

A Fish and a Balloon

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This is a fable—because it can't really be anything else—and it starts in a rocky place that neither a fish nor a balloon should be happy with. Rocky and hot and without witnesses, but it's where this story happens, so our fish and a balloon have to put up with it, as we all have to put up with places we don't like.

What can they have in common? Really nothing. Can a fish float on a balloon? Is a balloon alive? Or are they the same?

The fish goes floating on the balloon, up, up and away, into the sky, away from the rocky place. "Where do you want to go?" says the balloon to the fish.

"You talking to me?" says the fish to the balloon. The fish is walleyed—that is, its eyes point in different directions. It's that kind of fish, and the balloon, which can't see at all, certainly doesn't mind. "I'm not even sure I should be here. Because—you know the saying—'fish out of water'. But what exactly does that mean? Do they ever say 'an octopus out of water'? No way. 'A shark out of water'? 'A whale out of water'? Never. Always a fish. Well, here I am floating, floating up, up and away—on you."

The fish is awfully talky, and since balloons can hear even if they can't see, the balloon would like to ask it to talk a little less, but is too kind to do so. Instead, it says amiably, "Where do we go from here?"

"Why do we have to know the direction?" answers the fish. Because the fish can't see very well—it's always had a bad sense of direction. "Just go and we'll go where we go!"

Maybe to an unknown land far away—far away from this place.”

The balloon answers—not realizing the fish has no sense of direction— “I ask because I’m the one who is floating. You’re just along for the ride.”

The fish is getting annoyed. It knows it has limitations—eyes that don’t see very well—but it’s never cared. So the fish says to the balloon, “It’s whatever you want it to be. Don’t question so much. Be like me. I don’t know. Maybe I was going to die; maybe I’m still going to die.”

Though the balloon can’t see, it’s amazed at the words spoken by the fish, so it says, “But how can you be so brave, so brave, always so brave. I just carry people and things and now I’m carrying a fish to where I don’t know. Maybe back to the sea. Maybe not. Maybe to your death, maybe not.”

The fish who is now really annoyed, answers, “Who says I came from the sea? You didn’t even ask where I came from. All you wanted to know is where are we going, going, always more going. Just go and go and go.”

The balloon is feeling very anxious and unsure of itself—as we all do when in an unknown situation. So it answers the fish, “But what if something happens to me? It’ll happen to you too. What if I pop? Then down you’ll go into the sea or, well, worse—into the ground, deep into the ground never to feel water again...”

“Stop!” cries the fish to the balloon. “I think it’s time for me to leave, because you’re a pessimist and I had enough of those at home. Take me back to the rocky place, or, better yet, just drop me here in this unknown land. I know I will be fine, and if I’m not,

I'm not. Then just fly, dear balloon, just fly. If I were as free as you, that's all I do. But I've got stuff to do. I'm a fish with stuff to do."

The balloon doesn't know what the fish means, but it drops the fish on the edge of the sea, the edge of the land, and flies and flies. Time passes—an awful lot of it—and the balloon's air doesn't want to fly anymore. It leaks and keeps leaking and as the balloon drifts down at last, after all this time, it sees the fish again. But it's not the fish it was—too much time has passed. It walks on the land now, back at the rocky, hot place, on little legs, and in a moment, just two.

"I get it," the balloon says, and the fish, close enough to hear, says, "I bet you do."

Diane's writing is inspired by her love of travel, adventure and the world at large. She recently spent time in Africa working with cheetahs to help educate people about this beautiful animal. In an earlier life she passed her wisdom along to 5th graders as an elementary school teacher. When she's not writing, she enjoys her new grandson, Bodhi. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *All Things Girl*, *Clockwise Cat*, *Della Donna*, *Mirror Dance*, *Sand*, and *The Short Humour Site*.