

The Big Sheep.

'I've seen it,' the woman with lilac hair says convincingly to camera.

She's good. Very authentic. I can see my introduction already.

'I've seen it too,' her friend says, 'I'm Beryl.'

'So, Beryl and...'

'Sharon. Sharon Davis. I've seen you on the telly,' she blurts with a nervous giggle.

'Yes, where... exactly... did you see it?' I say in well practised, award winning style. Typically, I lean on a key word in the midway point of a sentence and then slide into the back end with sincerity and warmth. It's a skill that comes with years of practice. As you would expect, we are the focal point of the main street. Hardly surprising. It's not every day you meet Jeff Smith.

'Yep, I've seen it,' Ted the copper says, 'it's a big fucker.'

'Language Ted, we'll go again Rog'

'Still rolling,' my cameraman says.

'So you've seen it too?' I take it from the top.

'Fuck yeah, big bastard... we were out on patrol one night and...'

'Ted, look, it's a 6.30 timeslot, OK? Tell me what you saw and when.'

'Oh it was years ago. I was takin' Marchy home from the pub. He's seen it heaps of times – more than anyone 'round here. It was like some kinda holy grail for him, catchin' that thing. Wanted to shear it he said. I mean he was bloody mad... but he's dead now. He passed on the quest to Dazza.'

'Dazza?'

'Dazza's his son.'

'What exactly did he see?'

'Dazza? He hasn't see anything.'

'No. Dazza's old man. What is it that he *and you* saw?'

'Well it was kinda woolly and well... well, it's ... fuckin' big'

'Cut Rog. Thanks Ted. Look, any idea where I'd find this... Dazza?'

'That's Dad there,' Dazza says, sipping his cup of tea and pointing to a framed newspaper clipping 'he wanted it real bad... reckoned he could taste it.'

“Get him for me Daz. Nail ‘im. Shear ‘im. Do it for me” That’s all he said to me before he went. I owe it to the old man to finish his life’s work.’

The old cast iron burner is chock full of orange. Outside it’s black and cold as charity – the breeze blowing up from Clacka Creek could cut a bloke in half. A rattle in the kitchen pane makes the dog growl low. I look across to Roger over near the window setting up the camera on a tripod. He looks from Dazza to me and rolls his eyes. I have to look away or I’ll crack. There’s a dangerous note of levity in the room brought on by a couple of beers and a long drive.

‘Somewhere out there,’ Dazza says to me with a far away stare, leaning perfectly on a dramatic pause, his dark eyes fixed on the polynesian pattern in the lime green kitchen curtains, ‘there’s one hell of a sheep... and by Christ, it’s time to bring it in.’

I know that if I look across to Roger now, we’ll both explode with laughter.

‘So how ... big is it?’ I venture with a nice break mid sentence.

‘Depends on who you talk to, doesn’t it?’ Dazza says wearily, ‘Look. No-one’s got any hard evidence. Sure, there’s a footprint at Colac museum, but there’s a lot of talk that it’s a bullshit setup or it might even be a fuckin’ dinosaur’.

‘Steady Daryl, it’s a family show. Why do they think it’s a... sheep footprint?’ I say with beautiful weighting on the word “sheep”.

‘Hoofprint?’ Roger says under his breath off camera.

‘Well it’s ovine for sure... the shape of the imprint gives it away. And if you extra-appellate out of the size of the footprint up into a body, well, they’re saying it could be twenty foot high,’ Dazza nods and winks.

‘How hard do you think it’s going to be to catch it?’

‘It’s like Dad used to say, to catch the Big Sheep, you gotta think like the Big Sheep. So I put together a crack team. We’re using the latest training techniques to get me in peak condition and keep me there. When that moment comes... and it could be today, I’m ready to seize it. As dad used to say: Car-pet Diem.’

Despite the soft, warm afternoon sunlight filtering through the bluegums, you can see your breath here in the forest. There’s a bellbird somewhere and a light wind slips through the branches up high. I sit behind a tree looking across at Dazza, who is nestled in behind a bush, momentarily lost in the boyish challenge of blowing breathy smoke rings. Roger has his camera trained on this tragic moment, but senses my disapproval and switches off. Suddenly, we hear a rustle in the undergrowth. The unmistakable sound of steps. The crack of a twig.

‘Shit,’ mutters someone nearby.

Dazza signals to me with a commando hand motion indicating that he is about to attack. Part of me is feeling sorry for Dazza. Part of me sees a story. In a split

second, Dazza leaps up to his feet and launches himself at a creature that has wandered into the clearing. I'm right behind him, nicely in foreground shot of Roger's camera. Flying through mid air, Dazza lets out a guttural scream and the creature tries to run. But too late. Dazza tackles the animal bare handed and a struggle ensues. I crouch close to camera and look around as if concerned for Roger's safety. Finally Dazza rips the crude mask off the beast to reveal a startled face. A second face appears as the horse suit comes away.

'Struth guys,' Dazza says unhappily, 'It's not gunna come in like that into the open is it? It's never gunna give its position away that easy. How many times have I told you? You gotta ...' he pauses, 'Say it! You gotta ...'

'Think like a Big Sheep,' they say in unison.

'This is Jeff, you've prob'ly seen him on the telly' Dazza says pointing loosely in my direction, 'Mick and Davo,' he says pointing at the duo in what's left of the horse suit.

'Listen you blokes,' Dazza says turning back to Mick and Davo, now disrobing themselves from the horse suit, 'where's the element of surprise? I don't wanna see you coming. Do you understand? And which one of you said "shit"?''

Mick puts his hand up, looking guilty as charged – Dazza leans in and smacks him over the head.

'Like the Big Sheep's gunna say 'shit'?' What's the ONLY thing you're allowed to say in the suit?

'Baaaaaaaa,' they say in unison.

'Exactly. No talking in the suit. EVER! The suit is sacred. In the suit, you are the Big Sheep and I am' he says expectantly.

'The target,' they say as one.

'Where to?' Roger says as we load the van.

'Colac. Let's check this footprint out.'

'Hoofprint,' Rog says with a grin.

I throw him a tired look.

'Your turn to drive.'

The van swings through town, hugging the coast road, then turns inland for an hour of countless twists and turns through the forest. The steady onslaught of the footy call on the radio and the sun filtering into the cabin lulls me. I'm warm and comfortable and I begin to nod off.

'Holy FUUUUUUCCCKKKKK!!!!!!!' screams Rog.

I wake in panic mode, heart pounding as the van screeches and swerves wildly. In front of us is a massive creature covering the entire width of the two lane highway. Rog manages to take thirty K's off our speed, but we smash straight into one of the creature's hairy tree-trunk legs and the windscreen shatters instantly.

When I come to, a paramedic is holding a bloody towel to Rog's head and I become aware of a warm hand under my neck and a torch being flashed across my eyeballs.

'He's right,' my paramedic says.

The flashlight is replaced with the smiling face of Ted the copper.

'We thought you were fuckin' dead, Jeff. Can you remember what happened?'

'It was huge, it was right there in front of us. I saw it... we both saw it,' I say groggily.

'So you saw it huh?' Ted says with a note of vindication, 'told you it was a big fucker.'

'No. I mean... yes, it was a big fucker... but it wasn't it was a ...'

'Wombat,' says Rog, 'it was a Big Fucking... Wombat ... as big as a truck.'

Ted looks across at Rog, then back to me, then at the paramedic, who is clearly dumbfounded by the conversation.

'Keep an eye on these two for a minute will you Barry?' Ted says to the paramedic.

'Where you goin' Sarge?' the paramedic says nervously.

'Get my breathalizer. These bastards have obviously been drinkin'.'