

## Lorna

She peered through the wooden slats into the dim interior. From the side window, a shaft of yellow light picked out part of the high wooden rail around the auction ring and the door leading into the auctioneer's box. In the shadows beyond, where the tiered steps rose steeply from ring level, she thought she saw someone moving.

'Is that you, Gordon?'

She couldn't understand it. Gordon and Ivor had definitely said they would be there.

She was frightened of being in the mart on her own in case Peter the caretaker came by. Once she and Gordon had to hide beneath the counter in the auctioneer's box. They had watched through the knot holes in the wood as Peter's torch had probed in all the shadows. The beam had lingered on the boards, barring their bodies with thin strips of light. She had a mad impulse to make a run for it, but Gordon had clasped his hand over her mouth and held her till Peter's footsteps had retreated and they heard the distant clink of his front gate. She had no idea what Peter would do if he ever caught them. She just had a too vivid picture of his cruel face on market days as he stabbed and lashed at stubborn, bewildered cattle.

It had been drizzling off and on all day and this was the only dry place they had to play. Her jersey was already covered in a fine layer of moisture. She knew that if she brushed it, it would soak straight through to her blouse. If she sat outside much longer it would soak through anyway. She decided she would be better off waiting inside.

She climbed up on the top bar of the fence separating the ring entrance and exit. Her shoulders were level with the gutters of a lower roof. Half way up this sloping roof there was a dormer window with wooden shutters. She grabbed the wooden eaves at the edge of the roof and swung one foot into the metal gutter. Easing herself on to the slates she worked her way towards the window. She knew the shutters were never locked. She opened them quickly and slipped in feet first, feeling about for the first rungs that led down a shaft into the weighing machine. When she had a secure footing on either side of the shaft she closed the shutters tight and started to descend. About six feet from the bottom the metal bars of the weighing machine started. As she placed her foot on the first bar the machine groaned under her weight. She was sure she heard a stifled giggle. She froze and listened. The only sound was her own rapid, shallow breathing. She strained at each rung to minimise the movement of the metal cage. On the last rung, as she

lowered herself gently to the metal bed of the machine, hands grasped her ankles. A hand stifled the scream rising in her throat while another hand slipped under the waistbands of her skirt and knickers. 'Has she got hair?' She heard someone below whisper. The boy who had her head clamped against his shoulder turned so that his hot breath scorched her ear. 'Plenty'

In the struggle that followed she had to summon her last ounce of strength. Freeing one foot she kicked viciously into the darkness until she connected with something, something that howled as it banged against the bars of the cage. Both feet freed she twisted round dislodging the one at her back.

'Jesus fuck, Lorna', he muttered before crashing to the hard floor.

She scrambled back up the wooden rungs till she reached the shutters.

'Christ you'd think it was the first time you'd had your fanny felt. You didn't used to make such a bloody fuss.'

She clambered out the dormer window, down the sloping roof, on to the top bar of the fence and dropped to the ground. She vaulted over the pen fences till she came to the perimeter wall. She immediately found a toehold and was up, and over, and at her own back door before she stopped for breath. She stood trembling on the step before opening the door.

She hated that Jackie Campbell. Why did he have to show up? Gordon and Ivor were alright on their own.

The kitchen was empty. An overturned glass of milk had been left to drip onto the cracked lino. It had seeped into the floor cavity where it would add to the already suffocating stench. She had long grown used to the smell. It was only when people came to the door and she saw the disgust on their faces that it was brought home to her. She had pleaded with her mum during one of her sober spells to do something about it.

'Housework's a thankless task, Lorna,' her mum had said. 'The more you do, the more you'll find to do, till your whole life is nothing but cleaning and scouring and wiping and tidying away. You'll soon find that out.'

But sometimes a burly sanitary official, alerted by one of the neighbours, arrived to supervise a concerted clear up. On these occasions her mum danced to a different tune.

'Really, Mrs. White, you must make an effort. You don't want to end up back in hospital. Think what that means for the children. And this time it mightened be a case of just signing yourself out when you feel like it' The voice had been threatening and her mum had meekly followed its barked instructions. In desperation Lorna had run ahead of the woman on her progress through the house trying to sort the worst of the mess, but it had been an impossible

task.

Her mum was back on the drink again. The last time they had come to take her she had wasted away to almost nothing. One of her uncles had eventually called the doctor. When the doctor arrived and saw her crouched over the fire nursing a half bottle of whisky he shook his head with genuine concern.

'God, Miriam, how did you get to this state?'

Her mum had started to cry and some last vestige of pride had prompted her to reach for a brush and attempt to fix her hair. The hair had come away from her scalp in clumps. She had sat and stared at the clogged, matted bristles and then turned to the doctor.

'What happened to all my lovely auburn hair, Doctor Iain ? You remember how bonny it was.'

The doctor had gone next door to the Fairley's and phoned the ambulance. He had told them not to bother packing any clothes, the hospital would provide all that was required. He had also phoned the child welfare officer who arrived just as the ambulance was leaving.

'We're in luck', Lorna remembered her shouting gaily. 'There just happens to be five places in the local home so there is no need to go to Oban this time.'

It was a mixed blessing to say the least. They had been able to visit their mother, but had to suffer the shame of attending their own school with cropped hair after the customary delousing.

Her mother's recovery had been truly incredible. In three months she had gained three stones in weight. Her face filled out and her shiny apple cheeks returned. Her eyes regained their old sparkle and gradually her abundant auburn hair came back in all its former glory. Unfortunately this transformation also heralded the return of all her old boyfriends who had disappeared one by one during her period of decline. There was only one thing they wanted and only one sure way they knew how to get it; through the supply of drink. And so the whole process had started all over. The intervals between hospital visits were becoming shorter and shorter. One of these days they would keep her in for good.

Lorna went into the living room to look for money. She knew all the favourite stashes: the music box, the letter rack, the dominoes box, and the sewing box. Nothing in any of them. She went quietly up the stairs to Uncle Michael's room. His work clothes were draped over the back of a chair next to the bed. She went through all the pockets and only turned out sixpence. That wouldn't get her very far.

When she went downstairs again she met her little brother and sister coming in. Derek had a single nougat and Sally had a ninety nine cone.

'Where did you get the money for that?'

'From Uncle Michael. We met him coming out of the pub.'

'Where did he go?' she asked, thinking she could head him off and get some picture money.

'He was getting into Davey McFarlane's car.'

'Don't suppose you've got anything left?' The two of them shook their heads.

'Stay in the house till Mum comes home', she warned on her way out the door.

She set off down the road in the direction of the main street. She looked back to check that Sally and Derek stayed in the house. They had started a new game. They followed her about and then reported on all her movements when they got home. She had belted both their ears the last time but it only seemed to add to the excitement. When she was sure that no one was following her she turned into the lane beside the church which led down to MacIntyre's Yard. The men stopped early on Fridays so the yard was in darkness. She could see the black shapes of the lorries lined up on the other side of the hedge. The main gate was locked but the side gate was open for the workmen who lived in caravans at the back of the yard. Most of them travelled home at the weekends, but there were always one or two around. She picked her way through piles of building materials to a caravan right on the edge of the river. There were no lights on.

If he's gone to the pub already, she thought to herself, there's no point waiting.

Just then she heard footsteps crunching over gravel. She could see the approaching figure silhouetted against the light at the corner of the church. She slipped round the far side of the caravan. She watched as a young man climbed the two little steps to the door and put his key in the lock. He was carrying a bottle of lemonade and a packet of crisps.

'Been down to the cafe then, Archie?', she said suddenly.

He jumped and nearly dropped the lemonade bottle.

'Is that you, Lorna?' he whispered, peering into the darkness.

She stepped out of the shadow so that he could see her.

He pushed open the caravan door and gestured impatiently for her to get in.

'You're awful sure I was coming in,' she said as soon as he shut the door.

'No it's not that, Lorna, honest. It's just that Duncan and Bill are still here,' he explained. 'They decided to stay this weekend and take their lassies to the dance. They were in the pub, but they'll be coming up the road soon to get changed.'

'Just as long as you're not taking anything for granted.'

'I wouldn't, Lorna. You know that.' He drew all the curtains. 'But we can't take a chance of being seen.'

'No you can't, can you?'

He looked worried.

Why did she have to do this to him all the time? Sure he was older, but only in actual years. He hadn't made a big play for her. He had, in fact, required a lot of coaxing. It was just because he didn't grab or paw her like the others that she led him on in the first place. And afterwards his gratitude had always come as a total surprise. They all gave her money, but he gave twice as much as any of the others. He was small and sturdily built and his thinning blond hair was swept straight back from his forehead. She thought he looked old fashioned and she always imagined he was the one left alone at the end of the dance when all the others had someone to walk home.

He sat down on the bed and took off his jacket. She went over and stood in front of him. His hands went up under her skirt and drew her knickers down to her feet. She stepped out of them and turned round so that she faced away from him. He pushed back on the bed and pulled her down between his legs. She threw her legs over his and leaned back against his chest, resting her head on his shoulder. She closed her eyes as he went to work.

Afterwards he laid a ten shilling note on the table between them. She was drinking his lemonade and eating his crisps.

'Have you no change? People will just wonder where I got that much.'

He looked through his jacket and trouser pockets and counted out the ten shillings in change. She swept the coins into her hand and put them in the flimsy pocket of her skirt. She got up and went over to door. 'Hang on,' he said, turning down the dim lamp. 'Just in case they haven't left yet.' She leapt into the darkness before he could even say goodbye.

At the end of the lane she hung in the shadow of the hedge till she was sure there was no-one about, then slipped across the road and turned into main street as if she had just come from her own house. She looked up at the church clock. It was only quarter past seven, she had plenty of time to make the pictures.

When she got there they hadn't even started to let the children's queue in. Nearly all the other girls her age were paying the adult entrance and sitting up the back. She could either join the end of the line of rowdy kids or pay twice the price and walk straight in. Gordon and Ivor were at the front of the queue and Jackie Campbell was with them. She walked up the steps to the head of the queue and through the swing doors.

'Get a load of Miss Lah di dah,' Jackie Campbell shouted. All the others jeered.

Big Margaret was on the kiosk. 'You're wise', she said when she saw Lorna. 'You can't hear an effing thing with that rammy going on down the front'

'What's on? I never even looked at the board.'

'Move Over Darling, Doris Day and James Garner.' Margaret rolled her eyes.

'Oh great, I love her.'

'She's too goody-two-shoes for me,' said Margaret handing over the ticket. 'But all the men in her films seem to love it.'

Lorna laughed and took the ticket.