

Red-Sky Sunday

Red-sky Sunday drags around, and the old boys are gathering to loose the dogs. Straining at their chains, thick ruffs bunched beneath pronged wolf collars, the dogs yowl and holler at their men, snapping teeth and glossy coats in the dusty pre-dawn light. Currawongs in the branches drip liquid ghost-calls into the air as the men chuff and shiver and stamp their feet.

Yarrow holds a chapped hand up by the front of the bunch. The dogs fall still, corralled by their masters, chains pulled and slipping through worn palms and collars jerked tight behind pricked ears.

“Ain’t no place in the bush for a creature like this,” Yarrow says, and his thick voice carries between the red sky and the red dirt until each man and boy is grinning. “So garn, boys, git them dogs a feed. Not long now until we’re off.”

When the sun pools above the trees, and warms the air, sweaty heaving bush-warm that leaves the dogs and men in thick coats slaving for relief, Yarrow will slap his thigh and yell *hup, hup!* till each man frees his chain and the hounds cut loose across the dense scrub. A few minutes more, and a kid at the back is trembling, thin hands weak and clutching at his chain. The dog is huge. Gunner has seen many red skies, far more than the boy, and his grey-blue pelt bears the marks of it. He could snap the chain, if he wanted, and break off into the bush to finish the job on his own, but he will not. Gunner knows the hunt better than most of the men here.

Yarrow sees the old dog in the corner of his eye as he watches the horizon. He knew the boy’s father well, was there on the last hunt where the old man fell and crashed to the bottom of the river. He was there to drag him out, fending off the dogs with a branch as the old man gasped and struggled. He was there when the man begged him to look after his boy, to take him on the next Red-sky.

The fat plum of the sun bobs above the trees and Yarrow shouts out, dropping his own dogs’ collars and dodging the heaving tide of thundering bodies as the animals swarm forwards to disappear between the trees, baying as they run. The boy is left struggling on his own, Gunner rearing as he fumbles with the latch, small hands sweaty and nervous. Gunner smells it on him, tugging at the line, and the boy slips in the dust.

Oi, oi, Yarrow hollers, tramping over to the kid as he wrestles with his dad’s dog. “Jacky, what the hell you doing, kid, gittup!”

Jacky’s face is white and terrified, his hand now trapped in the tight loops of chain as the dog tugs and tugs. Yarrow smacks his thigh again and wrenches on the chain to heel the snapping beast. The Currawong warbles again, the noise high and frightening in the sudden calm.

“Here, lad, lemme see that. Y’alright?” Yarrow takes the now-lax chain from the boy’s grip, loops it round the grey trunk of a ghost gum. Jacky tucks his hand close to his stomach, thin shoulders shuddering like a rabbit’s.

"I dunno what happened, Yarrow, I dunno, he just went off and the chain got stuck. I'm sorry, mate, please don't tell my dad."

"Lemme have a look."

"You gonna let him hunt? Dad says I gotta let him run, says he's gotta be out there now. Please don't tell him I screwed it, he'll be so mad."

"Awright, son, I won't tell your dad. Now let me look at that hand."

Jacky lets him look, holding out his shaking hand as Yarrow prods and flexes it. It's bruised, red and angry, skin scraped away from the knuckles where the chain caught and held, but the old man nods and frowns and lets the kid go.

"Not broken?"

"Not quite. Reckon you had'ta stop a dogfight, an' that's what I'll tell your old man. You're a brave lad, goin ya first red day with that big mutt."

Yarrow leans over and slaps Gunner's flank before unclipping the chain. Jacky tucks his hand back to his stomach and stares as the dog shoots off, following the smell of the other animals and the shouts and swears of their men echoing through the bush. If Gunner doesn't get to the hunt in time, Jacky will have to face his father's shame, his quiet disappointment. The big dog's fall from grace.

"You wanna stay here? Dogs'll be back soon anyhow, saves you runnin off on ya own."

"You're not goin?"

"Naw. Dogs always bring the dead thing here, so's we can take it apart. Better to stay, stop em from takin the good bits for themselves."

Jacky shrugged. "Guess I'll stay too."

They sit awhile, Yarrow on an old grey stump, nursing a thermos of bitter-smelling tea while Jacky sticks twigs in the dirt and stains his fingertips with the rust-coloured dust. The sun slides through the dim red sky until they're both damp with sweat and tired in the pressing heat. Jacky starts when the bush behind him cracks and rustles, swearing as a fat coppery lizard speeds across the track. Yarrow grins.

"Not yet, lad. You'll know when them dogs are back, helluva ruckus. Mind that lizard don't think yer lunch, now." And he barks out a laugh, dry as the bush itself and twice as mean. Jacky hunches his shoulders up and waits another hour.

When the sun reaches it's apex and begins to droop, Yarrow jerks awake. He stuffs his akubra to the back of his head and stands.

"Up, lad. They're comin' back."

Jacky's hand is purple and stiff now, and it throbs as he leaps to his feet. Yarrow makes him stand by the edge of the track, under the old gum, and watch for the first dog. He presses himself against the cool dry bark and watches as the old man strides out to stand in the middle of the road holding Gunner's chain. The bush air is hot and still.

Jacky presses his body back against the tree and yelps when the dogs break through the bush. The two at the front are younger, leaping and snapping at the air, energy unspent even after the hours of running. They swing around to Jacky, nosing at his legs as he fumbles in his pockets to slip them each a strip of dry meat. Wet noses snaffle at his hands as the victorious dogs drag their catch up from the scrub.

Yarrow yells and shakes the chain, and a few of the spryer men crash through the brush to join him in chasing the dogs off and chaining them back up. Gunner is there, front of the pack, red maw stained with something that Jacky didn't recognise.

"Jacky, over here lad. Come an' help me."

He goes. Yarrow is standing by the thing the dogs had brought back, and Jacky stumbles when he sees it.

"Whatta hell is that? Fuck!" He turns and retches on the red dirt, but nothing comes up. He wipes his hand over his mouth, groaning, and stares hard at Yarrow. His shoulders are trembling again.

"Come on, we gotta cut it up. Lemme show ya."

"That aint somethin'. That aint a real thing, right? Right?"

"Ugly bastards, kid. Y'get used to em. Now c'mon, this is the part we want."

Yarrow sticks his pocket knife into the thing and it twitches. Jacky retches again. It isn't a roo or a feral cat, and he can't see fins like the big trout in the creek. Bigger than the dogs, sprawled across the track like it has been unscrewed, liquid that smells of sickness and filthy water spilling from the teeth marks the dogs had left. It's big and ugly and nothing that Jacky's ever seen in his life, and he's not seen much but he's sure this isn't normal. His father never told him what they were hunting. Something that might be a mouth or a hand lies limp and blank on the hot red dirt, reaching out to Jacky like it wants him near. Yarrow carves away at it, his tiny knife making quick work of the colourless skin until it lays in pieces like the cold meat in the shop window in town. Jacky draws closer, holding his breath and tucking his hand to his stomach. He feels ill.

The rest of the men have made their way back, and every dog is chained to a tree, sprawled in the meagre shade and panting. One of the men is wrangling Gunner, dragging the dog over to his boy and grinning.

"Jacky boy! Good lad. Got your old man's luck of the hunt, hey? Mean bugger here crashed outta nowhere, found the beast all on his own." He claps Jacky on the shoulder, and presses the chain back into his swollen hand. Jacky blinks and stumbles.

The thing on the ground is being packaged in sheets of butcher's paper, chucked in the backs of the utes. He grips the chain in both hands, heels the dog and stares at Yarrow.

Yarrow finishes loading the packages, wiping the sour-smelling blood across his filthy pants. He's grim and serious.

"You comin' on the next hunt, Jacky? Bring that dog o' yer dad's out for a run?"

Jacky thinks he should say no. He looks at the thing, its drab foul blood across the track and on the men's hands. Yarrow's eyes are sharp in the shade of his hat.

"Yeah awright. Thanks."

One of the men around him breaks the tense quiet with a *whoop* as Yarrow grins. The red sky makes them all look a little strange, brown skin made bloody. A dog barks, and then they're all going, straining at their chains and snapping at each other. In the chaos, Yarrow claps him on the shoulder and nods.

"Good lad. Ya dad will be glad."

Jacky and the boys loaded the dogs back onto the trailers with the brown-paper packages and headed back. He's one of the old boys, now, the scrawny kid with his dad's big dog, and when the next Red-sky Sunday drags around, he'll make his dad proud again. Dust kicks up as the utes drive off, Yarrow's in front with three big dogs swaying in the tray. Jacky sits beside him, clutching his hands to his stomach and grinning a little. The fat red sun dips beneath the horizon again, and a currawong croons and warbles a long, long note.