



**W**E WERE IN MIRANDA'S BACK GARDEN, whiling away the time with a flagon of bitterly cold Australian white wine. In the fading light of a warm afternoon, a figure appeared, as if from nowhere.

He was known as Fades, which was short for "Fade-away." He had a real name, but everyone called him Fades because of his extraordinary ability to appear and disappear as if by magic, fading in and out of peoples' lives with never a warning or an explanation. He was an old friend of Miranda's who'd invested a little too heavily in the mineral boom, then lost everything in the Lightning Ridge stampede. She introduced John and me as friends from Europe who had just arrived in Sydney and were about to go traveling in the outback, taking odd jobs where and when we found them. "Like you, Fades," said Miranda, her pretty eyes twinkling, "they're looking for something different to do for a while".

"Jackerooing?" said Fades. "Beauty! I'll be in that one." And so began our journey together. Two weeks later we were living at Kelly's Hotel in Finlay, a very small town perched on a vast, flat plain, with not much of anything in view all the way to the horizon. It was a well-worn establishment, not very expensive of course, with creaking stairs and dark wood-paneled walls, and a faint aroma of dust and homesickness.

Fades could talk his way into anything, and it wasn't long before he found employment for us all at a milk-

processing plant in a nearby town. The plant bought milk from surrounding dairy farms and produced casein, or powdered milk. We clocked in after sundown and worked till dawn. John worked in the 'wet room' wearing Wellington boots, a rubber apron, and rubber gloves. Fades, who'd always wanted to drive a truck, spent the night collecting milk all over the moonlit countryside in a long, shiny aluminum tank on wheels.

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My job, in the 'dry room,' was to bag up casein into fifty-pound paper sacks and stack them onto pallets. I toiled in a vast, hanger-like warehouse, with pallets stacked on top of each other as far as the eye could see.

The casein was pumped to my station through a large pipe that emerged from high up on the end wall, then rattled and thundered all the way to where I stood. The pipe angled down into a chute that ended in a conical device with a shutter that allowed me to control the flow in moments of extreme panic.

I placed an open sack under the chute and shook it around a little to get the powder filling evenly. When I thought it weighed fifty pounds I slipped another sack under the chute, then dragged the full one six feet to my left and hoisted it onto the scales. Checked the weight. Added or subtracted casein. Leapt back to jiggle the other sack that was filling up at an alarming rate. Hefted the first sack over to the industrial sewing machine. Folded the top in a special way, then ran it through the slot to stitch it closed, trying not to think about

stitching my fingers to the sack in a ghastly, gory mess. Heaved it over and laid it on a pallet. Then raced back to remove the sack that was now overflowing, and slip another one in place under the chute. That's what I did, over and over again. All night long. All alone in that enormous place. I thought I would go mad.

And so it went for a couple of weeks, by which time we were all in desperate need of some relief, for I wasn't the only one whose sanity was threatened by my work. So, on Saturday afternoon we went to the horse races. Fades put his entire paycheck on a dark horse called *Español* and watched it romp home at twenty-five to one. True to form, he vanished some time during the night and we never saw him again. Since he was the only one with a car, John and I were forced to resign from the casein factory and our brief career as jackeroos faded to a close. ★

