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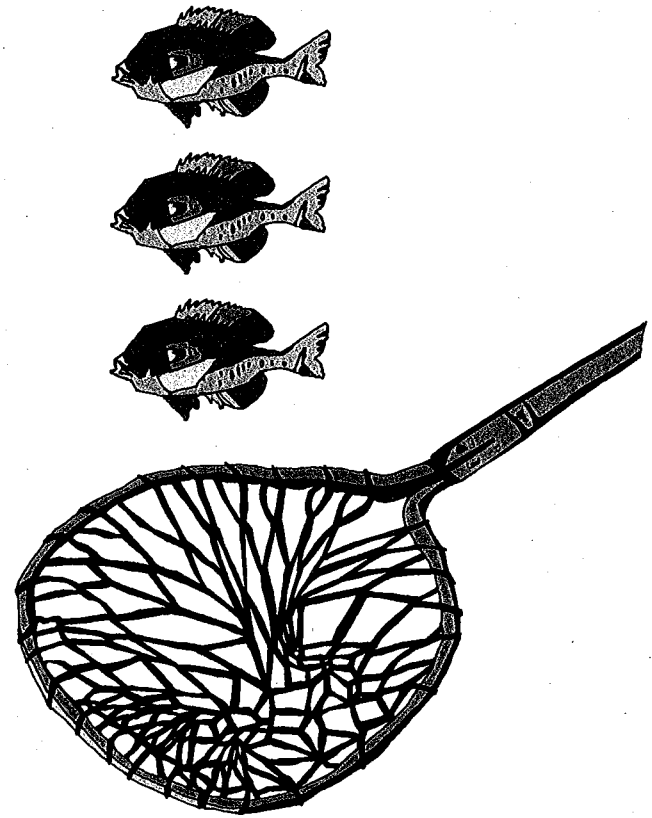
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of one of his big earth movers while he threaded the extension cord up the pine's trunk. He must have looked a hero to his girls, their daddy locating the North Star in the center of the solar system. Years back, smart Lib had to have seen through the clownish, ruddy good ol' boy to the decent man that Bobby, bracketed by his wife and girls, would become. Even with the Sally Morrisons of the world walking around as marital testimonies scarier than the living dead, Lib chose her husband on the promise she saw. She puts her faith in hearth and family, which is why she's held out hope for me, no matter how much I howl.

If I sit in this cold car any longer, they're going to have to wait for the spring thaw to send out the sniffer dogs. I crack open the door, rise from the seat, and slide Lyle's coat off. From where I'm standing, I can hear Libby's Christmas carols. If we'd had an early snow, a snowman with a carrot nose would be there to beckon me up the porch and into a Currier and Ives print.

But we haven't had snow yet, so it's Libby's stair-step daughters who find me. Each holds one of my icy hands to lead me into the house. They want presents. They want to know why my hair's so short. They want to know how Mister is.

They want, as little girls content in their own selves do, for their family to stay the same forever.



10. Michael Bourdaghs, "Invasive Species"

Akihito meticulously rolls the sleeves of his white shirt up to his elbows. He wades into the murky waters of Lake Biwa, sensing through the thick black rubber of his waders the morning cool of the water. Yesterday, the weather was sunny with autumn colors rippling across the lake surface in a lavish brocade. He'd tried composing a *waka* poem to capture the scene, but the words would only spin around and around in his brain, refusing to cohere into any recognizable shape. Today gray clouds block the sun, rendering the water a dull brown-gray.

The waders once belonged to his father. A size too small for

Akihito, they squeeze his calves and thighs. He happened upon them sitting forlorn at the back of a closet a month earlier, when he still lived in Tokyo. He remembers his father pulling them on to potter about in the palace grounds, tending to the tadpole and koi populations.

No one is nearby, and the only sounds come from the small waves rolling up against the shore and the cries of the seagulls flying overhead. Akihito carries a red nylon fishing net on an aluminum pole in one hand and a fiberglass fishing rod in the other. He dips the net into the water and swishes it around in broad swirls before pulling it back out. Waterdrops stream off it, falling back into the lake. Then, with a deft flick of the wrist, he makes his first cast of the morning, the fly sailing twenty meters out into the lake. He begins reeling it back in.

As he had guessed it would, the furor died down quickly. The first imperial abdication in centuries had stirred up the chatter monkeys of the press, naturally—better than a singing idol's sex scandal or a talking animal. He'd anticipated all of that when he made his decision. And as always, there was the fragile health of the Mrs. to consider. But a week or two of frenzy was a small price to pay, and as he knew it would, the media quickly moved on, its attention span shorter than that of a toddler. Now they have the upcoming enthronement ceremony to yawp about—if anyone still cares about such matters.

Only a handful of attendants noticed when Akihito and Michiko drove away unannounced from the palace in the silver Honda Accord he'd asked one of the chamberlains to purchase. The two of them headed west, alone in city traffic for the first time in their married life. The global satellite position system was a godsend, and he and Michiko took turns glancing down at the dashboard screen, toying with the buttons. Akihito quickly felt comfortable behind the wheel, just another anonymous driver in the swollen river of cars. A taxi driver honked at him for driving too slowly on the expressway—how delightful! Michiko awarded him with one of her rare private smiles.

The journey took two days. It occurred to Akihito more than once that he was retracing the steps of his great-grandfather, Mutsuhito, when he had moved the imperial seat east to Tokyo in 1868. Akihito

thought about paying a call along the way at the Kyoto Palace but quickly rejected this idea: he was finished with all of that. He also considered taking up residence in Suma, just like the Shining Prince Genji, but that was entirely too romantic, and besides, Akihito had work to do.

They stayed initially for four days in a small business hotel near the central station in Ōtsu. Then they moved into a small two-bedroom mansion on the fringes of the city, rejecting all offers of police protection. A few newspapers noted the fact, but people were forgetting quickly. His new salt-and-pepper beard helped, as did his close-cropped haircut, which Michiko said made him look like a Buddhist priest. Soon, they would disappear into the landscape, just another elderly couple in a graying country, walking to the local co-op market to buy their apples, spinach, and miso paste. Michiko spends her days setting up their new kitchen and living room; she still speaks little, but seems happier than in years. At night, they share five *shaku* of saké across their small kitchen table, dining simply on whatever she prepares: grilled *sanma*, fried tofu, *yakisoba* noodles. Every morning Akihito rises early, before dawn, and sets out for the lake.

He dips the net back into the water, swirling it around slowly like a teaspoon stirring cream into coffee. He pulls it out. He flicks the fishing rod again and slowly reels the line back in. Nothing.

1960. Their visit to the United States as newlywed Crown Prince and Princess. Disneyland and the Empire State Building, the gala state dinner at the White House with President and Mrs. Eisenhower. The afternoon tea in New York with senile General MacArthur, that old pompous windbag who had saved his father's life back in the awful days of 1945. The delightful informality of ordinary Americans, who asked the most surprising questions. "Do you use chopsticks even for breakfast?" a sixth-grade boy in Pennsylvania wanted to know. "Does it feel weird to know that any Japanese would sacrifice his life for you if you asked?" inquired a junior-high girl from Seattle. Such innocence!

He freezes at the next memory: the trip to the Shedd Aquarium on the shores of Lake Michigan in Chicago. The surprise gift from that awful mayor (what was the man's name? the one who reeked of

cigar smoke and sweat, who had danced so awkwardly with Michiko?): seven live bluegill to take back with him to Japan, the fish swimming alertly in the glass tanks as if trying to impress.

It seemed such a good idea at the beginning. His father the marine biologist approved. Akihito bred the fish in the palace grounds and delighted to find them multiplying in number: soon there were dozens, then hundreds of bluegill in the ponds and moats. The royal chefs filleted the fish, grilled them with salt, boiled them to produce excellent soup stock. It all seemed so marvelous: manna from heaven, delicious and healthful. He would feed his people.

And so a few years later Akihito made the gracious gesture of donating a thousand fish to stock Lake Biwa: a majestic act for the benefit of the nation, one of his first original ideas. He remembers the ceremony, the brass band on a cold spring morning, he and Michiko carrying a crystal vase with the first bluegill to the edge of the shore and together releasing the fish into the lake. It hit the water and darted away happily—Akihito recalled the English expression he had learned as a child: like a fish to water. The bluegill seemed at home in a way that Akihito never could.

It was all so simple, so pleasant: one of the rare days it felt worthwhile to be a royal. Like the annual rice-planting ceremony that for generations had ensured the fertility of the realm: a small gesture of generosity that could only help. So it stayed for years, as he received weekly updates on the stocking project from the Fisheries Agency. Surely the Ministry knew within months that everything had veered terribly awry, but not a hint reached Akihito until many years had passed. The bluegills were breeding only too successfully. They colonized the lake, driving out native species, destroying the local aquatic culture.

Akihito discovered the truth by accident, by way of an article in a fishing magazine he happened to receive during a ceremonial visit to a publishing house. In a panic, he delivered the disastrous news to his father. The amateur marine biologist listened impassively, perhaps sadly. You've tried your best, the old man counseled Akihito. Say nothing in public; it would only stir up trouble. Let the authorities handle this; they know best. He instructed the imperial household

agency to make a quiet donation of one million yen to the recovery effort.

But the situation worsened. Bluegill began migrating to surrounding lakes and rivers. Akihito arranged for further donations, and he surprised the palace staff by ordering the extermination of all bluegill from the palace ponds and moats. Even that modest task hinted at the deep-rooted obstinacy of the problem: short of poisoning the water and killing all living creatures therein, the only solution was to fish the moats constantly to remove the bluegill, one at a time. It took two years to rid the palace grounds of the species.

It had started in an act of love, but as so often happens, love led to unintended consequences. Now it was a question of responsibility. Akihito once more casts his line far out into Lake Biwa. He turns the handle on the reel to wind it back in. Nothing. Akihito refuses to feel frustrated: he will keep at his new task. He has, after all, only the rest of his life to devote to it. Responsibility is never easily won.

An hour's hard work yields two fish. He drags each back to the shore in the net and cuts off its head with the knife hanging from his belt. Just as he begins to feel his arms tire and thinks of taking a rest, he sees Michiko on the shore, holding up a thermos jar. It is filled with hot green tea she has brewed herself, he knows. Akihito smiles and wades back toward the shore.