

The image features a dark, starry night sky as the background. In the lower half, a wooden crate sits on a field of dry, golden-brown grass. A white cloth is draped over the top and side of the crate. The title 'THE CURIOUS SIGN' is centered in the upper half in a large, white, sans-serif font.

THE CURIOUS SIGN

SCOTT BLACKWELL

Some signs are big, bold and unmissable. But some are much more subtle. In fact some signs are more like clues and are only noticed by careful observers.

The signs we see all around us in the lead-up to Christmas are in the first category. They yell at us that the meaning of Christmas is Santa, kids, shopping, and food... *lots* of food.

But if you take the time to read about the very first Christmas—with its shepherds, singing angels, and baby in a manger—you'll discover a curious sign that points you to a whole new layer of Christmas joy.

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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

The Curious Sign

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①

RED SKY

I REMEMBER VERY clearly a curious experience I had as a small boy with my dad. I was standing next to him on the verandah of my uncle's house in Queensland (north east Australia). It was a home surrounded by sugarcane fields as far as the eye could see. The late afternoon sky was aflame with the most astonishing array of colours, but mostly it was crimson red. My dad was smiling, and as he rubbed his big meaty hand on my blonde head he said, "Red sky at night, shepherd's delight".

"Huh?" I said.

He looked down, grinned and said, "Red sky, Scotty. Red sky at night is a shepherd's delight. A

red sky in the morning is a shepherd's warning."

"Ah..." I said.

He still grinned. "Signs, Scotty, signs. You gotta know how to read 'em."

At that moment I thought my dad must have been the smartest person in the universe.

After that, the reading and interpreting of signs became a bit of a hobby for me, although I was not nearly as good at it as my older brothers and sister. Compared to them I was a bit of a slow poke in the art form. They could tell, for example, just by the sound of my dad's footsteps coming in from work whether he was in a good mood or a bad one. One minute we would all be sitting in the lounge room making a noisy mess and the next I would be on my own in the midst of toys and games with paper slowly wafting down to the floor. Suddenly there was Dad at the door bellowing like an ogre, "Are you responsible for this pigsty? Clean it up!"

Signs, you gotta know how to read 'em.

I got much better at reading signs as I got older, but with the passing of time I discovered that the whole 'red sky' thing had almost no

relevance to Australian weather patterns at all. Apparently it was a sure thing if you were in the northern hemisphere though (say... England). I also discovered that not all signs are subtle, and some are downright rude.

A case in point is a common sign used by the Department of Roads. This government body cannot afford the luxury of subtlety and I suspect that they deliberately employ people who have been blessed with absolutely no sense of social delicacy or restraint in the designing of their road signs. I mean, how much sensitivity do you need in order to place a road sign with its back to the oncoming traffic that reads:

TURN AROUND. YOU ARE GOING
THE WRONG WAY.

Some signs, well, they just shout the obvious. However, of course there is no cure for stupidity and in a world where careless and stupid people exist, *nothing* is obvious. This was driven home to me by a picture of a clothing label that a friend posted on their social media page. It was the label off a baby's jumpsuit. The label read:

WARM HAND WASH.
COOL TUMBLE DRY.
REMOVE CHILD FROM CLOTHING.

This is the result of living in a litigious society. Cafés must be especially careful to put signs on cups of coffee, tea and hot chocolate so that stupid people realize they contain “very hot liquid”. Manufacturers must place labels on clothing lest children be idly thrown into washing machines when the garments they are wearing become soiled.

I am, however, sometimes wonderfully heartened by the odd smart alec who will occasionally erect a sign which reads something like:

In case of emergency
RUN LIKE CRAZY!

Or:

Need help? 1. Push red button.
2. Yell “Help” loudly.

Or:

Illiterate? Write to the address below
for assistance.

Other signs are more subtle, like a tone of voice or the sound of tired parental footsteps. They require awareness and they caution you about what dangers may be lurking for the careless. However, the response to the warning is entirely up to you.

These are a bit like the signs near the cliff edge at scenic lookouts:

DANGER. GO NO FURTHER.

You can, of course, distrust the sign and go closer to the edge if you wish, but then there is an increasing possibility that you might die a horrible and grizzly death.

Then there are signs like my dad's 'red sky' that are portents of things to come, and these are always open to broad interpretation... and misinterpretation. The Department of Roads does not waste its time with these.

Signs, you've gotta know how to read 'em. And how not to. And who to trust.