LINDA DECICCO

Teganuma

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It's hot as hell. The water looks inviting. Like jumping into her sister's pool back home – smack dab in the middle of the good old U.S. of A. Like running through the sprinkler on America's Chem-lawn carpets. The old lady is watching her two grandsons fishing along Lake Teganuma. It's June in Japan. And they're a long way from home.

The grandmother is wearing a straw hat she bought for just such an occasion. She likes hats. Spends hours trying them on in front of department store mirrors. She has several in her closet. Rarely wears a one. Even this one on this perfect day for a hat will be off her head before long and crumpled back into her purse – a bag stuffed with her Japanese/English dictionary, towels for sitting on the shore, a paperback novel, lipstick, her passport, a wallet, coffee candies, and three rail passes.

Her daughter, heading off to teach at the Japanese university that brought them here, had given her mother the rail passes for the boys and sprayed the three of them with bug spray. These rainy-season mosquitoes – *ka*, such a harmless sounding little word – are growing greedier for blood.

A day of fishing – *tsuri* – was planned despite the weather forecast calling for the hottest day yet. Better heat than rain, which was all that was in store for the rest of the week. June was the rainy season in Japan, and the guidebooks weren't kidding.

The grandmother and the two boys walked the long walk from the Kita-Kashiwa train station to the lake, where they have fished many times in the months they have been in Japan. The walk takes them past large gardens with flowers and vegetables planted in neat rows. Rarely a weed. A few old people – bent over and bow-legged – and no young. A ghost town by day when any of the young ones who still live at home with their parents have boarded trains for Tokyo or other cities that had jobs that didn't involve straw hats and calluses.

Rice paddies – expansive and green – line the highway across from the lake. The grandmother and her daughter have been amazed at how much better the rice tasted in Japan. What was the difference? Another of the many inscrutable puzzles of this place.

At the end of the long walk, the water prettier than

any painting mirrors back the shore of green and the many walls of rocks, each wall another seat for her, another place to plop her purse and her book.

Today's gear dropped like breadcrumbs along the shore in the hours they have been here. A half-eaten bag of Skittles. A spool of fishing line beside a Swiss Army knife. Two half-empty bottles of water. It's mid-afternoon now. And it's not getting any cooler.

There are two swans today. They had only seen one the last times they were there. The grandmother smiles and looks for any babies, the cygnets that might be in a nest nearby. How can you tell a male swan from a female? Was this a pair?

"Nearly always monogamous," one website said. With an interesting qualifier. "A divorce might occur is there were *nesting* problems." It seems no creature is spared from such loopholes in the marriage contract.

One swan is gliding down the river toward them. The other is cleaning itself, like a cat. Its long neck dipping from side to side as it licks itself clean. Stopping only to dip its head into the water to nibble at something. Breakfast?

Pigeons – or are they doves? – coo and gather and swoop from one shore to the opposite. She makes a note to look up the difference, if there is any. There isn't.

A black bird she's seen here before dives from the sky straight to the water without surfacing for as long as she can keep her eyes on him. It's sort of like a heron with a long neck and sleek, but black. She's never seen such a one in America. Yet another Google search.

Bubbles pop from the depths of the water. Fish? Maybe just rocks settling, her grandson the fisherman explains.

The whirs of the casting and the reeling mingle with all of this nature. The kiss of the carp. The splash of their rogue leaps. And always in the background the low grumble of cars crossing the bridge over the water.

Across the lake, a noisy truck is churning away and a guy with a big hose aims at the grass in the park that runs along the opposite shore. From here, the grandmother can't tell if the worker is wearing goggles or a facemask. He definitely has on one of those towels or scarves she's seen workers wear, tied in the back leaving two streamers poking out like pigtails. He's spraying a hose as big as a water cannon from a fire hydrant back home. One of those hydrants disguised as a cartoon character – arms wide open and painted in kindergarten colors. Cheerful and reassuring. Like the water there would be used for play and not to put out fires that could burn down a

house or raze an entire city block.

There are other workers with him. One guy working the controls on the truck.

Another couple standing around doing god knows what. Slackers come in every flavor.

Tatsuo is the guy spraying.

The bullfrogs seem louder today. They sound huge and prehistoric. And there are more of them.

"It sounds fake," said the younger boy, seven years old and already bored with fishing. He would much rather be playing basketball or baseball or soccer. Anything that involves a ball and running.

His brother, four years older, could sit by the river all day long, staring into the deep, tying and re-tying his bait and messing with his tackle box.

"The visibility isn't good here," he pronounces. "I'm gonna try a popper." He switches to the corn from the can he opened the night before. A day of fishing means a night of preparation. And he enjoys every moment of each.

The little one puts down his rod and picks up a rock. He throws it out toward the turtle sticking its head out of the water. His brother scolds him and tells his grandmother, "I knew we shouldn't have brought him."

She goes back to Kawabata's *Thousand Cranes*. Pretends she doesn't hear him. Yeah, she knew it'd be tough taking both of them. But the little one insisted. He wants to be treated like a big guy for once. The night before he even talked himself into believing he would catch a fish.

The grandmother is watching the boys like a hawk. The book in front of her is only a "blind," like one of those the shoguns hid behind to shoot their ducks at Hama-Rikyu. The little one loved that trip to the Tokyo gardens. He peeked through the hole and pretended he was shooting a bow and arrow just like the shoguns before him. They all got a kick out of the monument built to honor the souls of the dead ducks. You wouldn't find one of those in America.

The grandmother peeks above her book to watch the little one continue to piss off his brother, who has moved with his rod and his bottled water to a spot further down the shore.

A water bug scuttles across the surface of the lake. It hardly makes a ripple or a wrinkle in the water as it gets closer. Do they bite? No need to worry herself about that. No way will her grandsons actually go into the water. They will stay on shore. Here beside her.

They are all just looking in. Only taking what could be had from the shore – photographs and fish they will

throw back in.

The grandmother's attention shifts from the water below to the sky above, on the lookout for bees and any other creatures who might appear from out of the blue. There are so many dangers in this world.

She remembers the horror stories about the Japanese hornets – as big as hummingbirds and one sting could kill you. "Better watch out," the native Japanese warned. The sting doesn't kill right away. It festers. A slow death, an agony of fever that starts with a rash radiating out from the sting itself. Bees here are called *mitsubachi* – like a car gone haywire.

When Tatsuo was a little boy, there was an old man in neighborhood that all the kids were afraid of. And, like children everywhere, they jeered at what they feared. He and his friends called the man Kumo-san *because the old man walked with his arms and legs curved like the embrace of a spider.*

The kids would follow Kumo-san *to his lair and watch from the bushes outside. They never saw anything outside of the ordinary, but they watched all the same. They didn't know themselves what they expected to see, but that didn't stop them from looking. And throwing rocks. After long afternoons wasted on an old cripple snapping at his flowers with rusty clippers or pruning his fruit trees, the boys would go back to their ball games and their mud pies in the dirty playground in the center of their apartment buildings.*

"At night is when it happens," Tatsuo remembers the older boys saying. "At night, Kumo-san *comes out and grabs kids who linger too outside their doorways." Their mothers and fathers gathered them up soon after dark – long after the 5:30 song played on the loud-speakers – and corralled them inside. So "night" was a safe place for all of them. The spider never really had his chance.*

The grandmother watches a water snake pop up his head across the lake, a tiny blue slit on the map of Japan tacked up in the kitchen of the apartment they are leasing. Its perimeter twenty-three miles around but only two-and-a-half square miles of lake. At the point where they sit, a river runs toward it. Not really running. Creeping may be a better way of describing it. Stagnant in some places, this lake is sometimes called a pond, a marsh, a swamp.

For 27 years in a row, Teganuma was listed as the most polluted lake in Japan. Things changed at the turn of the millennium, when the North-Chiba Channel was dug to connect two rivers – the *Tone* and the *Edo* – to the lake, feeding Teganuma with much-needed fresh water. The grandmother, of course, doesn't know all that. She

can only see what's right in front of her.

Garbage – plastic bags, cellophane cigarette wrappers, bottle tops, tampons – lodges itself into crannies along the shore. Sludge and muck matted up against the reeds and lily pads in the shallows. From a distance, the spot is lovely. But up close, things look different.

The grandmother grimaces and directs the boys' attention to the snake several feet away. "Grandma, you're afraid of snakes?" the little one asks, feigning incredulous but just as frightened. "Why are you so worried? Who cares about snakes?" he prods.

Reasoned responses would mean nothing to the boy. His grandmother is simply a scaredy-cat.

A few minutes later, she sees out of the corner of her eye that the snake – maybe a different one, who would know? – is right under her feet, which dangle from the rocks where she sits right above the water. She gathers the little one closer to her. She jumps up and warns the older boy what's coming toward him right now.

From his place on the rocky ledge with his bottled Suntory water and his bags of treats that double as bait, the boy sees nothing to be afraid of. Only another snapshot to be filed away under Japan: *Four months in the year 2013.*

Tatsuo was a young man of 20 when Kumo-san *died. A small obituary in the* Shimbun *told him more than anyone else had. It seems the man was the last survivor of the Nagasaki bombing. He was only 75 but he looked over 100 even when Tatsuo was a boy. Tatsuo had read in his schoolbooks about the bombing in 1945, only days after Hiroshima's. But so little was said in the living rooms and kitchens outside of the classrooms where history was taught. Everyone he knew would just as soon forget about the bombs*. I guess that's what happens when you get old*, Tatsuo thought. He remembered the Hershey bar wrapper his grandmother kept framed in the alcove of her entranceway. An American soldier had given it to her when she was a girl.*

Tatsuo went to the shrine to honor the old man. Several of his friends, too, had shown up. They talked about the old man and joked about what they'd find in the web Kumo-san *had left behind.*

"Maybe a dead fly."

"A beetle."

"Naoko's corpse." They laughed hardest at that one. The pretty young girl had disappeared years ago. Rumors turning to myths. No room for the truth. Naoko Yagi simply up and left – ran away to Tokyo to get away from this small hilly town that stank like sewers.

The old man's survival had gone unrecognized – thus un-

heralded – by this pack of friends who had spent their childhood taunting him. They hung their heads when the jokes ended and each remembered what the newspaper had told them.

The little one goads the grandmother into crossing the bridge to the other side of the lake. There he can play on the swings and the slide, while his brother fishes. They walk to the other side. Looking down from the bridge, they see carp swimming in the dark green water. More for them to take from Teganuma.

"I think we found the jackpot. Now we just have to find the technique," the older boy says, running ahead to try his luck. Only a week ago, he caught a carp bigger than any he could have expected. The grandmother's iPhone videos and pictures the only proof of a fish that didn't get away. But given back. The boy had spent at least a half-hour pulling the giant *koi* to shore – no reel or net to help him – only to return it lovingly to the waters it came from. He watched it swim away that afternoon as proud of his letting go as he was of his catch.

The men are still at work, but the grandmother carefully leads the boys past them. "*Sumi-masen,*" she says, scurrying out of their way. She bows deeply, always mindful of the manners of the Japanese.

"These people are all so polite," she tells everyone back home in the postcards and emails she writes. *These people*. Never a good phrase to use. "They have been so good to us. So helpful and kind."

Tatsuo bows back and mumbles. "*Gaijin.*" He can spot them a mile away. Foreigners come and they go. Eventually they all go. Taking with them their earmarked travel books, their sutras and trinkets from shrines and temples and kiosks. No *gaijin* leaves Japan without a suitcase full of fans and chopsticks and tea ceremony paraphernalia they'll never use at home. If they're really adventurous – and have spent a lot of yen – they'll pack souvenirs of samurai and sumo and maybe even a Japanese baseball game. No one but the old folks pays for Kabuki anymore. And geisha are good for nothing but a photograph taken on the streets. No *gaijin* would pay for anything more than that.

The grandmother pushes the little one on the swings while the older boy rips into a packet of carp bait and mixes it with water from the lake. The boy kneads it into a wad of dough and tears off a piece for his hook.

Who taught him how to do that? Tatsuo wonders. *No worm for this kid. He's even using the right bobber.* Needle-thin and hand-painted with the neon of orange and green stripes – the *koi* bobber pokes straight up after the

boy's perfect cast.

If it weren't for the American tennis shoes and the headful of blond curls, the boy could pass for a native. *He must have spent a lot of time here already*, Tatsuo figures. *He must have met up with some real Japanese fishermen.*

Tatsuo turns back to his work. *Let them enjoy this island while they can. It will never be theirs.*

Of all the foreigners who visit, it's the Americans who really gall Tatsuo. They come with their American dollars and think they can buy whatever they haven't already stolen. Like crows feasting on the intestines of the dead kitten he had seen only this morning on the side of the road.

The Americans are always laughing and loud – when not bent over their train schedules trying to figure out how to get where they are going next. At the grocery store too you can see them scratching their heads, flipping through the pages of their dictionaries trying to tell the difference between sugar and sea salt. Their eyes wide open

– some with horror – at what they find in the fish aisles.

Tatsuo wipes the sweat from his brow with his T-shirt – its message in "Jenglish":

Get peace a chance.

The grandmother is singing a song as the little one goes back and forth and back and forth on the swing. Some English words Tatsuo didn't learn in high school, where they were made to pore over passages that had nothing to do with America today. None of them cared about England. England had nothing to do with America as far as they were concerned. Japanese teen-agers only to master the language of their pop heroes and legends.

Did you know that the first American teacher to come to Japan was Ronald MacDonald? No, not *that* Ronald McDonald. This lame entry was one of the English lessons in Tatsuo's high school textbook. Students learned nothing of the real America. What was the first American fast-food chain to come to Japan? Here's a clue. He's some kind of colonel in a sparkling white suit and string tie. Not the kind of outfit to wear eating this greasy finger-lickin' good food. (Notice that *good* and *food* are pronounced nothing like each other. And people think Japanese is a difficult language!)

Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream.
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.

Tatsuo remembers his own grandmother's songs. Not so different from this one, its chant speeding up or slowing down to keep pace with the swing. Tatsuo cringes to think his *sobo* may have learned such songs during the Occupation. Maybe she sang them to Tatsuo's mother, who was born years after the Americans finally went home. American soldiers and generals – and each's entourage – had patrolled cities and villages throughout Japan until 1952.

His grandmother told them the stories. She made it sound like a magical time. But something didn't sound right to him. The Americans rebuilding a sand castle they themselves had knocked over.

There may not be a lot of Japanese who feel the way that Tatsuo does. He never claims to speak for his entire generation. He certainly doesn't speak for those who bend to a bow that is never low enough. An *ojigi* that stoops to submission.

Tatsuo and the other workers have been out since dawn. They have a lot of ground to cover – literally. They're spraying insecticide on the grasses of all the parks in Chiba Prefecture. Not all in one day, of course. It'll take a few weeks. And then they'll start all over again and do each one more time. Twice in a summer keeps down the spread of the pests that are the bane of their damp island.

They're supposed to wear goggles as they spray – at least the guy with the hose is supposed to – but Tatsuo is too sweaty as it is. The goggles steam up and block his view. He wouldn't want to aim the hose anywhere it wasn't supposed to go.

He puts down the hose to wipe his eyes with the back of his hand. He takes off his rubber gloves and picks his nose. Mucus mixed with black dust. Sediment and snot. Time for a cigarette break.

The guys with him are yelling something fierce but Tatsuo's not listening. Yeah, yeah, he knows he's taking a chance lighting up so close to the truck. He steps farther away toward the lake and sucks on the last of his Seven Stars. Another cigarette, another 3 yen to the government. A small price to pay. He'll just have to buy another pack from the vending machine up the road.

He watches the American fishing just a few feet away. The kid really does know what he's doing. Shit, he's even got a *tanago* rod dipped in the water. Tatsuo remembers fishing for the tiny fish with his grandmother when he was this kid's age. Nothing like an *obaasan* to take you where you want to go. Old ladies everywhere must be like that with their grandchildren. Even in America.

The grandmother pushing the little one on the swings has her eye on Tatsuo. She's not sure she likes the way he has moved toward her other grandson. The truck, which stopped its churning when the man stepped away, has now resumed its growl. She sees that the guy inside the truck is motioning the guy with the hose back to work.

Just as she's watching this scene playing out to her right, a bee divebombs to her left. It's huge. She grabs the little one off the swing and walks away as fast as she can.

It looks like the bees – hornets actually – that she was warned about. She recognizes it from her Internet search – *Vespa mandarinia japonica* – confirming what they had told her. They kill more people in Japan each year than bears and snakes combined.

The little one screams and tears away from her grasp. "Don't run," the grandmother warns. She knows he would be no match for the hornet. And the less attention he calls to himself, the less likely the hornet will follow. At least, that's what she read.

The boy ran one way and the hornet flew another. *Thank God,* the grandmother sighed. Thank God.

One more crisis averted. From the moment the three of them boarded the train, the grandmother stood sentry over these two babies entrusted to her. The first order of business keeping the little one from standing too close to the rails. Other obstacles followed, too many to mention. Cars zooming and boys not looking both ways. Slippery rocks and deep waters. Dirty hands and fish hooks. Snakes. And now this. No wonder she is gray and growing grayer every day.

Tatsuo is thinking about his own grandmother now. Thinking about *Kumo-san*. Thinking about the family he left behind in Kyushu. Island hopping to Honshu was the best thing he could have done under the circumstances. Jobs here on Japan's main island were plentiful. Nagasaki was good only if you wanted a life on the ports – fishing or loading.

And there were those memorials to contend with. The one-legged *torii* gate and a fucking Atomic Bomb Museum. *Torii* gates, at the entrances to Shinto shrines, are said to represent the transition from the profane to the sacred. After the War in the Pacific, they were rebuilt throughout the city, except at this one particular spot. Let it stand as it stood the day of the bombing. Separating the profane and the sacred. Either or. You can't have it both ways. The Americans tried.

15 DeCicco/TEGANUMA

He left one small island for a larger one shortly after *Kumo-san*'s funeral. The old man was cremated and his ashes scattered, like the ashes of those incinerated on August 9, 1945 by "Fat Man." The plutonium bomb destroyed the city of Nagasaki in less than a second. Seventy thousand people – mostly civilians – dying that very day. Hundreds of thousands of others died later from radiation poisoning. How dare the Americans give a bomb such a jolly name. Like Santa Claus. Like a round little fellow with his arms full of balloons for the kiddies. And candy. Hershey bars.

Tatsuo watches the grandmother round up the two little boys and their belongings. They are leaving Lake Teganuma. Going home. Maybe not to America today. But certainly tomorrow. Some tomorrow. They would take back with them the photographs and the stories. Japan is good to its visitors.

Tatsuo wants to send them away with something they hadn't expected. Something they ought to have. Something they deserve.

The water spewing from his hose is lethal. The systemic insecticide is a cancer cocktail. He holds on tight with his big rubber gloves. He wants to make certain he has complete control of the serpent rising to its prey. Doesn't his name tell it all? *Tatsuo*. Dragon.

Tatsuo turns the hose in the direction of the Americans. The guy in the truck shouts something at Tatsuo. "*Yamero*!" After a lifetime of World War II movies, the grandmother hears menace in the language of the Japanese. What could be more threatening than a *kamikaze*? There's no reasoning with a man who would sacrifice his life for his convictions.

16 DeCicco/TEGANUMA

The force of the water knocks the little one off his feet. The grandmother, too, buckles to her knees. Only the older child stays standing. He faces Tatsuo with a question in his eyes. He wonders if this strange Japanese man is playing a game with them. Is this simply a sprinkler for them to keep cool?

Tatsuo withers from the look the boy is giving him. He turns his eyes away and walks toward the truck. The hose has been turned off by the man at the controls. Tatsuo's power gone.

The boy walks over to his grandmother and lifts her up with both hands. The little one, crying, runs to her. The three of them walk back to the train station.

It's time to go home.