

## Catch and Release

If fishing at night was relaxing, then fishing with a friend at night was not only relaxing but also a great way to have some fun and build long lasting friendships, ones that could last long and deep later into life.

Both Miles and Greg loved to fish together. Greg was an executive at a local manufacturing company, Miles was a manager at a local shoe store, and once a month, every third weekend, they would meet up at 10PM on a Saturday night and fish until dawn.

Their wives both once got curious and followed them, only to find (surprisingly the wives thought) that the two friends actually went fishing.

Miles and Greg rented a little boat with an outboard motor, found a nice lake in the area – they had a couple favorites – and just parked the car and floated out and fished. Just two friends hard at work.

Their biggest catch had been a 40-pound trout, caught by Greg, and when they both revealed the magnificent fish to their wives, both women's jaws dropped in amazement, which confirmed that it was the largest fish they had ever seen anyone catch.

Miles and Greg had been friends ever since the third Greg. Miles had been a large kid, stronger than the others, average on the scale of intelligence, and Greg had been his complete opposite, small and highly intelligent, and even though Miles was never going to be the smartest of the group, it seemed he had a knack for picking great friends.

They were not just a great pair because of their loyalty to each other, but also because the two always went around school making sure the smaller kids never got bullied, and because of this they were the most popular kids, always commanding a large group of friends, and always being the first ones invited to parties.

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The night of their last fishing trip together they met up at Miles' house, attached the boat to the back of Miles' four by four, said their goodbyes to Miles' wife, and set off. It would be the last time she would ever see her husband alive.

The night was cool, and when they parked in the small lot beside the lake, a local police car was parked there. When the two men got out, they walked over and greeted the deputy, Sal McGundy, a nice man they both liked. They met him here sometimes, he was usually taking an early break, and they would see if he had any news on how the latest fishing trips had been going. Sal was also an avid fisher and liked to keep up with the most recent catches that had been made.

"Not much going on lately," Sal told them as he rolled down his window, "But there have been some strange reports of very weird fish being caught."

"Weird how," Miles asked, glancing at Greg, both men exchanging glances, knowing it took a lot for Sal to think something was weird. He had been involved in some seriously odd cases in his career as a deputy.

Smoke filtered out of the window of the police car as Sal told them, "Strange fish being caught, a couple people have told me that the fish look a little like a pike, and even more like a piranha..."

"A piranha?" Greg said, cutting Sal off, "There's no way a piranha is in fresh water. These people have records of drinking while boating?"

Sal chuckled, blew out another puff of smoke, and said, "Pretty reliable people from what I hear, not many rumors going around about them, looked up a couple of their names, no records to speak of."

"Did any of these people keep the fish so you could see them?"

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Sal shook his head and told them, “Catch and release, as usual, but the people also told me these fish are fighters and biters, main reason why they were thrown back was one of two things: either the fish would fight their way off the boat, or bite until they had to let them go. Really aggressive fish, probably why they remind everyone of piranha. I tell you, if you catch one of these damn aggressive fish, I would really love it if you would keep it, maybe help us identify it. Besides, if it really is such an aggressive fish, it could affect the other fish in the lake.”

“Like an invasive species of plant invades and destroys a forest?” Miles asked.

Sal nodded, “Exactly what I think.”

“None of the fish were big enough to keep?” Miles asked.

“All were too small but forget about the size of the fish. If you catch one of these, don’t worry about releasing them, just get one for me. Catch and release doesn’t apply here. Fish and game will love you no matter the size of the fish.”

The radio inside Sal’s car squawked to life, a report of a drunk driver being spotted in town. Sal picked up the mike, reported he was going to respond, waved a goodbye to the two men, and drove away.

“Weird report huh?” Miles said.

Greg nodded, “Something to look out for.”

They got all of their fishing gear from the back of the truck first, loaded it into the boat, and then backed the truck up to the lake. Miles was outside the boat, guiding Greg who was backing the trailer into the lake. When the trailer was half in and half out of the water, Miles jumped into the boat and prepared to start the motor as soon as the boat was floating on its own. A minute later he started the motor, and the boat began to drift.

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Upon hearing the motor start and looking in the rearview mirror to make sure the boat was floating on its own, Greg stopped backing up, and pulled the truck into a parking spot.

Miles guided the boat to the dock and waited for Greg. A minute later they set out to one of their favorite spots. They knew this lake by heart, and it had been where Greg had caught their record fish.

It was still early, a little before eleven, and the bigger fish would still probably not have come into the shallower areas yet, so the two men were not expecting to catch much until a little later. Finally finding their spot, Miles cut off the motor and after drifting for a minute, the boat settled.

The two men got comfortable on their cushions, got out their fishing rods, cast off, and began to wait. There were a couple of nibbles, one major bite, a smallish bass that they let go because it was not quite big enough to excite either one of them, before Miles got a big hit. The line tightened, the top of the rod bent forward, and Miles grabbed the pole before the whole thing was wrenched into the lake.

“Holy shit,” Miles said, reeling in the line, struggling with the pole, “Either this is a big fish or it’s one of those fish Sal told us about. This damn bastard is a fighter.”

Greg watched as the battle between man and fish raged on, Miles reeled in a bit, the fish fought, Miles let the fish fight again for a minute, and once the fish tired Miles would begin reeling again. It was like a tennis match, Greg’s head flicked back and forth from Miles to where the line was stretched and met the water, waiting and anticipating the first sight of what was either the largest fish they had ever caught or a damn aggressive fish indeed.

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The clash continued for another twenty minutes, at times the fish seemed to be winning, with Miles having to let the line back out so it wouldn't break. It reminded Greg of the couple times they had gone saltwater fishing and saw someone struggling to reel in a monster catch.

Then, just as Greg believed that the fish would never surface, it jumped from the water, and he could see that it was a decent sized fish, but surely this fish was not big enough to have caused the fight that Miles had fought to reel it in.

Another five minutes later the fish jumped from the water again, this time from only a couple feet out, but instead of landing back in the water, the fish jumped the couple feet and landed in the boat.

From up close Greg was acutely aware that there was definitely something wrong with the fish, something wrong with the shape of it, but even more troubling was the teeth sticking out of its mouth. Seeing those teeth for the first time caused Greg to remember Sal's report of how the fish were like piranhas. This explained why it had taken Miles so long to reel in the fish, it was surely the most aggressive fish Greg had ever seen. It's flopping in the boat was manic, quick and uncoordinated, like it was on some type of bath salt.

"Should we keep it," Greg asked, "This is definitely the fish that Sal was talking about."

"Look at those fucking teeth," Miles said, "They must be an inch long or more."

The 'f' bomb from Miles surprised Greg, his friend had never been one to cuss. It was at that point that Greg felt an itch of worry begin low down in his gut.

"Can you get the hook out of its mouth or should we cut the line?"

Greg stared down at the agitated fish and his first instinct was to just cut the line and be done with it but instead he told Miles, "I have some strong gloves in my bag, I can try first to get the hook off."

This would only be the first mistake.

Miles slid the gloves on and grabbed the fish by the corner of its mouth, which seemed like an okay decision at first, but then the fish began to fight even harder and snapped its jaws like a pit-bull in a dog fight. Miles struggled to hold onto the fish but lost the fight as the fish got loose and began writhing and throwing itself crazily against the bottom of the boat.

“Let’s just cut the line,” Greg said.

Without a word, Miles pulled a pair of scissors from his bag and cut the line as close to the fish’s mouth as he dared. The damn thing was like an ADHD child without medication, throwing itself around, resting a minute, then began to thrash some more.

Things began to go seriously wrong a minute later when as Miles dropped the scissors back into the bag, the fish suddenly turned its body towards Miles’ foot and with an aggressive movement like an alligator finishing off its prey, clamped its large teeth around Miles’ foot.

The sensation at first was not one of pain, but of a strange tingling sensation. Miles even had enough time before the pain set in to say to Greg, “It kind of tingles.”

But only seconds after saying this Miles began to scream, a horrible lunatic scream that seemed to float over the lake and come back at them from all directions.

“Get it off, get it off,” Miles yelled, struggling to shake the fish off his foot. This was another mistake, because as he began to kick harder and harder, struggling to detach the fish from his foot, the boat began to rock more and more. Then, as Greg began to rock with the boat, it only increased the instability, and when Greg bent to try and pry the fish loose from his friends’ foot, he lost his balance and a minute later the boat tipped.

Miles continued to scream, gulping down water in the process, and the next thing Greg saw was his friend struggling to stay afloat, arms thrashing over his head, his screams increasing

in intensity, yelling out, “There are more Greg, holy shit there are more. I can feel them on my legs.”

Greg swam towards Miles and time seemed to slow down. Greg knew that he was not swimming fast enough, yet also knew he had to swim faster to save his friend, and sure enough, Greg was only able to cross half the distance before Miles was disappeared.

Greg arrived at the spot where Miles went under and saw only a couple sets of air bubbles then the water was still. He treaded water and kept yelling his friends name in vain, looking into the murky depths of the lake, only able to see a few feet down.

Feeling deflated, losing strength, Greg began to swim back to the overturned boat, seeking a safe place to think and figure out what to do next. But before he arrived at the boat, he felt a tingling sensation in his foot.

He knew what it was, the fish that had gotten his friend had now come to get him as well. Even knowing this Greg struggled, even as he felt more fish biting his other leg, and still more biting higher up on his legs, he never stopped swimming for the overturned boat.

Just as the pain grew so bad that he could hardly push his legs in the water, knowing in his mind that any minute the fish would take him away to be with his friend, the biting stopped. The pain in his legs did not get any better, but it did not get any worse either. He had no clue then why the fish had let him go, and also knew he had no time to wait in the water and figure the question out because at any minute the fish could come back.

Miraculously he was able to get the boat tipped back over, was able to get back into the boat, and most surprisingly of all, was able to get the motor started and make it back to shore.

Back at the dock, not paying attention to the multitude of bite marks on his legs, he dragged himself to Miles’ truck and got his cellphone.

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Fifteen minutes after calling Sal, the cruiser arrived with an ambulance trailing it.

“What the hell happened to your legs?” Sal asked. Then, looking around, he asked, “And where the hell is Miles?”

“Gone,” Greg told him. “Those damn fish got him. Almost got me too.”

The paramedics came over then and started working on Greg’s injuries. They told him that most of the bites were not deep, and the ones that were deep would not require stitches. After bandaging the wounds, the ambulance left, and Sal helped Greg into the passenger seat of the cruiser.

“What the hell happened out there?” Sal asked again.

“Those damn fish got Miles. We caught one of them, tried to keep it, but everything went wrong. Those fish ate him. Miles is dead.”

“How the hell did you get away. They obviously had their way with you too, but they didn’t take you.”

Greg sat for a minute, dumbfounded, then a sudden realization dawned on him and he turned to Sal and said, “I wasn’t big enough for them, you know, I guess it was the fish’s version of catch and release?”