



## BACK IN TIME

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### THE EXTRAS

In our accomplishment-driven society we seldom acknowledge the perks of being between engagements (as actors put it), or see the silver lining that comes with being temporarily at a bit of a loose end. But the fact is that, for many of us, being unemployed is the only way we'll ever have the free time to do things we could never do while shackled to a regular job. Like working as an extra in a movie, for example.

Juanín and I had recently arrived in Australia and were on a sabbatical of sorts. One morning we noticed a casting call for male movie extras in the newspaper so we trotted over to the Sydney Cricket Ground, ready for work. About two hundred other blokes also showed up, many looking as though they had slept in the park, and we all milled around just inside the gates. The casting call had instructed interested parties to come unshaven, wearing their oldest, dirtiest clothes, so we were a rough-looking mob. The director was a crafty fellow, a Canadian, who wanted to stage a scene in an outback pub for *Wake in Fright*, his gritty 1971 movie set on the outer frontier of civilization in Western Australia. He was looking for lots of authentic barroom action, and his strategy was simple: he led us into the huge public bar at the Cricket Ground and announced that the beer was on the house. It was barely nine o'clock in the morning but there was an immediate rush to the bar and mayhem ensued.

Enthusiastic extras ordered beers in pairs, then fours, and poured them down their throats like cups of water on a hot day out on the cricket pitch. They were stashing backup pints on the shelf along the wall and coming back for more. It wasn't long before eyes were bleary and stubbly cheeks were

wreathed in rapturous smiles. Spontaneous conversations began and bonhomie was in the air. Then someone bumped into a fellow actor and the shoving started. Nothing came of it but there was a noticeable change of mood. Conversations became more intense and soon the room was so noisy that everyone had to shout at the top of their lungs just to keep up. The production crew handed out free cigarettes and most of the cast were lighting up from the butt of their previous one as they chain-smoked and chugged beers. The air above our heads was soon as thick and smoky as any pub anywhere. Eventually a truce-busting incident flared up, and just as the fists started flying the director rolled his cameras and caught some magnificent Australian wildlife in action. When the beer ran out, those still standing exited the building and dealt with the rest of the day as best they could. Juanín and I, needless to say, beat a stealthy retreat before the melee began and retired to the hammocks in the back garden of the house where we were staying.

The following morning a surprising number of extras from the pub scene showed up again at a large barn-like building on the outskirts of town. We trooped inside and sat on bleachers ranged around the walls, tightly packed onto about eight plank benches rising up to the low ceiling on all four sides. There was just one light, a naked bulb hanging from a long, grubby cord that dangled over the open space in the center of the room. The director stood on the dusty, cement floor under the light and waited for everyone to be quiet. When he tilted his head back to look at the men on the upper benches the light bathed his face, but when he looked down it was lost in shadow.





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He explained that we were going to play Two-up, a traditional Australian gambling game of dubious legality that was popular in the outback, and then proceeded to hand out one million dollars in Monopoly money. Each extra was given a bundle of cash with which to play. A “spinner” stood in the center of the room and held up a “kip”—a short wooden slat with two shallow round depressions in it where two coins were snugly placed, tails up.

At a signal, the spinner flipped the kip upwards and tossed the two coins high into the air. The gamblers in the stands bet against each other on how the coins would land: two heads, two tails, or one of each.



From the very first toss there was widespread chaos. Most of the extras hadn't changed their clothes since the previous day, let alone showered or shaved, so the director had an even scarier-looking crowd for these shots. Once again he allowed everyone free reign, and sat back and waited.

We handed in our play money as we left the building at the lunch break. When we came back the director announced that some sixty-odd thousand dollars was missing, and would we please give it back at the end of the day, no questions asked. He warned that trying to pass forged currency was a very serious crime, and that the money we



were working with would be instantly spotted wherever it was presented. Some of the gamblers sniggered and looked around, but others looked straight ahead and said nothing.

The following morning the director announced that a dozen or so extras had been arrested overnight for using their winnings to buy drinks at dingy backstreet dives. He also informed us that his bank of play money was now short about three hundred grand. There was more sniggering as we took our seats on the benches and settled into the final day's work. By this time, everybody's inner gambler had taken over and the betting was exhilarating. Men were yelling at each other across the room, waving fistfuls of cash in the air. Most of them were puffing on free cigarettes, and thick smoke swirled and danced in the light from the dangling bulb.

The brawl that the director had no doubt been waiting for broke out that afternoon shortly after he reported that the bank was now seriously depleted. This stint of employment had, relatively speaking, been as close as some of these extras had come to a full-time career for quite a while, and they'd been under a lot of stress in the last couple of days. So emotions were somewhat brittle and the fight spread like a forest fire. Soon everyone was trying to hit someone else and things were spiraling dangerously out of control as the cameras rolled. Juanín and I had prudently taken seats near the exit, and we were out of there in no time. Sad to say, that was the end of our movie career, and as we drove home we agreed that it might be time to get a regular job again.

