

Alone at night

By sunset Shane accepted that he would be spending the night alone. He felt angry with his father. And, somewhere, deep inside, vaguely resentful of his mother.

When dark began to descend and the surrounding bush became sinister with shadows, he locked himself in the caravan and lit the gas lamp. When the van wasn't hitched up to the ute he had to save the van's batteries for special times. He heated some baked beans on the gas burners and ate them from the saucepan. Tried to find something to listen to on the radio.

The quiet and dark outside the van were oppressive. Occasional, unfamiliar bush noises added to his sense of isolation.

A small truck worked its way down the nearby dirt road. From the van's window he watched its light pick up shadowy trees and fence posts leaning at grotesque angles.

A momentary dim light seemed to come on, from within the abandoned school building close by, as the truck rattled past. After a moment's surprise, Shane feebly concluded it was the headlights of the passing truck shining through gaps in the building.

A moment later the dogs on the hill had a barking fit.

Shane was aware that he was getting nervous. He switched on the van's small electric light and turned off the heavy gas lamp. He climbed into his bed in a space at the front of the van, above the collapsible table. His father had claimed the bed at the back of the van. Jokingly, he had said he wasn't up to climbing ladders to get into bed. Suited Shane. He decided to look at one of his dad's trucking magazines. It would take his mind off his loneliness—and, hopefully, help him get to sleep.

A light breeze rustled through the nearby trees.

Something rattled and scraped on the old school building.

Somewhere in the bush a night bird gave a lonely, mournful cry.

The dogs on the hill had another barking fit. He suddenly wondered why. He could think of a few reasons and some of them he didn't like.

Shane dropped his magazine and switched off the dim light. He was amazed how black the night was in the bush.

A branch crashed to the ground in the nearby bush and gave him a start. As he gained his composure he rolled over onto his stomach, gently slid open the little window at the head of the bed and peered into the darkness.

He could just make out the insipid farmhouse lights on the hill. They looked distant, uninviting, across a sea of darkness.



Cadaver Dog by Alan Horsfield, Lothian Crime Wave series, 2003