

## *Why They Seek Light*

**M**y father had a soft spot in his heart for fireflies.

We used to spend summers at a rambling nineteenth-century summer house known as the Reed's Creek place, which belonged to some member of my generally extended family. The house was set in a grove of cedars and was surrounded by hayfields, which rolled down to a wide creek where my family kept a number of small boats and a splintery swimming dock. Often in evening, after sunset, my father would retire to the wide porch on the western side of the house and sit there, rocking and watching the hayfields fade from view. The first spark of light from the rising fireflies would inevitably inspire him to launch into some long firefly reminiscence, which his children, his family, and his visiting friends had no doubt heard before.

Part of my father's love of fireflies probably came from his interest in the Orient. He lived in China for three years and would regularly visit Japan during his vacations. While he was there, or perhaps even before he went out to the East, he began reading Lafcadio Hearn, the then-well-known essayist and interpreter of Asian culture. Hearn was a folklorist, among other things, and something of a naturalist, and he had collected a number of essays on the rich insect folklore of Japan. Although my father grew up with hayfields and fireflies, I suspect that part of his appreciation for these insects came from his readings as well as his firsthand experience.

I don't remember much of the lore or reminiscences that my father would spin out on those long summer evenings, but there was one story in particular that stands out because it seemed to explain to me the logical way in which the world is put together. Periodically during those summers, in a Japanese folk tale probably lifted from Lafcadio Hearn, my father would recount the story of Princess Firefly.

It seems that centuries past, in the kingdom of the insects, the king of the fireflies and his queen had a beautifully bright daughter who came of age in spring. Her parents wanted her to marry, but she proved a fickle insect and



in spite of the fact that a retinue of marvelous beetles, praying mantises, lacewings, moths, and butterflies came to court her, none met her fancy. As the years passed, her parents—and indeed the whole insect kingdom—grew more anxious. Each spring they would insist that she take a husband, and each spring she would reject the entire entourage. Finally, in order to please her parents and hold off the suitors, she announced that she would marry the insect who could match her own brilliant light.

One after another the brave suitors took up the challenge. The great bronzed Junebug flew off into the darkness, seeking light. Hopeful moths fluttered through the night, lacewings and crane flies and even tiny gnats circled through the dark world hoping to steal fire to bring

back to the glorious princess. In time the suitors found light in the tiny flickering oil lamps of country people. They clustered around the fire, circled it, or landed nearby and watched, waiting. Periodically one of them would dash into the flame

to try to catch the fire, only to singe his wings and fall struggling to the base of the lamp. Try as they might, not one was ever able to bring back the fire, nor match the brilliance of Princess Firefly, and in a curious twist of traditional folklore, she never married and lived happily ever after as a dowager queen. But the poor suitors have never given up, and to this day they can still be seen, flitting and circling in the dark night, battering themselves against lamps, ever hopeful after all these centuries.



There was always a silence after my father completed his tale. Beyond the porch, the river turned black. No one spoke. There was only the sound of the rockers on the old wood porch floor, the *jug o'rum* of the bullfrog chorus from the pond behind the main house, the *quock* of night-herons down on the dark riverbank, the sultry air, and below the house, like Japanese lanterns, the dancing of the lights of ten thousand fireflies.

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