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### Fish Out Of Water

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## Fish Out of Water

By Francesca Krempa

Here's the boilerplate plot of just about every Hallmark movie there ever was: salt-of-the-earth, small-town guy teaches jaded, big-city woman how to let loose, live life and fall in love. This "opposites attract" formula is the cornerstone of our most beloved rom-coms, a surefire prescription for fictional romance: In "Notting Hill", the nobody Hugh Grant finds love when a dazzling celebrity, played by Julia Roberts, stumbles into his travel bookstore. The curmudgeonly and neurotic Jack Nicholson – who unironically plays a romantic fiction writer – falls for the only waitress who can tolerate him at his local diner in "As Good As It Gets". Unlikely coupledom rounds-out John Hughes' iconic "The Breakfast Club", when the Rebel seduces the Princess while the Jock ends up with the Recluse.

On screen, these cliches are familiar and predictable. In life, they're unnerving and less promising.

I was in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean when I realized I was living out the plot of one of these cheesy romantic comedies. My writerly mind found the scene perfectly scripted: here was the hero – my homegrown, fisherman boyfriend – miles offshore on a boat with me, his uptight urbanite girlfriend, looking for fish. The oddest of couples – could they make it work? If this was the Hallmark channel, happily ever after was certainly around the corner.

Except, it this wasn't the Hallmark channel – it was just me, my boyfriend, and his god-forsaken fish.

Perched on the bow of his boat, I closed my eyes and silently wished for dry land and bottle of Dramamine, dreading the minimum six hours we still had left at sea, and doubting the cliches.

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Allow me to introduce the love interest of this love story.

My boyfriend, Zac, is one of 3,000 maniacal anglers who flock to Martha's Vineyard each fall to fish morning, noon and night in hopes of winning the annual Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby.

We had met just four months earlier. Our first date wasn't your typical meet-cute – we didn't miraculously reach for the same pair of cashmere gloves à la "Serendipity" nor did he save me from getting runover by a rogue dumpster as if we were in "The Wedding Planner. Nonetheless, the setting and characters were promising for a Nora Ephron blockbuster: we were in an idyllic Lake Placid where I had skeptically moved to for a compulsory summer editorial internship. I was a gung-ho graduate student from Brooklyn, desperately missing the city, but secretly grateful for fresh air and green space the middle of a pandemic.

Zac was the epitome of an outdoorsman, born and raised in the Winter Sports Capital of the World: a professional skier, an avid hunter and, most importantly, a premier Adirondack fly

fishing guide. We matched on Bumble, where he asked me out almost immediately – a jarring move that opposed the weeks of cat-and-mouse I was used to playing back home in the city.

On our first date, he told me tales of the Vineyard, his favorite fishing in the world.

His stories sounded like they had been ripped off the page of a red-blooded Hemingway novel: tracking schools of fish for hours on end, arguing with gritty locals on jetties over the perfect shore fishing battle station, sleeping overnight in his boat on the open seas in hopes of finding the perfect striped bass.

I politely sipped my craft beer and tried to relate – the fishing experience I had was minimal: a few chartered deep-sea excursions with my grandfather when I was a kid, but that was it. My world was metropolitan. My world was highbrow. My world was writing and feminist book clubs where we discussed Roxanne Gay and Zadie Smith and overpriced avocado toasts paired with too-many breakfast mimosas and late-night subway rides back to Brooklyn, and of course, more writing. I tried to change the conversation, but it always found its way right back to fishing. Surprisingly, I didn't ask for the check.

That night, I returned home to my roommates, a young professional couple from the Upper West Side who I had convinced to move up with me for a pandemic summer in the great outdoors.

“How'd it go?” one roommate, Lauren, asked. She was no stranger to my dating woes back in Brooklyn and, being engaged to her partner of more than four years, had admitted to living vicariously through my stories of singleness.

“It was fine,” I answered casually. “We're very different. It might be fun for the summer but that's probably it.”

This would have been the part of the rom-com where the record scratched and the frame froze for the omniscient narrator to chime in with a smug remark: “It was far from a summer fling,” he would say, my unknowing smile fixed on the screen.

Instead, we simply fell in love. The summer whirred by in rugged fever dream. I, an indoor cat from Brooklyn, was charmed by Zac's simplicity, his savvy for the natural world. Our hypothetical rom-com would swell in a dream-like montage featuring the two of us having the perfect summer. We hiked. We star-gazed and camped. We ran his hunting dog through waist-high brush looking for game birds and we skinny dipped in water so clear you could count the tadpoles that swam beneath our feet. Gone were my literary salons and my boozy brunches and my cosmopolitan past life. I barely recognized myself, and it was all enough to make Nicholas Sparks sick.

And then, that montage would come to a screeching halt. A jump-cut to four months later, where the camera would pan on a miserable me, keeled over from nausea in his boat and too awkward with a rod and reel to keep up with the likes of him and his fishing hysteria.

How naïve I had been. This fishing tournament had exorcised a piscatorial demon I had underestimated back in Lake Placid – one that made me second guess myself, Zac, and the reality of our relationship. Popular culture teaches us that, against all odds, opposites attract, and the cliché prevails. But popular culture has never been offshore with a fishing fanatic who will do anything to achieve angler glory.

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At first, I had been intrigued. Being a writer, and also a supportive girlfriend, I felt inclined to research this famed fishing derby my boyfriend wouldn't shut up about.

I discovered the origins of the competition were earnest. In 1946, a group of local fishermen gathered for a meeting of the minds. Like its neighbors of Cape Cod and Nantucket, the Vineyard was, and still is, a summer vacation spot that relied heavily on tourism revenue from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

While Labor Day marked the end of summer for visitors, it marked the beginning of the annual fall fish migration for Islanders. Each September, millions of striped bass and other traveling fish pass the Vineyard on their journey back down the East coast, eager for warmer, deeper waters where they'll spend the winters before heading back in the Spring. A local spin doctor saw an opportunity to capitalize on this seasonal fall migration – an autumnal promotion that would guarantee revenue, at least through mid-October. Backed by the Martha's Vineyard Rod and Gun Club, the Derby was born.

Seventy-five years later, and the Derby remains a mainstay for the tight-knit island community, as well as ambitious out-of-towners like Zac, who have, in one way or another, caught the Derby bug. Like the very fish they set out to catch, these fishermen return to the Vineyard's waters year-after-year in hopes of winning it all.

I didn't get it. Martha's Vineyard and its Derby reminded me of the made-for-TV holiday movies where impassioned locals live for an annual harvest festival or a neighborhood cookie decorating contest. "Small-town fishing tournament" felt like a vapid plot-point some desperate writer suggested after running out of ideas. It was cute, but it certainly couldn't be that big of a deal.

And yet, I watched my 32-year-old boyfriend become consumed by what longtime Derby fisherman Nelson Sigelman coined "Derby madness" in a 2016 essay for *Angler's Journal*. Nelson – who once edited the island's newspaper and had published a collection of columns titled *Fishing, Hunting and Avoiding Divorce on a Small Island* -- recounted the sleepless nights, the obsessiveness, the delirium he and 2,999 other competitors battled each fall. For these fishermen, the Derby isn't a cute community contest – it's a lifestyle.

"There are all sorts of ways to keep score, not all of them in the daily or weekly weigh-ins: hours of sleep lost, secrets kept, lies told..." he wrote. "And just plain fun had."

And for every Zac and Nelson, there are their partners and their families and their friends who unwillingly get the backburner: The parents who anxiously await a text from their child that they

have safely docked the boat after a day on dangerous waters. The kids who are stuck with Mom for a month while Dad is off on a month-long fishing binge. The girlfriends who are dragged out to sea in a 10-foot-swell while their oblivious boyfriends hunt for a winner. We are a collective of modern-day mariner's wives who pace back-and-forth in our figurative cupolas, forlorn and aching, as we wait for our captains to return home from sea.

“How many times have I reassured my wife on the Derby’s opening day? *I’ll be home early... I’ll be a more responsible husband... I’ll only fish sunrise and sunset.* Foolish promises, all,” Nelson wrote later in that same essay. “The most important edge a fisherman can bring to the Derby isn’t fishing equipment, bait or skill. It is a spouse, partner or roommate who isn’t put off by a refrigerator stocked with eels and squid or annoyed by the nocturnal comings and goings of a bass fisherman muttering about tides and bait.”

Literature and film buffs will recognize the archetype of the benevolent mentor, or the sage, in classic storytelling. This figure is usually represented as a wise, old man whose primary role is to bestow knowledge on their younger, impressionable mentees. These characters are easily recognizable in hero-based storytelling. Think: Yoda in “Star Wars”, Albus Dumbledore in “Harry Potter”, and Sancho Panza in “Don Quixote”.

The more I read about Nelson and his time in the Vineyard, the more I realized he was my fishing sage, my Sancho Panza. Nelson knew this fishing tournament inside and out, but more importantly, he knew how to love people like him. I had to speak with him.

It’s four weeks into the Derby when I finally get ahold of Nelson who has reluctantly taken a break from his current fishing binge. Almost immediately, he reminds me of Zac – his love for the water and the outdoors practically drips through the phone, drenched in a friendly New England accent. Like Zac, too, he’s congenial and teasing.

“So, you’ve made two mistakes in your life – you’re dating a derby fisherman and you’re going to journalism school” he joked. “Now the third one is you’re talking to me.”

But Nelson is older, wiser, less fiendish than Zac. The Derby days he spent “strategizing with military precision” have been replaced with a romantic appreciation for the tournament, its camaraderie and its promises of grand reunion. He reflected on his younger self, and how his fishing fanaticism was the downfall of many previous romantic relationships – eventually, he ended up with his wife, Norma, who doesn’t mind his lifestyle.

“I was very fortunate to marry a good woman in spite of myself.” “he said. “My wife likes to do things she likes to do – she does a lot of different crafts, that sort of thing. She’s fine with me going off and doing my thing.”

After 45 minutes, I get to the point. My mentor is well-versed in the fishing/romance arena. Surely, he could help me navigate the tides of my own, mismatched relationship.

“We’re not married, so I’m not avoiding divorce,” I say, a nod to his book. “But I am avoiding a breakup, or something like that. What advice do you have for somebody who is dating a fishing fanatic?”

All Sancho Panza gives me is another cliché, something I can’t seem to escape: “Don’t expect him to change.

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The deeper into the Derby we got, the more our differences seemed to surface.

One afternoon, Zac offered to take me, his friend Will and Will’s 9-year-old-stepson, Maddox, out for a last-minute fishing jaunt. It started raining as the four of us piled into Zac’s boat and putted out into Edgartown Harbor. We trolled past what felt like hundreds of boats: modest fishing skiffs, classic, wooden sailboats, a few misplaced large yachts. It was crowded despite the showers. But it is a harbor after all.

We picked up the pace the further out we traveled, and the water picked up, too. In the rain, the Atlantic was gray and indignant. Waves slapped the side of the boat with such ferocity I worried, naively, it was going to break. Zac and Will cracked beers out on the bow while Maddox and I huddled for warmth behind the feigned safety of the trusty center console.

Once again, I found myself in a scene only a screenwriter could write: obnoxious boozehounds drink on the bow while the neurotic girlfriend and a literal child cling to each other in desperation. Eat your heart out, Apatow.

Suddenly, Zac yelled and indicated towards the water. He and Will quickly threw their beers aside and fumbled for their gear – a large school of false albacore – one of the tournament’s prize-winning fish – had supposedly appeared less than 20 feet from the boat, gunning for a squall of baitfish on the water’s surface. Zac beckoned for Maddox, who was suddenly emboldened by the prospect of fish. My only ally quickly abandoned me and raced to Zac’s side.

Reluctantly, I followed.

“See all those fins right there, Maddox?” he asked the little boy, pointing into the waves. Maddox followed the direction of his finger and started nodding enthusiastically, his smile growing bigger with every shake of his head.

“What fins?” I asked behind them, squinting into the steely water. There were waves, there was sea foam, but nothing that resembled a fin...

“You can’t see the thousands of fins right there?” Zac said, rushing to unspool the line of his fly rod. “Right there. Look right there.”

I strained against the rain, scanning the tide hard to try and catch a glimpse of all the excitement. Where were the fins? “Oh yeah. There they are,” I lied, too embarrassed to admit I couldn’t see what even the 9-year-old could.

We got home that night well after dark and I yearned for our bed. After dinner and a warm shower, I walked into our room expecting Zac to already be asleep. Instead, I found him in the living room at 11:00 p.m., tying flies for tomorrow's fishing trip.

The fly-tying table looked like it belonged in an elementary school art classroom. Zac sat hunched over a wooden drop leaf draped in a white tablecloth that was covered in what could only be described as if a Joanne's Fabrics threw up: threads of glittery fabric were scattered across the surface next to entire bucktails that had been artificially dyed magenta and lime green. In one corner, a rainbow of marabou feathers. In another, eerier corner sat a stack of stickers designed to mimic a fish's eyeball. Rows of eyes stared at the ceiling, waiting to bring the little, plastic flies to life, in greens and lilacs and blues.

"Are you coming to bed?" I yawned.

We had to be up and out the door, ready to fish, in five-and-a-half hours. I watched his bloodshot eyes, normally diamond blue, get heavy with sleep as he glued one of sticker eyes onto a hook with surgical precision. A lover's triangle of optics. He didn't answer.

In every opposites-attract plot line, there comes the pivotal point when the couple questions whether or not relationship can actually work. In "Fever Pitch", superfan Jimmy Fallon blames Drew Barrymore for making him miss a beloved Red Sox game, and the two separate. In "Notting Hill", the reality of dating a celebrity pushes Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts apart. And in "Clueless", superficial Cher struggles to reconcile her feelings for her brainy ex-stepbrother Josh. On screen, we know the couple muddles through and puts their differences aside. In real life, it's less certain.

"Zac," I repeated, getting annoyed. "Are you coming to bed?"

"Huh" he grunted. "Oh yeah. I'll be there in a minute."

I crawled into bed alone, bitter and hating fishing.

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It isn't ironic that the cliches we use to speak about love derive from fishing.

*"You're totally hooked."*

*"He's a keeper!"*

*"There are plenty more fish in the sea."*

The sport is a metaphor for love. We sit at our fly-tying tables and start by crafting the perfect lure. For some of us, it's a new pair of jeans or a fresh blow-out. For others, a new Bumble profile picture.

Then, we cast our hypothetical lines into the sea of opportunity, trusting someone --preferably someone who is above our personal slot limit, whatever that may be – will like what they see and take our lure. Sometimes they bite, and we set our hooks and reel like hell only to find out, once they break the surface, they aren't up to snuff. We throw them back, and then we reevaluate: was that the right lure? Maybe I shouldn't have chosen that profile picture. Were those jeans too tight?

So we go back to our fly-tying tables and get back to work. And then it's back to that ocean that's brimming with potential, that laps at our boats with the promise of a perfect partner if we just cast far enough or jig our lines the perfect amount or time the tides just right. We cast and wish. Cast and wish. Cast and wish.

Until finally, as the trope goes, we find that keeper -- the tournament champ who meets our every length and weight limit, who we proudly carry home to our friends and family and say, "Look what I finally caught!" before we cover them in lacquer and hang in our forever homes. We caught *that*.

The fishing metaphors are nauseating and unsubstantial, the rom-coms of the English language. But they exist to give us hope – something that neither fishing nor love can exist without.

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"Fish. Right there. Downwind."

I spun around. Downwind... downwind? There was no wind. The water was glass calm and the air felt still and unseasonably balmy.

"Where?" I asked, fumbling to get my lure away from its keeper.

"Downwind," Zac repeated as he slowed the engine.

I scanned the water again – No birds diving for minnows. No splashes on the surface. No hint of life that would let me cheat my way out of using Zac's confusing directions. The boat jerked to a halt as Zac raced to his gear.

Finally, I conceded. "I don't know what that means."

"Babe... really?" he replied, walking his way towards where I was standing at the bow, fly rod at the ready. "Feel the wind. Where is it blowing? This is an easy one, use your head."

His words stung. I had spent the past few weeks sleep deprived and seasick trying to keep up with him and his Derby mania, pretending I knew words like "starboard" and "gaff" just to save face. I had smiled through all his criticism on my amateur casting, nodding along as he analyzed my form when all I wanted to do was avoid accidentally sending a treble hook through his face. I had spent entire days hungry, cold and ornery, in the middle of the ocean for him and his fish.

This wasn't a rom-com – opposites could attract, sure, but they couldn't sustain. His jab sent me overboard.

“An easy one?” I heard myself bark. Exasperated, I ignored all of his previous casting lessons and flung my line as hard I could in front of the boat. Screw downwind. “I haven't spent 30 years on a fucking boat like you, Zac. I'm trying really hard here. Don't be rude about it.”

I blinked away misty tears and reeled like a madwoman. And before I could ever hear his retort, my line went tight.

Here's the thing about romantic comedies: no matter how different the couples may be, or how ridiculous the plot line becomes, audiences know they'll end up together. It's why these movies are such an easy escape – there's no guesswork. It's why Billy Crystal ran through the streets to profess his love for Meg Ryan in “When Harry Met Sally”, and why John Cusack held up the boombox outside Ione Skye's window in “Say Anything”. It's why Julia Stiles poured her heart out to Heath Ledger in front of all her classmates in “10 Things I Hate About You”, and why Richard Gere climbed through his limousine's sunroof to get to Julia Roberts in “Pretty Woman”.

We love a happy ending – especially ones of drama and grand gesture -- because in real life, we normally don't get them. But sometimes, we do.

In a nearly cinematic moment, our boat was surrounded by schools of porpoising false albacore – the same fish I had been unable to spot the day we went fishing with Maddox and Will -- their green fins slicing through the water like tiny jade knives. The once-glassy water came to life in an emerald swirl. In all my frustration, I had unwittingly found downwind and, like the clueless ingenue in a '90s chick flick, had thrown my line directly into the school. I laughed in awe of the school's beauty and their timing – my anger and defeat slipped away as fast as the fish had taken my lure.

Zac rushed to my side as my reel screamed. Few fish fight pound-for-pound like false albacore, and I was dragged along the hull – bow to stern and back again -- just to keep the powerful creature on my line. My boyfriend morphed into something between a coach and cheerleader, echoing each of his acclamations with clear directives: “Let him run”, “Keep your rod up”, “Watch the engine!”

It was a scene that would make even the cheesiest rom-com writers queasy: big-city girl at her wit's end of trying to impress her small-town boyfriend finally sees the piscatorial light, hooking the fish – and the guy! Gag me. I loved it. Here we were, an unlikely duo floating alone in the middle of the ocean, seemingly finding their perfect ending. Even the sunset felt oddly fated.

Like the fish that travel south each winter and the anglers who return to Martha's Vineyard each fall to find them, there's a reason the rom-coms and the Hallmark movies keep going back to the same recipe year-after-year, season-after-season: they work. Life isn't always stranger than fiction – maybe our instincts chase these hopeful cliches for the very same reason.

