

# Walking Away

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Special mention.

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The *For Sale* sign stands just inside the fence, rigid and without sympathy. A harsh intrusion on the landscape. It details the property and all its assets. The bright orange background ensures that it does not escape the notice of those passing by. Rather than a sign of change and progress, it stands as a sign of failure, loss, and sorrow. Everyone knows what has forced the sale. It is not the first sign to be erected in the area, nor will it be the last.

The ghostly gums that stand silently in the front paddock understand that there is no tomorrow for the beaten man they know. Their dusty green leaves, dried and brittle, scatter in the wind. They have seen this cycle of hope and despair for over a hundred years.

The man stands at the edge of the paddock, his shoulders drooping with defeat. He shields his eyes from the hot sun, pulling his Akubra forward. It hides his face from the glare of his reality. He walks the perimeter of the paddock in an aimless way, before retracing his steps.

He knows he has no choice. Despite attempts to renegotiate finance with the bank, it has come to this. If you could see beneath the brim of his well-worn hat, you would see that the crushing look of failure is etched on his face – a face weathered and lined from years of perseverance. Every line is a battle scar, a testament to his courage.

As he walks, he tells himself that he has done his best to try and hang on through this drought. He even took his cattle on the road, droving like Clancy, to try and ensure they didn't starve. The cattle were in poor condition, paper-thin, like leather on a hanger. They needed good feed to regain some condition before they could be sold. And so followed long, lonely nights sleeping rough, while the chill winds seeped into the very marrow of his bones. Day after day in the saddle, stiffening his joints, taking him further away from home. He is not a young man anymore, but neither is he ready to consign himself to a rocking chair on the veranda.

He was at the mercy of the rains which either came too early, too late, or more often, not at all. The crops failed year after year; stock feed had to be bought and transported; machinery needed upgrading or constant repair. The wires of the fences now hang loose and slack after months of inattention, in dire need of mending. The drought has reduced the landscape to grey dust – a wasteland. The pastures have all died and the paddocks are bare and barren. A mournful wind blows the topsoil away in willy-willy of despair.

The farmer has to say goodbye, but he needs to walk this place one more time. He goes to the machinery shed, where the old John Deere tractor lies in wait. Its green and gold paint is faded and chipped from its years of effort in a relentless sun, raking over soil that is cracked and hard. As he stands in shed, the long shadows make the silence seem more ominous. The only sound he hears is the creaking of the gate to the yards, as it swings back and forth without purpose.

He shuffles over to the yards. His old Blundstone boots kick up the dust with each heavy step. These yards, once filled with edgy and boisterous cattle, now stand empty. Like a metallic skeleton on the landscape. There will be no more beasts jostling in these yards. It is as though they have forgotten their purpose. The farmer runs his finger along the smooth metal rail, leaving a trail through the dust.

No matter what he has tried to do, the farmer has been finally beaten by the vagaries of the weather, the inconsistencies of the market and the unsympathetic demands of an avaricious bank. He stands leaning against the rail of the cattle yard. What do you do when this soil is in your blood, coursing through every inch of your body? He has lived with this land throughout it all – drenching floods, heart-breaking drought and promises unfulfilled. What remains of life to live? he wonders. He looks across the dying landscape, ravaged from years of drought and knows that, along with the land, his very soul has died.

He has no more tears to cry – they have all fallen.

All that is left for him to do is to walk away.