

Party Line

by Tony Beckwith © 1999

THE FARTHER INLAND we went, the more Australia felt like nothing but wide open spaces. We were jackeroos, the three of us, observing the country from the windows of a moving car. We stopped here and there to work, then moved on. Towns were scattered far apart in those days, and we sometimes drove for a long time without seeing any sign of civilization.

At a lonely crossroads stood Jerilderie, a handful of houses in a vast expanse of endless, flat farmland. We arrived at the Jerilderie Hotel one Saturday afternoon, and spent the night drinking beer with people who, for the most part, had long forgotten that they were living in the middle of nowhere.

The guest rooms were on the upper floor of the two-story building, each with an uninterrupted view of the horizon. At sunset the western sky turned a violent red, and the world was suddenly dark and silent. Stars gradually appeared, millions of them glittering, magnificently clear this far from city lights. Long ago, on this enormous plain, aboriginals gazed up at this same night sky and wondered about their existence and survival. Dwarfed by the landscape and humbled by the heavens, they created a web of myth and ritual to reassure themselves that they were connected to the eternal circle of life. But we were in the twentieth century now, and things were different.

The hotel saloon had a high ceiling and tall windows along one wall. John and Keith and I sat on stools at one end of the long wooden bar drinking schooners of ice-cold beer. As the evening wore on the saloon filled with regulars. The air became thick with shared indulgence, voices grew

steadily louder, and people laughed enthusiastically and often. It was Saturday night at the local pub and all was well with the world.

A sentimental sense of camaraderie, all-pervasive as pipe and cigarette smoke, gradually broke down natural resistance to outsiders. My companions and I were engaged in a pleasant conversation of no great consequence with Daphne and Neal, who worked a nearby farm. We were interrupted when Trevor, the proprietor of the hotel, put something on the counter near Keith's elbow. "Look at that!" he said in disgust, pointing at the handset that appeared



to have been ripped from the telephone in the alcove at the foot of the stairs. The black cord was only a few inches long and frayed at the end.

"Some drunken bastard's gone and pulled it clean off the wall!" Trevor moved away, muttering to himself, leaving the handset on the bar. Keith absentmindedly picked it up, held it to his ear, and spoke into it in low, confidential tones. Daphne giggled and asked if he was making a long-distance call. A flicker of playfulness vanished from Keith's eyes and his expression was suddenly serious. He covered the receiver with his hand, said yes it was, and would she like to go next? Her smile faded and she too became serious. She stared wistfully at the handset for a moment, then turned to her husband. "I wouldn't half like to talk to me Mum. It's been ever so long."

"Where is your Mum?" asked Keith.

"Dorchester. In England."

"What's her number?"

"Won't it be expensive?" she inquired.

"No," said Keith. "There's no charge to use this phone."

Daphne looked at her husband again. He merely shrugged and grinned clumsily. She opened her purse and pulled out a small, brown book. She found the right page and held it up for Keith to see. He went through the motions of placing the call. There was a pause during which we all stared at him, hunched forward in an oasis of silence. Then he spoke into the phone. "Mrs. Palmer? You have a long distance call from your daughter in Australia." And he handed Daphne the phone.

Somehow, none of us were surprised to see Daphne take the phone and begin speaking to her mother. Her husband sat quietly beside her, listening and nodding from time to time. When she had finished she handed the phone back to Keith. "Thank you," she said, her eyes as bright as stars. "And me Mum says thank you also."

Then she turned and called to her friend sitting a few stools down the bar. "Hey, Marge, this bloke's got a beaut phone if you'd like to talk to that daughter of yours in America." Daphne laughed a little unsteadily and said, to no one in particular, "I talked to me Mum!"

The word spread fast through the rowdy crowd, and soon Keith was busy making the rounds of the bar, placing calls all over the world. Demand was so great that he had to limit them to three minutes each. Trevor had difficulty clearing the saloon at closing time—all his customers wanted to use that phone before stepping back out into the starry darkness. ★