

A Story a Week ...

... from woodblock printmaker David Bull



A Close Game

This is one story from the 'Summer Suite' - a collection of stories written during the summer of 1994, when our family spent a month staying at the home of my late father-in-law, in a small village in Mie Prefecture.

Whenever we can, usually every year or so, my two daughters and I 'escape' from Tokyo for a while, and spend some time down at the house in the country village where their late grandfather lived. An elderly aunt of theirs lives there by herself now, and as there's lots of room, she doesn't mind much if we 'drop in' for a while. A typical visit usually lasts for a couple of weeks, and we always have a very good time, but the visit is not without problems ...

My girls are still quite young, nine and eleven, and I always have the same trouble with them each time we arrive in the country. They don't want to use the toilet. I think you can guess why. The house is very old, and the dark and gloomy bathroom, 'out back' behind the main building, and next to an old woodpile, is pretty scary territory for little girls. It's mostly the 'wildlife'. Every time you open the door and look in, you catch quick glimpses of various insects and 'creepy-crawlies' all running off into little cracks and chinks in the walls.

Sometimes one of the bolder ones, perhaps a beetle of some sort, perhaps a big spider the size of my open hand, will hold its ground, refusing to budge. It seems almost to be quite defiant, daring you to enter its territory. With the girls, this strategy usually works, and they run off in a panic to fetch some adult assistance. I say 'with the girls', but I have to admit that even I too have been given pause before entering, and once when I found a short snake in temporary residence in there, I withdrew quietly, and 'took my business' elsewhere ...

The aunt just laughs at us. She's lived there all her life, and these 'guests' are simply small nuisances to be chased away, brushed aside, or stepped on as necessary. Us 'city slickers' though, aren't so experienced as she. For all our lives, we've lived in an environment where no surprises lurk behind bathroom doors, and no 'guests' live with us.

But which of these attitudes is more natural; to live in quite close proximity to these (mostly) harmless neighbours, and share living space with them, or to maintain a rigorously clean, not to say sterile, environment, and keep them all out? Both options seem somewhat wrong to me. None of us wants to have bugs nibbling food in our kitchens, but on the other hand, as a result of the forced sterility of our city life, my daughters seem to be growing up with the feeling that they must avoid contact with just about all the other creatures that live on this planet with us. They are not 'friends' of ours, but things to be feared.

This cannot be a healthy attitude for them, and I must try and make sure that during our short times spent in the country, they get acquainted with as much of the local fauna as possible; the little frogs in the garden, the hawks floating over the fields, the mice living in the pile of straw, and yes, even those little 'guests' who share our bathroom.

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