

playing poker in George Macdonald's kitchen and telling tales out of school — about Norman.

Nancy Bryant, three months past her sixtieth birthday, had washed the last of her guests' dishes and reset her dining room for the onslaught of breakfast. She was emptying the dishwasher onto her herb garden when she heard what sounded like an infant's cry. Surely a night bird, though no bird she'd heard before in the near forty years she'd lived on this land. A feral cat perhaps. Unconvinced, she walked deeper into the yard.

A country night is dark when the moon is hiding. Unable to see a foot in front of her, she returned to her enclosed porch for the lantern Lonnie had left burning there for his guests' convenience.

Chains rattled. The dogs were disturbed by that late light and by the scent of strangers, and as Nancy walked by their shed, old Boss-dog asked his low question.

'Go to bed,' she said, eager to go to her own.

And she heard it again, louder this time, or louder because she was nearer. She'd borne seven children, was grandmother to twelve; she could recognise a baby's cry when she heard it.

She walked to the house fence where she swung her lantern, signalling to whoever was out there. 'Hello,' she called. 'Hello out there?'

No reply, and if she kept this up she'd disturb her guests, who had been sufficiently disturbed tonight when one of them had wanted a bath and been offered a small basin of precious tank water. She and Lonnie had done their best to make them comfortable but would be pleased to see their backs come morning. Family was one thing; they'd put up with what they got. Guests were something else.

She yawned, turned back to the house and took two steps towards her bed. And there it was again, that tremulous wail of the newborn. There was someone out there, and she'd find them too — or old Boss-dog would.

The lantern lighting its small circle, she walked across to the shed where five dogs were chained each night. Boss-dog was her

mate, fifteen if he was a day, a kelpie/border collie cross and no smarter dog ever whelped. Folk laughed when she told them he understood every word she said. Well, let them laugh. She knew what she knew.

‘Where’s the baby?’ she said. ‘Go find the baby.’ She released him from the chain and the old dog, unaccustomed to attention at midnight, wriggled for more. ‘Where’s the baby? Go find the baby.’

The grandkids played hide and seek with him. He knew the game, and if his eyesight wasn’t as good as it used to be, his hearing not so sharp, there was nothing wrong with his scenting ability. He laughed at her, got in the last lick, then ran to the house-fence gate.

There was a time when he would have been up and over the gate without breaking his stride. Tonight he allowed her to open it. Then he was off, scouting the north paddock. She followed with her lantern, her eyes not much use outside its circle of light, her ears compensating.

There were sheep in the far corner of the paddock. She heard a few sheepish complaints. Seconds later Boss-dog reported in.

‘It’s out there somewhere, boy. Go find the baby.’ He circled, seeking direction. She had none to give. ‘Go.’ She waved her arm in the general direction of the railway line and he took off again into the night.

Try following a black dog across a paddock on a moonless night, she thought. It couldn’t be done.

And she heard it again, not much more than a weary protest, but a baby’s protest and close by. Boss-dog heard it — and found it. He was calling her with his ‘over here’ yelp and she ran, her lantern lighting her feet, ran to the boundary fence.

He was on the other side, in the scrubby gully beside the built-up railway line. She placed the lantern down and climbed between the wires. Her face at dog level was an opportunity too good to miss. Boss-dog stole a kiss then ran laughing back to his find.

It wasn’t a baby. He’d found a woman lying face down. A black-clad, black-headed woman.

‘Are you all right, dear?’ She patted her shoulder, shook it.
‘Are you hurt, dear?’

There was no response, or none from the woman.

‘God in heaven,’ she gasped as a newborn grunted at her elbow. It was entangled in the woman’s clothing.

‘Lonnie,’ she screamed. ‘Lonnie!’

The house was too far away and Lonnie’s hearing worse than Boss-dog’s.

‘Go home,’ she said. ‘Get Lonnie. Lonnie. Home, boy. Go wake Lonnie.’

Boss-dog took off across the paddock to do her bidding.

One dog barking will set off the rest. The Bryants had five. Their chorus raised Lonnie and four of the five relatives.

Until their dying days, those four would relate the tale of their night spent as guests of Lonnie and Nancy Bryant. The beds were old, the facilities archaic, the food heavy, the water rationed, and when Bessie found her way out of the rabbit warren of passages to ask if someone could please shut those dogs up, she found her hostess cutting an infant’s cord, with a kitchen knife — on the kitchen table.

‘Good God, woman!’

Until her dying day, Bessie Watson, née Duckworth, would tell how she’d thought that woman had been getting a head start on her guests’ breakfasts.

One of the male in-laws helped Lonnie carry the woman across two paddocks and lift her into the rear of the Bryants’ fancy gig. He assisted Nancy up to the seat, the baby held in her arms. All four relatives watched the lantern strapped to one of the cart’s shafts, then watched that meagre light fade off into the dark, while the dogs, aware their masters had left them in charge, took charge, determined to rid the property of the scent of stranger. Duckworths were loud, but not as loud as five barking dogs.

‘It’s bedlam,’ Bessie yelled. ‘How are we supposed to sleep?’

‘How far out are we?’ Milly wailed.

‘Miles.’