

Lost in the Stars



On warm summer nights when the smell of the river marshes below the house would fill the air and dusk had long since faded out, we would sit on the front porch, watching the fireflies flashing in the hayfields to the west. My family—uncles, aunties, distant cousins, friends of cousins, cousins of friends of cousins—would sit and rock and talk about crops and dogs, horses, and hot weather. The air was thick then, and summer had its grip on us, and sometimes, it seemed to me, the very house would lift from its foundation at these hours and float suspended above the drying grasses and the fields to the north where the corn rustled in the evening wind.

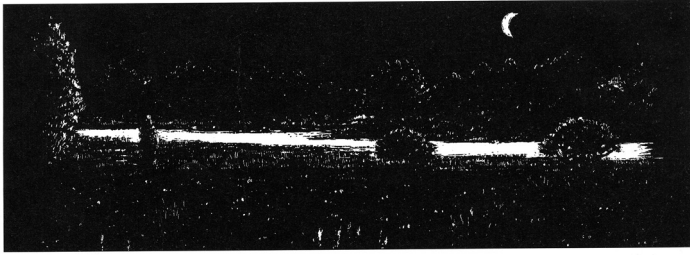
On nights such as this, as the fireflies ascended, my old father would often reminisce about his years in the Orient, and as winking stars of light rose in the fields below us he would retell yet again the old Japanese folktale of Princess Firefly and recount stories of the traditional firefly festivals that took place all over Japan in his time.

I was lost in the mystery of all this and would be swept into some vague, almost timeless suspension of disbelief. It all seemed so real, even though my father was telling the story of a firefly that was in fact a princess in a kingdom inhabited by insects. I was too young to know it was not true.

And often on those hot nights, as children have done for thousands of years, my cousins and I would descend from the porch with kitchen jars and sweep the grasses, catching the flashers and carrying them around in the jars like mystic lanterns.

Timing seemed everything to me, even then. Why did the fireflies flash at certain intervals? Why did they quit flashing periodically, and why did some of them never take to the air and perch low in the grasses, emitting a long, sustained light?

It was only later that I learned that there was a dark side to the luminous display taking place in the fields below the house, and that all the bright poetic legends and folktales had an element of truth. Out there in the real world of the grassroot



jungle, the lights that so inspired the folktales and festivals were in fact all about sex and death.

Fireflies flash to attract mates, and it is for the most part the

males that we see on summer nights. Shortly after they reach adulthood, usually around late June in New England, as dusk falls, the males launch themselves in the air and patrol to-and-fro across open areas, flashing a semaphoric signal to female fireflies, who lie below, watching. There are as many as thirty different species of firefly in New England, and the males of each species have a set pattern of flashes, which the female can recognize.

Below in the grasses, females spotting a potential mate light up with a sustained flash. The male blazes back, the female lights up again, and, after a series of exchanges, the male descends to locate his mate. Sometimes more than one suitor will fly down and the firefly princess will be surrounded by a company of suitors, each flashing handsome signals. But fireflies, it appears, are discreet denizens of this untamed complex world. Once the couple has found each other the lights go out and they mate.

All is not love in the world of fireflies, however; there is also the question of sustenance. There is one species of firefly that makes use of the flashing repertoire of males to attain a meal. These carnivorous femmes fatales lie low in the grass and watch for the signals of other species of males flashing above. They imitate the flash pattern, and thereby draw the unsuspecting male down to his demise.

But all that is science. When you are ten years old, and it is night, and the sparking stars of fireflies drift over the hay fields, and the wind is in the corn, it is all a half-lit poetic mystery.

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