

NIGHTMARE

I stare through the rain, watching as people gather around a wooden platform with a rope hanging from a post in front of the Fremantle Round House. Woman and men of all ages huddle under huge umbrellas, excitement visible on their faces. I glance around, as people peer under their cravats or oversize hats at everyone else, before staring back up at the platform, though I can't make out much over the sea of umbrellas, waistcoats and puffy dresses. The farmland and houses beyond are a blur of colour through the droplets of water on my eyelashes. Pitter-patter! goes the rain.

It's the 6th of April 1844, my 14th birthday, but I feel sick in the stomach.

Unexpectedly, this morning, Father had dressed me in my best jacket, pants and polished shoes. He even placed a tie around my neck, which he rarely does.

"Be on your best behaviour today, Martin," Father had said in his deep voice. "This is a once in a lifetime event, what will happen today."

I had assumed he had meant something special was going to happen, but no. My stomach swirled at the very thought of what was about to take place. Even worse, it was on my birthday, which Mother and Father seem to have forgotten. Mother clutches Father's arm with her right hand, while her left hand holds the frilly pink umbrella adding to the swarm. Their expressions are a mix of jubilant and nervous.

"GATHER ROUND, GATHER ROUND!" A man runs onto the platform and shouts into his megaphone. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, YOU WILL WITNESS A TURNING POINT IN HISTORY!"

The horde bustles closer, excitement audible, turning the air to static. Another man stalks over to the first, holding a teenager with his hands behind his back. The man grips the

boy's hands with enough force to break the bones, but the boy walks calmly. The pair stop next to Megaphone Man.

“HERE TODAY IS JOHN GAVIN AGE 15, WHO, BEFORE HE WAS CONVICTED, WAS AT THE PARKHURST PRISON ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT FOR APPRENTICED LABOUR!” The host shouts merrily. “HE WAS SENTENCED TO MURDERING HIS EMPLOYER’S SON, GEORGE POLLARD! TODAY HE WILL BE HANGED FOR HIS CRIME! THIS IS THE FIRST EUROPEAN TO BE EXECUTED IN THE SWAN RIVER COLONY!”

My world tilts, because John is only a couple years older than me. The man holding John shoves him towards the rope and my head spins, because this is all happening so fast, too fast. I close my eyes as the man secures the ropes around John’s neck. Everyone is yelling, stamping their feet, but as I open my eyes, I see others like me, eyes shut tight, bodies angling away.

I should have been looking away, but I’m drawn to the sound of a strangling, gurgling noise. My throat tightens, and I lurch forward, vomiting all over the slick, wet cobblestones.

Martin awakes, sweating, 1883, 39 years later, remembering the horrible, traumatic sounds of the past.