

from 'Dingo Dreaming'

Minutes later the pale grey-roofed buildings of Kiwikurra came into view. Macke flew in low, buzzed the community, banked, eventually straightened and steadied for the approach. Joe counted an assortment of thirty or forty vehicles parked around the windsock five-deep stretching back into the desert sands as if assembling for a country rodeo.

Macke flew in for another perfect landing then taxied slowly along the gravel airstrip past the crowd of desert nomads who were already jockeying and squabbling in front of their vehicles. A few elderly men stood with a blackboard; one of them appeared to be writing on it.

'See. They're carving up the carcass – listing the names of those who will get the lion's share of the monetary kill.' Macke observed the dark, questioning look on Joe's face. 'Tradition, mate.'

As the Cessna taxied along the airstrip, the crowd pressed forward, blocking off the boarding area. Macke worked the foot pedals and steered the plane some two hundred metres past the highly excited throng, the Cessna jerking slowly until a crawl and then stopping. By the time Joe had opened the door, stepped out onto the gravel to put the boxes of cash on the ground the Aborigines had figured out the pilot's strategy and were running towards him. Quickly scrambling inside, Joe watched as a wall of Tjawetji surged forward.

Hastily checking Joe's seatbelt Macke veered the plane away to the other side of the airstrip and once clear of the crowd, they stopped and watched the mob tear and claw at the money. Joe thought he was

witnessing some type of uniquely Australian gladiatorial event. Even after a few minutes had passed, he could still see arms thrashing about in a massive scrimmage. Several of the one hundred-dollar notes spiralled into the sky as if they were small birds.

'Why is the company throwing away so much money like that, Macke?'

The pilot shrugged. 'Don't ask me. It's the way business is done out here. It'd make a good scene in a movie, wouldn't it?'

Macke waited until the crowd had settled before easing forward and guiding the Cessna to the fuel depot where he stopped and turned off the engine. He hastily unloaded postal bags and a number of boxes for the Kiwikurra store and workshop as well as a polystyrene container of emergency supplies for the medical clinic. He then went to the side of the small square storage shed and returned with a stepladder and forty-four gallon drum on a trolley that he parked under the wing. He fitted the hydraulic pump to the drum then connecting it to the fuel inlet on the Cessna. Pumping the Avgas, he looked across the wing of the plane in the direction of the distant crowd, which by now had largely dispersed. Most of the people were heading for their vehicles; a few ambled towards the plane.

A pregnant Tjawetji woman approached, anxiously clutching a handful of one hundred-dollar bills and a few possessions to her chest including a pillow. Joe overheard her ask Macke if she could fly to Well 37. Macke agreed and she called three other women who scampered forward with more belongings and stood waiting for the pilot to complete the refuelling.

A vehicle with five or six men standing on the tray and trailing billowing clouds of dust stopped abruptly near the plane. The driver threw the door open and ran, yelling angrily at the woman with the pillow. The two of them quarrelled then settled to a silent standoff then quarrelled again. He snatched the money then began punching and pushing her until some sort of strange equilibrium had been restored. As Joe watched anxiously the man then swept her bag aside, grabbed her by the hair, pulled her towards the side of the plane and again punched her head and face. They were now so close to Joe he could hear sounds like the sounds of eggshells breaking. He found himself reaching unconsciously for the door handle of the Cessna but Macke restrained him.

'Remember you're a visitor. Don't be drawn in.'

Joe looked down at the woman who was crumpled on the ground. He saw her grab the pillow she'd been carrying, stagger to her feet then cringe as the man twisted her about. She fell to the ground again, cowering under him. Joe again reached for the door handle. This time Macke drew his revolver.

'I told you, do not interfere in tribal customs.'

'I wasn't going to interfere. Just walk between them. Maybe ask him a question or two, surely that's better than doing nothing?'

'Do you want to get us both killed?'

'But this is not a custom. This is a human being committing a crime.'

'In your eyes maybe. Just stay where you are.'

The woman lay on the ground, her arms wrapped tightly around her knees to protect her unborn child but the man held her, kicking and yelling at her. 'You can't leave our children and run away. You're the

mother,' he mumbled as he strode off. For one long minute, nobody went near her.

Joe sat confused and bewildered, his heart banging as if in his throat. A montage of horrible images continued to strafe him long after she had traipsed away. He'd witnessed violence in the streets of Chicago but this was the first time he'd seen a man bashing a woman. Nothing in his briefing with Bernard DeWitt had prepared him for this.

'The one thing the desert teaches us, Joe, is that the relationship between what we observe and what we think we've observed is never settled.'

'I still feel there was something I could have done.'

'Think of it as an orientation.'

As the onlookers dispersed, Joe became anxious about what may be waiting for him at Well 37 – a destination Macke advised was yet two hours further on the other side of the Gibson Desert.

As Joe braced himself for the take-off, sweat poured from his forehead and back. His shirt stuck to him. Macke offered him the remains of a bottle of soft drink. It was hot, flat, sugar-free and sickly sweet.

Once airborne, Joe observed the uniform swirling ripples across the terrain as though some giant personage from the eternal Dreaming had reached down and pressed the palm of his hand into the sand as a mark of ownership. Up ahead he saw a land of vast interconnected salt lakes and playas, a land of mirages, perhaps the last dwelling place of the Almighty. It has that kind of emptiness. He drifted in and out of sleep as he struggled to put the recent images behind him.
