

THE QUARRY

Jamie Derkenne

Mal Bligh's Dream

Knowing I had nowhere to isolate, a grazier I sheared for offered a small hut on 2000 acres down Albury way, near a place called Burrumbuttock. He told me Larry and I could stay as long as required, in return for keeping an eye on the Murray Greys and the fences.

We settled in well. I'd filled the back of my antique Hilux with cans, pasta, dog biscuits and the like. Larry and I would go for walks in the early morning, me checking the rabbit traps, picking dandelions, nettles and other greens. Sometimes I'd see a rabbit grazing nearby. Larry would look at me pleading, wanting permission. I'd pause a few seconds and then click my tongue. Rabbits are fast, but sometimes Larry was faster. She'd catch them by

the neck and shake them hard. But she'd always bring them back to me. Larry is half-dingo, half-red, manic in energy and slow in brains.

As the weeks went by, we fell into a routine. We'd get up early, start the stove, and put the coffee pot on. I'd give Larry breakfast. Just after dawn, we'd walk along some fences, check the traps, check the cattle, and then wander back for breakfast. The grazier had left us three isa-browns in a broken chook run. I'd cleaned the run, fixed the netting and had taught Larry to leave them alone by switching her backside with a long stick of cane every time she made a lunge. In the end, she'd just pretend they weren't there by gazing through them. Every morning, the chooks would lay me one or two eggs, which was just right for frying. The shack had a small verandah on the northern side, so we'd sit there in the rising sunshine warming ourselves, me enjoying a few coffees, and Larry snapping at flies. Sometimes I'd listen to a bit of radio, but the signal would come and go, so for the most part I didn't bother. Mid-morning, we'd head out in the ute, if we could get it going, and fix whatever needed fixing, hardly anything, usually just a few strands snapped by a lovelorn bull, or a trough that had run dry, and then we'd head back home, where I'd read on the verandah until dinner time. We'd go to bed early. Larry and I shared a single bed, so sometimes sleeping was a bit awkward. We'd have arguments about whose head was on the pillow, and arguments about Larry's farting, which was gruesome.

One day I found a clump of succulent looking mushrooms, white with pink gills and slightly colouring to yellow in the middle of the caps. I picked the lot and that evening made an omelette with the mushrooms, eggs and some wild sorrel. The mushrooms cooked up well, the stems turning a blue black in the heat. It was an outstanding meal, and that night I had a wonderful sleep.

The next morning, just as I'd got the fire going, I heard footsteps outside. That was puzzling, because I hadn't heard any car. I stood up. Through the window, I could see the shadow of a big man, and then I heard the thump of his footfall on the verandah. He didn't knock so much as thump. I opened the door. There stood a moderately tall, portly man wearing a blue city suit that was a couple of sizes too big for him, the sort of suit you'd wear to hide a large paunch. It looked expensive. Even though it was just on dawn, he was sweating profusely. He had a red tie, also too large, and a well-tanned face, except for around the eyes, as if he wore sunglasses a lot. His eyes were small and his eyebrows were arched in a way that made his whole face look angry. He had thin, yellowish hair that had been carefully combed to hide a balding pate. His lips were pursed.

‘Hiya, mind if I make a call? I can’t get a signal on the cell.’ He didn’t wait for an answer but pushed his way in and stood in the middle of the room looking for a phone.

‘I don’t have one.’

‘No shit, but you’ve got a cell, right?’

I shook my head. ‘You won’t find a signal until you get into Burrumbuttock. Nothing out here.’

‘What did you say? Where the hell am I?’

‘Near Burrumbuttock, on John Bishop’s run.’

He waved a hand. I noticed they were very small for a man of his build. ‘No, what state is this? I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.’

‘Australia.’

‘Huh.’ He shook his head. ‘I’ll be goddamned.’ He looked through the window and scratched his head. ‘Always thought there’d be more mountains, more snow. And more green. Hey, but you can’t believe everything you read, right?’

‘How did you get here?’

He tilted his head. ‘You know, you speak American pretty good, but I have to tell ya, and I don’t mean no offence - but you sound kind of Limey. Just saying.’ He suddenly remembered my question.

‘That’s the thing. I dunno. Not many people know this, but I had an uncle at MIT, super smart guy. Genius. So I go to the box room, and I’m trying to find a box of golden photos I need to burn, but that’s a different story, and there’s this box of stuff from Uncle John. I pull out this thing that looks like a remote and see it’s got a red light glowing. It’s been in a goddamned box for years and the darn thing is still working. So for the heck of it, I press the power button and whamo, I suddenly find myself amongst all this dead grass eyeballing the biggest rat you’ve ever seen, honest-to-god, bigger than those ones you get on the Jamaica Line, like it was the size of that dog there and now I’m here in god-damned Europe. Wait till the tech boys hear about this, there is going to be so much money in this. Maybe a TV show.’

I couldn't help feeling I'd met this man before. I held out my hand and said, 'By the way, I'm Mal. Mal Bligh'. He grinned, leaned right in and gripped my hand hard, squeezing it to see if I'd flinch. I've spent 30 years shearing. I squeezed back. His grin faltered.

'Hiya Mal. You call me Thedon.'

Thedon sat down on the dusty red couch that Larry or I used as a makeshift bed, depending on who lost the last argument. Larry had been sitting under the table all this time, but when Thedon sat down she let out a low growl. I could see the fur on the back of her neck stand on end. Thedon clocked the coffee pot and pointed with one of his small, stubby fingers.

'Gimme one of those. Four sugars, white and strong.' I poured him a mug, gave it a slurp of milk, spooned in half my sugar, and sat in the armchair opposite. He took a sip and spat it out, all over the floor.

'Jesus, I didn't mean that strong,' He looked pained. I took the mug, emptied half the coffee and replaced it with some hot water from the stove. He took another sip and sighed. 'Now that's nearly as good as a Starbucks.' I sat down again.

'So Mal, what you need to do is help me let my people know I'm here, so they don't freak the hell out that I'm like de-observed.' Larry growled some more. I was a bit worried. Larry had never bitten anyone before, but there was a first time for everything.

'That's a fearsome dog you got there pal. What's his name?'

'Larry. And Larry's a she.'

'Huh. You call your dog a dude's name?'

'Larry is just short for her real name.'

Larry growled at Thedon again. She clearly didn't like him.

Thedon's eyes narrowed. 'If I had a dog like that, I'd chain it. Maybe throw away the key. That's not a good dog.'

Keeping his eyes locked on Larry, he crossed his legs. He had expensive leather shoes, but they had extra thick soles, more like platform shoes. His crossed over foot was wagging at a hundred miles an hour. He rubbed his hand together.

'So Mal, you need to do this. You need to drive me to Barron's Ass or whatever the town is, and help me message my people. That can't be too hard can it?'

I nodded. I was looking forward to driving this man out of my life as quickly as possible. The police in town would probably clock him as a fruit tingle on the loose straight away. Let them deal with it.

‘Sure, come with me now, I’ll get the ute.’

The don got up and started to move forward. He froze. Held up a hand for me to stop. He stared at the floor for a second, held his other hand to his face and then let out a trumpeting sneeze. He looked at his hand horrified, looked around and then wiped it on the arm of my sofa. He acted like nothing had happened.

‘Hey, that was rude. That was filthy!’

He looked at me innocently. ‘What was?’

‘You just wiped your filthy snot all over my couch.’

‘I did no such thing pal! That would be disgusting! I’m a very clean man!’ He looked like he was getting ready to fight me.

I grabbed keys and walked out. He was behind me but made a point of getting in front of me as we walked to the ute, which was parked under a tree about 100 metres from the house. As we walked, The don made trumpeting sounds, the kind you make through pursed lips, reminding me vaguely of that Hendrix solo. He walked around to the driver’s side and opened the door.

‘What the hey?’ he asked.

‘I’m driving, not you.’

He went around to the passenger side and got in. Larry sat in the tray, slobbering on the rear window. I got into my seat. I could feel the ute leaning because of The don’s weight. I turned the key. The engine car gave a whine and a spluttering cough but nothing more. It was always causing me grief. I popped the hood and got out. The don got out and stood behind me. He was sniffing in a way that made my skin crawl.

‘You gonna fix it, right? I mean, I can’t stay here in these boondocks. Where did you say we are? Assville?’

‘No, you can’t,’ I mumbled to myself through gritted teeth.

I checked the timer belt, but it was good, and the carburettor looked good too. The battery caps I'd whittled a few days before from mulga sticks were still holding but one of the battery terminals had worked loose, even though it was clamped as tight as it would go.

I dug into my pockets and fished out a five-cent coin.

'Here, hold this,' I said and went to the tool sack I keep under the driver's seat and got out a screwdriver to loosen the clamp.

'Pass me the coin.' Thedon was just about to pass the coin when he stopped, staring at it.

'Hey, I know that broad! Bit long in the tooth, but great skin and great pins!' I snapped my fingers. He handed it over. I wedged the coin between the clamp and the terminal and tightened it up. It was secure now.

We walked around to our seats. Larry, seeing that her seat was unoccupied, had taken back what was rightfully hers. As Thedon approached, she started growling some more, wrinkling her nose and showing her teeth. Thedon reached out to grab Larry by the collar. Larry barked and lunged at his hand. She knew exactly what she was doing as she just nipped him, enough to draw a few drops of blood but not cause any serious damage.

'Oh holy crap! Blood! You can get infected!' Thedon wailed as if he was dying. I snapped my fingers at Larry and pointed to the back of the ute. Larry, now a bit ashamed by her assault, loped into the tray without fuss. Thedon was almost crying in anguish and, to be honest, his face had turned from a well-tanned brownish orange to an ashen grey. I walked over to a bush, snapped a twig and spun some cobwebs round it. I then went over to Thedon and looked at his hand. There were several drops of blood on his thumb knuckle. I spun the cobwebs around the wound. The bleeding instantly stopped. Old bushman's trick. We got back in the ute. I turned the key. It coughed again, spluttered like it had phlegm in the lines.

'Filter,' I said. 'I need to somehow replace the filter.'

'So you got plenty of filters, ain't that so? You'd be like the king of filters.'

'Not a single one.'

'Huh. If you know it's the filter, then you knew it would be the filter and you would have prepared. I'm just saying. What do we do now?'

‘We walk.’

We got out of the car and started the seven K walk to Barrumbuttock. We walked for about ten minutes, Thedon in front, when he staggered and stopped.

‘I’m not used to this. I need to catch my breath. I’m a very fit man, but not this fit. Ain’t you got a buggy or something?’

It was obvious I hadn’t. Thedon was wheezing a bit. ‘You should’ve organised a buggy. You ain’t a liberal are you? My people always organise a buggy. Where did you say the clubhouse is again?’

I pointed down the road. He started walking again, stopped and turned. ‘Hey, ain’t you coming?’

I shook my head. ‘You’re on your own on this one-’ I paused. ‘...mate.’

He waved a hand dismissively. I watched him trudge down the road, maybe another 200 metres. I didn’t stop staring. The man had Kalahari buttocks, bobbing up and down like the biggest ground turkey you’ve ever seen. I could feel Larry’s eyes boring into me. I’m ashamed to admit it but, not taking my eyes off Thedon, I clicked my tongue.