

TREVOR SHEARSTON

Dog

Warner woke to the yelps of a dog, five frantic yelps on one breath. He wasn't conscious of counting, but when they stopped abruptly his mind said *five*, then, *gone*. He heard an idling motor and identified it from the clatter as a Volkswagen. The light in the room was grey, the powerlines along the top of the window were pink. He thought simultaneously, half past six and please, not Bonny, it'll break Helen's heart. But it was most likely Bonny. That stupid blind driveway. He felt in the folds of the doona for the T-shirt he'd worn to bed.

The Volkswagen was stopped above the gap in the mangroves where he and the Danns hauled up their dinghies. It was facing headed towards the beach, the wrong direction for this time of day. He heard a woman's voice. He couldn't see her, she was below the embankment. A man answered. There was a murmured discussion. Then Warner heard a soft weight dragged over the blue metal, through the hiss of loose gravel and finally onto the silence of grass. The top of the casuarina sucker growing from the base of the embankment shivered. One of them had wiped their hands on a tassel.

He knew the woman immediately when she emerged onto the road, Janice from the store. Of course, fetching the newspapers from town. She was wearing a fat yellow sweater, jeans and very white joggers. Then a head distracted him. For a few seconds all he could see was its hair bobbing along just above the grass, black hair. John Dann was fair. The side of the man's face came into view at the dip in the embankment. Terry, from the new couple who'd moved into the house the other side of Helen and John. If it had to be one of Terry's, he hoped it was the arthritic black Labrador. He'd almost hit her several times himself, dragging her hind legs across the road. The slam of its door pulled Warner's attention back to the Volkswagen. He heard the handbrake released. The car lurched as the tyres climbed up again onto the bitumen. Then she flattened the accelerator.

He and Vera should have been in China. Vera was in Sydney, he was painting the house. Her grandmother had suffered a stroke. They were told she might go quickly. But a week later she was still in a coma and the prognosis had shifted towards uncertainty. He came home, Vera stayed. Not because she could do anything, but because, as she said, she'd be useless anywhere else. He waited a further five days then cancelled tickets, hotels, the lot. He explained to friends that her grandmother had been her mother from the time Vera was eight. He rang the school to try to terminate his leave and was told it wasn't possible, his relief had been engaged on contract. So he was painting the house.

He decided in the shower to omit any mention of dead animals to Vera.

He gave the laundry ceiling its second coat, changed rollers, and began on the walls. He finished the short wall behind the door just as the one o'clock pips were drowned by the fanfare for the news. He knocked the lid lightly back onto the can and carried brush and roller outside to the tap. Then he walked down the driveway to check for mail. Something white and bulky was lying on the grass verge below the letterbox. He knew he was looking at the corpse of the dog.

A female Labrador, but not Terry's. They'd barely dragged her off the bitumen. God, she'd been lying here for what was it, nearly seven hours! And he'd felt sorry for the woman! The dog's eyelids were parted - he thought for a half-second she was still alive, peeping at him - but when he bent closer he saw that the surface of the left eye was dull and minutely crinkled. His gaze was held for a moment by the lashes. They were long and curved. He realised he had never looked properly at a dog's eyelashes before. There was blood in the short hair about her muzzle. The lips were drawn up in a slight snarl. More blood had trickled from her anus and dried in a dark sticky-looking rope to the grass. Ants were busy there. But she was not a mess. Discounting the blood, and the absence of heave in her stomach, she could have been asleep. She wore a leather collar. He couldn't see a tag. If there was one it was between her fur and the grass. He crouched and her smell rose to meet him. It wasn't of "death". More that of any

dog in need of a bath. He tugged the collar through one full rotation and back to the buckle. No tag. He remained crouched. The stomach was swollen and the nipples were erect. She had a tick buried in the fold of skin beneath her left shoulder. He began to look around for a sharp twig, then told himself not to be stupid.

He went next door. The first thing he saw when he rounded the grape trellis was Bonny lying full length on the garden seat. Her head came up, then her tail thumped lazily on the slats. He found himself unable to go across and pat her. He saw Helen through the open double doors, seated on the couch. The baby was asleep, his slack lips still enfolding the nipple. Helen drew her breast free and closed her shirt.

"Sorry."

"No, he's had lunch, I'm just sitting here." She left the baby on her lap and did up a button. "How's the painting going?" But before he could reply she cocked her head and said, "Are you all right?"

"Not completely. Do you know who might own a female Labrador that Janice hit this morning and is still lying beside our driveway?"

"Oh no! Really? She's still there? I heard the thump of course, and the yelps. When I saw Bon was inside I didn't go down. John spoke to Terry over the fence because we thought it was Rolly or Coal. Janice told him she was going home to fetch Clive."

"Well she's still there, I assure you – the Lab. So he's taking his time."

Helen frowned when she stood over the dog. "She's no Labrador, she's a German Shepherd."

He looked at the head. It was obvious now that he'd been told. He wondered what state he'd been in not to see. He did know the difference.

Helen had crouched. "Not even fully grown, probably what tricked you." She reached out and stroked the left ear with the backs of her fingers. "Poor girl." She

looked up. "I've never seen her either." She was unembarrassed to be crying over a strange dog. She wiped her eyes on the collar of her shirt. "Should we move her?"

"To where?"

"Well ... just further from the road."

"I think that's her job. Or Clive's."

"Let me know how you go," Helen said quietly.

It would be Janice in the store. In the afternoons Clive drank. There were no other cars in the parking bay. He got out with an eye on the side door, now permanently locked and used as a window. There was a light on. It would be the single sixty-watt bulb directly above the counter. They no longer turned on the banks of fluorescents. To the left of the front door, taped to the glass, was a hand-lettered notice on blue cardboard: *Business for sale. Apply within.* The words were unreadable from the road. He'd heard from John Dann they were asking sixty thousand. John had laughed. "Can you believe it? Subtract the stock and that comes to fifty-nine grand for goodwill! Clive! Goodwill!" He paused with his palm against the door and peered inside, actually having to peer, like trying to see into a cave. He made out her head and shoulders above the counter. She was seated side-on, facing what he knew was the small television set on a stool. She had changed out of the heavy yellow sweater into a blue one. The bell on the door handle tinkled. It was a second before she withdrew her attention from the screen and looked, without curiosity, to see who had entered. The bell tinkled again behind him.

He had planned what he would say. Words that assumed the facts. But her flat gaze, the small interrogatory lift of the eyebrows when he didn't turn to the refrigerator cabinet but came on to the counter, flustered him. He heard himself blurt out, "I'm wondering why I've got a dead German Shepherd still lying beside my driveway."

"Why you asking me? What am I supposed to do?"

"Ah ... remove it. Would be nice."

"Me?"

She had bristled. Was she acting?

"Well, I'm pretty sure it was you I saw in front of my place this morning. It looked like your car."

"I don't think so. What time?"

He didn't believe this. "Half-past six. You were wearing a yellow jumper."

She plucked at the wool above her left breast with thumb and finger. "I've had this on since I got up."

He looked down at a tray of bubble gum to avoid the steady gaze of her eyes. "I think I've mistaken someone else for you, then."

"That would be my conclusion."

He described what he had seen from his bedroom window. She interrupted. "Who's Terry?"

"The new people two along from us? He's with the council."

She shook her head.

Warner felt compelled to explain why he hadn't been down to the road earlier – Vera was away, her grandmother, he was painting the house. The words were meant to placate, but he couldn't help an undertone of belligerence. He knew he hadn't found the right note to leave on. She was watching him, the corners of her mouth lifted in a smile he read as bitter amusement. *None of you comes in here from one week to the next and when you do it's still not to buy anything it's to accuse me of running over dogs .*

"I better get back, do something about this animal."

"If anyone comes in, I'll direct them to you, shall I?"

"Please. Once again, sorry – get my eyes checked."

"Quite all right. Mistakes happen."

He wondered should he buy a paper. They would both know what it was, a sop. The inane tinkle of the bell on the slowly-closing door followed him as far as the car.

"It wasn't her."

"Gordon, John spoke to Terry. And you saw her! And the car!"

"Precisely what I've been telling myself all the way back. But the fact remains she says it wasn't her and from her manner she's telling the truth. She couldn't be that good an actor." He was pacing about on the herringbone courtyard, unconsciously aligning his foot to the angle of each brick he stepped on. He saw Helen watching his feet, realised what he was doing and halted. "I know my long sight needs checking. What worries me more though is I saw *her* because I don't like her."

The remark silenced them both.

Helen broke it. "If you ... want a hand to move the lady out front..."

"Well, she's been there this long – ". Helen was ahead of him to children walking home from the school bus stop. "It's all right, I've covered her with a couple of sacks."

Terry rode a black 350 cc BMW. He knew he hadn't heard the bike, but at ten past four he walked along to the house. Terry wasn't there. His wife couldn't say when he'd be home, he was going up the river straight from work to look at a bridle. Warner returned home, changed out of his painting clothes, made a pot of coffee and sat on the verandah.

By five the casuarinas along the island had turned from golden to bronze. It was forty minutes or so to sunset and after that it would quickly grow dark. He couldn't leave a dead animal lying all night under wheatsacks. And if it was coming down to him to dispose of her – and that was how it was looking – he wanted to be able to see. She was too big to bury, she'd have to be dumped. The choices were the back of the beach or the bush. He watched a flight of swans come in honking what he'd always liked to think were landing instructions to one another, their wings canted for drag, the white underpatches snowy against the grey cloud above the island. They landed behind the mangroves, but he heard the long hisses of their feet as they hit the water.

He walked down to the road, lifted the sacks and looked at her. It seemed to him she smelled stronger. He was glad he had the ute, he wouldn't have fancied

laying her in the boot of the Peugeot. He told himself she wasn't so big that he couldn't lift her. He returned to the garage, pulled on his fishing overalls, and found Vera's gardening gloves. He ran the ute down the driveway and out onto the road, then backed up along the verge until he could see both the tailgate and her tail in the side mirror. He let down the gate and spread the sacks on the tray. He'd planned to grasp her by the upper muscles of her front legs and do a vertical lift, holding her clear of himself. He found when he tried that she was heavier than he'd imagined. And she was broken inside, he felt her body stretch as he lifted, the weight sag towards her arse. It was an ugly sensation and he lowered her quickly back down onto the grass. Her mouth fell open, clogged with matter. He contracted his nostrils, believing he'd made her somehow vomit up part of her guts. But it was her tongue. Loose, it seemed to fill her mouth. It occurred to him that the largest dead animal he'd ever had to handle till now was a hen. *If you don't want to fetch Helen, he told himself, you're going to have to get your arms right under her.* Apart from dirt her fur was clean. His overalls smelt worse. He clamped his lips shut as well as his nostrils, bent and did it. She lay across the tray. A claw scraped on metal as the tailgate pushed her legs in. He got into the cabin and sat a moment – there was that small clearing on the water tower track – he could back in and drag her off the tray without having to lift her again. He should have lain her with her feet facing him. Too late now. What else had he forgotten? Prayer book. Hah. He started the motor and looked in the side mirror. There was a light-coloured car coming, still way up near the 60 sign. It was expecting too much for it to be a pale blue Volkswagen, but he waited. It became a white Laser, zipped past.

He rolled the ute forward and got out again. He was surprised to see a pool of dark viscous blood on the sack where her anus had been. He reached in for the sack, to chuck it too, but then folded it. They used the sacks for collecting garden seaweed, a bit of blood didn't matter. He walked down to the track and turned. Despite the rising ground he could still see her. He walked back, got a good grip on the collar and dragged her into a gap between egg-and-bacon bushes. She was metres from a large ants' nest. He wavered, then demanded, "And just where do you reckon you're going to find a place without ants!"

He crouched and unfastened the buckle, pulled the collar free and stood. He couldn't bring himself to fold it into a pocket.

Terry's wife directed him past the station wagon standing in the driveway. The fibro garage's double doors were open and a bare high-wattage bulb was projecting a shadow giant along the side wall of the house.

The black bike, filmed with dust, stood on the concrete just inside the doors. Terry was still in his work greens. He had hung a bridle at chest height on a hook and chain looped round a rafter and was busy with a soft yellow cloth, working oil from a dark bottle into the leather. He must have heard the voices but didn't glance round till Warner's sandshoes squeaked on the concrete. His hands kept moving on the strap. "G'day. Got your message. Was gunna come over after I done this." He drew the cloth down to a ring, worked it thoroughly round the swelling where the strap was folded back on itself and riveted, then looked properly at Warner. "What was it you wanted to know?"

"Well, to start with, when I went down to my letterbox about one I found that dog still lying there."

The man's hands ceased their caressing of the leather. "You're jokin. She said she was gunna go and fetch her old man!"

"That's what I came to ask. Who was the 'she'?"

"The bird from the store! What's her name, Janice. Drives the Veedub."

"Yep, who I saw too. And when I went up there and tackled her on it she acted as if she didn't know what I was talking about."

The man grunted. He re-formed the cloth into a pad and wiped a dribble of oil from the neck of the bottle. He turned towards the light and began to work the oil into the section of strap past the ring. "Thought when I heard the thump it was Coal. Would've been doin me a favour."

"Actually, I'm wondering if you'd come up there with me."

"What – now? What for? She's a loony if she's saying it wasn't her – I *talked* to her, she was from me to you away." He grinned. "Dunno what she's on. Must be good, whatever it is."

Warner declined a beer.

He pulled into his own driveway and turned off the engine. He had fifteen, twenty minutes. He glanced down at the collar on the seat beside him. He knew what Vera would advise. *Forget it, darling, you're dealing with something more complicated than just lying.* He wanted to ring her. There wasn't time. In any case, whatever Vera said – even if she were here – he'd still have to decide what *he* felt he should do. He could drop the collar in the bin. But he knew his own nature. He looked again at his watch. There was no need to be brutal. He just needed to let her know she hadn't got away with it. He restarted the engine.

The Peters Ice Cream *OPEN* board was still out. He had worried on the drive there that Clive might have joined her to close up, but no, she was alone, seated on her stool, her face turned towards the television, the single sixty-watt bulb burning directly above her head. He understood suddenly that he was afraid of her. As in the afternoon, it was a moment before she turned towards the tinkling doorway. He heard a tiny voice shout something, followed by a spurt of studio laughter. He thought her eyes narrowed when she saw it was him but he couldn't be sure, the bare bulb made her face all planes and concavities. Before he could open his mouth she said, "Dogs again?"

"Ah ... yes. Same one."

Her left hand came abruptly up out of her lap. He held out the collar, to force her to touch it at least. But her hand slid beneath it to a small dish, then pointed past him. "Anywhere there's a space."

Her thumb and fingertips were offering him a pin, one of those with a blob of green plastic for a head.

"I'll let Clive know why it's there. I forgot to mention earlier, he went in for the papers this morning. Just so you know."

"Clive did. Right."

Her head was already turned towards the clock on the wall. "Oh – time I was closed. I take it you're not buying anything."

He shook his head.

A bare vertical strip between the map of the river mouth and the bait list offered itself. He held the collar flat against the caneite and pushed the pin through the end hole. The buckle scraped and fell still. She was waiting for him to step away.

"There's fine. As I said, I'll tell Clive."

Vera's grandmother died. He travelled up by bus for the funeral and drove Vera home. When they ran out of bread on a Sunday afternoon, or visitors with thirsty children dropped in, Vera went to the store. She reported that the collar was still where he'd pinned it. In July the business was sold. For half what they were asking, John Dann told him.

He saw Janice just the once more. She was driving back from town, he was driving in. She didn't acknowledge him.

Several days later, a Tuesday – he was reading a leaflet at the letterbox after arriving home from school – Helen told him she'd seen a removal van outside the house half of the store when she'd walked the baby up to the headland that morning. The van was a local company's and gave no clue to where they might be going.

The new proprietors were Chileans, from Canberra, relatives of the family who ran the Diamond cafe in the main street. There were feature articles in both local papers, with photographs. Neither article mentioned their predecessors.

He drove up to the store on the second afternoon they were open. The map and bait list were still on the noticeboard, the collar was gone. He fetched a litre of milk from the refrigerator cabinet, brought it to the counter and introduced himself to the dark-haired woman there. Arranged on an embroidered napkin on a plate beneath a glass bell were some miniature pasties. The woman explained that they were empanadas, she'd made them herself. So he bought four of those, too.