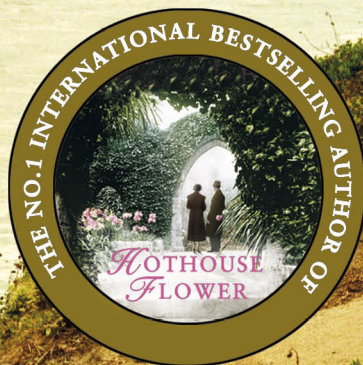


LUCINDA RILEY

'Atmospheric, heart-rending and multi-layered'

*Grazia*

*The* GIRL  
*on the*  
CLIFF



The Girl on the Cliff by Lucinda Riley

# I

## *Dunworley Bay, West Cork, Ireland*

The small figure was standing perilously close to the edge of the cliff. Her luxuriant, long red hair had been caught by the strong breeze and was flying out behind her. A thin white cotton dress reached to her ankles and exposed her small bare feet. Her arms were held taut, palms facing out towards the foaming mass of grey sea beneath her, her pale face looking upwards, as if she were offering herself as a sacrifice to the elements.

Grania Ryan stood watching her, hypnotised by the wraith-like vision. Her senses were too jumbled to tell her whether what she was seeing before her was real or imagined. She closed her eyes for a split second then reopened them and saw that the figure was still there. With the appropriate messages sent to her brain, she took a couple of tentative steps forward.

As she drew nearer, Grania realised the figure was no more than a child; that the white cotton she was wearing was a nightdress. Grania could see the black storm clouds hovering out over the sea and the first salt-water droplets of impending rain stung her cheeks. The frailty of the small human against the wildness of her surroundings made her steps towards the child more urgent in pace.

The wind was whipping round her ears now and had started to voice its rage. Grania stopped ten yards from the girl, who was still unmoving. She saw the tiny blue toes holding her stoically to the rock, as the rising wind whipped and swayed her thin body like a willow sapling. She moved closer to the girl, stopping just behind her, uncertain of what to do next. Grania's instinct was to run forward and grab her, but if the girl was startled and turned round, one missed footfall could result in unthinkable tragedy, taking the child to certain death on the foam-covered rocks a hundred feet below.

Grania stood, panic gripping her as she desperately tried to think of the best way to remove her from danger. But before she could reach a decision, the girl slowly turned round and stared at her with unseeing eyes.

Instinctively Grania held out her arms. 'I won't hurt you, I promise. Walk towards me and you'll be safe.'

Still the girl stared at her, not moving from her spot on the edge of the cliff.

'I can take you home if you tell me where you live. You'll catch your death out here. Please, let me help you,' Grania begged.

She took another step towards the child, and then, as if the girl had woken up from a dream, a look of fear crossed her face. Instantly, she turned to her right and began to run away from Grania along the cliff's edge, disappearing from view.

'I was just about to be sending out the search party for you. That storm's blowing up well and good, so it is.'

'Mam, I'm thirty-one years old, and I've lived in

Manhattan for the past ten of those,’ replied Grania drily as she entered the kitchen and hung her wet jacket over the Rayburn. ‘You don’t have to mind me. I’m a big girl now, remember?’ She smiled as she walked towards her mother, who was setting the table for supper, and kissed her on the cheek. *‘Really.’*

‘That’s as maybe, but I’ve known stronger men by far blown off the cliff in a gale like this.’ Kathleen Ryan indicated the wildness of the wind outside the kitchen window, which was causing the flowerless wisteria bush to tap its twiggy brown deadness monotonously against the pane. ‘I’ve just made a brew.’ Kathleen wiped her hands on her apron and walked towards the Rayburn. ‘Would you be wanting a cup?’

‘That would be grand, Mam. Why don’t you sit down and take the weight off your feet for a few minutes, and I’ll pour it for both of us?’ Grania steered her mother to a kitchen chair, pulled it back from the table and sat her gently on to it.

‘Only five minutes, mind, the boys will be back at six wanting their tea.’

As Grania poured the strong liquid into two cups, she raised a silent eyebrow at her mother’s domestic dedication to her husband and her son. Not that anything had changed in the past ten years since she’d been away – Kathleen had always pandered to her men, putting their needs and desires first. But the contrast of her mother’s life to her own, where emancipation and equality of the sexes was standard, made Grania feel uncomfortable.

And yet . . . for all her own freedom from what many

modern women would consider outdated male tyranny, who was currently the most content out of mother and daughter? Grania sighed sadly as she added milk to her mother's tea. She knew the answer to that.

'There you go, Mam. Would you like a biscuit?' Grania put the tin in front of Kathleen and opened it. As usual, it was full to the brim with custard creams, bourbons and shortbread rounds. Another relic of childhood, and one that would be looked on with the same horror as a small nuclear device by her figure-conscious New York contemporaries.

Kathleen took two and said, 'Go on, have one yourself to keep me company. To be sure, you don't eat enough to keep a mouse alive.'

Grania nibbled dutifully at a biscuit, thinking how, ever since she'd arrived home ten days ago, she'd felt stuffed to bursting with her mother's copious home cooking. Yet Grania would say that she had the healthiest appetite out of most of the women she knew in New York. *And* she actually used her oven as it was designed for, not as a convenient place to store plates.

'The walk cleared your head a little, now did it?' ventured Kathleen, making her way through her third biscuit. 'Whenever I have a problem in my mind to be sorted, I'll be off walking and come back knowing the answer.'

'Actually . . .' Grania took a sip of tea, 'I saw something strange, Mam, when I was out. A little girl, maybe eight or nine, standing in her nightie right up on the cliff's edge. She had beautiful long, curly red hair . . . it was as if she was sleepwalking, because she turned to look at me when

I walked towards her and her eyes were –’ she searched for the right description – ‘blank. Like she wasn’t seeing me. Then she seemed to wake up and scampered off like a startled rabbit up the cliff path. Do you know who she might have been?’

Grania watched the colour drain from Kathleen’s face. ‘Are you OK, Mam?’

Kathleen visibly shook herself. She stared at her daughter. ‘You say you saw her just a few minutes ago on your walk?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mary, Mother of God.’ Kathleen crossed herself. ‘They’re back.’

‘Who’s “back”, Mam?’ asked Grania, concerned by how shaken her mother seemed to be.

‘Why have they returned?’ Kathleen stared off through the window and into the night. ‘Why would they be wanting to? I thought . . . I thought it was finally over, that they’d be gone for good.’ Kathleen grabbed Grania’s hand. ‘Are you sure ’twas a little girl you saw, not a grown woman?’

‘Positive, Mam. As I said, she was aged about eight or nine. I was concerned for her; she had nothing on her feet and looked frozen. To be honest, I wondered whether I was seeing a ghost.’

‘You were of a fashion, Grania, to be sure you were,’ Kathleen muttered. ‘They can only have arrived back in the past few days. I was coming over the hill last Friday and I passed right by the house. It was gone ten in the evening and there were no lights shining from the windows. The old place was shut up.’

‘Where would this be?’

‘Dunworley House.’

‘The big deserted one that stands right on the top of the cliff up past us?’ asked Grania. ‘That’s been empty for years, hasn’t it?’

‘It was empty for your childhood, yes, but –’ Kathleen sighed – ‘they came back after you’d moved to New York. And then, when the . . . accident happened, left. Nobody thought we’d be seeing them around these parts again. And we were glad of it,’ she underlined. ‘There’s a history there, between them and us, stretching back a long way. Now,’ Kathleen slapped the table and made to stand up, ‘what’s past is past, and I’d be advising you to stay away from them. They bring nothing but trouble to this family, so they do.’

Grania watched her mother as she walked over to the Rayburn, her face set hard as she lifted the heavy iron pot containing the evening meal out of one of the ovens. ‘Surely if that child I saw has a mother, she would want to know about the danger her daughter was in today?’ she probed.

‘She has no mother.’ Kathleen’s wooden spoon stirred the stew rhythmically.

‘She’s dead?’

‘Yes.’

‘I see . . . so who looks after the poor child?’

‘Don’t be asking me about their domestic arrangements,’ Kathleen shrugged, ‘I couldn’t care and I don’t want to know.’

Grania frowned. Her mother’s attitude was totally contrary to the way she would normally respond. Kathleen’s

big, maternal heart beat hard and loud for any poor thing in trouble. She was the first round to a member of the family, or friends, if there was a problem and support was needed. Especially when it came to children.

‘How did her mother die?’

The wooden spoon ceased its circling of the pot and there was silence. Finally, Kathleen gave a heavy sigh and turned to face her daughter. ‘Well now, I suppose if I’m not telling you, you’ll be hearing it soon enough from someone else. She took her own life, so she did.’

‘You’re saying she committed suicide?’

‘’Tis one and the same thing, Grania.’

‘How long ago?’

‘She threw herself off the cliff four years ago. Her body was found two days later, washed up on Inchydoney beach.’

It was Grania’s turn to stay silent. Finally, she ventured, ‘Where did she jump from?’

‘From the sound of things, probably where you set eyes on her daughter today. I’d say Aurora was looking for her mammy.’

‘You know her name?’

‘Of course. ’Tis hardly a secret. The Lisle family used to own the whole of Dunworley, including this very house. They were the lords and masters round here a long time ago. They sold off their land in the sixties, but kept the house up on the cliff.’

‘I’ve seen the name somewhere – *Lisle* . . .?’

‘The local churchyard is filled with their graves. Including hers.’

‘And you’ve seen the little girl – Aurora – out on the cliffs before?’

‘That’s why her daddy took her away. After *she* died, that little mite would walk along the cliffs calling for her. Half mad with grief, I’d say she was.’

Grania could see her mother’s face had softened slightly. ‘Poor little thing,’ she breathed.

‘Yes, ’twas a pitiful sight and she didn’t deserve any of it, but there’s a badness that runs through that family. You listen to what I say, Grania, and don’t be getting yourself mixed up with them.’

‘I wonder why they’re back?’ Grania murmured, almost to herself.

‘Those Lisles are a law unto themselves. I don’t know and I don’t care. Now, will you be making yourself useful and helping me set the table for tea?’