

Red Dog – Louis de Bernieres

Episode 1

The Stinker

'Strewth,' exclaimed Jack Collins, 'that dog's a real stinker! I don't know how he puts up with himself.'

'It's his diet,' said Maureen, 'eating what he eats, it's going to make smells. And he gulps it down so fast, he must be swallowing air.'

'Tally would let off even if you fed him on roses,' said her husband.

'Don't light any matches, he's done it again,' said Maureen, holding her nose.

'Tally, you're a bad dog.'

Tally Ho looked up at her with one yellow eye, and thumped his tail on the floor a couple of times. He had noted the affectionate tone of her voice, and took her words for praise.

He was only a year old, and the most notorious canine dustbin in the neighbourhood. People delighted in presenting him with unlikely objects and encouraging him to eat them. With apparent relish he ate paper bags, sticks, dead rats, butterflies, apple peel, eggshells, used tissues and socks. On top of that, Tally ate the same food as the rest of the family, and at this moment carried in his stomach a goodly load of yesterday's mashed potato, gravy and steak and kidney pie.

This is not to say that Tally ever raided dustbins or browsed on garbage. He ate odd things in good faith, just because human beings offered them to him. He made up his own mind as to what was worth eating again, and whilst he would probably be quite happy to eat more eggshells, he probably wouldn't try another feather.

'I'm going to take him to the airport,' said Jack, 'he can work off some energy, and get some of that gas out.'

Tally Ho pricked his ears at the magic word 'airport.'

'Run time,' said Jack, and Tally sprang to his feet, bouncing up and down with pleasure. The caravan shook and glasses and cutlery in the cupboard started to rattle.

'Get him out before he demolishes the whole place,' said Maureen, and Jack stood aside for Tally to shoot out of the door like the cork from a bottle of champagne. He did some more bouncing up and down outside the car.

Jack opened the back door, said 'Hop in', and Tally jumped on to the back seat, hopped over and sat in the front seat. Jack opened the passenger door and ordered 'Out!'

Tally looked at him coolly, and then deliberately looked away: he had suddenly gone deaf, it appeared.

'Tally, out!' repeated Jack, and Tally pretended to be looking at a magpie that was flying over the caravan.

Jack picked Tally bodily off the seat and deposited him in the back. 'Stay!' he said, wagging his finger at the dog, who looked at him innocently as if he

would never consider doing the slightest thing amiss.

Tally waited until the Land Rover had started off down the road, before springing lightly on to the front passenger seat. Jack raised his eyebrows, shook his head and sighed. Tally Ho was an obstinate dog, without a doubt, and didn't consider himself to be anyone's subordinate, not even Jack's. It never occurred to him that he was anything less than equal.

Seven kilometres away the car stopped outside the perimeter fence of Paraburdoo airport, and Tally Ho was let out. Jack got back in the car and drove away. He blew the horn and Tally pricked up his ears.

It was a red-hot day in February, which in Australia is the middle of summer; one of those days when you are physically shocked by the heat if you go outdoors, and the sun feels like the flat of a hot knife laid directly on to your face. The air shimmers, and everything looks white, as if the sun has abolished the whole notion of colour.

Even the red earth looked less red. Through this ungentle landscape galloped Tally Ho, raising his own little plume of red dust in the wake of the greater plume raised by Jack Collins' car. His whole body thrilled with the pleasure of running. He was young and strong, he had more energy than his muscles could make use of, and the world was still fresh and wonderful. He ran after his owner's car as if he could catch it with no trouble at all. As far as he was concerned, he really did catch it, because after seven kilometres, there it was, parked outside the caravan, having given up the chase, too tired to continue. As for Tally, he could have run another seven kilometres, and then another again, and caught the car three times over. He came leaping through the door, headed straight for his bowl of water, and slurped it empty. Then, his tongue hanging out and leaving drips along the lino, he went back outside and lay down in the shade of a black mulga tree.

That evening Mrs Collins opened up a big can of Trusty, and Jack set his stopwatch to zero. So far Tally's record for a whole 700g can was eleven seconds flat. His whole body was quivering with anticipation, waiting for the moment when he could hurl himself at his dinner.

She put the bowl on the floor, Tally leaped up, and Jack pressed the timer on his stopwatch. 'Crikey,' he declared. 'One hungry mongrel ! Ten point one seconds. Truly impressive.'

Tally cleaned his bowl conscientiously, and then cleaned it again just to make sure. When there was definitely not one atom of food left, he lay down once more under the shade of the tree, and very soon he fell asleep. He dreamed of food and adventuring. When he awoke half an hour later, fully restored, he felt curious about what might be going on in the wide world, and the thought of missing out on something made him feel uneasy. He got to his feet, stood still for a time while he thought a little more, and then set off past the other caravans and into the wilderness.

In the morning Jack Collins said, 'I think Tally's gone bush again,' and Maureen replied, 'I'm worried that one day he's going to disappear forever.' 'Don't say that,' said her husband. 'He always comes back eventually.'

Three days later, just when the couple had almost given up hope of ever seeing him again, Tally appeared, bang on time for supper. He was dusty, his stomach was nice and full, his nose had a long scratch on it courtesy of a feral cat that he met on the kangaroo-trail, and he was grinning with self-

satisfaction. That night he polished off a big can of Pal in nine seconds flat.

Red dog goes to Dampier

The time came when Maureen and Jack Collins had to move from Paraburdoo to Dampier, a long hot journey of about 350 kilometres, along a difficult, ruddy dirt-track. It was early in the morning when they set off, because it was much cooler then. They had hardly gone fifteen kilometres, however, before Tally's stomach began to get to work on his breakfast, and a foul stink rolled over the two unfortunate folk. 'Oh, my God,' exclaimed Maureen, 'Tally's done it again!'

They had not gone much further before Jack had to stop the car, even though they were in the middle of nowhere. He grabbed Tally under the armpits and lifted him into the trailer, amongst all the furniture and the boxes of bits and pieces, saying 'Sorry, mate, but if you can't hold it in you're not coming in with us. You're lucky we're not leaving you and your horrible reeks out here in the desert.'

Tally looked up at him reproachfully, hoping that if he looked sad it might persuade his master to let him back into the car, but to no avail. As the car set off once more, he settled down and watched the world go by. There was nothing he loved quite so much as travelling from one place to another, simply for the pleasure of seeing what was going on.

Four hours later they arrived in Dampier. They clambered out of the car, stretched, fanned their faces in the heat, and went to see how their dog was. When they saw him they put their hands to their mouths and laughed. Tally looked up and wagged his tail disconsolately. All they could recognise were two sorry-looking amber-yellow eyes, because the rest of him was an inch thick in dark-red dirt and dust.

Tally at the Barbecue.

Tally had been missing for several days, and had only recently returned. Jack and Tally set off for Dampier beach, just when the western sky was beginning to turn gold at the edges. As they walked down amid the barbecues, Jack was puzzled and amazed by the number of people who seemed to know Tally already. 'Look, there's Red Dog!' said one man, and another patted him on the head and said, 'Hello, Bluey, howya goin'?' Jack realised that perhaps Tally had already attended a few barbecues on this very beach, which was a popular place for the local folk to come and cook up in the evenings.

What Jack saw next made the blood rise to his cheeks from sheer embarrassment.

There was a man lifting sausages off his grill with a fork and bending down to put them on a plate that was on a rug beside him. When there were three sausages on the plate he straightened up to collect a burger from the grill, and when he looked down again, there were no sausages. He gasped with surprise and looked around. 'Me snaggers!' he said, 'someone's swiped me snaggers. I'll be damned, they were just there and then there they were, gone.'

Jack Collins called after Tally, but the dog was licking his lips to get off the last

lovely traces of sausage-grease, and planning his next foray. He went down on his stomach and laid his head flat on the sand, with his nose pointing in the direction of a nice succulent steak that had just been put on a plate. The man who was about to eat it looked away for a second, and Tally darted in and snatched it, leaving his victim with nothing but a sliced tomato and a few scrapings of mustard. Tally bolted the steak and set off in search of a burger that he could smell quite distinctly at the other end of the beach.

'Did you swipe my steak?' the second man accused his neighbour, and 'Who swiped me stagers?' called the first man, soon to be joined by 'Bloody 'ell, where the devil's me burger?'

Jack crept away as quietly and inconspicuously as he could. He knew that Tally would find his own way home, and he wasn't going to hang about to be blamed for his dog's behaviour. An angry miner wasn't the kind of man you'd want to have a row with.

End of Episode 1