

Red

An inquisitive expression – soft, alert, expectant, excited.

The first rays of light are anticipating the dawn over the Pacific horizon. My fine cattle-dog, ‘Red’, is staring at me, ears pricked up, head tilted, tongue flicking from his smiling mouth.

It’s the morning after a huge storm. He has cuddled against my side all through the night, moaning gently, shielding me as flashes of lightning lit our weatherboard house. I’ve rubbed his furry ears and patted his side for hours, first as the thunder cracked and then as the rain lashed the tin roof like a thousand angry drummers. We’ve been friends for years, sleeping together under the stars, bush mustering – but these days are gone. Now, it just me and Red – an empty beach and the sea air – retired in a relative’s old house and this modern world.

The sky and house are peaceful now. Red is encouraging me, in his caring fashion, to get moving for our regular walk up the long sandy shore-line.

My backpack holds a water bottle, biscuits and a bowl for Red, two apples, old tennis balls and this new-fangled phone, when it works.

Not a soul in sight. A south-easterly wind is behind us, gently blowing the waves north, whipping up loose sand and veering my thrown balls up beyond the high-water mark. Red is not confused. His innate herding skills predict the ball’s path. He rushes back to me, ball in mouth, eyes telling me, ‘Again, please’.

So, I throw again. Red never seems bored. We have sea air in our lungs, companionship to die for and he needs to burn off his daily energy.

I grin as Red searches for the ball in the storm-washed debris. He finds it, returning happy for the next throw. His distinctive red/orange cheek patches give him a grinning appearance, distinguishing him from blue cattle-dogs.

The tide is ebbing. The wind bounces the ball ever farther on the hardened sand – but Red is relentless in pursuit. How lucky we both are to share such simple precious pleasures.

Red is barking – not returning. He’s dropped the ball and continuing along the beach. There’s something dark on the sand above the water line.

I can’t focus that far ahead. I hurry on. Red has stopped at the dark shape.

Closer. He is standing over whatever it is.

It looks like a body, washed up. That huge storm last night! Goodness!

What to do! The beach is empty. We’re over a mile from any houses.

Red gives an encouraging yelp as I come close.

A male shape. On its side, facing away from me. Very still. Bare feet. Dark trousers and top, both soaking wet. Black hair. Life jacket.

I'm puffing as I reach him. Red is pointing with his nose, giving little grunts at the face. I touch the cold skin. The eyes are closed. Red barks.

Is there a breath? Red licks the face. I feel for a pulse in the neck. Maybe. I speak to the man and shake him. No response.

I try to open his mouth. There is a reaction, like clearing the throat. The eyes don't open. I wash his lips and face with fresh water from my bottle.

The wind is blowing against his saturated clothes – he must be freezing. With my boot, I push up a ridge of sand to protect his wet back from losing heat. I heap some more over his bare feet, too. Red is nuzzling close to his front. To keep him warm. Instinct? Good dog!

I try again to waken him. There is a faint pulse. His breathing is barely noticeable. We need help!

I get the phone out from the backpack. 000. No reception. No-one else in sight. I'll have to go back for help. I can sometimes get reception if I'm on a high sand dune.

I look at Red. Think!

He is nuzzling up to the man's chest and licking his face, giving the man some body warmth. Could I leave Red there and go for help? He would run after me. How can I get him to understand that I need to go back for help or at least to get a phone signal?

The tide is going out. My sand barrier is giving the man some protection from the wind.

With my boot, I make a huge cross in the firm wet sand, followed by S O S – so that the place is marked.

He is still unconscious but I'm sure I can feel his faint breath on the back of my hand near his nose.

Red's eyes watch me as I stroke his furry head and ask him to stay. I point that I'm going for help. I hold his paws and plead with him. Does he understand? Trust me, Red!

I rise to my feet, point back down the beach, make running gestures with my fingers while speaking, 'Stay, Red! Stay, Red!'

I think he is smiling, nodding and he licks the man's face again.

I smile back and repeat, 'Good Red! Stay!' and I take off back down the beach as fast as my old legs can walk. I look back. Red has watched but not followed. As I silently thank him, I finally manage to climb up onto the dune line and extract the phone. 000. It rings. O joy! Human contact. I tell them where we are.

A helicopter will come. A boat had capsized last night. They've been searching. The other sailors have been rescued.

I hurry back to the scene as an approaching chopper's blades vibrate over the waves.

I arrive just as it lands. Red sees me. A uniformed paramedic and a crying woman rush to the motionless shape while Red runs to me.

A great elated *Whoop!*

The woman looks at Red and me. 'He's alive! My husband! Thank you! Thank you both!' she calls to us through her tears.

Her look says it all.