The Last Vest

By e.s. liew

I hung off the handrail. I was dangerously close to falling off the listing ship into the sea, which was dark and foamy beneath the soles of my Payless shoes. I looked around and saw old people, young people, men with mustachios and women clicking castanets; and the man in a donkey suit, and the Virgin Mary, and the Magi, and the Angel Gabriel. I heard the Magi shout, “There aren’t enough boats!” I heard the donkey shout, “There aren’t enough vests!” The Christmas tree was kneeling, crying: “Jesus!” Or was that the Christmas tree running past wearing one shoe from a pair of Nikes spray-painted green? I saw the Magi scrambling into a lifeboat. There were a lot of men dressed as Magi even though there were supposed to be just three, or so the myth goes; and in the myth they were wise, and since there were more than three Magi and the wise are not found in numbers, the last lifeboat was lost to us.

I watched the Magi row the lifeboats away. I watched as the wind blew one of the boats away, across the angry water. And in the distance the other lifeboats were like marbles – rolling over, rolling over. I saw people in the sea crawling into lifeboats only to be tossed out again to have to climb back in again. I saw a tuna – I think it was a tuna – it was huge, half the length of an oar. It was silver and fast like a bullet. I thought the captain might have jumped because there was a rumour that he jumped when the ship started to list – for what reason the ship started to list, no one knew, leastways I didn’t know. It was also rumoured that the tuna got him. I wondered if tuna were carnivorous. If they were, I might have once eaten some of them that might tonight eat me. I looked at my sister who was dressed as Tina Turner. She was gripping the last life vest. I said, “What should we do with one life vest?” I should have it. I was older.

I was born first and my sister came a minute later, feet first. We killed our mother. And then my sister grew up to become an obstetrician at the Weill Cornell Presbyterian Hospital. My sister enjoyed a six-figure pay check and many suitors – the last one, who was a partner at Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen and Katz, bought her a room in an apartment complex next to the Christian Louboutin store on Madison Avenue in New York City. If you don’t know Christian Louboutin, then you have not seen his shoes. I wanted the patent leather high heels; they were traffic-stopping red. My sister bought the last pair for herself. I never told her that I wanted them because she usually let me borrow her shoes. I was trying to be a poet. I lived on Cap’n Crunch in soymilk and slept in a one-room apartment with three roommates: two lifestyle magazine interns and a comic book artist.
One week ago, my sister had come to see me only to find that I was in bed and running a fever of 100 degrees Fahrenheit. I had let the laundry pile grow. I had left the television on. I had been writing. I could feel the bed creak as I breathed; the bed was rising, falling. I was mumbling to myself, saying that the words sucked me into the page. I was mumbling about being trapped in the page, trapped in the words, drowning in the words the words the words the words the words the words the words the words the words the words the words the words the words the words the words the words the words.

She erased them.

She wrote, “Take your Prozac.”

She came over the next day and did my laundry. She cleaned out my fridge. She started paying my bills and circling job ads in the newspaper. I said, “If you don’t stop, I’ll commit suicide.” She said, “You always say that.” She shouted at me, “If you do that I will never talk to you again!” She shouted as if she were the one with a problem.

She walked out. Slammed the door. Left me thinking. Then she came back, and shoving my manuscripts aside, slapped a bag of cheese calzones on the table. I said, “I don’t eat anything that has eyes or a mother or anything that came from something with eyes or a mother. I don’t eat anything that has a spine or anything that came from something with a spine.” She said, “Since when?” I said, “Since a week ago… a month ago.” She said, “You need a cruise.” She said she had made arrangements for me to join her on a ship. She had already booked the air tickets. My roommates were AWOL – maybe gone for the Christmas holiday – if I had been awake when they left I would have known where they had gone.

I looked up at the cruise ship and saw some signage on the side of it. Maybe it read: “Charon”, the mythological connections were symbolic – were we not in Greece? Or perhaps it read: “Shannon”, with the bottom of the “S” and an “N” and a half rubbed away by the salty water. “Shannon”, meaning “God is gracious” in Hebrew. Was he? I said to my sister, “Charon is the ferryman of the dead in Dante’s Inferno”. My sister said, “Dead people don’t have to love you.” I looked at the ship and said, “It looks like a giant shoe with trapdoors. I’ll be trapped inside it with your people… people who may not like me… people whom I may not like… I do not like…”

“Green eggs and Spam,” said my sister. “But you like chocolate seashells.” She took my bags and walked onto the ship. I followed my bags onto the ship that I hoped was full of chocolate seashells.

The journey started with stiff winds and grey skies. When we boarded the ship my sister went to buy chocolates from the duty-free gift shop and I wandered through the colourful inside: dining halls, games rooms, the gym, the bar, all gleamed with lemon polish. Occasionally, I
saw groups of people laughing together and I wondered what they were laughing about, but I could never introduce myself. Just throw me into the lions’ den with nothing but my clothes.

I had spent the evening nursing my Bloody Mary and looking into windows. Inside the ballroom, the motley dancers were be-bopping to a jazzy rendition of *Feliz Navidad!* I thought my sister was fast with the guys, you see, so I said, “You should go as Mary Magdalene.” So that evening after we fought over the Christian Louboutin shoes, I squeezed two tubes of waterproof epoxy glue together into the toes. She was in the shower and when she got out and got dressed, she didn’t notice the glue, she really didn’t feel a thing. She danced through the night, through streamers, exploding cracker toys, balloons, and the scent of sweat and cologne. The revellers were drinking champagne and eating Bombe Alaska. I walked out to the deck and ignored the Donald Duck who wanted to know if I was his Daisy. I was supposed to be Sleeping Beauty. Maybe the shoes ruined the costume. I stood on the deck, and looking out to sea, I imagined that if I could see like the NASA Hubble telescope, I would see a polar bear gripping the last piece of melting iceshelf while its brothers drowned. I stared into the distance until I felt like the ship was in outer space: the sky and sea were crow’s-wing-black with sporadic silver dots, and there was no distinction between above and below. It started to rain and in the storeroom the janitor wondered who had moved his lemon polish and stolen his waterproof glue.

I walked around the deck. I walked to a room where an engineer was watching a close-circuit TV. He saw water seeping into the lower decks. He switched on the pumps. Water continued to seep into the lower decks. He said, “don’t touch anything.” He left for the lower decks to check things out. I waited for him. I waited for an hour and at two in the morning the rain became a storm. I walked to the top deck where the swimming pool was lit fluorescent green by lamps fashioned to resemble palm trees. Lawn chairs were scattered everywhere. Rain bounced back off the Astro Turf into the starry sky.

I heard a scraping noise. I felt the ship starting to tilt. A woman dressed as the Little Mermaid became nauseous from the tilting and went into her cabin to lie down. Some teenage boys, dressed as the gang from Scooby Doo’s Mystery Van, ran to the other side of the ship to try to un-tilt it. I heard glasses smashing. The Christmas tree shouted, “We’ve been bombed by terrorists!” But except for the cracker toys there were no explosions.

For a moment, the screams receded to my periphery and I heard the reverberating sounds of a horn: seven short blows, one long one. And then the other noises came rushing back. Some of the stewards ran out of the kitchen. “Abandon ship!” They were waving skewers. “And take it easy, do you hear?” They shouted at the screaming people scrambling along the side. “Slow and easy!” And the swimming pool started to drain off the side of the listing ship and into the sea.
I grabbed the handrail – people pushing past – people pushing at me everywhere. I watched people slide down the Viking Evacuation Chutes. I watched as the chutes filled the last lifeboat and in the distance some lifeboats floated away empty. Wait, I thought, wait! But what was I waiting for? I could hear speech – someone talking to me – my sister was talking to me.

“Why weren’t you at the party?” She was holding the last life vest.

“What should we do with one life vest?” I said – I shouted.

I remembered when my sister and I went mountain climbing together. Near the top of the mountain I became faint. I thought that maybe I didn’t want to see the peak anyway. It was just like any other mountaintop and there were always postcards of it. I remember that my sister complained of cold. I gave her my gloves and told her to go on without me. I sat on an icy rock and I watched her disappear into the fog, then reappear to ascend to the top of the mountain, rope and clip, gripping each interchangeably, my gloves gripping the crevices, my gloves tight around her fingers. That night at the mid-point camp, I fell asleep as she told me the story of the way the sun rose over the mountaintop – glowing, golden, better than any postcard. We climbed mountains together, first with my father, and when my father got arthritis just the two of us on vacations from Switzerland to Borneo. We were missionary children. We grew up in boarding schools – between continents – and now over the Christmas holidays it made sense to spend it over water, a no-man’s land safe from electric wire, ‘keep out’ signs on gates, and glossy Doberman Pinschers with clipped ears and tails.

We were just above the water now.

My sister gripped the last life vest with her teeth; her lips were slick with spittle. I wanted the vest. I knew she wanted it too. I saw a husband and a wife hanging from the handrail. I knew they were husband and wife because of their rings. The wife started slipping. The husband caught her hands. The wife started pulling him under – it was the weight of the water in her clothes that did it. The husband released one hand, took out a pocketknife, and started to saw her left wrist – irises like dots on white – his eyes wide with shock. I looked at my sister with the last vest tight between her teeth. I said, “You wear it.” My sister said, “Are you sure?” I could barely hear her – the vest was in the way. I said, “No.” Why did I say “no”? I didn’t really mean “no” – or did I? “I am smaller than you and you can carry me.” The wife pulled the husband into the sea with her other hand and the weight of their clothes pulled them under. I said, “Wear it.” My sister said again, “Are you sure?” We were dangerously close now and my foot grazed a tuna – or was it a shark, which is carnivorous, no question. I said, “You must carry me! You must – I can’t carry you!”
We were dangerously close.

My sister released the handrail. She caught the life vest with her hands as she fell down into the sea or the sea flew up towards her. She shot straight down into the water. And around her the tuna – or was it really tuna? – fought for the life vest. And she fought them off with hands that could reach into wombs, with hands that wore my gloves that climbed to the peak of the mountain that others only saw in postcards. I saw her slip the life vest over her head. I saw the sea over my own head and bubbles were flying from my fingertips. I had been pulled under. I was under the sea, the tuna, the listing ship, and the rolling lifeboats. I saw the captain shoot past – or was it a tuna? And I saw my sister reaching for me. I felt her hands on my feet, then my thighs, then my hips; she was pulling me out of the sea and into the sky. I was rising over the sinking ship. I was rising into the stars. It was like falling up. And in the sky were stars as silver as the tuna were silver.

I could hear crying. It might have been me, crying.

I thought of my life. I thought that if I had a reason to cry, maybe it was because I had a life worth crying about, for example: I remember my classmates jeering at me on my ninth birthday after I couldn’t blow out the magic candles. I remember the goddess Maria Vitello in ninth grade, in the gym locker room. I watched the sophomore girls strip her and stuff her clothes into the toilets and flush them. I watched this, but I pretended to read The City in the Sea by Edgar Allan Poe in a corner of the locker room. My business was mine, hers was hers, and she never spoke to me again even though we both needed friends. I remember that my boyfriend left me for a cosmetics sales assistant because he said being with me was like being at a party for mourners. I thought of my life. I thought, I have slept through sunshine. I have wept through parades. But also… I remember the salty scent of seashells and an afternoon that felt like a dry texture in your mouth as you wake from a dream of indistinct sounds. I was fifteen and that was the summer I started writing poetry.

I don’t know why I might have been crying; there was no reason to cry.

I looked around for the crying person.

Were we really in the sea?

No. We were not. And we were not we. I was alone.

I wondered where I was now. I wondered where my sister was. It was calm… and suddenly I knew that I had kicked free – it was conclusive. I knew I had kicked free, because looking down I could see the sea. I saw the Virgin floating face-down among the refuse: golden calves shitting confectioner’s cream from their casings, José Feliciano sheet music, illicit stories from the pages of diaries, which were stashed in secret places like the underside of toilet tank covers. I also saw a boat rowing gently through the bobbing refuse. In the boat, the Angel Gabriel looked at the sea and looked at me (towards me) and said, “Oh God, show me
the way.” I said, “She wore Christian Louboutins.” Gabriel and the boat drifted into a sea full of Magi and looked for red shoes, even though he didn’t know why he was looking for them.

Gabriel lifts the last life vest out of the water.

I am in it.

I am still wearing the Christian Louboutins. Gabriel lifts the captain out of the water and then the Christmas tree, whose costume made of nylon, is actually quite buoyant. The Christmas tree says we can use his branches to fish the other people out of the water. We go fishing for people under the floating wreckage. I find many corpses. I can’t find my sister, the poet, Sleeping Beauty. I thought I was holding her feet. Her shoes slipped off. Why didn’t I hold her ankles? I see a celery stick from a Bloody Mary floating past. The sun is dawning. But it is too dark. I am not finished.

I was the poet.

I was my sister – for a moment.

I was looking down at the sea-scene. Helicopters flew over it. Harnesses were let down. The captain was strapped into a harness and lifted from the lifeboat. He wept as the ship began to sink. His tears fell into the sea and sank with the sinking ship. In the lifeboat, my sister looked out at the sea, vaster than vast, and saw nothing. Her face was wet and white. Once, when we were seven we both got lost on a street in Hong Kong, and jostled by the crowd that were oblivious to us, my sister clutched my clothes as if she were drowning. Harnesses were let down, again. Gabriel spoke to her, saying, get in, quick, get in. My sister pushed the harness away and said, “Wait. Wait.” My sister watched the sea. She watched the sea as if it was necessary to watch it. And I watched her watching it for an endless minute. But the water was dark and unyielding and the journey was fading out of view.
