

'Texas', Carrington, Newcastle, New South Wales, May 1930

Iris was running, thinking maybe if she ran fast enough, she could outrun her way of life. She'd walked demurely enough across the communal yard, past the meagre vegetable garden and short stand of bushland, but once over the dip in the fence she'd landed with a bound. Now she was off. Away, away she went beneath an apricot-streaked sky. The vast beauty of it soared above her and Iris dragged the cool, bracing air deeply into her lungs.

The rosellas fluttered, sudden in their flight, then graceful as they sailed against the sunlit clouds in silhouette. How Iris longed to do the same, to leave the dusty sheets of corrugated iron and debris behind. The dwellings in Newcastle's Texas were little more than shacks, haphazardly constructed and piled alongside one another like mismatched broken toys. They housed many of the town's poor but the state of them made mockeries of the word 'home', despite her mother Agnes's best efforts. The whinny of a horse carried on the breeze, reminding her of that faraway place Texas had been named for, but no. It took more than a few stables and workhorses to make such a namesake true.

Over the ground she flew, running as if it could take her anywhere, should she wish it hard enough. She'd always been fast, as quick as a rabbit, her father used to say when she was younger and such unladylike abandon was allowed. These days she only ran when no-one was watching, usually on an errand such as this for her mother.

The main town was only a mile on foot if you took the road, a mile and a half cross country, yet Iris never had to think twice about taking the longer route. Running it took her the same amount of time as walking the short way, and the sight of more struggling households along the busy main road only obscured the evening sky. Such depressing surroundings left scant room for wondrous imaginings.

Iris leapt, landing one foot after the other, letting her precious secret come out to play. Her beautiful dream. It could be thought of here, her perfect love beneath a perfect sky, and she let his face fill her mind. John Tucker: handsome, kind, funny. Forbidden.

The last word should have halted her musings, or at least slowed down her pace, but it only spurred her on, every freeing stride firing her imagination. Each new memory played against that sky, starting with the moment the boy from her old street went from nondescript to incredible. When, newly returned from boarding school in Sydney, the Protestant youth she'd long overlooked had somehow transformed into her very own romantic hero.

She knew her Catholic parents wouldn't approve if John started seriously courting her. Even before the Mitchells had been forced to relocate to Texas, the division between her and John

had long been in place. He was literally from the wrong side of the track. People tended to live clustered alongside their own on the main road, Young Street: his family residing with the 'Proddos' on the north side, hers with the 'Micks' on the south. That separation had only deepened since she and her family had moved out to Texas with the most destitute of the town's Catholics. Yet even the undercurrents of religious feuding couldn't steal away the beauty of her dreams right now.

John. Each landing foot seemed to call out his name. Tall, strong, fair-haired, and so striking that day the shift had occurred it had stolen her breath momentarily. Her sister Helena had noticed Iris's sudden gasp. Helena noticed everything. Fortunately, her sister was also her confidante, and, aside from a quick shared glance and a raised eyebrow, she hadn't commented or drawn attention to the fact that Iris was openly gaping. Who wouldn't gape, Helena had conceded later, admitting that she too had stood mesmerised by John Tucker as he stood on the back of his father's dray.

'All you men who fought in the war, shoulder to shoulder, extolled as heroes, how are you treated now? Fired upon in the Hunter Valley, by your own police force, no less. You're nothing to these men of industry and you'll remain nothing if we don't fight them in the boardrooms, where they'll listen.'

Young John had merely been nodding in support behind John Tucker senior as the man expounded further on the injustices suffered by the largely out-of-work steelworkers in the town. People listened, Catholic and Protestant alike, for it affected them all, yet his son's reaction had had far more influence on Iris than his father's political opinions, however impassioned. Iris would have marched into boardrooms herself had John Junior encouraged her to – in fact, Helena reckoned she'd likely have bought snake oil had he been selling it.

His blond-tipped hair had glistened in the morning light; his faith in his father so evident he'd seemed the perfect son. The perfect young man. Yes, perfect was definitely the word.

Iris ran on, revelling in that moment, as if she could glean some of that perfection and let it erase all the blemishes that tainted her every day. She hoped he'd show up again today. He'd often been there these past few weeks, waiting for her at the same spot they'd spoken that first time, on the corner of the divisive street that had brought them together.

'Iris Mitchell,' he'd said. It was an acknowledgement, not a question. He knew very well who she was.

'John Tucker,' she'd said back.

She'd sounded rather confident, almost amused, Helena had said later. 'However did you do that?'

Iris hadn't known she had such an ability but she'd managed to employ it whenever they'd met in the weeks since, flicking back her shoulder-length brown curls for effect. John seemed fascinated when she did it. People had begun to comment on her looks these past few years, saying she was a beauty. Hopefully that was what he was thinking as he looked at her curiously, not that she was flipping her hair to be flirtatious, even though maybe she was, or that she was a ninny. John was clever – so clever, in fact, he'd been on a scholarship down at that school in the city. Another tick on that list of perfect qualities.

The clouds were feathering and turning pink now as she approached the town. Iris slowed to a walk, catching her breath as the familiar streets came into view, although she still had to keep up her pace as she dodged the many carts and trucks rumbling along. The butcher shop closed promptly at five and Mr Parsons wouldn't take lightly to a last-minute customer on a Friday afternoon, if she could even consider herself such. Iris clenched and unclenched her fist. How she hated this degrading errand most of all. Fortunately, the corner where John might be waiting was further along. She could only pray that he wouldn't see her enter the shop and come to join her, only to overhear her humiliation.

The door swung open, the small bell above it tinkling cheerfully, although to Iris it sounded more like a warning. Mr Parsons gave her a brief glance, sending her a nod, but there was wariness there as he turned back to serve the other patrons. Iris could already feel a blush begin to burn in her cheeks and she hung towards the back of the shop, hoping to be the last customer of the day.

'...and I suppose a pound of lamb chops, although the pork does look tempting,' Mrs Spencer was saying, the decision obviously weighing on her as she checked the coins in her purse. Such fare was for Sunday best, Iris knew. These days most families only feasted on a decent cut of meat once a week, if a pound of it could really be termed a feast.

Mrs Spencer had four grown boys and a hungry husband to satisfy, all of whom were working, albeit sporadically. Still, Iris supposed there'd be plenty of bread and dripping on the table to supplement the meal. Plenty of vegetables too. The Spencers were one of the lucky families in their parish – they'd managed to hold on to their home and the well-tended garden out back that came with it. Iris swallowed her envy, trying not to feel resentful that not two years ago her own family had been the Spencers' neighbours and had enjoyed a similar garden. The shared, dusty excuse for one near the shantytown barely yielded enough for any of them, despite her mother's green thumb. She would merely shrug and smile over that, however.

‘We can make it stretch,’ Agnes Mitchell would often say to her daughter. ‘Think of the poor children and count y’blessings.’

She was always getting things to ‘stretch’ or ‘making do’. Sometimes Agnes’s cheerful outlook bolstered Iris’s mood but not always. And certainly not now. Asking the butcher for a free ham bone so her mother could turn it into soup rendered the Mitchell offspring ‘poor children’ themselves. This was nothing short of begging. Agnes didn’t see it that way, saying it was simply a case of ‘waste not, want not’, but Iris certainly did. Mr Parsons would too. So would Iris’s father Bob, had he any idea such a thing was going on.

Mrs Spencer was paying now, smiling her thanks, and she greeted Iris as she left.

‘Oh, I didn’t see you there, Iris. How’s your mum?’

She said it kindly and Iris felt guilty at her jealousy over the woman’s garden before.

‘She’s fine, thank you, Mrs Spencer.’

‘Is your father still away with Jim?’

‘Yes, they’ve been down near Braidwood panning but we expect them home soon.’ The other woman in the shop, Mrs Conlon, let out a sniff of disapproval as her horrid daughter Catherine looked on. They were well off compared to most in this town, living in one of the best houses on the Protestant side of Young Street, and Mr Conlon still held a decent job down at the dockyards. His wife’s attitude boasted that fact, as did her smug daughter’s, who seemed disdainful of the notion of a man and his son travelling to pan for gold.

Times were hard, however, and there was no work going for them down at the docks as carpenters, their chosen trade. If her proud father and brother could search for glints in the pan to help them all survive, Iris could be proud of them for doing it.

‘Well, give your mum my regards, won’t you?’ Mrs Spencer continued, ‘and make sure to let her know I have some good lemons from our tree to give her, and some leftover apples. I’ll bring them along to Mass.’

Iris simply nodded. The woman gave her a last sympathetic look before she left. Nothing colder than charity, her father Bob would say. Gold panning was one thing; it was still work after all. Being pitied and given food was quite another. Agnes would disagree, of course, Iris’s current errand a case in point. Iris found herself wedged somewhere between the two opinions.

Catherine smirked and Iris flushed, wishing they hadn't overheard Mrs Spencer's offer, but then Agnes's good nature came to mind once more and she forced herself to smile politely. Catherine simply turned away as if bored. At least that was one advantage of living over in Texas, Iris reflected, lifting her chin: not having to put up with having this nasty girl for a neighbour any more, or her horrid, lecherous brother Robert.

'Right then, what do you recommend today, Mr Parsons?' Mrs Conlon said, tapping on the counter with one gloved hand as she eyed the meat laid out before her.

'I've got some lovely cuts of beef – brought in fresh just this morning, Mrs Conlon,' he told her, leaning his hand on the counter too. Iris couldn't help but be distracted by the contrast between the woman's delicate white glove and the butcher's gnarled, chunky hands. They were well-worn from his trade and there was a stump where his little finger should be.

'The Singletons are coming over,' Mrs Conlon said, as if that additional piece of information explained the need for superior fare.

'Nothing quite like a roast beef dinner,' Mr Parsons said smoothly, his years of experience coming to the fore. Iris understood he'd be keen on selling his plentiful supply of the meat sooner rather than later. If only the Mitchells could afford such a delicious meal, she reflected, sighing inwardly. Her mouth began to water at the thought of crispy skin and juicy slices but she forced resentment aside once more. At least her family weren't a bunch of insufferable snobs like the Conlons and the equally self-entitled Singletons. Still, maybe she could tolerate being a member of such a family if it meant roast dinners instead of ham-bone soup for supper.

That thought was so wickedly disloyal she knew it would cost her at least ten Hail Marys come Confession this Saturday. Iris glanced over at Catherine, still smug as she stood alongside her mother. Protestants didn't have to go to Confession. Sister Cletus at the convent school used to say it gave them less conscience, although Iris's sister Helena had pointed out the reverse could be true. All Catholic sins could be instantly absolved on a weekly basis. That gave them permission to sin away, Helena had hypothesised, quietly and only to Iris, of course. No-one took on an argument about religion with one of the nuns.

Anyway, John's a Protestant and he's obviously a very compassionate person, Iris reminded herself now. Just look at the way he goes about supporting his father in trying to get a fairer lot for the workers.

Thinking of John cheered her and she wished Mrs Conlon would hurry up and just buy the expensive roast and be done with it so she could see if John stood waiting on their corner. Unfortunately, the woman seemed intent on discussing fancy French gravy with Mr Parsons.

Iris had to endure a good five minutes longer listening to the finer arts of thickening and flavouring the sauce until the package was finally in the woman's arms.

'Come along, Catherine,' her mother said, ignoring Iris as she headed for the door. No kindness there, like Mrs Spencer had shown, but then again she was no friend.

'In a minute,' Catherine said, bending down to lace her boot.

Mrs Conlon exited, immediately striking up a conversation with another neighbour outside the door, and Mr Parsons's attention turned to Iris at last.

'What will it be for you then, Iris?'

Catherine glanced over, laces held idly in her hand.

'I...I wanted...I mean Mum sent me to...to ask if you might...'

'Wanting a ham bone then, is she?'

'Yes, please.' At least he'd said it for her. 'She also said she'll settle your bill when Dad's susso comes through on Monday.'

'That's what she says every Friday.'

Iris fidgeted, hating that the 'susso', their welfare money, never made it through to the next payment, and hating even more the fact that Catherine was hearing every word of this painful exchange. Mr Parsons studied her for a moment longer then sighed. 'I may have one or two out the back.'

Catherine stood as Mr Parsons went off to find the bones and Iris braced herself for what she might say.

'Bones for tea, is it? We tend to give ours to the dog but I suppose beggars can't be choosers.' Iris felt her face flame as Catherine continued. 'Can't eat dirty old rabbit every day. Mind you, it's Friday, isn't it? Don't you Micks have to eat fish?'

'Only during Lent these days,' Iris told her, managing to employ that confident tone she'd been mastering of late.

'Oh yes, Lent. Isn't that also the time you have to give up a favourite food? Mind you, there's not much left for you to sacrifice, is there? Unless you talk that father of yours into giving up his drink. Little chance of that, I'd say.'

Iris's heart sank at those words. Her father's occasional binges were a source of great embarrassment to her, but he was a good man otherwise and there was no way known this prig was getting away with slandering him so.

'A man deserves a night off every now and then. Just look at your brother Robert.'

Aside from being a lech, Robert Conlon was a notorious layabout, drinking most days and causing all sorts of trouble around town. He was also very keen on Iris and she'd flatly rejected his advances on numerous occasions, a fact Catherine obviously knew. It was Catherine's turn to blush now but her tone was haughty as she replied. 'He's taking an important government job down in Sydney, actually, so I doubt he'll have time for it any more. He's getting married, did you hear? Found himself a lady from an excellent family when he was last down there,' Catherine said with a condescending smile. 'When the time came to make a serious choice in a woman, good breeding won out.'

'Well, here's hoping her bloodline continues to dominate once they have babies of their own,' Iris told her, adding in a whisper as Mr Parsons returned, 'The world really doesn't need a bunch of ugly, half-witted infants.'

Catherine gasped. 'How dare you...'

'Still here, are you, Catherine? I think your mother is waiting,' Mr Parsons said as he plonked two ham bones down and began to wrap them. Iris wasn't sure if he'd heard what she'd said but as Catherine huffed her way out Iris could have sworn she saw him smile. 'A fair bit left on them ham bones for you, Iris, and tell your mum not to worry too much 'bout what she owes me.'

'Thank you, Mr Parsons,' she said, blinking at unexpected tears.

Agnes would stick to her word and pay her bill come Monday but Iris suspected it would likely be discounted, despite his earlier gruffness. Joe Parsons was kind at heart and Iris felt a rush of gratitude, especially after putting up with the bigoted Conlons.

'Ah, think nothing of it, lass, and take no notice of that Catherine. It's pure jealousy that drives her, mark my words.'

Iris was surprised at that. 'I can't imagine what she has to be jealous of me about.'

'Oh, I think you'll find it's something to do with bloodlines,' he said with a wink and Iris giggled. The exchange was interrupted by the sound of loud singing and the butcher went over to the window, his expression clouding. 'I reckon you'd best take the long way home today.'

Iris moved over to look too, her heart falling for the second time that day. It was her father, making his way down Young Street, his gait unsteady, his swag bouncing about. People stopped to stare, and Iris saw Mrs Conlon and Catherine among them. To make matters worse, her brother Jim was nowhere to be seen, which meant her mother would have to deal with her drunk husband pretty much on her own. Iris wondered if John was witnessing the spectacle, feeling sick at the thought.

‘I’ll take out the rubbish and you can sneak off while I do,’ Mr Parsons said and Iris nodded. She waited while he grabbed the barrel and hid behind him as they made their way out, hoping desperately that her father wouldn’t spy her and shout out her name as he was prone to do when in this state.

Iris moved quickly then, down the road and away from the scene that was unfolding. Her gut twisted as, sure enough, her name carried on the wind as she found the edge of the field.

‘Iris!’

She took off at a run now. As fast as a rabbit she went, hating that she was ashamed, hating that Catherine Conlon stood there, gloating over her bloodline once more. Hating that each step took her further away from John and his perfection and closer to the life of squalor she couldn’t outrun.

‘Iris!’

Her name continued to be called, sailing in the cool air as her feet fairly flew, but it was only when Texas came into view in the dimming light that she realised it wasn’t her father’s voice that called it. No, it wasn’t her father at all.