

# Wild Dog

BY JULIENNE VAN LOON

The stray animal rounded the corner of Rosedale Road and Thomas Street at a slow trot, his bony hips tilted slightly to give the effect of walking at a tangent, the front legs not quite square with the back. His coat was yellow and thinning, the skin beneath dotted with the pus-filled scabs of kangaroo ticks. A fragile ribcage pressed outwards along his torso, but the animal's slender head was held firm and low. The dog had a purpose about him, his eyes bright despite the hunger. He moved impatiently, following his nose along the thin line of a powerful scent carried towards him on the warm northeasterly. It was a wind coming straight off the desert.

The town was still, the last of the tourists having returned to the city several days earlier as the temperature rose relentlessly upward and the sun drowned the landscape in a steady, reliable heat. The houses were all closed up, blinds and shutters drawn and verandah-awnings pulled down. The children were inside. Those people who could afford air-conditioning were running it, so that a droll electrical whirr beat out across the hot streets, a backdrop to the chorus of cicadas that skirted the roadside all the way down to the lake. Outside the tiny shopping centre on the tourist route, a white refrigerated van with its generator running, its back door open wide, was parked backing onto the butcher's shop. The animal could smell it.

The black tar was scalding against the dog's paws as he circled the van, crouched low, but the sweet scent of kill was strong and saliva streamed from his mouth. He could hear the drone of men's voices through the plastic strips that hung in the shop's doorway and he was wary. He knew too much of men already. Gloomily, he surveyed the empty carpark. He muzzled the tyres of the truck, so blinded by the strength of scent, so enveloped in it, he could no longer tell from which direction it came, only that this was it, that he was upon it. He was almost delirious. It was all he could do not to whimper. He circled and took a short searing piss against a nearby petrol bowser, marking his space and turning his nose up against the breeze.

And then he found it again, the trail. The rich sharp scent, the open door. He took a risk and in one extended leap he was amidst it, closed in by the cool walls of the thick container that formed the truck's payload. He was right inside the carcass.

Joe Stefani was easily sidetracked. Inside the Chidlow butcher shop a TV showed the Test at the WACA, and Joe was lingering, while Steve Marlo, the local butcher, filled him in. Gillie had managed to clock up a century in 38-degree heat. They watched in awe as the batsman wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve and lowered his

Photograph by Bill Henson



bat onto the crease, readying himself once again for the next ball.

This afternoon Joe was more willingly side-tracked than ever. He knew that when it came time to climb back into the truck cab it would start again, the dialogue he'd been having with himself for weeks. It was about her, of course. It always was. Only now it was about something else as well. Jen and the kids. Leaving them. Walking away. He could do it. He *would* do it. He'd promised Marlene he would. And he'd been set to do it last week. He'd been ready. But then ... In the truck cabin he had convinced himself it was do-able. In the truck cabin last week it had seemed so easy, when he was rehearsing the whole thing. He'd even had the bag packed, stowed behind the seat. All that was left was to tell Jen. To say it and walk away. But then there was the way the littlest ran to you when you pulled up in the driveway, dropping whatever she'd been playing with, the way her eyes got big when you twirled her around, the way her small hands clasped at your neck. And so he'd stayed. And now it was so close to Christmas. And the truck cabin, now, every time he climbed back into it, it felt like defeat. It felt like a fucking time warp in there. It felt like a bad joke.

Wasim Akram bowled one of those bloody semi-legal numbers. Christ it was fast. A left-armer, too. Joe and Steve were shaking their heads when the call came over the shortwave radio ... *all available ... Chidlow reserves ... level three emergency ... repeat ...*

There was a fire out at Baker's Hill.

"Fuck it," said Steve. He was a volunteer with the local brigade. "The fucking apprentice is off. I'll have to close the fucking shop."

"Shit ... I'd better get a move on myself."

When Steve had signed the delivery docket, there was nothing for Joe to do but climb back into the truck.

The dog lay down at the sound of the man's voice, shrinking low inside the body of the vehicle. There was a loud squeak, a thump and then the rushing darkness. He was suddenly cold.

An engine sparked and the truck floor began to vibrate with a low hum. The dog felt the suggestion of movement, a lurching forward that made his body lean at an unfamiliar angle. He waited until the sound and the movement levelled out, then lifted his nose and inhaled the rich air. It was the smell, the smell, the smell. He was surrounded by it.

After a while it did not matter about the cold. The dog grew accustomed to the dark and breathed in the soft scents of heart and liver, heifer and lamb, the firm fresh shoulders of swine, the tender breasts of fowl. He glided his tongue along silky tenderloins. He buried his teeth in a fresh cut and then another

and another. Sometimes plastic caught in his teeth but he swallowed it too. He felt the cold meat swelling quickly inside his small stomach. He was almost dizzy. Perhaps this was a dream after all. After a time, he began to feel tired and bloated, delirious. He rolled luxuriously in the mess of blood and juice he had created on the floor of the truck, coating himself in its heavy sweet aroma. And then he slept to the methodical tick of the truck's engine, the occasional curve of the road tilting his dreams one way or another, just as it tilted the heavy dead beasts that hung on sharp hooks from the ceiling.

To the west of Baker's Hill a grass fire, having covered several hundred hectares of open land, was licking at the edge of the highway and begging to jump across to the state forest where jarrah and marri sat tall amongst dense dry undergrowth. Emergency vehicles lined the edges of the road a kilometre west of the thickest smoke and a policeman held a flat palm up against the traffic. Joe Stefani was unsure what to do. He had one delivery left, and it was for the conference and wedding centre, out past Wooroloo. It was a big order. They would be waiting for it. And he knew the chef there, a woman named Eleanor, his brother's wife's cousin. She had cleavage. Joe sat in the long stationary line of trucks and passenger vehicles, humming a song that was on the radio: *Like a rhinestone cowboy / Riding out on a horse in a star-spangled rodeo*. This was going to take forever. He killed the engine, leaned back and scratched his balls. He was not going to think about Marlene.

Something woke the dog. His eyes flicked open in a panic and he stood up. He was chilled to the bone and the cold metal floor was biting at the pads of his feet. Everything was dark and too quiet. He paced the short space of the small room and began to whine. His stomach was heavy. He felt sick. He scraped at the floor as if to dig but the surface was smooth and solid and there was no movement in it. He flung his weight against the wall. Nothing. Nothing but the thick scent of meat.

"Listen, bud ..." Joe was leaning out the window, motioning to the cop. "Any chance of getting through to the other side of Wooroloo? It's the last bloody delivery for the day, mate."

"Well, you got Buckley's here. The highway's well and truly closed. The Old Northam Road's open, but. Chuck a U-ey here and you could get on the Old Northam and loop round that way."

"Good on ya. Thanks mate."

The truck engine coughed to a start and the vehicle was moving again.



The Old Northam Road was full of curves and shallow valleys, and the truck made its way too fast along the faded grey bitumen. Above and to the south, the sky was darkening with bushfire cloud. The forest along the road's edge waited, waxy leaves faced toward the sun.

Joe Stefani was thinking about Marlene. It was impossible not to. There was the way she whispered to him last Wednesday. That soft, desiring voice of hers, warm against his ear. He was deep inside her in the back room of the small goods depot in Wangara and she was sinking her nails into his back. There was only one way to fuck a woman, really, no matter what the position. It was all about in and out, in and out. God, it was simple. But Marlene made it all seem different. Marlene woke him up to his own body. He'd never felt this good before. He'd never made a woman feel this good, he was sure of it. They were somewhere else altogether. And she screamed. She actually screamed! He smiled to himself. Marlene and he shared a language. It was a language that simply wasn't possible with Jen and never had been. Never would be. Joe's gut ached. He swallowed. And here he was, still in the bloody truck, just thinking about it. He was gutless. He was a shit.

There was a new sound overhead: the heavy chop of a low-flying helicopter. Joe wound down the window and sniffed the air outside his air-conditioned cabin. He was beginning to worry. He hadn't seen a single vehicle on the road since leaving the highway. And the wind was here again, although the direction had changed. Would he get through?

Shivering. The dog was shivering. He started to howl, a lonely high-pitched song that curled and coiled around the dark echo-chamber of the truck. He closed his eyes. There seemed nothing to breathe in. There seemed to be no air at all.

And here it was right upon them. Joe eased off the accelerator, uncertain whether to pull over or to slow down and drive right through. The fire was in the treetops, open to the wind and moving fast. Burning twigs and leaves were lifted towards the windscreen, up and out of the thick smoke sitting low in the valley of the road. Joe wound up the window and lifted the collar of his shirt up over his nose. He shifted the truck into low gear and drove on. He would be out the other side in a few moments, he was sure. It wasn't more than two or three kilometres to Wooroloo.

The haze thickened as Joe approached the final gully. He switched on his headlights. There was a roar like a train in his ear and smoke oozed into the truck cabin through the air vents and up through

the floor, making him cough. He watched as a willy-willy of flame peeled off from the edge of a small clearing and sped towards the vehicle, a narrow, twisting plume disappearing somewhere behind him as the truck moved forward. The windscreen did little to protect him from the radiant heat and he cowered behind the wheel as the cabin temperature soared. Joe sounded the truck's horn. Once, twice, three times. Small explosions punctuated the eucalyptus forest left and right, as if to echo the blare of his horn.

*Keep driving, he thought, drive on and out of it.*

Joe's truck hugged the road-edge and rolled smoothly around the last bend and into the townsite. But there was no less smoke. The streetlights were on, and somewhere a siren was wailing. The fire was alive in the town. The wind whistled in Joe's ear and a broken shade-umbrella cartwheeled across the road in front of him. He saw a double-storey house lit up by orange flame, the building's steel skeleton glowing like an x-ray before collapsing inward. He drove on, sweating heavily against the thin cotton of his shirt. Somewhere the rotating light of an emergency vehicle sent thin blue beams through the white smoke. Tears streamed down Joe's face and his eyes stung with the heat and the haze. Then he saw her. Out to the right, through the passenger window, a little girl was running across the town's sports oval, her hair alight in a bright halo of orange flame. She was like a signal to him, alive and frightening. He stopped the vehicle and almost fell out of the driver's seat as he pushed the door open.

Joe ran towards the burning child. He watched her forge a confused loop, circling towards him, away from him, towards. She was not screaming. But he was. He ran, pulling the shirt off his back, something to smother her with. And when he reached her, he dived on top of her, tumbling her, tumbling the flames, the shirt, everything as they rolled on the hot dry ground. Joe was crying as he scooped up the girl.

"Sorry, baby," he found himself saying. "Sorry."

She was light in his arms as they ran back toward the only familiar thing, the truck. She was so light, almost nothing. She was like air.

"We'll be safe in the back," he shouted, and saw trust on the girl's damaged face.

The mongrel was ready. There was a squeaking sound as the door shifted slightly and then a thin strip of light, orange and white, opened into a different kind of air, a burnt, polluted air. But it was enough. It was better than what he had. He sprang forward, growling, knocking the blurry human figures down and landing surely on swift feet. There was light and heat all around him, nothing but light and heat. He took off towards the oval, barking. **M**