



The wilful whippet

Yet another Paul Dann yarn ... sorry, yarn

“HEY MATE, there's a young whippet in a family here, but it's not a good look. They don't understand dogs, the kids don't know how to play with her, and all in all it's not a happy scene. Would you take her on?”

Well, though I hadn't had a dog for some years, and wasn't particularly

looking for one, it seemed to be a reasonable thing to help out. “OK,”

I relented. “Bring her around”.

So next day she turns up — a brindle bundle of spring steel muscle, fine pointed muzzle, huge chest curving into flanks which almost touch. “Why don't you feed the bloody thing!” With fine delicate legs which would snap like matchsticks. And the first thing she did when we let her out of the ute? — straight for a couple of free range chooks which were promptly demolished. What a start.

The next thing she did was decide to rearrange the car's interior. This involved extensive modifications to the upholstery, and then the gearshift lever knob came in for alteration; the knob was completely chewed away. No doubt she was trying to improve things by making a non-slip knob, but in the process the little diagram of gear shift positions was destroyed, which could have been awkward to someone with a faulty memory. A non-slip version of the handbrake lever was also provided.

My brother, who bred whippets, learned about the acquisition. “Heard you got yourself a whippet, mate. Great little dogs, but no brains.

And he told the story of how he was on his knees, looking into one of his whippets' ears for a suspected grass seed, when his neighbour came up and asked what he was doing. “Jeez, mate, don't worry about that. There's so little space between those things' ears, even a grass seed wouldn't fit.” A little unkind, I thought — and so it proved.

A few months later I had to give a lift to a friend. “Put your

gear in the back, but keep an eye on the dog”. But she didn't; and only a few kilometres on we both exclaimed simultaneously “I can smell some thing”

That something was half a dozen hard boiled eggs. Whip — that seemed a logical name for a whippet — had undone a bag, removed a Tupperware container of hard-boiled eggs, opened it, and demolished the contents, leaving a neat little pile of eggshells. And she hadn't even asked.

She then found she liked hazelnuts. So she learned to belly herself along my rows of hazelnut trees, hoovering up uncollected nuts from the ground and cracking them. As she ate the kernels, a continuous stream of broken shells trickled from the side of her mouth — a pretty clever performance I thought. But one day someone noticed that every so often a nut would be ejected, whole and uncracked. So I picked up a few of these rejects; and sure enough each was empty. She had worked out that if a nut was light in weight it had no kernel, and therefore was not worth cracking.

Whip soon developed a few endearing habits, and a few not so endearing.

One of the latter was an amazing ability to snatch attractive, to her, food items from a table or bench when no one was looking. She did this by dancing along on her hind legs, scanning the table or bench for anything promising. How she managed the removal is not certain, but manage she did. A large leg of mutton was no problem; but the favourite item has been 500-gram tubs of Black and Gold margarine which — without the contents — now litter the landscape.

There are various theories - some not repeatable here — about the origin of the word whippet. One which appeals comes from a recent article about whippets, in the elegant English rural journal *Country Life*, describing the food depredations in some of the stately homes of Britain. One of the more impressive relates to a certain duchess hosting an aristocratic afternoon tea in the castle where whippets, hers and guests', had free rein, who went to collect a “magnificent” chocolate cake made and brought for the event by one of the society ladies. Guess what — it had “simply disappeared” - but guess which smug whippet was licking its chops under the kitchen table.

So the *Country Life* article suggested that the term whippet comes from the breed's members' astonishing ability to “whip”, when no one is looking, attractive food items from tables and benches — a nicer suggestion than some of the others currently in circulation.

Although Whip still retains her hunting skills, when it suits her, and goes like a rocket in the bush, she remains a great pet, albeit spoilt. Never let a whippet take command of a favourite lounge chair, for that's when the wilfulness shines. Switching off telly at bedtime and calling her to go outside is always such a performance; there's feigned deafness for the first half minute or so, until reality strikes and the head emerges from behind a cushion. Then the head shakes decisively several times - an emphatic “No!” — until the inevitability strikes. But there still follows much more delaying tactic, in the form of amazing contortions amongst the cushions which are sent flying, until finally as the commands become more insistent the front legs reach the floor and there's half a minute or so of protesting angled stretching until the dog admits defeat and departs for the great outside.

But who knows if she really acknowledges defeat? To her everything is still probably on her terms — and that's part of the charm of the wilful whippet.

Byron Bay Writers Festival

by Trish Solomon

THE BYRON BAY WRITERS Festival (2-4 August) was a feast for the senses. The venue is a paddock at Belongil Beach with six marquees of varying sizes, food outlets, a book shop and a massage tent. (It is Byron Bay after all!) For the eyes there are wonderful sculptures and pieces of public art scattered around the site; for the taste buds delicious organic treats and lots of good coffee; for smell there is the sea, the coffee and patchouli oil, for touch there is the delight of new books to run your hands over and the feel of warm sand between your toes — but most importantly there is an absolute feast for the EARS.

To have the absolute privilege of hearing words of wisdom from so many artists, musicians, writers and historians is beyond words. The feeling for me is euphoric.

So, where to start. The first session I attended was on the ephemeral nature of memory. Initially, I thought I would just write about this session as I took lots of notes. Then I attended a session on ‘Do poets do it better? Writing the book of love’.

Well, you can hardly go past a good love poem. However, immediately following this session was one of ‘Women & Power: the changing relationship, public & Private’. On the panel was Anne Summers (journalist, author and long time advocate for women), Yassmin Abdel Magied (founded Youth without Borders and is now an Engineer on the gas rigs in North Queensland) and Chris Wallace (writer and academic living in Canberra).

This was a powerful two hours and I thought well, really, I should write about how fantastic women are, how powerful they can be and how exciting it was to be part of the women's movement in the '70s.

Still reeling from discussions on the power of women I stumbled into the Macquarie Marquee for ‘Slings & Arrows of outrageous fortune: when



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things don't go as planned.’ Three amazing men all with different experiences of things not going as planned: Richard de Crespigny (A380 pilot of the ill-fated QF32), John Cantwell (war veteran from Desert Storm) and Mathew Mitchem (Beijing Olympic gold medallist who didn't qualify for London).

All these men suffered trauma as a result of their experiences and have written books about how they dealt with the ensuing difficulties of getting on with life. This session also tied in with the one on memory.

And then I cried. This was in a session of ‘Writing for social change: what's wrong with the world as it is?’ A young Greek-Australian poet, Luka Lesson, whose poetry was mesmerising, theatrical and passionate, recited a poem and the tears flowed. Was it the poem? Was it the poet? On examining my emotional reaction I realised I was grieving for the lost passion of my

youth. Maybe this is what I should write about. My memory of the event is mostly of the poetry which has a way of distilling thoughts, feelings and observations. There is deep rhythm in poetry. Words will fall into place from a rhythm in the mind. So, I would like to leave you with a couple of verses of Luka Lesson's poem.

Please resist me
Colonise me, compromise me, conflict me
Please don't risk me
If you see me at the airport
please come and frisk me
Please resist me

Colonise me, compromise me, conflict me
Please don't risk me
Please call me stupid
Because your resistance brings our evolution

Please resist me
Call me a 'wog'
It's brought us so close together I could call me a squad