I’m sorry it scared you.”

Olivia just stared at him. Her world had ended, she had been so sure it had ended, but now she was sitting in the nurse’s office and Tom was there.

He rummaged in the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a bottle cap—cherry red, *Strawberry Soda*. “Look, I found it this morning,” he said. “You want it for your wind chime?”

“My wind chime?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you weren’t listening to me earlier.” She swallowed to make the ache in her throat go away. “About the wind chimes.”

“Yeah, I was.” He set the bottle cap on the exam table, rustling the paper cover. Then he looked up at her. “So what do you think? Are you ready to go home?”

In Tom’s science textbook—the beat-up one with the diagram of the Milky Way on the front—it said that black holes can last forever. But it was wrong. After a long, long time, black holes disappear into the universe, leaving behind a faint glimmer in the dark. Olivia, sitting on

the nurse's exam table, knew nothing about this. But she felt, when she looked at Tom, like maybe the nothingness inside her was growing smaller.

She shivered, and Tom noticed. He reached out as if to touch her, then curled his fingers into a fist and dropped his hand onto the exam table. It hurt Olivia to see him make that gesture again, a sign of defeat. He thought she'd never let him hug her—and she couldn't, not just yet—but she felt like she might. Eventually.

Olivia looked at his hand on the exam table and inched her fingers closer, just close enough so that the tip of her index finger touched his. "I'm ready," she said.