

Nightlight

by

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“What do you think is up there?” I asked. A sliver of the night sky began to peek through the curtain of imminent dark closing over the sky, but the sun remained the star of the show. He always is.

“I don’t have the slightest idea,” replied Matt.

We were lying down on the large hill behind our parents’ house, admiring the creeping summer sunset. If you were to look down, you’d see a city teeming with life below us. A scrappy wooden gate stood hostage to its master, protecting us from the field of thorns that led to the city we could see from above.

“Momma always told me that not everything is dead up there,” I said, staring at the waning blue sky. Our Momma isn’t like most moms; she raised us to be intellectuals; to ask questions. Our teachers, in every grade, found us quite annoying, but that’s the Muller way: question everything and everyone. Life isn’t nearly as interesting when you don’t wonder. I would hate not to wonder. Some things don’t have to be left in the dark if you’re willing to explore.

“Oh yeah?” he mused.

“Yeah. Everything dead turns black and gray. Unless I’m crazy, the sky sure ain’t black and white, right?”

“I guess you’re right,” he laughs. I can always make Matt laugh. He has a great sense of humor.

“Damn right. And don’t you forget that.” I’m not always right, but when I am, I gotta let him know. Matt and I get along well, but we still get competitive once in a while.

“No, but seriously,” I said, turning over on my side. “What do you think’s up there?”

Matt turned his head, focusing his gaze on the opalescent sky. His eyes shifted, searching for a simple answer in the ever-changing atmosphere. Matt’s a thinker. He always crafts what he’s going to say in his head. He’s smart that way.

“I dunno, but I’d bet it’d be a nice place to think and relax, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” I agreed, lying back down. The cool, bristly grass once again tickled my back, but I didn’t mind it. The dirt underneath it cooled my overheated skin, something my back had been yearning for all summer long.

We sat and watched the wispy clouds move and disappear with the sun. I never get tired of watching a sunset. Especially the summer ones. It’s the perfect way to end a long day. There isn’t anything else quite like it. Nothing can capture its beauty. Nothing at all.

“This is my favorite part,” Matt whispered. “When the sun makes way for the moon and lets her shine for a while.”

The brightest of stars finally dipped beneath the horizon, ending the daytime’s long reign. Though retiring, it still left its marks in the form of orange streaks spread over the delicate, baby-blue sky. The sun may have to leave, but it doesn’t have to leave quietly, that’s for sure.

“I love watching the stars pop up to keep her company,” I said. “The moon can get lonely too, you know. The only thing anyone ever seems to care about is the sun. Never the moon. Heaven forbid she can have her place to shine.”

A cool breeze drifted over the hill and passed through our hair, commanding it to dance. The grass around us ruffled, and the trees swayed. I took in a deep breath of the guileless air and sunk deeper into the grass, lungs content.

“Close your eyes,” Matt said.

“What? Why?” I said, suspicious of what he was trying to do.

“Just do it!” he said. “Trust me, it’ll be worth it.”

I obeyed, still dubious. In our family, Matt’s known for pulling tricks on people. Last summer, he convinced me to touch an electric fence, claiming it wasn’t on. I still have a scar on my left pinkie from that incident, and he still apologizes to this day, but I’ve been wary of him ever since.

“What can you hear?” he asked.

I furrowed my brows and tried to focus my ears. I could faintly make out some jazz music from the city, some birds chirping nearby, and the sizzling of the grill from our neighbor’s backyard. It was a drastic change from just a few hours ago when noisy construction a block down ruined watching tv, reading, or listening to music. It’s impossible to read when every two seconds someone is hammering in a nail!

“Nothing,” I whispered. “Absolutely nothing.”

“Isn’t it great?” he laughed. “God, I miss the silence sometimes. It helps me to think.”

I opened my eyes and sat up, leaving the comforting embrace of the grass beneath me. I noticed a flash of light out of the corner of my eye.

“Look!” I pointed down the hill. “Did you see the firefly?”

Matt sat up and followed my gaze. It glowed again, it’s off-white glimmer vibrant against the monotone green. Just as quickly as it appeared, it hid, blending in with the young night. What a life that would be, to appear and hide in an instant.

“Yeah,” he said. “There’s another one! And another!”

The night was coming to life, healing the scars that the sun left on the weary earth. I think it's funny how so many people go to bed when the night is coming to life; a whole other world so many people don't get the pleasure of seeing.

I fell back down, my body colliding with my recent impression that the grass remembered. We watched the moon summon her children, banish the clouds, and listened to the cicadas make their music. It was an ephemeral type of peace, but one I wanted to last forever. Matt turned on his side, facing me.

"What do you think happens when you die?" he asked, breaking the fragile silence.

"Well, that's a stupid question," I snorted. "You won't feel anything. You're dead, remember?"

"So you think there's nothing, absolutely nothing, when you die?" he asked.

"I don't think," I said. "I know."

"Well that's a depressing thought." He turned back around, and we once more basked in the silence.

"What do you think?" I whispered. The eerie night reminded me of the ghost stories our father used to tell us. Until he became one himself. The moon has a way of bringing back memories—the ones that like to fester in the dark.

Matt sat there quiet for a while.

"I think you become a star to keep the moon company. I know it sounds silly, bu—"

"Like a nightlight," I interrupted. "So the moon doesn't feel alone, right?"

He smiled, "Yeah, like a nightlight. I mean you said it yourself: even the moon gets lonely sometimes."

"Do you think Dad's up there?" I whispered. Momma, Matt, and I don't like to talk about our late father—the memories are still too dark in our bright and curious minds.

"Yeah," Matt replied. "I do. And I bet he's watching us from up there. Next to the moon."

I sighed, dropping my head. "I wished he didn't have to run back into that fire."

Matt put a hand on my shoulder.

"I know, sis. But it was his job—to put other people's well-being above his own."

"Yeah, but why couldn't he value his family's well-being more than strangers'?"

Matt didn't have an answer. I didn't expect him to, anyway. We scoured the skies, searching for an answer, but the moon refused to offer us any clues. There would always be a gap in our family—one we could never fill. And we had to come to peace with that, no matter how hard it was.

We sat, watching the city's life die down, the lights dimming one by one, and the moon shining even brighter on the ever-darkening sky; a beacon in a sea of jazz, loneliness, and troubles. At around eleven, a shooting star streaked across the sky, making its first and last debut.

“Quick!” Matt shot up quickly. “Make a wish!”

I sat up with a wish in mind: “I wish this night would never end.”

He looked at me, his eyes twinkling in the starlight. “I know, little sis,” he said. “Come on, we ought to go to bed. School starts tomorrow.”

“I know,” I sighed wearily. “You don’t have to remind me.”

We both got up and walked back to the inviting glow of our house, leaving the distant moon lonely once more.