

THE FISHERMAN

In search of a lifeline.

BY TODD THORNE

Gold flashed between lichen-encrusted stones. William flung the cast net.

“Don’t know what you call this, Billy, but it ain’t fishing.”

He hauled in the net, shook it, and readied another toss. Chilled from the aquifer-fed stream, the mesh felt like frozen chicken wire.

“Not fishing ... restoration. My mission is —”

Urgent beeping shrilled. William rolled his wrist and jabbed the biometer’s alarm.

“That little cuss keeps going off. How come?”

“Because I’m sick, Dad. Getting sicker.”

“See the doctor.”

“Aren’t any.”

“On that ship of yours.”

“Busted. In the flare-up.”

It wouldn’t matter anyway, not with leukaemia or lymphoma, whichever the radiation had gifted him.

Gold streaked along the shoreline. Off-balance, William heaved the net. Fate nudged it into his quarry’s path.

Something seized his bowels and wrenched.

He jerked back on the net cord. His prize thudded into the dust at his feet.

“That’s no keeper, Billy. It’s smaller than your hand.”

The juvenile goldfish writhed its death, coating itself with grit. William yanked the scanner from his belt, flicked it on, and flung it atop the net.

“Throw it back — hurry! — before the game warden comes.”

He staggered ten paces out of scanner range and doubled over. A torrent of bile spewed, laced with crimson ribbons. The scanner chimed. William lay in the cockle-burrs as the cramps diminished.

“Do you remember the summer we fished Puget Sound? Wasn’t that sockeye heavenly, Billy? Tasted like butter, didn’t it?”

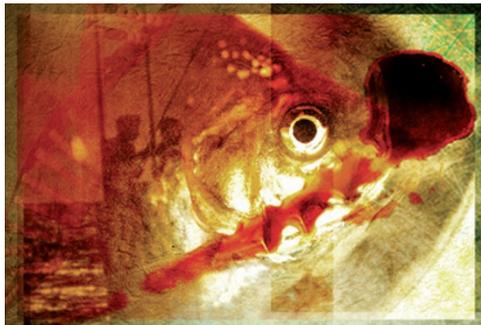
He dry-heaved at the thought.

“Or how about our blue marlin trip out of Lauderdale? What a fighter that fish was.”

“Florida’s gone, Dad.” He shuffled to his knees and crawled. “I saw from orbit. Covered by ocean.”

He reached the scanner, which registered nominal. The juvenile goldfish bore no marker isotopes.

“What about Yellowstone, Lake Erie? You



were barely ten when we fished those. Gone too?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

He stuffed the unmarked goldfish into the chill pack with the two mature ones he’d netted at daybreak. Those had positive scans for pink markers.

“The land’s intact, Dad. Can’t tell otherwise.”

“Damned alien things.”

“Eradicators.”

“Stupid name.”

“Accurate, though. They warned us what they were going to do and then did it, down to the last human genetic traces. Including yours.”

One month ago, he’d landed back in California and surveyed a total loss. The Sacramento Restoration Bunker had been gutted. In Denver, the Bunker had become radioactive glass, along with most of Colorado. Tampa Bay’s Bunker was drowned under feet of sea water. Nashville’s and Albany’s, he’d never reach alive. Which left only Midland.

The trip to Texas underscored the Eradicators’ methodical approach, with plenty of evidence of the last fight for survival: twisted wreckage, blackened char, wholesale devastation. No traces of the vanquished — even the graveyards had been sifted for genetic material. The aliens had obliterated all they could find.

Global contingency measures had all failed, including the gene bank his ship carried, compromised by a solar flare that, ironically, probably saved him from Eradicator probe detection. Doom rode upon those ionized particles though, more certain than any Eradicator weapon.

The biometer shrilled again: temperature

102.5 and climbing.

“Let’s head back to the Bunker.”

The Midland Restoration Bunker abutted a

sprawling intact wind and solar farm — a fortuitous surprise. Clean-room techniques had been applied to the farm’s construction like on the Bunker itself. It must have worked. Without taint by human genetic material, the aliens had been indifferent.

Deep in the Bunker’s main vault, William fed the two mature goldfish into the supply intake. Moments later a small panel registered 11 samples of viable human female DNA, representing the 11 Trojan horses he’d recovered so far from the surrounding ponds and streams.

The tally for male DNA samples read zero.

No blue markers meant no restoration for humanity. With no time remaining, according to his biometer.

William slipped the juvenile goldfish out of the chill pack. In its dead, black eye his reflection wavered.

“You’re a real keeper, little buddy. Do me proud.”

He snapped open his pocketknife and drew a gash across his left palm. The biometer shrilled its warning as spurts of blood streaked across golden scales. The fish dropped into the supply intake.

He waited.

“What are you doing, Billy?”

“Making you a grandpa.”

When the male DNA count registered one, he tapped Commit. To the subsequent warning about an excessively low male sample size, he tapped Override.

The biometer joined the scanner and his remaining gear on the vault floor. One day his progeny would discover them and contemplate their purpose, if fortune smiled and his irradiated contribution proved viable.

Outside, the spiteful Sun teased him with a tiny ray of hope.

“Restoration’s finished, Son?”

“God only knows.”

“What now?”

He turned southeast. “Lake Amistad’s that way. Did we ever fish it?”

“You grew up too fast.”

“Huh?”

“Time ran out on us.”

“Yeah. Since it’s happening again ... wanna do some real fishing, Daddy, like we used to?”

“Now that’s my Billy.” ■

In the micro-slices of free time permitted by his high-tech job, Todd Thorne (todthorne.com) tries to be a decent family man and writer of dark, disturbing tales.