

# JOCK SERONG

WINNER OF THE COLIN RODERICK AWARD

# THE BURNING ISLAND

'There is some kind of magic in the way  
Jock Serong conjures places and times and  
people ... A ripping yarn of a book.'

LUCY TRELOAR



## THE INDIAN



I had been aware of the man in the corner of my vision for an hour or more.

Dark, but not a native.

He wore no hat and I could see that his hair was deep in retreat above his temples. A thin man, slightly stooped, with a delicate formality to his walk. I'd passed the rows of vendors and bought what I needed. Short conversations, greetings. Bargaining here or there—*surely that's the price for a dozen?*—slowing, shifting, turning. But always I could feel the presence out beyond my shoulder. The man never came close enough to hear or to speak: he merely kept in step as I moved.

And I am not someone accustomed to being followed. Lord, you'd die of the tedium.

In the sheds I bought myself a hock of mutton and a pound of potatoes. *No, Mr Ross, I am cooking for myself, same as last week.* Mr Ross shrank back into his shell, tortoise-man. While

he wrapped the meat in long muslin, further out the dark man let the sides of his eyes inform him.

I forced a conversation with the woman who had broad beans. Veda, Vera, Thea. I didn't want the beans: I wanted to convince myself I was imagining things.

Still there.

He was not discreet. There was a stickiness to his movements that marked him out: I moved, he moved. While the crowd around us shifted and lurched, he was constant as a shadow.

I turned away from the market, out of the gloom of the timber sheds and onto the road. Sydney roiled about: raucous and uncaring, a stripling at forty-two years of age. Bullocks and horses splattered the dust of the street. Voices hailed and harangued; someone yelling about oysters. Scrapping children, the eyes of the old folk upon them, wondering in their breasts if these generations differed somehow for the accident of their birth. We do differ, down to the bones. And yet still we look homeward.

I turned back the way I'd come, stopped and drew out the hunk of mutton. Unwrapped it and made an elaborate show of winding the muslin around it once again as I looked directly at the man who shadowed me.

No, not a native. An Indian, I thought, though that told me nothing. The street swarmed with natives, with Africans, Bengalis, Malays. Even among the white faces there would be Americans and Welshmen and Dutchmen, and there perched on his wagon was the Chinaman who ran the Lion.

The man watching me was older, better dressed and much shorter than me. His remaining hair was a rich blue-black, his scalp smooth and unmarked, glowing in the sun. The face was

lined with thought or care; there were years on his neck and his cheeks but he wore them comfortably, as time and not decay. His eyes were fixed upon me in a way that alarmed me.

I turned back to the market, found old Copsley with his firebox. He greeted me warmly but his smile faltered as he looked closer. I did not want to alert him, or cause a scene at this stage.

‘I wonder if I could ask a small favour of you, sir.’

‘Of course, miss.’

‘Could I borrow that poker?’ I cut my eyes towards it, on the bed of straw by the firewood.

His eyebrows shot up. ‘This one?’

‘No, the one beside it, with the hook-end. I need it at home.’ He did not look askance at the odd request but simply went to grab it.

‘No, I don’t want to carry it around, not for the moment,’ I said. ‘Other things to do. But would you be kind enough to put it in the panniers on my mare? That’s her, by the big tree.’ I didn’t point, merely indicated once more by eye. ‘I’d be most obliged.’

‘Certainly, miss.’

I turned my back without another word and came out into the street again. If this man intended to follow me, I would draw him away.

I visited some more of the traders, manufacturing small conversations. The eyes burned on me, out at the margins. Could I say it was open malevolence? No, I thought not. But it is troubling enough to be stared at.

When I was satisfied that Copsley had carried out his errand I returned to the mare, took the reins in one hand and slid the other into the pannier. Cold iron in there. Not made for the delicate hands of a teacher, but that was fine with me.

The mare, as always, made an ally of herself, stepping gently for home. When we stopped at the high wall around the barracks I took her muzzle and looked into her eye. The world was reflected there in the dark pool: the curving sky and the wall, bent by the lens, and there, only yards back, the Indian. I made a decision.

I walked the mare to the end of the wall and turned the corner. I slid the iron from the pannier and gave her a light smack on the rump so she continued down the road. The street was empty. The iron hung by my leg. I slipped into the small recess behind the corner buttressing of the wall and waited.

He came around, stopped just in front of me and I saw him assessing the unaccompanied mare. Just for an instant.

It was easy enough to bring him down. I swung backhand across his middle and the iron caught him low on his chest or high on his belly. The air came out of him with a bark and he dropped, allowing me time to lay a knee on him, right where the iron had got him.

I took his lapels and lifted his head out of the dust: an old, careworn head, and I felt a flush of remorse. But the eyes bored into me, huge now, even while his chest clenched and unclenched under my knee, mouth open but no breath passing, and I began to worry. I lifted myself off him but stood with the end of the iron at his throat as a warning. The mare had wandered back. She nuzzled at his hair while I waited for his breath to return.

I took his lapels again and forced myself to stare into his eyes. 'Lost, are you sir?'

He did not resist me physically but the dark, dark eyes lent an intensity to his gaze, a kind of searching. He had air now, he had speech, but it was strained.

'You are Eliza Grayling, madam?' His accent was not as I

expected it to be: flat, close to English but fading to something more local.

I saw no point in denying it. 'It's miss. And who would you be?'

The eyes worked around my face, searching. 'We must talk. There is much I wish to discuss.'

The mare stood above us, eyeing me softly. Her hooves made small, impatient shuffles.

'And you think following people around like that is a way to foster discussion?'

'Forgive me.' The searching eyes. 'I mean you no harm.'

I could see now that there was no threat in him, nothing in the way of physical power. There was only the haunted look of his face, and that was his concern, not mine. 'I'm walking up the hill to my home. You can join me or not.'

'Then I shall,' he said, and grimaced. I had hit him hard. 'My name is Srinivas. You may have heard of me.'

~

Well, I had and I hadn't.

Srinivas was the lascar, I was fairly sure.

I'd never heard the name, but there was a Bengali who lived at the centre of the stories my father had told me. He would be as old now as this man. It was the nature of my relationship with my father that in our long hours together he would become reflective and summon stories from his bones. One of them came from his time as a young lieutenant working as an aide to Governor Hunter, commissioned to investigate the strange affair of the *Sydney Cove*. An irresistible tale for a child—a distant shipwreck, the mysterious disappearance of almost all



those who attempted the long walk to safety—salted with dark places and monsters. Clark, responsible for the ship's cargo, the bearer of unexplained wounds, who absconded at the earliest opportunity. Mister Figge, a shadowy figure in the tales, rendered compelling by the disgust, the horrified intimacy that animated my father when he spoke of him. The man was a tumour in him. He blamed Figge for the deaths of the missing souls and attempted to arrest him, whereupon he attacked my father with a knife and took off on a stolen horse. My father carried wounds, I understood, whose exact nature was not to be discussed.

Of all his tales, this one I could not ask to be told. He spoke of it only when he was morose, and then his gaze would drift, his voice would start at a murmur that scarcely shifted the silence. A man who had no wife, a widower in heart and temperament, a man with no one to hear him but an insatiably curious child. Later, as the drink took him, the account would be tinted with sarcasm and doubt. As I reached that age where children start their questions, my father would offer only fragments, the gaps filled by others and their rumours.

I never knew anyone else to mention Clark, but of Figge there were occasional whispers. He'd been murdered in the bush, or had found his way back to India, or even England. He was in China, he'd been hanged or impaled on a Gweagal spear or burnt alive. It was his skeleton that swung from the gibbet on Pinchgut, or turned up softened by the acids of a lime burner's barrel. He was a necromancer, a preacher, an alchemist. He was immortal, already reincarnated. He was a lightning rod for florid talk. When I listened to my father, I thought of Figge as some manifestation in the weather, a cataclysm that smote the men and violated the women and was gone.

The lascar boy, the Bengali, in my father's story had no name

and Father spoke little of him. He was Clark's manservant, that was all. It was he who had provided the account of the long trek north from the *Sydney Cove* wreck that cast so much suspicion on his two fellow survivors. And I knew, too, that it was my mother who had drawn the story forth from the silent, terrified boy, which perhaps accounted for some of my father's anguish around it. At any rate, the story was full of contradictions, made worse by my father's frequently addled state in the telling. It confused *him*, even years later. And it certainly confused me. It formed some part of his wider grief: that much I knew.

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As I walked up the hill, the provisions slung over the mare and the iron returned to the pannier, I waited for the Bengali to talk. It was extraordinary. This man, sunk deep in his middle age, was the legendary boy of those childhood tales. And yet I was no less disconcerted by his staring, by the smouldering intensity of his presence. Was he in his right mind? I felt sure he was quite profoundly disturbed.

Then he did begin to talk, prompted by some small invitation from me to do so, and it was as though a torrent had been released. The words rushed out of him, even while he stared.

'I suppose you may know, Miss Grayling, that I lost my father in the forest. I went back to the coast to find him.' This was the first thing he said, and it seemed stranded. As though it fell outside the order of the story he wanted to tell, such was his urgency in saying it.

I did know that the lascar boy's father was one of the survivors of the *Sydney Cove*. Now I learned that Srinivas had gone back south, when Sydney was done with him and he with them.



‘The Walbanja came and met me. I knew from their faces, straight away. They took me to a place where they had buried him in a tree, bundled him, I suppose you would say. We wept together. They were very kind.’

The other lascars, his father’s companions, had been taken in by the Walbanja, he said, and he was reunited with them. While he did not think they were *contented* with living in the forest, they were well settled with the natives by then, and the shipwreck was old history for them. They would not take Srinivas to the place where his father had perished. They had seen it, back at the time it all happened; out in a dark gully in the forest. They told Srinivas it was a dreadful place, a place they would not otherwise go. He stopped at this point in the story—we were again alone in a quiet lane—and took hold of my arm so firmly it hurt.

‘Figge had led my father there and cut his leg so he would scream in pain, and the screams would lead them all to separate from the party and search for him.’

The horror of that day was vivid to him, even now; he carried it like a blade broken off in his flesh. The other lascars told him they heard his father’s cries: they wanted to go and find him. But Srinivas had stayed with Clark, because that, his father had told him, was his duty. Clark had insisted on it, in any event. It seemed the boy’s father bled to death, in dreadful pain, alone and cold.

Walking beside me now, older in all likelihood than his father had been when he disappeared into the forest, the poor man let out a strangled sob. He’d been tormented by that wretched day for more than half his life.

‘Mr Figge took my father to a place filled with bad spirits, he said to me. I think about it...often.’

He released my arm and I saw the white points where his fingertips had pressed. The blood returned to them but left the crescents of his nails there. 'There is a rage inside me, miss. I cannot rid myself of it.' His eyes were holding me as he said it: they demanded my understanding. 'Rage is for the young. It is painful to live this way.'

I stroked the mare's muzzle while I thought. When we resumed walking, I saw my questions had been feeding his hurt, and his hurt was a wounded dog: offered pity, it might attack the hand of kindness. Silent, I left him the option of talking. In due course he took it, mouthing some Vedic voice in his head, it seemed, as much as speaking to me.

Years passed by, he told me, and some of the lascars, especially the married ones, left the forest seeking ways to return home to Calcutta, Kowloon, the places they came from. Others married into the tribes and built families: they invited the young Srinivas to stay among them and he accepted. The forest and the coast offered logic in a life unmoored and the Walbanja were gracious—and no one had any need of Sydney, he said. Something inside me rejoiced at this idea.

We were walking now among my neighbours, people who took delight even on an ordinary day in speculation about the towering spinster's activities. The mare whinnied a little, sensing my irritation. I saw one or two in their doorways and imagined their scandalised delight at this latest development: *The tall girl, George, you know the one, walking with a Hindoo. Deep in conversation!*

I say this because it is only me listening: fuck them, and fuck their smug, shallow gossip.

Srinivas spoke on and on, eyes closed but feet somehow never stumbling. He spoke of the arrival of the settlers on the

south coast, taking up the land and turning it into industry of one kind and another. There was conflict, he said, and I took him to mean that the natives did not go quietly. The lascars, who had seen occupation before, knew the cards in that hand. They got work with the settlers, clearing cedar for timber; in time, they began to hire their own cutters and millers. Srinivas discovered a particular talent for finding ways to ship the timber north to Sydney. The planks came back from Sydney as handsome vessels that collected more timber, and the lascars—*former* lascars now—worked out that they could employ shipwrights on the coast and turn the timbers to good use where they were.

They made a success of it, he said. Old differences persisted—the Indians were never invited into the drinking, the shooting parties—but a basic level of respect was shown. It raises a question, he suggested. If each of us—and by ‘us’ I understood him to include me—came from the old world, from Dublin and Birmingham and Leith and Massachusetts...from Calcutta, perhaps, then how much of that is left behind and how much becomes this place?

‘I walked that coast until my feet broke open. I do not wish to make grandiose claims, miss, but it is likely I was the first outsider to meet the Thaua. I sailed waters that Cook himself never found. But I will always be *desi* here, no matter my intimacy with the land.’

I was still wary of the wild anger in this man but I found myself warming to his sense of grievance. Perhaps one must nurse a grievance of one’s own to fully appreciate another’s.

His story meandered and stalled as we reached the Cooper property, Juniper Hall, perched on its rise and cut from a sandstone bluff at the back, a great fig tree towering over it. I led him along the path that skirted the main residence and ended at my

quarters among the other staff. I tied the mare off, brushed her down. She dropped her head and ran her mouth over my hand: when I pushed back, she snuffled and shook her mane. It was a habit now, a paying of the fare for coming to town, though I knew her to love the walk anyway. I gestured to the Hindoo man that he should enter and he hesitated. When he relented, he made a point of removing his shoes.

Inside I stirred up the morning's coals, hooked the kettle on the idleback and swung it over the new fire. I cleared the clutter from the table to find space for his cup: fabrics I'd been sewing, plates with old food adhering, the books—Lord, the books. I watched the man's eyes wander over the space, taking in the chaos, trying to assemble something from it.

'I teach,' I said to him, by way of heading off the inquiry.

'Ah,' he replied. 'Your mother is a very clever woman. Something you inherited from her, perhaps?'

I must have reacted—did I bristle?—because he seemed startled at my reaction.

'I'm sorry,' he stammered. 'Have I...?'

'*Was*. She is deceased, Mister...Srinivas. Many years ago now.'

'Oh dear me, I am sorry. So sorry.' He dropped his head and when it lifted his face had crumpled. 'I did not expect...I knew her briefly. She was very good to me.'

My hands had taken to fussing with the bottles and glasses on the bench. All of this was ill-advised. A stranger in my house, a stranger tugging at strings tied to the past. As usual, I hadn't thought this through. 'Any other painful subjects you wish to raise?'

'I can only apologise,' he sighed. Waited. Came to a decision. 'Yes, there is one.'

'It was a rhetorical question.'

'I need your father.'

'Need him?'

'I need him to do something for me.'

I shrugged, determined to give nothing away. But the bitterness stung my mouth now.

'What sort of thing?'

'I have lost a boat, miss. A boat full of valuable things—livestock, timber and, most tragically, people. A crew, passengers.'

'Where did you lose your boat?'

'Bass's Strait. She was two hundred forty-three tons, a hundred foot long. The *Howrah*.'

'That's a substantial vessel, sir. Rather careless to...lose such a thing.'

He spoke again in a way that was addressed more to himself than to me. It seemed a habit of his. 'Maybe I should have expected this. It was passing through those islands...Where the *Sydney Cove* was wrecked.'

I poured the tea and watched him rotate his cup to set the leaves spinning. 'The Furneaux group?'

'You know the geography, then.' He was silent a moment, picking at a fingernail.

'What do you want my father to do about this?'

'He must go and find it. In his interest, as much as mine.'

'He cannot,' I said abruptly.

I'd startled him. He gathered his thoughts with evident care. 'Is your father, then, also...deceased?'

'No, he is...alive. He is no longer in the service of the King, so I do not see how he can be of assistance to you.'

The dark eyes indicated a change of tack. 'It is not the King's concern. Would you take me to him, perhaps? I should discuss this with him directly.'

‘No. I will not do that, I am sorry.’

The visitor sighed. ‘These are difficult matters, young lady. Difficult things to—’

‘Very difficult, no doubt. But you see I’m not so very young. And I am busy.’ I waved a hand at a pile of balled wool on a side table. The fowl had taken to nesting in it. ‘I have domestic standards to maintain. So let us not waste each other’s time.’

He smiled reluctantly, the first time I had seen the smile. It was gentle. ‘You have your mother’s spirit, if I may say so. A sad and lovely thing to behold.’

‘And a long walk for the beholding.’ The man made no attempt to get up from the chair he occupied. He had sipped barely half an inch from the tea.

‘You cannot come here and make these demands—’ I stopped myself.

I thought about it, too briefly I now realise, and was swayed by the affinity I felt for the man. A form of relenting, I suppose; one I should not have indulged.

‘Oh, go on then—tell me why you must involve my father, or take your leave.’

~

He told me he remembered my father as a good man, though he was angry with him for a time. My father had promised him his freedom in return for testimony against Figge and Clark, then changed his mind and had Srinivas placed under guard. Seated in my kitchen after all these years, Srinivas said he could see that my father had been trying to protect him from the malevolent Mr Figge. The Bengali spoke that name with the faintest of shudders.

I tried to busy myself about the room, tried to make distractions. This story I'd heard in pieces, in moods, the leaden frame around my childhood, and much heartache besides. Governor Hunter was long gone, recalled to London, his name now just an inscription on a limestone slab; my mother was also in the ground. This story had belonged to me and my father, no one else. And this stranger had lived it.

As I reflected on this, the tale continued and found its way to the matter of the lost vessel. Srinivas knew something had gone wrong with it because it should have returned from Hobart, empty, by June. Things go awry with commercial voyages—even I knew that. Delays, disputes. Srinivas told me he was used to obstacles. But this delay was different, he said. There was no word at all.

Eventually a letter came through the governor's office. Some items from a wrecked vessel had been found. One of those strange symmetries: Mr Munro, a self-appointed leader among the sealers of the straits, had found them on Preservation Island, the place where, all those years ago, Srinivas's voyage on the *Sydney Cove* had ended and his ordeal had begun. He talked in a long-winded way, which I did not entirely follow, about how certain types of flotsam tend to reach shore when a ship breaks up, certain other types when it beaches and items are jettisoned, and so forth. Some sink and vanish, apparently, but some do not. 'One can tell a great deal about the catastrophe by the nature, and sequence, of what reaches shore.' I felt a sick certainty that he was referring to the bodies of the dead.

His eyes were elsewhere now, apprehending the demons that afflicted him.

Munro's letter did not lay claim to the discovery of a shipwreck: only to traces that must have come from a ship or ships.



Fragments of cabin fittings and a captain's sea chest containing correspondence and the ship's papers, which Munro claimed he had not read. It seemed to me that reading the ship's papers to identify the vessel would be the first thing that anyone would do, but Srinivas appeared unconcerned.

'I do not assume that he is able to read,' he said. 'In any case, I am satisfied by the description of the chest. It is my vessel.'

And indeed if, as he said, it was an Adige chest of the kind my father once owned, it would be unique: the ones I'd seen in other homes differed in all sorts of ways. Each was an individual act of craftsmanship.

I had taken a seat at the table as he spoke, and my eyes kept drifting to the embarrassing mess I had made of my small home. But Srinivas was fixed upon his tale and took no notice of what was around him.

Munro had made clear to him that, beyond these scraps of debris, there was nothing else. He'd thoroughly searched his own shoreline and those of the islands nearby, he said, adding that he was by reputation a trustworthy soul and, in recognition of that, he had been appointed the local constable, or some such title.

Srinivas looked at me now, an air of expectation about him.

'They all must have perished, then,' I said finally, at something of a loss. 'I am sorry. But these are common risks, are they not?'

'Yes, yes, of course,' he said, with something of the manner in which I would speak to the Coopers' younger child. 'But there are aspects to this, aspects that disturb me. This was a good vessel, in capable hands. There was no talk of storms. You eliminate the common causes—the weather, incompetence, an unseaworthy boat—and then you must look more widely. An isolated society of lawless men: yes, you would consider that.

Men who live off the sea, who might not be above committing a deception, an outrage. False lights, or...'

'This is wild talk,' I replied. 'There are patrols through those islands, everyone knows it. You need only ask them to carry out a specific search.'

He responded in a way I had not expected: he waved an irritated hand at his own face and told me no one would conduct a search at the behest of a Bengali. I hadn't considered this, but I knew immediately he was right.

'I have private means,' he said then, 'and I am long accustomed to achieving private ends.'

I had diverted him, and soon enough he returned to the thread of his story, to the other aspects of it that he believed to be *nefarious*. A striking choice of word: the sea took its share of vessels and lives every year; it was blind and indiscriminate. To hear talk of deliberate malice was something new.

A handful of sealers had turned up in port, said Srinivas, making splendid men of themselves, loaded with money. One such man, an islander named Drew, strode into a Launceston rooming house looking—and here Srinivas suddenly became awkward—for the services of a good woman. I nearly laughed: from all I'd heard, no one would seek a good woman in Launceston. But the point was that the man carried a fortune in cheques and heavy coin, and had no good reason for the possession of either.

This, I told him, was circumstantial. He was undeterred. 'Circumstances are strands in a rope,' he told me: it was their combination that mattered. When I asked him for another such strand, he told me that a cooked leg of mutton had floated ashore on Preservation Island. This time I did laugh, and Srinivas conceded a smile. 'They don't tend to sail the seven seas, mutton roasts.'

But his face quickly turned serious again, and he talked of rumours he'd heard: the use of lights to lure ships to their destruction. It had been put directly to him—he would not say where—that the crew and passengers had been murdered, the vessel plundered.

'The islands are wild places,' he said finally. 'A closed society. I cannot rely on anecdotes alone, because they tend to the outlandish.'

He meant no irony by this, I firmly believe.

~

When he was done, I drank my own tea in a gulp and set the cup down, said nothing in response.

'You remain unwilling to take me to your father?'

'He lives out of town.'

'Perhaps the next time he comes to town, then?'

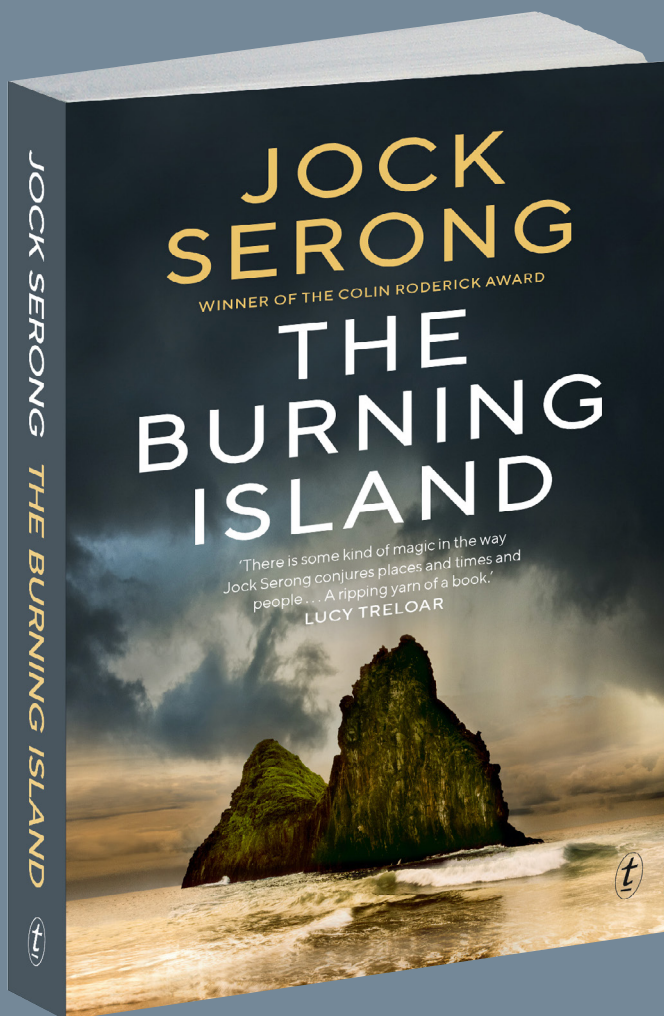
'He doesn't—I take him everything he needs.'

'You're not making this especially easy.'

'I see no reason to. And it is in my nature to be uncooperative.'

'Yes. I see. Can I ask for your assurance that you will tell him about me? I can provide a vessel, provisions, everything. He will be well paid for his trouble.' His voice was pleading now. 'I feel sure he will want to help.'

'I will speak to him,' I said, finally. 'You have my word. I do not expect he will be able to help you.'



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