

The Western Horizon

a serial novel by Anna Couani

Chapter 11 The Blue Building

The morning breeze off the water is warm and moist. The sky is still dark enough to see the lights of a procession of aeroplanes coming in from the northwest. Becoming visible and then proceeding along the western sky. Visibly winking and then disappearing. As Billie walks with her dog, the sky lightens and colours gradually appear. The grass slowly becomes green. The sandstone paving becomes pink and orange. The water changes from navy to silver.

A white-faced heron is standing at the mouth of the canal. The reflection of a ripple in the water, a single horizontal line of light, moves up the grey feathered body of the bird as it stands watching Billie on the opposite bank. It turns its head towards the bay and fixes a beady eye on her as she moves along the path.

Rini is standing at the bus stop, looking up the street for a taxi. She hears a noise and looks to the right. It's The Skull, shouting, abusing, punching the air with one fist. She looks behind her to see who he is abusing. Then she realizes it is her.

-Fuckin! Get out of here you fuckin hippie fuckin wog! Fuck off! he continues to shout. She puts her hand to her throat and touches the pendant around her neck. Three pearls on the ends of three tiny gold shafts, hanging from a horizontal gold bar. On each end of the bar there are two miniature pearls not much bigger than a grain of sand. And above the pendant, she can feel her pulse beating in her throat.

At night, Rini sits with Billie in a car opposite a single-storey corner house. The front door and window of the house are shielded by a wide piece of patterned cloth hanging from the eaves. A soft brown glow comes through the cloth from the window. Outside the fence are bundles of fresh newspapers ready to be delivered.

Rini gets out of the car. She walks up the side street and looks over the paling fence of the house. On the rear skillion roof, different kinds of junk are silhouetted against the evening sky. Rini tries the rear gate and it opens. She walks through the small yard which is also full of junk, mostly bicycle parts, approaches the open door to the kitchen and goes in. Everything is quiet. There is a stench of cooked lamb fat and a humid domestic warmth.

Suddenly The Skull walks down the hall and stops dead at the entrance to the kitchen when he sees Rini.

-Get out of here, you little bitch, he yells and lunges towards her.

She looks at his small wrinkled face and huge black-rimmed bifocals, the spittle forming around his mouth, his old bent shoulders. She grabs his wrists to stop him hitting her and kicks his lower legs. He doubles over and falls onto the kitchen floor, whimpering. Her heart is thumping in her chest as she gasps for air.

It is so hot and her mouth feels dry and sandy. She can't escape. Something is stopping her, pressing on her chest. She wakes and looks into George's face above her, cradling her in his arms, cooing in her ear.

-I could've killed him, The Skull, she sobbed. He was so old and frail.

-You haven't killed anyone, Rini, you're just having a bad dream, whispered George.

Rini got up and sat on the side of the bed.

-The house in the dream, I know where it is, she said. I want to go and see it.

Rini and George drove west across the city. The early morning peak hour traffic was starting to build up but was flowing briskly through banks of synchronised traffic lights. They turned off the main road and came to a small street in a housing estate near Billie's place. They stopped opposite a row of single-storey terraced houses. The house at the end of the row, on the corner of a side street, had a wide piece of faded cloth hanging from the eaves. On the front fence was a sign, Bikes For Sale. In front of the fence, there were several bundles of newspapers.

Rini got out of the car, walked up the side street and looked over the paling fence into the small backyard. The back door was open. The yard was full of bicycles and bicycle parts and an old man was sitting on a milk crate in the yard, pumping up the tyre of a bicycle wheel which was clamped between his knees.

Rini went back and sat in the car with George.

-There's this old guy in the backyard repairing kids' bicycles, she said.

-And what are those newspapers outside the house? asked George.

Rini got out of the car again and went back across the road to check out the bundles of newspapers. She lifted the cover sheet on one bundle. The banner of the paper read, AUSTRALIAN NATION, People for a White Australia. She went back to the car again.

-I was right, it's the journal of the Nazi Party, she told George.

Billie and Rini stood at the door of the flat waiting while the person behind the door examined them through the peephole. Alex's younger brother, Peter, opened the door and they walked into a sparsely furnished living room filled with people and cigarette smoke. There were about six people sitting on the lounge and on various kitchen chairs around a

table. Almost everyone was smoking. Some were engrossed in a CNN news broadcast on cable TV. Leon was working at a computer in the corner, next to stacks of newspapers. On the lounge there were two young women and an older woman talking quietly. Alex walked into the room from the kitchen carrying mugs of coffee for the women.

He moved towards the open balcony door, lighting a cigarette, gesturing to Billie and Rini to follow him. It was early evening but already totally dark. The cool breeze of the day had dropped but there was an autumn chill in the air.

-We're listening for the latest news from Yugoslavia, explained Alex. There's a peace deal but NATO's still bombing.

-Do the Russians in Australia support Serbia? asked Rini.

-We are not actually Russian, said Alex.

-I know, said Rini. You told me that your family was originally Turkish.

-The family was originally Turkish. Way back. But we didn't come from Russia, although we have lived in Russia. We're Yugoslavian but we speak Russian and we prefer to be known as Russian in Australia. There are fascist groups from Former Yugoslavia here. People who came here after World War II. We see them as dangerous.

-But this is not why I called you, he said, gesturing to the scene inside the flat. We have some information which we thought you might be interested in.

They looked out over the suburban roofs towards another block of flats a few hundred metres away. People were visible cooking in their kitchens and walking through their rooms. The colour from television sets reflecting on living room walls.

-Where we work as security guards, said Alex, there are some guys we work with who've been asked if they want to train as mercenaries. That private armies are being set up here. Fully armed and trained, ready to be deployed.

-You don't think that's just an urban myth? asked Rini. Where would these armies be deployed. Are they Serbians, Albanians?

-No, this is independent of the Balkan situation, said Alex. It seems that these squads could be deployed by whoever wants to pay. They're also saying that they've seen some stuff which was thought to have been destroyed. It's a yellow-coloured substance and it's the stabiliser for VX, a chemical similar to saarnin gas. It attacks the nervous system.

From the bottom of the concrete stairwell, Billie could hear a slow exquisite song sung *a cappella* in Greek by a soft resonating contralto voice. She stopped for a few moments to savour the music although she could not understand the words. Then she continued up into the main rooms of the Migas Gallery. There was no one there, so she went towards the office on the right and poked her head around the door. Inside the room, Eleni, the gallery owner and manager, was standing very erect, facing a painting on the wall and singing. When she saw Billie, she stopped suddenly, blushing.

-Oh, I'm sorry, my dear, I thought I was completely alone, she said.

-It was beautiful, said Billie. Are you a trained singer?

-No no no no no! said Eleni. But the family, you know, was always musical. Enough of that! Come and see our marvellous new show.

In the main room of the gallery, there was a transparent blue building suspended in the contained space of an excavation pit. Floating like a blue ship in a golden sea. Cerulean blue against the yellow and orange ochres of the clay and sandstone. The gallery floor below it, scattered with orange and light brown leaves. Billie walked up to the transparent sheets which held the image and felt for paint on the surface. The title on the card stuck on the floor was *Australia is a quarry*.

-Buildings are constantly moving, said Eleni, looking into the installation. It may be over long periods or short periods, but they're always moving.

The shopping mall was almost empty of people but still overloaded with goods, colours, muzak and the assorted clutter of extra stalls which were placed in the wide walking areas. Billie, overheated, stopped her shopping trolley, took off her coat, draped it over the trolley and started ferretting through her wallet for her rego papers.

-I know how you're feeling, said a woman beside her.

Billie turned to face her. The woman was dressed in loose Indian clothes and had a long soft braid of hair down her back. Billie looked down at her wallet, still wide open.

-Money isn't everything, but that fear of an empty wallet grips us all, said the woman, folding her arms across her bosom. Pressing down layers of thin violet-coloured lawn.

Billie looked at the woman's big floppy carpet bag and her silver pendant earrings. At the deep creases in her face.

-What do you do for a living? Billie asked her.

-Well, I'm an artist, but that doesn't really answer your question, does it? I also work part time as an arts officer for a council.

-I'm an artist too, said Billie, a printmaker.

-Really? Well, you must try to exhibit your work. There's a wonderful gallery out at the old Casula Powerhouse which shows a lot of young people from ethnic backgrounds. You must go there. Oh, and this might interest you too.

The woman took a folded leaflet from her carpet bag and handed it to Billie. Then she swept off towards the carpark, leaving behind a faint scent of lavender.

Billie looked down at the leaflet. It read:

Print Workshops for NESB Artists. Basic techniques explained in a series of 10-week workshops.

-Another arts bureaucrat with my interests at heart, muttered Billie to Tan who had walked up to join her.

-They still think I'm a beginner after all these years, she said. And how old do you have to be before you stop being young?

-The perennial supplicant, replied Tan.

The conference about the meeting of Asian and Australian cultures. After the three scheduled speakers for the morning session had finished speaking, it was discussion time. A petite man stood up. He told of an experience in Thailand when some genuine Thais asked him if he was Thai. Because they were aware that there were some bilingual Eurasians who maybe had a Thai parent or were born in Thailand. And they didn't necessarily look Thai.

-So, I can pass as an Australian in Australia and a Thai in Thailand, he said. I have the opportunity to adopt multiple speaking positions.

Everyone stared at him trying to reconstruct him as Asian. Was it possible? Rini glanced at Billie and Tan who were sitting on the other side of the room. Billie caught her eye and cocked one eyebrow.

-Now, not only are we not one of them but they can impersonate us at will, whispered Rini to George who was sitting beside her.

In the foyer, they stopped briefly to drink coffee. Tan walked to the refreshment table to get some sachets of sugar. A man using the milk jug turned around and with a look of immediate recognition said,

-William! William Yang the photographer, isn't it?

It was a perfect winter day, sunny and still. Billie and Tan sat together on Felix's deck, waiting for Felix to finish talking to a customer on the phone in one of his studios. They could see him through the folding glass doors, walking around, gesturing with his free hand. They were looking up into the branches of the jacaranda tree which was growing up through the deck and part of the staircase. The leaves of the tree were a light yellow-green against the blue sky.

When he had finished talking on the phone, Felix disappeared down the spiral staircase inside the studio and came back a few minutes later with a folder in his hand.

-This is what I wanted to show you, he told them.

He walked to the glass coffee table, opened the folder and took out the front page of a Sydney Morning Herald which he spread out on the table. The headline read: *Web of hate: meet Sydney's KKK*. And below the headline was a colour photo of three Klansmen with folded arms standing in front of a KKK flag.

-We've seen the paper already, said Billie.

-Yes, said Felix, you've seen that, but have you seen this? A friend of mine took this a few nights ago.

He took out a large photo and placed it on the table as well. It was a night photo and showed four Klansmen in their white gear and hoods standing in a street.

-Take a closer look at the street and the buildings, he said.

-That's the Town Hall and the Queen Victoria Building! said Billie.

-It's the Ku Klux Klan in George Street, said Tan. It's your painting, Billie, it's come to life!