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Vermilion Skies

Written by Wendela Lumley

Published by Matador

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A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Wendela Lumley, the daughter of a Chilean descended from a long line of South American artists and writers, and a Canadian International concert pianist and academic, was born in London and educated in England. She read Law at King's College, London, and went on to study Fine and Decorative Arts at the V&A. After meeting her English husband, they lived for many years in Chile with their five children. From 1999 she worked in shantytowns helping women develop themselves and their communities until her departure in 2004, when the family returned to England and settled near Newbury in Berkshire.

VERMILION
SKIES

WENDELA LUMLEY



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ISBN 978 1784622 947

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Typeset in Aldine401 BT Roman by Troubador Publishing Ltd



Matador is an imprint of Troubador Publishing Ltd



*For our children,
Saskia, Cosima (the instigator), Damian, Natasha and Alexia,
my best teachers, my challenge, my inspiration.*

For Christopher, thank you.

PART 1

Chapter One

September brought with it the first glimmer of summer. The snows in the mountains had begun to melt and the rivers to swell. With the warm air, the winter smog that hung over the city of Santiago began to thin and the sky, freed of its veil of winter pollution, took on a new brilliance. Everywhere little paper flags with the five-pointed white star fluttered in readiness for the Independence Day fiestas of September 18th and street vendors displayed sashes and *huaso* hats with bands in the Chilean colours of red, white and blue.

Milana sat on the banks of the Mapocho River gazing at the mountains silhouetted against the phosphorescent dawn, relishing the freedom of the early hour. A gentle breeze skipped over her bare legs, lifting eddies of dust and whispering through the eucalyptus trees as it danced its way downstream. Between her fingers she rolled a fragment of broken porcelain that she had dug up from the earth. A few feet away, her younger brothers picked out rocks from the river bed while the freezing mountain waters swirled about their ankles.

‘There’s a dead dog here,’ shouted Juanito, the youngest, rousing her out of her day dream. Milana tossed the fragment to the ground where the spoils of earthquakes and ancient garbage lay impacted between the layers of earth, and joined him. They stood staring at the mangy creature lying between two sun-bleached pieces of driftwood, its threadbare fur barely stretching over its bony carcass. She leant over and touched the still soft body. A cluster of flies rose from around its staring eyes. Beyond the eucalyptus trees in the shadow of the hills a vulture hovered. Juanito shivered.

'I hate them birds.' Milana glanced up, her gaze remained momentarily transfixed by its hunched predatory form as it settled on a high branch.

'Thanks for coming with us, Mila.' Juanito hugged her gratefully. 'I'd never have come down here without you,' he admitted in a whisper. Ricci, their middle brother, approached, triumphantly lifting a grubby plastic bag.

'Got the best rocks yet, in here! Race you back home,' he shouted to Juanito. The boys set off scrambling over boulders to paint the rocks they had collected. Milana crouched down again by the dead dog and stared into its glassy eyes. Flies hovered impatiently about her suntanned skin. She rose, stepped back and watched the flies take possession of their prize. At the top of the bank she turned to look back at the river; a solitary figure, accustomed to this forgotten wasteland, communing with the whisperings of the waking day.

Others didn't venture to this part of the river. They were afraid of *El Cuco* who might lure them to his fearful lair. Mothers would nurture these folk tales and threaten unruly children with abandonment on the riverbank for *El Cuco* to find them. As they grew, some children dared laugh in the face of these old myths, but older ones told stories about the mysterious man who lived beyond the bend of the river and roamed the banks on lonely nights. They spoke of the graves of his victims and the souls of the murdered that rose with the mist over the river.

For Milana these ancient legends merely served to enhance the enchantment of the wasteland where she would sit for hours digging her fingers into the damp earth by the water's edge. During the winter rains, the river swelled flooding the banks and coaxing all manner of debris, buried for years, to the surface. In the spring Milana would find new treasures delivered up by the flood water; remnants of porcelain or glass. Milana collected these coloured fragments whose edges had been worn smooth by time. With some she made mosaics in the earth, others she took home with her to turn into rudimentary pendants. In the dry season when the water ran so shallow she could easily pick

her way across the rocks, she would sit resting against a piece of driftwood and spend time reading the books that were passed on to her in charity bags from the parish. But in the heat of summer, when the wealthy repaired to their holiday villas and charity ran thin, she would lie on the hot, cracked earth dreaming under a cobalt sky. The rushing river, the blazing sunsets and the colossal mountains brought beauty into her dingy life and no grim warning could prevail.

Now, as she gazed up at the great Andean heights, there was a hint of defiance about Milana; something steadfast and determined, almost regal in her stance that set her apart from her peers. Far above her two condors circled. As she watched them, the first rays of the morning sun touched their wings. They soared higher as if they alone, with their majestic ritual, drew the sun over the mountains to where the waking population below could gaze upon another dawn. Milana shook her hair back, closed her eyes and let the first rays penetrate her skin while, somewhere deep within, inexpressible yearnings played out a melancholy symphony.

At five foot eight inches, Milana was the tallest girl in her class. But then the boys and girls of the 52nd Lyceo School were not noted for their height. This was partly due to their poor diet and partly to their genetic build. Many had Mapuche Indian blood. Some were descended from the Araucanian Indians of the south – eyes set wide apart and melancholy, dark hair and olive skin was typical of these people. But every now and again, one came out different, like Milana, a throwback to a John Smith, fair skinned and in search of adventure, who had chanced upon his Pocahontas on these far-flung shores.

A handsome new bridge linked the 52nd Lyceo on the left bank of the River Mapocho to Avenida Kennedy, the major uptown auto route. When the rain cleared away every last vestige of smog and the sun reflected off the impressive snow-covered peaks, Avenida Kennedy, with its monumental palm trees and breathtaking views of the Andes, became one of the most

spectacular avenues in the world: a six-lane ‘highway to the Gods’. It began in the wake of the Grand Hyatt hotel and stretched up through residential Vitacura all the way to Lo Barnechea where, in the shadow of the mountains, it suddenly petered out into a little plaza and slipped away over an old bridge. At strategic places along the river, elegant new bridges had been built to link the smart, new residential developments of Santa Maria Manquehue and La Dehesa to the older, elegant uptown districts of Santiago. Newly constructed villas perched smugly in the foothills of the mountains while down in the valley, caught in the shadow of these bridges like a bad smell, lay the shantytown of San Damian.

Milana lived in the second alley down from the baker’s shop. The homes on Oleander Alley were rough wooden constructions with sheets of corrugated metal held together by a few nails. Letty, Milana’s mother, boasted that theirs was held together by a prayer. The floor was, for the most part, the dark, damp earth of the riverbank. The rough, inside walls were decorated with old supermarket posters and discarded wrapping-paper. There were two rooms: the front room with a plastic table, two wooden stools and an old cane sofa, where Milana and her younger brothers, Ricci, Juanito, and Letty, ate their meals, and the back room, where they all slept on a mattress raised off the floor by a variety of discarded apple crates. On this particular morning, Letty had been peeling pumpkins since before dawn and preparing the dough for her *sopaipillas*. These were the pumpkin pastry rings which she fried and served with the local *pebre* sauce of onions, tomatoes and coriander, and sold from her white metal kiosk on wheels. Usually her clients were hungry bus drivers and construction workers on a meal break, but today she would join the other vendors in the market square for the craft fair that took place every year on the first Sunday of September.

Church bells rang for early Mass. Letty paused, saucepan in hand, to stare out at the women straggling past on their way to beg or sell their paperclips and sticking-plasters on the steps of the church. Today, in addition to their usual wares they carried

paper flags clenched like posies of flowers in their gnarled fists. The more flamboyant among them had crammed piles of flimsy plastic *huaso* hats on their heads, in the hope of attracting extra sales. Letty stretched, her limbs still slim and lithe, and pressed her hand into the small of her back; today, at least, she wouldn't have to push her cart up that hill. The shanty shuddered suddenly as someone came racing in. A second later, Milana appeared from behind the plastic shower curtain that separated the eating and sleeping spaces. She observed her mother momentarily with a troubled expression.

'I saw Ana!' she exclaimed breathlessly. Milana's usually melodious voice sounded tense and accusatory. 'She had Oscar pulling that big old cart they're going to use as a stall, all by himself, like he was a donkey and what's more he had another black eye.'

'Oscar's a big boy, he can take care of himself,' retorted Letty turning back to the task in hand. She hummed as she wielded her old saucepan as a hammer, tacking down some plastic sheeting, for want of windowpanes, which had come away from the wooden frame. Milana flung herself down on the makeshift bed and watched her mother's slender fingers tugging at the plastic, pulling it into place.

'Can't Ana stop his dad doing that to him?' She thought of Ana's matronly figure, her large bust and smooth wide face that seemed at odds with her dark sunken eyes. 'She's not afraid of Chevo. Why doesn't she say something to him?'

'Chevo doesn't mean anything by it. He's a good dad, Milana, leave Ana be.'

Chevo, Ana's husband, was one of the big cheeses in the busdrivers' syndicate. He was a burly man with a full mane of stiff hair and a heavy jaw. He had a voice like a rumbling engine and great spatulate hands that he used to knock their three sons about. Oscar, the eldest, was slow witted and excessive bullying had riddled him with ticks and stammers. Only in Milana's company did his speech and manner mysteriously improve leading him to the conclusion that Milana was the answer to his shortcomings. To him she was the embodiment of an angel and

his expression usually took on a look of pious adoration in her presence.

Milana's bright eyes flamed with outrage.

'Just because El Chevo is one of the bus drivers who eat your *sopaipillas* he can do no wrong in your eyes. I think he's a lazy thug. I don't like any of those men you hang out with up that hill for that matter.'

'Where are the boys?' asked Letty lightly, she knew it best not to engage when Milana was on one of her crusades. She pushed a strand of dyed red hair off her face, leaving a streak of white flour across her cheek.

'Out back! Doing something to rocks to turn them into doorstops.'

Letty laughed. 'Doorstops? What do we need with those? There's enough cracks in the doors to keep the place well ventilated, never mind these holes which make believe they're windows.'

The sound of the saucepan banging in nails punctuated the ensuing silence. Letty could feel her daughter's dark eyes on her. It made her uncomfortable. Milana was her inspiration and her hope; she'd been told how clever she was by the school principal himself. They had high expectations for her but recently Letty had felt her brooding and distant or restless, like a creature that senses it's trapped.

Eventually Letty straightened and, sweeping the hair off her face again, she met her daughter's quiet scrutiny:

'I don't know what's got into you, girl, but you're up to something *Chica*,' she ventured.

'Everyone's up to something, Mum.' Milana gave her a wry look. It occurred to Letty in that moment that had she opened her heart to Milana and told her the truth about her past, she would have found a strong and intelligent listener in her child. Instead she had chosen to hide it away. Milana, grown up as she was, perceived this concealment and not knowing the reason for it or its nature interpreted it, instinctively, as a breach of trust between them and had become secretive herself.

'What? What are you looking at, Mum?'

‘Can’t I look at my own flesh and blood? That’s something I’ve done right at least.’

‘Don’t go laying that kind of responsibility on me Mum,’ Milana turned on her stomach and laid her cheek on the bed, feeling the soft plush of the thin bedspread.

‘You don’t know what my life will be.’ In that same instant a sudden noise filled the air like a heavy lorry passing, only no lorry could fit down narrow Oleander Alley.

Milana sat suddenly bolt upright. Letty steadied herself. Around them the room shook, the boards creaked and the furniture shuffled to the vibrations of the earth. The light bulb in the centre of the ceiling swayed back and forth as though some invisible elf were playing there. A fallen mug rolled over the floor and loose bricks clattered over corrugated roofs. In the distance car alarms started wailing. They stared at each other in anticipation of the worst. But just as suddenly as it began, the rumbling of the earth, the groaning of the shanty, the noise and the shaking died. The convulsion passed and nature’s fit was over. Only the still swaying bulb testified to the earth tremor that had for a moment threatened to escalate. Letty’s murmured prayer died on her lips as the dread of what might have been, subsided; that this would be a big one, like the 1960’s earthquake that tore through the earth’s crust swallowing whole houses in its wake. Letty moved over to where Milana sat on the edge of the bed and, touched by relief and gratefulness, she stooped down to kiss her daughter. Milana stayed quite still, shocked into silence while Letty smoothed her hair. Then, taking a brush from the upturned crate that was their bedside table, Letty started to brush it gently

‘I thought you were busy, Mum.’ Milana relished the pull of the brush against her scalp and the gentle stroke of her mother’s hand.

‘And so I am.’

‘I wish you never had to work on the hill among all them bus drivers.’

‘*Those* bus drivers,’ Letty corrected. ‘You may be the only one to talk right round here, but one day it may help you. Besides,

Chiquita, those bus drivers eat my *sopaipillas*. I feed them, they feed us with the money they pay, it's an honest living. And I like it up on that hill,' Letty mused. 'Watching the houses being built and the palm trees being planted, great avenues of them. I can see for miles up there, I can see the mountains circling the city like I was on a level with them and at night the city lights twinkle below like the sky had turned upside down and was laid at my feet. You should see it, *Chiquita*.' There was a quality about the way Letty spoke at times; her voice became more lyrical, just as her wild red hair and brash manner belied a finer beauty that few who knew her had the aesthetic appreciation to perceive. The delicacy of her face and hands, the smallness of her wrists or the turn of her fine ankles were lost on the uncultivated eye of the shantytown folk. They accepted Letty unquestioningly as one of their own kind and never noted the significance of what set her apart from them.

Letty went on brushing Milana's thick mane of hair in long even strokes – soothing and hypnotic.

'We used to be friends remember, *Chica*? You told me about the wasteland and the treasures you collected there. You used to tell me stories you made up. I love the world inside your head. Let me in again, girl, don't block me out. It makes me sad.' She spoke as though she were weaving her insinuations through each glossy lock.

Milana stared ahead unblinkingly to stop herself revealing a single tell-tale response. Suddenly Letty prodded her playfully:

'Hey, don't play deaf, *Chica*! Doris saw you.'

A sudden wave of heat coursed through Milana.

'Mum, Doris dishes out school dinners, she sees me every day,' she responded quick-thinkingly.

'Well, you weren't eating school dinners when you knocked on the door of some fancy house in Vitacura last week.'

Milana wheeled round eyes ablaze to check the degree of information that might have been imparted.

'Got you there, girl!' Letty grinned.

'What was Doris doing in Vitacura anyway?'

'Following you *Chiquita*.'

Milana shrugged affecting indifference.

‘They wanted a part time maid,’ she lied.

‘You’re fourteen! You’re too young for that. Try again.’

‘Doris should mind her own business.’

‘You were in there for an hour. Doris worries about you.’

Doris had no cause to worry, with no husband or children to fuss over, only her cakes which everyone agreed were the best around. Still, she had a sad face; her eyes drooped and her lips stopped short of the twenty-past-four angle. Doris, Milana had always thought, looked as though her face had been taken from the Creator’s oven and hung out to dry too soon, causing all the features to run. Even her hairline seemed to have slipped to halfway down her forehead. Maybe gravity had exerted a greater pull on her than others. Doris had said she’d loved a man when she was sixteen and he forty but it hadn’t worked out and now he was dead so she’d saved herself the heartache. Instead, she’d put two nephews through university and now, at fifty, she made cakes and sold them to the *panaderia* on the corner.

‘Doris wouldn’t have to worry about us if you were around more,’ Milana retaliated pointedly. She hugged her knees up under her chin, instantly regretting the cruel dig at her mother. ‘Father Pancho sent me round there for confirmation lessons,’ she suggested trying a new tack. Letty stopped brushing, exasperated.

‘Why won’t you tell me the truth?’

‘You hide stuff from me too, Mum. You don’t give me straight answers. Like where you were born.’

‘Where I was born?’ Letty looked genuinely surprised, ‘Who cares? Who asks stuff like that?’

‘I do. I read books Mum, and the first thing they tell you is where people come from. Then they tell you what’s happened to them and that’s what makes them who they are. I know more about people in books than I know about you. Anyways, if Doris was so busy spying on me you know jolly well where I was.’

Letty sighed and tucked her loose curls back under the scarf tied and knotted round her head like a hair band. She passed the back of her hand over her mouth, a sure sign that thoughts were

churning under her relatively unruffled exterior. Doris hadn't been totally sure but she had gone up and enquired who's house Milana had spent all that time in. The answer had taken her aback. What business could Milana have at *Señora* Lisa and *Don* Victor Cornejo's residence, when they were known to be in Europe somewhere on some foreign posting?

Everyone in the shantytown knew the kind and charitable *Señora* Lisa. Had Milana gone there for advice or money? Was she in trouble? Did she even know they were away? Letty didn't blame her for going to search *Señora* Lisa out. Once Letty herself had passed the big house but she would never have dared ring the bell however much she might have wished to see *Señora* Lisa's kind face again in order to confide her doubts and concerns about Milana. Letty bit her lip as she remembered *Señora* Lisa's parting words; 'Talk to Milana, trust her.' Three years on, that wise advice remained unheeded. Letty sat down her wide eyes cocooning Milana in the sudden gentleness of regret, her face reflecting all kinds of lights from within. Milana let her hands be taken in the warmth of her mother's. And suddenly it felt as though some invisible defensive shield between them was melting into nothing.

'*Señora* Lisa was like my guardian angel. So many times I've wanted to see her again. If you went to find her, you're braver than I am. I never dared.' Letty stroked Milana's cheek gently and leaning forwards kissed her suddenly.

'She gave so much, I felt I couldn't ask for more. You see she was never like those other women who come to do their five minutes of charity in the shantytown to make themselves feel good. She really cared about each one of us.' Lurching from confidence to confidence, Letty went on in her effort to deepen the rare moment of intimacy.

Milana traced her fingertips over her mother's slender hand.

'Why did she care about us?' she almost whispered, 'I mean, she must have had a reason. I don't believe people do stuff for no reason. She didn't need to come here. And she didn't come with a friend like the other ladies do, like they're trying to prove a point to each other, all self-important and busy. She came alone

and kind of loved us.’ Milana lifted her eyes and watched her mother who stared down unusually quiet.

‘Mum?’ she urged. Letty looked up with a self-conscious smile:

‘You know,’ she confessed, ‘she told me once that she’d lost almost everything – even her will to live – and that she’d been rescued from the gutter and found hope again.’ Letty stood up and, stepping towards the window, she fiddled with the edge of the plastic there. ‘She gave us belief in ourselves, sort of bonded us together, me, Doris, Iris, Ana and Nilda.’ Letty paused, as though she had momentarily struggled to overcome some inner conflict, then turned towards Milana: ‘She sort of saved me.’

Letty picked up an elastic band off the floor and held it out for Milana to tie her hair back.

‘Like I say, I don’t blame you going to look for her *Chiquita*, I just don’t understand what you found there, seeing as how *Señora* Lisa went away to Europe these three years gone. We would have known if she was back. She’d have come to say Hi.’

Milana recoiled from the faintly mournful note she detected in the last sentence. It annoyed her. She loved her mother’s strength and devil-may-care manner; it unsettled her to recognise her pain.

‘You’re not going to tell me what you were doing there, are you?’ Letty sighed and found herself curiously resigned to not knowing.

‘We both have secrets Mum, right?’

Letty caught her breath, but she hid the hurt with a little laugh, recognising she had only herself to blame.

‘Get on with you girl,’ she quipped, pushing her playfully off the bed.

‘We’ve got work to do.’

Milana slipped off the bed, but from the door she looked back at her mother and for a brief moment allowed herself to see the soulful woman that lived under the usual bravado. She ran back and hugged her, pressing her face against her mother’s cheek.

‘Saved you from what Mum? What did *Señora* Lisa save you from?’

She felt Letty take a deep breath.

‘A black hole. But nothing is ever that bad for long.’ She paused before admitting, ‘I’d be dead if she hadn’t turned up.’ Letty cupped Milana’s face in her hands to prolong the brief moment of tenderness. ‘And happiness comes when you least expect it,’ she whispered smiling.

Letty’s eyes were as large as olives, and the same colour, set wide apart under long, dark lashes. Often when she broke into her trademark smile they remained distant as though they were observing an altogether different reality to the one before them. This time they rested on Milana filling her with love.

‘Why did you trust her?’ Milana whispered reaching for the enigma behind Letty’s smile.

‘Who? *Señora* Lisa? I don’t know, sometimes you just embrace what God sends you.’

‘How did you know He sent her, Mum?’

‘I just did. You know goodness, you just feel it in your heart, Milana, ‘cause it brings you peace.’

Through the grubby plastic sheet of window, Letty watched Milana disappear down the street to help the other women as she’d promised. Surprised by an inexplicable pressure on her chest, Letty glanced down and found her hand pressed there as if holding down something that had awakened and trembled with new life. It was as though the abortive earthquake had dislodged a rock that for years had restricted the flow of emotion to her heart.