



The Problem with Keeping



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Illustration Jared Meuser



Sam collects bugs in a square plastic basin he's lined with twigs and grass and leaves. Bethany helps him arrange the habitat. They sit in the side yard, sprawled out on the ground. Bethany builds a twig fort in the corner of the basin, propping the small branches against the sides. Sam tries to coax a June bug into the fort corner but she flies away. He grabs his glass jar but she's gone before he can reach her.

"There goes Mango."

"Why did you name her Mango? That's a stupid name for a beetle."

"Bethy is a stupid name."

"My name is Bethany, stupid. You just call me Bethy because you could never say it right."

"You're stupid."

"Want to know what's stupid? Catching bugs and trying to make them live in a home with no roof."

"So why are you even helping?"

Bethany stops working on the twig fort and sits back. She picks at a blade of grass near her knee.

"I'm just waiting for it to be three, remember? Momma said she'd take me to Katie's birthday party."

Sam stands up and moves down the yard, glass jar in one hand and the jar's cap, punctured with holes for breathing, in the other. Bethany lies back on the grass and studies the sky. Sam comes back from time to time to deposit more insects: a ladybug, an assortment of ants (he adds a sand pile for them in the middle of the basin, though the ants hurry around it), a few more June bugs, a white moth. They usually stay long enough to be named, at least, but the moth flies out of the jar and away.

"You were going to be Marshmallow!" Sam yells after it.

His momma hates the bug collecting, says it's the most frustrating thing she's ever seen. She

was always telling him, "You can't keep them, Sam. They aren't yours to keep. You can look at them. You can name them for all I care. But they're not meant for keeping."

Bethany watches the clouds scroll by as afternoon moves to evening in the side yard. As the sun begins to set, Sam complains he is hungry.

"We could try eating them," he says, pointing to the few bugs that remain.

Bethany makes a face. "Don't be gross."

Sam looks at his hands and wipes them on his overalls. "Do you think it's close to three?"

At night he dreams of a river. He walks to the river and picks himself a cattail, then another, and another. He stands by the river until he has an armful of cattails, before he knows what he's done.

He hears a noise behind him, and when he turns he sees her there.

"I picked you some flowers, Momma. Here." He thrusts the stalks towards her, but he's embarrassed at their size, at the quantity.

"Sammy, I can't take these with me. How will I carry them?"

"I can carry them for you, Momma."

Even as he says this she is flying away.

"Bethy." Sam's voice comes, little and afraid, parting the darkness.

Bethany climbs out of her bed and onto Sam's.

"She's coming back," she says. "She always comes back."

Bethany sits with him while he cries himself out, then she lies down beside him, letting him huddle against her until his breathing evens and calms and they are both asleep.

A dark beetle scuttles along the floorboards, unseen. Outdoors, in the side yard, a butterfly hovers above the basin before descending, finding the leaves left behind. @

