



Fades

We 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, a bit of a gambler she told us. He'd invested a little too recklessly in the minerals boom of the late 1960s, then lost a lot of money that wasn't technically his in the Lightning Ridge stampede. Unable to settle with his creditors, he thought it best to lie low for a while. She introduced John and me as friends from Europe who had just arrived in Sydney and were going to wander about in the outback for a while, taking odd jobs here and there, to see something of rural Australia. "Like you Fades," said Miranda, her pretty eyes twinkling, "they're of a mind to do something different for a while."

"Jackerooing?" said Fades, spotting the bolt hole he was looking for. "Beauty, mate! I'll be in that."

And so began our journey together. Two weeks later we were staying at Kelly's Hotel in Finley, a very small town perched on a vast, flat plain, with not much of anything in view all the way to the horizon. Traveling salesmen stayed here and itinerant working men. It was a well-worn establishment, not very expensive of course, with creaking stairs and dark wood-panelled walls, and a faint aroma of dust and homesickness. It had a pub where we enquired if anyone was hiring day labour. Fades could talk his way into anything, and it wasn't long before he found employment for us all.

We spent four gruelling days sweeping out a barn as big as an airplane hangar where creatures great and small

had evidently been in residence for some time. News of our prodigious skills must have spread like wildfire because we were soon hired to harvest an enormous field of barley. Backbreaking work that gave me callouses and spectacular sneezing fits. I think we were happiest when we were building silos for a farmer who was in the grain business. Once I got the hang of the rivet gun, I enjoyed assembling sheets of corrugated aluminium according to a blueprint. We stood on scaffolding, shirts off in the blazing sun, getting savage tans as a bonus on top of our princely wages.

When that job ended, we decided we'd like to try something indoors for a change. Fades got to work and found jobs 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 was in the wet room wearing Wellington boots, a rubber apron, and rubber gloves. Fades, who surprised everyone by having a commercial driving license, spent the night collecting milk all over the moonlit countryside in a long, shiny tank on wheels. My job, in the dry room, was to bag up casein into fifty-pound sacks and stack them onto pallets. I toiled alone in a vast, silent warehouse, with pallets stacked on top of each other as far as the eye could see. I bagged one sack after another, and another, and another. All night long. I thought I would go mad. We all started wondering just what we were doing there.

So, the following Saturday we went to the picnic races, one of the major social events in that part of the world. Fades put his entire pay-check on a dark horse called *Español* and watched it romp home at twenty-five to one. True to form, he vanished during the night and we never saw him again. Since he was the one with a car, John and I were forced to resign from the plant and our brief career as jackeroos faded to a close.