

## The Dog Show by Katherine Kovacic

It was the eve of the Gindalong and District Kennel Club Show. Light drizzle was forecast, so naturally the heavens opened shortly before midnight, dumping a month's worth of rain on the showgrounds in five hours.

Up at the Settler's Inn Motel, Ryan and David had already smuggled the dogs in from the minivan. Three Afghan hounds were sprawled across the blue chenille bedspread while the whippets were curled up in their travelling bed.

David twitched the curtain closed. 'I don't think anyone saw the dogs; no sign of any life out there anyway.'

'This room is all kinds of disgusting kitsch. I mean, this carpet...' Ryan mock shuddered. 'What is that colour called? Hurk?'

David stepped across the room and gave Ryan a reassuring pat on the shoulder. 'At least we're not camped out at the showgrounds.'

'This flea-pit is as close as I ever intend to get to camping, and if it wasn't for Australian Champion Khwshgul Whisper the Wind here,' he patted the fawn Afghan propped against the pillows, 'and his current point score, I wouldn't be doing anything less than four-star accommodation.'

'Don't worry babe. Best in Show tomorrow and our darling Whisper will finally be supreme champion. It'll be dog food endorsements and first class all the way!'

By 8 am, all the ringside spots were already taken. Ryan pursed his lips and gave David his best death stare.

'Don't say a word,' David glanced at him. 'We can set up right here and you'll still be able to see everything.' He dumped the portable gazebo on the ground.

David had left the minivan quite a distance away, ignoring Ryan's exhortations to blaze across the open ground and park closer. Last night's rain may have been a blessing for farmers, but the ground was spongy underfoot, and he could already see a couple of cars were bogged. He eyed the show ring uneasily. The surface didn't look too bad, but in several spots

water glistened between the sparse tufts of grass. At least the Afghans would be first in the hound ring.

‘I’ll get the rest of the gear while you set up the gazebo.’ David picked his way back toward the van, glad he hadn’t yet changed into his showing shoes.

It took him two trips to bring the groundsheet, folding pens and grooming gear, but years of practice meant setup was a snap. Next he brought the whippets across. BooBoo trailed along on her lead — she was retired from the show scene — but Doris and Charlie, AKA Khwshgul Highjinx and Khwshgul Ladies’ Man, he tucked under his arms. David did not want even a speck of mud to besmirch their fur.

The dogs were rugged up against the cold Gippsland wind in bespoke jackets. Booties would have been good, but Doris always refused to walk in them. Depositing the whippets under the gazebo, David took a moment to roll up the cuffs of his pants before making the next trip back to the van. The ground was already getting churned up and there was no alternative but to carry the Afghans too. Never mind that they each weighed about 27 kilograms; the long silky fur on their legs and chests would soak up mud and weeks of show prep would be out the window. Ryan was busy setting up the grooming table when David returned with their young female Afghan.

‘Speaking of bitches, La Hughes is here.’ Ryan jerked his chin toward the opposite side of the ring where a woman in a pink polyester suit was spraying product on a black dog. Her ample backside swayed as she brushed and teased the dog’s fur and both men recoiled slightly. ‘She probably slept with the judge.’ The woman turned and Ryan waved. ‘Hi gorgeous!’

David rolled his eyes. Honourable people in the dog fancy didn’t show if the judge was someone they knew, but there were more dogs around than just the four-legged variety.

He hurried to get Whisper, slipping a few times in the ever-expanding mud. The pampered dog was a deadweight as he staggered back toward the show ring, with so much fur in his face David could barely see where he was going.

By the time he reached the gazebo, Whisper was due in the ring. David just had time to change his shoes, brush fur off his burgundy jacket and clip on his competitor number while Ryan zhooshed Whisper’s coat and fluffed out his tail.

The steward was calling his number.

‘Coming!’ David scooped up Whisper and hurried to the showing’s entrance. He planned to put the dog down exactly where the judge would examine him so that the first look was of a mud-free dog.

He took one step into the ring and instantly knew he was in trouble. The surface was already like ice and David had too much speed. As his left foot slipped, he lurched forward and heard someone gasp. Trying to stay upright, he leant back, but overcorrected. There was a sickening moment when he could feel his feet going out from under him and knew he was going down. But David could only think of one thing.

‘Mind out for Whisper!’ clearly Ryan had the same thought.

Somehow, as he measured his length in the mud, David managed to keep the dog positioned on his chest, paws clear of the quagmire.

There was a moment’s stunned silence around the ring, broken by a sucking, squelching sound as David lifted the back of his head from the ground.

Ryan was bending over him. ‘Are you okay, sweetie?’

‘I—’ David stopped. Ryan wasn’t talking to him.

‘Did silly Daddy nearly drop you in the mud?’ Ryan turned his attention from Whisper to David. ‘I can’t believe you almost ruined Whisper’s chance of going Best in Show!’ He snatched the leash and walked Whisper along David’s prostrate form and into the ring.