

SUE WOOLFE

*To Kill or to Hit*

(from a work in progress)

Molly's curtains were exactly that pattern, full-blown pink and gold roses, falling in ripples down the length of her windows, hiding the river until she threw them apart to show how gleaming with light the river was, the way I imagined that she unveiled her own voluptuous amber body to delight my father. The curtains brought back that memory of shame I'd had as a child, standing on one leg, visiting with my father, hoping to be offered lemonade, believing I shouldn't look at her curtains because they were like her skirt and blouse, temporarily and almost transparently concealing her beauty.

I didn't want to be caught gazing, especially by you, I was painfully self-conscious that you'd imagine I was dreaming of being like Molly, dreaming of you touching my slippery body. The day of my twelfth birthday when Molly had baked me a cake and insisted I blow out my candles, it had become unbearable to walk into your house with a confident smile, to walk into the living room past you without trembling, to look at you all for the flames that leapt up in my face, in my body for you. I thought my lust – I had no word for it then, except evil – had been visited on me because I'd always wanted to be with you against your will, because I'd watched my father and Molly so closely, because I half-knew far more about sex than I should, while I knew nothing at all. For a month after blowing out those candles, I refused to visit, preferring to endure the mournful loneliness of being away from you, for I feared everyone: my father, Molly,

but most of all you sensing the heat of those flames inside me. No one spoke then of how passionately a young girl burns.

My only comfort through that month when I said no to Molly's repeated, bewildered invitations, was that one day you and I would grow up and be together, lie together, in our own little house, our own tumbled bed, the sheets hot with our love. I'd be like Molly, oh, I'd learned from her a thousand lessons in flirtation and seduction, and you'd do whatever my father did to her. I was scarcely able to sleep for imagining what we'd do through the long river nights.

I only saw you once more before you left.

And I'm still dreaming of you, Ian, touching my breasts, holding their weight in your hands, weighing them. My Ian. I'm twelve years old and waiting for us to grow up.

Now as I gazed at the chintz curtains, I told myself they were only a pattern printed on a fabric, like any other, and Molly was long gone, my father was gone, my mother was gone, and their lust and sadness were ashes in the grey ground.

But Adrian had chosen them. Adrian chose his mother's curtains. He must be my Ian.

That's why it took me more than a little while to notice the sound. It'd been on the edge of my consciousness, a noise that didn't seem to come from inside Gillian's house, for her house had that listening silence that constantly lived-in houses have when you're in them but all alone, as if they were patiently waiting for their real residents to come back to argue and sing and cook and sleep and make love. Gillian must've left already, either on a defiant morning walk on her own despite the warning about rape, or she'd been called to emergency duty at the clinic. The noise was growing, it was like a muttering, restless audience in a large theatre, with people coming in and greeting some and pushing past others to find their seats. Slowly I registered that it was coming from

outside, from the dusty red street beyond the small front yard with its cyclone fencing festooned like all the others with old newspapers and ice-cream wrappings. Then I saw shadows move along the curtains, the shadows of many people, both big and small, moving between the swellings and troughs of Molly's chintz, their bodies distending through the fabric's swelling and shrinking in the valleys of swirling roses, and their profiled faces too, their noses extending and dwindling, and there was someone's hand pointing a direction, becoming ghostly in its length like one of their magic spirits, and then suddenly short, just an ordinary human hand again.

In your reckoning, on your jetty, perhaps I am only a stick figure, as insubstantial as the shifting shadows in the curtains. You wouldn't even remember me.

I lifted the hem of the curtain, so it made a v-shape against the glass. The air was full of red dust, as if there'd been a dust storm but there was no sound of wind, and leaves of the tree opposite pointed towards the ground, disconsolate in the sun. The dust wasn't from a movement of air, but from the tramping of many bare feet. I could see through the red mist to as far as the street corner beyond the clinic, where the street turned and did a dogleg towards the airstrip. All along its length were men, women and children, family groups holding hands, old people as thin as sticks, occasionally a group of young men with American-style back-the-front baseball caps like they saw on the occasional TV sets in their backyards, young girls holding hands, but all quietly heading towards the airstrip.

They might be going to a ceremony, I thought. There might be singing. The women might leave the men and go somewhere hidden. I might find my old dying singer at last.

I pulled on clothes and threw open the front door. No one stopped to look at me, but opposite, at my house, a black man stood in the doorway. It was Boney. He wasn't moving, just holding the door open and gazing after the throng. I remembered my recorder, and went back to grab it.

At the clinic, Gillian ran past, scarcely noticing me. Behind her strode Nick in his brown turban, his loose trouser legs rippling. I heard Sister in the emergency room.

“Let me talk to them. I'll show them what's what.”

Dr Lydia's cultured tones argued: “I don't think you ought –”

But she was drowned by Sister's rising voice, obviously shouting at someone on the phone.

“We'll make a formal complaint about you if you don't come, we'll personally see you all sacked.”

The phone slammed down.

Then I heard Dr Lydia say: “Go home and make a cup of tea. It might be half an hour before the plane. You fly with him.”

I was wondering, in amazement, if the atmosphere in the clinic had got so inflamed that Dr Lydia had taken to telling Sister to go home and make a cup of tea. I dared to peep. No – I was wrong. There was a family of four or five people, heads bowed, resolute, refusing.

“You get results if you talk their lingo,” Sister told her, with a smile of superiority in her voice.

Doctor Lydia fell silent, and I waited, surprised, but Sister shouted, unadorned by any sentence, let alone any grammar, the phrase in Djerimanga: “go home”.

She not only barked it as an order, but she pronounced it as if they were English words that she'd picked up somewhere, not with their accent, so perhaps to them it didn't seem their words at all, just another strange, indecipherable English sound that white people made. I wondered if whoever had taught her the words had explained their meaning: *go back to camp*. She wouldn't like to know she'd said that, it would lower the standards she'd like them to have.

But her order had no effect.

"Half an hour," I heard her shout. I could imagine her lifting her plump freckled arm and showing them her watch, a large Sisterly one with fluorescent green numerals. In all the houses I'd glimpsed inside, no one had a clock on the wall, and certainly no one wore a watch on their wrist.

"Gotta match words with action," said Sister to Dr Lydia, and, so saying, I heard a shuffling.

"No – no – really – you shouldn't –" I heard Dr Lydia, over the noises.

"Get out of the way, useless," said Sister.

She opened the street door and pushed the family out, actually bringing up her substantial bulk against the nearest woman – who I now saw was Dawnie, Skeleton's pretty wife – so she had to move in the direction Sister wanted, and her daughter and sisters had to move with her or fall over, rather like the way Molly taught me to move errant chickens or ducklings back to their nesting mother.

"This is unseemly!" Dr Lydia called out.

"Gets results!" Sister countered, rather breathlessly, and she blocked the doorway to stop them coming back in. Out the window, I saw the family bowed, defeated, walking away. I felt ashamed, wishing I'd dared to intervene and pronounce "go home" for her in a way closer to what it should be. Next time, I'd intervene, I promised myself.

“What’s happening?” I asked Gillian when she dashed by.

“Skeleton’s had trouble with his heart. It might be his last day,” she whispered to me, and then ran for the clanging phone, but Dr Lydia had grabbed it first.

I heard her say, “Thank you.” Then, presumably to Sister, but with ice in her voice: “Congratulations.”

And Sister’s: “It’s all in the way you handle people.”

Then Dr Lydia’s voice to Gillian: “Nurse, the Flying Service is diverting. They’re on their way. Hurry with those towels. Nurse Nick, you drive Skeleton out to the airstrip, but pick up his wife and family first. Then come back for us.”

Gillian hurried with the towels, and Nick ran for the troopie, which had been parked outside his house, which adjoined the clinic. The troopie’s door banged and he roared off for Skeleton’s wife.

I decided now wasn’t the time to look for the singer.

Almost immediately the troopie was roaring back into the clinic driveway, and Nick jumped out and ran inside. Dawnie was in the back, along with her sister. I was surprised to see Nick’s children in the cabin. They were jumping on the passenger seat and sliding down its back as if it was a slippery dip, the boy’s buttoned up shirt and long trousers stretched taut and threatening to pop its buttons as he slid, the girl’s full gathered skirt ballooning behind her like a bride’s veil.

They saw me and clutched at the open window pane.

“We’re going to see the doctor’s little plane,” the girl called out to me.

I went over to them, putting my fingers on my lips.

“You’d better stay here with me,” I said. “What’s going on is very serious. People are very sad.”

“No,” said the boy, grabbing onto the door handle and holding onto it, so I couldn’t have opened it without a struggle. “We haven’t been out of the house for days and this is fun!”

“You must be silent then,” I said to them, my finger on my lips. “The man who’s going off on the plane is very sick. He’s the leader here. He’s –” I wanted to make an impression on the child, “he’s like the king here. Everyone is worried.”

The boy was not impressed.

“But we’ve only seen big jets,” he said. “We want to see a little plane.”

“A little plane, a little plane,” sang his sister, tobogganing down the seat again. “We’ve only seen big jets.”

Behind me was the screech of the trolley, with Sister and Gillian wheeling it out and Dr Lydia hovering uselessly. Skeleton was by then only a long thin shape raising a checked hospital blanket into a long narrow mound. His face was covered with an oxygen mask.

The children saw my anxiety and slid down to hide on the cabin floor as Sister bustled to the back of the troopie with the trolley and loaded it. Nick ran around to the driver’s seat, slammed the door and roared off. I joined Gillian as she watched them leave.

“He’s been a grand old man,” she said. “Everyone’s gone to farewell him. Everyone’s in grief.”

“I hope Nick’s kids stay quiet,” I said.

“Nick’s kids?” asked Gillian, looking around. “Where are they?”

I told her.

“Why didn’t I see them?” she asked.

“They hid when you came out.”

“Sister will be furious with Nick,” said Gillian. “She’s such a stickler for the rules. But if Skeleton survives, it’ll be due to her. She made that plane divert. No one gets the better of Sister.”

She turned away.

“I’d better go and clean up before they get back, or I’ll have her wrath on me as well.”

I decided to sit on one of the benches outside the clinic. There was always something to watch in this landscape. In the morning sun an ant crossing a sandy track was less visible than its long-legged shadow. Even the tiny pebbles had long legs. And later that day, the afternoon sun would change the shape of the distant hills, the way shadows carved other shadows out of the hills with the sunset, so the hills became a different shape. Light ruled this landscape and carved out its shapes.

I heard the plane before I saw it, a vast silver bird against the searing blue, tiny body and all wings, whining its half circle overhead and then falling into no sound as it came in to land out of my sight. Then the desert took over, insinuating itself, making everything belong to it, the way the desert could, the rubbish, the houses, the abandoned hide curing sheds, the trees, the boulders, the people, in a way that city people who rule their landscape would never know. Out here everything always became red silence; the bench I was sitting on with its sun-hardened blobs of spilt food, my recorder still in my hands, me, anyone who sat here – we all surrendered to the desert’s insistence, so it could do whatever it liked with us.

So deeply immersed was I in gazing at the light that I scarcely registered a dark figure coming down the street, emerging from my house, carrying something by his side. The dust from people’s feet hung still in the air like red mist on that breathless day, so he was almost level with the clinic before I made out that it was Boney, striding with



the nulla nulla that had rested beside my front door, the weapon Dora's family had made to defend themselves against Thatcher.

I wondered why Boney hadn't gone to the airstrip to farewell his brother, but I forgot that as I noticed how purposefully he held the nulla nulla. He was still an athletic man despite his age; he was upright, muscular, slender like his brother Skeleton, like all the older men there, the men who'd had desert childhoods away from white people's shops. From a distance, he could still be taken for a young man living in the bush. Though I knew that in his youth he'd hunted big animals with a gun, I imagined that a nulla nulla would have always been in reach to finish off a kill.

He stopped abruptly in front of the clinic, on the incongruously emerald patch of grass that one of the Aboriginal women, Mandy, hosed so often it'd become like a square of green carpet on a red floor. He was gazing down the road towards the airport, the nulla nulla across his body, and there was something about the tension in his stance that alarmed me. He was in mourning, yet his stance seemed angry, not sad. I wanted to distract him, though from what, I wasn't sure. I wanted to make the morning ordinary, I was always doing that as a child, cheering up my dressing-gowned mother as my father puttered his boat away from her, heading towards the amber Molly.

I fossicked in my mind for something to call out to him.

*How are you managing in my house?* I could call. Or, *Have you found enough food in the fridge?* Or, *Have you heard from Adrian?* People there were always asking the whereabouts of Adrian. But calling out to Boney seemed like impertinence, something only a crass white woman would do, something too domestic and familiar when our only connection was that I'd cooked him bacon and eggs. I couldn't even ask after his health in a language with no small talk. Besides, it wasn't the moment for white people's chatter. He might not even remember who I was. Perhaps white women looked

all the same to him. I considered going inside the clinic and asking Gillian's opinion, but I stayed sitting on the wooden slatted bench, gagged as usual by indecision, irresolute and frightened, though of what I wasn't sure.

People were beginning to drift back down the street, in twos and threes and sometimes in larger groups, still subdued, filing into their houses. There were a few glances in Boney's direction, at that strong old man unexpectedly holding a nulla nulla, but no one waved to him or called to him and he didn't acknowledge anyone's presence. It must have been very different for him once, I mused, when he and Skeleton were young, when they were both the leaders. I wondered what twists and turns of life had caused him to be standing on Mandy's square of toy grass while the whole settlement silently farewelled their elder, his brother.

A man opposite the clinic came out to make a cooking fire in a front yard, glanced at him and, bent-headed, went back inside. Someone came to a doorway to strum on a guitar, then fell silent, and a group of young men looked over at Boney, but talked quietly to each other near the uplifted bonnet of a battered car. One of them slipped into the driver's seat and tried the ignition. The noise startled the air. The man quickly turned the motor off as if he'd shouted in a church. Later I understood that the men were respecting his rage, for Boney still stood unwavering with his nulla nulla as if he was waiting, every muscle tensed, upon the stray movements of an unaware animal.

Then the troopie turned the corner, brown-turbaned Nick driving with his children still in the front cabin, in sight now but sitting quietly. He pulled up and Dr Lydia pushed open the back door to get out, I could just see her well-shod foot as she was about to step down, when Boney moved at last, running now. He ran around to the driver's door, shouting, wielding his nulla nulla from waist-height like a cricketer with a

bat, but this wasn't play, the bat was menacing. His face was that of a hunter. He yanked open Nick's door.

"I kill you, I kill you," he shouted in English.

Nick didn't get out. He yelled: "Don't you touch my kids." He lunged across the children, to the passenger door on the side away from Boney, grabbed the screaming children as if they were already lifeless dolls, threw open the door and pushed them out onto the roadside, shouting to them in Hindi. The children tumbled into the dust, the boy righted himself and without looking back at his frantic father still in the car, grabbed his sister's hand and they both raced up the street, screaming for their mother, the girl's dress flying, the boy's heels almost kicking his little bottom. Nick followed them out, on their side, the side away from Boney. He was then facing Boney, the cabin between them. Nick's hands were in the air to show that he wasn't prepared to fight.

"I kill you," shouted Boney.

Dr Lydia stood on the road, helpless, silenced, her face a picture of elegant horror. Then Sister, out of the troopie and standing in the road, arms folded, boomed:

"Boney!"

But Boney, stalking with his nulla nulla halfway around the back of the troopie towards the retreating Nick, ignored her.

"He's a nurse, Boney," roared Sister. "You will not kill one of my nurses."

"Our nurses," corrected Dr Lydia in her cool, quiet voice.

"Get inside!" Sister exploded in her direction, and Dr Lydia obeyed instantly, gratefully.

But Sister, despite her uniform and her little brooch that claimed kinship, was just a white woman after all, and Boney continued his menacing walk towards Nick, who backed away, arms still raised above his head, stepping closer and closer towards where

I sat, unmoving. Although I was behind Nick I could see the strain of his body. Sweat was pouring down his back, staining his shirt. We heard his children screaming in the arms of his wife, as she watched from the road outside her house.

“You are not going to kill him,” roared Sister.

Boney, still stalking his prey, paused long enough to shout again, not to Sister but to Nick:

“I kill you.”

He stalked his prey and Nick retreated.

Sister boomed: “That nurse looked after your brother.”

Unheeding, he advanced on Nick.

“I kill you,” he shouted at Nick.

“If you kill him, he can’t nurse you any more,” shouted Sister.

Boney’s steps paused, just momentarily, and his head jerked over his shoulder to the silly fat woman.

“I kill him,” shouted Boney that time to her, but also to the desert, to the silence. “I not kill him dead.”

Understanding came to me. This time I would speak, I’d promised myself I would. I jumped up, though no one noticed my sudden movement, and edged closer to Sister.

“He doesn’t mean it,” I shouted.

No one noticed a shout from another silly white woman.

Nick, on the other hand, hadn’t glanced at Sister, hadn’t slowed down, and suddenly he had gained the door of the clinic, which was swung open by Gillian, who’d been inside watching every moment. Boney hadn’t calculated on this. Nick ducked inside, and Gillian banged the door shut after him and locked it.

Boney paused.

Sister registered Nick's escape and turned back to Boney.

"You should be ashamed," she roared.

Boney's powerful body almost collapsed, after all that he'd demanded of it, after all the bravado of a young man. He leaned on his *nulla nulla* as if it was a walking stick, panting, remembering that after all, he was an old man.

"You shame," he cried. "You white shame. You shame! Shame to you!"

"Me?" roared Sister. "I'm the Sister here. I say what goes on here. I diverted the plane to save your brother. I saved your brother!"

"You shame," cried Boney, recovering a little in his anguish, now struggling to stand erect and upright.

"What have I got to be ashamed of?" shouted Sister.

"You take kids, say bye bye to my brother. Here!"

He banged the troopie door with his *nulla nulla*.

"Kids. Kids *here*."

The insistence was unmistakable. He was banging the cabin seat through the still open door. "*Here*."

Sister, despite thirty years in the bush, foolishly imagined that Boney's rage was something like hers. Or perhaps it was because she'd spent thirty years making people in her own image. She breathed out, she beamed that, despite it all, this black man had noticed her white rules, had respected them.

"Yes, it was wrong. Absolutely wrong. Nick broke the rules," she said still loudly but in conciliatory tones, so that everyone could hear. "Kids aren't allowed to ride in the troopie when it's an ambulance, you'd know that and you're right. No kids in the ambulance. I'd already reprimanded him and I'll do it again. No kids in the ambulance."

"No," shouted Boney.

He struggled with the impossible white language, with these impossible and uncomprehending white people.

“Skeleton my brother. We elders –” he pointed to the sky, surely to the plane now winging its way to the hospital. “My brother and me, elders. My brother, dead. You take kids to plane *here* –” He banged the door again. “You don’t take me.”

It was as if the air was stilled. As if the whole community bowed its head at his shame. He was spent. He turned, and limped up the red street to my house, past the group of young men who’d been watching respectfully, past the dogs, past the open doors. Everyone looked down, no one peeped out, and no one watched his retreating back as he stumbled with the *nulla nulla*. Not even the dogs called to each other. Even the desert understood him.

But Sister was not one to be gripped by awe. She banged loudly on the locked clinic door.

“Nick! Come out this second and park this troopie where it’s supposed to be!” She yelled. “Right now. Come out!”

I found my legs shaking and went back to sit on the bench.

After a pause it was Gillian who emerged, not Nick. She didn’t look at me, and she didn’t look at Sister. She walked past us both, intent only on re-parking a troopie that was in the wrong spot. She didn’t acknowledge Sister and, for once, Sister decided not to notice.

I went back to Gillian’s house, and, because we had electricity, made lunch carefully, roasting chicken legs from the shop, and steaming frozen spinach. But when Gillian came home, she merely toyed with the food.

She turned on the TV, although there were only talk shows.

“Sister’s demanded Adrian come back from town,” she said. “Not that it affects you.”

We looked at the TV because it was easier than talking.

Sister knocked on the door. She refused to come in when she saw I was there.

“Adrian’s granted us a plane into Alice Springs. We’ll leave mid-afternoon, so we get to Alice in the light.” She saw me listening. “This is how you teach these people. Leave them, let them think about it. I’ve contacted Adrian and he agrees.”

“Can we stay at a hotel with a swimming pool?” asked Gillian.

“Of course. Pack your bikini.”

“But what if there’s an accident here?” asked Gillian.

Sister was roused to anger.

“People have to learn not to be violent. Nick could’ve been killed!”

“No clinic because of one man?” I asked.

“There are many men here. You saw them standing around. Not one of them moved to defend Nick. So we’re showing them. It’s solidarity.”

“They mightn’t have read their Karl Marx,” I dared.

I was rewarded with a quick but wry smile from Gillian behind Sister’s back.

“Their what?”

Why was I such a coward in front of this woman? When I argued with her, my voice clotted, even my brain almost clotted in terror.

I said, trying desperately not to sound as if I learned it in my one week’s reading: “Boney said ‘kill’ and then said he didn’t mean ‘kill dead’. There are lots of words for ‘hit’.”

She was so large and trenchant and vehement. But I struggled on, my voice thick with daring:

“What I’m trying to say is, if English isn’t your first language, maybe your fourth or fifth, which you only use on official occasions, and you’ve been lying in wait for a psychopath, while your brother, the elder of the community, is dying, maybe in all that turmoil, you’d get your English confused.”

She glared at me.

“What’s confusing about threatening murder?”

“What I’m trying to say is, maybe he was threatening just to hit Nick. And he got his English mixed.”

She was one to recover fast.

“He was going to *hit* Nick? He was going to hit one of my staff? So you’re telling me that my staff have to put up with being hit? I haven’t time for this nonsense.” She sniffed. “Go back to your books.”

She turned away.

“Gillian, come back to the clinic and help close it down.”