

Going It Alone

The Lynch twins had the same long-legged stride and wore their hair in the same dark slick and laughed at the same jokes.

“Jack’s the one with a scar on his temple,” Rose Lynch used to say when people asked her how to tell her brothers apart. “And Charlie’s right handed, but Jack’s a mollydooker.”

Yet, somehow, I always knew without any doubt which twin was which. And, although I liked them both, I was drawn to Jack.

I became friendly with the Lynches the summer I finished high school. Of course I’d seen them around before then – the boys walking to cricket together, Rose’s photo in the paper the year she won Miss Showgirl - but I didn’t really know them. They went to the Catholic school, grew up in the housing commission, and sat with a big group at the public swimming pool, all tanned bodies and laughter and thread-bare towels, and Rose at the centre of everything.

When Rose left St Brigid’s she started working for Dad in the office down at the mill. Dad approved of her, commenting at the dinner table that the Lynch girl kept the accounts in tip-top order, or had a two-finger whistle so loud that the men could hear it above the noise of the saw. I never paid much attention to these conversations because I had little interest in bookkeeping or the timber yard or in anything about people who were planning to live their whole lives in Paradise Lake. I did my homework and my piano lessons and waited for the future to arrive. Nights when I couldn’t sleep I read *Peyton Place* by torchlight

under the bedclothes and, when the batteries ran out, lay restless in the dark, longing to know and be known.

Suddenly, at some point during October, people ceased caring whether my school shoes were polished or my uniform covered my knees and I matriculated with good marks in everything except French. That was partly because Mr Jones had a breakdown during the final term so we never made it all the way through the curriculum, and partly because it's hard to really get a feel for the language when the closest you've ever been to France is the Paris end of Collins Street, and then only once when Mum had to go to Melbourne to see a urology specialist. Almost immediately, I got a letter in the mail awarding me a scholarship to the teacher's college in Ballarat, a big, provincial town a couple of hours east.

Dad raised his eyebrows at my news. "Sydney or the bush I could understand, Josie," he said drawing on his cigarette. "But Ballarat? It's neither here nor there." He stubbed out his butt in the glass ashtray that fitted into the smoking stand next to his armchair. "And cold as a witch's tit in winter."

Dad had a bushman's ease with the wild of the forests and high plains, strangely coupled with a love of Melbourne, five hours distant, which he visited a couple of times a year 'to see a man about a dog,' (something that left me waiting for him to return from one of these trips with a puppy until Mum told me that I shouldn't take everything so literally). Yet, Dad preferred to pass through towns of any size at high speed, one hand on the steering wheel, the other rolling his next smoke from the tin of Log Cabin tobacco in his lap. As for Paradise Lake, Dad

often said that the only good things to come out of the place were his wife, his daughter and the highway.

“Anyway, Josie,” he said, “Wherever you decide to go, your mother thinks you’re too young to leave home yet.”

This was news to me. All Mum had said was that I’d need a good suitcase and a smart coat. In her view you can be ready for anything if you’ve shopped well and remember your manners. But I agreed to wait until I turned eighteen before I left. In the meantime I was to help out at the mill.

Rose Lynch taught me how to manage the orders for messmate and stringybark, to write up the invoices, and do the payroll. While she worked, Rose smoked menthol cigarettes from a silver case. If the pompous town clerk came into the office, Rose would greet him sweetly enough. But, when he tried to give Dad the secret Masonic handshake, Rose would raise her eyebrows at me and start tapping the keys on the adding machine in a strange, portentous pattern until my laughter bubbled up and erupted in a splutter of ill-disguised coughing. Afterwards, even Dad would shake his head and smile.

Like most people in Paradise Lake, we knocked off when the five o’clock siren went at the ball bearing factory, where Charlie Lynch worked as an apprentice boilermaker. Instead of driving home with Dad, I began walking with Rose and Charlie as far as the Main Street to meet Jack for a milkshake at Nino’s Café. One night, Billy Connell, whose father owned the brick company next to the mill, stopped to pick up the four of us in his blue 1964 Chevy Impala. It was a

convertible, like something from an American film, and everybody knew that he'd paid a fortune to have it imported all the way out here. I can still see Charlie and Jack springing easily into the back, exchanging a grin as they settled into opposite corners, each with an arm resting outstretched along the edge of the tray. Rose opened the passenger door then waited for me to get in and slide across the bench seat before climbing in after me. I knew immediately that Billy Connell was disappointed that Rose didn't get in first and sit right next to him.

That night Billy drove us up to the lookout on One Tree Hill and we all sat together on the wide, warm bonnet of the Chevy and looked down at Paradise Lake below us. Under a darkling sky the town lights glittered, almost as though they belonged to some place special. From then on we spent the whole summer together, Rose, Jack, Charlie, Billy Connell and me.

In the beer garden at the White Horse Hotel, Billy Connell insisted on buying me a gin squash instead of the lemon one I ordered. Fortunately the publican didn't seem to worry that I was still under age.

"Ah, young Josie Cathcart," was all he said when he came around to collect empty glasses, "I see you've joined the Lynch Mob." He slung his cleaning cloth over one shoulder and picked up his tray. "Give my best to your father when you get home."

I nodded, flushed with the January heat, and the effects of Juniper berries, and the company of new friends. A girl who knew Billy came over and sat with us for a while.

“Wow! You two are twins, right?” she said, looking at Jack and Charlie in turn. “Which one of you is the oldest?”

“Jack, by about 17 minutes according to Mum,” said Rose when neither of her brothers answered.

Jack downed his beer and stood up looking irritated. “My shout,” he said, rubbing the little scar on his temple in a characteristic way he had.

The girl looked up at Jack and then across at Charlie. “Can you read each other’s minds?”

Charlie sighed. “Not always,” he said. “But I’ve got a pretty fair idea what Jack’s thinking right now.”

Another time at the White Horse, not long afterwards, we were the last ones left in the ladies’ lounge at closing time, none of us ready to go home, though I knew Dad would be waiting up for me, playing solitaire at the kitchen table.

“Rose,” said Charlie, pointing to the old piano in the corner covered by a lace tablecloth. “How about you play us a song?”

“Yeah,” said Billy Connell. “I’d like that.”

“I can’t play, not properly,” Rose said. “But Josie can.” She waved me over to the battered old instrument.

With uncharacteristic abandon I flung the lace tablecloth aside and played a short fugue I'd learned for one of my piano exams.

There was silence when I finished until Charlie spoke. "Do you know anything we can sing along with?" he asked. "What about 'King of the Road'?"

I shook my head.

"Anything by Elvis?"

"No. Sorry."

I looked at Rose who shrugged and changed places with me. She played a few basic chords and soon she and the boys were crooning about a sea of heartbreak. The publican and his son, Nick, who worked behind the bar, joined in while they were cleaning up, calling for 'Irene Goodnight'. The Beatles were at the height of their fame then, but Rose knew mainly hillbilly numbers – unfashionable songs of death, drinking and love gone wrong – and everybody except me seemed to know all the words.

At some point, while we were all clustered around Rose at the piano, Jack leaned close and whispered to me. "You were brilliant, Josie," he said. "Very classy."

Saturday 4th February, 1967 was a scorcher, one of those days when you could fry an egg on the bitumen in the street. Rose and Billy had tickets for the cabaret ball at the Town Hall that night and Charlie Lynch would be in Melbourne for the annual Country Week cricket tournament. Jack had been

selected for the district team too, but he'd broken his ankle coming off a ladder at work.

"I can't play cricket and I can't dance on these," Jack waved one of his crutches. "So how about we give the cabaret a miss tonight?" he said. "Do something just the two of us?"

I nodded, thrown off kilter by the sudden realisation that I'd been waiting for this moment since the beginning of summer, and that somehow Jack had known it way before I did.

"Make sure you order a steak, Josie," Mum advised me when she dropped me at Nino's café. "Seafood in this heat and so far from the ocean, it's a recipe for gastroenteritis."

Through the plate glass window, I could see Jack Lynch waiting for me in one of the front booths, his crutches propped up against the wall. I pushed aside the fly-splattered plastic strips in the doorway and hurried in to join him.

"Catch of the day, please," I said when Nino came to take our order.

"And for you, Jack?" said Nino patting Jack on the shoulder. Nino was a rare man in Paradise Lake – demonstrative, foreign, good at cooking - and one of the few who never got the twins muddled up, even when they were apart.

"A mixed grill," said Jack.

"Ah, he's an excellent boy, this one," Nino said to me. "And the way he can draw!" He gestured to the menu board behind the counter, where a red crustacean waved stalky eyes and fanned its tail above Nino's never-changing list

of 'Daily Specials.' "His picture of a lobster looks nearly as good as a real one I boiled myself!"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Give it a rest, mate," he said.

Jack worked as a signwriter, mostly painting names and logos on the sides of trucks, as well as doing chalkboards for Nino and the bistro at the White Horse. He'd just finished his most difficult and best work ever, he told me, a reverse gold-leaf gilded window for the local solicitor.

"Technically, it was a pretty tricky job because you've got to do the words in mirror writing and any mistakes when you're working with gold leaf cost you a fortune. Luckily, I've got a bit of a knack for it because Charlie and I used to write our secrets that way." He shrugged. "Never imagined it would actually be a useful trade skill."

"And the solicitor was happy with his fancy new window?" I asked, because I liked hearing Jack talk, and I even liked the smell of vinegar rising from the plate of fish and chips in front of me, and the scalloped edges on the white paper serviettes in their holder next to the cruet set.

"Very happy. He actually seemed quite impressed with me all round until I fell off my bloody ladder." Jack grinned and shook his head at his own folly. "I leaned back too far trying to get a good look at how it'd come up. But at least every letter was perfect. I could see that even when I was lying in a heap on the ground!"

I laughed. "Well, I hope it was worth all that pain. And missing the cricket trip into the bargain."

“I don’t mind about the cricket,” he said. “I was just worried that Charlie would refuse to go without me. But in the end I persuaded him to.” Jack, cool despite the heat and bustle in the café, held my eye for a moment. “And here we are.”

It’s one of the things about small towns in the middle of nowhere, the way sound carries in the quiet of the night, alerting anybody who happens to be awake to whatever’s going on. Usually, only the chimes of the Town Hall clock, the whistle of the goods train as it nears the crossing, or the barking of a dog cut the silence. But, that night, music from the cabaret was still floating across the rooftops when I got home, even though it was late, long after Nino’s had closed.

Dad was shuffling his deck of cards ready to deal out another round of solitaire, an ashtray and a cup of tea gone cold at his side.

“Can’t imagine what you’ve been doing ‘till this hour.” He scowled. “And I can’t sleep in this heat, especially with the bloody racket that’s been going on. Police sirens and all.”

“Really? I hardly noticed them.” I smiled and kissed his cheek, happy, even later, kneeling over the toilet throwing up Nino’s fish.

At some imprecise moment over the weekend – perhaps as I studied Jack’s face across from mine at the cafe, or when I willed him on as he undid the buttons of my blouse - my inchoate yearnings collided with something fierce and

singular in Jack Lynch and were transformed into a desire for him that was both specific and consuming. Monday morning at the office I had no hope of concentrating on work. Fortunately, Dad was out at an appointment with the bank manager and it was a quiet day for timber orders. I dawdled over my tasks, transposing figures, misfiling invoices, and failing to notice until nearly lunchtime that Rose had barely spoken all day.

“Rose!” I said, suddenly aware of her quietness. “You don’t mind do you?”

“Sorry, Josie?” She looked up from the accounts ledger, but slowly. “Mind what?”

“About me and Jack?”

“Oh,” said Rose. She put down her pen and lit one of her Kool cigarettes. “You and Jack. That’s been coming for a while.” She blew a puff of smoke. “Of course I don’t mind, love, and I suppose Charlie will get used to it, eventually. Not sure about your good Proddy father, though.”

“Dad? It’s nothing to do with him.” I smiled. “How was the cabaret?” I asked out of politeness.

“You haven’t heard then,” Rose said, flatly.

It turned out that Billy Connell had got into a fight at the dance and the police had been called and Nick, the barman from the White Horse, had ended up in hospital.

“Is Billy all right?”

“He’s fine,” said Rose. “And Nick will be too, apparently. Billy’s father said there was no real harm done and that the police agreed with him.” Rose took a deep drag on her cigarette. “So, I doubt anything more will come of it.”

“Why would Nick fight with Billy Connell anyway?” I said.

Rose looked at me and shook her head. “Sometimes I wonder how you were ever dux of Paradise High,” she said. “It was the other way round, Josie. Nick didn’t want to fight. Billy just tapped him on the shoulder and punched his lights out. And for no good reason seeing I’d hardly spoken ten words to Nick all night.”

Dad arrived back from the bank. “Did you hear, girls?” he said, hanging his hat on the back of the door. “The ball bearing factory’s closing. They lost the army contract and haven’t got enough work to keep going past Easter.”

Dad’s words caused me a pang of anguish. Not, I admit, about the factory or the people who would lose their jobs or the effect on the town, but at the mention of Easter. Easter was only six weeks away. By then I would be eighteen and about to start my first term at college in Ballarat, a hundred and fifty miles from Paradise Lake and Jack Lynch.

Jack, his eyes closed, trousers undone, was talking in a lazy voice about how he was saving up to buy a car.

“Mm,” I said, lying in the crook of his arm, remembering the green Ford he’d pointed out to me in the local car yard, imagining him driving it down the

highway to visit me. Then, I heard a loud creaking sound. "What's that?" I sat up with a start.

"I think it's your Dad," said Jack.

"Bloody hell! They must be back from Mum's appointment already!" I leapt up, heart hammering, looking for my skirt so I could get dressed and fly out of the room.

Jack laughed. He reached out and pulled me back.

"Just kidding," he said. "It was only the eaves cracking in the wind."

"You nearly gave me a heart attack." I sat back in relief, leaned over him and kissed the scar near his temple. "How did you get that?" I asked.

"A run-in with one of the nuns at school," he said, fingering the white, raised patch of skin.

"Were you naughty?"

"No," said Jack, suddenly serious. "I just wanted to write with my left hand." He eased away from me and got up off the bed. "I couldn't bat or bowl or do anything properly with my right," he said. "So I couldn't for the life of me understand why they kept trying to force me to change something that wasn't for the better." Jack tucked in his shirt and zipped up his fly. "Also, becoming right handed would have made me exactly like Charlie, at least in other peoples' eyes, and I didn't want that."

"So, what happened?" I reached for my stockings.

Jack shrugged. "Sister had this belt," he said. "It never usually hurt too much, but that day she was in a fury. Said she'd strap my left hand as many times as it took to make sure I'd never write with it again. I tried to push her away and she stumbled, then came back swinging at my head."

I looked over at him as I clipped my suspenders, not sure whether he was grinning or grimacing.

"She got me such a beauty with the buckle that I needed seven stitches. But the doctor who sewed me up complained about her to the Parish and she never touched me again after that. So, I guess you could call it a draw."

By half way through March the inland lake after which the town was named had shrivelled and grown shallow, and the naked trunks of old gum trees that were usually covered by water jutted into clear skies. The ground hardened and cracked and local farmers grew impatient for autumn rain so they could sow their crops. The ball bearing factory was empty and its whistle no longer blew and we were quiet at the mill too, until Dad got a big order for a new building at the agricultural school down in Horsham.

"I could use a few extra hands for this," Dad said to Rose. "So I'll be able to give Charlie a couple of days work if he wants them. He can help Morrie."

Morrie was a contractor who did deliveries for us, an odd sort of bloke, with few friends who still lived at home with his mother. Dad always used him for long hauls, said Morrie mightn't say boo to a goose, but there were never any

reports about Cathcart log trucks being parked outside of pubs when Morrie was driving them.

The men hardly got a word out of Morrie while he was in the yard, and Dad didn't bother trying, but Rose could draw anyone out.

"I hear your mother's got a beautiful garden down there in Horsham?" she said while she was filling out the bill of lading.

Morrie nodded and stared at his own feet in their dusty workboots.

"What does she grow, then, your mum?" Rose asked.

"Orchids, mainly," said Morrie, looking up. "But she's got a few other things. Camelias. Fuschia bushes."

"Oh, my Gran had fuschias," said Rose. "Me and my brothers always used to go around popping the buds on them before they bloomed and Granny'd chase us, yelling like blazes! You ask Charlie about it."

Morrie just nodded with a serious look on his face, took the paperwork from Rose, and went out to his truck.

Apparently, when Morrie came back, he brought Rose a pink cymbidium in a terracotta pot. I didn't see him give it to her because I'd gone down to Melbourne with Mum who was having some procedure done at the Royal Women's.

Mum shooed me away from the hospital as soon as she'd filled out her admission forms.

“Why don’t you go to the pictures or something, Josie?” she said. “There’s no point you hanging around here all day like a lost sheep.”

“But Dad said I had to look after you.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “Dad would be really pleased if you got to know your way round Melbourne a bit. I’ve got my new nightie and brunch coat to put on. And I borrowed your copy of *Peyton Place* to read while I wait for the doctor. I’ll be better off on my own.”

So I took a tram into the city, wandered through the arcades, visited the hat shop at Flinders Street station where Dad always bought his Akubras, and saw Raquel Welch in *The Fantastic Journey* at the Forum. The following day back at the office I found Rose red-eyed and subdued, the pot plant from Morrie smashed to pieces in the rubbish bin, and Dad snarling around the place like the squatter in that Henry Lawson poem we learned at primary school. I wasn’t sure exactly who Dad was most angry with, but there were plenty of candidates. Rose for letting her personal problems interfere with work, Billy Connell for causing an angry scene at Dad’s mill, the bank manager for calling in the overdraft, or me for getting involved with Jack Lynch. Perhaps it was something else entirely that was really worrying Dad, but if it was, I didn’t see it.

It was the last Friday before I was due to leave for Ballarat. Rose and I were packing up, waiting, as we did now, for the five o’clock news to come on the wireless to signal knock off time.

“Rose,” I said. “Did you know that Billy’s offered to lend Jack his car tomorrow night?”

Rose rolled her eyes.

“What?” I said. “It was kind of Billy. He knows Jack wants to take me somewhere special for my birthday before I go.”

“He offered it to Charlie as well. He thinks that currying favour with the boys will get him back in my good books.”

“You mean that one-carat ring he gave you didn’t get him there already?”

“I’m not that shallow, you know, Josie.” Rose snapped at me.

“Sorry. I know you’re not. I was just trying to be funny.”

“Yeah, well,” she said. “Best leave the jokes to Dave Allen.”

The news bulletin was nearly finished, but we made no move to leave the office. Nor were we paying any attention to reports of violent clashes at the anti-war protests. The demonstrations taking place down in the city seemed nearly as remote from Paradise Lake as Vietnam itself.

“I may as well tell you now,” Rose said, “because you’ll find out after the weekend anyway. But I’m going to give back the ring and call it off with Billy.”

“You are?” I assumed that Billy would get over his jealousy once he and Rose were married. It never occurred to me that she would break up with him.

“Don’t you love him?” I said.

“The best house in Paradise Lake isn’t worth much if you’re going to spend your life walking into doorknobs,” she replied.

I wasn’t exactly sure what Rose meant, only that she had a knack for making me feel I missed the point. We were about to call it a day when ‘*These Boots are Made for Walkin’*’ came on the wireless. We turned it up loud and Rose and I sang along with Nancy Sinatra and stomped around the office while we dusted the adding machine and tidied the desks. God, we loved that song.

I grinned at Rose from the doorway, a trickle of sweat running down my nose. “Are you ready, boots?”

She grinned back, as beautiful as she’d ever been, then locked the door behind us. “More than ready,” she said.

Mum bought me a good black dress for the funeral. Silk and wool with capped sleeves.

“It was worth the expense,” she said. “I’m sure you’ll get plenty of wear out of it in future, Josie.”

If I hadn’t been so numb with shock I might have thought more about what Mum meant by that remark, taken more notice of how tired she was looking, how she was shrinking a little, everywhere except her belly.

St Brigid’s was packed. I’d never been inside it before that day and I sat with Mum and Dad in a pew near the front and looked all around the place – at the unfamiliar scenes of agony in stained glass, at the brass incense burners on

the altar, and at the curious row of confessionals with their dark timbered doors – looked anywhere but at that coffin in front of us with its sheath of waxy, white trumpet lilies.

The Lynches entered the church last. When they passed by, I could see that Jack's mother was shaking, her legs barely steady enough to carry her forward. Jack, holding her elbow, was grim but dry-eyed. He'd been strong ever since we arrived back after my birthday celebration. When we'd seen Dad waiting for us on the footpath out the front of the house at two in the morning, we laughed at first, thinking he must have been worried about having lent us his car.

Later, in the middle of that terrible night, Rose and Mrs Lynch wept in their kitchen amidst their neighbours and cousins and the peeling paint. By dawn, the priest and the first platters of sandwiches and cakes in Tupperware containers had arrived. Jack made decisions and arrangements while I tried to help by making cups of tea and heating food, but the Lynches still had an old wood-burning stove and I didn't know how to use it and was useless. Later we walked all the way up One Tree Hill to see where it had happened. Billy Connell's Chevy was a crumpled wreck in the bottom of the gully, lying where it landed after Charlie had crashed straight through the barrier and flown out into the air, alone over the town.

Jack walked to the edge of the lookout, stood staring down for a long while, hands in his pockets, then came over and sat by me on the dusty ground.

"No skid marks," was all he said.

When Rose came down the aisle she was clutching tight to Billy Connell's arm and I saw that she was still wearing her engagement ring and that black did not suit her.

In the end, I didn't move to Ballarat and I don't know if Jack eventually bought that green car or got to do any more reverse gilded windows or how long we might have stayed together if the crushing weight of our losses hadn't unbound us. Six months after Charlie's funeral and only a few weeks after Mum's, I enrolled at teacher's college in Melbourne where I developed a passion for the education theories of Maria Montessori, the novels of George Johnston, and the Italian food in Lygon Street. Everything was completely unlike home, with the exception of the old men running the cafes who all reminded me of Nino.

I didn't go back home the weekend of Rose and Billy's wedding, but I bought them a fine crystal bowl in Buckley's department store that Mum would have said was just the thing, and took a lot of trouble over the letter I sent wishing them well. I ran into Jack now and again over the years when I went to visit Dad who, having always maintained that Mum was the only thing that kept him in 'bloody Paradise Lake,' rarely left the place after she was gone. Jack and I never spoke for long, and I never told him that I thought of him often, especially at staff meetings at the beginning of each school year when there was usually at least one new set of twins to deal with. "I'll take both in my class, or else neither of them," I always said, wanting to never again feel responsible for separating twins.