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Catch and Release

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Catch and Release

M.G. BETTRIDGE

A spotless cooking area. A four-burner stove cradling a set of three deep-fry skillets, their pans shiny with vegetable oil. A butcher block for preparing cutlets. A man seated at the counter, eyeing his reflection in the stainless steel door of the diner's refrigerator.

The man raises a finger and gives his glasses – tinted, new prescription – a nudge, slides the finger down and up-and-down the crooked bridge of his nose, then turns away, and sits himself sideways to the counter.

The counter seats six, and the four tables on the floor seat another five each, but except for the man, the diner is empty. At his elbow are the juice can he's using as an ashtray, his Marlboros, and the Zippo lighter – a collector's item, the Web has showed him – titanium finish, wind-proof, 292.50 USD. He lifts the pack of cigarettes, gives it a shake to see how many he's got left, knocks one out, plugs it in, but his lips are as dry as the paper they touch, and he peels it back out.

He wets his lips. Naturally, considering all that's happened, he's on edge. And the wife? Not a word out of her since his second or third or however many damn calls it is he's made to her. But what'd he expect? So what, if anything is there to worry about? She's on her way over. The woman is cold-stone stoic. You just know she's gonna do the right thing.

He takes up the lighter, steadies it, gives the wheel one, two, three flicks before getting up a flame. He touches it to the cigarette, inhales, and blows out a pillow of smoke.

So, what will he tell the cops?

He will tell the cops: Coming up on the diner late this morning, he'd had the first of his what's-wrong-with-this-picture moments. Took him a minute, but only a minute, mind you, and then he'd got it. It was the newspaper still in the door mail slot at the top of the outside staircase. It shouldn't have been there at that hour, he realized, but it would be sometime yet before he climbed those stairs and entered the residence to discover what it meant, and that what it meant wasn't very nice. Not very nice to the old lady, not at all.

On the counter at the register end sits a *manekineko*, its cat's paw beckoning, though what the hell good it's gonna do anyone at this point, he hasn't a clue. More like mocking events, the

man broods, than anything else. Behind this ceramic feline lucky charm and a shelf below sits the diner's cash register, its drawer jacked open and empty and looking as clean as a scream.

The man fingers a menu. The diner's main fare: deep-fried breaded pork cutlets or shrimp or the combo with sides of shredded cabbage, rice, red miso soup and sliced pickles. He doesn't know how long it's been since last he ate here, though the distance to the *tonkatsu-ya* from his and the wife's residence is no more than ten, maybe twenty minutes max on foot, that is, depending if you come at it through the business district or take the scenic route, coming at it over the bridge and the canal. Depending.

The canal. He knocks a cigarette ash into the tab hole of the juice can, and it hisses back up at him when it hits the splash of liquid at the bottom, and he conspires an image of his wife standing at the bridge and dropping the sharp, lure-shaped object into the brackish waters, but then suddenly, and contrary to instructions, rushing on in a panic, the trying woman, not sticking around long enough even to make certain it stays down.

Who's to say, he worries, that it wouldn't catch a current, resurface down-canal, get washed up on shore? Or get snagged on some barbless hook and landed by some weekend fisherman? Or fisherwoman.

He takes a bite of smoke, and pulls down on a corner of his mustache, which is still the natural crow-black color it was when he was in his twenties, God help him, when he couldn't have imagined being indebted to anything but his own self-interest.

Confess, he has told her.

'That's all you gotta do. Confess, and it's over and done with, clear and free.'

She's got no choice in the matter anyway, he tells himself, when next he touches the cell phone in his jacket pocket. Vibrating, it does a lap dance on the tips of his fingers, and he guesses it's the wife calling in, smiles, knows it had better be, only then to realize that the vibration is originating not from the phone, but from the fingers that touch it.

He's told the wife: 'You don't know the answer to a question the police ask, or you forget the answer to a question, don't worry about it. People forget. Especially people under stress forget.'

'Don't make up some half-assed answer just to fill in your story,' he's told her. 'Just say, I don't know. I don't remember. But whatever you say ... and I want you to stay as close as you can to how you and me been talking about it ... believe it when you say it, and the cops, they'll believe it, too. They got no reason not to. The confession coming from you, the woman's own

daughter? The long history between the two of you? Piece of cake. Shake'n bake. Do the right thing!'

And the police will ask: Your wife? She has her own key?

Stands to reason, the man will think to reply to the idiots, this being her mother's place, for chrissakes, though to be more precisely accurate, you want the entire picture, it's about as much his place now as it is anybody's or ever will be.

Not that, of course, he'd answer that way. The way he'd answer is, he'd say: Yeah, both he and the wife has got their own key. And Mother, she had her key, too, of course. Three or four keys give or take, the dear woman always misplacing them, as if since forever they were never of any more importance to her than that.

Regardless of which, the man will continue, any one key fits both the lock for the diner first floor and the lock for the residence second floor. You get from one to the other, he will inform the cops, by way of the outside staircase at the side of the building.

Him? After spotting the newspaper in the mail slot, before going up to see what the hell that was all about, he'd gone around to the diner, found the door locked, unlocked it, slid it open, took a step, and then had his second what's-wrong-with-this-picture moment.

He'd hesitated, thinking that maybe, even after all these times, somehow he'd made the wrong turn. Cased the entrance up and down, as if all the sudden something about it wasn't right. Didn't get it. Couldn't see what he wasn't seeing. Glanced at the cigarette in his fingers, twiddled it, looked for a place to ash it, raised it and took a had-enough-of-this-crap deep drag, then dropping it, crushed it with the toe of his loafer, and stepped on through.

Inside the diner's entrance, his eyes took their moment to adjust, and then as quick as that, there it was, as obvious as all that, the *noren* curtain furred in the corner of the entranceway. On any day, this curtain, each half of it showing two characters of the four that make up the name of the diner's main dish, *to-n-ka-tsu*, would have gone up outside and across the entrance at the start of business.

Hadn't been hung, he now saw.

Something was not right, he now knew.

He felt in his pocket for his pack of Marlboros.

Called out: 'Mother?'

Nothing. And not that he expected her to be sitting there in the dark, but he called out a second time, and for good measure, a third. You never know with old folks. Could be she'd

slipped and fell, hurt herself. Or worse, it occurred to him, and he stretched, twisted his neck and popped it, perishing the thought.

To the cops: He wouldn't go so far as to call it a premonition, but there was something in the air. And, yeah, it unnerved him at the time he's willing to admit.

At the time, he went up on his toes as if the darkness of the diner might have an edge to it he could peek out and over and all the way past.

'Mother?'

Nothing again.

He flipped a light switch. Checked the floor, the tables, behind the counter, the cooking area, plugged in a fresh one, lit up, and headed toward the doorway and the beaded curtain at the back of the diner.

A poster advertising Sapporo beer tacked to the wall to the left of the sink's mirror. A stack of plastic beer crates, some with empties, others with full bottles, and the recycling boxes, one for newspapers and one for newspaper inserts: advertisements; leaflets; color brochures.

He adjusts his glasses, turns and opens the door to the toilet stall.

As empty as the day is new.

He balances his cigarette on the sink's edge, and sets his eyeglasses on the tray below the mirror. He bends, opens the tap, cold-slaps his face with water. He raises his head, looks himself in the mirror, into eyes as narrow as coin slots, designed by nature that way, he has always presumed, to keep people from seeing in. He is, he knows, inscrutable.

He replaces his glasses, takes out a comb, touches up the tips of his hairpiece – so top of the line, no one has any idea he's wearing one or the nerve to suggest he is – and then teases the comb through that forever-forgiving mustache of his.

He picks up the cigarette, and notices again the recycling boxes. He sees that yesterday's newspaper, folded as neatly as a bed sheet, sits on top of the stack. Some of the old lady's habitual tidiness, he muses. It makes him happy, he cruises. It makes him glad.

Finishing up, he goes back through the diner, hits the light switch, closes and locks the door behind him, and walks around to the steps that lead to the second-floor residence.

The police will say: So, whoever rifled the cash register must've had a key?

The man gives his neck a twist.

He asks: The cash register key?

The cops reply: Uh-uh. The diner-residence key.

The man: Right. The diner-residence key.

The cops: Right. You said, on arriving, you unlocked the door to get in. So, whoever came in and rifled the cash register, first of all, that individual found nothing, because there was no cash tray to be found, because your wife's mother....

He holds up a hand, smiling at what he is about to lay on them, but then, on second thought, he drops the smile, lowers the hand, uses it to dust a trail of ash off the front his Eton dress shirt.

The cops: Well?

The man: Well, what?

The cops: Well, what gives?

What gives?

Yeah. What gives? With you.

The man blows out a cloud of smoke, and then taps the tip of his nose.

What gives is, she's his mother, too.

At this, the cops will make a slow, clean sweep of him from head to toe, and back up top again.

Say what? She's your what?

She's his mother, too, the man repeats, jacking out another bone.

Your mother? Is that so?

Is so.

Okay. Okay, then. And, of course, you can explain this ... family connection?

Doesn't know that he needs to explain it, actually.

Oh, he needs to, all right.

Only if it suits him, then.

And does it suit him?

A 'pretty please' from the cops might convince him that it does.

The cops: A pretty please it is, then.

The man: Then pretty please, here it is.

And he explains that when he married the daughter, per the wishes of her parents, who were without a male heir, he let himself be adopted into the family, and so, among other things, he took on the family name.

A mukoyoushi?

Right.

Is that so?

Of course it's so.

Is that right?

Right as red.

Right as red, then. And that's that?

That's that, unless there's something else you think you don't understand.

And what else could there be to understand?

Whatever it is you don't, obviously.

Then, pretty please. Go. Get on with it. Help us understand.

And the man, he does just that. He gets on with it. He explains how during the first years of the marriage, how he and the wife lived upstairs close-quarters with the parents, until finally he'd had enough of that situation, enough of the diner, enough of breaded pork cutlets, and he'd moved him and the wife into a place of their own.

He pauses here, lowers his head, but after a moment, slowly looks up and adds that, through no one's fault in particular, the marriage is childless.

He drops a shell of ash into the juice can.

The man: Childless. Tore the wife up. Blamed herself.

The police: Blamed herself, did she?

Wouldn't any wife?

Would and did, this one, obviously.

Obviously.

He will tell the cops that he runs his own business, and he will pass them his *meishi*, which will show a family name the same as his in-laws, and it also will show that he is president and owner of a wholesale plumbing fixtures and equipment company.

He will tell them: The business, it's doing great. Really great. It's doing really well. Much better than you'd expect in an economy that is drag-assing the way this one always is. But construction is the sacred money cow. Always has been. Good economy, bad economy, the yen never stops flowing into construction. And construction, everyone knows, needs plumbing, needs toilets and bathtubs and light fixtures, sinks and mirrors. Try telling him he didn't get into the right business.

The police: And your name before the *mukoyoushi* family business? If you please.

He takes a puff, considers an answer.

Mr. Fix-it Man.

The cops: Alrighty. All right. So, tell us about the key, if you please. Mr. Fix-it Man.

The key?

You've told us that your mother-in-law ...

Mother.

... that she always took the cash tray upstairs with her at the end of the day. Well, seems that this person who came in, this person rifles the cash register, finds nothing, then goes upstairs to look for it, but not before locking up the diner after himself.

The man: Or herself.

The cops: Or herself. Right. Locked it up nice and tidy.

The man: Well, women are tidy like that.

The cops: But murder never is, not even in the hands of a tidy woman. Looks like a fabricated crime, besides.

The murder?

Uh-uh. The rifling of the cash register, the going upstairs for the cash tray, the taking of the cash.

He says: Petty crime.

The cops remark: Petty?

The man says: He meant to say, a petty cash crime. But, really, who knows how much she had lying about? As meticulous as Mother was about most things, she could be careless about other things, like leaving cash out, doors unlocked....

Doors unlocked?

Yeah. Occasionally. But like he's already explained, she lost keys left and right. Couldn't keep track of them. Had no use for them. But, what of it? This ain't America, after all. Americans. What can you say?

Not much.

Not much, is right. Him? He's gotta believe it's all the red meat they eat makes them so violent.

A violent people.

A violent culture.

A bit of homegrown violence here, too, though.

A bit of violent something, he agrees.

And you got to admit, someone wasn't being careful.

Mother, you're saying? She was an old woman, for chrissakes. Careful? Forgetful as all hell, yeah, but....

Cash lying out for the taking....

Occasionally, like he's said. Part of the culture and habit of Mother's naive generation, don't you think? Anyway, drove the wife absolutely crazy, stuff like that.

He buries his cigarette into the edge of the juice can, and takes his time lighting up another.

The man: But who knows what this's really all about?

The police: Someone would have reason other than money to kill your mother-in-law?

Blowing out a piss stream of cigarette smoke, he gives this some thought.

To the cops: He supposes there could be a reason to kill anybody. Not that anyone in reality deserves killing, mind you. But he supposes that for anyone, there'd be somebody out there could have a real reason to make 'em dead.

A real reason. Right.

Real, but he doesn't know that makes it right. And, really, he can only speculate on motives and states of mind. He ain't a cop, after all, and he's no guesses even as to who did this terrible crime, can reason no reason for it. That dear old woman had no enemies.

A random crime, you're saying?

Isn't for him to say.

The police: Tell us about her customers, then.

The man: What customers she had anymore, you mean?

Yeah. Those customers.

Mostly people in the area. Old folks, like herself. Shopkeepers. Pensioners. But she'd also get the occasional businessman, some poor sap trying to save on expenses. An office worker or two, though probably a bento from FamilyMart is more to their liking these days. But the *tonkatsu* is cheap, too cheap, and it is good, very good, too good, and too damn cheap for that. Once in a while he'd even see a foreigner in here, which isn't exactly a selling point, he guesses. It is better cuisine than your average foreigner could really appreciate, he's sure.

Foreigners?

Yeah. Americans, he guesses. Caucasians. That type, you know? Like they own the air they breathe. Chinese, too, though. He guesses, anyway, Chinese. Asians, anyway. Southeast Asians, too. Seen them around lots and lots. Southeast-something. Acted like it. You know, how they're always linked arm-in-arm, three, four to a chain, moving like little pac-men,

pack-women in heels, shopping, eating, always on the move, with one eye out for the cops and the other out for your wallet. Bar hostesses and as cute as all-get-out, most of 'em. Never met a working woman yet couldn't separate a sucker from his money, is his point. Speaking of which, that's another business for you that the economy, however lousy, does nothing but smile down on. The water trade.

Right.

And then there are the Arabs. Never saw any of them in here, but they're around. And what that race is up to, well, that is open to speculation, and condemnation, if you like.

Cause trouble, do they?

Stay off the streets, once he eyeballs them. They know he's got their number.

Did your mother-in-law ever mention any trouble with any customers, foreigners or otherwise?

Mother?

Mother.

He shakes his head.

To the police: Never heard of any trouble, no. And he doubts there was any. Everyone liked her, and she liked everyone. And since everyone who knew her knew her ways, they'd know she'd take the cash tray up with her at night. Call the crime a fabrication if you want, but whoever it was did it, didn't know her.

The police ask: And the door to the residence? When you first went up?

He says: Locked.

The police: Okay. Locked. So, the perpetrator, downstairs, upstairs, in with a key, locks up after with a key. That would be about right, wouldn't it?

The man studies the pale red tip of his cigarette.

Could be exactly right.

Exactly.

Could be. How it went down. No argument with that, prob'ly.

No argument? Except for whose key it was, and how this unsavory individual got their hands on it.

Right. There is that.

He takes a pull on the cigarette.

Would make all the difference.

It'd make all the difference, all right.

Almost missed it.

But then didn't.

The man takes another pull, finds the cigarette's gone out, hooks the heels of his Armani loafers on the rung of the stool, gives them a half-dozen pumps as if to jog his memory, slips out his cell phone, and speed dials the wife.

Just who the hell does she think she is?

Still, no way she would not do exactly what she knows only she can do.

Mr. Fix-it Man.

He will explain to the police how he and the wife offered to take care of Mother after Father's death eight years previous.

Offered. Pleaded with her – begged her – to give up the diner and come live with them. He can't count the number of times they offered, it was that many. But the old woman said 'no thank you just the same' each and every time. Which especially didn't sit well with the wife. Just ... did not sit well with her. The place not doing much business since who knows when, you see, and Mother refusing to raise prices, all but giving the product away as a consequence. Not quite that cheap, but you can imagine how the wife saw it: losing money hand over fist. And for what, the daughter would say. But, you see, he knew, even if the wife never did, maybe never could, never wanted to for all the trouble it caused her, that it was this little pork cutlet shop that kept the old woman going. Leave her be, he'd finally have to tell his wife. Leave her be. Just you wait and see.

And by and by, the wife pretty much did just that. But, yeah, of course she still came around, still helped out, as any daughter would, but not like in the past. Still, business or no business, stress or no stress, she dropped in less and less. That's a fact. Gave up on the place, he guesses you'd call it. Maybe gave up on the old woman herself? Maybe that'd explain it. Or maybe it'd explain something else he hasn't even considered, yet. Ah, what the hell does he know about anything? Here in the middle of Tokyo, this piece of prime real estate used, for godsakes, to deep fry pork cutlets. The hard feelings that caused, he doesn't even want to think about.

On the post at the end of the counter and to the right of where he sits hangs a framed photograph of the *tonkatsu-ya*'s two proprietors. It shows Mother dressed in a white apron and dark-blue pantaloons and Father in baggy, blue slacks and wearing the same style and color of apron as the woman. Both wear toques and dark-framed eyeglasses, but while the

man holds his arms stiffly at his sides as if uncomfortable with posing for the bore of the camera lens, the woman holds her hands in front of her, the fingers laced as softly as ribbon. She is smiling, showing porcelain white teeth, and tears well in the photographer's eyes, for how this or any woman's smile, its lines and curves as kind and clean as curtains on a window, could make a man feel forever significant.

He knocks a worm of cigarette ash carelessly onto the floor, his heart racing as he fast-forwards past all that, only to find himself falling headlong into the pit that defines the advantage gained at the expense of another's violent death.

He will say: Yeah, the photo's one of his. He took it. Not all that good, he's a shutterbug after all, but one showing them, Mother and Father, at their best, you gotta be sure.

Mother, getting on in years as she was, he made it a point to drop in on her, to check on her whenever he could. Busy, busy schedule he is keeping. Running his own company, after all. Couldn't get to the diner as often as he would've liked or even should have, you wanna be honest about it. But this being the rare holiday he had a few hours off, that is exactly what he does. He makes the trip over late this morning.

The police: On foot?

On foot? How else, you morons, he thinks to reply. He takes a taxi? It's ten minutes away.

But he stops himself here, and thinks: He did put it at ten minutes, didn't he, the time it takes?

He presses a thumb to his right temple. He cautions himself about getting ahead of himself.

To the cops: You got to understand, this ain't easy. Not for the wife, not for him. The two of them, they're just ordinary people, reacting to overwhelming circumstances. Something inside's bound to give.

He touches his chest.

Nerves, he'd call it.

The cops: Nerves, huh? That's what it is?

The man: What else could it be?

The cops: The truth, maybe?

The man shakes his head.

The truth does not give in to anything. It is what it is. It's all we got.

Then, come on. Give us the rest of what you got.

And the man, he gives them everything up to and after finding the old woman.

Coming up on the diner, he'd stopped. He remembered thinking, he doesn't know why, why at this moment it crossed his mind, but he thought, a single match, a carelessly dropped cigarette would bring the place down, it and most likely any other building in the area. These old, wooden things, as dry and brittle as the bones of the mostly elderly that inhabited them. Their doors so low, you'd catch your breath walking through. Windows so tight, you'd hardly know day from night, or whether it mattered to the inhabitants.

An icy breeze dog-nipped at his heels, and he shook a leg, planting himself where he stood. He reached inside his jacket, took out his cigarettes and the Zippo. He flicked the lighter's wheel. No go. He gave it a hard tap or three on the palm of his hand, flicked the wheel again, and up danced a fiery ballerina. He touched the flame to the tobacco, inhaled, tipped back his head, exhaled, watched as the air stripped the smoke into streams of afterthought, and then he saw the newspaper in the door mail slot at the top of the stairs.

He gave his glasses an adjustment. He checked his watch, an item, a vintage Rolex he'd fought a guy over, did he mention? Over a woman, he broke a guy's wrist over a woman, took a punch to the face over a woman he could've cared less about. Put a man down over a woman wasn't even Japanese.

He did mention that. He knows he did. But it sure as hell bears repeating.

It's the principle of the thing, is his point. The watch, natch, was just a part of the spoils.

Rolex time: 11:22.

On the landing at the top of the stairs stands a washing machine. It has separate compartments for washing and spinning, and its drain hose feeds into a dry gutter.

The man works the newspaper, the *Yomiuri*, out of the mail slot, unfolds it, scans the headlines – which he couldn't remember now for the life of him, so don't even ask – folds and tucks it under his arm.

He turns the doorknob, finds it locked, and is thankful that the old woman is taking precautions on at least one front, and as he takes out his own key, he rings the doorbell to announce to her she's got company, when there she is. As the doorbell chime fades, he hears a familiar, hushed slipper-shuffle coming toward the *genkan*, and he waits, listening, when

suddenly it stops, the shuffling, as if the person approaching is unsure she's heard the doorbell, or has suddenly decided she is not going to answer it.

He pulls the cigarette from his mouth, picks at his bottom lip, hunches his shoulders against the cold. He leans in, fingering the key.

'Mother?'

He listens.

'Mother? You okay? It's me.'

To the cops: No reply. Nothing.

He adjusts the newspaper under his arm.

'Mother. It's me.'

Nothing, again. No sound. Not a peep, but to the police he will insist: He definitely had heard something. Or someone. He is as sure of that as he can be.

Which means what, exactly?

The man will think, and then reply: He doesn't know what it means, he guesses, except that he heard it a second time.

He steadies himself, inserts the key into the lock, but hesitates. Above on the door is a judas hole. Mother, small in stature, even on tiptoe could not have reached it to look out, and wouldn't have used it even if she could've. After all, who would come calling, except for the people she knew and who knew her? Just the same, she doesn't answer the door, doesn't reply to his calling out to her, and why he does what next he does, he hasn't a clue, but he covers the spy hole with a finger, blotting out the inner-eye, and turns and looks out. He takes in the shuttered drycleaners and the portrait photo shop, both with upstairs residences. The closed-for-the-day bread, *sake* and *kome* shop. A children's playground gone to seed. The empty patch of street that has led him right to where he's standing now.

A slice-and-dice of smoke rises from his Marlboro and strikes him in the eye. Rubbing the eye, he puts his ear to the door, and he will tell the cops: Again, he hears the slippers feet, but this time, the sound is coming from further within the residence, and he imagines her quickly tidying up things, making messes disappear.

The police: Roof rats, maybe, don't you think?

Roof rats?

The kind'a noise those rodents would make. Don't you think? Considering all you're about to find.

The man: Knowing nothing at this point, he considered it was the old woman.

The cops: Rats playing gate-ball in and out of the roof tiles.

The man: He knows what he heard.

The cops: Right. And how does that change anything?

He picked up the menu, studied it.

To the cops: He wondered, by the way, what you could get in America for a meal of *tonkatsu*. Not that it mattered. Was just thinking aloud. Mother, with what she charged, she nearly gave it away at cost, which never sat too well with the wife, you could imagine....

He stopped himself here. He was rambling, and he worried that maybe he had made that point already.

He set the menu down, pushed it away. Still, there it was: the old woman was just that unselfish. Which played a big part, he figured, in her not coming to live with the wife and him. Didn't want to impose. Didn't want to cause trouble. As if that old woman, God bless her, could ever have been any trouble to anyone any at all.

The first room is the kitchen and dining area. Her washed and now dry over- and under-things are hanging on a laundry rack. Clean dishes standing at quiet attention in the strainer. A spotless countertop. A table set as neat as a pin. Two place mats. Two? She had company? Was expecting company?

Might come in handy, a bit of information like that. Might be useful somehow, someday.

A wooden container on the table holds a dozen or so pairs of chopsticks. On the table: scissors, a needle-with-thread anchored to a square of pink cloth, and a leather *yubinuki* lying with it. He sets the *Yomiuri* on the table, and picks up the thimble, a padded ring, and slips it on his pinkie, where it stops at the first knuckle. A slight woman, he smiles, his mother-in-law.

Tea tin and a one-cup strainer sitting on a small dish. A toaster oven at the wall-end of table and above it on a shelf a 12" black-and-white, the dial set to NHK 1. A Felix the Cat wall clock above, it's tail swinging, swatting away the seconds with a nonchalance that suggests it has an endless supply of the too-precious goddamn things.

A washbasin outside the toilet; a medicine cabinet-with-mirror above the sink. A shelf below the cabinet, and on the shelf, a double-folded pink face cloth and dentures in a glass of blue cleaner. The face cloth is dry and laundry-fresh.

And then, low and behold, there it is, the register's cash tray, sitting like nobody's business below and to the left of the sink, and he is about to reach for it, when something catches him up. He turns, gives a tight look over his shoulder.

'Mother?'

Nothing.

He hesitates, turns back, plants his cigarette between his teeth, bends slowly down, raises the cash tray's lid, when at that very moment – he will swear this to the cops – he hears a soft cry coming somewhere from behind.

He turns.

Calls out: Mother?

Nothing.

He listens a moment longer, turns back, looks down.

The tray is empty.

As if it could be anything but.

To the police: Petty crime. Didn't he tell you?

The police: Sure did, Mr. Fix-it Man. Sure did.

He stands, returns to the kitchen, but stops. He lifts his head, but not at a sound, this time. He's now getting a whiff of something ... of an unclean something. Of soiled clothes? Dirty dishrags? Long un-watered plants? He can't place it.

The cops interrupt his thoughts: A dead roof rat, maybe?

The man: In Mother's place? Right.

He steps over to the *fusuma* that leads to the room where she will be sleeping. Listens. Calls out softly.

'Mother?'

He waits, gives it a moment, fingers the round pull of each door, and sliding each open a touch, he is greeted with the odor of the unwashed, and in its mix, the sharp smell of rust on metal.

He one-eye peers into the room. The little he is able to see, he sees by the dim sunlight that falls over his shoulder, that slips around the crooked frames of the room's shutters, and he is able to make out a quilt-covered figure on the futon in the center of the room.

'Mother? You awake?'

He slides the doors open, steps out of his slippers, enters the room, and closes the doors behind him, but a little too deliberately, too sharply, as if, it occurs even to him, he is trying to drive home a point.

The cops: And what point might that be?

The man: It's late in the day? She's got a business to run? She shouldn't be living on her own?

He isn't sure.

The cops: Aren't sure of much, are you? Shuffling slippers. Loose hands tidying up messes. Soft cries from empty rooms.

The man: He's telling it as he experienced it.

Right. Go on, then, telling it as you experienced it.

And he goes on.

He steps forward, takes off his glasses, blinks, puts the glasses back on, and waits to see if his eyes make the adjustment. They do.

He is looking down and into her face. It is the blood-let color of someone who has spent a restless night fending off a bad dream, is how he would describe it. Her eyelids are at half-mast, as if stuck between the world that once was and that now is, and her upper lip has receded, conceded, he muses, exposing a ridge of toothless gum, while her chin ... but he can't go on. This is more than he had bargained for, more than he can handle, you wanna know the truth, and he backs off, deciding he will leave her discovery to others, and he is about to turn and go, when next he sees, is certain that he does see, her chest rise and fall ...

Huh?

... with a breath.

A breath?

A breath.

You were hearing things, and now you are seeing things.

Wasn't. Didn't.

Gas in the body cavity, probably, finding release, don't you think?

Uh-uh, he says.

Wishful thinking, then.

He twists his neck, pops it.

A fish breaking water ...

A thief in the night.

... then diving back into the depths.

Bubbles rising from the silt and dissipating, prob'ly.

Pro'bly.

Sympathetic memory?

He takes a bite of smoke.

Who's he to say? What the hell's he know, anyway? He runs a plumbing fixtures supply business under a family name ain't even his own, for chrisakes. Beyond that, he knows nothing worth knowing about anything.

Mr. Fix-it.

He thinks: So, how clever is it to wear little nylon jumpers with the word POLICE stenciled in English on the back? What do they think they're up to? Where do they think they are? New York City? London, England? Pasadena, California?

He checks his trimmed nails, and takes a double-deep draw on the cigarette, forming his next thoughts in the pocket of smoke he inhales.

To the police: He apologizes for all the trouble the old woman's death has caused them. He apologizes for his wife, for the terrible trouble she has caused. He clears his throat, apologizes a second time for each, and adds another for his own his mismanagement of everything, from calling the wife before he'd called the police, to stepping to the corner vending machine for a canned drink while he waited for her to arrive. All this before he called the authorities. He lowers his head. He apologizes. He apologizes.

He apologizes.

The cops: Your wife. Still hasn't arrived. Curious, that.

The man: Nothing curious about it. She'll be here. Hold your horses. Just you wait and see.

Right. And what again was it you told her when you called?

He asks himself: What again? He touches the mustache. So, he has answered this already? Shakes his head, can't remember exactly, but knows he has to.

The man: That she'd better get over to the diner.

The cops: And you told her why she'd better get over to the diner?

He runs a hand down the back of his hairpiece.

To be frank, not in so many words, no.

Not in so many words?

Not in so many words. He told her just enough to let her know something had happened. Something had happened. And how exactly did you put that to her, please?

‘Something bad’s happened. You’d better get over here. Needs our joint attention.’
Something like that.

You told your wife, ‘Needs our joint attention’? That’s how you put it? To the woman’s daughter?

The man: Yeah. That’s it. ‘Needs our joint attention.’

And the ‘Something bad’s happened’ part of it? That didn’t catch her up, make her think twice, naughty or nice?

He nods as if this is the very point he’s been trying to make, and he jags out a fresh cigarette.

To the cops: He didn’t go into it.

The cops: Didn’t go into ‘Something bad’s happened’?

Nope. She understood.

Sorry, but understood what?

That something bad had happened.

To her mother, you mean? You saying that’s what she understood?

He was calling from Mother’s place. She understood.

Okay. So, she have anything to say at that juncture?

About?

About? About anything. Maybe she asks a question or two.

The man draws on his cigarette, cocks his head.

No.

No?

The man: Silence.

The police: Silence?

Is golden.

He cracks a smile, knocks a cigarette ash into the fruit juice can.

The man: That pretty much sums it up, yeah. Her reaction. Silence. But she’s not normally the most ... what’s the word? ... demonstrative person. Not talkative, anyway.

Not an emotional person? Not the kind of person to react, except silently, to news that something bad has happened to her own mother?

The man touches his chest.

The cops: Nerves, again, is it?

The man: Holds it in like a pressure cooker.

Exactly.

He notes the band of white hair lying across Mother's forehead, as if holding the head in place, and he wonders if this, too, is the killer's work, when next his eyes drift to the neck, and from it, to the dark, wet pattern in the futon, to the spatters and tines of the same dark liquid fanning out a meter and more across the tatami. It looks as if someone has flicked a paint brush, dotting dozens of i's and crossing dozens of t's in the effort, and doing so dozens and dozens of times as if in a mad attempt to blur their criminal tracks, and now the poor man's heart is beating dozens and dozens of beats too fast, and he has to straighten himself up in an effort to slow the blood-beat down.

He places a hand on his chest. He takes a deep breath, and lets it out. His eyes go back to Mother. He sees placed there at the head of her futon a box of tissues, a radio, a clock. Eyeglasses. He studies the quilt she's lying under. It is unruffled. Creaseless. As if the person responsible had tucked the old woman in. As if this person had known and cherished her. As if this person had come here for a reason other than to see her dead. As if in apology, the beast had laid her quietly to rest after having done its beastly best.

A bunny-eared tissue peeking out of its box. A radio, a clock. Eyeglasses sitting on their wings. He can't get over that lineup. Like at her age, these or similarly death-incongruous objects are the items a person'd make ready for when their time came, and he can't help but wonder, is that what he will do when his time comes, line up his nonessentials for others to log away as their only memories of him?

The Zippo lighter – a collector's item – the Rolex, the Armani loafers, and the hairpiece.

He turns at a sudden disturbance of light, only to see that the strip of sun-white that fuses the *fusuma* doors is unbroken.

Still, just the same, he calls out: Who's there?

Roof rats.

Roof rats, my ass.

He feels for his pack of cigarettes. Can't locate it.

Goddamn it.

Goddamn it to hell.

He did lock the door after entering, didn't he? He doesn't remember, but then calms himself, reminds himself that what matters is not what he doesn't remember, but how closely what he does remember fits the truth.

The police: That's the thing, all right.

The man: That's the thing.

He goes to the *fusuma*, slides the twin doors open, steps into the slippers and out and into the kitchen and the sunlight, only in its unforgiving exposure suddenly to feel unwell. He goes to the sink, bends, and gets sick to his stomach. He runs the water, and wipes his mouth with the pink face cloth. He looks in the mirror, and there sees a man pale and tobacco hungry. He turns, pats down his pockets, takes out the pack, knocks out a nail. He feels for his Zippo, and his fingers touch what he knows to be a key holder.

Louis Vuitton Utah Leather. Expensive. That's the first thing she remarked about it, how expensive it looked. That and the name. Louis Vuitton. She noticed that. Women always do.

The cops: And how much would a guy pay for an item like that?

The man: Enough to make a woman forget everything he owes her.

The cops: As much as that, huh?

The man: Had better be, or how else is a guy supposed to get by?

On the table, the *Yomiuri*. He picks it up, plants the key holder, and covers it with the newspaper.

Time is getting late. He touches his glasses to bring his thoughts back into focus, pulls a handkerchief from his pocket, takes off his glasses, catches the pieces of a shattered self-reflection in the lenses, holds the glasses to the dim light, and cleans and cleans till he knows he has it right.

The dragon master, Mr. Fix-it Man, he blows a twin-stream of tobacco smoke out his nostrils.

Keep it simple. Simple is plausible.

He will say: The wife? She is a good woman. Good wife and daughter. More so than she gives herself credit for, anyway, that's for damn sure. But ... but....

To the police: But a confession is a confession, he supposes. Right? There's no backtracking on a confession once it's been made, is there? No catch and release of someone who's confessed to murder. Right?

To himself: If she makes the confession, that is, her concession to the event of her mother's timely death.

And milking it for reassurance, he tugs down on a corner of his mustache with one hand, while with the other he digs out his cell phone, and once again, one last time, giving it one last chance to work, he speed dials his confessor.

The End

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Two real-life crimes involving elderly victims, the first occurring in July of 1965 in the California southland, the second in June of 1997 in the Kanto region, were the primary inspirations for the fictional story "Catch and Release".

The clearance-rate for the type of crime that took those victims down is 64.5% in the one country (2014) and a reported 95% or better in the other. I have been unable to ascertain whether the 1965 and 1997 perpetrators were apprehended. However, when I first read – and read again the newspaper accounts of those crimes, and note again the paltry number of column inches allotted to each incident and victim, I imagine that their investigations would not have been given priority. I could be mistaken there, of course, but in my mind, those crimes have always remained unsolved, the victims' stories unfinished. Until now, that is.

"Catch and Release" is not a story about investigation and crime solving, however. Nor, strictly speaking, is it a story about the victim. It is the perpetrator's story, mainly, or if you will, it is a study of character and remorse, or lack thereof, and the likely inability of this criminal ever to come to terms with his guilt.

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