

The Knot at the End of the Rope

THE KNOT AT THE END OF THE ROPE

AND OTHER SHORT
STORIES

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Selected stories from:

The Knot at the End of the Rope and Other Short Stories

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*To my father, who gave me the imagination
to dream about the stars.*

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Forward

When I was growing up, my father would read or make up science fiction stories to tell me at bedtime. As I got older, I began to read short-story anthologies and novels written by some of the pioneers of science fiction. Their fantastic visions of the future filled me with wonder. Just as a child's imagination is unfettered by boundaries, these writers were able to make the unknown their own.

I grew with the writers, following the up-and-comers with their new approaches, styles, and understandings. New discoveries led to more scientifically accurate writing and gave the next generation of authors the opportunity to stretch the boundaries of belief even farther. Advances in science, however, also revealed the folly of some ideas that had been put forward earlier, making some of the stories I was so fond of seem just a little more absurd. While new technical knowledge gave credibility to their stories, I missed the early days, when any idea was considered fair game.

I decided to write a series of short stories in the style of the early years of science fiction, before scientific knowledge was king, when imagination drove authors to create stories that a young boy could dream about: traveling to the stars and having fantastical adventures, while falling asleep to the voice of his father.

-Leon

Reasonable Hand-drawn Facsimile

I heard a tapping on the window, like the sound of a tree branch in the wind hitting the glass. At first, I thought I was dreaming, but I slowly opened my tired eyes, rolled over, and listened again.

TAP ... TAP

I wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep no matter what it was, so I got up and walked out to the living room. As I stood in the center of the darkened room, barely breathing, I heard it again, coming from the sliding patio door.

TAP ... TAP

Slowly, I moved toward the curtain and slid it aside. There, on the patio, was a figure, my height, holding a cup. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. It raised a hand slightly in a gesture that I took to be a greeting.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Can I borrow a cup of sugar?" he asked in a gentle but firm voice. He held out the cup.

"Umm, it's kinda late, and who are you?" I inquired. I didn't feel threatened; I felt curious.

I saw in his hand, where the cup used to be, a jerry can. "I meant, can I borrow some fuel for my shi— um, my vehicle," he said.

As I reached for the light, thinking I should have done so earlier, I said, "I'm going to turn on the light."

"OK."

It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the brightness and a few more to adjust to what I was seeing. He was grayish in color, skinny, with large, dark eyes. It looked like he was wearing something, but I couldn't tell what, as it was somewhat form-fitting and only a slightly different color than his skin. I don't know what compelled me, but I opened the sliding door.

"Thank you. It was getting cold out there," he said as he came inside.

"You're not from around here, are you?" I asked.

"Well, not here, but not far, if that's what you mean," he answered. I didn't know what I meant.

"I mean, you look different. Not human," I said.

I could see concern in his eyes. "You mean I don't look like you?"

"Nope."

He gestured to the kitchen table. "Can we sit?" he asked.

"Sure, can I get you something to drink?"

"Scotch, if you have it," he replied. It just so happened that I did.

As he took a seat at the table, I grabbed a couple of glasses and the scotch and brought them to the table. Pouring a couple

of ounces in each, I slid one toward him. He reached out with his spindly fingers and picked up the glass.

“You know, we can’t really tell you apart from one another.” He took a sip and placed the glass in front of him. “We thought this,” he motioned to himself, “was pretty good.”

I looked at him and said, “It’s generally close. You have the right amount of everything.”

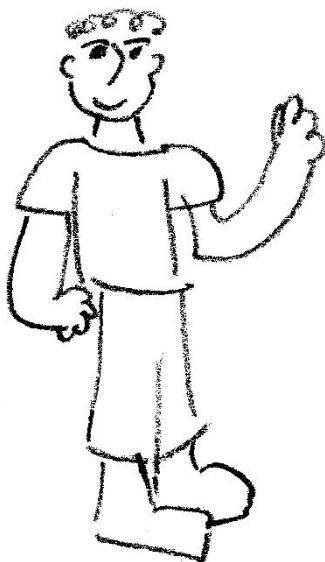
He looked dejected. “We have been practicing a long time. We made a bunch of paintings on some caves, scratched figures in a desert, made some big heads. One time we tried, and it looked like an animal. It’s frustrating.”

“It’s like this,” I got a pad of paper and a pencil from the kitchen and started to draw. “I have a heck of a time trying to draw people, too. It always comes out close, but not quite good enough.” I finished my sketch and turned it to face him. “See, you can tell it’s a person.” His eyes lit up and he looked at me.

“Can I keep this?” he asked as he reached toward it.

My alarm must have been going on for ten minutes before I woke up. I put on my robe and went to make coffee. On the table was an empty bottle of scotch and two glasses.

So, if you see a guy who looks like this:



Don't let him in. He'll just drink all your booze.

The View from Here

The handwritten note on the dashboard read: *Not Abandoned*. This was a nice courtesy to others, but unnecessary since the car was parked in the parking lot at the head of a popular hiking trail called The Ridge. My curiosity piqued, I studied the vehicle—looking for what, I don't know. It was a little dusty, probably a result of the dirt road, not the kind of dust that accumulates after several rains and drying winds, which we had experienced recently—two, three days ago? I wasn't sure, but it had to be at least two. I had reluctantly put off my hike to avoid rain. I usually don't mind hiking in inclement weather; it keeps the other hikers away. But The Ridge is notorious for looking like a muddy river on days like that.

There was no camping along the trail. Once you got past the easier first section, it was a difficult out and back, which according to the trail sign should be a half-day hike, about six hours. I once did it in three. I had come close to repeating that speed a few times, but that day was my crowning glory. Now, in my sixties, I usually finished it in four.

Since I wasn't there as an investigator, I checked my backpack: water, jerky, M&Ms, half a baked potato, and my first-aid kit. And my knife. *Never go without a knife*, was what my father taught me. I saw only one other car in the lot. The couple it belonged to were starting out just as I pulled in, so that

gave them a twenty-minute head start. Not that it was a race or anything; I just liked to know these things. I was sure to catch up with them. *OK, it's kinda a race*, I thought.

After kneeling to tighten my laces, I did a few stretches—getting older sucks—and started up the path. The first section of the Ridge trail is wide and hard-packed. Most people go to the first lookout, take a few pictures, and head back. It is a stunning view. The trees stretch upward, providing a decent amount of shade, while letting in magnificent shafts of light that give the forest a surreal quality.

It took only half an hour to get there. I'd been expecting to see the couple making out on the bench and was pleased to have been wrong. Leaning on the rail, I took a drink of water and started to chew on the jerky. No matter how many times I'd come up here, I was always blown away by the view: the valley, the mountains rising along the river, and the sea of green forest as far as the eye can see.

After the lookout, the trail begins to rise steadily. A bit narrower, a few more rocks and roots to put you off balance. But I had grown to know where each and every one was. One rock, right in the middle of the path, is so smooth and black from all the shoes stepping on it that it is almost as reflective as a mirror. At about 11 a.m., depending on the time of year, it seems to glow. I had been on this trail a lot.

As the terrain on the left side of the trail begins to drop away, the incline on the right gets steeper. Most hikers hug the right side as they're going up. I always kind of liked the feeling of being on the edge, so I was a lefty this day. It had surprised me to learn that no one had ever died on this trail. Lots of injuries, though. I have a scar to prove it.

The hikers in front of me must have been moving at a good pace. *I should be able to hear their voices*, I thought, since sound carries in this valley. Despite the heat, and breathing harder than usual, I picked up my speed a bit. I took another sip of water and a then few bites of potato for a little more energy.

I was lost in my thoughts. Looking at my watch, I saw that I had been hiking for an hour and a half, which meant I was getting close to the end. I felt I exceeded my normal pace. A little competition will do that. I decided to stop and listen for voices. Nothing.

After another twenty minutes, I finally heard voices. It sounded like they were getting closer. Rounding the corner, I saw a woman and a man coming toward me. Knowing the narrowness of the path and the steep bank, I called out, "What side do you want to pass on?"

"We'll take the inside," the woman replied. "Chickenshit here gets a little dizzy!"

He slapped her on the shoulder and said, "I tripped on that root and nearly fell over! Excuse me for being cautious."

“Been there, done that, and I have the scar to prove it!” The three of us laughed. “Have a good one,” I said as they passed me.

“You, too,” he said back. In a few minutes, I was alone again. *I completely forgot to ask them about the car, I thought. They probably would have mentioned it, wouldn't they have, if they had seen something?*

Finally, I arrived at the trail end, marked by a stone and concrete wall with a metal railing, which must have been quite the task to build. There were still old wooden posts sticking up through the ground, remnants of a wall that had to be replaced after the avalanche twenty-five years ago. I sat for a moment, had a drink, and looked around. From here, a person had three choices: go back, go down (straight down), or up (straight up). I got up and walked to the metal railing, then turned and looked up at the sheer rock face.

A free climber could probably scale it, but I have never seen any attempts. I brushed my hand along the rail, following it to where it met up with the mountain. That left my palm quite dusty, so I brushed my hands together and then wiped them on my shorts. Not wanting to leave the rest of the railing unwiped, I began to run my hand back along the top, then stopped. Looking closely, I confirmed there was a boot print in the dust on top of the rail. A jumper? Peering down, I had a moment of vertigo, which surprised me since I'd been here before. If someone had

jumped or fallen, there was no possibility of survival—or discovery. I looked over the edge and could see there was a bit of a ridge protruding from the cliff, about two feet below the wall.

I backed up a bit to see if I could tell how far it went along the rock face. It seemed to curve around a vertical shaft of rock. There was a narrow crack above, paralleling the ridge. A brave soul could possibly inch along, with fingers twisted into the gap, but to where?

I looked at my watch: 3:43. Plenty of time to get back before dusk. My curiosity fought with my good sense. I'd done some climbing before, but always supported. I looked around and spotted a long branch lying by the path. Grabbing it, I returned to the wall. I poked down to the ridge to see how stable it was. It was about an inch wide to start, then narrowed as it approached the corner. I used the branch to flick some of the loose material away and watched the tiny rocks fall to the valley below.

Except for one.

Poems and Tales from the Apocalypse

Found

I can feel it seep
Through my boots
 the heat
My skin, it crawls
My hair,
 it falls
The pain, it lingers
Till I can barely feel
 my fingers
Vision is weak and fading fast
I do not know how long
 it will last
Too tired to move, I take a seat
Nothing left to drink
 or eat
So, I leave my body and this note to be found
Beside this shallow grave
 in the rocky ground
And if the horror you can face
Please lay me in my final
 resting place

Found in a Boardroom on Madison Ave.

Ways to increase market share?

New and improved Soylent Green! Great taste with no Zombie filler

Soylent light: Now with 25% less Mime and Clown

Ethically sourced human flesh

Soylent breakfast bites

Soylent LGBTQ: All the colors of the rainbow

Beyond Soylent: For the vegan in the family

Soylent smoothies

Soylent Classic, the taste Heston raved about!

Hold Down the Fort

They left me behind. Well, I did volunteer—somebody had to. I'm not much of a people person anyway. They did leave a bit of a mess—not that I will clean it up, not all of it, just my tiny corner to live in. It's not that bad; a little dirty. Sometimes it smells. That's to be expected when men are in charge.

I have some weapons. I'm not expecting any trouble, but better safe than sorry, and I still have to hunt if I see something. Big, big *if*. My food rations should last me quite a while, but I'm getting tired of them.

What's my day look like? Pretty routine. Take weather measurements three times a day, gather fuel, tend the garden (although things don't grow here very well), and read. I was told not to venture beyond the perimeter, so I'm pretty much contained. My curiosity will probably win out eventually.

It's quiet. No birds, no insects. I almost forget what a frog sounds like. I took a walk down to the river to check the nets. Still nothing. It's quite eerie, not hearing anything. The wind, rain, and thunder are the only non-me sounds I hear. I'd like to hear my voice, but I'm afraid that if I try it, I'll start talking back to myself.

So here I am: taking notes, keeping records. The last one left here to document how bad we screwed up: Ninety-nine-point nine percent mortality and no cure. Congratulations, humanity.

It's a clear night. I can't remember the last time I looked up at the stars or the moon. I stare up at the shining—yeah, yeah, I know it's reflecting, but that's not as poetic, is it?—moon. Wondering if they got there all right. Wondering how they are making out with the rest of the survivors. Wondering if I really am the last person on this planet.

If you have enjoyed these poems and stories,
the full book can be purchased on Amazon.

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