A Taste for Lionfish by Megan Mayhew Bergman

**IN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS,** Holland would be 3,894 miles away, outside Nome on Alaska’s Seward Peninsula, setting up camp on a ridgeline near the Red Knot breeding grounds.

“You can’t *wait* to get there,” I said, trying not to show the hurt I felt. “Even with grizzly bears rooting through your trash—and mosquitoes the size of small planes.”

Holland snorted and took a big gulp of her beer. “I have bear spray,” she said. “And that weird mosquito-net hat. You won’t miss seeing me in that.”

“But I *will.*”

Holland was setting up her Alaskan research station with a woman named Rachel. I could tell by Rachel’s pictures online—mountain biking and bird banding—that she was a threat. She was tall, like Holland. The phrase “a handsome woman” came to mind, but that’s the kind of phrase that gets a person into trouble these days. You can’t say what you really think anymore, even if you’re one of the good guys—and we all think we’re one of those, I guess.

The trip was for Holland’s seminal research project on Red Knot migration, the cornerstone of her PhD. She spent most of her day studying the russet-chested endangered shorebirds. I liked them too, but Holland woke up thinking about Red Knots and where they were in their migration pattern, how weather was going to affect them. When she sat next to a stranger at a dinner party, she told them the story of the Danish King Canute, potential namesake of the Red Knot, who demonstrated his lack of power over the tides—and called it a testament to the awesome power of God. “That’s where they forage,” she’d say, always a little awestruck. “The tides.”

After spending two years with Holland, I would forever have secondhand Red Knot knowledge. I knew that they were jump migrants, covering large distances all at once—some of the largest migrations in the entire animal kingdom. They were monogamous. The male knot tended the eggs, a fact that Holland loved.

How would I get through three months of picturing Rachel and Holland in a yellow tent together, banding birds, explaining their deepest thoughts and lives to one another in the absence of any other human?

“It’s not forever,” Holland said, shoveling peanut noodles into her mouth. She patted my arm, amber-color eyes full of excitement, her thick, ropey braid tossed over one shoulder.

But I think we both knew it was.

Three months is a long time to be away from the person you love. It’s time enough for someone to change, to let go. I knew, because it’s what my mother had done to my father when I was fifteen, and we never saw much of her after that.

There is always the leaver and the left, and I understood which camp I was in.

**It was not** the goodbye I wanted.

There was nothing romantic about the odd glow of our bedroom at 4:30 a.m. as Holland knocked around the bathroom, brushing her teeth before her flight. She wasn’t one to be careful or overly considerate about noise. She flipped on the lights and zipped her suitcase loudly. I envied her assured movements.

I had ambitions of waking up and making her coffee, of looking clear-eyed when I said goodbye. But I sat up with matted hair, wrapped my arms around her, and she was gone.

I heard her cab pulling away from the curb, rolled over, and let myself cry into the pillow—but just for five minutes. My father always said you could throw yourself a funeral when you were sad, but only for five minutes. Then you had to dust yourself off and move on, like he had, retiring to a sensible one-bedroom condominium in downtown Raleigh.

Holland had moved her furniture and belongings to a storage unit the week before. I taped up the last of our boxes, preparing them for the storage unit, gazing at the remains of our life, the carpeted hall littered with the debris of a move—bits of tape and cardboard, the top to the toothpaste. Our rental would go back on the market tomorrow. Who knew what came after that?

To fill the time, I’d signed up for my own research project. I wanted to have something going on, something tugging at my attention that would render me unable to answer the phone every time Holland called.

When you live among PhD students, you get used to them saying “my research” in a breathless, sanctimonious sort of way. And even though I found it grating, eventually I grew jealous. I told myself that many of Holland’s friends were going to be making $15 an hour, living in a trailer on the edge of a national forest, applying for grants, hands raw from pulling invasive vines. Still, six months earlier I’d seen a posting for environmental justice enthusiasts who liked to travel, and I ripped the flyer from the café bulletin board. I applied and got the job, working on eliminating the invasive lionfish.

I threw my bags into the back of my Subaru, slammed the trunk shut, got on I-85 North, and headed toward Alligator, North Carolina.

**I drove east** for nearly eight hours, the flat roads flanked by pine forests and gas stations, and billboards for plastic surgery and tanning beds. The monotony kept me from thinking, lulled my brain into an exhausted fog. I stopped and got an enormous iced tea, the condensation dripping down my wrist and onto the seat of the car.

For the past six weeks I’d been studying the invasive lionfish in preparation for this trip. I’d always thought it an extraordinary-looking fish, with a permanent frown and several dazzling, venomous appendages. Native to Indonesia, the fish started appearing near Florida in the ’90s—and now they were destroying entire reef ecosystems. With no natural predators, they proliferate from Florida to North Carolina, releasing something like two million eggs a year.

My job was to convince people to start eating them. My boss at Invasivores, a new conservation organization, had given me a script. When I spoke to young people, I was supposed to say: “We’re creating a new generation of invasivores—people who hunt and eat invasive species in order to save native species. You can help save the planet by incorporating lionfish into your diet!” When I spoke to “ordinary folks”—that’s how they said it to me, as if that’s a box you could check on a census—I was supposed to say, “Lionfish are plentiful, free, and they taste great—soft white flesh, like a hogfish. They’re poisonous to the touch but great to eat.”

I got closer to Columbia, the town just outside Alligator. Men sat motionless in the sun in front of pickup trucks parked on the roadsides, signs advertising sweet potatoes, collards, and live bait. I had that new-kid feeling, like I was starting at a school where I knew I wouldn’t fit in.

A few minutes later I pulled into a long, sandy driveway off a road called Old Beach House Road. I found a two-story blue duplex on stilts, perceptibly listing to one side. I knew without entering that it was going to smell like an ancient underwater cave, like mildew. Houses like these take on so much weather, like getting slapped in the face repeatedly by hurricane winds and high tides.

“Hey there, sailor,” a tall, skinny man said. He came out from the utility closet underneath the house in denim cut-offs.

“Hey,” I said, wondering if he had my name wrong, or if “sailor” was a term of endearment. “I’m Lily, from Invasivores.”

“I can tell,” he said. “Let’s get your stuff in the house before the weather breaks.” He pointed at the charcoal-color cloud on the horizon.

There were a few other houses on the road, but this wasn’t a second-home hotspot like Nags Head. It felt honest and a little sad, like the end of the earth.

“Ward Williams,” he said, shaking my hand too hard. He scooped up a suitcase and two bags—he was wiry-looking but strong, maybe in his early fifties—and bounded up the wooden staircase to the first floor of the beach house.

Inside, the white paint was speckled with black mildew, and the drywall had some damp spots. He showed me to my room. “I’ll let you get settled,” he said, “and then we can meet up in the living room and talk logistics.”

I smiled and closed the bedroom door, swallowing down the dread. I slung my bags into the corner of the room and arranged my toiletries on the rattan chest of drawers. I could hear Ward bustling around in the living room and went to join him, afraid of being alone with my thoughts another minute.

“How’d you get into fish?” he asked, handing me a Coors Light.

Was I really even into fish? It was hard to say.

I cracked open the Coors and took a sip. “My dad kept two forty-gallon aquarium tanks in the waiting room of his dentist office,” I said. “He used to pay me three dollars a week to clean them and arrange the faux coral in the bottom of the tank.”

“Oh,” Ward said, grinning. “You started off as one of the bad guys.”

I laughed because he was right. It wasn’t cool to talk about aquariums in conservation circles, not unless you were breeding natives or something earnest like that. In fact, it was thought that lionfish had first gotten into the waters around Miami after a hurricane wiped out an aquarium tank left on a seawall, sweeping the poisonous fish into the sea.

Ward finished off his beer in a long gulp and opened another. “This was my mother’s house,” he said, as if apologizing. “I never would have picked white carpet.”

“I hear that,” I said.

“Do you ever think, ‘Man—*how* am I related to my parents?’ ” he said, shaking his head, taking another long sip of his beer.

“All the time,” I said, thinking about the mother I never saw, who now sold cosmetics at a mall in Texas.

“But the thing is—the older you get, you just *feel* it in your bones,” he said. “And in your words. Can you feel it?”

I must have cringed because he laughed. “But I’ve got a decade or two on you, sailor,” he said. “You still have time to change so much that your ancestors can’t catch up to you.”

He stood up, walked to the fridge, and pulled out another beer. “You may have assumed I have a drinking problem by now,” he said. “And you’d be right. But I’m harmless. I sleep it off. Can I get you one before I turn in?”

I shook my head.

“See you in the morning, then.”

I was left alone—me and a giant blue marlin over the fireplace, an unlit cigarette cradled in its open mouth. I stared through the windows at the seemingly infinite darkness of the ocean. Now that Ward was gone I could hear the waves and the wind.

I checked my phone, but there was no word from Holland.

**In the morning** I threw on a T-shirt and shorts, pulled my hair back, and set out to buy groceries. I found a local bait shop that offered pontoon boat tours, beer, and a dusty-looking set of packaged foods. I bought some soup, crackers, and Pop Tarts, knowing I would eat all of the latter first before I touched anything else.

“Who are you out here visiting?” the clerk asked, eyeing me. She looked to be in her sixties. Leathery skin, sweet smile, blue eye shadow. A wall of cigarettes and lottery tickets behind her head.

“I’m studying lionfish,” I said. I liked the way that sounded, even though it wasn’t entirely true.

“Gross little devil fish!” she said, blinking her mascara-laden lashes. “What do you want to know about them?”

“Well,” I said, taking a deep breath. “They’re plentiful, free, and they taste great—soft white flesh, like a hogfish.”

“They’re *poisonous,*” she said, giving me the eye. “Like being stung by a jellyfish, I’ve heard.”

“True,” I said. “But they’re fine to eat.”

“You can have them all for yourself, honey,” she said, breaking into a smile. She put my groceries into a plastic bag.

“No bag for me,” I said, beginning to empty the contents.

“You’re one of those world-savers,” she said, shaking her head. “Staying over at Ward’s, I bet.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said.

“We always know if a world-saver is in town, they’ve come to stay with Ward.” She leaned down as if she was about to tell me a secret. “He’s about half-cocked if you want to know the truth,” she said. “His family’s been big landowners around here for generations. But Ward’s as crazy as the day is long. Just hell-bent on punishing himself for something he didn’t do.”

I nodded. I was curious but couldn’t bring myself to ask for more details.

“You be safe,” she said. The door chimed as I walked out with my armful of groceries.

It was already hot out and the inside of my car felt oppressive. The air was thick. I drove back to Ward’s with the windows down, passing a few roadside stands, people walking dogs. Folks out here looked tired, as if they were waiting for something better to happen but knew it wouldn’t.

Congratulations, I thought, turning into Ward’s driveway. You escaped the development boom, and now it’s too late—everyone knows rising seas are going to wipe these places off the map, and you will never have to deal with price-inflated condominiums and homeowner associations and mini-golf. But I guess it’s not much of a consolation to know that this is the best it’s going to be. That better isn’t coming.

I put the groceries on the shelves and in the mini-fridge in my room. I took my bike out of the trunk of the car and assembled it in the driveway. There was no sign of Ward, but Holland had written. “Here,” she’d said. It was the simplest thing a person could declare—their arrival, the location of their body. It hurt me enough that I decided not to respond, to cause her worry if I still could. To register my absence in some way.

Numb, I pedaled the long, flat roads. Invasivore had instructed me to look for fishers—you weren’t supposed to say fishermen anymore—and to approach them casually before making my pitch. I passed overgrown houses, abandoned churches, recently mown family graveyards. Seagulls called out overhead and the sun bore down into my skin. You could really ride out life in a place like Alligator, talk and act like it was still the old times. But it was no longer the old times.

I saw some men fishing from the local pier and I biked closer to them, but they were deep in conversation. Who was I to interrupt? I went home.

I paused on the side of the road to respond to the text from my Invasivore coach. “How many converts today?” she asked.

“One,” I typed.

“The day isn’t over yet!” she wrote. I’d never met her face-to-face. My coach was a robot, for all I knew.

Ward was organizing some heavy ropes underneath the house when I biked into the driveway.

“Afternoon, sailor.”

“Afternoon.” I hopped off and rolled my bike to a shady spot, leaning it against one of the house’s stilts.

“Did you hear about the storm coming in?” he asked, excitedly. “It’s still three days out, and just a tropical storm, but it could intensify. Some are thinking it will cut in near Wilmington, which would give us some big surf this way.”

“I didn’t know,” I said. “I’ve been a little checked out the last few days.”

“That’s to be expected, sailor.” Wade’s eyes were brighter than they had been last night. “But there’s so much to do around here. I might need your help with some plywood later, if the forecast holds.”

“Sure,” I said.

“For the windows,” he added. He removed his sweat-stained cap and brushed his hair back out of his eyes. “This is when it gets exciting. This is when we can really start to *feel* something again.”

**That night** I could hear Wade moving around the house. I was sure he didn’t sleep.

I didn’t sleep either. The grief I’d been delaying for weeks washed over me that night, and I imagined its ebb and flow with the wind and current outside. I curled into a fetal position and gritted my teeth, letting the loss of Holland seep in and settle. The funeral.

In the morning, I made a bitter, strong cup of coffee and went out on my bike again, swigging from my thermos as I pedaled. Fuck, I said to myself, over and over again.

This time I biked to the marina, where several people were fishing. Three men and one woman—each a few feet down from the other—had cast out. I walked up to the first man I saw. He had a white plastic bucket by his feet, and when I got closer I could see a few inches of sea water inside.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said.

“I’ve already given my soul to Jesus,” he said quietly. “You can try someone else.”

“It’s not that,” I said, my cheeks flushing red. “I just wanted to talk to you for a moment about lionfish.”

“I don’t have much time for lionfish.”

“Did you know you can eat them?” I asked. “And that it helps save native fish?”

“Like swallowing poison, I’d guess,” he said.

“The white meat is just like hogfish.”

“Excuse me,” he said, turning to me, “but I can’t talk to every college girl with a mission these days. I’m going to get back to my fishing, if that’s all right with you.”

“I understand,” I said. Humiliated, I walked back to my bike. I knew my coach at Invasivore would be disappointed in my conversion numbers. Maybe I’d inflate them a little. That idea came from my fear of failure more than my desire to earn the conversion points required for the purple Invasivore hoodie and water bottle.

Holland used to say that she didn’t fear failure, but I think that’s because she came from an unbroken home and plenty of money. She’d never had to experience it, not the real kind. That’s how she got to be the type of person who could withstand the threat of grizzly bears outside her tent. That’s how she got to leave others behind. Risk was relative.

When I got back to the beach house, sweaty and sad, Ward was there with a newly buzzed haircut.

“I went to the barber. Great guy. A hundred years old. Can’t see well, always has a country-western film going on the television. I never let him do a full shave because—you know—he might cut something important.” He touched his neck.

“It looks nice,” I said.

“You have to stay prepared,” he said. “Speaking of—we should nail the plywood on tonight.”

“Sure thing,” I said, following him inside.

“How’s your work going?” he asked, handing me a beer.

“I’m no good at it,” I said, feeling miserable.

“That’s to your credit, you know.”

“How so?”

“It’s not honorable work,” he said, his face suddenly growing serious. “You’re out there trying to tell someone else how to live. You’re trying to tell these poor folks how to fix a rich folks’ problem. Do you know what it takes to catch a lionfish? A spear, or a net and a Kevlar glove. It’s not on the folks around here to eat the lionfish nobody else wants. It’s not on them to make it right for everybody else.” He was practically leering at me. I stepped backward.

“It’s to help protect native species,” I said. “A grown lionfish can demolish an entire ecosystem in days.”

“It’s more than that,” he said. “It’s *always* more than that.”

“If you hate the idea, then why do you rent out your room?” I asked, feeling defensive.

“I don’t mean to come on so strong, sailor,” he said, wiping his brow and gathering himself. “It’s just that guilt is all around us, you know? All around us.”

He was carrying a hammer, and I felt uncomfortable. I also knew he was right.

“You should probably get out of here in the morning,” he said, fishing for something in his toolbox. “Not because I don’t like your work but because the storm is going to come in, and it will be hard living out here for a bit. You should evacuate before they say to. The traffic gets awful.”

“I’ll do that,” I said coldly.

That night I packed up, having imaginary conversations with Holland, the same way I’d done for years with my mother. I could see Holland slipping a silver band onto the thin leg of a Red Knot, then looking up in the cool summer air at Rachel. I could see my mother packing her station wagon, not able to take one more day with my father and me. We were holding her back from the life she wanted to live, with powders and perfume. With freedom.

When you worry nine days out of ten that you aren’t any good, that you can’t keep people in your life, the anxiety plays on loop. It’s a never-ending story. It’s the snake biting its tail.

**I woke** to a strange darkness. Disoriented, I checked my watch to see that I’d slept in. It was ten minutes past nine. I realized Ward had boarded the windows and blocked the morning light. I had slept through his hammering.

I loaded my car with my belongings. There was no sign of Ward. I walked from the front of the house onto the wooden boardwalk to look at the ocean, which was now kind of emerald-looking underneath the darkening clouds and rogue rays of light. The water was wild and white-capped.

I stopped at the bait shop on the way out of town for some coffee.

“Is he out there already?” the cashier asked, the same woman as before.

“Who?”

“Ward.”

“Where would he be in this weather?” I asked, thinking she meant on his boat.

“You still don’t know?”

I shook my head. She lowered her face as before. “He ties himself to the front of the pier when the storms come in.”

“What?”

The cashier shook her head. “Yes ma’am. It’s hard to believe, but sure as rain that’s what he does. He ropes himself onto one of the pylons, and he just takes wave after wave to the face, sputtering and half-drowning himself and whooping in delight.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“It’s an awful thing to see,” the cashier said. “Just awful. The Weather Channel filmed it once. Drove his mama nuts when she was still alive. He said he was doing it to make amends.”

“For what?”

“For his family owning all that land and enslaving people. That was over a hundred years ago, his mama would tell him—but he wouldn’t listen. Like he was some sort of Catholic out there, punishing himself for the crimes of others.”

I paid for my coffee and took it back to my car. I sat in the driver’s seat for a long time. I could picture Wade out there in the wild surf, like a strange figurehead on a ship, mouth open, the salt water pummeling his face and stinging his eyes, running through him.

“I just don’t think that’s how asking for forgiveness is done,” the cashier had said on my way out.

But I’d never met anyone who really knew how to do it.

I made a U-turn and drove back to the pier. I guess I wanted to see if it was true.

I heard Ward hollering before I got close. I held onto the edge of the railing and looked down at the top of his drenched head. The rain was persistent and the surf was high, but there he was, soaking wet and roped to the wooden piling. The rope wound around his chest and hips, and his legs dangled in the water. When the waves came—and they were breaking all over the place—they crashed into his face, and salt water and snot dripped from his chin. He sputtered and whooped, in some sort of altered, if not ecstatic, state.

It was horrible to see, and I regretted bearing witness to it. I wondered if I was somehow responsible for his well-being. I turned back to my car and called the police. “We know about that one,” the dispatcher said. “There’s not much we can do, legally speaking, if he doesn’t want help and isn’t endangering others.”

“He’s going to die out there,” I said.

“Hasn’t yet. And, honey,” she added, “this is off the record, but sometimes you just have to let people like that go. If he wants to drown himself, I’m not sure we can stop him.” The line went dead.

I spent an hour sitting in my car, rain hitting the windshield.

I went back out to the edge of the pier. Spray from the waves came up over the railing. I was scared. “Ward! Get down from there,” I yelled. His body was more still now, with less fight in it.

He took out a knife and cut his ropes, plunging into the water below.

I gasped.

His head rose between the crests of two waves. He dove under and came up again a few feet away. Eventually he came up just before a big wave and the water took him to shore. He crawled up the sand on all fours.

I ran to where he was lying on his side, almost fetal.

“Hi sailor,” he mumbled.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Suffering,” he said plainly. “And to think—what I experienced out there doesn’t come close. Not to a month of what they put up with from my family. Not even a day. Can’t make it right,” he said, crying. “Which is why you have to do better than you’re doing. You can’t go around telling people how to solve your problems. *You* solve them. *You* get in this goddamned ocean with a spear and catch the invasive fish. *You* clean up the reef. *You* get down on your hands and knees and do the fucking work. *You* suffer for once.”

He gagged and vomited sea water.

“You need help,” I said.

“We all do,” he said.

I stood next to him, waiting for him to say more, but eventually I accepted that he was okay. I walked back to my car. I drove out of town, past the kudzu-covered trees and churches and the strip malls with tanning beds. I thought of Holland wearing her mosquito-net hat, staring out at the nests of vulnerable birds on the Seward Peninsula, content. I thought of my mother painting another woman’s face with rouge, driving home to an apartment I’d never seen, content.

The trick was to believe in your choices. Once you let the doubt in, it ate you alive. Once you started trying to be good, you could only see the ways in which you weren’t. I guess people like Ward and I knew that, and we’d never be at peace. And that was sort of the point.

That summer ended on a sad note. I drove home to Raleigh to have dinner with my father, who’d retired from dentistry and kept his aquariums near the dinner table. He didn’t ask a lot of questions when I showed up.

“Did you ever forgive Mom?” I asked. “For leaving us?”

“Of course,” he said. “That’s water under the bridge.” But I could tell by the blank walls of his home and the placid expression on his face that he hadn’t. He’d just given up the fight and let the current sweep him along. Maybe that was why she left in the first place.

We watched the exotic fish in his aquarium while we ate pizza; they circled the tank again and again, on some awful, endless journey. I never ate a lionfish myself.