



SINK OR SWIM
TONI FRISSELL'S
PHOTOGRAPH
(*VOGUE*, JANUARY 1,
1939) BROUGHT THE
AUTHOR BACK TO
ANOTHER TIME.

SWEPT AWAY

Young and in love, **Patricia Morrisroe** moved into her boyfriend's Sutton Place apartment only to have her visions of a romantic summer subsumed by a family drama.

When I was in a used-book store recently, I came across a photograph of a dark-haired young woman floating underwater. Dressed in virginal white, arms outstretched, she looked to me like a crucified mermaid. Yet despite the picture's haunting stillness, it throbbed with a subtle energy, as if the woman, with an aggressive flutter kick, could suddenly spout to the surface. The picture was taken by Toni Frissell, who was *Vogue's* first female staff photographer and someone I'd long admired. Born to a family of adventurers, she took up photography as a form of therapy after her beloved brother, a documentary filmmaker, disappeared at sea. In addition to her fashion work, she covered World War II as a battlefront photojournalist. In the sink-or-swim category, she was definitely a swimmer.

I toyed with buying the photograph, but my husband pointed out the scratches on the print. "It's in terrible shape," he said. "Why would you even want it?" I didn't tell him that at one point I was that drowning girl.

It was the summer of '72, and I'd just returned from my junior year in London, where I'd fallen in love with another student, an aspiring composer who looked like Roger Daltrey. We'd met the first week on a bus tour through England, where we'd exchanged soulful glances at Stonehenge. By the time we'd moved into the funky South Kensington hotel that would serve as our academic base, we were, to the disgust of our roommates, the resident love couple. Even a miners' strike couldn't dim our romance. Without electricity, we ate our meals and read D. H. Lawrence by candlelight. I'd been a theater major, but after one of my teachers read a paper I'd written on *Women in Love*, he suggested I switch to English. And so I decided to *nostalgia* >96

become a writer. Mostly, though, I was a woman in love. My boyfriend and I were so happy that at the end of the school year we couldn't bear to be apart—he lived in Manhattan, I in Massachusetts—so he hatched a plan to keep us together. His father, who was a prominent publisher, would get me an internship at one of his magazines. We could live with his family in their spacious Sutton Place apartment overlooking the East River.

I suspected my Catholic parents weren't going to be happy about this, and I was right. Stopping home after London, I stressed the job opportunity and emphasized that even though his parents weren't "exactly Catholic"—they were Jewish—they'd been happily married for more than 25 years. With the assurance that I'd have my own room, they reluctantly let me go.

My boyfriend was waiting for me in the lobby of his building when I stepped out of a cab, my suitcase bulging with clothes. As I gave him a shy kiss in front of the doorman, he muttered something about "complications." While we were falling in love, his parents were falling out of it, and his father wanted a divorce. "He's left my mother for someone else," he explained. "She's a secretary at the company."

"How old is she?" I asked.

"Old," he said. "Thirty-five." (His parents were in their early 50s.)

My boyfriend, however, assured me that everything was fine. His father had already moved out, and his mother was coping fairly well. Walking into the apartment, I saw that it was indeed beautiful, with a water view and modern art on the walls, but it smelled of cigarettes and something else—alcohol? His mother was in the kitchen crying while reading *The New Yorker*. I noticed a half-empty bottle of scotch on the counter. After I gave her the box of Russell Stover chocolates I'd bought as a hostess gift, she

showed me to my room, which was next to hers. In a loud, gravelly voice that reminded me of Elaine Stritch's, she kept referring to her husband as "the bastard."

As I unpacked my bag, I told myself that maybe I'd caught her on a bad day. But there were to be no good days. It was sad, because even at her worst she was beautiful and brilliant; she'd wanted to be a sculptor. If she hadn't devoted herself to her husband, she might have had a life as interesting as Toni Frissell's. As it was, she was bitter and resentful. Whether she'd always been that way or her husband's infidelity had brought out those qualities, I couldn't tell. But without "the bastard" around, she took out her frustrations on her son, whose only crime was that he was young and in love.

I didn't fare much better. One day, eyeing a magenta peasant blouse I'd bought at Bloomingdale's, she said, "Black is a better color for you." Though she was in mourning for her life and I was freshly in love, her unhappiness was contagious. At night I'd hear her crying in her room, and I'd want to cry too. After she

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and her son got into a major fight, we decamped to his father's apartment on Beekman Place. It had even better views of the river, and Greta Garbo lived around the corner. I was in real estate heaven, but I missed our life in London. We began to argue. One evening, after too much wine, I brought up what his mother had said about his father, that for a publisher, it was strange that he didn't own any books. My boyfriend didn't read much either. I saw a disturbing pattern. Things escalated, and I ran into the bathroom, slamming the door so hard we couldn't open it. The super

had to take the door off the hinges, and the next day, his father told us the building management wanted us to leave. We repacked our bags and returned to Sutton Place, where his mother didn't even look up from *The New Yorker*.

That night my boyfriend reminded me that in a couple of days he'd be leaving for two weeks to take a Red Cross lifesaving course in New Hampshire. He'd mentioned it earlier, but I'd conveniently blocked it out. He explained that his father thought it was important to have something to fall back on, in case he didn't make it as a musician. "And lifeguard is your next best option?" I shouted. Later, when my boyfriend said goodbye, I thought he looked less like Roger Daltrey and more like his father.

With my boyfriend gone, his mother and I hardly spoke to each other, although by then we had a big thing in common: We'd both been abandoned by our men. While she drowned in scotch, I drowned in self-pity. I bought a knockoff Saint Laurent suit in my new favorite color—black. She arranged a face-lift. At night, I'd walk

across the street and sit in the same romantic spot Woody Allen would later make famous in *Manhattan*. With the lights of the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge glittering overhead, I'd stare into the East River and imagine jumping into it. My boyfriend would have to live with the guilt of knowing that while he'd been administering CPR to an inflatable dummy, I'd drowned

off the coast of Sutton Place.

Somehow I made it through the rest of August. My boyfriend earned his lifesaving certificate. Though we stayed together a few more years, our love affair ended that summer. Eventually we lost touch, married other people. I'd heard that he'd gone into business with his father, leaving his music career behind. In the mid-nineties, not long after my Robert Mapplethorpe biography was reviewed in *The New Yorker*, I answered the phone. "You really did become a writer," my ex-boyfriend's mother said. "I guess you saved yourself." □