

# Uncle Timothy's Ships

By Summer Woodford

I loved the way he could make rocks dance across the water. He would make them do a different dance every time. He didn't know that I admired him. And I didn't want him to, for fear something would change. Maybe he wouldn't want me to watch him make the rocks dance if he knew that I admired him.

Uncle Timothy's swift and strong wrist reached for another rock and then paused in midair. I watched him.

"Look out there, boy." His wrist chose another direction to turn. "Tell me what you see."

I followed his long arm as it stretched out into the ocean mist. "I see the ocean and the boats and the gulls."

"What do you like most about the sea?" Uncle Timothy's lip quivered beneath his satiny mustache.

He asked me this every day. But I never grew tired of the question.

"The color of the water," I responded, letting my fingers sift through the trampled sand of many ages.

Uncle Timothy looked at me and a crooked smile spread across his face. He lay his weathered hand atop my head for many moments before withdrawing it and then leaving. He never bothered to say goodbye. I never mentioned my curiosity at this habit of his; I never felt I had to. I just knew that he didn't feel he should waste his breath on solemn 'good-byes' when he was to see me the next day. I couldn't help but admire him the more for this.

More and more each day I was beginning to think the house I lived in wasn't so special. Mama had tried very hard to give it character. A basket of choice blossoms sat placidly on the cracked cement porch, and, waving out over the sea, scarlet flowers grew against the clay walls of the crumbling house. But I felt that a house with character didn't need to have anything added to make it that way. A house with character just had it. And that was that. I thought all this as I stood on our porch, looking out over the rocks where Uncle Timothy and I had often sat. It was our place.

Mama poked her head out of the window above, her hair tied up in the torn red bandanna that hadn't been torn when I gave it to her. I couldn't remember my giving it to her, but whenever she wore it she had to remind me that I did.

"Where were you?" Mama called down to me. I didn't answer because she already knew and wouldn't listen anyway. "See this bandanna?" She pointed to it and smiled. "Remember when you gave it to me?"

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**He asked me  
that same question  
every day:  
"What do you  
like most  
about the sea?"**  
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I looked away and shoved my hands into the worn security of my pockets, lined with bits of sand.

He wore a crushed brown felt fedora with a wispy, rather bedraggled feather. I knew he was down there when I saw his feather, bobbing up and down among the rocks. Then I felt I should join him.

Mama stood, leaning perilously over the hot sink,

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**He didn't know that  
I admired him. If he knew,  
something might change  
between us.**

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her hands holding a dish that had been chipped many different times.

"He's down there," was all she needed to say to indicate her disapproval.

"I'm going down," I said, my eyes fastened on the worn enamel cover of the sink.

Mama's jaw stiffened and the edges around her lips began to turn white. She was going to say something. I left before she could.

"Those boats are restless." I watched Uncle Timothy as his eyes rested on the glistening boats tied to the docks.

"Boats can't be restless," I countered. "It's just the waves making them rock today."

Uncle Timothy grasped a smooth and faultless stone in his hand and threw it forcefully into the water. "They're restless."

I was silent.

"Look at them—all tied up," he went on, his burly voice skimming the waves. "They want to be free. Free on the water. Free as the wind. Forever."

I studied the dirt smudge on my shoe intently before replying, "I don't understand."

Uncle Timothy looked at me then but didn't smile. He put his hand on my shoulder and let it rest there.

"Come back with me, boy. I've been wanting to show you something."

Uncle Timothy's house had character. A plain log cabin set atop a crumbling hill over the sea. That was

all. It had character. His door squeaked rustily and without apology, revealing the essence of the man I so much admired. Just a couch at the window, its tasseled pillows tossed to one side. A rocker, forlornly rocking in the sympathetic wind. And the glass-bottle ships sitting proudly on the mantle—the only objects in the house that were free of dust.

"I love them," he said quietly. He walked toward them, then stood there, his eyes gleaming in the vivid darkness—I could see that plainly. I drew closer, close enough to see the intricate layout of the ships inside the bottles. They were so old! I could tell by the yellow, gnawing at their framework. Yet so timeless. Trapped and still, forever in a bottle.

"They are . . ." Uncle Timothy paused and then said, "what I am. They are trapped. They haven't tasted freedom."

I glanced out the neatly cracked window at the tied-up boats rocking plaintively on the waves. "They are restless," I responded absently, not realizing the puzzle I had then completed with my words.

"Someday," Uncle Timothy shook his head, "someday I will let my ships taste freedom."

I knew what he meant.

Mornings by the sea were always covered by a delicate veil of mist. I sat on the rocks waiting for the steady rise and fall of Uncle Timothy's heavy boots against the pebbles and sand.

He finally came and sat down. His usually clear eyes were clouded with distraction. I wasn't quite sure what to say, so I said nothing.

"What do you like best about the sea today, boy?" He said it with such an air of finality that I shivered.

"I like everything about it today," I smiled.

Uncle Timothy replied, "I do too."

His answer reassured my shiver.

And then, quite abruptly, he stood. I'd always marveled at his towering presence. Today he didn't seem quite so big.

He began to leave and I looked away, remembering our ritual. But then he turned.

"Goodbye, boy," he said briskly.

The urge to jump up and bring him back to me for so many explanations was strong—but I didn't want him to know that I admired him.

A morning had never felt so empty. Standing by the side of the house, leaning against the cold wall, I looked out over the sea. Waves so meek on such a

fierce day! I wondered why. But Uncle Timothy had never shown up, so I couldn't ask.

And now I was waiting for him. Not by the place where we sat each day, but here, at a safe distance.

And there came a boat gliding across the waves so easily, heading straight out to sea. He stood tall, face to the horizon, rocking up and down with his boat. I could see his determination in the way he held himself. And I knew he couldn't be so sure about leaving his home, his yellow tasseled pillows and rocking chair, his neatly cracked window and crumbling hill, and me—his friend—if it weren't for the glass-bottle ships bobbing joyously in his wake. I could see them there, a whole flotilla of miniature dreams, old but new, alive for the very first time. He had finally set them free. But I knew what it really meant . . .

Before they could leave my sight, I whispered, "Goodbye, Uncle Timothy—I hope freedom suits you well."

And he would know what I meant. He always had.