

## Dim Light

Jason bent over his bathroom sink splashing cold water on his face before taking his blood pressure medication as part of the nighttime ritual. Michiko, standing just behind him, glanced in the mirror at his pale body rimmed by her dark hair, then turned to look out the second story window admiring her garden in the darkening lawn dotted by the butter yellow day lilies. Her garden was unruly compared to the trim species in the neighborhood; still she took pleasure in the rich folds of hostas, ferns and lilies that curled around the White Oak tree standing guard in the front yard. She savored the scene – this huge suburban yard of green flanked by a boulevard of apple trees. Through the open window she felt the breeze cool with the settling of night. So unlike the humid summers of childhood in Japan, she thought to herself as she continued to watch the shadows grow. Then she saw what she had been hoping for-- the quick luminescent trails of the *hotaru* as they smeared the night with their calling.

“Come quick and look at all the *hotaru*,” she urged suddenly turning off the bathroom light above the sink casting them both into the darkness.

In the dark Jason continued brushing his teeth, spit out the water and said, “Yes I saw them start up a few days ago.”

Michiko pressed against the window half dreaming as she watched the prosperous trails arch like random etching over the dark green lawn drawing her into another time.

She was standing in the dark holding a bamboo pole attached to a white paper lantern; next to her, her mother was lighting a candle.

“Hold still, *oneechan*,” she instructed.

Michiko, and her brother Kenji, watched as her mother placed the candle in the lantern, the soft glow outlining her mother’s smiling face. Michiko held it tightly carefully standing up to follow her mother who seem to dissolve into the shadows – the faint light from the candle bouncing off the faded flowers of her mother’s kimono as she and Kenji walked between a small row of Pine trees. In a moment, her mother stood still as if waiting for a signal. As they both stood in the cool dark night, Michiko noticed the smell of incense mixed with smell of the baby powder she and her brother, Kenji, had been sprinkled with after their evening bath. “This will keep you dry,” her mother explained.

Against her cheek, she could feel the cotton *yukata* her mother had wrapped them in to absorb the heat from the humid summer night. On her feet she wore new sneakers instead of her wood sandals. Her mother explained, the path down the unlit road towards the rice paddies where the *hotaru* live would be muddy and wet.

Behind them, Michiko heard the voice of her father, “Are you ready,” he said walking around them and then leading the way into the darkness. The light from his paper lantern cast stiff shadows across the green pines. Michiko grabbed her brother’s hand instinctively and followed behind the silent figures of her parents. She felt like the big sister as she pulled Kenji along behind her. In a few blocks the suburban

neighborhood with its *danchi* apartments, concrete boxes build in the late fifties, gave way to country farms and rice paddies.

From the dark, came a neighbor's dog barking a warning. A wolf howling in the dark, she thought and walked a bit faster.

"When I was a child," the dark figure said over his shoulder, "the first time it was safe to go out, our family saw hundreds of *hotaru* that summer."

Michiko heard the frogs' guttural call, felt the *ka* or mosquitoes sting her skin, smelled the thick moisture of the rice paddies seeping through her shoes, but saw only shadows flickering over the dark green rice paddies.

Then her father stopped. Without a word they four lined up peering into the flat sheet of black water punctuated by dark green spikes shimmering in the pool of candlelight.

"*Hotaru!*" said her father pointing towards into the darkness. Then it happened-- first one, then two, then three, on, off, on again. They waited, still and quite. With the next tiny explosion, her father reached out with the net and captured the blinking creature. Michiko held open the jar and then quickly closed the cover over the lone *hotaru*. They waited a few minutes longer, but there were no more lights. Finally father turned and the three followed him back up the path to the city, where the streetlights marked their path. Michiko peered into the jar that held the dull green light; it seemed to shine just bright enough to cast a shadow over her face.

That night Michiko placed the jar next to her *futon*, which was surrounded by snoopy and pooh bears who formed a ring of protection around her dreams. Together they watched the magic of the jar first filling with a shimmering light, before fading once again. In the dim green glow, she thought she saw one bear smile. In the morning Michiko discovered the jar was dark and still. She asked her mother happen, "Ah Michiko, just like the cherry blossoms of spring, the *Hotaru* last only a short while."

"I still can't get over how many fireflies there are in the Midwest," Michiko said. She watched the grass fill in tiny burst of light like a spray of temporary flowers. "Jason come look!"

"In a moment," Jason answered.

"I think we saw so few in Japan because that was the beginning of all the pesticide use, and the water wasn't as clean... but here it's different—isn't it?"

She turned to look at Jason --his face and her outline barely perceptible in the dim light.