

# A Suit of Armour

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IT'S CALLED a gold town, Beechworth, but it's not always about gold. For now, for most of them, it is a matter of just getting by.

The Chinese camp is up the hill. Apart. They, the alien Chinese, pan the tailings: minutely sift what's been left behind by the white gold diggers. There are rumours they do okay out of it. When the townfolk hear the rumours they are more likely to ignore the backbreaking work, though it is obvious to anyone who looks down into the creek at the busy, methodical Chinese in their mushroom hats. It may not always be about gold, but it is always about jealousy. Someone's doing better somewhere else and it's not right.

Joe Byrne's sick of it. He was top at school 'til his father got bitten by the gold. Bitten, chewed up, and spat out. He works hard to keep the family going: Joe Byrne; not his father, a dead man, a dead father of eight. No wonder Joe comes in from Sebastopol Flat and climbs up to the Chinese camp, passing the precision rows of cabbages and feathery waves of carrot tops; greens against the enduring dun of Australia. They, the alien Chinese, make money from their vegetable gardens as well as the gold. And from opium.

'*Neih hou, Joe.*' He's greeted like a friend. *You good* the greeting really means, if you want to be literal, which Joe does when he explains this to his best friend Aaron Sherritt.

'Why do you yabber in that foreign language?' Aaron asks 'til he's told to shut up.

'I was top of the class. I have a brain. I can use it how I want.' Joe's not boasting. He's a flash writer, everyone says. And it's not bravado either: he

*does* use his brain how he wants. And now he wants to get opium.

He lies beside his Chinese friends. He lies to forget. Lets the light slipping between the slats of the hut take him.

It is all about gold for this moment. The town wants to celebrate. The townsfolk are scared the glory days are already over. It is too long since the miners shod a horse with gold and walked *their* man down Ford Street and right on into Parliament. Clip, clop, the ladies' hearts miss a beat with every step, watching gold shaved off on the rough road; cold shivers of loss. Lost meals, lost coats for their daughters, lost school days for their sons.

The mothers are grandmothers now so the town is having a reminder—a carnival to display their wealth. To say we're doing okay. The Post Office, the banks on opposing corners, the pub, are all brick, all two-storey; solid. The Telegraph Office, the Court House, the Gaol. All grand. They all shout: we're doing better than okay. No need to shoe our beasts with gold, the streets are paved with it!

The Chinese think they are part of Beechworth, too. They make an order back home by the postal service and in due time the *Onward* docks from Hong Kong and the treasures are put in a wagon like the ones the Afghani hawkers use. The wagon trundles up the hill into the Chinese camp.

Joe Byrne watched it sway up the mountain and over from Woolshed Creek. It was hot and his shirt hung open from his skinny chest. He's growing a moustache but his naked skin gives the game away about his age. And his ears. Maybe one day he'll grow into them. When he's past being a teenager.

He's panning when the wagon goes by, rocking the wooden cradle like his mother rocks the little ones at home. It's been worked over already: this part of the creek. He needs an eagle eye to catch the glint of gold in the sand and scree but he's no eagle; he's still just a sparrow.

Or he's a galah. He knows it's silly, but he tells himself his nighttime activities are *just* a bit of cattle duffing on the side, and only when the creek gives him nothing to take to the bank. He's only been caught by the troopers for the illegal use of a horse—damn Anton Wicks for the courtesy. And the illegal possession of meat. But the little ones have to eat. What can you do for a mother who is a widow as well as the mother of eight? Joe will not apologise to anyone.

But he'll go up to the straggling line of wooden huts the Chinese call a camp and try to forget.

The pill of opium is measured out on scales, miniature versions of the ones sitting in the Gold Bank. If he had a nugget of gold the size of the opium he is buying—no bigger than a pea—he'd be hooting along Ford Street like a yahoo not caring what the townsfolk said. They call him a half-Chinese lout just because he calls them friends.

His friend lights the oil lamp as Joe leans back in the hut. Reclines. He rolls the word around his tongue—as he *reclines*. It's his moment to be still. To stretch out on the low sedan and remember before the forgetting comes. He holds his pipe over the lamp and imagines the opium opening itself up like a flower, letting loose the vapours. He breathes in deeply. Closes his eyes. Opens them again to watch the world change into a world he wants to live in.

Ah Fook's uncle smiles from the sedan opposite. He has no teeth. His skin stretches tight over high cheekbones, his eyes are lost in dark sockets. His impoverished white beard curls like a wisp of smoke. He sucks deeply on his pipe. Joe laughs. He knows he'll never be that old. He wouldn't let himself come to that.

When the dragon rises up in front of him Joe isn't surprised. 'So this is the end,' he says to himself. It is golden, the dragon, with huge carnivore teeth overhanging a snarling mouth. It has quizzical eyebrows. 'I'll write about your eyebrows if you'll let me go,' Joe laughs. The dragon lurches out of the hut, blocking the light from the doorway as it goes.

The townsfolk line the street. They, the curious, there to fuel their envy. Braving the heat, sheltering under black umbrellas on the wide, dirt road. Waiting to see who'll put on the finest display.

Joe Byrne pushes Aaron Sherritt up front when the drums boom like thunder down from the Chinese camp. Tom-toms and gongs sound, fit to crack open the sky.

The aliens come down the hill from their camp, along a street that might as well be called Camp Street because that's the only place it goes. They have a horse up front, not shod with gold, but clad with golden silk and bearing a man as fine as a Mandarin. The Chinese have scrubbed up for the day. It's not just the costumes from China and the ceremonial weapons that make them look fine—they are clean and fresh and the pigtails of the young are soft and slick. Aaron asks Joe if he thinks Chinese girls are as pretty because they have only ever seen Chinese men in Beechworth and Sebastopol Flat and in the Woolshed Valley.

Joe Byrne waves to his Chinese friends who are waving banners and woven shields of clashing reds and blues and yellows with huge black 'eyes'

painted on. He laughs when he sees his dragon again, long and lithe and golden on a silk banner. Not a real dragon after all. But he goes silent when he sees the suit of armour. He knows he could fight a dragon if he wore the armour. He'd be invulnerable if he wore the armour. Invincible.

The armour curves around Ah Fooks' body, his skinny little chest and narrow back. The armour gives him broad shoulders with blocks of leather, and protects his nested-slug of genitals with a thick, impenetrable apron that falls down his front. The leather would keep out the arrows and swords and spears, the stuff of the Chinese enemy. To stop bullets, Joe thinks, I would need metal. Metal forged to those shapes. Invulnerable, invincible, Joe repeats to himself. I would be invulnerable, invincible like Ah Fook who looks a true warrior under his helmet. In his suit of armour.

The Chinese join the main parade and Ford Street erupts in noise and colour.

There's a crowd clotted on the streets even after the parade is gone. Yabbering. All yabbering as quick and slick as any Cantonese lingo. Made so by the excitement of the parade. Life needn't be so dull! Look what life can be! These aren't the words anyone says on the streets of Beechworth—this is under the words, like the gold is under the scree.

It is Aaron Sherritt herding Joe Byrne now the parade is over. He leads him past 'Ingrams' where Joe wants to sneak a look at the books that make him wonder about being a flash writer. Aaron won't let him stop though. He sees the Kelly boys in front of the tobacconists.

'Come meet Ned. He's there with Dan, in from Greta,' Aaron urges his friend whose eyes are full of the future. They knock against the little stone boy, the 'Blackamoors' tobacconist statue, in the crush. Ned Kelly's eyes look as dark as the statue's skin. As shiny as a magpie's.

'Joe, here's Ned,' Aaron says. The boys clasp hands. Joe and Ned, boys still, but near-enough men, shaking hands under the shop signs where proud citizens paint their names in gold, trying to inscribe time with their importance. As if any of them will be remembered past their deaths.

'Coming to see the fireworks?' Ned asks. His voice is a siren lilt.

The Chinese haven't done with their display yet. They have announced there will be fireworks. Huge illuminated fish will float across the Beechworth sky. Rockets will fly. Explosions flash. To be seen across the district, maybe in Jerilderie, perhaps as far as Glenrowan.

It's not about gold. Just sometimes gold gets mistaken for glory.