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Beetle

Rosie McCrossin

‘It’s the last day of our summer,’ she whispers, her feet gripping the branch. He squeezes his fingers into the bark of the bottle-brush until he can feel the blood draw out of them. A tiny golden-green beetle crawls across his knuckles, shining through the night like an emerald in a grandmother’s necklace. He raises his hand gently and the beetle contorts its antennae to ghost his skin. He places his fingers on hers and the beetle takes hesitant steps toward her, extending its tiny antennae again.

‘It’s beautiful,’ he whispers.

‘Is it?’ she asks, ‘What about me? Am I beautiful, Benjamin?’ Her hair is tangled around the leaves of the tree, the breeze making it undulate through the night, and the beetle crawling up her thumb, its feelers swirling on her skin. Her mouth is still open from saying the last syllable of his name, *min*, they say, Benjamin. He wants nothing more than to lean in and kiss her, to make it feel movie-perfect.

‘You’re not a beetle,’ he says softly instead.

She laughs lightly under her breath, ‘You’re right, not a fair comparison. Is it?’ she asks the beetle, raising it to her face and letting it crawl over her lips, its tiny feet clinging to her skin. It falls and she catches it, holding it in the cup of her hand.

‘You’re quite beautiful, Benjamin,’ she whispers, not breaking eye contact with the beetle.

‘Thank you, my mother has always told me so,’ he laughs. He has ruined it, made a stupid joke and now it’s gone.

She doesn't laugh. 'It's going to rain.'

'How do you know?'

'I can taste it, in the air.' As proof, she extends her tongue and leaves it in the night air for a few seconds before closing her mouth. 'It tastes like nearly wet dust, like dust that's waiting for something.'

He laughs, but softly enough so that if it's not a joke she won't hear it. 'Are you saying we should go back inside?' he asks.

'No,' she says quietly, still staring at the beetle. He suddenly feels soft coldness on his back, and he looks up. It is dark, and although he can't see it, he knows it is rain — her rain. A drop falls on her eyelashes and she looks up from the beetle and grins at him, her eyes open wide and glimmering in the black.

'I wish I didn't have to go to the city. I'm never happy there, not without ...' he starts, but she isn't listening, she is back to staring at the beetle. He places his hand where the traitorous insect found him and scrapes away at the bark. The rain is falling heavier now and flattening the strands of his fringe against his forehead. He needs a haircut. Things like that matter in the city. A chunk of bark comes away under his hand and falls onto the ground below them, landing in the thick grass.

'Without me?' she asks, and when he looks up she has put the beetle back on her face and it is crawling up the bridge of her nose, shining between her eyes.

'Yeah,' he says softly.

'You could stay here,' she says, smiling. 'We could live in old Merv's place together.'

'I have to get an education,' he says, doing a bad impression of his father's voice.

'Mmm,' she says softly.

'You could come to the cit-.' But then she's kissing him and the night fades away and his eyes are closed and his fingers are trembling on the bark of the tree and between their foreheads he can feel the beetle struggling, its tiny legs clawing at their skin.

More than anything he wants to keep kissing her and tell himself the beetle is okay, and then he is asking himself why he is thinking about a beetle in his first kiss, and then he is thinking about how the beetle brought them together and how it would be karma to kill it while they were kissing. He pulls away from her lips and plucks the beetle from her forehead, letting it fall upside down into his palm. She turns it over with her dirty thumbnail and it glistens in his hand. She leans over and kisses him on the cheek and kisses the beetle in his hand. Then she braces herself and jumps out of the tree, leaning against it and waiting for him. He jumps down next to her and they walk back to the house, his fingers intertwined in hers.

They arrive on the verandah and the rain has stopped, but there is a storm rolling over the dark horizon. 'I love you,' he whispers.

She pauses long enough for conspiracies to arise in his head. 'I love you too, Benjamin,' she whispers back.

They sit for a long time, hands intertwined, staring out at the dark storm. Suddenly, she sits upright, tension vibrating through her body.

'Where's the beetle?' she asks urgently.

He laughs and points to his shirt where the beetle fearlessly traverses the loose threads. She laughs as well, relieved.

'I should go to bed,' he says; and, as much as he hates the words, 'Big day tomorrow.'

'Mmm,' she says.

A lightning bolt breaks the darkness, like a flash photographing the landscape. 'It's close,' she whispers.

'What makes you think that?' he asks. She takes a strand of her hair and raises it above her head and it hovers in the air, taut and upright. She smiles at him and another lightning strike splits the night, raising more of her hair above her head. Behind her, moths hover around the light, craving neon death.

'I have to go,' he says.

‘Okay,’ she says. She leans in and kisses him again, her hair falling back around her face. When she pulls away he unhooks the beetle from his shirt and holds it out to her. She smiles and shakes her head. ‘What’s he going to do in this little town? Show him the city, show him what the real world’s like,’ she says, turning around and walking down the stairs. She stops halfway down and looks back at him. ‘See you round, Benjamin,’ she calls.

The train arrives in the city at 6:34 the next morning and he steps out onto the chilled platform, pulling the hood of his jumper over his head. The sleep-deprived taxi driver asks him hoarsely where he wants to go, and he takes the address out of his pocket and reads it to the driver. As the taxi speeds through the rain-streaked city he carefully removes a jar with air-holes poked in the top from his backpack. The beetle climbs up the side and falls down again, planning an endless, futile escape. He tips the insect onto his hand and it shimmers green-gold in his fingers. He raises it to the window. ‘Here it is,’ he whispers quietly so the driver can’t hear him, ‘here’s the real world.’ The beetle runs its antennae warily over the cold glass. ‘You’re right,’ Benjamin whispers to the beetle, ‘it’s completely over-rated.’



Rosie McCrossin wrote this in 2014 when she was in Year 11 at Sandgate District State High School in Queensland.