



"The Girl in the Rowboat" (Photo: Pinterest)

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# The Girl in the Rowboat

Theodore Jerome Cohen

“Dad? Dad, are you awake?”  
The woman gently shook the elderly man’s shoulder as she prepared to spend time with him early one spring morning. Sunlight filtered through the curtains covering the French doors bordering the nursing center’s central visiting area, brightening the room and giving it a sense of life renewed.

“Huh? What?” mumbled the disoriented man, awakening from his sleep. Then, seeing his daughter, he relaxed, smiled, closed his eyes for a moment, and, though he appeared to drift back to sleep, murmured, “thank you for coming. I missed you.”

“I missed you, too, Dad,” she said softly, setting her coat aside. Pulling up a chair, she sat beside him, brushed some loose hairs back from his forehead, and, picking up a cup of water from the table next to him, offered him a drink. He took several sips through the straw, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and settled back in his wheelchair.

“I have something to show you,” she said, reaching into her purse and withdrawing a weathered photograph of a sailor and his girlfriend in a rowboat. “I found this among Mom’s things when I was cleaning out her closet this morning. It was in a small cigar box full of photographs and letters she kept under some sweaters in the bottom drawer of her clothes cabinet. Have you seen it before? I’m sure that’s her in the boat, but I haven’t the faintest idea who that’s with her. There’s a handwritten note on the back, and even though the ink’s faded, I think it says it was taken in Central Park sometime in 1940.”

The old man laughed. “That’s Georgie Porgie Pudding and Pie!”

“Come on, Dad, get serious,” his daughter demanded anxiously, worried her father might be “losing it.”

“No, seriously. That’s what I used to call him when they were dating. Your mother hated it when I said that!

“Remember, your Mom and I attended college in New York City at that time. On weekends she used to dress to the nine, head for Broadway, and pick up anything in a uniform for some fun on the town.

“His name was George Anderson. She had a crush on him, and I have to say, I think he loved her as well. He didn’t get to the Port of New York often, but when he did, she’d disappear for days.

“And then, in 1943, word came he was missing in action—his destroyer was escorting a convoy across the North Atlantic when it was torpedoed south of Iceland with the loss of all hands.”

He motioned toward the water with his fingers, and she held the cup for him while he took a few sips through the straw.

“That must’ve been difficult for her,” his daughter said, dabbing his mouth with a tissue.

“She was inconsolable. For a while, she returned to running around the city and chasing anything in a uniform that batted an eye at her, just to help her forget George. She even dropped out of school for a semester. But her parents convinced her to return, and slowly, she recovered her ‘balance’. In time, we began a relationship that blossomed into love.

“But in all the years we were married—and those were 70 of the happiest years I have known—I don’t think she ever got over losing him. I’ll tell you this, a man could not have asked for a more loving woman to share his life, but sure as I’m sitting here, I’m positive she thought of him *every day of hers*.”

“But you had a great life together, didn’t you, Dad? I mean, you don’t have any regrets, do you?”

“No, honey, I have no regrets. We got married the day after she graduated from college, and we made a good life for ourselves on Wall Street. The city had so much to offer, and we took advantage of it at every turn. But then, it was time to turn down the flame, and central Pennsylvania seemed like a nice place to retire.

“I have to tell you, though, at first it seemed like a foreign country to us. Old buildings, some colleges, museums, restaurants . . . mixed bag . . . one room school houses in the countryside, hunters on the land in the fall . . . a good pastor in the country church, some professionals on their land estates, farmers, businessmen in their closed communities, mostly Germans and Pennsylvania Dutch to be found everywhere, and of course, everyone with stories of happiness and tears. But we all got along, trying to help each other and laugh as much as possible.

“I have no nostalgia for our old townhouse in the city, with the unfriendly, hostile neighbors, peeling wallpaper, and total dependence on trades people. Couldn’t even own a car, not that you needed one. I do miss the walks around the streets, though . . . and along the shore. Ah, yes . . . the shore. But it’s being destroyed, slowly, or not so slowly, when a big storm comes along. And, of course, after my brain tumor and surgery, my balance isn’t what it used to be, so even if I were able to use a walker, I wouldn’t be able to get around too good.

“But still, you do what you can do, right?”

He turned and looked at her with a wistful look in his eyes. Whether it was because of things he had left unsaid over a lifetime or undone when her mother was alive was something she couldn’t determine. But it seemed to her the picture of his wife with the woman’s true first love had rekindled memories of that time just before the world went mad when the three of them—his wife, George Anderson, and he—were about to embark on what seemed, at the time, a period of unlimited opportunities.

“No, *I* have no regrets, honey,” he said, laughing. “But on the day she died, your mother told me there were two things *she* deeply regretted never having done.”

“What were they, Dad?”

“Tangoed in a red satin ruffled dress and waltzed in black velvet.”