



Hairy inferno In the bush!

Another simmering summer's day on the job in South Australia. Glen and I had arranged to meet at the solitary hotel in town. It was a typical country pub: worn wooden floor with chest-high, olive-green tiled walls, beer on tap and bottles of spirits garlanding an ornately decorated mirror behind the bar.



With the sun dipping towards the horizon, this characteristically spartan front bar is beginning to come to life. A ceiling fan rotates in languid fashion above, while a grossly overworked barmaid struggles valiantly to keep up with demand for *schooners* of beer, as two or three dozen leathery-skinned men - some wearing the

iconic bushman's hat - talk at each other in small groups, with ever-increasing volume.

Arriving earlier than most, I had scored a prized corner stool at the bar, and now found myself listening to Glen, opposite me, leaning against the bar and discussing the finer points of sheep shearing, with a couple of men standing between us.



The discussion – fueled by liquor – is growing rapidly towards argument. One of the men in our group, who had been working at Glen’s place, boasts a veritable forest of thick black curly hair, which erupts out of a grubby white vest, spreading up to his neck and across the shoulders. The talk is swiftly escalating

to fever-pitch; those around us turning to watch with eager anticipation.

Suddenly, there’s a bit of a skirmish, and Glen, whipping a lighter from the bar, lifts the guy’s singlet, flicks the switch and sets the hairy growth alight. A fire takes hold on the dark thicket, and within a few seconds flames are sweeping up the man’s chest, engulfing his singlet in a serious blaze. The expectant drinkers nearest to the flaming man, look on in amazement, and some - quite wisely - start to fling the beer they were drinking over the guy, to help douse the flames.

After a minute or so of smoke and lingering smell of burnt hair, the smoldering man - crispy-brown fragments of dirty white singlet hanging from his body - standing in a pool of beer, looks down at his now hairless chest in disbelief, then turns to face his adversary, belittled by what has happened in front of workmates:

“Well fuck you Mister Moroney,” he says, red in the face (partly from anger, but also from the hairy-chest inferno). Then continuing in similar vein: “And you can go and fuck your useless fucking sheep too, coz I’m never coming back to your decrepit fucking place, to do it for you!”

He whirls around and storms out of the bar, slamming the door with all his might, leaving the brass doorbell clanging in his wake. There’s a stunned silence, people staring at the door where the man had just been. Then Glen turned to face the crowd.

“Bruce the goose they call him ... his shearing wasn’t much cop anyway. Let’s hope he pisses off back to Kiwiland, where he belongs.” Then, raising his glass to the engaged throng, *“Come on lads, back to work. Next round’s on me.”*

The impromptu announcement brings a resounding cheer, the men in the bar as one, downing their drinks and turning afresh to torment the already flummoxed barmaid.

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