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Fly Fishing

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Hip-deep in crystal clear water, they posed every morning. Two, three, sometimes as many as five men silently casting their lines soon after the sun appeared on the horizon. Whether they spoke before or after, she never knew. By the time she passed, they were already in position, each facing a unique direction, intent on casting their line with graceful precision, reeling in with stoic optimism.

Before 9/11, cars were allowed to drive over the dam on the Western side of the reservoir. After the terrorist act, cement blocks were deposited on both ends of the dam. Pedestrians were still permitted, between sunrise and sunset, allowed to traverse the mile-long dam with its sweeping lawn that sloped down to a trickle of river where the fly-fishers stood. All summer, this is where the couple took their morning walk. He calculated that the length of the dam was one-fifth of his daily Fitbit goal. She discovered the path down to the river.

The large reservoir, constructed during the 30's, was the primary source of water for a large city in the East. The descendants of families who had lived in five small farming towns, hers among them, had been awarded commemorative charms made from metal foraged from the submerged towns. Where once there had been hundreds of acres of rolling farmland, there was now a vast body of water dotted with uninhabited islands. A map at the overlook indicated where the towns had once existed, the steeple of a church here, a cemetery (all remains now re-located) there. Tourists often sat in their cars at the overlook, peering through binoculars at the sky. The islands housed an eagle restoration project, one of the most successful in the nation.

The reservoir and its tributaries were stocked each spring. Fly fishing was strictly catch-and-release. The fish that fly-fishers reeled in over the summer were required to be thrown back. The peaceful morning scenario was a fabrication. At best, a simulation of a survival skill. The meditation that it reflected, however, soothed her. Some mornings, she stood for nearly a half-hour watching the fishermen prepare arcing casts, following the gentle drag of lures being retrieved.

When there were droughts, as there often seemed to be, the quantity of water pumped through aqueducts to the city was increased. The local towns had their own water supply.

Earlier in the spring, the Department of Health had issued a Fish Advisory. A white warning sign was tacked to a tree stating that high levels of mercury had been found in fish samples taken from the reservoir. The advisory recommended limiting or eliminating consumption of fish due to the elevated levels. Water test results, the sign assured the public, had not indicated any reason for concern about the drinking water or its suitability for human consumption.

Pleasure boats were not allowed on the reservoir. The islands were off limits. Some mornings as they walked across the dam, she watched the Department of Public Works motor boat putter around the glassy surface, taking water samples. One early morning, she spotted something strange just under the water's surface. "Honey, what is that?" she asked her husband. He used his camera's telephoto lens to magnify the blob, but it bobbed listlessly. Neither of them could identify it. Soon, the DPW motor boat approached, leaving a large V in its wake. Several morning walkers stopped to see what they were looking at. The male on the boat retrieved a long stick and poked at the shadow. She overheard his companion saying, "They are watching us." After much discussion, the park employees lassoed the blob and towed it behind the boat until they reached the far side one of the distant islands. She assumed they left soggy remains on the shore to be eaten by wildlife. Deer, bear, even bobcats flourished in the "unintended" wilderness.

It irked her husband that dogs were not permitted in the park which surrounded the dam. Park regulations cited sanitation as the explanation, but certainly, he said peevishly, an area could have been allocated for dog walkers in the vast park. Dog walkers picked up after their pets. Which was, after all, more than the flocks of Canadian geese flying overhead were prepared to do. Whatever the DPW boat had deposited on the island couldn't have been great for the water supply.

He was a city boy. She got that. He expected accommodations to be made.

“Look at the motorboat spewing gasoline in its wake,” he pointed out to her as they walked across the dam. “That’s pollution they should worry about.”

Whenever they ate in a restaurant in the city, her husband would point to a glass of water and tell the waiter “that’s our water that you are drinking.”

“Mine,” she would think but never say, “not yours.”

He regularly insisted on a city fix. Camera in hand, he walked all day capturing the throngs of humanity clustering on every street corner. He thrived on street musicians, art installations, exotic cuisines. Accompanying him, she listened in on strangers’ phone conversations, writing down snippets of conversation that she would exploit later, in the quiet of the country.

“Sometimes I need to be alone,” she knew he would look hurt when she told him she wanted to take her morning walk alone. He had just said that he couldn’t imagine standing there all day in the frigid water. She could think of nothing else. If he didn’t have his camera in hand to fiddle with, he became restless, spoke too loudly. The fishermen glanced at him, annoyed, but never said a thing.

Fly fishing required equipment. A long, light-weight rod, reel, fly line and backing, leader, and trippets to connect the fly line to the fly. Flies, of course. Dry flies, nymphs, and streamers, each resembling the kind of bugs she swatted at all summer long. Casting shirts, wading jackets. She googled the necessities. Pop-up menus offered to sign her up for fly-fishing newsletters and equipment updates, a whole new world beckoning.

They were always there, no matter what the weather. Always men.

One night she dreamed she stood with them in the stream at the bottom of the dam. Wearing hip-high waders, her long hair in a braid down her back. In her dream, the silent men ignored her, just as they did in real life. On the opposite shoreline, a bear wore a hat like Smoky. He held his rod, angling for trout. She concentrated on casting, refusing to analyze what the dream meant. Overhead, a bald eagle soared, the shadow of his wingspan crossing the water ominously.

Certainly, mercury levels were bellwethers. And terrorists not apt to be deterred by concrete blocks. When they had visited the city, she noticed that policemen had started to wear guns where they could be seen in an effort at deterrence. Her husband was no longer allowed to take photos from the bridge that bussed in commuters on a daily basis.

By early December, a thin crust of ice formed on the shoreline. The men were still there in the morning, but their time was running out. Her husband didn’t celebrate Christmas, but in the hubbub of TV

and online advertisements, he purchased a new camera, a new camera bag. He ordered frames for two of his wilder creations and hung them in their foyer. Bright yellow and chaotic, they screamed at her as when she returned from her walks, her shoes squeaky with water from the stream.

Every day, she received more e-mail, encouraging her to buy flyfishing equipment and discounted clothing. The list of wildlife observations that was maintained in the Dam's visitors' center became shorter and shorter as birds flew south and animals hunkered into hibernation. She dressed in layers, long underwear, turtlenecks, vests, and a down-filled jacket. A knit cap and gloves, a scarf to cover her face against the icy wind. When the dam became treacherous, she refused to give up, adding crampons to her hiking shoes. Even so, she minced across the dam with small, careful steps. Dark patches of black ice glittered in the sunshine. She knew not to trust them.

By December, only one fisherman remained, wearing a wet suit and heavy gloves with fingers that folded back so that he could tie knots or fidget with swivels with minimal exposure to the cold air.

"Freezing my ass off," he said to her as she stood on the shore, shivering. "Cold weather is supposed to slow the fish down but I think I'm the one approaching torpor here."

In slow motion, he pointed towards the shore. "Hot coffee in that thermos there," he pointed to a small pile of gear beneath a tree. She wished he hadn't spoken.

After they had all gone, only the ghosts remained. Her father once told her that the only time he had seen his parents cry was the day that their house was condemned. No amount of compensation made it right, his father had sobbed. The drinking water of strangers had swallowed her family's history. Those who had not lost everything lived the rest of their lives in fear of doing so. By the time she met her grandparents, they were small people who lived in a stuffy house along the two-lane highway into town.

The eagles flew towards the coast in winter to stay warm. Here, survivors learned to tough it out. Turning her back on the stranger angling for slow fish in defiance of the approaching winter, she headed home. In the kitchen, her husband was preparing coffee and humming 60s rock tunes under his breath. A steady stream of water flowed vigorously from the kitchen faucet which he had forgotten to turn off while scooping coffee grounds into the bleached filter. Before she had a chance to stem the flow, he enveloped her in an enthusiastic bear hug. "How many steps did you take today?" he asked, as if that were the only thing that mattered.