

A. RAY NORSWORTHY

LET IT SHINE

SEATED ON THE EDGE of the sagging, half-rotten front porch, Cal picks cockleburs out of Ole Boy's matted coat and waits for the fireflies to rise in the Oklahoma dusk, when they will blink like tiny stars and leave a disappearing trail of greenish-yellow light. The summer day has been stifling and still, without a whisper of breeze. It was too hot to venture out of the shade to chase horny toads or grasshoppers, pick devil's claws to play with, or catch crawdads in the low, muddy slough. Even the prairie dogs stayed in their holes. It would have been much more bearable if the air had moved.

Maybe the wind forgot to blow, he says to himself. He gives Ole Boy a pat and then bends over, bubbling forth from his mouth a trail of spit that he lets elongate until the string separates and the shorter end attaches to his chin like a spider web and the long string disappears into the red dirt shadowed by the porch steps. Ole Boy whimpers and when Cal turns, his best friend who happens to be a dog, licks off the spit with his rough tongue. Ole Boy trotted up to their house a stranger on Cal's fifth birthday, a week after that day in the cotton field.

Now like every other day since that day in the cotton field there is no one to pretend to eat his mud pies. No one to pick a flower for or play pattycake with. No one to sing Hank Williams' songs with, like "Oh, Lonesome Me." No one to teach him how to do a Cherokee rain dance. No one to sew up his ripped britches or dig a knot out of his tenny

shoe. Now the days are full of hardly nothing and he is full of hardly nothing, too. He keeps hoping that his brother, Chase can come home soon. Chase has polio and can hardly walk, even with the braces. Daddy thinks it's better for him to stay in town with their sister, Arlene, and she is lonely anyway because she married Bob and then Bob went overseas to Korea to shoot commies. She takes good care of Chase. About all Chase can do is color in coloring books and read story books and play cards. Arlene says she's going to get one of those television sets at Sears and Roebuck if she can talk Bob's mother into loaning her the down payment.

Now like every other day since that day in the cotton field it is the end of day Cal waits for. Daddy comes home when the sun lays itself down to sleep and doesn't pray the lord its soul to keep since Daddy said its soul must belong to the devil in the summertime.

Cal tries to snap his fingers as he lifts his eyes to the red and purple sky above the low mountains on the horizon where Mama said the ghost of Geronimo wanders looking for a bottle of whiskey. Daddy should be home pretty quick. After sundown all the creatures big and little seem relieved. The crickets start to cheep one at a time like they're scared, but after a while they'll all be cheeping at once because they're so glad it's getting dark out. The cattle are bawling in the pasture, on their way to wade and drink in the mossy tank and plop plop plop out of their hind end right into the same water they're drinking. On the fenceposts bob whites sing their own name, *bob...bob white*. Even the crows that sometimes drive him crazy with their nosy cawing during the day settle on the highlines and shut up and tuck in their wings. Down on the creek the bullfrogs start to burp like they've been drinking Coca-Cola and the squirrels make laughing sounds from high limbs. These sounds that signal the end of a suffering hot day are like church music to him even though this church is wide open to the world without any walls and he can be as dirty as he wants and the lord might be his shepherd like his Sunday school teacher said, but Cal doesn't want to lie down in green pastures because the ants, blister bugs, chiggers, and maybe even a tarantula would get on him and he doesn't want anyone to lead him beside the still waters because in these parts the still waters are stagnant and stink like the green scum covering the water.

Cal hears the sound he's most anxious to hear—the ornery old Farmall tractor snorting in from the fields. Daddy parks it out by the barn and walks the trail to the house, whapping his straw hat against his leg. Ole Boy wags his tail and trots out to meet him. Even in the grayish light, Cal can see that Daddy is blanketed with dirt. When Daddy sees him,

he says, "California, your Mama would whip me with a switch if she knew I let you stay here by yourself. Did Mrs. Loveday come by with the washin'?"

Cal nods.

Daddy clears his throat and spits on the ground. "Come in the house before it gets too dark. It's almost suppertime. I'm gonna take a bath in the washtub first and then you. We got Sunday School in the mornin'."

He pats Cal on top of the head and goes in the house. The screen door slams.

Cal doesn't say a word. He doesn't move. Ole Boy lies down beside him and gnaws at a flea. Cal watches the yard. And here they are. Blink. Blink. Blink. Sparks of lightning inside bugs no bigger than raindrops. Cal loves them. One night when he and Daddy were fishing on the creek he saw a frog glowing in the water, his belly full of bugs whose lights hadn't yet dimmed. He's seen a flurry of them light up a jar as bright as a kerosene lamp. An idea has been going around his head like a mosquito. If I eat enough of them fireflies, he thinks, I bet I'd glow like the head of Jesus in those pictures at church. *I could wander around in the dark and she could watch over me from up there. Nothing bad would ever happen to me again. Maybe she would even come down and let me see her.*

The last time he saw her was when he was with her in the cotton field that day. Mama said it was the hottest day she could remember since the Dust Bowl years. While Daddy plowed in another field she went down the rows of cotton swinging a hoe, chopping out the careless weeds and Johnson grass from around the cotton stalks while he colored in his coloring book under the shade of a pecan tree at the end of the rows next to the barbed-wire fence bordering the section line. Besides his coloring book, he had a few Fig Newtons that the ants kept trying to get to, and the water jar, wrapped in wet rags. When she reached the end of a row he would take her the water jar and she would always say, "Thank you, sugar," and pat him on the head. But a long time passed while he colored the picture of some jungle animals a lion a giraffe a monkey an elephant and finally he realized it had been way, way too long since Mama had reached the end of the row so he went looking for her and for a while he couldn't find her and he got more and more scared but then he found her almost at the other end of the field and he found her between the cotton rows and he found her lying on her back with her eyes wide open staring up at the sun but her eyes weren't moving and her mouth was open and there was a trail of ants

going into her mouth where she had a half-chewed cookie and he tried to kill all the ants but there were so many of them there were so many of them there were so many of them he had to use Mama's bonnet to slap them off her and he cried and he kept begging her to wake up and he cried and he yelled for Daddy and yelled and yelled and yelled for Daddy but Daddy didn't come and then he fell asleep on his knees with his face wedged in the crease of her neck. It was almost dark out when Daddy came from the field he was plowing and drove into the cotton field on the tractor straddling the cotton rows and the snorting of the tractor woke him up. Cal stood up and waved and yelled and jumped up and down and started crying again. Daddy forgot about straddling the rows and just cut across the field. He jumped off the tractor like he was the scariest wildest man that ever lived and he fell down on his knees like Cal fell down on his knees and cried like Cal cried and shook all over like Cal shook all over and hugged Mama like Cal hugged Mama and said, "No, Jesus," over and over. *No Jesus no Jesus no Jesus.*

And that's why Cal is not going to hide his light under a bushel, he is going to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

He pats Ole Boy and jumps off the porch to chase after the lightning bugs, zigzagging through the yard, under the oak and piss elm with its tire swing and around the windmill, its blades barely turning. Ole Boy woofs and runs alongside him. The bugs are easy to catch. When he has a handful, he cups his hand to his mouth and throws his head back. One gets away. His mouth is alive and humming, tickled by flitting wings, prickly with bug legs. On the dark surface of the water trough under the pump faucet he can see lights flashing behind his teeth. He pumps the handle and catches the water in his left hand. It takes three swallows to get all of the bugs down. He makes sure to swallow them whole. A wing is stuck in his teeth.

He goes after another handful and swallows them down the same way. Then another. He begins to feel a little sickish, bloated, more from the water than the bugs. He looks down at his bare arms and legs. Not a glimmer of light. It's going to take a lot of fireflies, he thinks. He wonders how many it will take for her to see him. She's a long ways away. A long long long ways away. Way up in the sky behind the moon in heaven with Jesus and the preacher said at the funeral she is happy and free she is home in heaven no more sorrow no more pain no more cotton rows to hoe. At Mama's grave Cal ignored the old lady smelling like stinky perfume and the little girl who handed him some flowers. He stepped between the preacher and Daddy and asked the preacher how Mama could be happy without him and Daddy until the day they

die because he knew that she loved them both more than anything in the whole wide world and maybe even more than Jesus. The preacher didn't answer him he just smiled and patted him on the head.