

Shifting Sands by Belinda Crowther, Cottingham

Lorna looked out at the swirling foam capped waves of the estuary, where the river meets the sea. She shuddered and wrestled her thick mop of hair into the fleecy hood of her anorak. Some days she might glimpse a porpoise flipping through the water or a ship on the horizon but not today. She listened to the lonely cry of a seagull as it flew into the grainy sky and thought of all the towns and villages swept away over the years. All of those houses and churches at mercy to the crumbling clay cliffs and the ever-shifting sandbanks of the Holderness coast. Legend said that you could hear the church bells of Ravenspurn ringing beneath the waves on a quiet day.

Lorna inhaled the familiar briny scent of seaweed in the salty air. A tear escaped down her freckled cheek as she thought about her late husband Matt who had never returned from the angry sea. His fishing boat had been lost in a violent storm years ago, leaving her to raise Jenny alone. She had instantly become a single mother and had to abandon her Art degree to make ends meet. He had never met his daughter who shared his sandy coloured hair and clear blue eyes.

She sighed and walked along the beach past the remains of the concrete battery posts from the two world wars. She picked up a shiny green pebble and put it into her pocket. It reminded her of an emerald pendant Matt had once given her. He had said it reminded him of her eyes, as green as the sea. She wished she could find that necklace – she had been devastated when she lost it.

Lorna didn't know why she stayed here with all these memories – perhaps it was time to move on. It saddened her that the coast was constantly changing, shrinking daily. The long sandy finger of the peninsula was regularly breached by unseasonably high tides and was no longer accessible by car or bus. The only local grocery store in Easington had closed last year and the nearest supermarkets were in Patrington and Withernsea. The pilot houses were now as vacant as empty shells - the families having relocated across the water to Grimsby a few years ago. Even the caravan café on the point had closed recently and the new visitors' centre was often empty.

Lorna envied the swallows who rested at the spit, taking refuge before resuming their long journey south from the peninsula. They knew they could fly away at any time, a bit like the tourists who stayed in the Sandy Beaches caravan park once a year. She missed her daughter who was about to enter her final year at Brighton University. Inspired by the sea she was studying for a degree in marine biology. Jenny wasn't afraid – she was growing, following her dreams. She was hoping to travel the world eventually with Tom her fiancé. They were going to use their skills, to explore the depths of the ocean.

Lorna knew that she could stay on this beautiful but disappearing peninsula at the edge of the North Sea or take a chance and move on. She was resilient like the sturdy marram grass that clung to the golden dunes throughout all the seasons and the Glasswort on the mudflats of the Humber. However, sometimes she yearned to fly away like one of the summer birds on their journey to warmer climes.

She felt a drop of rain splash on to her face so she hurried towards home, down the long sandy road and its disused railway track and eventually past the curlews wading in the salt marshes. As she passed the farm a fork of lightning suddenly zig zagged across the darkened sky followed by a low rumble of thunder. The drizzle instantly morphed into a torrent of angry rain, soaking her to the skin and taking her breath away. She ran into the cottage and quickly added more coal to the fire before removing her wet clothes. She rubbed her copper coloured hair with a towel and put on another pair of jeans and a jumper. Then she made a pot of herbal tea. She added the emerald pebble to her collection of shells and pebbles she kept in the kitchen drawer. She carried the tea tray into the conservatory and settled into her favourite armchair to listen to the rain thudding relentlessly on the corrugated roof.

Lorna opened the yellowing pages of a book she had borrowed from the tiny mobile library van which visited the area once in a blue moon. It was about the lost villages and towns of Holderness. She started reading the chapter about the fate of Ravenspurn which met its demise in the 1800s. The bustling merchant town had been built on a sandbank and had been subjected to many floods and a lot of the houses and churches were abandoned. Eventually, a great storm had swept away the last of the buildings.

She closed her eyes and imagined the terror felt by the remaining townsfolk as the waves had swept over the town, demolishing their way of life, everything they had known. She pictured their futile attempts to escape the wrath of the North sea amidst the frantic pealing of the church bells.

It reminded her of a few winters ago when she had thought her cottage was going to be swept out to sea one stormy night. Her breathing quickened as she recalled the terror – the howling wind violently rattling the window panes and the piercing shriek of the coastal flood siren. Her palms felt clammy as she recalled the muddy sea water gushing relentlessly through the fields and down the roads in the inky darkness. The brackish swirling water hadn't quite reached her home but she knew she might not be as lucky next time.

Alongside the other villagers she had campaigned for new flood defences to fight the coastal erosion but the Parish council didn't have the funds. It was inevitable that the land would disappear as if it had never been here – claimed by the powerful sea. She shuddered as she thought of Kilnsea becoming one of the lost villages.

Lorna had always been afraid of water as she had nearly drowned as a little girl. One day in late summer she had been picnicking with her sister Alice at Spurn Point and had decided to go for a swim. However, the strong currents of the estuary soon began to drag her away and down into the briny depths of the sea. She could still recall that sense of panic, as she flailed about, gulping down salty water. Fortunately, her sister spotted her through her binoculars. She ran to the lifeboat house and the crew rescued her. Lorna hadn't swum in the sea since that day.

She had lost Alice last year after her battle with a long illness. She would always remember how she had saved her life that summer. She missed their daily chats over the telephone - her wise words had helped keep her strong over the years. She recalled her sadness when they had scattered her ashes at sea one autumnal morning. However, at least she had lived her dreams, sailing to different countries throughout her naval career. The sea had been in her sister's veins.

Life had been a struggle recently for Lorna. She had been made redundant from her teaching assistant post at Withernsea Primary School due to budget cuts. She missed the camaraderie in the staff room and working with the children. Recently, she had been half-heartedly trawling through the on-line vacancies but there weren't many opportunities in the backwater where she lived.

Fortunately, she had a few interests to keep her occupied. She had organised a monthly book club in the barn and she enjoyed her volunteer work at the lighthouse. She loved climbing the steep winding steps of the newly painted lighthouse to look out across the peninsula. It was such a beautiful view. She'd even started to paint again. However, sometimes she felt achingly lonely, particularly when summer morphed into autumn and the dark nights drew in.

She was considering making another pot of tea when the telephone trilled. She gingerly picked up the receiver, her heart thumping, hoping it wasn't another flood warning. She sighed with relief when she heard her daughter Jenny's familiar voice.

'Mum, I need you to come and stay,' she pleaded in her soft voice, which had lost all trace of her Yorkshire accent.

'Why, love what's happened?'

'Erm,' she said.

'Are you unwell, love?'

There was an awkward pause.

'Well, no, not exactly...' her voice trailed off.

'You mean?'

'Yes, I'm expecting a baby and ...'

'Oh love,' she replied.

'And ...'

'And what love?

'I don't think Tom wants to know,' she sobbed.

Lorna sighed, knowing how hard it is to raise a child alone.

'What do you mean, love? You've only just got engaged.'

'He's called it off. Said he's too young and all that. I just don't know what to do.'

'Don't worry about anything. I'll pop and stay for a while to sort things out.'

'That would be good Mum.'

'I've been thinking about moving to be near you anyway.'

'What, really Mum?'

'Yes. Leaving Kilnsea might do me some good. I can register at one of the teaching agencies or work in one of the art shops. I'm sure there'll be something I can do. I might even sell one of my paintings.'

'But you love living there Mum,' she said. 'You'll miss the peninsula's ever changing moods.'

'Don't worry, love. This place is etched in my memory. I need to take a chance and experience a new way of life anyway – before it's too late.'

'Well, if you're sure

'Yes love, I am sure. You can still achieve your dreams love, with my help. It'll just take a little longer. Us Merrill women are strong,' she said.

'Yes Mum, I suppose I will. Anyway, you'll love Brighton with its wonderful pier and pebbly beach. The sea is so beautiful.'

'Yes, love, I'm sure I will. I'll speak to you soon when I've made arrangements. Bye for now love.'

Lorna put the phone down and felt a wave of calm wash over her. She had made her decision. Jenny needed her. She would contact an estate agent tomorrow to put her

cottage on the housing market. She would also book a train to Brighton and stay there for a few weeks to look after Jenny and sort out more permanent accommodation there. She had saved some inheritance money from her sister's death which would help set her up with something.

Lorna dragged a shabby leather suitcase out of the wardrobe and sponged away the dust. It had been a long time since she had been away. As she neatly packed an assortment of jeans and recently knitted jumpers she felt a small hard object beneath the faded satin lining. She unzipped it and pulled out a necklace – her green pendant. It must have been in there for years. Her long fingers trembling she clasped it round her neck and smiled. Perhaps this was a sign that she could now move on – be free. She could always carry her memories of the peninsula and Matt with her, wherever she went.

Lorna walked back to the Point before dusk. The storm had cleared and the sun was sinking into a strawberry sky. She emptied her anorak pockets of some of the shiny pebbles and shells she had collected over the years and tossed them on to the shingly beach. She didn't need them now. She watched a flock of geese fly away from the peninsula, honking and flapping their large wings. She closed her eyes and thought she could hear the church bells ringing beneath the waves.

Word count

1991