

Drift by Elaine Webster

Lorna Jean Mackay sang her hosannas with the best of them. She was bemused and ten. The Mission leader cut fancy shapes into her attendance card and she knew she would get a packet of Spangles when it was full. Her mum, Elizabeth, sent her to the Mission Hall on Fridays, to all the summer camps and to Sunday school for good measure.

Only a boy called David,

Only a little brook,

Only a boy called David and five little stones he took...

Lorna loved the actions, circling the pretend pebble round her head and jettisoning it with an almighty shriek. Her giant was definitely floored, 'That wid learn him.'

Aberdeen had changed as fast as Lorna. The Oil Boom had saturated Union Street with American drillers, divers and dollars. The city sprouted shiny wine bars and pricey restaurants soaked in exotic accents. She sat perched on the stained red velvet seats of the Queen's Hotel, balancing a bottle of sickly pineapple juice next to a voddie. The make-up was approximate but her dark hair was sleek. She wore her skimpy white fluffy jacket in spite, 'Ye'll catch yer death ye minx.' Lorna was seventeen and a half and as bold as the drink in her. She smiled. She knew full well that she had caught the eye of a young lad in the corner, a trap. She reeled him in. 'Far dae ye bide? A'll tak ye hame.'

Steve and Lorna made clumsy arrangements to meet again, and again. They canoodled along the beach, they cuddled at the bus stop and they snogged in R.S.MColl doorways. Sometimes they came up for air. A neighbour kept discreet surveillance and passed on juicy gobbets to her mum. Lorna's mum gave the nosey besom short shrift then ripped into Lorna. Deep-down Lorna's mum thanked God that

Steve came from Torry, his folk were 'fisher'. Elizabeth offered her offspring a fly cup and measured counsel, 'Thon Stevie needs a haircut.' Steve temped for one of those extrovert companies with names ending in *co* at the extreme limit of the city. The job involved skiving a lot whilst sweltering under glass ceilings and clattering at keyboards.

Lorna sneaked in to the Art Gallery to check up on her boats. She had no time for fancy exhibitions, all she wanted was her fix of carved wooden hulls protecting secrets or sails flicking in saffron orange and the odd snooty seagull. The Art Gallery was always dead on Wednesdays. Lorna loved sliding along the marble floor past the scuddy statue to raise a smirk from the jannie. She clocked her Stevie, he'd been caught in the storm. They headed to the café. Grannies were slurping tea. Lorna fumbled with Steve's knee to wind them up as usual. The scones were burnt, she clarted them with jam.

'A've pit in for a job on the rigs.....aabody else is makkin a packet.'

Lorna nearly cowped her cup. Granny-ears pricked up. Lorna peppered him,

'Steve, ye're jokin, Steve tell me ye're kiddin on.'

He just sat there and waited.

Lorna spent the next few days, brushing her hair till it hurt and overdosing on chocolate. Steve pulled her to him gently and told her it would be okay. It wasn't. Going offshore was weird and meeting up again on Steve's week off was worse. She wanted to be close to him and he skirted her. She'd pad about in her jammies and bite her nails. They could have split up, but they didn't.

Things lumbered on. Lorna moved into a grotty flat near the harbour. Everything stank of fish and stale booze. Undernourished cats ripped her tights but she liked the buzz of the oil supply vessels loading up and unloading. Women hung

about in the street in baffies, laughing. Workmen told vile jokes and spat but she was okay.

Her mother visited on Tuesdays, she brought Mum cod roe and smokies. and talked. Lorna tuned in to her tranny. Mum warmed the teapot and cleared a corner for herself. She read Lorna's tea leaves and sat knotting until her callouses nipped and Lorna drifted. Mum carefully gathered her head-square and gloves together and put them on in the correct sequence. Lorna went to the door and nodded her 'Goodbye'.

Lorna loved sketching at night from the window, capturing the shadows that skedaddled across the decks. She rubbed fiercely at one bit of crosshatching till the paper was clean just as she had erased contact with school pals. Damn the Goodlife in Garthdee, mod cons in Mastrick and Tupperware parties in Tullos. She preferred footering. Sometimes, she strolled with mum. Mum Elizabeth always buttoned up her best coat and teetered on patent navy court shoes. Lorna knew not to offer an arm.

Elizabeth took up the hems of curtains, trousers and skirts for neighbours and let them down again. Tacking and machining, pinning and snipping. She handed in mindings for the newborn and handseled cutlery for the engaged. You had to be careful with knives. She was rewarded with home perms and a fry perched on the ledge at the back of the council house. Neighbours waved respectfully when she nipped out the back for a sly puff, but in all the years there only two neighbours dared cross her threshold. They stood at the door, wiped their feet and knew not to mention her man.

Lorna left her at the bus stop and headed back home. She badgered Steve into making their meal before he scuttled off to *The Lamp*. She caught his eye and laughed, he looked great in that striped cheesecloth shirt and soft denim waistcoat.

His lumpy kit bag lurked tightly-zipped in the hall and nearly crippled her as she headed for the loo. ‘Awa early themorn?’ she ventured. He nodded, nothing else for it.

In December, a helicopter pitched headfirst into the grey void of the North Sea. All lost. Steve was at home at the time but went mute. He kicked the flat door in and punctured a beer. Tommy, a neighbour’s son was among the Lost. Lorna looked up The P. and J. for the notice. Lorna would go to the service for her mum since mum didn’t do funerals. Lorna had always liked Tommy. He was straight-forward, nuts about the Dons and kamikaze in goals on the Links. He had just started on the rigs a few months back and was puffed up with the money.

She knew a few of the faces as she shuffled into the church but nobody took her on. That suited her just fine. Lorna liked the hymn and joined in. It reminded her of those Mission songs; she smirked imagining the actions but one widow snarled at her, ‘Hae ye nae respect?’ Lorna belted the song out and glowered. Her thoughts got away from her, her mum’s words and voice...trawlers battered by gales, mannies toiling, sweering and thrawn quines working, bent double. The rhythm of their names swirled about her, Mitchells, Cormacks and Walkers, families with fingers lost, jaws set and lives ripped. She felt sticky in her knee-length frock and her new black patent shoes nipped for attention. At the end of the service, Lorna breenged out of the panelled door towards the sea of lilies. She bent down and wobbled, giddy with the scents. She stole a petal or two and chucked them airborne, scarpering as the petals drifted downwards.

The service came home with her. She told Steve in no uncertain terms exactly what she felt about offshore. It made not a blind bit of difference, oil filled all Aberdeen’s crevices and that was that, turning everything blacker. Later, Lorna caught sight of Steve on the outside steps looking vulnerable like he used to. In a

couple of weeks he would share her space again with his knotted inked arms and the crinkly smile. He would tower over her, then collapse in a lagered heap. They laughed... sometimes.

Best not to tell him she was pregnant, it would not help. Indeed, should she tell anyone? She could hear them, 'Ye've made her ain bed, ye limmer.' She had too, always had. On the way back home, she picked up a pebble and spun it over her head, then chucked it hard into greasy water. Giant boats creaked, bobbed and dipped in turn, straining on the wires, eager to go places. The pink and white harbour lights were still on and winked at her.

Lorna set to. She packed her bag, throwing in a change of clothes, her pencil stubs and sketchbook. After some swithering, she ditched the fags. Finally, she bundled some grubby banknotes into the back of her faded velvet wallet and a new penny for luck. She did not need much right now, she's find work. Aberdeen was seldom quiet but at this time of night it breathed out. She would head off now and she would keep going, heading out from the shore. That was the sum-total of her plan and it was enough. What really surprised her was that she was not the least bit scared. She was as bold as the baby in her. Lorna buttoned her coat up to the neck, chucked her high heels aside and slipped into loafers that had carried a hint of fish. She would write to her mum once she had settled and landed her catch. 'God help ye,' she'd say 'ye niver did tak a tellin,' but Lorna hoped that she would come round, eventually. Above all, she knew that her mum would not let on to Steve about the baby. Lorna could rely on that, fisher-tight.

The sky was on fire and it lit the water. She wanted to go right up to the edge and shout. She pulled her pink mohair scarf round herself like a hug. The Mission

Hall was boarded up. She loved the folk, the boats and the buzz of the harbour but Lorna was ready to drift along the coast.