

Glenn of Green Gables

by Douglas Lucas

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"Glenn of Green Gables" is a short story about a crossdresser on a cruise ship who navigates through a love triangle. On 28 Aug 2009, the website above became the first publication (self-publication or otherwise) of the story.

"Glenn of Green Gables" is also available in HTML and plain text formats at www.douglaslucas.com/glenn

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The speakers chimed and again the captain of the cruise ship came over the intercom: “Quiet on deck, ladies and gentlemen.” The other passengers on the promenade absolutely refused to stop laughing and joking. They kept carrying on about what might happen if the ship sank. Me, I concentrated on tying my life jacket straps.

Just minutes ago the captain had sent us to the promenade for the lifeboat drill, a mandatory affair before the cruise ship cast off from Boston. Below, waves slapped the hull and the smell of sea salt rose; above, the #5 lifeboat waited to be lowered in the event of an actual emergency. I cupped my ear and stood on tiptoe, struggling to hear the lifeboat commander, a beefy man with a white uniform and a bulldog face. He was instructing us in the proper technique for putting on a life jacket — very important, but with all the guffawing, I just couldn't be certain I'd understood correctly.

“Be quiet,” I begged. Almost all the other passengers were elderly. Maybe they couldn't hear me.

They kept on talking — and not even about *Anne of Green Gables*! In its brochure, the cruise line had special-featured the excursion to the real-life Green Gables property, the beautiful farm that had inspired Lucy Maud Montgomery when she wrote her classic novel. If you haven't read *Anne* yet, you should. If you have, you should read it again.

“Shh,” I said. “This drill is very important!”

Nobody paid any attention. Maybe it was the sound of my voice . . . not very authoritative. To tell the truth, sometimes I can sound a little frilly.

The lady next to me held her life jacket in one hand and gabbed on and on to another passenger. I later learned her name was Vanessa. She looked about fifty, and taller than I, even though I was almost as tall as most other thirty-year-old men. Her dyed blonde hair domed up

on her big head and trickled down in rigatoni curls. She wore layered tank tops and strapless heels. Her artificially enhanced breasts sought the heavens. She was sexy, in a faux kind of way.

“— and well I'll be,” Vanessa was saying in her Texas drawl. “I saw on the TV that they just now released that man from prison, the one who —”

At my other side a bodybuilder fought to fit his life jacket over his epochal muscles. He had a hard face, a crew cut, a yellow Gold's Gym muscle shirt, little red shorts, and those blue eyes that make women swoon. Something seemed odd about the life jacket, but I couldn't pinpoint what since he slung it to the floor (with a grunt).

As I stood there watching him glare at his life jacket, I wished I could be a true tough guy. In fact, I was wearing semi-sheer hot pink panties underneath my manly Levi's. My panties had a petite black bow at the top of the front, scalloped edges at the thighs, and a black floral motif everywhere else. They felt so snug, so soft — and they made me feel so fragile! When a Filipino crewmember — all the low-ranking crew seemed Filipino, all the passengers white — brought my luggage to my suite earlier, I discovered my suitcase had been rummaged through. The TSA screeners left a slip of paper indicating they'd selected my suitcase for random inspection. And my nametag was on that suitcase!

A TSA screener must have found my lingerie. He'd be a macho man — all that wielding of heavy suitcases — with a sharp uniform and a harried look on his face. But that look would disappear as his jaw dropped into an Oh-my-God expression. He'd glance at my nametag, hold my panties high, and shout: “Glenn Wiggins is a sissy! Glenn Wiggins is a sissy!” If he spread gossip about me on the Internet, I thought, my chance to become truly tough someday would crumble like a sandcastle in a tidal wave.

The lifeboat commander called out passenger names to mark off his clipboard checklist, and the bark of his voice knocked me out of my imagination.

“Glenn Wiggins! Do I have a Glenn Wiggins?”

Vanessa gasped.

“That’s me!” I chirped. I wasn’t sure why Vanessa had gasped.

She took quick steps toward me and whispered into my ear: “I know what you are.”

#

Of course I jerked my jeans up. If my panties had been sticking out . . .

Vanessa slipped her hand underneath my life jacket. Something in the way she squeezed my shoulder — maybe the little circles she made with her thumb — told me she really wanted to squeeze all of me. No one had ever touched me like that before.

The lifeboat drill concluded, and we took off our life jackets. She fixed her eyes on me.

“So, where’s your cabin?” she asked.

At this point everything became all too real. I gazed down at the cameltoe crotch of her too-tight jeans and imagined my But how could I ever do what needed to be done? Women have the easier task, it seemed to me; I’d heard horror stories about what usually happens to male virgins their first time, and already an enormous, out-of-proportion flame had kindled in my pants.

Vanessa tugged on a rigatoni curl, then let it go. It snapped back into place. “I said, ‘Where’s your cabin?’”

I darted my eyes to the rolling sea, to the varnished brown deck railing, to the lifeboat gate, to the emergency light on my life jacket, and finally to the white deck.

“Well?” she said. “Show me.”

“Okay,” I managed.

We walked to the glass double door leading inside the ship. I saw myself in the reflection. Sure, I was pretty — baby face, trimmed fingernails — but I was as skinny as a blade of grass, and just as easily stomped on.

Vanessa stepped to the side and looked at me. And looked at me. And looked at me. Finally I realized I was supposed to open the door for her. I did, and she flounced through. We went across the red and gold carpet to the staircase, then took the stairs up to my deck.

The long hallway to my suite somehow seemed so short, and my door looked like a closed maw ready to open up and gobble me. Vanessa put her hand on my butt. My butt squirmed and clenched. The hallway became the tunnel of near-death experiences, only with no light at the end.

When we reached my door, I fumbled my electronic room key out of my pocket. A smacking sound told me Vanessa was chomping bubblegum. What would her mouth taste like? Would she let it stop at just kissing?

I plugged the key into the slot. The light lit up green, and I opened the door.

Vanessa said, “Why, you have a suite! And I’ll say, it is *so* nice!” She pointed at the potted ivy. “How pretty!”

My suite featured a flat screen television with a DVD/VHS player, a plush queen bed, and on one wall, an enormous mirror. I hardly could afford the suite, but I’d been saving for years to see *Green Gables*.

Vanessa shut the door. She locked eyes with me. “Glenn Wiggins,” she breathed. “Glenn Wiggins himself. You must feel so free now that you’re out of prison.” She giggled and put her palm on my chest. “I’m sorry, this is so inappropriate of me. But . . . I am such a big fan

of yours.”

I blinked like a high-speed camera shutter.

“I know you're maybe uncomfortable talking about it,” Vanessa went on, “but I want you to know I was on your side the whole time. I watched all about you on the TV. You should not have had to go to jail for breaking that stupid little law. Real men like you don't retreat before defending themselves and their families. You were so noble, protecting your wife. I'm so sorry she died of her wounds.” She slid her palm down my chest. “I wish I could be had by a man like you.”

And then it happened. She squeezed my crotch. I let out a little squeak of pleasure.

She giggled again. “You don't have to pretend to be humble. I know how brave you are, killing that armed burglar by bashing him in the head with a pot of bougainvillea.”

I lifted my hand to my mouth, knocking her hand off my chest in the process, and coughed into a fist. Of course I'm no hero. And though I never follow the news (too depressing!), I realized I shared names with the man she was talking about. My next realization told me being *thought* a hero — or maybe a brave bad boy — is an advantage with certain women. If I could win her heart, maybe I could tell her the truth about who I was later and she would move in with me and we could take things slowly and I could become a tough guy before we, well, did it.

“Um,” I said. “Oh, thank you. Maybe we could, ah, get to know each other out on the balcony?” I gestured toward the sliding glass door.

She turned her head to glance outside, so slowly she reminded me of Arnold as the Terminator scanning his surroundings for danger. I had broken one of the rules in those dating books stacked in my apartment: I'd said 'Maybe we could get to know each other out on the

balcony?' instead of the more confident 'Let's go out on the balcony.' You violate one of those rules, and some women will drop you from their list of candidates forever. I tried to recall the remaining rules. God, I thought, I'd already blown opening the door for her.

Vanessa's big head swiveled back to me. "Fine. Let's go."

We walked out into the cool briny air. Two chaise lounges reclined near the privacy wall between balconies. Vanessa flopped onto one. "So," she said, "what do you need to know?"

I stood there, looking at her, and decided it was my only chance. I went for it. I opened my heart. "Have you read *Anne of Green Gables*?" I said. "It's my favorite book."

She stared at me as though I were gay. "No, I haven't," she said. She popped upright, leaned over the railing, and spit her gum overboard.

I ignored her violation of the ship rules and studied her butt. It consisted of two saggy lumps. However, I can fall in love with any woman if she's wonderful enough. I decided to tell her about *Anne*. If she found it interesting, maybe someday there could be a love between us as deep as the ocean.

"Well," I said, "the ship is stopping at Prince Edward Island. That's where Green Gables is, the beautiful farm that inspired Lucy Maud Montgomery. Actually the specific town on Prince Edward Island is called Cavendish, but we dock at Charlottetown. Anyway, Lucy Maud Montgomery is the author of *Anne of Green Gables*. I know the events of that book better than the events of my own life. It's about this precocious little orphan girl named Anne Shirley who —"

"Do you think my purse is safe in my cabin?" Vanessa said. "Maybe I should check —"

"Wait, wait!" I cried. "Just picture it. Anne Shirley has long braided red hair and freckles sprinkled on her face. She's *so* imaginative. At one point she tells this woman, Marilla,

about her imaginary friend, Katie Maurice. I can quote the passage:

“When I lived with Mrs. Thomas she had a bookcase in her sitting-room with glass doors. There weren't any books in it; Mrs. Thomas kept her best china and preserves there — when she had any preserves to keep.” Vanessa fished a cardboard nail file out of her jeans. I spoke faster. *“One of the doors was broken. Mr. Thomas smashed it one night when he was slightly intoxicated. But the other was whole and I used to pretend that my reflection was another little girl who lived in it. I called her Katie Maurice, and we were very intimate. I used to talk to her by the hour, especially on Sunday, and tell her everything. Katie was the comfort and consolation of my life. We used to pretend —”*

Once more Vanessa interrupted, this time with the loud scratching of her fingernails against the file. A massive internal debate ensued. My prefrontal cortex told me I'd never see her again. My reptilian brain, so to speak, insisted I had to have her. I switched from *Anne* to the bad boy stuff.

“I memorized the book in prison,” I offered. “It was, uh, the only book I had access to. New government regulations about prison libraries and all that. That's why *Anne* means so much to me.”

The nail file stopped in midair. “Really!” Vanessa said. The nail file retreated to her pocket. “In prison, were you ever, you know . . . scared?”

“Not at all!” I said. “My single copy of *Anne of Green Gables* gave me the strength of a million Bibles, and —”

But then she was on me, ruby lips smacking, then chewing, on my own lips, and her hand scooped its way down the front of my jeans. So that her hand couldn't get any farther down, I listed backward like a sinking ship, but she had already touched the top of my panties.

“Hmm,” Vanessa said. “What kind of underwear is that?”

“Hero' brand,” I said, inventing the name. “Sleek, aren't they? For jogging. So you don't chap your thighs. The string is for tying around my MP3 player's clasp.”

Vanessa cooed in appreciation. She leaned forward to reach farther, and I cakewalked backward. “Not yet! Not yet!” I cried.

“Oh, you tease, you. Well. Tell me more about prison.”

All I knew about prison was what I'd seen in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Even though she'd missed the bit about prison library regulations, Vanessa still might have been able to peg me as a phony. So I said nothing.

“Such a tease,” she said, advancing.

A tease, I thought . . . good idea! I rushed at her, gripped her shoulders, pecked her lips, and said: “Good things come to those who wait. Besides, don't we need to get some protection?”

“I have some condoms in my purse back in my cabin,” she said. “I'll be right back.”

I hadn't foreseen that possibility. Before I could think of another way to put her off until later, she kissed me, with tongue. I remembered to shut my eyes. Her tongue was hot and was textured like lasagna cheese. Her mouth tasted peppery from whatever gum she'd been chewing. Still, I wasn't going to complain, and I couldn't bring myself to stop kissing. She ground her body against mine, and I fought off an accidental early end to our encounter.

Finally she stopped. “I'm going back to my cabin to get the condoms,” she said, breathing hot peppery breath all over my face. She hurried out, but not before telling me she might not be back for a while, since she wanted to 'put her face on again.'

I locked the deadbolt.

#

It was time to have a conversation with the brother of Anne Shirley's reflection-friend Katie Maurice. His name was Caleb Maurice. Lucy Maud Montgomery never wrote about him.

I ripped off my sneakers and jeans, swapped my shirt for my soft black camisole. Wearing just lingerie gave me safe harbor, if only for the moment.

I searched the mirror and called forth Caleb. He appeared, the only other person who knew my secrets.

“You're pitiful,” Caleb said.

“I know,” I whimpered. “I know.”

“You finally have a woman, and have you made a man out of yourself yet? No, of course not. Take off your stupid lingerie and dump it over the side of the ship.”

“But that won't help anyway!” I wailed. “Vanessa is coming back soon, and I can't . . . can't . . . you know.”

“Bah,” Caleb said. “You can't even say 'premature ejaculation.' If you dump the lingerie overboard, you might make yourself into the man you need to be to satisfy her.”

I watched Caleb nod. I squiggled out of my camisole, stripped off my panties, dropped them both, and dressed in boxers, jeans, and a plain black T-shirt. I wished for a T-shirt with a beer bottle on it. Or maybe a pink button-down. According to my dating books, real men wear pink so women will judge them as being unconcerned about being judged.

I went to the balcony and leaned over the railing, holding my lingerie bunched in one hand. The ship was cutting a trench through the water. The waves resembled ski moguls, but that's just a comparison; the waves were only the waves, themselves, more honest than anything onboard. Earth primeval. I wanted to be out there, a dolphin perhaps, off this cruise liner and as free as those waves. They refused to obey any rules other than those of Nature. I turned away. I

would not pollute the honest sea.

I hid the lingerie and waited.

#

When Vanessa knocked, I opened the door. She was wearing a black leather jacket over a black T-shirt, bitch boots, and short short short black shorts. I looked for a riding crop, but unfortunately, saw none.

While waiting I'd realized that as long as I *acted* tough, I could put off sex at least for a while. I took her arm in mine and said in the most confident voice I could muster: "Let's explore the ship."

She looked down at her clothes. "In this?"

"Hey. You're Glenn Wiggins's girl. What's anyone going to say?"

She patted my shoulder with her other hand and giggled. Arm in arm, off we went.

At the end of the hallway, a double door led to a deck with a swimming pool. This time I remembered to open it for her. We stepped out into the wind. A white guardrail circled the deck, and chaise lounges circled the pool; below, on other decks, passengers shuffled back and forth; and, farther beyond, rolling on forever, the grand sea.

Near the pool, the bodybuilder, bare-chested, performed sit-ups.

"Hey, good-lookin'!" he called to Vanessa. He did a sit-up. "Wait!" Another sit-up. "Don't leave!" Another. "Almost done!"

We waited. As his titanic muscles clenched and unclenched, names tumbled through my head. Arnold. Stallone. Van Damme. Glenn Wiggins? Who the hell was Glenn Wiggins?

The bodybuilder finished his sit-ups and sprinted over to us. "Whew. It's off-season, but I still gotta train for the Natural Olympia. Gotta beat Jumbo. That guy's hoss." He paused for

breath. "The name's Rock. 'Cuz I'm all rock, not a speck of fat on me. See? See?" He lifted his shirt to showcase his astounding abs.

Vanessa counted his abs with a pointing finger. "Wow . . . there's eight! I didn't know that was possible!" She looked at his face. "Can I feel your chin?"

Rock obliged. As Vanessa cupped his chin, he ogled the two points her breasts made in her T-shirt. From far, far below, I looked up at a jacket illustration for a romance novel, one that would never include a character named Glenn Wiggins.

Vanessa released Rock's chin. Rock asked her for her name and cabin number. She gave them; he gave his number. He turned to me. "You, too, of course."

"Glenn Wiggins, D-503," I mumbled.

"Don't be shy," Rock said. "Speak up."

"Glenn Wiggins, D-503."

Vanessa said, "Glenn is a very brave man. He killed an armed burglar with a pot of bougainvillea. What do you think of that, Rock?"

Rock scratched his head, biceps bulging out. "Not bad, not bad. When three armed burglars broke into my house, I took them out by hurling barbells at them. Yup. That day will go down in history."

What could I say to that?

Suddenly Vanessa announced she was going back to her cabin. She aimed a single wink at both of us. "You boys decide who's taking me to dinner tonight. Give my cabin a call."

She pranced inside.

"I'll arm wrestle you for it," Rock said.

I just sulked back to my suite.

#

There I lay on my bed, dressed in my lingerie, trying furiously to masturbate. It was useless. Whenever I shut my eyes, Caleb would shout from the mirror: “Do sit-ups instead!” or “Solve your problems intelligently!” I got up, hid the camisole, pulled my jeans over my panties, donned a black T-shirt, and went to wander my worries away by exploring the ship.

Eventually I found myself in the casino. Lights brighter than Christmas flashed and glittered from clusters of slot machines and from globe-shaped bulbs strung across the ceiling. Beeps and whirrs emanated from the machines, and above this arcade for adults, a recorded voice gibbered: “Have a wonderful evening! Good luck!”

Through the packed crowd I came to the craps table. Rock stood next to it, wearing a fresh set of exercise gear, shaking dice in a mighty fist. He threw them so hard they bounced off the felt, spun through the air, and slammed into a centenarian. The centenarian didn't notice and shuffled on.

Rock told the dealer to cash him out and, after the dealer did, gestured for me to approach. I headed over, and we moved next to a wall.

“Have you noticed how old all the passengers on this ship are, except us?” Rock asked. “Vanessa — *I'm* taking her to dinner tonight — she's the youngest woman here! She only came on this cruise because she won a ticket playing Bingo.”

I said, “Not enough young people care about *Anne of Green Gables*.”

“Anne of who?”

I explained.

“I signed up for the wrong damn cruise!” After a moment, he continued. “Look. I'll let you take her to Anne of Whatever. Other nights —” he shrugged “— we'll let her decide.”

Failure seemed inevitable, either way.

“You know,” Rock said. “I teach P.E. to Special Ed kids. I can show you some exercises sometime, if you want to get bigger.” His cheery tone told me he didn't recognize the maladroit insult in his words.

“No thanks, Rock,” I said. He held out his hand to shake. I gripped it. His hand crushed mine.

As I walked back to my suite, I thought about Rock. A dedicated athlete, a Special Ed teacher . . . a dumbbell for sure, but he was a good guy.

That made everything hurt all the worse.

#

I passed the next few days secluded in my suite, reading and re-reading *Anne*, my lingerie snugly on my body. From time to time the ship vibrated gently, and the motion reminded me of the waves, which journeyed across the immense sea without effort.

Occasionally Caleb glared out from the mirror to hurl exhortations at me.

Vanessa telephoned often; I coughed into my handset, pretending to be sick. A certain part of me wanted to have sex as soon as possible, but the rest of me didn't want to face abject humiliation any earlier than I had to.

She was sweet. She asked again and again if I needed anything, but I pretended the crew was already taking care of me. She admired my insistence that she not come to my suite lest she get ill; when she agreed to accompany me to Green Gables, she said it was because I had been such a gentleman.

At last the day came.

#

Anne of Green Gables! The excursion was technically optional for passengers — but boy, it was not optional for me. Dressed only in my most manly clothes, I led Vanessa by hand off the gangway into a warehouse-like terminal building. On a dais a girl no older than nine scratched out Celtic melodies on a violin. In the very center of the building, a redheaded teen playing the part of Anne — pigtails, freckles, and all — posed for photographs with passengers. (Of course Vanessa and I had ours taken.) And to the sides, vendors offered *Anne* merchandise. They even had *Anne* potato chips!

Out the other side of the building waited the private tour guide I'd arranged, a sweet elderly lady named Heidi. As we drove to Cavendish, she tried to tell us about the local weather and economy — until she finally figured out I was busy trying to tell Vanessa about the life of Lucy Maud Montgomery and the story of *Anne*.

Vanessa never responded to what I said without mistaking my point; her eyes wandered; she smiled all too much and said “uh-huh” liberally. But she was stroking my thigh . . .

With our own tour guide, we arrived at Green Gables before it became crowded with others from the ship. Vanessa and I got out of the van. Heidi waited behind, saying she needed to brush up on *Anne*. She offered me a refund; of course I refused it.

In the parking lot a bus disgorged Japanese tourists armed with cameras. *Anne* is, in fact, very popular in Japan. A group of Canadians has even sold Anne-style homes there. If only Americans were so cultured.

Next to the parking lot stood the small visitor center. A shrine, really. A Japanese kid butted in front of me and snapped a photograph. I patted my fellow *Anne* fan on the shoulder. I didn't take pictures. I was so busy experiencing my experience, taking it in, treasuring it, that I didn't want to interrupt its flow by trying to document everything with a camera. I knew I would

remember every detail.

Vanessa yawned. She apologized and, accepting my hand, entered the visitor center with me.

Inside, I admired yellowed photographs, Lucy Maud Montgomery's old tattered journals . . . and they even showed a short film! Vanessa and I watched it from the back of a small dark theater. Whenever Vanessa reached over to rub my crotch, I took her hand and set it aside.

Once we left the visitor center, the span of Green Gables became clear. Outbuildings and white wooden fences decorated dirt paths and meadows. An old buggy stood watch. Even the wingbeats of mosquitoes, high-pitched whine or not, belonged. I wakened to a new past, spun, gave Vanessa a peck on the cheek.

We walked to the farmhouse, and — yes! — its many gables were painted a dark forest *green*. Outside its doors, Parks Canada officials checked their watches and ignored the visitors. We went in. Ropes marked off permissible walkways. This weak security offended me. But I quickly chose to forgive it, for around me was the gentle temple that inspired *Anne*.

Soon we climbed the stairs to the second story. No one else was there. We walked down the hall to the open doorway of the bedroom called “Anne's Room,” a tiny sanctum with white flowery wallpaper and 19th-century furniture. Vanessa took one look at the bed and detached the rope from the poles in front of Anne's doorway. She walked back up the hall and attached the rope to the two poles flanking the stairs, blocking anyone from ascending.

“What are you doing?” I hissed. “You can't desecrate —”

She giggled, returned, and went into Anne's Room. “Come on!”

She pointed to the bed, an altar of pure white. Perhaps, I thought in wonder, the magic of Anne would help me perform. I went in and shut the door.

We mounted the bed. My memory of these moments is divided into individual frames, like photographs, but they are sensate things, things that make me quiver as I recall them. Vanessa below me, closed eyelids and ruby lips, unable to wait, wrapping her arms around my back, the weight of her locked hands pulling me toward her. Her scent, a peculiar watermelon perfume I had never smelled before and do not wish to smell on anyone else, for she alone owns it. Her kiss, rough, hurried, hungry. And then the scrambling of thumbs and forefingers on buttons and zippers, the awkward words of *where*, and *here*, and the hot grip of her inner body around that part of me.

Now I remember Vanessa arching her back high and using Anne's pillow to muffle her cry, her strange coils of hair escaping from underneath it — no, I don't remember this part, that's not what happened.

What happened? I think you know. It ended, almost before we began.

For a full minute afterward I couldn't speak, couldn't move; thought was overtaken by physical sensation — something unpleasant turned over and over in my stomach — and at last thought returned to tell me a single thing: I was the wrong answer to life's question. I kept my eyes closed, not knowing what to say.

Vanessa touched the soft pad of her index finger to the bridge of my nose and traced a line down to the tip, then landed her finger against my lips. *Shh*. I opened my eyes. Her heavy eyelids curtained down, stayed shut; then, after a moment, she lifted them: a double wink.

“It's an eye-kiss,” she whispered. “Now you do it.”

I did.

“You're a different Glenn Wiggins, aren't you?” she asked.

I nodded.

She took my hand and, wordlessly, led me out of the farmhouse. I stared at the dirt as we walked back to Heidi's van. As we drove to the ship, Heidi chattered about something or other. I couldn't listen. Vanessa, beside me in the back of the van, massaged my shoulder with that circular thumb motion that should have meant so much.

Aboard, I couldn't say anything as Vanessa waved goodbye.

#

“You know why she ditched you, don't you?” Caleb said from the mirror. He meant that it had been a full day, and Vanessa still hadn't called.

“Yes,” I said. I was naked. In the St. Lawrence River, the ship was passing rock outcroppings, headed toward Quebec, and ultimately toward Montreal, where the cruise was to end.

“She was only nice after you ruined everything,” Caleb continued, “because she felt sorry for your pathetic ass. No one will ever understand you, no one will ever accept you. You will never succeed with a woman. You might as well be one. You don't know how to be a man — and you will always, always fuck like a virgin. Put on your stupid lingerie. You know what to do.”

I put on my camisole, moving it down my body inch by inch. My panties I held in one hand and caressed with a lover's touch. For a long moment I tweezed the panties' bow with index and thumb. I stepped into the panties and turned a full circle, looking at myself in the mirror one final time.

I saw a malformed man.

There was nothing left. I slid open the door to the balcony, stepped out. The sun was sinking, its rays struggling to reach the sky. The roiling waves hissed. Somewhere deep beneath

them, Nature smiled as species devoured their own kind, and misfit mutants died. Striking the water, I hoped, would break my body apart.

I gripped the railing. Counted silently. *Three. Two. One* —

An immense groan came from the ship. I was thrown to the deck. The impossible rending sound lasted several seconds. The ship's horn gave seven short blasts and one long moan. The emergency signal.

The ship had struck an outcropping and was about to sink.

#

My thoughts went immediately to my friends: Vanessa and Rock. I turned from the railing and ran through my suite to the door, grabbing my life jacket from the closet along the way. Into the hallway and to the staircase. I leapt downward three steps at a time. On each deck I passed, some passengers simply stood still, holding colorful alcoholic beverages and chattering. They pointed at my lingerie and brayed laughter. Other passengers, and the crew, ran around like ants in a smashed anthill.

The floor tilted only slightly, but the rate at which it tilted grew exponentially. Some people screamed; others snapped pictures with digital cameras or cell phones as if nothing were wrong. Sometimes they took pictures of me. An announcement finally came over the P.A. system. Something about the watertight doors closing on the lower decks, and a politely optimistic request that we proceed to the lifeboat stations.

By the time I reached the promenade, the listing of the ship was easily noticeable, and growing terrible. The cold air bit at my nearly nude body. As I threaded my way through passengers and crewmembers, I slipped my life jacket over my camisole.

Lifeboat station #5. The beefy lifeboat commander was yelling at deckhands, who were

operating the machinery to bring the lifeboat down. As the machinery floated the lifeboat over our heads, it made a noise like an elevator, only louder. The lifeboat landed and seemed to hover next to the now-opened promenade gate.

I spotted Rock standing near the wall, but couldn't find Vanessa. The women at our station boarded the lifeboat first, moving with too much haste to comment about my lingerie; then the lifeboat commander called for the men to board. Rock wouldn't move. He was yelling something indecipherable and trying to squeeze into his life jacket. His neck muscles prevented him from getting it onto his shoulders.

The ship tilted farther.

Now the rest of the male passengers at our station were seated in the lifeboat. The commander screamed at Rock and me: "Get onboard!" I shook my head at him and ran toward Rock.

When he saw me, Rock said, "What the hell are you wearing?" and then added: "Never mind. I can't fit in my fucking life jacket. I'm going to another station. I'm not getting on a lifeboat without a life jacket."

The ship's horn gave one long, final wail. The lifeboat commander shouted: "We're abandoning ship!"

I saw what was wrong. By some mistake, a crewmember had stowed a child-size life jacket in Rock's cabin, and Rock hadn't realized. I explained this, and gave him mine. It fit him. The child-size life jacket fit over my needle-neck with room to spare. It wouldn't help me much were the lifeboat to sink, I thought, but I didn't tell Rock that.

"Where's Vanessa?" I asked.

"I don't know," Rock said. "I'm not waiting for her. Sorry."

“I’ll wait,” I said.

Rock took a longer look at me than he had to, then shook my hand, gently this time.

“You’re a braver man than I,” he said. He boarded the lifeboat.

“We’re going,” the lifeboat commander shouted at me. “This is your last chance.”

“Go on,” I yelled back.

The lifeboat lowered until I couldn’t see it. I stood there, no one else in sight, thinking about Rock — not anything in particular, just that he was a person who meant well.

Just then Vanessa came running down the steep promenade. “Glenn!”

She saw my lingerie and, in the total despair of an empty lifeboat station on a sinking ship, took the time to ask me why I was wearing it.

“Why not?” I said.

She put her hand in mine.

“Hurry,” I said. We ran to the open promenade gate. The lifeboat was a good eight feet below. Enough to break bones if we landed poorly — but we could make it, all the same. The passengers and crewmembers cleared space for us to land.

Except Vanessa wouldn’t jump. She said something about finding another lifeboat station, but I knew there was no time. She grabbed me, bound my arms with hers, and said:

“Don’t leave me.” I couldn’t escape her grip, couldn’t push her to jump.

So I said: “Anne of Green Gables *drew a long breath and flung her head up proudly, courage and determination tingling over her like an electric shock.*”

Vanessa laughed, letting go of me for an instant.

I pushed her off the ship toward the lifeboat.

Rock caught her.

As soon as Rock set her aside, I jumped.

Rock caught me.

A few moments later, Rock and Vanessa were sitting in the back of the lifeboat, hand in hand. I never told Vanessa about Rock abandoning her. They look too good together.

As we sailed away from the cruise liner, I made my way toward the bow of the lifeboat. The lifeboat commander commanded me to stop. I ignored him. I took off the child-size life jacket and dropped it to the bottom of the boat. The commander kept commanding me, and I kept ignoring him. At the bow I placed one foot on the side of the lifeboat, so that my knee bent and I could rest a hand there. Standing tall, I stared out at the primeval waves. I must have looked like George Washington crossing the Delaware. In lingerie.

THE END

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