

CHAPTER ONE

A FACE IN TIME

It was his self-commanding, passionate look that captured Lesley's attention most. He looked like a man with a sharp mind, a thinker, but there was action in his features also. He stood there, hands in his pockets; his expression enigmatic: determined, sorrowful, knowing. The photo stood out from the newspaper article that contained it. His features were fine: intense, deepset, passionate eyes; high cheekbones; a fine nose and mouth. His hair was dark, close cropped revealing a high forehead. Frowning slightly.

What was this young man, from so long ago, thinking as his photo was taken? The heavy, grey fabric of the coat he was wearing almost merged into the dark grey, cell wall behind him. Austere. That was the word. The large metal tag with his convict name and number on it was clearly visible around his neck. At once Lesley could feel the oppressiveness, the harshness of the reality of life in the 1800s when Australia was being colonised by the white man. And yet this young man's face, he must have been in his twenties maybe his early thirties, leapt off the page for all of that; as if he had been able to transcend the harsh realities of his time then, and in fact was still doing so from this newspaper article, over a century later.

Who was he? The article's title provocatively stated: "After 130 years, red tape still binds convict". Lesley read on. The state's most celebrated escaped convict, John Boyle O'Reilly, was still finding the British bureaucracy invading his life. Guidelines for free pardons had very clear criteria, the article said. Sentenced to transportation in 1866 for failing to pass on information to his British superiors about an intended mutiny by his Irish neighbours, he had eventually escaped from prison, with the help of Irish sympathisers, and on a whaling ship he made it to America. Here he had become one of that country's leading social, literary and political figures.

Ah, so I was right, Lesley thought to herself. The intelligent look of the face staring out of the paper, past her, past the cell and the penal life of the new colony, past all of it, into somewhere, something else, not bound by time, not bound by circumstance. He was someone, one of those rare individuals, with the capacity to rise above those things, and go somewhere else, somewhere new. And with any luck, Lesley thought, take at least some of us with them.

She checked her watch, an elegant antique, quite beautiful, too flash for day wear her grandmother used to tell her. But then Lesley was a jeweller with one of the most prestigious and oldest jewellers in the country, Augincourt Jewellers, so it was only fitting that she herself reflected what she did. That was always her point of view anyway. Besides, she loved it. She looked once more at the striking face of the convict, then folded the article and put it in her desk drawer.

John Boyle O'Reilly stepped off the ship onto the dock.

He had imagined what this new land looked like during the six month voyage on the *Hougoumont*. He had imagined its harshness, distant from his homeland, its shores foreign and far away, holding hardship and hostility and little chance of redemption for all who went there. But now he was here, he sensed that it was more than that. Above him was clear, blue sky dotted with white, fluffy clouds and to as far as the horizon in one direction, the blue-green sea and white pristine beach, and in the other direction, dense, thick bushland.

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Looking around him again, he saw dozens of convicts, his fellow Irishmen as well as English and other nationalities, all those who had fallen foul of the punitive law of the English, as he well understood it to be. All moving in lines in chains, watched and beaten by English soldiers, the noise of the new colony, Bunbury, and yet under the most brilliant blue sky he had ever seen. Nothing in the old lands, the motherlands, looked like this. The waters were crystalline and shining, the shores, white and clean. No grey skies, no spitting rain, no cold winds, no wet marshes, no lonely cries of the marshland birds.

A shove on the shoulder sent him lurching and stumbling forward and brought him out of his thoughts. A firm grip steadied him and he looked up into the oldest, blackest eyes he had ever seen. Eyes a thousand years old. But intense eyes of deep suffering. An aboriginal. An ancient inhabitant of this land, another made subject to recent occupation.

“Get a move on”, he heard a cruel voice from behind. He turned to look at a harsh face, about the same age as himself; yellow hair under a red cap, blue eyes clear but cold. The English soldier who had pushed him.

“Move him along,” an older, more solid man ordered loudly from the ship deck above.

“Yes Captain,” the younger officer answered him, gesturing with his musket, cold metal glinting brightly in the mid-morning sun.

“Move along there,” he ordered again, not sounding entirely sure of himself.

John O’Reilly gave him a look, which in spite of the difference in their situations, made the other man step back and think again about giving him the shove he was about to give him and the aboriginal. There was a presence about John O’Reilly that had always made other men look up to him and follow him. Even as a lad.

We’re all young, O’Reilly thought. This man who had so much power over him could be his younger brother, playing in the streets and hills of Ireland with him and his friends. Rambunctious, foolhardy, young. The aboriginal too must have been around his age. But look at the lives they were leading. Harsh lives, full of pain and fear and fighting.

John O’Reilly wanted something else, something more. He was a young man, who had always shown a fine, sharp intellect, a quick wit, and not without a sense of mischief.

He had known the risks in 1866 of not being complicit with his British overseers. Betray his countrymen? It was not something he could do. He came from Irish gentry. He had relatives in the law, some were even judges. But even they had not been able to help him. He had known the risks and this, the penal colony at Bunbury, is where they had brought him. He looked around him again. The beaten bodies under the brilliant sky. No, the thought was crystal clear in his mind - man was not meant to live like this.

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