

# Children's Literature

## *The Dragonfly Summer*

### *A Child's Flight Through Grief, Wonder, and Healing*

*By: Jayant Neogy*



#### **Jayant Neogy**

Writer, Photographer and Traveler, I have a Master's Degree in Engineering from Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur followed by 40 years of work experience in India, Germany, Switzerland and the US.

Thereafter, I had over 5 years of teaching and consultancy experience.

As an author of non-fiction, 9 of my books have been published in India so far.

I write fiction for Substack, Medium, Wattpad and Tumblr.

**D**ragonflies skimmed the water's

surface as their wings flashed rainbow colors. Watching them, Julia waited for Jalkanya to appear, as she was alone. Since her mother's death, this riverside spot had become her sanctuary where she watched mist rise off the river, like the prayers she sent heavenwards for her mom.

Sadly, she remembered how just a few months ago, she had helped her father to scatter her mother's ashes in the river, watching swift currents carry them away.

"They're dancing for us today."

As peace filled her mind, Julia knew Jalkanya had come without having to look. There she was at the river's edge, her pale blue sari rippling like the river itself although there was no breeze.

"Why are they dancing?" Julia asked, as a yellow-winged dragonfly hovered above a lily pad.

"They dance when there's danger afoot," Jalkanya's voice was a distant echo, like water flowing over smooth stones.

The dragonflies suddenly scattered, vanishing as if they had never been. Startled, Julia asked, "What's wrong?" Jalkanya whispered, "Run, Julia! A monster is coming." Her eyes were on the sky.

Julia heard a distant hum that rose swiftly to a roar, drowning out the river's song. A shadow raced across the water as a small plane hurtled by, flying low.

Julia reached out to Jalkanya for comfort, but her hand passed through the river spirit's arm, as if she were made of shimmering river mist. As always, Julia pretended not to notice. Then a loud sound made her look up. The plane had struck the power lines spanning the river.

For a moment, it hung suspended in the wires, then erupted into a fireball, and twisted free. Burning wreckage fell into the river with a splash and a sizzle, to be carried away by swift currents.

When Julia could breathe again, her first thought was, "The pilot will never return. Like Mother, he is gone forever."

She turned to look for Jalkanya, but saw no one.

From somewhere out on the river, Jalkanya's voice reached her, "The river is upset and needs calming. You'd better go home, Julia." Her voice faded away.

Home. Father would be worried for her. He'd been on the river measuring depths all morning. Julia's stomach clenched thinking how close he might have been to the crash.

As she ran home, the river behind her grew calm again. One by one, the dragonflies returned to skim the

rippling water, dancing their secret dance.

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Alex Ferguson, Julia's father, was designing the bridge foundations when he overheard shouts from the outer office of a plane crash near the river bend.

Oh God! He thought, right where Julia plays.

He grabbed his jacket, heart pounding. "I'll be gone for the day," he told the superintendent. "I must find my daughter."

The man replied knowingly, "Right, Mr. Ferguson. Go to Julia. She's still upset."

They both knew what he meant. Two months ago, the superintendent spotted Julia on the riverbank talking animatedly to no one. Alex learned that Julia often spoke to a "river spirit" named Jalkanya.

Was Julia's obsession his parenting failure? Alex looked at his wife's picture on his desktop, eyes misting. "I've done a poor job of comforting her," he thought. "I've been too focused on my own grief."

Six months ago, he'd scattered Catherine's ashes in the river she loved. Now their daughter spoke to phantoms by the water's edge, creating the companionship she couldn't find at home.

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Later that evening, Alex watched Julia pour tea. She stirred in milk and sugar, her small hands moving with careful precision that reminded him painfully of Catherine.

"Do you have a friend who visits you by the river, Julia?" he asked, keeping his voice relaxed.

As Julia set down her teacup, it rattled against the saucer. "Oh, you mean Jalkanya?"

Alex said, "Yes. Why don't you invite her over sometime?"

Julia looked up; her eyes wary. "Daddy, she's bound to the river. She's only there when I'm alone. I don't think you'd see her anyway. She turns invisible when anyone else is near."

Alex's cup froze halfway to his lips. Invisible friends were normal for children, but Julia was eleven, and this started after Catherine's death.

The next day, he took Julia to see Dr. Winters, a child psychologist. While Julia leafed through magazines in the waiting room, Alex described his concerns.

"She spends hours by the river talking to 'Jalkanya', who no one else can see. She hardly speaks to her classmates anymore. It's got me worried."

Dr. Winters nodded. "Let me speak with Julia alone. Then we can talk."

An hour later, Julia sat in the car while the psychologist discussed his findings with Alex.

"Physically, there's nothing wrong with your daughter. Her imagination is vivid, but that's typical for children processing grief."

"But this river spirit," Alex began.

"Ah! Jalkanya? Julia must have heard of the ancient fable of a river mermaid that the ancients claim to have seen on the river. They called her 'Panir Kanya', or 'Jalkanya' meaning 'daughter of the water' in Assamese. She was believed to be benign and comforts children in great grief."

"Is it even possible?"

"That's immaterial. It's her way of coping with loss. Your wife's sudden death has left Julia vulnerable. She fears losing loved ones. She's invented a friend who comforts her and won't desert her."

Alex stared out the window at the parking lot. "I've tried to be strong for her. I thought that was what she needed."

Dr. Winters placed a hand on Alex's shoulder. "She needs to see that it's okay for you to grieve too. Give her time, Mr. Ferguson. Allow yourself time."

On the drive home, Julia was quiet until they approached the river road. "The doctor was nice. He understood Jalkanya better than you do, Daddy."

Alex glanced at his daughter, wondering what she and the psychologist discussed. "Did you tell him about Jalkanya?"

Julia nodded, her eyes following the river curve visible through the trees.

"He didn't say she wasn't real. He just asked questions about her."

"What did you say to him?"

"Jalkanya has always lived by the river and knows things about it that no one else does. The river listens to her sometimes if she pleads hard. She knows how to deal with sadness by calling the dragonflies to dance for her and make everyone cheerful again."

Despite the warmth of the sun, Alex felt a chill. Julia's voice made Jalkanya sound less like an invention and more like a real river deity from ancient folklore.

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Julia couldn't forget the sight of the plane erupting into flames and falling into the river. For days afterward, she avoided her special spot, haunted by the memory of the crash and the pilot who would never return home. Like her mother, he had been claimed by the river, forever.

When Alex came into her room two weeks after the crash, Julia was busy

drawing. He said, "Julia, do you remember the pilot who crashed?" She nodded and focused on her drawing.

"His wife is coming today for a small river ceremony. Would you like to join?"

Julia's pencil paused. "There won't be... They didn't find...?"

Alex assured her, "No. The current was too strong. Nothing was recovered." He understood her fear. Watching her carefully, he said, "You may like to come, to say goodbye..."

He didn't finish, but Julia understood. She had said goodbye to her mother's ashes by the riverside not too long ago.

She stared at her drawing. It was a swirl of red and yellow dragonflies surrounding a small figure by the water's edge. Finally, she set down her pencil.

Perhaps Jalkanya had finished soothing the troubled river, she thought.

"Yes Daddy, I'll come."

That afternoon, they stood on the small jetty where Alex kept his survey boat. A black car pulled up, and an elderly woman helped a younger one from the passenger seat. The young woman wore a simple white dress with a sheer veil that could not hide her tear-stained cheeks.

As the boat stopped near the shore, Julia whispered, "Daddy, the crash happened much further out, near the middle."

Alex explained quietly, "We can't go there. The current's too strong."

The young widow rose unsteadily, clutching a bouquet of white lilies and a garland of white roses. She whispered words the river swallowed before they could reach Julia's ears. Bending low, she placed her offerings on the water's surface. The current

caught them, carrying them downstream away from the plane crash site.

Julia watched the flowers drift until they disappeared around the river bend. Her heart ached for the young woman who lost her husband, just as she had lost her mother. It saddened her to see the garland headed in the wrong direction, away from the pilot's crash site.

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That night, as Julia knelt by her bedside for prayers, she kept thinking of the lost pilot and his grieving wife. She whispered, "Dear God, I pray for Daddy and Mother's soul, but especially for the pilot. Please let him get the garland. Things should reach those who they are meant for, like my prayers should reach Mother." Her voice dropped lower. "Please, God, let the pretty lady's flowers find the pilot."

After climbing into bed, Julia thought she heard the faint buzz of dragonfly wings outside her window. She fell asleep wondering if Jalkanya could see the dragonflies at night and if they danced for her when Julia wasn't there.

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Three days after the memorial, Julia returned to the river. School had ended early, so she headed straight for her favorite spot—a large rock jutting into the water, that created a whirlpool. She liked to watch leaves and twigs caught in the swirling current, spinning before being pulled under.

The day was cloudy, and the dragonflies were missing. Julia sat on the rock, hugging her knees.

Something inside her urged her to wait.

Jalkanya appeared suddenly beside her and said, "I didn't think you'd come today."

Julia smiled. "The river feels different today."

Jalkanya said cryptically, "It's waiting,". Her pale fingers traced patterns in the air, leaving small ripples of light that dissolved like foam on water. She looked tense, expectant.

They sat in silence, watching the water churn around the whirlpool. But nothing happened.

Disappointed, Julia rose at last, only to freeze. Something caught her eye, bobbing in the whirlpool. She thought it was a branch, but as it tumbled over, she saw it was a leather glove. Her heart raced as the glove spun again, revealing a severed wrist. The river had swallowed the pilot and returned this small piece of him.

"Oh! I can't bear to see dead things." Said Julia.

"Wait." Said Jalkanya tersely.

"Oh! It must belong to the pilot. How strange that it got stuck here." Julia's voice dropped to a whisper. "But what happened to the flowers?"

As she watched, the glove came around again and turned over in the current. Then she saw it, the garland of white roses caught in the glove's fingers. The pilot had received his wife's offering.

For several moments, the glove and garland spun in the whirlpool. Then the undertow sucked them down and out of sight.

Julia looked around but Jalkanya had vanished. For once, she didn't mind. Then, she heard a whisper as light as a dragonfly's wing, from far out in the river, "My work is done, Julia. The river has answered."

She looked up to see the afternoon sun turn the river into a stream of gold.

"How wonderful. If the garland found the pilot, my prayers can't be lost either. They'll surely find Mother."

As she turned home, a swarm of dragonflies rose from the reeds. Their wings caught the sunlight as they danced above the rippling water.

When Julia burst into the house, her eyes shining with excitement, Alex was at his desk.

"Daddy!" she said, "The pilot got his garland! It was beautiful, although the cut hand in the glove bothered me a little."

Alex looked up, puzzled. "Slow down, Julia. What hand? What garland?"

She took a deep breath and described everything: the whirlpool, the glove with its severed wrist, and the white rose garland caught in its fingers.

When she finished, Alex stared at her, astounded. "You're fortunate to have seen it. A few minutes either way, and the glove and garland would have vanished forever."

Julia pulled out a chair and sat across from him. "Jalkanya helped me to see that if you wish hard enough, good things happen. Just as the pilot got his flowers, I'm sure Mother hears my prayers."

Alex thought of Catherine's ashes, scattered in the river months ago. The current had carried them away, never to return. Yet, the river had returned this small miracle to their daughter.

"Daddy?" Julia's voice broke his reverie. "Can I go to Sunanda's birthday party tomorrow after school? Her mother bakes delicious cakes."

A slow smile spread across Alex's face as he recognized the return of the joyful little girl Julia once was.

He answered, "Sure! I'll send a box of

chocolates with you as a present. Stay as long as you want."

A dragonfly buzzed at the window.

Alex looked past it to see a sunset reflecting on the river, flooding the sky with crimson, gold, and deep purple.

For the first time since Catherine's death, he felt true peace.

He wondered briefly about Julia's river spirit. Was it his daughter's imagination, or perhaps something more—a benevolent presence from the waters that had received his wife's ashes? Whatever Jalkanya was, he was grateful, for she had returned his old Julia.

That night, Julia knelt for her prayers as usual. But this time, she didn't ask God to keep Jalkanya from disappearing. She knew the river spirit would always be there when she truly needed her, like the dragonflies that vanished before danger, only to return when all was well.

### *The End*

