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Len Comes to Conyer

by Sue Hitchcock

After the row Roma had gone straight back home to Conyer, to her father, to the barge, with all its smelly dampness, the pumping of the bilges and the mud, but as she clambered aboard she sighed with relief and grabbed her father in her arms.

“Hello, what’s up love?”

“I’ve come home.”

“Yes? For how long?”

“We had a row.”

“Never mind. Coming to the pub for a drink?”

Since her mother had died, her father had gone to the Conyer Arms for company most nights, and more so since Roma had met Len. He felt that fatherly resentment at the takeover of his only daughter, but accepted that she had to make her own life and so he made the best of what was left of his. At least he still had the barge.

It was like a party at the Arms. Roma was the queen of the evening, her dad and his mates buying her drinks. When they eventually lurched back to the barge, they slipped and slithered, Roma eventually having to pull her dad out of a puddle laughing and muddy.

The celebration of Roma's return faded a little on the second evening and on the third, her dad and his mates reverted to their usual topics of football and newspaper gossip. Roma spent a while at the bar chatting with Oliver, who owned the pub. Most of his clientele were the yacht people from the more salubrious end of Conyer Quay, quite demanding and not looking for work. Roma might fill in sometimes when he was short of staff.

The next day, while they were eating lunch, a shout came,

"Roma...Roma, are you there?"

Roma groaned and bared her teeth,

"It's Len."

"Don't worry, I'll tell him to go away."

Roma followed her father up the steps, knowing she'd have to face him.

"Clear off! She doesn't want to see you."

Len ignored him and continued calling. He made a somewhat pathetic figure, standing on the jetty with one of those cheap red and blue plastic holdalls people use to go to the launderette.

"What do you want, Len?"

"Just to talk."

"I'm not going over that last row again."

"I love you, Roma. Come home!"

"I'm never coming back. I've got a life to lead."

"You bitch! You took what you wanted. Did you ever love me?"

"Did YOU ever love ME? The real me, not just what you wanted me to be."

"Like I said, everyone knows what you are, now."

"Everyone? Like who? We didn't have any friends."

“My brothers, and what about Elaine?”

“You haven’t been talking to her, bad-mouthing me?”

“I thought you might be there – anyway, she knows.”

Roma trusted Elaine. She was sure she wouldn’t believe Len’s side of the story.

“Len, just go home, leave me alone. I’ll pay you back for the college fees, when I can. I’m broke just now.”

“I wanted you to come home, not the money. Anyhow, here are your things.” and he dropped the bag and turned away. When he was out of sight, she collected the bag and took it below, still shaking. Was it anger or fear?

“Dad, I’ll have to go. I know how to disappear. You’ve been lovely, protecting me, but he’ll come again, I know it. I’ll get a job at that hotel in Margate I worked in a couple of years ago. He’ll never find me there.”