*Bushman*

**By Peter Bishop**

**Winner, Fiction category**

**2014 New England Thunderbolt Prize for Crime Writing**

As if those dumb coppers were ever going to catch him.

Him – Cleve Cassellberg – a whole family of Cassellbergs had grew up in these mountains – run goats, pigs, chooks, trapped dingoes, sold a dozen or more calves a year, not bad considering the old man had three cows to his name. Jersey cross, udders like chaff bags, four and five calves hanging off each one of them. Tucked away up the end of the valley where no nosy busybody would be fool enough to come. The cottage vertical slabs of grey ironbark splotched with red lichen, roof battered tin, ribbon of blue smoke from the rusted flue.

Cleve had been collecting cleanskins since he was eight years old. Early morning slip through the flash new wire fence of that flash new city neighbour, newborn calf lying in the dew-damp grass still surprised at life, trusting. Smear of coarse salt down its back so Dad’s cow would take it. Suck anything that stood still long enough.

Knew every creek, every gully, every split in the cliffs, every cave in the escarpment, every rabbit hole, every eagle’s nest, every fish in the river come to that.

And here were these stupid arsehole cops looking for him with motorbikes and helicopters.

Hear them coming miles off.

’Course there was that one time when they’d brought in the dogs – on foot, real quiet. He and Jerry had been tucked away in that little fishing shack out on the Big Styx.

He’d got a bit careless that time, off guard. Jerry had heard them – given just that one little whine and they were out the door into the bush and he’d shot the dog handler with the little pea-rifle he’d found wedged up in there between the ceiling and the roof.

Rifle fired low right – he’d aimed at his head, hit him in the right shoulder. Knocked him down, dog still tied to his wrist. And Cleve and Jerry gone into the scrub and the two cops hanging back at the edge of the clearing jabbering on their radios, shit scared.

Old Jerry was his secret weapon. Half Barb, the rest Kelpie and Blue Heeler, black with a white patch over one eye – catch a rabbit in ten strides, never make a sound, hear someone coming a mile off.

Only reason Cleve had been in the fishing shack was the solar panel on the roof. Charging his IPhone. Watched the coppers every night on the news on his IPhone.

Well it wasn’t his IPhone of course – picked it up from that piece’s house on the edge of Ebor – girl in that house he’d had his eye on reminded him of Julie. Been a long time since Julie. Skinny body and big tits. Girls like that spent all their time thinking about it.

Some women, thick waisted, moved like their sex was an accident they wanted to forget.

But girls like this one were different. You could tell. Long dark hair down her back. Three days, three nights he’d watched, out in the trees on the edge of the Guy Fawkes.

Watched her leave the house that evening and he’d slipped in quiet as you like, found the IPhone – thought he’d just stay there waiting for her – give her a nice little surprise. Cleve liked giving little surprises. Julie had never got over hers.

Well you wouldn’t expect it, the way things had turned out – having to gag her and keep her tied up all that time. She’d just sort of lost interest after a while. There’d been others after Julie, six of them to be exact. Never been found that he knew of. Some hadn’t even been missed. Imagine that – living a life so small that when you’re gone you aren’t even missed.

Anyway Cleve had been waiting for this little piece to come back – he was getting quite excited about it – giving her the big welcome – and here she comes and she’s got another girl and two blokes getting out of a ute and Cleve’s out the back like a moon shadow, with the IPhone. Never even had a pin number to it.

And she’d keep.

So you could say that’s twice the IPhone has nearly got him into trouble – except it wasn’t really the IPhone the first time – it was the prospect of those heavy tits on that skinny little chest – the IPhone was what you’d call a corollary. But it was handy for finding out what the coppers were up to next.

That night they had footage of the one he’d shot – he didn’t look too bad. Might have been wearing a Kevlar jacket. Still, nice to have a gun – and the coppers would worry.

Norm Sabine, called himself Julie’s father, he’d been on the news that night – tattoos writhing up his neck from his collar, seeping down his arms below the sleeves of his T shirt, crawling from under his shorts, bare feet.

‘I want to know where my little girl is – I gotta right to know – I should be told, I gotta right.’

Straggly blond hair down onto his shoulders, shining bald dome, gap toothed mouth – the lying bastard.

‘He done things to me.’ That’s what Julie had said, before he’d had to gag her that was. ‘He done things – ’

That’s all she’d say.

Looking at the lying bastard on the news it wasn’t hard to believe.

Little Julie.

That’s how she’d come to him.

Out of the frying pan into the fire so to speak. Well, that was life sometimes.

But to see that lying bastard on the news – he was going to get away with what he done to Julie – wasn’t like Julie was going to come back and accuse him – not where she was now.

But maybe Cleve might be able to do something. It wasn’t right what he done – to his own daughter – the dirty bastard.

That was two things on Cleve’s agenda now. He liked that word – agenda. Had a classy sound to it. Cleve liked having an agenda.

And one thing on that agenda was that little piece with them heavy tits that owned the IPhone – he would give it back to her – say he found it – he could see the excitement in her eyes now.

And the second thing was that dirty lying bastard who said he was Julie’s father. Cleve had never met him till he saw him on the news – the bastard wouldn’t recognise Cleve until it was too late.

He’d do that for Julie. The thought made him feel good.

And the stupid cops’d still be looking for him down the Big Styx where you couldn’t find an elephant if it wanted to hide – and he’d be back on the banks of the Guy Fawkes having fun like he hadn’t had since Julie. Those others didn’t really count.

Julie had been five years ago so they said on the news. Five years – imagine that. And the cops hadn’t laid a finger on him.

Now he was *The most wanted man in New South Wales. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars reward.*

*‘The Commissioner has urged all shop owners, all householders to secure their premises, lock all doors and windows in case Cassellberg is seeking food or supplies.’*

As if he’d go to a shop or a house. The useless city bred cops had no idea at all.

Anytime he wanted Jerry could catch him a rabbit – he’d give the head and guts to the dog, spear the carcase on a green stick over low coals – beautiful. And there were birds’ eggs, plover, quail, wood-duck, any number of them right time of year – ducklings along the creek banks – and trout.

He’d watched the fly fishers casting for trout – looked like fun if you had all day and you weren’t hungry. Cleve could guddle a good sized trout from down under a cut in bank in five minutes. Bare hands.

Them city bred coppers with their helicopters and motorbikes. Five years, quarter of a million dollars, none of it made the slightest difference. They had two chances of catching him – none and Buckley’s.

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‘We got photos of him where they found that girl in that house at Ebor. Someone watching when the police moved in took pictures on their phone, saw someone dive out the back. Can’t see much.’

‘Show me’ said Detective Sergeant Riley.

Riley had come late to the Cassellberg manhunt – Riley was that rare thing, a policeman raised as a boy in the country – now Detective Sergeant with Homicide, brought in because of the girl at Ebor.

Tied up she’d been, damaged in ways you wouldn’t want to think about. Died hard. Riley had four more possibles tenuously linked to Cassellberg.

James Riley examined the images on the computer screen. Running figure, followed by a smaller figure.

‘Has he got a dog? Did that constable he shot say he thought he saw a dog?’

The Commissioner shrugged.

‘Can you blow up these images?’

‘Sure.’

And the images swelled – before they pixillated – a black dog, white patch over one eye.

‘It’s a damn dog.’ Riley was excited now.

‘Of course it’s a dog.’

‘No – I mean it’s not a bitch – it’s a dog. I think we’ve got him.’

*‘Following reliable sightings the manhunt for the State’s most wanted man, Cleve Cassellberg has moved from the Ebor area east of Armidale to the southwest, near the little town of Bendemeer.’*

Cleve had come to the top of the escarpment to get reception for his IPhone. Bloody Bendemeer. A hundred miles away. Jesus.

‘I want four bitches, I want them filled with prostaglandin until their ovaries are on fire and I want them here on the lip of the escarpment at these designated sites around Ebor, and I want them here tonight.’

‘Yes sarge,’ said Senior Constable Millburne.

‘When you have the bitches tethered at the designated sites you will notify me by radio.’

‘Yes sarge.’

‘When the dogs turn up you will destroy, silently, any dog that is not black with a white patch on its left eye.’

‘Yes sarge.’

‘When a black dog with a white patch on its eye appears you will do nothing until the dog has its dick irreversibly inside the bitch.

‘Understand?’

‘Yes sarge.’

‘You will then seize the dog, affix the collar with the radio transmitter to the dog in question.

‘Understand.?’

‘Yes sarge.’

‘You will restrain the dog and immediately notify base of this event. You will not release the dog until advised to do so by myself personally. By that time our helicopter will be airborne and tracking. Understand?’

‘Yes sarge.’

‘Any questions?’

‘How do we destroy the unwanted dogs silently?’

‘You will use your knife, your bludgeon, your mace – you will use your bare hands if necessary – you will not deploy your firearm. Is that clear?’

‘Yes sarge.’

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‘Sarge – Senior Constable Millburne here sarge – I got the fucking dog, white patch on his eye and all – waited till he was shagging the bitch like you said and I clipped the collar with the transmitter around his neck and the fucking bastard turned and bit me, sank his fucking teeth into my hand – nearly took my bloody thumb off.

‘Anyway – the bastard got away.’

‘Are you telling me, Senior Constable Millburne, that you released the dog before notifying base? Before you received authorization to release the dog?’

‘Shit sarge – the fucking dog tore my fucking hand open – I was bleeding like a stuck pig – I had to stop the frigging bleeding before I could even hold the fucking radio.’

‘Senior constable Millburne, you will control your language when speaking on police radio – pull yourself together. How long ago did you release the dog?’

‘I didn’t fucking release the fucking bastard – the fucking thing escaped – nearly tore my fucking thumb off. I’m not a fucking dog handler – you knew that.’

‘Senior constable Millburne, how long ago did the dog escape?’

‘I don’t fucking know – maybe ten fucking minutes? Who gives a shit about the dog – I need urgent medical assistance sergeant – right now. You knew I wasn’t trained as a dog handler when you assigned me to this – I’ll have your stripes for this Riley.’

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Jerry had been missing for two hours when Cleve saw him trotting towards him along the bank of the big waterhole on the lip of the Ebor Falls, one of those blue mesh collars around his neck with a fucking radio transmitter on it.

Cleve drew his knife, called ‘here boy’, slid the knife under the collar, sliced it in two, knotted the collar around a stick, threw the stick into the swollen Guy Fawkes, watched stick and collar sweep over the edge, tumble two hundred feet down the falls into the miles of turbulent river that was the headwaters of the Nymboida.

That’d give them something to follow.

He looked at the dog. ‘How’d they get you sport? How’d they fucking get you ?’ And then it dawned on him.

‘A slut on heat – I’ll bet. Some smart bastard out there after all.’

Cleve Cassellberg and Jerry vanished into the wild Eucalypt forest surrounding the Guy Fawkes Nature reserve as the first helicopter clattered up the valley.

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There was a persistent knocking on the front door of his back street Katoomba cottage that Norm had tried to ignore – but even through two six packs of VB’s it wouldn’t go away.

Norm grunted slowly from his chair in front of the television, who wanted to watch the Indians beating the shit out of the useless frigging Aussies anyway – bloody cricket – stumbled over a beer can, kicked the rest out of the way, opened the front door.

The bloke standing there looked vaguely familiar – black dog with a white patch around its eye sniffing the lunch scraps Norm had tossed in long weeds that might have once been a lawn.

‘Norm Sabine?’

‘Who wants to know?’

‘This one’s for Julie’ the bloke said.

Norm caught a glimpse of a long knife coming up real quick in this feller’s hand, into Norm’s belly, hardly felt it then it bit into his heart in an explosion of pain that buckled his knees and he fell, his face smashed into the concrete step, he felt teeth break – blood from his pierced heart filled his mouth, his nostrils – he tried to suck air but all he got was blood.