

The River Where His Lover Lay

by Con Chapman

“So, how was vacation?” the brown-haired woman asked her friend, who was blonde but not by birth.

“Okay,” came the answer.

“Just okay?”

“You know how things are. It's such a hassle getting away, then when you get where you're going it's crowded. By the last day you want to come home but you have to go through the packing and traveling again and when you get back you're exhausted. Sometimes I wonder why we bother.”



The brunette gave out a little sigh of sympathy. “I know. You need a vacation from your vacation,” she said, but she sensed there was more to the story. “This was your first time in Old Saybrook, right?”

“Yes. But apparently not for Jon.”

“Oh.”

“I was bugging him to come up with someplace new to go when he mentioned it one day. When I found a cute bed and breakfast online and told him he seemed to sour on the idea.”

“What was wrong with it?”

"He didn't say it first. He said he'd gone on-line and found there was nothing to do there if you didn't own a boat."

"So why did he suggest it?"

"That was my question. He said it just popped into his mind."

"But you went ahead?"

"We didn't have any other ideas and it was getting late. We did the Berkshires last year and there was no ballet I wanted to see. If we go to the Cape we have to stay with my parents or they get offended. I have to make all the arrangements anyway so I just went ahead and did it."



"I've heard it's lovely."

"It is, so I couldn't figure out what the problem was. Do you want some more coffee?"

"I'm fine."

"Anyway, we get down there and it really *was* nice. The inn wasn't full, and they didn't have one of those breakfast rooms where you have to eat with strangers at the same table, so it was fine."

"What did you end up doing?"

"Antiquing. We rented bikes. There are beaches. I'd walk every day. We went to the theatre once."

"Um hmm."

"There are lots of nice boats there, but I don't like to sail--Jon does."

“Why don't you like it?”

“I never learned. There's a lot of yelling about jibs and sheets that I don't understand. And I was on a boat that ran aground—hard—when I was girl.”



“Oh. I can understand.”

“Anyway, he went out to rent one for a day sail and when he came back that day I asked ‘How was it?’ He said ‘Fine.’”

The blonde was silent for a moment. After a moment her friend spoke.

“That's it?”

“He put his stuff down—sunglasses, lotion and so forth—and I noticed there's a little notebook that he didn't have before. ‘What's that?’” I asked, and he said ‘Nothing.’”

“Which means something, right?”

“Right, but I wasn't going to press him on it then. I mean, we were on vacation, it was his fun thing to do for the day. I didn't know, maybe he was taking notes on some sailing thing, like the wind or the way he went out to sea, so he could find his way back.”

“Right.”

“Except it wasn't.”

“It wasn't?”

"No. He fell asleep and . . . I couldn't resist. I picked it up and there was . . . poetry in it."

"Poetry?"

"Right. *The river where his lover lay* was the first line, then something else that was scratched out."

"I didn't know Jon wrote poetry."

"I didn't either. He's certainly never written any to me."

The brunette said nothing at first. "Well, maybe he was just . . . trying something new while you were on vacation."

"That's what I thought at first. Then at dinner that night we got to talking. I asked him how the sailing went and he said fine. I asked how much it cost and he didn't answer right away. Then he said he didn't remember."

"Is it expensive?"

"I didn't know, but I wanted to know. I'm watching our credit card balances. So I said did you pay with cash, and again he didn't answer right away. Then he finally said it's not that much, like \$100 for a couple of hours, don't get upset about it."

"Sounds kind of defensive."

"That's what I thought. Then I said I wish you wouldn't use cash for that sort of thing, we need it for little things while we're here, and he said what he always says, 'There are ATMs everywhere, you know.' So it kind of cast a pall on the dinner. All of a sudden we were talking about the same old stuff we talk about at home, it wasn't vacation anymore. It was as if we'd had an argument and were both trying to change the subject."

"You didn't bring up the poetry?"

"Not then. Later we walked down towards the docks. The moon was shining on the water. That's when I asked him."

"And what did he say?"

"He didn't say anything at first, then he said he didn't go sailing. He went down to the river in the car and drove along until he found the place where an old girlfriend committed suicide last year."

"Oh my God."

"He didn't tell me about it at the time. He knows I don't like to hear that kind of stuff."

"So . . . the poem was about her?"

"Yes. Apparently she put stones in her pocket to make sure she sank down. I guess Virginia Woolf did that."

They were both silent. "She was crazy," the blonde said after a moment.

"Virginia Woolf?"

"I don't know about her, but I guess you have to be crazy to take your own life. No, his girlfriend. She'd been put in an institution by her sister; their parents were dead. She had early onset dementia."

"That's so sad."

"It is. She was allowed to go into town on leave, I guess, as long as she took her medicine first. She didn't—she put it under her pillow along with a note."

"He told you all this?"

"Yes. He'd taken the trouble to find out, from a friend, but he never mentioned it to me."

They were both quiet, then the brunette spoke.

"So . . . he was writing out of grief?"

"I guess."

"Well, if it helps him get over it . . ."

"I suppose you're right. Still, I felt he'd cheated on me. With a dead woman."

