



HOME
ABOUT
BOOKS
AUTHORS
ARTISTS
CONTACT
LINKS



From **CATCH AND RELEASE**

When you spent enough time fishing, you got so you knew the waters. You had certain spots that had worked for you over the years, and you went to them at certain times of the day in certain seasons of the year. You chose the tackle appropriate to the circumstances, picked the right bait or lure, and tried your luck.

If they weren't biting, you moved on. Picked another spot.

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He was cruising the Interstate, staying in the right-hand lane, keeping the big SUV a steady five miles an hour below the speed limit. As he passed each exit, he let up on the gas pedal while he kept an eye out for hitchhikers. There was a string of four exits where they were apt to queue up, college students looking to thumb their way home, or to another campus, or wherever they felt a need to go. There were so many of them, and they were always going someplace, and it hardly mattered where or why.

He drove north, passed four exits, took the fifth, crossed over and got on the southbound entrance ramp. Four more exits, then off again and on again and he was once more heading north.

Taking his time.

There were hitchhikers at each exit, but his foot never touched the brake pedal. It would hover there, but he always saw something that made him drive on. There were plenty of girls out there today, some of them especially alluring in tight jeans and braless T-shirts, but they all seemed to have boys or other girls as companions. The only solitary hitchhikers he saw were male. And he was not interested in boys. He wanted a girl, a girl all by herself.

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Luke, 5:5. *Lord, we fished all night and caught nothing.*

Sometimes you could drive all day, and the only reason you'd have to stop was to fill the gas tank. But the true fisherman could fish all night and catch nothing and not regard the time as ill-spent. A true fisherman was patient, and while he waited he gave his mind over to the recollection of other days at the water's edge. He'd let himself remember in detail how a particular quarry had risen to the bait and taken the hook. And put up a game fight.

And sizzled in the pan.

#

When he stopped for her, she picked up her backpack and trotted up to the car. He rolled down the window and asked her where she was headed, and she hesitated long enough to have a look at him and decide he was okay. She named a town fifty or sixty miles up the road.

"No problem," he said. "I can just about take you to your front door."

She tossed her pack in the back, then got in front beside him. Closed the door, fastened her seat belt.

She said something about how grateful she was, and he said something appropriate, and he joined the stream of cars heading north. What, he wondered, had she seen in that quick appraising glance? What was it that had assured her he was all right?

His face was an unmemorable one. The features were regular and average and, well, ordinary. Nothing stuck out.

Once, years ago, he'd grown a mustache. He had thought it might give his face some character, but all it did was look out of place. What was it doing there on his lip? He kept it there, waiting to get used to it, and one day he realized that wasn't going to happen, and shaved it off.

And went back to his forgettable face. Unremarkable, unthreatening. Safe.

#

"A fisherman," she said. "My dad likes to go fishing. Once, twice a year he'll go away for the weekend with a couple of his buddies and come back with an ice chest full of fish. And my mom gets stuck with cleaning them, and for a week the house totally smells of fish."

"Well, that's a problem I'm spared," he told her. "I'm what they call a catch-and-release fisherman."

"You don't come home with a full ice chest?"

"I don't even have an ice chest. Oh, I used to. But what I found over time was that it was the sport I enjoyed, and it was a lot simpler and easier if the game ended with the fish removed from the hook and slipped gently back into the water."

She was silent for a moment. Then she asked if he thought they enjoyed it.

"The fish? Now that's an interesting question. It's hard to know what a fish does or doesn't enjoy, or even if the word *enjoy* can be applied to a fish. You could make the case that a fish fighting for its life gets to be intensely alive in a way it otherwise doesn't, but is that good or bad from the fish's point of view?" He smiled. "When they swim away," he said, "I get the sense that they're glad to be alive. But I may just be trying to put myself in their position. I can't really know what it's like for them."

"I guess not."

"One thing I can't help but wonder," he said, "is if they learn anything from the experience. Are they warier the next time around? Or will they take the hook just as readily for the next fisherman who comes along?"

She thought about it. "I guess they're just fish," she said.

"Well now," he said. "I guess they are."

#

She was a pretty thing. A business major, she told him, taking most of her elective courses in English, because she'd always like to read. Her hair was brown with auburn highlights, and she had a good figure, with large breasts and wide hips. Built for childbearing, he thought, and she'd bear three or four of them, and she'd gain weight with each pregnancy and never quite manage

to lose all of it. And her face, already a little chubby, would broaden and turn bovine, and the sparkle would fade out of her eyes.

There was a time when he'd have been inclined to spare her all that.

#

"Really," she said, "you could have just dropped me at the exit. I mean, this is taking you way out of your way."

"Less so than you'd think. Is that your street coming up?"

"Uh-huh. If you want to drop me at the corner—"

But he drove her to the door of her suburban house. He waited while she retrieved her backpack, then let her get halfway up the path to her door before he called her back.

"You know," he said, "I was going to ask you something earlier, but I didn't want to upset you."

"Oh?"

"Aren't you nervous hitching rides with strangers? Don't you think it's dangerous?"

"Oh," she said. "Well, you know, everybody does it."

"I see."

"And I've always been okay so far."

"A young woman alone—"

"Well, I usually team up with somebody. A boy, or at least another girl. But this time, well..."

"You figured you'd take a chance."

She flashed a smile. "It worked out okay, didn't it?"

He was silent for a moment, but held her with his eyes. Then he said, "Remember the fish we were talking about?"

"The fish?"

"How it feels when it slips back into the water. And whether it learns anything from the experience."

"I don't understand."

"Not everyone is a catch-and-release fisherman," he said. "That's probably something you ought to keep in mind."

She was still standing there, looking puzzled, while he put the SUV in gear and pulled away...