

Red Dog 8

Red Dog had decided on John as his beloved owner, but John died tragically young in a motorbike accident. Red Dog didn't know where John had gone, and became even more of a wanderer looking for him. He became The Dog of the North West.

Looking for John

Red Dog had his greatest adventures after John's death. He had always enjoyed his freedom, but he had always had John to return to. Now he took absolute liberty, and refused to give it up. Being such a well-loved and well-known local character meant that almost every week somebody tried to adopt him, to make him comfortable, and to feed him up so that he would settle down and stay. Red Dog liked these people, and if their children were sick he would even wait patiently by the bed until they were better. Then one day they would find Red Dog by the car, waiting to be driven away on his next great quest. With sadness in their hearts, the people who had hoped to own him would drop him off wherever it was that he wanted to go, and it might be months until one evening there would come that imperious scratching at the door, signalling his temporary return. Red Dog simply treated people as people treat their friends, dropping in and then passing on.

Red Dog travelled as usual on the Hamersley Iron buses, in their trucks, and on the train to Mt Tom Price. Keenly he looked at everyone they passed. People noticed that he still seemed to be searching.

Red Dog travelled the 900 kilometres to Broome, a magical tropical town where there are tata lizards that wave at you every few minutes, where there is Cable Beach, whose waters in summer are as warm as a bath, where divers bring pearls from the bottom of the sea, and where there are crocodiles in the mangrove swamps, who like nothing so much as to swallow a nice plump dog. Red Dog went there with a road train, and stayed for two weeks, eating every night at the local hotel. He looked everywhere, but he couldn't find John, so he came back very slowly in an ancient car crammed to the brim with a large family of aborigines.

One day he happened to be outside her caravan when Patsy was loading up her car for her holiday. It was midsummer, and the tropical heat was unbearable for many of the folk of the Dampier Archipelago. Warnings were being issued about not letting the sun shine directly on to fuel tanks. They had been known to explode, with fatal consequences. Patsy had made friends with Ellen, the unfortunate lady who had made the mistake about Red Dog's ticks, and these two had planned to go to Perth with Nancy Grey, because Perth is 3000 kilometres to the south and is cooler and breezier..

'Hello, Red,' said Patsy, and he gave her his dog's version of a smile. 'Got nothing to do?' she asked.

'Why don't we take him with us?' suggested Ellen. 'He might enjoy it.'

'Want to come to Perth?' asked Nancy. She patted the seat beside her, and the dog jumped into the back. Women smelled nice, and often gave you sweet things to eat, so it struck him as a good idea to go on a trip with them. It was because of women that he had acquired a taste for chocolate.

The three had clean forgotten that Red Dog was not necessarily very good company in a confined space, and they spent the two days' drive making disgusted expressions and exclaiming, 'Pooee! Pooee! Oh, my God, I can't believe it! Not another one!' The dog stuck his head out of the window to enjoy the breeze in his face and to make it easier to keep an eye open for John, so he had no idea of the torture endured by the three women, who would remember this trip for the rest of their lives, and not just because of the smells.

What happened was that they went to Cottesloe Beach, a long beautiful stretch of sand. Patsy, Ellen and Nancy were sunning themselves on the beach after a swim in the surf. Red Dog loved the surf, and devoted much time and energy to trying to round it up, as if he were a sheepdog and the waves were some very difficult variety of sheep. He had also pounced on the shadows of lots of seagulls, and had caused much distress in one small boy by mistaking his model aeroplane for a bird. By the time he had jumped on it and given it a good biting, it was too late to repair the mistake. He had joined in a game of frisbee, another of volleyball, and another of cricket, in which he had confiscated the ball, forcing the cricketers to chase him up the beach.

The three women lay in the sunshine, planning to get as suntanned as possible before they went home, where just now it would be too hot to lie in the sun at all. They frequently compared forearms to see who was getting the brownest.

'Let's go to Rotto tomorrow,' suggested Nancy.

'Oh, yes,' exclaimed Patsy. 'I'm dying to see the quokkas*. They're supposed to be really sweet.' (* Small marsupials, look a bit like a large rat – large colony at Rotto)

'Well they are,' said Ellen, 'but they're not exactly bright. Sweet and stupid, that's what they are.'

'They don't allow dogs, do they?' said Nancy. 'What'll we do with Red?'

Ellen suddenly sat up; 'Where is he anyway?'

They searched up and down the beach, and they asked everybody they saw. No-one had seen Red Dog at all. They whistled and called, and then enquired in the local cafes and hotels, in case he was busy befriending the chefs. They went into Fremantle, and they searched Mosman Park.

'You know what we've done?' asked Patsy. 'We've only gone and lost the most famous dog in Western Australia.'

'In all of Australia, probably,' corrected Ellen.

'When we get home, they're going to kill us,' moaned Nancy. 'What are we going to do?'

The holiday was ruined. They went to see the quokkas, but it wasn't enough to cheer them up. They went to the best fish restaurants at the water's edge, but found they couldn't eat. They shopped for souvenirs, but didn't find anything

they really liked.

They cut their holiday short and drove home. It took them another two days, taking turns at the driving, and they hardly said a word. They remembered Red Dog, with his head out of the window, and the awful smells he made, and they felt completely miserable.

When at last they reached home, late at night, they found Red Dog waiting for them outside Patsy's caravan. He had hitched a lift home from a truck-driver who recognised him. He hadn't liked Perth all that much, with its bottle-brush and peppermint trees, its pretty yellow sourgrass, its military looking Norfolk Island pines, and its shiny modern buildings. He preferred the tougher life up north, with its silvery river gums, its rock wallabies, and its deep red stones. Besides, he had been to Perth before, with John, to that very same beach, but this time there had been no sign of him at all.

The three women fussed over him and fed him, with a sense of relief such as they had seldom experienced before, and after that they told him off for ruining their holiday and causing them so much guilt and worry. Then Nancy pointed out that they had a few days of their holiday left and suggested, 'Why don't we make the most of it, and go to Exmouth?'

'Yeah, why not?' agreed the other two. They looked over at Red Dog, and Ellen said, 'Are we taking Red?'

'No chance,' said Nancy.

'Not on your life,' confirmed Patsy.

In the morning they piled back into the car and with light hearts headed south once more on the North West Coastal Highway.

Red Dog called in on the new vet in Roebourne, and then he went to Point Samson and Cossack. He visited Jocko, Peeto and Vanno at Hamersley Iron, and afterwards he went and stayed for a night at the Walkabout Hotel in Karratha, where the chef was one of his providers. Finally, he surprised and astonished the three women by turning up in Exmouth three days later. They spotted him walking by when they were all having a milkshake at a café. He seemed pleased to see them, but by the next morning he had hitched a lift to Onslow.