



The more easygoing among us usually called him “Fossil,” but resorted to the standard “Carcass” when one of his more outlandish goals, or “victories,” was achieved. And for the purposes of the yarn I am about to relate, he most certainly deserved the name “Carcass.”

Carcass was a reasonable shearer, but never a great one. He could knock them off pretty fast, but was, as the cockies say, “rough as guts.” The sheep sliding down into his catching pen looked like they’d had a date with a bad surgeon—a plastic surgeon who’d been struck off but kept practicing, nonetheless. Merinos are renowned for the extra wool they carry in their skin folds, and it takes skill to weave the comb in and out of those mighty crevices, but Carcass was notorious for shearing straight on through—skin, wool, and anything else in the way. And he had that element of sadist about him that even the young blokes found a bit hard to stomach. The cockies who knew of him wouldn’t let him near their prize rams . . .

I am not one for painting backgrounds, and like to get to the point. But I will say that like those real estate adverts, so much rests on location, location, location. Or maybe I should say isolation, isolation, isolation. I mean, you've got to understand that when we're shearing the stations, we're a long way from anywhere, and you tend to get to know each other's bad habits pretty well. Carcass has many, but his worst as far as the rest of the blokes are concerned—and I mean any blokes on the same team as him—is his habit of cracking on to every girl rouseabout he comes across. They're a captive audience for him. Sometimes it's a female wool classer, or even the cook. He's not fussy: any size or shape or age will do. He claims they'll all fall to his charms sooner or later. Seriously, the guy is grotesque, and stinks with it. And there you go, he hounds them, flatters them, jokes with them, drinks with them, smokes dope with them, and they eventually fall.

Then he'll tell us of his conquest, describe qualities and flaws with intricate detail, to the point where even the young blokes don't want to hear anymore. And the fallen girls and women—they just go red whenever he looks at them, or anyone else for that matter. Within a day or two, humiliated, they'll hook a lift with the infuriated contractor, who'll be muttering to himself, why did I do it, why did I get a girl on the job? They never think of dropping Carcass, he has that way about him. Returning, they'll have picked up some young bloke from God knows where to cover for the girl.

So that's the scenario, repeated over and over. But then the world turns upside down—for Carcass, for all of us. The contractor hires this beautiful young woman—sorry if that sounds off, but she was! I mean, really classy and gorgeous with it, and with a brain like a steel trap. He hires her because he's drinking in the pub then playing pool and holding the table until he's beaten by a chick and can't get over it. And forgetting about his missus for a moment he asks her if she's looking for work and she says she might be and he offers her well above the

award and the next thing she's on the team. With his hangover the next morning he packs his ute and finds her standing at the passenger's side asking to be let in. He remembers, groans, but that's it. She's on the team.

The rest of us are already out at the quarters, sorting our gear out. Sharp-eyed, Carcass sees them coming down the gravel—Jeez . . . he says. Get a load of that. I'll have her broken by tomorrow. We look up and see this burst of sunlight that's not going to fry your brains, and snap back, You'll be lucky, you dirty bastard. Okay, it's our standard reaction when he declares an impending conquest.

So she unloads her gear and takes her room—we share two to a room, but she has her own—and comes out to meet us all. She's okay. We all like her. She has an easygoing way about her. But she's so sharp. Carcass drops innuendoes, and she throws them back at him with a laugh. It'll keep, he says.

The working week begins, and there's no sign of her breaking. As we watch Carcass's efforts rebuffed with that laugh, we grow in confidence. Under his watchful eye, as he hacks the blazes out of a sheep, we banter with her as she sweeps the board. There's a good feeling on the team for the first time in months. She has brought heaps of CDs and plays them. Even the old-timers get into them: the Slits, Sleater-Kinney, shit like that. The shed pumps. Carcass is clearly in crisis. He's bad-tempered. Wallops the sheep with his handpiece, which really offends her. Lay off those sheep! she yells. If you carry on like that I'll report you to the RSPCA. Now, normally, if someone—anyone—said something like that, they'd be out on their ear. But she can and does and no one holds it against her.

What does she look like? Well, you know, sort of agile, with smart eyes. A green color. Brown hair. No makeup—that doesn't work in hot sheds anyway. Melts. But even out of the shed, on our days off. Just . . . natural. And tall. Leggy, Carcass says, spitting it out. Three weeks in, and nothing. He's looking hunched, and "congested." I'm not one for pulling the pud, he says to her, having

now given up on all levels of decency. He'd molest her, we guess, if he thought he could get away with it. But he can't—we'd beat the shit out of him, and he knows it. And she knows it too.

And so the shed comes to an end and the run at that, and with the cutout—a massive piss-up that sees her kiss all us blokes long and hard, and only peck Carcass on the cheek—we jump into the minibus and head back to town to be met by wives and partners, or to be dropped out our places for a few weeks of R&R. Carcass, who always drives the bus, drives even faster than usual. He almost wipes us out three or four times.

During the break, I hook up with the contractor to do a bit of cockie shearing. He has a few sheds not too far from town that really only need him classing, me shearing, and the farmers' sons penning up. Easy, not pressure work, and I build up my nest egg that little bit further. Some of the others say I'm hungry, but I don't give a shit. One day I'll have that big house and pay for it with cash. So after we knock off one evening, we drive to the local pub for a quick drink, and run into Carcass. His misery has worn off by this stage, and he shouts us a round, which is not a common thing. We ask him how he's been and if he's still celibate, and he just laughs it off and says that you win some and you lose some. But he can't quite hold it together because after a few seconds he adds . . . not that I lose many. Then he insists that our contractor make sure a less bitchy female rousy is taken on for the next run, as he has to get his tally back up. So we laugh for longer than we mean to, and finally decide to kick off. We're moving to another shed the next day.

Where? asks Carcass.

At Ben Williams's, we say.

Well, I'll be damned, he comes back. That's where I'm staying. The old bloke has a shack down the back of the place and I've just moved in.

The contractor is incredulous. You mean you've given up that swish place you've got in town? Given up your plasma telly and gas barbie?

Nah, says Carcass, this is a temporary arrangement, it just suits me at the moment.

I look hard at Carcass, who seems more decrepit than usual. His bulkiness shifts uneasily on his legs, and the hairs in his nose are so barbed that they're pricking his mucous membranes. He hasn't washed for days. He's sweating grime.

Anyway, he adds, as we're leaving, poke your head down when you finish work and I'll give you a drink.

Two acts of generosity in two days, that's overload.

We don't see Carcass while we're working. We check with Ben Williams regarding the location of his shack, and he says it's about a mile down the creek. He is a flat kind of bloke, so he doesn't offer to discuss how he came to this strange arrangement with Carcass. He just goes off to make sure the sheep penning's going according to plan.

To tell the truth, we really just want to head home. The sheep are tough—a lot of sand in the wool—and I've been through a lot of cutters. I'll be grinding all night to get them right for the next day. But victims of Carcass that we ultimately are, we drive down the track along the creek to search out the shack. It's easy enough to find, and Carcass is already out the door when we arrive.

Good onya for comin' down, he says. Or gloats. We've seen that look in his eyes all too often. They're semi-closed and almost weeping. He fixes us with a boar-like intensity. Like he's going to charge.

Come in, come in.

We follow him, at a safe distance. And there she is, slightly blushing, flipping the top of a longneck. A beer, guys? she asks.

Er, thanks. We look at Carcass—glowing . . . no, swollen with vindication . . . we look at *her* . . . ?

What? She cuts in before we can speak: Carcass had no place to stay, you know, and Ben's my uncle, so I can use this place whenever I'm around.

We shuffle our feet and say nothing. Carcass just has that big grin on his face that says, You guys keep your mouths shut.

*carcass*

Well, she says, anyway, there's room here.

We look around. There isn't much room. The lounge is a double bed folded up for the day. There doesn't seem to be much more than a kitchen. An outside dunny?

We have a drink, make our excuses, and leave. I make the foolish mistake of glancing back as we drive off along the creek. Carcass is at the door, giving us and anything else that might walk, crawl, slither, or fly past the thumbs up. Yep, all's right in the world.