

Chapter 3 – Jim – 2013 – Discovery-

My house is old by Australian standards. A friend, knowledgeable in older houses, told me its construction features suggest a build date of around 1820, a time when those who came on the first fleet were not yet old. Perhaps it should be listed on the Heritage Register, but it's not grand or in any way remarkable. It seems to have been forgotten about by time.

It sits in an obscure Sydney suburb, not one of the well to do early locations like Balmain, Glebe, Paddington or The Rocks. It occupies a gap between two old and decommissioned railway lines running west of the city, all alone in a no man's land between Newtown and Redfern. It looks like the railway builders knocked down all the other houses around my house when they built these lines. Somehow this one was forgotten. Perhaps a railwayman lived here once to work the signals. If so, nobody remembers his story now. I've searched local libraries, old railway records and many other places, wherever I can think of, but I've found nothing. Nobody seems to have bothered to tell the story of this building.

I also know it's old because it's built of sandstone blocks, one's that look as if they were convict hand cut, the chisel marks on them still sharp, the stones held together with seashell mortar. The roof is slate, except for a front porch with timber shingles, which leaks when it rains.

It's a house of only two rooms, a main room with a front and back door and a small room alongside it, entered from the main room. I use the small room for my bedroom. The main room serves as an office, living and dining room, with an ancient sink and stove in one corner. An outbuilding provides my toilet, bathroom and laundry. It has an old copper boiling tub and a cast iron bath. I think this part was built at a later time.

I've lived here for thirty years. When I bought it, I'd just returned from five hard years of working in outback mines. I carried a pocket full of cash, which the tax office had no business knowing about, and I was tired of being homeless. I needed a place of my own, somewhere to call home. The house's freehold title, which dates from 1933, the depression era, was of dubious provenance, so I bought it for cash for a low price. The real estate agent told me the buildings were a leftover of a long-deceased estate, and there was little interest due to their poor condition and location wedged between the railway lines. To this day not even lost druggies come here, only mice, weeds and windblown bags find it a worthwhile stopping place.

Thirty years of neglect have not improved the house since I bought it, and while I've thought it deserved a facelift, I've never had any spare cash. Until now.

I've never met my mum's older sister but, when I was about eight, she'd sent my mother a letter. In return, my mother sent her a photo of us together. Somehow this aunt remembered me in her will from all those decades past and, with her death, a cheque for fifty-three thousand dollars drifted into my bank account.

The money won't go far paying builders, but I'm still handy, if getting a bit long in the tooth, so I'll use it to pay for good quality materials and do the building work myself. It's not like I plan on pulling off the roof or other big dramatic fix ups like that. I only plan to strip out the old fittings and put in modern replacements.

Perhaps I'll also create a private back yard within a walled off garden and grow flowers like my mother used to. I have a need to put some fresh daily beauty into my life. It's become a sterile place with only the shells of empty memories in residence. I don't even have neighbours. My home is at the end of a dead-end road that almost nobody ever comes along.

It's not that I'm antisocial. I have a handful of mates who I meet at the pub for a few drinks. But as the years have passed I've become more isolated. I like to think I've grown mostly comfortable in my own skin, but really I'm just lazy about getting to know others. I work odd jobs, just a day here and there, enough to live on and pay the bills. I mostly read old books, a mix of history and mystery. These transport my mind to other places. It's not a bad life. It just seems to have become bleak with the passing years.

An image of Cindy, who I met when I came to Sydney as a teenager, enters my mind. She was like me: another teenager out on her own. We lived together for a year in a one room squat in Woolloomooloo. I was eighteen when our baby, a tiny thing who we called Emily, came along.

But there was barely enough money for two of us, let alone three, so I took a job over the mountains for a month. I left Cindy with all the money I had, two hundred and twenty dollars. It was just enough to pay the thirty-dollar weekly rent for the room and leave a bit for food. Cindy assured me she would be fine. I left her with loving kisses and a pocketful of dreams. I came back a month later with a thousand dollars in my pocket, but Cindy and Emily were no longer there, and our squat was vacated.

A few of Cindy's things were thrown in the street, mouldering in a pile. The man and woman now living in our place knew nothing; the other few people I knew in the neighbourhood also knew nothing. All the landlord could tell me was that a week after I left town, Cindy and Emily vanished too. When the rent fell due it wasn't paid, so he gave our place to another. There were always plenty in need of such spaces.

I searched for a long month, going all over this part of the city, looking in all the places I could think of. But there was nothing to give a clue. Then my money was gone, and I had to leave and find more work.

I went west to the mines, where I made plenty of money. I had hoped to come back to Sydney and look some more for Cindy and Emily, but five years passed, and five years is a lifetime of empty absence.

There was another special woman for a while, but she grew tired of the loss burning in my heart, and so she went away too and never came back.

Now, at odd times, I enjoy a woman's company for a night. The rest of the time it's just me, in my home, alone. I've got used to it. I feel I've moved past the ability or need to change.

I return my focus to the present and the task ahead of me: the renovation. The house floor is covered in flagstones, old rectangular slabs of sandstone, worn smooth over time. Between them is a mix of sand and dirt with odd remnants of mortar. They're cold and damp underfoot in winter, so I plan to lift them and put a dry layer beneath. I begin by photographing them in position, then I number each stone, so I can recreate the sequence when it's time to put them back. My furniture is minimal, so I move it to the back yard and cover it with a canvas tarp to protect it from the weather. I'll live in the outhouse, with my kettle, microwave and bedroll on the floor, along with my chair and books for company, until the work is finished.

I begin in the living room corner furthest from the back door, carefully lifting each flagstone free and stacking them outside. It's slow heavy work and takes two long days until all are lifted and removed. What lies below is interesting but unremarkable, the odd English coin or scrap of another distant past hidden amongst the rubble, but there's nothing buried here to fire my imagination.

I move into the bedroom and continue the floor removal. At first it goes the same, but halfway across the room, I find another block of stone sitting below the block I've just lifted. This block is different. It's square cut and smooth, about two feet each way. I scratch my head and push on. The square cut stones are now a new pattern beneath the old flagstones, and they have me intrigued.

I remove the rest of the flagstones, brush away the loose dirt and look closely. The second layer of stones completely covers one half of the bedroom floor. They look fresh cut, untarnished by use.

I try to lift one free. It's jammed tight, as if somebody has mortared it in place. This is my house's very own mystery. I take a picture on my phone. Perhaps one of my mates will know what the stones could be there for.

It's Sunday and getting late, and tomorrow I'm working in the local lumber yard, so I go to the pub to drink a few knots out of my muscles.

My mates look closely at my phone pictures, and one, an old house buff, says, "You need to let the State Heritage mob know about this. It could be an old grave or buried treasure. Reckon they'll fine you millions if you dig it up without permission."

I'm not a lover of government telling me what to do. But he has a point. I don't want to lift these stones only to find buried bones.

Of course, treasure's another matter, but that's the stuff of fairy stories, the kind that only happen to somebody else, one first sprinkled in magic dust.

The next day, I ring up the Heritage Office and tell them a bit about my discovery. The person on the phone seems only half interested. She says something about needing an archaeological investigation. I can see all my money fast running down the plughole as a rich dirt digger, one with some fancy degree, gets even richer at my expense.

“Well, I might as well get to work myself and dig it up, see what I find,” I suggest. “Perhaps pirate treasure or a body is buried underneath.”

This seems to get her interest. “Wait a minute. I’ll put you through to a Heritage Officer.”

A friendly woman’s voice comes on the line. “Kate here, how can I help?”

I give her the potted version. I can tell from her tone she’s intrigued.

“How old did you say the house is?”

“The title deeds are from 1933, but a friend in the know says much older, maybe 1820. Despite my best endeavours to find out, it seems nobody knows.”

“I’d love to have a look. Is it possible to arrange to come and visit?”

I can feel this getting out of hand and want to run a mile. She has no details to let her find me if I hang up now. But there’s a musical timbre to her voice that will not let me go. It’s a sound from another time and place, a long distant familiarity, but I can’t bring that memory into my mind to place it.

So, despite my better judgement, I suggest a time and place in two days’ time, to meet at a pub on the main road corner in Newtown.

“I don’t know about that, I’m happy to meet you at the house if you give me the address.”

“The streets don’t make much sense, so it’s hard to find. It’ll be easier if you follow me there from the pub.”

I hear reticence in her voice. “What you propose is outside of normal procedure.” But she agrees, despite whatever her reservations.

I like that. Something about her intrigues me.

I don’t know what to expect when I meet her a couple of days later, but when I see her from behind, waiting for me on a bar stool, I instantly know it’s her.

She’s probably in her mid-thirties, and she has brown hair and a trim figure. She pushes her hair back from her ear, a mannerism that feels intimately familiar to me, as if I’ve seen it before. Her face isn’t one I remember from another place or time though, but her smile captivates me.

I propose we have a drink while she tells me about her heritage role, and I tell her about the house, before I take her and show her what I’ve found. She acquiesces, though I can tell she’s impatient to see the house, not talk. I drink a schooner of beer while she sips a lemon lime and bitters.

I begin by telling her about my purchase of the house and its dubious title, then of my inheritance of enough money to do a limited fix up. “I’ve taken photos and recorded the pattern of the flagstones, so everything will be able to go back how I found it.”

She nods. “It is good you have done that. Having a record of the past is always important.”

“So, what are the rules before I go further?”

“Let’s have a look first.”

To pass the time until I finish my drink, I ask her about herself and what led her to do this work. I expect some meaningless answer, but she turns to me and says, “I think it’s me trying to find a part of me I’m missing. I was adopted, and my parents

are wonderful, but a part of me wants to discover a past I never knew. Maybe that's why I've always been drawn to study old things."

She shrugs. "I know it's not my own past when I research old buildings, but it's still a way of me being connected to what came before, to build a story of a past that I can put myself inside."

I nod, unsure how to respond. To cover my non-reply I quickly finish my drink and suggest she follows me in her car. In five minutes, we're there.

"Well, here it is. It's not much, but it suits me okay." I invite her inside.

Her eye for detail is amazing. She's already pointed out ten things that tell of the house's early history as we walk through the door and go inside.

"Your friend was right about this being from the early 1800s. I can't understand why it's not listed on the national estate.

"It's clearly one of Sydney's oldest houses."

I take her into the bedroom and show her the mystery of the stones I've uncovered. She looks at them from all sides and walks back and forth, closely studying them. "This is remarkable. I wonder why they're here?"

She kneels down and studies them minutely. "I'm looking for quarry marks or things to identify them," she tells me. Just as quickly she seems to forget I'm there and seems oblivious to my presence, her mind far away, lost in total concentration in her work.

As she bends forward to look more closely, a small silver pendant falls out of the front of her top, swinging free on its silver chain below her neck. She stands and turns towards me, eyes alight with something important to tell me that she's just discovered.

But my mind is unable to hear her words as she enthuses to me. All I can see is the pendant hanging from her neck. It has the name 'Cindy' in connected silver cursive letters, mounted on a silver base.

I reach out and turn it over. On the back, in faded inscription, is a heart symbol and the words, 'From Jim'. My head reels and I stagger backwards.

She reaches out to steady me, concern on her face. "What is it? You look ill. Are you okay?"

I can only point; my words have run away.

I remember so clearly the day I bought the pendant. It was only a couple weeks after Emily was born. I didn't have money to buy Cindy a wedding ring, or pay for a wedding. Our wedding was only a thing of our promises, not anything official. But the extra twenty dollars I'd saved bought this, and I gave it to Cindy with all my love. She'd shyly accepted it from me and allowed me to hang it around her neck, where it had stayed until she went away. Now it's returned into my life.

Kate is looking at me, puzzled. I still haven't spoken. Instead, I take her hand and lead her to the mantelpiece above the stone fireplace. On it is a black and white photo, in a plain frame, of a young woman and a tiny baby. It's the only photo of Cindy I have. It remains my most treasured possession.

Faintly glimpsed on Cindy's neck is this same pendant, detail indistinct, yet its outline clear. I point to the pendant in the photograph and then to the one hanging from Kate's neck. "How did you get this?"

But she's staring at the woman, oblivious to me and my question. At last she says, "I don't know. I was found abandoned outside a hospital when I was a tiny baby. The only thing on me, apart from my clothes, was this." She touches the pendant.

I pick up the photo and hand it to her. "This is Cindy. I think she may be your mother."