

LOST AND FOUND

Dixie Coutts

LOCAL WINNER



Dixie Coutts was born in the Upper Murray. With her husband, she has been living and working on the family farm since the death of her father in 1997. She was an English teacher for 31 years. Since retirement, she has devoted her time to family, farm, gardening, reading and writing and trying to play golf.

Dixie's writing is inspired by her love of the land and interest in relationships.

Susan was running away, through the bush, with only the mad red dog for company. It was hot and the grey trees were closing in around her and her breath came painfully but she kept going, for her heart was so unhappy she could not stop.

"I hate him, hate him, hate him!" she kept saying over and over, the sobs ripping away in the stifling air. Owen.

It was always Owen. The bully. The boss. The usurper. How she had suffered when he came. It seemed to her that all her sorrows had started when he married her mother. For Owen did not love her. Oh, he had pretended to at first. The miniature piano he had given her for Christmas still stood on her bookshelf in the big, cool room they had made her move into when the baby arrived; she had never quite been able to bring herself to smash it. He had taken her swimming at Lakes Entrance – there was a photo to prove it. Her mother had taken it, catching them by surprise, he had his arm around her, she was so small at six, and they were both laughing. She remembered, and her crying started again. Why, why, why? Why wasn't he her real father? But thank goodness he wasn't, she reminded herself.

She stopped running. The heat was nearly unbearable. She sat down under a tree and the silly dog capered back and licked her face. She put her arm around him. He was smelly and wet and stupid and uncomplicated. He was full of affection, he was everybody's friend.

Susan knew that her mother would worry about her, but, by the time she returned from work Susan would be far away. They had ridden these bush tracks often enough and she knew where to go, even though the bush was full of abandoned mine shafts and Owen never let them go on picnics. It was too dangerous, he said, but in fact it was because he was such a spoil sport. She knew.

All through the hot afternoon she trudged, the dog usually trotting on ahead, returning in a haphazard fashion to check on her. Once she lost him for half an hour and thought he must have decided to go home, and felt lonelier than ever. Then she heard a crashing in the nearby scrub and saw a flash of grey bounding away, and heard the frantic yelping of the dog as the kangaroo escaped him. He returned soon afterwards, hot, bedraggled and looking even more foolish.

They reached the bottom of a gully and paused to drink from the creek. Susan rested in the cool, ferny shade and the dog plunged into the water and ran back and forth. The little girl's anger had subsided into a dull, aching sorrow. She felt leaden. There were no more tears, only a dry, burning sadness behind her eyes. What was she going to do? Thoughts of returning home began to penetrate the fierce barrier of determination which she had set up. No, she would not, could not.

Last night they had watched a documentary about homeless children in the cities. One boy who was interviewed said he had left home originally because of pressure. By the time he decided that he wanted to go home his parents had made up their minds that they did not want him back. "Now I am homeless," he said as the camera zoomed in on his stricken face and statistics about street kids flashed across the screen. Her mother tut tutted and Owen read the newspaper. It's like that for me, Susan thought, I can't go home. The circumstances might be different but the feelings were the same.

Presently she got up and went on. Mum would be home by now. She would put the car away and come up the steps, carrying her work bags and perhaps some groceries. She would leave her sunglasses on the bench, get a drink for

Katrina, put the kettle on, go up to her room to change. Where is Susan, she would ask. Would Owen even realize she had gone?

Owen laughed at her when she ran home screaming from the bus because she had seen a snake. She still remembered the shot of terror that surged through her when she saw its lithe, stick like body in the dusty shadows of the gums that hung over the road, the blind panic that took over her legs and sent her racing home. He was so mean.

In the middle of the afternoon the sky suddenly darkened and the air thickened with smoke. With terrible clarity Susan suddenly thought of the Tiramunda fires. They had heard about them on the news and now she remembered that the wind had been fanning them from the West; she knew where West was because she had watched the setting sun so often while waiting for her mother to return from work. Now the sun was lost and the air was dark with smoke. She stopped dead in her tracks, clutching wildly at the dog when he trotted back enquiringly. "What are we going to do?" she whispered, starting to sob.

She looked around. They had made fair progress up the track in spite of the heat and now they were a long way from the creek. It seemed to Susan that the smoke was all around, but the fire itself, where was it? Close enough to be dangerous? She could not tell, but she sensed it and she panicked. She began running blindly towards the creek, dashing through undergrowth, scratching her arms and legs on sticks and blackberries, desperately trying to keep a diagonal course, taking the short cut towards water. And as she stumbled and fell, and picked herself up again, gasping for breath and crying, she saw the first flames and heard the terrifying crackling of the fire in the bush around her. Her screams rent the air: "Mummy, Mummy, Mummy!!!!!" She hardly knew the wailing was her own voice but she knew she was going to die alone and the knowledge was more horrifying than the fire itself.

Somehow, even at the height of her hysteria, her legs kept propelling her forward in a mad, desperate compulsion. Dim flashes of memory resurfaced in her mind. Someone – who was it? Grandfather? Uncle Stan? Someone, she had been told, had been caught in a fire long, long ago. No, there had been two people – it didn't matter – and one panicked and ran for the creek. He didn't make it, but the other? What happened? What did he do? She couldn't remember but something kept hammering in her head. She must remember, she must do the same thing. But what was it?

The roar of the fire engulfed her now. She thought she heard the bark of a dog, she thought she saw a vehicle but that was impossible. Her mind was playing tricks on her. As she felt the breath knocked from her and crumpled to the ground, suddenly she remembered what you had to do - what her grandfather had done all those years ago. Lie down, roll up, close to the earth, like a ball, down, down, so the fire will go over you, down, low, there's more air down on the earth, down, down. She fell and rolled and burrowed, and everything was black.

A dark haired man jumped out of the Land Rover and ran, coughing in the smoke, stumbling over the charred body of what might have been a red dog. His frantic calls ripped through the last of the fire noises. "Susan! Susan!" The little figure was still curled on the blackened ground when he found it. He was sobbing as he picked her up. My God, my God, was she dead? He thought he could detect a pulse. He held her close, brushing the hair and dirt and grass from her face. Not burnt, not much anyway. Only her back where the fire had gone over. He carried her as tenderly as if she had been his own child. He held her as he climbed back into the Land Rover, he kept his arm around her as they started the tortuous journey home, and he was sobbing.

When she opened her eyes his face was the first thing she saw. "Owen?"

He looked down at her and she suddenly recognized the expression in his eyes that had been there so long ago. "It's all right now, darling," he said. "I'm, here, you're safe now. We're going home.

You'll soon see Mum."

His voice was different and his eyes, his eyes.....perhaps she was really dead. Her own eyes closed. She felt herself drifting. When she opened them Owen was still there and his arm was still around her. She began to see other things and to feel. She smelt the familiar dusty, oily interior of the old Rover, the sweat of Owen's shirt, the smoke. She noticed the blackened skeletons of the trees they passed. She felt pain, bad pain.

She looked back again at Owen's face, and smiled, and smiled.