

Built to hold an animal still, the cattle crush had a side lever which operated the head bail. From opposite sides, two vertical metal tubes crunched across on slides. The animal was forced down the alley and into the crush, where somebody quickly hauled down the handle, capturing the animal by its neck. Sno' tapped the crush handle. 'This 'ere can kill ya. Can spring back up.'

Men can kill you, horses can kill you, cattle can kill, and now machinery can kill. Is there nothing on a cattle station that does not kill you? We climbed into another yard and I froze. Sno must have seen the blood drain from my face. Waves of panic tightened and turned over my stomach. I felt betrayed and really hated him. Tethered in the yard was the same dark horse I'd ridden, fire in its eyes, defiance in its heart. I felt sick, as every horror moment of that first ride flooded in.

'*That* horse ... almost killed me, you prick.'

'Nah. No. No, he didn't. If he wanted t' kill yer – you'd be dead. He was so shit-scared he didn't know what was going on ... just like you.'

There was nothing to say. No words would work.

'See, we didn't like what Kris did, what went on. My people said it was wrong. Old people said, circle's broken, gotta make it right. When you were crook and laid up, we broke the horse in. Kris didn't know, nor Joe. Nobody. Secret blackfella business. We taught him what we had. He showed us what he had.' So softly, he caressed the horse's face, devoted fingers combing through its silky mane. 'Only something's still missing ...'

With the toe of his boot, he carved a wide broken circle in the ochre earth, with one end going above the other. 'This is wrong. When it's right ... the ends meet. That makes it complete. One follows the other, like seasons. This horse and you, you're like this, two different ends, but trying' to find the same end. Ends without ends. Only way to start and finish is to bring the ends together. Our people always try to bring ends together. From that comes something else worthwhile.'

His boot tapped one end of the broken circle. 'You,' then the toe of his boot tapped the other end, 'horse. You're apart, see. Shouldn't be.' And with that, he destroyed the shape, and with a decisive and meaningful drag of his boot, he drew another – a rough oval shape.

'Trust. Trust will bring the ends together,' he said slowly. 'He doesn't trust anymore ... like you ...'

'You know nothing about me!' I said defiantly.

'I know everything about you. And him. I saw his eyes when you climbed on. Proof's in the eyes. When you know, you know. You're both hurtin'. Not blackfella way. We taught *him* right, I'll teach *you* right. Be

your best mate, this fella.’ He stroked the horse’s twitching ears tenderly.

A numbness covered my brain. On the one side, there was the horror of the ride, the indescribable agony, humiliation and vulnerability that followed. My legs still bore the angry, sensitive scars that marked wounds as raw, burning memories. To trust again was an ask too far. Sno was Aboriginal – maybe he couldn’t understand how hard it was. All I could trust was my fear.

For what seemed ages, Sno stared at me. At that moment, I wished I could get behind those dark eyes and see what he sees.

‘Kris broke the circle – not him. Y’need to see without looking. It’s about feeling, not seeing. You have a God you pray to who you can’t see, but you still believe he listens. He’s your prophet, right? The storyteller. Like in your Bible. Our Old people teach us. What you would call wise ones, Dreamtime fellas teach us. Teach us the Dreaming. Old fellas passed on see what we can’t see, but ... what you call spirit always sees the truth**’. You pray. We talk and sing, songs from long time ago. We ask the Dreamin’ for truth;¹⁰ those old fellas, Dreamin’ fellas, see all. People can lie, but what you call spirit never can lie. So we asked the Dreamin’ fella about you – the answer was ... forgive your scars.’

His sincerity wrapped around me like a blanket, but only pain and terror dominated my mind.

‘There are moments in life, fella, which are great gifts to you. You can’t just forget the hurt, that’s unfair. If you do, you’re not preparing yourself for the future, because life has many sorrows, many regrets. It does get dark out there; you’ll be challenged all the time, and many times you’ll fall. But that isn’t important. What’s important is that you stand, and you say, “I can do that and I can overcome, try again”. I know hurtin’ people. They have a common face. An’ you know something else, the face has no colour. Just like the story of my people. My people have to learn to stand again. Stop looking at their feet and the tracks of where they’ve been. Only the sky, where they’re going, and not be angry. Forgive the scars.’

I knew he wasn’t talking to me then, but thinking out loud about Young Turks like Gubirri and many growing like him. Harnessed emotionally to a heritage beyond time, they question if the old ways were best. They’re unfulfilled by the pace of change, respectful of blood and heritage, but pushing back hard against domination. In Gubirri,

10 See Author’s Note p. 290 for explanation.

rebellion was the pulse of countless generations that demanded, not asked for, change. They felt robbed of their land and betrayed by white promises turned to ashes. From the ashes, the furnace of change was stoked, forged by impatience with tradition too slow and change too meagre – hungry for tomorrow, fashioned by their own yearning of equality.

Sno had such a strange energy with the horse. His hand floated in the air to its nostrils. It sniffed deeply. Then his hand seemed to hover, just glide slowly through the air, coming to rest just below its ear. Then, almost like an embrace, his palms swept down towards its shoulders, following the line of the mane, and then back up again, his fingers running tenderly, the affection palpable.

Trying to swallow down my fear as I walked over, I could see the horse's dark coat shining in the sun, so sleek and glossy that it looked as if it had been brushed down and dressed by its own personal valet. Without warning, it arched its thick neck and snorted like a protest; I almost leapt out of my skin, jerking backwards.

'He's feeling' y' fear. You see, most people are sensitive to the feelings of others, a-aye. You know when they're crook. You know when they're happy, or sad. You just feel it. You dunno where y' feel it, you just do. For all animals ... everything's feelings. That's how they live, outta harm's way, they sense what you're feeling. That's how they understand. He doesn't care how much you know – he only cares how much you care. You see, horses, unlike people, believe trust means trust. You can have a whole conversation with a horse without saying a single word. He'll know. Y' gotta f-e-e-l the words.'

With that, he stepped away, handing me the rope. It was like a rite of passage.

Taking a step forward, committed now, I tentatively placed both hands under the muzzle ... I stared into his eyes and willed, with my heart, that I'd care for him. *We mustn't ever hurt each other again.* It must have been a special embrace as, for a long time, his hot breath was in my face, but neither of us looked away.

'Blackfella way' riding class was now in session.

The remaining afternoon was saddles, bridles, stirrups, mounting, turning and walking, over and over. Sno, slow and methodical, the horse patient and forgiving, me clumsy and confused, the sun relentless and tiring. His method was to show me, then sit on the yard rail, repeating only one word: 'Again,' until he was satisfied. If not, 'Again.' He never

told me what was wrong – that I had to find out for myself with ‘Again!’

He appeared not only able to ‘talk’ to the animal, but ‘read’ its moods, respond to them, somehow fathom its feelings. I envied his inner world, wondering if such refined, inward-looking senses were possible for somebody whose previous ‘inner knowing’ had largely come from a daily reading of TV guide.

The match flared, turning his smoke end into a red ember as he pulled back a long drag. ‘By the way ...’ His eyes seemed to narrow a little and mischievously flicker, as he blew out twin ribbons of cigarette smoke. ‘All animals feel and understand – no such thing as dumb animals. People only think that because they’re outgunned with the competition.’

It was the school of the rough, but I wasn’t ready. Pain sank its fangs into my lower back as I bent to pick up different types of saddles, strapped and removed them to the fence, and set the stirrups and bridle. Hours passed in an increasing blur. Sweat ran into my boots, and my shoulders ached from carrying the saddles to the fence, to the horse, strap up then back to the fence. It felt as if it had tripled its weight. I panted, fought for breath, broiling under a relentless sun. Eventually I was forced to stop, bent over, hands on my knees, eyes glazed, like a beaten long-distance runner. My feet shuffled, staggering in small steps as I fought for balance. Sweat coalesced and fell in drops off my nose, immediately sucked up by the gasping dirt. Swallowing, working my mouth, desperately trying to find a drop of saliva to run my tongue over dry lips, I willed myself to look up, to meet Sno’s inscrutable, Buddha-like expression.

‘... I know,’ I gasped, ‘Again ...’

‘Nah.’ He climbed down. ‘Ridin’.

Around the massive yard – walk, turn, trot, gallop, jig, lead, follow, stop, go back, go forward, sideways, jump – it went on. ‘Again, again! Again!’ The horse was like me, lungs like bellows, sweat thick on his skin, fine hairs curled and glued in patterns like ribbons. Several times the yard swam. I had to hold tight to the saddle, fearful of falling.

Suddenly there was a flash in the sky, the sound far behind – a dot of aluminium in the darkening sky – the helicopter returning. A moment ago I’d felt at peace, a small achievement, but now I was instantly deflated, even afraid, as I knew it was carrying the ever critical Kris. My little cocoon of confidence suddenly filled with uncertainty and fear. I stared at the chopper, wrapped up in my own frets, until Sno’s voice abruptly cut in: ‘Fuck ’em.’ I jerked my head around.

His face had changed; his eyes had grown darker, fixed on me. ‘This is



Preacher.

your time. You and your horse.’ The sound of blades chopping through the air grew louder, signalling they were nearly upon us. Sno just stood there, feet apart, hands on his hips, head cocked to one side, smiling easily. ‘So, what’re you gonna call him?’

‘Preacher,’ I said. ‘First time I got near him, he taught me to pray!’

His teeth showed the broad smile that again crinkled his whole face. Even under the broad, muck-stained, battered hat, his thick eyebrows

sparkled, soaked with sweat. His greying stubble beard was powdered with red soil and dust, and sardonic amusement gleamed in the deep-set eyes that sat in his craggy face. His wide forehead and the wrinkled skin at the corners of his eyes formed a mosaic of features which the burning sun and red dirt seemed to have carved a long time ago.

John skimmed the chopper just above a yard fence line. Then he spun it around like a determined dragonfly and, as if showing off flying skills, closed an open gate by pushing it with one of the skids. He then dipped sideways and flew over the yards, setting down on the other side. Waiting there was one-armed Joe. The blades slowed as Kris climbed out, followed by John. Joe joined them. They looked straight in our direction.

‘Go on, city boy.’ There was a broad smile of triumph on Sno’s face as he jerked his head. ‘Be a ringer.’ In a sense, I felt this was as much about him as myself.

With just a touch, Preacher responded, from a trot to a relaxed lope, hugging the fence line. I could not remember when I’d felt more alive. The sense of life’s cadence between man and horse was overwhelming. I saw Sno cross the yard to fling open a gate to the far beyond. Riding through, Preacher seemed to transform into an explosive half-ton bundle of taut muscles and exquisitely turned nerves that wanted to run ... so we did, an incomparable powerhouse where the scenery became a wash, and earth a blur.

Here was something from life lived, this mammoth pounding beneath me in the wretched nonsense of this hostile world. A moment of divine interaction between man and beast, nature made real.

Shadowy fingers of dusk were rapidly snatching up the last lustrous shards of light, diverging outward from the red globe as the open ravenous mouth of the earth’s dark horizon hungrily consumed it. We returned to the yards.

With Preacher fed, watered and pampered, a sensation of elation floated me to the house. I showered under the cold dribble, then lay naked in the dark on the bed. The far sounds of a vehicle arriving and the closing of doors carried easily in the muggy, still air.

Anticipation and anxiety kept me restless through the night. From the moment dawn showed as a pale glimmer on the horizon, I was peering out of the dust-smearred window at the flat paddocks dotted with indiscriminate blotches of bracken, trees and shrubs in stark unadorned scenery. In its own way, rather beautiful. But, for some odd reason, I dreaded the coming of morning.

NINE

DUST ROSE IN VAST choking clouds, and swamping blankets of dirt smothered everything. Some of this dust was kneaded by hooves, while the rest rose and hung like a cloud over everything, settling in eyes, ears, hair and nostrils, and worst of all in the lungs of the men and beasts as they moved along. Cattle stretched ahead for kilometres, snaking through the scrub, bellowing, snorting and protesting along deep rutted tracks, like scars in the earth. Lines of Brahmans, with their bone-coloured hides, ghostly faces and eyes like holes cut in a sack, merged with other mini-herds in an unforgettable sight and cacophony of sound. The ground thundered and shuddered under thousands of hooves.

We rode on like this for hours, driving ever forward, while a kaleidoscope of weaving colours seen through a dazzle of sunlight appeared and disappeared in plumes of whirling dust. Around, mostly unseen ringers were whistling, making guttural noises that echoed the lowing of the cattle. 'Hoy, hoy, hoy!' shouted the voices, '*Yirrip! Yirrip!*'

It had begun at dawn. Boundless outback sky erupted in a display of pink hues. Silhouettes moving, sounds of boots cracking the cold ground, rustle of clothes, blazes of matches lighting smokes, blue circling smoke rising and swirling. Phantoms moved, four-legged, two-legged, in heeled riding boots, checked shirts, grime-stiff jeans, sweat-stained worse-for-wear Akubras.

They stood casually, almost motionless, in that relaxed, hip-thrown-out stance that typifies the outback. Mumbled voices, coughs, yawns and farts thickened the air. Steam from nostrils rolled over horses' heads; the slap of leather, the horses' snorts of protest, then the sweet drifting scent of coffee, rich, pungent, in chipped metal cups held with both hands.

The vehicle which had arrived last night had brought three seasonal ringers who worked several stations. Mustering usually lasted a week or two and was to bring in cattle from the sprawling paddocks to be

branded, dehorned, earmarked and separated for sale.

Cowboys that drove the herd to the yards had different positions. The 'arse' pushed along stragglers, or cattle who suddenly decided to about-face and head back where they'd come from. Arse ate dust and grime, including the stink from thousands of farting, shitting and sweating cattle. Arse was my job. Sno had guessed that was where Kris would dump me; that was the reason he had said I should take an extra shirt to wrap around my face.

The chopper burst over the treeline and skimmed above the herd, suddenly ripping high almost at right angles, then peeled away, with a bird's eye view of the muster I envied. I paused on a low scrubby rise away from the mob so we could take a breather. Sno suddenly rode up beside me with a wilted smoke dangling from his mouth. His horse was covered with tides of white foam mixed with red dust.

'Gotta push 'em. What's up?'

'I resign.'

A broad smile brightened his face. 'Go on. Is that right? I don't give you permission to resign.'

'Is that why they're called "ringers", because all you see is cattle arseholes?'

His laugh almost spat out the remnants of the lifeless smoke as he rode off.

Shadows lengthened in the late afternoon, and the wistfulness peculiar to evening was stealing through the bush. Even the tawny reddish dust that was kicked up deepened into an atmosphere of saturated yellow and bronze.

The dusk was heavy with the day's laboured load and the whole sky turned to streaks of blood as I stood holding open the gate to the massive yard while the last of harried stragglers were pushed inwards. A vast mass of animals, ghostly pale and starkly silhouetted, bumped, bellowed, groaned, snorted and called, with the thud of hooves rending the air as they jostled, nudged and manoeuvred for feed or water. An overpowering stench of hot, heaving and sweaty animal bodies held the air hostage, together with the stench of crap and churned dust.

Freeing Preacher in the horse yard, I saw his deep, majestic eyes peering into my face, searching. We had come through our first muster and he looked as tired as I felt.

There was a small building acting as the station's office, attached to the back of Joe's shed. Inside, a door led to an enclosed area holding the

station's generator-driven cool room stocked with the station's beef supply, called 'killers'. Regularly Kris, with some black ringers, would journey out, using the station's Lee Enfield .303, shoot a creature, butcher it into slabs and bring it back to the locked cool room. Fresh meat from a killer was rationed to once a week. The station did not feed its workers and families, including Aboriginals. Everybody had to be self-supporting, buying in from Willimparra. Many white workers were independent, owning their own vehicles and shopping as required. Alternatively, some relied on the fortnightly 'town runs', where a 'volunteer' would drive in with a pocketful of shopping lists. However, there were strict rules.

Aboriginals could go along and look after their camp's domestic needs, but never alone, never without a white, and could never have a vehicle. Blacks in town, with access to both grog and a station vehicle, were not trusted. The word was they would get pissed, wreck, steal or go 'wild', off into the sunset.

In addition, the freezer contained the station's beer stock. The carved-in-stone commandment was that whites could drink as much as they wanted, but turn up to work the next day drunk and you were instantly sacked. Cattle stations were too dangerous to work hungover. Aboriginals, however, had a separate rule: two cans per day per man. Whites could, but blacks could not bring grog on the station.

After another gut-busting day, it was common to gather and wash away the grime and dust with some beers outside the office. There was the tribe of whites drinking, rolling smokes, talking, guarding several gutted slabs that the seasonal ringers had bought with them. And the tribe of Aboriginals were by themselves, deepening and lengthening dusk playing off their black skins, contrasting vividly with the darkening ochre dirt.

I sat alone, my back against a fence, not feeling part of either tribe, but thinking about Sno and Gubirri: a study in contrasts. Sno clung to his belief of a level playing field between races, a fair go and the nobility of his heritage, yet he was forced to confront a terrible schism in the realities of that outlook. Gubirri touched an electric line that frizzled the ends of yesterday's obedient and subservient black. Sno seemed to live today in memories and wrongs of yesterday. Although such memories were instructive, they seemed to be a place for him to wallow rather than be cathartic. Gubirri felt hemmed in by the traditional culture his blood demanded, but was resentful and frustrated by the tempo of change. For Sno it appeared the issue of heritage took precedence over a rising passion

for independence. Gubirri's rages were just to slap whites across the face with their colonist history, make them pay, one way or the other, and gather those whites driven by guilt, compassion and sympathy along the way. Ultimately, however, it would serve only to repel and antagonise the majority; after all, how many times can white society say sorry without it losing all meaning?

It was only a guess, but I think Sno was afraid that too many gains would turn to shadows, and after recognition – then what? History teaches that during the flush of 'revolution' you start to see societies torn apart generationally, with traditional values abandoned and untested ones installed. In the midst of a violent rejection of the past, who was going to umpire the new cultural playing field and referee what level meant? What guarantees were there, in the surge of change, that Aboriginals would not again become irrelevant, relevance being just another headline immediately important, but only as quickly forgotten.

Kris was at the office door, beer carton at his feet, issuing cans to a line of Aborigines. Dutifully, one black shadow followed the other, never meeting Kris' eyes, saying nothing, heading back to their shed. Obediently, with downcast eyes, Sno took his cans. Surrounded by empties, whites were chatting, drinking, ignoring the process.

Only Gubirri remained, sitting on a drum, his bloodied, dirt-caked red bandana around his head, the wound from the horn saw swollen and angry, matching his mood. Sno passed him, then stopped and turned back. Something stirred in his guts.

Kris fixed Gubirri with a stare, unsure why his attitude appeared feral and why there was this rupture to the natural order of things. Gubirri's eyes met him evenly, a small challenging smile on his face. Slowly standing, he sauntered over, ignoring the cans. Sno, sensing danger, eased himself closer. Gubirri looked at the cans, a slow contempt spread across his face, then with narrowed eyes he scanned the white drinkers, finally coming back to fix on Kris. Gubirri's mouth rolled into the appearance of an ingratiating smile – but as cold as an arctic wind.

'Sure you can spare 'em?' he said eventually.

'What?' said Kris surprised.

White teeth dazzled against black skin as his smile, although broad, dissolved into something more mocking. Gubirri made an easy, unhurried sweeping gesture. 'Blackfellas always drinkin,' getting' drunk, they reckon ...'

Kris' eyes narrowed. A red light had begun to flash. He pulled back,

straightening. Gubirri's smile was fixed as he relaxed back on one leg, 'Whitefellas look like you need 'em more than blackfellas.'

It was a put-down; Kris was having none of it. He immediately established the terms of how this challenge was going to play out. The growing danger was palpable. 'You want 'em or not? Last ... chance.'

'Have 'em if you can spare 'em.'

'Gubirri!'

Alarmed tension in Sno's voice immediately spread and swallowed the atmosphere. All talk petered off to nothing, just the sounds of drinking. Even Burney, big and tough, his boots drowned with dead cans, stared at his drink deliberately. Perhaps he had witnessed Kris' explosive temper before. However, this seemed different; something was happening with a black that had not happened before – not just disobedience, but defiance. All eyes shifted between Gubirri and Kris.

Inner forces were propelling Gubirri, which took him past the boundaries of reason and self-control. He stood on a platform of principle, an unsteady structure held together by black 'rights'. However, in this heat sink land of increasing culture conflicts, it was likely to be only momentarily supportive before a lever was pulled and he would fall through a trapdoor, attached to a noose, dropping no further than the length of two cans.

'Blackfellas get two can per man,' Gubirri said. 'Whitefellas drink more than blackfellas, I reckon.'

What surprised me was the instant change in Kris. He did not contest Gubirri. Kris was a cunning tactician. He knew violence would alienate the blacks at a time when mustering was needed. Instead, his attitude was almost conciliatory, like an 'elder' or benign uncle. When he spoke, he had the most giving smile; his voice was soft, almost hypnotic. However, behind the theatre, there was a coiled spring pushed flat and tight. Kris was Machiavellian clever – it was one thing to lose the backing of the Aboriginal ringers in the middle of muster; it was another that he would lose his status, and for him status was everything. The sides were committed, the bell had rung; it was too late to call off the match.

'You got something to say, I'm listening.'

Sno almost jumped in. He could see the tension escalating dangerously. 'He's got nothing to say. I'll take them.'

'The boy's got something on his black chest he wants to get off.'

Gubirri held his rage. Sno knew it was a deliberate test how far Gubirri was willing to go.