A Forest Full of Stars

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It's a hot summer night. Crickets chirp and cicadas hum and hiss outside Rachel's open window.

"Rachel," Grandma whispers from the doorway. "Get up. I have something to show you."

Rachel rolls over. "What is it?"

"Just put on your shoes and come with me," Grandma says.

Hand in hand, they walk down the stairs and cross the kitchen. As they leave the house, Rachel shuts the door softly so she won't wake her parents.

Today, Rachel and her parents drove two hours from New York City to drop off her big sister, Claire, at sleepaway camp upstate. Then they drove another four hours to Grandma's house, way up here in this quiet country town. No matter how much Rachel had begged, they wouldn't let her go to camp with Claire.

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Rachel misses her sister so much already it's like a small cave opening up in her chest.

Outside, the darkness is thick. Grandma switches on a flashlight and starts walking. Her sneakers make a *shh-shh* sound in the grass.

"Where are we going?" Rachel asks, a little nervous.

"You'll see," says Grandma.

They reach the edge of the woods behind the house. Grandma smiles at Rachel, then steps into the forest.

Rachel squeezes Grandma's hand. The trail is soft with soil and moss.

Somewhere an owl keeps hooting, as if it's asking the night a question.

A few pricks of light appear out of the darkness. They flicker, then vanish.

"What are they?" Rachel breathes.

"They're little beetles," says Grandma. "Fireflies."

They follow the lights deeper into the woods. Then, suddenly, they reach a clearing, and Grandma turns off her flashlight. Fireflies are everywhere. They flash on and off, floating and climbing, darting and dancing. The forest shimmers as if it's full of stars.

"They're talking to one another," Grandma says. "They talk with light."

"What are they saying?" Rachel asks.

"I really don't know," Grandma says. "It's a secret language. Spend enough time with them, and maybe you'll figure it out."

Rachel looks up at Grandma and sees that she is smiling.

For a long while, Rachel watches the lights. She imagines this clearing is the state of New York. She and her sister are two of the fireflies. They are flashing each other messages. They are telling each other secrets. They are connected.

"It's a secret language," says Grandma.

Walking back to Grandma's house, Rachel feels wide awake. She starts writing a letter in her head.

Dear Claire,

Tonight, Grandma showed me the most incredible thing. A million fireflies talking in the forest. I can't wait to show them to you next time we visit Grandma!

They reach the edge of the woods again. "Grandma?" Rachel asks.

"Yes?"

"Can we do this tomorrow too?"

Grandma gives Rachel a hug. Somewhere in the distance, the owl hoots again. This time, it sounds like an answer.

