

## Adrift

### Kate Lance (2005)

She met him at a barbecue held by an old friend whose husband did something or other in the maritime world. He was visiting the port on some equally obscure activity, and they chatted early in the evening as cicadas burred in the trees beside the pool.

He was sinewy, brown, sun-wrinkled. He wore an old green shirt and was perhaps sixty, his grey hair cut unbecomingly short over his ears. He was a salvor, he said. When ships broke apart or ran on the reefs his company was hired to rescue them.

Big money involved. The cargo—often oil—worth millions, but you had to move quickly—tugs, ground tackle, ballast. She had no idea what he was talking about. Luckily someone else intervened and the topic shifted to renovations.

Later she saw him rolling a cigarette—rolling, like an old hippy!—and smoking it sheltered inside his palm, staring at the ripples of light in the pool. There were scabs on the backs of his large sunburnt hands. (She'd had one too many by then.)

These wrecked ships, she said, how can there be enough of them around to keep you busy? It's headline news when it happens, and that's hardly ever nowadays.

He dropped the stub of his cigarette and ground it out very deliberately. Stupid to smoke when you work near oil tankers, he said.

He gazed at her. Just about everything in or out of this country goes on ships—most of you haven't the faintest ... look, you only hear about the big ones, the ones they put in the quick clip before the ads. There's a whole different world out there.

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She didn't like him much, but he rang a few days later and asked her out to dinner. It had been a long time, really, since a man had asked her out. She knew she was still pleasant-looking enough, but she'd become middle aged. The women's magazines said age didn't matter, but perhaps men didn't read those articles.

She met him at the restaurant, which was quiet, Italian, in the city not far from the docks. He was married, he said, and lived in Queensland—the Barrier Reef brought in a lot of good jobs. He didn't wear a ring but there was a fresh cut on the side of one of his brown, capable hands.

They ate in the open courtyard, the air still heavy from the humid day. He wore an old blue shirt this time. The lines of his face showed years of concentration and fierce impatience, lit up now and then by a sly boyish grin.

He talked of a great tanker they had salvaged—even she vaguely remembered it—not far off the coast, the bow ripped off, the oil catching fire, the ship decrepit, dangerous.

But we did all right, he said, that was a good one.

She shook her head in disbelief.

Where do you think it all comes from, hey? he said. You want your new cars, clean, expensive—you never think of the oil and dirt, the fires, the ships. You want everything nice and tidy.

Perhaps we're not expected to think of the sea, she said, just fashion and house prices and gardening. We only hear about it when there's some sort of dispute.

Sailors always go their own way, he said, that's why the pollies don't like them very much. But everything comes from the sea, you know. Even words.

What—you mean like being taken aback, or a loose cannon. Or the bitter end.

Or coming adrift, he said. Maybe you know that one?

She laughed. Yes, I rather like ... adrift. Floating on smooth water, far from land. Alone. Calm. Safe.

And what if you find yourself on a lee shore? Slowly heading for the rocks, unable to escape.

But I'm not, she said.

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It was late by the time they finished the meal. He walked her to her car. The lift in the car park was broken so they climbed up three flights. The staircase, enclosed in steel mesh, was open to the air. Lightning flickered in the distance, too far away to hear the thunder.

At the landing they stopped and she turned to face him. In her heels they were almost the same height. She heard a car go by in the street.

He touched her neck lightly, then slid his hand to her breast and stroked it. She closed her eyes. He came closer and his mouth traced her lips. She held his arms, warm through the cotton of his shirt, and felt the sinews shift as he eased her back against the wall.

He laid his forehead against hers and they looked down at the buttons of her dress. That's convenient, he said, and slowly undid them.

He lowered his head, seeking. After a time he looked up. Do you like that?

Yes, she said.

Lift your skirt then, he said.

It bunched easily at her waist, and without haste she took off her panties and stood, feet apart in the breeze. He looked at her for a long time, then knelt. She could hear him breathing, feel his mouth. She stroked his head as his fingers moved. Soon it was too intense and she said, come here.

She opened his trousers and coaxed him towards her, smoothing blunt silk with her thumb. Please, she said, now. His legs rough between her thighs, he eased inside, as true and sweet as anything she knew.

She thought, what if people come up the stairs, what if they see? And the old fantasy, as potent as lightning, flashed through her as she raised her arms and arched her back, so that everyone could see.

He groaned and heat spread. Pleasure tendrilled and faded away. Aftershocks rippled as they softly laughed. After a time they eased apart and re-covered themselves. She buttoned his shirt and he did up her dress. They hugged, leaning against the wall.

She heard cars in the street again, swishing through puddles. The door at the base of the stairwell clanged, and voices echoed upwards. They looked at each other.

Well, she said.

They walked to her car. The storm was almost overhead now, rumbles of thunder between the gushes of rain.

Mother Nature's being rather symbolic tonight, she said, and he laughed.

She sat in the car and did up the seatbelt. He leaned in and kissed her and said, So, are you still all adrift?

Only because I want to be, she said.

I'm coming back in a few weeks, he said. Perhaps we can meet again.

Thank you, but no. A married man is definitely a lee shore.

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Driving home slowly in the wet, for the first time she noticed the rainbows of oil on the road. Oil, carried over the sea in tankers. Oil, salvaged, sometimes, by capable men.

She stopped on Beaconsfield Parade to watch the lights of ships waiting far out on the bay. Droplets rolled and scintillated down the windscreen. She shivered with pleasure, as if lying wrapped in warmth and hearing rain on the roof.

I'll go to the marina tomorrow, she thought. It's time I learnt how to sail.