

Dingo Calling

By Russell Irving

Roy tapped Danny gently on the shoulder. 'Come on son time to go'. Danny's mum had agreed to his pleas for a day off school to help check on the newborn lambs. By the time he staggered out of bed and through the back door, the ute was already loaded with fencing wire to do a few repairs. He jumped in beside his dad and headed off, silenced by the pre-dawn stillness as the first rays of crimson broke over the distant hills.

Even before they reached the crest, they noticed a couple of hawks circling near the back paddock adjoining the national park.

'Bloody dingos' muttered Roy, preparing himself. As they got closer, he counted at least half a dozen lambs missing from the flock which was bunched in the corner furthest from the forest.

The smell was overwhelming even before his dad opened the door. 'Stay in the car Danny, you don't need to see this.' Try as he might, he couldn't stop himself. He peeked through the driver's window and saw the blood-stained trail of remains being picked over by the crows. 'Let's go Danny we have to get some help with this.'

They drove back to the farm, had some breakfast then headed into town to the sale yards.

Danny stood next to his father, seeing how far he could kick a stone while listening to him berate the other farmers. A forest of hairy, stout-legged stubbies, beneath a dense crown of Akubra hats, had gathered, swaying more and more vigorously.

'Last year the Murphy's planted olives, the year before it was the Brown's sowing quinoa to feed the bloody vegans! At this rate the district won't be able to fill a backpacker's van with wool,' yelled Roy.

The stiff breeze bent and swayed before it was silenced again. 'That's progress Roy, there's no avoiding it, you either move with the times or get left behind' piped up a smart Alec at the back'.

'Come on Bob, we've seen it all before' countered Roy. 'How long did it take before Joey had to sell up his Alpacas. Less than 3 years! Listen, I know it's tough, but those Italians are falling back in love with our wool. If we can just get on top of this Dingo problem, we'll be fine. So, who's going to join me next week, or do we need to bring in some professional shooters?'

'What do you mean you can't join us,' yelled his mum. 'I don't care about the bloody lambs or dingos; this holiday was planned years ago. Yet again we come a distant last behind this bloody farm, and I'm sick of it.'

Instead of packing for the holiday Danny's mum and sister packed for an apartment in the city.

'You're off to high school next year Danny, and old enough to make your own decision. You know I love you and your sister just as much, but you both have to decide whether you want to live with me or your dad. Either way, I'm only four hours away, and you can stay anytime you like.'

'But I don't want to choose mum. We can't leave dad all alone on the farm, it's just not right.' His older sister, Mia, remembers it differently and swears their dad told them not to come back if they went on the holiday.

A workable, bachelor's routine had solidified over the five years living on their own.

Danny washed the plates and pans; it was the deal they had if his dad did the cooking, which was most nights, and all the cooked breakfasts. Danny cooked Fridays, spaghetti Bolognese, and Sundays, sausages with mashed potato and peas, or for a real treat, pork chops.

‘That bacon was amazing dad, how do you get it so crispy every time?’

‘You either have a knack for something or you don’t son,’ laughed his dad. ‘Hey, can you move the sheep up to the top paddock this morning, I have to go to town to get more Roundup?’

‘Sorry dad, it’s a perfect offshore wind this morning, I’m off to Clarke’s beach for a surf,’ he yelled as he ran out the door to his car, packed, and ready to go.

The car was given to him by his dad for his seventeenth birthday, the same HR Holden that Roy learned to drive in. It’d been sitting out in the yard for years and took a few months scrounging parts, and a lot of nights stripping, cleaning, and rebuilding the engine. Time spent together that was just as valuable as the car. ‘It’s an antique now dad, it’s probably worth more than the farm,’ he laughed when they’d finally got it going.

‘Bloody hell Danny we can’t run this farm as a part-time hob... ‘

‘Dad it’s not my farm or my hobby, it’s yours and I don’t want my life ruined by it!’ I’ll move the sheep when I’m back around lunchtime. Where are the keys anyway,’ he muttered to himself searching his pockets and bag?

‘Looking for these?’ his dad asked, holding up the keys. ‘I told you the sheep need moving, so get to it.’

By the time he’d finished, it was blowing a strong onshore wind and the surf would be blown out by now. Damn him, thought Danny, I’m going anyway. He drove to the end of the drive and down their dead-end lane to the Indigenous Protected Area, or IPA as they called it, which abutted the northeast corner of the farm. The ranger, Charlie, had given him a gate key in exchange for an old board he didn’t use anymore. It was only a short drive through the Banksia and Paperbark forest to Clarko’s, his favourite point break.

As he was driving, he remembered his last visit to see his sis. They were leaning into the giant Marshall speakers, hypnotized by the heavy bass at her favourite nightclub. ‘Hey before I forget, I found a great sounding ecology course I reckon you’d love. And you’d be closer to me and Sally,’ she yelled. ‘You know she’s got the hots for you, why don’t you go dance with her.’ Danny looked over at Sally. ‘I don’t need to go to Uni, I can learn all I need to know on the farm, and if I was interested there are plenty of girls in town in case you don’t remember.’

‘God Danny, you piss me off! I can see you’re unhappy but you’re as stubborn as dad.’

‘Just drop it will you and let me relax for once.’ They stayed a bit longer and he crashed for the night on her couch. The next morning, he woke with a blinding hangover but there was no sign of Sally. Must have been a dream he realized as he got out of bed to head home.

He liked visiting his sister but only for short stints. He missed the tranquillity of the country, and strangely he thought, had grown accustomed to the isolation. He parked just behind the dunes, waxed his board, and walked down to the beach. The weather report was spot on for a change, windblown but still solid four-foot walls breaking off the headland. Not a soul in sight. He smiled and let out a small laugh thinking of his mates who would be battling it out with the crowds in town.

After he paddled out, he sat for a while, taking in the peaceful mid-morning stillness, and light. A pair of sooty oystercatchers flew overhead. If only Dad could ease up now and then.

Taking off just behind the peak, he got straight to his feet and trimmed along the face, then cut back into the foam to reposition for a nose ride. Dancing to the rhythm of a silent beat, this time. He rode it all the way to shore and was about to paddle back out when he spied the Dingo standing on the edge of the rock platform, maybe fifty yards away.

It seemed as startled as he was. They both froze momentarily, locking eyes. It was a ginger colour with a dark muzzle, waist-high, raw-boned thin but not malnourished. Fit, like a marathon runner. Narrow-shouldered, narrow hiped. Alert, no, on edge, but not twitchy, very calm. Head down and looking intently at Danny.

It was difficult to read what he was thinking. An indifferent curiosity? Sizing him up?

Either way, the Dingo thought the better of hanging around any longer, turned and trotted up, and over the dune, giving Danny one final glance before disappearing.

Danny hoped he'd see him again one day.

A couple of days later, Danny was sitting out the back with Charlie, waiting for the next set to arrive. 'Do you know much about the Dingo's around here?' he asked.

Charlie had worked on the IPA since he left school and was now head ranger. He lived in town but grew up on the mission. A big bloke with a deep rolling voice that commands you sit up and listen.

'Sure do. You're lucky to see one though, they're real shy and wary of humans. We stopped baiting on the IPA years ago and now have at least one family group that we know of, and a few lone males that hang around. They get kicked out of their families but are probably too scared to leave the IPA. Who can blame them?'

Danny kept scanning the rock platform and beach as he spoke. 'I saw one up close the other day, he looked right at home. I'd only seen them strung up by our front gate. Dad blames them for every death on the farm, you'd think the hills were crawling with them.'

'Look, don't get me wrong, they love lamb but prefer wallaby and roo tail, just like we do. We have a Ph.D. student tracking them, there's a lot less fox, cat, pig, deer, and goat so they've either sat down for a few months to eat or driven them into the national park.'

'Quick here comes a set, paddle out, our neighbour, Bob Mackenzie, has a couple of Maremma dogs guarding his flock, Dad thinks he's crazy.'

‘I’d love to meet Bob one day, you take this, I’m going for the one behind. Oh, and I forgot to tell you, this board’s a piece of shit, I want my key back. Ha, only kidding.’

Roy tapped Danny gently on the shoulder. ‘Come on son time to go.’

‘Dad I told you I don’t want to.’

‘Sorry mate I need you, Alf’s got a sore knee, so I need you as my backup. We probably won’t find ‘em anyway, they’re all hiding on Bob’s place by now.’

By the time Danny emerged they were all gathered around the gate, four or five farmers, and another shooter hired by Parks.

It was Danny’s favourite time of the day, usually reserved for an early morning surf. The pre-dawn light, heavy dew on the ground, the kookaburra’s chuckle leading the chorus of birdsong, and a still breeze. Not ideal for tracking into the wind.

‘Parks reckon their baiting got most of ‘em so we’re just trying to flush a few stragglers out,’ explained Roy. ‘Rick, you take Billy and Timmy with your dogs around the other side to turn them back if they come your way. We’ll drive up through the farm and into the park, then fan out down Rainbow and Happy Hollow Trails toward you.’

Danny jumped in with his dad and by the time they reached Rainbow Trail, it was light enough. They fanned out with John and Nick either side, about two hundred metres away, moving forward in unison. ‘Dad I’ve been meaning to tell you, the other day...’

‘Quiet son, we don’t want to announce our arrival to everyone! Danny went quiet and trudged off beside his dad.

They’d walked slowly through the bush for about a mile when his dad gave the squat signal, pointed up ahead, and to the left. Next to a big ironbark tree, about a hundred meters away, standing side-on, staring into a dense thicket of bracken and sedge, he saw him.

‘Quick Danny, take the shot you’ve got the best angle’.

Danny turned to his dad and saw it was useless. Sighting the dingo, head motionless, he raised his rifle into position and centered it through the scope. A couple of small adjustments, a few deep breaths, slowly squeeze the trigger, he had him.

The Dingo turned his head and looked at Danny, head down, alert. They both hesitated.

‘What’re you doing Danny, you got him, shoot! demanded his dad. Danny pulled the trigger, as he’d done over the years, training, and practicing for moments like this. Proud at having become a good shot for his age, making a real contribution to the family farm.

Danny hit the ground about the same time as the dingo, but only one of them got up.

‘Good shot son, I thought he was going to get away for a minute there, hey are you ok?’

Danny couldn’t tell if it was the same dingo, but he felt sick in the stomach anyway.

Charlie, Danny, Anna the Ph.D. student, and Kath, the national park ranger, sat around the old, battered kitchen table at the IPA ranger base. The monthly work plan was scrawled on a rickety whiteboard next to the dedication poster, and a faded photo of beaming community members. Some ochre paints, a few half-finished boomerangs, and spears for the school kids to make lay in the corner, whose walls were plastered with photos of plants and animals Danny could barely recognize.

They were planning a town hall meeting to discuss ‘the dingo problem’. Danny had had a quiet chat with Bob after the hunt, and he came strolling into the office, then got quickly out of the way as a carload of Elders and their grandkids arrived.

‘Boil the kettle will ya Charlie, and there’s not enough tucker as usual’ came the chorus as they erupted out of the car.

‘Giddy Bob, glad you could make it welcome to our IPA. Go and grab yourself a cuppa and some cake,’ came Charlie’s reply. ‘You mob be quiet, can’t you see we have guests today, and you kids can bugger off outside for a while so we can hear ourselves think. Let’s get this show on the road. Aunty can you please welcome everyone, and then I’m happy to chair the meeting if you like.’

‘Righto Charlie, thanks for that, said Aunty Vera, as she settled into her chair.

‘On behalf of our community, I’d like to welcome you all to our Country, and our IPA. We’re excited to have you join us to figure out a way we can help our dingo. They’ve been here a long time, they’re kin, family to us, and it’s upsetting to see them hunted and poisoned.

There was a murmur of support from around the room.

‘We used to have ‘em around our camp growing up, mum and dad would take ‘em from the den when they were young, so they’d bond with us. Blackie was my favourite, she was a black and tan colour, smart, loyal, could leap a mile, and loved to follow me everywhere. They’d usually stay around camp for a year or so then take off into the bush. Blackie used to come back and visit me for years, sometimes with a young’un in tow, then she stopped coming.’

‘Thanks, Aunty, chimed in Charlie.

‘No worries, Charlie, anytime. Now as I was saying’

‘Sorry Aunt, these people are on tight schedules, and we have a meeting to organize. Bob, I’m glad you’re here, there hasn’t been much joy convincing the farmers to stop baiting and shooting, as Danny knows.’

‘You’re right Charlie’ replied Bob who was welcoming the chat, ‘I’m happy to talk about what I’m doing, my dogs have been pretty good at guarding the sheep so far. And Danny, a few words from you as Roy’s son would go down well, I reckon, although I don’t know what he’ll think about it.’

‘Leave Dad to me, Bob, it’ll take a while for him to come around, but I know a few weak spots I can prod.’

There was some disbelief, and a general chuckle around the room at the thought of old Roy being quietly undone by his son, their secret weapon.

Danny spotted his mum and Mia take a seat up near the back and gave a quick wave.

‘We’re so proud of you Danny, of course, we’ll come down and support you,’ his mum had promised. ‘Not sure about your dad though, you know how set in his ways he can be.’

There was still no sign of Roy, although knowing him, he’ll be outside berating some poor politician about God knows what, Danny thought with a smile.

‘Quiet please everyone I’d like to welcome you all today and thank you for coming,’ began Charlie as he rang the little bell. Danny stood up, nervously, when it was his turn, and gave a final scan of the hall for his dad.

‘Most of you know me, I’m Danny, Roy Maguire’s son. I love my dad; I reckon he’s one of the best farmers in the district and I’m very proud. We agree on a lot of things, but this isn’t one of them. I was hoping he’d come tonight but he’s a stubborn coot. I wanted him to hear from Bob about what he’s doing with his guardian animals, so we could give it a try too. I wanted him to hear about the research Anna and Charlie are doing; that Dingo’s prefer wallaby and kangaroo if given the choice, that they’re not wild dogs but ninety-five percent dingo.

‘A few months ago, I shot one, and not for the first time. But this time I think it was the same one I’d seen at Clarkes Beach when I was surfing. He had been looking for food in the rock pools like he’d been doing for thousands of years. He was beautiful, where he belongs, and his stare still haunts me.’

Danny stopped to wipe away a few tears.

‘I want to see him and his family again when I go surfing, not strung up with the others along our fence line.’

Danny could see Ms. Kelly, the school teacher, shift uncomfortably in her chair. He remembered her lessons about apex predators and the successful release of wolves back into Yellowstone National Park.

‘OK, I’ve heard enough, stop right there Danny,’ said Rick from the back. ‘You’re lucky Roy’s not here, he’d be ashamed of you, crying like a baby. If you were proud of your dad you’d listen to him more, at least until your old enough to know better.’

Danny looked at Rick, and hesitated, struggling to find a response. Charlie stood up, and then another voice rose from the crowd.

‘He’s my son too Rick and he’s allowed to have an opinion,’ came his mum's response. ‘He has far more sense than his dad ever did, at least he knows he’s not the expert on everything. God knows, his dad will always be stuck in the 19th century!’

Danny sat back down in his seat as the crowd stirred into life, passions aroused. Charlie’s booming voice took control.

‘Right, everybody, I think we’ve heard enough for the night. I want to thank everyone for coming and we’ll let you know about the working group shortly. For now, let’s lick our wounds and rediscover our legendary community spirit over a cup of tea and Aunty Vera’s delicious homemade scones.’

Danny’s mum and sister came up to give him a hug. ‘You were wonderful son, I’m proud of you. Don’t worry about your dad, I’m sure he has his screwed-up reasons for not coming. I know he’d be proud of you too,’ consoled his mum. ‘Yeh, that took so much courage Danny, but you look exhausted. Why don’t you come to the Blues festival, there’s a group of us going, you’d have a great time,’ pleaded Mia.

‘Thanks, I’ll think about it and let you know. For now, I just need a good night’s sleep and surf in the morning. I’ll be fine.’ His mum dropped him off at the farm gate on her way back to the city. ‘I’ll give you a call tomorrow son, come and visit soon.’

Roy was sitting at the kitchen table in semi-darkness, clutching a cup of cold tea. ‘Sorry mate, a couple of sheep escaped onto the road, by the time I’d rounded them up it was too late.’

‘That’s bullshit dad and you know it.’

‘What, you’d prefer we had it out in front of the whole town?’, he said trying to control his temper. ‘You know me, I wouldn’t be able to keep my mouth shut, and it would have ended badly for everyone.’

‘I was hoping you’d do it for me dad. Just once, sit back and listen, maybe learn something new!’

Roy stood up, ‘Watch yourself, son, don’t talk to me like that.’

‘Come on then, you don’t scare me. At least mum was there to stand up for me, you only care about yourself and this bloody farm. She was right to leave you!’

Roy felt the words land, hard, in the chest. Knocked back down, silenced by the anger and venom in his son’s voice, as much as the words themselves. Where did that come from, he thought as he slumped in the chair.

Danny stormed out and took himself to bed. He lay awake, tossing, turning, staring at the ceiling. What a night, what just happened, something will have to give.

He finally fell asleep.

The dingo, a lone male, was staring back.

Head down, a look of clear intent.