

Red Dog 5

Red Dog, an independent creature living in the Pilbara mining area of Western Australia, met John, who became the person he loved most. John tried to make Nancy his girlfriend, but Red Dog wouldn't allow it – he ruined their date by pursuing them to the drive-in movie, and then breaking wind most foully just as John was moving in for the kiss. 'One more romance that nearly happened.'

Red Dog and the Posh Pooches

One day Red Dog was lying under the workbench at Hamersley Iron Transport section, when he began to grow restless. There was not much going on, and he didn't really feel like travelling around on the buses today. He had befriended one of the drivers of the enormous locomotives that took the iron ore from Mount Tom Price to Dampier and had been all the way on it, back and forth several times. It took a very long while, but it was good to sit in the driver's cabin and watch the landscape go by. In the evenings he saw wallabies and kangaroos, and he liked the look of the pools shaded by white gum trees in the places where creeks ran through.

Today, though, Red Dog did not feel like spending several hours on a train, even if he could visit Paraburdoo afterwards by getting a lift with one of the miners. Today Red Dog had a feeling that something interesting was going on. He had an excellent instinct for knowing when something was about to happen, even turning up to supervise operations when somebody was moving into a new house, and then attending the house-warming party a couple of days later.

Red Dog got on to one of the long yellow buses that was going into Dampier. There was somebody in his seat, so he growled until the man said, 'OK, OK, Red, I get the message,' and ungrudgingly gave up his seat and moved to the back. At the junction with the main road Red Dog tugged at the sleeve of the driver, and kicked up a fuss until he stopped. He alighted there and went to wait for a car that he recognised.

Shortly he detected the noise of Patsy's engine. It had loose tappets and a small hole in the exhaust. As soon as it appeared he ran out in front of it, and Patsy skidded to a halt.

'You nearly gave me a heart attack,' she said as she reached over to the passenger door to let him in. Red Dog leaped in and made strange motions with his head, which Patsy rightly interpreted as a request to open the window on his side. They drove off together, he with his head out of the window to catch the breeze, and she recovering her equanimity after such a sudden halt. 'One day,' she said to Red Dog, 'you're going to get munched by a car.'

Red Dog made no kind of acknowledgement. He was used to being told off, and accepted it with the same amused indifference that an elephant would display if complained to by a mouse. Patsy accepted that Red Dog had his own ideas, too. She had learned the hard way, because she had been the one who had tried to throw him out of the air-conditioned supermarket. Since then she had grown to like and respect him as much as everyone else, and

always watched out for him in case he needed a lift. (She had once taken him to the vet as well, but that's another story.)

They drove past the glistening white salt beds of the Dampier Salt Company, and past the narrow gully of Seven Mile Creek. It seemed to Red Dog that he could smell just a hint of lots of other dogs on the wind.

Patsy wanted to turn right to go to the industrial estate at Karratha, but Red Dog had other ideas. He made her stop at the turning, and jumped out through the window, crossing the road and then trotting off into the town centre. He amused himself for a while by chasing the shadows of birds, and pouncing on them, and then he caught that smell of dogs again.

Red Dog liked some other dogs, but he often got into fights with the ones that he didn't. He was never afraid of a fight, but was annoyed by being dabbed with stinging antiseptics, so he avoided fights unless it was absolutely a matter of personal honour or extreme dislike. In this case he didn't catch a whiff of any of his enemies. He followed his nose until he arrived at a patch of wasteland that would one day be a carpark for Karratha City shopping centre, and found to his delight that there was indeed something interesting going on.

Most people had cattle dogs or kelpies, or mongrels, but some people in the Pilbara had pedigree dogs. These folk were proud of their animals, and regretted never having a chance to show them off, so they had formed a kennel club, and begun to organise shows and competitions. They met up on agreed dates, judges were appointed, rosettes and certificates were made in advance, and competitors obsessively snipped off stray hairs, shampooed and combed coats, tried to disguise blemishes, and put their pets through strict regimes of obedience training.

Here they all were. There were whippets from Whim Creek, Rottweilers from Roebourne, poodles from Port Hedland, cairns from Carnarvon, Pekinese from Paraburdoo, pugs from Pannawonica, corgis from Coral Bay, Dalmatians from Dampier, English sheepdogs from Exmouth and even a mutt from Mungaroon, which its owner was claiming to be a new breed.

They had got to the point in the proceedings when all the competitors were lined up in a row, waiting to step forward for their awards, and when all the judges were conferring in order to add up points and finalise their decisions.

Red Dog surveyed this curious scene with much interest and decided that, of all the people there, the judges were clearly the most important. In order to make his mark he walked with great dignity up to their table, and peed on to one of its legs. Having thus left his visiting card he paraded slowly along the line of smart dogs and their equally smart owners. The dogs he ignored altogether, but he recognised many bitches that he had flirted with all over the Pilbara, and whom he visited whenever he could get a lift in their direction. He greeted them happily with sniffing and playfighting, much to the horror of their owners, whose comical and panicky attempts to shoo him away he ignored.

The judges in the meantime were watching Red Dog's intervention with both concern and amusement. Some of them had given Red Dog lifts in their own cars, and knew that he was a local celebrity. In later years they would even

vote to have a picture of his head as the official badge of their club, but just now they were wondering what to do. Red Dog saved them any further trouble, however, because, having paraded along the line in one direction, he now paraded along it in the other, as if he himself were a judge with some difficult decisions to make.

Finally he went over to the judges' desk and peed on it again, although this time on a different leg, and then he decided to go home. He loped off back to the roadside, and waited for a familiar car. This time it was Nancy Grey who took him back to Dampier, and she made extra sure that all the windows were wide open.

One of John's friends telephoned him that evening and told him what his dog had been up to that afternoon. John looked down at Red Dog, who was fast asleep in the corner, and laughed. He said, 'I'm surprised that he didn't just jump right up on that table and award himself all of the prizes.'

End of episode 5