

The afflicted heart

A vice-like grip encircles Jane's heart. It suffocates her, choking tendrils of hope before they can reach light. Clutching the back of the chair, she closes her eyes and inhales; but a vision of her darling Janey being lowered into the soil of this godforsaken place immediately fills the darkness.

The clatter of boots kicking up clouds of dust in the yard disturbs the hushed stillness of the midday heat. The door slams. George and little Johnny Gavin stagger into the kitchen, laughing over a shared joke.

'I've told you already today,' Jane says. 'Do not slam the door.' She struggles to lift her gaze from the table as the smothering gloom overtakes her again. Her skin blanches and beads of perspiration form on her brow.

'I think you should lie down, Mam,' George says. 'You're looking poorly. Johnny and I will fix our dinner.'

Menacing shadows dart across the walls as Jane rests on her bed, but she cannot close her eyes. To do so invites in the horror. Janey's screams haunt her, and the memory of her sweet girl's blistering skin is too much to bear. Jane's heart thumps with a ferocity which is frightening; her mind is a kaleidoscope of life since they first set foot on the sandy shores of this colony.

The door slams again with a splintering shudder.

'Eh, Johnny,' she hears George say. 'Go get a gimblet and an adze from the carpenter's shop. I'll have to fix this before Mam sees it'.

Jane's head throbs and a persistent hum renders her deaf. She reaches for her prayer book, and mechanically recites the words on the page.

'Turn thou us, O good Lord and so shall we be turned. Be favourable, O Lord, be favourable to thy people, who turn to thee in weeping, fasting, and praying.'

Words which had once given her strength, now offer no solace. The Lord has abandoned her. The clamouring whine in her ears turns to drumming, and a murky pall curtains her vision. Consumed by a fog of anguish, she is oblivious to the world, until snatched phrases of song pierce her trance. The notes don't ground her though; they transport her far away from this place, back to the verdant fields of Ireland.

'And when we close these gates again, we will be all true blue,' George sings. His melodious tones trail off and Jane hears a voice. *You could go home*, it murmurs. *But first, go to George*. The voice multiplies and magnifies to a chanting chorus. *Go to his room. Go to his room. George needs salvation. Go to his room.*

'Argh! There is no peace for my afflicted heart', Jane says, and rises from her bed, making her way through the house like a sleepwalker.

In the kitchen, she beats batter for her dinner; the stirring keeping pace with the persistent chanting in her head. *Go to his room. Go to his room. George needs salvation. Go to his room.* Her sight is constricted to a dim tunnel, but a scurry of movement draws her attention. Johnny Gavin emerges with feline grace from under the dresser. He stretches out one limb, then another, and rises to standing. His lips drip with thick, white cream as he mouths words she cannot hear. He turns on his heel and prowls out to the yard.

And still the voices insist. *Go to his room. Go to his room. George needs salvation.*
Go to his room.

She can defy them no longer. She stumbles towards George's bedroom. In her semi-blindness, she feels someone push past her, but she has no sense of where she is. Is it the kitchen or the yard? The voices urge her on, but she wades through time like it is mud. Chanting fiends surround her, taunting her. Johnny appears, his eyes wild with distraction, stooping and spinning in a frenzied dance. Floating before her is the sleeping figure of George, a mound of motionless flesh draped with a coat.

'George, George. Mammie is here, George,' she whispers, reaching towards him to cradle his head. Her fingers sink into his broken skull.

The pulsing in her ears ceases and the shroud drops from her sight. Jane stands in George's bedroom. In her hands, she holds an adze dripping in blood. Next to her cowers the pathetic figure of Johnny Gavin. His face is ashen, and his clothing wet and bloodied.

'Johnny Gavin!' she screams. 'You murderer!'