

# The Fireflies, Ray Bradbury

## The Fireflies

“FIREFLIES NEVER QUITE make it back,” said Grandfather, on the bottom front porch stair.

“Make it back where?”

“My father used to say they were stars got shaken loose. On summer nights, he said, God cleaned his furnace, shook it down. Coals dropping everywhere. Run out and pick up a few, he’d say. I’d run. Come back, a light in each hand.”

“I’ll catch some,” said Douglas.

“Thanks.”

Douglas moved like a breath. There was darkness and stars in the heavens and stars on the lawn.

“They don’t even burn!”

“No. Gentle now.”

“They’ve gone out!”

“Startled.”

The fireflies were transferred to Grandfather’s cupped hands. Later, they lit up again.

“I wish I could glow like that.”

“Why, boy, you do. We all do, at times. Poets say love burns with a pure light. Here’s proof. Anything as beautiful as this must be important.”

“I don’t light up like that.”

“Saw you looking at your mother yesterday. In a dark room, bet I could read a book by your face.”

“Aw.”

“Yes, sir!” Grandfather held up the fireflies. “Better let them get back to brightening the corner where they are.” He opened his hand. They lit the air softly, flying away. “Yes, sir, love is a wonderful thing.”

“We go out in the lobby and eat popcorn or go to the toilet until it’s over, matinees.”

“You’ve got yourself an argument.”

“It’s pretty silly, some Saturdays.”

“You ever see Grandma and me on the movie screen down there?”

“Heck, no.”

“Ever seen your mother, father, yourself, your brother on that screen?”

“Not yet.”

“I’m afraid you never will. Or any of your friends or aunts or uncles, or the boarders here. On the day when the Elite theatre starts showing Grandma and me and your mother and father and all the other relatives and boarders, tell me, I’ll come down with you.

We’ll stay until midnight and they sweep us out with the popcorn. In the meantime, Douglas, you keep right on marching to the restroom when things get silly on the screen. You’ve got good common sense in that head. Everybody knows love isn’t like that.”

“Charlie Henwood says he sure hopes not.”

“Maybe you’re wondering what it is, then? It’s what I said; it’s you and me and Grandma and all our children and the children of uncles and cousins, and all the boarders here. It’s how we all feel about each other most of the time, subtract the fights and meanness. Simple as that.

It’s trying to live peaceably in an un-peaceable world. It’s Grandma baking a pumpkin pie and me whittling you a hickory whistle. It’s you sitting here right now listening very politely.

And you and your brother going to sleep winter nights and warming your feet, one on the other. It’s your mother worrying when your

father works late, and there may have been an accident. It's all of us laughing at the dinner table. It's Neva playing for us to sing in the parlor.

It's sitting here on the porch nights, or a game of checkers in the fall, inside. It's so darned many things I can't tell them all. But it's a miracle if you find them on that silver screen downtown Saturday matinees.

Almost as hard to find in the evening shows. Once a year maybe I see Grandma on the screen, or myself, or someone I know. The rest of the time it might as well be a bunch of rabbits hitting each other on the head with clubs, for all I understand the shows. Do you know why they put those kissing scenes in films?

They can't think of anything to say that means anything. It's the trademark of an empty man. When they show you that sort of thing, Douglas, you just stroll right out of the theatre and stand on the nearest street-corner. You'll see more real love in the popcorn man's cat and her kittens than you'll ever buy for a dime at the show. Don't let it fool you. The kiss is just the first note of the first bar, played by a piccolo. What follows is either a symphony or a riot, everyone trying to get out the door."

"What good is love?"

"Good. Well, I guess you'd call it a kind of lubricant. It stops friction. There are so many elbows to knock and feet to step on in this world. And so many people swatting each other in the face with pan-cake flippers, accidentally, of course, you need to be baptized in this first-grade oil, love, or you wouldn't get anywhere. Your brakes would burn out on the first mile."

The end