

Story Title: Cut Strings

Wordcount: 2160 words

CUT STRINGS

And then I was motoring across this dark lake, in the dark. I was peering forward into the darkness, determined to illuminate something monstrous, some horror lurking in the fog, something perpetually beyond the reach of my torch.

Then, through the fog there was a pier, vaguely, and a man.

“Funny old night,” he said.

I coasted closer, then I was roping my little tinny to the cleat and disembarking onto his pier. The tinny pulled back against its tether, preferring the open water.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Funny old night,” he repeated.

He was old – quite old – hunched on a stool, and between our words was silence, and a fishing rod was tucked below his stool with its line extended.

“Are you okay?” I asked. I hadn’t expected to find anyone all the way out here.

“Oh yeah,” he replied. “Never mind about me. You just keep exploring, keep on searchin’.”

I made towards the land, saying “Thank you,” with a nod, but the man said, “Young man, I know what you’re looking for,” and I stopped.

“I’m an explorer,” I said. “I’m here to discover something new, that’s all.”

“Nah, nah, nah. That’s not it.”

“Okay,” I agreed, and again I gave a nod, and...

“Something old – that’s what you’re after. Ancient, prehistoric...”

A little less politely I nodded, saying, “Okay, sir. Have a good night then,” and then I left the old man where he sat.

I could make out trees at the end of the pier, a thick, dark forest, and with a chill of anticipation I smiled gently. This was just what I lived for. Certainly there’d be something new in there. My pace quickened, the rickety boards beneath me creaked and groaned. I wasn’t concerned about finding an easy path into the forest – the line of pines before me was now like an enemy front, and I: a hero-knight, charging into battle. I wanted to clash, tumble into the darkness. I wanted to do battle with the deep, dark unknown. Moonlit chaos in a forest!

I touched my pocket; pen and notebook accounted for. And then...

“Wrong way,” he called.

His voice cracked through the silent fog and I paused like a prey animal.

“You don’t wanna be goin’ in there, you wanna be comin’ back now.”

I called back to him, “I’m not afraid,” and he said, “Oh, I know that much. I’m saying – if you’ll listen – that I know what you’re lookin’ for, young man! And I’m tellin’ ya where it is – and it ain’t that way. Understand?”

I turned my torch on him, he was looking out over the water.

“Come on, hear an old fella out. You’re an explorer, aren’t ya? Didn’t you say that? You want something new?”

“New discoveries. I want to journal new discoveries and take them back to my university, to study...”

“Yes, yes, that. That’s what I’m sayin’, son, I’ll tell ya something new.”

He was reminding me of visits to my grandma, and I sighed quietly as I recognised how impolite it would be to decline his offer. The forest would have to wait.

“It’s not going to be something new though, is it?” I said, walking back along the pier.
“Not if you’re telling me it.”

“It’ll be new to you. Might be new to your university, too!”

“Right you are,” I said. “What is it then?”

He nodded to the water. “In there,” he said.

“What, in the lake?”

“Under it. Down the bottom. You’ll definitely find something to take back to your professor down there.”

“You’re crazy if you think I’m going in there.”

“And you’d be crazy to go in! Awful place. Dreadfully cold. Last place you’d wanna go.”

“No kidding...”

“Dreadful place.”

“Well... I thank you for the tip, but I’m going to...”

“That’s where you’ll find it, though. You’ll always find the thing you want most in the place you least want to look. You’ll always do that. Take it from an old fellow like me.” He gestured to the water again. “Down there.”

Timidly I peered into the water. It was black and still.

“Could I take the boat?”

“How do you suppose you’ll take a boat to the bottom of a lake?”

Nervously I laughed. “Right... of course not,” I said, and the black water remained black water, and transfixed on it now as I was, the moment became silent and long as the stubborn water refused to move. I peered harder still, and harder, and soon I found myself

desperate for some horror to lurk up through the blackness and beckon me in, or to burst out and pull me under.

“Any tips?” I asked, and by now I was mesmerised – completely unable to wrench away my gaze from the water, scared though I might be.

“Yessss. Oh yes, yes, yes! Start here, young man: with the supposition that you, young man, might be special.”

“I might be special...” I repeated dolefully.

“Yes, that’s right! And your professors might be fools...”

Gently I swayed forward.

“Fools...”

“Your universities are made of string and driftwood.”

“Is-dis-oooh –”

My thoughts were a cloak around a strider’s ears, my words mere echolalia.

“And if you’ll only see the strings, young man – see them!”

“See-see-see...”

Further I tilted forward, all I saw now was the black – the deep, dark black.

“You might understand you’re not a puppet after all.”

“Noh-noh...”

“But an anchor!”

“No!”

And then – I was in the water.

Awful place to be, cold and black. Immediately I felt I needed air and I strived towards the surface, my heart throbbing in my chest. Towards the surface... Up, and slowly up, a million miles up, until gasping I breached back into the night.

The old man peered down at me.

“Cold?” he asked.

“Cold,” I squeaked, and then something brushed my ankle. And then it snaked around my ankle, then my calf, and then with a yank it wrenched me under.

I shook the tendrils away as they felt out my wrists and feet and waist – but I was no match for these snakes, twisting their way around me from every angle. My feet were pulled together. I was screaming by now, uselessly screaming into the water. I felt my body bump against the bottom of the lake, and I was pinned to it by these crawling snakes. Like quicksand I sank into the mud until I was entombed, and then I fell through, out the other side, and entwined in snake-ropes I hung from the ceiling of an underground cavern, sopping, and I breathed in the stale, dead air.

The underworld. That’s where I was, I felt that must be it, and I soon learned that the most frightening thing about the underworld is that there is no one else in the underworld. I heaved in the air, thin and acrid, and listened as the splashing of water echoed around me. I twisted in my constraints to no avail, I was bound too tight and there was no getting loose. It seemed that by now the snakes had hardened into vines of ivy, and I was part of this hanging tree.

I could see – I noticed with some alarm, and it was firelight that I could see by, the ivy leaf shadows dancing by the flickering of a small fire across the cavern.

A man stood, his shadow flew up the wall.

“Help!” I said. “Help me!”

There was a scream, a wailing, guttural scream, and I noticed behind him was a woman, naked and wide-eyed, sitting by the fire with her back against the wall. Cradled to her chest was an infant, and she curled it closer to her as if to hide it.

The man – or was it an ape? – leaned forward. Squinting he took one footstep closer, his hands were poised together at his chest, poised to block, or strike, or grab.

“Please,” I whimpered.

Again the woman squealed. “Don’t you dare,” she was saying to the male – though without language – “You stay away from that thing.”

He dismissed her with a grunt and crept closer. Below me I could see my things – my notebook, my torch, and my knife.

“Knife,” I said, though I knew this creature did not speak my language, or perhaps speak language at all.

He was thinking, hard, I could see him listening, watching. He bent and picked up the knife, then with a grunt of surprise, he dropped it and recoiled. His partner cried out to him again from beside the fire.

“Please!” I urged, “Please, I won’t hurt you. Just cut me down.”

He turned away.

“Wait!” I urged, and he paused. She screamed. The baby remained silent. “Please...”

He turned back, looked at the knife below me. The woman stood and made to leave through the dark tunnel. She’d seen enough.

“Yes, the knife. Hand me the knife. Or cut me down.”

He came closer – nose to nose – and he sniffed me, and I sniffed him back. He smelled of compost and fungi.

He bent, down, and came back up with my notebook. He thrust it into my hand and scampered away, grunting. The family left through the tunnel, and that was it from them.

With my hands bound together, and my body trapped in the vines, I knew that this was the end for me. Carefully I drew my pen from the book, and

CHAPTER 2

I did what I had done often in times of terrible uncertainty. I wrote. My hands were numb, dripping, the joints in my fingers brittle. I scrawled, *The abyss... has taken hold of me.* I don't know why I did it. I breathed the cavern's crisp air through both nostrils, cooling my throat. *I always thought the abyss would be the final place for me, the conscious grave. But here I am, and now I know, it is more like restless sleep.* At once the ink began to drip. It was as though the dried letters gave up their form and longed for the pen once more. Black drops wept off the page, dripping away. I held my breath. A rain of black drops fell, I heard them bell into the puddles below, but their belling noise was not without light. One of the ripples glowed green. Then my words appeared in the ripples. Green letters in the black water. *Abyss. Conscious. Restless. Grave.* The letters spread apart like flotsam in a wild sea. More letters appeared, unbound by words. Soon the floor of the cavern was dressed in green words and abandoned letters, glowing like primeval mushrooms. I drew out my pen and wrote more, and as I wrote, the words could hardly keep to the page. They dripped off the paper and rippled through the cavern. I didn't mind, I thought I was hallucinating anyway. So I watched my words cascade onto the ground below.

The cavern glowed pearlescent green.

CHAPTER 3

On the pier above, the old man felt his line go taut, and with a grunt of surprise, took the rod from under him and began to wrestle with something from the deep.

Something *big*.

"We got one," he said. "Here she comes!"

The pier rattled beneath him while he battled the fish for nearly an hour. It was slow work, but when a bite came, he was young again, such was the adrenaline that flowed through him.

Finally the thing surfaced. He heaved it up onto the pier. It was too gigantic and too exhausted to flap about, instead it just pulsed rhythmically. For a moment the old man kneeled beside the thing, catching his breath and steeling himself for the task at hand.

He began to prod along the fish's belly until he found the spot he sought, and there he slid in the blade of his knife.

"Sorry, ol' girl," he said.

She didn't seem too much to mind.

Carefully he towed it along. The slit seemed willing to grow, like a splitting pea. Inside, a lumpy cul de sac was intact, and he could see movement within it. He nicked it slightly, then the knife was put away and he pried the membrane open with his fingers.

"Ohhh," he sighed, "there you are!"

From inside the pulsing fish he extracted a tiny infant boy. His cry pierced the night. The old man wiped him dry, then wrapped him in a cloak.

"Shh-shh-shh, we'll get you home. It's too cold out here for a little bubba."

The baby was placed on the pier while the man shoved the fish back over the edge and gathered his things.

"Shh-shh-shh..."

The baby wailed into the night. He picked it up and headed off the pier, and into the forest.

"Shh-shh-shh," he soothed. And still the baby cried.