

**Apocryphal Irish Texts, Revived in Australian Historical
Fiction, as Collective Memory**

Unsettled, the Magistrate of Galway, The Hibernian

Father

and

Narratives Arising from the Wreck of the *Admella*

Ph D thesis

Volume 1

A Novel: *Unsettled*

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The Hibernian Father by Edward Geoghegan

The Register, 11 May 1844.

THEATRICAL REGISTER:

On Monday “the first original tragedy” composed for the Sydney stage was represented for the first time. It is entitled the *Hibernian Father*, and is said to be founded upon an episode of Irish history; which, however we do not recollect to have met with in our reading. We are unable, therefore, to speak as to the historical accuracy of the piece. That it is, as a whole, a production of literary merit, we readily admit. There are even passages of very considerable beauty and pathos in it; the defects are a want of probability in some of the incidents, and a straining after effect, after the modern melodramatic style.

The story is this: — *Walter Lynch* (Nesbitt) is the Chief Magistrate of Galway. His son, *Oscar Lynch* (James), enamoured of *Anastasia*, a young orphan, and ward of the elder Lynch (Mrs O’Flaherty), having been engaged in foreign travel, and returning home with *Alonzo* (Grove), a young Spaniard, the son of his father’s friend, discovers that his companion is also in love with *Anastasia*, and in a fit of jealousy throws the latter overboard. *Oscar*, arrived at his father’s house, is about to be married to *Anastasia*, when *Gerald* (*Oscar’s* attendant on the voyage,) relates the guilt of his young master to *Rupert D’Arcy*, a pirate, also in love with *Anastasia*, and at enmity with *Lynch*, but who is for the purpose disguised as a priest. The fact thus related *sub sigillo*, is at once proclaimed by the imposter *D’Arcy*, who denounces *Oscar*, who is tried, and condemned, *à la Brutus*, by his own father. *Anastasia* proceeds to the residence of the Viceroy...

I. Frontier of South-east South Australia (1859)

It is a day for dying. Just this morning Rosanna has found a wombat collapsed during its trundle to the water — a cushion of bloated pink flesh, paws outstretched, eyes black and slitted. Too putrid to contemplate roasting a haunch. The heat weighs on her skin. If she spat on her hand it would sizzle. Edwin says that the beds of swamps are crazed and cracked like china and birds drop dead from the sky. She carries the pail to the house, slopping water as she lifts it onto the wooden verandah. Her mother appears in the doorway.

‘For God’s sake, the children are thirsty. Can you not do anything right?’ Eilish presses the flat of her arm against her temple, covering a streak of grey that runs like smoke to the coil of hair on her crown. Moisture pearls her upper lip. ‘Today of all days, you soft *girseach*.’ She reaches out as if to strike her daughter.

Rosanna jerks her hand to fend off an unlikely blow. ‘I can, of course.’ Her voice is hoarse from the dust and she wishes that the unrelenting blueness of the sky would open up and swallow her. As she walks back to the pond she is stopped in her tracks by the crack of a stockwhip. A man’s voice rises over the sound of cattle breaking from the scrub. She hauls herself behind a stringy bark, bruising her calf with her bucket as a fine white horse bursts into view. Perspiration streams down the rider’s unhappy face and darkens the waist of his moleskin breeches. His hat jounces at his neck as he turns the large mob past the water and through the trees. Dust rises in filthy clouds around them and the squawking rattle of a wattle bird starts up. Can it be *them*? The tall man jerks around in the saddle to look behind him, gives the whip one more crack, then drags on his horse’s mouth. The grey backs up to jump the fallen branch of a shea oak before man and horse hurtle back into the scrub after the cattle, the sound of their crashing fading away in waves.

Rosanna resumes her trudge to the pond. On her knees beside the water, her reflection confirms that everything is wrong: the high arch of her eyebrows, her strong nose, the slant of her cheekbones, the springing dark hair fizzing with perspiration at her brow. ‘*Thah*,’ she murmurs to herself.

The silence swelling around her is broken by a new sound, like the sonorous boom of a steam ship’s fog horn; she starts to her feet again. It is the bellow of an angry bullock. The man on the white horse must be miles away by now. The recalcitrant beast will come, smelling water. She waits. Then abandons her bucket

and lifts her skirts to locate the bellow, following the trail of broken saplings and churned earth that mark the progress of a heavy beast. She approaches quietly.

Something or someone has felled the bullock between two trees; she watches its desperate attempts to rise from its knees. White spittle froths at its mouth. Rosanna creeps closer fixing her eyes on the source of its pain. It scrabbles again in the dirt, fails to gain its feet, and falls exhausted to one side. Surely the front leg has broken under its great weight. On its side the Ashby brand, sunk in its neck is a spear. Rosanna stays clear of the thrashing limbs, gouging the earth. ‘Poor *fullah ballum*,’ she murmurs. Coat matted with filth and blood and eyes resigned, it has begun to dig its own grave. What are the implications of the spear? Would Jack take an Ashby steer? Surely he would not abandon a week’s feed? Rosanna scans the tree line. Softly, she calls for Moorecke. She and Jack have not been seen in months.

Left alone will not the bullock lose consciousness and die in its own time? But that is an end too slow and cruel to contemplate. She casts her eyes about for a waddy amongst the scatter of twigs and leaf litter covered in the white and desiccated trails of ants. Even if she found one solid enough to strike the bullock’s head, it would be a dangerous thing to do alone in the bush. If the animal offers one last desperate struggle, knocking her off her feet, she could be trapped beneath its mammoth body.

She imagines dogs tearing flesh from the live creature. And Mr William Ashby convulsed with rage at the loss of valuable stock setting off to punish Moorecke and Jack. For sure, he is the man on the white horse? If she shoots the bullock, quickly, kindly, and covers him with branches, who will know? Why waste fresh meat? She imagines her mother throwing her deft hands from the damper bowl to exclaim, ‘*Arrah*, what is it?’

Father has opinions about straying stock, and justice, but his first duty lies in the feeding of his family, being nothing if not practical. William Ashby nettles Father about justice being done; for there *is* justice in the colony of South Australia. An Irishman has been hung for killing a black. Father told him that the Irishman was maddened by the English convict system. What would he say about this spear? While he has never forbidden Rosanna spending time with Moorecke when the *Booandik* return to camp nor does he approve. He is watchful — in some instances, grim. For him, everything is complicated. She turns to the trees. Nothing stirs. The bullock

heaves its head and rolls its yellow eyes. Fluid froths from its filthy mouth. Such dreadful suffering is wrong. She will stop up his bellow.

Eilish raises herself from a stool in the skillion kitchen behind the house, splaying her hands in the small of her back. She leans up against the smoke-stained wall. How does she bear it, Rosanna thinks? It is not much of a dwelling to be mistress of — two wattled and daubed rooms lined and pegged with bullock hides, a thatched roof and a stone chimney, box furniture wobbling on an earthen floor — when measured against the three story granite Irish public house they had left behind.

‘You have the water?’ Mother bends wearily to pluck a crying child from the dirt floor; she looks too small to lift him.

Her daughter hesitates. ‘Mother, I need to take the gun to fill the bucket.’

‘Why do you need a gun to fetch water?’ A wave of comprehension passes over Eilish’s face. ‘Is it a big one? Leave it.’

Rosanna leaps at this suggestion with relief. ‘It is my own fault. I was dreaming in the reeds of Aoife and Cuchulain, right by a nest of little ones. By the time I saw them their mother rushed out, reared up on her tail, and flicked her tongue at me like a serpent from hell. I threw the pail at her head.’ Rosanna looks into her mother’s face for effect.

A stream of perspiration runs down Eilish’s tanned and grimy face. She dabs at it with the corner of her apron, steadying the plump baby on her hip. ‘I need water. Hugh is dirtying and dirtying himself. He is burning up with a fever. I should come with you.’

‘I’ll be all right, Mother. It’s not such a big one, just a red-belly,’ Rosanna skites, feeling as treacherous as the viper she has conjured for her mother.

‘Where is St Patrick when we need him? God be with us in all hours, and that reptile and its hellish family slide back into the reeds, before you get there. Take the gun then, but be careful. And bring home the bucket.’

Rosanna lifts the gun from pegs above the fireplace and hurries away. Wobbling along the rim of the pond she carries the weapon above her head and into the bush to the wounded bullock. Not wishing to blow the creature’s head to pieces she measures up the distance and steps back to pull the trigger. The charge slams into the bullock’s head. Red tailed cockatoos screech into the sky, wheel once, and

descend in a moon-shaped spiral to settle in the eucalypts. The recoil throws her backwards and she falls down hard. Face collapsed in upon itself the bullock shudders one last time before ceasing its laboured breathing. Rosanna remains sprawled, rubbing at her hip, listening for the sound of lithe feet in the grass or bodies moving through the scrub. Nothing. She approaches the bloody mess and tugs at the spear. It vibrates in her shaking hand, twangs. Uneasily, she glances around. Mr Ashby doesn't like black workers. A year or so after the Lynches' arrival, Moorecke, Jack and all their people drifted to Curratum Station, leaving only over summer to camp at the old places.

She covers the carcass with stringy bark boughs. The dolomite is baked too hard for grave digging. She shakes the leaves of a branch, dancing backwards like Moorecke, to sweep the ground and cover her tracks; it is fear she feels. Mr William Ashby must never see the steer.

When she humps the brimming pail through the door a second time her mother tugs at her arm with some relief.

'I heard you. It was easy? Just one shot?'

'You act so brave with snakes. I am not fond of them, at all.' Rosanna shudders for effect. There has been no lie.

Eilish stares into her daughter's eyes. Satisfied, she turns away.

Rosanna goes to the camping place to look for Moorecke. So much has changed since the Lynches came from Ireland. Too many people have walked away. Can the land miss its people? Years ago when she rode with Edwin across the ridge on winter nights, campfires burned on the sides of the hills and beyond the swamp as well, blazed like beacons on the summit of the volcano, several hours walk apart, more than the distance between smoke-stained Irish villages in which her own people gathered to tell stories about the old people. Now the Blacks have come in to the stations, agreeing to be paid in sugar, tobacco and grog instead of bullets, setting up new camps in old places near the Big Houses.

How long has it been since Rosanna woke in full moonlight to the whump of possum skin drums, the tapping of sticks, the rise and fall of singing? Smelling roasting bustard she had crept between the trees and hunkered down at a distance to watch Moorecke seated with the young women at the *murpenas*. Why had she not been paired with one of the *moorongal-ngara* who stamped a half second behind the

beat through the camp dust round the fire, spears quivering at their young shoulders, goanna fat and ochre glistening on their skin? Instead she had married that old man, Jack, who danced the kangaroo. Rosanna remembers his face angled to catch the breeze, his nose twitching — sniffing *her* perhaps — one hand cupping his wagging ear, the other scratching his hard flat belly. The night sky had soaked up her rustling along with their ancestor voices. Father Woods says that in music, drums are the heartbeats — melodies the legs and feet. Rosanna thinks Irish music comes from the heart and *Booandik* music from the belly. It is the belly Moorecke clutches, when she is sad or frightened or angry.

A hot north wind puffs ash from the fireplace. Rosanna ignores the creaking lament of crows and parts the chewed-string curtain in the doorway of Moorecke's beehive-shaped wooden hut. Skins hang on the wall — a reed mat and some tools. They have been back for the summer and, no doubt, walked on to MacDonnell Bay, to scruff crayfish from rocky ledges or to smoke sea eels with heads as big as dogs' and hang them in the trees. Rosanna will speak to Edwin about the bullock. If she can, she will concoct another great lie, for the occasion, they will enjoy the meat. By dusk she will be capable of it.

II: Brother and Sister

Edwin and Father ride in, their horses so foamy and rank with sweat it is a wonder the saddles don't slide from their backs. Rosanna follows them to the rough yard behind the house, where they brush the horses down and hobble them. Lucifer and Bran shoulder the men aside to shake and rub themselves against the trunks of trees. They snort the warm eucalyptus air and whinny as they edge into the shade. Lucifer rolls. As soon as Father's back is turned, Rosanna beckons her brother, leading him away to the pond. She carries his flensing knife in a fold of cloth.

A pigeon cavorts on the bullock's rump. Then rattles away. Edwin kicks at the cloud of flies feeding on the dark contusion of blood. 'It is no prettier than houghing, and just as pointed.'

'What do you mean — houghing?'

'Back home, families were turned off their allotments because they couldn't pay the Burkes. They slashed the hocks of his cattle.'

‘I’ve never heard that word. But this is an accident, Edwin. Or they would have kept it for a feed. You know that.’

‘You’ll have a problem persuading the Ashbys of that, with a weapon stuck in its throat.’

His sister shrugs. She sniffs the air. ‘I’m not thinking this is a spear from around here, Edwin.’

He snaps it off, carves out the head and wipes it on his pants, then places it on the flat of her hand. ‘Are *they* back then? Ask *her*.’

‘Can we not take the meat home? I swear Moorecke is camped in the cool at the port.’

‘So we tell Father that the Blacks have driven this bullock from the other direction. That the beast was dying and that we put it out of its misery.’

‘He doesn’t have to know about every stray.’

‘I’ll say I fought off a fierce man, bigger than Cuchulain, and blacker than a cockatoo. He had blood red feathers at his brow, and screamed worse than an Irish banshee. I’ll tell him the man was blacker than an American negro come off a whaling boat at Portland. He was chasing the bullock when you distracted him, and mad with drink and loneliness, he turned on you.’

‘Oh Edwin, you’re such a fool to dream up black demons to cover our own thievery.’

‘All right then, I can sell the meat and skin to a Kerryman I know at the bay, who doesn’t ask questions about the brand.’

‘And why should you have the money when I did the killin’?’

‘I am a man planning a business with a cart and a team of bullocks. Now that the spear is taken, and the carcass cut, the police troopers will be looking for a gun. I think you should lay low yourself.’

Edwin will make his way in the colony, Rosanna knows. ‘I don’t see why they would come out here. Swear to God, you won’t say a word to Mother and Father.’

‘Why would I be blathering to them about their feckless daughter?’ He grins.

Nothing dampens his spirit. ‘Edwin, stop your teasing.’ She picks up his hand and recoils from the smell on his fingers. ‘God, you’re such a reeky thing. The flies are loving you, now.’

Edwin snatches back his hand and returns to his task cutting through the flies and fat to the clean red meat beneath. It takes a long time — perhaps two hours — to butcher the beast. Rosanna impatiently watches her brother squatting in the dirt, his dark curly hair flopping into his eyes as he hacks and saws with concentration. Twenty year of age come Whitsunday, he is strong enough to do anything he wishes. She crests his shoulder but has not grown an inch since she first bled. Edwin cuts slabs of meat from the bone and wraps them in Rosanna's cloth. He sighs, half rising to stretch his cramped body, wiping his hands from waist to thigh. 'I'll take some more of the hip. It's too fresh to waste.' He bends once more.

She paces the perimeter of the clearing, anxiously listening for horses, and then returns. 'In God's truth Edwin, why do they bring the cattle to their knees? Back in Ireland; it would be the cruellest thing.'

'Cruel that some have much and others little. Life is not like they say in your books.'

Rosanna nods and turns her face away.

'I saw worse when I went to the Portumna Poorhouse with Father to look for his brother,' he says.

'Edwin, I know these things. I wasn't a baby then. I remember Alice Spain and her mother coming along the High Street, like broken-down mares in harness, humping their belongings.'

'Only two hundred souls in *Graíg na Muílte* when we left. The Burkes aimed to clear the village by death or emigration.'

'His agent battered the Spain's roof in. Did you know that? They buried their baby in the ditch outside the Poor House.'

'We're better off here. I'll have my own herd and no one'll lay a finger on *them*.' He tugs at her hand. 'Come on. We'd best not burn a carcass today. It's warm.'

Four years ago fireballs fuelled by savage winds had hurtled past their house to the sea. For weeks they had kept vigil over smouldering stumps and prayed. It is a beautiful thing to be so lucky when *Mar* is on a rampage. 'Why buy bullocks, Edwin? I thought you were going to the gold.'

‘Well, I might have, when I was younger, but I’ve seen them coming back, the seekers, and the brown and yellow creepers, from all the corners of the Empire. It is land they want, not gold. Even the Chinamen are returning.’

‘How will you pay for land?’

‘When I get my cart, chaps like Ashby’ll ask me to carry their goods to the new port and back.’ He curves his knife along the inside leg bone and cuts through sinew with a flourish.

‘What else will you do?’ she asks, half attending. He’s pleased with himself, without a doubt. A puff of air ripples the corners of the meat cloth.

‘Supplement my wages racing. Breed horses.’

She pushes irritating tendrils of hair from her face.

‘Like the poet or Mr Livingstone on Carratum Station, for the British Army in India. Then I’ll buy land.’

‘Land is what Father wants, more than anything.’

‘Sometimes sons become more powerful than their fathers. God grant me good luck, I’ll do well.’

‘Well, you have plans, Edwin, and more chance than Skelly and I of them ripening. What of your sister, then, who loves you to death?’

‘She should be grateful that her brother cleaned up a bullock and left her with the spear.’

‘You’ll be marrying soon, I suppose.’

‘Good luck and prosperity never put off a wedding.’

‘You’re bummin’ again, you great *shoneen*.’

‘I heard about a meeting between small land buyers and the government. There’s talk of dummying.’

‘You’d never go to a meeting, Edwin. A dark lad like you. Always galloping off in the middle of the night with money in your pocket for Miss Lallah’s *síbín*, but coming home with none. You think I don’t know, but I watch you in the moonlight. And so does Father.’

‘It is a weight on a man trying to make his way with all this watching, watching. The devil take the lot of you.’ Edwin kicks up sand.

She shields her face with her hand and raises her voice. ‘A terrible life you lead winning money for your secret business plans. I feel for you. I do. What about

Skelly and me, stuck at home with Mother?’ She slaps her hand against the trunk of a gum. Then covers the remains of the bullock with branches and begins to sweep around it.

Edwin ties the cloth and hauls it over his shoulder, glaring at her. ‘You’ll not marry a man or win your freedom if you are always spitting and grousing. Why should a man as sweet tempered as me be burdened with a sister so unlike him? Shut it now. Come with me to the bay. We’ll quickly tell Mother, while Father is busy at the still.’

III: Reminiscing Proves a Great Distraction

‘You took your time.’

All skite and charm he presses his lips to his mother’s cheeks, sliding an arm around her waist. He is taller now than Father who is over six feet in his socks.

‘Let her come with me. She can bring back medicine for Hugh. It is cooler by the water and it will do her good. Perhaps we could bring home a little crayfish.’ Edwin raises his left eyebrow; it is a quirky thing he does to melt his mother’s heart.

Emotions tangle up in Mother’s face. Her mouth droops. Rosanna knows that more than anything she wants love between her children; and she has always talked of living in a more civilised place where her daughter will not be required to kill anything more dangerous than a quail or spatchcock. Rosanna knows these things, as surely as her mother pretends to be oblivious to the dark tides of discontent sweeping through her daughter’s blood.

Eilish touches her hand to her face, where Edwin has softened her resistance. ‘Edwin, I need Rosanna to cook. I am faint with the heat. My head pounds like *tunder* in the hills.’

‘Don’t go worrying yourself about me, Edwin. I’ll stay and take care of Mother,’ Rosanna says. Ceasing her fingering of dried grass-tree gum adhering to the spear head in her pocket, she folds her arms against her own bad luck, and watches *him*, lanky as a stick insect, silhouetted against the rays of the grevillea sun sinking over the port, descending the hill on his horse.

When he pauses to gather the warm and laden cloth from the fork of a tea-tree, he lifts his hand in a laconic wave.

Rosanna calls pointlessly after him. ‘If you see Moorecke, do not speak... about anything’. She follows her mother inside the hut. ‘Mother — tell me again why you brought us here?’

‘At least help me while we blather.’

Rosanna croons. ‘*Tha*. Sit here and I’ll finish off the dinner.’ She moves a stool into the doorway. ‘I hope a little breeze will kiss you.’ She damps a cloth and dabs at her mother’s face, wipes down her neck and arms.

Eilish holds the cloth against her forehead and sighs. ‘Some days I wonder if it was the best thing — to come so far.’

Rosanna kisses her cheek. ‘Remember how the church bells rang as we boarded the coach for Portumna.’ She is good at this — this reminiscing. It proves a great distraction.

‘Standing with our trunks on the step, the street a quagmire. Father Egan was waving from the bridge. I wonder if he knew what your father had done — oh the shame.’

Rosanna shrugs. ‘Skelly was trailing behind you like a calf at foot.’

‘That he was.’ Eilish reaches out to touch her daughter’s hair. ‘Do you remember *alannah* that Granny Walsh died seven years to this day?’

‘Didn’t I nurse her each time you dropped like a stone in a bog into your rocking chair?’

Eilish angles her face away. ‘Her chest was as hard as a rock, the pain as fierce as if someone was breaking into her with a spade...’

Rosanna croons. ‘We rocked along the canals through Meelick, Banagher, Balinmasloe and Shannon Harbour to the Dublin wharfs. Do the words sound like a poem?’

‘More like a prayer.’ Her mother sways on the stool. ‘The packet was as crowded as could be and I threw the contents of my stomach into the Irish Sea.’

‘The old country melted away in the fog. Do you remember floating off on the Plymouth tide, aboard the *Emma Eugenia*?’

‘I felt such a pang. Worse than childbirth.’ Eilish stills herself. ‘Keep on with the dinner, Rosanna. Turn the meat and mix the boxty.’

Rosanna lifts the cloth from her mother's shoulder and folds it around her hand to protect it from the heat of the oven. 'I doubted I would ever find my way home again, Mother.'

'Garrick's fingers dug so hard into my arm that I thought I would faint. Sorrow coursed through him.'

'It was terrible loud, with the roaring wind and and the sound of the screw...'

'The howls and cries from the deck.'

'And the whistling and banging on the rails. Even the petrels left us,' says Rosanna, wiping down the table with her cloth.

'I was praying everything was just a dream. That we were just in a curricule bobbing on Lough Derg — going on a pilgrimage to the Holy Island — instead of travelling to the other side of the world.'

At certain times, Rosanna thinks, Mother enjoys her misery.

'And now it seems but a blink until we arrived here on this step. You and Skelly — my curly-haired boy, how blessed we are to keep him — your father and Edwin, riding away each day.' She rises to gather bowls from a shelf and place them on the rough wooden table. 'And the first day across the *turlough* we saw that other little family standing by the tillage for my new potatoes.'

'Moorecke,' whispers Rosanna.

'Like they rose on a platform from the swamp. Not a bit like *sidhe* slipping out between the trees, dissolving in the air when I snap my fingers.'

IV: Shenanigans beside the Sinkhole

Skelly wears the feather of a firetail in his hat. Perched high in the foliage of a buloke tree, he spies on his sister chiacking with her heathen friend Moorecke at the edge of the pond. Their washing basket lies abandoned in the reeds. The sky is a clean strong blue and full of heat, broken only by the inelegant belching lines of ducks flying between the sinkholes and ponds. Skelly hopes that the eerie whine of the wind combing the buloke needles will cover the sound his pencil makes as it moves across the page. Mostly, everyone watches *him*. But where are they now, when he is way above the ground and could fall and hurt himself? He angles his head to peer between the branches at the sound of his sister's laughter; better for her than sliding off to the scrub to mope, as she has been lately. He holds up a sun-warmed

pink and downy peach from the tree behind the pit, fingering the luscious curves, before he eats it. He needs no reminding that since he has turned thirteen his sketchbook contains the secret shapes of girls' *thóins*.

A pair of azure kingfishers bob and nod to each other in front of their excavated mud nest – like the little Indian nabobs Mother showed him in a book – and they interrupt his drawing. He takes up his pencil again and begins to outline their violet blue wing feathers, but suddenly they leap into the air – peee, peee – and, wings whirring, zigzag across the surface of the water. The spangle of birds and water is a gorgeous thing. If only he could paint in colours, like a real artist. Father bought Skelly the precious sketching book. No one else received a gift — not Blinnie, nor Hugh; not Rosanna, nor Edwin — paper being scarce and expensive.

Rosanna and Moorecke lie full length to skim water with the flats of their hands and behave like ninnies. Skelly likes their long bare legs — one pair shapely, more deeply golden than his morning *fúal*, the other spindle-shanked in all the under shades of mushrooms. They have draped their skirts across the currant bushes and wear only chemises tucked in short pantaloons. An urgent fluttering feeling begins in his pants, like a bird trapped beneath his hand. Half irritation, half longing it confuses him, as much as his dreams about being suspended in the coolness of the pond. He has nightmares about being cut by the rocks beneath the surface, pink clouds of his blood suffusing the clear water until he is completely drained and fainting. *Musha*, with his luck, Mother would arrive too late to save him. By then he would be sucked through a crevice to the rock cathedral below the main pool and her constant fear would come to pass. The water in the pond is more than an Irish roadside flush, but calmer than a river. It is dark and deep. As chilly as a tomb.

The girls' voices bounce up from the pool. Skelly listens and intermittently sketches.

'Why did Jack duff that *ballum*?' Rosanna raises her arm indicating the scrub behind the pond.

'Little Jesus sent the bullock right alongside our sit down place. He ran away from his mob.'

Rosanna smirks and whistles through her teeth. 'Who was that riding after you?'

'William Ashby, as cranky as *koo-no-wor*, came back to get him.'

‘Were you frightened?’ Rosanna looks suddenly worried and Skelly leans closer to catch their words.

‘*Yooch-ba*. Off we ran to *Ngaranga*.’

‘He chased you to MacDonnell Bay?’

Moorecke shakes her head. ‘No.’

‘Perhaps he didn’t see you?’

‘Later, Jack and me followed the tracks — *ngorn-da* — and we can see that bullock broke his leg. But no meat left. William Ashby got it first.’

Rosanna looks ill at ease. ‘You were bold to touch his cattle.’

Moorecke shrugs and dives, makes long slow sweeps with her arms, insinuating her body like an eel through the chasm between the rocks, holding her breath for a long time, until Skelly’s teeth ache with clenching. He waits for her darting shadow until finally he sees her, face swelling, big eyes opening like lilies, breaking through the skin of the water. He wobbles on his branch above her and his sketchbook slips in his lap. He lurches forward to prevent it falling. Moorecke flops as slick and dark as a seal onto the rock platform beside the reeds and Rosanna runs along the edge of the pond kicking up water with her great long legs. Mother would despair. It is only because Father and Edwin have ridden away, swags strapped across their horses’ broad backs, to help Mr Ashby muster more scrub cattle that there can be such shenanigans.

Skelly’s pencil scirrs across the page as he shades the curves of their bodies. Moorecke squats beside the water peering into the deep below. The sunlight is much too bright for eels. But he has seen her trap them in woven baskets shaped like trumpets, and bait them too, with bone hooks — sanding her hands to kill them with a rock and then twisting them around her neck. Rosanna squats beside her, fingers tracing the corrugated burns on Moorecke’s hips, caused by rolling into her campfire. Skelly holds his breath and stops sketching, his pencil just short of her belly on the page. He grips the branch. Almost yelps. He must not fall. But he has bitten his tongue and he is not supposed to be climbing trees. Ever. He does not bleed but, all the same, the pain sings through his mouth.

Rosanna tosses water into the air. It is fey girls are, lucky, and he can never draw them well enough. They bend to the water, then shrieking like banshees throw back their heads to shake drops out of their hair. Rosanna’s hair is almost as blue-

black and wild as Moorecke's. Eilish would reach for her wooden hairbrush and smack it smartly down on her daughter's head.

Later they lie like crocodiles along the edges of the hole, their eyes flicking, tongues blatherin', all the while drying off Rosanna's washing on low dead boughs of the tea-tree. He cannot hear their secrets now but he sees two snakes intertwined in the highest branches. Shall he call? Oblivious, Rosanna traces the pink soles of Moorecke's feet with a twig, and then the tiny water drops on the crest of her lips, and Skelly is sick with excitement, as if a thousand little people are running round in his belly. He wishes he could come down from the tree, and be with them.

Any minute now, Eilish will call. He starts, twisting his head in fright, but it is only a bronze-winged pigeon rattling from the straggly trees by the water. If Mother calls, or Jack comes for Moorecke, the black girl will skedaddle through the scrub. She drinks from the pond, through a reed. Skelly remembers her drinking vessel, years before — Jesus, Mary and Joseph, it was a skull — he knows that now and it still shocks him. But it wasn't long before Father accused her of stealing their best bucket to carry water. The skull has long been abandoned.

The sun disappears behind a cloud and Skelly senses change. Something has set the pelicans clattering from the lagoon behind him. Along the distant shore spumes of water rise and fall. Black cloak flying out behind him, the priest canters towards them on his great horse, leading another weighed down with supplies and books and notes. As sure as Father Woods will need a Christian hearth for the night, Rosanna will be saying Hail Marys for the rest of her life.

He hurls cones from the buloke tree until they splash beside her. Moorecke whips around like a startled adder and calls up to him: she knows. 'Might be William Ashby comes. Go home, Skelly boy, little booger.' Rosanna hauls her printed calico shift over her head and looks around with annoyance. '*Alilu,*' she shouts at him. Then leaps to her feet and scoops up washing. Skelly grins to see the pair of them scurrying away like mad wombats in the moonlight. What will he say to the priest when he offers confession? 'Father I have sinned, for I have drawn girls' *thóin?*' Never. He pinches his eyes shut in dread thought and scribbles across the folded page. Should he tell about the bullock?

Skelly comes from a family of sinners. The priest must know that they use the creek water for illicit distillation.

V: Father Julian Tenison Woods

If Father Julian Tenison Woods sees a flash of colour through the spraying water, hears the gurgle of girls' voices in the nearby trees, or wonders why an angry swan skids to a halt in front of his horse, he says nothing.

'*Faille*, Father,' calls Skelly, backing from the buloke tree to drop at the feet of God's servant, 'are the flies troublin' you?'

'Good afternoon Skelly. I suppose they are. Thank you for enquiring. How is your family?'

'Fine, Father. What do you think about cattle duffing?'

'It is the chief business of courts in all the colonies.'

Skelly purses his lips and glances around at the trees. Perhaps he will not tell. 'Isn't it warm, Father?'

'Indeed it is, but uppermost in my mind, has been the thought of a cool drink from the pond and breaking bread with your family.'

Skelly sighs with satisfaction. 'It will be grand to have you, Father. Will you stay the night?'

'If I may. In the morning I'll make my way to Portland to take confession.'

Skelly tightens his grip on his sketchbook, his skin mottling into all the colours of a parakeet at the thought of confession. He must sketch over the drawings of girls' *thóins*. Father Woods dismounts to walk beside him. Skelly leads the horses to the water trough behind the house. 'We'll have good *craic* after supper?'

Father winks. 'For once I have brought my cello.' He taps a large case with his whip. 'And I have a gift for you from the gum tree at the halfway place where I say Mass. This falcon fell at my feet. I fear it has lost colour and verve but you may like to sketch it before maggots set up their colony.'

At the house Eilish rushes forward to greet the priest. 'Leave the damper and come,' she calls behind her. Rosanna arrives on the step, face flushed from the fire, stockings rolled down to her boots, exposing her golden legs. Her plait is fuzzy and matted with azolla and pond-water. When she throws her head in a defiant way Skelly is filled with love for her. He wants to reassure her that he has not confessed anything to the priest about duffed bullocks and afternoon shenanigans. And that she has flour upon her nose and a lacy spray of it across her damp black skirt.

‘Rosanna, I am glad to see you looking well.’ Father Woods takes her hand and turns it palm side up. ‘I can see from these good hands that you have been helping your mother.’

Wary, Rosanna smiles.

‘I have brought you a book of poems by Browning, recently returned to me by my friend, Mr Gordon, all the lines of which, I swear, he has committed to memory. Sit with me.’

Adam Lindsay Gordon rides with Father and Edwin. In a steeple chase he is really something, everybody says so: like a wild bird clinging to the back of his horse, flying over fences that would make you sick to the stomach; he is a horse-breaker. Skelly has seen him bobbing across the flats between the swamps, clay pipe clamped between his teeth, sometimes holding a book up against his nose, other times mumbling to himself, or reining in his horse to scribble verse into his notebook.

Father Woods draws a slim book from his leather satchel, and opens it to a page he has marked with a ribbon. Rosanna and Skelly seat themselves on the step beside him.

‘*How it Strikes a Contemporary*’, he reads:

I only knew one poet in my life:

And this, or something like it, was his way.

‘The poem is like a friend telling you a great confidence,’ Father says. ‘Read on a little, Rosanna.’

She places her finger on the page and commences:

He walked and tapped the pavement with his cane,

Scented the world, looked it full in the face,

An old dog, bald and blindish at his heels.

‘I wish I could look the world *full in the face*, she says, tossing out words like arrows.

‘You do it now, Rosanna. It is one of the things I like about you,’ says Father Woods. ‘And you read well. Skelly, take your turn.’

He knows, Skelly thinks, how to make her happy. He is devilish good at it. They read turn-about until Skelly takes the last two lines:

Well, I could never write a verse — could you?

Let’s to the Prado and make the most of time.

‘Mr Browning speaks directly to me, Father. I could never make a poem.’ Skelly shakes his head, despondent.

‘Perhaps he could not draw as well as you.’ Father Woods pats Skelly’s arm.

As the sun sinks low in the sky, he cleans and polishes his chalice and spreads his altar cloth on a red gum stump overlooking the pond. He carries two box seats from the house for himself and Eilish. Blinnie lies across her mother’s lap, sticky fingers inveigling beneath the neck of Eilish’s gown. They drink ‘mops and brooms’ brought by Father Woods in a hessian bag. Skelly watches him spooning black sugar into the twiggy brew and thinks how lovely it is to see his mother happy. Rosanna cannons off the verandah — jealous, Skelly decides, that the priest pays attention to anyone but to her. Their mother tells Father that Hugh is such a sickly boy even in the summer months that she fears he will not survive another winter. Skelly edges closer.

‘When I lived in Ireland, Father,’ Eilish says, ‘the church was next to the public house run by my family and every day I would slip inside to pray for Edwin and Rosanna.’

‘And Skelly?’

‘And Skelly, of course.’ Eilish sighs and Skelly feels the weight of it.

‘You’ve not lost a child, here or in Ireland. Baptising Hugh will be an act of faith.’

She nods. ‘You have the strangest parish, Father.’

He smiles. ‘It is my mission to carry God’s word, on horseback, to all of you in the New Country.’

‘The church must fear your ministry will fall into savagery.’

He touches her arm. ‘There are always some who think the worst. Even though I travel hundreds of miles through floods and drought and bushfire, losing my way in places unmarked by roads or inns, my health improves. I prefer this work. Indeed, I rarely cough at all now.’ He turns to Skelly who feels swept up in the warmth of his gaze. ‘Let us speak of Skelly’s confirmation, in the autumn. I will leave him a pamphlet to read.’

Skelly blushes. White cockatoos rise on the wing, wheeling across a setting sun as plump and lustrous as an egg yolk. The rich fat smell of roasting mutton fills the air, and Father and Edwin canter in, ducks slung across their saddle cloths. It is

always a grand night when the priest comes. The men sluice off their dirt in a barrel behind the house, before they come to Mass. If Skelly was a proper artist he would paint them all, weary and grimed by toil, their faces lifting in hopeful supplication, standing before their cottage with the lagoon spread out before them like a prayer cloth, a pallid cuckoo beginning the night's sonata.

Skelly lifts his head, takes the host in under the roof of his mouth where it sticks until he works at it with his tongue and swallows. Then crosses himself. Mother rocks her body, one foot before the other, stroking Blinnie in her arms, and clutching Hugh's small hand. Edwin pays scant attention, turning his hat in his hands, watching a blue crane take one elegant step and then another, before dipping its head to feed in the pond. Is he dreaming of girls? Skelly feels the weight of his sinful thoughts, and shifts his gaze to Rosanna. She grimaces at him. Father stands between his family and the bush, a giant black-bearded man slouching in the gathering dusk, coat riding up, hair sprouting from his ears and nostrils. He acts fiercest with Rosanna.

VI: An Evening's Entertainment Ends Badly

Clouds of mosquitoes hover round the lamps and supper is taken in slapping humour. Edwin and Rosanna skylark about vying for the priest's attention. Skelly wishes they would include him. They press close together in one small room with smoke-grimed walls and a low ceiling. Rosanna has squeezed four wooden chairs around the table; she and Skelly share a box, Hugh sits on his father's knee. Blinnie snuffles at the bodice of her mother's dress, peeps out to grin at the priest, and then covers her face with her fingers.

'Edwin tells me that the little Irish girl, the overseer's wife who helps Mrs Ashby at the station, is awful melancholy,' says Eilish, her face filled with sympathy.

'I have heard she was one of the orphans that landed four years ago at Guichen Bay.'

'Not an orphan, Father, just a girl with enterprise. You being a wee bit Irish yourself, you would know that. Plenty of families got broken up by the Famine', Mother says.

'She's not so well?'

'She won't go to her work in the morning. Can't get out of bed,' Edwin contributes.

‘Most of the girls begin in service and before you can blink, marry men in the district. Irish girls are plucky.’

‘They say that she is useless, Mother and won’t lift a finger for anyone. Keening half the day and night, or silent as the dead. Her husband is losing patience.’

‘Edwin, hush now. Have some compassion.’

‘I will call on her in the morning,’ offers Father Woods.

‘Thank God for that. I would go myself but for Blinnie and Hugh. And I would send Rosanna, but they might be too much for each other.’ She throws a sidelong glance at her daughter, who glares, and looks away.

Father drinks steadily through the meal, his mouth loose to accommodate his breathing, his great dark head thrown back, one hand dropping to lever his belly over his belt, two fingers resting against his *bod*. Each time the priest mentions temperance he takes another draught from his tin cup and wipes the thicket of his beard with the back of his hand. Skelly knows that his father stands on his dig about teetotalling but, nevertheless, responds to the priest’s remarkable charm.

Father Woods leans across the table to gain his attention. ‘Garrick, abstinence is the only way.’

Father nods and takes another sip. ‘You could be right.’

The priest changes the subject. ‘There is much talk of settlers taking up land in the new Hundreds.’

The meal cleared away he offers a blessing and takes up his instrument to play and sing. Since Father’s last visit Skelly’s body has changed. Now that his voice hurtles up and down a startling oral staircase, he no longer wishes to join the singing. Father Woods sits like a black grasshopper, tall and straight on the edge of his chair, legs straddling the cello, tapping out the music with his long fingers, his expressive voice filling the room. He is young and handsome, not much older than Edwin. By the time the little ones collapse in their beds, their heads full of laughter and music and talk, he and the Lynch men will be poking the coals, ready to talk deep into the night. And before he unrolls his bedroll on the verandah, they will play chess like Cuchulain and his enemies.

Mother pushes aside the table to clear a small space and hitches up her skirts. Eager to join her mother in a jig Rosanna leaps to her feet, her skirt spread around her *thóin* like petals around a pestle: flying up when she leaps and fluttering down when she lands; toes pointed, her feet flip and bounce and kick, as she attacks the

beat. Her oval face looks like Father's, only much more beautiful. She holds out her hand to Skelly to jig along beside her — taking care, taking care.

Skelly is not so young that he cannot remember summer nights outside Walsh's pub when Father leaned up against the wall with townsmen and travellers, his eyes on Eilish slapping tankards on the bar. He reaches out to catch his mother's hand. She misses a step to drop a kiss on his head; and scoops Blinnie from his arms. If only it were like this every night and Edwin and Father were not *lomicking* through the door in the wee hours, waking the babies when they knock cups and plates from the old box dresser, stumbling against the walls and urinating like horses until Eilish comes hissing to steer them to their beds, singing as they go:

Gra ma chrce ma chriskeen

Sláinte gal mavoureen

Ge ma chree

Suddenly, the music stops. Is the priest tired?

'Git,' says Father in a voice as small and hard as the kernel of stone fruit. He raises his hand and slaps Rosanna's face.

'Garrick, no.'

Startled out of his reverie Skelly sees that Rosanna has knocked the mug of whiskey from her father's hand. She scowls at Father and looks away. Unceremoniously dumping Blinnie in Skelly's lap, Eilish moves to her daughter's side. Rosanna's body slumps and she transforms from a beautiful laughing girl to someone knotted up inside herself who wants to fly away.

Father Woods tries to draw her back. 'Be of good heart,' he says, picking up the first few bars of a new song. He nods to Rosanna.

'I hate you. All of you.' Implacably, she murders them with her look.

Mother presses down her daughter's skirt, smooths out her clenched hand.

'Don't touch me,' Rosanna cries, and leaves the room.

Mother ducks her head in mortal shame and presses tea on the priest.

It is a very long time before all the confessions are heard and Rosanna comes mawking into Skelly's bed to recite poems about dying, wishing the priest were her real father, so that she could ride away with him. He has told her that in adversity she must be as brave and as good as little Dorrit, a girl in a book that he will borrow

from the Adelaide Lending Library. That she is beautiful, and a woman, and that she must love God. With Father Woods' encouragement she could go into service or teach school. *This* is how Rosanna is to be rewarded for her carelessness.

'It will never happen,' Rosanna spits at Skelly. She will run away, she says, before too long.

VII: Absconding to the Cave

Next morning, apart from the soft thwack of Mother splitting wood, the house is quiet. Skelly should carry and stack the freshly cut Shea Oak logs from the back door but is never to use the axe himself; nor stand close, in case of flying chips.

Where is Rosanna? Skelly's heart bounces at the sight of her empty bed and her green dress lying in a miserable puddle on the floor. He remembers the events of the previous night and his sister acting wild — throwing back her hair to laugh into the priest's face, prating about freedom. Has he noticed that Rosanna thinks she is a woman now, in her tightly laced dresses, and her skin turning golden like apricots in the hot Australian sun? Hugh curls like a wee limpet, his weight squelchy-damp across Skelly's middle, sucking at his fat fist. Mucous catches and turns at the back of his throat. Blinnie has crawled in beside him, and lies on her back, belching the air like a small sea creature. Skelly prods at Hugh's soggy bottom and eases him off his pillow. He has a vague remembrance of waking to the laughter of kookaburras and the sounds of Father and Edwin's imminent departure: clanking billy cans, thudding swags, and horses snorting and neighing, backing irritably into each other in the morning chill.

Over his blanket he sees Father kissing Mother, hard and angry on the mouth — how long has he noticed such things? — grazing his thumb against her breast as he pulls her up against him. He imagines him instead woad-painted: spear in hand, dark hair streaming out behind him, hunting deer, not chasing cattle. Last night Father was a wild man. Mother passes hats, and food parcels warm from the stove, and warns Edwin to take care. She shakes hands with the priest who will ride with them as far as the station. Left behind by the men, Skelly feels himself a gangly, soft, pink-faced boy. They will surely let him ride out this year.

‘Where is your sister?’ Mother’s eyes look black and darting; her face is whiter than a corella’s. ‘I need her help.’ Mother is not worried about chores — only about her daughter. Rosanna is a runner.

He sets off to find her.

‘Don’t go past the pond.’ Even when the weather is hot, he wears long pants and a jacket to protect his skin. Firstly, he checks on Edwin’s horse, lame and hobbled by the still. He doubts that Rosanna would take off on him, for she loves horses more, he is sure, than people. But he feels obliged to check. The sun beats down on his head. Dripping spread hastily on a wedge of stale damper greases his hand as he climbs slowly towards the limestone ridge behind their house. He hasn’t told Mother that his sock, stiff with washing, abrades his sore heel. He is sick to death of being precious.

The morning passes slow and steady like treacle from a spoon. He calls at Rosanna’s favourite places: beneath the trees where she reads the priest’s books; the small sinkhole; the top of the ridge where she shouts at swallows making their way in clean swoops across the lagoons and swamps, to take her back to Ireland. At the mere thought of her leaving him, he feels ill. He turns his head and casts his eyes behind him. The sea is a thin ribbon of colour on the near horizon. Edwin brings home bags of periwinkles, reef mussels, green whelks, cockles and limpets from rock pools by the sea. Skelly loves the way the glistening flesh springs open in his mouth, releasing salt pleasure so intense that he rolls back his eyes until he feels the slide of their skin on the back of his throat.

He labours on. What if she has been carried away by a hawk and set to scrubbing pots and pans, or kidnapped by a Chinaman to light his joss sticks. Rosanna would go anywhere with anyone, and he suspects, it is the heathens that she loves the most. Finally, he arrives at the last likely place, hot and tired and sore. Honeyeaters, attracted by the smell of water, dart at the lip of the cave. He rests his hand on the cool stone at the entrance before he picks his way inside through loose limestone rubble. The air smells damp and fetid. Dark walls close around him and he is overpowered by the peculiar smell of bent-wing bats. He steps into the main chamber, its great walls stretching thirty feet above his head. Motes surf the sunlight thrown from a small hole in the ceiling where reassuringly he sees grass and sky. A crow alights in the space. It cocks its head, making its mournful cry, as it peers in. It

is looking for a snake, tumbled to the bottom of the cave, trapped. Skelly shifts his feet, uneasy.

The bats start up. Has *he* disturbed them? Dusk is the time to watch out for snakes waiting at the entrance of the cave for a low-flying bat. He settles on a large boulder, the small abrasion on his heel aches and he eases off his leaky *bróg*. Relief floods his white and wrinkled swollen foot, but if he can't put his boot back on, how will he get home? Bold bats roil about his head, flapping stale air across his face on their way back to their hanging place. Small dead bats lay scattered on the guano like leather gloves. Reflected in the dark sheen of sluggish water trickling past his feet he sees a yellow light. It moves slowly along the shelf that links three tunnels to the main auditorium. His heart thunders in his ears until he sees, to his great relief, Rosanna, looking annoyingly pleased with herself.

'Skelly, darling.'

'Mother is fretting.'

'Pft. Father won't be back for days. I'll make up for it by then.'

'Are you fine, Rosanna?'

'Even if I am, I'm not staying here much longer. It's all very well for Father and Edwin riding away each day. I am going to the goldfields. We only need one decent nugget to take us back to Ireland and live rich, just the two of us in a castle. Why should we be stuck out here in the middle of nowhere?'

'But we're together. We're not hungry. You know what Father says about Ireland. We *had* to leave. Even Edwin remembers we *had* to leave.'

'How do you know? You were so young when we came. You don't have the longing'.

'I aim to go back there with you.' How she infuriates him. 'Rosanna, you smell like apricots.'

'I brought two in my hat. Have one. Skelly *alannahh*, I want to show you something grand.'

'I can't walk.' He eases his left foot onto the rock in front of him.

'Let me see.' Rosanna peels back his sock and peers at his heel, as her mother does. 'It's red for sure, but it hasn't broke the surface.' She moves her candle closer, dripping wax on the wound.

'That's hot,' he squeaks.

‘Of course it’s hot, you ninny. Come on now.’ She leads him across the floor of the cave, up onto the smooth surface of the shelf. Shoes in hand, hobbledehoy, he follows her into a tunnel.

‘This tunnel links up,’ she calls back to him, tucking her plait inside the bodice of her dress, ‘with another.’ Nosing around a tight bend, her skirt drags along the floor of the passageway and she gathers it up in a bunch at her hip. Eilish would be furious. He skims his fingers along the slimy walls, and shudders. In winter, they could both be washed away. The ceiling rises and the tunnel opens into a large antechamber where, backs slightly bent, they can stand together.

As if she is praying to Our Lady, Rosanna kneels below a shelf in the wall. ‘Will you look at this’, she whispers.

Skelly leans forward to touch bones gracefully splayed on the stone in front of him. ‘Is it a shrine?’

‘It is, I suppose.’

‘Is it a little wallaby?’

‘No tail.’

‘What then? A baby wombat fell down here?’

‘Noo, look at the skull.’

‘Oh, it is not a sheep, nor a calf.’

‘It is a little human being, Skelly.’

‘That is so sad.’ He drops his head. ‘Do you think it was here picnicking in the caves with the station people and it crawled into the tunnels? That is why we are not to come here,’ he reminds her.

‘It has no clothes. I think its mother laid it here,’ she says.

‘Or its father?’

‘I suppose Skelly. More likely, its mother.’

Skelly stares at the bones a long time imprinting the shapes and patterns on his memory, the ivory lattice of the ribs, the tiny skull small enough to cradle in his hands, the shapes and patterns. He wants very much to draw them. He imagines the little thing mewling in the chill darkness and wipes his eyes on the back of his hand.

‘Oh, but you’re a wet thing, Skelly. I think you’re gorgeous.’ Rosanna hugs him hard until he drops one of his boots, and slips sideways, knocking several of the bones. ‘Moorecke cries *koongine* when she brings me here.’

‘Whose son? *Koongine* means son.’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I want to go home, Rosanna. Mother is worried.’

‘We will. And on the way home I will tell you my plans.’

Skelly stands gingerly on one leg, stooping to gather up his boots.

‘To run away, to go to the gold.’

He limps miserably after her. A useless *boccah* he feels, to everyone. Near the entrance Rosanna takes several bounding long-legged strides up the rubbly slope and into the sunshine. She walks strong like the Royal Emer, as if she owns the possum poo spattered path on which she walks. When she turns back, her warm brown eyes are alive with sympathy. ‘I’ll piggyback you a wee bit.’

He shakes his head. Useless, and grown too big to piggyback.

VIII: Ennui: Lynches’ Cottage

‘*Ach*, may God help us,’ Eilish shouts, crossing herself. A sour white mist rises from the marshy ground behind the house.

‘I’m fine if you are at all interested, but Skelly has a red foot. After I got his shoes on, I helped him home along the creek.’ This is wormwood to her mother. Rosanna arches her back, straightening up with virtuous weariness, and then runs her hands down her spine.

‘You’ll rot in hell, Rosanna, if anything happens to your brother.’

Rosanna is not so much afraid of eternal damnation, as she is of Skelly falling sick and leaving them. Let God come after her. Even the priest comes but three months. When they first arrived in the colony their mother had whispered that for all her sins, *she* had gone to hell in a bucket: tipped out in an upside down place where the people were black and the swans too; and with all of them clinging on, at the bottom of the world, it sure was as hot as hell. How could it be worse? Soon enough, it was: so cold that grass couldn’t grow and the flats flooded between the ridges.

Eilish pushes hair off her face. Swooping on Skelly, she presses him down onto a deal box at the back door and eases off his boots.

‘I am fine, Mother — only tired,’ he says.

‘Tired...of course you’re tired, you daft *cratthur*, and flushed. Running all over the countryside after your sister, who is turning into a little savage. In the name

of God what am I to do with her?’ She dabs his foot with antimony. ‘Say your prayers.’

Rosanna hovers. What a fuss she makes. Doesn’t he look just fine? Blinnie tugs at her sister’s skirt. She scoops her up and kisses her soft baby mouth.

‘Don’t kiss her mouth, Rosanna. Hugh has croup again and she is awful *bronickle*. Where have you been, girl? I needed your help.’ Eilish places a poultice on Skelly’s foot, ties strips of cloth around it, and shoos him to his bed.

Rosanna tries to understand her fierceness.

‘Do you not recall when O’Flaherty, that drunken linen-maker, shattered his glass all over Skelly. You were just a little girl, six years old.’

Rosanna winces as she dances her fingers across the top of the stove, blinking hard. ‘I’ll never forget the blood running down his cheeks and stopping up his mouth and ear-holes. It was a wonder he could breathe at all before I came to find you.’

Eilish hugs Rosanna. ‘He had bare enough strength to sip water from a spoon.’

‘And you pressed cobwebs into his wound until the bleeding stopped.’

‘I did so. And I stitched tea and dog root into muslin bags to hold against his dilly downy head. I carried water from the Holy Well to sprinkle on his forehead. He was cold as a corpse.’

For two days Skelly lies in bed, waking only to seize his sketchbook, work feverishly and then subside again. Shamed, Rosanna stays close to home scouring pots and pans with sand brought by Edwin from the shore where he does his business. Skelly is happy not to stir himself, while she runs ragged feeding babies and making soda bread.

‘Don’t you leave *that* sketch around,’ she spits at him. That he is troubled by the scattering of tiny bones abandoned in the cave will not help Moorecke. She places a bat, fallen from the rafters, beside him on the bed wrappers, and watches him turn the creature reverently between his fingers. He must recover soon.

By the time he is well again something has built up in Rosanna. Why *should* she stay? Skelly’s sketch of the tiny bones brings on a yearning that comes only at certain times: when reading books or stroking herself in a gentling private way.

Music brings it on. She leans into the feeling, and takes it up knowingly. Edwin feels it too. Father, also. It is as if they have been born with a piece missing.

The priest understands. ‘Still yourself,’ he says. ‘Trust in God.’

Rosanna wonders if the restlessness is ever in her mother. When Eilish isn’t watching Skelly and the little ones, her eye is on her daughter, earnest as a wedge-tailed eagle circling smoke. When they first arrived, in 1852, she made them copy from old books brought from the Woodford National School, believing in the redemptive power of learning.

‘What else can I do,’ she said, ‘in such an empty place? Not even a hedge school.’

By then Edwin had taken up boundary riding with Garrick and begun the religious working of the ledger in his head. He had only ever cared for sums. And money. Rosanna read the three volumes of *The Macdermots of Ballycloran*, over and over, until the pages wore thin and the ink came off in her fingers. Mother had come by the dog-eared volumes by default, when an English lady with a belly as round and hard as a barrel of lard, but with such nice manners and a fancy wrap, was spied leaving Walsh’s Inn without paying her chit. Running away, more than likely, Mother said; she had wanted her gone before a bloody wailing scrap turned up in one of the upstairs chamber pots. At first she refused the books as payment, then, when she saw the fierce look of pride in the woman’s green eyes, took them with bad grace. ‘Written by a postmaster in Drumsa, County Leitrim,’ Mother said when she pushed them towards her daughter. ‘What would a postmaster know about writing a novel’ — she had been wrong about that, for now Mr Trollope was popular and famous — ‘and surely it will be dull.’

Every time the priest dropped into Walsh’s premises for a drop of *usquebaugh* Rosanna’s luck would have him catch her before the fire with the kitchen hangers-on, head stuck in the book. Even the cheese-woman slummocking in the chimney corner had an opinion about the ill effects of a novel on a girl. Rosanna read and reread about the troubles of Feemy Macdermot, a girl without education, whose abilities were exercised in entirely the wrong direction — reading novels and taking up with a lover. For years she hid the book from Mother, uncertain about whether, had she known its entire contents, she might remove it from her daughter’s custody. Now she reads books brought by Father Woods and reading quells her need to run.

She hears the flap of a fan as her mother cools her babies. The persistent buzz of bush flies and the coughing of Blinnie and Hugh suck Rosanna into a pit of torpor. Everything is loathsome. How she had looked forward to wearing the green dress, but it has been as unsatisfactory as everything else. All she wants is to die. Father Woods says that dying is beautiful and he longs, when he has outlived his usefulness, to be with God. Nothing moves.

Rosanna springs up and uses the kitchen knife to slash at the sleeves of the green dress, opening up the long darts from breast to waist. Then shamed, she stamps it into the earth by her bed — stamps out the smallest hope that the dress might bring redemption. Feemy Macdermot's life is far more interesting than hers. She will tear the pages, one by one, from *The Macdermots of Ballycloran* and stomp on them as well. Tomorrow she will go to the gold.

IX: A Paltry Theft

'Light exercise,' Edwin says, instructing her to feed and work his horse. 'Just enough to keep him fit for the race.' Light exercise will not hold her or Lucifer. Edwin is a devil, too, so they are suited. She runs her hands down the muscular flanks — there is no heat in them now — and soft over the hocks, where only a faint scabby line remains. She flicks at the dry crust with her fingernail. The swelling has gone. She lifts the back hooves and examines his feet, like a blacksmith, like Father would.

'You're a begger, just like me. You want to go,' she whispers, lifting tack from a tree branch. If only she hadn't cut her dress. Her second-best will have to do. She pulls the bridle over his head, easing her fingers into the sides of his lips to open his teeth for the bit. The big horse sidesteps, ears twitching, swinging his backside about, snorting and breaking wind as he swishes flies with his tail.

'Oh, you.' She buries her face in his neck and breathes in his lovely smell. He blows out to prevent her tightening the girth strap. She balls her fist and punches him hard in the side until he lets go; then she tightens up the strap. Eilish and the babies will sleep for hours. When Skelly hears Lucifer's heels drumming past the stands of wattle by the track and the indignation of the black cockatoos shattering the air around them as they pass, he will put down his sketchbook; he will know she is gone and wish that he was with her flying up the hill behind the house. But he will tend to

the babies if they wake: play games on their toes, tweak at their noses, and hold beakers of warm water to their fat lips. He will buy her time.

Rosanna stares up at the unforgiving blue sky before tying her reticule to the pommel. In it she has placed a shilling earned from washing Father Woods' surplice and polishing his chalice and candle sticks. The heat is as strong and rich-smelling as leather. She uses a stump of wood to mount, shifting her weight in the saddle to encourage Lucifer to fancy-step up into the bit. He drops his head suddenly, legs splayed, all tug and temper. 'Oh, you'd like to throw me, you skittish thing. Get me into trouble with Edwin.' Not that she cares a *thrawn* about that. Clear of the house she nudges the horse, giving him his head. He takes off in a startled canter, moving swiftly into a gallop on the bridle path leading to the ridge and the caves. Light on the reins, she gives herself up to the rhythm of his neck and the cooling rush of air in her hair. A mob of kangaroos surprise him. Corellas split open the afternoon hum of the bush, flying up like a tossed hand of cards. He shies again. Each time he goes to market she moves her head to one side away from his neck and digs in her heels. Once he had broken her nose. It is best to push him forward when he rears; even Edwin says so. The sun beats down on her back.

Father and Edwin are miles away, mayhaps resting in the shade of a swamp gum, sucking on their pipes and pannikins of green tea, keeping an eye on a crazy mass of yearlings they have driven from the scrub. Father will be reading poetry. Edwin, all impatience, plinking limestone pebbles against a tree, or sleeping like a baby with his hat over his face.

Cresting the ridge she pulls the horse up hard, taking everything in: the track winding through the marshy flats, the smoking chimneys of the station house, the looming volcano behind it. It is like a park, she thinks, the muted greens of the stringy bark forests to the east, the remnant pools of water. She intends to gallop past the Big House where Garrick and Edwin draw their wages and on to Gambierton, where wagons pull up, and beyond. She cannot be trapped forever, helping her mother in a workman's cottage.

She wipes her eyes and looks behind her. Over her shoulder dirty clouds drift to the coast. The sea is a mere wisp of blue collaring the tea-tree scrub. She will leave the horse in Gambierton, and offer her services to a family with children, on their way to the goldfields at Ballarat. She leans back in the saddle, allowing the horse to pick his way, sliding and clattering through limestone rubble at the lip of the ridge.

At the bottom he bounds and eagerly skids forward. Rosanna rides him into the landscape as if she is entering a painting, rushing along between wind-bent trees, praying Lucifer will avoid hidden branches and boggy holes, past a flock of chestnut teal that splash and leap into the sky with crabbity quacks. Perspiration runs down her arms and back. Black horsehairs and filth speckle her dress where she has gripped the galloping horse.

After the worst flood, the Big House had been rebuilt on higher ground. She cannot resist a peep. At the gateway, she hesitates. Her boldness ebbs. Lucifer, sensing her lapse in concentration flattens his ears and bounds forward along the avenue of trees towards the house. She hauls and hauls at the reins but the whistling of a hot and sudden wind excites him further. At the end of the track, he pitches her onto the ground. She lands heavily, bouncing on her *thóin*. A fierce pain shoots through her lower back. Lucifer pulls up at the last tree and stretches his neck to snatch at leaves. Rosanna limps forward. Praise God, she is not hurt. She edges towards Lucifer, managing to gather up his reins and tie them to a branch. A dung-coloured dog barks. She has never seen a house so commodious and white. Cut in square blocks of limestone the walls somehow seem to curve around the windows. Behind the house, a small village of outbuildings for cooking, stores, meat and stabling have sprung up. Overblown roses splash like blood against the walls.

Her attention is caught by shifting shadows between the trees. When Rosanna's eyes focus she sees Moorecke running through the yard, with a squawking bird under her arm. A barking, honking racket ensues.

A small blonde woman with pale eyelashes and pearl drop earrings the size of grapes pitches stones. 'You brazen creature. I will have my husband after you. I will use his gun.' Moorecke is gone, quite likely streaking home across the mud-crazed dried out swamps. And Rosanna should be on the road to Gambierton. The woman lifts her apron to her pale face — then strides to free the dog straining at its chain. It bounces through a phalanx of turkeys wheeling across the yard. Alarmed they gobble and break formation springing into the air. The dog, fierce enough to chew the tail off a bullock, bounds across the grass towards Rosanna who crouches behind a spindly cherry ballart. It barks and circles.

Stick in hand the woman marches towards her. 'I fear you don't speak English, but show yourself, now.' Pale and sweating, the woman holds a stick out in

front of her as if to ward off evil. The dog slathers at Rosanna's neck and she shoves it hard away before moving into the harsh sunlight. The woman suppresses a gasp and calls the dog off.

'Oh...oh.' She looks done-in. Her small round face crumples as she whimpers. This must be young Mrs Ashby. One word to Father and Rosanna is done for. She lifts her face to meet the woman's eyes. One hand on the dog's collar, the other pressed for balance against the sky, like a statue in a garden, Mrs Ashby smiles in an insipid sickly way and sways and drops like a felled roo. The dog licks her face, smells freedom, and scarpers. Rosanna falls to her knees beside the woman, attempting to smooth out her untidy landing, to lift her head and tap her cheeks, to push hair from her face. She runs to fetch water from a jug in the kitchen outhouse, and a cloth. A baby bawls from the dim recesses of the house.

Rosanna presses a wet towel against the woman's neck and brow and waits. Almost immediately, Mrs. Ashby revives, eyes roiling. Her head flops to one side; she pulls herself up and vomits into Rosanna's lap. They both recoil. Rosanna takes the cloth and runs down the slope to the edge of the swamp, where she uses her hands to sluice water down her front. Holy Mother of God, she is reeky. The woman struggles to her feet and Rosanna rushes back to assist her to the house, where Mrs Ashby collapses onto a couch in the front room.

'I am most unwell. I fear it is the influenza.'

Rosanna brings a mug of water. Then she finds the baby, pink with exertion after its sudden squall. It whimpers, head down, bottom up, in its fancy cradle. Rosanna humps it, sodden backside and all, to its mother, and prepares to withdraw.

'Can you not speak, girl?' says Mrs Ashby, over the baby's head. 'Make yourself known. Why are you so dirty?' Rosanna is in a binding chair. Damn the bossy English woman, for it is she who threw her breakfast all over Rosanna's dress which, but for a few horsehairs, was clean enough. The woman drools and faints again. Rosanna plucks the baby safely from the white frilled shoulder shuddering against the lounge and takes more pity as Mrs Ashby rouses.

'I'll help you for now until you feel well. Unless the boundary riders come... until your husband...' She cannot leave a sickly woman and a helpless baby. One more day will make no difference.

Mrs Ashby shows immediate relief. ‘The Blacks have gone?’ She looks around in trepidation, holding her forearm to her face. ‘You’re Irish. Tell me your name.’

‘Rosanna.’ It is only a whisper. She feels obliged then, to speak about Moorecke, but she must not say her name. ‘She is not fearsome, the black girl.’ So much fuss about one fowl when the woman has flocks of geese and turkeys. ‘She names this place her *m’rado*, where you have settled down. And she can get feed from anywhere.’

‘I have no doubt of that, Rosanna, but this is my husband’s land. He has leased it from the Crown.’

‘*Booandik* people lived here — before your family came. They work on stations. Father says they are the finest riders.’

‘You are gabbling, Rosanna. You know this girl?’

‘That, I cannot say.’ Rosanna turns her face towards the ridge, stubbing her toe into the rag mat.

‘Your mother should not allow you to roam about the countryside. Why do you not stay at home and help her? Has she other children? Are you a wilful girl?’

Rosanna swings away, deciding, after all, that she will set off for Gambierton and then the gold.

The woman relents. ‘I will pay you a penny if you can comfort the baby while I bathe.’

Rosanna stares her down. A penny will not take her far.

‘Rosanna,’ Mrs Ashby implores half expectant of her dues. ‘My husband is an affectionate man but he does not understand that the dearth of labour takes its toll on me, as well as him. He promised me scenic walks and sketching parties and all I do is work. Just this morning I have lost my Irish maid. Please look after the baby until I recover.’

X: The Big House

By the time the sun is sinking into the western sky, Rosanna has worked harder than all the slaves of Egypt, harder than her mother would believe likely, or even possible. She has no strength left to make a journey further away than home.

‘I am going, ma’am. My mother will be worried.’

‘Let us hope so, for we are living in a dangerous and uncivilized place. I will speak to my husband about the girl. He will locate her and make her understand that she must not steal.’

Rosanna remembers shooting the bullock and is anxious to be off. It is not the black girl — her mother shot and killed by settlers — who is dangerous. Her first encounter with Moorecke had been within months of their arrival. She had found her cowering in the fork of a tree, the sound of distant gunfire terrifying her. Rosanna had settled down to watch her. After the gunfire died away — perhaps someone hunting ducks or geese — Moorecke had emerged, digging stick in hand, wattle blossom in her smoky hair, lumping her dreadful skull. Rosanna had reached out to touch her skin, in all its shades of charcoal, ochre, midnight-blue. Seemingly oblivious, Moorecke had rocked from side to side, moaning and slapping at her small dark breasts for some time before she seemed calm. Rosanna thought her wondrous good at acting: either that or she was mad. It had been the beginning of their talking. Rosanna tried to mimic her but rued the difficulty of taking her tongue to the back of her throat, to utter any of the harsh words with the girl’s fluency.

‘Roanna,’ Moorecke copied *her* quite easily, arching her slender arm to indicate where the sun rose in the east, and a fire smoked to the north, south where Rosanna had seen two brolgas rise like kites over the stringy bark forests, and west where later, the sun would drop into the sea. ‘*M’rado.*’

Rosanna lies to Mrs Ashby. ‘I have never seen her. She will run a long way and never come back. You have frightened her with your shouting. They are fey people.’ In the early years Father had been sent out to work on other stations, sometimes for a week or more and Moorecke’s people had camped closer to the house. If the Blacks approached the house in daylight, Eilish gave them tea and flour, and they brought her wood, which they stacked against the walls. Rosanna knew her mother had feared they’d burn the house down and had patrolled after dark, in a heavy coat, carrying a loaded rifle. As a show of strength she had shot swamp wallabies in the moonlight and cut them up for stew. Eilish was as tough as a tanner when protecting kin.

Mrs Ashby thrusts out her hand to clutch at Rosanna. ‘Will you return in the morning to help me? I am stranded here and unaccustomed to this work. The overseer’s slatternly Irish wife rarely gets out of bed to help me.’

The woman must be daft, insensitive, to speak in such a way to a girl from Galway. ‘I might be leaving for Victoria.’

Mrs Ashby ignores this and sidles towards the window. ‘In any case, she is gone, taken away this morning by the police and Doctor Wehl.’ She looks out.

‘Oh the poor dear girl,’ Rosanna laments.

‘Nothing could be done. She was quite hysterical, filthy, and tearing at her hair. They have taken her to the asylum in Adelaide.’

‘I think my mother needs me.’ Rosanna says, filled with uncertainty. She will get into a muck more trouble because Eilish will be unhappy about the orphan girl.

‘I will ask my husband to speak with your father.’ A look of distaste plays across Mrs Ashby’s face as she lightly touches Rosanna’s soiled sleeve.

Rosanna rides through the late afternoon heat and wonders why she should consider helping a strange woman and her baby. Better to take Skelly to the goldfields as she has promised. Wages might afford her a coach from Portland. But if she works for the English woman her parents will have to know; they will forbid it. Father will be furious that she rode so far on Lucifer in the first place. Her head muddles with conflicting thoughts. ‘Mother Mary make me a better girl’, she moans quietly. Every so often, she thinks of the Irish girl shackled in a wagon, travelling across the mallee desert to the city.

On the far side of the swamp she slides off Lucifer and leads him to slurp water at the reeds while she gathers swan eggs to appease her mother. It is a simple matter to chase the pen off the nest. Leaving several eggs behind, just as Moorecke has taught her, Rosanna backs away. The cob flies across the water, hissing fiercely at her, wings outstretched, feet ready to clutch her back if she turns. Lucifer throws back his head and whinnies, dropping his head to paw the water. The swan skids to a stop, bugling like an infantryman. Rosanna quickly mounts.

On the spine of the ridge and near the caves the horse bucks. Two swan eggs catapult from her bonnet and crack open at his feet. His front hoof pulverises the shells. ‘Such waste, now.’ Swinging his great *thóin* against a tree, he kicks out again. Rosanna sits down hard in the saddle. When she leans back to run her hands over his rump, he dances, jumps. Her hand is sticky, wet with blood. He has cut himself. ‘By the deer, you’re a wild one.’ What will Edwin say?

XI: An Offer of Employment

At dusk, Rosanna rides into the yard, her hair mussed, filth on her shift and swinging a bonnet full of swan's eggs yet no more mutinous than if she has been to the pond to catch little crayfish for their dinner. She smiles at them and shimmies off the horse to pass the eggs. Skelly knows Mother plies her rosary until his sister takes notice. It is not for lack of seeing that Rosanna is in trouble. Too soon they hear the clatter of horses telegraphing Edwin's and Father's return.

Mother spits at Rosanna, 'I have been been worried sick about you. Hush up now. Your father is home.'

'I'm truly sorry.' Rosanna trails her mother as she works, picking up the babies who push at her like puppies. 'Sometimes I think I am dying. My head is full of bad things.'

'Hold your tongue, you foolish girl; it is a mortal sin you'll be committing.' She squeezes her hand. 'You're not dying, you daft *cailín*.'

Rosanna bites her lip.

Edwin has brought home a leg of mutton tied to his saddle rolls. Mother breaks the intact swan eggs over a feed of potatoes in the camp oven. Hugh and Blinnie act as lively as chickens, after their long afternoon sleep. Holding Hugh high in his arms, Father fills the doorway, bending to search out love in Eilish's face. He kisses her like a drowning man, and then turns to his oldest daughter, plucking her hand and holding it hard against his chest.

'Have you been helping your mother?' He pulls her closer. Like a collared dog, she ducks her head against his.

Eilish inserts herself between them, pushing her daughter aside. 'Garrick, go. Blather with the little ones. Rosanna and I have work to do.'

Skelly thinks the worst is over. Unless Father takes to the grog. Through the door, he can see the men belting fleas from their bedding spread across the hitching rail. He surreptitiously watches Rosanna pour water from the jug into the bowl on the box between their beds, and turning her back to wash and change her shift. How thin she looks. He has found the green dress that Mother made for her birthday, torn to pieces and stuffed behind the piss pot under their beds. First he arranged it on his pillow and made a sketch of Rosanna wearing it, before she became so sad. Then he returned it to its place.

At table, Rosanna is quiet, jumpy and watches everyone. Skelly turns the back of his spoon over the sweet curve of precious apricots. One day he will leave home and become a famous artist. And he will draw girls' *thóins* — whenever he pleases.

Edwin begins to tap his spoon on the tabletop, just like Father when he is simmering over something. 'Rosanna, how is my horse?' he asks.

'He is better every day. The leg is not warm. The swelling is down. Not one girth gall.' Rosanna licks her lips, and stares at her empty plate.

'I thought to ride him in the steeplechase on Saturday. I am set on it.'

'I know it.' She lifts her eyes reluctantly. 'He'll be fine Edwin, I swear by my Granny, who is in her grave.'

'Well what would the sticky mess on his backside be then?'

Her eyes skim over her father's head. 'I took him for a little ride. Just some light work. I saw a creature near the trees and he took fright and shied away. He swung his backside into a tree.'

'A creature?'

'A native dog, maybe...like a yellow streak, at the sundown. Big.'

'For sure, it is a good story, Ro,' says Edwin. 'But you know most of the dogs are dying.'

Rosanna bites her lip.

Father's face becomes severe. 'By all that's holy, Edwin, I'm surprised to hear you gnashing into your sister, after today's events.' They fall into an uncomfortable silence. What has Edwin done this time?

It is just the older ones around the small deal table, Edwin, Rosanna, Skelly, Mother and Father. Edwin and Skelly begin a discourse about a dead rat that Skelly has found on the step. Rosanna shudders, pushing her stool in, as she begins to gather up the plates. Hair snarls at the nape of her neck, where she has hastily washed.

'Rosanna,' says her father. 'Don't be long fussing; I want to hear about your grand ride.'

Her eyes shimmer with nerves. Skelly begins a game of chess with his father at the table. All the while he places the worn wooden pieces on the board, he watches Rosanna crouched on the step, washing crockery. A dish breaks against the pan.

'Take care. We have no more plates.' Eilish looks uneasy, stealing glances at her husband as she shifts Blinnie onto her shoulder and kisses her small cheek.

Rosanna bends over the steaming tub, nose tilted, nostrils flaring like an animal in gun sight. When Father calls her she ducks her head as if he pulls hard on her mouth and she skitters by his chair to wipe down the table.

‘Sit,’ he bellows. ‘Tell us where you’ve been on the horse today.’

‘Leave it. She’s been helping me since then.’ Mother knows about drink talking, after living in a public house.

‘Why do you defend her when she’s in the wrong?’

‘I don’t want a scrimmage in my kitchen, with Skelly recovering and your daughter tired.’

Edwin fiddles with papers and tobacco. He has been waiting for such a scene, Skelly knows: Rosanna, too. Father hauls on the bit some more, digs his heels in hard. Skelly makes a foolish move and loses his queen. Father sweeps up the pieces with his calloused hand. Rosanna is taking it hard.

Mother wants it over. ‘Garrick, leave her. She’ll not ride out again, unless she asks. Will you now?’ she demands, turning to her daughter.

Father rolls his shoulders back, raises his glass to examine his drink, and places it down again. Leisurely, he fixes his pipe. ‘Have you not heard, Eilish? Rosanna hasn’t enough to do at home. She’s wanting work with Jane Ashby. Tell your mother the truth now and none of your lies.’

‘It isn’t exactly true. She was sick. She fell down in the yard and I couldn’t leave her.’

It is like watching clouds pass over Eilish’s face, Skelly thinks: heavy ones, lighter ones, then, glimmering sunlit ones.

‘What were you doing at the Big House? Is Mrs Ashby all right? And the baby?’

‘She’s fine.’ Rosanna throws back her head. ‘And I do... I do want to work for her. I could ride over in the mornings, with Father and Edwin. Come back when they finish. I am old enough. She is offering wages.’

‘Now, Eilish, you see how it is.’ Father stares hard at Rosanna. ‘I am to send my own daughter to Uncle William’s cabin — to slave for his wife.’

‘I want to go. Skelly can help here. He is mostly well enough and careful. If only you would let me.’ Skelly loses sympathy for Rosanna and glares at her. She storms to her feet, twisting the end of her plait with her fingers.

‘I hate it here,’ she says, all stinging vehemence.

Father takes it personally. ‘Isn’t it enough that Edwin and I toil to put food in your mouth, and to save for land of our own ... after all we’ve been through?’

‘I’ll run then, right away. I’ll ask the priest to find a place for me, in the city with all those orphans.’ Skelly sees that she has forgotten her promise to take him to the gold.

‘It’s not the city needing orphans,’ says Eilish, ‘unless you’ve taken a fancy to living in the Poor House or the asylum. They’re all being sent to the country, into service.’

‘Mrs Ashby has no help in the house.’

‘What can have happened to the overseer’s little wife?’

‘The police took her away to the asylum in Adelaide. Mrs Ashby says they tied her to the cart.’

Eilish stays Rosanna with her hand. ‘Oh Mary, Mother of God, the poor girl.’

‘Rosanna, help your mother, now. Forget about the Ashbys.’

Eilish grips Rosanna’s hand tighter and turns to her husband. ‘Did I not help my mother working in the bar? I raised our passage. Rosanna can earn money to help us buy land.’

‘And what would she know about the kind of service the Ashbys would expect. You’d be laying her open to criticism.’

‘She’s as good as anyone, and bright. Don’t frighten her.’

Rosanna flounces from the table and uses a cloth to lift the heavy kettle of boiling water from the fire. Edwin lights his pipe, leans back against the wall and winks at his brother. Skelly knows that he is awfully pleased by this turn of events. He is glad to see Rosanna drawing heat, instead of him, for once. She goes back to washing pots. Skelly notices that she has brought the crucifix threaded on velvet ribbon around her neck to her mouth, and is biting down on it while she beats the water with the soap holder.

‘Rosanna.’ Mother raises her voice. Rosanna lifts her head, deliberately placing her hand against the hot water kettle. She holds Eilish’s gaze. Tears spill down her mother’s cheeks. Rosanna waits with perverse satisfaction for fierce pain to fill her eyes. She lifts her injured hand. Then continues washing. Before he rolls his eyes and takes himself outside, Edwin kisses his mother, and strokes her hair.

Skelly cannot bear to watch Rosanna a minute longer and skeddaddles after his brother into the yard where Edwin is rubbing foul smelling salve into Lucifer's back.

'Will you be racing him on Saturday, Edwin? If he is full recovered?'

'I shall do that, God willing.'

'Where is the race?' Skelly leans forward to pat Lucifer, who nuzzles in his pocket.

'At MacDonnell Bay. The steeplechase is my best chance to win a few sovereigns.'

'What will you do with the money?'

'Invest it in my business carrying goods to the bay and back, as well you know.'

'Do you suppose Lucifer can win?'

Edwin looks disconsolate. 'I sure could use the money, if he did.'

'Why is that, then?'

Edwin is rubbing tenderly; the horse's coat gleams. 'Did Father not say?'

'Nil. Not a word.'

'I had such bad luck; just when I saved enough money for a cart and near enough for a pair of bullocks. I was mustering a mob of cattle along the ridgetop. All of a sudden they charged and broke the line. Mr High-and-Mighty Ashby, more-n-likely, set them off himself. Two dead. The penalty is to come from my wages.'

'By the crass, Edwin. That is hard on a man.'

'Then, when I had to butcher them up for the Big House kitchen, not a shin bone did he offer a poor lad trying to make his way in life.'

'You should not complain. Every day things happen to you that are better than my dreams.' If only Edwin would talk to Father about taking him boundary riding.

'Lucifer's the best horse in the district. Even Gordon the poet says so. I'm thinking I might sell him for a lot of money,' says Edwin.

'I wish I could help you in your business. You're so lucky, Edwin.'

'I am, and I'm Irish.' Edwin lifts his eyebrow in his deliberate way.

Skelly laughs. 'We're all Irish but we don't feel lucky like you. Rosanna tore up her best dress. Did you ever hear of such a thing?'

Edwin sweeps his hand down Lucifer's hocks and the horse sidesteps. 'Get out of the way Skel, or he'll step on you.'

Skelly sighs. 'Can I come on Saturday?'

'I'll see about that.'

Skelly is tired and bothered by mosquitoes. A bruise is swelling behind his knee. At least his feet have healed since his walk to the cave. Inside he finds Eilish holding Hugh over a bowl of steam. The boy barks and throws his head like a seal pup. Rosanna is nowhere to be seen. He crawls into bed and pulls a blanket over his head, longing to scratch at his bites. When he was little, Eilish made mittens to prevent him drawing his own blood. He hears Father raising his voice in the next room, Mother arguing as much as she dares, and he strains to pick out words over Hugh's wails and noisy exhalations at the steam bowl.

'Garrick, I can't hold her, not lately. She's got wind in her brain. I fear for her.'

Father snorts. 'Back home, what would we do? We'd take her to the sisters in Loughrea. Let them thrash a bit of sense into her.'

Skelly is suddenly afraid for his sister. But there are no nuns here. Only Father Woods. It would not be deemed proper for him to take her, although Skelly thinks she'd like it; Rosanna says that the priest is gorgeous.

XII: Rosanna Conceives of a Plan

Hugh worms under Skelly's blanket, murmuring and wheezing. He smells of camphor, garlic and eucalyptus. 'Tell about Cuchulain,' the little boy begs.

'What about Maeve?' Sometimes Cuchulain is too much for Skelly, so strong and brave, leaping like a salmon at the throat of his enemies. Rosanna has a better chance of being a hero than Skelly. 'Maeve was the best of the King of Ireland's six daughters. She could take any man she wanted to be her husband.'

'Like Rosanna?'

'Not quite. Rosanna lives in South Australia, where there is no one good enough for an Irish princess.'

Hugh giggles. 'I will marry Rosanna, when I am grown.'

Skelly kisses his forehead. Emotion catches at the back of his throat. At night, his spirits drop like kestrels upon some worrisome thought he has put aside in daylight hours. Now he has a new fear, fuelled by his father's strictness. If he'll not let Rosanna work at the Big House, will she run away this time? It isn't a good story but the worst of bad ones. Surely to God, Father Woods will not act the liberator, for

he is also a friend to Father. Skelly stills himself until he can hear his own breathing, which he fears will stop when he least expects it. Is life just a kind of dream? He touches the part of him which is most responsive. Then falls asleep, filled with mortal dread.

An owl wakes him. 'Boo-book, boo-book.' Dainty breezes push the calico at the window, lift Blinnie's hair. She murmurs in her sleep. Mary, Mother of God Rosanna's bed is still empty. He is always afraid for her. He calls on the man above. He holds his breath while he listens to the owl and the snorting of the horses. Warm air presses down on him. He tosses, dreams a little, starts awake again. And he stirs when Rosanna pushes in beside him, smelling of charcoal painted on her face to drive away mosquitoes. In the moonlight he can see that she has tried to rinse off the black marks but they have streaked.

'Skelly, *alannah*, I love you so much,' she whispers in his ear. Is she carried away with drink? The smell exudes from her pores. She has tied a rag around her left hand, and winces when he moves against her.

He lifts it gently, as he would a dog's paw. 'I remember how you hurt your hand,' he says reproachful.

'I burnt it.'

'But you promised...'

'Shut it, you great ...'

'Did Mrs Ashby really ask you to work at the station house?'

'She did, Skelly.'

'What was it like there?'

'It's a fancy house. A lot of rooms for only two people and a baby.'

'Are you very sad that you can't go?'

'I'll go, whether they like it or not.'

'Where have you been just now?'

'I went to the pond. Edwin left me a little drop of the doings. I think he was sorry, the trouble being entirely his fault. Moorecke heard the birds and came to me where I was sitting on the stones, dabbling my feet in the water. A great moon as pearly as the inside of an oyster shell lit everything up as bright as day. Do you think it is the same moon, Skelly, as the one in Woodford?'

'I'm thinking it is, but it seems unlikely.'

She laughed. ‘I wish I was Edwin riding out on Lucifer whenever he wants. Some days I think I’ll turn into a lunatic, start eating dirt and run at the walls, take all my clothes off and fall down screaming.’

Skelly jabs her in the ribs. ‘They’ll be taking you to the Adelaide asylum, to be with all the other mad girls.’

‘Oh you.’ She ribbed him back. ‘Moorecke lit a fire and we smacked down little pond crayfish on hot rocks. They were cooked in no time. I brought two home for Mother.’

‘Why do you hate it here with us so much?’ Skelly feels overwhelmed by her sadness. Is it a kind of cleverness? He can read near as well as she can, but Rosanna always knows what to do: since they first came she has run barelegged in the bush, and brought home wonderful surprises. She knows about rock-salting eels and smoking them on leaf-strewn coals beneath the stringy barks, about turning them until the oil runs into the heads — smoking ducks too — and hunting lizards. She knows how to steam a long-necked tortoise and an echidna. And she is beautiful. Is that why Father keeps her close at home? She smells and tastes like honey. Adult breaths are reeky with tobacco, bad teeth, and grog — not Rosanna’s. Her breath is always sweet; her skin always warm and smooth. She is as brown as a mulatto.

‘It is because I don’t belong here.’

‘Why not?’

‘I was born in another country and I remember it in my dreams.’

‘But I was too, Rosanna. Tell about Ireland again.’

‘We came in a ship, just Eilish and Father, and Edwin and me.’

‘And me, Rosanna.’

‘And you, of course. I was just making sure that you remembered. After we landed at Portland, in the colony of Victoria, Mr Ashby met us — he’d been buying cattle — and he took us on a ferry across the river. Then in a cart over the border.’

‘Was it a big river?’

‘I don’t know if it were as big as the Shannon. It was wider than the River Rossmore. There were high cliffs beside it and sand bars at the mouth. Mr Ashby and Father swam new cattle across. They rode together and talked about the wages and the work.’

‘Were you afraid you would sink?’

‘I was. The water was dark and dirty, and it was a long way to the bottom. Even though it was a cloudy day I saw eels and water snakes. After we were safely on the other side, Father heard a story from Mr Ashby that once the ferry went down, and all the people drowned. It chilled me to the bone.’

‘Tell me again, about the murder.’

‘When Eilish heard that, I thought she would turn about. Head straight back to the port, and get on the next big ship for Ireland. She was that frightened.’

‘Tell, tell.’ Skelly hugs her close.

Rosanna drapes her arm around his shoulders and kisses his cheek. ‘Firstly, there was a ship went down in the bay. It wedged fast on the reef. The captain stopped on the boat to guard the stores, whilst all the passengers were rescued in lifeboats. Some ruffians from the station came riding down on their horses. They rowed out in a little boat and slit the captain’s throat with a razor. Like this.’ Rosanna slides her fingernails, along Skelly’s neck, ear to ear. ‘They stole money and galloped away.’

‘What happened next?’

‘One of them went to jail. The other one took the policeman’s gun, stole his horse, and rode away.’

‘Did Father know those men?’

‘Of course he didn’t. We had only just arrived in the colonies. Mother was shaking and crying, wishing she was home again in our village’.

‘Tell me about Ireland again.’

‘I’m damned tired, Skelly. I’m going to sleep.’ She kisses his forehead and wriggles out of his arms. ‘It is green.’ She yawns.

‘Are there volcanoes?’

‘No.’

‘Caves?’

‘No.’

‘Wild animals?’

‘No.’

‘It doesn’t sound much good. What else did you do by the pond?’

‘I listened to Edwin and Father, rowing.’ She moves her head in the direction of the window. ‘Father pushed Edwin in the chest, like this.’ She drums her finger

into Skelly's solar plexus. 'Lurking about in the moonlight, they were, like a pair of great buffoons, and I heard them say my name.'

'Tell me what they said.'

'Shush now. I want to sleep.'

'And if I stroke your head, what say you then?'

'Great fools they are.'

Skelly reaches up to smooth her hair back from her forehead. It is her favourite way to fall asleep.

'I say, I have a plan. I'm going to Portland, before I am trapped by the wet, when even Father Woods has trouble making his way through the swamps. Then I'll travel on to Little Belfast, to Geelong, and to Melbourne. I don't know why we bother with Adelaide at all; it is so far away from everything.'

Skelly extends the sweep of his fingers from her thick and tangled hair to the hollows in her neck.

She flicks him off and rolls away. 'I'll take you with me, Skelly, maybe not straight away. Now shut it. Close your eyes.'

XXI11: *I Only Knew One Poet in my Life*

Edwin wakes Rosanna rudely hauling on her quilt. 'Father says get up and help before you go.'

'Before I go where?'

'To the Ashby's. We need the money.'

Rosanna feels a stirring sense of injustice. Is this what they have been fighting about the night before? Is she expected to slave for nothing and hand over her money, just like that?

By the time the sun throws pink rays over the eastern hills, Rosanna rides astride behind Father, skilly cake clutched in her hand, Eilish's plaid cloak tied around her shoulders. Edwin and Father do not speak as they canter up the slope behind the house. But there is nothing uncommon about that. It is a grand adventure to be riding out with men and perhaps she will die of happiness. On the way to the Big House she rejoices in every sound: the jingling of spur and the creak of leather; the clump of hooves over hollow earth; the slap of reins on the horses' necks; the piercing scream of a swamp harrier attacking prey. She imagines the hawk gliding through pale grey skeins of clouds in the carded sky, then returning to drop a

wriggling morsel into the beaks of its chicks waiting in their platform nest above the swamp.

At the station yards mucky with the prints of horses, Garrick upright in his saddle, all pride and assertion waits for William Ashby to come to him. Mr Ashby is hunkered down beside a stockman carping with a stick at a slow fire and frying duck eggs. Meanwhile, Rosanna slithers to the ground, clutching her cloth bag and cloak. When he stands up she sees that he is the giant of a man she saw on the white horse the day she shot the bullock. He is taller than Father, fair, like his wife, with a fine blonde beard and anxious penetrating blue eyes.

‘Rosanna, you look a good strong girl and smart enough. My wife slept poorly and is indisposed. On Friday house-guests arrive from Melbourne. One is a famous actor from the Melbourne Princess Theatre. They leave Little Belfast this morning. Will you help her prepare any way that you can?’

She nods. She has never met an actor, only the storytellers and musicians who frequented Walsh’s Inn. Tears of joy swamp her eyes. Her life is opening out like pig-face flowers in the sun.

As she moves towards the house she hears her father grim-voiced, remonstrating, ‘Just for the moment she can help. Rosanna will make right Edwin’s loss of the cattle.’ It is like a piece of grit in her eye.

From the back door, Rosanna hears the baby wailing up a storm and once inside she scoops it up on her way to locate its Mother. Mrs Ashby’s face is pale and piteous — peevish, Rosanna thinks, like a survivor of a shipwreck, bobbing on the surface of her high bed, in a froth of white quilts. A jam preserving pan lies beside the huon-pine chest. Jars of smelly creams and unguents, pot pourri, and lavender water, commingle their scents with the pervasive stench of vomit. The room smells like an old biddy’s breast. Mrs Ashby impresses on Rosanna the urgent need for the house to be set to rights by Friday when the house-party will arrive from Melbourne. If Rosanna can clean the house, including the kitchen out-house, and bring the baby in for feeds, her mistress will rest a further day and then, recovered or not, she will do her duty. While Rosanna jiggles the baby and swings her head about in curiosity, Mrs Ashby composes a great long list of chores and then, eyes beseeching, subsides upon the pillow.

‘Don’t break things, for it is hard to replace them in such a place as this.’ She turns her face to the wall.

Rosanna imagines her composing a letter to her family. *The Irish serving girl has cracked the vegetable tureen and is working her way through the entire dinner service. Scarcely worth keeping for wages. There is no hope for me in this God-forsaken place. I daresay you are heartily sick of hearing my grievances.* Nevertheless, Rosanna feels optimistic; she has ridden out to meet her fate; she has left the stultifying boredom of her own house and chores; the English baby is curled against her neck and gently snuffling. Her proper life is about to begin.

Mrs Ashby remains in bed the entire morning. Once Rosanna has fed the baby and changed his linen, he falls asleep. She scrubs the kitchen table and stews green apples for his dinner. She stokes up the copper and boils the vomity sheets and towels that she finds lying putrid in a basket at the bedroom door. Even this can’t dampen her mood. It is a grand house and Rosanna tackles its surfaces with damp cloths and enthusiasm. Mr Ashby and the Lynch men have ridden out and won’t be back ’til dusk. Holy Mother of God, she hopes that Mr Ashby will soon forgive Edwin and that she can pocket her own money, or at least a bit of it.

The house is almost silent, apart from yellow-tailed black cockatoos gnawing and scraping their beaks on the wooden shutters. What a mess they make and she will have to clean it up. She beats her knuckle on the window then she hears a faint sound. Is the baby wailing again? Why doesn’t the woman feed it herself?

It is not the baby crying but Mrs Ashby, who has arisen and is sobbing her heart out over a photograph. House silver is strewn across the dining table. She thrusts a cloth into Rosanna’s hand and runs from the room. What can be wrong? Rosanna bends to her task, rubbing the black stains from the fine cutlery until it gleams. She sees herself indistinct but eminently present in the bowls of the largest spoons. When she looks up she is also present in the mirrors of the rosewood sideboard and the marble-topped credenza by the bay window. If she lived in this house, she would check herself a hundred times a day. Then she would know for sure that she existed.

It puzzles Rosanna that Mrs Ashby is so unhappy. Through the window she can see the great red gums and the house cattle grazing beneath a mottled sky. She holds a spoon against her cheek and sighs, then spits on it and polishes some more. Does Mrs Ashby have the longing for another country? Is she not happy in her big

station house with her husband, who is arrogant but like as not, kind to someone of his own class. Everything in the house is elegant; it is a mansion stuffed with beautiful things: furniture, cloths, china, silver and polished wood. There is meat aplenty. The cellar holds flagons of port wine, and boxes and tins of every kind of provision. Has Mrs Ashby's white skin soured like milk in the hot sun, her body shrunk from feeding her baby? Rosanna imagines life as a fine lady, a pastoralist's wife, riding out on her horse each day. Preparing for house parties is the only work she would do.

For the rest of the afternoon she labours over cruets and pickle jars, tureens and vegetable platters. She lays her head on the table and stares dreamily at her reflection in the polished surface of a silver teapot, noticing that she has touched her face and blackened it. 'Look at you,' she mouths, 'as dour and privileged as the little Queen of England, sitting on a balloon-backed chair, in such a grand palace'. What would she be doing, back in Galway — helping in Walsh's bar, getting married? She is, after all, seventeen. Seven years she has been in exile. It is such a thrilling word: exile. It is not a word that Father likes for it is 'sent' he hears, not 'intent' and 'went'.

'Exile! Don't be blathering, Rosanna. It is a new life we are making for ourselves,' Eilish had berated her once, 'and no more than a calculation. You make us sound like the Israelites rushing across the Red Sea. We more resemble geese, flying to all the corners of the Earth, with a kind of compass in our hearts. When the wind is right, and the seasons have turned, the fat and prosperous flocks will fly home. People have been doing it for centuries. My own father went regular to England for work, cutting the harvest. And his ancestors came from Wales to mine the iron.'

'Why do you fill the child's head with such nonsense, Eilish?' Father had said.

'And what of your mother's name ... Spain? I'll wager her family did not come from Peking,' Eilish had retorted.

'I'll not be going back. We are family enough on our own.'

'Garrick, no.' Eilish kissed her cup and offered drink to him. 'We left our dead behind. Pitched like sea biscuits in the Poor House ditches and under the yew tree in the church graveyard beside our inn. Do you not remember how I visited them every day?'

The kookaburras had started up as Father stormed away along the pathway to the creek.

‘Shut up your gobs, you heathen jackasses,’ Edwin had bellowed from the rough bush table where he worked plaiting leather. He grinned at his sister. ‘Exile!’ he ragged.

‘I had to bring your father away. People were dying.’ Eilish said. ‘Now he is hard on himself and on everyone around him.’

‘He doesn’t like to talk about dying, Mother. It is morbid.’

‘It *is* exile then, if we don’t bring the memory of our dead. I *like* to think of them, especially Granny Walsh.’

‘Rosanna,’ Mrs Ashby admonishes her from the door. ‘Stop your dreaming. I am feeling better now and there is so much work to be done, I dare not think on it.’ Slight and bony as a bird cage, Mrs Ashby is swaying on her feet again.

‘Are you wanting me to come?’ Rosanna looks helplessly at the unfinished silver.

‘No, I am recovered. Thank you. I will bake the cakes. Please clear away the silver before you go to the stables at five o’clock. But first, gather me some eggs. Hurry, I had quite forgotten about them, and they will be ruined by the crows, or lifted by black hands. Why it is only a week since that girl absconded with my Sussex.’

Rosanna hurries to the nests beneath the trees. The sun dips in the west; the hens squabble as they roost. Every day will be a grand day now she decides as she prances between fallen perches like a sword dancer. ‘Think before you go flying off,’ is what Eilish always says. Rosanna gathers twenty eggs in her hat and tries not to think at all. She sinks them in a pan to test their freshness. Only three float. Mrs Ashby is a small soft woman. She could not harm Moorecke.

XIV: A House Party and all Manner of Diversions

Each morning, without complaint, Rosanna lifts her weary body from her bed and swings up onto the horse behind Edwin or her father, for the ride to the Ashbys.

‘Perhaps it will be the making of her,’ she overhears her mother telling Father. ‘Work brings a kind of happiness.’

Although she feels too tired to plot right now, she has not given up on the idea of running away. She will not wait long. The baby is needy. Mrs Ashby is polite enough as she begins the great preparations for the weekend's house guests. Rosanna runs ragged fetching and carrying: linen from trunks to make up beds; bacon and cheese from the cellar to the pantry. She sweats over the blazing fire, turning sides of beef in the roasting pans, cutting and mincing, kneading and rolling, working knobs of suet into weevilly pastry until her arms ache and her body slumps.

On Friday she waits as usual in the stable for her father. Next week he and Edwin will camp away for several days and nights and Rosanna must find her own way home. Taking up her mother's shawl she shapes it around her head and shoulders lying full length on the stable floor. She likes the smell of hay and liniment. A small bat swings from the joists, its wings folded around its body. Rosanna feels like the bat, in her shawl, toes pointed, staring up at the inky sky: suspended in time. She does not want to fall asleep, but some part of her seems to know that Edwin and Garrick will not return for hours, and Mrs Ashby, pressed and stressed by the demands of hospitality, is not her responsibility. That is the beautiful thing about being Irish, she decides. Mrs Ashby cannot push her.

While the sky turns oyster dark she thinks of Cuchulain slinging stones — killing Maeve's pet bird and her marten nestling on her shoulder. Even then things were hopeless. And remembers Eilish's stories about Aoife's gifts: embroidery, chastity and hunting through the night. What can Rosanna's gift be? She draws her arm across her eyes. Is it nodding off that sets her lips twitching, turn her limbs to liquid, cause her to hopelessly flip her hand like a hooked fish against her thigh? Do dreams keep her alive — being the only vivid parts of her life?

When she hears the clatter of hooves outside the stable she starts and clammers up the ladder into the hayloft where she can safely observe the horses and their riders. Through a small wall aperture big enough for a rifle barrel she sees that it is not Edwin and Garrick come to collect her but two strange men, one tall and thin, the other small and plump, and that they have come some distance: foam sets like chantilly around their horses' mouths. The men lead their mounts down to the swamp to drink, walking like pregnant women, lifting their heavy legs from the hips and clumping their feet down. Baby on her hip, Mrs Ashby appears at the gate. Will she send them on their way and return to sipping Madeira by the fire, loaded gun at

her side. She has told Rosanna how she shudders over tales told by the Arthur brothers, and the Leakes, their homes attacked by marauding *Booandik*.

When the men return they spring forward and hold the gate for her, remove their hats and point away down the track to Punt Road leading to Nelson. Hand outstretched, Mrs Ashby directs them to the stables, then takes her hand to her forehead. Is she perpetually giddy? Rosanna crouches in the semi-darkness listening to snippets of conversation wafting to her in the loft: a spring cart and a broken axle, not far, south. One of the men will take fresh horses to Mr and Mrs Brigstock, who wait resting beneath a river gum. Men will ride out early in the morning and repair the wheel. The other man, eyebrows meeting like spitting caterpillars in the middle of his forehead, clutches his belly and shakes his head. He rushes towards the privy. Mrs Ashby disappears into the house.

The taller man leads the horses towards the stables. Rosanna darts away from the aperture. His boots crunch on the compacted stable floor and leather creaks as he secures the horses and removes their saddles at the hitching rails. ‘Alright. Wait.’ The horses thrust their heads towards the loft excited by the smell of chaff and he climbs the ladder. She shrinks into the shadows, closing her eyes while he sweeps hay into his arms. On his second climb, she smells damp wool, perspiration, and tobacco. To her surprise he suddenly crosses the floor pushing back her head with his hand. She opens her eyes in fright to find him staring into her face. Even in poor light she notices his well-shaped head and delicate features. How can a tall man be so pretty? Will he hurt her? He lowers his head and nudges his lips against hers. Her mouth responds to the strange warmth of an unexpected kiss. Why had she not screamed — immediately? She imagines Mrs Ashby slapping her hard across the face. Or Father. The man’s hands smooth her skirt. She pushes hard against his chest.

‘If my father were here he would knock you down,’ she hisses, struggling to stand up.

He laughs. ‘What is his name?’

‘Garrick Lynch.’

‘I am rehearsing a play about a Lynch father and his son. I play the son.’

‘And why would *you* be taking the part of a Lynch? I’m sure that you know nothing about them.’ She brushes down her dress.

‘The play was written by Mr Edward Geoghegan, an Irishman.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

He raises his eyebrows. As soon as she has let the words go, Rosanna wishes she hadn’t. It is not her place to argue with Ashby guests.

‘They are Irish Lynches — the father and his son, in the play,’ the actor says.

‘I am an Irish Lynch, from Galway.’

‘Then it is fair that I show you the play for Mr Geoghegan tells me that it is based on a Galway story. Would you like to see the playscript?’

‘I would.’

It is a raw feeling to look up at a grown man and see moonlight dancing through the dormer window onto the tiny yellow hairs coiled against his collar, to see him looking back at her, his fingers all the while moving in delicious rhythmic motion on the inside of her wrist. Over her heartbeat she hears the plonking sounds of frogs. Oh it would not do, if Father came now.

‘Can you read, then?’ he asks.

‘I can, of course,’ she throws at him. ‘I know about the abolition of slavery everywhere in the British Empire excepting Ireland, about the Zulu War, and the Afghan War as well.’ Her eyes shy away from his beautiful teeth, the white of his collar. ‘Say that you will read me some, tomorrow... oh. If you want to know anything about me I will tell you.’ She sounds bad mannered, desperate, a boundary rider’s silly girl.

‘I will bring the play here tomorrow.’ He backs down the ladder.

Mr Ashby and his men arrive home and Father lifts Rosanna into the saddle behind Edwin, who is always in a desperate hurry to get away.

‘Did you see a man, Edwin? Riding out when you rode in?’ She stretches up to shout into his ear.

Edwin grunts.

‘There were two men — the advance party of the Ashby’s house guests.’ She says ‘house guests’ like an incantation. ‘Their cart broke down.’ The sky is clear and cloudless; the Pleiades sparkle over the volcano. ‘Two men rode ahead. One of them was ill. The other is an *actor*.’

Edwin snorts. ‘An *actor*!’

‘What do you suppose an actor looks like?’ She touches her fingers to her lips.

‘He’d be a great lunk of a man with a red cravat and a beauty spot.’

Rosanna laughs.

‘He’d have a massive chest like Lucifer and mighty lungs. And he’d be full of horse droppings.’ Edwin rises in his stirrups, and leans forward to pat his horse’s neck as he urges him over the rise. ‘All right darling, we’re almost home.’

‘Edwin, I don’t mind going to the Big House at all.’

‘Well stop blathering and tell me about Lucifer. Did you look to him before you left home this morning?’

‘He’s full recovered. It was nothing — just a wee graze on his rump. Felt like a mosquito bite to him.’ Rosanna warms her hand inside Edwin’s coat and croons, ‘Edwin, *alannah*, I could ride him tomorrow; there’s a ladies race after luncheon. Remember you told me that I might, that day we played swordfight among the grasstrees.’

‘My boots need cleaning. I’ve been chasing Ashby cattle through the swamps.’

Father draws close.

‘I will do everything you say, if you let me race,’ she says. As they turn the horses south to face the sea, salt wind stings their faces. ‘And Lucifer is grand. Didn’t the poet make you an offer for him after his last race?’

‘You’re not thinking to sell that horse, man?’

‘I don’t want to, Father, but I might need money.’

Rosanna rests hard up against Edwin’s shoulder as they lurch to a stop beneath the wattles. ‘If only I could buy him with my wages.’

Her father turns to dress her down. ‘By the holy Virgin and Saint Patrick, what would *you* be doing with a stallion? Shut your flighty gob, and go inside to help your mother. Edwin and I will tend to the horses until you’ve learned some sense.’

‘But what about the race?’ Rosanna gathers her shawl around her shoulders, and savages him with a look.

‘Go inside. Edwin needs to stop lommicking about and making promises he can’t afford to keep. If it weren’t for your great *gramog* of a brother living so hard, bringing trouble on all of us, you wouldn’t be slaving at the Ashbys; you’d be helping your mother at home until you marry.’ He reaches into his pocket and takes coins from a leather pouch. ‘Take your earnings and give them to Edwin. The only racing he’ll be doing tomorrow is past the debt-collector.’ Rosanna fingers the shape

of the coins, then dismounts, before she flings them at Edwin, and turns on her heel for the house. They rile her when she can least tolerate it.

XV: Race Day

The sky breaks open the colour of eggshells with dark clouds looming on the horizon. The season will break, perhaps today. A sweep of chill wind shepherds his sister from the privy, along the walls of the house. Crested pigeons rattle beside the path where they sit like pomaded Chinese gentlemen in tangerine slippers. Even the birds know that Rosanna is out of sorts: her mood as grey as the morning ash that she carries in a metal bucket to the toilet pit. She may go to the races to buy fresh produce for Eilish from the carts, but is forbidden to harangue Edwin about riding Lucifer.

Skelly watches her sullen efforts to make purchase on the day: pulling on her second-best gown, braiding her hair and fastening it with a bodkin at the nape of her golden neck, attaching Granny Spain's *claddagh* brooch between the tips of her starched linen collar. Blacking polish used on Edwin's boots rims her fingernails and stains the palms of her hands. Happily, Mother can spare Skelly too, for Hugh is well again and Blinnie has cut her tooth. As he slides his sketchbook into his knapsack, he stares back at the house with all its certainties. Rosanna's intensity wounds him. In his mind's eye, he paints the blue and meat-fat yellows of bruises beneath his skin.

Single file they follow the *boreen* over dips and rises to the bay, the mood of the group subdued. Edwin makes no comment about Lucifer's tail, plaited and threaded with coastal daisies. Skelly carries a leather water bag, a pumpkin, and jute sacks for Eilish's produce and he sticks like a burr to Rosanna's unresponsive back. His sister slouches on Glorvina, a mare of twenty, purchased because she was solid and reliable enough to be left at home for Eilish in the event of an emergency. In the early days they had lived in terror of emergencies. Half way to the shore Lucifer spins about, nipping the mare on the shoulder. She squeals, splays her legs and drops her head to mouth the wound.

Rosanna raises her crop to him. 'What's got into you, you useless thing?' The sea breeze catches her scarlet petticoat, exposing her patched stockings. Edwin whistles in his irritating way, in much the same way that he taps his foot beneath the card table; he is focused on his race-plan. Seven days ago he had ridden to the bay,

ostensibly to sell his skins, but at the same time to help the other men who frequent Miss Lallah's to clear away the bush, using ropes to set up fallen logs as jumps, to build a dry-stone wall at the half-way point of the race circuit, and to mark a finishing-line. It is only a picnic race meeting, but Skelly has heard from his father that the stewards have raised eighty sovereigns for the steeplechase and that the poet will ride a young horse named Ivanhoe.

They cut across the point and around the last curve on the track to the bay. Alongside them surf crashes against the rocks; wind sprays them with salt. Skelly ignores the pitying glances of the lady-folk as they ride in. Edwin stalks away to take a drink, perhaps to lay a wager with his friends near where Miss Lallah dispenses punch from her cart in front of a pair of spindly windblown trees. Skelly finds a log on which to sit and watch the men sauntering past a thoroughbred marked for sale. At the same time he keeps an eye on Rosanna. Wind tosses her dark hair and she pushes it from her face to glare at Skelly, then at Edwin and his friends. He sketches her woman's shape as she leans her hip up against Lucifer's side to plait his mane. He supposes that her eyes are casting around for the station party, hoping that they will offer her French wine and snipe pie! Skelly admires the fine hats and elegant habits of the ladies, the way they strike light whips on the ground. And he imagines their *thóins*, round as wombat heads, beneath their habits.

Rosanna looks redder than her dress, he decides. Surely, her heart must be smarting at being denied a chance at the saddle prize offered to the winner of the Ladies Race. She feeds Lucifer a coddly apple, while she adjusts his halter. He refuses her, spraying skin and juice. *Booandik* people sit cross-legged under a stand of trees, weaving rushes into baskets. Even with possum-skin tied around her body, Moorecke looks thin. Two of her cousins, coats dragging in the mud, cabbage-tree hats askew, slide between the horses of their employers from Curratum Station. Old women, smouldering pipes resting in their straggly beards, sell boomerangs and woven mats and baskets to passersby.

Father can be seen with a pannikin in his hand, knocking back the raw liquid he purchased fair and square, above Lallah's makeshift counter, and the policeman from the Gambierton station stands nearby. When Father and Edwin return Rosanna pounces. 'Well, look at you both thinking you're so grand. Leaving me here, like a damned stable boy.' Her eyes flash up at Edwin. 'Did you put me down for the

ladies' race.' She leans up against Lucifer's withers, obstructing Edwin's efforts to tighten the girth strap.

'Give over, Ro,' Edwin blusters, pushing her aside to spring up into the saddle.

'I hope you're enjoying yourself.' She folds her arms and digs her heels in.

'Hold your tongue. Don't shame us in front of the station people.'

'*Shame*. What about your promise? I cleaned your boots.'

'You won't get within a chaff bag of my horse the way you treated him you *cailleach*. You might have ruined his chances galloping about on him before he's healed. Giving him a new injury to boot.'

'And bad luck on the day I got a brother like you.'

Skelly sees that Rosanna is spoiling for a fight: a fresh gum shoot strangled by her family.

XXVI: The Turf Flies

Edwin rides away, shoulders hunched, cantering Lucifer to the starting line. Turning up his collar against the cold Skelly follows him on foot. The wind keens. Predacious clouds threaten the day. At the starting line, a handsome barrel-chested bay goes to market, kicking out at a chestnut stallion pulling into place behind him. They both jump sideways, crashing into the judge's dray, scattering boxes and papers and bumping an official as round as a scallion, down on his back in the mud. Unnerved by the whinnying of the horses, the thump of their hooves on the turf, and the grim lines of the mouths of their riders, Skelly retreats to a safer observation place where his father joins him.

The first jump is a fallen blue gum propped at one end. The second, twenty yards in front, a tea-tree brush fence bolstered by saplings, while the third is the stiffest jump of all: a dry stone wall, stacked with limestone to an alarming height. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, if one of the horses clips it, they'll all go to God in the falling stones. But Lucifer will sail over the remaining six. The poet rides away from the saddling place, waving a dismissive hand at bookmakers as he passes. On the starting line, Ivanhoe, his horse and Lucifer move together like two boats in choppy water at the dock.

'Mr Gordon likes stiff timber,' Skelly murmurs. 'He won on that horse at Guichen Bay, but I fancy Edwin's chances.'

‘Gordon will win,’ says Father. ‘He is fearless.’

Edwin is just as reckless, Skelly thinks. Why doesn’t Father believe in his son?

‘I’ll end up carrying the boy home.’ Father spits, and makes to turn away. All show for the Ashbys.

The starter’s flag cuts through the hazy afternoon, and they’re off. Edwin takes the log easily, the horse stretched out beneath him like black silk as he pounds towards the tea-tree brush. The poet, close behind him, leans back in the saddle like a lunatic swept into Hades, head thrown back in his peculiar fashion, one hand outstretched as if to balance the horse’s spirit against his own. They wheel around the trees, four horses bunched in the lead, the sound of the drumming hooves drowning the crash of the surf. They soar over four more jumps. The poet’s horse moves out strongly, and then a length in front.

On the second lap the small crowd chants: ‘Gordon, Gordon. Bravo Gordon.’ But Lucifer looks steady, striding out with complete ease; he has not put himself out yet, even for Edwin. Mr Gordon’s horse approaches the stone wall, a beat out of rhythm. It hesitates, recovers, and throws itself into the ascent. The poet stands up in his stirrups as the horse leaps. In mid-flight they clip the wall, setting off a cascade of stones. Skelly’s fingers clasp his face in horror. Lucifer comes down behind Ivanhoe like a dancer picking gaps between swords, leaps sideways, thrusting out his back legs like a spring, and takes off again. Behind them, a horse falls into the stones, its squeal piercing the heavy thudding sound of hooves. The rider rolls to safety and jumps to his feet, striking his whip against his side in disappointment. Lucifer and the poet’s horse tear down the straight neck and neck, towards the finish line. Lucifer edges out in front and Father’s eyes well with tears.

Lucifer wins by a nose. Grinning at Skelly Father dances a proud jig on the spot. The horses pull up yards past the line and Mr Gordon reaches over to lay his hand upon Edwin’s arm; then offers his hand to shake. Have they forgotten their boxing match at Miss Lallah’s that Father says finished in the horse trough? Gordon rubs the twitchy bits of Lucifer’s ears — ‘well done, old cock,’ he says — and Skelly suppresses a grin. The fallen horse is led limping from the track; the crowd remains, subdued. Father tells Skelly later that Mrs Ashby disdains to shake Edwin’s hand,

preferring a fainting fit. A Mrs Brigstock is announced, from Punt Road, Melbourne, who looks as solid as the Bank of England, and robust enough to do the honours.

Skelly runs to find Rosanna, cross-legged, and absorbed in Moorecke's nimble fingers threading weaving reeds into the shap of a mat.

'Lucifer won,' he shouts.

She tilts her face to the leaden sky. Moorecke elbows her in the side and grins.

Edwin leads Lucifer past a gaggle of servant girls from Sutton Town. Who is the freckled white-faced girl who steps out to greet him and pat his horse? Edwin loops his hand through her arm and she laughs up at him. Oh there is no doubt about it, Edwin is lucky. All rippling muscle and shining coat, Lucifer picks his way back along the hoof-carved track, shaking his head in a distracted way. The end of a race is nothing to a horse; all it wants is to stride onto the beach, lunge into the water, and swim powerfully past the breakers to the sand bar.

Father strides forward reaching for Lucifer's reins, his expression unreadable until he leans forward to grasp Edwin by the shoulders and kiss him on the mouth. 'Good, Man. Begone now and deal with the money-lending leeches.'

Edwin's face works, and he wipes his eyes with the back of his sleeve. He steers his father away from the pale girl who fiddles with the sash of her blue dress and prinks her hair with wet fingers. Father walks around the horse, and praises him as well. Edwin nods pointing in a careful way, to Rosanna, now bent over a game of cat's cradle with her friend under the shelter of the gums. They confer. Skelly strains but is unable to hear their conversation over the wind. They straighten and nod. Father claps Edwin on the back. He will agree to anything now it seems, on this grand day for the Lynches.

He slaps the reins into Edwin's hands and retreats. Edwin leads Lucifer towards his sister. Stranded, the blonde girl twists her gimrackery ornamented fingers and pivots her slippers in the mud. She turns on her heel throwing a backward smile at Skelly. Her dainty skirt moves in two-part harmony over the gently undulating ground. Skelly pulls his eyes away in time to witness Rosanna standing up to her oldest brother, like a small bearded dragon, her collar flipping in the wind, her body angled towards him. Edwin dangles Lucifer's reins behind him like a bribe, and the horse, head down, is pulling. Suddenly he thrusts the reins into Rosanna's hands.

‘By all the swans on Lough Derg, Rosanna, pull yourself together. I’ll have more than you think riding on this race, before the starter drops his silk,’ shouts Edwin.

Rosanna glances across the track at the fancy party that Skelly is sure must be the Ashbys’, and steps into Edwin’s hand to mount. She takes up the reins, and lifts her head as if smelling the sea will clear it. ‘More fool you then, you dirty *spalpeen*. Show some decency and get out of the way.’

Members of the Ashby house party cast oblique glances in their direction, enjoying the Irish spectacle. When Edwin bends to shorten the stirrups Rosanna snatches the crop from between his teeth and taps his ear with the tip. Skelly holds his breath.

‘Edwin,’ one of the racing men calls, and laughs. ‘I’ll wager four sovereigns on the little hoyden in the red dress.’ Father starts towards the pair of them.

But Rosanna is away and Edwin is not out of the Derrycrag Woods yet. All his life, Skelly has seen them going at each other: one minute spitting and screeching, the next larking and rolling in the long grass beside the pond. Intent on winning, Edwin’s emotions rush through him like electric storms. And Rosanna is never happy; but if her life is dull, Skelly’s is worse. She should spare a thought for him — always the watcher. She canters Lucifer to the starting place. The ladies ride a flat race in a circuit set around the judge’s cart newly restored to its wheels.

Head in the air, nose tilted towards the northern hills, Rosanna appears oblivious to bystanders casting glances in her direction. Will Father smack her down? By turn Lucifer prances, then paws the mud; she walks him to the line, turning him in tighter and tighter circles. Skelly imagines her half-attending to instructions from the stewards about the course, too proud to wave to Edwin’s friend sweetly trying to catch her eye and wish her luck. Lucifer throws a tantrum on the line, spins, lifts his front feet and considers rearing. The steward brings down the flag.

Rosanna eases up on the bit, using her legs to send him forward. Skelly sees the shapes of words on her lips. Away they go. Three take a wide arc around the swamp gums, bunched together, up to their knees in brackish water. Two fall to the back of the pack. Before Rosanna takes the first bend, she leans to one side, her hands following the rhythm of Lucifer’s lunging neck. The horse slips in a slushy

hole and stumbles forward but quickly rights himself. The rider in second position seizes her advantage and surges past. Rosanna crunches down, pushing Lucifer back up to the grey to snatch back the lead. It will be close.

As she takes the bend Skelly watches her face: the wide mouth, the quick eyes darting across the uneven ground, the jutting chin, the braid flopping on her shoulders. He knows that she is mad to win, and nothing else will do. The crowd roars, and black cloud rolls in from the sea. Eerie light douses everything in silver; the air is expectant; lightning flashes across the water. Rain will fall for the farmers. Everything is caught up in this electric moment. Lucifer's sides heave as Rosanna powers down the western side of the track, drops of rain glittering in her hair, delirious joy painted on her face, her dress swirling around her.

'Who is the girl in red riding that great horse. Is she bolting?'

'Nein, no, the Lynch girl it is. Ride she can.'

While Skelly knows that Lucifer isn't bolting, there is something not quite right about his sister, her lungs full of vindictive freedom, taking the lead by three lengths: is she riding for a fall? He sucks at his fist. Pounding down the track, Rosanna flings a fleeting uncertain glance at Edwin who, all cool appraisal, rests his arm lightly on the elbow of his girl. Not a doubt about it. He thinks the money as good as in his pocket.

To his astonishment Rosanna refuses the finish line, savagely hauling Lucifer at an angle across the track, heading for the dry-stone wall. The crowd groans. The horse whinnies in surprise. 'Damn,' Skelly mouths, for it is a grim jump, and she approaches it too fast. But Lucifer takes it in his stride and soars, like a bat across the night sky. In agitation, Edwin brushes off his girl. Rosanna lands, her body jolting like a bag of potatoes on a dray. She slips sideways but manages to hold her seat. Lucifer gallops on. Within seconds they are no more than small dark shapes moving across the parkland towards the trees, then they are gone. Rosanna is going home.

XVII: Father and Skelly, Baffled.

Three times Edwin pounds his fist into his hand. 'The curse of Cromwell on her. Why did she not cross the line? The vixen, the bitch, the damned tosser. The loyalty of a death adder, she shows. She damned well won.' Edwin leaps onto Bran, his father's horse and gallops after her.

Black cloud casts shadows over the course. Men from the Ashby party pack up their trestles and seats, and their picnic hampers. The presentation to the winner of the ladies' race proceeds through rain splashes. Gulls and cormorants fly inland, away from the rising sea and the weather. Malingering crested terns dive for fish. A grey shape rises and falls between the white-capped waves beyond the reef. During the ruckus, Moorecke and her people have gone as well. It is as if they had never been there, in the space between the trees.

Father shakes hands with station boundary riders; one of them has won well enough to make an offer for Lucifer. Kow-towing to others sticks in his craw like dry cheese. Abandoned, with only Glorvina to carry them home, Skelly hopes they will arrive by midnight.

The old mare plods along the coastal track. 'Edwin and Rosanna'll be scaring the birds out of the trees, screeching and cursing in the worst Irish, all the way to the house,' his father grouses.

Skelly lifts his head from his father's back to shout into the breeze. 'But no one will hear them.'

'Only emus pounding in the opposite direction.'

'Edwin will thrash her.'

Father grunts.

'Are we shamed?'

'Shamed? Not by the likes of them, nor for a peck of high spirit. There's no rule says you have to finish the race, just because you happen to be out in front on a magnificent animal and it could save your brother from the debtor's prison. That'd be far too grand for Rosanna.'

Father's emotions shift like the vast plates below the Earth's surface, explained to Skelly by Father Woods.

'Might be the poet'll save Edwin's neck. He has a good eye and he likes the look of Lucifer.'

'Do you ever wish, Father, that I was more useful?'

'You silly *gossoon*. No one could be more useful than you to your mother. Now that Rosanna works up at the Big House she needs a man at home.'

Skelly sighs. He is taller and stronger now at least.

‘And what about your drawing, man? When Gambierton is as big as Dublin, and twice as sophisticated, they’ll hold exhibitions of Skelly Lynch’s work.’

‘I only do paltry sketches around the house — just birds and animals.’

‘Well and won’t that be something to make people sit up, one day, when all the birds and animals are gone to God. The damned Ashbys will have shot everything by then.’

Skelly laughs. ‘That will never happen, so. Kangaroos are hardier than corncrakes. Moorecke’s people have been killing them for years, Rosanna says. And you’d hardly know it, to see so many mobs.’

‘Kangaroos, at least, have freedom. Hanging round the stations, slaving for Englishmen can wear you down, kill your spirit. It can bring fearful sickness. We all need our own land.’

‘Are you afraid we’ll become ill, Father?’

‘No, *alannahh*. People with a bit of get up and go will do just that. See which way the wind is blowing and leave. Like we did.’

Skelly lays his head against his father’s shoulders. ‘And what if your blood is different?’

‘You have to listen harder, to all the voices in your head. Blood runs in families. You have to be tough and brave like the people you came from. Take heart from being here at all.’

‘I’m not like Rosanna, or Edwin. Mother says I was suckled behind the bar.’

‘She’s a wise woman. I don’t know how I’d live without her.’

‘And why would you want to? If it weren’t for my drawing, no one would know I’m here at all. I want to work and make my future, move around like Edwin, like Rosanna, like the bats.’

‘Rosanna’s impatience will be her undoing. I saw her with the Blacks. What does she say about Moorecke’s mob, lately?’

‘Awful sick some of them’ve been. Did you see the scabs and scars on the old woman’s face? Rosanna thinks they won’t stay long. Mr Ashby’s onto them about killing a bullock.’

‘A bullock?’ Father’s voice catches. ‘She told you this?’

‘I heard them by the pond.’

‘Is it another station they’re heading for?’

‘She doesn’t know. They might go to the lakes.’

‘Like us, Skelly. They’ll leave when they have to.’

XVIII: Placating the Punters

Dark comes quickly on a moonless night. She had snatched her father’s oldest oilskin jacket from a stable peg, and fled across the boggy yard, scrambling into the branches of a blue-gum, from where she had a perfect view of Edwin’s arrival in the yard.

‘I hate her. Why is she so wild?’ he had shouted at Eilish, throwing down his crop. It was all about her timing; she should not climb down until Edwin settled, belly lined with food but not too much of the drink.

‘You’ll regret it, I swear to God,’ he had yelled into the bush, and kicked the verandah posts. She waited until her father’s lantern bobbed past the tree and back again — long enough for Mother to have swept the hearth and arranged the chairs for the comfort of the dead before the fire. When she crept inside Edwin had been asleep with the others, an arm curved around his head, still wearing his dirty riding shirt, and breathing through his mouth. Rosanna, as cold as a hag’s *diddy*, placed her hands on his warm chest, allowing them to rise and fall. It is no surprise to her that Kitty of Dismal Swamp fancies him, his hair coot-black and curly, his broad face open. Hauling on a horse’s neck all day has made him as lean and muscled as a working dog. When he simmers down they will laugh together, perhaps tomorrow, and she will hand over her wages, for a sin nowhere near as bad as Feemy Macdermot’s.

At breakfast he averts his face from her. Eilish whispers that creditors may come for his money and that, as usual, Rosanna has been a foolish girl making everything worse for herself and people who love her. She has only just managed to keep Garrick’s hand from his stockwhip. Rosanna has not slept enough to be cheerful but her face is pink from the splashing of icy water, and the steaming pannikin of tea set before her. Skelly goggles his eyes at her. Intent on soda bread and boiled moorhen’s egg she will not say sorry, yet, and Edwin knows it. On the way to the station he rides close beside her, huffy, knocking his horse up against hers amongst the trees, trying to unseat her.

The day is long and slow. The baby has a loose tummy and cries half the

morning, beating the air with his little fists, peddling his knees with gripe. The house party has abandoned coats and umbrellas and boots beside the fireplace in the dining room, and the ladies of the party remain in bed until after noon, while Mrs Ashby struggles to prepare broth and meat for the men branding cattle. Rosanna is surprised that her mistress, such a grand lady, has ridden home at dawn from the dancing and piping at the bay, but not at all that she is as tetchy as a goanna, especially with Rosanna. Mrs Ashby chips away at her about 'decorum', and 'dignity', about why a girl would bring disgrace to her employers and her family by throwing a race, like a tinker, and by cursing at her brother in a public place, for all of society to hear. Rosanna is on trial. It is a revelation. She works and works until she aches with tiredness.

In the middle of the afternoon, Mrs Ashby runs out of steam and subsides on the *chaise-longue* in the parlour. 'God's truth, Rosanna, I am at my wits' end, but I cannot do without you.'

Rosanna drops her head and bites her lip. She will not be rude to Mrs Ashby. Confined to the kitchen, she bakes lady-finger biscuits and fruit scones, which Mrs Ashby arranges on dishes painted with blue and white pictures of a willow tree and oriental people standing on a bridge.

'Take care carrying the Spode,' she snaps, pushing Rosanna towards the door. 'Before you serve the tea, check you have made the beds, and cleaned the floors,' she orders, 'but leave the front room with the bay window, where the child and his mother lie sleeping.' When Rosanna is done, Mrs Ashby wafts a handkerchief before her face and rolls her eyes. 'Rosanna, wash yourself in the copper with a rag — you smell.'

Clean and sullen, in a worn gown the pale yellow of early sunshine, lent by Mrs Ashby, Rosanna prepares to serve tea. When the door springs open, they both start. Three men from the house party enter Mrs Ashby's domain, in a lather of excitement about a kangaroo-hunt arranged by Mr Ashby for their amusement that very afternoon.

'Why, I do believe we have a champion jockey in our midst,' says the shortest gentleman, his fair but ruddy face alight with interest, as he turns to face his friends.

'Jove, it is. The Irish bolter,' says a taller one, his face as diffident as a

coastal sapling. He fingers his drooping moustache in a contemplative way. Rosanna blushes, conscious of the third man with swamp grey eyes and a delicate mouth that she feels sure must be the actor, now that she can clearly see his face. Mrs Ashby instructs her to address them as Mr Melvin Brigstock — a grazier from Portland, who is the father of the small child — Mr Laurence Colyer — a lawyer from Melbourne who wishes to speak to Mr Ashby about buying land — and Mr George Sutherland — an actor, lately on the Melbourne stage. She must remember exactly how they prefer their tea. Instead of bobbing, no doubt as Mrs Ashby would prefer, Rosanna straightens up and holds the actor's gaze before she turns away. It is a powerful thing to be stared at by a man. Reversing through the doorway to the hall she half turns, and catches Mr George Sutherland's eyes whipping up and down her back. Surely he will say nothing to the others about the kiss.

She returns with heavily laden tea trays. As she passes milk and sugar in front of the window she sees Edwin and her father erecting a stockade for the kangaroo hunt. When she clears the table they have begun digging pits. They will hunt at dusk when the kangaroos stir from their sets behind the stringy barks and move out to feed between the grass-trees. Edwin and Garrick Lynch, Mrs Ashby says, will be required to assist with the flensing of bodies and the disposal of carcasses. Does she think Rosanna is an orphan or simply invisible?

XIX: George Sutherland and the Kangaroo Hunt

Rosanna retires to the stables to wait for them, wondering if she can watch the hunt. The stable bat flutters past, its wings grazing her face. Light from a smoky crescent moon illuminates half a dozen horses stamping their feet against the belt of bush at the back of the house. Father says Mr Ashby never tires of hunting. And the mobs of kangaroos never diminish in their plenitude. Creatures of habit, they move through the corridors of trees, descending on the swamps and the station garden at night.

Rosanna watches the horses wheeling away behind the scrub and although she can hear the bark of dogs, the crack of breaking branches, the excited whinnying of the horses, she sees nothing more for several minutes until hundreds of animals come leaping from the scrub, down the gradient towards the pits.

'Tally ho,' a fool is crying. Shouts and rifle cracks, whistles and shouts pierce the night silence. Rosanna thinks she smells the kangaroos' panic as they smack up against the makeshift walls of the stockade. Most crash where they are shot and fall

back into the mob, scrabbling for purchase amongst fallen bodies; some fly over the rails, veering suddenly across the path of galloping horses. Mr Gordon stands up in his stirrups, silhouetted against the remnants of a sunset as pink as a parrot. A large buck swerves and is driven back by the lash of Father's stock whip, smashing to smithereens a section of the stockade. The roo sprawls amongst the broken timber, struggling to right itself. Rosanna sees it stand upright, claws lashing, blood rushing from his massive tail. Is it screaming she hears: high pitched whistling? Edwin will be grinning like a loon, bare headed, his *caubeen* lost in the scrum. Finally, she sees George Sutherland.

Mr Ashby shouts out to him and waves him round to cover a breach. But the main mobs have passed and are bounding away. She sees Edwin take off in pursuit but it is pointless. The roos will scatter in panic along the edge of the swamp. Some will leap into the water and with powerful thrusts, swim out to wait, the swinging lanterns reflecting in their eyes, their ears twisting against the sounds of the killing. Others will leap left and right, deep into the scrub, following the remainder of their old man mob, away from the smell of blood, in a desperate race to meet the dawn. Rosanna likes eating meat but the twitching bodies sicken her: bad *cess*. She leans up against the rain-stippled wall, attempting to blot out the distressing sounds.

The men complete their work, roping and hauling corpses deeper into the pit, making their careful way around the thrashing limbs. The station dogs run back and forth, dropping their heads low to the ground to bark. A small roo jerks its head around and a porridge-coloured dog is on it, worrying at its throat, keeping clear of the powerful legs until it sustains a lashing wound across its belly. Mr Ashby puts a bullet in its brain and drags it to one side.

At the end of the killing the men gather like primitives in a circle. Rosanna creeps closer, sheltering behind a cart, to listen to the chorus of men. No doubt Skelly would like to sketch Mr Colyer, acting such a champion, one foot on the largest buck, rifle thrust to the sky. Mr Brigstock wipes his face with his handkerchief. Is he overwhelmed by country hospitality? Edwin is sent to the cellar for the finest drop of porter and the men raise their glasses to Mr Ashby for the excellent sport he has offered for their enjoyment. What a fine upstanding occupier he is, with so many estimable qualities, bringing order to the land and its inhabitants. They toast God and the Queen. Rosanna senses Mr Ashby's excitement, his pleasure heightened by his responsive audience. But his face looks as soulful as a British

bulldog's, as he stands on a rise by the pit. Removing his hat he sweeps it upward in an emphatic gesture towards the Southern Cross. A faint breeze dances along the branches. The leaves shiver and still.

'We will tame this place,' he says. 'Make it safe. It is unfortunate that these creatures, gentle enough, must feed our sport. They know no better than to tear the livelihood from our grasslands, cutting out the cattle for whom it is intended, come bounding from the scrub we have allotted them, when we could hunt them on fair terms, on their own terrain, give them a fighting chance, as we would elk or deer or pig. They are opportunists, marauders. I toast Queen Victoria and her British Empire, and you, my worthy hunters, for your energy and courage during this successful foray — at least one hundred pesky kangaroos felled — meat for the dogs and for us all.'

His voice carries clearly across the yard until he is interrupted by cockatoos. The men drink quickly; Edwin refills their glasses and, Rosanna sees, turns his body to swig sly and quick from the bottle. The actor angles his face in the moonlight. He has spied Rosanna retreating towards the stable doors. Even from this distance she feels his deliberate gaze, and remembers his mouth on hers. She slips into the shadows of the stables, from where she observes Mr Ashby drawing her father and Edwin aside. Edwin ropes two dead roos to the rumps of their horses. Surely they will not be required to finish the work at the pit tonight, covering the sticky flesh before the native cats and dogs arrive. Rosanna hears one howling now. Garrick squelches across the stable yard, carrying ropes. He will be smarting over the toasts.

He brays, 'Rosanna, are you there, *alannah*?'

'I am,' she calls back, as loud as she dares. A hand touches her skirt. She steps forward, brushing it down behind her.

'Edwin is skinning the good carcasses to sell at the port.'

'Fine then, I will be alright.' Mr Ashby will take half of the profits, she thinks, and burn the hides not worth huckstering.

'Stay where you are, until I come for you. Do not fall asleep.'

If she calls, 'Father, I will,' he will cock his head, uncertain, for Rosanna is rarely biddable. She waits, throwing uneasy glances into the darkness behind her.

Garrick forms a solid presence in the doorway, blocking out the moonlight. Can his eyes penetrate the darkness of the stables? 'What are you doing, girl? Show yourself.'

George Sutherland's fingers release hers. Little goosey bumps trill along her spine. Through the back door the actor has come, with such audacity.

'Whose fault is it that I am waiting and waiting, while men make such a display of killing that it makes the bile rise in my throat?' She will act, and well enough. But her father is not amused. She remembers that it is another slight to have a daughter speak this way in the vicinity of William Ashby. 'It is only Edwin that you care about or you would not send me here to take up a living.'

Rosanna smarts over her own stupidity. Reckless, she has uttered a truth. She rushes forward. 'I am tired, Father. Finish your work so that we may go.' Even if the little queen herself begs her for the sake of the Empire, she will not say sorry. Her father reaches out to strike her, hesitates. He wipes a weary arm across his brow and strides away.

'Why do you creep about like a bushranger?' she throws into the dark recesses of the stable.

'So Miss Rosanna Lynch, all the South-east of South Australia and half of Victoria knows your name, since your ride on Sunday.'

'Pft.' He is teasing her.

'What made you throw the race at MacDonnell Bay? It put your brother in a funk.'

'My brother cares only for the timing. It is none of your affair.'

The actor moves closer. Glancing up at the ceiling she notices that the little bat has gone — flapped into the night to feed. At a distance she can see her father leaning up against a horse's side, lifting its front hoof to examine it for stones. He picks with a sharp stick. As if sensing her surveillance, he turns his head, and Rosanna raises her hand to him before moving deeper into the darkened stable.

'You will bring the play tomorrow, while it is still light.'

'If I promise, will you show me the stallion you rode on Saturday?'

'Lucifer is Edwin's horse.'

The actor moves to a saddle bag slung from a peg and reaches in to lift out a sheaf of papers, which he rattles in front of her face. 'I will tease you with an extract.' He rolls out a line with great inflection and claps the pages against his chest.

She suppresses laughter. Are all actors like this, their voices dark and rich as molasses, their mannerisms so fey and affected? Rosanna feels self-conscious. 'Until now, I have never met an actor,' she says, by way of conversation.

He slaps the papers against his side in mock exasperation. 'You must have heard my name? I am well-known in Sydney and in Melbourne. I have worked most recently at the Albert Theatre in Geelong, with Mr Geoghegan the playwright of this play.'

Rosanna is inexplicably filled with longing, for what, she can't ascertain.

He puffs his chest out like a pigeon. '*The Hibernian Father* is to have a Melbourne run at the Princess Theatre.'

She reaches out to snatch some pages. The sheets are loose and covered in an elegant sloping script. Angling the title page she tries to decipher words in the moonlight spilling over the stable door. She feels his eyes on her face; his hands come creeping to her waist. He fiddles with her yellow sash and continues speaking about the play as if hands and minds are not connected. She struggles to control the papers slipping through her fingers until he takes them from her. He leans so hard against her that she feels a kind of pain. But when his mouth opens over hers it is more delicious than anything in a book.

'Has anyone told you that you are beautiful? They must have.'

'Everyone is beautiful, in their way. I don't like to be discoursing about it.'

'Last night I dreamt that you had the legs of an untried two year old at a St Patrick's Day race meeting,' he teases.

'I am not a horse,' she snorts.

'Rosanna,' Garrick's voice booms across the yard, like thunder cracking over the ridge behind the house.

She hurries forward, without a backward glance, repairing her hair and dress with one hand.

'Bring your things,' he calls. 'We are done here.'

He waits for her on horseback in the yard, preoccupied with Mr Gordon, who is reading a poem aloud in a monotonous voice. Rosanna takes her father's arm, and vaults up behind him. It is not the way she cares to ride, anymore, like a trusting child behind her father. The wind catches her hair. When the actor materialises from behind the stables, she ducks her head. Alert in the moonlight, Edwin walks his horse between his sister and the man, and subdues her wind-ruffled skirt with his crop. The

actor grins. Mr Gordon recites on and on to her father, head high, hand on his pommel; he seems arrested by the beauty of the words released in the moonlight. Impatient with poetry, Edwin walks his horse forward.

‘Wait,’ the actor calls. ‘I want a word with you.’ But Edwin ignores him and moves along the track. It will be about Lucifer, Rosanna reassures herself.

The poet tails off his recitation, closes the book, and nods to Father.

They canter along the boggy path beside the water’s edge, the moon bobbling on the surface like a Chinese lantern. Does God love her, after all? It is a new space Rosanna inhabits on a sunlit plateau, with a bigger sky opening out around her, the old dark chasms receding on either side. She looks back at the station, outlined in the moonlight. A pair of brown kestrels hover over the kangaroo pits. When she turns again, a large doe materialises waist-deep in the water, beating at her shoulders with her claws; drawing blood. Has she lost her baby? Rosanna curls against her father’s back.

‘I hope that you’ll get more sense working like a gin for Mrs Ashby,’ her father shouts. The horse slows as they bound through the shale at the crest of the ridge. Twenty yards in front of them, Edwin takes off on a mad gallop, roos’ legs slapping against his saddle. Garrick calls after him. ‘Watch out, or you’ll be losing your stirrups, man.’ Edwin’s careless laugh frightens a possum across the track, and Rosanna holds her breath as it skitters beneath the hoofs of Garrick’s horse. She waits for the crunch of gristle and bones; but somehow it emerges squealing on the other side, looking back at them with its aggrieved saucer eyes before darting up a tree. Edwin slows and turns his head, throwing murderous glances at his father.

‘I like working for Mrs Ashby. Could I keep a little money for myself?’ Rosanna asks. When Mrs Ashby takes back the lemon gown, she will need cloth for a new dress. She would never, not in a hundred years, have thought to meet an actor, and it is all because she is employed at the Big House. Jaysus and the little virgin; or, is it the grand wild women of Connaught, from Eilish’s stories, coming into play?

‘I’m not promising anything, when your own mother is making do in a cottage. But you can stay on for now, until we’ve saved enough for land of our own and quit your brother’s debts.’

It rankles with her that she is no more than a pawn in her father’s game. Edwin is lucky to be a man. He will call in his favours, as sure as God forgets her. At

least Father hasn't found out about them selling the bullock. But now everything has changed. She closes her eyes, reliving the moment of the actor's mouth on hers, his fingers at her wrist, his hand on her waist; she shudders with pleasure. Has she committed a mortal sin — worse than running away? She can hardly wait to return to the Big House.

XX: The Bath and the Goose

In the morning creeping fog blots out any memory of the heightened atmosphere of the night before and Rosanna feels cheated. She carries the coal bucket to the yard where Edwin and Garrick have finished skinning roos, jerking meat, and burning the remains of bodies in the pit. Some of the carcasses have been dragged by dogs. It is not a pretty sight. She scrubs muddy and bloody boot treads from the verandah, face averted from the stink of bodies. Skinned roos covered in flies, like clove-studded roasting meats, sway and creak from the verandah rafters of the outhouse. Each time Rosanna attends to chores outside, she feels her stomach turn, but she is buoyed by the memory of the actor's promise to read from the manuscript at dusk.

Edwin and Father wash their flensing knives in the creek and cover the kangaroo pelts with tea-tree branches then ride away to check on a shepherd camped near the Ellis's station boundary. They will remain at his hut for the night to rake the coals of his fire for ewe bones. It is rumored that he has taken to the drink and run off, leaving his sheep for dingoes. The following day they will count the remains of the flock and check them for coastal fever and ticks. Today Rosanna will ride home from the Big House alone.

The house guests set off for Gambierton on business and to partake of luncheon at the Farmer's Inn. Rosanna watches the horses gathered by the wagon at the lip of the ford. Overnight showers in the hills have caused a meagre channel to rise. Mr Ashby stomps about in the middle of the stream, water rushing past his thighs, as he determines its depth. He pronounces it safe by raising his hat and then strides out to lift his wife and baby into the cart. She looks fragile: kept awake half the night, she says, by the interminable howling of dogs. Beside her Mrs Brigstock nurses her own small boy. On horseback and in single file, George Sutherland, Mr Colyer, and Mr Brigstock follow the lurching cart through the water. Rosanna wonders if it may be presumptuous or familiar to wave them off.

Back at the house she wipes the dust from polished wooden surfaces, scrubs meat-encrusted pans, and washes breakfast dishes before replacing them on the dresser. She neatens the piles of books and papers on Mr Ashby's massive wooden desk and crushes inch ants between her duster-clad fingers as they climb an invisible sticky ladder up the side of his whiskey glass. Opening shutters, she removes the bodies of night insects from the sills, polishes the precious glass in casement windows, and folds linen drying on the racks beside the fire.

Meanwhile, water bubbles in the cauldron on the stove and Rosanna hums with happiness for she has half filled the hip bath with cool water from the lagoon behind the house. A plan is crystallising in her mind. Why should she wait for Mr George Sutherland to read the play? First, she will take a bath and then... she hardly dares to think upon it. She must be a fool to put everything at risk — for curiosity. God's truth, she can hardly imagine herself bold enough, to intrude on a gentleman's privacy — but after her work is done, she has half the afternoon to read at leisure. Why should she not read something that rightly belongs to her family?

First she will enjoy the hip bath. Dare she touch the lily of the valley perfumed soap she has seen on Mrs Ashby's washstand? Better to use the old soap chips rattling in the metal holder to stir some suds into the tub. Everything unfolds in an instant; each new decadence more exciting than the next. Should she not wash her mother's blouse, at the same time? But merciful Mary, Mother of God, she couldn't be getting about the house without her clothes. How would she confess such a thing to Father Woods?

The next thought comes easily, rolls into her consciousness like a soft cloud on a summer's day. Of course, she hadn't planned to be rifling in Mrs Ashby's Saratoga trunk, nor her huon-pine robe, her red hands touching scarves and ribbons, and fancy garments — flick, flick, flick — this way and that, drawing in the smells of French cologne, and dried lavender sewn into muslin bags hanging from brass hooks. It is womanish she feels, and no harm in that, she thinks, the moment before she plucks out a robe the colour of moss, and slips it on over her clothes, before the dressing table mirror.

She gazes at her dishevelled face and, for a pleasing novel moment, senses why she has drawn the eye of the actor: the dark wings of her hair scraped back from her high brow and braided and looped at the nape of her neck; her strong cheek

bones; her flushed lips. She pinches her cheeks. At last, she really exists. She is having adventures — not just mending and fetching and carrying like Little Dorrit in Mr Dickens' book, nor waiting, waiting like Feemy Macdermot. She dances along the passage, one hand unbuttoning her blouse, the other holding up Mrs Ashby's robe as she crosses the cobbled yard to the kitchen, where she has placed the hip bath beside the fire. After rinsing her mother's blouse, she hangs it over the rail of the cooker.

It is the grandest feeling, she decides, as she sinks deeper in the water, pulling up her knees to rock herself back and forth along the base of the tub, enjoying the warm trilling of the water around her legs and hips, the swirling around her shoulders. Racketing yellow-tailed black cockatoos rising from the gums behind the stables spoil her reverie. Has someone come? She straddles the edge of the tub, snatching up the green robe from the chair. Condensation covers one small window; the other is ajar. Dear God, it is the poet passing the window, an open book in his hand. He walks with his head thrust forward like an emu. He is ever so quiet. And now he approaches the kitchen, stumbling a little on the cobbles. Rosanna's heart hammers. Pulling the gown tight around her waist she calls out to him. 'I have had an accident with hot stew. I was forced to bathe.'

Indecisively, he steps inside. 'Did you burn yourself?'

'Please go away, Mr Gordon.'

'I would like some tea.' Light blue eyes fix on her; brown curls frame his face. Up close his face is gentle, lachrymose. He wears a blue shirt tucked into his corduroy breeches. Chafing his hands together, he stamps his knee-high Wellington boots on the hearth. 'I am a great admirer of your brother's horse.'

'Edwin won him at cards from a drunken shyster at Miss Lallah's.'

'Larking about on your brother's horse must be more enjoyable than working at the house. He stares into her face as if to fix her features in his mind. 'I had two sisters,' he says, and then recites with great intensity:

*For we have played in childhood there
Beneath the hawthorn bough,
And bent our knee in childish prayer
I cannot utter now!*

Had two sisters. Rosanna feels heartsick. It is rumoured that he has disgraced his family. 'I will make your tea.' She brushes past him to the hob to shake tea into a pannikan and fill his flask with water from the faucet. If he betrays her to Mrs Ashby, for taking a bath, they will surely not dismiss her while so desperate for help in the house? Has the actor bad-mouthed her but then she remembers that the poet is very sniffy about station people; thinks he is a cut above them. Once a pastoralist directed him to the workman's quarters and, for this slight, the poet rode away refusing to do business there again. This is one of the things Father likes about him, and the way he can hold his tongue for hours.

Returning to the door she points to pelicans drifting as solid as barges across the low sky towards the sea.

He cocks his head but is not to be distracted. 'Did you get a ragging from your brother when you flogged his horse off the course on Saturday?' Again he peers into her face. She feels his breath on the side of her neck, his arm pressing against hers. 'You look a strong girl. Are you industrious and sensible?'

She blushes, easing the door closed between them. 'I must do my work.' Is he, after all, a ladies man?

When he turns the corner of the kitchen outhouse and crosses the yard her thoughts return to the second part of her plan. The actor has forgotten her. She still has time. She slips along the passageway between the buildings to the boxroom, which have been set up with three makeshift bunk beds for the male guests. Only the Burkes of Portumna Castle have guest beds enough for large house parties. On the surface the room is neat. She carries the duster to the window and swishes it around the architrave, glancing out; beneath a tree the poet cradles his tea and stares off into the distance. Gathering her robe tightly around her waist, she tidies and straightens items on the box shelves — a mustachioed cup, a shaving brush — then pokes like a possum into saddle bags and boxes, seeking to identify their owners. Is it Mr Colyer who smokes the briar pipe, and if so, why has he left it behind? If not, perhaps it belongs to Mr Brigstock, who smokes but rarely. She is almost certain the slightly dandified and foppish embroidered vest belongs to George.

Where can it be? The search takes longer than she expects and she casts frequent frantic glances through the window to check that the poet has returned to lunging the mare. While patting down a coverlet she stubs her toe on a metal box and

lo, it contains the manuscript. She snatches it eagerly. Almost in the same moment, she hears a piercing shriek.

‘*Yaki yak!*’ Moorecke’s face appears at the open window.

Rosanna leaps to her feet. ‘Holy Mother of God, you’d scare the skin off a lizard. What are you doing here? Is there never to be peace?’

Moorecke lays a large bedraggled goose on the grass before springing through the window. Rosanna peers into the yard. The poet is using a long-handled whip to encourage the mare around the circle. Surely *Booandik* be wilder than Irish girls and twice as strong. ‘Not a word have I heard from Ashbys about that bullock, but Moorecke, you should leave soon for Curratum. The cold is coming: *koo-na-maa.*’

‘Pilfering from the bosses.’ Moorecke touches the green gown with her fingers and laughs.

‘What about the goose?’

Moorecke grins. ‘We can cook our goose together.’

‘You must be more careful. Think now, what happened to your mother.’ Rosanna’s eyes fill with tears. ‘Quickly, go home.’ She snatches at Moorecke’s hand and squeezes it. ‘You must not let the poet see you.’

‘Why, so cranky?’ Moorecke’s voice is soft. She pats Rosanna’s arm before swinging her long thin legs across the sill.

Rosanna waves; then makes a split-second decision to lift Act One, leaving behind the cast list and the bulk of the manuscript. George will never notice and, in the meantime, she and Skelly will copy the words by candlelight. Will he begrudge the last clean pages of his sketchbook? She must hurry. Running along the passageway to Mrs Ashby’s dressing room, she buttons her mother’s damp blouse. When she returns the gown to its hanging place, she delicately sniffs the underside of the sleeves — sweet enough — and tucks the manuscript inside her blouse.

Moorecke stands outside the open bedroom window ignoring Rosanna’s frantic waves. ‘*Winana yon*, I will not go.’ A smile haunts her broad face. Her luminous eyes stare back at Rosanna. She has tied the goose around her waist with dirty string.

‘Go *now*,’ Rosanna calls, leaning on the sill, then flies through the house checking every room on her way to the outbuildings. She places more logs in the kitchen stove, and closes it up; carries the bathwater to the straggly rose garden

beneath the bedroom window. Little birds start up, as they do when telegraphing snakes; geese and turkeys join in the chorus – dear God, Moorecke, do not be excessive. It would not make sense, carrying two heavy birds across the ridge. Something else must have set them shrieking.

A shadow darkens the window as she slips into the study. Rosanna leans over the sill to scan the yard. A cloud has covered the sun perhaps. She flips through papers on Mr Ashby's desk, but they are covered in palimpsest. Paper is awful expensive. On what can she copy the words that tell the Lynch's story? Almost certainly, Skelly will lend her *some* pages from his precious sketchbook; he loves her, does he not?

Rosanna runs to the stables. It will take longer to make her way home on Glorvina. Edwin is resting Lucifer again – no doubt just to spite her – dare she ride him tomorrow? What ever would become of him if a creditor came? Edwin, with all his money problems, would have to let him go. Canterng along the edge of the swamp she sees the poet riding slowly in the opposite direction along the track to Gambierton, body slumped over a book. Sour smoke from the Big House chimney hangs over the valley. Has she over-stacked the stove? She sniffs the air. The manuscript crackles against her skin as she moves. When she glances down she can see the edge of the pages frilling the neck of her blouse. Will the play be like books by Mr Dickens, in which the reader has to wade through words as dense and sweet as treacle, trying to make sense of them, all the while revelling in their richness? Her mind leaps from one thought to another, images appear, unaccounted for; she sees things, but doesn't see things: an echidna hurrying beside the track: a man and his son playing chess in a glade of oaks, and a woman screaming. Moorecke believes that the dream of a woman can bring sickness in a man.

Pounding hooves penetrate her reverie. Someone is following her. Who can it be? Miles away, Father and Edwin must be coming to the end of their day in the saddle; and the station party returns by the Gambierton road, from the other direction. But there is no one to be afraid of. South Australia is the most enlightened of colonies – hardly a convict or a bushranger; well, some old lags, on the lam from the east. Most camp on the boundaries of the runs – shepherding sheep – or live in rough shacks at the bay. She urges Glorvina on in the dusk light. Fierce wind scours the hilltop. Gulls flap inland, keeping ahead of black clouds building on the coast.

Behind her, the hooves beat louder. A branch cracks as she passes. She startles and shivers. Her mother's blouse cools against her back.

On reaching the summit she can safely gallop for several hundred yards, leave the track and plunge into unmapped scrub. Then she remembers that the caves lie just ahead. She will hide there until the stranger passes. She swings into a clearing and dismounts to listen, tying the mare's reins to the low branch of a tree. Will the rider look for Glorvina's veering tracks? If he finds her rider-less, he will know that someone hides close by.

Taking off her boots she scampers in her home-knitted socks leaving tracks invisible to a white man, across the clearing to the limestone outcrop which marks the entrance to the caves. Down she climbs between rocks the colour of kangaroo pelts, stained and smoothed by underground water, her heartbeats matching the whumping sound of leather and the heaving of a horse's sides as it labours up the slope. She scrambles the last few yards, flattening her back against the walls of the main chamber where she can observe the entrance. She tilts her face like a goanna at the point of a stick: shoulders squared, head thrust forward, eyes shrewd but not accepting.

XXI: The Actor Makes a Promise

The horse treads uneasily over the hollow ground, dislodging clods of earth that shower through the entrance. Rosanna clutches her throat, swallowing dust as she watches the lift and fall of fetlock, knee, hock, hoof. Horses and carts have disappeared through the collapsed ceilings of caves. Go, she prays, glaring out. She hugs the manuscript against her body. The chestnut, seventeen hands high perhaps, resents the evenhanded tug at the bit, the pebbles moving beneath its feet. It throws its head as it backs up.

The rider wears breeches and a black dress-coat and when he turns the horse to face the sea she cannot see his head, but there is something familiar in the way he holds himself, the impatient way he taps his whip against his legs. While he faces the downward path winding through the hillocks to Lynch's place Rosanna holds her breath and shrinks against the wall of the cave. Water drips on her hair.

'Rosanna,' the man calls. After all, it is a god, not a stranger, for he knows her name.

She concentrates on the voice: deep-timbred, penetrating, practised, with a small inflection. Her heart hiccups. It is almost certainly the actor, George. What should she do? ‘*Che shin?* Who is speaking?’ Her hands flutter at the edge of the manuscript. ‘I am in the cave.’ His horse dances sideways and throws its head in her direction. Rosanna, poat-like, pokes out her head as he dismounts.

The actor pleats his brow. ‘Where is your horse? Do you live near by?’

He asks too many questions. ‘No,’ she lies.

Knotted his reins over a branch he bounds into the cave.

‘Why not call out earlier? I heard you flying up the hill behind me and thought you were the devil incarnate, come to punish me.’

He places his hand upon her head as if she were a child and he an angel of the Lord. ‘I hear a guilty person speaking.’ He sweeps hair from her face. ‘Tell me how you discovered this cave.’

A shadow of regret crosses her eyes. Is it the cave that holds his interest? Will he tell the Brigstocks and Mr Colyer? The station people must know about it for she and Skelly have seen the evidence: a broken chair, an English flint, a kerchief. George places himself beside her – everything he does is deliberate, rehearsed – hands smoothing down his thighs, head swivelling in wonder at the stalactites and stalagmites, the cathedral ceiling, the gloomy offshoot passages, the glistening stream. Rosanna remains standing deciding whether she should leave. She focuses on the last column of sunlight, near the entrance, the shimmer of fast-moving wings above her head. ‘I am very late.’

He tugs at her arm and points at the ceiling. ‘What is all this scritch and flapping?’

‘Bats,’ she whispers, folding her arms across her chest. The manuscript rustles against her skin. The actor’s arm encircles her waist, his fingers move swiftly to the edges of the stolen pages.

‘Father Woods can tell you a great deal about the caves,’ Rosanna waffles. ‘He has published papers in Melbourne: “Observations on Metamorphic Rocks in South Australia”.’ She prates to cover the sound of the paper moving beneath the actor’s fingertips. It is guilt she suffers — he is quite correct — and something else.

‘Rosanna, you have starched your undergarments until they can stand without assistance in the corner of your sleeping quarters.’ He walks his fingers to the height of the paper. The pages slide smoothly past her breasts, before he lifts them clear.

Her eyes fill with tears. ‘It is a sinful thing I have done, but why did you not come at five o’clock, to the stables, to read the Lynch story with me?’ Oh, she is disingenuous. The actor inspects the rims of his fingernails and she reminds herself that he is pretty, but a pompous man.

‘Do you know that the author of this play made but one copy to submit to the colonial secretary, and then two others, for the actors. How would he view its loss?’

Rosanna quivers, then fires up. ‘And who is Mr Edward Geoghegan to be writing about Lynches? Who does the story belong to, if not to a Galway Lynch?’ She will lose her job, for sure.

He pulls her down beside him. ‘You are a little goose.’

Her heart palpitates again at the thought of the goose — Moorecke. She struggles forward. The actor reaches out to draw her back.

Rosanna resists. He holds the sheets of manuscript behind his back and leans over her, his mouth but an inch from her own. She concentrates on breathing smoothly.

‘You shall read the play, I give you my word,’ he murmurs.

‘I can take Act One then?’ She reaches behind him to gain purchase on the papers.

‘I’m afraid not. The play is to be performed in a month. How can I trust you now?’

She bites her lip in aggravation. Over his shoulder she sees the bats swarm through the entrance to the cave and leap into the dusk. It is warm outside; bark blows across the pathway. They will fly out for hours, perhaps until the early hours of the morning, feeding on the wing and returning to their young ones. She thinks of the tiny bones in the alcove. Caves have always held secrets, but will the actor, George, tell hers to Mrs Ashby? She has never thieved before.

‘What are you doing?’ Rosanna jerks her head up, as he levers her back on the smooth rock, his fingers working at the buttons on her mother’s blouse. He seems no longer angry about the manuscript. She is accustomed to the sharp smell of guano, but not to the full weight of a man’s body. She feels a frisson of fear. Her mother has told her about drunk and violent men. She is never to walk on the streets of Gambierton after dark; she is always to be careful at the bay; and when riding out she

must never lose sight of Edwin. But Eilish can't mean to save her from a man like George.

'Mr Sutherland, you would not hurt me?' Rosanna is reassured by the clever sweetness of his face, his pale skin beneath the clipped beard which tickles her throat. Had she ever been so clean that a man would want to run his tongue inside her waistband? He murmurs reassurances, steadying her body with one hand and pressing hair from her face with the other, as he hovers over her. When his mouth covers hers, sounds overwhelm her: water gurgling over the stones on the cave floor, his horse snuffling in the twilight, the *tenap, tenap* of a cuckoo of frogs deep in the chambers, the scuttling of native rats, the electricity of the bats.

'George. No. Do not be rough.' She reaches up to touch his eyelids; as if to remove herself from his sight. He presses her against the cold stone, hands and mouth placating her. A feeling resembling the yearning she has at first light — half irritation and dissatisfaction — tugs at her will. He strokes her in the place where she touches herself, feathering his fingers across her *fáel*-flaps; finding his way inside. At the same time he clamps his mouth over hers as if he is sucking her between his teeth. She is dragged by the tide, like a starfish from a rock pool. Her head tilts forward and she bucks against his *boddagh*. He pushes harder until she feels raw. When she gasps he takes her top lip between his teeth as if to transfer her pain and she strikes at his face with her elbow. He cannot know that he hurts her. She relents, loosening her legs, opening them wider to ease the pressure. His *thóin* moves as emphatically as Lucifer's straddling Glorvina on a sand hill. But he has not pushed his face into the stream of Rosanna's *fáel*, nor screamed with excitement when she finally accepts him. Preoccupied, he thrusts and thrusts until he sighs and flops his head onto her neck; then rolling aside he drops to kiss her knee. When he looks up at her his face is mournful, comic, as pink and beautiful as a girl's pinched for effect. He tugs a linen handkerchief from his pocket to wipe blood from his fingers and dew from his *bod*. Rosanna feels shamed by this fastidiousness. A gust of wind swirls through the cave attacking moist trails cooling on her legs. Why had Eilish not told her about this? It is better than the thought of dying. The actor must love her and she is only a girl.

'I will assist you to find your horse,' he says, as she leaps in a panic towards the entrance one hand on her skirt, the other in her hair. Bats swirl around them,

faster than the eye can see, zig zagging past their heads, swooping over the trees, their movement not the least like birds. She hears the flap and creak of their wings. A soft body dashes against her face, drops and rights itself. Even after the wicked thing she has done at the Big House, she is not in trouble. Rosanna touches her fingers to her face. Garrick and Edwin will have swagged down at the shepherd's hut. Only Eilish waits for her at home.

The moon is rising in the sky when Rosanna descends too quickly down the steep track to the house. She has not once turned her head to observe George cantering back along the ridge and over the other side. She feels damp and loose-limbed. She has had her way. Tomorrow, George has promised, they will read the play together. She rides with her face thrust up against the sky, using the back of her hand to wipe away tears brought about by bitter wind. She smells the sea. It must be a mortal sin she has committed but it doesn't feel important.

XXII: Duplicity Does Not Become Her

Brandishing a stick, Skelly takes her by surprise at the last bend in the track. Glorvina cat-jumps and spins around in fright.

Rosanna struggles to keep her seat. 'Skelly, what are you doing out here in the dark?'

'Eilish is asking the same question of you.'

Rosanna drops her head. 'Why are you limping then?'

'I ran out to wait for you and I fell.'

'Why do you always panic and crash about like an emu with a bullet in its backside? The Ashbys went to Gambierton. I awaited their return and I'm not so *very* late.'

'Let me on the horse. I have a terrible bruise on my knee.'

Rosanna flings out an arm and braces herself to help him climb up. 'Skelly, I missed you, *amadan*.' She closes her arms around him.

'That is so far from God's truth, Rosanna, you should be struck down. It is lucky Father Woods comes to administer the sacrament this Friday.'

Something heavy settles in the pit of her belly. Father Woods *cannot* know. She kisses the top of his head. 'What would I do without you?'

'Shut it, Rosanna. I'm sick to death of you all caterwauling over me.'

‘Well, that’s grand, and what if it were me that was doing the leaving — not you always threatening.’ She will beg the actor to take her away with him. He loves her half to death, already.

‘What about your job at the Big House, then?’

‘I can get another one of those. I have experience now.’

‘Moorecke has been looking for you. “Long time”, she said. I thought you must have fallen off Glorvina.’

‘God save Ireland. Hold your tongue.’

‘She has brought something to the house for you. Green stuff. Mother says it is silk.’

‘Did she leave it?’

‘The answer to that question would be no. She’s camped near the still, with Jack, and I smelled a good smell, like roasting bustard. It *is* the best place to camp, like Father says.’

‘Black or white or yellow ... everyone wants to camp in the best place, you daft thing. I’ll go to her. Tell Mother I am tending the horse, and sorry to have troubled her.’

She hobbles and waters Glorvina, stopping only briefly to kiss Lucifer’s nose and offer him a handful of chaff, before rushing through the scrub. Moorecke beckons Rosanna from a fallen tree beside her fire, patting a blackened hole in the underside.

‘Green bees?’ Rosanna squats beside her.

Moorecke laughs. ‘Pretty, like green bees.’ She curls her hand into the hole, easing out a bolt of filthy cloth.

‘May the holy virgin save me, for all my sins, is it Mrs Ashby’s robe covered in goose fat and feathers? Did you drag it along the ground behind you? Oh my *Croí*.’ Pray her mistress thinks that the robe has gone to God? Now she will lose her position. Her head swarms with terrible lies. Moorecke pirouettes, throwing the robe out from her shoulders like a broilga displays its wings, mimicking Rosanna’s pose in front of the dressing table mirror. She holds Rosanna’s gaze. ‘That Missa Ashby has plenty of clothes,’ she sing-songs.

‘Don’t speak like that. You sound like a minstrel.’ Moorecke has brought the gown to please her. Edwin will not be the only one to fear the policeman from

Gambierton and his bung bung. 'You watched me at the mirror?' Rosanna sighs. 'Where is Jack?'

'Bringing *kang ngaro* for his *mala*.'

'You have a feast already.'

'Take some for Skelly boy, the little booger.'

Rosanna hurries home clutching the grey and oily breast of the goose in a curl of bark.

Eilish waits in the doorway, arms folded, a small pannikin of tea in her hand. She wipes her apron over her face in great relief. 'What have you got there? You smell like a chimney-girl.'

'Bustard.'

Rosanna attempts to pass between her mother and the door, but Eilish catches her by the waist. She splays her fingers across her daughter's bodice and arches her eyebrows. 'Your blouse is damp and the bustard has a curious smell.'

Rosanna paves the way for the play. 'Did I mention yesterday that Mrs Ashby is awfully pleased that I can read and write? She may lend me some important documents to improve my mind.'

'She is a lonely woman, like me, with only her baby for company.' Eilish kisses Rosanna's cheek. 'Bring the documents home, and read them to us while we're raking a pot of tea. It will be a treat for Skelly and me. But now, I need your help. Make a steam bath for Hugh and rub some Holloway's ointment on his chest.'

'I'll help you too, Mother, I swear. I'll always love you.' The mention of love sends raw feelings surging through her. Does the actor really love her? She feels sweet and ginger, bleak and tender, all at once; her father must never know. She wets her mouth with spittle, tastes her breath, and it is changed.

XIII: Rosanna Plays her Part

The guests must have returned in great frivolity from their long luncheon in the town the previous day. Rosanna finds the evidence: empty bottles of porter, sticky glasses, dirty plates and musical sheets spread over the top of the piano. The Brigstocks and Mrs Ashby spend the day in their rooms.

Rosanna is instructed in a note on the kitchen table to bring sandwiches and coffee at five o'clock. At three she sees the Brigstock child and his father walking along the edge of the swamp. Soon after that Mr Brigstock and Mr Colyer play

backgammon at a round card table they have carried beneath trees in the garden. The small boy falls asleep on his father's coat. If only propriety would allow her to ask one of them, 'And where might Mr Sutherland be, sir?' She thinks she may have glimpsed him smoking with Mr Ashby in the gun room, but the door stays ominously closed. Surely he will come before she bites off all her fingernails.

Apart from the occasional cry of the Ashby baby, not a sound emanates from the north wing of the house while Rosanna makes pastry, washes dishes and folds linen on the scrubbed pine table, all the while keeping an eye on the kitchen clock. At five minutes before the hour of five she taps on the bedroom door with a tray. 'I am going to the stables, Mrs Ashby, to wait for my Father.'

'Is everything alright? There is no disturbance?'

'No, ma'am.' Rosanna has seen her mother sit bolt upright in the dead quiet of the afternoon, prepared to defend her babies against God knows what. Living on the edge of civilisation unsettles everyone. Mrs Ashby seems half-glad to see her and she struggles from the bed, fastening her robe around her body as she crosses the room.

'Come in. I have something. A little paste and glass brooch for the neck of your blouse.' She upends a silk drawstring bag on the dressing table, pursing her lips and cocking her head like a curious parrot. Mrs Ashby is indecisive in all her dealings with Rosanna. On the one hand, she is only a young woman with a baby and in need of her maid's assistance. On the other, she looks half afraid as she shakes out precious jewellery, perhaps remembering that she employs an Irish girl not to be trusted with anything.

'Turn your back.' Mrs Ashby's lips flex and purse. 'You are lucky, Rosanna, to remain in the care of your family.'

'I am, ma'am.'

'My father is unwell. I was loath to leave him when I married Mr Ashby.'

'You must write and tell him to pay you a visit.'

'I fear not, ever. He is too frail to leave Hobart Town. Turn again. Hold out your hand.'

Rosanna swings around to face her. 'I am sorry about your father. Thank you for the brooch.'

On the way to the stables, she fears that the actor will not come, is convinced he will not; but he is already ensconced, leaning up against the door of the tack room,

a cheroot dangling from his fingers. Full throated unselfconscious, he throws lines of script into the musty room, pausing only to draw in fragrant smoke. She has not seen him the entire day. He feigns surprise at her arrival. Filled with delicious dread, she fingers the new brooch in her fingers. What does *she* know about a man touching a young lady? Will he speak of what happened in the cave?

‘Such a face, Miss Rosanna.’

She moves away, blushing. Seating herself on a barrel she opens *Little Dorrit* lent to her by Father Woods. She is suspicious that he has borrowed the book from the Adelaide Lending Library for the purpose of instruction. Little Dorrit is very humble, a much better girl than Rosanna, and takes great care of her father in the debtor’s prison. For the life of her Rosanna cannot understand why the girl doesn’t run away. It makes no sense in a book, when Mr Dickens could allow her to do anything he wished.

‘I am not crabbity at all. You rehearse the play?’

‘Indeed, those harsh and dutiful words with which I greeted you belong to the Lynch father.’ He lifts his boot, twists it at an angle like an Irish dancer, and extinguishes his cheroot.

‘The Lynch father sounds so pompous? Is he a weak thing, then...?’

‘Pray no.’ George angles his head to make a more expansive ‘o’ of his mouth. ‘Some Galway people consider him a hero. A paragon of moral conviction.’

The actor strides towards her as if she has displeased him. Disconcerted she returns the book to her cloth bag. He drops the manuscript onto her lap.

‘I can’t read this,’ she flusters. ‘Not while you stand so close.’

‘And you went to all the trouble of bringing Mr Dickens’ book. It is no great shame, not to read, when living on the edge of civilization.’

‘I can read, you ignoramus.’ How bold she feels lifting the manuscript from his fingers and marching to the tack room, where she spreads the pages over the wooden bench on which her father sometimes works repairing leather or greasing saddles. The actor follows her like a dairy cat. She lifts a slush lamp from the shelf behind the door. He takes a flint box from his pocket, fusses with the lint and cotton, teasing it up with his fingers. She hears the sharp nick-nick-sound of his flintlock. The flame flutters into life, emitting a fatty smell.

'*The Hibernian Father* in three acts.' Her finger travels across the page and stabs down a cast of characters: Walter Lynch, a wealthy merchant and Warden of Galway; Oscar Lynch, his son; they are the important ones.

The actor observes, seemingly amused as she devours the words.

'Oscar Lynch. You take his part?' she snaps the question.

'Certainly.'

'And the magistrate — the father?'

'Mr Geoghegan pines for his dear friend, Mr Nesbitt, who was famous for the role in Sydney. Like me, Nesbitt was an extraordinary judge of horseflesh, with a preference for Irish fillies.'

Rosanna pouts. 'So he will play the Lynch father?'

'Sadly no — he died in Geelong before the Melbourne production could be brokered. Mr Geoghegan says that Nesbitt made his reputation dying on the stage, and at the racetrack. He was a great tragedian and made the magistrate famous.'

'Tragedy, please not that.' It is unsettling, him always speaking in riddles. 'I shall read on; I must.'

'Read from the beginning, for you cannot understand the full tragedy of the Lynches unless you know the historical background. Read, while you can,' the actor says, leaning up against the door.

'Oh.' Rosanna sucks in her breath. He would not take it from her now. She places the first page behind the others and reads aloud: *Scene 1: A mountain pass with views of a sea cave.* Well, it is not Lough Derg, nor our village. A sea cave, how wonderful. How grand. Bearnard speaks first. Bearnard, and who is Bearnard?' She turns back to the cast list. '*Bearnard is a pirate*', she reads, '*a confederate of Rupert D'Arcy. Rupert D'Arcy is a pirate disguised as Father Oswald.* You know this already, for you have been practising your part. But it is confusing.'

The actor grins, places his hand on a feed bin and hoists himself upon it, brandishing his crop snatched hastily from a peg. He menaces her with his prop, taking on the visage of a grimacing pirate. '*On a mountain pass overlooking the sea cave, I plot revenge on Walter Lynch.*' He laughs at her.

It is infectious. She laughs back. How handsome he looks. She tidies Mrs Ashby's yellow dress. Does he love her enough that she can read the play whenever she wishes? She reads the pirate's lines:

*I am Rupert D'Arcy the last descendent of
A race whose name spread terror through the land
An outcast wanderer...a ruined man...*

'Oh he is fearsome. And what reason can there be for all his misery? Can it be famine times?' Rosanna picks up a stick and points at George, as if to place *him* in the dock.

'Were you to ask him, Irish maid, he would say that the scoundrel, who vanquished his father's vessel, slaughtered his crew and sent him to a pirate's death, was none other than Magistrate Lynch.'

Rosanna turns back to the actor, her eyes dark with terror. 'Will he kill the Lynch father?'

George leaps from the feed bin brandishing his crop, whipping the air in front of him, until he brings the tip to rest below her chin:

*I would not take his life – but would I fairst
Rob him of Galway and of fair repute.*

'He will then, I know it.' She pushes at the crop. Rosanna tastes the actor's breath; he smells of apples and tobacco. Time slows. Nothing is real: not Lynches in a story; not an actor from Melbourne fingering the folds of a borrowed dress, lifting the hem to stroke her legs, long and strong from years of running in the bush with Moorecke; not the wicked things he whispers as he eases off her shoe and kneads the arch of her foot like Mother might a ball of dough when she is pensive. Rosanna curls her foot around his thumb and bucks against the wall, where he has pressed her, raising her right knee. She knocks her head. Tears fill her eyes and he kisses them away, increasing the pressure on her foot. He kisses her with great deliberation taking up her lips as if lifting whelks from a shell. She does not like to look at him, preferring to hide her face. Does she look like the idiots of Woodford: liquid streaming from their mouths, eyes rolling one without the other? She drops her head to mouth tiny ginger hairs lacing the inside of his wrist. He has not pinioned her below the tack hook. Her legs clutch his waist as Hugh might hers, or Blinnie. When he snatches her fingers and places them inside his breeches she feels alarm but his skin is soft — softer than the skin of her *cíochanna* — and warm. She touches the tip of his *boddagh* with trepidation, as she might approach a small sea creature that

twitches and trembles beneath her fingers, oozing silky liquid. He sighs and shivers. She hunkers down over a familiar ache in her lower back that she remembers from the aggravating few days before she bleeds, when she can't keep her fingers from her *fâel*-flaps. The iron and grit smell on his fingers passing over her cheekbones and into her hair belongs to her. She savours it, crooning, pushing her chin into his shoulder. Then he lifts his *bod* inside her — pressing, pressing — into the beautiful aching part of herself. He jolts inside her and then subsides. Jesus, Mary and Joseph; she begins to cry.

XIV: Strict Impartiality Reigns

‘George, do let us read on...the manuscript... a pirate dressed as a priest and plotting against a Lynch. What a grand story. I’m dying to know what happens.’

‘It seems that you have not forgotten it even with all my soothing.’

‘Nothing soothes injustice.’

‘You’re no pirate’s doxy, Rosanna.’

What has she done? She straightens her gown.

The actor reads at a pace through the next scene in which the people of Galway celebrate the Lynch father’s election as warden, with a banquet in the Town Hall. Rosanna feels transported. ‘It is wonderful eloquent you are with your actor’s voice – quite changed. I doubt that I should trust you.’ Would Mr Trollope say that passion always prevails and that she has fallen into vice. But he does not understand the importance of the play.

‘It is your decision. You are the mistress of your destiny.’

Rosanna hesitates.

‘Let us read on,’ he says, ‘and I will decide if I can trust *you*.’

‘George, if you only knew me better.’

‘It is my ambition to do so.’

Rosanna rests her hand on his. ‘What happens now, in the play?’ she says.

‘Act one, Scene four: a ship arrives at the port of Galway.’

‘A ship...’ Rosanna seats herself upon a stool, placing her gown carefully. ‘Who is on this ship?’ She enters the spirit of the game; it is surely harmless. She can hardly wait to relate it all to Skelly.

‘Oscar Lynch returns from Spain, accompanied by his Spanish friend, Alonzo.’ The actor raises his eyebrows, his face comic.

‘*Huzzah.*’ She claps. ‘Commence.’

‘Oscar is melancholy, his spirits much depressed.’ The manuscript lies at the actor’s feet. He glances down, and finds his place, ready to speak again.

‘George, could I be following Oscar Lynch’s words, while you recite them into the air?’

‘You may be my prompt, and more beautiful than any other from whom I have accepted correction.’

He is funning her. Grinning like a loon he swoops up the pages and proffers them to her. It is all play to him. ‘Better still. Let us take the parts together. You must be the voice of Anastasia affianced to Oscar Lynch.’

Rosanna bites her lip. She is not sure that she wishes to play Anastasia. George’s fingers trail down her nape. She shivers. It is a prideful thing she has done, offering to read. Lynches are proud people, Mother says. They bow their heads to no one, even God, to their shame. Her eyes dart towards the door. Dusk gathers. Her father’s horse can not be far away and they have read little enough of the play.

‘In this scene Oscar Lynch returns from business in Spain. His father awaits him on the shore. I will play the magistrate’. The actor stands tall, using his thumbs to outline an imaginary regal garment, swirling it out behind him before placing one hand upon her shoulders. ‘He is *miadh*. What is that, Rosanna?’

‘*Miadh* is most awful sad. Is he sore with longing for his son?’

‘Indeed, he must be. Beside the magistrate stands his ward, Anastasia.’

‘They are both in danger?’

‘Neither one more than the other. The Lynch father is the newly elected Warden of Galway. He is plump with pride.’

She thinks back on quarrels with her father. ‘Lynches stand by their kin, who are the source of their pride. It is a matter of survival. The father will support his son to the death.’ She slants an uneasy smile at the actor.

George glances away. ‘You have it in a nutshell, but I shall not spoil the surprise. Do you suppose that on disembarking, Oscar will pluck a kiss from Anastasia?’

‘Has he done such a thing before?’

George leans over Rosanna and takes her bottom lip between his teeth. She leans away to take a ragged breath. ‘If it is in the play, I may play it.’

The actor laughs and plumps himself up, fingers at his fob, face set in an arrogant sneer. Rosanna thinks him beautiful, terrifying. She imagines him on stage.

He bows. ‘I am Walter Lynch, Warden of Galway, exchanging confidence with Anastasia, about a dispatch from my son.’

‘The Lynch father is fond of her?’

‘Fond enough. Anastasia is his ward and Oscar’s childhood playmate. The magistrate is gratified by the mature affection she has developed for his son.’ George lifts Rosanna’s chin, in a paternal way. ‘Their new love is *exceeding* convenient.’

‘How does Anastasia respond, then? It is my turn to speak back, to take her part.’

‘Speak then, lo.’ He points to her place on the page.

‘*To Oscar...*’ After all, Rosanna likes the sound of her voice, quavering in the musty stable air. It reminds her of the times she reads aloud for Father Woods, but more exhilarating.

George softens his stern warden face to play the role of guardian. Rosanna reads Anastasia’s part and arrives at *simple Irish maid* stumbling and blushing. The actor throws back his head and takes up the gruff voice of the Lynch statesman:

*And, as the guardian of my country’s laws
I will as zealously discharge the truth
As their unspotted purity demands
Within our courts, corruption ne’er shall stalk.
But strict impartiality shall reign.*

‘What is his meaning?’

‘He will favour none, not even his son.’ The actor puffs out his chest and resumes the magistrate’s voice:

*I have enough the Roman father in me
Though, in the effort did my heart strings crack*

To seal his doom and lead him to the scaffold.

‘Oh no, he will not. For he is not a Roman father, but an Irish one, and he will stand by his son. Oscar is his *only* son?’

‘So I believe. No others are mentioned.’

‘Why does he call on Romans? Do they not protect their sons?’

‘He alludes to Brutus, a Roman consul who, in antiquity, slew his son.’

‘In Shakespeare’s play?’

‘Shakespeare’s Brutus was also interested in murder and justice but no, it was the elder Brutus. You know Shakespeare?’

‘Is it as Mr Shakespeare’s fool you are casting me, in your superior melodrama?’

He strokes her face, his brow knitted in mock contrition. ‘Believe you a father should place his principles before his child’s survival?’

Rosanna shakes her head.

‘There are plays within plays, as you may well know.’

He is wonderful, astounding and magnificent: brighter than a cockatiel. If only he will stay long enough for her to know the whole play.

‘You must come with me to Melbourne. What a fine actress you will be.’ George touches the tip of his tongue on the salt skin below her lashes.

He makes fun of a colonial girl. Everything is sugar-coated. But Melbourne — her heart skips.

When she hears the sudden thump and jingle of horses and men in the yard, she pushes him away. ‘George,’ she whispers. ‘Will you not allow me to take these pages home and read them with my brother?’

‘After yesterday, I am a fool to consider such a thing. I should have you dismissed... If I allow you one scene to share with your brother, you must promise never to trespass on my privacy again.’

There is something clever about the actor’s lines. Fear trickles through her veins, and cautious optimism. She blushes. Perhaps he *is* a fool. ‘I promise.’

‘In any event we will play the scene again, tomorrow. Go quickly now, or the Lynch father and son will take leads in a different play.’ He passes her several pages. ‘Place them beneath the stable lantern, the moment you arrive tomorrow.’ She rushes

from the tackroom, feigning a yawn when she catches her father's eye, and bends to pluck straw from the hem of her skirt.

'Rosanna.'

'Here father. I am waiting, waiting.'

XV: Sons and their Duties

Rosanna has secrets now, perhaps as many as Edwin. Good luck stalks the pair of them, ignoring Skelly. In the twilight he can just make out the silhouettes of his brother and sister racketing into the yard. Edwin runs with Rosanna's bridle towards the pond and she follows, snatching it back and holding the reins over her head.

Father yells, 'Stop your fooling, the pair of you, now. I'll not have decent leather spoiled for your nonsense.'

Edwin swoops to pull her down by her dress, tugs at her hair. He gives up the bridle and flings it onto the grass, then lifts her around the waist to dangle her legs over the water. Rosanna shrieks. Eventually, they come laughing and gabbing through the door.

'Skelly darlin', I missed you.' His sister tries to catch his eye. He turns his face away. It is all about luck.

After supper Edwin and Father take the newspaper and their pipes to the verandah and Skelly follows. Father reads about the war in Europe. As soon as he can Skelly will enlist. The army will not treat him like a cripple.

Edwin acts so confident. 'If my business doesn't profit I'll take myself off to war. Then I'll invest my wages in something grand.' He looks raffish, his long legs resting on the water barrel, dark hair curled over his collar.

'I will come with you,' Skelly interjects, and Edwin cuffs him.

Aggravated sucking on his pipe makes Father's speech sound sloppy and careless. His nose is red with drink. 'Irish boys have always run off to fight other people's wars. It is a mark of their desperation.'

'The Irish have a reputation for soldiery. I could be a hero. Bring home medals,' says Edwin.

'Who would you save?'

'Go away with you, Father, there's action everywhere in Europe. And talk of a volunteer fighting force from South Australia.'

'I was once offered a commission with the British Army.'

‘And what happened?’

‘I took a chance on forty-five pounds a year and rations here. Honest labour. You earn good money here. If you weren’t so careless losing it at Lallah’s you’d have your bullocks by now.’

‘You only know about slog. I’m planning a different life.’

‘Gambling eats profits. Don’t come to me for loans. Your mother and I have saved seven years for land.’

‘If the bullocks don’t give me a start, I might import cases of Kinahan’s Dublin whiskey. Or port, champagne, claret, colonial wine, brandy, rum, gin and gineva.’

Father holds out his newspaper. ‘Land is the only way to get ahead. Listen — ‘the following leases of Waste Lands of the Crown are being offered for sale in lots of twenty-two square miles, in the Hundred of MacDonnell — Surveyor General’s Office.’

Edwin takes it from him. ‘Skelly darling, listen to this. Moffat’s Vegetable Life Medicines: for flatulence and foulness of the complexion ... Shall I order some for you?’

‘*Pog mo thóin.*’ Skelly carries his sketchbook inside in a huff. Seated at the table, he takes a cloth parcel from his pocket, from which he unwraps the dessicated body of a bat. He manipulates the limbs, tests joints where the wing bends like a hinge. He strokes its tiny head and the seamed underside of the wing and begins to sketch the bat in sections. So many bats have died in the drought.

Rosanna slides in beside him. ‘You’ve been to the cave,’ she whispers. ‘Mother won’t be happy.’

He looks up from his sketch of the bat, turns the shrivelled body in his hand, and stares into its eyes. ‘If I had not come back, she wouldn’t know now,’ he snaps at his sister.

‘Darling, can you help me? I brought home a wonderful surprise.’

He wants to resist her wheedling voice. ‘Is it a secret, then?’

‘Well it might be. I was hoping, Skelly, that you would allow me a page or two of your sketch book.’

He curves his arm around it.

‘Don’t be sour. Where did you find the bat?’ She strokes it lovingly. ‘They’re quiet now, for the winter. Only a few coming and going for food.’

‘A hole opened up behind the cave. I almost fell in. The little bat flew into my hand and died.’

Rosanna turns the bat over. ‘Sad. Skelly, the actor, George Sutherland, has allowed me the privilege of reading a play. You’d never guess what it is about: Lynches from Galway! George plays the part of the Lynch son.’

‘Are you sure he isn’t skiting so you’ll kiss him?’

‘Please don’t say that in front of Eilish. Look. I have two pages of the playscript, to share with you.’

Skelly scuffs the floor with his foot.

‘Spare me a page or two of your precious book. I’m sure Father Woods would not want you to act so mean.’ She pinches him, sly. Reaching across his body she flicks the pages in an idle way until she lights upon the picture in which the trunk and branches of the buloke tree frame the page. ‘I knew you were there that day, amongst the leaves – hiding, watching — quieter than the Blacks.’ She moves her fingers across the shaded pond swarming now with creatures. She lingers.

Does she see?

She flicks over the next page, clicking her tongue. ‘What does Father Woods say about your perspective — the little animals and giant birds?’ She takes the pencil from him. ‘How can you draw with that? It’s stubbier than a koala’s nose. You’ll smudge your work.’

He snatches it back. ‘I’ll scrape the point with Edwin’s knife.’

‘Oh no, you’re not to. Why risk cutting your finger when your sister, who loves you, wants to do it for you?’

‘Give it back; I’ll do it myself.’ The first mistake he made was to trust his sister. Always treating him like a cripple or a baby. Nothing has been the same since she began riding to the Big House. He is caught: one hand clutching the bat, the other hopelessly lunging for his book and pencil. Something snaps inside him and he reaches further across the table, and strikes her face hard with the flat of his hand. Rosanna’s head snaps back against the dresser. Her mouth falls open. Her hand cradles her cheek. To his horror the sound has resounded through the house. He

drops the bat, picks up his book and pencil and dashes outside. Darkness swallows him.

Father bellows from the verandah, 'Eilish. Is this progress in the evening — fighting and screeching? The boy should go to bed.'

And Mother retorts from the babies' beds, 'We're not so poor that we cannot afford a candle or two or some sperm oil to light a lamp. Your youngest son needs society in the evenings, just like you and Edwin.' Within minutes she flows across the back step and tracks Skelly to where he sits shoulders hunched, head in his hands, beside the pit. 'You must apologise, of course.'

Through his fingers he sees that she is severe, arms folded; her face creased with tiredness and worry.

'Rosanna, bring a quart pot of tea for your brother and me,' Father calls from the verandah.

Skelly creeps in the rear door and slides back onto his seat. In the lantern light he can see the red mark on her face, moist now from carrying tea. Straightening a page of the manuscript he begins in tiny script to transfer the words from the play to the last half a dozen blank pages of his sketchbook. He will not apologise. She should him show more respect.

Rosanna allows armed truce; desperate she seems to copy the manuscript. 'Fancy, a Lynch story, a Galway one at that, and we were never told.'

'Difficult it is to read, in parts, with the ink fading.' Skelly's voice breaks.

'Better if you know it well, like George. His eyes are not troubled by it.'

'George?' He fixes her with a rude stare. She has bruises on her neck. 'I never heard of a warden.'

'Nor I, apart from the warden in Trollope, a fusty old church man — not at all gorgeous like Father Woods. In this story he is a magistrate.'

'*Or* George,' he mimics her voice. He will see what Father Woods thinks about *George*. 'The Lynch man will be quite important to the story.'

'Heavens, he must be. The play is named for him.'

Skelly's head hangs over the page. 'They are on the cliff top, watching the boat arrive from Spain. What is the warden saying to his friend Mr Blake?'

Rosanna reads with him. 'That they are too old to care about women.'

'Have they wives?'

‘I haven’t read that far yet. There is only Anastasia, who is to marry Oscar Lynch, the warden’s son.’

‘Are you craving a wedding?’

‘I never thought about it,’ she says; her face looks shifty. ‘I’ll speak to Father about organising a few head of cattle, a hundred guineas, and two feather beds.’

Skelly bunts his head against hers. ‘I was wrong to slap you.’

‘Perhaps I forgive you. Now read on. A priest bursts in on the wedding crying out to all assembled that Oscar may not marry Anastasia. And imagine it. The priest is a pirate in disguise, seeking vengeance on the Lynches.’

‘Let me read it. Don’t spoil everything. How could it be?’

‘He is accused of murdering his friend, Alonzo.’ Rosanna licks her lips.

‘Murder and he is a Lynch.’ Subdued, Skelly reads on. ‘Anastasia expects him to defend himself. But he cannot. Oscar confesses his guilt. Can he really be a murderer?’ He is aghast.

‘Oh,’ Rosanna’s eyes fill with tears. ‘*The scorpions of remorse* — is that not beautiful? Imagine them scorpions stinging his heart.’ She leans back in her chair.

Skelly reads and copies by candlelight. He ponders what she leaves out when she talks about the play — apart from the bruises on her shoulders. ‘It is a foolish play, Rosanna. He wouldn’t have done the crime in the first place, but if he did, the family would all go to the Loughrea assizes and defend him in their own tongue.’

‘His mother would run to the public house and raise a crowd.’

‘Or hire a sharp-tongued Galway lawyer to get him off.’

Rosanna eases herself from the table, appearing to calculate his mood. ‘Will you copy the rest for me?’

‘Alright.’ Skelly bends to his task. Panicky thoughts break his concentration. The play is the most exciting thing that has happened this year — and the beginnings of a beard. Hair grows in other places too — bound to be the wrong places, for doesn’t he fail at everything. Edwin will soon leave to become a soldier and Rosanna will go to the gold. Skelly hopes that Father Woods will, one day, take him on as a geologist’s assistant — perhaps if he peaches on his sister.

When he finishes copying Act One he packs up his work, blows out the candle and trails to sit on the edge of the bed beside his mother. She sits upright and grasps his hand. ‘You have apologised to your sister? Everything is fine?’

He hangs his head. 'Edwin is leaving to be a soldier.'

'Garrick will not allow it.'

'It is true that he was not in agreeance but Edwin does what he wants.'

'Let me tell you a story about your father becoming a soldier. It is one of the reasons we came here.'

Skelly nods in the dark, although she cannot see him.

'Back in Woodford the barracks kept Father busy blacksmithing from first light until dusk. Every day at noontime I carried him a plate of food. One day I arrived at the forge in a slurry of mud and when I stooped to scrape my shoes I heard men laughing. Through the doorway I could see the heads and shoulders of the barracks' soldiers, their arms resting on the stalls. All of a sudden, one of them threw a coin upon the ground. Garrick was working on a horse's upturned hoof and his mouth was full of nails. *I* could see the temper in his expression. What a fool to let boys rankle him, I thought, for that's all they were; the tallest just the Tenpenny boy, flexing his young blade muscle. But you know what it means, Skelly, don't you — the throwing down of an English shilling?'

'How would I know? I have no use for them myself only to buy Wiggs' drawing books from hawkers for Rosanna to write her secrets in.'

Eilish pats his hand, refusing to be diverted. 'A soldier throwing down a shilling can mean only one thing. A call to arms, and me a widow.'

'Did Father pick up the shilling?'

'The answer to that question would be no. If he did it would be a contract. And I would have lost him to the British Army. Off he would have gone to fight in foreign wars. All because a soldier from the barracks, who had nothing more useful to do than intimidate a working man, threw down a coin. Your father is stubborn and proud, which mostly leads him into trouble, but in this case it saved him.'

'What happened?'

'He went on with his smithing. I kicked the goose off my grave and elbowed past the soldiers with bread and cheddar for his midday meal. He dropped the mare's foreleg and smiled at me. "Keep your coin," he said to them. "It is honour enough to shoe your horses."'

'Father was clever to praise them like that.'

‘I prayed to the Blessed Virgin that he would not cause offence. Then I tried to throw them off the scent. “There has been an eviction, have you not heard,” I said. “Take yourself quickly down to the cottages near Blanket Bog, before murder is done.”’

‘And did you make that up?’

‘It was one of the blessings of running an inn that I heard about everyone’s misfortunes. A runty little fellow with a splash of red hair and face whiter than a ghost with the measles nodded to the others. He said, “We’ll need a drink by dark, Eilish.” And he winked.’

‘What did you reply?’

‘I said, “I’m sure my husband will need a drop as well. It will be my pleasure to wait on the lot of you.” I held your father with a look that would stone a hare dead at ten paces. Off to the well I would go in the morning to tie rags around the tree trunk of the largest oak if they let him be. And they did.’

‘Why then did we leave Ireland?’

‘The thing was still not finished. Every night they congregated below our window. But that is another story. Now off to sleep with you. Leave it to your father to stop your brother getting himself killed on the other side of the world and perhaps you didn’t hear all the details.’

‘What about my sister?’

‘Can we worry about her next month?’

‘You do not take me seriously.’

‘I take you *all* seriously. Kiss me goodnight. I hear your father coming down the path.’

XVI: A Melbourne Invitation

Bertram, the Brigstock child, has translucent skin like that of an albino. Rosanna has watched him standing stock-still in the yard, at a distance from his mother, completely covered in ants. Once she saw him running into the swamp as if he expected it to lift him up. He appears to have no sense. He will follow a dog outdoors and up the hill without a backward glance and yet is afraid to come to the table for his porridge.

It is burden enough to work in the kitchen without a child underfoot. She is surprised that Mrs Ashby will allow it but the truth is that she is desperate. Poorly or

not, Mrs Melvin Brigstock — although Rosanna has heard Mrs Ashby call her Olivia — has gone riding with her husband and George Sutherland, along the river. Today Rosanna feels sorry for her employer. Her face looks peaky, her eyes tired.

‘Have you seen my green silk peignoir? I was sure I hung it in the huon-pine robe.’

Rosanna lowers her eyes, and flushes. Can she mean the robe? So soon.

‘You must help me find it.’ Mrs Ashby places her hand at her throat, retracts it, and moves towards the door. ‘By the way, the day after tomorrow my husband and I have planned an excursion to Mount Schanck, a picnic. I will need your help. Wear the yellow dress and make sure your hair is braided tightly away from your face. Nothing is worse than tendrils falling into food. Eating outside will be tedious enough. Let us hope the weather holds.’

‘Yes, Mrs Ashby. Will a picnic be amusing?’ She is disinclined to be more gracious.

‘I dare say it will.’

Rosanna’s heart rises and falls. She has never been on a picnic. But she will be at the beck and call of all the houseguests, including George Sutherland. All day she feels on edge, deciding that perhaps the actor does not care for her at all. Well then, if he does not come at five o’clock, she will keep Act 1. What a fool he was to trust her. And Mr Edward Geoghegan will have an actor who knows but half the play.

For at least a quarter of an hour she waits ...*Oh Villain, Villain. Deceitful Smooth-tongued Villain* she casts at him, on his dishevelled and late arrival through the stable door.

He grins, as unrepentant as any boy. ‘You have uncovered the Lynch son’s crime?’

‘He did not commit it. Of that you can be sure. All will be revealed at the climax of the play.’

‘What and the ship crew in agreeance, and Gerald his faithful servant willing to testify against him: *He hath thrown his dear friend Velasquez, son of Spanish ... Overboard.*’

‘Oscar would never do such a thing. He is rich. His father is the warden. Anastasia loves him. It is not such a blighted life.’

‘Ah, but he is yet to be acquainted with her changed love, which has ripened into something more seductive than sisterly affection. Show me do, how she shall act to signify it.’ George roughly pushes up against her crushing the pages of the manuscript. ‘Kiss me that I might forget my saddle weariness and the prattle of Olivia Brigstock. Then we can rehearse until your father and amusing brother come.’

She sees that George is not all sweetness. ‘It is boisterous you sound and not sincere at all.’

‘It may be foolish to sacrifice my sensitivities for the manuscript, Rosanna. Are they not inextricably intertwined?’

She concedes this, one hand cupping the base of his skull. His neck smells of horses and sweat. She inhales again, nuzzling the soft skin beneath his beard. Unperturbed he smooths the flesh inside her pantaloons. So urgent his will, ear pressed against her own, head ducked over her shoulder, that he fails to guard his back. No one will come. Her hand moves beneath his shirt stroking his nipples in an agitated rhythm as if they have become her own, and he begins to rub against her like a horse against a tree, only half-attending. He curves his hands around her *thóin* and she rocks her hips against him. If a coach comes by she will get on without him. But he makes room with his fingers for the rest of him and plunges into her. Her hands curl like a suckling babe, her mouth loosens and falls open and she makes little sounds like Hugh sucking at his mother’s breast — until she feels she has expelled her insides. Even love is ridden at a gallop now.

George buttons his breeches and worries his fingers through his hair. ‘Such tedious telegrams I receive from Edward Geoghegan. Now he is in lather about backers. He asks too much. I cannot rush back to Melbourne before I have concluded my business here. And he is always unwell.’

‘When I am an actress I will meet the famous man.’

‘Oh he is not so famous. With his disreputable background, I am sure that he would like an Irish girl like you.’

Rosanna scowls at him. Love-making does not bring out the best in him. ‘Let us act then.’

‘I doubt that you are acting, but have your way. We may as well rehearse. Let us read on to where Oscar is as good as dead clapped in his father’s dungeon.’

‘A father will not lock up his son?’ She settles huffily on a box beside the chaff barrel, one eye on the door.

The actor sits beside her. ‘The warden is a man of honour. Justice is his first love.’

‘There is nothing just, in that. It must be the pirate’s doing. Is he still dressed as priest, the black devil?’

‘He is well pleased with events.’ The actor straightens his jacket and settles his collar.

‘Like you.’

‘It is love, Rosanna, I feel for you.’

‘Oh, you sound perfunctory.’ She looks sideways at him. Does he mean it? Can it be true, after all his rudeness? If only she had not read the *Macdermots of Ballycloran*. She kisses him. ‘Read on, George.’

He stops to lick his fingers and thumb back pages. ‘Act Three, Scene 3: the Oratory.’

‘What is Oratory? Speech?’

‘It is the family chapel. Anastasia speaks to her maid servant. She is much cast down.’

Rosanna takes up the page. ‘Worried she should be, if *all is melancholy, dark and drear*. She has felt this way before, I swear.’

‘Like Mr Geoghegan, you have some understanding.’ Pensively, he rests his hand upon her arm. ‘Listen again. She is hopeful still: *And imagery of a fearful dream, from which yet I may wake to happiness.*’

Rosanna lifts her face to his. ‘Oscar’s sadness has infected her. It is natural to feel a loved one’s pain.’

‘But she is serious about wishing she were dead.’

‘Why do you say so?’

‘Mouth the words, Rosanna. Mouth them sweet.’

Rosanna trembles as she reads. The words cut deep inside her. She has felt like this but not for love, for lack of it:

*Oh Heaven in Mercy snatch me from a life
Where nought for me exists but misery
Despairing wretched days and hopeless nights.*

‘The Lynch boy has caused this storm in her but he must be suffering more. Perhaps Mr Geoghegan’s unhappiness infects the play.’ She places her hand against her belly. Being with George makes it churn so.

‘He bucks against the law.’ He takes back the pages and rifles through for evidence of Oscar’s moods. ‘On the voyage back to Galway Alonzo, his beloved friend, bears witness to his mercurial shifts of temper:

*But ere five days had lapsed, the former grew
Reserved and sullen, and his spirits lost
Their wanted buoyancy. Absorbed in thought*

‘He began the voyage with an unhappy countenance,’ Rosanna interjects. ‘A disastrous event overtakes him, does it not?’

‘It is not explained, merely that he is despondent, increasingly absorbed in thought. He *frequently would pace the vessel’s deck with moody sadness traced upon his brow.*

‘Oh it is a terrible feeling, when it strikes. Only Moorecke helps me.’ This irony puzzles her for *Booandik* lives seem harder compared to Lynches’ in Galway or the colonies. Rosanna stands and moves towards the door, her face pleated with sympathy.

‘Moorecke?’

‘It matters not who. Except that she is dear to me. What does the narrator of the play say about Oscar’s misery?’

‘It is his older companion, Gerald, who relates the events on board.’

‘And so? Proceed?’

‘Read for yourself.’

Rosanna returns to her seat ‘*And when at times...*’ she stumbles over the words.

*‘... at times, his eye would rest upon,
The unconscious object of his vengeful thoughts
His angry glance would kindle to a glare
Of settled hatred.*

...jealousy...unconscious thoughts, George! He cannot be faulted for thoughts springing from within.’

‘They come from somewhere.’

‘Dreams perhaps.’

‘Mr Coleridge believes so. Oft loosed by the poppy. Unreliable. Read on. What think you now?’

‘A quarrel rose. Alonzo tries to placate his friend, Oscar. Oh no!’ Rosanna brings the page close to her lips in agitation:

*...Unawares, Oscar Alonzo seized
And hurled him headlong in the wild abyss
Of foaming ocean! Unperceived, I stood...*

Unawares note. He is in a dreamlike state, George.’

‘Yet Gerald describes his haughty spirits.’

‘Father is haughty but only, my mother would say, on his family’s behalf.’

‘We shall see what haughty fathers do for sons. Are you, Rosanna, haughty?’

He reaches over to touch her face, creased with irritation.

‘I am not,’ she cries, pulling away from him, moving again towards the door.

He grins and follows her, holding the pages out before her.

‘It is not such a Lynch trait,’ she says, ‘but I have seen it here at Ashby’s.’

Rosanna turns and skims the words. ‘His father will free him. Plead his case for clemency. It was an accident, a young man’s temper.’

‘What do you suppose to be the substance of their quarrel?’

‘It must be the girl, Anastasia.’

‘You would blame a girl.’

‘I would not *blame* a girl.’ She clasps the pages under her arm and climbs the crossbars of the stable door. ‘Tell me quickly. Does Anastasia mourn Alonzo, Oscar’s friend? I love this playing, but I am sick with fear,’ she throws behind her.

‘Read Anastasia’s words and all will be revealed.’

Withhold me not – for I myself will forth

E’en to the Council – in their sight I’ll kneel

Myself will be my Oscar’s advocate

Will plead for him with love’s persuasive tongue.

My Oscar. Mother would say as much.’ Rosanna sniffs. The sound of hooves startles her. Is Mr Colyer riding out again?

‘Rosanna,’ her father’s voice booms from the yard.

She jumps down in fright.

‘You must tell no one about reading the play,’ George whispers in her ear. ‘If any awkwardness should arise I shall say that I bring you letters for your brother who I have met on business at Miss Lallah’s.’

‘But you have not.’ She unfastens the stable door. George melts into the shadows. ‘Father, you bark louder than an owl. You startled me.’

‘What are you reading?’

‘Something the poet gave me.’ Oh fool, she thinks. Pray to God her father is in a hurry.

He loops the reins over his arm and leans against his horse’s flanks to lift her into the saddle.

‘Am I haughty, Father? She secretes Act Three under her plaid wrap.

‘Haughty. What kind of language are you speaking now — English language?’

‘Skelly taunts so,’ Rosanna cries. “‘Hoity-toity,” he says. ‘Where is Edwin?’

‘Edwin has business at MacDonnell Bay. He cut away through Benara and south. Take that look off your face or you’ll have people believing this haughty toity.’

Rosanna is satisfied that Edwin is once again at the centre of Garrick’s thoughts, God bless him, and that she is safe from interrogation. She leans her cheek against her father’s back and fingers her mouth. Her chin feels rough, abraded. Eilish must not see where the actor has rubbed his beard against her tender skin. She feels an urgent love for him despite his roughness. Will there be time before he leaves to finish the play? But now he has offered to take her with him. Has he not said that he loves her? What a fool she was to tell Skelly about him.

XVII: Go Be Damned

Skelly suspects the reason his mother twice sent him to the pond to draw water is because she wishes to speak privately with Father Woods — perhaps about the changes in Rosanna. He has not completely forgiven *her* and yet *he* did the slapping. No one cares about changes in Skelly. It is on his return from the pond the second time that Skelly sees his mother has been crying while relating the story of the shilling to the priest.

Skelly likes the way she uses voices to explain events as if they are scenes in Mr Geoghegan's play — this morning she has read two scenes with him.

'Every night the soldiers jostled beneath our window and I rose up like a *chailleach* to hex them through the curtain,' she tells the priest. 'A shilling! I told Garrick, "We'll not stay. I have money saved for a passage to Australia."'

"Who will run Walsh's now that your mother is dead?" Garrick asked.

"My mother worked until she couldn't get down the stairs to lift a bumper of claret, and my father, spared that horror, dropped dead in the bar, singing Ffion Murphy's song about the land wars. We've suffered enough. I'll be glad to let Thomas take the business off my hands," I said.

"I doubt that useless *scullog* of a brother'll be capable of it. He gets so drunk he doesn't know you."

"Well now, he'll have to. How can you talk at all, when you're barely speaking to those left in your own family?"

"I stood by Granny Spain."

"*Huzzah*, they've moved on now to the barracks."

Skelly is unsure of the point of Mother's dramatisation but the fact that she has been crying makes him think there must be one. He only vaguely remembers Uncle Thomas's tall stooped frame shuffling in a shiny suit along the passageway to the bar, and he doesn't remember Granny Spain at all.

Father Woods listens with a serious expression on his face, holding a skillicake in one hand and dandling Blinnie upon his knee.

'Go on, Eilish.'

'Garrick agreed that life was getting harder. Sure we wouldn't starve while there was food to buy, and we were luckier than many, but trouble has a way of brewing when some families go without. I asked him, "Did you hear talk in the bar about D'Arcy, Burke's agent?" and he replied, "I did so."

"Attacked and robbed driving his gig a mile from Loughrea. He could have been *kilt*."

"Good luck to them, I say...he deserved it."

Mother lifts Blinnie from the priest's arms and offers him a cloth to wipe his hands. 'I said to him, "*Thar*. I only remind you about the agent to warm your soul. You can make money enough to feed us, and take pride in your work, but

something's eating out your insides. Let Lord Clanricarde and his mother have their way. Every week more people leave for the colonies. I want to go, Garrick. I have put away the money."

"If you're set on it, I don't need *your* money because I have the offer of a situation with a Mr Ashby on a station in Gambierton, in the colony of South Australia. Forty-five pounds salary and rations o'er twelve months. He sent our passage."

Father Woods begins to nod as if he has placed together final pieces of a puzzle.

Mother carries on, acting out her sorrows. "What a sly thing you must be, Garrick Lynch — scheming away behind my back."

"Bite your tongue, woman, or I'll leave you behind. I'm a Protestant now."

"A Protestant, indeed." Eilish looks across at Father Woods.

Skelly wonders if *he* understands the implications of her confidence. Will the priest be angry? What will she say next? 'My children reared as Protestants — over my dead body.'

'Skelly.'

He starts.

'Bring one more bucket of water. I need to scrub the table after Father Woods rides on to Nelson.'

He lifts the bucket, straining as he moves away, to hear her last words.

'Garrick said, "I feel like one, in any case, with all this taking care not to spill my precious seed. Not a babe dropped in six years.'" Eilish lowers her voice until it is barely audible to Skelly. He sidles back a step and drops to take off his boot.

"Garrick, what is it you're blathering about?"

"If it is Protestants they need in South Australia, not Catholics, I'd not like to see them short of a man, when all it takes is the stroke of the quill."

"Never have I heard such bluff and blather. I cannot believe a Lynch would recant for a recruiting agent."

"We're Protestants on the application, and on the shipping documents."

"Widow Spain would be apoplectic."

‘How is a woman supposed to know what is going on inside a man’s head, when he always shuts her out?’ Eilish complains to Father Woods, ‘A Protestant indeed!’ She begins to cry again and he places an arm around her shoulders.

‘My husband came through twelve cruel years, his mother and sister dying of the cholera, his brothers buried, his father too broken down to apply when they reopened the road works. In the end, Father, I found a pistol in the pocket of his coat,’ Eilish adds, ‘and a note saying *Go be Damned*. I was afraid he’d gone to the Whiteboys, the Ribbonmen of Sleive Aughty, or any one of those angry mobs roaming the countryside in the early hours of the morning, armed with pitchforks and spades and sticks. He denied it, of course. I did the best I could, Father. “A Protestant is not the worst thing I’ve been called,” I said to him.’

‘Eilish do not be distressed. You celebrated the Eucharist the moment Father Ryan welcomed you to Australia. And later, he baptised Hugh and Blinnie. Thank God and Our Lady for all your blessings. May all your enjoyments be innocent.’ The priest places his hand on Mother’s head and blesses her. ‘Skelly, hurry now for that water.’

Skelly moves away. Recanting must be a wicked sin. The priest will surely ask for penance. If Mother and Father are sinners, what about Rosanna? He makes up his mind that he will confide in Father Woods, who will deal with *her* far more harshly.

XVIII: A Scientific Expedition

Skelly bides his time. Father Woods is as curious as a newborn about the world. While they gather rock and fossil samples along the karst a heavy sky rolls overhead. Perhaps the storm will travel quickly and not linger until the next day to spoil the Big House picnic that Rosanna is in such a lather about. She has ridden away early to prepare more cakes and jellies but also, Skelly suspects, to avoid Father Woods.

‘Describe these tiny invertebrates for me, Skelly, and note their resting place.’ Father secures a page of his morocco notebook. Black coat flapping around his legs, silver hammer in hand, he examines shards of volcanic rock with his thumb. His leather sample bag lies at his feet. Silver and indigo lights spill through the clouds; lightning forks in the fringe of trees behind them.

‘We must hurry or we may be caught up in the storm.’

‘I can take you to the bat cave. It is only a short walk.’ He will show Father the bones and then talk about Rosanna.

The priests’s face lights up. ‘What a pleasure that will be and the storm is a passing one. See the clean sky beyond it.’

To Skelly’s satisfaction Father Woods caresses the cold smoothness of the stalactites, cups the dripping water and tastes it on his fingertips. He is full of wonder. Thunder rips open the sky. Pounding rain sends rivulets of water rushing over the lip of the hole, cascading over the roots of the trees buttressing the cave walls.

‘Last time I came here I was sick for days afterwards. I dreamed terrible hot dreams, that I was covered in blood and my clothes were saturated with it.’

‘I also dream about blood but Our Blessed Mother comforts me.’

‘Mother told me that the blood in *my* nightmares is true. When I was a baby, a linen-maker threw his drinking glass into my cradle and it shattered on my crown. She said that when I am sick, memories flood my mind with blood.’

Father Woods places his arm around Skelly’s shoulders. ‘Drink can be an evil thing. How cold it is below the Earth’s surface, Skelly.’ He shivers.

‘Come and see the bats. Last time I was here, it was hotter than the furnaces of hell.’ He crosses the main auditorium ducking through an archway into the second largest chamber. Father follows him, holding a handkerchief to his nose. The smell of guano is palpable. ‘Is it warm enough now for you, Father?’

‘It is very ripe.’

Skelly stoops to pick up a tiny body splayed across a rock. ‘This one has crashed. They do not like to fly low.’ Tenderly, he cradles it, fingering its woeful snouty mouth and pointy ears, its fine leather skin, outlining fine blood vessels from membranous wing to ankle. Candlelight illuminates the bat’s changing colouration: golden lights on the fur of its back; pink limbs and ear holes.

‘Look at the little ones, Skelly.’ The pups pulsate, their thin feet clinging to the limestone dome of the ceiling. A small white bat stands out like a cabbage moth against the dark fur of the bumping humming throng. ‘See how they pet the albino. He is curiously well accepted.’

Skelly strokes his specimen. ‘I don’t suppose babies know about colour. Father, it is fearful hot in here. I am sweating like a horse.’ He wipes his face with the back of his sleeve. ‘Rosanna loves this cave.’ He raises his voice over the din.

‘She should not come alone.’

‘Once she brought a houseguest here.’ He claps his hand across his mouth and looks away. Rosanna is not the only actor.

‘Do not further breach your sister’s confidence. I will talk to her. Perhaps I shall write her a letter about teaching little ones at my school,’ says Father sharply.

‘She cares for the actor at the Ashbys more than me. Will you ask her to confession?’

‘All in God’s time.’

Skelly feels guilty satisfaction.

‘Other people’s lives are never as simple as they seem. Think what a fine zoologist you are. You know the creatures of the caves, the ponds, the sky, and the bush around you. I could not wish a better assistant. How long will it be before these babies streak across the night sky, feeding on the wing?’

‘Perhaps they go now, riding on their Mother’s backs.’ Skelly laughs and the tension between them dissolves. ‘They grow quickly in a month or two.’ He strokes his specimen. He will sketch the parts and label them – phalanx, forearm, tibia, metacarpals and *penis* in English, as Father prefers. More than likely the priest will confront his sister. She will be sorry.

XIX: Secret Letters and Sin

All morning Rosanna has sole responsibility for the Brigstock child. It is the last day before the picnic. At ten o’clock she takes him by the hand to the stable yard to pet and feed coddly apples to the horses. Mrs Ashby weighs each request: afraid perhaps that a silly Irish girl is likely to run off in the middle of a chore, never to return. True enough, but at the moment it does not suit her. At dusk she hopes to read the play with the actor but has not set eyes on him the entire morning.

The boy lags and she coaxes him with scraps of pastry, eager to feel the sun on her face. He drags on her fingers, head down, picking his way behind her. As they cross the yard to the horses, he wipes his fingers, distractedly, on his silly frilly shirt. She will not pick him up. He is a solid child. Is it a new tooth making him so crabbity? By eleven o’clock he has fallen asleep in a dappled pool of sunshine on the chaise and Rosanna is once more unencumbered. She works on. After the dining room clock chimes twelve she hears voices in the yard and she makes her way to the window to see the actor returning from a ride with Mr and Mrs Brigstock.

Mrs Ashby has cheered a little and relates to Rosanna the many entertainments available in Hobart Town, and the perils of her journey to South Australia. She is excited about the picnic at the volcano. It is always diverting to have society, particularly in a place of scientific significance. Why, it is from the vantage of Mt Schanck that Mr Ashby and his father, awed by park-like heaths and lush stringy bark forests rolling to the sea, made the decision to purchase the lease for the station. She tells Rosanna about her plans for the picnic. The party will travel by spring cart and on horseback to the small crater at the base. Only the men will proceed on foot to the top of the volcano. ‘You will take care of my little man, Rosanna, and serve refreshments. If Mrs Brigstock is well enough to accompany us – Mrs Ashby raises her eyebrows and then retracts them – ‘and indeed, I hope she will be, for it is for her benefit and entertainment that the excursion is planned, you will have the care of Bertie, as well. Since her illness he has been difficult to quieten.’ Bertram sleeps on, serenely, fist in his mouth. Rosanna enjoys this irony and smiles, as she considers the plan. Mrs Ashby holds the small of her back and tentatively smiles back.

All this Rosanna hears, and more; Mrs Ashby’s tongue runs on at astonishing speed, while they roast mutton, beefsteak and shanks of kangaroo, assemble Scotch eggs and shortcrust pies, bake cakes and custards. Sent to the cellar with steaming victuals for their jaunt, covered with floury cloths, she is disconcerted to find it occupied.

‘It is not safe, Mr Sutherland.’ Rosanna sounds terse. Her voice reverberates around the room. Her face works in strange ways as if sinful thoughts have broken through her skin. It seems she cannot help but agree to almost anything he suggests. Has he lain in wait for her? Now Mrs Ashby calls a list of items over the ballustrade above them. Rosanna’s shaking hands shift earthenware bowls in pretence of searching for preserves. Fingers wet with spittle, he seeks her breasts inside her bodice, ducking his head over her shoulder to bite and fondle, moving at the same time against her *thóin* until the shelves rattle and she turns her head towards the staircase thinking that she might faint. He laughs as he sweeps up her skirts and manoeuvres her in clumsy fashion to the floor; she thrusts her tongue into his mouth to silence him. Life is no more than a game to men. Edwin acts the same with his fancy girl. Rosanna had once observed them partly screened by trees behind the store at the bay, wind whistling over any sounds the girl had made when he stooped to

burrow his head beneath her riding habit. But surely, George's feelings are excessive. Rosanna feels hot. Is her face red?

'What can be taking you so long, girl?' Mrs Ashby scrapes the rickety cellar gate across the stone steps.

Rosanna raises her head in fright. If only the baby will bawl.

George stares, unblinking into her eyes, as guileless as a goanna disturbed while feeding but then relents, kissing her breasts back into her bodice, pulling her onto her unsteady feet.

'Bring a jar of pickles and some cheddar', Mrs Ashby calls.

Will she descend? Rosanna twists away from George, brushing cobwebs and filth from her gown as she rises. She straightens her apron and rushes across the room to the wooden shelving to gather food and hurry, arms laden, up the stone staircase. When she glances back, she sees George gloomy as a ghoul in the darkness at the base.

Mrs Ashby sets her to work squeezing the juice of lemons into jugs of boiled water.

At five o'clock she waits and waits in the stables — prays to the man up there — fearing that George will not come to read the play after all.

'Miss Lynch, I have a letter for your brother,' he calls, unnaturally loud when he finally ducks beneath the lintels.

She hesitates, looks up; how strange that he has brought Mr Brigstock with him. She gathers up her shawl. 'A letter?' she hisses. 'My brother is working at another station.'

George passes her a note sealed with ruby wax. 'Remember our previous discussion about delivering this to your brother.' She holds out her hand to take the note. She had thought the letter no more than a ruse for their playing in the stables, but it is, after all, written and sealed. Their play reading will have to be cancelled.

'Come, George, we can bag a duck or two before dark,' begs Bertie's father appearing in the doorway.

'I shall be with you shortly, Melvin. Fetch some bread and wine to carry with us. The air is cooling rapidly.'

'Melvin...' A voice calls.

‘Go to your wife; I wish only to speak with Miss Lynch about the importance of delivering this letter to her brother.’

The man is torn. He hesitates and overturning his frustration hurries off.

‘How many acts and scenes are in your play,’ she bites. Saddled and tied to the hitching rail by the stable door, Glorvina lifts her feet against gusts of cold wind. Rosanna shivers.

George opens his mouth over hers, and holds her hard against the wall. The stone abrades her skin through her thin dress. She flattens out her back, then softens, and like a water snake moves her body in sections, to accommodate his fingers. He lifts her higher. He cannot get enough of her, it must be love.

‘Sir, Mr Brigstock may return.’ She curls over his head to whisper.

‘Do not fear, Rosanna. You may take the next scene with you, when you go.’

His chin rests on her head. She slides her hands inside the neck of his shirt. The feeling with George is not unlike drinking Father’s *potoín*. She wants to resist, most times, but once she feels it under her tongue, the smoky taste of it moves swiftly into her veins, and she is helpless, languid, laughing, not herself at all. It is as if she floats disconnected from her troubles but never for long enough, before guilt comes seeping in.

Rosanna slides down the wall. Straightens out her petticoat.

George disentangles himself. ‘I will check on Brigstock.’ He hurries away.

She is a bad girl that is certain but must not end up like Feemy Macdermot in her book — dead. Within minutes, George returns, bouncing his crop against his thigh. ‘Mr Brigstock is captive. William regales him with frontier tales, while Jane packs victuals and fetches a lantern for his hunting expedition. I swear he will be too terrified of Blacks and bunyips to depart.’

Rosanna rifles through the pages of the manuscript; her expression implores: ‘Act Three: Scene Four.’

‘Ah, the Council Chambers, where events of consequence transpire.’

‘George, do not forget your promise. You will take me with you, when you leave.’

‘It would be most unseemly.’

She raises her eyebrows. ‘Pish. I will ride out with you at break of dawn or fall of dusk.’

‘On Lucifer?’

‘It might be so.’

‘You *have* finished with the Lynch drama?’

Rosanna eyes him, speculatively. ‘We shall bring it with us.’ She holds his gaze. After all her criticism of Edwin, she gambles with his horse. ‘You are just like my brother — self-absorbed. I will not allow you to rile me. Who is present in the council chambers?’

‘Oscar and his father, attended by his friend, Blake.’ He stands beside her, crop under his arm, peering at the pages over her shoulder.

‘I know Blakes. It is a Galway name. How fares Oscar?’

The actor helps her find the page. ‘In anguish. He is crying out to God.’ George loosens his collar and throws back his head.

‘What then of his father? Does he not weep with him?’ Rosanna runs her finger down the page in great anxiety.

‘He is convinced that God has laid before him an insurmountable trial, but quite determined that he will do his duty.’

‘It is a Christian story. In the end, good will triumph.’ Her nervous smile belies her lack of conviction.

‘The father rocks his face in his hands. He grieves sorely.’

‘Oh...’ she croons, thinking of her father. ‘And he would, of course, the poor soul. Men can be so stupid? Do you suppose that the playwright’s father would be so confused? Read his words, now.’

‘How ungrateful you sound, saying such outrageous things.’

Rosanna blushes. George only half attends her. His interest lies in his own performance.

Enough proceed we with the case –And now

The father in the judge is wholly merged he recites.

‘No.’ Rosanna sucks in her breath. ‘Sure he abandons his son to the courts, but he is Irish. There is more to it, rest assured.’

‘Oscar confesses his morbid jealousy of Alonzo. On the homeward voyage, he has heard his sleeping friend call out Anastasia’s name. Rising in agony from his bed, he presses his dagger against Alonzo’s throat.’

‘But he does not kill him.’

‘It is but a brief reprieve.’

‘Oh the fool, when Anastasia loves *him*.’ Rosanna begins to pace, pages fluttering in her hand.

He tugs at her hand, smirking with satisfaction. ‘Oscar pleads guilty.’

Rosanna takes her hand to her mouth. ‘It is a troubling story.’

‘The warden’s friend begs him to retract his plea.’

‘The warden will listen to a friend,’ cries Rosanna.

‘Read for yourself.’

Rosanna holds the page up to the lighted doorway and skims the text. ‘It is all repentance, guilt, and *no* mercy. His son has one week to prepare for death. The Lynch father is torn between his love of justice and his son.’

George takes up the father’s part, breaking his voice in ghastly sympathy:

But yet remains one task to be fulfilled.

Support me heaven in this last dreadful struggle. He staggers across the stable floor pressing his hand to his heart.

‘George, it does not bode well. Tell me if the Lynch boy can be saved. You have read the whole; you have seen it played.’

‘Throw yourself at my feet and beg for mercy,’ he mocks. ‘This is what the play asks of Anastasia.’

Rosanna looks askance, calculating how many minutes of light remain. She must go.

‘I’ll not beg, George.’

‘Ahah! Then you have not loved.’ He ducks behind her, brandishing the page. ‘Read on, then. Take Anastasia’s part.’

She snatches at the page, and lifts her head assuming the attitude of an imaginary actress: *He is your son. You will surely kill me too.* Rosanna feels overwhelmed by admiration for Anastasia. ‘How bravely she acts, standing up to the Lynch father. She goads him:

Tis not Justice rules thy stubborn heart.

But reckless Stoicism – and haughty pride. I can hardly bear to read on.’

George lowers his lips to tease along her shoulder bones.

‘How can you be so distracted, when it is a young man’s life at stake?’ Rosanna stamps her feet and moves away.

‘Never fear, for Anastasia will enlist the assistance of the Viceroy. He is her father’s friend.’

Rosanna holds George at arm’s length. ‘I must go. Let me take Act Four Scene One, as well. It is not so long.’ Oh she pushes him, but God help her, he allows it now.

George does not demur while answering Mr Brigstock’s call from the yard.

‘I will await your brother’s reply tomorrow.’ He smiles benignly and lifts his hand. As if he is no more than one of Edwin’s horse cronies.

XX: Picnic at Mt Schanck

Rosanna is not afraid to make her way to the Big House alone. She has been sleepless with excitement about the picnic. The volcano looms in the distance, arresting pink rays scattering the plain. Swamp gums poke their twiggy fingers into the sky: gnarly-skinned hags up to their knees in water, peering through their dripping hair. Rosanna ducks cankerous boughs. The wind blows drifts of cobalt, splotches of grey, and banks of dirty wool-coloured clouds over her head to the sea.

It is a full three hours before the gay station party is on its way: women and babies on the cart, men on horseback. Mrs Ashby smiles at her husband as he converses with the men. Mrs Brigstock’s pale face peeps from her voluminous coat and hood. Rosanna balls her feet to grip the boards of the cart, one hand steadying the food hamper, the other on the Brigstock heir. Baby Ashby sleeps in a Moses basket at his mother’s feet. Happy in their separateness, the men throw courtesies at the cart, swinging their faces, back and forth, between the mountain and their companions. George makes reconnaissance forays, cantering ahead and back, eager and impatient. If only Rosanna were free to gallop across the plains with him. If only he would look at her as if she were a plate of cream instead of avoiding her gaze to pay compliments to the ladies. She feels the grit of his affection. He does not acknowledge her in station-company.

They follow cattle-crushed rutted trails to the mountain. The men shoot an emu running near the cart. The Brigstock heir, unsuitably dressed in velvet and soft-shoes, laughs with delight at the bedraggled body pulsing by the track. At the lower crater the men unpack hampers and boxes beneath the shea oaks. Mrs Ashby passes a canvas water bag amongst them. Rosanna uses a small branch to sweep clean a

picnic place and they spread rugs and cushions, onto which Mrs Brigstock subsides like a collapsing parasol. A fire is built for the blackened kettle. The men shade their eyes preparing to climb the steep path to the summit partly obscured by spindly wind-bent shea oaks clinging to the crater sides.

Bertram whines, softly tugging at his papa's breeches. 'Bertie go?'

His father brushes him off. 'Olivia, he must stay with you. Keep him, do. He'll not manage, and will be such a pest.'

'The maid, surely, may take him part the way.' Mrs Brigstock turns to Mrs Ashby. 'Do say she may, Jane.'

Rosanna turns her inscrutable face to her employer who bows her head. 'I will serve tea to the ladies until you return with Bertie.' His confidence has much improved, Rosanna thinks as she takes the child's hand. He pulls away from her as soon as he takes to the path in his ungainly way. George and the men are already striding away and soon it is only she and the child, following in their wake, their echoing voices winding up the steep incline until they become quite faint like the gurgle of a distant spring. Within a hundred yards, the boy breaks away from her, running up the grassy track pressed down by the men. Surprised, Rosanna tails him, intermittently calling his name. But soon he is well ahead of her and deaf to her calls. The path steepens and she lifts her skirt to hurry forward. Subsumed by guilt she glances frequently behind her. The dark eastern walls of the lower crater resemble the walls of a house, its roof long blown away into the big sky. The women have settled like cabbage moths beside the shining lake.

'Wait!' she calls, startled by a fall of stones above her. 'Stop at once or I'll take you back.' Her threats waft away on breezes sculpting the shea oaks. She wipes her brow. The little beast is as slippery as a water rat. How much trouble will afflict her if he slips and falls? She labours then, for several minutes, halting only to listen over the drone of insects, for Bertie's childish panting.

'Bertram,' she calls again. With some of Edwin's luck, just a wee drop, she will overtake her renegade without alerting the men. He will tire: such a weakly boy, to be cantering up a mountain, like a goat or a pony. Rosanna's yellow gown is drenched with perspiration; her heart beats like a bodhran at a wake. A formidable rock-face lies before her. Pigface flowers riot across its surface. At first she focuses on the solid and immediate: silver grass, igneous bubbles in the rock face — the

traces left by volcanic gas. She traces a whorl with her fingers, a pine-shaped hole; then she lifts herself forward over the dolomite rim of the crater. On the far side the men march around the rim like eager Lilliputians. Their voices have ebbed away. Singing and carrying flags, they should be. What if Bertie's little body lays splattered on the base? Holy Mother of God let him be safely perched on a ledge.

Her head spins when she finally looks down, searching the red rings like the contours of cut gum that encircle the unbroken walls of the crater. A wagtail aggravates a flock of swallows, resting on their tails and diving off, riding invisible currents over the startling void. Not a flutter of clothing. Father Woods and Skelly have long conversations about the Pleistocene period, when molten lava cooled forming the solid parts of the South-east landscape and great seas retreated leaving behind corals and small crustaceans. Moorecke has told Rosanna *Booandik* stories about giant *Craitbul's* cooking mound, for that is what *she* calls it. Now the volcano has taken a small boy. Rosanna sobs. May all the saints protect him.

What will Mrs Ashby say, about her deplorable state, her windblown hair, her dirty fingernails — and Bertram missing? A skink runs out of a rock crevice. It blinks and stares, slides away like mercury. Anchored by a hardy bush, she casts her eyes every which way, then past the north rim of the volcano. She shakes convulsively. If only she were in Gambierton boarding a coach for the goldfields. She thinks of people climbing in and out of the spring-fed cave by the policeman's hut, walking past Mr Crouch's store and the telegraph station — not one of them concerned about Bertie.

The men look up. The shadows of two kites suspended in the shimmering air darken the rockface; will Bertram Brigstock be their prey? Their black shoulders tilt as they glide in a wide arc away from the crater and towards the sea. She takes off her hat and waves it in the air. Oblivious, the men progress around the rocky rim; how absurd they look, like gambolling boys. Her knees quiver. Light-headed she turns away. Molten mud has risen up and taken Bertie. What a daft *gommach* she was to let him get away. Perhaps he failed to reach the summit and, playing along the western scarp, hurtled like a cannonball to the base. She shifts her gaze over chains of swamps and forests to the east, follows the fuzzy blue line of the ocean to the port. He cannot be far away.

Rushing down the mountain path, eyes darting left and right, she prays to the Blessed Virgin for the little *maneen*. Surely, she will find him and haul him back by his pudgy arm. She imagines a happy picnic reunion between mother and son; George selecting meat for her plate, whispering in her ear, ‘I saw a yellow bird upon the summit — too small to be a honeyeater — perhaps a wren or a European thrush.’

‘Cooee’, she cries at intervals, tearing aside tangled brushwood to clamber onto large rocks overlooking the lower crater — in vain. Breaking from the last stand of shea oaks, she pants towards Mrs Brigstock, who reclines against a mimosa.

‘Where is Bertram?’ Mrs Brigstock jerks upright. Then scrambles to her feet and taps her finger against Rosanna’s shoulder like a mother bird might an enemy. Within minutes of her screaming the men come running down the path. ‘Melvin, Bertie has disappeared.’

‘We must all search. The boy cannot have wandered far,’ his father says.

‘He ran ahead. I could not catch him,’ Rosanna cries.

‘You have been here, beside the water? He has not returned?’ asks George of the women.

At this new terrifying thought Mrs Brigstock swings her head towards the lower crater.

‘We will work our way up the path, fanning out at the sides,’ says Mr Colyer. ‘The Irish girl must retrace her footsteps.’

‘Oh poor, dear Olivia, do not grieve. He will be found, your lovely boy.’ Mrs Ashby holds her friend upright.

XXI: The Lost Child

At dusk they return to the house. Something terrible has befallen Bertie and it is all Rosanna’s fault. In the station yard, as stiff and proper as a coachman, George helps Mrs Ashby from the cart. Mr Brigstock half carries his wife in his arms. Mr Colyer sets off for Gambierton to raise a search party.

‘Go home, girl. There is nothing more you can do.’ Shamed, she jumps down. Mr Ashby has lost his hat. His face is sunburnt and distressed.

Rosanna canters back and forth in the scrub on the way to the volcano. She dare not follow Mr Brigstock and Mr Ashby, who have returned to the lower crater, where they will work their way to the summit one more time. Resigned to changing

feet, Glorvina trots left and right. Bertie could never walk so far. He must have fallen. The gloomy braying of the bittern will surely frighten him. The light is fading. A mile from Mount Schanck Glorvina stops dead and Rosanna is hurled onto her neck. Hand to her forehead, to block the last dazzling rays of the setting sun bouncing off the lagoons, she sees two figures walking along the shore: one tall, one small; one light, one dark. Moorecke has knotted a blanket around Bertram's shoulders. 'God, Mary and Patrick to you, and what are you doing with that child? His parents are distraught,' Rosanna barks at her.

Anger flashes like summer lightning across Moorecke's eyes, and she drops the child's hand. Bertie continues sucking at a piece of tuberous grass-tree root. She pushes against the small of his back, and begins to march away.

'Moorecke, I'm sorry. I was wrong. You took me by surprise. Where did you find him?'

'He walked a long way, poor *wunine-wunine*.'

'No, that's not correct. He has a mother.'

'He fell down tired in the swamp. I shook him and shook him. Make him cranky enough to cough up all the water.'

Bertie begins a soft whine, holding his arms up to Rosanna. Moorecke turns to lift the child into the saddle in front of her.

'It is a miracle you saw him. And he is alive. We must take him to his parents.'

The boy places his thumb in his mouth and curls into her body. Moorecke scans the horizon, her face hostile.

'Get up, behind me, please. You're wetter than an eel. We must take him back to the Big House and then go home.' Moorecke reluctantly clambers up beside her.

'Bertram you frightened us. How did you walk so far from the picnic? Now, Glorvina will be dancing a polka around the wombat holes, in the dark. All because of you. You don't care about *my* mother waiting at home, nor about Moorecke's killed by squatters.' The boy droops against her chest. A chill settles on their shoulders. When Rosanna sees the Big House chimney smoke she is filled with apprehension. Lantern lights bob along the path and she can faintly make out the shapes of horses and their riders. The boy whimpers as they canter down the slope to the house. 'Shush now, Glorvina is like a rocking chair. And it is all your fault.'

Mrs Ashby stands by the stable doors, a shotgun breeched against her shoulder. What is she waiting for — Red Indians with a ransom note? It is difficult to ascertain who is frightened *most*. Moorecke quivers. Rosanna imagines her friend's eyes widening with terror, her fingers twirling in her springy hair. Does the gun trigger terrible memories of running for her life through the bush — of her mother struck down from behind? It really is too much. These people. And this time Rosanna is to blame.

'Olivia, Bertie is back,' cries Mrs Ashby over her shoulder, holding the barrel steady. 'He is alive.'

Mrs Brigstock runs from the orchard. 'Jane, was he taken by the Blacks?'

Rosanna affects a composure she does not feel.

'Let him down. Let him approach his mother so she can be sure that he is unharmed,' orders Mrs Ashby. Rosanna turns Bertie's shoulders and lifts him free of the pommel. The boy runs to his mother and begins a terrible wailing. Uncertain, Mrs Ashby throws venomous looks at Rosanna and Moorecke. She lifts the gun. 'You, girl. I remember you,' she flings.

Rosanna feels as if something delicate has ruptured. If only *she* had found the boy. 'No, ma'am. Stop. Bertram walked into the swamp near the volcano. There's bound to be a story about following butterflies or hopping mice. It is lucky someone saved him when his lungs were full of water.' She backs Glorvina into the bit and swings her around.

'You know this black girl, then.'

Nails dig into Rosanna's hips. When she turns in reassurance, Moorecke's eyes remain fixed on white-faced herons wading serenely through pools of water in the yard. She will not speak to Mrs Ashby.

'We must go,' Rosanna says. 'My mother is home alone with little ones.'

Mrs Ashby gestures with the gun. 'First ride out to tell the men. Mr Ashby will want to speak with you, and with this girl, tomorrow, after the child has been examined by Doctor Wehl in Gambierton.' Jane Ashby is on her high horse.

'Light a fire behind the house and they will come,' Rosanna suggests. Her mistress will rush inside, take her own child into her arms and almost squeeze the life from him. She digs her heels hard into Glorvina, and they take off at a jolting trot. It seems an interminably long time before they see a rider cantering towards them. The

rising moon lights the shape of the dark monolith behind him. When Rosanna turns her head she sees that Jane Ashby has done as she has suggested. Flames dance behind the house. Smoke carries on the breeze. Mr Ashby has seen the fire and turned for home. She calls out to him over the wind riffling the surface of the swamp, 'The child is home, safe with his mother.'

'Thank God,' he answers in a rasping voice and uses the back of his hand to wipe away tears of relief. When he notices Moorecke, he stiffens.

She kicks Glorvina's belly.

He fires his gun in the air, three times, and two more riders arrive.

'The fire?'

'To get your attention,' Rosanna says, turning Glorvina in a tight circle around him. 'I cannot stay, sir.' At that moment he looks uncertain and then, buoyed by relief, he hauls at his horse's mouth and gallops towards the station. The men ride after him. There is no knowing what the station people will make of Bertie's rescue. Jane Ashby will think it one more trial to endure. At the very least, she will admonish Rosanna for losing a child and then for consorting with Blacks.

On the ride home, Moorecke is silent and unresponsive. Before they reach her camp she suddenly slides from the horse and, without saying goodbye, walks away in the opposite direction.

'Wait. Where are you going?' Rosanna calls.

'To catch wombat.'

'For your dinner?'

Moorecke nods, impassive.

'What were you doing by the mountain in the dark? Where was that old man, Jack?'

She hangs her head. 'We started a growling and then fighting. Jack hit me. I wanted to kill him and have his fat. The policeman in Gambierton gave me blankets and food. I stayed with our *druals* until late. But I came back.'

Rosanna extends her hand to touch her shoulders. 'It was grand that you saved the boy. Tell Jack you are a hero, when you take him his tucker.'

Moorecke shrugs. 'My *koonge* also lost. No more *moorongal*.'

Rosanna stares at her, swept by a sudden wave of comprehension. 'You lost your child in the cave?'

'*Yanang-a*. I am going.'

‘You did not pinch his nostrils?’

‘*Yaki yak.*’ Moorecke begins to slap in a fury at her thin dress. She shoves the horse’s neck away and turns on her heel. Screeching over her shoulder at Rosanna she turns back to thrash at the horse’s rump. Glorvina startles into an untidy trot.

Rosanna is immediately filled with self-loathing. She is worse than the Ashbys. Twice she has betrayed her friend. ‘I am sorry,’ she calls after her. ‘Please do not walk near the station tomorrow. It may not be safe.’

XXII: Snakes and Narrative Surprises

The light at the skillion is a welcome sight. Eilish waits tight-lipped on the doorstep. Creases in her face have deepened in the hot Australian sun.

‘Where have you been? You took your time,’ she says, before retreating behind the hessian curtain to put her little ones to bed.

Skelly looks pale, weighed down. Rosanna gulps mutton stew straight from the camp oven.

‘Why do you eat like that...?’

She swings her head in surprise. ‘Shut it. You don’t know what I have endured today.’

He flushes miserably.

‘If you ever betray my confidences I will beat you with a poker until you wish I had left you back in Woodford to drown in your own blood.’

‘Worse than *an cailleach*, you are. Father Woods wants you to make confession.’

‘Confession. I have been to the volcano. I have worked all day. The Brigstock child almost drowned. Moorecke is in trouble for saving his life. Why?’ Lately she feels older than Methuselah. Like Feemy she will ignore her priest’s advice. What would he know about love?

Skelly bites his lip, glancing uneasily in the direction of the bedroom where Eilish is singing an Irish song. ‘I sketched a beautiful snake.’

‘Well now, that is good, if you were careful.’ She wipes her hands on her dress and ladles water from the barrel. ‘Show me then.’

He opens his sketchbook to the page.

‘Holy Mary, Mother of God. Why did you place it beside the babies’ bed?’

‘They were not in the bed but down at the pond with Mother. I drew the snake as it passed me at the table. I heard a little sound, like a shiver.’

‘You could have been bitten.’

‘I did not shout out in case Blinnie or Hugh ran inside or it turned on me. I watched for an eternity until it passed.’

‘You drew it while you observed it?’ Rosanna slaps her forehead, her eyes wide with amazement.

‘Only a few strokes of the pencil. Then Mother came and took the pitchfork to it between the beds.’ Skelly’s face is damp and pink with shame. ‘How could I kill the thing — with my pencil?’ Now he looks close to tears.

‘You did right. Father said *you* should never kill a snake.’ Rosanna hugs him and strokes the hair at the back of his head.

He ducks away. ‘It is late for a brown snake.’

‘It is not and you know it. They move about, more than people think.’ Skelly should know this; he is bluffing. Rosanna decides not tell her mother about Bertie. Perhaps she may try to keep her home.

After the children fall asleep, the three sit close by the fire. Of late there has been sewing from the station and Eilish bends over her needle by lamplight. More and more, she has become fascinated with the play and her face lights up as Rosanna relates to them the developments in Act Three.

‘The Lynch father has cast his son into the dungeon,’ says Rosanna.

‘No!’ Eilish ceases sewing.

‘Skelly, let us take turnabout. I will first read and you write. The first scene of Act Four is set in a rocky place beside the riverside, in a cottage.’

‘Much like us.’ He laughs with deep pleasure. Skelly is growing tall and thin. His bony face more like a man’s every day. He must be relieved to be alive after his ordeal with the snake. Rosanna knows he looks forward so much to her homecomings that she wants to cut herself with guilt. Soon she will ride away with George and then where will Skelly be? Even the little ones will pass him by.

‘We need to purchase paper. I have four pages left.’

‘Write tiny, like the water snail.’

She begins to read aloud: *Alonzo appears...*

‘Alonzo!’ squeals Skelly. ‘He is the murdered Spanish friend, on whose death the whole play hinges?’

Rosanna checks the line. ‘By all the goats in Galway, it is so. Fancy Mr Geoghegan misleading us. There we were, worrying about a murder that has never happened.’

‘None but an Irishman could do it!’ says Eilish.

‘When Oscar pitches him overboard, Alonzo keeps his head above the water, struggles ashore and is rescued by a fisherman,’ adds Rosanna.

‘He is alive,’ says Skelly with satisfaction. ‘The play can end well, after all.’

‘Perhaps he is not himself, and he will die, all the same’ says Eilish. ‘Read the verse, Rosanna. We do not know for how long Alonzo has been waterlogged and sorrowful.’

Anastasia stood beside my couch, reads Rosanna. ‘Poor Alonzo has visions.’

‘He is raving mad,’ Eilish concludes. ‘I fear for him.’

‘Fear for the Lynch boy, Mother, if Alonzo does not live. In his dream, Anastasia calls on him to save the life of Oscar.’

‘I could not blame him if he does not wish to, and I am the mother of Lynches. After all, Oscar hurled him overboard. Read on Rosanna.’

‘The fisherman reveals to Alonzo that Oscar has confessed his murderous act,’ cries Skelly. And then, much cheered, ‘Huzzah, Alonzo wishes to go to Galway, straightways, and save his friend from the gallows.’

‘He is a good man, this Spaniard.’ Eilish rolls up the sleeve of Mrs Ashby’s gown and snaps off her Loughrea thread. ‘Your father’s mother was a Span. Common enough in Galway.’

‘The journey is to be a perilous one,’ cries Skelly, ‘descending along a craggy path to Galway town.’

They read and exclaim into the night until Eilish tires of reminding them of their beds and goes to lie with the little ones.

‘We must finish the scene, Skelly.’ Rosanna turns the page and crosses herself. ‘You read and I shall write more swiftly. The gloating and vengeful pirates plot to capture and kill Anastasia, who tramps the mountain paths, on her way to petition the Viceroy for a pardon for her lover. The pirate boasts that the beautiful Anastasia of *peerless charms* and *witching loveliness is in his power*. He is distracted from his vengeance on the warden.’

‘He will attack her, of course,’ calls Eilish from her sleeping place. ‘Mr Geoghegan has written a most exciting melodrama. Murderous pirates, fathers as hard as granite, mountain passes and evil priests — what would Father Woods think of it? We must use my sewing money to purchase more writing paper, Rosanna. When is the actor expected to leave the station?’

Can Eilish see Rosanna’s face bloom in the lamplight? What might she think of her daughter acting the part of Anastasia on a Melbourne stage? She turns her face from the lamp. Her voice catches, slows in the reading — refines itself. Tomorrow, she must find out from the actor how many scenes remain.

XXIII: Good Lynch Girls from *Graigh na Muilte Iarainn*

At ten o’clock she slides beneath her mother’s bedcovers and turns to face her, raised up on one arm.

‘Where is your brother?’

‘He finishes copying Act Three.’

‘He is fine?’

‘Oh Mother... I suppose so. I cannot stop thinking of the snake between the children’s beds. Tell me a story to calm me — the one about the week before your wedding.’

‘That old story?’

‘You know it is my favourite. About putting the *comedher* on Father.’

‘I made the *comedher* posy to enchant him. Do you think your mother would be so bold?’

‘I do not know how you met Father or if you knew him well.’ Rosanna wraps her arms around herself. Mother must never know.

‘God’s truth I do not remember where we met. We lived in the village. We knew each other.’

‘Tell me about the wedding. Do.’

‘You’re a good girl. I said that once to a soldier.’

‘That he was a girl?’

Eilish laughs and strokes Rosanna’s hair behind her ears. ‘That I was a good girl. Two of them stepped out of Barracks Lane, firearms on their shoulders. I knew

them both from the inn: the Connemara man bouncing on his bandy-knees; and the other, taller with a pock-scarred face and missing teeth.'

'What were you thinking?'

'I thought they might detain me.'

'Detain you like...'

'I was saved by the sound of gunshot which sent them running to their horses. "Hup," I heard and the drumming of their horses' hooves as they wheeled into Upperforge Road. I dared not turn my head to watch them crest the rise.'

'What did you do then, Mother?'

'I stepped along the street in the opposite direction, past the church where within a month I would marry Garrick Lynch – oh, but he was wild then; he could cant and gammer with the horse traders. Every night he drank with us at Walsh's. Every morning he was back at the forge, pumping the bellows and hammering iron.'

'Was he gorgeous then?'

Eilish laughs. 'Well, he was tall and dark, and strong for his scant rations. Praise God, a Galway man, with Norman and Spanish blood, coursing and cursing through his veins. When he bent to lift a glass of drink, his eyes bored into me. At the June Fair – after the Solemn Novena and nine rosaries – he swept me off my dancing feet as easily as he would an armload of birch twigs. Powerful I felt. It was one of the reasons I waited three long years for him, helping Granny Walsh in the bar. In famine years we village girls wed older.'

'So you ran away from the soldiers?'

'Up Barkhill I went armed with a blackthorn cudgel. On my way to Derrycrag Woods on the last Saturday in July. To pray for a peck of luck for my marriage.'

'I love the way you tell it. What happened to the soldiers?'

'I would face them soon enough. Once the banns were up, right and proper, there was no doubt where my loyalty lay — with a Woodford man.'

'I cannot marry a Woodford man.'

Eilish touches her daughter's cheek. 'On the way to the woods I heard a corncraic. Scarce they were, so it had to be lucky. I picked up my heels and ran through the blue-eyed grass to the Holy Well.'

‘Tell me about the flowers again, that you picked along the way. Not a banksia among them.’

‘I picked a grand posy: Sweet William from cracks in the dry stone walls, sword ferns and pink foxgloves from the glades, hyacinths and tiny daisies tangled beside the pathways and fuchsia from the hedgerows. The woods were beautiful — what was left of them.’

‘More beautiful than bush?’

‘Not so. I sat for a wee while by the shrine, sunshine at my back. I tidied my nosegay and sneezed a lot because the air was ripe with new-mown hay. Catkins landed on my head. Rooks cried from their oak nests. I heard the scuffle and slide of creatures in the grass, pine martens perhaps. I maybe thought about when Garrick laid me back in the fleabane and asked me to be his wife — after I put the *comedher* on him. I crossed myself and laid the posy at our Lady’s feet.’

‘What is a shrine again?’

‘A mound of consecrated stones. A statue. I said five pathers and five aves.’

‘Do you believe in magic, Mother?’

‘I do, and I believe in God and the Blessed Mother.’

‘And then you did the ritual?’

‘After I rucked up my petticoats and skirts and bunched them into my pantaloons.’

Rosanna laughs.

‘The skin on my shins was blue and battered from carrying pig buckets, but I was not prepared for the pain. Down onto my knees I went and crawled forward.’

‘I don’t like to hear about how you hurt your legs.’

‘Three times I crawled around the well my head full of prayer. At six times three, I muttered “God grant me good luck.” My knees were covered in nettle welts. At nine times three, blood was drenching my petticoats. I limped to the well to wet my skirt and squeeze cool water through my fingers. I moaned and cursed.’

‘Then the soldiers came.’

‘First I heard gunfire, perhaps deer hunters. I quickly turned my jacket inside out — for good luck. Four more shots rang out before I ran from the well, dodging branches, slipping and tripping in muddy badger holes, striding as well as I could with my poor sore knees towards the Mountshannon Road.’

‘I love this part.’

‘A horse exploded from the trees, thundered past me. Knocked me sideways. I got up and ran back into the woods.’

‘Soldiers?’

‘Only one. Riding low over the horse’s neck. He came crashing through the undergrowth and hauled on my arm as he overtook me. “Wait,” he said. It was the Connemara lad. “State your business,” he shouted. “I have been to the Holy Well,” I said.’

‘I would be so angry,’ whispers Rosanna, clasping her mother’s hand.

‘I was, of course. “Alone?” he shouted. I crossed myself. His eyes darted like birds scared from a hide. He was just a boy. I made up my mind to resist him. Up I stood, tall and steady as a dancer. Out of the woods I walked, towards the village. He did not bayonet me, the fresh-faced *spalpeen*.’

‘If only I could be so brave.’

““There are men meeting in the woods,” he called. “Swear on the Bible you were not with them?” I turned and faced him, his eyes still scanning the forest for torch-bearing scoundrels. “I am a good girl,” I called back. I would not be blamed for the flushing out. “Do I know you?” he shouted. “How should I know, unless I stir your punch at Walshs’?” I replied. It was a great relief to me when he turned away. I had diverted him long enough — for them to get away and their meeting to be abandoned? Perhaps they had a lookout and saw that I was safe. Perhaps they didn’t care two figs for me at all.’

‘For who to get away, Mother? I don’t remember this part.’

‘We never talk about secret societies. Garrick’s own grandfather watched from the top of the hill when the smoke and flames devoured Portumna Castle. When riders brought the news that the house of the Clanricarde was burnt to the ground, everyone in the village cheered. But I feared Garrick endangered our wedding plans, with his secret meetings.’

Rosanna pulls at her mother’s arm. ‘In my book, men in a secret society hack off a man’s foot with an axe. Why did you never tell me that Father was involved with them ... but the soldier let you pass?’

‘The answer to both questions would be yes. You’re a grown girl now. Behind the low stone wall on the far side of the river — do you remember it,

Rosanna? — the barracks loomed as gloomy as the winter coats of cattle. As I passed the gatepost I saw a splash of colour — a dusty bedraggled bird with beads of blood at its throat. Who would fling down a pheasant, unless their life was in danger? I picked it up and whisked it home through the back door.’

‘And where was Father during all this shemozzle? Why did he not take care of you?’

‘He arrived late to take his usual place at the bar with the old men who congregated in back rooms and doorways, and who stayed late in the woods. They came down to the village one at a time, passing the *Galway Tribune* from hand to hand. I enticed him with a plate of pheasant to the foundry gates in the yard behind the inn, and I snapped at him. “Were you in the woods at sunset?” He showed me a pamphlet, by way of explanation. “By the crass, Garrick,” I said. “You’d vex a saint. A fine marriage we’ll have with you cooling your heels at the barracks, or drawn and quartered in Galway town.”’

“If there was trouble in the woods,” he said, “I would melt into the Sleive Aughty Mountains. I’d toss my weapons into Lough Aterick on my way, and soon be over the border to a safe house in Clare.”

“And what if I told you that a soldier kissed me in the woods?” I said.’

‘Were you not afraid you would make him jealous or that he might chop off someone’s foot?’

‘Of course, your father *is* jealous.’

‘And what did he reply?’

“I’d fight him at the Loughrea Fair,” he said. “And I’d kill him.” He lifted an ingot and struck it down upon the foundry gates — throwing sparks, and making a fearful harsh high note. I took the plate from him and said: “He did not kiss me. I was only afraid for you.”’

‘And then on Saturday you wed?’ Rosanna searches for her mother’s hand beneath the covers and squeezes it. Dare she ask her father about Ribbonmen?

‘We did and one day, I’ll dance at *your* wedding.’ Her mother seizes her daughter’s face between her hands and fiercely kisses her.

‘Will you help me put a *comedher* on a man?’

‘I will not. Now hop step to your own corner.’

Sleep comes slow. Her mind darts from George to her father, to Moorecke and back again. Will the Brigstocks see sense in the morning and reward the *Booandik* girl for finding Bertie?

XXIV: Moorecke and Anastasia in Danger

Edwin arrives home in the morning, as grumpy as a bear. Rosanna watches him snatch up food and the actor's letter before he rushes away to the Suttons' station from where he will carry goods to the port. Father arrives minutes later, cursing his son for had not Edwin lit out for Miss Lallah's the night before, leaving him to roll out his bedding alone?

Rosanna works unsupervised at the Big House until midday when Mrs Ashby runs from the bedroom to the yard to greet Mr Brigstock and his wife, returned from Gambierton. Rosanna follows, holding out her arms to lift Bertram down and kiss his downy head. Mr Brigstock passes two brown paper packages and a wad of letters to his wife. The women duck their heads together, periodically glaring out at Rosanna, like native bees from a honey nest.

'What is Doctor Wehl's opinion?' Mrs Ashby asks. Mrs Brigstock withholds her reply until Rosanna carries her child away. Is the wee boy sick, after all? Has he taken swamp-water into his lungs, sucked in dreaded hydatid? Rosanna carries the mail to the diningroom table. The women retire. After several minutes she opens the door to offer tea. Mrs Ashby walks back and forth before the fireplace, her nose red and her eyes streaming. The Brigstocks look up from their conversation by the window.

'Please knock before entering a room,' Mrs Ashby scolds, inelegantly sniffing as she dabs at her forehead with *Eau de Cologne*. A curtsy seems politic and Rosanna does this hovering in the doorway. What can be wrong? Is Bertie dying? Her employer follows her to the kitchen to instruct her about cakes to serve with tea.

'Imagine if my child had been taken,' she says, tugging uncertainly at Rosanna's arm. 'It was only a matter of chance that he wasn't. Oh, I cannot rest easy after what has happened.'

Is Jane Ashby mad? 'Can Bertie be having a relapse? He looks so well.'

'The boy is fine. The doctor has given him a clean bill of health. You must care for William if I leave.'

Rosanna purses her lips over the chaotic conversation while arranging cups and plates on a tea tray. Has the woman been drinking?

Mrs Ashby leans into Rosanna's face. 'News has come by telegram that my father is gravely ill in Tasmania. In truth I cannot bear much longer to be alone in this dangerous place. I must go to him.' She has not recovered, she reminds Rosanna, from her dose of influenza, but she must put on a mask of gaiety until she farewells her houseguests. Then she must make preparations to leave as well, perhaps for several months. In despairing tones she describes her plans in detail.

Will George Sutherland leave as well? When will he make arrangements for Rosanna to follow him to Melbourne? Events unfold so quickly at the Big House. How will she read the last pages of the manuscript? Skelly must finish his transcription for Eilish to read, and for the little ones, when they grow older.

'I hope my departure does not bring William low, for he takes things very keenly. The money he owes his father for the land. The unreliability of labour. The scab and the sheep ticks. The Blacks — although now, there are fewer of them.' Her eyes bore into Rosanna's face. 'Oh.' Mrs Ashby dabs her handkerchief over her mouth as if she has been indiscreet.

Rosanna digests this.

'You must make this house a haven for my husband. But you will not go to the cellar alone, for I know how you Irish like to drink.'

'I'll take your husband with me to the cellar, ma'am,' Rosanna feels rage boiling up inside her, 'if that would suit you better.' She thinks of George and flushes.

Mrs Ashby takes the linen square to her brow and looks askance at her. 'Do not speak like that. I will return with at least two gowns, suitable clothes for you to wear in service.' She tweaks at Rosanna's blouse with distaste. 'You will do your best for Mr Ashby. Each evening, you will return home.'

Rosanna turns her back to spit into the teacup before passing it to her mistress.

'Mrs Brigstock tells me that she has seen the black girl in the town making a spectacle of herself in a green robe with gold embroidery; it was quite distinctive.'

Rosanna senses hysteria and tries to move away.

Mrs Ashby tugs at her skirt. ‘Would you not say, Rosanna, its description resembles that of my missing gown? The very thought of that girl touching my clothes...’ She turns her head to one side in distress.

‘I doubt it could be yours, ma’am. In the town.’ Her skin feels clammy and despite the heat, she shivers. She must warn Moorecke.

During the morning the station folk act tired and snappy. Bertie is confined to the house but no one speaks of Doctor Wehl’s assessment. Rosanna is caught up in the bustle and preparation for the impending journeys, washing and drying, listening to instructions about the household and advice about consorting with Blacks. After a late luncheon is served and cleared away, she is permitted to take her pick from the table-scrap, before feeding the rest to the poultry. Light rain falls. Mrs Ashby sneezes a great deal and dabs her nose with her scented handkerchief. When the ladies retire to the morning room, Rosanna takes her bowl of food to the stable. The actor has taken to leaving his manuscript in an iron box, two feet by two, in the tack room and she cannot resist stealing a few moments to copy Act Four: Scene Two. She has taken one last sheet of paper from Mr Ashby’s desk, it being an emergency.

Rosanna writes as quickly as she can. Anastasia is tramping through the mountains on her quest for a Vice-regal pardon which will save her fiancé’s life, when she is suddenly accosted and kidnapped by the wicked pirate, Rupert D’Arcy. Oscar Lynch’s life is more than ever in peril. And yet lo, hope comes from an unexpected quarter. The next scene opens with Oscar’s three young Galway friends plotting to storm the castle and rescue their friend — *Huzzah*. How frustrating to see their plans stymied by arguments about guilt and the law. She feels the magistrate father’s pain, but how can he be so cruelly intransigent, when the life of his son is at risk? How can a parent’s instincts be so confused?

Rosanna will trust in God, as Father Woods has taught her. The play will work out well, of course. Even in the books she reads, the authors try their best to terrify the readers. Plays are written to torment the emotions of the audience, following an unlikely sequence of events decided by a playwright. Mr Geoghegan would be a bleak Irishman to dash an audience’s need for resolution. As well as that, Lynches are lucky. Despite floods and fires and epidemics, vicious snakes and felonious lags, Eilish has never lost a child. Edwin has his carting business, and Garrick will have his land. Rosanna will become an actress. If not, or if she does not

fancy it, she will take care of George, who worships her skin, her teeth, her hair, her smile — other things as well — and is forever kissing her to death. He has never lied to her like Feemy's Captain Ussher in her novel.

She writes in tiny hand-cramping script, on and on, until her arm aches and the last two pages are covered. Palimpsest is something she will not contemplate. Skelly will never follow it.

'Rosanna.'

She starts. Guilt swamps her and she lifts her pen to gaze out into the rain. She has never been a good girl; nor a bad girl, neither.

'Rosanna.' The voice belongs to Mr Ashby booming from the doorway. He is a big man, not unkind, but often diffident. His eyes whip over her in a precise way, as if checking an inventory.

Rosanna is startled, most particularly by her apparent sudden materialisation in his eyes, as if she now exists in some more substantial way than she did before.

'What distracts you from your duties in the house?'

He has been sent to look for her. She is relieved by this thought. He cannot know that she is loved by a houseguest. 'I was writing a letter to America,' she lies, with equal equanimity, gathering up her paper sheets and moving towards the door. 'I have finished.'

'Sit down upon the blacksmith's stool. I wish to speak with you on matters of importance.'

Rosanna finds that she can not do this thing: lower herself to the ground and have him tower over her. In this she is her father's daughter. Some things stick in her craw. 'I am employed to help your wife, Sir.' Has he not remembered that she came to replace the orphan girl?

'Fine,' he says. 'Stand, as you wish. You know that Mrs Ashby is shortly returning to Tasmania. I must surmise the speed of her plans is connected to Bertram's mishap. Doctor Wehl pronounces the boy completely well, and we must thank God for that. My wife, however, has lost confidence and made herself susceptible to yet another infection. I blame you, for not keeping a closer watch on the boy.'

Sympathy lighting Rosanna's eyes is swiftly extinguished.

‘I hear from the policeman in Gambierton — and it seems he is acquainted with your brother — that choice cuts of beef find their way to MacDonnell Bay.’

Rosanna bristles. Father would forget about saving for land and knock him flat. ‘I doubt it would be your beef, sir. Edwin tells me that you keep excellent stock records.’ Compulsively she seizes her own wrist and feels her pulse betray her.

Undeterred, Mr Ashby glares into her face. ‘This is also a consequence of that black gin camping on my land.’

Rosanna’s fear takes a new turn. It is not Edwin but Moorecke who is at risk. ‘Sir?’

‘My wife has seen the black girl on two or three occasions. There has been a matter of poultry, several bullocks, and some items of clothing. The girl has been seen in Gambierton wearing, in ridiculous fashion, a silk robe of my wife’s. I cannot rule out that girl enticing Bertram from Mount Schanck.’

‘But she saved Bertie from drowning, after he wandered off alone.’

‘Well, we shall never know. Nevertheless, I find it unsettling. The girl belongs to an old man who has made himself a nuisance at several stations.’

‘They are married, Mr Ashby.’

He dismisses this with an imperious wave. ‘As a pair, they seem curiously healthy. It is only a question of time before something worse occurs. Tell me where they camp. Mr Colyer has agreed to ride out with me in search of them.’

Rosanna is stricken by this detour in the conversation. ‘Moorecke belongs on this land. It is her *m'rado*, Mr Ashby, but they are rarely here. Her husband often works at Curratum. Perhaps they have gone.’

‘Is their camp near your hut?’ He says ‘hut’ as if it could be expected that Irish and *Booandik* people could be relegated to the thin edge of civilization.

Rosanna grimaces; then tries to transform her physiogamy into an arrangement more benign. ‘They use several camps, depending on the weather and the game. I am sorry but I cannot help you.’ She curtsies. It is a great actress she has become, for she has one more line left in her, to throw him off the scent. ‘It is rare that I see the Blacks, now that everything is settled. You know how they walk about. I would be thinking of asking the poet, Mr Gordon.’ Obsequious tones have infiltrated her speech.

‘My wife will leave soon; nothing is more certain. And the *Booandik* gin will be the cause.’

‘I am sorry, sir.’

‘It is disappointing that you see fit to withhold information which could render our home safer. It brings to mind my initial doubts concerning your employment. During my wife’s absence there will be little work to do about the house.’

Rosanna looks at her feet. He threatens her, but Moorecke is more at risk. Men are dangerous creatures when thwarted. When she looks up, he has gone. Rain drums on the roof of the stables. There will be no rehearsal this afternoon and she must speak to George but she dares not leave a note. She wraps a page or two of the play in her mother’s shawl. First she must warn Moorecke. She hurries inside.

‘Rosanna, what is this? You are not composed.’

‘I’m sorry, ma’am, but I cannot stay. My mind wanders to my mother sick at home. I did not like to mention it this morning. And as well, my brother has taken a turn for the worse; he suffers from a terrible illness. If I could go now, it would set my mind at rest to see them both alive.’

Mrs Ashby continues feeding her baby. The little thing looks up at the spoon arrested in its flight to his mouth, and smiles at his mother. Immediately smitten, her face softens. Rosanna sees weary lines around her eyes, and she reaches out to stroke the baby’s pudgy hand.

‘Is he not delicious, Rosanna?’

Through the morning-room drapes, she sees Mr Ashby and Mr Colyer riding towards the ridge, rifles scabbarded to their saddles. She nods. ‘All babies are delicious, ma’am, but if I could take the buttons to sew at home, I could also tend my mother.’ She waits.

Mrs Ashby waves her hand in a desultory way. ‘Go to your mother. God knows, she is not my responsibility.’

Rosanna stoops to kiss the baby’s fingers and pulls away. ‘I beg your pardon, Mrs Ashby, and God bless you.’

XXV: The Import of a Second Letter

What a fool she is to believe that she can warn Moorecke in time, when the men have ridden ahead of her. Only their unfamiliarity with the location of *Booandik* camps

reassures her. The rain eases as she reaches the last hillock before her ascent. Rain does not bother Glorvina as much as wind and she manages something close to a gallop across the ridge. Mist drifts through the low hills, settling in the trees like a snood. A slippery track means Rosanna must be satisfied with a long loping canter through the back hills. If only she were riding Lucifer. At the last fork before their house she urges Glorvina east through the scrub. There is not a puff of smoke. But three gunshots explode nearby. No one shoots *Booandik* now.

‘Moorecke’, Rosanna’s voice catches in her throat. Silent rain drips from leaves, heightening the scent of eucalyptus and mimosa. Three horses swing out as she crashes into the camping place. Mr Brigstock sits untidily at a trot, plump belly overflowing his shirt, jowls wobbling above his cravat, unused perhaps to dealing with refractory servants and Blacks. Is he ruddy from exertion? Mr Colyer mops his face with a yellow kerchief and reloads his double-barrelled shotgun. She glances at the camp behind them. The *ngoorla* has been ripped asunder, its tea-tree logs piled onto the fireplace; its cutting grass thatch pitched around the camp. All that remains is an untidy pile of bark and branches, little-used bowls and crushing stones. In the old days, Jack would have stood up to these men, shaken his spear and threatened their horses. Now he is old and fat from white man’s tucker. His creased old face hides behind a wild black beard but he can’t make Moorecke’s babies stick.

‘Return to the station, girl,’ Mr Ashby gestures, one hand steadying his gun across his horse’s neck. His expression is severe.

‘Sir, you must go. Bertie’s signal fire has reignited. Mrs Ashby fearing it burns towards the store house sent me after you.’

The men shift in their saddles and nose the damp air. It is a poor diversion. She should have burned down the store before she left. Rosanna pulls her head in like a tortoise, manoeuvring Glorvina out of their way, as they canter off. A wattle bird rattles in the near distance. She eyes the scrub. Run. Run. Inspecting hoof prints carving up the desecrated campsite, she finds a bullock skull. Moorecke always carries flint and digging sticks, baskets and her water vessel. Jack would take his tools and traps and *catum catum*. She finds no evidence of these. She waits. Calls. Nothing stirs.

At home, Rosanna finds her mother attempting to dry linen squares over a smoking stove.

Eilish lifts the kettle from the fire and pours tea. 'Why are you home so early?'

Rosanna seats herself, her head flopping on the table. 'Moorecke has gone,' she ejaculates.

'To the harbour?' asks Eilish. 'It is bitter cold.'

'Mr Ashby and some men on horseback came after her with guns.'

'Go to the camp and suggest that she and Jack return to Curratum.'

'I have been there. The men have wrecked the camp. It is as quiet as the bottom of a sink hole.' Rosanna sobs.

'More than likely she is driving a feed of mallards into a net strung between the trees, and Jack is waiting in the water to twist their necks,' her mother soothes.

'I wish that it were true'. She imagines Moorecke half way up a large gum, smoking out a possum, her slim back leaning way out from the footholds scored with a small axe, thrusting a smoking branch into the hole at the first fork. Possum screams rupture the air; blood sprays like red-gum blossom from its ruff. Moorecke springs from the tree to neatly skin and peg the pelt. Jack is a law-man; his young wife fitter with powerful arms and legs. They will get away.

Eilish untangles Rosanna's hair with her fingers; then reaches for her brush. 'I am more concerned about Edwin than Moorecke.'

'He is so lucky, all his life. Why would you gnash your teeth over him?'

'While he lines O'Leary's purse for his connections at the bay, his nerves jangle in his head. Night after night, he goes to Lallah's, making good his debts. I would not like to get in his way if he loses this carting business. He has set his heart on it but your father cannot lend him another penny.'

Rosanna sighs. 'Edwin is like winds along the coast. He will change his tack. He will becalm the gobbity Mr O'Leary and then, he will blow him off his feet.' Moorecke has more to fear.

'Your brother would not see you shamed, *alannahh*.'

Rosanna feels colour suffusing her neck. 'He has forgiven me throwing the race but he was no saint himself.'

Eilish exchanges the hairbrush for her rosary beads and begins to finger them. 'I pray for you all, especially your father.'

'Do not waste your prayers on me. I'll be fine. Lucky like Edwin. Pray for Moorecke.'

‘I love to watch you riding off to the Big House with the men. I am envious. I am. Work has lifted your spirits.’

Rosanna shrugs. ‘Will Father ride home tonight?’

‘Tomorrow. Edwin too. He has business in Gambierton.’ Eilish moves swiftly to the dresser and passes a note to Rosanna, who blushes. ‘It is from your brother, *mavoureen*.’ She eyes her speculatively.

Rosanna reads quickly, her eyes filling with tears. ‘Oh, the fool, he is — the daft *oinseach*.’ She beats her hand against her head and stands to face the back door, through which she can see the horses feeding.

‘What is it? What has he done?’

‘He has been dilly-dallying at Miss Lallah’s with the actor who is houseguest at the Ashby’s.’

‘No harm in that. Why should you be jealous? You read the play with Mr Sutherland, and Skelly enjoys the drama of it all. Why would you want to have him all to yourself?’

Rosanna runs crying into the yard and lays her face against Lucifer’s.

Eilish pants behind her. ‘What is it then?’

If only Rosanna could gallop away. ‘Mother, why did you not tell me that the actor had made Edwin an offer for Lucifer?’

‘And how would I know? It is men’s business the buying and selling of thoroughbreds.’

‘Mr Sutherland has bought our horse to resolve Edwin’s debts with O’Leary.’

‘Oh, *alannahh*, no.’

Such fuss brings the children running from the bush, Hugh coughing with exertion, Skelly clumping along beside them carrying a bucket of mushrooms. Blinnie, winsome child, tugs at Rosanna’s skirt and throws back her head, to read her sister’s expression.

‘And what shall I do about Moorecke?’ Rosanna cries afresh. Lucifer backs up, bunting his head against her waist, kicking out his back legs to catch the tree to which he is tethered. She pulls down his head and cries into his face, traces the soft vein on his nose, and his whiskery lips, and rubs his twitching ears.

‘Rosanna, do not upset Lucifer; he’s mighty flighty already, without you keening in his ears. Come now, and tell us what is wrong.’

Blinnie wraps her arms around her sister's neck and cries along with her. Skelly's face strains with anxiety as he digs the toe of his boot into the mud.

She takes the folded letter from her pocket and reads it again. Fresh tears spill. 'I am to take Lucifer to the bay, where the actor will inspect him and give me the money. I am to count it. Then I am to hand it over to that reeky turnip, that *gombeen*, O'Leary, at his shanty by the bay.

Eilish kisses her mouth. 'Go then. It is better not to build up a head of steam. You are upsetting the children.' Eilish wipes Hugh's face on her apron and lifts Blinnie onto her hip.

XXVI: Love, Pride and Lucifer

It is a great pity that her last ride on Lucifer will be at a paltry canter. How her gradgrind brother can bear to part with him she will never understand. Setting out from the house she sees two trading vessels anchored a mile out to sea. On her way criss-crossing swamps and water-courses she thinks about his business; he hopes to cart wood, tallow and home supplies from the lighters. If it is successful, that is if he can keep his axles out of the bog to the north of the bay settlement, he will not be so dependent on his boundary riding or the sale of skins. The building of a lighthouse, and a causeway over the low-lying ground near the new port, will help everyone. Now Edwin takes only casual work with Mr Ashby, between his runs to the boats. Already she misses him.

His letter relates how Mr O'Leary takes forty percent for all the goods he carries from the bay to Gambierton and the stations. It is a deuced large cut, and one that Edwin can ill afford, until the year is out and the bullocks paid for. She sniffs the salt air. Soon, his letter reminds her, he will have regular customers, more than he can shake a stick at, and perhaps a business partner, perhaps a wife.

She rides south towards the *Booandik* summer camps in the sand hills beside the sea to look for Moorecke. All the clouds are moving in the same direction as if God hurled them in a hissy-fit or blew them out to sea. Lucifer likes the warm sun on his face; he steps out nicely. Leaping across bogs and pools he tugs at the reins. If it weren't for poor old Glorvina hog-trotting along behind he would kick up his heels and gallop to the shore. Instead he wends his way around sandy pathways between the tea-trees and over the smooth tracks of copperhead snakes until she reins him in hard. The mowed down *Booandik* coastal windbreak pains her. They have been here

too. Rosanna shivers. The sun disappears behind dirty streaks of yellow striating a sky like potato skins or one of Skelly's bruises.

George waits at the back of the wheelwright's cottage. She lifts her carriage, sitting up tall. They act like a pair of dogs. Who will snarl and lunge, and who will give in and roll over? He need not think that she and Lucifer do not belong together. She turns the stallion sideways to show off his beautiful flanks, his coat as glossy as a seal's, and the great orbs hanging between his back legs.

George tips his hat. 'Miss Lynch.'

They conclude their business on the ground, George counting the money into her hand, she concentrating, not wishing to contradict him in a public place. He takes Lucifer's reins and attaches a lead rope to his borrowed station horse. Rosanna thinks the contrast between the horses heartbreaking.

George touches his fingers to her puffy eyes. 'It is a good solution for your brother, Rosanna. And perhaps you will see Lucifer again, before too long.'

Her heart lifts as he leans in to kiss her. Outside the shipping office Mr O'Leary slowly turns his head towards her, like a bloated toad on a mud heap.

George moves away from her.

'I have to take a message to Mr O'Leary, for my brother,' she enunciates in a clear loud voice.

'I will wait for you at the point.' He waves his crop.

'French's Point?'

She jerks her head. Mr O'Leary has risen from his seat beneath the sagging verandah to bark orders at a young man rowing a skiff thirty yards out in the water. By the time she arrives at his door he is seated at his desk and she can smell his fishy unwashed skin. If she were a fly she would alight on his bulbous head and enjoy good pickings.

'Where is your horse?' He looks down on her standing uncertain on his step. She lifts her head and points to Glorvina, tethered near the pathway. Does he know about Lucifer? He has struck the first blow. 'My brother is in Gambierton and would have me make good his debt.' There is no doubt that if an Irishman is on a spit over a fire, another can be found to turn it.

'Place it on the table then, and we will see.'

She leans forward to count the money out in front of him. His chair creaks and she can smell his yellow crapulous breath.

‘Where is the rest, girl? Have you been buying prinky-trinky things from a hawker?’

Rosanna stiffens. ‘This is the figure agreed upon. Edwin wrote it down. I counted it. I am following his instructions.’

‘You Lynches are all the same. Don’t think I don’t know about you. I had money on your horse at Racecourse Bay.’

‘I am sorry about the race.’ She lifts her head to meet his eyes and thinks that she may asphyxiate.

‘Your brother owes me for goods I disposed of a month ago — a little matter of some meat.’

‘I will speak to him. It is nothing to do with me, Mr O’Leary.’ God forbid, but it was. ‘I would be obliged if you would make my brother a receipt for the money I have brought you in his stead.’

The toad shifts his weight. She has gone too far. His eyes linger on her neckline; his hand hovers over his ink pot. Outside, the lad calls out his name. It is a thick and dirty sheet of paper he pushes at her across the desk, on which he has scrawled the additional amount. When she notices a corner lifting on the paper, she carries it carefully, using both hands, to her face to read. A page is stuck, one beneath the other. Rosanna is exultant. O’Leary noddles his bulbous head over the desk drawer in which he places Edwin’s money. He licks his fingers, lifting a piece of fishing line from the drawer, before ushering her out and locking the door behind them both.

‘Tell your brother he has two days. After that I will take evidence of our previous transactions to the police at Gambierton. If I am not mistaken the brands were sliced.’

Pride is a sin. She folds Edwin’s receipt and the additional sheet of paper into her reticule and sweeps forward. Gaining an extra page on which to copy Act Four is a small victory, compared to the aching loss of Lucifer and the terror of O’Leary’s threats. No brain at all, has Edwin, dealing with a crook, who is never satisfied. What will her brother do about the remaining guineas? How will he get about the district without a decent horse? And now it seems that he is to be the victim of blackmail because his sister put an animal out of its misery.

Making her way along the boggy track to the sea she ties Glorvina to a stunted blackwood tree beside George's splay-toed station horse. From here she observes the antics of O'Leary on his way to the boats, shouting across the water at his boy. Bent over his oars the lad lowers his head, cowed by the man and the choppy swell. Rosanna feels equally subdued by the time George and Lucifer come galloping along the beach and stop before her in a flurry of sand. She brushes down her skirts. They make a pretty pair, she thinks — the blonde man and the black horse — until Lucifer, in a fit of exuberance, ducks his head and snorts into her lap. A tear comes to her eye and she dabs at it with the sleeve of her jacket.

'Rosanna.'

'It would have been grand if Edwin hadn't left me to deal with that loathsome man filling his jowls with clean sea air and turning it sour.'

'He was disrespectful?'

Rosanna shakes her head. 'No.' George would never understand.

'Shall I speak with the cur?'

'I'm alright. You think I don't know anything,' she says.

George dismounts falling to his knees in the sand.

'How comic you look.'

He bounces up playing for a laugh, settles for a watery smile.

'You are a handsome fool.'

'Act Four: Scene Three. Let us begin.'

'You have the play?'

'It is a great scene — full of drama. Alas, I do not carry it with me, but I know it well. I will guide you through it.'

'Indeed?'

'I will feed you lines. The scene opens on a moonlit night, with Anastasia unconscious, insensible on a mountain path, awaiting rescue. Lie down, dear girl.'

Rescue, indeed. Rosanna flicks him a look usually reserved for Edwin and settles back against the slope of the sand hill. It is secluded enough. The bruised sky rolls over her head, so swiftly she fears that she is moving also, in the opposite direction, and that she must close her eyes to retain her balance.

George crouches over her. 'How beautiful Anastasia looks. *I'm thus bereft of sense*, says Rupert D'Arcy.'

‘The pirate?’

‘Indeed. *How lovely... tis indeed a prize.*’

Rosanna is lulled by George’s worshipful face, his hands unravelling her hair.

‘How can she save her beloved Oscar?’

George slaps her face, as if to bring her around: ‘Stir, Anastasia, wake.’

Rosanna gasps. It is just play. She flutters her eyelashes and struggles up against him. ‘Will she defend herself?’

‘Recite Anastasia’s words, Rosanna. Say them after me:

*Say what means this dreadful violence? If your purpose be
To Pillage, you your object have achieved.*’

‘Is Anastasia to your liking, George?’

‘She is only as good and virtuous as Mr Geoghegan’s lines will allow.’

‘What happens next?’

‘She begs for mercy: *Release me and permit me to depart.* If ransom be his object, she will support a generous payment. Saving Oscar is uppermost. *Stay me not for on my haste a life most dear depends.*’

‘Rupert D’Arcy has no heart.’

‘There is more craft than heart in melodrama, whereby he will have murderous revenge and the girl as well.’ George lifts Rosanna’s hand and kisses it: ‘*Thy lovely self alone the object of our enterprise.* The pirate gloats over his *possession of a prize.*’

‘In melodrama, does the poor girl die?’

George leaps to his feet and plucks a piece of driftwood to make a show of swordsmanship.

How can she resist him?

‘*Thy puny minion, Oscar is nothing but a pawn*’, he infers, and that she might be a ‘*Pirate’s chosen queen, the D’Arcy’s bride*’. He lunges behind her, mouth at her ear to whisper.

Rosanna repeats the lines into the wind:

‘*The D’Arcy! Gracious Heaven and am I then within that Monster’s power whose wiles,*

Have brought such dread calamity to all I dearest held.’

George scoops her into his arms. She winds her arms around his neck and kisses his eyelashes, thumbs the delicate tracery of veins at his temples, mouths the lemon hairs below his ears.

‘Rupert curses her and mocks her then. He will have her anyway, *his slave, his captive... Lady such thy doom!*’

George is rougher with her than any pirate, surely. His touching brings on a raw, sad feeling. ‘I don’t know what Father will say about my acting, Mr Sutherland.’

‘Tell him that I love you.’

‘To what effect? Can Anastasia escape that devil’s clutches?’

‘She has offended him.’

‘I have not offended you, George? What thinks Anastasia about such captivity?’

‘*Oh villain, villain... It is gothic, Rosanna. Whisper back to me.*’

‘Oh villain, villain,’ she whispers against his lips. They taste of salt and sweet wine from his silver flask.

His arm frames her face as he shifts his weight and stares into her eyes. ‘The audience will be wild with confused desire,’ he says, mouthing her ear. ‘They will boo and hiss and stamp their feet. They will throw their black silk hats into the air. Gaslights will flicker. When Rupert D’Arcy seizes her and drags her to a little boat set upon the stage, they will erupt with joy.’

‘Oh George, I want to go with you to the theatre but not in the little boat. Tell me again that you love me.’

‘Who could not?’

‘Is Anastasia doomed?’

‘The audience will swoon when in one swift moment she exposes a dagger in the bodice of her gown.’

Rosanna mimes this action, raises an imaginary knife above his head.

He stays her hand.

‘She will defend her honour against this swill — D’Arcy and his men?’

‘Sadly, no. Say these lines, Rosanna, with desperation in your heart:

Life hath no charms for me at honour’s cost.

*My fate is sealed - or I depart from hence.
Free, unimpeded to pursue my way
Or rather than be subject to your power
This dagger in my heart should find a sheath.'*

Rosanna is on her feet. 'Mr Edward Geoghegan plays her for a fool. What point in disposing of a girl like that? Then who will save Oscar Lynch?'

Something impels her to cast her eyes along the beach to the store where O'Leary and a police trooper stand on the verandah, pointing to a lugger at anchor. Now wouldn't that be right, the little wart consorting with police, and Anastasia dead. Injustice swells inside her. She raises her voice. 'When I meet Mr Geoghegan, I shall ask him why he dealt so harshly with Anastasia.'

'Perhaps you will. He was once an Irish doctor who had bad luck in business — criminally bad luck. Not unlike your brother.'

'I have to go.' She darts to kiss Lucifer's nose, scattering mountain ducks — *chank chank* — camouflaged against the rocks. 'George, tomorrow at the Ashby's you will tell me how it will be with you and me, in Melbourne.' She feels as desperate as Feemy Macdermot.

XXVII: Arrests and a Pitchfork

Skelly hears them going at each other from the moment Edwin arrives home two days after his sister delivers Lucifer.

'Rosanna, did you not pay that corpulent bag of pus, O'Leary?'

'I did, of course,' his sister shouts, 'but he wanted more. How could you sell Lucifer? Even in debt up to your lumpy neck. Why did you let him blackmail you?'

'For the privilege of using his contacts on the boats.'

'You did not mention the spear?'

'I may yet.'

Skelly takes perverse pleasure in their cussing and slapping the verandah posts, their marching towards each other and backing off.

'You're just a girl. What would you know about getting ahead in the colony of South Australia? All men carry debt. Only women save pin-money. I want to take risks, forge ahead.'

‘No doubt you will and leave the rest of us behind, but don’t forget my money saved you from the debt collector. And you left me to deal with that Barbary ape, O’Leary.’

‘I will buy another horse — better than Lucifer.’

‘Lucifer wins races now. He’ll sire champions,’ his sister sobs. ‘He is worth more than gold, and useful. He’ll bring you luck. What will people say about Edwin Lynch, so successful he cannot afford a decent horse?’

‘I’ll buy him back before too long.’

Mother drops a basket of dirty linen at Rosanna’s feet, and points to the pond. Skelly sees that she is sorely tried by their ruckus.

‘You’ll never be rich enough, ever, to be happy,’ Rosanna shouts.

‘Shut it. You’re got so sour you could pickle cucumbers.’ Edwin kicks a clump of mud whistling past her head.

‘Rosanna.’ Eilish’s voice is cool and tough, as she steers Edwin into the house.

Skelly helps his sister carry the basket of washing to the pond. They kneel beside the water. Rosanna’s reflection is dark with misery and worry: lips downturned, hair dishevelled, skin sallow in the pale sunlight, eyes large and swollen. Why does she bother to quarrel with Edwin? Even when he is losing an argument, he is ferocious. Skelly peers at his own reflection in dismay. Just when he had thought to make some progress with his beard, his face erupts like a lava field. He breaks up the painful image with his fingers. *Do not pick at your face.* This is the kind of advice Eilish offers. And advertising leaflets from Mr Crouch’s store: *A Book for Young Men. Written by a Physician, For the Public Good and the Suppression of Quackery.* He gingerly touches his face and moans.

‘*Thar...*,’ Rosanna croons stroking his arm. ‘You’ll grow out of your bad skin, unlike Edwin, who will always be selfish.’ She drags wet linen up against the wash board and thumps it down, glancing behind up at her mother digging in the potato patch.

It is not long after this that they hear the beat of approaching hooves, and finally, the jingle of spurs. Even from the pond, Skelly recognises his mother’s look of consternation as she rises above the greenery to wipe her face on her apron, and walk slowly towards the front of the house, where a black-suited man reins in a

splendid barrel-chested grey. Rosanna drapes a chemise across a slab of rock and backs up on her hands and knees.

‘Is Mr Edwin Lynch at home?’ the man calls out. It is a rude intrusion on an isolated outstation. Screened by the black-wood trees Skelly creeps behind his sister towards the house. Edwin and Father appear in the doorway.

‘I am assistant bailiff to the local court.’ The man throws out his authority, by way of introduction.

Father stands rigid on the step, food in his beard, eyes glittering like snakes.

‘You are the defendant, Edwin Lynch?’

Skelly sees that his brother has clenched his fists and he feels a rush of love for him. Alarmed he must be — much more than his face shows. The dark suited man, gun at his side, is as fat as a turkey cock and pompous looking, his jowls wobbling over his collar, his purple hands bunched on the pommel. He looks like a renegade from a boxing tent.

He creaks forward in the saddle. ‘Edwin Lynch, I have a warrant against you for debt and the theft of two bullocks.’

‘It would take a better man than you to arrest me.’ Edwin steps forward, fist raised, tongue belligerently thrusting against his left cheek.

Skelly gasps.

Rosanna pushes her fist against her mouth. Something impels her forward. Father scans natural detail in his vicinity: the muddy track, the corridors of trees, and the pathway to the privy. Edwin bounces on the balls of his feet, looks poised to run, if necessary up the walls of the house and onto the roof. What is to become of him?

After the expeditious issuing of his warrant, the man seems surprised by this resistance. He shifts in his saddle, lifting his right hand to flick an imaginary insect from his cheek. ‘You will accompany me to Gambierton.’

Father takes three strides, seizing up a pitchfork angled against the side of the house. ‘Leave now — before I pitchfork you off the place.’

The bailliff loosens his left rein and circles the horse in the mud before putting him up to Father. ‘You Irish are nothing but trouble.’

‘Get off your horse and say that,’ says Father, conceding nothing, and brandishing his fork.

When Rosanna comes walking from the trees, dragging a broken branch along the ground in a loud disruptive way, the bailiff swings his head, uncertain. He glances back at Edwin. Skelly grins, watching his brother, cocky now, hands in his braces like a Whiteboy, back swayed, belly and bottom sticking out. Father lunges forward to restrain the bailiff's horse. The horse jerks its head; a bewildered boyish expression darts across the law-keeper's face. He reasserts his authority, swinging his legs to the ground, and leading the horse away from Father to lay a hand upon Edwin's shoulder. Edwin throws it off. Father slashes the air with his pitchfork. Skelly feels inexplicably excited. Will his father claw the seat of the policeman's pants and catapult him to Mount Schanck?

But Mother rushes between her husband and the bailiff, placing the flat of her hand on her husband's chest. 'Garrick, leave it.'

He stabs the air once more with his pitchfork, offering Mother a look that would throw a man on his *thóin*.

The bailiff backs up, one arm slung across the horse's neck, and feels with his other hand for his stirrup.

Skelly and Rosanna step out from behind a blackwood tree.

'Look at yourselves. Coming out of the woods — like Fenians.'

She appears to take offence at this and pitches up a piece of limestone, then another, aiming for his head. Skelly feels half proud half apprehensive. The bailiff ducks the hail of stones as he throws his leg over the horse, and retreats. She throws unlettered Irish after him and his horse: '...Nothing wrong with Fenians or Finn Macumhail. Don't come back or we'll cut off your leg.'

Skelly feels faint with terror.

'We're in trouble enough, girl,' Mother admonishes her and turns towards her husband who is steering Edwin towards the still.

'The darling boy,' Rosanna sobs, staring after Edwin, hat pulled down, shirt riding up, an arm around his father's waist. 'It is my fault for upsetting O'Leary.'

This will not be the end of it, and Skelly knows it. Rosanna takes her melancholy face back to her drubbing over the pond. Throughout the afternoon, Skelly hears his father's low serious voice and occasional outbursts of vehemence from Edwin. Eilish cries in the potato patch. She moves up and down the furrows

between the beds, pulling weeds, straightening to check Rosanna at the pond and wipe her face with the back of her hand.

It is not until the weak winter sun is half way to the sea that Edwin and Father return to the house, just in time to greet the bailiff and two policemen, cantering in. Seated on the verandah Eilish throws her head to the sky, then eyes fixed on the intruders, continues to lightly beat her fists on Hugh's back, using her knees to steer his head over the steam bowl. Rosanna has disappeared, perhaps to the cave to look for Moorecke.

The lawmen stay seated on their horses to deliver the next decree. 'Garrick Lynch and his son Edwin Lynch are called, upon information, to answer a charge of assault preferred against them by John Duncan, assistant bailiff of the Local Court, in revisiting the execution of a warrant for debt issued by the said Court against Edwin Lynch, whereby the said Edwin was rescued from lawful custody.'

Later, seated on the step, head cradled in one arm, Skelly sketches the incident from memory, while Blinnie and Hugh play conkers at his feet. He tries to ignore a kernel of fear hardening in his belly. Without Father's and Edwin's wages, they will surely starve.

When Rosanna returns from the pond she sits by the fire with Skelly and Mother. Scratching at the coals, they kiss the cup they pass between them.

'It is that filthy O'Leary,' she says.

'You paid him, surely?' Skelly asks.

'The bailiff is lying about the bullocks.'

'Edwin would not lay a hand on anyone's stock. He would be a fool,' Skelly probes, his face intent.

'He would not, no.' Rosanna feels the heat of more than the fire on her face. She prods him with her foot. 'But he is my brother and no less than any opportunist.'

Eilish stares at her, her knuckles white against the drinking cup. 'You know something about this?'

'Edwin is lucky. Sometimes it is an accident that bullocks go missing.'

Skelly lifts his pencil and places it in his mouth — satisfied.

Eilish stands up and reaches for her husband's coat. 'I cannot stand the lot of you. I'm going into town to see for myself.'

‘Wait until tomorrow.’

‘I cannot bear not knowing.’

‘Mother, I will go,’ Rosanna says.

Rosanna urges Glorvina through the wind and rising water, at times up to the pommel. She has never ridden alone up the mountain between the blue crater lakes and down the steep track to Gambierton. She finds Father and Edwin chained to a cart near a young policeman shaving, who waves his blade above his cup: ‘Move along.’

‘I have food for the prisoners.’

He flutters his hand at her and returns to his ablutions.

‘You must tell him that we found that bullock,’ she hisses at Edwin.

‘How should I do that without the detail of the spear?’

‘Explain how the bullock broke its leg stumbling into a wombat hole.’

Father takes the parcel of food and pushes her towards Glorvina. ‘Go home. Your brother is accused of hocking more than one bullock.’

In the end, it is Father Woods who brings the news next morning that Mr Corcoran has appeared at the policeman’s hut for Edwin and Father. The magistrate reprimands both parties. Had it not been for the presence of Mrs Lynch, he said, Mr Lynch might have gone wild with the pitchfork. Eilish blows out her cheeks with indignation. It is the same hot breath Father will feel when he returns. All charges against him have been dropped. Edwin is sentenced to three months hard labour for debt and, as the Gambierton jail is full, and Guichen Bay jail as well, he is to be transferred to Adelaide. The charge of theft is dropped due to lack of evidence.

‘Why not release him then, if all the jails are full?’ asks Skelly.

‘It is not for us to say, but only to pray,’ replies Father Woods holding out his hand for Skelly’s sketchbook.

‘My son would never steal a bullock,’ Eilish snaps, scrubbing at the table.

‘O’Leary lied about the money. I took it to him and I counted it,’ Rosanna says, blushing.

‘Such a story, Rosanna. I wish I was as good,’ Skelly bites.

She pushes him hard and then thinks better of it, lunging forward to steady him.

‘Restrain yourselves. We must pray for those who administer justice,’ Father says. ‘That they show compassion. And that Edwin draws strength from his adversity.’

How can Father Woods be so impartial? He is worse than the magistrate. Rosanna looks as if her heart will break. Skelly watches her from a distance. She loves him just as much as she does Edwin, but he’ll keep out of her way this day.

XXVIII: Mrs Ashby Departs From the Station

Days after the arrest, she arrives at the Big House early enough to begin reading Act Five, lifted from the box in the stables. It is a grim thing that the first scene relates Oscar’s intercessions with God, whilst confined in a dungeon, and her own brother is locked up. Of course, Oscar is in more danger than Edwin, but *The Hibernian Father* is just a story. Rosanna reads avidly in the dim morning light. The warden enters and clasps his son within his *circling arms*; a *blissful tear of tenderness bedewed his parent cheek*.

Rosanna thinks of Edwin grieving for his family in his cell, and begins to cry. Had Father thought bleak thoughts about *his* son — always feared the worst? It is not natural, surely. Is it fear makes a man hard? In the play an unruly crowd of citizens assemble at the gate, demanding the boy’s release. Surely amongst them stand Oscar’s mother and sister?

Mr Blake, the magistrate’s friend speaks up: *Save your son from ignominious death*.

Licentious Scum, replies Oscar’s father. He will not succumb *to a ruffian band of Curs who snarl and bark*. When he has withstood so much, how dare they?

He has no heart. At least, Edwin will not hang for their sins. But nor will he be as comfortable as Little Dorrit’s father in the London debtor’s prison. She hears the baby crying and Mr Ashby’s raised voice — he has not forgiven her for the lie about the fire — and remembers that today his wife departs for Tasmania. She hurries inside in time to assist her with the last minute arrangement of clothing in her trunk. Mr Ashby lingers near his wife, a morose expression on his face, sipping porter like water. Mrs Ashby tells Rosanna to prepare several cold collations for Mr Sutherland will stay several days at the station to conclude some business; she hopes he will keep her husband company. William has expressed mild curiosity over Mr

Sutherland's plans for Lucifer to be trialled in several races in Adelaide before he goes to the October Melbourne Sweepstakes.

Mrs Ashby farewells her husband in a brisk and determined manner, as if she fears that he may break down. At the last moment *she* begins to cry, leaping down from the cart to stroke the side of his face with the back of her curled hand.

'William, oh, I do wish that we might all be going. You and I — and Baby.' She sweeps the landscape with a resentful eye. 'I will speak to your father when I arrive home. He must understand that the situation is untenable.' Mr Ashby flinches over the word 'home' as if it is a blow to his solar plexus. She draws her hand across her mouth. Mrs Ashby's dog smells unhappiness and howls, body bunched, head thrown back; jackasses drown out the last murmurs of the unhappy separation. George assists Mrs Ashby into the cart. Mr Ashby takes the baby's waving fist and smothers it with kisses. How would Father be if Mother booked her passage back to Ireland? Rosanna's heart is strangely afflicted by sympathy for Mrs Ashby and a surge of affection for the wee boy. It is a touching scene.

Father throws dark looks at George when the men ride out to cut unbranded calves from the main mob, and look for sick cows. Rosanna washes bed linen, then scrubs the kitchen dresser and the table where she and Mrs Ashby have prepared and packed food for the journey. George has elected to keep an eye on the house for it is rumoured that a bushranger is at large in the district. In point of fact, he tells Mr Ashby, staying behind will serve him very well for his rehearsal has fallen away of late. The play will open at the Princes Theatre in less than six weeks. He has received instructions at the Gambierton telegraph station. And he must remind the maid about laundering and packing his linen.

It is only a few minutes until, stock riders and horses the size of ants on the horizon, and lowing cows forgotten, George bounds into the kitchen enticing her with lines from Act Four, Scene Two, in which Oscar's friends have organized a vessel at anchor in Galway Bay, to snatch him away to safety. Two scenes remain in Act Four.

'You must speak *all* the lines until I finish here,' Rosanna insists, using the feather duster to keep him at a distance.

'Then will you love me, beautiful lady, my Anastasia?'

'Then we will read Act Five, together.'

It is an exciting scene, although George seems much distracted: Anastasia rescued from the brigands by a fisherman, and surprised to find Alonzo alive after all. His fiance greets him with surprised affection. In haste they descend the mountains, intent on saving Oscar, his execution nigh. George springs with a metal spoon to chime upon the lid of the butter dish. Can Anastasia find her way through the crowds in time to save her lover?

‘Read her lines,’ says George. ‘Such a dramatic scene will test your mettle.’

Rosanna feels overcome by emotion: the Lynch boy may be killed, Edwin languishes in a prison cell, and soon George will leave with Lucifer. She can barely find her voice.

George scoops her up. ‘Dear love, let us go to the stables, where we can remember all the sweet times we have spent there.’

‘No, please, George. You must allow me to copy the last two scenes for Skelly. He wants so much to know what happens. I too. Then I will come.’

‘The play. The play is all I hear,’ he snaps.

Rosanna makes a moue of her mouth and taps her foot.

He strokes and cajoles her. ‘Is it not enough that telegrams arrive pressing me to return to Melbourne? Capital has been raised for a fine production with elegant backdrops of the mountain pass and Lynch’s Castle in Galway’s High Street. Soon I shall go. You will vouch that I know the lines of Oscar exceeding well, and you those of Anastasia?’

‘George, can we not go, you and I, and I play Anastasia?’

‘Nothing would please me more but the impresario...’ he sighs. ‘The play will have to wait; it will be a long run, nothing is more certain. In Sydney the number of revivals, over ten years, was remarkable. But in the meantime, I have my investment in fine bloodstock to attend to.’ George glances uneasily over her shoulder to the window and checks his fob. ‘I swear *you* care more about the play than me or your horse.’

‘It is not true.’ Rosanna twitches like a netted seahorse, as his fingers move inside her blouse. ‘Please, George. Let us race Lucifer together then. He loves me more than you.’

‘I have no desire for your father to black my eye, before I reach Guichen Bay.’ He lowers his head to mouth her *ciochanna*.

She pushes away. ‘In Melbourne, do the ladies race at picnic meetings?’ He will take everything from her.

‘I will wager Lucifer on a wedding, if he will win for me in Adelaide, and resolve my bills at a Swan Street tailor’s. I own a small cottage and stables near the Melbourne Racecourse. Perhaps they are not splendid enough for a haughty Lynch girl but I have an Irish trainer and I have no doubt you will like him.’

Rosanna views this with suspicion. ‘Can I not ride with you tonight?’ Suddenly she remembers Captain Ussher’s lies to Feemy: ‘Don’t make difficulties, dearest love’, *he* said.

George frowns, cradles her back, and lifts her over him. ‘I will send someone for you, soon. I know a man in Portland Bay: the same agent who buys poddy calves from your brother. Are they cadged?’

‘It is nothing but a vicious rumour. It is only the boats he is interested in — if he has been there at all.’ Edwin would knock him flat for saying such things.

George reaches into his fob pocket, with difficulty. ‘Put these shillings in your pocket that you may travel in comfort to Melbourne, when I write for you to follow me.’

Rosanna drops the coins one by one inside the neck of his shirt and as they fall, holds them hard against his belly with her thumbs as she considers what they mean. It is not proper to take money from a man even if the reason sounds plausible. But how else will she travel to Melbourne? Surely George would not blacken her name when she has loved him so fervently and with such confidence. Things were no simpler in Galway that is certain. But she cannot cry and faint like a character in a book — like Feemy. The old people used prophetic mirrors and the entrails of freshly slaughtered deer, to read love in the shifting sky, their thoughts simmering with violence? If Rosanna cannot go to Melbourne she will dream a better death.

XXIX: *The Hibernian Father: The Final Scene*

Rosanna’s hand aches from copying, and her head from crying. How can George think of leaving her behind? She slides her hand into her pantaloons to scoop shimmering silky stuff that he has left inside her and rubs her thumb against her forefinger. He has insulted with his money. And why has Mr Geoghegan written a play so cruel? Her hand flies across the page. Pray that Mr Ashby will not notice

that she has been forced to borrow another of his fine Indian pencils. She shaves it back, breathes in the clean smell of pine and graphite, and begins again, a callous swelling on the inside of her third finger. While Rosanna struggles over the fading India ink copy of Act Five, Scene Two, Anastasia, Vice-regal pardon in her hand, runs through the crowds beside the river and into Shop Street, her thoughts dwelling solely on saving her beloved Oscar from the hangman's noose.

Perhaps e'en now with agonising...

He feebly murmurs Anastasia's name

And in the pining accents of despair

Calls upon me for comfort and for Hope, the dear girl mourns. Rosanna's hand quivers in sympathy.

Rising to stand at the open window she lifts her hand to George, cantering hatless on Lucifer, putting the horse through its paces. His hair is as yellow as mimosa, his mouth softly fallen open with exertion; a red cravat flies at his neck. She has kissed him there. Would he not make some signal, throw back his head in his surreptitious way — wave his hand — if Mr Ashby returns?

The bells toll on in Galway.

It is the dreadful signal which proclaims

The hour of execution is at hand!

Rosanna paces past the window, crying out Anastasia's lines, to her own love: *Oscar, I come – I come to bid thee live. To live for Anastasia and for Love.*

George hears nothing of the detail but smiles at her across the yard, touches his fingers to his lips, and puts Lucifer at a log. It is a great actress she has become, rushing past the curtains like the female lead in a play. It is not hard to imagine members of an audience shifting in their seats, hope and fear journeying across their flushed faces, necks stretched forward, nervous fingers fiddling with cloth and ornament, drawing in their breath in agitation as they lift out their fobwatches to consider hailing a hansom cab on Bourke Street rather than look away to avoid the terror. The auditorium is warm, their bodies closely pressed. Suspense eats at their faces.

The ink of the play-script darkens. Does Mr Geoghegan copy with more intensity? Does he wipe perspiration from his brow, reliving the agony of his own creation? Act Five, Scene Three, the last, set in the Grand Hall of the warden's

mansion. The Galway City banner surmounts the arch. Rosanna writes as if her own life depends on it, only glancing to the window in occasional aggravation when she snaps her pencil lead. The yard is clear. Only the sound of the cottage clock and the rattle of brush bronze-wings can be heard above the beating of her heart. She scrapes the blade down her pencil stub, breaks the point and scrapes again, pinching the curls of shavings between thumb and forefinger and placing them in her pocket. On she presses, writing in thick swift strokes; there is no refinement now. Oh it is a terrible thing for wringing out a heart, a story.

Everything is wrong: Edwin taken, Lucifer sold; the actor leaving; Moorecke not seen since Mr Ashby destroyed her camping places. Later George will find the manuscript slapped on the dining-room table, held down by a silver pickle-jar. Perhaps he will see her make her way, bare-armed, on Glorvina stumbling up to her hocks through freezing water. Perhaps he will watch her progress like a small green pennant flapping up to the ridge and over, disappearing into a silver mullet sky. He must love her. He has said so.

Supper is quiet. Bowed over their beans, they industriously slurp to cover the dearth of conversation. Skelly cannot clean his plate, remembering that he has scuttered three times in the privy that afternoon. Eilish stacks bowls and mugs and wipes the babies' mouths with a cloth. Water drips through the rafters into a bucket beside the hearth. Garrick slumps at the table, lungs whistling, breathing shallow.

At the end of the meal he tells Eilish that within a month he will have cleared Edwin's debt. 'Partly due to Rosanna's money,' he says, gruff with speech, 'from helping at the Big House. I can do nothing about the bullocks. I think them nothing but a fabrication.'

Rosanna's eyes fill with tears.

Eilish leans against her daughter to steady the plates. 'That's grand even if Edwin has to finish his sentence. What news of Mrs Ashby, Rosanna? She is safely returned to her ailing father?'

Rosanna nods.

'And the actor gone?'

'He leaves Guichen Bay with Lucifer on Saturday's tide.' She casts her eyes down as if she has said too much.

‘Damned pity Edwin sold the horse, thinking it would save his neck. The fool, dealing with a Kerry man.’ Father drags on his pipe.

Skelly sees Eilish’s eyes light on her daughter’s fallen face.

‘We have the play,’ she says. ‘Are we up to Act Five, Skelly?’ He shakes his head, feels disappointment swamp him. Now they will never know what happened to the Lynch boy.

‘But I have spent my last hours at the Ashbys copying the rest out. Without *herself* lecturing on and on about my Irish manners, I can finish my work in a trice,’ Rosanna pipes.

Skelly’s heart bounces with excitement. How lucky he is to have a sister like Rosanna.

‘Well then, shall we not have a reading, Eilish?’ Garrick says. ‘Skelly told me some details, about the early scenes. It is a familiar plot. In Galway Town, people tour the dreadful places where the events supposedly took place. Let’s not be dull, without Edwin. We can make our own entertainment.’

Eilish covers her surprise, drawing Blinnie onto her knee. ‘You did not tell me that you knew the play, Garrick.’

‘I did not say I knew *this* play.’

Skelly thinks his mother calculates the number of tankards consumed by her husband that night as she rests her head on Blinnie’s downy head; no doubt as her fingers swiftly separate the beads of her rosary beneath the table.

‘Get the new pages, Rosanna, and allow your brother to begin. Such a tedious day he’s had, hiding from the rain.’

Skelly jumps to his feet with excitement. ‘Act Five, Scenes Two and Three, Rosanna. Have you brought the last? I crave to know Oscar Lynch’s future.’ He jigs around his chair.

‘Well then, I shall fetch it,’ she says and flounces to her cloth bag hanging from a peg near the door. When she turns back to face him, the play in her hand, he sees that her face looks incredulous. She does not know that he and Father have talked about the play.

‘You have read to curtain close — Ro?’ he asks.

‘How could I not. You know that I have copied all of it.’ She glares at him.

Skelly takes the pages firmly from her hand. What can be wrong with her? She knows more than anyone how much he enjoys the play.

His father nods and draws out a chair for his daughter.

Skelly thinks that he reads well, hesitating only when Rosanna's script is especially blurred or the lantern flickers. 'The warden's friend, Mr Blake, is present.'

'I know Blakes in Woodford.' Father takes the rim of his tankard into his mouth and swallows like a draught horse.

Rosanna says, 'No doubt you'll be hoping a Lynch father might take notice of a friend's advice!'

He raises one brow, in Edwin's way, but with less pronouncement. 'Mansion,' he croons. 'I like the sound of that.'

Is he full of the grog or dreaming of building on new land?

'Well you would, *alannah*.' Mother makes it her duty to smooth out dips in the conversation.

'You're like a chorus, the two of you. Let Skelly put us through it now,' Rosanna snaps. She nods at her brother, leaning sideways to inhale a plume of her father's plum tobacco.

'The boy's mother will raise her brothers from the inn, just as I would. They'll not put up with such nonsense: fathers arresting sons. That would never happen.'

'Mother, shut it,' Rosanna cries.

'Rosannaaaa,' Garrick's voice inflects.

Skelly resumes his reading: '*There is much disaffection amongst the citizens.*'

'Did I not tell you?'

'Eilish, let the boy run with it now. Speak as the friend, Blake':

To justice you have full adherence shown

And now let gentle mercy rule your breast

Yield to the citizens' demand and spare,

Oh spare the life of your unhappy son!

'They are wise words,' says Eilish. 'And well read. Will the magistrate not concede them?'

Rosanna rocks on her stool, arms wrapped around her knees, eyes wistful. She watches Father.

Skelly stands up tall to play the magistrate. Cresting his father's shoulders, is he not almost a man? He clears his throat before commencing:

*Tis duty and not fear restrains me now...
From issuing command by force of arms
To sweep them hence and their insurgent mob.*

Skelly's performance as great tragedian falls away in the lantern-light. He has shocked himself. How can he act a part so unnatural? The Lynch father's words do not bode well for Oscar.

'It is an ancient story, Skelly, from bloody times,' Father rumbles, stroking his hand. 'And well performed.'

'Not a true story,' Eilish reassures.

'A Lynch story oft told in Galway, most often by the city council to attract travellers. When I was a boy, another version, written by a Reverend, was performed in Galway. A Burke showed me the pamphlet.'

'It is unnatural,' Skelly says, 'a father not to save his son.'

'Stories can be taken up or not,' Garrick soothes.

'We don't have to choose it then,' says Skelly, passionate in the darkening room.

'And what if it choose you?' says Rosanna. 'Fathers can be severe.'

'Read on now, Rosanna.'

She crosses to Skelly's side of the table and finds her place. Then draws herself up full of angry pride. Was this how Mr Geoghegan's friend, Francis Nesbitt, played the magistrate: *You have asked me for my reply, behold I give it here*. She waves her hand. *Oscar enters attended by a monk and followed by two guards and the executioner. The Warden regards him for a moment with parental tenderness. Then by an extreme effort repressing his emotions takes the hand of Oscar*. The warden, his own father,' she scores, 'delivers this verdict':

*Here on the altar of my country's laws
I offer up the sacrifice of all
My Heart in this world holds most dear
My son thou now hast...*

'Oscar, kneel at my feet,' Rosanna whispers to Skelly. She holds the play in one hand and tugs at his buttoned-up coat with the other.

He supposes he can play the part of the Lynch boy well enough to make his mother cry. There is little doubt his sister will act the warden to the hilt. He shivers.

Nay to my arms, she orders, pulling Skelly against her legs:

To my last embrace.

And may thy fate to all example prove

How unavailing every virtue else

Within the heart where passion rules supreme

Farewell farewell my boy – prepare for Death. (The Warden covers his face with his hands and appears for a moment convulsed with agony).

Skelly trembles and pulls away. He looks to his father, his eyes wide with surprise.

‘It is not over yet,’ Garrick says, without conviction.

Rosanna nods, reads on: *They embrace again.*

She pulls Skelly back against her and he feels her legs shake: *The curtain in front of the arch is drawn aside and discovers a large balcony on which are displayed the Block and other apparatus for an execution. Oscar is removed by ... guards to the balcony and prepares for death.*

Skelly clasps his hands in prayer.

Rosanna’s face takes on a savage grimace, and she seizes a stool between her hands to rock in a semblance of private grief: *Oscar at length kneels and places his head on the block.*

Her voice breaks and Skelly obeying the strictures of the script lays his head upon the stool. He feels uncertain. Will his parents cope with the distress of the warden and that of their own children?

Rosanna narrates with increasing fervour: *A convulsion shudders through the Warden’s frame, as casting one look to Heaven and another to Oscar he waves his hand as the signal for execution.* She takes her father’s shotgun from above the mantle and raises it above her head. Then seemingly overcome by horror casts it at his feet.

‘It is just as I thought, he cannot do it,’ Skelly cries, exultant.

‘God will stay his hand,’ says Eilish, counting her beads in frenzy.

Rosanna returns from the doorway where she has rushed to gulp fresh air. ‘Friends beat at the door.’

‘And the mother too?’ cries Eilish.

‘The crowd roars,’ shouts Rosanna, whumping the bellows over the fire. Fanning her face she rushes back to the door.

Skelly holds his hand over his mouth.

Eilish leans forward, furiously rocking Blinnie. ‘He must abide by the wishes of the people.’

Father throws back his drink.

Rosanna again takes the part of the warden: *Back ye Back Rebel Slaves...*

‘He is mad, Rosanna,’ her mother cries. Alarmed by the ferocity of the playing, Hugh frets to be picked up. ‘Should we not wait, Garrick, until the little ones are sleeping?’

Garrick’s face is grim. ‘*Arragh...finish it now, Rosanna.*’

But even as the patriarch of old when called by Heaven to devote his Son... his daughter reads.

‘It is Abraham, his son laid out on the pyre before him, pleasing God,’ says Garrick in an acid voice.

‘It is not just God afflicts us, husband. But Cuchulain in battle, knife at his son’s throat, the son of himself and Aoife.’ Eilish holds her beads to her throat and flinches.

‘Mr Geoghegan writes of Brutus. As does Mr Dickens in *Hard Times*,’ says Rosanna, her voice harsh and cracked. ‘At least, despite every provocation, our father has not killed Edwin.’

‘Nor me.’ Skelly quibbles at Rosanna’s feet.

Father stands and waves his unlit pipe in their direction. ‘Well that’s grand. You have the better of me now.’

‘Holy Mary, Mother of God, what would Father Woods be thinking of our entertainment?’ Eilish claps her hand against her mouth.

Rosanna swirls her shawl over Skelly who has slipped onto the floor: *I am childless*. Her voice is high-pitched. ‘Well you might ask about the Lady Anastasia, Mother. She is close by, carrying the Viceroy’s pardon.’

‘She will surely come and save him, at a great dramatic moment. I had forgotten her,’ replies Eilish, relief flooding her face.

‘I will play Anastasia as she approaches Oscar’s bier.’ Rosanna shrieks and bends to Skelly, kissing his hand; then dies, in spectacular fashion, at father’s feet.

His mother croons as if her belly pains her.

Rosanna rises to deliver the benediction: *From his entrance the warden appears completely overcome and stupefied by the accumulation of misery and remains motionless and seemingly unconscious. Tableau: Curtain. End.* She swirls the shawl, drags Skelly to his feet and curtsies.

Skelly sees that his mother is full of righteous anger. Pacing back and forth, she crushes Blinnie against her chest, and peers through the window into the darkness. 'I am wishing we had not brought on this performance,' she fires at her husband. 'None of us will sleep, due to the terror of its conclusion.'

'Why it is just a story and Mr Geoghegan has shaped it in his own way. He is not a Lynch,' says Father.

'He is but a convict, and a rogue,' says Rosanna. 'Mr Sutherland says so.'

'His father would not believe him so. And we are making our own story,' declaims Father.

'Stories are often about death, Mother. The ones you tell, as well,' says Skelly, feeling more recovered. His face feels flushed and he prods at it with his fingers; then places his stool beside the table to lean over and kiss her.

'Well, and I know that, Skelly, and it is not surprising that a dreadful tale should follow us, but we have stood by Edwin, at least, in this God-forsaken place.'

Garrick puts an arm around her. 'I am glad we came here, away from village talk. When I have my land, we will be free.'

'The story will not imprint on our hearts,' Mother murmurs to Skelly.

'No one will know *our* story,' he rues.

'That is not surprising. It is so dull,' says Rosanna.

'We are living it,' his mother soothes. 'We have Skelly's sketching book to remind us.'

'That is only for the eyes of the family.'

'And Father Woods, I believe,' she says. 'Perhaps you should remember *that* when you choose your subjects.'

Rosanna looks as if she wants to run away forever. Why does she never think of him? He is a Lynch son, after all. The play is more emotional for him. The performing of it has made the story powerful. It has shipped pain all around his body, set it throbbing in his knee joints.

XXX: Three Conversations and a Close Call

A head cold keeps Rosanna home three days before she returns to the Big House. She thinks the rooms have taken on a masculine appearance evidenced by mice waltzing over dirty dishes and through bread crumbs on the tables. Dust has blown through the loose shutters. Fires not laid, beds not made. She flicks her duster around a letter trapped beneath a crystal whisky decanter on the credenza, unable to resist scanning its contents. *Although I did not write on your birthday, I drank your health,* Mr Ashby Senior writes, instructing his son to dig in, work harder, employ some Blacks — and persist, until his investment pays dividends. *As you have four thousand head of cattle, you cannot be worse off than your neighbours.* In the evenings *why not play the piano, he writes, or backgammon? Make a practice of writing home each Sunday. I am afraid that you have not put your mind to all that might be done. With best wishes, I remain, my dear William, your very affectionate father.* Fathers can be so warm and firm with sons.

She finds Mr Ashby at his desk — dealing with his accounts. He barely raises his head to acknowledge her. ‘Have you heard, sir, from your wife?’

He nods, barely lifting his slumped head from the page of figures he labours over.

‘Her father is recovered?’

‘Evidently so.’ He peers at her through a flop of unbarbered hair, as if she is a troublesome stinging insect that he is inclined to sweep from his desk in a fit of temper.

‘The child is also well?’ Rosanna’s lip trembles. ‘And your guests Mr Colyer, Mr and Mrs Brigstock and Mr Sutherland are well?’

‘Bertram has recovered from his ordeal,’ Mr Ashby replies, scratching out a calculation with his nib.

‘It was most stimulating to meet an actor,’ she says, drawing open the string of her bag.

‘I have heard nothing from the actor. I doubt that you will see him again.’

Rosanna stiffens, feels blood rush to her face. ‘And what of Mr Sutherland’s play? Perhaps the Brigstocks think of attending. It is not far between Melbourne and Portland.’

‘I dare say they will.’ He stands impatiently and shepherds her towards the door. ‘Your father has no doubt told you that the station is on the market. It doesn’t live up to its promise. I doubt that I will require your services much longer.’

He does not listen to *his* father. ‘Well then, I thank you for your trouble. If you hear of another situation you may let my father know of it. Please convey my respects to your wife and the little one.’

Rosanna curtsies. It is no more than a game, to survive such hardness. She plods through the decimated flock of turkeys roaming free between the stables and the house and vomits in perfunctory fashion in a corner of the tack room. Aggravated Irish pride rises with her bile. For her wedding portion Maeve asks for a man without stinginess, without jealousy, without fear. Anastasia dies on the altar of Lynch pride. Feemy’s speechless death commits her brother to the gallows. Grim life. All Rosanna asks is love and a play.

Yet more trials present themselves on her wild ride home: O’Leary, the corpulent bag of pus, stands his massive bay across the bridlepath, obstructing her way.

‘And how is your beautiful self today?’ He touches the tip of his whip to her shoulder. She spits on the ground before him. He seizes her arm.

‘When Edwin comes home he will flay you, you lying *pishrogue*,’ she curses, pulling free and hauling Glorvina up the small incline behind him. What a blaggard he is, a black ruffian. Her mouth is sour with all her disappointments. In her mind, she mouths the springing ginger hairs in the hollow of George’s throat, the scatter of freckles on his forearms, and the curve of his lower back where his dress shirt billows. Blotting out the fleshy neck of O’Leary proves difficult when he hauls his horse around to grab her by the waist. She struggles against him, nails flying at his pocky face.

The sudden arrival of Father Woods surprises both of them; O’Leary releases her and, in an attempt at dignity, dips his hat before he scarpers: ‘Father Woods.’

‘Dismount for a moment, Rosanna, and calm yourself,’ Father begs, leading Glorvina to a large rock beside the track. ‘Such an unpleasant scene. You should tell your father.’

‘There is little point.’

‘How are you going? Are you happy in your life?’

Rosanna considers this and begins to cry.

‘You haven’t been to confession for a while. Would you like to make it now?’ His face is sweet and understanding, his voice quiet. Surely, he is the instrument of God. He never gets in a huff with her.

Rosanna kneels beside the rock, hands clasped — eyes downcast. ‘Bless me Father for I have sinned. It is three months since my last confession.’

‘Tell me what has been troubling you.’

She hesitates. ‘I have impure thoughts. I want a man to touch me.’

‘You must stop. It could do you harm.’

‘It is too late for that.’

‘Did you go further?’

She nods.

‘Resist the urges of the body. Love God. Do penance now. He will absolve you of your sin.’

She nods again.

‘Do you want to confess anything more?’

‘No Father.’ She thinks of O’Leary’s homage and feels ill.

Father blesses her and she is shamed by his beautiful eyes — enough to say three Hail Marys in a rush of tears. On his way to Penola he will say a prayer for her.

Garrick arrives home late from the town where he has been sent by Eilish to purchase paper for a letter she will write to Edwin. Rosanna follows him to the still and places herself beside him on the rock near the water, her head between her knees. Her reflection tilts and swims.

‘It is hard on your mother with you at Ashby’s and Edwin gone,’ he says.

She sits up. ‘Don’t you think I know that?’

‘When you feel tired and crabbity you must also think of her.’

‘I may be home to help sooner than you think. Mr Ashby is to sell the station and I am to be dismissed.’

Father raises his eyebrows and leans close, better to hear her words. ‘He has said so?’

‘Now that Mrs Ashby has left *him* he has no need for temperance in anything. His wife warned *me* not to tipple in her cellar. I swear he will drink it all before I get there!’

‘You have grown up, *mavoureen*, since the summer. Try to see it from a man’s point of view. He is lonely.’

Rosanna cannot speak about George. She wants to tell him that men bring suffering on themselves but not while she plays at taking Edwin’s place in her father’s heart. ‘Reading the end of the Lynch play was a terrible thing. Did it hurt you when you heard it in Galway?’

‘It is not the end of the story — only where Mr Geoghegan chose to end it.’

‘What more could be of consequence? Oscar lies dead.’

‘The death of your first-born is a terrible thing. Imagine if you were the instrument.’

‘I do not feel for the magistrate. He is a fool of a man. Why should name matter before love?’

‘Name and pride help families survive. He did not waver, even as he grieved. Cuchulain too, slayed his son. Then took his sword and strode into the sea — mad with pain, like a speared bullock.’

‘You know about the bullock?’ Rosanna blinks and ducks her head. Oh what a fool she is — not to concentrate.

‘William Ashby needs every one of his thousands of bullocks to repay his father’s loan. Each dead one grieves him. I fear that the Blacks left in haste because of this.’

Rosanna changes tack. ‘I am anxious about Moorecke’s safety.’ She bites her lip. ‘I have not seen her or Jack for weeks.’

He places the back of his hand against her cheek. ‘She will take her stories wherever she goes, just like Eilish.’

‘I dream Irish scenes, from our life and from stories.’ She doesn’t know why she tells her father this.

‘Don’t dwell on everything so much. You’re worse than the poets. Everyone knows things they can’t explain.’

She considers this. ‘Mr Geoghegan’s play is a tragedy, much like one of Shakespeare’s. Oscar is doomed from the outset. His father’s name is more important than his life. I hope Moorecke’s fate will be different.’

He shakes his pipe from his pocket and taps it on the rock before him. Sucks on it and taps again. 'It was not the end of the Lynch tribe, as we know. Nor will it be the end of Moorecke's.'

She hesitates. 'Edwin is lucky, Father. Luck dies in my hand.'

'I'm sure Edwin does not think so while under lock and key — you sound like Skelly. You'll be alright, Rosanna. We're fools to think our lives should be better than anyone else's.'

She breathes slowly, placing her hand on the rock to steady herself.

'Where does Mr Geoghegan live? I should like to know why he wrote this play.' Father packs his pipe in his brooding way. 'At least he did not make the magistrate a potato head peasant with sprouting hair and seed-fested pockets.'

'Mr Geoghegan is raising money for a revival of the play in Melbourne. George says he has had deuced bad luck, since he came from Ireland.'

'George Sutherland, the actor?' Her father looks sharp at her.

She looks away and then returns his gaze. 'If the play does not go ahead *we* can tell the magistrate's story. It is a shameful one, but, all the same, it is ours.' When George sends for her she will take care of him in the cottage near his stables. She must be careful not to let this slip to her father, who looks hard at her as if his thoughts commingle with hers. Guilt runs through her, as sharp as Cuchulain's sword.

'It is true. We are nothing but actors in our own plays. The Lynch story is uncomfortable, but we will bend it to our purpose. I doubt that it is true. Go tell your mother I'd like to have a drink with her beside the pond.'

XXXI: Wreck of the *Admella* (August, 1859)

Morning rain thrums on the roof. Wind rips up the surface of the pond. Skelly and Rosanna take turn about to bring damp rough cut logs inside from the stack beside the step. All day they huddle near the smoking fire. Eilish picks weevils from the flour, her deft hands slapping the dough into a glistening ball. Rosanna, hair awry, smudges of ash from the fender darkening her face, shawl about her shoulders, tends a pot of broth while she reads her novel. *Dishabille*, she mouths, and *dissolute*. Skelly recites lines from the Lynch play, and prods at her foot, hoping to gain her

attention. Eilish begs her to read to the little ones, who sing-song over their fingers and toes, and roll tins across the dirt floor.

For two long days the weather holds them all to ransom. The days being short, but feeling long, they take early to their beds, piling on clothes for extra warmth, clinging to each other like human water-bottles. On the third night, when they fear the storm will never shift to the east, rivulets of water rush beneath the door. Rosanna tries to ignore the scrapings and howlings, the shriekings and creakings. She sleeps fitfully, lurching from one half-familiar nightmare to another. She gallops to her wedding on Lucifer, through the Woodford High Street and on to Loughrea; the scalloped train of her gown speckled with mud, her veil streaming behind her like that of a warrior queen — like Maude's or Aoife's? She lies on her belly in the hayloft where George inveigles his way into the picture, loosening the ties on her gown, mouthing the base of her spine. She bucks and groans. Her father stalks them with a coil of hemp rope. Is it simply that George refuses to say his marriage vows, or has Edwin caused his father's ire? Her father plays the Magistrate of Galway, his face savage with anxiety. But then it is Moorecke who runs along the banks of the windswept pond, away from Mr Ashby, who is chasing her on horseback.

Rosanna sits bolt upright in complete darkness. It is a long moment before she remembers that George has gone: Edwin too, Moorecke and Lucifer. A schism of loss opens in her body. Blinnie cries out in bed and she goes to comfort her. Eilish stirs. Hugh has found his way into the space Father usually fills, and sleeps with a hand on his mother's breast, a leg flung over her hip. It is a fitting night for loss. Is Father safely swagged down at a station? Rats squeal and scrabble, gnaw wood and nibble paper — pray God, newspaper plugs and not the manuscript, or the book by Mr Trollope. Truly, she has gone to hell in a bucket. Luck has deserted her.

She does not wish her crying to disturb Eilish and the others. What should she do? Struggling from her bedclothes, she jumps up to wedge newspaper between the lintel and the wall, stepping along the planks Father has laid across the muddy floor. Dragging the pot a few yards closer to the warmth of the dying fire, she tosses on wood. Draughts as cold as knives attack her bare legs; rain washes soot from the chimney onto the sulking coals; and her heart is weighed down with gloom. If Irish ancestors come they will not stay long, the house being so poor with clothes drying

before the fire and mice scurrying across the hearth. The dead — will they speak? She crunches her body over the steaming chamber pot, warming her thighs with her hands. Even after the job is done, her belly bloats. Wind whistles through the gaps in the walls. Her breasts ache. The last act of the play flutters on the table where Skelly has left it, weighed down by a candle in a can.

The sky splits open and eerie light floods the yard. Horses whinny. Rosanna moves to the window. Has Glorvina been spooked by wind? Lucifer has been gone since July, and she has heard from Father that the darling thing won two Adelaide races and placed well in a third. It is a travesty of justice that he should show his mettle with a rider other than a Lynch. Would selling him to the poet have been more satisfying? Does Edwin languishing in his debtor's cell know of Lucifer's success?

Sorely troubled she must be conjuring Lucifer when surely, by now, he is on his way with George to Melbourne for the Champion Sweepstakes. She peers into the darkened yard, jerking back when a fist of thunder pounds the house. For a moment the wind drops and she hears horses whinnying. She finds her feet like a tardy shepherd. The moon slides behind heavy clouds. Lightning splits a tree like kindling, behind the hitching place. Something is happening in the house yard: thieves or dogs? Nothing could prepare her for the next shock when the moon reappears and bathes the yard in light. What she sees next sends her crashing outside in boots and shawl.

Tears run down her face as she squelches through the mud; for it is a miracle and must portend some good. Lucifer rears behind a fallen tree, a small dark figure clinging like a whelk to his neck. His feet land jarring Moorecke wildly scrabbling at his mane, before she is thrown across the trunk of the fallen tree.

Rosanna searches for her in the wet darkness. Lucifer prances around the yard, then, dolefully, legs splayed, drops his head to bunt her. In the end she does not require a lantern, for hissing, Moorecke finds her feet.

Rosanna holds her friend hard against her chest. 'Are you hurt?' Rain runs down their faces.

Moorecke takes her hands to her temple and shakes her head. The horses jostle against each other in the mud. Lucifer barges between them blood caked on his flanks, nosing Glorvina's tail, biting her back, as he attempts to mount her. She

shunts him sideways. The stallion throws down his shoulders and jumps away, pawing the ground, ears twitching with aggravation.

‘How did you come to be riding Lucifer, and where have you been?’

‘Lucifer came dancing in the storm, past our *ngoorla*. He let me catch him with string. We’ve been camping back by Curratum, waiting for the shearing.’

Rosanna pushes wet hair from her face, brings a halter-rope over the bridge of Lucifer’s nose, and fastens it. She croons and soothes and strokes, walking him round in circles as she guides him towards a post and rail. ‘You caught him with just string and rode him home twelve miles? You one brave, *ngat-mal*.’

‘I see him running. I feed him. On I hopped.’

‘I have been so worried about you. Mr Ashby smashed your *ngoorla*?’ Rosanna points. ‘He was cranky about that boy you rescued in the swamp. When I came to warn you, you had gone.’

‘*Bung bung*. Bullets all in the trees. Kicked up plenty of dust. Jack and me, we hide. Then we run to *Kongorong*.’

‘I looked everywhere for you. I was afraid you’d been *kilt*.’ Rosanna bites her lips in puzzlement. ‘Why is Lucifer not with George?’

Moorecke shrugs. ‘Lucifer belongs to Lynches.’

‘Well, darling he did, but Edwin, the right fool, sold him to Mr Sutherland. Lucifer has been winning races in Adelaide. Father heard it from Ashbys.’

Moorecke cocks her head, her mild eyes look doubtful. She shrugs again. ‘Jack saw *oorincarto*, big ship, stuck on the rocks. *Coomimor paron*, white people, crying out and falling into the sea.’

Rosanna slaps her hands to her mouth. Nausea guts her.

‘Men coming from every place — from Gambierton, Curratum — to help people caught on that ship.’

‘And Lucifer ran from the sand hills? Is that what are you are saying?’ Rosanna cannot think what it all means. ‘You must take me there, now. I will tell Skelly that there has been an accident.’

Moorecke shakes her head. ‘It is a long way to me and Jack’s camp. Maybe eight more miles to the wreck, Jack says. Lucifer will be all knocked up.’

‘Glorvina, then.’

‘No. She is too old, that mare. The sand will suck her off her feet. Water is flooding everywhere.’

Lucifer accepts the bridle and the bit, with sugar. He will not stand up politely for the saddle and swings sideways throwing his head about. It takes ten minutes to manoeuvre him against the rail so that they can both leap on. Faint pink light suffuses the sky. Moorecke guides them around the swamps, along the banks of debris built up on the eastern sides, all the time prattling in Rosanna’s ear about the significance of certain stars, about how she and Jack’s family curl like lizards around the remnants of their campfire, and how above the wind they hear voices — ‘ooooaaii’ — spirit ancestors.

Moorecke directs Rosanna due west. Up to his girth in water, skirting sink holes, Lucifer crosses deep bogs. They pass through long grasses, scrub and stands of black-wood. He takes logs in his stride with Moorecke jolting like a post office package, hands on his haunches and Rosanna, standing on the balls of her toes, in the stirrups. They curve their backs against the stiff salt wind like crooked trees – like *curratum*, Moorecke says. A swamp harrier drops before them and screams as it rises — a scrabbling creature dangling from its talons.

White mist settles like a ration-blanket around their shoulders. They approach the sea, making their way with caution past sinkholes and through limestone littered clearings. Sea heath and spear grass cling to the dunes. Lucifer begins to flag. Fingers stiff with cold Rosanna shortens his reins. The hollow roar of the sea reminds her that she has seen these limestone cliffs undercut by ferocious waves on a ride with Edwin. ‘I know this place. There is a spring.’

‘No stopping here.’ Moorecke lifts Rosanna’s hair to bellow in her ear. ‘Blackfella’s caves.’

‘All caves, Blackfellas.’ Rosanna’s eyes try to penetrate the blur of fog and sand and scrubby trees. Yellow blossom stains the horse’s neck where he has nosed his way through stands of early wattle. A channel overflows its banks and fans into the sea. Lucifer slips about on the rocky footing; the sound of surf is loud.

‘Not this cave, Rosanna — bad stories happened here. *Manyoon*, long ago, many *druel* die.’

They follow the path past the cliff-tops, curving around the bays and across two sharp points. Rosanna stops to listen to the sea, and then turns north, resting

Lucifer at frequent intervals while she shouts into Moorecke's cupped ear. Crests of sand hills collapse beneath his feet. He flounders in deep drifts. Rosanna slips sideways and Moorecke uses her shawl to haul her upright. 'Lucifer — he bucked near here.' Moorecke guides her along the sedge-tangled path between high dunes.

The fog breaks up; daylight seeps into the sky casting pink and yellow rays over the low eastern hills.

Moorecke strains her ears over the crashing of the surf and the roaring wind; she listens, and nods. 'Tie him up now. We'll walk a bit more closer.'

'Should I not take you to your camp?'

'First see about that boat.'

They slide off and tether Lucifer to a tea-tree. Rosanna fossicks in her pocket for more sugar, then follows her friend through the dunes past clumps of bower spinach and spiky grasses. On the last sandy rise before the sea, they haul each other up to peer onto the beach. *Rasach*, it is a wild place. It is difficult to see through the curtains of spray, with sand whipping the beach, and fresh rain on their faces. A pitiful sight confronts them. Rosanna can't stop shivering. Appalling enough to see a vessel, mostly obscured by the rising swell, and so stricken upon the reef that the mast and sail have been ripped asunder but, most distressing of all, a man runs along the deck, his hands thrown in the air in wild gesticulation. The agony of his cries can be faintly heard above the wind tunnelling along the beach. Suddenly, he claps his hands to his head and throws himself overboard.

Rosanna clutches her belly and retches, grasps Moorecke's hand. 'He is *Booandik* man. Did you see?'

She shakes her head. 'Might be American whaler or sealer man.'

Holding each other up, they peer again over the dune grass. Split asunder, the deck of the ship is set at an alarming angle, and continually beset by waves. The sea bucks like a live creature, slurping and sliding, washing and sucking at the boat thrown up on the rocks. If only, in some miraculous way, it would withdraw leaving behind sand mountains and the wrecked boat quivering on upraised rocks, the survivors could climb down and scramble to safety.

A horse's body lies sprawled on the beach. Rosanna's mind turns over and over the single dreadful thought that Lucifer has plunged ashore, leaving behind George Sutherland, who must be one of the distraught people balancing on the

rigging or clinging to the rails of the deck. All the while she had worried that he had jilted her – not a letter, nor a note to tell her how Lucifer had performed like a champion on the Adelaide track, nor any details of his departure for Melbourne to run the sweepstake — and now he may be trapped on a disintegrating boat in the worst imaginable weather.

Instinctively, Rosanna turns to the hillock behind them, where Lucifer stands tethered, back turned to the scouring wind. Two more fine horses graze in the tussocks beside the beach. Had Lucifer swum ashore with them and found his way to Moorecke's camp? She drags her mind back to the main event.

'We must ride for help. People will die, if we don't.'

'Jack told me the policeman and more boats, coming.'

For hours Rosanna is transfixed by the horror. Moorecke curls up her long legs and falls asleep beneath the woolly tea-tree. Rosanna strokes her hair, drawing her coat around her shoulders. If help is on its way, what harm in staying, while her exhausted friend rests? Lucifer lies on his side in the knoll of a sandhill, legs outstretched as if he is dead. Eventually, she hears the sound of horses approaching from the northeast.

A party arrives on the beach in a flurry of sand. Rosanna squints through the blizzard of spray and sand. It is not William Ashby but the manager of a neighbouring station accompanied by several men including her father sucking his unlit pipe, hat pulled down hard on his dark head, long legs slapping around the girth of a small mount. Is it comedy or love that makes her cry over Father riding in on a donkey? The men walk their horses along the beach, their heads turning in unison to survey the wreck and the flotsam and jetsam strewn along the shore, including the comatose horse. They dismount and struggle in the shallows in their high riding boots. Father stands apart. In his silent way he seems, nevertheless, one of a fellowship, in a way Rosanna had never imagined possible. She must stay out of sight.

Within minutes a second party arrives, a dozen men on horseback, one carrying a doctor's kitbag. They light a driftwood fire and the men wave and shout and signal the wreck. The sea calms long enough to reveal crewmen waving a flag in frenzy. Rosanna stands up, hand shielding her face from the wind and grit, eyes drawn to the disastrous scene; stupidly, she has shown herself. She pulls back, too

late to protect herself from her father's angry words, when he arrives beside her on the sand hill.

'Why are you here? Go home.'

She cowers before him.

'Men's business. Nothing pretty about it. Git.' He glares at Moorecke, who has roused herself.

'Father, please.' She begins to cry.

'You'd rather be one of those little girls naked on the deck apart from their petticoats, I suppose, waiting for the next wave to take you to God.' How distressed he sounds.

And, indeed, she can just make out the shape of a small woman swaying against the rails. 'We will go.'

'How did you get here?'

'I rode.' She gulps. She cannot say the word, Lucifer. Filaments of cloud wreath the moon. She waits while Moorecke picks up her digging stick and skin bag. 'We have to go.' Father retreats to the beach. For all his tiredness, Lucifer agreeably pulls himself up from his knees.

The *Booandik* shearing camp is small: a half a dozen huts clustered beneath paperbark trees. Jack emerges wearing a trailing overcoat and a knitted hat. He shouts at Moorecke and points in the direction they have come from. Three or four children run out to take her hand. Rosanna's belly hardens in sympathy. She hugs her hard, thinking of the bones in the cave, as she helps her slide from the horse.

'After shearing we come back to smoke eels at *Ngaranga*. When the sun is hot again,' Moorecke says.

'Before that I will see you here. I cannot stay away.'

XXXII: A Catastrophic Week

Rosanna feeds and waters Lucifer, checks a superficial cut on his foreleg. When she removes the saddle he shakes himself and rolls in the mud. She limps to the house and crawls into her bed, whispering to Skelly, who worriedly hovers: 'Lucifer has come home. He has swum off a great boat in the storm. Do not tell Mother, yet.'

In the late afternoon she is shaken awake by Father. 'Explain yourself.'

She seizes his hand. Tired tears trickle down her face. 'Moorecke found Lucifer and took me to the wreck.' She holds up her hands in helplessness.

‘What has the horse to do with this disaster?’

‘He ran to Moorecke’s camp near Curratum. You saw the horses at the wreck. Do you remember that Mr Sutherland was taking Lucifer to Melbourne? Pray God, he sent him ahead in the care of a trainer.’

‘Don’t concern yourself over him, girl. Not one of those people deserved their fate. More’n hundred men are gathered on the beach, hoping to rescue survivors before they die of thirst and cold.’

It is best that Father never understands. But how can that be? She keens a moment, feels faint. ‘Will they get them off Carpenters Rocks? The water is so rough.’

‘I just called in to tell your mother that I’m leaving now, to help take the station dray and the life boat from the lighthouse to the wreck.’ He shakes his head and turns towards the door. ‘Tether the horse behind the pond and take care of your mother. I’m not sure when I’ll be back.’

When he next returns, he is falling-down tired. He and the station men have seen the dray safely to the beach, at three o’clock in the morning, on the authority of Mr Ashby’s pocket watch. They have remained on the sand anxiously watching until morning when a small steamer comes close to the wreck but is unable to effect a rescue. During the day several passengers have died, either by toppling overboard or making desperate attempts to take themselves ashore. Grey and tired Father whispers confidences to Eilish. It is mens’ business yet, Rosanna thinks, straining to decipher details, something he cannot bear alone. She prays and prays to the Holy Mother that if George is among the passengers he will be rescued.

Next morning she rises early and prepares food for her father. ‘Please let me come with you today.’

‘It is only men on the beach, doing dangerous work.’

She drops her head. ‘Do you have information about the wreck?’

‘Two crewmen from the *Admella*, the inter-colonial steamer, made it through the surf on Monday and raised the alarm at the lighthouse.’ Garrick sucks harder on his tea.

‘Did the storm drive the ship onto the rocks?’

‘It has been said that a horse fell in his stall. By the time they righted him with ropes they lost sight of the coast in the dark and the boat foundered.’

‘Are you wondering now if Lucifer was among the racehorses?’

‘I am, now.’ He looks severely down his nose at her.

She knows that he thinks of Edwin.

‘And it is him that *you* should be concerned with. Take care of him for your brother and leave saving souls to men.’ His face softens, and he reaches out to stroke her hair.

‘It was such a blessing to see Moorecke riding him in on Monday night, but you know that Mr Sutherland bought him off our Edwin. And it was him that kindly allowed Skelly and me to copy out the Lynch play.’

‘Well and I can’t be sure if that particular thing has had such a great effect, but I wouldn’t be hoping a man would drown for the trouble he took stirring the hearts of my children. I heard Mr Ashby talking about the owner of some of the racehorses, and an Irish groom accompanying them, but no mention of this Sutherland, the actor. Nor Lucifer. No doubt, in time, a passenger list will be published.’ He places his tin plate on the table and wipes his mouth. ‘I can’t take you, *alannah*. Help your mother and rest.’

An hour after her father leaves, halter in hand, she skirts the house and Eilish cries out to her from the leek-bed, ‘Where are you going, girl? Will you stop this running?’

Rosanna is not the only rider on the *boreen*. On the heath she passes the poet. Edwin says that he has been seen with a married woman in Gambierton — he must be a secret lady killer — but he has shown not the slightest interest in Rosanna since their exchange at the kitchen door. George would never speak to him about her — surely. Creamy tea-tree blossoms fall, washed by rain. Wattle drifts in the wind. Gordon lifts his hand, grim-faced; they are both preoccupied. People are drawn to the Carpenters, like flies to a wound. Crouching in the dunes, she watches stockmen clustered around the large bonfire, fed by driftwood and despair. A young Livingstone Black in stockman’s hat and torn velvet trews takes care of the horses. She has seen him with Moorecke at the camp. Hope flares and dies with every failed rescue attempt. Rosanna watches, curls her nails into her palms and rocks her body to the eerie sound of the flightless bristle-bird — *reeor, reeor, reeor* — rising from sand gullies.

Each new day her father has returned with horror stories whipping like wildfire through station communities, about survivors trapped on the truncated deck

— starving, dehydrated, demented by exposure to the elements. Cries can be heard from shore. It is increasingly difficult for Rosanna to slip away in bright moonlight, past her mother, who, at every creak, rolls and groans in her sleep. Each morning more passengers have failed to survive the bitter night. Boats go out. Boats come in. The coast community weather watches. Father intones bylines from torn out pages of the *Register*, reporting that crowds weep in the capital cities and both Houses of Parliament adjourn.

Rosanna dreams that Lucifer swims between the waves, foam glistening on his powerful shoulders, sand matting his mane. ‘Wait,’ she cries, for it is George’s head she sees, bobbing red and blotched by wind and weather, holding the manuscript above his head. Even as he is swamped by waves, and sinks below the surface, he manages to keep his sheaf of papers aloft: the fool. In her dream Rosanna reels from the sand hills, and is swept from her feet in the surf. But she rights herself and staggers on, her skirts tangling around her knees. Once she sights George beyond a line of breakers; then, he dips from sight. He sinks and rises. Splutters. Petrels cry on the wind.

Eilish hauls her upright, shushing her mouth with the palm of her hand.

‘I was in the water, Mother, with George and Lucifer.’

‘Rest. The wreck has seized everyone’s imagination. I don’t know how your father bears it, or the other men.’

‘I was reading the play with George.’

‘What a fool you were to be doing that,’ Eilish snaps. ‘Even in a dream.’

‘But I love him.’

‘Is that right, Rosanna?’

‘I love him more than Ireland.’

‘Enough of your wild talk. Nothing can be done if the man has drowned. Prayer is all you have. Keep away from the whisky now.’

Rosanna claps her hand against her head and throws herself onto the sham to wail. It dawns on her that she is never going to be an actress. Nor will she go to Melbourne. How can she ever explain the worst of it to Mother? Soon she won’t be able to dissemble over her mortal sins.

But Mother hears Father coughing up phlegm and she withdraws. Rosanna hears them, spitting at each other like cats.

‘I fear for her.’

‘She’ll be alright.’

‘You must speak to her.’

‘It will work out, Eilish. Leave her alone.’

Rosanna grinds her teeth. All week she has ridden out in the full moon light rinsing the Carpenters, managing to stagger home before her father. Even so, shameful apparitions leap from the shadowy landscape. She is afraid to go, afraid to stay at home. Father brings news from the would-be rescuers on the beach and those in boats, and from more newspapers passed hand to hand around the bonfires fed to blazing heights, to lift the morale of the survivors. They can only bear witness. On Thursday, a telegram bungle results in the *Havilah* steaming from the port of Adelaide to Melbourne instead of the Carpenters, abandoning the passengers to their fate.

‘Those fools in Adelaide will never help us,’ shouts Father. ‘Secession is the only way. Only Victorians can save the day.’ On Friday, all hope is dashed when he brings home the news that the Victorian Premier, an Irishman no less, has refused to underwrite a rescue. ‘They are between an Irish devil and the deep blue sea,’ he moans. ‘And what of our own Parliament hovering over the wrong telegrams, looking after their friends in the city and ignoring the poor suffering beggars on the boat? They’re as useless as ever.’ Meanwhile, a pilot boat from Guichen Bay battles the waves, approaching the wreck, again and again.

Returning home late at night, Rosanna surprises O’Leary making water behind an acacia. ‘Riding at night don’t signify,’ he sneers at her, clutching his pants with one hand.

She raises her crop to him and digs in her heels.

‘I still know that stallion of your brother’s,’ he shouts.

Lucifer obliges her with a show of silliness, rearing before he bounds past. It is a pretty pickle she is in. Will O’Leary peach? Cream light shafts the sky, as if the weather moves in blocks. Rosanna arrives home and falls fully-clothed onto her bed. O’Leary, ham-fisted, fat hairy-*bod* dangling from his trews, chases her from one dream to the next until, flailing and sweating, she shudders awake, pulling her night wrapper around her.

On Saturday, despite high seas, the Portland Lifeboat rescues nineteen passengers from the wreck, one a woman: a little Irish girl, bound for her sister in the

goldfields. Tales abound of the rescue; enough men gathered around the bonfire on the beach to form a government, and Rosanna does not know why they didn't, instead of relying on Mr O'Shannassey and the colonial government of Victoria. No survivor lists include George Sutherland. It seems that he did not accompany Lucifer on the boat that sank. Or, if he did, and a shipping agent failed to record his name, only sharks will know of his friendly disposition. But she refuses to be convinced by government reports, newspaper stories or shipping logs which are, after all, written down by men like O'Leary, and not to be relied upon.

After supper she makes her way to the pond and smokes a pipe with her father while he pours and measures at the still. 'O'Leary saw me on Lucifer. He threatened me.'

'He did not touch you?'

'He did not', she gulps. 'If only Edwin were here.'

'Edwin,' Father shakes his head disparagingly. 'I am no horse thief but I see no harm in lying low, at least, until we know the facts. Hobble Lucifer in the scrub. Do not ride out on him and O'Leary'll not bother you.' He strokes the curve of her elbow and drops his great high forehead against hers. His eyes hold her. In his fiercesome way he loves her. She thinks of the bats in their torpor, safe in the winter caves. Only foolish humans push against the elements.

XXXIII: Revelations at the Penola Steeplechase

It sorely grieves her that while Edwin is detained at her Majesty's pleasure, Father has paid off his debts and leased his bullocks back to that pustule head O'Leary. Oh yes, he is lucky, but what a fool to trust the filthy *gombeen*. Father Woods has asked the policeman in Gambierton to keep an eye on O'Leary's activities at the bay. Meanwhile, Rosanna is left behind with the crows and dingoes, a shattering sense of loss, and her growing shame.

Three months later, surprisingly subdued, Edwin completes his sentence and rides home. He puts down his head and works to repay Father, who needs the money for land of his own — a government block in the Hundred of Caroline — all he can afford. Rosanna follows them to the creek and eavesdrops on their conversation about Mr Ashby. They speculate on the bleakness of his mood, as he battles to rid his stock of coastal fever and cattle tic, and spends his lonely evenings pining for his

wife. Men-folk of Gambierton know that William Ashby cannot find a buyer for his run, and that he drinks enough muscat to refloat the boat that brought Lucifer home to the Lynches.

Rosanna has more pressing concerns. During daylight hours she mopes in her mother's shawl, as she has every day since the week of the wreck. She mends splits in her dress and dreams of running away from black shadows biting at her heels. Every day she imagines a letter arriving from George inviting her to join him in Esperance, or Moreton Bay, or Melbourne. She takes long rides Curratum-way to see Moorecke.

Chores half-done, or not at all, incite her mother, in a futile way, to reprimand her. Worry etches deep into her face. 'And what if someone sees you on that horse?'

Rosanna shrugs. 'Lucifer does not belong to Edwin any more. Let him say one word to me.'

'Your reputation will be in shreds and I blame you for bringing home that dreadful play and souring Skelly's mood. There must be a nicer play about Walshes. If only Father Woods could pay another visit. The weather is so drear.'

'He follows me everywhere with his damned sketchbook.' Was he worse when she worked at the Big House every day? Skelly's reproachful looks weigh her down — and his veiled threats. Father Woods has already invited her to confession, although he doesn't know the worst thing.

To please Edwin, Rosanna enters the ladies' race at the October picnic race meeting. She will not let him or Lucifer down again. This time there is no rush from the course, no fighting before or after the race. Although she fears that someone will come forward to claim the horse, it is especially satisfying to win. On account of Mr Gordon away training a horse for Mr Livingstone, Edwin wins well on Lucifer, too. The sun sparkles on the sea, warming her back and lifting her spirits. For a moment she forgets the events of the past months — only a moment. She drapes her plaid carefully around herself, edging closer to a conversation between Edwin and Mr Ashby. Wishing to appear half attentive, she clutches her brother's arm, and over the thrumming of her heart she hears her employer's careless words. It is the first time she has encountered him in many weeks although he pays her scant attention.

‘Charming man, George Sutherland,’ she hears him say. ‘No doubt his absence from the stage will be mourned.’

Something hard and indigestible lodges itself in her gullet.

Edwin nods, glancing across at Lucifer. There is always a point to the peregrinations of Mr Ashby’s conversations.

‘I see you have the horse, Edwin. I have heard that while in Adelaide George stabled it with Magarey’s recently purchased stallions. Mr Magarey, the Messrs Fisher and Rochfort planned to attend the Champion Sweepstake in Melbourne. Alas, one of the Fisher brothers, Magarey, and his groom perished at the wreck’

Rosanna forces herself to pay attention. Her chest tightens. Dust motes float in the air before her. She squints and blinks into the glittering sunlight.

Edwin nods. ‘Someone brought the horse to us, found him running wild.’

‘It is most peculiar. Sutherland is not listed on the passenger list, nor has he identified himself as a survivor. In any case, arrangements have been made for his wife and child.’

It is possible that Rosanna will expire from shock as quickly as birds driven slamming into Moorecke’s net.

‘George was damned keen to run him in the sweepstake — thought him a dead-set walloper.’ Edwin shakes his head as a tide of details swamp Rosanna; she flounders in the backwash. Perhaps she will swoon. It is as if she doesn’t exist. George is married.

‘Keep the horse for the moment,’ says Mr Ashby. ‘As you know, I am planning to finish up my business here, sell the station lease and join my wife in Tasmania. I have received a letter from an attorney representing Mr Sutherland’s wife. Complete tragedy. She has heard nothing from him since he landed in Port Adelaide. Naturally, she has read all the newspaper reports about the boat going down, never dreaming that her husband might be on board. But with the passage of time ... the presence of the horse is, of course, rather damning: *ipse loquitur*. Not a trace of Sutherland can be found, and despite advertisements, no correspondence. If Providence divines it so, he may turn up in another colony. I will write to her about the horse, but she may not be in fit condition to make an immediate decision about a claim. Quite understandable.’ Mr Ashby strokes his beard in a ponderous way. ‘He won well today.’

Mr Ashby gazes over Rosanna's head. Is he watching the shags drying their wings on the rocks beside the track? Does he bear her a grudge for attempting to protect Moorecke, or is it simply that she no longer works at the Big House and has become invisible? Well, that is how she likes it, and the curse of Cromwell upon him. No wonder his wife left him. She knows he looks down his long nose at Edwin.

'Perhaps the horse is associated with a period of your life you'd rather forget, Edwin,' he adds. 'Nevertheless, Lucifer's damned fine horse flesh, and probably worth a few guineas. Your business seems to be picking up.'

Edwin assents. 'We would be glad to assist him for the moment, until Mrs Sutherland makes arrangements for him.' He looks uneasily at Rosanna.

Oh he is bold; there is no doubt about that. Rosanna wants to hug her brother. He tightens his grip on her arm to perambulate her away. Edwin is lucky, she thinks. Even while Mr Ashby patronises him, he appears, on the surface, solicitous. And he is not long returned from the Adelaide jail. It is the way of men.

George has a wife and child — it cannot be true. Did he not love *her*? But Lucifer remains and George has disappeared. It is the way of things. Lynches survive to tell the tale. In the end, Lucifer will make his way to Melbourne to George's wife, of that Rosanna is sure. And she will be left with the consequences of her wickedness. The heat beats down on her head. A buttery haze has settled on the hills behind the bay. Rosanna's mouth dries and she gulps the salt breeze. The green ribbon on her hat flutters in front of her eyes, as pressure builds in the back of her head. Light fractures into shards of dazzling colour.

Images of George disrupt the pattern of her thoughts. In pirate smock he sword fights to save the Lynches' honour; he opens his mouth on the flesh of her hip. Rosanna rides along the banks of the Shannon, crosses the bridge into Tipperary. She rocks on the balls of her toes — heel toe, heel toe. Mrs Ashby waltzes past in the lemon gown. The poet babbles. Moorecke runs through the scrub and Skelly limps behind. Arms outstretched, Eilish leans over the rail of a ship slipping on the tide.

Rosanna's body sags, a hand grips onto her arm — Mr Ashby's? Would *he* step forward to catch her? Edwin snakes an arm around her waist. His shrewd eyes bore into hers the moment before the black closes in, and she goes down like a packet of salts.

XXXIV: The Scorpions of Remorse Invade my Breath (April 1860)

Skelly's heart lurches as he crosses to the window. Since the wreck he cannot help but listen for horses in the night, thus he is not particularly surprised to see Moorecke leading Glorvina, and Rosanna slumped in the saddle. They have been to the shore perhaps. Rosanna will smell of crayfish pulled by Moorecke from crevices between the rocks. Or fiery crabs. It is jealousy he feels, imagining them watching the tide, building up a steaming fire between the dunes, laughing their heads off as they smash the red shells and suck out delicious meat. It has been months since his sister thought of him, and he loves her more than ever.

In fact, Rosanna has been missing all day. Early in the morning he has seen her trudging past the pond, in the direction of the horse yard, head down, Mother's cloak fastened with the claddagh brooch around her shoulders. Lately, Rosanna reads, and reads, as if the real world has lost all meaning. As if she is waiting for winter for something to happen. It is the disappearance of the actor, Skelly is sure, that is the source of her pain. Rosanna begins to resemble *Booandik* women he has seen on market day in Gambierton, stumping about in outsized overcoats, on the edge of the boggy rutted streets. Oblivious to the rising miasma of cattle dung and mud, Rosanna often forgets the one item she has been sent for. At home she creeps about the house, never washing or changing her clothes.

He has become so accustomed to her absence that he no longer reaches out to place his hand on her shoulder and share his confidences with her. Nothing has been the same since she stopped working at the station and went back to drifting around the house, whey-faced, and deaf to everyone's requests. Now she rides Lucifer late at night, jumping big timber — hoping she'll die, so she says when he confronts her. Soon a fight will erupt between Rosanna and Edwin about Lucifer losing condition. Perhaps tonight; has she injured him again? But Lucifer is the kind of horse that can win a steeplechase at Lake Hawden and gallop home again. And it is none of Skelly's business.

Nor is the Melbourne newspaper cutting that he carries in his pocket, passed to him that morning by his brother on a lightning visit. 'It was given to me by William Ashby,' Edwin said. 'Tell her gently. Father told me that while I was away you read this play together.'

So Skelly waits to disclose to Rosanna the news that a Melbourne performance of *The Hibernian Father* was cancelled because George Sutherland went missing. And now his badly decomposed body has been dragged from the River Torrens, a knife lodged in his spine. His *wife* has identified him. Does Rosanna know that George Sutherland was married? But the Lynches have Lucifer back and the play. Has she wasted a thought on the actor since the wreck of the *Admella*? Who can tell with his sister?

He pulls on his boots and hurries out to greet his sister riding in, lifts his hand to Moorecke leading Glorvina. Blood trickles down the mare's back. Have they fallen? His sister lurches forward in the saddle. 'Rosanna,' he hisses, clutching her leg in terror. 'I have something to tell you. Where have you been? Is Glorvina hurt? Are you?'

She makes a feeble attempt to stay upright, cradling a bundle of clothes. He tries harder to steady her but she fends him off, her brow tight-knitted with concentration.

Moorecke reaches past him to help his sister down. 'No, Skelly boy.' There is blood on the tattered shawl she has slung around her hips. She turns back to him, the whites of her eyes shining in the dark, her expression tender and angry at the same time.

Rosanna slides to the ground in a heavy way, favouring the bundle in her arms. He can scarce hear her hoarse whisper over the susurrations of the trees. 'Skelly, it's alright I am. It is such a grand night. I've been at the cave with Moorecke. The moon lit everything up around it. I wish you could have been there.'

Skelly looks askance at her. Is she drunk? Next she will be carted off to the city. Praise God, Edwin returned none the worse for reducing diamonds on the banks of the Torrens River... oh...the river...he cannot tell her now about the actor's fate. Then she faints, black cloak outstretched, landing like a large bat, prostrate on the path. Glorvina stands over her, legs akimbo, eyes tender as she drops her head and blows into Rosanna's face. Moorecke struggles to tidy the layers of clothing flapping around his sister. A curious gurgling cry fills the space between them. He thinks of the bats roiling in and out of the cave for food, of the tiny white bones in the aperture, of owls barking, and dogs howling in the bush outside. He thinks that after all, his sister must be fitting, and he must fetch his mother.

When he returns Moorecke releases Rosanna into her mother's arms and leads Glorvina away. That is the last he sees of her. Eilish settles Rosanna into a chair and stokes the fire to warm her. One hour, two hours, three go by. Father enters the house. Skelly hears the rising and falling of their voices, from the bedroom, where he has been sent to look after Hugh who is wheezing like a possum. He must not take the clipping to her now. Surely, she is ill.

'We should have kept to ourselves,' Father cries.

'I should have done the same when I met you, you fool of a man,' Mother yells back.

Through the window, Skelly sees Garrick clutching his pipe and tobacco as he stomps away to the pond. He is crying? This has never before happened. Rosanna must be dying. Over the chittering of night birds and beyond the verandah he hears Moorecke exclaiming *Aiigh* in her sympathetic way. Inexplicable animal sounds cause him to clutch the soft little bodies next to him. Hugh coughs and coughs, as if he will never right himself, and Blinnie snuggles up against him. They throw themselves from side to side, roll their eyes at him, and eventually turn back into peaceful sleep. Sweet Virgin of God, he is the watcher but he cannot see. Before dawn, he rises to make water behind the house.

Father comes weaving from the pond knocking into Skelly. Turning in a fury he clips his ear. 'Agh, Skelly, you're always in the way,' he roars. Wounded, Skelly slides away.

Later when he thinks back over this time, he supposes that the actor tore at Rosanna's heart-strings because she was never sent for. In the morning, if she is well enough, he will tell her that a Mr Magarey loaded Lucifer onto the *Admella* at the dock because George failed to arrive. Like Oscar Lynch, the character he played, he came to a violent end. She is bound to turn to Skelly for comfort.

XXXV: Bailed Up

Skelly waits in the hide. It is not the first time he has seen the great cranes soaring, their necks outstretched, or spiralling out of sight on currents, in the air far above the water. But it is the first time that they have nested within walking distance of the house. He leaves Eilish bent over the griddle and Rosanna mooching by the stove to

set himself up on his limestone seat near the reeds: sketchbook across his lap, hat low on his brow to block the spring rays of the sun, wedge of bread in the breast pocket of his jacket.

He broods over Father's comment the night Rosanna came home with Baby Arlen. Skelly *is* always in the way; not much more than useless. Now Father Woods has put a proposition to Father and Mother that after Easter Skelly should accompany him to Melbourne, where he will introduce him at a seminary. If he returns to his former jocund disposition, attending to prayer and scripture, the Bishop of the diocese may find him a place. Until then he must practise his scientific drawings of shells and bones and sharks' teeth from the ancient seas. He must mind his health and try to be more useful. He must not worry so much about what people say but judge them by their deeds for sensitivity can be a kind of selfishness. In the meantime, Skelly must put aside Mr Geoghegan's play about the Lynches and take God into his heart as often as he can.

He tries. But he has lost enthusiasm — for everything. He flicks the pages of his sketchbook, dipping his fingers in the water to smudge the hard lines of a recent sketch, dabbing away spots of excess with the sleeve of his jacket. He cannot give up Mr Geoghegan's play — now completely transcribed in his sketchbook. He recites the opening lines of Act Five:

*Ask your own heart, explore its secret openings
Search out the cause and you perchance may find
That pride as much as principle there weighs
With justice thus the counterbalance mercy.*

Was it pride that made Father hit out at Skelly, or whiskey, on the night when Rosanna rode in from the cave. If only Skelly could swing the ark of his pain around. He waits for the cranes. He remembers waking to their trumpeting, and how they had shattered the quiet dawn, distracting him from *his* wounded pride.

At the same time, he examines the yellow striations of a resolving yellow bruise on the inside of his wrist. He strokes them with his little finger. The injury is tender still and angry looking. He does not know how it happened. Blood makes its troubled way around his body, pressing against his skin like a caged animal, swelling around joints, protesting against the least activity. Father Woods has told him that sons of European queens suffer the same complaint, and that he must not mind for it

is the will of God. He is not much appeased. Skelly has always been afraid of death. Blood flows in his dreams.

But it seems that after all, he is not to die. Not to run away to the gold with Rosanna, either. He is a grown boy, only half a head short of Edwin. Of late it has been impossible to gain his sister's attention. Sure she looks at his drawings, but her slow wide smile is for Baby Arlen. She helps Eilish with less complaint than before, but he sees that something has changed in her. He had been foolish to think that she would seek solace for the actor's death by reading the play with him again. Now she has Arlen — and Skelly loves him too — she has no time for a terrible story that could not possibly be true. Nevertheless, the play belongs to Lynches, and through reading it they have learned more about themselves, if only that hearts have as many cavities and passageways as karst. Skelly is more than ever horrified by the fate of Oscar Lynch; he cannot desist from dwelling on it, as he reads and re-reads the carefully copied scenes in his sketchbook.

Eilish has threatened to remove the pages and throw them in the fire. 'I find it so unnatural. Morbid,' he hears her berating Father Woods. 'Whoever heard of such a thing, a father hanging his son? Someone made it up for a purpose, of that you can be sure.'

Kurr. Kurr. Kurr. Skelly starts. It is the music of courting cranes. The reeds shift in the slight breeze, tickling his chin, and he parts them to see more clearly. The birds alight less than twenty yards from him, and form in lines like choirs of angels: feathered arms outstretched, robes falling in crenulations the colour of Loughrea linen or the underside of mushrooms, dewlaps as vivid as the blood of Christ. Then their dance begins and they lift their heads, stepping forward on their elegant stilts. Skelly sketches furiously. He forgets the visceral disquiet which occupies his mornings as he watches Blinnie and Hugh coaxing smiles from Baby Arlen. He seems always to be confined with babies. And he forgets the way his mind gnaws at the problem of Rosanna, who is no longer thin and quiet and full of immutable longings. The birds advance and retreat, dip their heads, and throw them back again.

Scatched up grass flies around their ears; the largest bird leaps into the air, collapses its wings, shudders; again draws up its shoulders, proud and tender, advancing and retreating on its mate. Skelly's eyes glaze over in the brightness. He angles his body to hold back the reeds so that he can better see the birds as he

sketches them, pushing up his sleeves to accommodate the sweeping arcs required of his pencil to shade the massive fringed wings on his page. Skelly has always been a watcher. But squinting through the sunlight bouncing on the surface of the water, he is so intent on drawing brolgas that he does not immediately notice gold-rimmed eyes watching him. Nor does he hear, between the trumpeting cries of the birds, a shiver of skin passing over tuberous fronds, or the gulp and splash of frogs on half-submerged rocks.

Small black ducks scatter in the shallows. Skelly's eyes penetrate the foreground of the larger picture, worshipping the yellow variegations, lightly sketched, the mosaic of scales perfectly attenuated on a thick body, the dove shades of the reptile's fish-like mouth, the black dart of the tongue, and the elegant cord of the tail completing a lap of the body. Sunlight throws apricot tones into Skelly's composition.

He stops breathing when his heart lurches. Ever the intruder, he has stumbled over yet another doorstep — into territory where he doesn't belong. He waits and watches. Considers hurling himself sideways. The snake's head emerges from the glistening coil; it sways and weaves the air; it takes him in. Does it think him predatory? Its body, thicker than wurst made by Prussians in Gambierton but far more beautiful, unknits itself and follows the shining head.

The snake moves towards him as naturally as wind or rain. Skelly feels the light punch of its head against his trouser leg and finally — as his pencil spears the water — the stab of its fangs into his bare arm. He throws up his hands. An image invades his stricken consciousness, of his sister wrapping his sketchbook in oilskin, and placing it back inside the knotted hole of an elderly gum, where he keeps it safe from the babies.

Scrambling hopelessly to his feet, he clutches his throbbing arm as the snake hoops across the open ground towards the house. Skelly turns his eyes towards the bridlepath. His feet squelch. He smells the blue smoke coiling from the house chimney and sees Rosanna, Arlen on her hip, hand to her brow, pointing up at the soaring cranes. She looks preoccupied, serious, as if it is her only duty to reveal such wondrous things to a new Lynch child.

Skelly cries out to her as he bounds from the reeds onto the path, where the slight incline destabilises him, and he crashes full-length like a felled stringybark, air

leaving his lungs with a whump. It is too late now to agonise over whether he will bleed to death like the sons of European queens. His sketchbook flies from his hands. He rights himself and staggers forward. The baby waves both hands above its hyacinth head; clouds block the sun; shadows fall in the blackwood trees beside the path. He hears the clicking and whirring sounds of the bush. Is it Moorecke rolling her tongue? Has she come? The great cranes abandon him, crying out as they flap away to the south.

His lips try to form his sister's name as she runs towards him, the baby joggling at her hip. Where is the snake? He raises his hand. No. And his hatless, grey-headed father, gun jouncing against his hip, pounds in heavy boots across the hollow ground, falling to his knees on the rise below the house. Will he be angry? If only Skelly has time to show him the liquid brilliance of the snake now veering towards the outhouse. Gunshots pierce his eardrums. He closes his eyes and thinks of Cuchulain who cared not if his life would last one day, provided his name, and the story of his life remained.

XXXVI: Coda (1863)

Eilish removes her husband's dinner plate; he pulls her hard against his side. 'Where have you been these last two nights?' she asks.

'Working at Suttons. I met a Cork man and rode with him to a meeting at the Tarpeena Hotel.'

'Not Irish plotting, you fool?' Eilish bites her lip, and tries to pull away.

He keeps the pressure on. 'I want you to read a pamphlet. It makes sense.' He releases her hand to take a creased and folded bill from his pocket.

'Holy Mother of God, not Fenians now is it? And written in Irish. Who says *you* have to take any notice of what they're doing in America, or Ireland, for that matter? Did we not come here to get away from all that? Now that Edwin is home and making his way again, can you not leave politics alone?'

He pulls her closer; the plate tilts. Gravy drips on her arm. He bends to kiss her wrist, licking at the juice from the meat. It is the drink, Rosanna thinks, as she stands in the doorway, pretending to check the children playing by the pond, and tries to shut out her parent's quarrel.

‘Leave well enough alone,’ Mother says. ‘You have land now. Remind yourself of the house you’re building. Concentrate on Tasmanian shingles. Extra rooms. The little ones can go to school. Rosanna will help all she can.’

She turns her head and glares at her mother.

Father lowers his voice. ‘You know that I’ll not talk about secret societies to the children.’

‘Nor should you. Leave Edwin out of this, as well. I have no wish to lose my firstborn, who has already sashayed on the wrong side of the law.’ Eilish’s voice catches.

‘It is a great joy to see O’Leary installed in the new Mt Gambier jail.’

‘Too bad we couldn’t afford a lawyer to restore Edwin’s reputation. A pardon...’

‘He and I thrashed this out and you know it.’

‘St Patrick and the Holy Virgin, if you have the means you should clear his name, or I’ve never been to Galway.’

‘Leave it. It is not that simple. O’Leary brought stray beasts across the border. Responding to that *gombeen’s* extortionate demands put Edwin in a difficult position. Sure he didn’t mind a little remuneration for his trouble — nor would any man.’

‘Next you’ll be telling me my son was gully raking. Were the cattle branded?’

‘Some were. Some weren’t. It seems your daughter is implicated in the disposal of at least one Ashby carcass. O’Leary was after ruining our Lynch name. Edwin has served his time and doesn’t wish to pursue it.’

‘Rosanna!’ Eilish touches two fingers to her forehead and closes her eyes. ‘Garrick, enough. I fear I will never recover from losing Skelly.’ Rosanna slips guiltily onto the verandah.

‘Law is not the only measure of justice and you know it.’ Father shouts.

Rosanna and Edwin hunch over the chess set, which they have placed on a small tea chest at the edge of the pond. Edwin complains that she is too quiet; she coughs too much, and eats too little. That she presses harder than she ever did on a horse. What a miracle, Glorvina throwing a foal, after all those years. He belongs to Rosanna — Father has said so because Edwin should never have sold Lucifer in the first place.

When Arlen stumbles against her arm and knocks the chess board flying she does not strike him but gathers him in, explaining the game as she replaces the board and pieces: her seraphic pale-skinned child, with golden butter curls like his father's. Nothing will stop her this time.

Edwin calls to Hugh, 'Come, get your pesky brother, or you'll not be coming to Nhill with Kitty and me.' Despite his sunken chest, Hugh grows taller, looking more and more like Skelly. At the thought of Skelly, Rosanna grieves; her heart as gravid and tender with feelings, as if it has been pierced by a poker. Now she knows things about staying alive that she hadn't known before. Skelly had not been dead four weeks when she saw her mother yawning along the black-pitched edge of the pond, during the darkest part of the night — jaws clenched, arms pinned to her sides, tears truckling down her cheeks. Even from the privy, she knew her mother's intention, and she had screamed loud enough to be heard in Ireland as she ran. Flying at her like an angry gander, she had knocked Eilish off balance and onto her back on the bank, throwing her arms around her. They had held onto each other and wept.

Father had burst from the house and stood helplessly, as if tethered, to the verandah. 'Come inside,' he cried. 'I will warm you.'

'Can I not be alone, even by the pond?' Eilish had called back. 'Leave me now. It is not the same for men.'

'It is harder, for all you know.' Father cried, butting his head against the wall.

'I grieve for your grieving, but for once in your life you must wait.'

Rosanna had steered her mother then beneath the trees beside the pond, to sit on a log out of sight. '*Tha, tha,*' she had murmured, hand curled into her neck. 'Skelly would never want you to leave the rest of us.'

Eilish's had keened, her voice piercing the night sky until Rosanna's voice joined in and then, eventually exhausted, trailed away. 'Bloody woe, we'll have him rising from his grave,' she had lamented.

Grief had bleached her mother's hair white and lined her face. Incumbent beside her at the water's edge near Skelly's limestone seat, Rosanna waited until the first flush of dawn before easing her mother onto her feet. Father brooding in the doorway, clouds of smoke swirling round his heavy shoulders, had reached out for her as they reached the step.

Edwin takes up his mouth organ and leans into the last song, a lock of hair falling across his forehead, his elbows sawing the air, his hips set forward to balance the tapping of his right foot. Arlen bows to the opening chord. Blinnie throws herself into the set. The music travels faintly up from the pond to the house, and Rosanna sees her mother begin to jig on the verandah. When the little ones cavort like fireflies around Edwin, she stops dancing to hold her side and cough. 'I am *alright*,' she calls up to her mother. 'In a moment I am taking Arlen and Blinnie for a little ride to see the bats.' One last time, she thinks.

When the dance finishes, Edwin stops to help his sister, slinging an arm around her shoulders as they make their way to the horses, the children dancing behind them. He lifts Arlen up to her, the small boy clutching the pommel of a big stock saddle on Glorvina's foal beautifully broken by the poet. She will never forget the day Mrs Sutherland's groom collected Lucifer and told her about another Sutherland boy, who broke his grandparents' hearts by dying at the age of four.

When Father Woods left for his new appointment, Rosanna cried. He rarely writes to her now, forgetting it seems that he had offered to write her a letter of introduction to a school in Penola, looking for young teachers. Rumour has it that another school will open in Mount Gambier, for that is what everyone now calls Gambierton, but she has lost her confidence.

'Love God, Rosanna, and our blessed Mother Mary,' Father Woods had said, shaking her hand on the day of his last visit. 'Ride hard, read well, and take care of your family. God will light your way.'

'Yes Father.' Everything has changed.

'Honour Skelly's memory. I think of you both, often.'

To steady herself, she had looked away, focusing on the Gang Gang Cockatoos rising on the wing behind the pond.

Soon winter will arrive. Perhaps Moorecke will return this year after Rosanna leaves for Melbourne. She will leave a message with Patchuerimen, a Mount Schanck man, before she goes. Edwin saw her once, drifting past Mrs Smith's school gate in Mt Gambier. When Rosanna had ridden into town to feed her addiction for novels at the circulating library she had stopped at the school and made enquiries. Moorecke had been gone three weeks.

‘Can we see the little huts and the camp, Rosanna?’ Arlen coaxes, as they pass by. She nods. It is more than two years since she last met Moorecke at Racecourse Bay.

‘I am leaving soon,’ Moorecke had said, hands resting on the head of a small child.

Rosanna had rejoiced to see the little girl, tugging at her pinnafore.

‘Going with the aunties along the *Coorongk*. Maybe to three mile camp.’

‘Cranky Jack, also?’ Rosanna had asked.

‘He fell down dead on the boards at Curratum shearing shed.’

How had she not heard? Had Father known?

They had moved together, away from the crowd and onto the dunes, to pick muntries and place them in Moorecke’s flat basket. Was it the early ripening tartness of the berries that brought tears to Rosanna’s eyes, or her friend’s mobile sympathetic face? Or was it the glistening necklace of blood that Moorecke had coughed at her feet. In any event it was a day when words failed, *Booandik* words, Irish ones, and English, all the same. She could not find language that would work and she had unpinned her *claddagh* brooch and placed it in Moorecke’s dillybag.

Blinnie and Arlen burst through the shining cobwebs laced between the huts and trees; they poke their heads into doorways.

‘Watch out for snakes,’ Rosanna cries, her voice swelling.

‘Where are the little people who live in these tiny houses?’ Arlen always asks, his face alight with curiosity.

‘The Blacks have gone,’ says Blinnie, kissing him. ‘Father says,’ her voice rising with importance, ‘that the Big House people have scared them all away, and *kilt* a few as well.’

‘Not for many years, *alannah*. A *Booandik* girl lived here — and her husband — all the summer. Has she not left behind her rugs and tools? If we were nicer, they would come back sooner,’ Rosanna soothes.

‘I am very nice,’ says Blinnie.

‘I think they are dead,’ Arlen decides, ‘like the little bats and Skelly.’

‘I once saw *Booandik* black people winning running races in the town,’ remembers Blinnie.

‘Of course, and why not? Arlen, put back the digging stick. You would not like it if someone touched your things. Perhaps people in Ireland think us dead,’ says Rosanna. ‘We have left no family to tell them different. Even Thomas, Mother’s brother, is dead. No one can tell our story.’

Arlen’s face turns glum. ‘Can we see the bats now?’

Business-like, Blinnie hauls her horse’s head from a feed of cutting grass and flings the reins over his head to mount.

The sun sinks behind them as they dismount, tie the horses to a tree branch, and settle on a smooth rock in front of the cave.

‘Will they come?’ Arlen whispers, his face dipped into Blinnie’s.

‘They will, of course,’ she says.

‘What does the little bats eat?’

‘I think mosquitoes, darling,’ Rosanna says.

‘Aint that lucky because I don’t like mosquitoes.’

‘Pull down your shirt, for they love a fair-haired Celtic boy.’

She kisses his upturned face. Rosanna doesn’t know why she brings the children to watch bats fly out. She leans back on her hands, allowing the breeze dancing along the ridge to lift her hair. She coughs, crosses her legs, and coughs again. She will never forget the taste of the actor’s mouth, the warmth of his skin. Or the mellifluous tones of his voice. She hunches her body and wonders if she is dying, any more than she has ever been. She can no longer read Mr Geoghegan’s play — tangled up as it is with Skelly’s death — but safely stored for Arlen to read when he grows. He is far too young to understand dying for greed or love let alone on the altar of a father’s pride. Soon he will meet the Sutherlands in Melbourne and she will look for work — housekeeping for a priest, perhaps. She will tell them who he is.

‘One is coming,’ cries Arlen. ‘Oh, it is a bird — a little owl — come first.’

‘Hundreds is coming,’ says Blinnie, kissing Arlen’s cheek with excitement.

‘The sun is going to Ireland and the bats is coming here.’ Arlen jiggles happily on Rosanna’s lap.

Out they fly: one, or two, half a dozen; then enormous numbers swooping from the black hole of the cave’s entrance into the trees, breaking the skin of the mottled air like dragonflies gently piercing water; not at all like birds. Rosanna hears the familiar whirr and flap and creak of their flight, imagines the shape of their

leather wings against the darkening sky. But she sees only the shimmer of disturbed air where they have been, hears only the faintest sound of their leaving. The children point and laugh and hold up their hands to bat them away from their faces.

‘How will they come back home?’ Arlen worries.

‘They will carry the knowledge in their blood,’ she says.

‘But what if they are kilt by dogs or peoples or snakes? What if they die while they’re away?’

‘Their children will come. And their children’s children.’