The Female Pike

(A Fictitious True Story)

The family had packed themselves into the car when the man remembered that his telephoto lens was still lying on the living-room table. The woman went back to fetch it; she had the house key.

As they left the suburbs, the mounting quarrel in the back seat subsided instantly, and the children settled into counting cows.

The man was in excellent spirits. After all these years he was looking forward to spending midsummer on his home farm in Kainuu. The holiday cabin in Kuusamo was starting to bore him.

Midway through the journey, the car hit a fox that suddenly sprang from the dark spruce thicket. The little girl wanted to stroke it, but the mother forbade her; wild foxes carry all sorts of diseases.

The little boy was upset by the death of the fox. He whimpered for a while as they continued their journey. "The fox has gone to animal heaven," consoled the father. Thank heaven for the bumper bar – the car was unscathed.

When they arrived at their destination, the man's brother stood in the yard with a shotgun in his hand. The fieldfares were feasting on the year's first crop of raw strawberries. Shooting at them was ridiculous, thought the man; this was no way to behave on an organic strawberry farm – after all, fieldfares are just birds. "Birds that eat up profits," retorted the brother, praising the kick of his double-barrelled shotgun.

Later that afternoon, the man and his son drove to a nearby stream to fish for brown trout. From afar he spotted the grand old spruce tree that was split in half by lightning. It caught his eye at once, even though the woods were twice as thick along that stretch of the stream.

"Fancy that, it's still standing," he thought.

He had put a picture of that spruce on the cover of an annual report he once designed for a steel company. Now he noticed that his picture was back to front: the dry tip of the left branch arched north, not south. The man had copied the tree from a photograph of himself and his brother posing with a fine catch of trout. Their father had been a keen photographer in his youth. Together they often went fishing, hunting and berry-picking; the man had many pictures of their boyhood outings.

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The man cast his line and caught a fish on his first try. At first he thought he had caught a whitefish, but the

adipose fin was missing. He suspected that it was probably too bony to eat, but at the boy's insistence, the man popped it in the bag. An hour later, the bag was full. The man showed the boy how to make a carrying stick out of a forked branch.

The boy was irritated by the mosquitoes. The man longed for the days when the stream was full of brown trout. His socks got soaked as he jumped the hollow. Back at the car, the man and the boy made coffee in his brother's billy-can. The boy complained that it tasted bitter, but the man told him that billy-can coffee is always taken black. Before they left, the man pointed at the grand old spruce: the trees are dying because of the smog and chlorine from Russia, he told his son.

Back at the farm, the boy proudly showed off their catch. "That's coalfish," said the brother. "No good for eating." Besides, he added, all the fish in the stream tasted of peat. He would rather eat muskrat. The grandmother gutted and fried the fishes anyway; she remembered the times when food was scarce.

The woman and the little girl spent the afternoon petting the lambs and picking flowers in the meadow. Every vase in the farmhouse was full. The outdoor privy was "cool", said the little girl. The woman admired the old watermill; the grandfather had repaired it. The flour from the mill made heavenly bread.

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Later that evening, they heated the sauna. The sunset over the lake was breathtaking. The man was so moved by the beauty of the summer's eve that he wanted to capture the moment on film, but the woman was too lazy to fetch the camera from the caravan. Tomorrow, midsummer's eve, was sure to be just as beautiful. They might even see a brood of young diver birds on the lake, the grandfather had told her.

After his second beer, the man complained to his brother about the holiday cabins spoiling the lakefront. They ruined the peaceful, secluded atmosphere. The brother disagreed; the vacationers brought life to the dying village. What bothered him were the "wilderness treks" planned by the local trade ombudsman and the double-dealing manager of the ski resort. The inaugural launch of their first "highland jeep safari" was to be celebrated that following week. A Cabinet Minister had promised to dress "sporty" and shake the mayor's hand at the ceremony. The other man understood this symbiosis: nature must evolve in step with human progress.

After their fourth beer, the men started quarreling about the "scraggly conservationists" who chain themselves to trees. After their seventh or eighth beer, the brother swung a punch at the man. The corner of his eye began to bleed. The brother just hated being badgered for not having a wife. The brothers made up in the early hours of the morning under the sparse, narrow spruces on the hill where they ski-jumped as young boys.

Two days later, midsummer was but a memory. Back in town, the woman, girl and boy were radiant. The boy proudly showed off the large pike-head his grandfather had given him. The man had a terrible headache. It must have been all the booze he knocked back as they sat by that smoking mound of tractor tyres.

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Translated by Silja Kudei