

Whatever, Muth-er!

Gabrielle Johnson





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Sherman Oaks, CA 91413

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# Whatever, Muth-er!

by **Gabrielle Johnson**

“We must, we must,” we ‘little girls’ giggled in unison, as our mothers beamed at us, the cameras switching from us to them as we danced and mimed making our ‘busts’ more like theirs, “we must increase our bust!”

What could I do but giggle and go along with all the pretty girls around me, a raucous Charlotte leading our singing if that’s what you’d call it. I would have called it caterwauling, myself.

“Oh, but Diana’s hardly singing!” exclaimed Mrs Sharpley, Louisa’s ‘mama’. “Don’t hide there in the back, darling, where no-one can see you! You are going to be the star of our little show, aren’t you?”

Oh, why did she have to say that? The girls hated me enough already. I’d felt their animosity after my mother had let me go, pushing me in with them, into the dressing room marked ‘Girls Only’.

"It's The Face That Launched a Thousand Slips," Charlotte had sneered on seeing me in my pleated, tartan, schoolgirl skirt and tight blouse that showed the straps of my bra, and the underslip that I had to wear, through the flimsy fabric. I'd told Mummy that I was showing off my girlie underwear but she'd only laughed at me.

"Now, Diana," she'd said to me, taking my hand and pulling me from my bedroom, out where Mick, the producer's assistant, was waiting to take us in to the film set. "Little girls of your age always dress a little older than they actually are. You'll fit in with the other girls perfectly. You'll see."

"Diana looks really pretty today," said Mick enthusiastically, applauding me as I simpered towards him as Mummy had taught me to do, years before, it seemed. "I love that pretty, red bow in your hair, Diana, but you know how the beauticians are! They're going to re-dress you prettily, like a model, anyway."

"Like a stylish little girl," said Mummy quickly, probably seeing the pout on my face and recognizing that I was going to dig in on the kitten heels she'd made me wear for the trip downtown. I kept threatening to stop what she was having me do, throw a fit, be the 'diva', as Charlotte called it – she ought to know as she threw fits constantly in the times we did shows together – but I hadn't done it, not yet.

No, Diana Miller was always the perfect, little girl, in what she wore and in the way that she behaved. Everyone always told Mummy, and the press at large, what a wonderful little girl I was, so sweet, so darling, so even-tempered and nice to everyone. That was why, Mummy told me, I was making so much money for us both, money I'd really enjoy when my 'career' as a little girl, a 'fashion model', well, a girlie model of some sort, was over, as, one day – I fervently prayed at



night that it would come soon – it surely must, Oh, it would be so lovely to go back to being Johnny Vreeland again.

Penny, the nicest of the beauticians, swept me away from Charlotte and sat me in front of a makeup mirror, where she proceeded to attack my eyebrows as she always did. She re-arranged my permed, feminine hair, and applied the lightest of girlish makeup to my face. Just a touch of the palest pink lipstick made me into ‘the new Princess Di’ before I had to take off my skirt and blouse. I had to let Penny then dress me in the newest of girly fashions, changing my slip into another that had swishy petticoats that made my bare legs shiver.

“Don’t mind the little bitch over there,” Penny whispered in my ear as she hung the flowery, pink earrings from my lobes. “She’s just jealous of you, Diana. You make every dress you wear, even this sort of old-fashioned dance tutu, look so perfect for a girl of your age.”

And that was why Mrs Sharpley wanted me in front of the group, later on, in my short, swishy dress, as we girls giggled and pretended we were teenagers. Mrs Sharpley worked for *Better Dressed*, the company that sponsored the ‘fashion show’. Snippets would appear on all kinds of news programs and shows. We would be described as ‘sweet’, ‘cute’, ‘beautiful’, and ‘darling’, or words that meant the same thing.

Our dresses would be praised as well. Lately, according to Mummy, I was the one, the demure, blonde beauty everyone wanted to see. Every dress I wore soon sold out in the stores that sold *Better Dressed*, all because of me.

The newest catalogues featured my face, showing me off in new, fashionable dresses, skirts and tops that little girls would love to wear. Girls everywhere,

Mummy said, styled their hair like mine and shaped their eyebrows and eyelashes like mine. I was a goldmine and wasn't it so wonderful that she'd seen the potential in me, seen how I would make such a pretty little girl, and seen how to make both of us so rich?

Oh yes, and if I could only increase my bust, I might even make a wonderful, teenaged girl fashion model, my mother assured me.

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I hated the memories of my childhood returning to me. I thought, someday, that I really was over all that. But something always came up to shock me and make me gag as I thought of the child I had been. It was the doll-like girls in the back of the Caddy I'd filled with gasoline, that was my job now, before walking around and flicking dirt and bugs from the windows.

The mother shouted at one of the girls who'd dared to move in her pretty dress, possibly wrinkling it. "No-one's going to pick a girl, Marnie, no matter how pretty she is," the mother had snapped, reminding me of Mummy, saying the same thing to me, "who can't keep her clothing just as pretty and clean as she is."

Marnie saw me look at her. She raised her eyebrows as her mother ranted on. The girl curved her mouth silently telling me how bored she was with the whole process of being pretty for some fashion tryout she was going to. I couldn't tell her that I'd had a mother who said the same things as hers did.

"Good luck, kid," I thought after her in sympathy as I returned the credit card to the mother. The Caddy almost ran over my foot in its hurry to be away from a dirty, tousle-haired grease monkey like me.

The Mercedes that drew in to the Service lane had its driver window down.

"Hey, kid," the guy behind the wheel called to me. "You know John, Johnny Vreeland? He works here, doesn't he? Here's a twenty for pointing him out to me."

The guy was reading my name tag, 'Ed', as he looked up at me, a frown on his clean, rich-boy face.

I debated with myself, a lump at the bottom of my stomach. Should I tell him that John Vreeland had quit the week before? This 'Hollywood' guy was looking into the working areas of the station where all the guys were busy, changing tires for the winter. It was that time of the year. I'd have been doing it, too, but for the other young mechanics being too stupid, according to Van, the manager, to work the credit/debit card machines correctly.

Yeah, Van was in today. If this guy didn't like my answer, he could go inside. Van would tell him Vreeland was gassing up cars in the service lanes. He could talk to me when I was done.

"Don't see him," I said with a frown, finally deciding on another tack. "He's a big guy, right, six-four, doesn't speak much, a little simple." The guy looked back at me in surprise. "Never changes the last name tag on his coverall. Probably went next door for a hoogie. Oh."

I didn't have to add more, embellish the lie, as Duncan came walking out of the fast-food next to us, tearing into a huge sandwich. He does have a dopey look about him. He shambles, too, but he's the pick of the bunch at our service station as a mechanic, in my estimation. He kept my old Chevy running even though it was over twenty years' old.

"Must have the wrong guy," said Hollywood, as I privately called all guys in ties and knife-edge, pressed

pants like the Mercedes driver. He drove off, looking at Duncan on the way out. Dunc had stopped and was sitting on a fence wolfing down the hoogie with obvious relish, ignoring the car that slowed to let the driver look him over. No, Hollywood didn't give me the twenty he'd offered for pointing out 'John Vreeland' to him.

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"It's this way, Diana," said Marashov, the lawyer Mummy had said would do anything for her. "You're a minor, aren't you? And your mother is dead, isn't she? So, I can't give you any money out of her estate, not yet, anyway. There are some legal niceties we have to perform. Did your mother ever give you a birth certificate or anything to prove who you are, Diana?"

Diana, there it was again. He kept calling me that. It had always been 'Little Miss Miller', 'Miss Miller', or 'Little Miss', when I was with my mother, sitting quietly, my stockinged legs crossed as they discussed money. Oh, it would be no problem, I could almost hear him saying, me getting access to my money if anything happened to my dear 'Mummy'.

And we did know that Mummy was pretty sick. "Now, you know why I had to have you make all the money we have," Mummy said to me when I helped her up the stairs to our apartment and put her to bed. The doctor had been pretty angry with her, and me, for letting her walk into the hospital.

"Don't you want to see your pretty daughter grow up?" the doctor had growled at her. "Don't you want to see her as a bride?"

I quivered at the images in my mind. The last show I'd been on hadn't aired yet but there I was, in the last parade, dressed as a bride. That hadn't been the worst

part, nor the dressers getting me out of the bridesmaid dress, that's what it really was, and into the bridal gown on camera.

I was getting used to undressing as a girl in front of the cameras, smiling prettily, I thought, though I was always described as 'shy', 'coy' or 'demure', whenever anyone said anything about me, Diane Miller, 'America's Favorite Princess'. That was the label the promoters for *Better Dressed* were trying to attach to me. It really made me shudder every time I heard myself called a princess.

As a bride, I went gaily, what a word to choose, out into the parade, not thinking at all that I had to have a groom, a boy a little older than me. And there he was, Justin Lamora, lead singer in the boy group, Street Credit! Oh, how I jiggled in embarrassment as I was paraded through the set, cameramen closing in on me as I had to blush and smile up at Justin until we got to Mike, the producer's assistant, grinning foolishly, in a parson's collar.

"You may kiss the bride," had been the only words Mike had said, a silly grin on his face. We had to shoot that five times over as I couldn't let it happen at first, not let a boy kiss me. Then, I had to re-do it so that the camera could get the right angle. People had to see the look of rapture on my face as Justin kissed me, the director said. We had to kiss 'romantically' four times until the director finally said Justin was perfect, at last.

"That's what I was whispering to you," Justin said to me, stroking my bare shoulder as he clutched me with his other hand. "If you'd only loused it up a couple of times, Diana, we could still be kissing one another. I really liked doing it. You did too, didn't you? And sorry about that second time with my hand on your tush. But that's how I'd like to be kissing you again and very soon. Let me call you!"

I was shaking as I shook my long hair over my bare shoulders, my veil making my skin shiver as if I was cold.

Mummy scolded me for not promising to date another boy. She was in her wheelchair then, on the set, supervising me, making sure everyone treated me properly as the princess I was supposed to be. Yes, she'd already paid someone, I guessed, on television, to call me the new 'Princess Di', which made me furious. I actually shouted at Mick not to call me that.

"Wow, she is a diva after all," I heard him saying as I quivered and shook as I got back into the straight skirt and gauzy, see-through, purple blouse I'd worn, my black bra and slip easily seen by anyone.

"Don't you dare do that again!" Mummy yelled at me. "You *are* the next Princess Di! It's going to be an identity that you can easily slip into. She was shy, just like you. You'll have everyone notice how similar you are, how pretty you are, like her, and you'll have a new career as a woman open up for you, Diana. Millions, my darling girl! So thank your darling mother prettily as you should, for doing all of this for you!"

"Mummy, I don't want to be Princess Di," I'd whispered to her after I'd dismissed the nurse for the night.

"Don't be silly, Diana," said Mummy crossly. "I'm not going to last much longer, you know. Now, you'll have a career, my darling girl, and riches to keep you going, long after I'm gone. So,, tell me all about kissing Justin Lamora. You know that his last name means 'love', don't you? Wait till you see the pictures of the way he was staring at you. He's halfway to being in love with you, you know. I could see it. A woman knows these things!"

I shivered all the way to my bed, refusing to tell my mother how I felt when Justin had kissed me. I couldn't tell her how frantic I'd been. She should have told

me what was going to happen. I'd have persuaded her to not let it happen, of course. I'd have told her I was leaving her, and meant it, I supposed.

I'd be on my guard now; and so it would never happen again, I promised myself as I changed into my nightie. Mummy insisted on a nightie now we had a nurse in our apartment. I was really glad of it the following morning when Kate, the nurse, came flying into my room to tell me to put on a robe and come quickly as my mother had taken a turn for the worse.

Mummy never spoke to me again. It took her five days to die. There were pictures of me, my face ravaged, my blonde hair held back by black ribbons as I fled from the hospital. There were more of me, in a young woman's black dress, from the *Best Dressed* catalogue, like the hat and veil, the black stockings and black high heels, at Mummy's funeral.

No, I didn't know how to stop being Diana. I was so grateful to Mr Masharov for taking over where Mummy had left off. Oh, he did cancel a couple of appearances I was supposed to have made as Diana Miller. I didn't care. I only wanted to get it all over with, right then. I wanted some money, some of *my* money, that I'd labored for so torturously over the previous ten years, in girls' clothes, being Diana, as much, if not more, than I was Johnny Vreeland, the real me.

"Of course, I don't have my birth certificate," I said, uncrossing my dark stockinged legs, feeling so weird as I saw how Mr Masharov was looking at me doing that. He was almost foaming at the mouth or so it seemed to me. Oh gods, he doesn't know that I'm not a girl, went through my mind.

"There isn't one in my or your mother's records, Diana," said Mr Masharov. "You're what, fourteen years' old now?" I almost said the wrong thing and told him that I was sixteen. In hindsight, it was proba-

bly the best thing I'd done in the interview, not to tell him my true age.

"And your name isn't Miller, is it, Diana?" Mr Masharov was going on. "Your mother never married, did she? But you do have a brother, don't you, two years older than you?" He consulted some record he had in his files. "Yes, your mother used her maiden name, Vreeland, to register his birth."

"Mr Masharov, my money," I began, icy fear making me tremble as he looked down at my legs again, and then up at the heavily made-up, girlie face that Penny had re-done for me after the cremation ceremony. Well, there still had been television cameras following me. The papers over the next few days, and then the magazines, would be full of pictures of me, as Diana Miller, such a model princess even in a funeral dress, along with stories about my 'tragedy'.

"Call me Andrey," said the man supposed to be my lawyer and my mother's trustee.

"Andrey," I began weakly, girlishly. He reached forward and touched my leg, his hand sliding up my thigh to the hem of my short skirt.

I squeaked as much in rage as in distress, pushing back my chair. His hand tightened on me and shifted under my skirt until he did something more that no man had ever done to me. He caught hold of my garter belt, caressed my stockings and even touched my black panties. Oh, the weird, girlie feelings that went through me! Andrey was treating me as if I really was a girl! I was supposed to like what he did!

I couldn't help it. I screamed, my voice higher and more girlish than I ever remembered it. Madame Masharova came bounding into the lawyer's office to catch her husband with his hand up my skirt, me a supposedly fourteen-year old girl.

I couldn't follow what she said in such disgusted tones to 'Andrey' in Russian, but I did manage to break free, my garter belt snapping against my thigh and hip, sending more sensations of awful femininity through me. I ran for the door in my tall, black, high heels.

"I need proof from you," yelled Andrey after me. "If you want a dime of this money, you need to prove that you are your mother's daughter. Otherwise, it all goes to your brother."

"I'll send his lawyer to see you," I gasped at Andrey. His wife was holding on to him, as I wiggled as quickly as I could in my heels and skirt, out of my lawyer's office and onto the street. Only as I fled, my heels clicking like knitting needles on the sidewalk, did I begin to comprehend what was happening to me. I had no money, no skills, nothing. I could be a girl, but if I did that, I'd be trapped forever as Diana, having to kiss men like Justin and having to learn to like it.

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I ought to have known that the rich kid in the Mercedes would be back. He'd looked to be the determined type. I should have moved on and not thought myself safe in a nowhere place in the back of beyond.

"Hey, Vreeland," called Van across the garage; and so I slid out from under the Buick I'd been checking out. There were clean, men's shoes and the knife-edged pants standing beside Van.

"This is Eddie Vreeland," said Van with a frown. He took the two bills, fifties as far as I could see, from the rich boy's hand.

"Neat trick," said the rich boy, kneeling and looking at my oily face and filthy hands. "But this was my only

lead. I had to come back and start somewhere looking for the real John Edward Vreeland."

"You owe me twenty," I said to him, pushing myself back under the car I was working on. Yes, it was going to need a new transmission. I could get Duncan to fix it as he did mine so that it ran for a month or two at least. The older man who'd accompanied the Buick didn't look like he knew what was really wrong with this ancient piece of junk.

Someone grabbed my legs and pulled me out from the Buick, almost making me dump the contents of the crankcase all over my face.

"Hey!" I yelled at the rich boy as I came into the open again. "Who'd you think you ...?"

I stopped as I thought he was trying to show me a police badge. Fear went through me but then I saw that it was only some kind of private investigator's license that rich-boy was showing me. It said his name was Joseph Williams.

"Diana Miller," said Joseph Williams, "is your sister. Where is she?"

I looked up at this dude in his rich clothes while I lay there on a greasy floor, my clothes only fit for the garbage can. "Don't know her," I said to him. "You got the wrong John Vreeland."

I tried to get back under the Buick. The well-shod foot stopped my wheels from moving. "You answered that pretty fast," said smiling Joe.

"I've been asked it before," I said to him. That wiped the smile off his face. "Those I didn't like I told them she was living in Malibu with her surfer boy friend."

"And is she?" persisted Joe.

"Don't know her. Never had a sister. There's more than one John Vreeland in the world," I told him.

"Now, I got to tell the owner of this clunker how much it's going to cost him to keep it on the road. If you don't mind, I got a job to do."

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"Mummy, mummy! I don't want to do this!" I said, pulling a face as she sprayed me all over my chest with this cloying, girlish scent.

"Hold onto Dolly, my darling," said Mummy, sitting me in her lap, smoothing my dress in front of me, my black shoes glistening at the end of the white socks, up over my knees. I wore them, and the dress, because she had told me to.

"Mummy, I'm not a girl," I shuddered as she hugged me to her.

"I know, my darling," Mummy whispered in my ear, my long hair brushing against her cheek and my own. "There's a man coming to see us, darling, and I want him to think that you are, with your pretty hair and pretty dress. He'll call you Diana, and Mommy will as well. He's going to take your picture, my darling. It will make us lots of money. I can buy you that baseball glove you wanted me, the one in the store. Only, he wants a picture of a pretty, little girl and thinks that you are one. Your hair is so long! We'll get it cut very soon!"

That was one of the first lies she told me. I never got my hair cut. I had it pulled back and pinned when I was a boy. I wore it in a low pony tail down my back and didn't think of it at all. But, whenever Mummy washed it and used a curling iron on me, even curlers as I went to bed, I knew what was going to happen the next day. I was going to be a girl again. I was going to wear a pretty dress, have ribbons about my hair and

have to smile as I played girlish games with dolls and had my picture taken over and over again.

Mummy did buy me boyish things that I wanted. I had a train set that I loved and all kinds of sports equipment. I learned that I wouldn't have any of the things I really wanted if I didn't go and get my picture taken with lots of other girlie girls like me. Mummy taught me all sorts of games that girls do – she taught me how to skip rope – and so I played dollies with lots of girls and giggled as we put makeup on our faces to make ourselves look prettier. I even got to kiss several girls, tasting Louisa all the time as she loved it most. How we giggled at all the girlie things we did. Mummy always hugged and kissed me as well so much after the play and photograph sessions we went through.

“You won't be able to do this forever, Diana,” Mummy often told me. “But you won't mind being a little boy again, will you? Oh, next week, we've been invited to a photo shoot in New York. They're going to pay us so much money, darling, but it does mean that you're going to be Diana for about two weeks. But you might earn enough, my darling, so that we can afford to buy a car. Wouldn't that be just stupendous!”

I agreed that it would be stupendous. I had to talk like Mummy and use words like hers. She did tell me, when I was a little older, that girls didn't talk like boys. They talked in the way she talked to me. I was such a good mimic that I really sounded like Mummy, when I wore my pretty dresses; which is why *Better Dressed* thought I made such good model for all little girls who wore their dresses.

As I grew older, the length of time I had to dress like Diana grew longer and longer. Sometimes, I even felt weird getting into rough, boy's clothing, after weeks

of being in flouncy dresses, nighties, and in playing with other girls like me.

Whenever I mentioned how I felt, Mummy always reminded me of the money I was earning before she would arrange for me, I had to ask her repeatedly to do that, to meet and play with some other boys, sons of friends of hers. She'd invite them over to play with me. I'd try to arrange baseball and stuff but, inevitably, the boys would ask me why I had such long hair.

Doug wanted to know if I really was a boy or was I a boy who wanted to be a girl. I tried to fight him for his remarks and ended up with a black eye, my arm twisted until I hurt, and bruises all over me. Mummy was really angry with me as I couldn't go on a photo shoot she wanted me to be on. Doug wasn't invited again but all the other guys who came over knew that he'd beaten me up. I guess he bragged about it.

So, as a boy, I got used to being alone, playing by myself. I was 'home-schooled', of course, by Mummy, and so I didn't have to go to school.

"Don't worry about those nasty boys," Mummy told me. "With all the money you are making now as darling Diana, you'll have all of those boys working for you when you grow up. You'll make them all so jealous when you marry the prettiest girl. All grownup girls love a man with money. You'll have so many girl friends when you're a teenager. You'll see, my darling.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Diana! We have a fashion show to do next week we have to prep for. Why don't you change into a pretty nightdress and let me set your hair for you. You have to be a real platinum blonde for this shoot! And you get to wear a pretty bridal gown! Isn't that exciting! The other girls will all kiss you at the end of the fabulous show!"