

A Nice Dry Launch

By

Maripat Allen

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... “A Nice Dry Launch” by Maripat Allen starts as a small, beautiful kernel of an idea and moves into a poignant metaphor for a story.*

In a short version, our narrator and her husband, Miles, go out for a day on a fishing trip.

Yet, as you must already know, there is more at work here for these two characters.

I am thirty-three years old, and, in that short amount of time, I have had at least three relationships just dissolve – well, blow up and then disintegrate. In that same amount of time, I have also seen countless relationships and marriages fall apart.

Allen has the perfect fulcrum on which to explore the concept of how two people can literally drift apart, “We were like two people crossing a creek on stepping stones, one stretching out a hand to the other, the other stuck on a rock, unable to reach out to grab the hand, for fear of falling in.” The reader reads and watches these two people, married for twenty-four years, knowing that they are in love, but are bumbling around each other at a crossroads and deciding which direction they would like to go.

What I like about this story is its honesty. Most people don’t just one day fall out of love. They have good days and bad days, happy days and sad days, easy days and hard days, but eventually something in one of the people dies and, even then, that usually isn’t enough for someone to let go just quite yet. In the case of our narrator and Miles, the reader gets to see a picture painted of the day that something in someone dies – and the humor, the sadness, the frustration, and the joy that surrounds that moment makes this a subtle portrait of real life.

Allen’s work is humble, clean, and well-crafted. “A Dry Launch,” is a solid story well worth reading.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

After Miles got the boat off I parked the truck and trailer, and as I walked back to the dock I caught sight of him getting into the boat. The way he slid in so gracefully, his broad back gleaming in the sun, took my breath away. His complete lack of self-consciousness was a type of grace in itself.

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I'd learned that with a good strong rope and a can of silicone spray you could board and launch a fishing boat without ever having to touch the water. It looked simple enough on Youtube, and sounded good to me. A nice dry launch.

"Getting in the water is half the fun!" Miles had said. But I didn't like the wet, the cold, the slimy ramp under foot, the trying not to flip the boat as I heaved myself into it. "I'll help you with that," he said. "Remember when I taught you to roller blade?" "I was twenty then," I said, but I looked away and smiled to myself as I recalled how he'd caught me around the waist when I stumbled while skating, and how later that night he'd pulled me to him in the same way, and we'd made love and laughed at the goofy eroticism of that earlier moment. The sweet, surprising rescue had unlocked a door in me. But like someone who's grown up in a dangerous neighborhood, I could never leave a door unlocked for long. "What about my shorts?" I said, "They'll get soaked." "So what? They'll dry." But who wanted to sit in a puddle? And as far as wearing a bathing suit—his suggestion-- who wanted to see a middle aged woman's stretch marks and cellulite? "No one's going to notice that," he said. Well, I would.

We'd been married twenty-four years and the kids were off at college, our youngest having just started his freshman year two weeks before. The long, gold light of September reminded me of my own first days of college, the freedom, the relief. Even the cafeteria had been a wonder, with its hum of conversation and grace notes of laughter. But the occasional sound of a dish breaking would make my heart pound, and I'd have to remind myself that this time it was just an accident.

Miles had just traded in his old fishing boat for a new one, a shiny aluminum fourteen-footer, with a small motor, for those souls who might row out into the lake but lacked the stamina to row back. He was so pleased with it, proud even. He'd loaded it with his fishing gear and night-crawlers he'd dug up earlier that morning, while I slept. "The fish like them fresh!" he'd said. The kids had fished with him when they were younger, but now they were gone, off at the universities where childhoods receded in memory and parents shrank in importance. We'd scrimped to pay their tuition, and now college was stealing them away. So when Miles had said, "Let's go fishing together, just you and me!" I'd agreed, although it had been over twenty years. I had never really liked wobbling around the water, just to drag fish in on a line, then watch them gasp for air and die. When was watching desperation fun?

The day was sunny and calm, and if you liked the water, a perfect day to be out on it, even if it was late in the morning for the best fishing. The deep azure of the lake reflected the sky, and hints of gold and orange lapped the edges of the woods. Miles had hauled the boat to the ramp with the plan to back it into the water, then have me get in the water and guide it off the trailer. But I didn't want to get wet, and I didn't trust myself—nor did Miles, I knew—to back it in either. So, he would back the trailer in, then get into the lake himself to guide the boat off. After that he'd get in the boat from the water and row it over to the dock where I'd get in, nice and dry. It sounded simple, and it was—for him. He was one of those naturally athletic people with good balance. He could make that type of thing look easy. I was the opposite, I could barely walk across a room without tripping.

After Miles got the boat off I parked the truck and trailer, and as I walked back to the dock I caught sight of him getting into the boat. The way he slid in so gracefully, his broad back gleaming in the sun, took my breath away. His complete lack of self-consciousness was a type of grace in itself. "Hop in," he said,

pulling up to the dock, “we’ll catch us some supper! Just lower yourself down so you don’t lose your balance.” I did, but still fell. “Oops!” he said as he helped me up, my face flushing as I braced for the put-down that never came from him. Old habits die hard. “Damn it!” I said. “Clumsy ox!” I thought.

We fished for an hour, not the whole morning as we’d planned. “We’ve got one on the line!” Miles would say, and, “It’s a whopper!” But I was uncomfortable on the hard seat, in the sun that had gotten higher and hotter, and the panicking, flopping fish were too hard to ignore. I hated Miles for being able to not notice them. “Look at the colors on this baby!” he said. I said nothing. We were like two people crossing a creek on stepping stones, one stretching out a hand to the other, the other stuck on a rock, unable to reach out to grab the hand, for fear of falling in.

Miles had loved fishing since he’d done it with his father as a child, the same years I’d failed to keep my father from drinking, and wasn’t cute or smart enough to keep him from moving out. The same years he didn’t show up for visitations, or showed up drunk, and screaming, and being hauled away by the police. Now, as Miles and I sat together not talking, me grimacing in the hot sun and cringing at the fish, I could see his joy leak away, like air from a tire I’d punctured and didn’t know how to patch. So when he suggested going back early I agreed, and we motored back to the marina in silence.

Miles dropped me off at the dock where I got out, nice and dry. It went without saying he would get the boat out by himself, and he did so easily, with no help from me. I’d gotten sunburned, and back at the house pointed out my red nose and cheeks to him. “Look at what this day did to me!” I said. Miles looked at me and said nothing. That’s when I knew that it was over. He had realized what I would come to understand only later. I would never reach out to grasp the hand he held out. He would stop offering it, and I would stay on that rock, barely balancing, but nice and dry.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *The idea for this story came from a newspaper article on how to dry launch a boat. I thought, “if getting on a lake without getting in the lake isn’t a metaphor, I don’t know what is!” I love the water and love to dive right in. And I try to take that approach to life too. But as a therapist I know how much anxiety and insecurity can get in the way of that. If you’ve been rejected or abandoned, or otherwise traumatized in formative years, it’s hard to just relax into life and love. This story is a glimpse inside a woman who not so much sabotages her relationship, but is just so uncomfortable in herself and in the world that she can’t enjoy and sustain it. I hope the story, like the lake in it, holds a lot under the surface.*

AUTHOR BIO: Maripat Allen is a mental health therapist of many years, and amateur writer, primarily playwright. She has had one acts, ten minute plays, and a full length comedy produced in Michigan, Indiana, Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, England (London), Australia, and Pennsylvania. She will have a ten-minute play published in the Drama in the Time of Covid anthology this year. Maripat won the first place Community Theatre Association of Michigan award for a full length drama, We Gather Together, in 2014, and in 2021 for her full length collection of shorts, Love Among Mortals. Maripat’s plays can be seen on the New Play Exchange at <https://newplayexchange.org/users/51017/maripat-allen>.