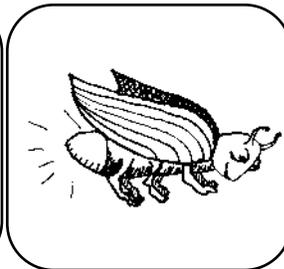
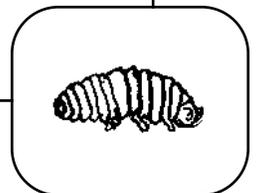


How The Firefly Got Its Blink.



**Story by Stuart Baum
Illustrations by Zoë Baum**



For Mom.

When my Mother was a little girl, there were no fireflies, or lightning bugs as some people call them. On warm, Summer days, she and her friends would head down to the local park and try to catch grasshoppers.

Grandma would call Mother in for dinner and Mother would bolt down her food and hurry back to the grasshopper hunt. After what seemed like only a few minutes to my Mother, Grandma would call out, "Come on in! It's getting dark!"

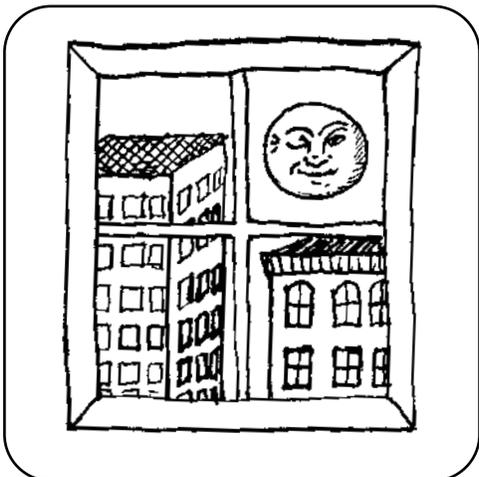
"Aww! Please no, Mama!" Mother would holler back. "We haven't even caught any grasshoppers yet!"

But Grandma would respond, "It's no wonder you haven't caught any grasshoppers. It's too dark to see them." Mother would look around and notice that the sun had, in fact, sunk down behind the city buildings and that either the grasshoppers had all gone to bed or there was no longer enough light by which to see them. Head hanging low, wishing she could stay out longer, Mother would walk slowly home and go to bed.

Once in bed, Mother would look out the window and wish that the sun never set, that it would always be light.

"What good are you?" she would demand of the moon. "You don't make enough light to see anything worth seeing." Then she would fall asleep, wishing the moon were the sun, so she could play outside all night long.

And every night, just as Mother fell asleep, the moon would wink at her and smile.



When my Mother was a little girl, there were these little black beetles with dark orange heads. Oh, they had a name, but it was a long scientific name used only by entomologists, who are people that study insects. My Mother didn't know what they were called and neither did Grandma. Every now and then, on the way home from the grasshopper hunt, one of these little black and orange beetles would fly over to Mother and land on her arm or leg or, sometimes even, her face. Mother, who was never afraid of bugs, would brush it off and yell at it.

"Stupid bug! Get off my leg," she would yell. And the little black and orange beetle would fly away.

Where would the beetle go? Mother never knew nor cared.

But *I* know. It would fly over to *its* Mother, another little black and orange beetle. The two of them would talk, sadly.

"No one wants to play with me," complained the little black and orange beetle. "I keep trying and trying to get one of the children to chase me or play with me, but they only want to chase grasshoppers."

The Mother black and orange beetle would explain, "Grasshoppers can hop. Just when a child is about to catch one, they hop away."

"We don't do that. We're easy to catch," said the little beetle, not understanding.

"Children don't want bugs to be easy to catch," the Mother beetle further explained. "They want fun. They want a challenge. Easy to catch is not a challenge. Easy to catch is not fun."

The little beetle thought he understood. So the next day, he found



the children playing in the park and he flew near Mother's face. Mother swatted her hand at the little beetle and nearly hit him. The little beetle flew away from Mother, expecting that she would chase him. She did not.

So the little beetle tried again. He flew right in front of Mother's face and as soon as he saw Mother looking at him, he flew away. Once again, Mother did not chase him.

The third time, he hovered right in front of Mother's nose and waited for her to try to catch him. But instead, Mother turned away and said to her friends, "Let's go home. There are too many stupid bugs here today." And the children went inside Mother's apartment to play Monopoly.

"I don't understand," said the little beetle to his Mother. "Why wouldn't that girl play with me?"

The Mother beetle patiently explained, "We don't do anything that children think is fun. We just fly around. And we're not even fast. Flies are fast. Hornets are fast. We're slow. Why would anyone want to try to catch a slow bug? It'd be too easy and, as I said last time, easy is no fun."

"It's not fair!" hollered the little beetle. "Why can't *we* fly faster or hop? Other insects can."

"That," said the Mother beetle, "I cannot tell you. Maybe you should go ask the BugMaker."

"I will," declared the little beetle.



When my Mother was a little girl, you could still talk to the Makers. The Makers were, as their name describes, in charge of making all the animals and plants and minerals of the world. If the world needed something new, one of the Makers would make it.

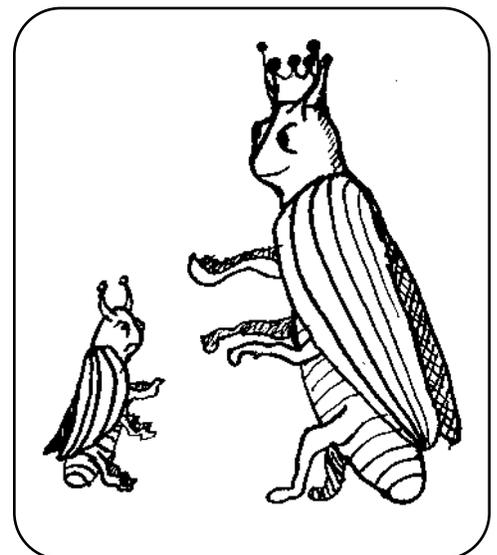
There was a TreeMaker, a PlantMaker, a FlowerMaker, a RockMaker, a PeopleMaker and all sorts of other Makers. And, anytime you had a question about why you were here or why other things were here, you could ask one of the Makers. You just had to know where to look.

So the little black and orange beetle went to see the BugMaker. He flew up the tree to where the BugMaker lived and waited by the BugMaker's door, which was really just a large oak leaf. The little beetle softly rustled the leaf and inquired politely, "BugMaker? Are you in?"

An old woman insect's voice came gently from inside, more like the sound of the wind than the click of a beetle. "Yes. I am here. What sort of bug are you?" The BugMaker always asked what sort of bug was at the door, because she always came out looking just like that type of bug, only bigger.

The little beetle answered sadly, "A stupid, little, slow-flying, no-hopping, black and orange beetle."

The BugMaker came through the leaf door looking just like the little black and orange beetle (only bigger.) She chuckled softly and gave the little black and orange beetle a look that made him feel anything but stupid. Her look made him feel warm and loved as only the BugMaker could make an insect feel.



"What brings you here, today?" gently asked the BugMaker.

The little black and orange beetle responded firmly, "I want to hop like a grasshopper." Then, thinking he might have been rude, quickly added, "Please?"

The BugMaker was confused. "But *grasshoppers* hop," she explained.

"That's what my Mom says," said the beetle.

"Your Mom is very wise," said the BugMaker.

"Then make me fly faster like a fly or a hornet," tried the black and orange beetle. Again, he quickly added, "Please?"

"But *flies* and *hornets* fly faster," explained the BugMaker. "That's what *they* do."

The black and orange beetle sighed. "Mom says that, too." Then the little black and orange beetle had an idea. He realized that children liked to chase butterflies as well as grasshoppers.

"I know! I know!" he offered excitedly. "Give me beautiful multi-colored wings like butterflies have!" He spun around, imaging what it would be like to have such beautiful wings. When he spun back to look at the BugMaker, he knew that his idea was not very good at all. In fact, this time he supplied the answer himself. In a voice that sounded somewhat like his Mom's and somewhat like the BugMaker's he said, "But *butterflies* have big, beautiful wings."

The BugMaker smiled and nodded at him.

"It's not fair!" the little black and orange beetle complained. "Grasshoppers and flies and hornets and butterflies got all the good bug stuff and all I got was this orange head!" The black and orange beetle glared at the BugMaker and challenged, "What good is an orange head for playing with children?"

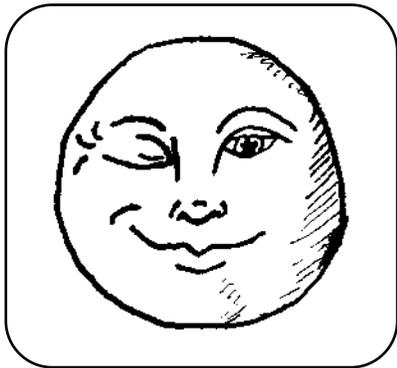


The little black and orange beetle knew he had gone too far. You do not accuse the BugMaker of giving you a bad gift, but he was not going to take it back or apologize. He had said it. He had meant it. He also expected to be punished, or at least lectured, for it.

But instead, the BugMaker smiled sweetly at the little black and orange beetle and said softly, "So *that's* why you came here. You want to play with children." She reached out and ruffled his antennae gently. "That's a very, very nice reason to come to see me." She smiled once again, ruffled his antennae a second time, and looked up at the sky.

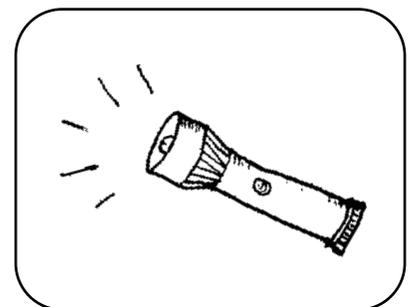
The little black and orange beetle looked up into the sky as well,

but all he saw up there was the moon, which made him realize that it was getting late and that he had better get home soon before his Mom missed him. He flew off in a hurry. He hurried away so quickly (for a not-so-fast-flying black and orange beetle, that is) he did not see the BugMaker wink at the Moon. Or the moon wink back.



When my Mother was a little girl, they had flashlights, but not plastic ones or ones that blinked on and off. All the flashlights were made of metal, which dented very easily. Also, not everybody had flashlights. Usually, only emergency people like policemen and firemen had them. Why am I telling you this? Because on my Mother's birthday, Grandma gave her a flashlight, which, as you now know, was a very special gift in those days.

"Oh, thank you Mama!" Mother exclaimed.
"Thank you, thank you!"



Grandma explained the flashlight gift patiently, "This is so you can chase grasshoppers after it gets a *little* dark, but not *very* dark because you still have a bedtime and you still can't forget you live in a city."

"Oh, don't worry, Mama," said Mother. "I'll still come when you call me." And with that she ran out of the house and to the park, determined to catch grasshoppers with her new flashlight, even though it was still hours before it would get dark.

Mother loved her flashlight and every night that Summer, Mother and her friends would run to the park after dinner and catch grasshoppers. Or at least they would *try* to catch them. Even with a flashlight, catching grasshoppers at night is no easy task.

One night, the little orange beetle saw Mother running through the park holding her flashlight.

'Now that is something!' thought the little orange beetle. 'A light a child can carry around.' The little orange beetle decided that he needed to get a closer look at this light. He flew over to Mother.

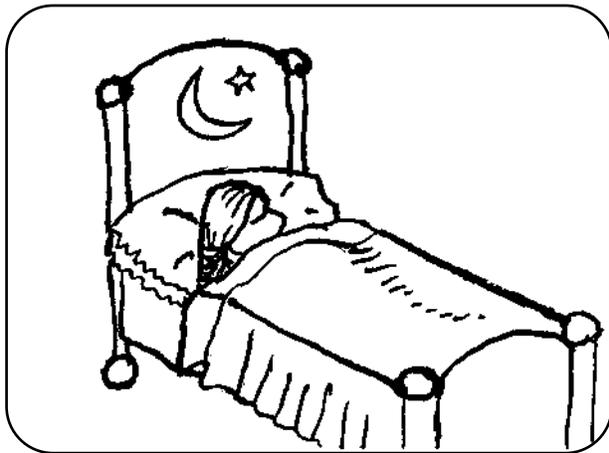
Mother saw him and, as she always did, yelled, "Get away from me, you stupid, little bug!" To make her point, she swatted at the little orange and black beetle with her flashlight. She missed and the flashlight flew out of her hand. As soon as it hit the ground, the flashlight went out. At that same moment, the moon, which had been unusually bright that evening, hid behind some clouds and the park was plunged into total darkness.

Mother looked around for her flashlight, but she could barely see her hands in front of her face, let alone a flashlight hidden in the grass. She searched and searched, even dropping down to her knees to feel her hands around in the grass, but she found only a few sticks and an empty soda bottle. Soon Grandma called her in to bed. Reluctantly, Mother plodded home without her flashlight.



The next morning Mother ran to the park and found her flashlight. It now had a small dent on one side, but otherwise it looked fine. She flicked the 'on' switch and, to her glee, the light went on. But then it went off again. Mother shook the flashlight and the light, once again, went on. But it didn't stay on. Even though Mother changed the batteries, the flashlight no longer gave off a strong, constant beam of light. It would flicker on for a second and then, as quickly, go out.

That night, Mother put the flashlight on top of her bureau and, sadly, went to bed. She was very tired and very upset. She looked up at the moon and made a wish. Well, it was really *three* wishes. But none of them came out quite right and they were all lumped together into one. She meant to wish that, one, her flashlight would work again and stop



blinking off, two, the moon would be brighter so she could catch more grasshoppers, and, three, all those orange and black bugs would go away. But what came out of her mouth, what she *really* wished, sounded like this: "Flashlight... work... blinking ... moon ... brighter ... stupid little black and orange bugs."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than she fell asleep. The moon winked at her and smiled.

When my Mother was a little girl, they used to believe that leaving windows open at night was bad for you. So Grandma would always make sure to close the window in Mother's room and tell Mother



that she should not open the window until the morning. While Mother usually obeyed Grandma, sometimes she got so hot at night she couldn't help but open her window. This was one of those very hot nights and Mother, half-awakened by the heat, opened her window to let in a cooling breeze. She also let in the little black and orange beetle, which still wanted a closer look at the flashlight.

The flashlight was easy to spot. It was sitting right on top of Mother's bureau and was illuminated so brightly by the moon you would think the moon were shining one of its moonbeams right at it. The little orange and black beetle landed next to the flashlight. He was surprised that it was so ordinary looking for something that made light come out of one end. To the little orange and black beetle, the flashlight looked just like a long, silver can with a piece of glass at one end, as well as a dent on one side. Then the little beetle noticed the 'on' switch. He pushed at the switch, but it was too hard for him to move. It was nearly as big as he was. He tried harder, but still he could not budge the switch. He was determined. Flying as fast as he could, which isn't very fast as we all know, he zipped towards the switch and landed right on it. The switch moved.

The flashlight flickered, sending its somewhat dim beam across the room and onto the wall. The little black and orange beetle was very excited. He had an idea. A *good* idea. And, to himself, he made a wish that sounded very much like my Mother's wish. (Only without the word 'stupid' in it.)

He flew out of the window and straight to the BugMaker's tree. When he got there, the BugMaker was sitting in front of her door, looking very much like the little black and orange beetle (only bigger.)

Before the little black and orange beetle could say a word, or even



properly settle himself on the branch, the BugMaker said in her soft, old woman voice, "I think it is a *lovely* wish."

The black and orange beetle thought the BugMaker was talking to someone else, since he hadn't yet said anything. He looked around, but he saw no one else, just he and the BugMaker. For some reason, he looked up into the sky and saw the moon. The moon winked at him.

"The *moon* told you my wish?" he asked the BugMaker.

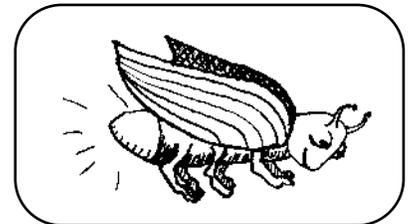
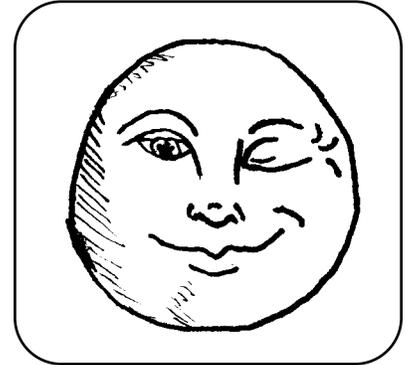
The BugMaker nodded. "You made almost the same wish as that little girl," the BugMaker explained. "Though she may not know it."

Expectantly, the little black and orange beetle asked, "So I *get* my wish?"

"You already have," said the BugMaker. She turned around to show the little black and orange beetle that she, in her present appearance, could make her bottom blink like the broken flashlight.

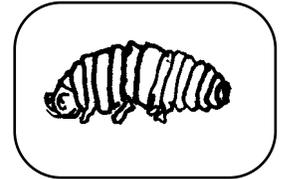
The little black and orange beetle jumped off the branch and started to fly home, then he stopped suddenly and, at the top of his tiny, beetle-sized lungs, hollered, "Thank you, BugMaker!"

To this day, nearly every warm, Summer night, children hurry outside after dinner to catch little black and orange beetles. These beetles do not hop. They do not fly very fast. They do not have big, beautiful wings. But they *do* blink, making them fun to catch after dark.



Epilogue.

When *your* Mother was a little girl, there were small gray bugs that looked like tiny armadillos, but when you touched them, nothing happened. They were not yet able to curl up into balls like pill bugs, or roly-polies as some people call them.



One warm, Summer night, a little not-yet pill bug was watching a group of children catching fireflies in the back yard and he became jealous. He wanted to play with the children, too.

So he crawled, rather slowly I might add, to the BugMaker and asked, politely, in his squeaky, gruff voice, "Can you please make me blink like a firefly?"

The BugMaker, also shaped like a tiny armadillo bug (only bigger), looked up at the moon and smiled before she responded.

"But *fireflies* blink," she explained.

The End.



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