

A Dog's Breakfast

By Rick Cogbill
July/August 2005

I picked up a set of keys pushed through the night key-drop slot and read the note that was attached. “G’day, mate!” it said. “The old van needs an oil change, and while you’re at it, check for a strange smell. It’s driving the neighborhood bitzers crazy!”

The note was signed by Nick Dundat, a retired sheep rancher recently arrived from Australia. I knew that a bitzer was Australian slang for a mongrel dog. As a former sheep man, Nick had been handling dogs for most of his life, so it was odd that he was having canine trouble.



“Here, Quig,” I said to our service writer. “See if you can work in this oil change today.” I handed him Nick’s note. “Say, Quigley; have you ever been ‘down under?’”

He yawned and reached for his coffee. “Once, years ago. Got a job shooting dingos on a ranch in the outback.”

I had to pause at that one; I knew Quigley was a gun collector, but a former sharpshooter from Australia? I figured he was pulling my leg.

Beanie finished up the oil change in short order, but spent considerable time trying to locate the source of the smell. He couldn’t find any oil or coolant leaks, or any other fluids that might be dripping onto a hot exhaust system. In fact, the ’95 Ford Windstar van was practically spotless underneath. “To tell you the truth,” our apprentice commented at coffee time, “I can’t find the source because I can’t even smell the smell. When does it happen?”

Quigley shrugged. “The note didn’t say. Let me give Nick a call.” It turned out that the smell only materialized when Nick went for a bit of a drive. “We’re out of coffee,” Quigley informed me later. “So why don’t you run down to the corner store with Nick’s van. Maybe the smell will become obvious by then.”

It sounded like a good idea, so off I went. I suspected a leaky heater core, but no matter how I fiddled with the heating controls, the air remained pure.

But when I got out of the van at the store, a strange aroma assailed my nostrils. I glanced around. *Strange*, I thought. *Who would be burning leaves in the springtime?* I came out of the store a few minutes later to find some local dogs sniffing around the van. They refused to leave, and actually followed me for a couple of blocks as I drove away.

Back at the shop, the smell of burning leaves was still there. By this time Nick had arrived, curious as to how we were making out. “Is this the odor?” I asked.

He inhaled deeply and wrinkled his nose. “Too right, mate – that’d be it.” He took off his battered hat and ran a weathered hand through his thick hair. “Just a thought, Slim, but last fall I came across a pack of pine cones stored on top of my engine by a squirrel.” Together we opened the hood and took a look. There were still some remains of the pine cones around the intake plenum, but nothing that would make the kind of odor we were getting.

I closed the hood. “Let’s put it up on the hoist again, Nick. Maybe your squirrel has picked a cozy spot on the exhaust system this time.” Starting at the front, we searched the system thoroughly, finding nothing until we got to the very back. “Hey, I can faintly smell that odor from the tailpipe.”

Nick took a sniff and agreed. “D’ya think the little bushranger stuffed his pine cones in there?”

“There’s one way to find out.” I dropped the hoist back to the ground and drove the van outside. I stuck my head out the window. “Keep your eye on the tailpipe,” I called back to Nick. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the local junkyard dog and a couple of his nefarious buddies slinking in our direction. “What is it with these mutts?” I muttered.

I goosed the throttle hard a couple of time, and suddenly Nick let out a yell. “Well, I’ll be stuffed – I think you’ve found it!” I got out and went back to see what he was talking about.

Expecting to see some toasty pine cones, I was surprised when Nick pointed out a pile of well-cooked Kibbles & Bits. The squirrels had been stealing dog food from the neighboring homes and stockpiling it in the resonator of Nick’s van. I had to laugh. “Kind of gives new meaning to the phrase, ‘Put another dog on the barbie’, doesn’t it?”

He grinned good-naturedly. “You’re tellin’ me.” He looked around at the menagerie quickly gathering around us. “At least now the dogs will stop following me around. I wasn’t looking forward to hirin’ yer mate, Quigley there, to start culling ’em.”

My mouth dropped open. “You mean you know Quigley? Like, from Australia?”

“Sure do; he used to work the station down the road.” He winked at me. “An’ I can tell you, he’s a mighty fine shot!”