

(Apr 21 70 - rds)

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Beautiful
with
1944-1945

The Magpie Lucky Dip 1

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1st

The ladder was as old as Claireville, and small as Jim Kaye was, it creaked and groaned as he clambered on and began to ascend. He'd dragged himself up the winding stairwell of the bell tower to the final landing, and these twelve rungs were all that remained of the climb to the belfry.

Sunlight spilled down the access hatch, illuminating his young, careworn features, straining with effort as he pulled himself up, hand over hand. A year bedridden with polio had left him with a withered leg, and the brace he wore to protect it seemed heavier with each passing second.

He stopped to catch his breath, resting his forehead against the ladder. *Half-way there.* Settling all his weight onto his good leg, he inhaled the sour, musty smell of the sandstone walls. The day was getting hotter. Sweat trickled down his back.

Years before, and not long before he'd shipped out for good, his father, struck by a sudden whim, had carried the boy all the way to the belfry. Jim had been little more than a toddler then, but he had been left with impressions of vast space, of an eiderdown of fields and houses stretching off into the hazy distance. *There's a big world out there Jimmy,* his father had said. *Just waiting for the likes of you and me.*

Muffled talk reached him from above.

"There's your dad," said a voice.

"Where?" came the response, with a note of dread.

"There - trying to join in with the tug-o-war! Is he drunk, Lachy? He's arguing with some bloke... Now he's punching him!"

There was a pause, and the sound of frenzied yelling reached them. "Here come the cops!"

"Maybe this time he'll go to gaol," said Lachy.

Neville Huckell's face, excited and raw, suddenly appeared several yards above Jim, framed by the access hatch. "Come on Jimmy - Lachy's dad's getting arrested!"

"I'm almost there -"

His good leg was getting the shakes. Jim could hear his own ragged breath, mingling with his friends' voices and the sounds of the fete: shouts and laughter, a brass band, a droning loudspeaker.

"Hey, there's your girlfriend, Neville!"

"She's not my girlfriend."

"Yes she is! Her big brother told me you're always riding y'bike past her place after school!"

"You love her! You love her!" Lachy called out, his voice a sing-song. "Hey, Car-o-line!"

"Shut-up you bloody idiot!" Neville hissed.

"Everyone's looking!"

Jim, hearing footsteps suddenly clattering up the stairwell, lost his balance; and panicking, half-fell, half-slid down the ladder to the floorboards below, where he landed with a frightened yell.

"Who's up here?"

The voice belonged to Mr Tunks, a wiry, sober-faced man who did odd-jobs around the church. He shook a finger at Jim, who lay stunned on the floorboards.

"Jim Kaye, you stupid boy! You know you can't come up here! One day you'll break your ruddy neck!"

Mr Tunks stepped over Jim's body and peered up the ladder.

"Come down or I'll come up for you," he said.

Jim sat up, gasping for breath, and groped about for his crutch. He knew he'd left it here somewhere.

"There's no-one else. Just me."

Mr Tunks looked at Jim hard, and then, despite the boy's sobbing protests, scooped him up off the floor and carried him back down the stairs, through the vestibule and outside, where he deposited him on the church steps in full view of the crowds. "You wait here while I get your mother."

Moments later Lachy and Neville appeared at his side, and helped him to his feet. "Thanks Jimmy," said Lachy Campbell, squeezing his shoulder, and handing him his crutch. "You left this behind. Let's go!"

#

The three boys had jostled and milled through the rest of the sticky summer day, chewing at toffee-apples and fairy-floss while taking in the attractions: obstacle races, white-elephant stalls, and a gumleaf orchestra that performed birdcalls and popular melodies.

They were beginning to grow tired and bored when they saw the stranger.

'Step up, mates,' he cried in a voice as dry as dirt. 'Step up and try your luck.'

The ladies of the Claireville Fete Committee glared at his sooty beard and ragged hat. They consulted lists of registered stallholders and muttered amongst themselves. Frightened little girls in Sunday-best clung to their mothers' skirts and wept. The three boys watched, and whispered, and inched forward.

Lachy was adamant. 'He's a pirate.'

'A wizard,' said Neville in return, narrowing his eyes. 'Look at that cane. Look at those stars on his coat.'

Jim held back. He too had seen the beard and hat, the flea-bitten horse, the cart: its broken mirrors, its dangling spoons and bric-a-brac. The garish hand-painted letters that read:

Brummagem's Motley

Knives sharpened, rats poisoned, fortunes told

A yellow-eyed magpie perching high on the cart inclined its head, gurgled, sang, and coldly regarded the gathering crowd.

Beside the cart was a black wooden box. Mr Brummagem rapped on it with his cane.

'Come on then! Who'll try my lucky dip?'

Lachy glanced slyly at his companions. He raised his hand.

'How much for a go, mister?'

Mr Brummagem grinned, his teeth brown stubs. 'How much, you ask? Well, mate, a little or a lot. A lot, or a little. It all depends.'

Lachy sorted through his pockets and held up a coin. 'How's that?'

The old man scuttled over, pocketed the money, and bowed theatrically. 'Sold on gold, sir, but copper is proper. Choose wisely, now,' he confided, gesturing at the box with his cane. 'This lucky dip ain't no joke, mate, and that's dinkum.'

Lachy thrust his arm deep into the box, felt about and brought out a little brown paper package. He tore at the

wrapping and string, casting it thoughtlessly aside. His prize was a toy gun carved from a single piece of wood. Taking aim at a pigeon perched on the church roof, he laughed with raw delight.

'Not bad, eh?'

His friends agreed. Mr Brummagem struck the box sharply.

'Who's next?'

Neville was already counting out silver coins into his palm. He deliberated, and then poured the lot into Mr Brummagem's hat.

'What'll that get me?'

Mr Brummagem twirled the hat - the coins appeared to have vanished - and put it on again, carefully straightening the brim.

'Whatever you choose, mate, whatever you shall choose.'

Neville took his time, sorting through the packages, rattling them in turn.

'Come on, Goldilocks,' rasped the old man, rolling his eyes and mugging for the crowd. 'We ain't got all day!'

The boy, flustered, made his choice and retreated. His friends huddled round. Like Lachy's, his prize was small and carved from wood, but it was not a gun.

Jim leaned in. 'It's a trumpet. Or a bugle, maybe.'

'I like yours better, Lachy,' said Neville, a catch in his voice.

Mr Brummagem coughed. 'And what of you, mate? Care to take a punt?'

Jim's pockets were empty. He looked into the sun-blasted face. He looked away again.

'What's the matter? Spent your last penny? Down on your luck?'

Jim nodded and stared at the ground. Mr Brummagen approached and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. The old man smelt of turpentine, horses and dust. He smelt of feathers and blood. His voice softened as he leaned in.

'What's your name lad?'

'Jim Kaye.'

He pointed a thumb at the magpie.

'You see Jim, Blackie here hates to see you go away empty-handed. Breaks his heart.'

The boy glanced up at the bird. As if on cue, it hopped from the cart onto the horse's back, and then on to the edge of the box.

'Mind, we don't take with bludgin' here.' Mr Brummagen tapped the side of his nose and winked. 'Tell you what, Jim Kaye, you can owe me.' He held out a hand. 'Agreed?'

Jim looked to his friends, then the horse, the magpie and finally to Mr Brummagen. He shook the old man's hand. It was cold and dry to the touch.

When Jim went to approach the box, Mr Brummagen stepped in and barred his way with the cane.

'Uh-uh, Jim. Blackie's got one picked out for you. Something special.'

Jim watched as the magpie dropped into the box, and re-emerging a moment later, flapped over and perched on Mr Brummagen's shoulder, a tiny package in its great black beak. Mr Brummagen gestured.

'Come on lad. He won't bite.'

Jim reached up. He flinched, wary of the fierce-looking creature, but Blackie relinquished the prize without a struggle.

Mr Brummagem tipped his hat. 'Your blood's worth bottlin', mate. A pleasure doing business.'

The three boys retired to a nearby bench to compare their loot. Jim set his crutch aside and turned the package over in his hands. He noticed that faint lines and symbols decorated the brown paper. It looked like some kind of writing. The coarse string came away easily in his hands, and a moment later his prize was revealed. He held it up.

'What is it?' asked Neville.

Jim turned it over. 'I dunno. I guess it's an angel. Look at the wings.'

Then Lachy was on his feet. There was a commotion at the stalls. A policeman was pushing his way through the crowd, accompanied by a stony-faced representative from the Committee. They arrived too late. Mr Brummagem, Blackie, and the horse and cart were gone.

#

The following Wednesday Lachy ran amok with his gun, as he had every evening since the Claireville Fete. His father was drunk as usual and listening to a cricket match on the radio. When Lachy ran past for the fifth time screaming 'BANG! BANG! BANG', Mr Campbell stood. He was unsteady on his feet, but he managed to grab hold of Lachy's arm. He twisted until he heard his son scream. He threw the gun in the fire. They both watched, stupefied, as it sizzled, burnt and finally exploded in a cloud of sparks and greasy smoke.

A week later something woke Lachy in the night. He staggered from his bed and, gingerly, tried the door to his father's room. The bed was empty. He expected to find him snoring at the kitchen table, or sprawled on the lounge

perhaps, but there was no-one in the house. He looked outside, and noticed that a light had been left burning in the garage. He found his father, finally, surrounded by empty bottles, dead, a rifle between his knees.

#

Neville wore the wooden horn on a string around his neck. It seemed the correct thing to do.

Several days later his voice broke. The transformation was dramatic, and unprecedented in his family. Hitherto the Huckells hadn't shown any musical inclinations, but now the youngest member of the family walked about singing to himself like a miniature Caruso. His new voice was pure and warm and resonant. He delighted in it. He found he could effortlessly mimic the styles of popular singers, and improvise melodies of his own.

Before long his father appeared at his bedroom door. He sat Neville down on the bed. Said they had to have a talk. His mother had asked him to *say something*. It was the singing. He wasn't to do it round his sisters. Why, asked Neville. Mr Huckell went red. Hard to say. His singing had a strange effect. Made them feel... *funny* inside. Unsettled. That's it. It made his sisters feel *unsettled*.

"Does it make them feel sick, Dad?" asked Neville, evenly.

"You might say that," replied his father, looking pained.

Neville, mystified but unperturbed, nodded. He agreed he would sing in private, or outside. Perhaps he would join the church choir.

#

Jim and his mother - she in black, he in long trousers and his father's tie - attended Mr Campbell's funeral. Despite his notoriety, or because of it, the church was filled to capacity. Afterwards, Jim lined up with Neville and the rest to shake Lachy's hand. An aunt in Brisbane had been tracked down, Lachy said, and had agreed to take him in. Was he nervous about taking the long train trip north alone, asked Jim.

"Not really," Lachy replied. "It's either that or the child welfare mob."

#

Jim hid the wooden angel under his pillow. Before falling asleep he would study it, noting the contours of its wings, the little folded hands, the serenity of its features.

He took to flying in his dreams. Each night he left his sleeping body behind and, joyful, unencumbered, soared into the sky. He could see Claireville laid out like a vast and moonlit map: the avenues and roads, the yards and garden sheds. All revealed. He saw the railway bridge that crossed Salt Pan Creek, and the water winding like a silver thread through the dark. He saw the church with its bell tower, a scale-model he might snatch from the ground with one hand and hold lightly to his chest.

Each night Jim flew further, and higher, in great exalting circles, a young hawk testing the limits of its world. When, after many nights, and far beyond the sleeping town, he spied movement on the plain below - a horse and cart, travelling slow - and when finally, he could distinguish the driver, a black figure in a hat, and perched on the hat, a great black bird - Jim realised he

felt less a soaring hawk than a paper kite being reeled steadily in.

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The Claireville Fete is still held in the local park in the shadow of the church. Traditionally, it takes place on Australia Day, in late January, when the air is close and humid, and the weather can suddenly turn to thunderstorms.

Wendy Thiele had an engagement in town, and so she'd dropped her two girls off at the fete for an hour or so. By the time she returned rain had set in, and Jasmine and Lily were standing by the side of the road, huddled and miserable. They got back into their seats, glad to be out of the wet.

"Well, that was an adventure," observed Jasmine, her eldest, shaking out her hair.

Wendy glanced in the rear vision mirror at Lily, who was staring forlornly at an object in her lap.

"What've you got there, love?" she asked, checking for traffic and steering the car back onto the road.

"A chair."

Wendy looked questioningly at Jasmine, slumped beside her in the front passenger seat.

"A toy chair," she shrugged. "This weird old guy was running a lucky dip."

"Yeah - he had a horse, and a crow!" said Lily, perking up a little.

"A magpie," Jasmine corrected.

"Well Lily," said her mother, "I reckon that chair's just about the right size for your doll's house."

Lily seemed satisfied by this, and examined her prize with renewed interest.

Wendy glanced at Jasmine. "Did the old guy carve that himself?"

"I guess so."

"It's a bit 'arts-and-crafts' for a lucky dip, isn't it? How much did he charge?"

"Seventy five cents!" yelled Lily, suddenly happy.

"Mine was free," volunteered Jasmine, with a look of distaste. "I just had to shake his hand, and tell him I owed him one. He smelt *gross*."

Wendy glanced across at her.

"Right."

"I didn't have any more change, and he wouldn't accept credit cards, Mum."

They drove on in silence for a while, listening to the muted scrape of the wind-screen wipers.

"So what did you get, Jasmine?"

Jasmine rolled her eyes, fumbled around in her satchel, and held up her prize.

"Is that a toy *crutch*?" Wendy asked, disbelievingly. "Whatever happened to key-rings? Magic bouncy balls?"

"Well, I let him know I wasn't happy. I told him I thought it was supposed to be a lucky dip, not an *un-lucky* dip."

"What did he say then?"

Jasmine zipped her satchel up. "He said 'I can't speak for luck, young lady.'"

Wendy chuckled. "Well, I suppose you get what you pay for."

They drove on, into the rain.

