

The dog who wouldn't play dead

Stepping out into that hot January evening, I was jolted into remembering where I was. Being cocooned in the air-conditioned luxury of the Trans-Australian Railroad for the last thirty hours had isolated me from reality.

Now the heat, the smell of a strange land brought back that smug feeling: at home it was no doubt snowing, freezing and all my friends would be cursing.

With almost three hours until my next train, I strolled towards the town. Several blocks from the station, I heard the noise and laughter of an apparently large crowd and following my ears I wondered through open gates into a huge beer garden. There must have been several hundred guests. Thinking perhaps I had intruded on a private party, I was about to ask, when a six-piece band, elevated on the back veranda of the adjoining hotel blasted forth a typically modern American rock-and-roll number. I had in fact heard the tune three weeks before while I waited two and a half hours in L.A. for my 707 to be repaired with a seventy-five cent screwdriver.

Well, the entire scene was unexpected. Young girls were dressed in evening clothes and artfully arranged hair-dos; the young men, all sporting Olympus-type tans, had on clean linen and the inevitable knee socks and shorts. Middle-aged mums and dads were up there dancing to a song the words to which I had never been able to decode.

You are probably wondering why I found all this so strange. No doubt you've seen pictures of Sydney with its skyscrapers and revolving restaurants, right? Let me tell you then that this

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town was 2,000 miles from double-decker buses, hydrofoils and discotheques. This was a gold-mining town in Western Australia.

I had an inexplicable feeling of disappointment. Where was the bush, the loneliness, the uncivilized I had expected to find out here? It certainly wasn't here amidst this smartly-dressed laughing group. Not here, with the same un-music I didn't understand at home.

Weaving my way through the tables and past the ant-men line carrying large glass pitchers of beer, I eventually reached the hotel pub. It was considerably quieter and dimly lit – an atmosphere which created a feeling of less heat and less open to the sky. So I decided to wait there.

He came in from the lobby and walked over to a table of five men, who, like me, had apparently sought sanctuary inside. Since the cut of his hair or should I say, his un-barbered hair and unpolished boots and clothes not donned for dancing with sweet-smelling ladies, I guessed he was a friend of theirs and came to join them. However, he took a four-time folded sheet of paper from his pocket, opened it and seemed to be asking if they had seen whatever it was.

The five passed it around and each shook his head. Then he approached the barman who also replied negatively. I had hoped he would ask me. Perhaps it was someone who had been on my train and I had studied them with intent and out of boredom while we traveled for hours and hours through the Nullarbor. (At the risk of sounding pedantic, I tell you that word means “no trees” only so you understand my ennui).

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But the stranger sat down at the waist-high bar and ordered a seven. Only when his glass was empty did he glance at me. Shifting over to the stool next to me, he took out his single sheet of paper again and inquired, albeit with a prepared negative thought, that I too would say no.

“Have you seen this?”

Having already jumped to the conclusion it was a picture of an escaped criminal, or secondly, a Pomme family lost in the bush, or way down on my list, a stolen racehorse, I was totally unprepared for what I saw.

It was a crayon colored, rough, amateurish sketch of a dog!

I was so confounded I committed a breach of good Aussie manners and exclaimed, “What on earth is important about finding him. He looks like a mutt.”

If he was startled by my rudeness, at least he had the grace not to show it and replied, “He is important to some.”

Since he did not then show me the seat of his pants, I asked if he would join me in a pint, to which he agreed. When he quickly finished that, I invited him to tell me about this strange looking dog he was searching for so diligently. From here on, this is his story.

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"About a year ago, he showed up at Kathy Downs. He wasn't there one night but the next morning he was.

"Our squatter's name is MacLeod. He's a good boss. He eats with us and we do our work together. That early morning at breakfast we discussed moving one of the mobs to the south pens, so afterwards we saddle and whistle up our dogs. Coming up behind our five is this strange piece of black fur. He don't run with them, he follows some two hundred feet behind.

"Now this is odd. First off we never see a strange dog around our station and then, our dogs are ignoring him which ain't like them at all. Sometimes a neighboring station will fly over a bitch and even under those circumstances, our dogs aren't friendly. Which will give you an idea of their lack of hospitality.

"Mr. MacLeod asks if we've seen this dog before and none of us ever laid eyes on him, much less one like him. He must weigh seventy pounds and he's black all over except for tan feet and feathers. And he's got those feathers all over him. The tips of his ears, the backside of each leg and down his long tail. Then, he's got a great mane of hair all around his neck. He's so homely, he's kinda of fascinating.

"Since he seemed to be safe, we don't shoot him. We ride about one hour, with our dogs sometimes ahead, sometimes beside us and sometimes they look back to see if this black piece

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of fur is still bringing up the rear. All of a sudden this dog ranges around us and runs on ahead out of sight.

“When we ride up an hour later to the mob we're about to move, there he is, sitting in front of the gate. Now, how did he know which mob we're going to move? Did he look at the pasture and see it gone?

“We open the gate and our dogs go in and start the mob a' moving. They're good border collies abut they got their likes and dislikes. A couple of them are getting old and short-tempered and would rather lay in a dust hole during sun hours. And all of them are afraid of Moses.

“That's what we named an old ram in that mob. Moses can still stand on his hind legs so he's useful – probably sired more lambs than any in this land. But he's a holy terror. He hates everything and everyone except his harem. We've had to shoot two of our horses on account of him and he's slaughtered three dogs which got too close. He's just plain wicked. I've cocked my gun at him more times than I care to admit. Even Mr. MacLeod, who has the mildest temper you've ever had the pleasure of doing business, with, has done it.

“Well, to get back to this black dog – he's in the pen working those bloody sheep like a pro. Our dogs are barking, running around like they're mad and doing what they've been trained to do. This stranger don't open his yap. He's getting his work done all quiet-like. You'd think maybe

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the sheep would get excited. After all, they never saw an animal like this before much less being nosed around like one. Yet, there he was, creating nothing but a good, solid days' work.

"We're so busy watching, we forgot about that evil Moses. There's a knoll in that section and the new one has gone to the other side to see if there's any strays, while our dogs are bringing out the last dozen or so.

"And there stands Moses. He's got his hooves apart, his horns down and eternal fire and brimstone erupting inside his 200 pounds. He's so mad, he's quivering and just waiting for that black piece of fur to come running back up the rise into his sight. I found myself thinking we were going to see that dog's brains spread all over the brown earth, when here he came bringing two more sheep. Moses sort of snorts and those two last sheep start jumping. None of us are going in there and risk losing our horses, so all we can do is watch.

"The dog sees Moses and stops in his tracks. One minute he's running and the next he's clock still. Maybe there was a thousand feet between them.

"Moses charges like a mortar shell at Gallipoli and that dog just stands there 'till the distance is narrowed by half and then he starts flying right at Moses. They got so close I had to strain to keep my eyes open. A split second before that horny head rips, the dog swerves around that bloody ram. Moses can't stop, so he keeps charging down on the other side of the knoll.

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“So that puts the dog close to the gate and we all start yelling, “Come on out, dog! Here dog!”
But he sits down and waits. He ain't even got his tongue out his mouth and it must have been over 100 degrees that morning.

“Soon, back up the knoll comes Moses. He gets to the top and assumes his stance. You can almost hear his beady brain thinking he's gonna split that damn piece of fur in two. So they go at it again. That dog runs so fast he blurs your vision and then he avoids that charge just when you know he can't possibly do it.

“Saw a film once about two chaps playing a kind of game. They had a horse and a long pole. They start off at opposite ends of a great field and galloped towards each other until one knocked the other off his horse. Well, this dog and Moses were playing that kind of game, only Moses was playing for death. By this time, we're all a 'whooping and hollering, with best going – about equally divided between the dog and Moses. I noticed Mr. MacLeod put his on the dog. We didn't keep count how many times those charges took place but I guess maybe nine or ten. We argued over this for weeks after.

“The last time, Moses headed for the knoll. He disappeared from sight. The damn dog sat down and waited and you know, he still wasn't panting.

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"We wait and wait. Maybe ten minutes and still Moses don't come back. Mr. MacLeod said he'd bet that stupid ram killed himself. So the dog trots down toward the knoll, and we ride in after him.

"Moses is at the bottom – spread eaged and his sides going in and out like a pair of bellows. That food dog trotted up to him and puts his nose dead center between Moses eyes like he was claiming victory.

"Soon Moses drags himself up and moves slowly back up the hill with the dog walking by his side. Being bested don't change Moses – he still hates a lot but he never gave the dog any more trouble as long as he was there.

"That evening when cook whistled up our dogs for their food, the new one sat on the outside of our camp circle and waited 'til he was asked in even though he was entitled to twice his share. Mr. MacLeod said when we got back we'd better try to find out to whom he belonged because as he put it, "he's of value to someone.' We never did though.

"The boss and that dog became friends. He'd been with us about a month I think, when he moved into the house. Up until then he slept outside with our dogs as he was supposed to. But one night he nosed open the kitchen fly-screen and went into the office where Mr. MacLeod was working. He laid down beside the desk until the boss got ready for bed and then he laid down beside the bed. That's where he slept for some time to come.

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"We called that dog every name we could think of: Rover, Spots, Blackie, all the way down to Zachary. He'd simply sit and stare at us, so we called him Dog and he answered to that and only that.

"All this time we never heard Dog make a sound. Not a yap, yelp or bark came out of him. We talked about it and decided he was a mute. So one night as we were smoking after our tucker, and dog was sitting with his head on Mr. MacLeod's lap, getting his ears scratched, we were as shocked as if we'd found a scorpion after we'd pulled on our boots.

"For Dog stood up, walked stiff legged to the fly-screen and let out the most hair-raising murderous alarm you ever heard. Every feather was taut as a strung bow. His mouth was drawn back and down showing fangs we'd never noticed. His great mane of neck hair was ruffled up like a tidal wave and that gut deep ferocious snarl was affecting the hair on the back of my neck. Don't know what my mates felt, they never said, but I had a shiver inside me. Dog had never once drawn a lamb's blood even after carrying it a mile or so, never shown distemper, and here he was, looking and active and sounding so different what he had let us see before. I tell you, if I had been on the outside of that door, even knowing him as I did and he knowing me, I couldn't have come in without a gun for all the winning tickets of the Melbourne from then on out."

It was right here that I became aware of many things in a single second.

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At first, when my dog-searcher stopped his story I thought he was mentally reliving that fearsome scene of a tame animal suddenly turned savage. Then I thought, 'No, he's thirsty.' After all, telling a story and listening to one as intently as I had been put cotton in the mouth but I saw our pints had been refilled although I couldn't remember getting them or being served. Next, I became aware someone was calling my name and at the same time I wondered who knew my name. The name-caller touched me on my arm and when I turned around I recognized the wine steward from the train. Even though I had last seen him wearing the traditional white coat of a dining car attendant and he was now wearing the summer Aussie suit of socks, sandals and shorts and shirt. He advised me my train would be departing in five minutes.

The fact that I am a clock-watching, time-oriented American caused me to stand up and say, 'Oh' before I sat back down and said, 'I can't.'

The steward simply nodded acceptance and waited for me to remember my luggage would now have been placed on board. This caused me some hesitation because also being a typical American traveler, I couldn't imagine being separated from it. He solved my obvious dilemma by saying he would fetch it if the story teller would wait to finish his story.

When he had trotted off I wondered aloud if I could book a room at the hotel this late on the eve of a National holiday. I must admit I was somewhat non-plussed to hear a man with

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assurance that I could. Looking around to find who had the authority, I saw that the story-teller and I were surrounded. Five of them must have moved over to us, those who had shared a table when I first saw them; there were perhaps six or seven who had showed up from somewhere and obviously the train attendant had also joined us.

All of this, as I said, took such a brief time but I felt like a TV viewer who, left with the good guy hanging by his fingernails from an icy cliff crevice on Mount Everest, is spoon-fed six commercials before the station break and seven after.

The steward came back with my luggage and I suddenly remembered the booking agent telling me my accommodations on the Trans-Australian were sold out for months, so I certainly wouldn't be able to leave here on a train. A phrase I had repeatedly overheard since being in this upside down country was, 'Not to worry, Mate.' I tried it on.

Now, we were thirteen or fourteen for the steward had picked up half an empty glass so I was right – it was his and he'd been here before. I remembered to thank him and turned to prod our story-teller to please continue. Our group nodded.

"Mr. MacLeod went over to try to calm Dog but he couldn't. That fearful noise just went on and on. One of the Hands ventured, 'Gone mad, he has.' But he didn't believe it any more than the rest of us. The boss left to get his gun and we emptied the cook-house in a tumbled hurry. Dog was the first out and that was the last time but one he was ever in the main house.

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“While most nights star light guides us, that night was ass-black as a burnt out cane field. We couldn't see in which direction Dog had vanished, nor hear him, for he was no more through the door than that liver-splitting noise stopped.

“It's peculiar – when you are straining to see or hear something different, how aware you are of what you do know. I mean, standing out there I knew the generator was kicking over, the wind-rigs were clapping, the horses were settling down, and one of the dogs was gnawing on a mutton bone. The shadows of the dumpies, sheds and all building looked like they were supposed to. We didn't find a thing out of place. Mr. MacLeod rode out to check the plane and brought back the key.

“Afterwards Cook boiled up a pot and we lit up again. Mr. MacLeod said maybe Dog had heard a storm off somewhere which would account for the back sky and the wind-rigs working but you could he said it without much conviction. Dog didn't come back that night.

“Next morning, four of the hands were leaving for a couple of days to stretch new fences and the rest of us were going to muster some Herefords for the road train. First time I could recall the boss didn't join either of our two groups. We all knew he was waiting for Dog to come back.

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"As it happened, we were all starting in the same direction. About ten miles out, where we would have parted company, we spied Dog.

"He's sitting under a big white gym. On the other side is a pair of scuffed boots turned up sole-wise. So glad we were to see Dog, even those had had lost a few quid on account of him, we didn't stop to think there might have been something attached to those boots. When we rode near enough to see there was a body lying in them boots, I don't doubt every last Jack of us thought Dog had killed him.

"Well, he was alive all right but barely. Only thing there wasn't a mark on him. We unloaded the billy cans and tucker off a horse and slung the sick jackeroo over it and headed back for home.

"Turns out this lad is just out of hospital. Been wounded in Nam, doctor in Viv dismisses him and tells him to rest and relax for a month or two. 'Stead of that, the crazy kid starts looking for work and walking while he does it. He's so thin, a willy-willy wouldn't have no trouble blowing him clear from Darwin into the Bight.

"After a few weeks, during which Dog don't leave his side, not even to work and earn his keep, the lad can walk around again and ask Mr. MacLeod if he can stay on and work. Says he don't want no wages 'till he's paid back his care.

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"The boss tells Jimmy, that was his name, to ask if I can use him. The boss is like that. I say we can try him for a while especially as we got shearing on the Merinos coming in a month or so.

"Jimmy proves only middling as a jackeroo. I mean, he don't extend himself greatly, even after he put on some poundage and stopped looking like an unbaked loaf of damper. He just don't fit in the bunk house. Always seems to be laughing at us even when he's not smiling. Won't play two-up with us, calls it an 'idiot game for moronic adults.' And it's always those 'bloody sheep' and 'bloody politicians' and 'bloody uneducated brown land.' Once he said, 'You don't own this land, it owns you.'

"Now we've all cursed the sheep, the lack of water, the tax men at one time or another but we say it without deep rancor. Jimmy meant it ... he really meant it. None of us would leave this land if given a choice but Jimmy would turn his weak back on it in a minute.

"It begins to affect us in the bunk house. Our talk gets less and our laughter little. I'm turning over in my mind how to put it to Mr. MacLeod. First time that has happened. What we say to each other we say as friends. But you see, around the boss Jimmy was different. He didn't exactly lie; he was just quiet. And then there was the part about his being a wounded veteran. We Aussies are always sentimental about our solders, especially those that lost.

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"Jimmy and Dog were hardly ever apart. Dog slept by his bunk and only when Jimmy came in the cook house for meals, did Dog wait outside. Jimmy played with him a lot. Spent hours trying to teach him to shake hands or fetch.

"I was up fixing one of the rigs one day when Jimmy was throwing sticks and saying 'Fetch, Dog. Got get it, Dog.' Dog sat and stared at Jimmy like he always did. All the time Jimmy's grinning and muttering. 'You stupid beast – you're like all the rest of the animals 'round here.' Then he hopped off the fence post, fetched back the sticks himself and started all over again. 'Fetch, Dog.' And Dog sat and stared at him.

"I could tell Jimmy was getting mad inside him but he still had that grin on his face.

"Come on you rangy mutt. Maybe you can play dead,' and he jumped down and grabbed Dog by two legs and threw him on his side. I remember it so well; I can still see the dust fly when Dog hit the ground.

"Bang, you're dead! Dead dog – dead dog – dead dog.' Jimmy cried, still holding him down. 'If you get up when I let you go, Dog. I'm going to kick you the way to Malbboma."

"Jimmy must have forgotten I was up there 'cause he looked startled as if he had jumped his horse and forgotten to tighten his cinch when I shouted down, "Jimmy, I wouldn't do that if I was you,' and right after I heard myself say that I knew I was going to tell the boss that jackeroo

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would have to go. But he let go of Dog and looking up said, 'Certainly, Big Man, was only playing.'

"I can't prove what I'm about to tell you 'cause there wasn't no one else there, but that do was grinning!

"That night after supper I asked to see the boss in his office and I tell him Jimmy wasn't fitting in. He went quiet for a few minutes and then he said, 'All right, Mike. I'll tell him in the morning.' It was so simple I felt like a stray jackass for not doing it before.

"Now I got to tell you the rest of the story as Mr. MacLeod told it to me 'cause you see I wasn't there when it happened.

"The boss said he was still working on the books about eleven that evening when he heard a tap on the door. Turning around he saw Jimmy standing outside. Jimmy asked if he could speak to him for a minute and was told to come in. When Jimmy entered he had the boss's 'roo gun in his hands.

"Mr. MacLeod said, 'Put the gun down, Jimmy. You don't want to make a mistake now. Apparently the boss's quiet words enraged him 'cause Jimmy started trembling and if there's one gun you don't want a nervous finger one, it's that one.

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"Jimmy, dizzy with his own creating, walked unsteadily towards Mr. MacLeod and said, 'I want the key to the plane and I want all the money you've got in that top drawer and maybe, just maybe, if you don't give me another word, I won't shoot you.'

"Then they both hear Dog. He'd slipped inside and gone wild again like the night before Jimmy came. He streaks for Jimmy with those fangs bared and Jimmy reels and pulls the trigger.

"Dog gave a grunt and fell on his side.

"The boss, with the side of his hand, hits Jimmy below the ear and he sinks to the floor. In the bunk house, we hear the shot and we run. When we get there, Jimmy is still unconscious and Dog is stand over him with his nose pressed between Jimmy's eyes. You see, Jimmy didn't know Dog like we did.

"After they took Jimmy away the next day, Dog disappeared. One minute he was there and the next he wasn't. Mr. MacLeod sent me out to look for him. I've been looking for six months now."

I stayed in Australia for another five months. Everywhere I went, I looked and asked about Dog. Since leaving, I've looked in such unlikely places as Shanghai, Istanbul and Texas.

You haven't seen him, have you?