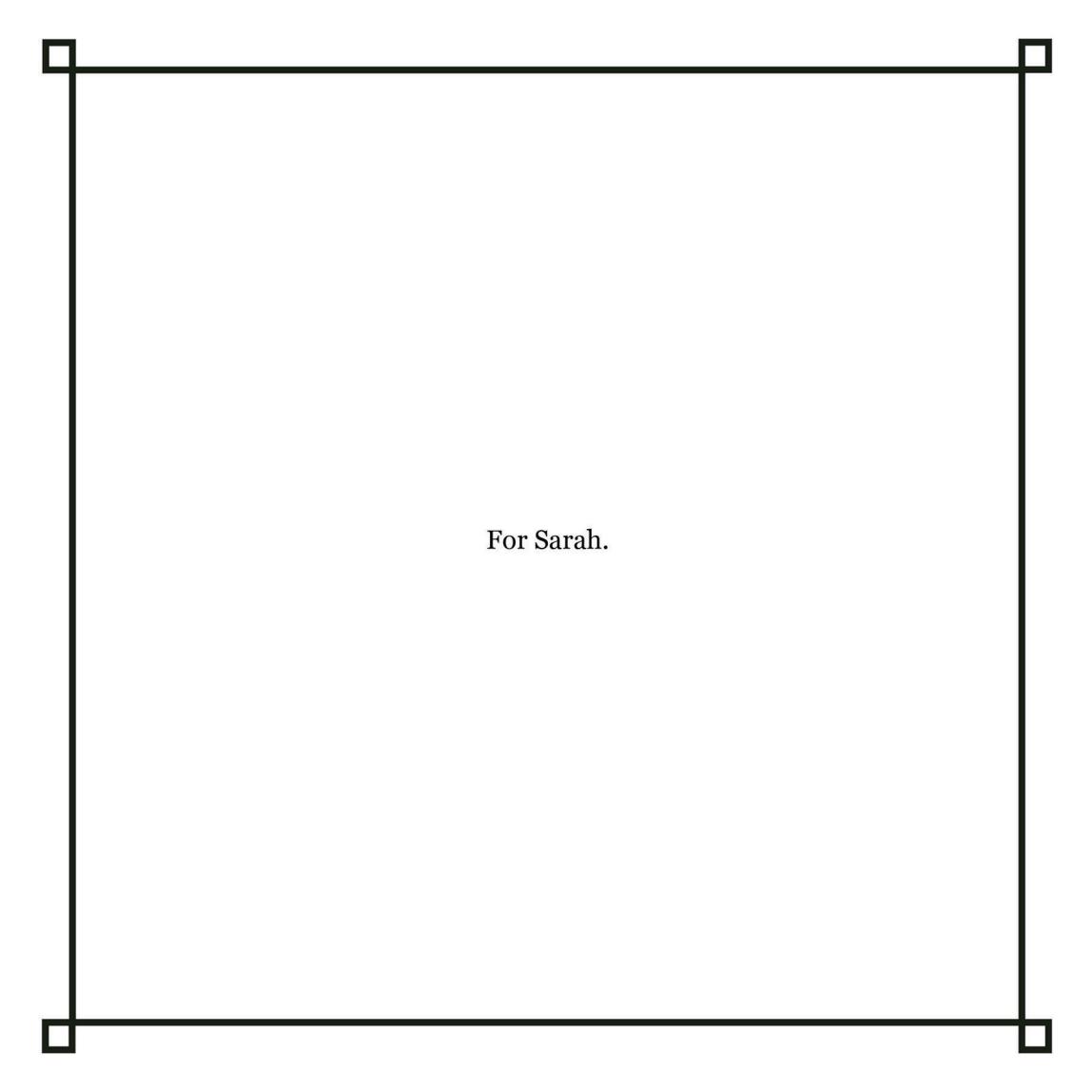


i am the tree

by Travis Bundy





For Sarah.



Once upon a time, there lived a young raccoon.
He was rambunctious, gregarious, and outgoing...



...though all within the confines of his own little corner of the world,
a hollowed out old tree.



The tree was shabby. Not much to look at. But it gave the raccoon comfort.
It was his domain...
to laugh, to look upon his treasures and to play pretend.



And while there were many other animals that came along to play,



they would part ways after a time, leaving the raccoon back where he started... alone. But the raccoon reveled in his solitude. It gave him more time for his favorite thing: himself.



One evening, during a particularly long period of self-imposed solitude, the raccoon was awoken by something he'd never seen before.



A light. Small, but bright. And it zigged and zagged through all corners of the forest... fast and free! More so than anything he'd ever seen.

At first, he paid it no mind. After all... it was outside of the tree.

But, night after night, the light returned to his corner of the forest.



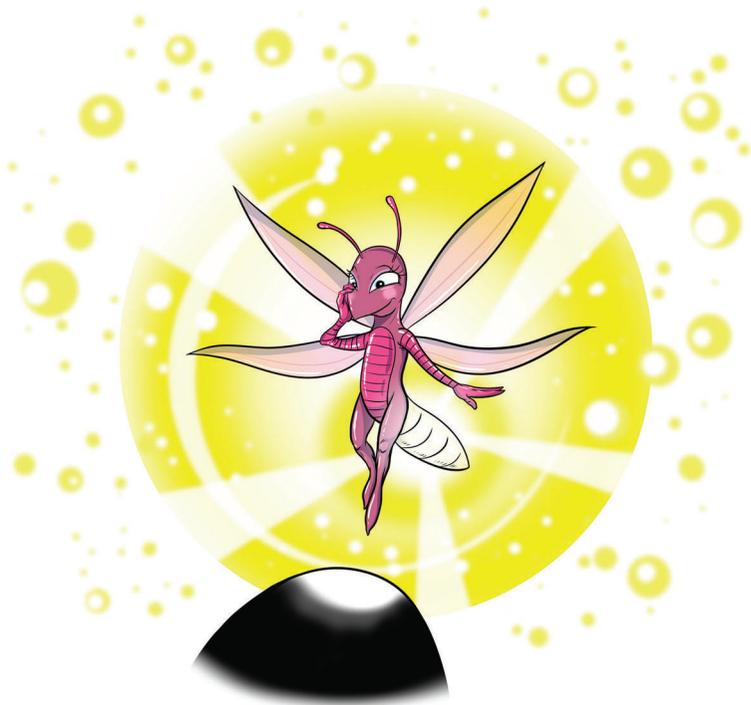
A playful exhibition that became more and more interesting... until finally, the raccoon could no longer deny it. He fixated on the light, wondering what it was. He wondered if it was truly alive; if it had a mind, and a voice, or a heart... and how it could be so carefree and wild.



And then... the light noticed HIM. It was not afraid and boldly floated above the raccoon's head. Playfully it danced, mesmerizing him, until it decided to delicately rest right on the tip of his nose.

“Wha... What are you?” Asked the Raccoon.

“Why, I’m a lightning bug, you silly old raccoon... haven’t you ever seen one like me?” she replied.



“No.” the raccoon muttered. “I have not... I’ve never seen anything like you.
You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

The lightning bug blushed and burned brighter for a moment.
“Well, I must admit...” she said with a smile, “I think you are most
fascinating... I’ve been watching you for a while now.”



The raccoon was stunned. He had no idea. “Really? Me?”

“Yes. You.” She replied. “The life you’ve built in this old tree is really magnificent. And you make me laugh.”



The raccoon snapped into action!

Any chance to make this creature stay and share its light with him was an opportunity he would hate to miss.



He dove into his treasures, finding one of his many costumes.
He threw it on and performed for her with all his might.
Her smile and laughter was all he needed in return...
and he would do anything for it.



“I have many more treasures and costumes inside... would you like to stay and play?” asked the raccoon.

“I’d like nothing more.” Said the lightning bug.



Night after night, the raccoon performed for her.
And she performed back... each with their own flair and excitement.
Soon they were inseparable... and the raccoon even found a
special space in the tree that the lightning bug could call her own.

A special treasure.



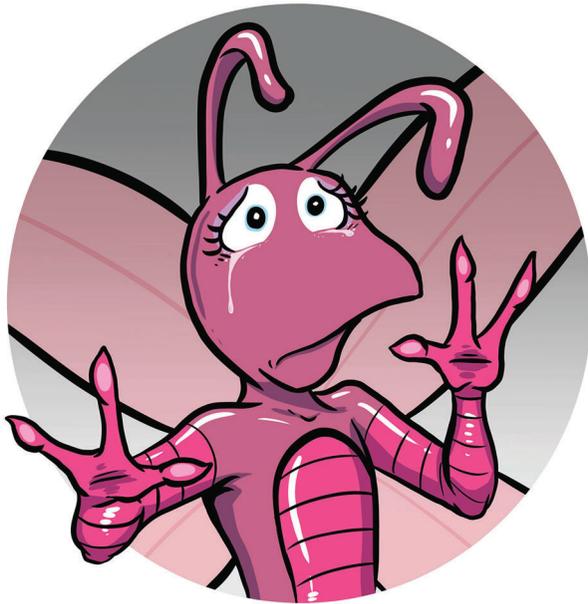


And for the longest time, they were happy. But very rarely did they leave the tree. After all, the raccoon would always think of their best interests: it would be raining, or it would be too windy, or there were monsters outside who would hurt her and he just could not have that. And she obliged. He was doing what he thought was right and, well... maybe he was.



But over time, unbeknownst to even the lightning bug... her sparkle faded. She would glow, but never as bright and never as often. And she longed for the days when she would fly through the forest. A free spirit on the wind.

But the raccoon was the only creature that could make her laugh... so she stayed. And night after night, her light dimmed.



And with it, her very spirit.



One day the raccoon awoke to a dark and cold tree.
He nudged the lightning bug hoping her light would illuminate the
darker corners and this day could start like any other.
But this day, there was no light. No spark. Nothing.



Frantically, the raccoon rattled her.
Hoping it would jumpstart the light he was used to.



But there was nothing.

She would not glow. She just lay there, deep in thought and unaware of his desperation.



The raccoon put her down and retreated to a dark corner of their home.
For days there they sat. Each in their own corner. Shadows in a once
warm and vibrant tree.



And then one day, like a switch flipping in his mind, the raccoon remembered. He thought back to the days when the two of them would play and laugh and curl up with each other to shield each other from the cold of the outside world. He thought back even further, though it was difficult to remember a time before the lightning bug was a part of his life. He remembered how wild and free she was. How he had never seen anything like her. He wondered how things had gotten to where they were now.

And, in an instant... he knew what had to be done.





Delicately, he picked up the lightning bug. He crawled out on his branch and lifted her out of world he had made just for her. For it was never what she needed... and perhaps neither was he.

 Holding her in his palm, he leaned in and whispered the only word he could muster...



“Fly.”



Slowly, ever so slowly, the lightning bug's eyes brightened. She could smell the fresh air and it lit up her senses. She noticed that she was outside of the tree... all that remained was the night sky, and the endless possibilities it entertained. She felt herself getting warmer. Her mind and heart raced. And without thinking, her wings expanded, her eyes shined and she gave off the most beautiful glow.



The warmth enveloped her and she began to float up into the night sky. The raccoon watched her with sad eyes... for he knew he had taken a part of her for himself... and he worried that she would never return to him.

She hovered high above the world for but an instant, and then...



...she flew!

Streaming like a rocket through the night air. Illuminating every inch of the forest around her, she darted over rocks and around trees...
gleefully laughing all the while.



And while it hurt him to see her leave, the raccoon could not help but smile. He knew that she was her true self again and he could not deny that it did in fact make him a little bit happy. He watched her until the warm light of her glow trailed off into the dense forest... and then returned to the welcomed solitude of the tree.



He looked over his treasures and with each one, he attached a memory of the times spent with her. Laughing, playing, cuddling... each vivid in his mind. And through his heartbreak, he would tell himself that it was all for the best. She is where she was meant to be. And so was he.

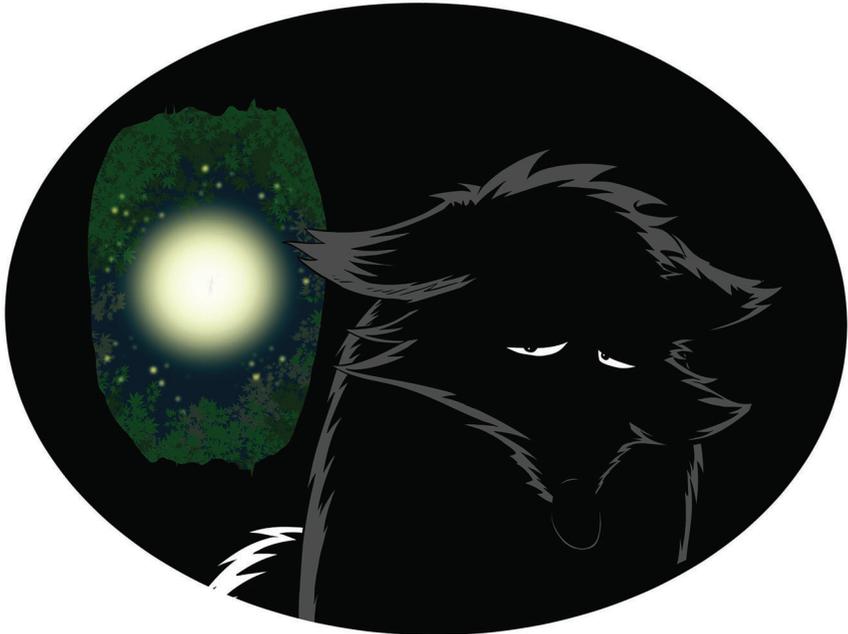
He bed down for the night, hoping he could have a little more time with her, if only in his dreams.



Soon though, he was awoken by a soft glow. The lightning bug hovered near the opening to his tree.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “You’re free... free from the confines of this old tree... and me.”

“You silly old raccoon...” she replied. “There is a great big world out there. So much more than just this tree. Come with me... and we’ll see it all!”



The raccoon shrugged away from her.

“I... I can’t.”

The lightning bug became perplexed. How anyone could want to deny this was beyond her comprehension.

“But... why?”

The raccoon sat up and peeked his head out of the hole in his tree.

“We all must be who we are, lightning bug... You are who you are.
Untamed and free of spirit... like the wind that blows through
the forest.”

“And you?” she asked.



“I... well...” the raccoon muttered as he paused for a moment.

“I am the tree. This is where I belong. It’s just who I am.
But I’ll always be here... for you... when you need me.”



A look of disappointment washed over the lightning bug. The raccoon could see it in her eyes.

“But... you don’t have to. You can choose to be free. You can decide to be like the wind.” She pleaded.

“Some of us... can’t.” he said.
“Be free, little lightning bug... I’ll be here.”

And with that, the raccoon went back into his tree to lie down.

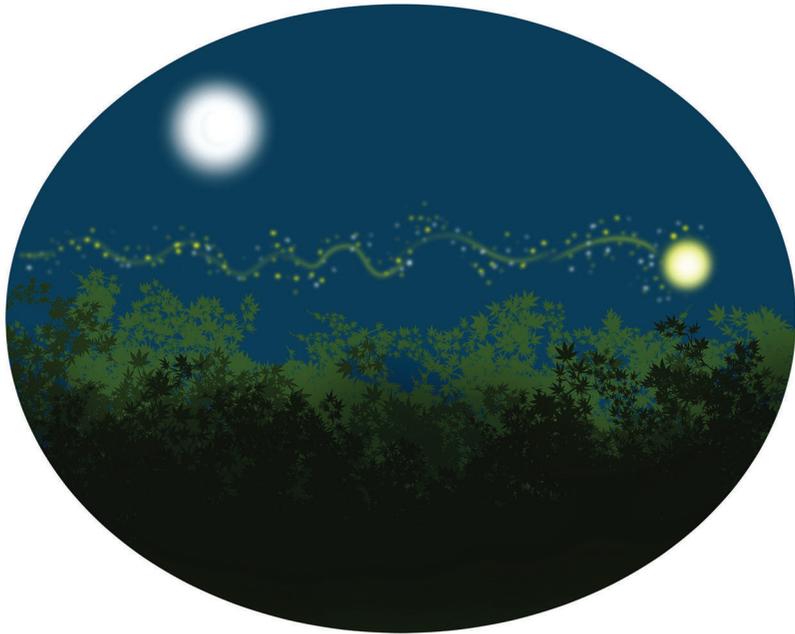




Although she was hurt by this, the lightning bug knew it to be true...
some things cannot change who they are so easily. So she sat.
Not in the tree, not on the branch... but nearby. The raccoon could
not help but notice her glow from inside his tree. Night after night
she was there. Leaving every so often to dart through the forest, but
eventually she would always come back.



Being just out of reach was enticing to the raccoon. Every night he would leave his tree... inching closer and closer to the warm glow. And when she moved further away from the tree, he would follow. Eventually he would scamper back to his tree... but night after night he was moving to new trees and seeing new parts of the ever expanding forest. All to be near her... to hear her laugh and watch her smile as she danced and flew through the trees.



In the end, we are who we are meant to be. But until then, we can be whatever else we choose. ... as long as we are honest with each other, and more importantly, ourselves.

Love is strange. It is wonderful and terrible at the same time. It is one of the things we simply cannot deny exists, yet we cannot hold it in our hands. It can change the very core of our being.



It can even make us leave the tree.

The End.