

# Fireflies

by Jackie Harris

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BIO: Jackie Harris is an incoming freshman at Governor Livingston High School. She is extremely passionate about acting, dancing, singing, and playing percussion. She also enjoys creative writing, and is thrilled to be able to put ideas on paper in the Summit Playhouse Bake-Off!

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What's keeping you positive?

Hikes with family, Zooming with relatives, and FaceTiming with friends all help me stay sane and happy, as well as Zoom singing lessons, dance classes, and acting workshops.

Yes, you may publish this!

# Characters

JOHN GLENN: Age 40s. Occupation: Astronaut. Confident and charismatic. While he is intelligent and prepared, he is curious and childlike at heart.

WILLIAM STEWARTS: Age 60s. Occupation: Spacecraft Communicator at Mission Control NASA. Serious and blunt, no nonsense. Clearly advanced and well trained, quick on his feet. Heavily invested in his work.

MARTIN: Age 40s. Occupation: Director of NASA's Mercury 7 Missions. Stern, but caring

BASIL KENDRIK: Age 30s. Occupation: Guidance Position at Mission Control at NASA.

Playful, but extremely intelligent. Natural problem solver. Scattered, but focused when he cares to put his mind to his work.

JAMIE CHAMBERLIN: Age 30s. Occupation: Head Engineer of Friendship 7. Serious, but clever.

STEVE CARLTON: Age 40s. Occupation: Spacecraft Systems Monitor at Mission Control. Somewhat self absorbed, indecisive.

KATHLEEN EDWARDS: Age 30s. Occupation: Journalist at NASA. Articulate and well trained, but not passionate about her job.

KENT HEMMINGS: Age 50s. Occupation: Director of Press at NASA. Cautious, over-thinker. Serious about his job.

ANNIE GLENN: Age 40s. Occupation: Mother, advocate for people with disabilities. A warm-hearted and affectionate woman. Shy due to her stutter.

LYN GLENN: Age 15. Charismatic, supportive of her mother.

DAVID GLENN: Age 17. Shy like his mother, but no stutter.

\*Plus unnamed Staff of Mission Control\*

# Time

February 20, 1962

# Place

JOHN is located on the Friendship 7 portion of the stage, orbiting earth.

ANNIE, LYN, and DAVID emerge from inside their rental house by the Florida launch site and onto the porch.

MARTIN, KENT, KATHLEEN, WILLIAM, JAMIE, STEVE, and BASIL, are all at Mission Control at NASA.

*(Lights fade in. JOHN is sat behind an extensive dashboard of controls. He is conversing with NASA Mission Control through his headset. Beside him is a large, circular window. Mission Control is set up on another portion of the stage. People are sitting and typing on computers, jotting notes down in journals, and conversing with one another. Each member wears a headset and listens as WILLIAM questions JOHN.)*

WILLIAM

I read you loud and clear. Would you give me your fuel on the control systems check?

JOHN

This is Friendship Seven. Control systems check was perfect. Control systems checks perfect, over.

WILLIAM

Understand control systems check was perfect. John, could you get started with your station report?

JOHN

Standby. I'm getting out some equipment. *(Begins to move around, catches a glimpse out of the window, is awestruck.)* The capsule is turning around and I can see the booster just a couple hundred yards behind me. It's absolutely gorgeous. Annie would be all over this view.

WILLIAM

Focus.

JOHN

Got it. *(Pause)* Oooh, I can see clearly behind Friendship, theres a big cloud pattern way back across towards the Cape. It's a beautiful sight.

WILLIAM

*(Impatient)* Please started with your station report.

JOHN

Got it.

*(William peels off his headset.)*

WILLIAM

*(To MARTIN)* Did we spend billions of dollars to send a man into orbit so he can look out-

JOHN

*(JOHN visibly catches sight of something else out the window, studies it for a second, then-)*  
Mission Control?

WILLIAM

*(Continues without skipping a beat, because he didnt hear JOHN due to the headset by his neck and not his ears.)* -his window? No. I mean, what are we going to do? He's the most capable man we've got, but he's spending our precious 5 hours-

JOHN

*(Impatiently)* William?

WILLIAM

*(Again, not skipping a beat because he doesn't hear.)* -in space like its a road trip? Whats next, I-Spy?

MARTIN

He's still on track. Yes, we cannot afford distractions, but I believe the occasional glance out the window is going to hurt far less than the time you spend obsessing over it.

*(BASIL snickers, receives disapproving look from WILLIAM, and turns back to his computer. WILLIAM lifts his headset back up to his ears just in time for-)*

JOHN

*(Borderline yelling)* Mission control???

WILLIAM

*(Winces, exasperated sigh)*

What.

JOHN

I-spy-with-my-little-eye...

WILLIAM

No, John. *(Glances at MARTIN)*

JOHN

-something yellow.

WILLIAM

*(Sarcastically)* Oh my goodness, do you think they could be stars? *(Tone drops)* Station report please.

JOHN

*(WILLIAM barely listens at first. JOHN is looking out the window)* No seriously though. I'm in a big mass of some very small particles that are brilliantly lit up like their luminescent. I've never seen anything like it. Their coming by the capsule, a whole shower of them. And yes, they kind of do look like stars? No, more like fireflies.

WILLIAM

Sorry, what?

JOHN

Yeah, they're like little yellow orbs that swirl around the capsule and go in front of the window, and they're all brilliantly lit up. They probably average maybe 7 or 8 feet apart, but I can see them all way down below me, too.

*(Mission Control is extremely engaged. Whispering increases, continue to type at computer and jot down more notes.)*

WILLIAM

*(Worried)* Do you hear any impact with the capsule?

JOHN

Nope. They're going only slightly under my speed. They do have a different motion though, they swirl around the capsule then depart back the way I'm looking.

WILLIAM

Standby. Work on your station report for God's sake.

*(WILLIAM peels off his headset, lights dim on Friendship 7 portion of the stage.)*

MARTIN

Mission Control, we need to get this figured out. Any initial impressions?

WILLIAM

It very well may be coming from the Friendship 7.

MARTIN

True, so lets monitor the capsules oxygen, carbon dioxide, and pressure levels by the second, not by the minute.

WILLIAM

No, we need to figure out what it is ASAP. Do you want to be responsible for the first death in space?

MARTIN

Keep your shirt on, gosh. Jamie, Head of Engineering, any thoughts?

JAMIE

It looks like the heat shield could be falling apart and shedding those little shiny particles. If its destroyed, he isn't going to make it back.

WILLIAM

I'll have John conduct tests, but I won't tell him. Lamb to the slaughter is best in this situation, right?

*(JAMIE hesitates, nods very slightly. WILLIAM puts on headset and silently talks to JOHN. Lights fade brighter in his area. JOHN begins to move around and conduct tests on the heat shield, beneath his feet.)*

JAMIE

Steve? *(STEVE and an extra member of mission control both look up)* Head of Spacecraft Systems? *(Extra member looks back to his computer again)* Check that it couldn't possibly be sparks.

BASIL

*(Has been doing basically nothing at his desk, now talks to STEVE.)* Hey, what if it's extraterrestrial life?

*(STEVE rolls his eyes and looks at his computer. Pause, silence.)*

STEVE

Nope, it can't possibly fathom them being sparks or anything from the ship's systems.

*(More silence.)*

WILLIAM

*(Pulls down headset around his neck again.)* No, John couldn't find anything wrong with the shield. And I don't think he caught onto why we did that. Any other explanations?

STEVE

*(Thinks about BASIL's suggestion)* Extraterrestrial life? *(WILLIAM thinks. BASIL studies him smugly.)*

WILLIAM

Oh my God. Is that even possible?

BASIL

I mean, yeah! We've confirmed it's not coming from the spacecraft, right? I mean what else could it be? Dust from planets isn't sparkly, is it. There's no way sparks could have traveled from other planets. This is *extraterrestrial life* right here. Steve you are a *genius!*

*(Mission Control beginning to understand. Everyone is abuzz, giddy and excited, getting up to talk to each other.)*

MARTIN

Thank you, Steve! Oh my goodness! Yes! What do we do? Do we have him collect it? This is amazing!!! Um. Everyone, keep your watch on the spacecraft, William, come with me, Basil, take over the headset. You can let John know what it is as we decide how to proceed. Everyone-

KATHLEEN

*(Walks through Mission Control yawning, clearly dimmer energy than the rest of the stage.)* Alright, it is 5 o'clock, I'm heading out. Have a good night guys! *(WILLIAM removes his headset and places it on his desk, where BASIL walks over, sits down, and puts it around his neck. Meanwhile MARTIN and KENT turn to KATHLEEN.)*

MARTIN

No, Kathleen, actually we still need you.

KATHLEEN

Sorry, what?

KENT

You see John found extraterrestrial life! I would like for you to do a report on it.

KATHLEEN

*(Indifferent to the prospect of extraterrestrial life. Yawns, then sighs in irritation. Pulls out her notebook.)* So I'm assuming you need the story out tonight. *(KENT nods)* How long are you going to need me for?

KENT

It's going to be at least until a few hours after John returns.

*(MARTIN nods.)*

KATHLEEN

*(Annoyed and tired.)* Someone get me a coffee. *(Walks back where she came from (her office). MARTIN and KENT leave Mission Control. The members of Mission Control stop working, turn up music, and begin to dance and cheer. A few seconds later, blackout. Lights brighten on a porch outside a front door. KATHLEEN walks up to it and knocks on it, notepad and a coffee in hand. ANNIE opens it and answers, hesitating due to her stutter. Out of tune, raspy trumpet music floats through the doorway. )*

ANNIE

Y-yes?

KATHLEEN

Are you Annie Glenn? *(ANNIE nods.)* Can we talk with you for a story for the paper? *(ANNIE nods again, and turns back to call into the house.)*

ANNIE

Ly-lyn? *(LYN rushes to the door.)*

LYN

Hello? Oh, I see, an interview. Have a seat. *(Motions to the seats on the porch, KATHLEEN and ANNIE move to sit down.)* Let me just grab David. *(Shouts through the doorway.)* David! Stop playing the stupid trumpet and get down here.

DAVID

*(The trumpet stops. DAVID calls from deep inside the house.)*

Let me just finish-

LYN

Nope, do not curse the poor lady's ears with that. It sounds like you stepped on a duck. *(Steps back out and sits down. A few seconds later DAVID also exits the house, closes the door, and takes a seat. Throughout the interview, KATHLEEN is hurriedly scribbling down notes.)*

KATHLEEN

So you are...?

LYN

My mother is Annie Glenn, an advocate for communication disabilities. I'm Lyn Glenn, her daughter, and I'm 15.

DAVID

I'm David, 17.

KATHLEEN

Great! So how do you all feel about John being the first American in orbit? *(Looks at ANNIE.)*

ANNIE

*(Hesitates due to stutter.)* Great! We are s-o p-proud of *(hesitates)* him! I a-am worr-wo-w-

LYN

*(Taking over for her mother.)* Worried? Absolutely! We are always concerned for his safety, especially as he explores the unknown, but confident in his abilities.

DAVID

Right! NASA couldn't have possibly picked a better man than our father for the job.

*(Lights and volume fade as lights get brighter over at Mission Control and Friendship 7.)*

BASIL

John Glenn?

JOHN

What.

BASIL

I'm Basil, not William.

JOHN

Oh hi Basil! What's up! *(More serious.)* Actually, what's going on with the heat shield?

BASIL

No, nothings wrong with it, we just-

JOHN

Actually, though. What's wrong with the heat shield? All of those tests I did weren't for nothing, were they. I'm not stupid. If I am going to land back on earth a crispy, well done chicken nugget then I would like to be aware of that.

BASIL

No, so NASA freaked out thinking those particles you saw were the heat shield deteriorating. Which it's not. Then, I may or may not have led Steve to get them to think its extraterrestrial life. So they're freaking out, the Mission Control Staff are so excited, they stopped working to throw a dance party. They're also brainstorming ways to collect samples, and sending a journalist to your house to tell your wife, Annie, the news and get her reaction. So, yeah, they are PSYCHED.

JOHN

Is it actually extraterrestrial life?

BASIL

*(Begins to speak quietly so those in the room do not hear.)* No.

JOHN

Then wha-

BASIL

*(Giddy, thinks it's hilarious.)* It's urine.

JOHN

What's that? *(As in "what did you say", but BASIL misinterprets.)*

BASIL

It's your pee, dummy. They forgot that the container for your urine is designed to spray it into space. Obviously the particles must have frozen or something and they look all glittery.

JOHN

For real?

BASIL

For real!

JOHN

*(Thinks it's hilarious.)* Oh. My. God. That's awesome man! You're the best! *(They cackle.)* Why the extraterrestrial life thing though?

BASIL

Because I just don't like Steve. The guy's an idiot. If I tell them this theory, with evidence, it will look great in comparison to his. Maybe they will take me more seriously?

JOHN

Want me to tell them? I can mention how great you are?

BASIL

No, actually, I want to tell them on my own time. Also, everyone is dancing in the break room, so we only have like their assistants working. Mission Control is down to 7. It's crazy!

JOHN

Sounds crazy! Your secret is safe here. *(Looks out his window at the frozen drops of urine.)* Pee is so beautiful in space! It's like pixie dust! Especially because I can't smell it.

*(KATHLEEN enters. She hands a paper, the story for the press, to KENT, who begins to read it. MARTIN stands at his shoulder. It is silent, but he moves his mouth as if he is reading out loud. STEVE walks back to his desk to take off his jacket, smiling and elated. BASIL pulls his headset down by his neck.)*

BASIL

*(To STEVE)*

Hey Steve! What's up?

STEVE

Nothing much! Having fun! You should join us.

BASIL

No, John is landing in under an hour.

STEVE

Ah, whatever, we'll get back to work in a few. Why be so early though, if he doesn't need to run any tests? I mean, we found *extraterrestrial life*!

BASIL

You're certain?

STEVE

Well, I mean... yeah?

BASIL

You're certain it's not coming from any of Friendship 7 systems?

STEVE

... yep.

*(BASIL returns to the computer and headset, and STEVE peels off his jacket, and places it on the back of his chair.)*

KENT

*(Continuing to read KATHLEEN'S report, but now out loud.)* "... sums up the lovely chat with Mrs. Glenn. But, all is owed to Steve Carlton. *(STEVE smiles again, overhearing.)* With his unique ideas, we have had the power to share this groundbreaking and game-changing discovery of the most elusive stuff in the universe. Thank you, Steve, for ending the debate, it's confirmed. We are not alone." Yeah that's pretty great! Especially for a 10 minute car ride. I would just change "the most elusive stuff in the universe" to "the universe's most elusive and... perplexing... elements." Oh, and you had a run-on sentence earlier, fix that if you can. *(STEVE, KENT, MARTIN, and KATHLEEN all begin to leave.)*

KATHLEEN

I'll make those changes. Off to the publisher?

KENT

*(Martin nods.)* Off to the publisher.

BASIL

*(Dramatic gasp.)* Stop the press! Stop the press! *(The four turn around. BASIL looks at them like they are idiots.)* It's not life.

KENT

No, we are not arguing this now, it's too late.

BASIL

Come on, you are going to look like idiots. Publishing that you found life? What will happen when they find out its urine? You are going to lose all accountability.

KENT

*(As in, "what did you say" but BASIL misinterprets again.)* What's that?

BASIL

It's John Glenn's pee. Why is that so hard to understand? So I was just looking through all of the Friendship 7's components, and realized that it's the urine tank that must have sprayed it. And of course it froze, then the sun reflected on the drops.

KENT

Yeah I don't do science. I can't confirm that that makes sense? Martin?

MARTIN

Yeah, lets get confirmation on that. *(Not entirely convinced.)* Thank you so much Basil, you *may* have saved NASA a fortune. *(Sarcastically)* Also great catch, Steve.

*(MARTIN, KENT, and KATHLEEN leave. Steve sits down at his desk.)*

JOHN

Oh. Wow. This is crazy.

BASIL

I know, right? Have you still been running tests?

JOHN

I'm no idiot. I don't need a grumpy old man who smells like death to be yelling at me to know what to do.

*(MARTIN re-enters.)*

MARTIN

NASA would like to offer you a 15% raise, Basil. Thank you for having a brain. *(Stares at STEVE, then walks off.)*

BASIL

What! Yes! Wow!

JOHN

Didn't see that one coming. Surprising they pay you at all given you have the work ethic of a sloth.

BASIL

I know, right?