Catch and Release

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

I remember talking to a man once – he was a fishing boat skipper just like me – about death by drowning. He had been dragged of the boat by a net line. He was tangled in it. He struggled but could not get free. There was no air left in him. He looked up at the surface of the water and saw the sun on its dappled surface. He would die in the ocean that had sustained him. It seemed right. He opened his mouth and took in the water. There was peace. He was weightless. There was no pain. The dappled light faded away and death seemed so gentle to him. And then he found himself on the deck of the boat with a crewman pounding his chest and seawater spewing from his mouth. Life was violent, whereas death was peace.

“Drowning is the way to go,” he said. It gives an old salt like me some comfort that death is just over the side and it is not a bad way to end.”

Perhaps that is why I can understand why she wanted to kill herself by drowning, not that she had heard the story.

Or perhaps it is because a drowned body seems so perfect. There is no gaping wound, no crushed skull from a fall, no distortion or discoloration from strangulation by hanging. It is like man who died and came back – a drowned body looks clean and peaceful. She looked that way. But this time I was the one banging her chest and tipping her over as the water flowed from her lungs.

I was alone that day. The boy who was always with me had failed to appear and called in with some excuse. The sea was calm so I could do that job alone. It was like a millpond in fact. Perhaps if there had been any swell she may not have survived. I never would have seen her.

I thought that she was dead. She seemed so beautiful with the long light brown hair and the absurdly pretty face. There was warmth in her body enough for me to try to bring her back. As I worked her chest I saw that it was flat like a child, although she seemed older. I thought nothing of it. If you are trying to save a girl’s life you cannot be checking out her tits.

It was only when she started to convulse as her lungs fought for air, that her thing floral dress rode up and I could see that inside her panties was some kind of strap that concealed a deformity. She lacked the proper form of a young woman so fair – she had a penis.

For some reason I accepted this not with disgust but with sympathy. It was out of place and concealed. It was her embarrassment, not mine.

I wrapped her in a blanket, and I sent below to make her a hot drink.

She said: “You should have left me to die.”

I told her: “A man who live by the sea can only save the lives of people he meets. I leave the judgement of death to God alone.” Or it was something like that. I am disposed to use phrases of fake wisdom from time to time, but as often as not it sounds true.

She had seen that I had seen her secret. She said: “I cannot live in this body. I would rather be dead than become a man.”

“Then don’t be one,” I said. “You don’t look like a man to me.”

She smiled at me. I was telling the truth, but suddenly I saw something more. That smile was like a sunburst at the end of a long storm; like a calm harbor after days in huge swells. I knew what I had to do.

“Let me help you,” I said. “A life was lost today. A young boy died. The sea took him as the sea does. He will never be seen again. Then today also the sea delivered up, as it does. When you catch a mermaid, it's bad luck to throw her back.”

But that is not the name of this story. I am so much older than her, but I am not ashamed to admit that I fell in love with that girl that day, and she sat on the deck of my boat, wrapped in a blanket and smiling like the sun.

I took her home and I was there through her transition. I paid for everything. I had the joy of seeing her blossom. I shared the moment of thrill when she came through surgery with the body that she always wanted.

But a young woman like her is like the perfect fish, but undersized. You can admire it, and want to put it in your box, but it has a life to lead, and that life is not yours to take. Sometimes you have to let go what you love to prove your love.

I may be hardened by the salt and the wind of years at sea, but I cried when I gave her away as a beautiful bride, years later.

She kissed me on the cheek and said: “Thank you Daddy. I owe you everything.”

The End

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Author’s Note:

Another story inspired by my muse Erin about a transgirl attempting suicide: “A kid decides he's had it with trying to be a boy he puts on a girls swimsuit and swims out of sight of land intending to drown himself but the captain of a boat saves him and doesn't realize he's a guy (long hair, padded breast, gaffed)…”. I thought that it might be better if he did know.