

The Western Horizon

a serial novel by Anna Couani

Chapter 10 The Viaduct

The cool night breeze is blowing into the flat from the hallway through the open door. The hallway is in darkness except for a soft glow from the coloured panes of glass in the heavy front door. Billie holds her keys between her teeth and, in each hand, a plate of food left over from Rini's election party. She stands in the doorway looking at the dark figure silhouetted against the light coming through the balcony doors. The figure starts moving towards her.

-Tan, Billie whispers, is that you?

She sees the slight movement of the long silky hair over his shoulders. The moonlight raking over the tools in the open tool pouches on her workbench. The glistening fur of the small possum-skin sack. And on one end of the table, a miniature tableau of the painted lead castings of three cone-shaped Ku Klux Klan figures and a burning cross. Everything lying as she left it a week before.

She turns ninety degrees and walks into the kitchen. She puts the plates down on the sink and drops the keys into her shoulder bag which she lowers onto the floor near the door. She turns back to the living room. The man has now tied his hair back into a pony tail and the shape of his head is square, not oval like Tan's. Shorter hair falls in a half-fringe over his forehead. One of the balcony doors blows open silently behind him. The breeze ruffles the flowers of the browallia spilling onto the tiles of the veranda. As he turns, light from the street shines through his transparent hair. Transparent blond hair, not black hair. And the light rakes across his face showing two deep vertical creases at the sides of his mouth and horizontal creases on his forehead. As he moves, light glints off the pendant around his neck, a cluster of small metal objects.

Suddenly he seizes the vinyl cover of the workbench and rips it off, sending everything on it across the floor. He takes a flick knife out of his pocket and slashes at the upholstery of the sofa and the lounge chair next to it. He moves closer to her.

She backs towards the open front door of the flat. He stops close enough for her to smell alcohol and tobacco on his breath. She looks down at the pendant on his chest, at the cluster of gold objects, a cross, a ring and a bullet.

-Where is Tan? the man whispers.

-I don't know, says Billie.

Billie's dog Tui appears in the doorway looking like a ghost with the white T-shape on its head. The dog growls and advances on the intruder baring its teeth. The man retreats quickly back through the room and out of the balcony door. He picks up the pot of browallia and flings the contents back into the room, spraying the dog and everything else with dirt. Billie stands in the centre of the room, spitting dirt off her lips. Tui takes off barking and chases the man to the balcony rail of the verandah. The man vaults like a spring over the balcony into the garden, cracking branches in the bushes.

As he runs through the garden to the gate, a car can be heard starting up in the street. Then a car door slamming. Billie starts to run and Tui follows. Down the hallway, out of the building, down the garden path and into the street. She stops on the footpath, watching the car take off down the road in darkness. Tui runs after it barking as far as the corner, then gives up.

Billie went back into the flat and turned on the light. She picked the cordless screwdriver out of the clutter of things on the floor. She found the screws which had been forced off the door bolt on the carpet. They were still useable. She reattached the same bolt to the doors a few centimetres higher. On the carpet, the tiny Ku Klux Klan figures lay scattered among the debris of tools, soil and orange browallia flowers. She picked up the figures and the burning cross and stood them all upright on the coffee table.

Then she went back to her shoulder bag and took out a sheet of folded paper and unfolded it. She brushed off an intact patch on the lounge and sat down in front of the tiny group of figures. She laid the piece of paper on the table. It was covered in small neat sections of handwriting, boxes with peoples' names in them and lines linking some of the sections and names. She took a pencil from the drawing implements on the floor and added another arm to a branch of the diagram. She pencilled in another section and connected it to the box with Tan's name in it.

Other peoples' comments were racing in her head:

-Now we know the racists amongst us.

-Your work in that area is done, Billie. Anti-racism has gone mainstream.

-Australia is the closest western country to Asia.

-This great southern land is western.

-You are a western person from the south. I am an eastern person from the north.

-Australia has always been a British military base strategically close to Asia.

-Australian citizenship is only 50 years old. We were all British subjects once.

Rini and George arrived just after sunrise. They stood in the living room looking at the lacerated lounge, the damaged doors and the workbench which was still in disarray. As they watched, Billie came out of the bedroom with a patterned bedspread and threw it

over the lounge. Then George walked to the phone and called the police while Rini sat on the lounge with one arm around Billie's shoulder. Billie placed the palm of her hand across her forehead.

-It's too much! My life has no continuity, no security.

The police arrive and take down details. They look down into Billie's pale face and suggest that she move house.

The white-faced owl appears on television. Up north, the white-faced owls are hunting rats in the cane fields.

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The viaduct, a familiar gestalt. A glimpse of that image in a magazine lying open on a chair. Its curved brick arches and deep fat pylons. The arches, the arcade, the aqueduct, the colonnade, an endless series.

In the park, the viaduct. A crowd of people stand watching the fireworks over the city through the casuarinas. The practice run for Sydney 2000. The central image of the night, the fountains of light spraying upwards from the arch of the bridge. The image beaming from TV screens all over the world. The Lord Mayor, answering criticism about the money wasted on fireworks, declares,

-Cheap publicity and international exposure for the year 2000!

Large square patches of hot light reflecting the sinking sun. Burning off the western walls of the glass office buildings along George Street. Billie, striding along the footpath through one hot patch after another. Felix, Billie's art dealer drives by in a small convertible, spots Billie and toots his horn, gesturing to her to get in the car.

-I can't believe it, he says. I have a buyer for your Ku Klux Klan castings. I really didn't think there was a market for that kind of stuff. Especially now that the heat's gone out of the Hanson business. And she wants to meet you. The buyer, I mean. She's a gallery owner. Maybe she'll give you a show.

They drove into the glare of the western sun across the flyover to Billie's place to pick up the castings and then back through the city again to the Migas Gallery run by Felix's client. Felix was now walking with a carved walking stick, still recovering from his broken ankle. He came up the long staircase to the gallery one step at a time. Billie reached the top of the stairs ahead of him and walked around inspecting the three huge light-filled rooms of the gallery and the two separate exhibitions which were showing. One show was a group of abstract paintings which had dense intricate surfaces. The other was a collection of contemporary Greek icon paintings.

Felix appeared and continued on to knock at a small grey door at the side. An elegant woman in a plain black suit came out and walked over to Billie with her hand extended.

-My dear, she said. I don't know how I haven't met you or seen your work before. It's marvellous, marvellous! Felix has shown me your portfolio. And he says you have an interest in the Byzantine period too. So what do you think of our Eikon Show?

-I think I know some of the artists, said Billie. All those atheists in Athens, painting icons for a living.

-Absolutely! she said and laughed a loud throaty laugh with her head thrown back.

Billie finished her cleaning shift and arrived home in the quiet dark before dawn. She opened the door to her flat and switched on the light, scanning the living room and listening for noises before entering. The only movement was the small red light flashing on her answering machine. A message from her Uncle Jim, her only relative in Sydney.

Billie, come to the shop. You forgot to see us at Xmas and your auntie has a present she wants to give you.

Billie collected Tui from the backyard and took him for his walk in the park. As the sky grew lighter, the birds started twittering. A pelican from the fish markets was fishing at the mouth of the canal and a white-faced heron was walking in the shallow water next to the sea wall. There were small crabs running into the cracks between the stones and some periwinkles were growing there. But still no oysters.

Billie looked through the door of her uncle's workshop. He was working on a small last at the central table and looked up as Billie came in.

-Hello stranger, he said quietly. Where've you been?

-Up to Jabiluka, down the south coast, getting threatened by thugs, working.

She looked around the room and saw the back of a neat-looking man wearing a leather apron standing at a bench cutting leather at the other end of the workshop. He pulled some scraps of leather off the table and threw them into a large cardboard cylinder.

-I think you know my new apprentice, said her uncle raising his voice above the radio.

The apprentice turned around to face her. It was Tan with short hair. He reached under the table and took out a brown paper package and handed it to her.

-I made you a pair of shoes, said Tan. For practice. Happy Xmas!

Billie opened the package and took out a pair of maroon coloured suede shoes with a cut-away pattern across the toe.

-Thanks, Auntie, she said.

They went into the back room to make tea. Billie and Tan sat on the old leather lounge while Jim sat on his tall stool watching the expressions on Billie's face changing from worry to relief. Tui stood next to Tan and leaned against his knee.

-I did need someone, said Jim. The work's been too much for me since George retired. I met Tan in the *pho* shop one day and he told me about these guys who were after him.

-It was lucky. It seemed like a good solution, said Tan. And I thought you'd turn up sooner or later. I didn't want to lead those thugs to your place, Billie.

-They came to my place anyway, said Billie. But who are they?

-Probably some of the local General Ky supporters, said Tan. They ransacked my room in the residential. They've given us trouble before, especially when we first started our Vietnamese language newspaper.

-You mean Vietnamese people? asked Billie.

Tan nodded.

-That's why I moved house before, he said.

-I found a man in my flat, said Billie. It was dark. I thought it was you at first, then he started wrecking the place and wanted to know where you were. But he was Caucasian.

-Not Vietnamese, not Chinese? asked Tan.

-No way, said Billie. He had long blond hair and white skin. I saw him right up close.

-Well, said Jim, we know that all the Australian criminals are either Asian or Aboriginal, so this fellow must be an albino!

-Did you tell the police he was looking for me? asked Tan.

-The police think I surprised a thief, said Billie.

A strong wind came up and blew some papers into the workshop from the street. Billie looked down at the old brown sandals on her feet. She went back into the other room and fetched her new shoes from the table. Then she returned to sit on the lounge and try them on. Jim walked out of the workshop and stood in the street, waved at the people in the takeaway opposite and walked over for their daily chat.