

The Well of Stars and Shadow

Caitlin R Kiernan

Through the deepening slash-pine shadows, the dim and fading shafts of twilight falling pale through the high branches of Shrove Wood, and Dancy Flammarion follows the familiar twists and turns of Wampee Creek. The cinnamon ferns and saw palmetto grown waist high to an eight year old, understory carpet of rust fronds and emerald-sharp leaves, and she watches the uneven ground, mindful where she puts her feet, watching for snakes and steel-jawed traps laid among the pine straw. Traps set for raccoon and bobcats, but they're just as happy to snap shut on little girl ankles, even this strange albino child who can only go out to play when the sun turns fat and red and sinks slow into the swamp.

"You watch yourself now. Don't go getting lost or hurt," her mother or her grandmother always says, and "I won't. I'm very, very careful," Dancy always reassures them. "I know my way," and she does, the long mile and a half between their cabin and the place where Wampee Creek spills out into the wide, peatdark lake that no one has ever bothered to name. But they worry for her anyway, this girl all they have left in the world, and sometimes, hazy grey evenings when the cicadas are a little quieter than they should be or her mother doesn't like the look of the stars rising over the trees, Dancy carries her grandmother's crucifix in the bib pocket of her overalls, near her heart, and maybe a sprig of pennyroyal or dried angelica root wrapped in a white cotton handkerchief, as well.

"Never hurt nobody yet to be too cautious," her grandmother might say, and "Better safe than sorry," her mother might nod. So Dancy carries their charms, and wears her own tarnished St. Christopher's medal, and watches where she puts her feet.

A sudden splash, and she stops, focuses her pink eyes on the crystal waters gurgling between low yellow-white limestone banks. *Just an ol' bullfrog*, she thinks, scared off by the sound of her boots, the dry crunch of pine needles underfoot, the brittle snap of twigs. "I ain't after you today, Mr. Frog," she says, her voice big in the still and the half light of the Wood. "If I was, you never would'a heard me coming."

Wampee Creek whispers back to her in its secret, frog-hiding language, conspiracy of moss and ripples, and Dancy Flammarion shrugs her bony shoulders and looks up at the sky. Only indigo scraps and patches visible between the boughs, but enough that she can see it'll be dark soon, and she'd rather make it all the way to Mr. Jube's shack before the greedy shadows swell and swallow everything, the world tumbling down the night's velvet throat, leaving her to pick her way blindly through the trees. Then it won't matter how hard she squints and stares at the ground, then the snakes and traps and stump holes will have her at their mercy, and she learned a long time ago that mercy isn't one of the virtues of night in the Wood.

"See you sometime else, frog," she says and starts walking again, and by the time Dancy comes to the lake there's only the slimmest rind of dusk hanging low in the sky and an icy white sliver of moon is rising above the pines and cypress crowded like thirsty giants around the shore.

* * *

Rain and rust and the baking North Florida sun, time and all its corrosions, to leave only rotting bits of iron mongery where once there was a town; a hundred years ago, and the Hebbard Lumber Company of Philadelphia sliced a path through the canebrake wilderness and stitched it up again with steel rails and creosote cross ties. The men who came to cut the trees, to turn pine and sycamore and bay into weekly wages and callused hands, a billion board feet of timber hauled from the swamp by the company's clattering, steambreath engines, and maybe no one ever gave the lake a name, but the town that grew up around it was christened Hebbard's Mill. 1904, and the company built shotgun houses and a general store, raised a church and school for the children of the men, ran telephone lines all the way from Milligan, and for two decades this was somewhere.

And then, suddenly, it simply wasn't anymore.

A cholera epidemic in '21 and rumours of scandal back in Philadelphia, embezzlement and doctored books, death, and, finally, nervous whispers about the lake, blue lights seen floating above the black waters late at night. Blue lights or lights the color of infection, gangrene will-o'-the-wisps, and the men began to leave a year before the company took the town apart, pulled nails from weathered slats, shipped away the pieces that could be sold or used elsewhere and left the rest to decay, a belated offering to the swamp so at least maybe the bad luck wouldn't follow them.

Nothing remaining now but the scattered hulks of steel—boilers and steam pipes lost amongst the tall brown grass and dead leaves, abandoned washtubs and the disintegrating skeletons of company trucks; Hebbard's Mill gone all the way back to the forgotten gods of the Apalachee, back to the bears and alligators, and hardly ever anyone out her but Mr. Jube in his shack to tend the small cemetery set back among the live oaks and magnolias.

Dancy Flammarion pauses where the clear, clean waters of Wampee Creek bleed themselves away into the peat-stained lake, always a moment's hesitation because there are ghosts here, ghosts and worse things than ghosts, she thinks. But then she sees the lantern burning bright on Mr. Jube's porch, the warm and welcoming orange-white glow of burning kerosene, and the old man waves to her from his rocking chair. She looks over her shoulder at the forest, the inky spaces between the trees, the trail leading back the way she's come, back to her mother and grandmother and their small cabin near Eleanore Road. They've never met Mr. Jube, but sometimes they send him a jar of blackberry preserves or a loaf of bread, anyway, trusting Dancy, that she's wise enough to know good men from bad.

She walks quickly along the muddy cattail-choked shore, the short path he keeps clear for her, and in another moment, she's standing safe on the porch. Mr. Jube smiles his wide, false-toothed smile for her, tobacco-yellowed dentures and his skin the color of molasses, a full white beard to make up for his bald head. "Well now," he says, "what you doin' all the way out here this evening, Miss Dancy?"

"I never had to have a reason before," she says, and "No," he replies. "I guess you never did. Just, some nights, well, some nights ain't the same as all the others."

"Want me to go back home again?" and the old man stares at her and rubs his beard a moment.

"No, girl. Now that you're here, you'd best stay a while. What's wrong with your arm there?"

"Nothing. I got scratched up by some creeper briars, that's all," she says and shows him the pricked and bleeding place on her left forearm, the small red welts on her pale skin.

"Well, we ought to put something on that, some iodine, don't you think?" and before she can say yes or no, he gets up. "You just wait right here," he tells her, points to the crooked stool near his rocker, one leg longer than the other two, or two legs shorter than the third, and she obediently sits down for him. The screen door slams loud, echoes far across the lake, and Dancy waits alone until Mr. Jube comes back

with a small bottle of iodine and a cotton ball.

"It don't hurt much," she says, trying not to wince, pretending the antiseptic doesn't sting as he dabs the brownish liquid on her outstretched arm. "It's just a scratch."

"Never can tell with briars. Better safe than sorry."

"You sound like my Momma," Dancy says and frowns.

"Is that a fact?"

"She says that all the time."

"Well, then, your Momma must be a right smart lady," and when he's done, Mr. Jube screws the cap back on the bottle and blows on Dancy's arm a moment, his breath like stale pipe smoke and apple cider. Then he tosses the cotton ball away into the hungry darkness waiting at the edges of the porch and sits in his chair again; the wood creaks and pops, and he looks at the label on the bottle before setting it down near his feet.

"She taught me how to read," Dancy tells him. "I've read all her books. I've read the whole Bible."

But Dancy's already told him that a dozen other times, and Mr. Jube only nods his bald head for her and stares out at the night and the wide, still pool. His eyes almost the same color as the water, old man eyes grown suddenly distant and alert, and she knows he's listening to the lake.

"Did you hear something?" she asks, but he doesn't reply, leans forward a few inches and stares intently into the dark. So Dancy sits quietly and watches the restless cloud of bugs flitting about the lantern's chimney, waiting patiently until he's ready to talk to her again.

"How 'bout a game of checkers?" he asks, finally, sitting up straight in his rocking chair. "Think you're up to a few games a checkers tonight?"

"Sure," she says, even though she really doesn't like checkers and doesn't want to play, would much rather he told her stories about his days in New Orleans and St. Louis, or showed her the snakes and frogs and turtles that he catches to sell to the men from Tallahassee.

"I'll make us a pot of coffee," he says, still watching the night. "I got some jellybeans, too. I've been saving out all the red ones for you."

"I like the green ones best."

Mr. Jube shakes his head, sighs, and looks away from the lake. "Damn. I could'a swore it was the red ones you liked best."

"I like the red ones, too." And she sits on the stool while he glances back towards the water one more time. That look on his face that she's never sure means he's afraid or he's curious, both maybe, and after a few moments more he stands up and takes the lantern off its hook, and Dancy Flammarion follows him inside.

* * *

Almost a whole hour later, and Dancy is not talking because she knows that Mr. Jube doesn't like to talk

or have to listen to anyone else talk while he's playing checkers, not even when he's letting her win. She sucks on a yellow jellybean, letting the tart and sugary coating slowly dissolve in her mouth, stripping the candy down to its gummy, bland center, and Mr. Jube taps his fingers lightly on the edge of the table, *tap, tap, tap, tap*, deliberate woodpecker noise to make her wonder what he's thinking about. His face all wrinkled concentration and his eyes fixed on the board between them, but she knows his mind is somewhere else; he takes a sip of his black coffee and slides a red checker towards her. Dancy jumps it, and two more besides, and Mr. Jube scratches his head and pretends to be surprised.

"Now why didn't I see that?" he says.

"Cause you ain't trying, that's why," Dancy says and spits what's left of the yellow jellybean out into the palm of her left hand.

"Yeah? Well, maybe, or maybe you're just gettin' too good for me."

Dancy adds the three captured checkers to the neat stack in front of her. "King me," she says and pops the jellybean back into her mouth.

"Look at that. Now you're gettin' my checkers all sticky."

"It isn't any fun when you don't even try to win. I don't want to play anymore. Tell me a story, instead."

"Bad luck to leave a game unfinished."

Dancy stares at him for a moment, trying to remember if she's ever heard it was bad luck not to finish a game of checkers, the sort of thing her grandmother would have taught her, if it was true, so she's pretty sure he's just making it up.

"I ain't never heard—"

"You *haven't* ever heard."

"I *haven't* ever heard it was bad luck not to finish a game of checkers."

"Lots of things you ain't heard, child."

Dancy fishes another jellybean from the big bag on the table, a pink one, and she thinks about putting it back because the pink ones taste like Pepto-Bismol.

"That's why I come way out here to talk to you," she says and puts the pink jellybean back in the bag, takes out an orange one, instead.

"I look like a schoolteacher?"

"I ain't never seen a schoolteacher," Dancy mumbles around the orange jellybean, "so I wouldn't know if you do or not."

"Bet your Momma don't let you sass her like that," Mr. Jube says and looks over his shoulder at the door, at the dark windows on either side of it like bookends.

"You could tell again me about the time you saw the *loup-garou*, or the time you caught the two-headed snapping turtle and—"

"I never said that was a snapper. Just an old cooter terrapin, that's all," Mr. Jube says, still looking at the door, and Dancy sighs and swallows the orange jellybean without bothering to chew it.

"Or the time you went deep-sea fishin' and—"

"*Hush* a minute, girl," the old man growls at her and holds up one index finger like he's pointing the way to Heaven, so Dancy sits still and waits for him to be finished with whatever's gotten his attention. Whatever's he's listening to, listening for, and then she hears it, too, and "Oh," she whispers. "What *is* that, Mr. Jube?"

"You just sit right there, Dancy," he whispers back, "and don't you say nothin' else, not one word, till I say so," and now she's afraid, the urgent tremble in his voice and this sound she's never heard before; something far away, but coming closer, rumble so deep she feels it in her bones, her teeth, all the way down in her soul.

"You shouldn't'a come out here tonight, Dancy," Mr. Jube says. "But you didn't know."

Dancy shakes her head, *no, no, no*, she couldn't have known, and she grips the edge of the table, grits her teeth together tight, and the rumbling sound rises and falls like hurricane breath and locomotive wrecks. The earth splitting apart beneath her feet and the sky above her head broken by the weight of the stars; the bag of jellybeans falls over, spilling a rainbow spray on the cabin floor, and the checkers skitter and dance across the board.

"I should'a told you all this a long time ago," he says. "Guess I should'a told you a hell of a lot of things . . ." but she can hardly hear him now, regretful words buried deep in the roar, and across the room a quart Ball mason jar full of pennies and nickels tumbles off a windowsill and bursts. Dancy shuts her eyes tight, not wanting to see what could ever make such a terrible racket. So loud there's no room left for anything else, the whole wide world pressed flat and dry and silent as an old briar rose held forever between Bible-thin pages, the world pressed brittle, and she can't even remember how to pray.

The salty, copper taste of blood, sharp pain nailed between her eyes, and "You make it stop!" she screams. "Oh god, Mr. Jube, make it stop right *now!*" and it does, meanest splinter of the empty moment between her frantic heartbeats, space between the throbbing in her head, and the only thing left behind is the murmuring swamp outside the cabin—the frogs and cricket fiddles, cicadas and night birds. Dancy slowly opens her eyes, blinks at the back of Mr. Jube's bald head, and when she wipes her mouth on the back of her hand, there's a smear of spit and crimson.

I bit my tongue, she thinks. *That's all, I just bit my own stupid tongue.*

"Now, you do what I said," Mr. Jube tells her, firm and a bright hint of fear around the edges of his voice, the way her grandmother sounded the day that Dancy found a rabid fox hiding under their back porch.

"This is all gonna be done and finished 'fore you even know it. You listenin' to me, child?"

"Jesus, ain't it done *already?*" she asks, and he glares over his shoulder at her.

"What d'you think your Momma would think about you blaspheming like that?"

"I bet you she'd say something worse'n that, if she was here."

Mr. Jube shakes his head and turns back to the door, the blank, unseeing windows. "Well, she *ain't* here, so you're gonna mind me. And this *ain't* done just yet. We got a little bit more to come. But we gonna be fine, Dancy. You do exactly what I say and everything's gonna be jake."

"Yes sir," she says, trying hard not to let him hear how scared she really is, trying to feel the way a grown-up would feel, brave like her grandmother when she shot the rabid fox.

"What you want me to do?"

"Stay where you are, and I want you to start counting backwards from one hundred. Not out loud, just start counting to yourself, in your head."

"Backwards from a hundred."

"And don't you say a word, girl, no matter what you see. Think about them numbers. Imagine you got a stick and you're drawing numbers in the sand. When you get done drawing one, imagine that you take your left foot and wipe the sand smooth again before you draw the next number. Can you do that?"

"Yes sir. I can do that."

"Then we both gonna be right as rain," he tells her, and a second later there's a knock at the door. Dancy looks at the checkerboard, bad luck not to finish a game, and wishes she'd stayed home and watched her mother sew, wishes that she'd followed Eleanore Road out to the hilly place where she sits sometimes and gazes across the tops of the pines at the far-away lights of Milligan, wishes she were any place instead of in this cabin at the edge of the black lake at the end of Wampee Creek.

"Now, Dancy," Mr. Jube says. "You start countin' now," and she does.

* * *

Moonlight and magnolia, starlight in your hair, all the world a dream, a dream come true, did it really happen, was I really there, was I really there with you . . .

A vast lion of white connect-the-dots fire, frigid pinpricks against eternity, and the imaginary lions men draw between the stars. Capricious swipe of a twinkling paw, and light falls from midnight autumn skies, November 1833, and the glowing dust of comets and all the things a small blue world brushes against in its lonely race around the sun; bright and frozen things to burn as they streak and scream and fall, falling since the universe drew its first scalding breath and coughed up Creation, but finally falling *down*. Angels down from Heaven, and fingers groping in a dark place touch something soft and cold that burns—

We lived our little drama, we kissed in a field of white.

November 13th, 1833, and the wide Southern night sky gone bright as noon. Startled men and women coming suddenly awake in their beds, squinting, dazzled eyes for the darkness that wasn't there. And *This must be judgment day*, they whispered and listened for Gabriel's trumpets and Seraphim explanation. Terrified, amazed, humbled at this end, surely, this ice-white curtain of flame drawing closed across history, and there are times when all men pray to one thing or another.

I can't forget the glamour, your eyes held a tender light, and stars fell . . .

Inevitable intersections, convergences, the crossing of ancient, invisible paths: 1799, 1833, 1866, 1867, 1966, forever and ever, and the lion swats at glittering baubles hung for its or no one else's pleasure.

. . . and stars fell . . .

Mobile Commercial Register (Nov. 13, 1833)—"Last night, or rather very early this morning, the vault of Heaven presented a brilliant spectacle, differing from any we have ever heard of. We regret that our slumbers were so heavy as to prevent our observing it, but a great number of our acquaintance were

roused by their servants, to whom it had imparted no small degree of alarm. Meteors of the description commonly termed *falling stars*, but of unusual splendor and magnitude, were seen shooting in every part of the heavens, in every line of direction below horizontal. Some from above appeared descending, (but as is usual in the same phenomenon as it ordinarily appears in single instances) they were generally extinguished before coming in range with the level of the earth. Hundreds were seen darting at the same moment. Their vivid corruscations continued for hours, and only ceased when the light of day compelled them to hide their diminishing heads, so that for any thing we know to the contrary, they may still be disporting in the upper air.

"Philosophers have not been able to offer any plausible theory in explanation of the description of meteors. To say that they are electric, or that they proceed from the spontaneous combustion of inflammable vapor, is only to evade rational enquiry by the employment of learned words. Before either of these principles can be admitted as sufficient causes, it must be shewn in what manner electricity can be accumulated in an atmosphere pure and dry, or what there is in such a region of the air as to develop explosive gas, or to ignite it after it has been produced. We believe it is admitted that no branch of scientific investigation so completely puts the ingenuity of philosophy at defence, as meteorology."

And some smoldering something flashes swift across Mississippi and Alabama and marsh-grey Florida skies, one more momentary inferno in a burning dawn, the blink of a million frightened eyes, and it plunges sizzling and sputtering into a deep black pool. A splash and charcoal wisp of steam, and the waters take it down into the soothing, fishsecret silt, the slime and a blackness not so perfect as that former, lost Paradise, but the pain that seared away its soul is cooled, and in a hundred years it will hardly remember the lion's paw, the flames, the fall, the innocent eons of weightless vacuum before gravity's deceiving pull.

I never planned, in my imagination, a situation so heavenly, a fairy land where no one else could enter, and in the center, just you and me, dear . . .

November 13th, 1833, and for seventy years nothing and no one looked into the pool but soulless alligator eyes and wild cats and the Indians who were afraid to stare too long into those murky, unmoving depths. A stain on the land, a seeping hole in the leprous skin of the swamp, blue lights above the waters on a long summer's evening, and Apalachee mothers told their children about the demons from the moon, the starfall whisperers below the water.

"At night there, something uncanny happens: the water burns."

Infinites away, the lion closed its sleepy eyes and opened them and closed them again. And again. And again.

The world turns.

The water burns.

My heart beat like a hammer, my arms wound around you tight, and stars fell on Alabama . . . last night.

* * *

Knuckles like a hammer on the door, flesh and bone on wood, and "You do exactly like I told you," Mr. Jube says. Glistening beads of sweat on his brow, sweat hanging like dew from the end of his nose.

"Tomorrow mornin', I'll go into Milligan and buy you a whole *bag* of them green jellybeans." And Dancy nods her head, but he doesn't see, is already reaching for the doorknob with unsteady hands, and whoever it is out there knocks again, harder than before, and the door shudders on its hinges. She imagines that she's holding a crooked, long hickory stick and carefully draws the number 95 in the sand at the edge of the lake.

"Just hold your horses a goddamned minute," the old man croaks, the knob turning in his hand, and he opens the door.

And Dancy sees the eyes and forgets all about the numbers, 95 erased with the toe of her boot, smooth sand like brown sugar, and that's as far as she goes; there's nothing out there but the eyes, twin balls of the deepest, the most vivid blue she's ever seen or imagined, roiling, pupilless eyes that shine bright enough to blind and somehow give off no light whatsoever. Blue eyes bulging from the fabric of the night, and Mr. Jube takes a small, hesitant step backwards and looks down at the floor between his feet.

Don't you scream now, girl, Dancy thinks in the old man's voice. *Don't you dare start screamin'*. She tries to look away, look down like Mr. Jube did, tries to bow her head so there's nothing but her shoes and the floorboards, the spilled jellybeans, but she can't—not for all the tea in China, all the love of God—and her heart skips a beat as those blue eyes narrow down to suspicious, angry slits and glare past Mr. Jube directly at her.

"*Who's she*," the thing on the porch growls in a voice that is thunder and wildfire and the buzzing wings of poisonous red wasps. Movement in the darkness, and Dancy can see that there's more to it than the eyes, after all, that it's pointing towards her.

"She ain't no one," Mr. Jube says. "Least ways, no one you got to be concerned about."

"*You know the rules*," it growls, eyes swelling wide again, eyes big around as oranges, and the dark around them flutters for a moment and is still again.

"Yeah, I know she ain't supposed to be here. I know ain't *nobody* supposed to be here but me. But it just kinda happened, and there ain't no use worryin' over it now."

"*Dancy*," the thing purrs. "*Dancy Flammarion*," and the sudden, hot trickle down her thighs as she wets herself. She bites at her lower lip, bites hard until there's blood and it hurts too much to bite anymore, but she doesn't scream.

"She ain't gonna tell a single living soul what she's seein' here tonight," the old man says, and Dancy realizes that he's pleading for her life. "She knows better. She knows what would happen if she ever did."

"*Does she?*" it asks, blue eyes swirling, restless, disbelieving. "*Does she know the rules?*" But it stops pointing at her, and the jointed thing that isn't an arm melts back into the blackness.

"*The day you were born*," it says, and some of it flows across the threshold, sticky, tar-baby shreds of itself to lap about Mr. Jube's ankles. He takes a deep, hitching breath and stands absolutely still. "*There were tears the day you were born, Dancy Flammarion. There are tears in your mother's heart every time she looks at you.*"

"I have the riddle," Mr. Jube says.

A black tendril wriggles noiselessly across the pine boards towards Dancy, its ragged tip end rising like the head of a coachwhip snake, serpent head pausing a few inches from her boots, and she smells dying fish and mud, peppermint and curdled milk.

"*But who's going to cry the day you leave?*" the thing at the door mutters in its thunderstorm, insect voice.

"You listenin'?" Mr. Jube says. "You know the rules. I only have to ask my riddle once."

The tendril hovers a moment longer near Dancy's left foot, indecisive, reluctant, and then it slips back across the floor, flows away and leaves behind a glistening slug trail on the rough wood.

"*Then ask me, old man. Ask me quick, before I forget the rules and take what I please.*"

The black puddle around Mr. Jube's feet shivers like jelly, and "You ain't never gonna get this one," he says, glances back at Dancy, and there's the thinnest ghost of a smile on his lips. "When the sun's done flickered out and the seas freeze up hard as gravestones, you *still* ain't gonna get this one here."

"*Ask me the riddle. Why does the crow fly in the woods? What kind of bushes do rabbits sit under when the rain comes?*"

Mr. Jube raises his head and stares directly into those huge and bottomless blue eyes, and when he speaks, his voice is calm and sure.

"The man who made me, never used me. The man who bought me, never used me. The man who used me, never saw me."

A gust of cold and stinking air through the open doorway and the lantern on the table glows brighter for a moment, its small flame swelling, flickering against the chill, as the blackness uncoils from about Mr. Jube's ankles. Pouring itself backwards, slow as syrup, and the eyes narrow once more down to angry, hating slits.

"Maybe next time," Mr. Jube says, and he looks down at the cabin floor again. "I can tell you're gettin' smarter. I'm gonna shut the door now," and he does, easy as that, closes it gently, latch click, and they're alone. The old black man and the albino girl, and she doesn't say a word, waits until he turns his back on the night and whatever it hides, and he sits down across the table from her.

"You got blood on your face, child," he says. "Looks like you done bit a hole clean through your bottom lip. Just let me get my breath, and I'll see about it."

"I'm all right," Dancy says. "It don't hurt," not the truth but the pain seems small and far away. She stares at the checkerboard, the candy strewn at her feet, the kerosene lantern flame no larger or brighter than any lantern flame ought to be.

"You got your questions, too. I know that."

"What if it had known that riddle? What if it had guessed—"

"No," Mr. Jube says, interrupting her, and he shakes his head slowly and rubs at his beard. "I said I know you got questions. I *didn't* say I got answers. Hell, there ain't no answers for things like this, Dancy. That's just somethin' you gotta learn. Ain't everything in the world got a *what* and a *why* for the askin'."

"But it knew my name. It looked at me and knew my name."

"Well, you try not to think about that too much. It don't mean nothin'. It probably don't mean nothin' at all."

And outside the cabin by the lake at the end of Wampee Creek, the summer night mumbles uneasily to itself in the dark tongue of pines needles and cypress leaves, cricket whispers and the mournful call of owls. The waxing sliver of moon rises higher and casts a thin, pale glow across the water, and in a little while the surface of the pool has grown still and flat again, and the world rolls on towards morning.