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**ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST**

## WINNING STORY

Cooper's Red

By Emily Brugman

**Word Count: 2.013.**

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## Cooper's Red

Cooper carried the laundry basket out to the green clothesline in the back yard. The clothesline that his daughter Pip hated because it was the same as next door's clothesline and the same as every other clothesline in their suburb. He hung his T-shirts on the outer rung, his jeans on the next. Then his socks, pairs together, on a small rung close to the centre, and his undies on another—two pegs each.

'Should dry in no time,' he said, gaging the sun above him then refocusing on Red at his feet. 'It's a warm one.'

The dog looked at him, barked once, then bounded off to run circles around the yard.

'You got too much energy for your own good,' Cooper called. Watching Red his thoughts returned to the fiasco at the Pound on Friday. He shook his head as he glanced at the fence surrounding them. He'd added an extra foot to it last weekend yet somehow Red had still managed to fling himself over it. Took himself for an excursion around the suburbs and got himself thrown into the pound. For the third and final time, they had told him. Cooper thought of the rope he'd bought from Aldi, which he'd left coiled neatly by the back door. It would be a temporary solution.

'C'mon knuckle head,' said Cooper, 'I'll take you up to the water towers for a proper run.'

They drove up the hill in the last still hours of the day, Red's wind-blown head craning out the back driver's-side window and his long wet tongue flapping in the breeze. Cooper stopped the car at the start of the gravel road—it was the same track they took every afternoon—and opened the door for Red, who hurtled out in a flurry of limbs and rusty fur. Cooper drove at twenty k's along the deserted road with the dog sprinting behind like a bullet. As he steered he looked out at a mob

of kangaroos poised in the thirsty brown paddock, soaking up the last bit of sun. The big male checked his gaze—he stood like a statue against the fading shadows of the Brindabellas.

The dog had come to him from down the road. Bev and Derrick from number eighteen were going to get him put down, were at their wits end—they'd said—and so he took him. Cooper's Red, he liked to say, and he'd laugh as he took a slug from a tall brown bottle of Coopers red-label ale, his beer of choice.

The dog was a mongrel, that's what most people said. Wasn't his fault of course. He was majority Red Heeler. Born and bred for the country, for nipping at the heels of cattle. Not for the suburbs.

Theirs was a planned city, with wide roads and orderly roundabouts, built on top of the Monaro Plains. The clay earth of that country sucked the lawns dry, but Cooper wasn't fussy about grass, and so it was home. Pip used to say the trees that lined the roads were planted too evenly but he didn't see the problem. She was like Red in some ways—she didn't like to be fenced in either. He wondered whether the trees and neighbourhoods in Europe were more to her liking.

Once home Cooper took Red out back and filled up his water bowl. With the dog slurping and panting happily and night creeping in, Cooper got himself a beer from the outside fridge—the beer fridge. He really didn't need more than one fridge these days, but he'd keep it.

'Cheers mate' he said, and laughed, holding the Coopers ale out at Red, who missed the joke, his nose buried in the drink.

Inside Cooper turned the radio on and got the speed dial ready in time for the six o'clock birthday reel, which he entered each evening but never won. Well, he got a scratchy once. Tonight wasn't his night though, so he let Red in, who was calmer now for the walk and they sat in the lounge, Cooper in his armchair, Red on his mat, and listened to the Golden Oldies radio hour.

Cooper sighed. Sunday bloody night. Bloody work tomorrow. For thirty years he'd worked at Ingram's delivering chooks to supermarkets around the city. Over the years he'd watched the people change around him, as the country changed. In the beginning his co-workers had been mainly Greeks and Yugoslav's, but now they came from Vietnam and Lebanon. Yes, he'd been there a long time, for half his life just about, and he was tired of it. With a groan he pulled himself up from the armchair and went into the kitchen, unwrapped his TV dinner, put it into the microwave and pressed cook.

After dinner, as they watched Doctor Who, Cooper picked up the postcard that lay on the table beside him—the latest from Pip. She'd gotten into making them herself with a photo and some coloured cardboard. The places she had been whirled in Cooper's imagination. Budapest. He had looked it up in the Atlas earlier that day. Reading it over once more, he felt his heart expand, and it helped to take his mind off the dilemma of Red.

From his mat on the floor Red's eyes followed Cooper around the bench to the fridge, where he stuck up the postcard with the others.

'Pretty neat ay Red?' The dog's tail swished and Cooper took it as a nod of agreement.

Later, on his way to bed he stopped outside Pip's room. Everything was exactly as she'd left it. It was a child's room, with a single bed; African safari themed curtains; a wooden box filled with marbles on the sideboard.

Cooper never set an alarm anymore, hadn't done for years. He woke up at 5:45 on the dot and poured himself a Nescafé. At 6:20 he stepped out into the crisp morning air to start the old wagon. He always left it rumbling in the driveway for ten minutes before backing out. Got to keep the old engine happy. As the car puffed exhaust into the cool, clean morning, Cooper went out the back—he'd been putting it off as long as he could. He breathed a heavy sigh, picked up the rope from the ground by the door and walked towards the clothesline.

'C'mon.' Red followed him into the centre of the yard and allowed Cooper to loop the rope around his collar. He tied it off tightly and then secured the other end to the clothesline. He yanked to make sure it wouldn't budge.

'Sorry mate,' he said, as he scuffed the top of the dog's head. 'If you didn't run off.'

With spring the blossoms had come out, and the plum trees flared a deep red, brightening the yard if only for a fleeting month. As he reversed out that morning he thought of his daughter, playing in those trees with next-door's mob. Such a long time ago, now.

It was a usual day. He drove the truck from one loading dock to the next, until he no longer registered the kilos upon kilos of packaged chicken he unloaded. Business was still good at Ingram's, even with the trend towards free-range meat. He'd thought about it a few times. Thought about how he'd like to buy free-range, there being only one mouth to feed, these days. But then he got em for free — it was one of the perks of the job. He'd chat to the supermarket workers throughout the day. About chicken, mostly. They'd stand there, arms crossed, watching him unload.

‘These five-buck chooks eh? People just can’t go past em.’

And he’d nod and say ‘well, when you got a family to feed.’

At 3:30pm when he rolled into the driveway he listened out for Red’s usual racket. Quiet. You gotta be kidding, he thought. He marched straight through the side gate and bellowed the dog’s name into the sleepy afternoon. His gaze travelled across the yard. He saw the long brown grass; the woodpile; the old tree house, now just a few bits of rotting timber lodged at strange angles between trunk and branch. Then he registered that familiar rusty colour in the corner of his eye. Red’s limp body was pried up against the metal poll of the clothesline. When Cooper got closer he saw the rope wound like a noose around Red’s neck.

Cooper sat on the brick edge of the overgrown garden bed staring down at the clothesline. He’d undone Red, and laid his sleek body down on the yellowing grass under the plum tree. He sat there for a while, his eyes glazed over, thinking of Red running round and round the clothesline, the rope getting shorter with each circuit. His choked attempts at a bark. And nobody there. The afternoon was still, the air heavy around his shoulders. There was the intermittent rumble of cars as they passed along the road on the other side of the house. He didn’t move for a long time.

Three days passed and Cooper rang Ingrim's each morning, said he was sick. His chest felt so tight he thought he might keel over. On that first afternoon, as dusk descended, he took Red up to the water towers one last time. He'd thought of burying the dog under the plum tree out back, close by. But in the end he knew Red had been fenced in for too long. Strictly speaking it wasn't allowed, but no one went up there much, apart from Red and him. He took the shovel, and as the last blemishes of sunlight vanished from the horizon he sank the shovel into the hard, dry earth beneath an old spotted gum. He dug until sweat streaked his forehead and the hole looked big enough. Cooper rolled Red's body into it, choked out an apology, and began to heap dirt back on top. Red's body disappeared one shovel load at a time, and then was gone. Cooper stood by the huddled grave, and opened a long-neck of Coopers Red. He gave the dog one last salute. Standing in the dark now, he thought of little Pip, groggy with sleep at first light, watching with wonder the hot air balloons take flight by Lake Burleigh Griffin. She had taken flight, and he was glad of it, right then.

On the third day Cooper went out the back with a full washing basket. It was time to get back on track. Stop wallowing. But when he arrived at the clothesline, he let the basket drop to the ground and instead walked swiftly around the side of the house to the woodpile. The blockbuster was resting on a stump. He snatched it up and headed back towards the clothesline, the handle swinging wildly in his grip. He lifted it high over his shoulder and brought it down on the base of the green pole. A deep, blunt thud rang out into the air and the whole thing quivered, sending a shudder through his arms. He brought the blockbuster back up and down again. He kept on swinging until the pole finally gave way and the structure fell to the ground in a skeletal heap of

tangled metal and wire. Cooper threw the blockbuster to the side and slumped onto the ground next to it.

‘Fuck you.’ He yelled at the corpse of the clothesline. His exhausted hacking split the air and evaporated into the silence of the suburbs.

As he lay back in the wiry grass, looking into the open sky, he remembered Pip’s hot air balloon ride. It had been her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday present. He couldn’t afford to go with her, but he didn’t mind. He was content watching from the lakeside as others floated away in the wide, new day. As she began to rise, he had felt a sudden pang in his chest. If he could have, he might have tied a rope to that basket, so as to keep it from straying too far.