

THE FIREFLY TREE

by Jack Williamson

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They had come back to live on the old farm where his grandfather was born. His father loved it, but he felt lonely for his friends in the city. Cattle sometimes grazed through the barren sandhills beyond the barbed wire fences, but there were no neighbors. He found no friends except the firefly tree.

It grew in the old fruit orchard his grandfather had planted below the house. His mouth watered for the ripe apples and peaches and pears he expected, but when he saw the trees they were all dead or dying. They bore no fruit.

With no friends at all, he stayed with his father on the farm when his mother drove away every morning to work at the peanut mill. His father was always busy in the garden he made among the bare trees in the orchard. The old windmill had lost its wheel, but there was an electric pump for water. Cantaloupe and squash vines grew along the edge of the garden, with rows of tomatoes and beans, and then the corn that grew tall enough to hide the money trees.

His mother fretted that they might cause trouble. Once he heard her call them marijuana. His father quickly hushed her. The word was strange to him but he never asked what it meant because he saw his father didn't like it.

He found the firefly tree one day while his father was chopping weeds and moving the pipes that sprayed water on his money trees. It was still tiny then, not as tall as his knee. The leaves were odd: thin arrowheads of glossy black velvet, striped with silver. A single lovely flower had three wide sky-colored petals and a bright yellow star at the center. He sat on the ground by it, breathing its strange sweetness, till his father came by with the hoe.

"Don't hurt it!" he begged. "Please!"

"That stinking weed?" his father grunted. "Get out of the way."

Something made him reach to catch the hoe.

"Okay." His father grinned and let it stay. "If you care that much."

He called it his tree, and watched it grow. When it wilted in a week with no rain, he found a bucket and carried water from the well. It grew taller than he was, with a dozen of the great blue flowers and then a hundred. The odor of them filled the garden.

Since there was no school, his mother tried to teach him at home. She found a red-backed reader for him, and a workbook with pages for him to fill out while she was away at work. He seldom got the lessons done.

"He's always mooning over that damn weed," his father muttered when she scolded him. "High as a kite on the stink of it."

The odor was strange and strong, but no stink at all. Not to him. He loved it and loved the tree. He carried more water and used the hoe to till the soil around it. Often he stood just looking at the huge blue blooms, wondering what the fruit would be.

One night he dreamed that the tree was swarming with fireflies. They were so real that he got out of bed and slipped out into the dark. The stars blazed brighter here than they had ever been in the city. They lit his way to the orchard, and he heard the fireflies before he came to the tree.

Their buzz rose and fell like the sound of the surf the time they went to visit his aunt who lived by the sea. Twinkling brighter than the stars, they filled the branches. One of them came to meet him. It hovered in front of his face and lit on the tip of his trembling finger, smiling at him with eyes as blue and bright as the flowers.

He had never seen a firefly close up. It was as big as a bumblebee. It had tiny hands that gripped his fingernail, and one blue eye squinted a little to study his face. The light came from a round topknot on its head. It flickered like something electric, from red to green, yellow to blue, maybe red again. The flashes were sometimes slower than his breath, sometimes so fast they blurred. He thought the flicker was meant to tell him something, but he had no way to understand.

Barefoot and finally shivering with cold, he stood there till the flickering stopped. The firefly shook its crystal wings and flew away. The stars were fading into the dawn, and the tree was dark and silent when he looked. He was back in bed before he heard his mother rattling dishes in the kitchen, making breakfast.

The next night he dreamed that he was back under the tree, with the firefly perched again on his finger. Its tiny face seemed almost human in the dream, and he understood its winking voice. It told him how the tree had grown from a sharp-pointed acorn that came from the stars and planted itself when it struck the ground.

It told him about the firefly planet, far off in the sky. The fireflies belonged to a great republic spread across the stars. Thousands of different peoples lived in peace on thousands of different worlds. The acorn ship had come to invite the people of Earth to join their republic. They were ready to teach the Earth-people how to talk across space and travel to visit the stars. The dream seemed so wonderful that he tried to tell about it at breakfast.

"What did I tell you?" His father turned red and shouted at his mother. "His brain's been addled by the stink of that poison weed. I ought to cut it down and burn it."

"Don't!" He was frightened and screaming. "I love it. I'll die if you kill it."

"I'm afraid he would." His mother made a sad little frown. "Leave the plant where it is, and I'll take him to Dr. Wong."

"Okay." His father finally nodded, and frowned at him sternly. "If you'll promise to do your chores and stay out of the garden."

Trying to keep the promise, he washed the dishes after his mother was gone to work. He made the beds and swept the floors. He tried to do his lessons, though the stories in the reader seemed stupid to him now.

He did stay out of the garden, but the fireflies came again in his dreams. They carried him to see the shining forests on their own wonderful world. They took him to visit the planets of other peoples, people who lived under their seas, people who lived high in their skies, people as small as ants, people larger than the elephants he had seen in a circus parade and queerer than the octopus in the side show. He saw ships that could fly faster than light from star to star, and huge machines he never understood, and cities more magical than fairyland.

He said no more about the dreams till the day his mother came home from work to take him to Dr. Wong. The nurse put a thermometer under his tongue and squeezed his arm with a rubber

gadget and left him to wait with his mother for Dr. Wong. Dr. Wong was a friendly man who listened to his chest and looked at the nurse's chart and asked him about the fireflies.

"They're wonderful!" He thought the doctor would believe him. "You must come at night to see them, sir. They love us. They came to show us the way to the stars."

"Listen to him!" His mother had never been out at night to see the fireflies shining. "That ugly weed has driven him out of his head!"

"An interesting case." The doctor smiled and patted his shoulder in a friendly way and turned to speak to his mother. "One for the books. The boy should see a psychiatrist."

His mother had no money for that.

"I'll just take him home," she said, "and hope he gets better."

A police car was parked in front of the house when they got there. His father sat in the back, behind a metal grill. His head was bent. He wouldn't look up, not even when his mother called through a half-open window.

The police had more cars parked around the garden. They had chopped down all the money trees and thrown them into a pile. The firefly tree lay on top. Its fragrance was lost in a reek of kerosene. The policemen made everybody move upwind and set the fire with a hissing blowtorch.

It spread slowly at first, then blazed so high they had to move farther away. Feeling sick at his stomach, he saw the branches of the tree twist and beat against the flames. He heard a long sharp scream. A cat caught in the fire, the policemen said, but he knew it wasn't a cat. Fireflies swarmed out of the thrashing branches and exploded like tiny bombs when the flames caught them.

His father was crying when the police took him away, along with a bundle of the money trees for evidence. His mother moved them back to the city. In school again, he tried to tell his new teachers about the fireflies and how they had come to invite the Earth into their great confederation of stars. The teachers said he had a great imagination and sent him to the school psychologist.

The psychologist called his mother to come for a conference. They wanted him to forget the fireflies and do his lessons and look up his old friends again, but he wanted no friends except the fireflies. He grieved for them and grieved for his father and grieved for all that might have been.

About the author:

Jack Williamson is a living legend in science fiction, who has been writing and publishing SF since the 1920s, seven decades now, and it looks very much like he might make it to the eighth. Of all the writers of his era, he is the last to keep writing SF that is part of the living evolution of the literature today. His classic fantasy novel, *Darker Than You Think*, originally published in *Unknoum Worlds* in the early 1940s is still influential, and his SF classics, including *The Legion of Space* and *The Humanoids*, still drop in and out of print in paperback in a decade when many newer books by others are gone. This piece appeared in *SF Age*, which has been required reading for several years now but in 1997 had its best year yet for science fiction, and is the first of several from that magazine in this volume. It is about a boy and an alien and is a moving evocation of wonder in what we might perhaps call the Ray Bradbury tradition.