

Red Dog 7

Red Dog, living in Western Australia in a rough mining area, has all the workers at the Hamersley Iron Works doing his bidding – he’s got his own seat on the bus, he gets rides all over the district with anyone he chooses. But his favourite person, the one person he really loves, is John, and his possessive behaviour and terrible smelly wind-breaking have ruined any chance of John having any other close relationship.

Red Dog and the woman from Perth

One evening John was sitting in his hut drinking tea, when there was a scratch at the door. It was Red Dog’s scratch, so he got up to let him in. Just as he was reaching the doorhandle, however, there was also a knock. ‘Strewth,’ thought John, ‘Red’s learned a new trick.’

He opened it, and there was Red Dog with someone he had never seen before. She was a woman in early middle age, with a tightly permed hairstyle and a worried but resolute expression.

‘Sorry to bother you,’ she said, ‘but I’ve come about the dog.’

‘I’m not selling him,’ said John. ‘In fact I’d sooner sell me mum. If she was still alive, that is.’

‘Oh, I don’t want to buy him,’ said the woman. ‘I’ve just come because I’m worried about him, and I know he’s yours.’

‘Belongs to everyone, really,’ said John, ‘but I’m his best mate. What’s up then?’

‘It’s the ticks,’ said the woman.

‘Ticks?’

‘Yes. Look, my name’s Ellen Richards, and I just moved up here from Perth, and I’ve got a job at Hamersley, in the admin office, and I heard there’s a problem with ticks round here.’

‘Yes,’ said John, ‘you burn ‘em on the backside with a hot needle, and they drop off, and you kill ‘em in metho.’

‘Yes,’ said Ellen. ‘It’s just that Red visited me this evening, and I couldn’t help noticing that he’s got ticks.’

‘He gets them sometimes,’ said John. ‘I check him every couple of days.’

‘Well, I checked him too,’ said the woman, ‘and I found some on his ears and one on his back and I burned them off, but there are some strange brownish pink ones on his stomach, and I can’t get them off; and when I try to burn them off he just squeals. I’m worried about it, and as he’s your dog, I thought I ought to let you know.’

It was John’s turn to be concerned. ‘Ticks on his stomach?’

‘Yes, on both sides.’

John called Red Dog and rolled him over on his back. He lay there with his paws in the air, wondering whether his master was going to rough him up and tickle him, which was very acceptable, or whether the woman would be coming

at him with hot needles again, which definitely was not. 'Where are those ticks?' asked John.

The woman knelt down and pointed. 'Look,' she said, 'there's about four or five on each side.'

John was horrified. 'You haven't been putting hot needles on those?'

'Yes,' she replied, 'but they wouldn't drop off.'

John scratched his head in disbelief. 'And he squealed, did he?'

'Oh yes. It was horrible. I think that when I burn them they just bite into him harder. Maybe you should take him to the vet.'

'Listen, lady,' said John, 'I can't think of a nice way to put this, but those aren't ticks.' He paused, thinking how best to express himself. 'You've never had a dog of your own then?'

'Oh, yes, I've had several.'

'Were they dogs or bitches, then?'

'Both. I've had both.'

'And you've never noticed?'

'Never noticed what?'

'They've all got.....well.....they've all got tits. Even the dogs. They don't use 'em, but they got 'em.'

Ellen put her hand to her mouth. 'You mean?'

John nodded, 'Those aren't ticks, they're tits.'

She went pale and sat down on John's only chair; 'Oh my God,' she said, 'and I've been putting hot needles on 'em.' She forgot about John and went down on her knees. She put her arms around Red Dog's neck and started to cry ' Oh, Red, I'm so sorry I hurt you. I'm so sorry, so sorry.....'

Red Dog looked up at John, sharing this moment of embarrassment. Red liked to be hugged as much as the next dog, but not necessarily by somebody who was whining and wailing in his left ear, and whom he didn't know very well at all.

The next day, much to her shame, and much to the amusement of the workers at Hamersley Iron, Ellen discovered that the news of her mistake had got to work even before she did. 'Watch out for your tits, mates,' called the men, covering their chests with their hands, and pretending to run away.

It took years for Ellen to live it all down, but Red Dog came and visited her anyway, because he could forgive anyone who was generous with food, and she'd soon given up all that painful business with hot needles and methylated spirit.

Has Anyone Seen John?

John bought a nice powerful motorbike because, although he already had a car, he liked the idea of riding around on hot days with the breeze blowing in his face. Once or twice he put Red Dog on the seat in front of him, with his paws on the petrol tank, but he didn't seem to like it very much, greatly preferring the comfortable seats of trucks, buses and cars. When John kickstarted his bike, Red didn't make any moves to come too, as he always did when his master

started up the car. Instead he lay in front of the door, waiting for John to come back, or he consulted his encyclopaedic memory, and took a stroll to one of the houses where somebody might have fed him years before. Sometimes in the fierce summer he went to the shopping centre where Patsy had once tried to kick him out, and lay in the air-conditioned cool of one of the shops, seeming to know by instinct when John was due to return.

One night John went to have a meal at the house of a couple of friends, and he took the bike even though it was July and the nights had been very cold indeed. Red Dog was out on patrol, looking for other dogs to fight with and cats to chase, and by the time he came back, John had already gone to dinner. What happened after that dinner will always be a mystery.

John had had some beers, but he wasn't too drunk to drive. He was in a happy mood, and there didn't seem to be anything wrong with the bike.

There is a sharp bend on the road coming into Dampier, and in the undergrowth around the verges are heaps of the great red rocks that make the landscape of the Pilbara so particular.

John never made it round the bend of the road. He lost control of the motorbike, hit the kerb and went flying through the air. As bad luck and destiny would have it, he landed on a rock, which caved in his chest. He did try to crawl back to the roadside, and perhaps if he had reached it he might have been found in time. However, he was too weak and too greatly hurt. After a while that gentle animal-loving man, who was a friend to everyone, died all alone in a rocky patch of spinifex, with no-one except Red Dog to realise that he was missing.

The next morning John did not appear for work. He was not there by breaktime, and so Jocko went round to John's hut. He found Red Dog waiting outside the door. The dog got to his feet and greeted Jocko with some relief. 'Where's your mate?' asked Jocko, and Red Dog flattened his ears and wagged his tail. It always gave him pleasure when someone mentioned his mate.

Jocko knocked again, and waited for a while. If John was there, he wouldn't have locked his dog out. John's car was there, but there was no motor-bike leaning against the wall at the back. With a sinking feeling in his heart, Jocko remembered that the previous night John had said that he was going out to eat with friends. Jocko went back to the depot and rang them up. 'John left at elevenish,' he was told. 'Why? What's up?'

'Was he on his bike?'

'Yes.'

'He never got home,' said Jocko.

Jocko borrowed a company truck and drove over to the friends' house, then drove back in the direction of John's accommodation. He watched the road with the eye of experience. There were always places that were especially dangerous for motorcyclists. When he came to the sharp bend, he stopped and got out. He wandered over to the other side and looked down into the hollow.

It was a very small community back then, and everybody knew everybody else. John had been well liked and for several days everybody felt a sense of shock

and loss. He had died with the best part of his life still to live, leaving behind grieving friends, and a devoted pet dog who had no idea what had occurred, and never would.

Amid all the sadness and the arrangements for the funeral, everyone forgot about Red Dog, and it wasn't until three days had passed that anyone noticed that he was still waiting outside John's hut. John's friends brought food, which Red Dog would eat, before lying down in the dust with a heavy sigh to wait once more.

After three weeks Red Dog came into the transport depot in case John was there. The drivers treated him as an old friend, and he spent half his time in the depot, and half his time waiting for John outside his empty hut.

No-one knows exactly how a dog thinks, but Red Dog's mind was full of a single great question: 'Where is John?'

There is only one thing worse than losing the one you love the most, and that is losing them without knowing why. Red Dog had only one plan. He went to every place that he and John had ever visited together, and sniffed in every corner to find a trace of his master. When the scents faded, he looked up into the face of each person he met, hoping that somehow they might divine his trouble and lead him out of it.

It was from this time that Red Dog became the Pilbara Wanderer, who belonged to everyone because he couldn't find the one he loved the most, and wouldn't settle for less.

End of episode 7

1794 words including intro