

88 LINES  
ABOUT  
44 WOMEN

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VIKING  
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PENGUIN BOOKS

There was no wind and the sea was silver-flat, disturbed only by slow rolls of swell coming from somewhere so distant they could hardly shift the equilibrium of the boat. Outside the Heads we'd picked up a little westerly that encouraged me to put up sail, but after a time even that petered out. We were becalmed, and that should have been divine. We should have opened a bottle of cold white, we should have made love.

Instead Gizelle was going on about some crisis at the studio. She had been up all night and the after-effects of whatever it was she'd taken, combined with the sun, the stabs of light off the water, made her scratchy. She was intent on rehearsing, in painful detail, a recent conversation with one of the other actors. She'd got it into her head that this girl was trying to undermine her.

I said something about what a beautiful day it was.

'This stuff might not mean anything to you,' she said. 'But it's my life.'

I said I knew that, but perhaps we could forget about the TV station for a while and just be where we were, together. If saying

this was part of some campaign to lure her into my arms, then it was a tactical error. She pulled off her T-shirt and threw it on the floor of the cockpit.

‘You know what your problem is? You never think about anyone but yourself. Well, I’m not going to let you ruin my day. I’m going for a lie in the sun.’

I was left in the stern with the unopened wine and my grievances, the mainsail hanging slack. I tried to read the papers, but couldn’t see the words. The indignities I’d suffered at her hands played their tiresome refrain in my mind. At some point I had convinced myself I loved her, but clearly I was every kind of fool; she’d never cared for me.

I looked at her lying on the deck, flaunting herself, telling me with her long legs and her bare back that this was what I could be having if only I’d give her whatever it was she wanted, whenever she wanted it. I thought that even if she were to express a desire for sex, I’d refuse, that I never wanted to have sex with her again. What I felt for her was disgust, pure and simple. At last, I thought, her power over me was gone.

I sat in the cockpit, staring out at the ocean stretching to the horizon, and eventually the other argument presented itself: that sex *was* the answer, that if I could only swallow my pride and go to her, the day might not be a complete disaster. She was just lying there, not reading, not looking at anything. She had found an odd, terry-towelling visor for her eyes and she was wearing only that and her tiny knickers, and they were white and brilliant against the darkness of her skin.

When I went to her she opened one eye and looked at me grimly.

‘Hey,’ I said. I sat beside her. I ran my hand from shoulder to

hip and back again, along the curve of her, gently, generously, with feeling.

After a time she rolled over. 'You're blocking my sun,' she said, those lips curling with the faintest touch of a smile. I bent to kiss her. She let me. Her mouth full and moist, open to mine. I had been right; in this place we could still meet, effortlessly, with mutual joy. I brought myself up over the top of her, holding my weight with my straightened arms, still kissing her.

She pushed me away. 'Strong male smell here,' she said, but this time without rancour, still with that half-smile. 'Hot male.' Putting an appreciative hand between my legs. 'Hard male.'

'Well, let's have a quick swim, then.'

She liked to swim in deep water. It was one of the things I loved about her, her fearlessness, the spontaneous joy she took in things like diving naked into unconfined water. I stood up and dropped my shorts, dived in. There were no rails on Roly's yacht, he kept *Naiad* set for racing.

When I came up to the surface she was still on the deck, watching me.

'Come on,' I called.

I don't think she planned to abandon me. There were too many variables for that. If it hadn't been so calm I wouldn't have gone for a swim. I wouldn't have left the boat as it was. I think it was the drugs. I think she was still pissed off with me and when the opportunity arose she simply went for it.

'Come on,' I said again, and swam a few strokes away from the boat. The cool water thick and lustrous on my skin. Deep water is different from shore water. It carries the weight of its depth in every molecule, holding the human body in a particular way, at once supportive and completely merciless. Swimming in it is like

tightrope-walking, with only the boat to catch you.

When next I looked she was back in the cockpit, starting the motor. I wasn't concerned. I was still thinking with my cock. I was waiting for her to jump in and frolic with me, and after that we'd climb out and make love and all the anger and stupidity would be as if it had never happened, at least for as long as the sex lasted. When she started the motor I think I thought she was going to bring the boat over to where I was. Instead she turned it away from me – not directly away, turned it so that she could circle around me. She was standing in the cockpit in those tiny white knickers with one hand on the helm and as the boat moved, the sun went behind the mainsail and she fell into its shadow. A moment later she emerged back into the light. She was laughing, tossing her head and laughing. This was one of her jokes, her mean jokes.

'You're a bastard, Larry,' she said. 'You think you're so fucking smart. You think you've got it all worked out, don't you? But now you're in the water and I'm in the boat.'

'Cut it out, Gizelle,' I said.

I started to swim towards the yacht, so that I'd be at the little ladder by the time it passed. She saw what I was doing and took the two or three paces to the stern and lifted it inboard. Then she went back to the cockpit and gunned the motor.

'What was that you said, Larry? I couldn't hear you. Did you want something, Larry? Did you think this was some sort of game, Larry?'

I couldn't help myself, I swam after her. I was under the influence of forces stronger than rational thought. The boat was moving away, the boat was where I needed to be. I swam after it as hard and as fast as possible – freestyle, but with my head out of the water so I could see where she was, and I was panicking, taking water in my

mouth, saltwater. I was forced to stop to catch my breath. When I did that she brought the boat around.

‘I want to talk to you, Larry. Have I got your attention now? Are you listening to me?’

I was. I was listening harder than I’ve ever listened in my life. I had stopped pursuing the boat but even then I was having trouble breathing. As if my lungs had shrunk. One aspect of my mind wanted to believe this was just a joke, but another, more primal part, had sent my body into survival mode. It was responding to every possible scrap of information that could help me live. It was measuring the distance to the boat, to the loop of sheet that was hanging over the port side, just a little, just enough to be reached from the water. It was registering the temperature of the medium I was in. It was considering how long it would take to swim to land and the possibility of surviving such a journey. It was considering ways to talk Gizelle into letting me back onboard.

‘Come on, sweetheart,’ I said. ‘Joke’s over.’ I started to swim towards her again. I did not go for the rope. I did not want to draw her attention to it.

‘Don’t do that,’ she called out, spinning the wheel so the yacht swung away, diesel exhaust blowing out across the water.

When she saw I’d stopped, she brought *Naiad* back around. ‘I can’t talk to you if you do that,’ she said. ‘And I want to set you straight on a couple of things. I want you to listen to me. I know you think I’m stupid, but —’

‘I don’t think that. I don’t think you’re stupid. That’s just the drugs talking, baby. I love you. It’s me here – Larry. Remember? I’m the one who loves you.’

‘Shut the fuck up!’ she yelled.

I said nothing. I hung in the deep green water.

‘I know what you think of me,’ she said. ‘You think I’m boring – what was it you called me? Crass. That was one thing. Arrogant. That was another one. Self-centred. You probably think you’ve made a big mistake marrying me. And that’s true. That’s fucking right. Because now, if I want it, you’re dead and I’m alive.’

All the time, circling around. Gizelle moving in and out of the shadow of the mainsail, the wake chopping itself within the boundaries of the boat’s curve, where I was, naked, treading water, turning to watch her against the ever-changing background – the empty horizon, the skerrick of the north shore, the Heads, the national park, back to the horizon again. Way to the south, the beginning of the thunderstorm that the heat of the day would eventually pull up out of the ocean.

‘Let me tell you something, mister. You don’t get to decide what I am. I do. Nobody owns me. You think because you put a ring on my finger I’m yours. You think you can do what you want with me.’ She was talking very fast, holding onto the wheel, making to step up out of the cockpit but then going back down again. ‘But you’re right about one thing – getting married was a mistake. I had the wrong idea about it. I thought because you were a good fuck we’d be good together. You’ve got a nice cock, but there’s plenty of nice cocks out there. I don’t need yours. I don’t need your shit any more.’

I hadn’t realised until then just how out of it she was. I tried to tell myself that this was going to blow over, I just had to wait it out. But I didn’t feel like doing that, the adrenaline had got into me, swimming after the boat had pumped it into my blood and I was desperate.

‘It’s all right, baby,’ I said, as calmly as I could. ‘It’s all right. I love you.’

‘The fuck you do! You don’t love anyone. You wouldn’t know love if it hit you in the fucking head. You’re a cold bastard, Larry, that’s what you are.’

Strangely, my nakedness was a problem. If I’d been wearing swimmers it wouldn’t have been so bad. I might have considered turning around and swimming towards the shore, no matter that it was several kilometres away, but naked, even if I made it to one of the southern beaches, I wouldn’t have been able to get out of the water. This is the way the mind works.

‘Please, Gizelle,’ I said. ‘I don’t like this any more.’

‘That’s you and me both.’

The mainsail had swung out on its boom, almost at right angles to the boat. It was late morning, the sun high in the sky. She had one hand on the helm, the other on the throttle, standing there, her small breasts with their dark nipples exposed. Behind her, the land coming around again. I saw Sydney pass for maybe the third time, and as it began to recede, as the boat turned south-east, I saw the clouds, but also a slight ruffle on the surface of the ocean, the mark of some approaching wind.

Gizelle was getting impatient. Somehow things weren’t happening fast enough for her. The drama needed pumping up. She let go of the helm and this time stepped right out onto the deck, so she could see me better, or so I could see her, I don’t know which. Just as she did it, the wind found the sail.

It wasn’t much of a wind, barely a squall, a zephyr weaving its way across the surface of the sea. But it found the sail and filled it and the boom swung around with the rattle of the loose ropes in their pulleys, swinging hard, hitting her across the shoulders, on her neck, the back of her head. I heard the sound it made. It knocked her right into the water.

My instant reaction was glee. Serves you right, bitch.

Except that now the boat was unmanned. The motor still running. The filling sail had shifted it off its circular course. It was moving away from me, out to sea. I swam after it, putting my head down and stroking as fast as I could. I tried to focus on technique, anything that allowed for greater speed, but none of it made a bit of difference. I was trapped, as in those running dreams where you never reach your goal. My flailing gained me no ground, the boat kept moving away.

I did not think about Gizelle. My only concern was to get to the boat, and the boat was receding. I would have lost it altogether if the breeze hadn't reappeared, swinging the mainsail back round again.

In another ten or fifteen strokes I was beside the hull. So relieved to feel its solidity that for a moment I stopped swimming. The boat, though, was still moving, and I was unable to get aboard. There was no ladder, the deck beyond my reach. I grasped at the smooth painted surface with my fingernails. It slid past.

Then, suddenly, there was the sheet, looping down. I reached up, caught it. The slack came away in my hand, metres of it, pulling out. When finally it drew taut I was trailing behind the boat. I wrapped the rope around my wrist, tried to catch my breath, hanging there, drawn along through the ocean.

It was then I looked around for Gizelle. I was surprised, I think, that I hadn't heard her screaming. I could not see her.

The rope was thin. The nylon cut into my hands. When I pulled myself alongside I found, too, that *Naiad's* hull sloped away below the waterline – I couldn't get my feet against it for purchase. I managed to haul myself up far enough to get hold of a cleat. I dragged myself up on that. If my life had not depended on it – if

I had not, by then, figured out that Gizelle's life also depended on it – I wouldn't have managed it.

I turned the boat around and went back towards where I thought she was. The ocean, though, is a landscape without markers. We were several kilometres offshore. There was no way of telling where we had been a moment before. Having parted to let the boat through, the water had closed up again behind it, leaving no trail. I motored this way and that, possessed now of a different kind of terror. The terror for another, for someone you love. Eventually I killed the engine. I dropped the mainsail and climbed up the mast.

That was when I saw her, floating just below the surface, going down.