**Solitude Has Its Own Rewards**

Doug Jacquier

Keith turned his gas bottle on and lit the flame under the wok resting on its frame on the camp stove, poured a slurp of peanut oil into the wok and, after feeding a couple of pieces to Arfer his German Shepherd, added the diced meat he’d had marinating overnight. When it had browned, he added the sliced vegetables and gave the wok a shake. He had just poured another glass of cabernet sauvignon when a white 4WD towing a white caravan pulled up some fifty metres away.

A man in his sixties with a belly ponderously overhanging his shorts emerged, puffing noisily, and shouted to Keith, “Great spot you have here!” He was followed shortly after by a woman of a similar age with badly dyed blond hair, a blouse displaying a shoe-leather tanned cleavage, and a skirt short enough to have been fashionable fifty years ago. Through her nose she intoned gaily, “You look like you could do with some company.”

Keith looked at them coldly and said, “Why did you stop here?”

They both looked perplexed, and she said, “Well, you never know who’s out on the road, and there’s safety in numbers.”

Keith said, “There’s no numbers here except for me and Arfer. How do you know I’m not an axe murderer and that Arfer doesn’t live off the leftovers?”

The man said, “Come on mate, you’re scaring the missus. There’s no need for that sort of talk.”

Keith said, “Here’s what I suggest you do. Get back in your snow-white rig and keep driving until you see a similar group of grey nomads circled around a campfire. Pull in there and get out your cask red and cheese and biscuits and join them. Your wife can share her three gazillion photos of her grandchildren with the other women who will tell her they’re gorgeous, and you can share your ill-informed prejudices on politics, the unemployed, superannuation and football with a sympathetic group of morons. Or, to paraphrase, fuck off.”

To underline Keith’s sentiments, Arfer stood up, bared his teeth, and growled menacingly. The couple moved rapidly to their vehicle. Once safely ensconced, the man yelled, “You’re mad, ya bastard!” and pulled back onto the road.

Resigned to the fact that his stir-fry was now largely ruined, Keith picked at it in a desultory fashion before giving most of it to Arfer.

He picked up his well-worn leather-bound journal, pumped up his lamp and said, “Arfer, what do you think of this passage? I think it has a sort of timelessness, but that may be beyond your sense of the aesthetic.”

Keith read the passage in his sonorous voice. When he’d finished, Arfer revealed nothing.

Keith said, “You’re right, it needs work. Time for bed.”

He turned off the lamp, burrowed into his swag, and as he drifted off to sleep, he noticed the moonlight glinting off his axe and heard Arfer laughing in his sleep.