

Chapter 4 White Australians

The dry warm weather, the drought, rolled on day after day but the heat was accompanied by the visuals of autumn, if that is a truly relevant label for Australian central east coast weather leading up to mid-year. The light became yellow and more slanted. Black trees against the golden western horizon like a Buvelot painting. Casuarinas along the canal bisecting the park. An ancient gestalt like a hand on a rock. I swam in the pool in the late afternoon. The huge Port Jackson fig trees were silhouetted black against the burning orange walls across the road, reflecting the sunset. Under the surface, the pool like a big blue room. The pool floor like a knitted bouclé pattern of lines with rainbow edges. Doing freestyle, the hand, my hand reaches down and acquires definition as a shadow through the wavering lines. High above, the totally Rococo sky with clouds, delicate shell colours and puffs of brilliant white. Under the water, in sharp focus, people with white skin swim by. A man with a long white scar on his less white calf. A man swimming towards me with a huge silvery moustache of bubbles covering his lower face.

The white-faced owl appears on television. The face of legends. The omen. Then the white-faced owl wrapped in a teatowel. Then white-faced owls in blue cardboard boxes. The owl image interspersed with footage of children riding bikes through rainforest and from an advertizing image, words in graphic form travelling into a man's head. But the white face over-rides the other visual noise.

Billie put on her white cloth gloves and rifled through the drawers in the office desk until she found some keys. She walked to a filing cabinet, used the keys to open it and continued searching. She found a folder and stuffed it down the front of her uniform. She locked the filing cabinet again then moved over to the computer which was now open. She pulled out a disk of her own and inserted it into the drive, working quickly on the keyboard.

Towards the end of the shift, Tan, her co-worker, started waving frantically from the other end of the floor where he could hear the sound of the stairwell door opening. Billie switched off the machine without shutting down and ran for the glass wall. Then she looked over to the work station she had just left and saw the tiny red and green lights of the modem still on, flashing from underneath a shelf. She threw the electric plug of her vacuum cleaner into the space and walked in there pretending to retrieve it. As she moved behind the desk, she kicked the modem plug from the wall and walked slowly back again as her boss was locking the bolts of the glass doors into the floor and switching off the lights.

Billie looked out at the lightening sky over the city as she and Tan sped along the Darling Harbour flyover.

"I found something - my own file. You were right. They didn't destroy the files at all. There's thousands of them there."

Tan was unsurprised, his eyes on the road.

"And I have a little hard copy souvenir for you."

She produced the folder from inside her uniform and slipped it onto his lap under the steering wheel. Tan took his eyes off the road and stared at her for a

moment.

"You want to give me your file?"

"It's not my file, it's yours," said Billie.

Tan joined Billie for her walk in the park. The sun was breaking over the city as they sat down on the bench by the water, heads bent together, to decipher the contents of the file.

"This is not only about me," said Tan, "it's got our whole group."

"From the newspaper?" asked Billie. "The whole team?"

"Even peripheral people. I mean, look at this one - Thuy, she was not really involved. It was such a tiny operation, it was just the six of us who wrote everything and did all the production work."

"Do you think I could get more casual work with your team?"

"I'll tell the boss that you're always available for relief."

The young man at the table next to Billie and Rini dropped into a confidential tone. He was boasting to his male friend about his success with the local women since he arrived in the country and his prowess at sliding in and out of romantic entanglements.

"White Father junior," whispered Billie, gesturing to the neighbouring table. Rini looked across. At the receding blond hair, at the skin the colour of fat.

"I remember men like that," she said. "That treachery. I used to feel sorry for them - their self-deception. Until I realized it wasn't self-deception, that they're knowingly deceitful. But about your file. I thought the police were supposed to have destroyed all those secret files they kept in the Menzies era."

"Maybe they did destroy some files. But I didn't see any recent stuff in the filing cabinets. I think they're putting everything on disk or tape now."

They moved from the coffee area into the morning sunlight. They lay on the concrete steps near the pool basking in the strong autumn sun for a while, then packed their gear into backpacks and walked into town for the anti-racist rally. The first speaker took the platform and moved to the microphone.

"Let's make no mistake. White paranoia is synonymous with white denial. The claims of Aboriginal imperialism are nothing more than a stalking horse. The Coalition is conducting an exercise in artifice. Pauline Hanson is no less than their spearhead and the fascists who control her are now controlling the social direction of this country. We cannot stress sufficiently the importance at this time of making a thorough examination of any legislation passing through parliament."

Before the end of the speech, a man at the back of the hall started shouting jingoistic slogans and "Asians Out!".

"It's The Skull!" shouted Billie. "He's still alive!"

Back in the flat, Billie sat down to write in her journal:

*can we efface the ghosts
of the past even when a sense of
foreboding about the future
invades the present like a foreground
shape obscuring its background
like the fractal edge always*

*the same could be a hatchet
a flower a shining line
an eclipse but there is an intention to
extinguish something a right my
right to be here or the right to exist
as me in opposition to them
the beauty is in the background or in
the foreground the figure is in
the foreground obscured by its
background the finger smudging
the edges bleeding the
line until there is no difference
no native title
just little sacks
of yellow arsenic*

A woman is walking towards Rini, staring, her hands held out from her side like a drunken tightrope walker. Across the tiles of the shopping complex, accompanied by muzak. Her teenage son is at her side, calling to her - Mum, Mum - a warning, as she almost collides with wire racks full of cellophane bags of toasted bread. Closer up, it becomes obvious she is not staring. Her eyes are wide but they are white, the irises rolled back under the lids. But she heads towards Rini, kicking sideways at something imaginary with her foot.

"Fuckin Lebs! You're all wogs! Fuckin Leb, Halal shit," she was muttering as she passed the sign for goat meat outside the butcher shop. She lurched towards Rini. Rini stepped to one side and turned her shopping trolley quickly back towards the supermarket.

"I'm an Australian-born Greek," she said over her shoulder.

But the woman was now focusing on the butchers who were busy behind their glass display cases.

Alex, Leon and Peter arrived with Billie at Felix's warehouse with a proper storage box for the rug which was now in Felix's strong room for safekeeping. They walked through the newly finished areas admiring the glazed walls and scumbled pastel ceilings. Felix impressed them by going through a number of security procedures which included moving concrete panels to get to the strong room. Alex took the rug from a cloth bag and spread it on a bench to show it to Billie and Felix.

"This is a knitted rug from Silesia, now in Poland. It is 200 years old. It was miraculously saved by my relatives after World War II, then smuggled into Russia and kept for years by my grandmother. The family never knew its value. Today, museums are fighting to get them because they are so rare. There are only about 20 of them in the world. They were the only non-clothing knitted products made at that time in the region. And the patterns of the foliage can be traced back to the influences along the Silk Road. You see it's almost like an enlarged Persian miniature with its narrative scene and elaborate floral border. It's a scene from the Old Testament. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah." The scene showed a city engulfed in flames and in the lower right foreground,

the tall white figure of Lot's wife turned to salt.

"So fine and so detailed but also like a Turner painting," said Felix.

"These pieces were used by craftsmen to showcase their skills. They were one-offs," said Leon.

He, the beloved, comes walking back to join her on the dirt road, through the beech trees, through the fallen yellow leaves, along the ground which is dappled with sunlight. He seems untouched, unchanged even after the long sojourn in the palace. With the king, the powerful, the degenerate, the seductive. Surrounded by beauty and beautiful minions. But as he approaches and draws closer, his face changes, slowly contorting into the face of a cat, the face flattening, the eyes widening into a tawny stare that no longer sees her.

Rini jerked awake from the dream as her head dropped onto her chest. She moved her papers off her knees, walked to the balcony of her flat and looked down to see Mrs Spellano going out of the main door of the flats.

The city was cold in the late afternoon in the brief twilight before dark. There was a kind of hush, a hiatus in the traffic and the feeling of George Street being like an huge draughty corridor. Billie looked back at the demonstrators outside the town hall. In front of them was a row of people dressed in white Ku Klux Klan outfits holding a long cloth sign which read, Pauline we love you. Then a voice behind her spoke suddenly,

"I never thought it would come to this, Billie. "The bitch which bore fascism is on heat again."