

## Red Dog 12

Red Dog was born in 1971 and died in 1979 in Western Australia

### The Last Journey

For all of us there comes a time when the luck runs out.

Red Dog was only eight years old, but he had had a tough existence, riding all over Western Australia looking for his lost master, getting in fights, eating too much some of the time, too little at other times, getting shot at, falling off the backs of lorries, freezing at night and roasting by day. His dark red muzzle became flecked with grey, his limbs stiffened and sometimes he felt just a little too tired to chase the shadows of birds. Worst of all, though, was the casual malice of some of the human beings who crossed his path.

One day Nancy was grooming him, when she found bullet holes through his ears. That was one more of his narrow escapes, but then one Saturday in November Peeto was driving from Karratha to Dampier when he saw something dark red in the stones at the side of the road, lying on the ground, and quivering. He backed up and got out. He looked down in horror. Red Dog was writhing and twisting, in his amber eyes an expression of terrible pain. 'Oh jeez; oh jeez,' Peeto muttered to himself as he struggled to lift the dog into his truck.

Fortunately for Peeto, Bill the policeman drove by. Bill and Peeto had never really got along since Bill had charged Peeto with drunk-driving whilst coming home with Red Dog all those years before, after Red Dog had been shot. In this case it was only a moment before he and Peeto had forgotten their differences altogether.

'What the hell is it?' asked Peeto, gesturing towards the suffering animal.

'It's poison, mate,' said Bill. 'Strychnine. I've seen it before. They get these convulsions that last for hours, and then they die.'

'Who'd give Red poison, for God's sake? He's everyone's pet dog.'

Bill shook his head knowingly. 'The things I've seen since I was a policeman, you just wouldn't believe. I tell you, mate, there's no animal lower than us in the whole damn world.'

They looked at Red in his agony, and Peeto said, 'Let's take him to the copshop and call the vet out. I don't reckon it'll do him any good to go all the way to Roebourne.'

So it was that Red Dog was laid down on the table at the police station, where Bill tried to hold him still whilst Peeto called the vet. He came back looking grim.

'The vet's away,' he said. 'I've left a message, but they don't know when he'll be back.'

Peeto called up Red Dog's friends, and they arrived one by one to take it in turns to hold on to him and quell the convulsions during the long hours until the vet's arrival. By the time the vet arrived the following morning, they were all hollow-eyed with exhaustion and pity.

The vet listened to Red's heart and shook his head. 'It's strychnine,' he

confirmed. 'I guess he must have eaten dingo bait.'

'There aren't any dingoes here,' said Peeto.

'People leave out poison anyway,' said the vet, sighing. 'The stationmen blame wild dogs and dingoes for just about everything, and nowadays you've even got people who put out poison for cats, 'cause they're not a native species. It makes me sick.'

'Yeah, well,' reflected Peeto, 'None of us is a native species either.'

The vet looked sadly down at his old mate on the table, and Patsy asked, 'Are you going to put him down?'

'I damn well ought to,' said the vet. 'He's a strong old dog, though, and I'm going to give him a chance. I'm going to have to ask four of you to hold him still while I give him an injection. He mustn't move at all. I can't have the needle breaking off. Understood?'

It was almost impossible to keep the animal immobile, but finally the vet jabbed the needle into him and quickly pressed down on the plunger. Red Dog's friends watched with bated breath as his twitching and shaking gradually subsided, until finally he lay still. 'Hey, doc,' said Vanno in a hushed and admiring voice. 'It's a bloody miracle.'

'It's an anti-convulsant,' said the vet. 'I ought to have make him sick first, to get the rest of the poison out, but I think it would have killed him.'

The vet kept Red Dog unconscious for two and a half days, administering small doses of anti-convulsant every time that the shaking and writhing began to start up again, and after that it took Red another twelve hours to get to his feet. In the meantime a rumour had gone round the shire that Red Dog was dead, and the local paper printed a story reporting the poisoning, but saying that Red had made a recovery.

Certainly, that was how it seemed. He was clumsy and unsteady, but he emptied his bowl of food, wagged his tail when his well-wishers called in, and even escaped for a while to the Walkabout Hotel, where he knew there were people who were generous with tasty titbits. The effort of going there was too much for him, however, and the vet came round to fetch him back.

Everyone was elated at Red Dog's recovery, and he began to receive cards at the vet's surgery, but the vet had a bad feeling about it all, and was not altogether surprised when Red Dog's clumsiness began to get worse. He was walking into the furniture, falling over sideways and then struggling valiantly but hopelessly to get up. He still had his appetite, but finally that was all that he did have left. The vet rang round his friends.

'He's been falling over, and now he can't get up at all. It's obvious that he's got brain damage. He's not himself, and he's never going to be. You know, you can look in an animal's eyes, and when the light goes out, you know it's time to give in. I'm really sorry. We tried, but now we've got to finish. Anything else would be too unkind.'

Patsy, Ellen, Nancy, Bill, the ranger, Don, and some of the boys from Dampier Salt and Hamersley Iron all called in to say goodbye to Red Dog. The men tried not to show their feelings, because that's how Aussie men are, but their throats were so choked with sorrow that none of them could speak. They patted Red,

and ruffled his ears for the last time. Silently they filed out, unwilling to look each other in the eye in case they lost control. Only Vanno cried, because he was Italian, and that was all right in Italy. Between his tears Vanno swore that if he ever found out who it was that had poisoned Red Dog, there was going to be hell to pay, and that's for sure.

The women came in and kissed Red Dog on the top of his head, stroking his neck and weeping. One by one they knelt down and hugged him. When they had gone, the vet came in. He made his own private farewells to this character who had been so much part of his life since he had arrived in this hard and captivating part of Australia. He thought about how much the place had changed in the few years of Red's life. Now there were houses instead of caravans, and tarmac in place of stones. It was as if the passing of Red Dog symbolised the passing of old Roebourne Shire.

He thought about how he used to think that Red was lots of different dogs that all looked the same, about how many times he had dealt with Red Dog's accidents and emergencies, and how few times he had ever actually been paid for it. He thought about how much he would miss this obstinate, valiant soul, who seemed such a typical Western Australian, even though he was only a dog. He looked into Red's tired and pained eyes, stroked his head and said, 'Time to go, old mate, time to go.' He breathed deeply a couple of times to overcome his regret and steady his mind, and then he performed the lethal injection. Then he lowered Red's body gently sideways on to the table as he drifted off into his last long sleep.

Who knows what went through Red Dog's dreams? Perhaps he was young again, galloping back from the airfield in Paraburdoo. Perhaps he was chasing the shadows of birds on the beach, or out in the bush chasing wallabies, or in the caravan park, watching the scarlet sunset with Red Cat. After half a lifetime of looking for John, perhaps in that final dream he found him.

Bill and the vet buried Red Dog in a simple grave in the bush between Roebourne and Cossack. There is no-one now who remembers where that grave was, and no headstone was ever placed above it. His friends eventually raised a bronze monument to him in Dampier, otherwise nothing is left but the stories, and his collar, whose tag reads 'Red Dog – Bluey' on one side, and 'I've been everywhere, mate' on the other.