

Fly Away Home

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Ce récit est un retour poignant sur la brièveté de la vie et l'importance de poursuivre ses rêves avant qu'il ne soit trop tard. Les thèmes abordent la sagesse, le courage, l'amitié et la fidélité à soi-même sans succomber aux attentes des autres souvent oppressantes et restrictives.

The world around her was just beginning to stir as Cassie returned to the small cabin from her night shift at the seniors' home. Parking the car, she walked straight to the back garden and flopped down on the hammock strung between two pine trees, a ritual she performed each morning. A delicate scent of peonies and lilacs infused the warm spring air and Cassie took a deep breath, enjoying the rewards of the miniature Eden she had created. It was the only time she felt at peace, when the relentless longing to be elsewhere subsided. The cabin was an inheritance from her grandfather who raised her after a fire claimed the lives of her parents and grandmother when she was a young girl. Cassie escaped the deadly blaze but suffered severe burns from the flames. She had been withdrawing from the world ever since. After her grandfather passed away she sold everything but the cabin that had been her lifelong sanctuary, a place so isolated she didn't have to worry about hiding herself from others.

Swaying lazily in the quiet dawn Cassie watched as the sun began its rise over the mountains and cast its blinding rays across the hammock. Shielding her eyes, she reluctantly got up and went indoors. Glancing over at the morning mail spilling onto the floor, her eyes fell on the monthly subscription to Travel Magazine lying amidst the junk mail and bills, its glossy cover beckoning tourists to explore the beauty of Spain. Sadness clouded Cassie's eyes

as she realized yet another month had passed and she had travelled only the few miles between her job, the village and her cabin, the dreams still living only in her mind. Shoving the thoughts aside, she grabbed the magazine and made her way toward the bathroom. Pausing in the kitchen doorway she looked at the colorful photographs scattered across the table, images from her garden. Lately she was feeling uninspired by their beautiful sameness and had started donating them to the retirement home to brighten the rooms of the residents. She decided she would burn the remaining photos in the wood stove, maybe abandon photography altogether. She didn't want to take pictures of flowers anymore.

Soaking in a warm tub of bubbles, Cassie returned her attention to the pages of her travel magazine. Feelings of frustration washed over her as she admired the views of faraway places; places her heart longed to be. Brushing away tears, her fingers lingered over the jagged scar on her cheekbone that trailed all the way down to her lips, lips that had never been kissed. "Someday," she whispered to herself, "Maybe someday I will get there." Spain, Russia, Egypt. It didn't really matter where. Before the fire, she had visions of being a freelance photographer for a travel magazine. Now her ugly disfigurement kept her from exposing herself or venturing away from home and she spent most of her waking hours trying to forget the dreams the flames had consumed. Sighing, she climbed out of the tub and wrapped herself in an old flannel robe and threadbare socks that had seen better days. Avoiding the bathroom mirror, she reached for her bottle of sleeping pills and swallowed one down with a mouthful of brandy before curling up in the cozy familiar bed, her eyes still wet with tears.

Waking with just enough time to toss on fresh clothes Cassie headed out into the night for her next shift. When she arrived, she paused to pull her long disheveled hair across her face—a habit acquired since the fire—then climbed the stairs of the old Victorian mansion converted to a retirement home and made her way down to the dimly lit duty office. Passing by the front parlor, she was surprised to see one of the elderly residents sitting in front of the big stone fireplace. Jenny, one of Cassie’s favorites, sat with her eyes closed, a small, pink envelope clutched in her hands.

was awake and reading a letter, tears streaming from her eyes as her slender hands slowly turned the pages. Cassie looked silently at the graceful petite woman dressed in the latest fashion, her pearls in place and hair groomed even at this late hour. Clearing her throat to alert Jenny to her presence, she made her way to the chair by the fire and reached out for her hand.

“Are you alright? Is everything okay?” It troubled her to see the pain in Jenny’s face.

Several moments passed until tired grey eyes lifted up

“She was one of my best friends,” Jenny replied.” Glancing down at the pieces of delicate pink stationary Jenny continued. “There were four of us, so close we might have been sisters. I have secretly thought of them as fireflies for as long as I can remember ... the way they found their way in the dark with only the light in their eyes to guide them.”

She had never found Jenny up at such a late hour before. She usually appeared only in the early morning when she would join Cassie over a pot of freshly brewed tea and talk about everything and nothing at all. She was fond of Jenny because she was one of the few people who never tried to cajole her into cutting the hair that curtained her face. It was as if somehow Jenny understood.

Tiptoeing past the room, Cassie continued to the office where she found the afternoon staff anxious for her arrival. Eager to join their boyfriends outside, they gave her a brief update and ran out the door before she could ask about Jenny. She quickly followed but the girls had already gone so she locked up, set the alarm and returned to the parlour where Jenny sat as still and fragile as a porcelain doll. Deciding to leave her undisturbed, Cassie headed up the stairs for her rounds.

Climbing up the wide mahogany staircase, she heard nothing but the soft, slow passage of time echoing through the house from the elegant grandfather clock that stood on the second floor landing. She had often wondered why anyone bothered to wind it in a place where time didn’t seem to matter anymore. Gently opening each door, she shone her flashlight into the rooms and glanced with affection at the occupants lost in slumber. The only evidence of life came from an occasional moan or twitching of limbs as they dreamed of lives and moments already lived that now only they could see. Content that all was well, Cassie made her way back downstairs, guided by small nightlights glowing along the dark, rich wood of the walls. From the front of the house she thought she heard the sound of weeping. Jenny! Hurrying down the hallway, she stopped at the parlour room door. Jenny

toward Cassie and Jenny whispered, “My last firefly. She has gone without saying goodbye.” Confused by the silence that followed, Cassie gently helped lift Jenny from the chair and led her to the kitchen. Putting on the kettle for tea before settling down beside her, she waited for Jenny to continue. She wondered who the firefly was and what it meant to her. The sound of the kettle’s piercing whistle startled them both and Jenny’s eyes gradually returned from what had seemed a faraway place. With a sad smile, she gently placed the letter on the table. “Where was I dear?”

“Who is the firefly Jenny, the one that has gone?” Cassie asked.

“She was one of my best friends,” Jenny replied, her voice filling with tenderness.” Her name was Hannah, the prettiest of our group and the only one who ever found what she was looking for.” Glancing down at the pieces of delicate pink stationary Jenny continued. “There were four of us in the beginning, so close we might have been sisters. I have secretly thought of them as fireflies for as long as I can remember ... the way they found their way in the dark with only the light in their eyes to guide them.”

Intrigued, Cassie got up to make a pot of tea and quickly returned to the table. She had only recently begun sharing personal details of their lives with this beautiful elderly woman and Cassie was eager to know more of Jenny’s life. But before continuing, Jenny excused herself to go to her room. When she returned she held a faded black and white photograph. Holding it out to Cassie, she poured out the tea then settled back to share the tale of four young girls who had first bonded in college, each of them sensing they didn’t belong to the world in which they had grown up. Feeling like misfits in their own families they found

themselves drawn to one another like kindred spirits. They had never lost sight of each other for the remainder of their lives. Over the years, not a week went by without Jenny receiving a letter, but today that would come to an end.

"I met Laura first," Jenny explained. "A smart adventurous girl, bored with the simple farm life she had been raised in. She knew what her future would be, a life of toil from morning till night, being a dutiful wife, and expectations of producing strong sons to continue the legacy of the dairy business that had been in her family for generations. I remember Laura's telling of how she begged her parents for the chance to go to college. They finally relented with the condition that she return after graduation. She agreed to this, but the truth was, Cassie, Laura had other plans. Just as soon as we finished our senior year she wrote a letter to her parents apologizing for breaking her promise to return. She was determined to head west to look for a job, eager to explore the world beyond the fences that had contained her for so long and the idea of living in a big city excited her.

Cassie thought how daring Laura was to journey so far from all she had known without knowing what she might find. She was immediately curious to know what became of her.

"Was she happy with her new life?" she asked Jenny.

"Oh yes, for a time anyway. She found herself a job working at a prison for women. In her free time she roamed the city, captivated by all the unfamiliar attractions. She used to say it was like travelling all over the world every time she stepped outside." Jenny looked over at Cassie and smiled. "Then she met Eddie and everything changed. Within a year she was pregnant with little Johnnie and Angela came soon after. They moved to a small town where Eddie thought it would be safer to raise his family. Laura objected, fearing he would soon want to raise chickens too but in the end she had no choice but to follow."

Cassie imagined how Laura must have felt, being forced to live once again in a place like the one she had escaped from so long ago. "Did she ever return to the family farm?"

Jenny hesitated, wondering how much of the truth she should tell. "No dear, she never went back. But her children did. Being used to life in a small town they were thrilled when, years later, Laura told them about her family's farm. They begged for the chance to go visit. Once there, they didn't want to leave and Laura agreed to let them stay with their grand-parents, despite Eddie's protests. But then Eddie died soon after and Laura moved back to the west coast alone. The children came to see her every summer." Jenny stopped there, deciding not to tell Cassie about Laura's murder. She had already suspected Cassie's carefully shielded lifestyle and she didn't want to discourage her by painting a portrait of a frightening world.

Pointing to an exotic, dark skinned girl in the photograph, Jenny moved on with her story. "This was Olivia. She was the youngest from a wealthy family and the last to leave the nest. Her older siblings had already built successful careers and respectable marriages that satisfied their parents but everyone was growing frustrated with Olivia. They thought she was lazy and unmotivated despite the many doors they tried to open for her so they sent her off to college hoping for great accomplishments. Poor Olivia, she always felt such pressure to make her parents proud and was too afraid to tell them that she had no interest in following the same path as her siblings or that she found their high society lifestyle suffocating. To their horror, Olivia decided to drop out of school and shocked everyone by travelling to the Amazon and dedicating herself to saving endangered species."

With eyes closed, visions of Brazil travelled across Cassie's mind. Her parents had taken her there when she was seven, one of many adventures she cherished and relived when she allowed herself to remember. The desire to roam ran deep in her blood but she fought the hunger every day even if it meant starving her soul. "That sounds like a wonderful thing to do," she commented, too embarrassed by her lack of courage to confess her own true desires.

"Not to her parents," Jenny replied, "But Olivia was lucky. A trust fund allowed her to go wherever her free spirit wished. Eventually leaving the rainforest she dabbled in everything from helping the homeless to painting lessons at the Institute of Emily Carr." Jenny sipped her tea before resuming. "Between you and me," she confided, "I sometimes wondered if Olivia wasn't a lost soul. She never did get married and the times she went home to visit she felt so out of place she often left sooner than planned. She said it was just too difficult to explain who she was to those who should have known her best."

Jenny sighed and picked up the photograph, the moisture in her eyes returning. Directing Cassie's attention to a pretty blonde girl with flowers in her hair she said, "Hannah was the last to come along and everybody's favourite. Such a sweet, innocent girl she was, her heart always bursting with love. Her only dream was to find her prince and have a house full of babies. An only child from a broken home, she wanted a life that was opposite from the cold, empty one she grew up in. Her mother was an angry, bitter woman who told Hannah to marry for money; romance was just a fool's illusion. Hannah refused to believe her."

Cassie had long since abandoned any thoughts of romance, suspecting she would grow old alone, maybe even spending her last years in the very house she now sat in. Her grandfather had been the only one who adored her despite her ravaged face. Since he died there had been

no other men in Cassie's life at all. Looking now at the picture of Hannah, she couldn't imagine someone so beautiful being alone for long. "Did she find him?" Cassie wondered, certain she knew the answer.

"Not right away," Jenny laughed, remembering all the men who chased unsuccessfully after Hannah. "She broke many hearts but Hannah was not going to settle until she found the right one even if she had to go to the far corners of the world to find him. As it turned out, that's exactly what happened."

"If you wonder why I didn't tell you my own story my dear, it is only because it was never written. I hope you will understand, too, my wish to discover your absence when I return. You do not belong in a world that has already fallen asleep when you are only just beginning to wake and I think you will not feel at home until you find where you belong."

Cassie studied the picture of Hannah again, trying not to be jealous of her perfect features. "Where was he hiding?"

"In a makeshift hospital bed," Jenny chuckled. "As time went by and her prince didn't appear, Hannah wondered if maybe she was wrong to believe so she focused her love on children, making her way to Africa to care for the orphans there. During a visit to a remote, impoverished village she met a doctor who had lost a leg from a landmine explosion while trying to save a child. She fell in love with this man whose heart was as big as her own and they soon married. After Hannah discovered she couldn't bear children they began adopting, eventually opening their own orphanage. They gave everything they had to those poor little ones, keeping nothing for themselves but Hannah didn't care. She had all she wanted. Never once did she look back."

Glancing at the clock, Cassie jumped up. She was dying to hear Jenny's own life story but she was due for her rounds. Promising to return quickly, she hurried upstairs where she discovered one of the residents sleepwalking in the hall. Carefully guiding the elderly man back to his room she quickly checked on the others. When she returned to the kitchen it was empty. A small note lay next to her tea cup.

"I am sorry to leave you Cassie but I am tired now and have gone to lie in the parlour. We will finish another day. Jenny."

Disappointment filled her and Cassie hoped Jenny would wake again before her shift was over. With reluctance, she returned to the office to finish her nightly reports and wait. The remaining hours ticked by until, slowly, the light of early dawn crept through the windows of the silent house. Jenny remained asleep in front of the empty fire, oblivious to the morning's arrival.

The next evening, Cassie arrived for her shift eager to see Jenny again, hoping she would find her awake. Seeing the parlour empty, she went to Jenny's room. It too was dark, vacant. Turning on a small lamp, she stared at the tidy, four-poster bed with a growing sense of alarm. Her mind raced, wondering if something had happened in the day, angry she had not been told. Pushing down a wave of unease Cassie walked further into the room, surprised at the simplicity, the lack of personal identity. Feeling like an intruder, she was about to leave when her eye fell

upon a pile of boxes stacked behind the bedroom door. Peering inside the top one, she found what looked like pages of a manuscript. Jenny's name was printed boldly across the cover but there was no title, only a handful of words smeared by black ink. Thinking about the fireflies, Cassie wondered if the pages contained clues to Jenny's own story. Leaving the boxes, she stood in the doorway and looked back again, this time noticing a small card with her name on it tucked inside the lid of a delicately carved jewelry box. Reaching over, she carefully pulled it out and sat on the edge of Jenny's bed to read.

Dear Cassie,

Please forgive an old woman for not saying goodbye. I have spoken such words too often in my life. I have gone to stay with my brother for an extended holiday and I am very sorry if my sudden departure alarmed you. I hope you understand why I shared with you the story of the fireflies—in many ways they remind me so much of you. If you wonder why I didn't tell you my own story my dear, it is only because it was never written. I hope you will understand, too, my wish to discover your absence when I return. You do not belong in a world that has already fallen asleep when you are only just beginning to wake and I think you will not feel at home until you find where you belong. I have left a ticket for you, a chance to fly wherever your heart desires and I assure you I want nothing in return. The thought of your face turned up to the sun will be more than enough reward. Do not be afraid dear Cassie, you will find the world will accept you as I do, if only you have the courage to let it see you.

Affectionately, Jenny.

Tears streamed down Cassie's face as she tucked the card in her pocket and looked again at Jenny's meager

possessions. Except for a large painting of fireflies that hung above Jenny's bed, the room could have belonged to anyone. Walking back out to the hallway, she softly closed the bedroom door.

Several months later a parcel from overseas addressed to Jenny arrived at the retirement home. Having just returned from her brother's in England, Jenny assumed it was the books she had shipped from a delightful antiques store they had found in the countryside just before her departure. But when she opened the box there were no books. Instead, a collection of photographs spilled out into her lap along with Cassie's picture and a small pink envelope. Jenny crossed the room and settled before the fire before opening the letter. Her eyes lit up with excitement when she saw the fine gold chain with a delicate firefly made of diamonds lying among the pages and she began to read. "Dear Jenny..."

Living with her dog in rural Northwestern Ontario, Linda Kmet is a writer and hopes one day to inspire others with her voice. Her extensive work as a crisis counselor for women and children has influenced her stories about the triumphant survival of the human spirit.

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in their late incarnations
long after children and men.

Melissa of the sad song
falling line dropped
like a plunged hook
from sky to sea

letting the sharpness
ferret and grab, tug at her
never looking down
never taking dark
bird eyes and streaming hair off
the far horizon, a dance
of flute and drum.

The foreign feast she craves
waiting for her, always
out of reach
and only now admitting
her joy in the going
knowing it can never be

except in dream, ringing
the bell of herself, soaring
from sight and sound
making music with those
who can

finally free of the lie
living in the flight she takes
after soap opera and self-delusion
hovering in new air

feather-tipped, quick
as a humming bird
aerodynamic miracle
a fin around the globe

a streak of beginnings.