KIM KELLY

The Blue Mile

'Marvellous depth and authenticity.' — *Daily Telegraph*

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KIM KELLY

ONE

YO

There aren't any trees in Chippendale. I see this now, this evening, as if I'm seeing it for the first time, as if I'm not stepping out the door of the Native Rose for the hundredth time to find this street treeless. Cleveland Street. There are telegraph poles here, a mile of them all along it, but there are no trees. Only telegraph poles, which used to be trees.

I look the other way, behind me, where there are trees. I can see the tops of the figs of Victoria Park, but they're in Darlington, and beyond them the trees at the university, fenced off from us. Precious trees, they must be. I look down at my boots: here, on the footpath, in Chippo.

Keep looking down at these boots, until they stop swimming about beneath me. I'm a bit shickered, I see, and very possibly for the last time, for a while at least. I've been drinking here at the Rose since three, drinking my last pay too. None of which discredits the fact of there being no trees in Chippendale. There is not a struggling blade of grass to piss on in Chippo. Only telegraph poles.

'Move it along, Yo.' Jack's fists smash down onto the back of my shoulders as he jumps off the step of the pub behind me, more shickered than me, on the rum for the last few.

'Move it along, the pair of you.' Cully closes the door after us, pretending he's not happy with our efforts to empty our pockets into his till. We're the last out. I'm almost always the

last out. Round the corner into Shepherd Street, O'Gorman's dragging his heels ahead of us, Finnerty and Nash ahead of him, two dozen or so heading home. Any ordinary Thursday evening, it could be, each of us having dutifully played our parts in the daily transference of cash from factory to publican.

'Giz a smoke then.' Jack takes the tin from my pocket and helps himself, leaning into me too hard, so that I fall over my feet and into the gutter – with the last of my tobacco flying over the road and mostly into a pile of horseshit.

'Too clever, Jack,' I thank him for it.

'Oi sorry, Yo.' He's looking at the horseshit, reckoning the for and against.

I shove him along: 'You spoon-headed idiot.'

But I soon pull him back as we near the corner of Pine Lane. The factory. Our factory. Foulds Boots, from which we got well and truly booted today. The low sun is coming off the windows on the building, making them golden, and Mr Foulds is standing beneath them, locking up, saying goodnight to Mrs Whitby who oversees the girls. Three hours ago he was saying he was sorry to us. Jack takes in a breath beside me, but before he lets it out again, I say: 'Leave it.'

It's not going to help us much to be in trouble as well as unemployed, and Foulds is not a bad sort of fella. At least he bothered with an explanation. It's the fault of this 'trade depression business biting in', he said; and that the girls will take a third as much as us now that we're men, he didn't say. I turned twenty-one on the nineteenth of June, exactly six months ago today, should be grateful I was kept on that long, bad planning on my part that I didn't see it coming. Didn't look. Jack'll be twenty-one come February, not that you'd know it, the veteran way he drinks, but that's meant Foulds'd have to put his pay up too, or risk the fine from the inspector. He's not a bad sort of fella, Mr Foulds, no. He wouldn't underpay a man, wouldn't risk a fine – he's avoiding that by not employing any men at all.

It's the week before Christmas; I was going to buy Aggie a new dress.

My own fist curls into a ball, a hot ball of anger. Useless anger.

Foulds sees us over his shoulder and he's quick to be off, going round the corner a block out of his way to the train. Home to his family. Somewhere in Petersham, he lives. There'd be plenty of trees there. I'll bet he's got a garden, with his own tree in it, kids hanging off it everywhere. I'll bet he sleeps well in his bed, without much of a thought for us, if he has a thought at all.

'It's all sorry O'Paddy to some!' Jack shouts after him, and I pull him back, pulling myself back too.

'Leave it, Jack. It's all O'Paddy to the cops too, you know.'

He stops still on the footpath. Staring at nothing, the uselessness coming over him too. Staring at the future, at tomorrow, no work to get to. Nothing.

Nothing but a worn out joke between us: 'You know O'Paddy's easier for them to spell,' I say.

So he says: 'I can't spell your name either, Yo.'

And I say, 'Can't argue with that,' as we start moving along again, because there isn't any argument in it. Jack's not a spoon, not really, he's not ignorant, but he can't spell, has trouble enough with his own name, Callaghan, despite Sister Joe's efforts with the ruler, too long ago now. I can still feel it, though, smashing across the back of my own hand: *Get to the Devil then, Eoghan O'Keenan*. *Get out!* Couldn't win an argument then, either.

Jesus, where am I going to now? Where am I going to find another job? And you know I'm not blaspheming with this wonder, Lord; I'm praying for the answer. It's going to be the same story all over Chippo. I will knock and ask at every door, at every *No Situations Vacant* sign, at the knitting mills on Wellington Street, the shirtmakers on Abercrombie, the sweets factory at the corner of Mooregate and Daniels. I will take any work. But they'll all be wanting girls, if they'll be wanting anyone, paying them on air and lint and crumbs of peppermint. Not men. And

not ones called Eoghan O'Keenan. Are men with names such as mine even considered to be men? Eoghan – *How do you say that again?* Yo-un, it's not that hard – Owen will do if you're not too keen on your whys, or you're not my mother, pity her. *Come again?* Ah, forget it. Forget we have names at all. Or a need for living wages. What are we then? Dead men?

No, get away with that. I'm living, all right. Only pissed, more than usual, and for the last time, O'Keenan. It's always the last time, isn't it? It is, this time, unless I can get another wage of some kind. I tell Jack: 'We should go up to Redfern in the morning, try at the Lebbo places.' The Syrian factories; I've heard they've got a new one, bed linens and that, and their shirt makers have always got work on of one sort or another.

But Jack says: 'The Lebbos?' Turning his lip up as if I've just said let's go and see about work picking the filth off the legs of cockroaches, never mind the ten minute walk to Redfern to save the tram fare.

A job's a job, though, isn't it? I need the money. I don't care if it's not the proper wage they'll be offering, or what bargain makes the inspector never take a look in them Lebbo shops. We turn into Myrtle Street, our street, past Gibsons on the corner, the furniture factory, where I worked before Foulds, sweeping first, as a boy, and then lugging dressers and wardrobes and that, and no one's working there now. It closed down a fortnight ago, laying everyone off: seventeen men and boys; the Finnertys have not got a man in work in their house now. Jesus. Remember when I got the job stitching at Foulds, though? I'd thought I was something special, with the machine work. I thought I was getting some skill at it. I was there nearly three years – three *years,* that's a long time to be working anywhere in this world. But I know I do a good job when I'm at any sort of work: I have to. Why else would Foulds have kept me on so long on a man's wage? Remember: I've never been sacked before this day. Not even from my first job stacking the bottles at Quirks cordials – the boss there put me on to Gibsons when he was closing up to

move out west. Because I'm worth a job. I have to get another job. I will get another job, trade depression horseshit or no. And I'm getting another one – tomorrow.

'Reckon I'll go up and say hello to Hammo tonight – you coming?' Jack says, picking up his pace with the idea.

'No,' I say; I won't be going up to say hello to Mick Hammond tonight, or any night. But I hear what Jack's suggesting: Hammo's done better for himself than anyone else we know, going in with Tex Coogan, looking after his girls for him at the knocker at Strawberry Hills. Why not be the dirty O'Paddys we were born to be? And end up dead quickly too: Tex Coogan is after a share of the coke trade up at the Cross, is the word. I tell Jack: 'You should leave that alone too.'

He doesn't answer me; he says, 'See you later on, then,' and he ducks under the verandah of his house, gate banging behind him, with the number seven swinging upside down on it beside the eight of number eighty-seven, hanging on by a nail.

I want to shout after him, tell him again, he should leave that alone, but I don't. It's his business what he does, and we've got different concerns. I cross the road, following the eternal fart of boiled cabbage and bacon bones home: if that's what you might call the place, when you're not calling it the gateway to Satan's arsehole. One hundred and twenty-two Myrtle Street, but there's no number on this gate.

And I can't believe my luck today as I find the Lord of Darkness himself is here in visitation: the front door's wide open and I can see right through to the kitchen, the shape of his boots stretched out there by the table.

My father is home, and far too early for it. It can't be six-fifteen yet. He won't have lost his job today, too, I can be certain of that: he's a carter for Tooths and rusted on with them. Only two minutes at a stagger up on George Street West, but he's never home before nine o'clock at least, staying on at Ryan's, the tap next door, as long after closing as is necessary to be certain my mother will be thoroughly, and I might say mercifully,

unconscious with the Royal Reserve on his return, if he comes home at all.

Jesus. No blasphemy in this one either. I am a dead man now. He's heard I've been sacked, hasn't he. It's my wages pay the rent and put food on that table.

I'm not for a bashing. Fuck this. No. Not now, I'm not having this now, too. I turn around, going to the Callaghans', I've decided – I'll go and say hello to Hammo tonight after all. But I don't even get across the road. A motor car speeds past through a puddle that splashes right up over the pickets of the verandah and onto my boots. I see the shape of a woman's hat, in the backseat, as the motor heads round into Abercrombie at the Oak, a red hat in a white motor, taking a fast shortcut through nowhere. I could hurl myself after it, hurl myself across the roof of that motor to get away, get anywhere, but that Aggie chooses now to hurl herself at me: 'Yo-Yo!'

My little sister, wrapping herself around my knees, preventing any sort of escape, settling my fate.

'Evening, Ag.' I pick her up, little slip of nothing that she is. Seven, and small for it, smaller still under her head full of wild black curls, and telling me through her lost front teeth, 'You smell like beer.'

'I'm sure I do,' I tell her. Aggie: her blue eyes bright and fearful and wanting. Very possibly hungry. I stop still in her eyes for this second, her skinny arms around my neck as if they might afford me some protection. I say: 'We'll go out and get some chips in a bit, yeah?'

'Eoghan!' he shouts. Our father.

Aggie nods and I put her back down on the doorstep. She slips into the front room, where she'll hide under our mother's bed till he's finished.

'Eoghan, you scruttery fuck, get in here!' No scrape of the kitchen chair. He's not going to bother to get up and find me; he's so sure I'll come, to save our mother the bashing instead, or delay it, while anyone who hears or cares decides it's Kath

O'Keenan, our mother, the one who has trouble with the drink. Jesus, but you know I could run and leave them both to it, run as both my brothers have before me.

But that Ag is waiting, and she's waiting for me, because I'm all that she has, bag of horseshit that I might be.

I'll take what's coming.

'*Screan ort!*' He smashes his fist down onto the table.

Yes, our father, telling me I'm damned. At least I might still be pissed enough not to feel it too much. Then me and Ag'll go out for some chips. We'll have to go to Kennedy's, though, up on Regent Street by the tracks: they're open late.

OLIVIA

'That's gorgeous, Ollie – *gorgeous*. I love those bebe roses.' Mother touches the brim of the vagabond I'm trimming, her lips brushing my cheek before she's out the door in a heady whirl of Chanel and jade chiffon. 'Toodles.'

'Will you be late?' I turn to see the tassels of her handbag disappear past the *COSTUMIÈRE* on the window. I stick my needle back in the pincushion and frown at the backwards lettering, fresh gold lettering that is Mother's response to international financial catastrophe: *The middlings will let us down now, you'll see,* she said of the ladies of modest means and the majority of our clientele, *so we must go upwards, Ollie. Up. Up. Up*. So that our window and our card now glitter:

EMILY COSTUMIÈRE
— Exclusif Couture et Chappellerie Féminine —
PARIS ◇ LONDON ◇ NEW YORK ◇ SYDNEY

And we've just this morning taken delivery of new 'mahogany' display cabinets and one velveteen chaise. In ivory. With gold brocade trim. So ostentatious, so obvious, I can hardly look at the thing.

Don't give me that face, Ollie, Mother said when the men brought the furniture in, *you'll get frown lines. If you'd be happier with 'Miss Greene's Hats & Frocks' you're welcome to it.* She waved

at the door: *Out in – in – in Homebush or somewhere. You can dress chickens as a sideline.*

That made me laugh, and appreciate her efforts, as I always do, if not always the sense of them. She's doing all this for me, to give me a chance, signing the lease here the week I missed my debut with a head cold I didn't have, which in April will be two years ago. It's not as though other offers of society or dancing with smelly old Barker College boys have run thick and fast since, and it's not as though I'd want them to, not now anyway. I love this shop. Our little salon, on the second floor of the Strand, up in the gods, snug between the optometrist's and Monty's Photography. It's me, my heart is here, and when I'm here, dreaming and scheming up my designs, I can forget that I'm five feet and eleven inches tall and that all I possess of the Greenes' wealth and position is the prominent placing of an aquiline nose. *If we were in Paris, you'd be muse to a thousand, Ollie,* Mother says, *you're gorgeous.* She's blind. Love is, isn't it? I'm eighteen, and three-quarters, and no one's ever looked at me as if I might be something worth looking at; certainly not the way Mother does. Don't look at that chaise either. Good God. Atrocity.

Back to my bebe roses then, my work, my salvation from all things atrocious, and our only means of paying for them. What I can't do with the twist of a ribbon isn't worth doing, and Miss Min Bromley is most certainly going to look gorgeous in this hat. We're designing her whole trousseau, and this is one of two afternoon casuals I'm creating for her. She's a very sweet blonde, and this shell pink is going to double her sweets so her girlfriends writhe in envy and must have one too – and won't ever get it because I only do one-offs. Minerva Bromley is also the daughter of one of the directors of the Commonwealth Bank. If she's pleased with her trousseau, we might indeed be travelling upwards. I stab my needle through the base of my next bebe with her other, less appealing connection: Minerva Bromley is also the cousin of Cassie Fortescue, with whom I went to school at Pymble Ladies,

and the taunts still seem as nasty as they ever were: *Sticky, sticky, stick insect. Is she a bug or is she a boy?*

I transform into a Parisienne muse now as I stitch. I'll show Cassie and her ilk. One day, I'm going to be a costumière of international renown. I'm going to be as famous and fabulous as Coco Chanel.

'Ollie?' the shop bell dings with my name.

It's Glor, my friend, my newest and in some odd way my first real friend. Gloria Jabour, from downstairs. I turn and smile: 'Hello, lovely one.'

'Ollie, it's six-thirty,' her smoky amber eyes rouse on me. God but she's relentlessly lovely: I don't see her all day and it catches me up as if I'm seeing her anew. 'Dad says it's a mad mob of riffraff down at the Quay – he doesn't want you waiting for the ferry after dark, and neither do I. Come on, knock-off time.'

'All right.' I smile at that too: Mr Jabour takes his fatherly responsibilities so seriously he extends them to every child he knows. He's also our favourite and exclusive purveyor of all things silk. Jabour's Oriental Emporium – he's got a stock of gold-shot flouncery in at the moment that looks like it wafted in from Persia via magic carpet. I ask Glor: 'Anything come in that I must have?'

'Mmm, maybe a couple of samples,' she says with a teasing grin. 'Some fantastic Fujis, tough as leather, soft as cloud – in candy stripes. But you'll have to wait until tomorrow. Dad's locking up now.'

That he is: I hear the grille screech and thump over their shopfront, echoing up from the ground floor. A newly installed contraption, unfortunately necessary: there've been three robberies, in this arcade alone, this month. I'm compelled myself now to check our new cabinets are locked, the three of them we spent most of today fussing about with, arranging and rearranging our perfumery, our jewellery, our hosiery and glovery, and as I half-gag on an acrid whiff of the gleaming new polish I take some comfort at the thought that thieves would have a hard time

heaving these things out into the street: well made, at least, even if the 'mahogany' is painted-on pine.

'Oh Ollie, the chaise – doesn't it look grand?' Glor spots the atrocity, as if it might be possible to miss it, and she bends to run her hand over the ivory velveteen, that firm, graceful sweep over fabric that says she could true-up the edges of the air if she had need to measure it.

But I look away, and I say, 'Grand, yes.' Distractedly, pretending my locking of the stockroom door now requires my full concentration, as I fight off a rush of resentment: well, you would think it grand, wouldn't you, Gloria. Chi-chi showiness designed to attract those who like glittery things. And money: all Arabs worship money, don't they. Equal rush of remorse for these thoughts as I think them, too; as if the Jabours don't work hard for their money. As if I'm any better. Above money. Still, a nasty little voice says I am. Grand. I'm the only child of Viscount Mosely, Lord Shelby Lawrence Ashton Greene. Shouldn't have a shop at all; shouldn't be worried about the debt this stupid furniture has put us in.

I keep a grip on the stockroom door handle, to keep this all locked in. Glor knows nothing of it, of course, no one here does – it's our private atrocity. As far as the wider world's concerned, poor old Daddy was lost in the war, and I would be happy to believe that if it weren't for the birthday cards, the payment of my school fees, and these days a contemptibly pitiful allowance that barely buys my thread – £15 per month. How old does he think I am? Ten? He's in Kenya at present, on a hunting expedition, and I hope a lion eats him. Forgive me. Mother might've picked herself up from the divorce and carried on, sent home from whence she came, but I didn't; haven't. I was only seven when he put us out to sea –

'Oh! And these fresh flowers, too?' Glor is now gushing over the white roses, the ones that are sitting on the magazine table by the chaise; the bold extravagance of two dozen white roses, which arrived this afternoon at about five past three.

'Oh yes,' I laugh, not looking at them either, and my laugh is so brittle Glor guesses that these are *not* part of Mother's refurbishment.

'Oh.' A say-no-more-about-it sort of oh.

The Jabours will have seen Mother flying by their window, jade chiffon whirling out to the waiting cab. His cab. This barrister chap: Bartholomew Harley. A criminal barrister, chasing Mother. And Mother chasing in return. *Darling Em,* the card says, *see you at 6.15 – try not to be* too *late. Bart x*. She only kept him waiting ten, if that. He's something heroic around town, name in the papers for putting some terrible razor-gang crook behind bars, and he's taking Mother to the Merrick Club, for the third time now. Which is where they met: in the Jazz Room. Which *is* part of the refurbishment: Mother parading our creations on the dancefloor of the latest and most popular place in town on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. Not a bad idea at all: her beauty alone is enough to draw attention. No one would ever guess, to look at her, that she herself is the seamstress, and no one could be more admiring of her glamour than me. But really. She didn't get in until almost two o'clock on Sunday morning. She's not known him a fortnight. This in itself isn't entirely unusual, but the *Darling Em* and the spectacular nature of these roses are. I don't like it. I haven't met him – I never meet them – but I don't like him either.

'Ollie?' Glor's concern is the sound of loveliness itself, but I turn away from her again, packing my bits and pieces into the drawers of my work table, brushing up my squiggles of thread ends. 'Why don't you come to ours for dinner? You could stay the night – Mum would love to have you over.'

Yes, I know she would, and genuinely: if Mrs Jabour could have the whole world over to her house in Randwick for dinner she would never be happier. But I can't accept the invitation, not tonight. I'd be there ten minutes, squeezed in amongst their big boisterous happy family, half of Beirut round the table, Mrs Jabour telling me I'm too thin, while her sister, Aunty Karma,

pinches my arm to demonstrate it, and I'd be wanting to run. I tell Glor: 'Thanks, lovely one, but I've got so much to do with this trousseau, I'm going to plough on with it – at home, don't worry.' I'm already reaching for a hatbox.

'If you're sure . . .'

'I'm sure. Toodle-oo. Off you scoot. I won't be far behind you.'

'Promise.' She rolls those delicious Arabian eyes, because I will linger a little longer here. I always do. 'Lunch tomorrow,' she insists. 'Just you and me. Pearson's, yes? Before the silly season gets too silly and we don't have time to scratch ourselves.'

'Yes, that sounds fab.' I wave her out, and I will have lunch with her at Pearson's tomorrow. Plate of sweet, fat summer prawns: yummy. I'll look at those candy stripe Fujis in the morning, too, get to them before anyone else does – could be just the thing for a kimono I've half-conceived for Min Bromley's loungery.

But for now I go back to my ribbons, back to half-finished afternoon casual bebes, and I'm about to toss a card of the pink satin into the box when I decide, no, I'm not going to work on the trousseau at all tonight, not taking this vagabond home with me. I'm going to have some fun of my own. Design something especially for Glor. Something snazz, for Christmas. I do love her so. But what shall I make her? It takes a while to come to a decision, staring into the limbs of our hat tree, our style samples that ramble over the steel display frame that covers almost the whole of the back wall, but finally I see it: a little taupe sisal midbrim I'd almost forgotten we had. I pluck it and pack it into the box with some silver and bronze ribbons – colours that will look more than gorgeous against those amber eyes and that creamy, flawless skin.

I pat the lid down on the box with that swish of good feeling I get whenever I'm about to begin something new. Not knowing what it will be until it is, letting inspiration take me. With a little help from *Vogue*: I lay the October and November issues

in my portfolio and clip it closed, swing it over my arm, hatbox following, and as I lock the door of the shop behind me, I look up through the glass roof of the arcade to see the sky is the most divine shade: gold-shot teal. Magic-carpet sky.

And it is getting on for late: *bonggg* . . . *bonggg* . . . *bonggg* . . . the Town Hall clock strikes seven as I scoot down the stairs around the lift well, through this dim cavern of shut-up shops, only the Aristocrat Cafe across from Electrolux still open, at the George Street end, and it'll close in a minute as well. Out on Pitt, Ned the barrow man is shutting up too, tossing his leftover bits and pieces of fruit into a crate and tipping his hat to me, 'Night, miss.'

'Goodnight to you too, Ned,' I reply under my brim, already scooting past him.

Mindful of Mr Jabour's warning of mad mobs, I quicken my steps, keep my eyes on my mary-janes and my mind on their rhythm, soon joined by the oompah-pah of a Salvo band playing 'Good King Wenceslas' in front of the Commonwealth Bank on the corner of Martin Place. I don't stop to hunt about for change to pop in their box, though; I've barely got tuppence for a tram myself and whatever I do have I shall be spending on Pearson's prawns. I don't look up.

There is quite a mob out tonight, mad or not, a lot of shoes. I keep my eyes on my mary-janes; I really must give these a fresh coat of paint: starting to look like crumbling stucco. Certainly can't afford a new pair. Glance up as I near the corner of Hunter Street, where Bartholomew Harley's chambers are, and where Mother met him for lunch at the Tulip on Tuesday. *Bart.* I really don't want to think about him, them, about what this might mean for us, if . . . No, that won't happen. I just hope she's safe with him. I'm sure she is; of course she is. She knows what she's doing, even if it might not be immediately apparent to anyone but herself; even if the neckline on that jade chiffon plunges just a little too . . . dramatically.

Take a deep breath. Take in the salty smells of the harbour

drifting up on the warm breeze and I'm here, at the Quay. Glance up again as I cross the broad boulevard of tramlines and there's no one about. No mad mob anyway, only the normal quantity of late-ferry stragglers, and a few tramps, the usual poor souls; the blind man with his cup and his sign under the awning of the kiosk: *spare a bob for a digger*. Not from me tonight, I'm afraid – my ferry is here, I see, and I just about scoot through the old beggar for it as the deckhand reaches for the board rails of the gangway.

'Please, wait!' I call out across the wharf, hatbox clattering against portfolio.

He doesn't look up.

'Wait!' I shout, and I make a leap for it.

'All right, miss, where's the fire?' He shakes his head as I thump aboard, bumping his shoulder. He says some other disparaging thing but I don't hear it as the whistle blows.

Blowing me and my embarrassment round to a lonely seat up near the bow. Where the water looks strung with fairy lights, there are so many vessels dotted about – it's a dream. I close my eyes for a second and see a beaded evening cloche: teal, gold, pearl. Mmmm.

Open them again as the ferry chugs under the great claw of the Bridge, as it is so far, this Dawes Point end. Look out across the harbour at its matching pair in the north, at Milsons Point. Two monstrous, grasping claws, they seem. Black against the teal dream sky.

I don't know about this Bridge creature. It's a necessary evil: that awful ferry crash with the schoolchildren last month, and half-a-dozen near misses every year, the harbour is just too crowded at peak times. This Bridge will also be something heroic, some kind of wonder of the world, if it succeeds in holding itself up, so they say. But no matter how wondrous it is, it's going to ruin the view. Our view over Lavender Bay. What will that do to the value of our house? It's only a tiny thing, a tiny, leaky-roofed cottage, but it's all we own, apart from hats and

frocks. No one thinks about that sort of thing, do they, when they go off and build a bridge. Oh dear, your home is worthless now. Tough luck. Be grateful they didn't demolish our house with a wrecking ball, I suppose.

I shiver with the cooler breeze coming straight off the water. I shiver with the wonder of how precarious everything seems, and not just for Mother and me. For everyone, everything. Whole stock exchanges tumbling into the drink . . .

Look up into the great North Claw, reaching out into nothing. Imagine working up there, catching fifty tons of girder or what have you, dangling off a crane perched high on the edge of nowhere. I'd rather not. Listen to the clang, crunch, grrr of the workshops below, grinding on all day and night, and be grateful we don't live at Milsons Point. Good God, that must be appalling to live on top of. But I look up at the claw again now as the ferry pulls away towards McMahons Point and it's a different view altogether. I see the zigzag that will run along the whole arch, soaring from point to point, a glimpse of the majesty of it. The genius of its design.

And I'm swished right the way through with inspiration at it. When the ferry pulls in to the wharf, I'm the first to thump off, 'Excuse me!', bashing a man in the leg with my hatbox on my way. I don't stop to say sorry: I fly up the steps to the ridge top and home. To make a start on my creation for Glor. I've seen it now. I know exactly – *exactly* – what I want it to be.

YO

'Shut your mouth, woman,' our father spits into our mother's crying. His face is grey with hatred and his mouth is an old scar ripped through it as he blames her: 'It's you who killed him.'

That makes the cop flinch. Constable Smith, I think he said, and no older than me, if he's a day. Never seen this one before, but he's getting his lesson in O'Paddy tonight. He's just now brought our brother Michael in through the back and laid him across the kitchen table. Michael's dead, and the grazes across his neck tell how. He's hanged himself, at the boarding house up on Goold Street, where he was living. Dying. I haven't seen him for more than a month before this, since he left the tin-pressers at Ultimo, where he was working; not laid off: sacked for drinking on the job. Drinking himself to death, here's the evidence. Lost two stone off him, at least; it's a wonder the weight of him could do the job. But it has. Found this afternoon when the landlady came for the rent.

But regardless of these facts, our father now turns his menace to the other cop, McKinley, who on any other day is a bastard to match him, and he tells him: 'You will find out who did this, who murdered this boy.'

I'm sure I look at him just as McKinley does: disbelieving. Doesn't want it known that Michael has murdered himself. Jesus, at what low place in the shitheap of hypocrisy does this sit?

McKinley shakes his head: 'We'll leave that to you, O'Keenan.' The cops have done us enough of a courtesy as it is, bringing Michael home, instead of tossing him in the morgue for the pauper that he is.

And now they're leaving, the constable saying, 'Evening, missus, er, sorry . . .' to our mother, who won't stop crying, if ever she has.

I look at Michael again. He's grey as our father, only he is in fact dead. My brother is dead; not me. I'm having trouble with this fact: half-relieved I'm not getting a fist in my face for coming in sacked. Jesus. Michael is dead? Yes, and he is not at peace about it. His jaw is crooked, as if he'd taken one there. Maybe he did. I wouldn't know. I didn't know him well at all. There's another fact to trouble me: twenty years under the same roof and three streets away after, and I didn't know him well. I can't remember a time he wasn't drinking. Always fucked or looking to be; he was never going to run very far. Twenty-three years old, he is; was. Never had a life. Never knew him. Nor Brendan, our other brother. He's seventeen and I've not seen him for more than a year. No one has. He could be dead too for all anyone knows.

Our mother is holding Michael's hand in hers, his dead hand, and crying, 'Michael, my Michael,' over and over again, until it's like a siren far away, from me, although she's right here, a kitchen table's breadth away.

'I said shut your mouth, woman,' our father says again, but softer, telling her something in Gaelainn, the language I don't know, calling her Kathleen and pouring her a glass of the Royal Reserve. Pouring blood into a filthy glass.

She takes it from him. She's let go Michael's hand and stops her crying long enough to drink it down, all of it. She'll drink that whole bottle now. She's had one already: I see the empty by the fire, the fire I lit this morning, which she's let go out and not lit again all day.

It is her fault that Michael's dead, and she'll never see it. I

do, though. I see it all too well, this moment, in the claret stain of her face. A thief at the least, she is, for taking herself from us, for putting more of the Child Endowment down her fat red neck in grog than food in her daughter's mouth. Aggie. Jesus, she can't see Michael like this; I'm hoping she's stayed hiding.

'Eoghan, get Madigan,' our father says to me, telling me now it's my fault; telling me I'm to go and get Father Madigan at St Benedict's. 'Tell him your brother's been murdered, that he fell in with Coogan, got himself lynched.'

I stare at him again: the Devil has lost his senses. Madigan's no doubt already heard the truth of it; if McKinley told our father of it near five o'clock at the brewery stables, then it's bound to have been a dozen times across the road to St Ben's by now. Madigan is not going to bury Michael, and we've no money for it anyway. No one will chip in for a funeral, not even the Callaghans, not even any of them at Tooths – especially not them. No one will want to be near this. And I'm not saying anything with the breath of the name Coogan in it to anyone, or I'll be the one getting lynched.

'Pat, leave it,' our mother begs: 'Please. Pat –'

That brings his fist smashing down on the table again, making Michael's boots jump as if he might be brought to life, making our mother scream and beg again, 'Please, Pat!'

Why does she beg him? I ask you, Lord. She's always begging him, and that's what sets him off, the same as showing a cur your fear.

'Don't just stand there, useless fuck,' he spits his hatred into me. 'I said get Madigan.'

I nod at him, but before I go I look at our mother once more, taking Michael's boots off, taking them from the table as if that might keep the Devil from this house, her hands shaking from fear and grog, and now I turn my back on them, on the pair of them, and I walk out, up the hall to the front room, and there I reach under our mother's bed for Ag and drag her out by the ankle with one word: 'Shush.'

I'm holding Aggie's curly little head to my chest as the gate bangs closed behind us, holding her tight to me as I start to run, and I don't care if that man bashes that woman to death without me there tonight. I hope he does, so that he will be hanged himself, so that they are both gone and with them all the shame I've ever felt for being born to them.

I've taken the corner at Abercrombie and run halfway to St Ben's before I tell Ag, promise her: 'We're not going back.'

She says, not letting go of my neck: 'Are we going up to Kennedy's for chips?'

'No,' I tell her. 'We're not going to Kennedy's now.'

We're getting out of Chippendale, out of this scruttery shitheap, and we're never coming back.

Coming up to St Ben's on the corner, Ag asks me: 'Where are we going, Yo-Yo?'

'I don't know,' I tell her, the spire of the church to our left and the chimney of Tooths to our right. I am running through my life, thick with the stench of hops, the entire extent of my life set between George Street West ahead and Cleveland Street behind us. You can live and work and die here without ever going outside their bounds. Not me. Not Aggie and me. There's music coming from St Ben's, from the hall, a banjo and a fiddle winding round a tin whistle. The Christmas concert; I see Ellen Callaghan, one of Jack's little sisters, she's with Lil Casey, and they're walking down between the back of the convent and the church, in their emerald dancing skirts, flowers wound through their hair. I tighten my hold on Aggie: she can never be one of them girls, not if we stay here, and I will never kiss Lil Casey, because she'd never go with me, never look at me.

Where are we going, though? Where can we go? At the side of the brewery, at the stables, I see one of the other carters, Frank O'Toole, just inside the gates; he's cooling off his draught mare with a few buckets, late in from his run. He's an all right sort of fella, that one, not one of them our father would consider a mate, not one he drinks with, but I step up my pace to get past him,

past all of it. The band at St Ben's is pounding out 'God Save Ireland' now and my head is pounding with my boots from the skinful I had myself this evening. The last ale I will ever have, I promise myself, again, but a promise to the death this time. If alcohol should pass these lips ever again, then the Devil can have me too.

I tell Ag, for want of another idea: 'We'll catch a tram, yeah? Into town.'

'Can we?' Aggie tightens her hold on me as we turn into George Street West, where I keep running, dodging this way and that through the traffic across the road and right past the tram stop because we can't stop here, not right in front of Ryan's Hotel. I keep on up to Railway Square, where the clock on the tower of Clark's strikes the half-hour. I look up at the clock: seven-thirty. I look at Clark's: I was going to get Ag's Christmas dress there, though I've never been inside before, or in any department store. And I can't remember the last time I caught a tram.

I keep running, right through the crowd around Central Station. I keep running right past the fish-and-chips on the bend into the Haymarket, though I know Ag is starving for her tea. I keep running even though I need a smoke; Jesus but I need a smoke now.

'Are we going to get a tram, Yo?' Ag asks me. She never complains, my sister. Ever. She asks, but she never complains.

'In a bit, Ag,' I tell her. I won't let you down. Ever. One day, I promise you, you'll never be wanting again. 'We'll get a tram in a bit.'

When I can stop running. There's a whistle still screaming through the banjo and the fiddle in my mind, though they are well behind us. Screaming through my legs. God save Ireland? Jesus, God save Agnes O'Keenan and me.

OLIVIA

I wish we had a wireless, I sigh into my zigzag of silver satin. I'd turn some music on over the rather heavier metallic fashioning going on and on and on crash-thunk down at the bridgeworks tonight, bashing and grinding out the old adage that success is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration. To be gained only one stitch at a time. Or one hydraulic hammer smash at a time.

Crash. Bang. Thunk.

It's five after eight now, too. Must be another big bit of zig or zag going up tomorrow, or perhaps I'm especially bothered by it tonight. I don't know how the people at Milsons Point get any rest at all, I really don't. How long is this going to go on for? At least another two years, they say. I wonder if we might afford a wireless, sooner rather than later; they've got some models on special at Hordern's right now. Perhaps, with Min Bromley's final payment for the trousseau and with some Christmas sales –

SCREEEEECH. THUNK.

And I stab straight into the top of my palm with my needle at that one. Oh, for crying out – don't get a bloody smudge on the sisal, Ollie. I drop Glor's hat and press my handkerchief onto the wound, inspect it under the lamp and it's hardly there already.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

I just about jump out of my chair with this one – a bit closer

to home. Indeed, it's the front door. A man calling: 'McIlraith's!'

Our McIlraith's hamper is here – I'd all but forgotten it was due – our box of festive goodies. Yummy yum yum: it'll be a task and a half not to get into it forthwith. I open the door to the man and give him a cheerful: 'Good evening, you're late.'

The man doesn't return my smile; he grunts, slaps the box down on the step at my feet and thrusts a docket at me: 'Sign there, will you.'

'Oh. Yes.' I sign the paper and give it back, presuming I've offended: 'I didn't mean you're late – I meant it's late, to be working.'

He grunts again, says something unintelligible and climbs back into his motor-lorry, putters off. Rude man. Obviously has no idea what a Parisienne muse is when he's looking at one, does he.

Crash. Thunk. SCREEEECH.

Or perhaps he lives at Milsons Point and hasn't slept for six months. I look out at the North Claw, in the very last of the light, black talons on indigo velvet. Striking, and I'm almost compelled to dart back inside to sketch it: a slouched toque with a random spray of girder-ish appliqué high on the upturned side. Crisp. Smart. A little theatrical. Winter, most definitely. A whole series of Bridge hats, by the season . . .

And fun for another day. I must stick to finishing Glor's tonight. Oh but it's turning out well; I look over my shoulder down the hall and spy it, toppled on its side on the tea table under the lamp, just as I dropped it. When I finish it off with the bronze ribbon bands round the brim, which will contain the silver zigzags, it's going to be *the* snazz. Snazziest snazz that ever there was. It's so Glor. I want to give it to her tomorrow at our lunch, and not only because I'm bursting to. We possibly won't get another chance before Christmas. Things will most certainly be hectic for us both in the rush, and then the Jabours shut shop lunchtime Christmas Eve, when they all pile into their elderly Oldsmobile, off to Mr Jabour's equally elderly parents' place in

Menindee, wherever that might be, in the Never-Never somewhere. So very odd, the thought that Gloria's a native, second generation and of bush pedigree, too – her grandpapa Jidi is a pioneer outback haberdasher from Broken Hill.

That returns my smile to me as I heave our hamper in off the doorstep: if there's such a thing as Levantine pioneer outback haberdashers from Broken Hill, then there can be such a thing as internationally renowned costumières from Sydney, can't there? And – oh dear God – there's always the Mexican chocolate cake, I see as I flip the lid of our box of goodies. How am I going to keep my hands off *that* till Christmas? Ritual yuletide torture. How cruel are the Mexicans to combine dark chocolate and cinnamon in the one cake and then smother it in a layer of cinnamony-chocolate shell? How cruel to have to wait six days to eat it? Think about prawns at Pearson's with Glor tomorrow. Mmmmm. Now, put the Mexican chocolate cake in the sideboard. Put it in the sideboard right this minute and lock it. Take the rest into the kitchen and unpack it: almonds and walnuts and cherry shortbread tarts, fruit mince for our pies, Paradise pineapple creams, caramel fudge bonbons, the real French cognac for our brandy sauce . . . oh dear God. All for Mother and me. Just the two of us – and we'll eat every crumb. After an appearance at the Christ Church morning service while the ham cooks, we'll race each other home to spend the rest of the day wallowing in fabulous, honey-glazed, chocolatey-cinnamon sin.

It will be just the same this year, won't it? I ask the depths of the pantry as I hide the tin of bonbons behind the Bovril and baked beans. Of course it will be, I answer myself above the whisper of doubt.

Darling Em . . .

What's she doing now? Whirling about with *Bart* to 'Blue Heaven' in the Jazz Room, martini in hand. A place as foreign as Menindee, to me. He's not going to whirl you away from me, is he?

But Mother is entitled to a romance, isn't she? A real one.

Not a strategic liaison for a deal on felt supplies or a dancefloor fling to help pay the council rates by the frock orders of the envious that might or might not come of it. She's entitled to two dozen spectacular white roses. She's only thirty-nine, and she's so very delightful, and so very deserving of all good things. This is her chance, perhaps, now that I'm grown. I so very much want her to be happy, in a permanent whirl of happy, happy days. But I don't want a man in our lives; I don't want us to change. I can't remember ever having had a man in our lives. I can't remember our Christmases in London at all either. I only remember them here, by McIlraith's boxes.

In this little leaky-roofed house. Our house. I put my hand on the cool, solid stone of the wall between the kitchen and the sitting room. It's a good foot thick – not about to whirl off at any time soon. It used to be the back wall of the house, and I remember when it was, before Mother had this kitchen added on with the bathroom soon after we arrived, with the tuppence go-away money she got out of his Lordship. I remember it most vividly and permanently: I was terrified of that outside lavatory, the spiders and the spooky hoots of the ferries through the night. I'd been terrified for weeks, it had seemed, for the whole of the voyage here, terrified just looking at the sea, that endless sea. Mother had jollied me along, of course – *This is our adventure, Ollie. Grab your hat and coat.* Intrepid, Mother is, unfailingly chin-up intrepid; I've only ever seen her frightened once. Somewhere in London, out shopping, we saw a biplane in the sky: she grabbed me and pulled me along the street and into a lane so fast she hurt my arm. I can still hear the crash-bang thumping of her heart as she held me to her. Wasn't until years later I realised what had been going on then: the Germans, dropping their bombs in the summer of 1917. We left not long after that, mother not taking no from a man about travelling restrictions and submarines. *Does the name Ashton Greene mean nothing to you, sir?* Our passport out. Didn't say goodbye to Daddy, though; can barely remember what his Lordship looks like; he was still in Flanders

at the time, with that woman called Marie, with whom Mother decided she didn't want to share a marriage, however fleetingly – such backward, colonial sensibilities she has.

She's a native, Mother, undeniably, and so is this house – indeed, it's a brief history of the nation. Convict hewn, *1847* engraved above the front door, built by her Grandfather Weathercroft, before he made his fortune in shipping wool along the riverways, so he could build a great big stone house on an estate at Windsor, on the Hawkesbury, where Mother grew up, with her beloved brothers, Archie and Alex. The Weathercrofts had a great big sheep station of their own in Mudgee too by then, but her father lost it after the slump of the nineties. Soon as she was old enough, no older than I am now, Mother was sent to London to marry well – *well-accomplished disaster*, as she says. Sent Home to Mother England, then all the way home again eight awful years later, and utterly alone but for me, as both Archie and Alex were killed in France, and her parents had gone not long after them, utterly ruined, in every way, the remains of the shipping company gone too, finished off by the railways. A wild colonial tragedy. Some wobble of the wheel of fate kept the creditors from getting their claws on this cottage, though. Or perhaps it was simply overlooked, it's certainly small enough: four rooms on a handkerchief-sized piece of East Crescent ridge top, lost amongst the great jostling argument of flats and great big boarding houses that range around us. But it's ours. My home. We'll always have it. Won't we?

And McIlraith's Christmas boxes.

And Mexican chocolate cake. No: don't think about that Mexican chocolate cake. Get back to my ribbons, my creation for Glor. Don't think about the cake. Don't. Thread my needle, settle to it, one stitch at a time.

Grrrr. Thunk. SCREEECH.

Good God, but remember how frightened I was when the bridgeworks first got under way? What was I – thirteen? School holidays and they brought the whole of the rock face at Milsons

Point down to put the workshops there and move the train station round the bay: *BOOOOM.* That rattled the windows. The sound of the end of the world. Mother sang it away that night; she sang 'My Sweet Little Alice Blue Gown': *oh, when I had it on, I walked on the air* . . . I can't remember how the rest of it goes, though. I try to catch it as I stitch but it swims off and loops around into 'Blue Heaven'; that'll do, sing the blues away: *A smiling face, da da da da, a cosy room, a little nest that nestles where the roses bloom, tra la la la la, tra la la la la, so happy in myyyy bluuue heaven* . . .

Who needs a wireless when you can rattle the windows all by yourself? While you're not even looking at that sideboard, are you, Olivia? There is no sideboard and there is no cake. None at all.

Stop looking at that clock, too. Won't bring Mother home any quicker.

YO

I've stopped running. Ag's given up on tea and fallen asleep. I can't find anywhere to eat, anyway. I've been the length of George Street now, down to the Quay, and nothing's open, excepting for a few hotel dining rooms with dance bands, and I can't take Ag in them, can't take myself in them, not as we are, so I'm trying our luck on Pitt Street now. There's got to be something. Don't people want a parcel of chips in this city after dark? Seems not. We'll get something back at the Haymarket. There'll be a Chinese cafe open, there has to be. I'm getting weary myself and the want of a smoke is starting to drag at my knees.

So is the wonder of where we're going to sleep tonight. I've got a little short of four pounds in my pocket; how long's that going to last us paying for a room? And not here. This is the big end of town: banking, insurance and trading companies, six and seven storeys high, and only words, to me, words you wrap parcels of chips in; can't sleep or eat in any of them, either. Maybe I should just keep walking and take Aggie right the way back home. But each time that thought comes to me it's a fist in the face. I can't take her there; never again. Not for all the tears our mother will cry over this, our leaving her too. They'll only be more tears. They didn't do anything for Michael. They don't do anything for her. Our mother will have to live with it. Or not. But the cruelty of that is another bashing. For all the failings she has, how can I do this to our poor mother?

'Evening there,' a fella says to me from the corner we're passing, bending over something under the street lamp – a trombone case, clipping it shut. I see the silver buttons of his Salvation Army uniform as he stands up straight again, and there's the rest of the band, five of them. All saying: 'Evening.' Friendly.

'Evening,' I say, and I almost stop as we get nearer, to ask where we might find a place to eat. But I can't trust them with the question. Do-gooders: they'll take Ag off me. They're as good as Welfare, these tambourine types, coming into the Neighbourhood to the sound of doors slamming shut and the silence of kids hiding under their mothers' beds. Keep walking past them. Heart jumping like I'm running again, but I don't run. Walk. Look normal. Normal as a filthy O'Paddy in the big end of town, looking for trouble.

And one of them, the tallest one, steps in our path: 'Lovely night, isn't it?'

'It is,' I nod, and go to step around him, get past the glare of the lamp.

But another says, stepping out too, to meet me there: 'You all right tonight, young man?'

He's an old man, and there's something familiar about the lines on his face, like he might be an old alco dragged up from the gutter. There's some kindliness in this face that puts me at ease enough to ask him: 'We're looking for somewhere to eat.'

'Oh,' he says, and all the Salvos look at each other as if conferring about it before he adds: 'There's not much around this part of town, not this time of night.'

There's helpful for you. I say: 'Thought as much,' and I go to keep on round them.

But the old man stops me again, his eyes gone bright with an idea. 'Hang on a minute,' he says: 'Do you like apricots?'

'Apricots?' I can't say I remember the last time I had one, and the strangeness of the question fixes me to the spot for a second.

'Yes, lad. They're a bit overripe,' he says, looking behind him and then back to me. 'But they'll be sweet. Barrowman passing

earlier this evening give us a couple of bags.' And a couple of paper bags there are, sitting by the trombone case. 'The little girl might like a few, eh? She looks a sweet thing. Your little girl?'

'Yes,' I say, holding her so tight round the legs it's a wonder she doesn't wake and yelp with it. My little girl, and what do you reckon about it, you sly old bastard? Just you try it on with me – go on. I'll take you all on.

'It's all right,' another of them says, a short, fat one, fiddling about with the bags, slipping something from his pocket in one too. He's smiling as he hands the bag to me. 'You'll be doing me a favour, lad.' He pats his gut: 'I'm on a diet.'

I take the bag from him. I don't even say thanks. I've taken three steps back and sideways, away from them, and I'm running again now, off Pitt Street, uphill, as fast as I can manage, keeping to the shadows. On the next corner, there's this big-end hotel with all lights blazing, shiny motors along the road outside and a doorman out the front. A woman is getting out of one of the cars, I hear her laughing. I see her shiny dress caught under the lights and she's made of diamonds, and though my boots have got some lead in them now, I can't stop running.

I don't stop again until we've got to the top of this hill and I've turned left again, taking the darker alternative, back towards the Quay. And now I've got no idea where we are. Shame bashes into me again: this is my city, I've lived not five minutes from here since we come off the ship from Tralee, when I was two years old, and I've no idea where I am in it now. Not a fucking clue. How can I look after Ag when I can't even say where I am?

Jesus. I could cry. I could stand here and cry.

But Aggie rouses in my arms, rubbing her eyes. 'Yo-Yo?'

It's a crime that she's ever been denied the simplest thing: her safety. I say, 'Bet you're starving,' and I scrunch the bag I'm holding by her left foot.

Her eyes light up like Christmas as she holds my face in her little hands, and I could cry for that too. She doesn't know what's in the bag, only that I've got it for her. Promise her again:

one day, you'll never want for anything. I look about for somewhere we might sit so she can tuck in, but there's not a bench in sight. Of course there's not. But as I'm squinting up the road and across it, towards the furthest street lamp I can see, I just make out a gateway – big high palace gates. I could fall on my knees with the recognition.

I know where we are. That's the Gardens up there, the gates to the Botanic Gardens. I tell Ag: 'We're off for a picnic, yeah?' And she's says: 'Can we, Yo?' as I start heading off again. I'm hoping so. I've only been here a couple of times and a long time ago, three or four years, it must be, just before I left Gibsons and we did some big deliveries of cupboards and desks and that, to Parliament House, which I realise we've just walked right past. We're on Macquarie Street. I could laugh with relief.

Almost. When we get up to the corner and cross the road, there's a cop, on the beat, on the path outside the Gardens, between the gates and the statue in front of them. I don't have to tell Ag to shush as I sneak us down behind a line of skinny-trunked trees that run this side of the statue, watching him all the while; she's watching him too. I take note of where we are: behind us, a big building that looks like a courthouse, with a stone triangle face and columns, but it's something else; I don't remember what. Yes, I do: it's a library. I ate a pie on the lawn here, looking across at them gates, the walls either side about ten foot high, and the gates even higher, keeping the mob out dusk till dawn. When I look at the cop again, he's moving off into the darkness, down the road behind the library. We watch him till he disappears, till the crunching of his boots is long enough gone.

Then we're across the roadway, quick as thinking it, and I'm following the wall down from the gate and into the dark, running my hand along the iron railings, looking for a break or some kind of leg-up so we can get over, but I find one railing that's bent out like a runaway lorry's smashed into it for us earlier, thank you, Lord, and we're through. Into the trees: fat

trunks and great black billowing heads; they're fig trees. I keep on for a bit, through the trees, with the sweet smells of the earth and the softness of walking on the grass letting me believe for a few moments that we might be all right. We're together, we'll be all right; I'm just looking for a place to picnic, with my little sister, my starving, shoeless little mop-headed sister. I keep on through the darkness and the quiet until I think my lead boots are going to sink right through the softness of the earth, I'm that weary. But before they do, I trip up on a fig root and I ask Ag: 'This do us, then?'

'Mmm,' she says, with her chin on my head, she wouldn't care, and I can hear her smiling as I put her down on the ground, in the fork of these great big fig roots that rise so high near the trunk they seem made to harbour us. I pass her an apricot and I listen to her chomp that down, slurping the juice of it, and I listen to the rustling and squeaking up in the huge roof of the branches of this tree – bats, I suppose, big fat fruit bats, same as the ones in Victoria Park. And Aggie says: 'That was nice. Is there another one?'

'There is,' I tell her. 'There's another five of them.' There's also a sandwich in the bag, wrapped in paper. A big fat sandwich. She won't mind whatever's on it, and I say: 'You can have all the apricots when you finish this.'

I have half with her. It's ham and pickle, and it tastes just like what it is: a gift from heaven, from good strangers in the street, and for the first time in what seems forever, I think maybe we might be all right too. I will be giving us a fair crack at all right anyway. Somehow.

As she's chomping away, Ag sneaks back in under my arms, making herself snug. She says, through a mouthful: 'Will we go on a tram tomorrow?'

'I don't know, Ag,' I tell her. 'Maybe. Got to get you some shoes before we get far anywhere, yeah?'

'Buckle shoes?'

'Whatever ones you want. And a new dress, too.'

'You mean it, Yoey?'

'Yes.' I'm counting out our budget now, and she can have the whole of our £3 17s 6d, if that's what buckle shoes and a new dress are worth to her. I'll get another job soon. Things will work out.

But for this moment, this night, weariness is finishing me. With my gut chomping round that ham and pickle, I've even gone past my want of a smoke, and my lids are already at half-mast as I ask Ag: 'Reckon we should stay here tonight or go home?'

'Stay here,' she doesn't hesitate. She pushes the back of her curly head into my chest: 'Promise me, Yo-Yo, promise you won't take me back there.' I do. She says: 'I like this tree.'

'So do I,' I tell her. 'It's a wonderful tree.' I look up into its branches, so thick with their leaves it's blacker than black against the starless sky, and I close my eyes and pray for our brother Michael, that he is at peace with you, Lord. Somewhere.

'There's fairies up there in it,' Aggie whispers. 'Can you hear them?'

'I can hear them,' I tell her, and I know her eyes are wide with it as she tells me all about the fairies that live in this tree and how apricots are their favourite thing and so she's going to leave one for them and if it's gone in the morning we'll know that Oonagh the Fairy Queen likes us. I hold her to me as she burrows round deeper inside my arms, inside the arms of this great fig tree, and inside her blue eyes, wide and bright, some kind of sleep claims me.

ALSO BY KIM KELLY

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Lady Bird & The Fox
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‘Kelly’s evocation of 1930s Sydney has a marvellous depth and authenticity based on some impressive research, and her characters, plot and fluid prose draw the reader into this world.’

– *Daily Telegraph*

Broke and hopeless in 1929, Yo O’Keenan flees the violence of his home in Chippendale, and by some miracle charms his way into a job on the Harbour Bridge, a new start for himself and his little sister, Agnes.

Meanwhile, on the north side of Sydney, in her cluttered cottage at Lavender Bay, a young and ambitious costumier, Olivia Greene, works on her latest millinery creations, dreaming of taking her colours to Paris, London, New York.

A random encounter in the Botanic Gardens sparks a powerful attraction, even as the gulf between this pair seems wider than the blue mile of harbour that divides the city.

By mid-1932, the construction of the Bridge is complete, but Sydney is in chaos, on the brink of civil war, as the Great Depression begins to bite – hard.

And then Yo disappears.

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