

Papunya 1

The administration office at Papunya, Northern Territory. McCaig, the administrator, and James, Senior Sergeant of Police, are talking about the settlement they control.

McCaig Don't fuckin tell me, I don't wanta hear about it! Night and fuckin day they're on the booze. They smash up their missus. When they're not fighting each other, they fight another mob. They leave their fuckin kids to fuckin starve half the time. I feel sorry for those kids but if we start feedin'em, mate, they'll be our responsibility ...

James Speaking of kids ...

McCaig What?

James Have you been watching that new teacher?

McCaig Ah, Jeezus, what about him?

James He's on their side.

McCaig Lot of teachers are. A few've got more sense.

James He doesn't know enough about the place to know what he's doing.

McCaig (warily) How do you mean?

James The kids're gonna paint the wall of the school ...

McCaig So?

James The men are talking about it. They want to do it.

McCaig At the school?

James The men want to take over.

McCaig I can hardly stop him letting the kids paint. What's the bugger's name?

James Bardon. Geoff.

McCaig Well, that's forgettable. He's on a one year contract, I think ...

James You can do a lot of harm in a year ...

McCaig He wouldn't say boo to a goose. He shits himself when I look at him.

James You keep your eyes open.

McCaig What'm I gonna see?

James He's got something about him, that kid. He's gonna cause us trouble.

McCaig More than we've got?

The men laugh, and leave. There is a pause, then we see Geoff Bardon at the door of his sparsely furnished flat.

GB Is there someone there?

Mick Talk with ya.

GB You can come in.

Mick C'm out here.

Bardon goes through the door. We can only just see the exchange he has with the men.

Mick Ya got the kids paintin the school ...

GB Yes. How do you think it's going?

Mick Pretty good, them kids.

GB I've told them no whitefella style. Do everything their own way.

Kaapa Our way.

GB I don't want them reproducing trash they get from comics.

Uta Kids don't know much, that the trouble.

GB You want to advise them?

Mick Advise ...

Kaapa Men advise kids?

Uta Ugh!

GB Sorry, is there something wrong?

Mick Kids watch, that way they learn.

GB I'm not running the settlement, you know. I'm not even running the school.

Kaapa That fella running the settlement, you get him to paint the wall.

GB I don't think McCaig would be interested. Not very good at it either ...

Kaapa Ya need the right fellas for the job, eh?

GB Ye-es. The right fellas ... (He realises that he's accepted their argument.) The right fellas for the job ...

Mick Few of us be over in the morning. Tell the kids they going to see something.

GB Right ... ye-es ... good night ... (He comes back in.) Good night? What sort of visit was that?

Another pause, then it's morning, outside the school. Geoff is there with the men who called on him, and half a dozen others.

GB You've got to measure it up, work out what you're going to put where.

Mick In our heads.

GB It's harder than you think. I've got a lot of boards for you, over there. You've got to learn to paint. Keep your brushes clean, that sort of stuff. You have to learn how long to wait before you paint on top of something, otherwise you get a mess. It's not hard but it takes getting used to.

Uta Big wall. Simple.

GB (a born teacher) Big idea, need big skill. I put a lot of paper in the shed over there. I want you to draw up what you want to do, and show me. We can't start until we work out we've got everything we need. Go on, I'll be with you in half an hour. Draw up what you want to do.

The men go, somewhat frustrated, but prepared to do it the whitefella's way, then McCaig and James appear.

McCaig What are they doing in the shed?

GB Working out what they're going to paint.

McCaig I thought the kids were supposed to do that.

GB They were, but the men see it as a chance to teach the kids traditional ways.

McCaig If you take any notice of that crap, you'll find yourself going round in circles.

James Until you find yourself advancing up your own orifice!

GB What?

James You're not here to listen to them. You're here to tell them. You need to get this clear, mate. They have got no fuckin idea. Never did have, never will. Totally fuckin clueless, that's what they are. Lettin'em tell you what they want to paint. Hah! (He shrieks with laughter.)

GB Oh, come on ...

McCaig Ifya want the kids to paint the school, get'em started. Where are they? Upstairs?

He looks and we can see that black children are looking down on the scene, working out what's going on.

GB I promised the men ... I think I'd better wait ...

McCaig Don't make any trouble, mate. It'll come back and grab you by the balls.

McCaig and James leave. Geoff goes inside. Our attention turns to the shed where the black men are looking at the boards and paper that Geoff has left them.

Kaapa Might be a chance.

Mick Paint'em stories.

Uta Kids learn, if we tell'em.

Kaapa Trouble is, we're mixed up people. Your stories not the same as mine.

Mick Maybe we connect. You tell your bit, I tell mine. Kids see we got everything connected in our mind.

Uta Fuck the kids. We do it for ourselves.

Mick That important too. But we gotta keep the teacher happy. Wall belong to him.

Kaapa Wall belong to McCaig. Him'n' James, they run this place.

Mick They run us. But we got a hold on them bastards. They need us to make themselves feel good. If we go back to the desert, they got nobody in their town.

Uta Back to the desert ...

Kaapa My missus want to go. I not so sure.

Mick Learnin to be slaves, that all we're doing here.

Uta Huh!

Kaapa Slaves gonna fight! (He slaps the paper.) What we gonna do?

They get to work on their design with energy and satisfaction bursting out of them in calls and cries. We see them painting the walls of the school, watched by teachers, children, their wives and other blacks from the settlement. McCaig and James are there too, watching. Near them is Fred, the head teacher; he goes to Geoff.

Fred It's a feather in your cap, Geoff, I have to say.

GB The kids are looking up to the men. Which is what they wanted.

Fred I have a feeling that something's been put to rights. That's to your credit, with me, anyhow ...

McCaig What's this about them wanting the shed?

GB (prevaricating) They've been using it as a base while they've been working on the school ...

McCaig No drinking in the shed, no kids in there, no women ...

GB That's not part of their plans ...

McCaig (peremptorily) You take the cork out of a bottle, you can't put the fizz back in again. You got a problem. Why? Because you let the demon out when you had him where you wanted him.

GB I don't think there's any demons in what I'm doing here.

McCaig You don't know anything about this place, boy. You haven't seen the downside of these people, not yet.

He moves away, leaving Geoff perplexed, and turning to Fred, his immediate superior.

Fred We're not in an easy position, Geoff. If he complains about us, we get transferred. No two ways about it.

GB What's he got to complain about? Tell me that?

Fred He doesn't like you lending your car. He reckons that when you give them a lift, they're bringing grog into the settlement ...

GB Oh rubbish!

Fred If he complains, you won't be there to pull his story down. He'll complain in Darwin, maybe it'll get to Canberra ...

GB If people in the cities knew what sort of artists these men are, they'd sweep men like McCaig aside. They wouldn't be listened to!

Fred That's not how things work. We're on the edge of a desert. Between us and the Indian Ocean, there's nothing else ...

GB That's Pintupi territory, and others further west!

Fred That nobody's ever heard of in Canberra. We're nothing, mate. We're clinging on here because nobody wants to come here. If you can do these people a good turn, do it for sure, but don't forget who runs the place because once you go too far, we're out, you and I, and I don't want to go. I'm as silly as you are and I want to do some good. Let's not wreck it, mate, by going too far.

Fred goes, Geoff goes, and we return to the shed where the black men do their painting.

Kaapa (to Mick, and everyone else) We all got stories. Stories run in every direction. Do what Geoff says, sit down and paint.

He sits in the middle of the space, with paints and a board, and turns off. Mick finds himself a spot near the door. Uta goes to one end, near a wall. Others grab brushes, paints, and bits of board, and sit or squat while they work. A wind rises, outside, and while the men paint we hear fragments of their thought blown over them by the wind. Their words are given to them, here, by name, but the men whose thoughts we hear do no more, to our eyes, than paint. Their thinking is voiced to us by others out of sight.

Kaapa Honey ants running through the grass ...

Uta Budgerigar got a problem. Not enough to drink till it rain ...

Mick Rainbow tell the people where the water gone ...

Other men come to look at what the painters are doing. The three who started the paintings indicate with eye movements that there are boards and brushes still unused. Two more men – Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri and Anatjari Tjakamarra – also sit down and paint. As they do so – as the men of central Australia reach into their minds for the things they want to express – we see pictures – perhaps only one picture – projected on the wall behind them. (See the ceremonial men getting ready for their ritual dance, p. 380 of *Papunya: a place made after the story, The beginnings of the Western Desert Painting Movement*, by Geoffrey and James Bardon, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2004.)

Tim How far back I go? Where'm I gonna look? My end, or my beginning?

Anatjari Mick's painting rainbow. I wanna paint lookin down, seein where the water go when it fall. Come to think of it, how it get back up again, eh? Bird fly, but water lift ... That not easy ... (He thinks.)

GB (appearing at the doorway) How's it going? (Mick nods to him, meaning, come and have a look. Geoff points to something.) Is that what you call a tjuringa?

Mick (cautiously) Tjuringa, yeah.

GB They're sacred, aren't they? Not everybody's allowed to see them?

Mick Only proper men. Been 'nitiated. Otherwise ... (He points a finger, meaning a bone, or death brought on by a kadaitcha man.)

GB I mustn't let you break your own rules. Leave out anything the women and kids're not allowed to see.

Mick Ugh!

(He starts to talk to the other men in their own language, or whichever language they use to communicate across tribal groups. This takes some time, before they reach agreement, and resume their painting. Geoff stands near the door, where he's joined by Fred, the senior teacher.

Fred You'll be ready for a show, pretty soon.

GB I'm taking a van load into the Alice next weekend.

Fred To sell?

GB There's a few in there interested. Pretty shonky, some of them, but you've got to make a start.

Fred Keep records for Christ's sake because there'll be arguments, later.

GB I'm photographing everything, measuring, writing artists' names on the back.

Fred Here's trouble. Scuse me.

McCaig appears as Fred goes.

McCaig Y're keepin'em busy, anyway. Never seen'em with their heads down before.

GB (proudly) They believe in what they're doing!

McCaig (conceding) That's true. But you're still creating a problem no one will be able to solve.

GB What's the problem you're talking about?
McCaig I'm not stupid mate. I see they can paint. But what're you gonna do with the pictures? Where do they all go? They feel good for a while, then down they come with a crash. These people've got no resilience. They can't sustain themselves. They're no good for the long term. If they've got grog, they drink it. If they've got tucker, they eat it. Tomorrow? Who gives a shit? The day after? They never heard of it. You cannot make them stick to a plan. For anything. How can you build on that? Tell me, Geoffrey Bardon. Tell me that!

GB You've never called me by my name before.
McCaig Take it as a compliment. Take it as a question too. They're digging in their past, and they're putting it down in paint. Good luck to'em. But where do they go next? This is only a rubbish dump, this settlement. There's no future for anybody here! You look at their situation, because it's yours. Mine too, I'm sorry to say. They've got a past. Pure rubbish and crap, to my mind. You think better of it, but then you have to. You're young, you're still telling yourself there's hope. Have a drink with me in a year or two, if you're still here, and I'll put you wise. They've got a past. They have no present. Understand that? They have no present. Future? It's only a dream. If it exists at all, it's a turnback, a twister, a whirlwind, carrying them back to a past that was nothing.

GB That's where they have got so much to teach us. We think we see a desert, they see ancestral tales ...

McCaig If there was anything there to see, I'd see it. I'm no fool, mate, and I've been right through the Pintupi lands, and the Arrernte lands, and all the rest of their bloody lands. It's got nothing and it gives you nothing. You can't live in those places, you can only starve and tell yourself you're eating.

James (entering) He's right lad. I've been listening and I have to say he's right in every way.

GB But they paint their stories and it gives them back their pride!

Some of the painters begin to prop their paintings against the wall and these are then shown, greatly enlarged, on the back wall of the space where the opera is being presented. One after the other we see works of the western desert painting movement, and see also the pride and mutual enjoyment among the painters who feel keenly that they are resurrecting the lives of their people, and it is their gifts which are making this return to life and achievement possible.

McCaig I've got to hand it to you, you've done something, but where does it go from here? There's no place to hang pictures in Pintupi country. Even the rabbits keep out of there!

He laughs, and leaves, James leaves too, and Geoff is left enjoying the warmth and excitement of his painting men, still putting their

pictures against the walls, where, by process of enlargement, they are shown to the listening audience. The voices of the painters whom we've seen over the last few minutes, and those other voices who sang and talked while the paintings were done, now merge in a sound that wavers, breaks, restarts, interrupts itself and then congratulates itself in floods of uproarious laughter. Geoff claps, the painters laugh even more loudly, Fred looks in with a smile, and behind him we see some other teachers and the aboriginal children, standing shyly near the door.