

MYSTERIES

Graham Wilson

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Graham Wilson 2020

I live in an old house – well at least it's old for Australia. I think it was built in the early 1800s, at a time when those who came on the first fleet were not yet old. Perhaps it should be on the national estate, but it's not grand or in any other way remarkable. So it seems to have been forgotten about by time.

It is in an obscure suburb, not one of the well to do early Sydney locations like Balmain, Glebe, Paddington or the Rocks. It sits in a gap between two disused railway lines running west of the city, lost in a no-man's land between Newtown and Redfern. It looks as if the original railway builders knocked down all the houses when they built these lines and then somehow they forgot about it. Perhaps a railwayman once lived here to work the signals. If he did nobody remembers his story. I have searched through local libraries, the records of the railways and many other places, wherever else I can think of. But I have found nothing. Nobody seems to have bothered to tell its story.

I know it is old because it is built of sandstone blocks, convict hand-cut, chisel marks still sharp, held together with sea-shell mortar. The roof is slate, except for a front porch with timber shingles, ones which leak in the rain. It's a house of only two rooms, a main room with a front and back door and a smaller room alongside it, entered from the main room. The small room is my bedroom. The other room serves as my office, living and dining room. An outbuilding is the toilet, bathroom and laundry. It has a copper boiling tub and a cast iron bath. I think this was built at a later time.

I have lived here for thirty years. Its title was of dubious provenance so I bought it for a low price. The real estate agent told me it was the residue of a long deceased estate. There was little interest due to its poor location, wedged between two railway lines, decrepit and unused. Not even druggies come here, only mice, weeds and windblown bags find it a worthwhile stopping place.

I had just returned from five years of working in outback mines with a pocket full of cash which the tax office had no business knowing about. I had grown tired of being homeless, so I decided I needed a place of my own, a place to call home. The real estate man had this old freehold title, unencumbered. It was for wedge shaped block; six metres wide at the front, twelve metres deep, its backyard wedged between two diverging railway tracks, both lines long unused, kept apart by two rusty high wire fences. I did not want to share my house title with a bank and this was all I could afford, so I paid cash and the salesman handed over to me the title.

I have lived here since. The title dates from 1933, depression era, though the house is clearly much older. A friend, knowledgeable in old houses, told me its construction features suggest a build date around 1820, but who is to know without some actual history.

The house was not flash when I bought it. Thirty years of neglect have not improved it. But it was all I needed and it still suits my purpose. At odd times since I thought it deserved a facelift but I had no spare cash. We both seemed happy to let our lives drift along the way they'd always been.

Then a great aunt up and died, older sister to my mother who I'd never met but who once wrote us a letter when I was about five or six. Yet somehow she had remembered me from decades past. A cheque for thirty three thousand dollars drifted into my bank account. I decided that using it to do work on the house was a good option. I knew it would not go far paying builders, but I am still handy, if getting a bit long in the tooth. So I will use it to pay for material and I will do the work myself. I am not planning on pulling off the roof or anything big and dramatic like that, but rather stripping out the basic internals and putting in modern fittings.

Perhaps I will also create a private back yard and garden – I like the idea of growing flowers. It is something my mother did, a distant image of faded fond remembrance. I have a need to put fresh daily beauty into my life. It has become a sterile place with only the shells of empty memories.

It is not as if I have neighbours to care if my house changes, my nearest are on the other side of abandoned railway sheds that line the road into my house. It is a dead end road that almost nobody ever comes along.

Who am I? I guess you have gathered I am a bit antisocial and you may be right. As the years have passed I have grown mostly comfortable in my own skin. I work odd jobs; just a day here and there, to pay the bills. I mostly read old books, a mix of history and mystery, which transport my mind to other places. I have a few mates who I share a drink with from time to time; we meet at a pub and leave our own private lives at the door. It is not a bad life though it seems to have become a bit bleak.

When I was sixteen I lived in a little town out in the back of beyond, but my mother got sick and died. My father was already gone and there was no one else. So I came to Sydney to seek fame and fortune, both proving elusive. Instead I met a girl, Cindy, out on her own like me, another teenager. For a year we lived together in a squat in Woolloomooloo. We had a baby, she was a tiny thing and we called her Emily.

To help us get ahead 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 with all her loving kisses and a pocketful of dreams. I came back with a thousand dollars in my pocket.

But of my girlfriend or baby there was no sign. Our squat was empty. A few of Cindy's things were thrown in the street, mouldering in a pile. Another man and woman, unknown, were in our place. They knew nothing; the other few people I knew around there also knew nothing. All the landlord could say was that a week after I left they were no longer there and when the rent fell due it was not paid, so he gave the space to another, they were always plenty in need of such places.

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

So I went west to the mines, where I made plenty of money. I had hoped to come back and look some more for Cindy and Emily. But there was really no point, gone is gone, and five years is a lifetime of empty absence.

There was another special woman for a while who came to stay, but one day she went away too and never came again. She told me she had grown tired of a candle of loss for another burning in my heart and that I needed to move on. She was the one who told me how old this house is. Now, at odd times, I pay for a woman of the night to relieve that part of my needs. I visit them at their own places rather than invite them here. For the rest of the time it is just me, in my home, alone. I have grown well used to it and I feel I have moved past the ability or need to change my ways.

Anyway it's time to get to work. My furniture is minimal. I move it to the back yard and cover it with a canvas tarp to protect it from the weather. I will live in the outhouse, along with my chair and book for company, and with a microwave, kettle, and bedroll on the floor, until the work is done.

The 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 are cold and damp in winter. I decide they must come up to put a dry layer beneath. I photograph them in position then number each stone so that I can recreate the sequence.

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

I move into the bedroom and continue the removal. At first it goes the same, but half way done I find a block of stone sitting below the block I have lifted. This block is different. It is properly square cut, about two feet each way. I scratch my head and push on. Now I find that this is a new pattern, the old flagstones sit on top of a second layer of stone; these are all cut regular and square to the same size. I do not know what it is but I am intrigued.

I remove the rest of the flagstones, brush away loose dirt and look closely. These buried stones cover one half of the bedroom floor. They are all the same and unmarked. I try to lift one free but it is jammed tight, as if wedged or mortared in place. So I take a picture on my phone, thinking, *This is my house's own little mystery. Perhaps someone else will know what it means.*

It is getting late and is Sunday night. Tomorrow I am working in the local lumber yard. I go to the pub to drink a few of the knots out of my muscles.

I tell of my discovery to my mates. They look at phone pictures.

One of them, an old house buff, says, "You need to let the Heritage mob know. It could be an old grave or buried treasure. They will fine you millions if you dig it up without permission."

I am not a lover of government's telling me what to do. But I think he has a point. I don't want to lift these stones only to find a mob of buried bones. Of course treasure is another matter, but that is the stuff of fairy stories, ones which only happen to somebody else sprinkled in magic dust.

So, 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, as if to say, who is interested in a bloody pile of old rocks. She says something about needing an archaeological investigation. I can see all my money running down the plughole as a rich dirt digger, one with a degree, gets even richer.

I say to her, "Well, I might as well get to work myself and dig it up, see what I find, perhaps pirate treasure or a body is buried underneath."

This gets her interest and she says, "Wait a minute, I will put you through to a Heritage Officer. A friendly female voice comes on the line. "Kate here, how can I help?"

I give her the potted version. I can tell she is intrigued. "How old did you say the house was?"

"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."

She replies, "I would love to have a look. Is it possible to arrange a visit?"

I can feel this getting out of hand and want to run a mile. She has no details which will let her find me if I hang up now. But there is a sibilance to her voice that will not let me go, it is a sound from another time and place, it holds a distant familiarity.

So, despite my better judgement, I give Kate a time and place, two days hence, at the nearest pub on the corner in Newtown. She asks for an address but I tell her, "The streets do not make much sense, it is hard to find, it is easiest if I bring you and show you." I think I can back out if needs must.

In turn I hear reticence in her voice, "What you propose is outside of normal procedure," she says. But she agrees despite reservations. I like her for that. A magnet pulls me towards her. Perhaps she feels it too.

I don't know what to expect when I meet her. When I see her from behind I know it is her. She has dark hair and a trim figure, a woman in her thirties. She pushes hair back from her ear, a mannerism redolent with old familiarity, as if I had seen it before. But the face that greets me is unknown. It is not one I remember from another place or time, though I like her smile.

She is sitting on a bar stool in the pub. 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 have found.

She acquiesces though I can tell she is impatient to look, not talk. I drink a schooner of beer while she sips a lemon lime and bitters. I begin by telling her about the house and its dubious title, then of my inheritance of enough money to do a limited fix up. I tell her how I numbered and photographed the flagstones in their pattern before I begun to dig up the floor.

She nods, "It is good you have done that, having a record of the past is always important."

I ask her about the rules before I go further, but she fobs me off saying, "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 is about trying to find the past I am missing. I was adopted and my parents are wonderful. But part of me wants to find my own story and discover the past I never knew. The nearest I can get to this is to study old things from the early history of this town, old houses, old families and their lives, things that happened before I was born. I know it is not my past but it is a way of me being connected to what came before, to build for myself a story of a past that I can put myself inside.

I nod, unsure how to respond. So I finish my drink and suggest she follows me in her car, to see what I have found. In five minutes we are there and I show her though. Her eye for detail is amazing, she points out ten things as we walk through the door and into the house that tell a story of its early history. She agrees this house is very old, she cannot understand how it is not listed on the national estate as it is clearly one of Sydney's oldest houses.

I take her into the bedroom and show her the mystery of the stones I have uncovered. She looks at this from all sides, she walks back and forth, saying, "This is remarkable, I wonder what it is?" She kneels down over the stones and studies them minutely; she says she is looking for quarry marks or other things to identify them. She seems oblivious to my presence, total concentration in her work.

As she bends forward to look more closely a small silver pendant falls out of the front of her shirt, 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 has just discovered.

But my mind is unable to hear her words as she enthuses to me. I can only see this silver thing hanging from her neck. It has '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 'From Jim'.

My head reels and I stagger backwards. She reaches out to steady me, concern on her face, saying, "What is it? You look ill – are you okay?"

I can only point, my words have run away.

I remember so clearly that day when I bought it. It was only a couple weeks after our daughter was born. I did not have money to buy my Cindy a wedding ring, and our wedding was only a thing of our own promises, not a thing in a church, but the extra twenty dollars I had saved bought me this and I gave it to her with all my love. She shyly took it from me and hung it around her neck, where it stayed until she went away. Now it has returned.

Kate is looking at me, puzzled. I have not spoken. Instead I take her hand and lead her over to the mantel piece 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 is the only photo of her I have. It remains my most treasured possession. Faintly glimpsed on the woman's neck is this pendant, indistinct yet its outline is clear.

I point to that pendant then the one hanging from Kate's neck. "How did you get this?"

But she is staring at the woman, oblivious to all other. At last she replies: "I don't know. I was found as a tiny baby, abandoned in an alley. Nobody knew where I came from. The only thing on me, apart from baby clothes, was this." She touches the pendant.

I pick up the photo and hand it to Kate, saying, "This is Cindy, I think this is your mother."