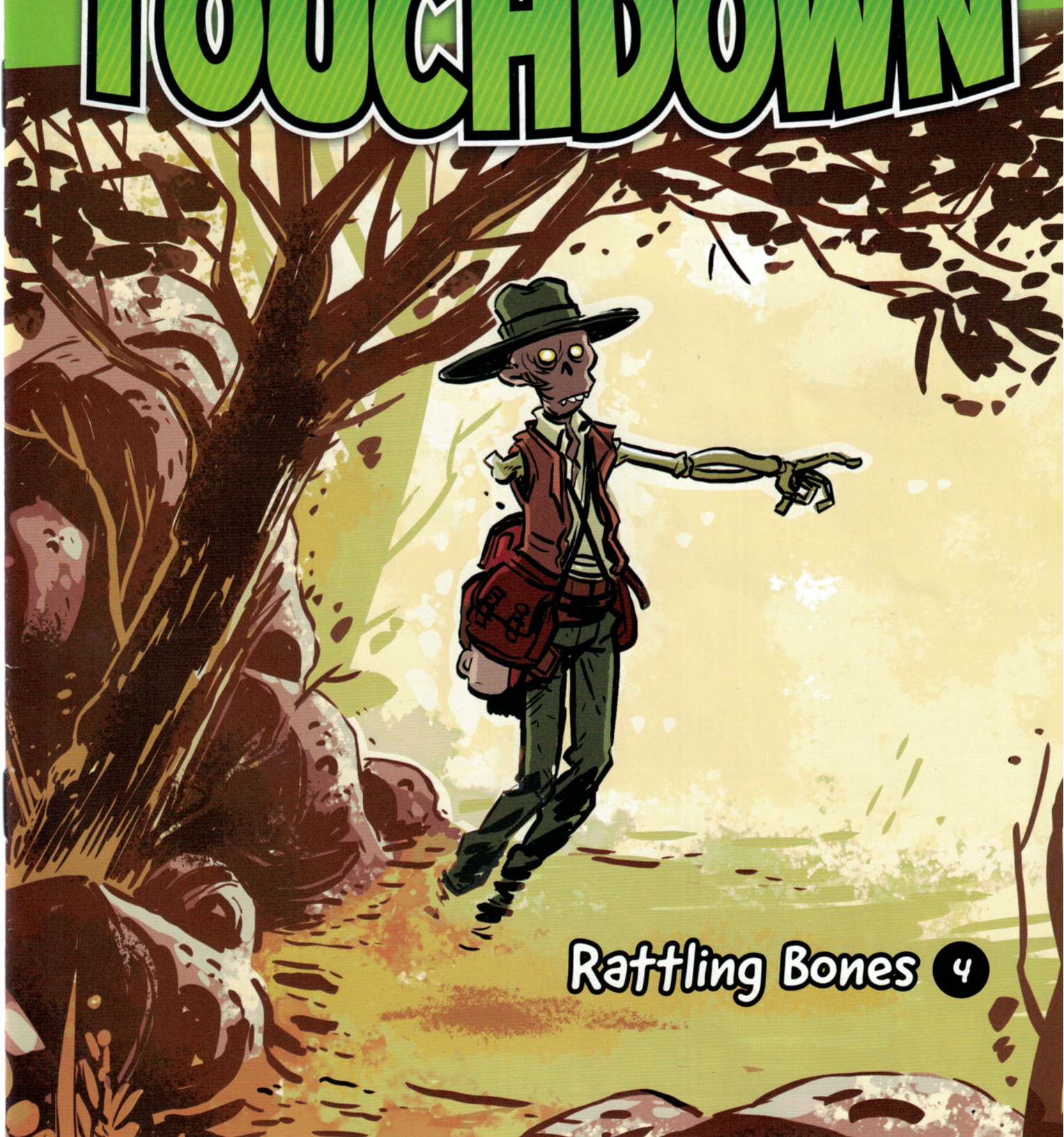


TOUCHDOWN



Rattling Bones 4

The Haunted Holiday

story by Marian McGuinness | illustrated by Douglas Holgate

MAISIE'S DAD WAS the best finder of crazy holidays in the universe. Every week, he searched the internet for the cheapest deals and the weirdest, wackiest, zaniest places to stay. But this weekend, Maisie's mum took charge. 'Enough of yurts and lava caves and renovated, oversized sewerage pipes,' she announced. 'I want somewhere *ordinary*. Nothing unusual. No surprises. No out-of-the-ordinary experiences! I've found the perfect guesthouse, and it's available this weekend!'

Maisie and Dad peered at the web page.

Enjoyable Normal Holidays.

Maisie read the comments.

'Atmospheric, olde worlde charm. Sit back and enjoy the scenery of the Blue Mountains. It's almost like you're the only ones here.'

'Dad, who else would be there?' Maisie asked, but her dad just shrugged his shoulders.

'Time to switch on the fog lights,' Dad said later that night as they wove up the corkscrew bends of the Blue Mountains. Mist curled around tree branches that looked like skeletons wearing shawls. Maisie's

ears fizzled and popped as the air pressure changed.

At the top of the plateau dim lights of distant houses winked through the mist. Maisie shuddered at the outlines of shaggy, long-legged creatures in the paddocks. She'd read a lot about creatures. *Mythical creatures. Drop Bears. The bunyip. The Blue Mountains Panther!* She remembered reading that they lived in remote mountain ranges and came out at night in search of prey. She peered at their woolly heads and dark eyes. 'Yowies!' Maisie whispered.

'Those alpacas look a bit bedraggled,' said Mum, looking at the same hairy creatures.

As it started to rain the car came to a turn-off. Dad flicked on the windscreen wipers. 'This looks like the place,' he said.

A storm rumbled in the distance. Maisie rubbed her foggy window. She saw a crooked, mossy sign that pointed down a dead-end bush road. Mum squinted as she read, 'HOST HILL GUESTHOUSE. This must be it,' she said. 'And it's going to be lovely and normal, just like the website said.'

Maisie noticed a vine obscuring the

edge of the sign. In a *blizzz* of lightning she saw another letter. It was ... G, for ... GHOST HILL GUESTHOUSE. She drew in her breath. Goosebumps prickled on her neck. Another strike of lightning flashed and Maisie read the rest of the words on the guesthouse sign ... LEGENDARY HOME OF MAD MARY AND ONE-ARMED ALBERT. *Things are looking up*, she thought in a tingle of excitement. Just like the weird, wacky, zany good old times.

The timber guesthouse was two storeys high with lace curtains hanging in the attic windows. 'Did anyone see that curtain move up there?' Maisie pointed to the window.

'The room on the right. Is there someone else staying here?'

'No,' said Dad. 'There's no-one for miles. It's probably the wind blowing through a chink in the window. These old houses are notorious for being draughty.'

They stood with their suitcases on the lopsided front verandah. The claws of an ancient peach tree curled beneath the tin roof and fingered through its rusty holes. Maisie shuddered as a silhouette of bats flew past.

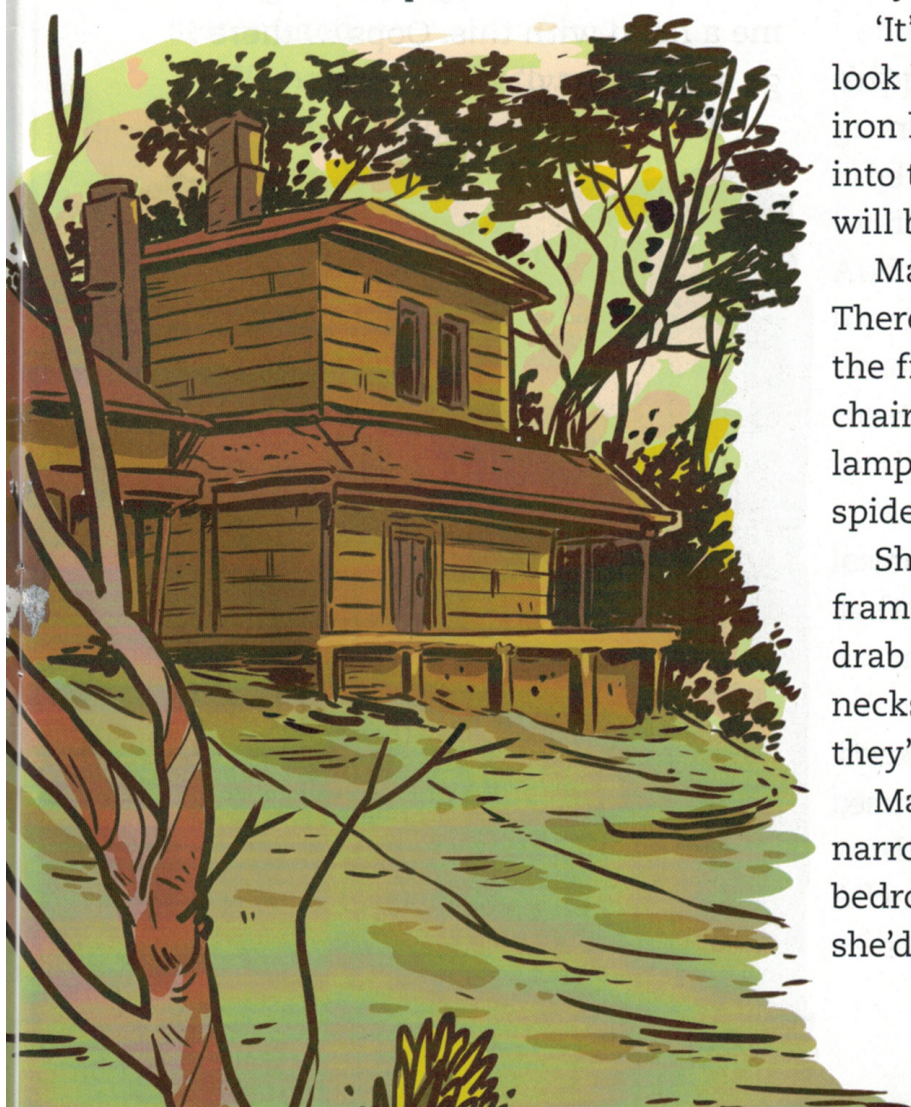
'Flying foxes,' said Dad. 'There are lots of orchards in the mountains. They're off to search for their supper.'

'It's not what I thought it would look like,' Mum sighed, sliding an iron key from under the doormat into the lock. 'I'm sure everything will be more *ordinary* in the morning.'

Maisie explored the ground floor. There were two gloomy rooms at the front with leather lounge chairs, an old piano, some tasselled lamps and a fireplace covered in spider webs.

She crept down the hall past dark-framed photos of people dressed in drab clothes, buttoned high to their necks. They all looked as though they'd seen a ghost.

Maisie dragged her bag up the narrow wooden staircase to her attic bedroom—the one where she thought she'd seen the curtain moving.



As well as a four-poster bed topped with a faded patchwork quilt and giant pillows, there was a trolley with a ceramic jug sitting in a bowl. The room smelt like the spices in her grandma's pantry.

That night, after a dinner of Mum's one-pot wonder, Maisie snuggled under the feathery quilt. As the rain hammered the attic window, she saw a book on the bedside table: *The True and Terrifying Tales of Ghost Hill Guesthouse ... Children's Edition*.

The familiar tingle started in Maisie's tummy. The one that came before an adventure.

She started the first chapter: 'Mad Mary and One-Armed Albert'. An hour later Maisie closed the book. She lay in bed with her eyes wide open.

That's when the clanking started outside her door. Not of chains. Not of rumbly bathroom pipes or bamboo wind chimes. It sounded more like ...

Maisie sat bolt upright. Then she heard whispering.

'Yes, yes, Bertie, I know you're armless,' came the voice outside her door. 'Sorry, son, I couldn't resist that one. Stop whining; you'll frighten the girl.'

Maisie tried to shout to her parents that there were burglars in the house, but nothing came out of her mouth.

Then there were three hollow tap ... tap ... taps at the door.

Fear and curiosity flooded her body. Maisie's lips went dry. She swallowed hard.

'Come in,' she squeaked in a voice so high-pitched she almost didn't recognise it as being her own.

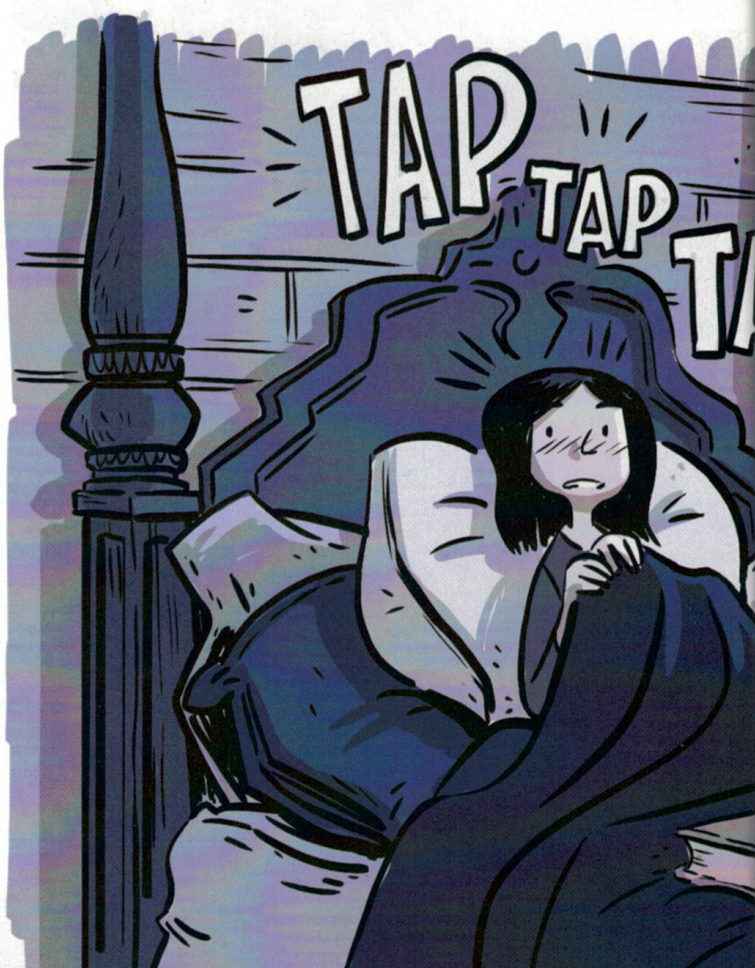
Two skeletons clanked into the room.

Maisie hid under the quilt, then peeped out with one eye.

The larger skeleton nudged the smaller one. The smaller skeleton was wearing a knitted tea-cosy on its skull.

'Give me a break, Bertie,' the smaller one said. 'Oh sorry, bad choice of words again. I know your arm broke off. Well, you could give me a hand with this. Oops ... there I go again. Sorry!'

'We're sorry to trouble you, love,'



continued the smaller skeleton, 'but now that you've read the book, you'll know of our plight.'

Maisie held the quilt around her like a shield.

'Are you Mad Mary and One-Armed Albert?' she asked. 'Or are you a dream?'

'This is no dream, dearie,' said the smaller skeleton. 'I'm Mary, and this is my son, Bertie. That's short for Albert. He's been driving me crazy for over a century! He loses an arm and you'd think the world ended. Look at him; what a fright! Just a collection of bones anyway.'

'Wh ... why are you here?' Maisie stammered.

'We have a favour to ask,' said Mad Mary.

The skeletons sat on the end of Maisie's bed. They adjusted their bones, jiggling about until they were comfortable.

Maisie looked at Bertie. 'I read about you. You lost your arm in an accident in the coal mine near here.'

'You've got it in one, love,' said Mary. 'I knew you were going to be the right person. And you see, that's our problem. His arm's still down there. And he's annoyed every guest who's ever stayed here. I'll never have any peace until he gets it back.'

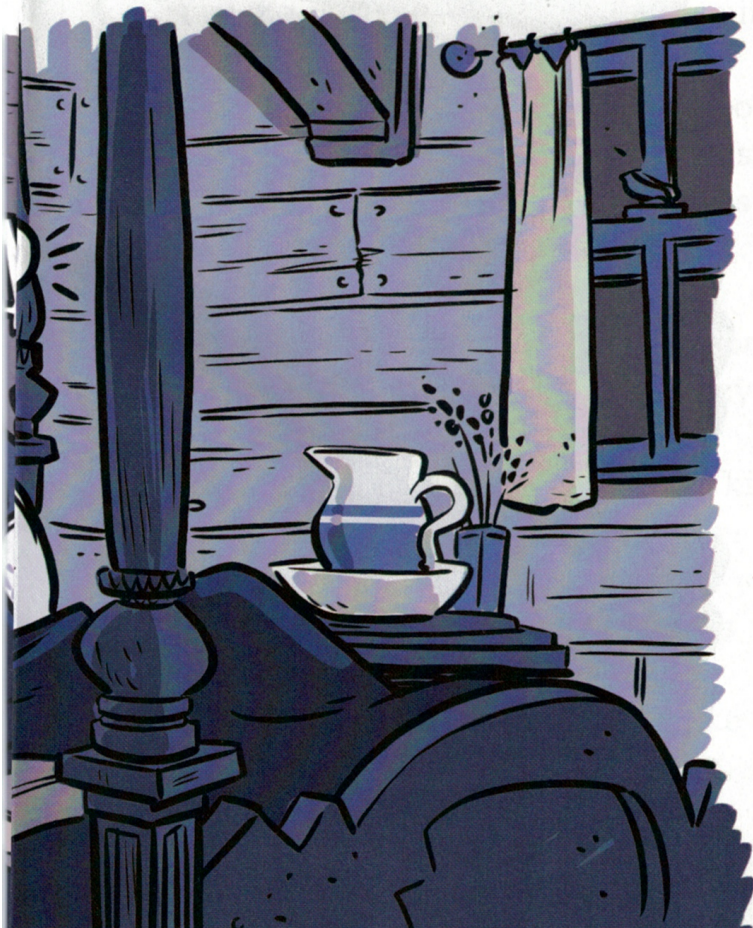
'What do you expect me to do?' Maisie asked, horrified. 'I'm not touching old bones.'

'But, if you wouldn't mind,' chipped in Bertie, 'I'd be ever so grateful. I haven't been able to clap or play *Chopsticks* on the piano or twiddle my thumbs for 132 years! And look ...' He put his fingers on top of his skull. 'I can't even pat my head and rub my tummy at the same time.' His bones slumped down. 'I'm totally miserable!'

'Anyway, dear,' said Mary, 'we'll leave you with it. We'll come back tomorrow night to collect Bertie's arm. Toodle-oo!'

* * *

The next morning Maisie sat with her parents to eat breakfast. She'd worked out her plan. She knew that Albert's arm would be in the coal mine near the bottom of the railway.



She'd read about it in the tourist brochure on the hall table.

'Mum ... Dad, can we take a ride on the Scenic Railway today? Actually, it might be too scary for you.' She sparked up, 'I know, maybe you could drop me off!'

Mum sighed as she looked across the bushy view of the Jamison Valley. 'Maisie, you go with Dad. I'll stay here and relax.'

And that was how, within the hour, Maisie was at Katoomba, squeezing beside her dad along the backwards-tilting bench of the railway carriage. She wriggled her backpack and pulled the security bar over their knees. Then *whoosh*, they were rumbling along the track, tipping like a roller-coaster and hurtling down ... down ... down through a dark stone tunnel. Maisie gripped the security bar so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

The train stopped with a jolt at the valley floor. Maisie and her dad walked along a boardwalk that wound through the ferns and palms of the Jurassic rainforest. She heard whipbirds high in the trees and watched lyrebirds scratching around the leaf litter.

Maisie saw the sign to the disused coal mine. 'Dad, you go on ahead. I want to read some of these signs. They're really interesting.'

Luckily, her dad had a new-found

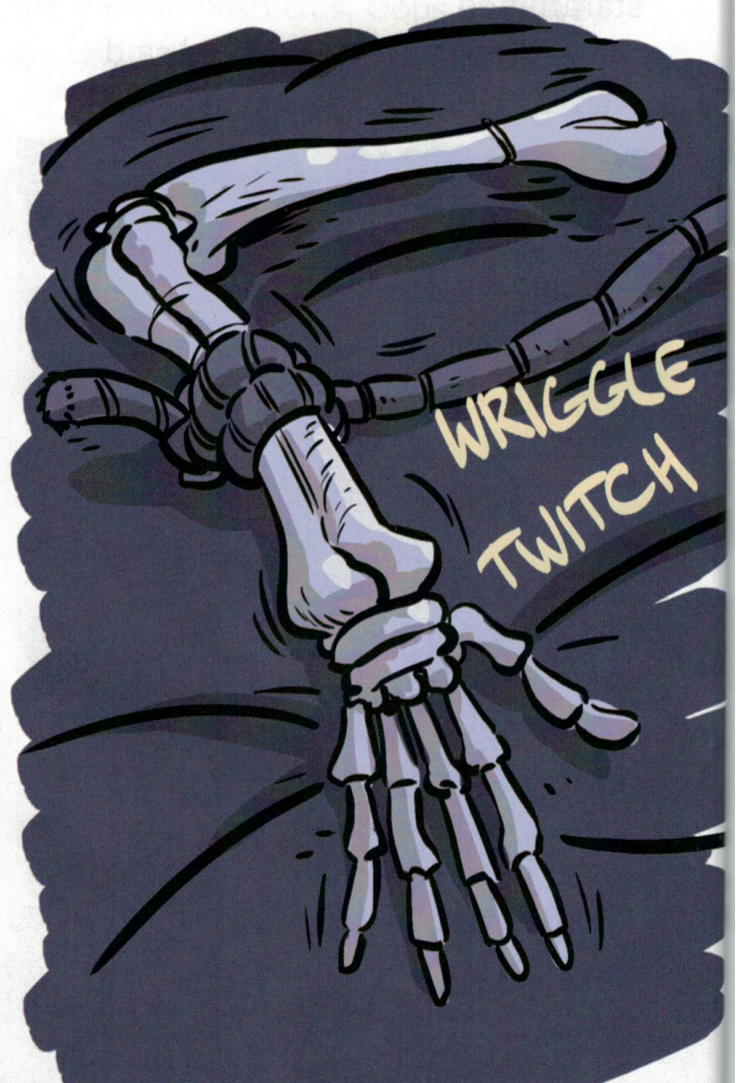
interest in rainforest fungi. 'Okay,' he called, following a trail of colourful mushrooms, 'but don't be too long.'

When her dad was out of sight, Maisie scampered into the tunnel. It was dark and smelt mouldy and damp.

She followed the old rail tracks into the mine. Albert's accident had happened somewhere along the track. But where? The tracks could go for miles, and the light was getting dimmer.

In the silence, Maisie heard fingers clicking. The sound was coming from an old wooden skip that had derailed.

Maisie knelt down and peered under the skip. There it was. An arm,



with no skin. Just bones. All in a row and all connected.

The index finger wiggled; then the hand jumped out and grabbed her wrist. She fell backwards and banged her head.

Shivering at the realisation that she was handling discoloured bones, Maisie folded the arm like an umbrella and shoved it into her backpack.

The fingers kept poking her as she made her way out of the mine. She ran to find her dad and acted as if nothing creepy and spooky had just happened.

* * *

That night, Maisie pretended to be super tired. After dinner, she popped on her pyjamas, kissed her parents good night and went off to bed. She lay the skeletal arm on top of the quilt. It started to finger-crawl, trying to escape, so Maisie tied it to the bedpost.

When the house was quiet, Maisie heard the familiar rattling of bones along the hallway.

She opened the door, and Mary and Bertie clanked into the bedroom.

Mary was still wearing the crazy tea-cosy on her head. She put her hands up to her face, 'Oh, I could kiss you, young Maisie. I knew you'd be the one to find Bertie's arm.'

The arm moved and the fingers waved at Bertie.

'If I could cry, I'd be sobbing like a baby,' said Bertie, patting the arm.

Bertie took the arm and raised it to his shoulder socket. He twisted and turned it, but he couldn't make it fit.

'Here, I'll have a go,' said Maisie. 'I once had a doll with a wonky arm.'

After a few winds and grinds, she snapped it into place. Bertie clapped his hands and clicked his fingers.

Mary and Bertie hugged Maisie and said their goodbyes. She was sad to see them go. And she never did find out why Mary was wearing a tea-cosy on her head.

* * *

'Well, that was a lovely, ordinary holiday, wasn't it?' said Mum as they drove away the next morning and headed for home.

'Yep,' said Maisie. She turned around in the back seat and saw two bony hands wave from the attic window. She waved back.

Dad was looking in his rear vision mirror. 'Did anyone see that curtain move in the top window?'

'Dad, it's just your imagination,' said Maisie, with the biggest smile on her face. 'There's probably a chink in the window. Remember, these old houses are pretty draughty. Anyone would think it's haunted!' ■

I was just like Maisie when I was a young girl. And I still love adventure!

