

Prologue

See me swinging with the full moon behind me. Streaming under my feet, the mists and clouds part to allow a panoramic view of the prison settlement: *there*, built on that black, snaking river channel. She, the moon, has woken me at this the fairy hour to speak in confidence about the lost boys and girls who once lived down there in that prison. 'Imagine them!' she gestures grandly. Well yes, I *can* see them, because I *remember* them. *I was there*. The little blighters, sleeping away in their mangers, snoring, lifting an arm, turning. They must sleep, sleeping is good, with me watching over them, one tap on the cheek for him, and another for her, another for kisses and love. Their skin is aglow like a firefly's, their cheeks do not yet have the haggard look of the leathery lag. They are lovely to gaze upon, a moment of goodness in this whole nasty business. I could lie me down to sleep with them—but that I must not do. I must stay awake and watch over them, and tell you what really happened to them.

They had to survive, and survival depended upon cleaving to the Commandant of the settlement, Captain Blake, a.k.a. the 'Beast'. The consequences otherwise were dire indeed. His bravery and toughness were legendary. He fought against France and in the colonies of America. There is a story well told of how Blake (at that time only a private) and a host of other soldiers had to endure a terrible march across the Spanish countryside. I can never remember foreign names. But I remember the mud. It sucked the boots off the men. Night and day they walked. Did I mention it was in retreat? Many men died. Very

cold. But Blake wouldn't give up. He made it all the way from France to Australia.

But there are other stories, less well known. About the prison settlement. Lots of mud there too, and skeletons.

See my bright buckled shoes, and my curls bobbing and springing...? All right: it wasn't all bad. You can put people in cages but they still have a knack of building a whole world for themselves. Personally I was lucky. I got to meet lots of people. I was a free person and worked in the Female Factory oiling up the girls.

I had my own room but often chose to sleep with the convicts. I was their mother and mentor. They came to me when they were crying, and I went to them when they were fighting. I wouldn't stand for fighting. At night time, when Mrs Shaw, the matron of the Factory, had gone to bed, we would sit and read or talk quietly amongst ourselves. This was strictly forbidden, but Captain Blake preferred not to have anything to do with the running of the women. He delegated it all to Mrs Shaw, who could, *could* be called upon for small mercies, so long as one kept her well topped with praise and love (and a few other things). So with Shaw gone we would hold our own society. Very agreeable. There was little threat of discovery: our building was far from the others and surrounded by a high brick wall. The sentries were of no concern. And as for the soldiers, well! There was only one way through to the girls, and that was me.

Dealing with the men made us a little happier (and, ahem, richer) in that horrible gaol. Much happier. There was nothing lovelier than the constant stream of men. Each time you were with a man, it filled you with a sense of fullness, a closeness, and a shininess that was like the very

moon herself. These liaisons almost always occurred in secret and at night, for to get caught meant corporal punishment and confinement. In those moments of connection, there was no home far across the sea from which you were severed eternally, no wild crazy land beyond the settlement filled with savages and mad runaways, and there was no time even, no convict time, no chores time, no duty time. All time was now.

I've almost, as I've recollected these fragments, forgotten about the convict boys. My connection to them was roundabout, at the beginning. I was involved with everybody except them. There was so much to do in the settlement. It was a real society, very busy. I remember having to walk a lot doing chores, from one end to the other. It was very well organised though you wouldn't think so. And for that it was very admirable and, you know, you even felt part of it when you played your role, and you felt it was a good thing, and that you and your work were good. It gave you a bit of dignity, the work and the neatness. I especially liked the detail of the place, which always represented itself to my mind in the bookwork. All that information, written down, logged, tabulated, recited—orders, plans, produce, punishments, illnesses, deaths. Everything had its own special book. There was even a book (believe it or not) called *The Book of Remarkable Occurrences*.

Now that would have been a fitting vessel for the events which involved my brood of young convicts, children amongst them, who revolted against the system and against Captain Blake personally. For their disobedience, their names were razed from the books of life.

Stop swinging. Breathe. Don't let the difficulties of history, personal or otherwise, constrict you or you'll never breathe properly again. Ugly, destructive thing! I close my eyes to history, recorded

history, accepted history. But wait. The moon has started speaking about the lost children, initiating me into her secret knowledge while the rest of the household sleeps. It eases my heart to be here with her. Otherwise this remembering, I feel, would be too sore a trial. Already I can feel the knot in my stomach, and suspect I am not looking my best. I would feel very alone here, with the old Female Factory still beckoning but now all shut up, everyone gone. And I feel I can't breathe, or that I refuse to breathe—I'm not sure which. Always there are no answers: only darkness and silence.

But what happened with my revolting brood, you ask? Something that has left me miserable in the deep layers of myself. I feel I must unpack myself completely to get at what happened, and I don't know what will be left behind after I do.
