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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien
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Ah, *Photinus Pyralis*, My Love

by

S. Dorman

Look at this luminous night! Riding this soft voluptuous air, I dip down and glow, my sensitive antennas quivering. The night is full of the sights and sounds of insectan coupling. This meadow by the woodland is dotted with blips of light. Grass leaves and stems vibrate with chirrings. Everyone yearns for a mate.

Me too. I'm *Photinus pyralis*, a firefly looking for sweet Miss *Pyralis*.

There's a low flyer. What style he has! A cool flash whilst laterally swerving.

See the black contour of the fir trees in the deep blue night on the far side of the meadow? Watch for flashes against that darkness. Oops, there it goes again. Three flashes and darkness, followed again by three flashes. It's *Photinus consimilis* signaling for a mate. Of course only Miss *Consimilis* need apply. She must have replied, with her distinctive two flashes, because he's stopped sending and apparently gone down to greet her.

Ah, imagine the fun they're having now.

I better get down to business, too. Lucky me, I was made for this.

A quick down and a long up, light organ glowing. Now off! Dip and undulate; dip and on! Now off. Ah mama bug, respond to papa bug; I know you're down there.

No luck yet; keep trying.

My glow's yellow-green, but color's not the important thing. Uh-uh. It's the flash pattern. Irresistible. There are a lot of genus *Photinus* around: *Photinus granulatus*, *Photinus pyralis*, *consimilis*, etc.... and each has its own special signal. There's even a larger genus *Photurus*. I'm told the females eat--nope, don't bring up that old horror story! To believe that or not? --But, for *P. pyralis* the others won't do. We all flash differently, move with our own special charm. I flash in a J-shape at six second intervals, and closer to the ground than *P. consimilis*. Nothing else would appeal to Miss *Pyralis*. Oh, she may mistake a flash once or twice. But when she realizes a misflash, that's it. She won't respond the third time. A real cute bug--and smart.

C'mon darlin'. She's down there somewhere in the daisies and mullen. I give a few delicate rapid wingbeats, a luminous dip....

She's there! A half-second flash--precisely timed! I give her another!

Darn. No response. Wait! Double darn--it's only a man with a flashlight threading through the tall grass. Those things ought to be outlawed.

Without our glorious glows, we *Photinus* beetles wouldn't be much to look at. We're

drab little things. Emerging from my last exoskeleton was a bit disappointing until I opened wings and lit up. Our orange organs are shining, complex, tri-layered. The outside layer is transparent and our slab-like light cells shine through. The inmost layer, opaque whitish cells, reflects the beam from light cells. To us luminescence is the most sensual thing on earth. A little oxygen and luciferase--to catalyze the pigment luciferin--and we're all set. Understanding the mechanics of sexual attraction is fine, but it's definitely not necessary for a loving time. I just hope that having the enzyme and pigment named after the deceiver doesn't mean all this enjoyment is evil. How could there be anything evil in this spangled night?

Give myself a few wingbeats and a couple nice shiny J's to shake off the heavy thoughts.

Hey--I think I found one! Give another couple glimmers at six second intervals: timing is everything. Great!--she signals at the right interval.

Oh heck, I don't believe! Here comes another *pyralis* in front of me. He looks fresh from a molt, too. *Humph*. He must've been especially voracious as a larva. Now

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he's down in the grass with her as I sweep past, left out again.

Hmm.... something's amiss.... His light's not right. Better make another pass. His light's still glimmering but suddenly smaller. A closer flyby.... Hey!--that's not *pyralis* with him! She's not even *Photinus*. Look at the scope of that embrace! It's the amazon *Photurus pennsylvanica*--and she's devouring him.

Suddenly I've got a date on the other side of the meadow.

How many passing strangers do you think she's attracted with that unpennsylvanica-type winking? Heard they do a good imitation of *consimilis*, too. They must have quite a repertoire of flash patterns. I'm out of here!

... Well, no reason to give up delight--not when this side of the meadow well away from that fright might have someone for me. But I'm going to be more careful looking for Miss *Pyralis*.

Yeah.

A couple J's. Nice and undulant! Mild night. Full of lights...

Author's note:

This story was written in the foothills of the Alleghenies in the early 1980s and later incorporated into a novel, *Fantastic Travelogue: Mark Twain and CS Lewis Talk Things over in The Hereafter*. In the early 2000s this SF was begun as a project for the thesis paper in the CSUDH masters in humanities program (HUX). Mark Twain had written stories imagining travels in various parts of creation, leaving me with an impetus to re-imagine him as a character taking part in sundry aspects of same.