

## University of Southern Queensland

### Nike Sulway

### Paper boats

Biographical note:

Dr Nike Sulway is a writer and academic. She is the author of several novels, including *Rupetta*, which – in 2014 – was the first work by an Australian writer to win the James Tiptree, Jr Award. The award, founded in 1991 by Pat Murphy and Karen Joy Fowler, is an annual award for a work of ‘science fiction or fantasy that expands or explores our understanding of gender’. Her new novel, *Dying in the First Person*, will be published through Transit Lounge in 2016. She teaches creative writing at the University of Southern Queensland.

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At the end of winter, Linda hired a car and drove to the town in northern India where she planned to stay for three months, perhaps longer. After that, she could go home, or move on. There was nothing pulling her forwards; nothing pulling her backwards. Only her daughter, an anchor, holding her exactly where she was.

She had travelled before; by herself and with her husband and even, once, with her husband and their daughter. A holiday in Bali during which they had hired a beachfront bungalow and spent their days reading, listening to music, eating and cycling.

Bella had been small then. Barely two years old. Her husband had cycled with her on his lap to a temple complex where a monkey had sat next to their daughter while they were eating. They had taken a photograph in which Bella's plump, sun-warmed face was creased with concern. Her empty hands, which she was holding out to her father, were shiny and sticky, with small blobs of fruit mashed between her fingers. And there was the monkey beside her, knees to its chin, its black-fingered hands neatly holding the stolen banana.

She wondered where the photograph was now; her husband must have it. It seemed only fair: she had Bella, and he had the photographs of Bella.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to come to India. People were suspicious of her in a way they had never been when she travelled alone, or with her husband. They peered at the empty space beside or behind her, where her husband must – it seemed to them – be going to appear. If they were polite they didn't ask where he was. But many of them were not polite.

Lying would have been easier than telling the truth, but she was determined to live honestly, in a way she hadn't felt able to live when she was married.

'I'm divorced,' she said.

Men and women, cabdrivers and shopkeepers and waiters, shook their heads. They opened their hands and shrugged.

'That is too bad,' they said. Or, 'I am very sorry.'

She was not an unattractive woman, and Bella was pretty, with big eyes, long eyelashes and a full, pink mouth. But after she told people she was divorced, they were not interested in getting to know either of them. They served her tea, or drove her to where she needed to go, and then turned away. This is what she'd expected, what she'd wanted, but at first it was disconcerting to be nobody, and nothing.

She had booked a room in a guesthouse, hoping for something in a state of genteel decline she could tell stories about when she eventually went home. According to the website, the building had once belonged to a maharajah. The photographs showed lotus flowers in a courtyard pond; bedrooms with heavy, carved furniture; a dining room with white tablecloths and silver cutlery.

The bell on the front counter didn't appear to be working, but shortly a woman a few years older than herself – a white American wearing a pink sari – came and showed them to their room. The woman cooed over Bella, patting her head as if she was an agreeable pet. When they reached the room the American woman – Kate – looked

around at it disapprovingly, especially at the little bathroom, as though she had never seen it before. She told Linda what time to come down for dinner and then left, closing the door firmly behind her.

There had been no other cars in the parking area, no people lingering in the reception area. On the second floor, as they had walked along the tiled corridor, all the other doors had been closed. Linda sat Bella on the end of the bed. Somewhere, perhaps outside the door-length shutters on the opposite side of the room, she could hear a radio. Bella slid onto the floor and began taking off her shoes.

Linda opened the shutters. One of them was not properly attached to the wall at the top and the paint on the outside of the shutter was flaking away. Linda imagined herself fixing the hinge before she left, without saying anything to her hosts. A small, unobserved kindness.

A narrow, tiled verandah ran around the inside of the second floor. A little further along, a man was sitting in a chair reading a newspaper. Beside him was a portable table, on which sat a radio and a jug of water.

Some of the shuttered doors to the other rooms were open, and inside the rooms she could see unmade beds, suits or dresses on coat hangers. Through one window she could see a rumpled bed and a woman's bare legs.

She filled the basin in the bathroom with water and washed both her own and Bella's face, hands and feet. Then they went for a walk.

This would be the first of many walks, so she felt no pressure to remember everything, though she looked at it all with a sense of impending permanence. This is the shop where I will buy the paper each day, she thought. This is the beggar I will pass on my walk each afternoon. This is the tree under which I will drink tea. Sitting in one of the folding metal chairs, day after day, watching the town and its people go about their business.

She looked at each face they passed, wondering which of them would become familiar to her, which would become acquaintances. She did not imagine making friends. That is not why she'd come.

Many of the houses were behind walls, over which treetops extended. She did not know the names of the trees, but she imagined they had exotic names. In the spring or summer they would yield colourful fruits and flowers. Buddha had sat under a Bodhi tree, but she couldn't call up in her mind a picture of a Bodhi tree. Whenever she tried, the tree she imagined was a cross between an elm and a fig, with buttress roots and a shaggy, dense canopy of leaves.

Everything was just as she'd expected. Even the river, which was wide and brown, with stone steps leading down to the water. Men and women squatted there, washing their clothes. A group of boys were swinging from a rope into the water. Their long, thin legs and chests and arms glistened as they swung up towards the fading light. And then let go of the rope and arced into the water.

Surely her money would go further here than at home. She could buy a house with a walled garden. Bella would learn to speak the local dialect, and would go to school

with the local children. Once a year, perhaps more often, they would fly back to Australia so that Bella could see her father. Or he would come here. He would stay in the guesthouse where they were staying now. In the evenings, he would come to their house for dinner. She would serve exotic meals in the walled garden, and tell amusing stories about her early days in the village.

She could set up her own practice, or join a local one. The pay might not be what it was at home, but the cost of living would be lower. She would learn about local health issues, write papers for medical journals, make a difference to the lives of the people who lived in this town, and to the rural poor, too. She could make something small but significant of herself, of her life.

Back at the guesthouse, the dining room was open. A statue of the elephant-headed goddess – on wheels – held back one of the doors. The doors were heavy, dark timber polished to a high gleam, with brass handles. They did not look like an original part of the building: there was a two-inch gap between the top of the doors and the doorframe.

There were about ten small tables in the dining room. The radio-man was there, but he didn't look up as they entered. A woman was sitting by a table at the window with another man, and Linda wondered if hers were the bare legs she'd seen stretched across the sheets in a way that had suggested her whole body was naked.

Four businessmen came in, smiling at each other, and laughing deep, confident laughs. They brought a sense of liveliness to the room, pouring water into their glasses, pulling napkins over their laps and rearranging the cutlery at their places.

Linda ushered Bella towards a table near a window, with a view of the mountains. She'd settled Bella into her seat and was just taking her own when Kate emerged from the kitchen. She'd changed into American clothes, and was wearing an apron with the guesthouse's silhouette printed on it, a little crookedly. She counted the occupied tables, then disappeared again. The doors to the kitchen were like the ones Linda remembered from the restaurant scenes in *Sesame Street*. They swung back and forth after someone passed through them, and had porthole windows. Kate returned with menus, and went around placing jugs of iced water on the tables where people were sitting.

When she reached Linda and Bella, she asked if they would like company for dinner.

For a moment, disorientated, Linda wondered if this was a service offered by some establishments in India. She glanced across at the woman with the bare legs, and the man opposite her. The guesthouse's website had claimed that it was a welcoming place. *Friendly staff*, the site had said. *Family business*.

'It's just we've got an older gentleman staying alone. A retired fellow. He's from your country.'

'Oh,' Linda said. 'I see.'

'He'll be down in a minute. I'll bring him over, shall I?'

When the older man came in he was halfway across the room before he noticed Linda and Bella. He hesitated in a way that made Linda think that they were sitting at his table. Kate rushed over and led him to them.

The man's name was Michael Miller. 'But you can call me Dutchy,' he said, winking at Bella.

'Yes, Mr Miller,' she said.

Kate took their orders and hurried away. The swing doors clapped against each other. Linda wondered where the name Dutchy had come from, but she didn't ask. 'Have you been staying here long?' she said.

'Reckon so. About two years now. Better than any retirement home, I tell ya.'

He nodded towards the men in suits, who were drinking beers, their jackets hanging off the backs of their chairs, their white shirtsleeves rolled up to their elbows.

'They work for a construction company, those blokes, overseeing the building of the new shopping centre. They stay here a couple of days each week.'

Mr Miller was smaller than Linda had at first thought. His wrists were fine-boned and his fingers long and uncalloused. He poured water into all their glasses and then clinked glasses with Bella. *Cheers!* There was a heat-rash creeping up his throat, just inside the collar of his shirt, but otherwise his skin was healthy and only faintly lined. Like a piece of paper that has been crushed and then ironed.

Kate brought everyone their food. Linda began to wonder if she was the only member of staff. Through the swing doors, she occasionally glimpsed a cook, wearing checkered pants and a white shirt, but he was a local person. His face – despite the steam and heat of the kitchen – was serene and beautiful. His black hair was thick. Soft curls peeked out from beneath his starched white chef's hat.

After Linda's last attempt to call her husband after the divorce, she'd cycled home from the clinic where she was working. The cycle path took her along the river and under the bridge. She knew she had to pick up Bella from day-care, and buy something to cook for dinner. There was a leek, goats' cheese, and some tomatoes in the fridge, as well as half a bottle of cheap Chardonnay. She would have to get money out of the ATM before she went to the market, because the market did not have EFTPOS.

She found herself having to speak to herself about what she was doing like this. Not aloud – she wasn't crazy – but inside her head. The instructions she gave herself were in third person, and she found them difficult to follow. The middles of them kept falling away, like collapsing bridges.

When she got home, she pulled the landline out of the wall. She wanted to hear his voice, but she wanted even more for him to experience what it was like to have her not answer the phone. She took off her shoes and her shirt and opened a window. She poured herself a glass of wine and sat, for an hour, with no lights on and no music playing, with the apartment arranged around her almost exactly as it was when she

was not there. After an hour, she looked out the window. There was the moon, and the city's skyline. Everything just as it should be. Water had pooled on the table around her wineglass. She was standing at the sink, tearing off sheets of paper towel, when she remembered that she hadn't picked up Bella.

She raced down through the building and retrieved her bicycle. She called the centre first, and then her husband. Nobody answered. She thought about calling the police, to report herself. The relief she felt at the thought of being arrested, of being gaoled, was so complete it pricked her to tears. She would not have to remind herself where to be anymore, or what to do. She would not be responsible for keeping herself, or anyone else, alive.

She didn't think about committing suicide any more. She was always careful not to notice how easy it would be to bring home what she would need from work. Instead, she focused on what would happen to her body afterwards. How it would look. How it would feel in the hands of the doctor performing the post-mortem.

The day-care centre was closed: all the lights off and the gate locked. She should have plugged the phone back into the wall and checked her messages before she left the apartment. She cycled over to her husband's house. Her thighs were starting to ping. Her husband had painted the front door. It was the same colour it had always been, but the paint was fresh. She could hear Bella laughing as she came up the path to the house. She couldn't knock. The instruction for doing so wouldn't travel through her body to her arms, her fists. She stood in front of the closed door and waited. Eventually, she reasoned, he would have to open it.

Someone would have to come, and open the goddamn door.

She woke up too early, after a restless night. Bella was sleeping diagonally across the bed. She kissed Bella's hot cheek and brushed the sweaty curls back from her forehead. She put a pink scarf over the lamp and went onto the verandah, leaving the door ajar. She needed to get some air. She felt as if she was suffocating. As if she was being sealed inside a clear plastic bag.

She'd met her husband in a health food shop. She'd thought this was a good sign, but of what she could no longer remember. She had told her therapist about their meeting in great detail, but neither of them had been able to make anything of it. It was like telling a long, detailed joke for which she didn't know the punchline.

She went downstairs and through the courtyard in bare feet. The lights were on in the kitchen. The elephant-headed goddess had been rolled across to hold one of the kitchen doors open, and a tall fan was set up, turning its silver head left and right, blowing air in through the open doorway. Kate was sitting on a kitchen bench, one knee tucked under her chin, smoking a cigarette. The man with the dark hair was preparing food. Linda thought about going in to speak with them, but she couldn't think of a reason to do so.

The man came and stood in front of Kate, between her knees. He put a morsel of food in her mouth. After she'd swallowed, she inhaled on her cigarette and then blew a plume of smoke into his face.

It was late afternoon. Linda was lying in the shade with a book, and Bella was floating paper boats between the lotus flowers in the pond. Kate came through with a basket full of white tablecloths. She smiled when she saw them, and stopped, shifting the basket onto her hip.

'I'm going to the market after this,' she said. 'Would you like to join me?'

Linda put her finger on the page, as though she really had been reading and needed to keep her place.

'The market?'

'You'll love it. And it's not far: an easy walk. No need to change.'

'Oh,' Linda said. 'Ok.'

Linda went up to her room and collected her bag, and sunhats for herself and Bella, and then all three of them set off towards the market.

The dirt road looked pretty in the late days light, almost golden. Whenever they passed beneath a tree, Linda felt the coolness of the shade move over her like a caress. People passed them on rattling old bicycles. Bella ran ahead of them, but not so far that Linda needed to worry. She was a well-behaved child: when she reached a crossing or a corner she stopped and waited for the adults to catch up.

They were nearly at the market when Linda heard a loud, crumbling noise. People had been streaming forwards, and she was moving with them, but suddenly and quite violently the tide changed. It started to flow backwards.

Linda grabbed Bella and pulled her close. It felt strange to be standing still in the middle of the backward-flowing stream. Faces kept coming towards her, and then flashing past, as though borne away on a dusty floodwater.

The crumbling sound grew louder. There was a plume of dust ahead of them, rising and puffing outwards like a genie's cloud. A building was collapsing into the street. Falling down onto its knees, then its elbows and hands.

Linda picked up Bella and passed her to Kate.

'I'm a doctor,' she said.

She kissed the back of Bella's head, and held her hand against her back, feeling the reassuring solidity of her body. She could smell blood, already, and hear the soft groaning and mewling of the wounded.

Linda shared a long look with Kate over the top of Bella's head. They understood each other. They understood what needed to be done.

'Of course,' said Kate. 'Go. I'll take care of her. She'll be fine.'

Linda fought her way towards the heart of the disaster. One woman she passed was holding her hand to her head; blood ran through her hair onto her dusted face, but it was just a flesh wound.

The building had collapsed in such a way that it blocked the whole width of the street. There was a high pile of rubble on one side, sloping downwards into two long barrows on the other. Linda thought of the child pose she'd learned at yoga, remembering the feel of the rubber mat against her forehead and nose. Behind the ruined building there was a garden, no longer secret or shaded. A man sat on a platform under a tree – a neem tree – a newspaper open before him, a pot of tea cooling by his side.

Linda turned her attention to the street, and to the men and women whose bodies were being pulled out of the rubble.

'I'm a doctor,' she said, over and over.

She had no implements, no medicine, nothing of use, but she knew what needed to be done. She asked someone to bring clean water and soap, and cloth she could use for bandages.

The man with the newspaper finally shook himself free of whatever held him and went inside his house. A little later a woman came out with bowls of clean water, soap, sheets, bandages, and needles and cotton and scissors.

Linda got them to move the injured bodies into the shade of the garden, to lay them out in rows. She moved along the rows doing what she could. It was not long before they brought her the first dead body. Linda began washing the old woman's face and hands, but someone came and took the cloth from her, moving her along to deal with the living.

The garden grew quiet. There was an unfamiliar bird singing in the tree. Someone came running with a camera; Linda could hear the old-fashioned shutter, and then the soft, heavy click-clacking of the film being wound.

All of the bodies under her hands were thin and dark and coated in dust. She wanted to tell one of her patients, a young girl, that she would need to go to a hospital. The girl had at least three broken ribs. There could be internal injuries: secret wounds Linda could do nothing to diagnose or treat. She tried to tell the girl to lie still, to breathe as gently as possible. The girl smiled up at her, uncomprehending, and nodded.

The sun disappeared. Somebody brought a ladder, and strung a set of party lights across the gap where the wall had collapsed. Others brought torches and lanterns. Linda stood and stretched, then moved to the next patient and crouched down again. She was like a toy that could only repeat the same actions over and over again. Bending, cleaning, stretching, stitching. Narrow, urgent hands ushered her from one patient to the next, pushing at the backs of her elbows as if she was a child.

Once, as she knelt over someone, she looked up and saw the bare-legged woman standing in the garden. She was talking to the boy with the camera, gesturing angrily with her hands.



When Linda arrived back at the guesthouse all the lights were out. She could barely manage the stairs, barely open and close the door to her room. She sat on the edge of the bed and washed her face and feet and hands with a wet washer. Someone had put a covered plate on the bedside table. She lifted it, but could not eat the cold food that lay there.

In the morning, when she woke and found that her daughter had disappeared, along with Kate and the chef, Linda tried calling her husband. She let the phone ring out, then dialled again. And again and again.

She went down to the dining room, to the table by the window where she and Bella had sat the day before. Mr Miller was there, and she asked him if he had seen Kate, or Bella. She tried not to sound hysterical.

The bare-legged woman came over, cradling a cup of tea in her hand, and asked them whether they knew where Kate was, or Kate's husband. Then, one by one, the businessmen, too, began asking where Kate and her husband had gone. Linda had to explain to each of them that her daughter, too, seemed to be missing.

At first, nobody seem overly concerned. They were more worried about who was going to make them breakfast. Who would change the sheets on their beds and bring them jugs of iced water? They asked Linda if her daughter wasn't just playing hide and seek, or sleeping in one of the empty rooms, or under the bed.

They split up, conducted a search of the premises, and then came back to the dining room. Kate's room was empty: it looked ransacked. And her car was missing. Bella's small suitcase was gone. None of them could remember when they had last seen Bella. Not even Mr Miller, who had folded paper boats for her to float on the courtyard pond.

The guests sat Linda in a chair near the window and offered her coffee. They talked about notifying the police, but nobody knew the number to call. The bare-legged woman thought perhaps they should call the American embassy in Mumbai, but Linda and her daughter weren't American. Nobody knew the number for the Australian embassy. Eventually, someone found a phone number for the police. Mr Miller left a message on their answering machine, but nobody was sure whether the person who checked the messages would understand English.

There was a lull during which nobody seemed sure what to do next. Somebody started cooking breakfast, which appeared to settle things for now. The guests were like small children whose teacher has disappeared in the middle of class, and who go on doing the things they always do on a Wednesday. Sooner or later, someone would come to tell them what had happened, and to take over the running of things, but in the meantime they followed the pattern of the day as faithfully as they could.

Linda had to do something, so she decided to walk into town. There must be someone she could report to; someone who would do something.

She reached the place where the wall had collapsed. There was the gap, like a lost tooth, and the pile of rubble that did not, any longer, look like a stone giant collapsed into the child pose. The bodies were gone from the lawn, and the string of party lights, and all the other paraphernalia, but the man was there in his garden, with a fresh newspaper and a pot of tea.

When Linda had married her husband, it had been partly because he was so imperturbable. He was tall and solid and not particularly attractive. Married women noticed him, but young women – single women – did not. He had wanted to marry her too quickly, and she'd had to hold him back, but eventually she'd relented.

She leaned against a portion of wall that was still standing, feeling it give slightly as she did so. The bricks or stones behind her shoulders ground against each other like old teeth. She was tired, she realised. Too tired to keep going.

The neem tree extended its branches over the street. A bicycle clattered past. She felt her phone ringing in her pocket and put her hand in and held it. The phone vibrated like a small animal against her palm, something alive and urgent.

## Research statement

### *Research background*

This work of contemporary realist fiction explores the gap between theoretical models of ethical decision-making based on gender (Gilligan 1982) and based on broader cultural contexts (Ford and Lowery 1986). The work explores the notion that ethical decision-making is multiple, embodied, emotional and inarticulate, as much as, if not more than, it is singular, intellectual and/or theoretical. The story presents a complex overlapping of responses to the problem of who to care for, and how, and demonstrates the messy humanity of characters who embrace, rather than retreat from, personal and relational crises.

### *Research contribution*

This original work of short fiction takes an exploratory and original approach to exploring ethics of care. The narrative explores Ford and Lowery's (1986) proposal that differences in the moral reasoning applied by individuals are as much a consequence of life situations as gender. The work explores the uniquely complex or hybrid proposition that the ways in which ethics are a product of culture, and cultural difference, as well as gender.

### *Research significance*

The work makes an original contribution by describing and illustrating the relationships between gender, ethics and culture. The work presents complex knowledge about ethical decision-making in the form of a creative, rather than theoretical, narrative. It has been published in a quality peer refereed journal of creative writing research.

## Works cited

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