

## THE MAGPIE

... a strong opening, with superb atmosphere and sense of place. The opening scene was unusual and absorbing. Although narrated in a relaxed pace, the voice keeps the reader engaged through details. Equally, while description dominates, the structure is varied and stylistically confident. The dialogue is vivid and characters seem to be introduced effortlessly.

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## Prologue

Something in her simple binary brain told her it was time to move on; time to leave her brood behind. She had been a good mother. She had wrapped her eggs carefully in silk and placed the neat bundle into a narrow opening in the pink bark of the majestic salmon gum. For three weeks she stood guard. She went without food. She fought off death on more than one occasion. Behind her, the tiny embryos grew. When the time came, she gently tore the silk and eased their passage into a brutal, arid world. Two hundred and two surviving hatchlings scuttled free. She stayed with them while they moulted their first two soft pale skins. They were hardy now; smaller yet perfect copies of their mother. It was time to eat again. Time to find a mate. Time to start over.

A little after sunset, the female huntsman crawled out from the tight gap between the shedding bark and onto the corrugated iron roof. She did not walk with the high knees typical of arachnids. Evolution bestowed on her a broad, flat abdomen and legs that extend forward, crablike. Easily the size of the average human hand, she was capable of squeezing through spaces that would trouble a smaller spider. Under the light of a waxing gibbous moon, she moved quickly across the undulating metal. She sought cover in a small opening where the roof builder had been a little slipshod. The sensory hair-like setae coating her body, alerted her to movement and warmth within. The huntsman does not set a web, but as the name suggests, she will actively hunt her prey. She will inject it with venom, to paralyse and liquefy tissue. Her powerful mouth parts will tear it apart. She passed through the gap between roof and wall. She dropped onto the bed.

## Book I

### Chapter 1

#### The Visitor

Happy to share its territory with the newcomer, the magpie busied itself, working through debris from the carnage of the night before. There were easy pickings to be had underneath the gas lamp and around the embers of a smouldering fire. The bird's carolling woke the young man, who lay quietly enjoying the confident song. As ever, the dawn reveille reminded Jim of how far from Skerries he had travelled. Yet, at a push, he would insist there was something of the seagull about the refrain. Soon the sun would rise above Bungarra Rock. It would be too hot to stay in bed and the flies would be about the place.

Rolling onto his side, Jim extended a lazy arm and felt about for his Hong Kong movement, bright red, Donald Duck watch - a thing of questionable good taste he picked up at the Nullarbor Roadhouse on the way across. For three dollars, it kept excellent time. Not that the time mattered much out here. The day's activities were largely determined by the approximate position of the sun in an endless blue sky and the ambient temperature. Nonetheless, first thing every morning, Jim would always cast a quick eye over Donald's hands. Once he did the maths and subtracted the eight hours in his head, he could picture what everybody back home would be up to at that very moment - yesterday.

His fingers touched something. It moved. Hang on! Watches don't move, do they? Jim's sleepy brain pondered. Actually, technically speaking, don't they have a movement? Some timepieces may even hide a little bird that springs out and chirps to mark the hour. Yeah but, Donald doesn't. Behind his disc of plastic glass, Donald just swings his arms slowly, pointing. An angry beak always open. The rummaging stopped.

"Jesus Christ!"

Jim's body jerked backwards, then froze. His last breath got sucked deeper into his lungs and there it stayed.

Eight eyes, set out in two rows of four, stared back from the edge of the pillow. Man and giant spider observed each other. Jim did not blink. The spider's blank 8 ball eyes couldn't. God, you're an ugly son of a bitch, Jim thought, but sensibly kept his

opinion to himself and more importantly, his mouth shut. Up until recently, he could well have gone into cardiac arrest at such an intimate encounter, but today, except for an initial flutter, his heart held out. Six months living and working in the Australian bush had knocked the edge off some of Jim's small town, Irish sensibilities. Huntsman. Yeah deffo, a huntsman, he told himself; big, nasty bite, very sore, localised swelling, headache, but not deadly. It would be very much appreciated, if you could just feck off out of my bedroom and preferably do so without actually moving. That would be great thanks! Reasonably sure he was not about to die, he tried to will the spider away. But not blessed with the capacity to read minds, it stayed where it was. Along with the immediate threat of a painful bite, Jim feared the very sight of far too many synchronised stubbly legs scuttling at speed, in the confined space, could unearth any dormant predisposition to arachnophobia he might be suppressing. Arachnophobia would not do. Not out here.

Jim's bedroom was small, in fact tiny. The low sloping corrugated roof provided shelter and enough height that he could sit comfortably. The walls were sheets of canvas; the floor a wooden panel door he came across on one of his many scavenging trips through the bush. A flywire mesh screen and crude wood frame, formed a window looking out from the foot of the bed to the tidy camp below. The bed, an old feather eiderdown of incalculable depth, swallowed its occupant whole and took up all the available floor space and more. Most nights, before retiring, Jim would shake out the eiderdown and his sleeping bag to remove daytime visitors. But try as he might, he was obliged to share his bed with the ants. Mercifully, but peculiar amongst Australians, the treehouse ants did not bite. They simply tickled his legs, while marching defiantly in formation through the bedding. Nevertheless, the bed was comfortable. It gifted him a good night's sleep and many great dreams.

Exiting the room involved a small climb that finished with a tight shimmy through a hessian flap, up onto a platform he liked to call a balcony. This morning the manoeuvre would be complicated by the unwelcome guest. The huntsman appeared unfazed when eventually, summoning the courage and without taking his eyes off her, the naked man gingerly extricated himself from the bed. She watched his toes delicately seek out and open the flap to the outside. Then, walking slowly backwards on his hands over her, Jim disappeared feet first through the opening, beaching himself inelegantly up on the balcony.

The spider's demeanour however did change when the naked man returned bearing arms. Again hanging headfirst from the balcony, Jim diffidently went after his uninvited bedfellow with a long stick. Following some remarkable shows of speed and reflexes from both parties, the giant huntsman sought refuge in an empty powdered milk tin lowered across her path. Jim happily released his prisoner on a nearby tree, then returned to stoke the fire in preparation for breakfast.

Whistling steam popped the lid on one side. Seething water hissed and spat over the rim, vaporising in puffs of dust on the coals. Hooking the loose wire handle with his stick, Jim fished the blackened billy from the fire and set it down at his feet. Using his baggy cotton hat to protect fingers, he removed the lid and picked up the billy again to pour. Why there was no proper handle, he could not understand. Of course, he could just as easily have boiled the water in a saucepan, but in the bush, it has to be the billy can. The world is full of amusing instances where culture and tradition prevail over practicality. A billion Chinese know of the knife and fork, but persist with chopsticks. Jim could never get the hang of chopsticks, but he liked his awkward and well used billy.

The water surged up the hot metal sides. It boiled again, bubbling violently before landing on the generous mix of instant coffee and powdered milk, spooned into a battered enamel mug. Squashing the larger doughy lumps against the side of the mug with the back of the spoon, Jim made a token effort to break up the bobbing remnants of powder that floated to the surface. He quickly gave up. The coffee tasted fine. Mixing the milk in advance with cold boiled water is always preferable, but unfortunately, yesterday's batch already stank. The homemade Coolgardie fridge wasn't up to the job at all really. It needed a bit of work. The rancid smell inside the fridge box and the sour milk, had brought him right back to his wet summer at sea, trawling for prawns and preparing meals in the fetid galley, deep within the bilge of the fifty footer. It was a little too soon to be a happy memory, but not far off becoming a fond one.

The tiny twinned black spots drew Jim's attention to the maggots. Breakfast this morning was the last of the damper baked in the camp oven the previous night. Experience thought him to be meticulous about replacing lids, but again the blowies had somehow managed to dive bomb their way into the butter. Without hesitating, he picked out the offending maggots and flicked them to the ground for the magpie, or

some of the small lizards that occasionally cleaned up around camp to enjoy. Not looking too closely, he scooped out a healthy portion of butter with a knife and spread it thickly over the two large wedges of bread. Neither the maggots nor the soot coating the crusts, spoiled his enjoyment of breakfast. It was good.

Sitting by the fire, sipping his coffee, Jim listened to the sounds of the morning. He always enjoyed a strong coffee first thing, but when the day got hot, and in the Western Australian Goldfields it got hot, his preference would change to tea. To his surprise, he found hot tea more refreshing and far better at quenching a thirst than any amount of the tepid well water he kept in drums under the balcony. Already he could smell the heat coming into the day. It carried the wonderful scents of the plants and the earth with it. He watched a maggot at his foot contort and wriggle. It covered itself in the red dust. For the second time that morning, Jim contemplated how he had adapted to life in this strange and beautiful land.

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There was a Heath Robinson look about it that appealed. For nearly seventy years the elements, not to mention the bugs, had ravaged and eaten away at the magnificent wood and steel structure. Yet the bones of it endured. It still imposed itself on the surrounding landscape. Jim could picture the great arms of the machine crushing enormous quantities of rock and releasing the tiny grains of gold hidden within. What came out of the Waihi Battery would have either made the dreams of those who laboured here, or killed them.

A trickle of water gathered pace and picked up some dusty red earth on its way down. It meandered around the fold of the eye and joined with another droplet of sweat above the nostril. The sudden change in volume accelerated its passage to the tip of the nose where it hung momentarily before dropping with a splash onto the open pad of watercolour paper. The sweat lifted a circle of pigment from the carefully worked foreground. The white of the paper showed through. With a controlled swipe of a round sable, Jim blended in the additional water. The dust, he decided added a certain authenticity to his work. He took off his wide-brimmed hat and wiped his face with it. A fresh streak of red ochre came off onto the hat. Everything he owned including himself, had turned a deep earthy red.

Sitting up on the tray of the Ford F250 and hunched over as he worked, Jim had been lost in his painting all morning. The splash broke his concentration. It must be time for lunch, he thought. He put the brush in a mug of murky water and propped the watercolour pad against the spare wheel. Bracing himself with both hands, he threw his numb legs forward and jumped to the ground. On landing, a grey, humming cloud of flies rose up off his back. They circled his head fleetingly, before returning to their roost. Jim stepped back a few metres and studied his work. He took great care to sketch it out before highlighting the preferred pencil lines with Indian ink. To finish, he washed over the ink with very diluted paint, in the hope the colours would bleed slightly into each other. He leaned his head to the left and back to the right. He squinted. Not bad. The perspective looked fine. The scale and decay of the old battery seemed to be there. But the washes weren't behaving as he wanted. The early afternoon heat dried paper and paint too quickly. He would finish it later on the balcony with a drink in his hand, the sun setting and no flies. Maybe, if he was lucky there would be cricket on the BBC World Service or Radio Australia.

Over a century had passed since the dry blowers first came to this area. They brought with them their overloaded wheelbarrows and high hopes. They came in their thousands. They laboured with little or no water, in the dust and heat of the Goldfields. Once the surface gold had been picked clean, they followed it underground. Crawling on their empty bellies, with pickaxe and shovel, they chipped away at the white quartz 'reefs' that led them deeper underground. They toiled in the dark labyrinth of their coffin-like tunnels. People got rich; people lost everything. In time, dispersed populations and mining camps coalesced into townships. Manners were put on the miners. Indigenous communities were destroyed.

After a lunch of hot tea, biscuits and a large tin of peaches, Jim left the truck at the battery and went off to explore the area on foot. Rusty, contorted scrap metal, bricks and rotten timbers told some of the story of long departed miners. Old mine shafts were crudely boarded up to prevent Jim and others from getting too curious for their own good. Resembling giant anthills, mullock heaps of spoil dotted the old workings. When diesel replaced sweat and sinew, many of the smaller mines were consolidated into huge

open-cast pits. These too now lay abandoned; their treasures carted away. Jim marvelled at the scale of the majestic terraced scars left on the face of the Earth; man-made canyons, monuments to human endeavour. For those who knew about such things, they presented a window into the beginnings of the history of the planet itself.

Beside the canyons, sterile grey monoliths of crushed waste rock rose as significant hills and cast their bleak shadows over the area. With hard angular edges, scarred by rainwater washed gullies, they had none of the aesthetic of the holes from which they had come, nor the charm of the quaint anthills of waste thrown up by the old boys' workings.

Jim continued on down to the old townsite of Davyhurst, one of the many settlements that grew up around the mines. Today a small hand painted wooden sign told him he had arrived. He found himself in a dusty clearing, where all around, patches of bluebush and spinifex grass were slowly reclaiming the ground for the bush. A few lonely gum trees grew proudly near the centre. He liked to think they might have once offered shade to a couple of old-timers lamenting the price of a drink. A pile of brick and rubble remained where one of the more substantial buildings had stood. The occasional rusty tin can and the ubiquitous broken glass bottle were the only other evidence that people once made homes here. The town existed now in a very few hazy memories, sepia photographs and old map drawers.

Jim walked over the area trying every now and again to kick up a bit of history with his boot. He wondered how this could happen, how could a town just disappear? Big mining still operated nearby, much of it over the very same ground the pioneers worked. He could see the major Cons. Ex. Gold operation beyond the far trees. The gold never ran out.

He recalled a faded map in Old Bill's study. Ten wide streets or more, were laid out in an ordered grid pattern. Cassidy, Kenny and Eileen streets, were three Jim remembered. Oasis and Siberia, two others that teased the imagination. Old Bill owned a fascinating collection of photographs and postcards from the pioneering days at Davyhurst. In its heyday, the town boasted hotels, schools and other less family friendly amenities.

Jim turned slowly, taking in the emptiness around him. He imagined a busy street, the hotel filled with revellers. Someone sold newspapers on a corner. A fellow, braces pulled down, collar removed and shirt open, was having his face shaved under a shade out front of a tent. A dapper gentleman, lifted a pocket watch by the gold chain,

from his waistcoat and checked the time. Children ran home from school, their white smocks gleaming in the bright light. A bicycle leaned against a post outside Kurth's General Store. The smell of fresh bread baking, percolated through the noxious, sulphurous odours hanging in the air. Jim imagined the noise from the constant pounding of the battery heads out of town, crushing ore. He saw a long line of water tanks cooking over wood fires. These were the condensers. They transformed brine, pumped from groundwater, into a passable facsimile of potable water. Harder to stomach and more expensive to buy than beer and spirits at the time, if Old Bill was to be believed. He pictured the billowing smoke from the condensers and the smelter furnaces, mingle with the clouds of rock dust rising up from blasting in the pits. The Woodline Railway came through and offloaded a mountain of fresh-cut timber.

In times gone by, the Goldfields had an insatiable appetite for wood. Some they used for building homes, much of it they burned, but most of the wood went underground to support drives and shafts. According to Old Bill, fifteen hundred tons of timber were harvested everyday by the Woodline as it snaked through the region, collecting and delivering the vital resource to the mines and towns of the Goldfields.

The flies buzzed in Jim's ears. A spiral of wind blew a wave of dust up off the vanished street. Mining is a dirty, noisy business, he thought. Davyhurst may well have been a lively little town, but it had to be a dirty, noisy place to live. The brilliant white and probably well starched clothing, preferred by the inhabitants of Old Bill's photographs, always intrigued Jim. Given the environment they lived in, he wondered how the townsfolk managed to look so clean, and to a certain extent, he wondered why. Surely, it would have required considerable effort. Perhaps the cooling benefits of white outweighed the extra laundering. Perhaps 'the Sunday best' came out for the novelty of having your image immortalised. Plausible for the more formal studio portraits, but many of Old Bill's photographs were of residents about their business. Maybe some of those scenes were staged. Maybe the pristine whites were partly an artefact of early photographic techniques. Whatever it was, keeping things clean in those conditions, must have been bloody hard. With ever decreasing returns, Jim struggled manfully to keep his own clothes presentable with modern detergents and the wash cycle of a sealed bucket bouncing around on the back of the Ford. He would happily admit, he was made of lesser stuff than the early pioneers and had all but given up, opting instead to wear considerably less as time went on.

There were not too many smiling faces captured in Old Bill's photographs, the occasion of having your photograph taken, far too serious a business it seemed, for such frivolity. But it struck Jim, that despite the challenges of living in this place, they were a contented proud people. Folk back then he figured, were prepared to endure great hardship and simply got on with living the best they could, cheerful in the certainty that a fortune could be found with the next blow of the pick axe. And for a few, it was.

Eventually, they took away all the gold their technologies could reach and when the time came, they took away their town. They left behind the scars of mining and their dead.

Jim returned to the Ford and drove the couple of kilometres south to the town cemetery. It pleased him to discover it even now, rather well looked after. He wondered if some descendant made the long pilgrimage out here, or if perhaps out of a sense of shared collegiality, workers from the nearby mines would occasionally take on the task of caring for the place.

There were prominent graves with large marble headstones, brass plaques and wrought iron railings. Other graves were simpler, marked only by long rectangles of white quartz pebbles. Many of the names on the headstones were still legible. Quite a few appeared to be of Irish origin and tragically, an awful lot of the graves were those of young children and infants. It was a sad place.

Jim stopped and paused by a small, tidy grave with a marble headstone and an ornate railing. He read the inscription.

IN SAD AND LOVING MEMORY OF OUR DEAR CHILDREN

HENRY ROWE AGE 7

AND ROBERT AGE 5

WHO WERE ACCIDENTLY KILLED AT DAVYHURST 2<sup>ND</sup> SEPTEMBER 1911

DEEPLY MOURNED

WHY SHOULD WE WEEP; THEY'RE SAFELY O'ER

WAITING FOR US ON THE GOLDEN SHORE

ERECTED BY  
THEIR SORROWING PARENTS

One day, when out mending a fence nearby with Helen, she told him the tragic story of the two brothers. The children had climbed down a mine shaft. The shaft was used as a magazine to store explosives. One of the brothers lit a match to light the way. It was not hard to imagine the horror of the incident and the trauma of a small community. Great sadness unquestionably hid behind many of the proud faces in Old Bill's drawer of photographs.

Seeing the boys' grave upset Jim. He wanted to leave something, but could find nothing that resembled a flower in the parched graveyard. He took a small notebook and pencil from his shirt pocket and sat down next to where the children lay. Carefully, Jim drew two small toy bears. He placed the pictures under a stone on the grave and sat there a while and thought of home. He had grown up in a noisy, happy house by the sea. A house full of children. His youngest brother wasn't much older than Henry. He missed home. He got up and left the two babies to rest in peace.

"Jesus!"

Taken aback by the name on a neighbouring headstone, Jim stepped in to check he had read it correctly.

JAMES MICHAEL RYAN

DIED 9<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 1908 AGE 25

MINE ACCIDENT

The coincidence unsettled him. He stood for a moment head bowed, hands clasped in front, as if in silent prayer and contemplated the life and death of his namesake.

"I hope you found your gold Jim," he whispered, "and no parent in Ireland grew old and died waiting for a letter that never came."