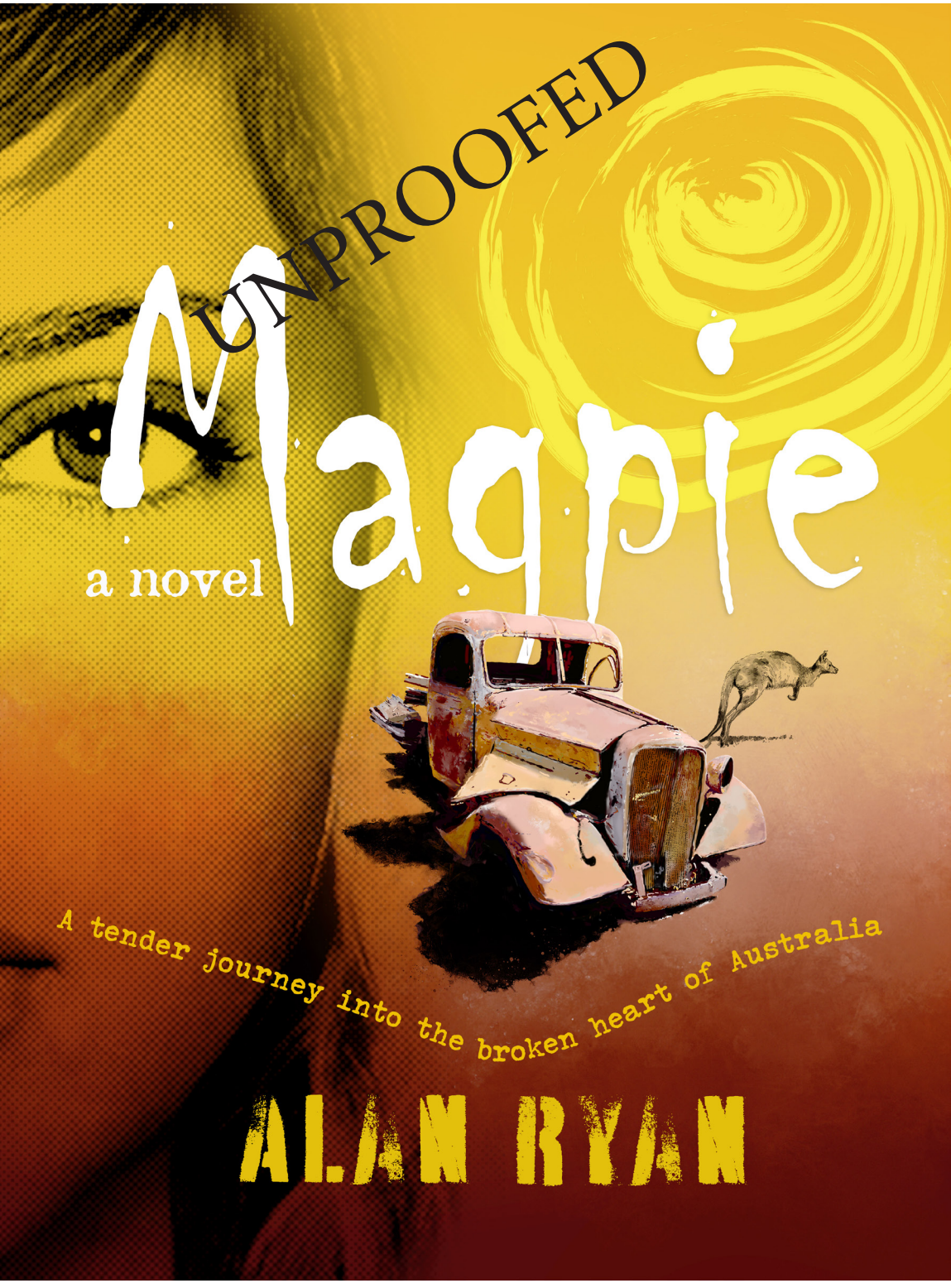
UNPROOFED
a novel
Magpie
A tender journey into the broken heart of Australia
ALAN RYAN


GREAT SANDY DESERT
Port Hedland
HIGHWAY
NORTHERN
GREAT
WESTERN AUSTRALIA
PILBARA
LITTLE SANDY DESERT
GIBSON DESERT
Warburton
Meekatharra
GREAT VICTORIA DESERT
Sandstone
Leinster
Mount Magnet
Laverton
Leonora
Geraldton
Paynes Find
Menzies
Mt. Manning
Yilgarn Station
Kalgoorlie
Boulder
Southern Cross
Kellerberrin
PERTH
WHEATBELT
Esperance
Bunbury
Margaret River
Albany
N
W
S
0
200
300
400
500
600
700
kilometres

Magpie

Docker River

Yulara

Uluru

NORTHERN TERRITORIES

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Leonora

GOLDFIELDS HIGHWAY

Lake Barlee

Mt. Elvire

Lake Ballard

Lake Giles

Dismals

Johnstone Range

Menzies

Mt. Manning

Stone Hut (Ruin)

Banded Iron Formations / Ridges

Tree House

Davyhurst [aband.]

Callion [aband.]

Siberia [aband.]

Aurora

Broad Arrow

Yilgarn Homestead

Kanowna [aband.]

Two Up

KALGOORLIE

Coolgardie

Unsealed Road

Off Road Driving

0 100

kilometres

ALAN RYAN

Magpie

UNPROOFED

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We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

—Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*

Prologue

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

In time, they took away all the gold their technologies could reach. They took away their towns. They left behind the scars of mining and their dead.

Chapter 1

A whole world away

Something in her simple binary brain told her it was time to move on, time to leave her brood behind. A caring mother, she had wrapped the eggs in silk before placing the neat bundle under the pink bark of the salmon gum. For three weeks, she stood guard. She went without food – happy to die for her progeny. Behind her, the embryos grew. When the time came, she tore the silk and eased their passage into a brutal, arid world. Two hundred and two hatchlings scampered free. Ever vigilant, she stayed with them, while they shed their first delicate skins. They were hardy now, tiny 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 huntsman crawled out from behind the shedding bark and onto the corrugated iron roof. Under a waxing, gibbous moon, she scurried crablike across the undulating metal towards a gap missed by the slipshod builder. Her full coat of hair-

like setae detected the warmth and movement inside. She does not set a web, preferring to hunt and ambush. A bite of potent venom will paralyse and partly liquefy tissue, before her powerful mouthparts tear it apart. Passing easily through the narrow opening, the giant spider dropped onto the bed.

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 its confident song. As ever, the dawn reveille reminded Jim just how far from Skerries he had come.

Soon the sun would climb above Bungarra Rock and the warming air force Jim from his bed. And of course, the flies would be about the place. Rolling onto his side, he extended a lazy arm and fumbled for his luminous red, made in Hong Kong, Donald Duck watch – a bargain picked up at the Nullarbor Roadhouse on the way across. His fingers explored down the side of the bed, but came up empty. More blind rummaging and he retrieved the watch from under a discarded pair of shorts.

Of minimal horological value and dubious taste, surprisingly Donald kept good time. That said, accurate time mattered little to Jim. These days, the approximate position of the sun in an endless blue sky, and the temperature, governed his activities. Nevertheless, first thing every morning, he would cast a quick eye over Donald's hands. Once he did the sum in his head, and subtracted the eight hours, he could picture what everyone back home would be up to at that very moment – yesterday. At the other end of the day, alone by the fire, he might do a similar calculation and imagine how things were in Copenhagen.

Jim reached to remove a balled-up woolly sock that had found its way on to his pillow. The sock shuffled closer to his face. That's odd

… socks don't crawl, his sleepy brain pondered. A warning sounded in Jim's head. His body jerked backwards.

'Jesus Christ!'

Set out in two rows of four, eight blank, 8-ball eyes stared back at him. Jim's own wide eyes did not blink. The giant spider's could not. The Irishman and the huntsman considered each other – neither moved.

Trawling through the many images of venomous spiders collected in his head, Jim scrambled to identify this monstrous beauty. Until recently, he may well have panicked at such an intimate encounter, but six months of living and working in the Australian bush had knocked the edge off Jim's small town, Irish sensibilities.

Huntsman! Yeah, deffo a huntsman, he convinced himself, and remembered what he knew of them. Not deadly, rarely bite, localised swelling, minor pain.

Reasonably confident he would live, Jim tried to will the spider away. But, not blessed with the capacity to read minds, she stayed put. Jim had no desire to share his pillow with the huntsman and all those stubbly legs. Neither was he about to allow such a close encounter unearth any dormant arachnophobia he might be suppressing. That would not do. Not out here.

Jim's bedroom was small, tiny in fact. A low-sloping corrugated roof provided shelter and enough height to allow him to 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 fly-wire mesh screen and crude wooden frame formed a window looking out from the foot of the bed to the tidy camp below. Filling all available floor space and more, the bed, an old feather eiderdown of incalculable depth, swallowed its occupant whole.

At night, before retiring, Jim would shake out the eiderdown and his sleeping bag to remove daytime visitors. Obviously, it did nothing to help with the night-time callers and, try as he might, he

was obliged to share his bed with the resident ants. Mercifully, and peculiar for Australian fauna, they did not bite. The ants merely tickled his legs, while they marched defiantly in formation through the bedding. Still, the bed was comfortable. It gifted Jim a good night's sleep and many great dreams.

Exiting the bedroom involved a small climb that finished with a tight shimmy through a hessian flap, up onto a 'balcony' higher in the salmon gum. Today's unwelcome guest complicated this manoeuvre. The huntsman appeared unfazed when, summoning the courage and without taking his eyes off her, the naked man slowly untangled himself from the bed. She watched his toes seek out and open the flap to the outside. Then, walking backwards on his hands over her, he disappeared feet-first through the opening and beached himself inelegantly on the balcony.

The spider's demeanour did change when the man returned bearing arms. Hanging headfirst through the flap, Jim 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 that Jim had placed across her path.

Jim released his prisoner on a nearby tree and then stoked the fire for breakfast.

WHISTLING STEAM POPPED the lid to 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 a baggy cotton hat to protect his fingers, he removed the lid and lifted the billy by the rim to pour. Why a billycan can't be made with a proper handle puzzled Jim. It would have been easier to boil the water in a saucepan, but in the Australian bush, it has to be the billycan. 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 never got the hang of chopsticks, but he liked his awkward and well-used billy.

The water surged up the hot metal sides and boiled again, bubbling violently, before it landed on the generous mix of instant coffee and powdered milk he spooned into a battered enamel mug. With the back of the spoon, Jim made a token effort to squash the bobbing doughy lumps of powder against the side of the mug, but quickly admitted defeat. The coffee tasted fine. Mixing the milk in advance with cold water is always preferable, but unfortunately, yesterday's batch already stank. The homemade Coolgardie fridge was not up to the job at all really. It needed work. The sour milk and rancid smell inside the fridge box this morning 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. Too recent to be happy memories, but his fishing days were not far off becoming fond ones.

Breakfast was the last of the damper baked in the camp oven the previous night. The tiny, twinned-black spots drew Jim's attention to the maggots. Experience taught him to be meticulous about replacing lids, but the blowies had found their way into the butter again and laid their eggs. Casually, Jim picked out the offending maggots and flicked them to the ground for the magpie, or any of the small lizards that occasionally cleaned around the camp to enjoy. Then, not looking too closely, he scooped up a healthy portion of runny butter with a knife and spread it over the two thick wedges of damper. Neither the maggots nor the soot on the crusts spoiled breakfast. It tasted good.

Sitting by the fire, sipping his coffee, Jim listened to the sounds of the morning. He enjoyed a strong coffee to get him moving, 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 tiny maggot contort and wriggle at his foot. It covered itself in the red dust. For the second time that morning, he contemplated how he had adapted to life in this strange and beautiful land. There were things to do.

Jim got up and knocked back the last of his drink. As he did, his gaze fell on the prominent salmon gum off to the right of the Ford. The tight, almost polished, brassy bark flowed beautifully along the trunk and over every seductive curve. About a metre from the ground, the single trunk divided and two elegant parting 'legs' continued skyward. He noticed it some weeks ago and, once seen, the female form began to appear in trees everywhere. But this one had a name. Sometimes, he gazed on it and felt shame, other times happier emotions would flush through his thoughts. Jim raised his empty mug to the nubile tree.

'Morning, Ellen.' Having put time and a whole world between them, he could still not let her go.

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 pictured 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 shattered 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 an 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 he himself, had turned a deep, earthy red.

Sitting 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 lunchtime, he guessed. 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. Then, hoping the colours would bleed into each other, he had washed over the ink with dilute paint. Jim tipped his head to the left, back to the right, then squinted.

'Not bad,' he whispered, almost as if saying it loudly might be considered immodest. The perspective looked fine. The scale and decay of the old battery seemed to be there. However, the washes were not 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.

Jim opened a tin of peaches and flicked on his transistor radio to enjoy the company of another human voice over lunch.

I wish to put it plainly that the Government has taken a firm decision to release Mr Mandela unconditionally.

It had been a few days since President FW de Klerk's Friday

speech to the Parliament of South Africa, but it still occupied the media's attention. Jim listened intently to the discussion around de Klerk's historic words, while forking the peaches from the tin into his mouth. He waited to hear if Mandela was out. It seemed not. Disappointed, Jim switched off his transistor to save the batteries and poured himself a milky tea from a flask.

After lunch, he 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 opencast pits. These, too, now lay abandoned, their treasures carted away. Jim marvelled at the scale of the magnificent terraced scars left on the face of the earth – man-made canyons, monuments to human endeavour. For those who knew about such things, the story in the rocks exposed in the walls presented a window into the beginnings of the history of the planet itself.

Beside the canyons, sterile grey monoliths of crushed slag left over from modern mining 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 pits from which they were dug, or the charm of the quaint anthills of waste thrown up by the old boys.

Jim continued on to the old townsite of Davyhurst, one of many settlements to spring up around the mines. Today, a small hand-painted wooden sign marked the site. He found himself in a dusty clearing, where all around, patches of bluebush and spinifex grass were reclaiming the ground for the bush. A few lonely gum trees grew 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 brick

chimney stump and piles of rubble remained, where a more substantial building had stood. Broken glass bottles and the ubiquitous rusty tin can were more evidence that people made homes here.

The town only existed now in a few hazy memories, sepia photographs and old map drawers. Jim walked over the area, trying occasionally to kick up a bit of history with his boot. He wondered how this happened, how a town just disappeared. Big mining still operated nearby, much of it over the same ground the pioneers worked. He could see the major Cons. Ex. Gold operation beyond the far trees. The gold never ran out.

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

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. In a high-chair out front of a barber's tent, a young fellow rubbed his newly clean chin in approval. Close shave done, he pulled his braces back over his shoulders, while the barber assisted with the fiddly collar studs on the shirt. Children ran home from school, their white smocks gleaming in the bright light. A dapper gentleman lifted a pocket watch by the gold chain from a waistcoat and confirmed the time. 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 line of water tanks cooking over wood fires. These were condensers that transformed brine pumped from underground into a passable facsimile of potable

water – harder to stomach and more expensive to buy than beer and spirits, if Old Bill was to be believed.

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 to build homes, but much of it went underground to support drives and shafts. The rest they burned. According to Old Bill, the Woodline harvested fifteen hundred tons of timber every day, as it snaked through the region collecting and delivering the vital resource to the mines and towns. Jim pictured the billowing smoke rising from the fires, the smelter furnaces and condensers. It mingled with clouds of rock dust-blasted from the pits.

The flies buzzed in Jim's ears. A spiral of wind blew a wave of dust 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 looked so clean and, to a certain extent, 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 going about their business. Maybe the photographer staged those scenes. 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 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

freely admit he was made of lesser stuff than the early pioneers and had all but given up, opting instead to wear 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 seeming far too serious a business for such frivolity. Old Bill mentioned how the long exposures required at the time would have tested even the most jovial character's ability to hold a smile. Posing for an imaginary photograph, Jim stood straight, with his shoulders back and smiled. His cheeks soon tired. A fly entered an ear. He flicked at it. An imaginary photographer popped out from under the dark cloth and scolded him for moving and wasting a plate.

Yep, lesser stuff. There was no doubting it.

It struck Jim that, despite the challenges of living in this place, they were a content, proud people. Folk back then, he figured, were prepared to endure great hardship and got on with living the best they could, cheerful in the certainty a fortune would be found with the next blow of the pickaxe. For a few, it was.

Jim returned to the Ford and drove south to the town cemetery.

ARRANGED BY THE diligent gravediggers, like trapdoors to the afterlife, for the majority of Davyhurst's dead, a neat rectangle of white quartz pebbles was all that marked their final resting place. Picked out by seams of sunlight falling through the stands of salmon gums, the pebbles shone bright against the dark purple ground. Perhaps time had removed any simple wood or iron markings. Even the smallest stone rectangles, of which there were many, were bare. Jim wondered how a town could bury its children in unmarked plots. He supposed the people had their reasons, but still, he thought it unforgiveable.

'Ernest Kurth, beloved husband of Emma Kurth,' read the inscription on the most elaborate and tallest grave in the cemetery. An ornate, cast-iron surround protected a lopsided, polished-marble cross with lillies carved in relief. Jim remembered Kurth's General

Store from Old Bill's photographs. It struck him as odd that the most prominent grave in a town of gold miners belonged to the storekeeper. Then maybe, it wasn't odd at all.

Moving on, he stopped by a group of three tiny graves. Two infant graves were unmarked, but behind the modest wrought-iron railing of the third, a pointed-arch marble headstone told a tragic tale and it broke Jim's heart.

In sad and loving memory of our dear children
Henry ROWE age 7
and Robert age 5
Who were accidently killed at Davyhurst
2nd 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 afternoon, while mending a fence near Davyhurst with Helen, she told him the story of the two brothers. The children had snuck off on a Jules Verne adventure to the centre of the Earth. They imagined an old mine shaft as one of Verne's lava tubes and climbed into the blackness. One of the boys lit a match to light the way and set off explosives stored at the base of the shaft. It was easy to picture 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. Jim wanted to leave something, but could see nothing that resembled a flower in the parched cemetery.

Part hidden under a pile of leaf litter blown up against the base of the railing, two venomous eyes assessed the threat. The snake sniffed the air with whips of its forked tongue. Silently, it watched the

lone figure sit and take a notebook from a shirt pocket. Jim began to draw. Squeezing its trunk muscles, the snake pulled all its hundreds of paired ribs tight along an almost endless spine. It lifted a scaly head clear of the leaves. Cocked, the colourful serpent waited for instinct to decide between a strike and a stealthy retreat.

Jim drew a small bear, elbow deep in a honey jar and a curious looking pig distracted by the swarm of bees above the bear's head – or perhaps they were flies. When finished, he placed the sketch under a stone on Robert and Henry's grave and stepped back. His attention now turned to the two tiny, unmarked graves. Two brief lives, who should have had names to be remembered and stories to tell. He took out the notebook again. The infants got their own character from *The Hundred Acre Wood.*

Sitting once more, Jim thought of home. He grew up in a noisy, happy house by the sea, a house full of children. His youngest brother was not much older than Henry. Jim missed home. He wiped his eyes, got to his feet and left the babies to rest in peace. Unseen, the snake too moved away – a meandering furrow trailing behind.

On his way out of the cemetery, Jim spotted a small bronze plaque fixed to a simple undressed headstone.

'Jesus!' he whispered, after stooping to read the inscription.

In memory
- OF -
James Michael MACKEN
age 23
Accidently Killed
- on the -
golden pole G.M.
18th February 1910
erected by
- his -
comrades

He stood a moment, head bowed, hands clasped as if in silent prayer, and contemplated the life and death of the stranger with whom he shared a name and age.

'I hope you found your gold, Jim,' he said, as if his namesake stood next to him, 'and that nobody back home grew old and died waiting for a letter that never came.'

Out of the sun, in the shade of the cab, Jim wondered if any women were buried back there. The few marked graves he found were all male. Surely, some of the children and babies must have been girls. Did women have no 'comrades' in turn of-the-century Davyhurst? He took a swig of warm water. It did little to satisfy his thirst. A giant ore truck rumbled by, pulling a cloud of dust behind it. Holding his breath until the worst blew over, Jim saluted the driver.