



KIM KELLY Sunshine



'A wonderful story: alive, full-hearted
and shimmering with hope.'

– Belinda Castles, award-winning
author of *Bluebottle*

Sunshine

KIM KELLY



HERE

JACK

Sunshine lay along a bend in the Darling River that curled around itself here in the shape of a finger beckoning, but not too many came this way anymore. Two empty and abandoned homesteads were all that remained either side of what had fleetingly been a village, sprung up in the 1880s heyday of the wool trade, out the back of Bourke, on the red desert's dusty edge.

Now, near forty years on, the schoolhouse was silent and lonely and doorless, a great hole in the floor where a curious young steer had wandered in out of the heat. The chapel had been swept off in the Great Flood of 1890, and the general store a few years later in the Great Trade Crash that took every last man, sheep and penny with it, looking for a job and a feed in town, or anywhere but Sunshine.

Drought set in then, and it seemed the land

would be returned to itself, to the redgum trees, their gracious limbs arcing over the slow green river, corellas gossiping in their boughs, and beneath them, in their shade, Jack Bell – who was, on this day, fishing there. Jack had been born on this riverbank, thirty years ago, in the June of 1891, or possibly the May, he couldn't tell you precisely when, as there hadn't been a priest or public official handy that day to note it down. His mother and one of her sisters had walked the five miles into town a week or so after the event to have his arrival registered with St Stephen's, Church of England, and none of them had ever bothered much with dates – never having had much of a need to.

Young Jack was christened immediately by a kindly parson, who had lately arrived from a mining town down south where worse things happened with a terrible regularity, so he didn't ask too many questions of the women. Jack's father was a wool classer from Sydney who would never name or know or care about his boy, much less his mother, who took a job with that parson's wife, washing and sweeping, to make sure her boy was fed and learned his letters. She died when Jack was fifteen, too soon and too quietly, the way the overworked poor so often do, but he was out droving by that time,

bringing a mob up from Wilcannia to Wanaaring, five thousand head, and getting paid ten shillings a week plus tucker, plus clothes and boots at cost price. He was doing all right, back then. He was a happy-go-lucky kid with a grin as big as the wild western sun, back then.

Not so today. Jack wasn't wearing any smile nor any boots today. He was fishing; only fishing, waiting for a black bream or maybe a fat, juicy cod.

He'd seen men come and go from Sunshine. He'd come and gone himself, out to Broken Hill, up to Longreach, and from there all the way to Palestine with the Light Horse, the thunder and blood of the charge still ringing in his ears these three years on. And now he was home again, at last: he wasn't going anywhere else. Ever again.

He'd lately been approached with the idea of moving on.

'Jack, mate . . .' Sergeant Bill Greavy from the lock-up in Bourke had come out for a chat, just after a small pack of government survey blokes had been through, only a few months ago, sizing up the land with their theodolites, chewing on the ends of their pencils, chewing on the ends of their pipes. 'The whole lot is being parcelled up and sold off,' Jack was told. 'Citrus fruits – that's the go out here, that's the

future. Oranges and lemons. Perfect Mediterranean climate, they say, and so all these acres are going to the Soldiers Settlement Plan.'

'Land for returned men, ay?' Jack had let that question hang in the air, staring at the policeman until he'd looked away, for the unspoken shame of the lot of it, for the unspoken thought, *I'm not your mate, mate*, and then he'd told him: 'I ain't bothering no one. Nor have I got any plan to.'

'You're all right.' Sergeant Greavy had nodded, but still he wouldn't meet Jack's eye. 'You'll suit yourself, I know. But I can't say who your neighbours might be.'

'Long as they behave themselves, I won't mind.' Jack had shrugged. He wasn't going to move. He wasn't going to be shoved off onto the Aboriginal station at Brewarrina; he wasn't going to be corralled there – or on any reserve, be it at Wellington or Dubbo or Pooncarie – he wasn't going to be told by some pink-arsed superintendent he was no longer a man in charge of his own life, not after all he'd endured to get back here; to get back home. He'd die here – whether they shot him today or left him alone to let nature take its course, he didn't care. There were potatoes growing on their own by the schoolhouse; old grape vines by the homestead

to the south; tomatoes all through the overgrown garden – more potatoes there too, just bloomed. And fish – always fish. Yabbies in the dam to the north. He'd survive.

And Greavy had sighed. 'Well, you stay at your own risk, mate. I can't help you if things go bad.'

Jack had told him with a harder stare: 'I've taken risks a lot worse than this one.'

He had, and although the policeman hadn't served in the war himself, he knew where Jack Bell had been, he knew what Private Jack Bell had done. Everyone did, as everyone knows every such thing in any small town and its surrounds, even if no one around this one would admit it out aloud. Not that any of it mattered today. No one would give Jack Bell a flaming job, regardless of all he'd done for his King and his country. Regardless that this country was his by a right likewise unrecognised. But, in the four and a half years he'd been away, things had changed for the worse, and the worse. Now, whitefellers had every law imaginable to make a brown-skinned man do as he was told; and they had anthropology: *Science has established beyond question that the Aboriginal is the lowest form of humanity existing on the globe. Crude . . . Degenerate . . . Lacking in the intellect for invention, with the exception of the*

boomerang, whose engineering it is supposed the savages discovered by some accident. So said a lecturer on 'Australian Curiosities' Jack had gone to listen to in Egypt, thinking it might be interesting.

Boomerang. Jack Bell couldn't throw a boomerang if his life depended on it. Why would he? He'd learned to shoot when he was twelve years old – and from the saddle at a gallop. He didn't have a rifle today, though. He was too worried he might use it on the wrong animal.

Only being home could keep the heartbreak contained, the incomprehensible tragedy of all that had happened. The ceaseless chatter of the corellas above; the frog song lullaby at his feet; the glimpses of a sweeter eternity in the stars at night: these brought him peace.

The vast blue spoon of the sky provided for his every need, day after day, after day.

And this day, he was determined, would be no different. A fish twitched on his line; a shingleback lizard blinked at him from a nearby rock; and the sound of bullock bells rolled into Sunshine.

SNOW

The gate still bore the name ‘Copeland’s Corner’, burned into the top paling, greying and riven with neglect, and seeming to promise Snow McGlynn this land would never be his before he’d even set foot in the front paddock.

‘Oh, mate.’ Stu Egan, riding up the track beside him, tipped his hat back at the sight of the place: an impressive spread set into that northernmost fingertip of Sunshine, wound all around by the Darling but for its southern boundary, where the remains of the tiny hamlet lay. ‘It’ll be a dream come true to irrigate,’ Stu made his envy plain.

And Snow could only reply, ‘Yep,’ for that word comprised approximately half of his spoken vocabulary – the other half consisting of its opposite, *Nah*.

Stu leant across the gulf between them, and gently knocked his old friend’s shoulder with a fist:

‘You’ll be right. Look.’

Snow flinched at the touch, but he looked ahead: the homestead sprawled above the river’s edge, inside the prettiest stretch of the bend, yet though the bank was steep-cut here, all he could think was: *This’ll be hell in a flood.*

Sure enough, a high-water mark could be seen on and in the house itself: a faint mud stain ran the length of the central hall, about two feet up the liner boards. Rats scurried at the intrusion: this had been their domain for almost twenty-seven years, since the previous owners, the Copelands of the careworn gate, gave in to the drought and the flood and the impatience of the bank, and upped sticks back to wherever they’d come from.

‘Jeez, it’s not too bad.’ Stu stepped into the sitting room, the hub of the house. A kerosene lamp still hung from the ceiling, its oil chamber rusted, its glass dome covered with a thick layer of ochre dust, cobwebs trailing from its fringe of beads: a grand piece. Stu pointed up at it: ‘Funny the things people leave behind, yeah?’

Snow supposed it must be broken, or otherwise unwanted for some reason: maybe it was thought to be ugly, or old-fashioned, or something that held memories of things better forgotten. A thought that

only reminded Snow of —

‘Here,’ Stu called out from the kitchen: ‘They left the range as well.’

Because it must weigh a ton. Snow followed him out, frowning, and frowning deeper again at the cast-iron cooker sitting within its bricked in-gle. All very solid, he noted; this was a grand place, for sure, once.

And now it was his. The Department of Lands said so. And so did the sound of the bullocky’s bells drifting in through the house on the breeze: the dray carrying his few bits of furniture, his tools, his trunk of clothes; the box of pots and pans and other household things put together for him by Mrs Egan, Stu’s mum, back in Condobolin, where he was from — an age ago. Condobolin was not so different from Bourke five miles down the road: a wool town like many others, on a river. But Condobolin was two hundred and fifty miles down the road, and it needed to be; it wasn’t home for Snow anymore.

Neither was this place, or maybe any place on earth. He stepped out onto the back verandah, to feel the creak of the timbers under boot as some evidence of his existence. The morning sun was suddenly warm against his chest; familiar and unfamiliar, as though he hadn’t ridden up from Bourke

just now with this same sun. He took off his hat and crouched to the boards, and as he hung his head his over-long fringe fell across the lashes of his left eye, reminding him that he hadn't had that haircut in town he'd meant to yesterday, reminding him of his name: Snow, for his hair, the colour of pale straw, almost white against his tanned-brown skin. His name was really Joseph, but no one had ever called him that, not even his mother.

Joey.

Snowy.

'Snow, what's got into you?' The fear in his mother's eyes followed him here. 'Snow?' He'd walked away, from her, from the family farm, from the quarrel he'd had with his brother, Bill, if it could be called a quarrel: 'Jesus, Snow, I'm not telling you what to do, I'm just making a suggestion . . .' About when to get the shearers in. It was Bill's business, Bill's farm, since passing to him as the eldest after their father's death three and a half years ago while Snow was hanging about in the ceaseless rain of Dorset, waiting for the wound in his side to close, then waiting for the war to end, then waiting, waiting, waiting for his ship home. Bill had only tried to be kind, tried to make him feel at home – make him feel *his* home. Snow hadn't lasted three and a half

months there. 'I'll be off, then,' he'd said, boiling his guts with rage, with not being able to say or to think about why he felt this way. He packed up and went to the Egans, whose farm lay over the other side of town; he camped in the old shepherd's hut out there, sometimes with Stu for company, mostly alone with a rum, until Stu brought him the news of the government's request for applications for this Soldiers Settlement land up north: land where he could make his aloneness a financially viable and more or less permanent arrangement.

'Snow.' Stu crouched with him now. 'I'm only going to say this once. You'll never bring him back by grieving on and on.'

Him. There were a few thousand of them: so many that his own father's ending by heart disease, asleep in his bed, aged fifty-seven, seemed a pleasant fact by comparison. But there was only one *him* Snow really mourned. It was a mourning that had grazed the inside of every vein, and stoked the fire of his anger only more this minute, brought it shouting from every splinter at his feet.

'Yeah, I know,' Stu said beside him, at and into the silence, and it was true that he knew most of it.

Stu and Snow and —

Moz.

Mozzie.

Morris.

Ray Morris.

Ray.

Raymond.

The three of them, they'd been mates since they were little tackers, mates since primary school days. More than mates, they were three sides of the one character: Snow, always the sensible, organised one; Stu, ever smiling, ever cheerful, ever a little bit thick; and Moz, the one with the bright ideas, the darer who got things done. It'd been his idea that they join up, and they did, riding into Sydney together, almost exactly seven years ago to the day, in that spring of 1914. They were all nineteen; Stu turned twenty on the way. Delivering their letters of permission from their fathers to the infantry, and their horses with them. For Australia. For adventure. *Girls*, said Moz, as he'd looked out at the Pacific Ocean from Bondi Beach, with no idea their travels would take them first to the ragged cliffs of Turkey, where the only girls they'd meet were the nurses on the hospital ships, too busy to chat unless you were bleeding, and bleeding to some significant degree.

'There's not a day goes by that I don't miss him, too,' said Stu. 'But, mate, you can't go on like this.'

‘I don’t know any other way,’ Snow told the redgums out along the river, loud white birds crowding their boughs, hundreds of them.

‘Got you talking.’ Stu smiled, reaching into his shirt pocket for a cigarette.

And Snow smiled back him, if you could call it a smile, as he wondered if those birds would eat his orchard clean of fruit.

*

A week on and he was at the river’s edge testing the water pressure of the new irrigation pump when he thought he saw a bloke watching him from a few yards off under the dappled shadows of those redgums: khaki strides rolled, a fishing pole in one hand and a good-sized fish in the other. Snow only glanced away for half a second, wiping the sweat from his forehead, but when he looked back again, the bloke was gone, if he was ever there at all.

Still, when Snow made his way up the bank and over to Stu, who was on the ladder above the tank stand, checking the pump was doing its job in filling up the reservoir, he asked him: ‘You seen anyone around, fishing? Along the river?’

‘Fishing?’ said Stu, jumping down from the tank. ‘No. But that sounds like a good idea, yeah?’

‘Yeah,’ said Snow, but the pair of them stood there a while yet, with the pump thumping and spluttering diesel, and as they did, Snow thought he saw three leaks in the brand-spanking shiny iron of that tank before he was satisfied they weren’t real, either. He put his imaginings down to being off the rum for so long a time, and made a more certain decision never to get on it again. It was also hot: only mid-September and mid-morning, but it must have been well over eighty degrees. He turned on the tap and let the water run over the back of his neck. The river smelled of mud and metal and his own salt, and he startled as a far more real imagining flashed: of the black Belgian sky pounding red; of being trapped, breathless, in the devil’s black heart. He shook it off and walked on to the house, for his rod and tackle box.

He walked past his rifle by the kitchen door: rabbits; that’s what it was there for. That’s what they all were, though; that’s all they were: vermin. A plague. A murderous curse. Ploughed back into the earth. He wondered where Moz was, really: his bones were in Ypres, somewhere in that field of bricks and blood that had once been the village of Messines, but where was the rest of him? Where did flesh go? If we are all just worm shit in the end,

then where is Moz now? In a poppy leaf? A blade of grass? Seed scattered on the wind? Where? Snow could have picked up that rifle, bit the barrel, pulled the trigger: *Ask Moz himself then – really.* But he picked up his rod and tackle box instead.

Outside, looking east off the verandah, back towards the tank and the river, he saw Stu, slouching on his left hip, lighting another cigarette, probably smiling at their job well done. Snow wouldn't kill himself while Stu was here. He wouldn't kill himself at all: they'd survived too much, not always together, but together enough. He looked out at the work they'd done just now in Sunshine, in only a week, getting the channels dug for the rows, and clearing this whole first section of gidgee stumps left by the previous owners – bastard stumps, they had best be called, those stubborn dead ends of the tall, stringy wattle scrub that grew on the clay-loam flats all across this country. Work: that was Snow McGlynn's rescuer. Work: that's why he was here. To work so hard he would forget. Eventually.

The debt helped – the two-hundred-pound development advance from the government sitting across his shoulders like a heavy pack. The deal couldn't have been fairer, with repayments all set out over forty years, but he wanted to have it paid off in half

that time, or less. To achieve something. Something measurable. Something decent. To rescue himself. A few months ago, he knew nothing of citrus fruit, except that oranges were orange and lemons were yellow, and the intensity of all the learning he'd had to do gave his mind its firmest branch to cling to. He had a plan laid out, and regardless of the crop, he was a farmer, a third-generation son of a farming family – he knew how to make these kinds of plans. In this first season he would put in three acres of Washington navel oranges, and three of Eureka lemons – he had them arriving at the end of the month. Three hundred trees that had cost him just over sixty pounds, including their transport, but not including the help with the planting; and with the eighty-five pounds invested in the irrigation, that was pretty much all his savings gone. He'd be using a sliver of his advance to have a ton each of superphosphate and bone dust drilled into the rows the day after tomorrow, in preparation. Sulphate of potash, quick lime and cow manure to follow. Next year, he'd do it all again, with Valencia oranges and Lisbon lemons, and depending on his bank balance, an acre of grapefruit. Then, the season after that, he'd begin extending whatever was thriving. It would take three or four years to achieve a bankable crop of any

significance, but his plan banked on five or six – to account for any failings, or any contrary plan of the weather, or the plan of those noisy birds that seemed to watch him even as they swarmed as one to roost above the river at dusk. His first good crop would wipe off at least a quarter of his debt, he reckoned, and he'd keep up with his repayments every other year with what he knew backwards and sideways in his sleep: sheep. He was careful. He was deliberate. He did things properly. He would succeed.

And if he didn't?

He looked over his shoulder, back at the house.

He should store that rifle in his trunk, and put the lock on it.

*

The trees came on two heavy motor-trucks, off the train, pallets of them stacked three shelves high. Well-grown, strong and free of pests, he was promised, and so they were: their green leaves gleamed against the pale, warm sky.

And a little boy climbed out of the cabin of the truck nearest to see them all unloaded up the rows; a very little boy, about two or three years old.

'Don't mind the kid,' said one of the blokes who'd be helping him and Stu plant out the orchard

that day, one of three, and the one that had come up with the trees by rail.

‘Shouldn’t someone be minding him?’ Snow found enough words to say.

‘He won’t cause any trouble,’ the bloke snapped back, barely meeting his eye. ‘He’s a good kid.’

Sure, thought Snow, but he was still a kid, and he didn’t like the idea of one running around under their feet, while they were busy.

The boy didn’t do any such thing, though. As the men set to it, easy work in the turned earth and the plots all marked out down string lines, the boy did as he was told: first, making a remarkable effort at collecting the hessian sacks the trees had travelled in, and then, when he’d tired, he contented himself digging his own patch of dirt in the slice of shade between the trucks, with a little blue-handled spade.

‘Daddy, is it big enough?’ he asked his father of the hole he’d made when they all stopped halfway for a smoko.

‘Yes, boy, that’s a good one,’ his father replied, smiling broadly and somehow awkward about it, too, the smile of a man who did not care to smile at all for anyone else.

And a slight crack was rent in the dark that

Snow carried about his head like the lead casing of a shell, a silent helmet shell.

He asked the man of the boy, 'What's his name?'

'Gordie,' the man nodded, 'Gordon,' but still he didn't meet his eye, repeating: 'He's a good kid.'

Obviously, but Snow didn't ask why. The pain of it was written in the lines of the man's face; deep, grey lines, and yet he couldn't have been much older than Snow was himself, that was, at last count, twenty-six. They were lines Snow recognised, although he didn't know the man.

When he and the boy and the others were gone in their trucks, Stu said at their dust: 'That feller with the kid, his name's Ross Brock. He's had a hard time.'

'Yeah?' said Snow, as if that wasn't obvious, too.

'Yeah,' said Stu. 'He got home all right, took a good bullet at Gallipoli, went and got married, got his farm all right, down Nyngan way, then the wife died not long after the baby was born. She'd been a nurse, over there, poor girl.'

'Right.' Snow stared after those trucks, their streaks of red dust thinning, and he asked his friend, 'How do you know all that?'

'He's a shearer by trade, is Ross Brock,' said Stu. 'He come down the long paddock to our place

last summer with a team. Needed the work – goes anywhere for any work, that bloke. Turns out his land is a sack of sun-dried dog shit.’

There was all kinds of hard luck, but still Snow replied: ‘Doesn’t seem right to be carting that kid around.’

Stu raised an eyebrow at the judgement: ‘He usually leaves the kid at home – the good women of Nyngan fight for the privilege of looking after him, so I heard – but he’d been away for a few weeks straight and didn’t want to leave him again so soon. That’s why he brought him here, just for this short job, up and back on the train, give the kid a bit of joy. Didn’t put you out, did it?’

Snow looked at Stu, as he often did, wondering: what would it be like to be the type of bloke that could get that kind of chat on others? To get others chatting like that over a smoke and a brew, be it a bottle of beer or a cup of tea. Snow had never been much of a talker, regardless of beverage; nothing to do with the war, more the way he was made. He wondered of himself: *Maybe I don't care about the troubles of other men; maybe there's always been something wrong with me.*

He had no time to think more on it; he had to get the trees watered in. Over at the tank, the

valve shrieked under his grasp with newness, and the pipes rang with filling across the top of each of the fields, oranges one side and lemons the other, spilling out then into the channels all down the rows. He and Stu stood and watched the water run. The system worked just as it should, just as Snow hoped it would, worth every penny and pound. The trees seemed to grow half an inch before his eyes; he seemed to feel their roots moving through the ground, finding their place.

This is good, he told himself; convincing himself this was his place, too.

‘You coming home for Christmas?’ Stu asked him, because it was time for him to be heading home to Condobolin himself; he’d been almost three weeks in Sunshine, and he had to get back to his own work, his own farm, his father’s farm that would be his one day; he had to get back to a girl he’d lately got sweet on, too.

‘Nah,’ said Snow. ‘Can’t leave the trees so soon for that.’

Stu gave him a look that said, *You’ve got to stop this*, but he only touched his fist to the blunt bony edge of Snow’s shoulder: ‘You have any need, send word, send a telegraph if you have to, I’ll get here quick as I can.’

‘Thanks, mate,’ said Snow, and at first light the next morning, his mate was gone, his oldest friend, maybe his only friend, slouching over to his left even on a horse.

Snow didn’t watch him too long after the wave; he went down to the pump, at the river, not for any reason other than to check it over once more. He wouldn’t fill the tank again yet for another two days, such as the clock of this crop was set.

All was good. He gazed out along the sandy bank as it bent round into the sun; the river was such a green and still-seeming and smooth, it looked like a polished stone he couldn’t remember the name of – his sister, Pattie, had a small statue of a cat made out of the stuff. Japanese or something. She was a kid last time he saw her, plaits swinging as she ran to kiss him farewell; she was married now, to a bloke called Sanderson, at Eugowra. Snow hadn’t seen her since that day he left, his ship pulling out from Circular Quay, his mother and his sister lost in the crowd. And at that thought, he saw he hadn’t got home himself, yet. Where was he, then? Where did the spirit go? Was there any such thing? Was it possible to know?

The rising sun blast gold across the water, a sudden burst, picking out the ripples that were a

second ago unseen. And it was then he saw the fisherman again, looking straight back at him. Snow blinked, thinking it might have been the sun in his eyes, but this time, the man stayed where he was, under the redgum boughs, watching, making his presence felt, not twenty yards off. And in this brightening light Snow also saw the man was a blackfeller, his bare feet brown against the ash-coloured mud of the bank.

Great, that's all I need, Snow thought, a mob of blacks camping along the river.

He didn't have anything against blacks, not really, but they always made a mess and had their hand out, the government always looking after them, giving them rations for nothing, putting them up on reserves, all expenses paid. They made him uncomfortable, the way any and all outcasts can tend to do – like it's your fault they are the way they are. Besides, the last thing he wanted was company, of any kind.

Snow raised his hand and gestured for the blackfeller to clear off. He didn't want an argument; he didn't want a conversation. Weren't the blacks of this district meant to have been rounded up anyway? That's what he'd been told when he signed for the land. He hoped the bloke would get the message,

disappear, and that would be the end of it.

But this blackfeller only stood there, giving back a little salute at the well-bashed brim of his hat, before turning away – slowly.

Smart arse, thought Snow. He'd show him the rifle next time.

ALSO BY KIM KELLY

This Red Earth

The Blue Mile

Paper Daisies

Wild Chicory

Jewel Sea

Lady Bird & The Fox

Sunshine

Walking

Her Last Words

The Truth & Addy Loest

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'Shining from this deeply moving story of battle-scarred lives is the beauty of the land and the courage, resilience and generosity of ordinary people. *Sunshine* is a wonderful story: alive, full-hearted and shimmering with hope.'

– Belinda Castles, award-winning
author of *Bluebottle*

A tale of longing, loss and growing
love under the bright Australian sun.

It's 1921 and the Great War has left in its wake untold tragedy, not only in lives lost, but in the guilt of survivors, the deep-set scars of old wounds and the sting of redoubled bigotries.

In the tiny hamlet of Sunshine, on the far-flung desert's edge, three very different ex-servicemen – Jack Bell, an Aboriginal horseman; Snow McGlynn, a laconic, curmudgeonly farmer; and Art Lovelee, an eccentric engineer – find themselves sharing a finger of farmland along the Darling River, and not much else. That is, until Art's wife Grace, a battle-hardened nurse, gets to work on them all with her no-nonsense wisdom.

Told with Kim Kelly's inimitable wit and warmth, *Sunshine* is a very Australian tale of home, hope and healing, of the power of growing life and love, and discovering that we are each other's greatest gifts.

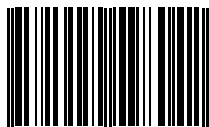


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