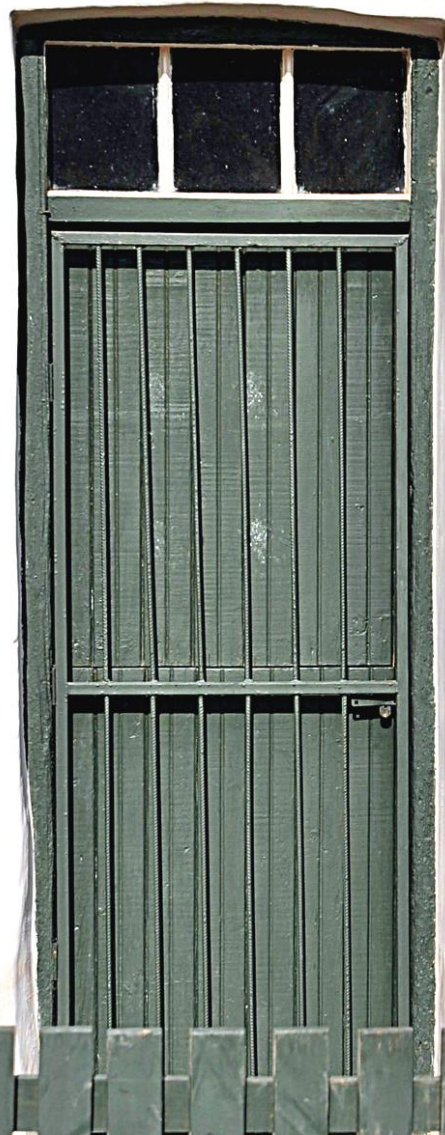


FOREWORD BY ALEXANDRA SMITH

# SOUTH AFRICAN SHORT STORIES



THE 10 WINNING STORIES  
FROM THE SA WRITERS COLLEGE  
SHORT STORY COMPETITIONS  
2013-2017

EDITED BY ANIKA VENTER

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# FOREWORD

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Short stories are one of life's great, secret delights. I once met a woman who said she didn't like them because they were too short and she always felt cheated: she liked novels that were big. Though as a writer I pretend that I have some deeper ability to understand everyone, honestly I have never been able to relate to this woman's complaint. For me, a short story is like glimpsing a rare and wonderful bird in flight between the trees of a riverbank forest: part of the pleasure is in that fleeting quality, that sudden flash of colour, mood and insight. But then again, that is the glory of written fiction: there is something for everyone. Short stories might not be to everyone's taste, and that's okay.

Actually it does seem that short stories are not as popular as they should be. Anthologies of short stories are a notoriously hard sell in the cold light of Trade Fiction commerce, and yet for writers, short stories can be extraordinarily beneficial. On the one hand, they are by far the best way to cut your teeth and hone your craft as a writer. I had the privilege of knowing André Brink before he passed away, and although he was most famous for

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his novels, in his early twenties at the start of his writing career, he made his first sales, churning out pot-boiler short stories, some of them even romances, for an Afrikaans magazine.

Which brings me to the other hand: in South Africa, while local novels flounder in a sea of competition and poor marketing, authors who pen good short stories discover that the form is astonishingly lucrative because of competitions. In purely financial terms, I can definitively say I have made more money per word out of short stories than I have out of my published novels.

The most prestigious writing award for authors of African origin is the Caine Prize – it comes with a hefty £10 000 prize, plus a residency at an American university, immense publicity, a star literary agent and an all-expenses paid trip to London for a week, followed by an all-expenses paid trip later in the year to a country in Africa for a workshop. And even if you're only a runner-up, as I was, you still get the week of being wined and dined in London, a trip to an African country for ten days, plus, when I was shortlisted, £500 for reading your story to an audience at the London Literary Festival. (To put that in perspective, most local novelists would be lucky to get that sum as an advance for a full-length novel from a publisher!) But writing isn't about money, is it?

No. Writing is about stories. Stories make us human.

What makes a good short story? As far as I'm concerned, it's good if you enjoy it, but other greater authors are more eloquent in their assessment

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of what makes the form sublime. I propose to read the ten stories of this collection through their lenses:

*“A good short story crosses the borders of our nations and our prejudices and our beliefs. A good short story asks a question that can’t be answered in simple terms. And even if we come up with some understanding, years later, while glancing out of a window, the story still has the potential to return, to alter right there in our mind and change everything.”*— Walter Mosley

In 'That Night', Melita Vurden, crosses local borders, and takes us to Durban’s North Beach, to a sense of belonging, to friendships, youthful (mis)adventures, and freedom, the kind of freedom one only has in those years after school and before Life begins in earnest. But what will Life be? What might be possible beyond the cash box where the young narrator works at the Ice Rink?

Heinrich van der Walt’s 'Frankie' is a melancholic contemplation of regret. His character Frankie Arbour has triumphed over cruelty and a childhood in “a ruined little house with a sagging fence and an overgrown yard”. Yet the narrator of the story, once an unkind neighbour to Frankie’s sad youth, though equipped with a new heart and perhaps some fresh hope, seems unable to escape from his past.

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Liam Kruger crosses time to a dystopian near-future supermarket, with a disturbing, cleanly crafted probe into the future of marketing and religion in 'Wholesale'.

Consumerism rears its ugly head in 'And the Meek', where Matthew Child uses landscape in a quest to find beauty and peace and 'less' within a world made ugly by the quest to possess more. Through his pair of idealistic lovers, he challenges the reader to review all manner of beliefs, including the natural urge to procreate.

*“It’s possible, in a poem or short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring – with immense, even startling power.” – Raymond Carver*

Using the home space, an untidy bedroom, Janice Gardener-Atkinson, beautifully creates an awkward mother-son relationship in 'The Teen Factor'. Like Heinrich van der Walt’s 'Frankie', this is also a tale of second chances, but in this story wry wit replaces melancholy, and Janice Gardener-Atkinson’s character uses her sense of humour to hold on for dear life and dear love.

Bruce McKenzie’s blissfully nostalgic 'My Mother Takes One Look at Me ... And Gives Me Away' is a journey in exquisitely described

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commonplace things, not least of which, in fact perhaps the most memorable (and most important ), is the condom.

*“A short story is confined to one mood, to which everything in the story pertains. Characters, setting, time, events, are all subject to the mood. And you can try more ephemeral, more fleeting things in a story – you can work more by suggestion – than in a novel. Less is resolved, more is suggested, perhaps.”* – Eudora Welty

Duncan Aird has very specifically and successfully, adopted the mood and time and setting of Herman Charles Bosman’s much-loved Oom Schalk Lourens in his story, 'An Anniversary, Shaded'. With gentle humour, the story examines marital relationships, love and sex, a trio of themes which come up with equal verve in 'My Mother Takes One Look at Me .... And Gives Me Away' and again, but with more subdued sadness in 'Frankie'.

As the title hints, Mike Forde’s 'The First Time' is also about sex, but the mood here is utterly different, a little James Bond-ish. There is that sense of borders crossed. These are international borders though, and with vivid descriptions the author deftly puts his readers in humid Singapore, place of orchids and new experiences. Mike Forde’s Singapore and unashamedly easy sex makes a great contrast to Duncan Aird’s dusty, prim but lusty, country town and Matthew Child’s riverine park landscape, where his pair of coy sprites intellectualise the perils of conception.

Alexandra Smith, 28 August 2017

SAWC SHORT STORY ANTHOLOGY 20013–2017

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## Foreword

# PREFACE

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We started the annual SA Writers College Short Story Competition in 2008 to support beginner writers. At that time, there were already plenty of writing competitions recognising established writers, but what about the newbie about to enter a competition for the first time? Uncovering emerging talent has been a rewarding experience for our team of judges. But what we didn't anticipate back then was that the competition would create a community of writers – often the same writers entering each year, improving each year.

It's now a decade later, and we proudly present our second published anthology of winners. These are the top stories from beginner writers in South Africa. Many of these writers have never been published; some a couple of times. In each case we've been honoured to select them from up to 700 entries each year, and give them a nudge on their way up.

Not all of our winners could make it into this anthology. Not all names can appear in the limelight. But the perseverance of this community of enthusiastic writers was highlighted recently when I received a letter from an entrant, Raymond Hattingh, the former chair of the Pinelands Writers'

Circle in Cape Town. Raymond received ‘Honourable Mention’ for his stories submitted in 2013, 2014 and 2015, and ‘Honours’ in 2017. He also encouraged his fellow members of the writing circle to enter, and one of these writers - Janice Gardener-Atkinson – received a mention in 2015, and has gone on to win second place in 2017 for her poignant piece ‘The Teen Factor’.

These writers echo our belief at SA Writers College - that to become a writer, you have to write.

As always, a huge thank you must go to our outstanding judges – all notable writers in South Africa: Ginny Swart, Alex Smith, Karen Jeynes, Andrew Salomon, Fiona Ingram, Maya Fowler, Helen Brain and Lisa Lazarus. Travel writer Don Pinnock supplied the beautiful cover photo for the anthology. Layout and typesetting was done by Koos Turenhout, and editing by Anika Venter. Thank you to these experts for all their hard work in making this anthology possible.

We will continue supporting upcoming talent for decades to come, so keep writing, keep entering!

Nichola Meyer  
(Principal of SA Writers College)

Acknowledgement and appreciation goes to Don Pinnock for supplying the photograph adorning the cover page.

# FRANKIE

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## Heinrich van der Walt

**F**rankie Arbour.

I had not thought of that name in more than thirty years, yet sitting in the smelly back seat of a taxi, I could think of nothing else. Had it really been that long? The name brought back fragmented memories, almost as if I were peering into the corners of my mind through a broken kaleidoscope. As the memories slowly surfaced through the murky waters of time, I wished that they had stayed submerged. The crumpled note I clutched in my hand had forced me to drag those waters and I had a feeling that there was more beneath the surface than I had the courage to face.

I had just left the hospital for the eleventh, and hopefully the last, time. Doctor Ames was satisfied with my recovery and again marvelled at the almost unnatural way my body had accepted the new heart.

## Frankie

“Your surgeon did a divine job, Arthur. And your body seems to be happy with the new pump.” He had smiled broadly as he said this. “You are by far the luckiest transplant patient I have ever treated.”

The steady rain that had been falling for the last two days had already reduced the streets to shallow rivers, reflecting the dull grey skies above. Outside my window, people were rushing along underneath their umbrellas, their images blurry, and I wished suddenly that I could leave the confines of this stinking taxi and join the phantoms that fled past.

As the vehicle crept forward a few more feet, I tried to remember what Frankie’s voice sounded like. His speaking voice, not when he was crying or screaming. I tried very hard, but I just couldn’t. I could recall his face though, as if I had seen him yesterday. His mouse-coloured hair was always standing on end, little patches cut too short, revealing the pale skin underneath. The haircuts were something that occurred all too regularly and Frankie would often have scars on his forehead or scalp when he slunk into class. Once he had to wear a bandage over his left ear when his dad cut the tip right off. Frankie explained that it was his fault, he wasn’t sitting still and his dad was in a hurry. *In a hurry* was what he called it when his father was drunk and angry. Like when his father broke his arm because he left his battered old bicycle out in the yard.

“Pa was in a hurry to go into town and my bike was in the way,” Frankie explained the next day. His dad was always in a hurry, it seemed.

## Frankie

We didn't care though. Who could blame his dad for taking a hand to the side of his head when Frankie was just such a useless kid? He never did well in school and at the age of six he still had trouble writing his own name. He was even worse at sports, and whenever teams were picked for our Physical Education periods, we would draw straws to see who would have to take Frankie. The shortest straw would get you Frankie, followed by loud groans of protestation from everyone on that team. They would inevitably lose and Frankie would get the blame. If the loss was particularly humiliating, we would shove him to the ground and dance around him like Indians, cupping our hands over our mouths and chanting incoherent battle cries. If he tried to get up, someone would kick his legs from underneath him and we would carry on our 'war dance', our cries getting louder until you could hardly hear him screaming and crying.

And sweet Lord, could he scream. One Saturday we were beating up on him behind old Calpy's Café, and as usual he was hollering his head off for us to *please just stop*. Suddenly Mrs Southey rounded the corner and started yelling at us that she could hear him crying all the way from the other side of the park. Her house must have been about four blocks away, yet Frankie's voice had carried all the way over there to where she was listening to RSG in her kitchen. We thought this was great and were almost impressed with Frankie.

## Frankie

He also never retaliated. Even when a kid half his size started beating on him, he would just stand there and take it, infuriating his tormentor even more. After a while even the smallest kids in school would slap him in the hallways and casually stroll away, knowing that he would not fight back. In fact, the only time I can recall him getting angry was one day when he nearly broke our living room window. I had invited him to come and play at my house that afternoon, promising that *this* time I was serious about letting him join our group of friends. But just as all the times before, we locked the doors and teased him through the window when he came knocking. That afternoon he seemed to take it a bit harder than before and when we pressed our backsides up against the glass to moon him, he threw a rock the size of my shoe at the window. He missed (he was horrible at anything that involved throwing, catching or kicking, remember?) and hit our front door with a loud *thunk!* We fell down laughing even harder than before. He didn't throw another rock and just stood there looking at us, tears and snot running down his face, before turning around and fleeing into the street.

Nobody knew what happened to Frankie's mother. He lived alone with his father in a rundown little house on Elam Street. Set far back from the street, the house was obscured by an overgrown hedge that ran the length of a limp fence. We would often peek through the tangled branches, trying to see into the gloom of their front yard. We didn't even know if they had a back yard as none of us had ever stepped through the rusty gate out front. His father's battered old Nissan would always be parked out front,



## Frankie

sometimes with the front wheels on the pavement from when he would arrive home late at night, usually *in a hurry*. I asked my mom once what Frankie's father did for a living.

“Never you mind what that man does. You just stay away from him, you hear?”

The look in her eyes told me that was the *only* answer I would get, so I didn't ask again. My friend Alex told me that *his* dad said Frankie's father didn't work at all. I found this hard to believe, as he was an adult, and all adults work.

And so, Frankie and his father lived alone in their little ruined house with the sagging fence and overgrown yard. Even though we tried our very best to come up with unique and interesting ways to torment him, he never missed school, and every morning when the bell rang he would slip into class quietly and scamper to his desk, where he would make himself as small as possible. When final bell rang, Frankie would be the first one out the door, running for the gate as if the hounds of hell were at his heels. Which in a way I suppose they were. The hounds in this case being me and my little troop of friends. Most of the time though, he was lucky and made it through the gate without us catching him.

Then one day Frankie was gone. His father had had one too many the night before, and on his way home from the Tiger, he drove straight into the boundary wall next to the Methodist Church, leaving broken glass and pieces of his scalp scattered all over the rose bushes that the ladies from

## Frankie

Sunset Home had planted only the previous week. I suppose he must have been in a real hurry that night. Frankie was collected later that week by his grandmother, who took him to live with her in Port Elizabeth. We never saw him again. His father's remains were left to the municipality to bury. As far as I know, their house stood empty until Pick 'n Pay tore the entire block down a few years later to build a liquor and cut-price clothing store. Frankie and his father were already erased from our collective memories by then, so we missed the irony in that.

The rain had finally stopped when the taxi pulled up to the curb in front of my little house in Fir Street. Getting out carefully, I noticed again how run down the place had become. I struggled to open the front gate, pulling at the vines that seemed to have grown over the hinges during the few hours I was in hospital. I yanked it closed behind me and walked up the cracked walkway that led to the front door. The door used to be bright red, but it had now faded to a dirty pink. Evelyn had painted the door one Saturday afternoon, a long time ago. I still remember how lovely she looked that day. I had sat under the willow tree drinking beer and watching her graceful movements as she applied layer after layer of red paint to our door. We had made love that night and afterwards, as I fell asleep with her in my arms, I had wondered if I could ever be happier. It turned out I couldn't, and

less than a year later she left. I accept full responsibility for the disintegration of our marriage. She had always been faithful. I had not.

The air was still heavy with rain and the untended garden smelled of rotted leaves. Closing the door behind me, I was overcome by a weariness that I have not felt since the first few weeks after my operation. Switching on the light bulb that dangled from the stained ceiling, I shuffled to the living room and sat down heavily on my scuffed La-Z-Boy. I rested my head in my hands and listened to the silence of the house around me. It felt empty and cold. A sob broke the quiet and I finally gave in to the sorrow that had been welling up inside me since I left the hospital. My hand drifted to the front of my shirt where I could feel the scar tissue underneath the fabric. The thick red line that ran vertically up my breastbone no longer hurt, but I could feel a deep throbbing pain underneath the scar, much deeper than my new heart. As my sobs echoed through the empty house I reached into the front pocket of my jacket and took out the folded note that the nurse had passed me before I left the doctor's office. I read the lines slowly, my eyes blurry with tears.

Frankie

*Dear Arthur,*

*I was the surgeon who operated on you in June. I noted in your chart that you were born in Westbury in the Northern Cape. It took me a while but I think I remember you from the few years I lived there with my father. Unfortunately, I have not been back there since the day I left, but I assume the old town is still the same as always. Or perhaps it has changed. In my heart, I hope that it is the latter. You see, I have come to realise that some things in life can never be changed, even though we wish they could. But every now and then we get lucky and life gives us a second chance.*

*Your new heart is that second chance, Arthur, and I hope you treat it as well as you can. It's a good one – and good hearts are very rare.*

*I wish you much happiness for your future,*

*Dr Frank Arbour*

# Heinrich van der Walt

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Heinrich van der Walt has been reading and writing stories since he was a child growing up in the Karoo. Fascinated with the tangible nostalgia that lingers in these small towns, he is particularly fond of places where, on a quiet moonlit night, you can hear the skeletons rattling around in their closets. He lives in Cape Town with the love of his life and their son.

'Frankie' was the winner of the 2017 South African Writers College Short Story Competition.

## THE TEEN FACTOR

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Janice Gardener-Atkinson

**W**hen you look into the bedroom of a teenager you do so at your own risk. You peer as cautiously as a gazelle who knows the lions are awake and feeling a little hollow in the middle regions. You know that you are the interloper in this space.

And Marileze knew this as she allowed her gaze to sweep the room, ironically the only thing that had actually swept in there for some time. Regardless of the fact that the sun was high, the blinds were still drawn, clearly designating the room as the lair of the occupying species.

She was not surprised by the shambles. She was not even angry any more. She knew, everyone knew, and the Literature reinforced it, that the knee-high layer of assorted clean/dirty clothing, discarded foodstuffs and the containers they came in was standard stuff for teens. The musical instruments, books and mystical technological devices for listening to and

illegally downloading ear-shattering sound bites were what the average teen considered vital to being both 'real' and 'authentic' on his/her planet. Neither was she surprised by the hunched body bundled to near-invisibility on the rumpled bed.

She knew better than to attempt to clean up again, let alone try a tentative triage from Least Disgusting Substance to the Substance Most Likely to Foment an Undiscovered Virus That Will Eventually Wipe Out Humanity. And even though she hadn't laid eyes on Kelly for a couple of days now, she knew better than to disturb the dormant body. It was, after all, Saturday and Saturdays were sacrosanct, so the Literature assured her.

She hesitated in the doorway, grateful that the cause of the localised biological disaster perpetrated on the unsuspecting neighbourhood did not stir. She'd done her best. She'd tried to be both understanding and supportive, but stepmothers have a built-in likelihood of relationship failure. In fact, she knew that in this she was on a par with the Titanic, the Hindenburg and Donald Trump's first executive order – she was going down, baby, going down. All politicians and stepmothers know that 'making good' on election promises doesn't always work out and she was the one who was going down in flames.

The 'election promises' that she had made were to Marcus on their wedding day, when a younger Kelly had stood by his dad, still sweetly innocuous and clean. She'd chosen Marcus, the love of her life. She'd chosen

him. She'd got him. But she had also got the smaller, less hairy, less blonde version in the bargain.

She didn't really understand where the sweet little person who had drawn birthday cards for her had gone – when was it he'd morphed into a sullen adolescent? The memory of dear little twelve-year-old Kell, if nothing else, continued to keep her committed. If only the current Kelly would commit too.

She'd gone through the whole performance recommended by the Literature of laying down some Rules to help manage the health hazard down the passage – the room, not the boy. To give him his due, he seemed to shower frequently enough and from what she saw of his hair beneath the ever-present beanie, it was clean and presumably free of insect life. The Rules were a) no food left lying around, as it attracted bugs and cockroaches; b) nothing wet that accumulated mould and might possibly cause a mushroom field to populate the carpet; c) nothing large enough to trip over and cause injury that might require hospitalisation of either the room's incumbent or any stray visitor or step-parent on the war path.

The atmosphere in her kitchen during the Rules Discussion had been relaxed and friendly, or so she'd thought, but while Kelly had listened politely, his eyes had held the slightly glazed look that comes over every teen's face when being harangued by really, really old persons, as in more than two years older than they are. When she'd asked: "Are you ok with this, then?" Kelly had removed his beanie and the previously undetected



earphone buds from his ears, blinked his pale eyes and said: “Awesome. Got to go. Things to do.”

She’d wanted to scream in frustration and disappointment. She really was disappointed, because she actually liked Kelly. Or rather, she’d liked him when she’d first joined him and Marcus in the family unit – her first, their second. But now she was relegated to the stepmom nuclear waste dump and her attempts to ‘reach out’ to him, as the Literature called it, had failed yet again. She’d never liked the phrase ‘reach out’. She’d tried it not long ago, literally, but the silent rigidity of his frame had told her not to do that again.

She sighed, gently pulled the bedroom door closed and nearly died of shock when she turned to find Kelly standing right behind her. They were closer in this instant than they’d been in a while, and she was doubly shocked to realise that she had to look up to meet his eyes.

Kelly said nothing, but Marileze jerked back reflexively. She was furious with herself when she started to chew her way through an ill-assorted selection of defensive half-sentences, finishing with a garbled apology “Sorry ... sorry.” Then she gave up, hands raised in involuntary imitation of a police series on TV (“Step away from the teen with the ice-blue eyes and place your hands on the car ...”), and tried not to actually run towards the kitchen, the door and an escape from her embarrassment.

She sat outside in the garden with a Coke Zero and reflected morosely on her current failure. Caught snooping: doing exactly what stepmoms ought

never to do. Did he think she was going through his things? Examining his rubbish bin – if she could even have found it? Searching his sock drawer for *dagga*, or pills, or fine white powdery substances of unknown origin and mind-altering effect?

Why, then, had she been considering going into his room in the first place, if not to snoop into his life while she pretended to clean up? She cringed again as the old arguments came to the fore: he was not really a boy – he was nearly old enough to vote, nearly old enough to die for his country, definitely old enough to have – wait, wait just a frigging moment!

She reimagined his room, the chaos, the dimness and the huddled, sleeping body on the bed. She'd thought it was Kelly, but he had been standing right behind her.

A few Life Truths from the Literature suddenly crash into her consciousness. She jumped to her feet, sat down again, hesitated, undecided. Kelly, the solitary, moody, silent creature had a friend, a partner, a lover? Whatever that body was, it was unknown to her but known to him. She slumped back on the bench, closing her eyes and the Literature, for once, provided the answer – *don't do anything*. Just leave it. Give the boy – person – she couldn't bring herself to call him a man just yet – give him his space and back the hell off.

When the bench rocked slightly, Marileze knew it was Kelly beside her. She kept her eyes closed. Embarrassed silence enveloped the garden,

except for the pair of thrushes that bounced indignantly about in the hibiscus bush, irritated by the disturbance to their family life.

Then Kelly said, a little gruffly: “So, you saw Mel.”

It wasn't a question. She opened her eyes and turned to look at him. She didn't often see him in such bright sunlight. He was looking straight ahead. She stared at his profile, so much like his father's, but softer, more vulnerable.

She nodded. Then, because she couldn't help it: “Who is she?”

He turned toward her and she was amazed to see a faint smirk.

“Not ‘she’. Mel's a guy.”

Her face must have shown how she instantly jumped to all the usual conclusions, for the smirk turned into a grin and she suddenly saw that younger, laughing Kelly from happier times.

“Come on, Marileze. It's not like that. He's a friend from school. His mom and dad've just split up and he's, like, kind of in a mega-bad place. I know what it's like to lose a dad, so I offered him a place to crash while he sorts himself out.”

The boy morphed back into the serious young man she knew was in there somewhere, someone with insight and compassion. He looked away over the garden again while she gaped in silence.

“It’s OK. His mom knows he’s here. He’s going home today, but he’s still a bit, like, shattered. I should have told you this morning, but I went out to get some chow.”

It was an apology and an explanation. Marileze grabbed it gratefully with both metaphorical hands.

“That’s, that’s OK,” she stammered. “I’m sorry for him. You did a good thing, Kell. I’m sorry I was nosing in your room. It’s your space, but, it’s just, I haven’t seen you for a while.” She tried to keep it light. “Just please don’t let things get to the stage where the Department of Health comes knocking on the door. If you can.”

“Sure,” said Kelly. “That’s cool.”

He stood and she looked up, sure he had grown even taller in the last half hour.

“Gotta go feed Mel. See ya.” She watched him all the way down the path to the kitchen doorway where he suddenly turned back and said: “Thanks for not, like, going ballistic, Mar,” and he disappeared.

Marileze sat motionless, scarcely breathing. Had Kelly just shorten her name to Mar, or had he maybe, just maybe, called her ‘Ma’? Nothing in the Literature had prepared her for the wonderful, tentative, warm feeling that her whole world had just shifted slightly and realigned, turning now on a sturdy axis of hope, tilted a bit off-centre, of course, as it must be when there

## The Teen Factor

is only one parental figure, but nevertheless humming quietly like an expensive engine.

Life after Marcus had been tough, for Kelly too, but the two of them had had to make the best of it and after this morning, maybe “the best” was starting to happen at last.

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# Janice Gardener-Atkinson

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I wrote my first historical romance novella when I was 14 – a shocking crib of all the romantic novelists of the day but my family all laughed uproariously throughout my reading of it, so I felt there must have been some value somewhere! I wrote another novel when in my 30's, put it away in a cupboard and then nothing for a long while. I joined my first writer's group in 2012 – the Pinelands Writers' Circle - and that was where I was introduced to the short story genre, which I have been practising and enjoying ever since. I haven't been published so far but live in hope and, like most amateur writers, am making a collection of rejection slips!

'The Teen Factor' was the runner-up of the 2017 South African Writers College Short Story Competition.

# MY MOTHER TAKES ONE LOOK AT ME ... AND GIVES ME AWAY

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Bruce McKenzie

**I** am 75 years old – five years beyond the expected biblical expiry date. Like many iconic figures before me, I am being prevailed upon to write my memoirs, before all my wit and wisdom is lost to the world for all eternity!

Where do I begin? I could, like Charles Dickens, begin at birth – no, I will begin at conception.

The first most spectacular thing I did was get through a condom. I, of course, do not have any memory of this feat – and what follows is based on hearsay.

It is 1958. I am eighteen years old – tallish, good looking, athletically built, cocksure. I have just matriculated from Estcourt High School with a

string of A's. Next year I go to university – my parents are not rich, but I have a scholarship.

I am also, through no fault of my own, a virgin; but if I weren't, I would not want my elders to know, because in these days, sex before marriage is considered sinful (fornication).

I am holidaying at the rich home of a friend in sunny Durban. Life is good – sunlit beaches, beautiful girls, dancing all night, surfing all day.

Elvis is king! Johnny Mathis woos the world with 'A Certain Smile'; Shirley Bassey belts out 'Kiss Me, Honey, Kiss Me'. Gene Vincent sings:

*'Be-bop-a-lula she's my baby  
Be-bop-a-lula I don't mean maybe  
Be-bob-a-lula - she's my baby doll  
My baby doll, my baby doll.'*

The elders are not amused. The Beatles are later banned in South Africa.

*West Side Story* hits the cinemas. What a sensation! We see it multiple times. We know all the words to the songs:

*'There's a place for us  
A time and a place for us  
Hold my hand and we're  
Halfway there.'*

*'Gee, Officer Krupke, we're down on our knees.'*



*'Cause no one wants a fellow with a social disease'.*

*'I feel pretty, oh so pretty, that the city should give me its key.'*

I receive a letter from my mother. She has found a packet of condoms in my school blazer pocket.

She is not shocked, she is not judgmental or censorious, she is not in tears, she is not upset. She just kindly kicks me in the balls.

“Condoms are not reliable – and you are living proof of that.”

What! How! When! What! Who, me? Not wanted! Born but not wanted! Not planned for, not eagerly anticipated – no choirs of angels, no smiley faces – just another mouth to feed and arse to wipe.

I am devastated – not only ‘not wanted’, but actual physical barriers were put into place to prevent my entry to Earth. I owe my life to a defect in a piece of latex rubber.

My holiday is ruined – plus, the thought of my parents having sex at all (never mind for non-procreational, recreational purposes) is not one that I would have chosen to be forced so brutally to entertain.

I have a friend who is so appalled by the thought of his parents having sex, that he pretends that he is adopted and that his parents are just very good friends.

Please note that my pals and I carried condoms mostly for bravado and to fuel the fantasy that we might suddenly come across a girl of easy virtue and should, like good boy scouts, be prepared. In the small, church-going town of Estcourt, nestling peacefully in the cosmos-covered foothills of the Drakensberg, girls of easy virtue were as plentiful as Martians with green heads.

When I get home, I cross-examine my mother. She spills the beans.

It is 1940. A great war is raging in Europe. Millions of people are killing each other (at the final count, 60 million). The men of South Africa are preparing to join the fight and go kill or be killed.

My mother and her three sisters have returned to the family homestead in Dundee to wait out the war – with the old folks. It is large, but not that large – nine children (three still in nappies), four adult women, two aging parents and a stray 93-year-old aunt with Alzheimer's.

Money, food and space are rationed. There is no room to swing a cat, never mind another baby.

The four sisters make a pact: there will be no farewell sex with their spouses unless the aforementioned spouses wear condoms. Signed and sealed over a nice cup of tea.

My parents-to-be are arguing. He is of the opinion that if he is to go off like a knight in shining armour to save the world for an indeterminate

period, the best condition he can leave his lovely wife in is with a baby at her breast – like a sort of human chastity belt.

She is of the opinion that if he is to go off for an indeterminate period or maybe forever, she does not want the responsibility of caring for and raising another child (she has three already) on her own.

Mommy-to-be wins – and backed by the pact with her sisters, keeps her legs resolutely closed until Daddy-to-be uncharacteristically gives in and none too graciously dons the unreliable condom.

I am conceived.

Back to 1958. I approach my father, now fifty. He is not very approachable – conservative, puritanical, taciturn, loving but not demonstrative. We have never discussed things of an intimate or sexual nature.

I broach the subject of ‘condoms and not being wanted’. He surprises me with a devilish grin. “Can you keep a secret?” he asks.

“Of course I can,” I say.

“When your mother wasn’t looking, I pricked a hole in the condom with her birthstone (opal) broach pin, lying unsheathed on the bedside table.”

Thanks, Dad.

Thanks, Mom.

It would take more than a world war to keep me out!

*'Give me the child for the first seven years and I will give you the man.'*

Jesuit maxim

It is 1940. I, like Charles Dickens and the rest of mankind, am born.

I am not a prepossessing sight. Blue in the face, gasping for oxygen, held upside-down by the feet, smacked, slightly squint, covered in mucus and if you don't hold my head correctly, it falls off.

My mother is screaming obscenities – which no one knew she even knew.

My mother takes one look at me and gives me away.

My mother is stressed; up to her eyeballs in domesticity, with demanding offspring, rationing – trying to keep the place clean and the family equable. Her beloved is in Europe fighting in the great war; she misses him terribly and dreads every day to hear of his death.

She gives me to my grandmother (Gran).

Gran and I take one look at each other.

I see a wiry, grey-haired woman, her once-clear English complexion wrinkled and spotted by the harsh African sun. She wears thick-lensed, myopic glasses.

My Mother Takes One Look at Me ... And Gives Me Away

She sees little squished, head-lolling me.

It is love at first sight.

Gran is a gentle, educated woman, once a primary school teacher. She loves education, reading, music, cooking and gardening.

She adopts me completely; bathes, dresses, feeds, soothes, cuddles and hugs me, tickles my toes and blows raspberries on my tummy. I fall asleep on her lap and awake in her arms. She calls me her 'hot water bottle'.

She massages my body with scented oils and exercises my limbs. She feeds me warm, creamy Jersey-cow milk with homeopathic additives. I become almost robust.

She helps me to walk and teaches me to talk. Then my ABCs and 123s and do-re-mes. She reads me wonderful stories. For hours she plays the piano with me on her lap. Mozart, 'The Rose of Tralee', 'The Rustle of Spring', Chopin, 'Scheherazade', modern romantic melodies ... Gran can play everything and anything. Gran is a consummate pianist.

She teaches me about cooking. She calls me her culinary assistant – makes me pronounce it and spell it.

The smallholding has seven different types of fruit trees, and delicious black grapes that pop out of their skins into your mouth. There is a large vegetable garden. We bottle yellow peaches; make fruit jams and grape jellies; pickle onions, beetroot, beans; we store pumpkins and gem squashes. There is no freezer or refrigerator. We bake breads, biscuits and cheese

scones in an old, black, log-fed stove. Newly baked bread and melting farm butter ... ambrosia!

Gran teaches me about gardening. She calls me her 'Horticultural Aide' (makes me pronounce and spell it. My present-day proclivity towards loquaciousness is definitely Gran's doing).

We plant everything from seeds, slips, cuttings and bulbs – pansies, petunias, primula, pentstemons, phlox, pinks, snapdragons, mesembryanthemums, Namaqualand daisies, vegetables galore and berries (straw, goose, rasp and black).

She protects me from the jibes and jeers of my siblings. They tease me because I cannot catch (butter fingers), throw or kick balls (at least not without falling over backwards). My siblings are jocks and cannot conceive that I am not. Gran tells me that proficiency in ball games is not a prerequisite for success, and cites many famous people who weren't (Alexander the Great, Rudy Vallée, Tarzan ...).

I am consoled, but still wish I could.

Gran breeds chickens for eggs and meat. There is a large fowl run with an old, fecund fig tree at its centre. As a toddler it is my favourite place; fluffy yellow chickens, cocky cockerels, resplendent scary roosters, broody hens. I perch on the lower branches of the fig and eat its fruit. I talk gibberish to my fine feathered friends – they cluck and nod in agreement. I get covered in lice.

## My Mother Takes One Look at Me ... And Gives Me Away

Gran dunks my head in a bucket of diluted sheep dip, then squirts it with a hose. It stings but does not deter me from returning to the chicken run. Gran squirts the entire fowl population with diluted sheep dip – all of us chickens are deloused.

Gran is always encouraging: “There’s a clever lad, there’s a brave boy, there’s a bright spark.” I am the apple of her eye and she of mine.

She is my heart’s mother, my friend, teacher, protector. She is my sine qua non – my ID.

When I am seven, she dies. I do not understand. My heart breaks. Like looking at yourself in a mirror and the mirror shatters – and you cannot see yourself anymore.

I grieve for a long time. I am a lonely boy without you, Gran. I am lonely.

My real mother understands, is kind and patient. I recover and when we leave Dundee and move to Colenso, Mom takes Gran’s piano with us – for me.

# Bruce McKenzie

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Some three or so years ago I attended my son's wedding in Canada.

On my return, the church, at which I am the organist, asked me to write an article for the church magazine.

The article was so well received that I got turned on to the brand new idea that maybe I can write.

I joined a writer's group called 'shared pencils' run by Rae Nash. They guided me to keep writing and encouraged me to enter the short story competition.

I am looking back at my life and trying to put together a collection of short episode's which I call 'Literary Selfies'.

'My Mother Takes One Look at Me ... And Gives Me Away' was the winner of the 2016 South African Writers College Short Story Competition.



## AND THE MEEK

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### Matthew Child

**T**here are creatures on this earth that live and die in one day. Born beneath stones in fast-flowing streams, the change of season sees them float to the surface in bubbles, like ghosts crossing the void. These are the mayflies of the order Ephemeroptera – the ephemerals.

He nods, pretending to understand.

“They lack even the mouthparts to feed,” she says. “So they can’t consume once they’ve metamorphosed. They just buzz around for a bit and party and mate.”

“All the important stuff then.”

“That’s how we should be.”

“What, mating?”

## And the Meek

She blushes and smiles. “We should be born without mouths, so that we can’t do any damage to the Earth or to each other. So that we focus on the present.”

He thinks of a few people he wouldn’t mind seeing silenced forever. Like his boss, the prick. Not just a surface-layer prick – a deep prick. The kind who buys a Porsche while firing half his staff. Some people are just unsalvageable.

He’d say, “Siyanda, you’ll action this, OK?” as if the vagueness of the verb masks the lack of meaning in the work.

Wodwo wonders about these people who begin and end in office-block coffins, who eat at places called Tasha’s and speak about boutique wine bars and the new BMW series. When the dizzying emptiness of their lives comes to dizzy them, rolls back their eyes, kicks them in the balls, what do they feel? They’ve convinced themselves that life is simple, like a menu, shutting out anything that’s not *lifestyle*.

Wodwo wanted to feel more than comfortable.

He had found her on the street, on a poster plastered to the pole of a robot. A meek scrawl saying *Lost Soul? Be found*. There was no number but a strange address: *A delta in the heart of Joburg, a Walden by the pond*. He called his boss and told him to go action himself.

Wading through tall grass, he crawled through a gap in the fence, into an area set aside for birds. In a clearing, hidden from the sight of the

surrounding joggers and dog-walkers, was a crude bivouac made from branches lashed together with satin ribbons and dusted with thatching grass. A wisp sat over a *potjie* humming some sort of pop song. When she saw Wodwo coming, she grabbed a sharpened stone and braced herself – he thought he heard snarling.

“Hey, sorry – I’m not a *tsotsi* – I’m here for your ad? I’m a lost soul?”

“What’s your name there, honey?”

“Wodwo. The wanderer.”

“Come on, that’s not a real name.”

“It’s my tribal name,” he said. “All right, it’s my spiritual name.”

She eyed him slyly.

“Would you be more comfortable if I was called Matt? That’s racist.”

She laughed and lowered the flint. “I’m Aquamaria. The *sangoma*.”

“You’re a pretty pale-looking *sangoma*.”

“Racist.” She grinned.

“So what now, *sangoma*?”

“I dunno. Do you want to look at some birds?”

And now she’s telling him to *listen, really listen*. He gets down on his hands and knees and nestles his ear in the undergrowth.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Exactly. The vegetation should be teeming with small creatures like *Dendromus mystacalis*, *Dasymys incomtus*, *Suncus infinitesimus*,” she says, incanting the Latin names like a sorceress, “but their habitats are too degraded.”

“*Suncus infinitesimus* – that’s a cool name.”

“The least dwarf shrew.”

“What does it do?”

She shrugs. “Probably just tries to survive.”

“Much like what we’re doing?”

“To be present and not to dissipate. That’s the goal.”

He likes that. They’re not hanging out – they’re eking out.

She takes his hand and leads him up the path, explains that shrews need intact habitats to survive, that their bodies are little furnaces funneling through the veld, blazing micro-trails, igniting the insides of owls. The facts are biological, as if she were once a scientist, but her tone is heretical, as if she’d been exiled from the academe for demonising the data.

“Besides, it’s not what they do that’s important – it’s about all of us existing together, allowing each other to flourish. Did you know the extinction rate is a thousand times what it should be? Think of rhino poaching, climate change, fracking in the Karoo fucking up the riverine rabbits – all these interesting creatures buried beneath concrete and greed.

Pretty soon the rich and powerful will have erased all features on Earth, leaving us no choice but to stay at home or go shopping. Which is of course exactly what they want.”

She’s pretty cute, all nerdy and apocalyptic.

Her favourite mornings were those looking out from her bedroom window and watching the wind move the leaves in waves of shadows and listening to the birds synchronising their calls from unseen perches and her knowing that the world can be a beautiful and peaceful place and her trying to hold onto that feeling before it drained away with the flow of the day. She was a little princess lost in a world of bushveld trails.

But she got a job like the rest and she met some boys with whom she could have married and made children and they would have had names like Jack or Matthew or Sarah and they would watch TV on the weekends so Mommy and Daddy could get some fucking rest and they would become ungrateful little monsters just like their parents and the cycle of reproduction would start again. She was sucked into routine back then. She started being aware of herself saying things like “It’s Monday and I’m already tired” or “I work hard too, OK?” or “Did you have a good weekend?” and she was so hateful. Every time she looked at those fat cows in her office, her eyes stung and she wanted to fight. She couldn’t let go of all the water it took just to sustain their *lifestyles*. The kind of people who eat lunch on principle.

One summer she got a research internship following birds around the Kalahari Desert, gathering data on their behaviour. She learnt basic survival

skills. She would speak with the birds while they foraged, asking them *Am I crazy? Am I fucking crazy?* She was happy. She decided she liked speaking with the birds. So when she returned, she didn't go to the interview her dad had arranged. She started squatting in Delta Park, spinning little sticks together to make fire, trying to grow her own vegetables and when it all got too much, she would sneak in some tins of spaghetti and feel guilty.

When Wodwo saw the empty macaroni packets, he said "So you're just a tramp?" and it hurt her because at least she was *fucking trying*. She told him that by the time she was done with him, they would both be sweet little Buddha mystics, eking out with all the other creatures.

They find a bench by a small pond. There's a hard-yolk sun nesting in the sky and if you keep your line of sight to canopy-level or above, you might just convince yourself this is natural. But picnickers sprawl out amidst the dog shit and debris and look past each other, look past other picnickers, look past everything into personal voids. Some of them have babies and she stares at the small creatures clambering stupidly through the grass. The deep well of hatred sloshing around in her belly is a gravitational force; it stoops her, a furtive, bird-like foreigner transfigured by terror of offspring.

"The greatest gift we can give our children," she says, "is to make sure the other children aren't born."

Wodwo turns to her and sees her seriousness. "That's a pretty harsh statement."

"These kids are just growing up to want more and more."

He nods, understanding. His gaze drifts over the picnickers and he sees a young girl sitting amidst the cosmos flowers with a blue light glowing across her face, eyes sucked into her iPad. They call it information, but it's disembodied. Taliban beheadings, arctic drillings, motorised dildos – they all converge on the same, soft grey spot in the brain. As if lives now are paper thin, pulp fiction.

He says, "What we need to worry about is not the multitudes coming into this world, but the multitudes who don't give a damn about the world. That's our problem – the bored."

"The ever-widening gyre of consumerist shit."

"Poetic."

"What rough beasts."

"I get it."

"Thoreau said the whole world is a canvas for our imagination."

"Sounds like a bumper sticker."

"Shut your face," she laughs. "It's deep. The art of life is to stay interested. Be present."

"To not own iPads."

"Let's promise to always be mystics together, to not have mouths."

She holds out her pinky finger for him to interlock, but he leans in to kiss her instead. He feels his whole life has been standing by a river waiting

for a chance to get to the other side. But now he wants to ooze back into the water, crawl beneath a stone, wait forever while uncertainty passes by.

“Mouths are good for some things,” he says.

Her nose twitches, testing the air for sarcasm. She smiles but she’s afraid. His kiss ignited in her that ancient impulse for sex, love and family, but she won’t go back to bourgeois. A helicopter drones above, and now the noises of humanity leak back into the scene – barking, shouting, crying. They look at each other as if they were the first two species flung together, treading water in the primordial swamps while the whole world turned predatory. The meek will always be there, he thinks, a pile of bones beside the powerful, inheriting the failures from above.

“What do we do now?” he asks.

“We keep fighting to survive. To live.”

“Never start a fight you can’t finish,” he says reflexively, but he knows fights never finish, no matter how many you start, no matter how strong you are or how many Sudoku puzzles you can do, no matter the self-help books and rich inner lives lurking inside you, fights manifold are there to roll you over and send you tumbling back into the oil-thick waves. Never start a fight you can’t let fray and unravel into the tedium of groceries, dogs, misinterpreted texts, gnawing emptiness. Maybe never start anything at all.

“OK, well, it’s not fighting, exactly,” she says. “It’s more like being happy with just being.”



## And the Meek

He smiles, stands up and takes her hand. “Come. Let’s drift back across the delta.”

They pick their way through the picnickers, trying to keep the line of vision to canopy-level or above.

“Here’s a thought experiment for you: say we were lovers.” She side-glances at him slyly. “And we were walking through the wilderness.”

“Where would we have sex? Is that the game?”

She laughs and blushes. “No, idiot. Say we’re walking and we come across a porcupine quill and I pick it up and tap you on both shoulders and say something like ‘I hereby knight you Sir Wodwo’ –”

“Lame.”

“Shut your face. That memory would form part of our mythology. It’ll add meaning to our lives. Help us notch time. But we can’t do that if the interesting creatures aren’t around.”

Now all he sees is dog shit. He wonders whether that’s part of someone’s mythology.

“I’ll always pick up porcupine quills with you.”

She smiles and blushes as they crawl back through the hole in the fence.

There’s a land of beauty and peace hidden somewhere. Perhaps it’s already been pulverised to dust and they have to push it back together, one

## And the Meek

speck at a time. The newspaper they use to light the fire says “Global Markets Sink” and he thinks it sounds like Atlantis fabling around them; the great economic fairy kingdom finally returning to fantasy.

She strikes a match and says, “The only reality is the landscape – with the trees and the soil and the birds and us.” She spins in the hovel, singing and spilling beans, squelchy on the floor, overcome with raw happiness, the kind that lava-flows from deep magma core. Wodwo watches from his corner, shrew-like and near-blind with bliss. The *Suncus infinitesimus*, sunk in love, an infinitesimal in the ecosystem and okay with it. A couple of ephemerals eating each other’s hearts to live for a few days on Earth.

# Matthew Child

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Matt believes that nature is the ultimate source of inspiration for writers. From harnessing natural imagery to providing a sense of place, our interactions with various species and our complex environment defines the breadth of our imagination and thus defines the depth of our relationships with each other. Thus, conserving

biodiversity is tantamount to conserving cultural diversity and the capacity for our minds to flourish.

Matt has a Masters in Conservation Science from the University of Cape Town and a Masters in Conservation Philosophy from the University of Cambridge. He has published numerous scientific articles and is a co-author on *Bird Conservation: Global Evidence for the Effects of Interventions* (Pelagic Publishing: 2013). He is also undertaking a PhD in conservation policy through the Centre for Wildlife Management at the University of Pretoria.

'And the Meek' was the runner-up of the 2016 South African Writers College Short Story Competition.

# AN ANNIVERSARY, SHADED

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Duncan Aird

"**N**ee wat," said Oom Schalk Lourens, rocking forward in his chair. "I think that we will rather leave that motion picture alone, or at least wait for the DVD to come out."

He took a deep swig of peach brandy, surveyed the dusty farmland and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"It's not because I have a problem with matters of the flesh, you must understand," he continued. "In that respect I am just as much a man as any *boer* this side of the Dwarsberge. It's just that I'm more of a straight in-and-out type of man when it comes to things like that.

"Francina and I have a special code for when we want to engage in bonding of a carnal nature. I will reach across the bed and place my hand on her bosom. '*Ouvrou*, are you *lus*?' I'll ask. Sometimes when I do this she will let out a moan of such intense ecstasy, even taking the name of God and

making use of vulgar terminology. From this I will conclude that my work is already done. I will attribute my lack of memory of the events that led to her state of euphoria to the poor quality of the peach brandy at that time of the year. Then I will retire to my side of the bed.

“On other nights she will say, ‘If we really must, Schalk, but remember I have to get up early tomorrow to make *koeksusters* for the church bazaar.’ Three minutes later Francina will fetch us each a glass of water, and a minute after that we will both be snoring. Or at least I will.

“From what I gather, this film has very little normal sex like that in it. Although, that didn’t stop my neighbour, Gideon Erasmus, from taking his wife, Elsabe, to see it at the bioscope in Rustenburg on their wedding anniversary. On the day that he bought the tickets, he told me that he only did so because the title had led him to believe that it was a *fliiek* about hair-dressing in an *ouetehuis*.”

Oom Schalk coughed and cleared his throat loudly, then spat into the bushes next to the porch. He took a sip of coffee from the tin mug on his right and chased it down with another swig of peach brandy from the mug on the left.

“In the years before Gideon and Elsabe’s children grew up, they used to ask me to look after the house when they went out on their anniversary night. Every year, I remember, it would take me slightly longer to find where Gideon kept his brandy. In the latter years it was sometimes so obscure, you would swear he was trying to hide it from somebody. Once I

found it in a cabinet filled with wedding photographs. In all the photographs Elsabe would smile so sweetly at the camera, just like a model on the cover of the *Rooi Rose* magazine. Gideon would look nowhere else than at Elsabe.

“But I digress. I hear from *Dominee* Nel, who was standing outside the bioscope, that by the time the Erasmuses came out of that movie show, it wasn’t just their hairs that had turned a few shades greyer. *Dominee* Nel maintains that he was there to watch the evening show of the Sponge Bob Square Pant movie.”

Oom Schalk coughed and spat again.

“He tells me that even Gideon’s face was grey when he walked out of there.

“The funny thing, you know, is that Gideon and Elsabe Erasmus did not go straight home after that movie show.

“There is a strange toy shop at the top end of Boom Street in Rustenburg, near the bioscope. It is the kind of toy shop that children are not allowed to enter, and that no right-thinking adult man or woman should enter either. It is run by a man called Surprise Molefe, who also happens to be a *sangoma*. I can only think that the effects of seeing this shocking motion picture had so addled Gideon Erasmus’s brain that his sense of judgement was temporarily disabled. I have even heard it told from other witnesses, who were far outside that shop of course, that Elsabe Erasmus walked in ahead of Gideon, and that the way they walked gave the distinct impression that she was pulling him by the hand.”

Oom Schalk paused for a while, then continued.

“I am not suggesting that Gideon and Elsabe Erasmus were the only two customers in the shop that night. And neither am I suggesting that Mr Surprise Molefe didn't maybe already have a whole lot of money saved up. But I did hear that the bag of toys that the Erasmuses carried out of there was big enough that both of them needed to carry it. And also I heard from *Dominee* Nel, whose wife works in the jewellery shop on the other side of Boom Street, that Mr Molefe was in the jewellery shop the next day and that he bought a very expensive gold watch. *Dominee* Nel's wife said that he had winked and asked her not to mention this to anybody, because the watch was for a 'secret lover'.

“Well, it was around ten 'o clock on the very evening of the Erasmus's wedding anniversary, when the new *snotkop* constable from the district came tearing up this dirt road. He is a very eager young man, that constable, and he had his blue light flashing and his siren on. This notwithstanding the fact that there is not a single other car on this road, even during the day. And the state of the road is such that one can't drive at more than twenty kilometres an hour anyway. As a result, I heard him coming right from where one turns off the government road. So I went outside to ask him what was happening. He said that Elsabe Erasmus had telephoned and that they had need of a policeman to unlock a set of handcuffs. The young constable assumed that they must have apprehended an intruder on the farm, and that was why he had put on his light and siren.

“I convinced him that if they needed keys to *unlock* the handcuffs, then the suspect must already have been in custody. Hence, there was no need to rush, and he should stop for a little while and try some of the peach brandy I had distilled the previous week.

“He agreed with me and so we sat together in the *voorkamer* and discussed the merits of my latest distillation. That constable, as young as he may be, is a man who likes to consider things very carefully before passing judgement. It is also a peculiar tendency of peach brandy distilled in this particular part of the district, that one can never be quite certain about its quality until one has tasted a great many cups of it. Hence, it was well after midnight before we started to wonder why it had been Elsabe who had telephoned, instead of Gideon Erasmus.

“We reasoned that it must have been because Gideon was guarding the suspect. As such, he was probably getting tired and it would be inconsiderate of the constable to leave him any longer. So we drank a final *loopdop* and he set off again in the direction of Gideon Erasmus’s farm, with his blue light flashing and his siren blaring into the night.

“It was some time before I heard the sound of the police van descending the dirt road past my farm again. I didn’t even have to go out and wave to the constable to stop; he stopped immediately as he reached my gate. He walked straight into my *voorkamer* and poured himself half a cup of my peach brandy.



## An Anniversary, Shaded

“When I asked him what had happened, he started blushing like a girl. He said that he had seen a side of Gideon Erasmus that he did not want to see ever again. From the way he said it, I could tell that he was not speaking figuratively.

“He said that, to avoid the risk of being called out for another such incident, he had confiscated a pair of pink, fluffy handcuffs. He had them hanging from the belt of his police uniform. I did not have the heart to point out to him that his real police handcuffs were now missing.

“In the weeks that followed, I did not see very much of my neighbour Gideon Erasmus. On the few occasions that I did catch sight of him, he seemed to look more haggard every time. It was as if he didn’t see me, the way he stared absently into the middle distance.

“Then, one month to the day since the anniversary, I again heard the sound of a siren screaming its way up this farm road. The flashing lights that splashed their colour across the midnight *veld* were not blue on this occasion, but red. Out of respect I made no attempt to attract the attention of the ambulance driver.

“In my experience, when an ambulance makes its way somewhere in a huge rush, but then does not leave that place soon afterwards and rush off somewhere else, towards a hospital or such-like, it is always a bad sign. The longer the ambulance lingers at the site of its initial destination, the worse the chances are that one will be hearing any encouraging kind of news.

“And when the next sirens that one hears do not belong to the ambulance, but to a fleet of police cars making their way in the same direction that the ambulance followed, you can bet your *veldskoene* that there will be only bad news to follow.

“Such was the case in the early hours of the morning that followed that night. The sky in the direction of Rustenburg was turning pale already when van after van came bouncing up this road. Every single one of them announcing to the dawn the urgency of their business.

“As I was later to learn, the large number of vans that arrived had nothing to do with any kind of challenge that required lots of manpower. It was rather because every single one of our district officers wanted to see for himself the bizarre position that Gideon Erasmus had found himself in at the time of his passing. Evidently, the ambulance driver had not been as discreet as our young constable had been a month before.

“The morning sun was shining into my *voorkamer* when the whole procession made its way back down again. Even a mortuary van was in tow and I could see the driver shaking his head as he went.

“It was another whole day later in the mid-afternoon when once again I heard the sound of a siren approaching. It was the young constable. He tore past my gate without as much as a wave.

“On his way back down he drove very slowly, out of consideration for the comfort of Elsabe Erasmus, who was riding in the cage at the back. He stopped very briefly, to inform me of the findings from the autopsy.

*An Anniversary, Shaded*

“Through the grid of the cage I could see Elsabe Erasmus’s tender wrists shackled to the bar above the window with a pair of pink, fluffy handcuffs. Protruding from beneath the pink fluff on her left wrist I could see what looked like a very shiny, new gold watch.”

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# Duncan Aird

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Although he still earns his bread and butter in the corporate IT world, Duncan Aird yearned to write fiction from a young age. He now does so sporadically, squeezing this passion in between his other loves, namely his family, running, cycling, surfing and painting. He first spotted an advertisement for the SAWC Short Story competition in 2007/8. He

entered and achieved sufficient recognition to spur him on to put more of the stories he'd been nursing in his head to paper. Some were keepers, some were not! After that, Duncan entered the SAWC competition religiously every year. With some varied levels of success at first, he started to edge closer to the top 5 in the latter years, and was delighted to finally take top honours in 2015.

'An Anniversary, Shaded' was the winner of the 2015 South African Writers College Short Story Competition.

# REMBRANDT

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## Ian Sutherland

**I**n a twisted sense, it was fitting that Rodney Huntington-Down discovered the evidence on Valentine’s Night, that high feast of the greeting card industry and his wedding anniversary. Most fathers of a teenage son would consider it confirmation that their worst nightmare had materialised. The fact that his firstborn son wasn’t dead or missing was small comfort. He was as good as gone.

He stood in the darkened hallway, staring at the message on the phone with a sense of foreboding. Something was wrong.

“Rodney ...” His wife Shirley was waiting in the Mercedes. From twenty feet, her alto soprano pierced him. “We’re late. Again. You know what they’re like. Don’t do this to me.”

She was right, of course. Last year they’d arrived at Aubergine twenty minutes late to find that the *maître d’* had given their table to an Enrique

Iglesias lookalike in black denims, whose date had a strapless dress, bare shoulders and a honeybee tattoo at the base of her neck. She was of the age where the lack of make-up only enhanced her beauty. If only ...

Rodney waited for the smartphone's touchscreen to swim into focus, feeling both guilt and fear. If his son, James, discovered him prying on his correspondence, he'd explode. The boy still hadn't forgiven him for calling him a lost cause. All Rodney had managed to extract from him since then was a drip feed of grunts and scowls between silences. Why couldn't a sixteen-year-old listen to reason? What, after all, was the point of taking Art and Drama to Matric? No, he was doing the right thing. Why squander the opportunity in his finding the boy's cell phone without password protection? It might prove to be the long-sought window to his soul.

*Crnr Lower Main & Station.* At first he took the opening line at face value. It spelt the epicentre of Observatory's hip zone. Familiar territory. At forty-nine he still indulged in the occasional night out with the boys when Shirley consented. The pool lounge routine was a favourite: sucking a Carling Black Label while chalking a cue; the drawl; an unhurried shot.

*Tonite @9.* On the surface it appeared to be one of those 'get-togethers' that the twenty-first century teenager seemed to prefer to parties. But wait a minute: it didn't make sense: he'd overheard Shirley making lift arrangements for a rave in Upper Claremont. Which meant fetching the child past midnight. And worse, no drinking. Taxi driver and ATM: the

suburban parent's fate. Shirley was always quick to volunteer, as long as it meant not lifting a finger.

The blast of the Mercedes' horn almost caused him to drop the phone.

Silence.

"Rodney ..."

He knew he had sixty seconds. Her tempers were a precise science. He glanced at his watch, then up the stairway at the closed door. The boy was showering. Rodney lifted the phone. There was no time for scruples. Anyway, wasn't it a father's responsibility to check? He tried to stay hopeful. The message could be old. He scrolled down the Whatsapp timeline. No luck. The damnation was on in bits and bytes. *What u driving?* A message sent ten minutes earlier. His mood plunged.

*Bzzz.* The vibration of the phone in his palm was a live wire. The screen lit up. New message. Rodney swallowed, not sure he could follow through. What the hell. The first thing that he noticed was the sender's icon. It was the portrait of a bloodhound. Post-modern scheme, or comic? *Faizel.* Strange name: why was James mixing with one of them?

*Crunch.* His wife's footsteps on the gravel. The dragon was approaching. He recoiled from the door. Had he really once loved her?

*White Sentra.* Rodney's shoulders tensed. A cheap car in a dodgy neighbourhood. His dread had grown horns.

*Creak.* Rodney spun round and looked up the stairs. The phone dropped on the table. Silence. James must have finished his shower. There were only seconds left to find out what he needed.

*Bzzz.* Another message. Two words like an ice pick to his heart. *Deal's on.*

The boy appeared on the landing with a curious expression.

"James!" For once Rodney was relieved to hear his wife's voice. "What are you still doing in your underwear?" She glanced at her Cartier. "Isn't Charles fetching you now? Come, Rodney."

Once in the car, he leaned back in the driver's seat, clenching the steering wheel. He was bracing himself for the inevitable fight. Then he said, "James is doing drugs."

"Rodney Down—" Shirley used his last name in those rare moments when she was angry but struggled for words. "That's preposterous."

He removed a hand from the steering wheel and turned the radio down. "At least hear me out."

"What? You expect me to sit here and let you pronounce that James is one of those ... those ..."

"My dear ... please."

"Don't patronise me. If I really was your dear, I wouldn't need to cajole you into taking me to a restaurant on the one night of the year that



isn't all about you. What happened to those days when you bought me flowers?"

"They ended when you ticked me off for getting carnations instead of roses."

"We've been married twenty years, Rodney. You should know these things."

Rodney looked out the window at the row of roses lining the driveway. He noticed a dead flower head and wondered if Shirley had seen it. Happiness, their Malawian gardener, was risking his Christmas bonus. "I read his cell phone messages." He depressed the cigarette lighter. "It's there in black and white."

Shirley yanked at the door handle. "Shit. Why do you have to lock the doors before we even leave?"

"Because you used to insist on it." He placed a hand on her thigh.

"Don't touch me."

"You're my wife." The cigarette lighter popped. "Married couples are supposed to touch." He withdrew his hand. "Hear me out. Just this once."

"I'm through with listening to your conspiracy theories. Just because he'd rather paint than watch Super 15 ... Get over it. He's not a rugger bugger like you."

“That’s got nothing to do with it. I’ve watched every one of his hockey games this season. Which is more than can be said of you.”

Shirley’s scream rang in Rodney’s ears long after she’d slammed the front door behind her. Must be pissed, he reflected, to sacrifice Aubergine’s degustation menu. He pressed his gate remote and waited for the rumble of metal. The skeleton of a plan formed. He tapped the accelerator. Relief. He was almost looking forward to learning the truth.

Rodney’s view from the balcony of the pool hall was perfect. Though it was dusk, he could see all four corners of the intersection of Lower Main and Station Roads. He sank into his chair and reached for his Black Label. He was almost happy.

The white Nissan Sentra arrived at nine sharp. It double-parked at the far corner of the intersection. Rodney sipped at his second beer. He had time.

As a father, he should have recognised his son by his uniform – ripped black jeans, printed T-shirt and beret. Instead it was the swagger. He felt a familiar loathing. He’d given the kid everything: a stable home, the best school. And all he got in return was attitude and trouble.

James rapped on the Nissan’s roof and climbed in. Rodney downed his last inch of Black Label. The beer had taken the edge off his earlier anxiety,

but now a bolt of panic struck his gut. Things were happening too fast. He edged out of his chair and back inside the hall.

Rodney followed the Nissan left onto Malta Road and onto the Salt River Circle. Within half a mile, the neighbourhood had changed completely. Gone was the shabby chic grunge of Observatory. It was a land of hard industrial menace. When the Nissan disappeared into the gloom of London Road, Rodney thought of calling the police. But what was the point? The one time he'd dialled the emergency number it had rung for two minutes. They were useless, anyway. The lot of them.

Rodney decided to walk the last block. If there were gangs involved, he would rather be anonymous. Something caught his eye. He ducked behind a post. Scant cover, but it would have to do. He peeked around. The Nissan stood in the centre of a factory loading zone. The ground was littered with weeds and broken bottles. At the far end was a two-storey wall formed by the neighbouring warehouse.

Rodney almost didn't notice the lightless Toyota Corolla rolling down London Road. The only sound was a whirring of gears in neutral. The car's momentum was enough for it to cross the grating and pull up alongside the Nissan.

For an age, nothing happened. Was he imagining things? Could James and a mate just be looking for a spot to make out with their girlfriends? But there was no turning back now. He'd have to wait it out.

A wiry figure with a bandana stepped out of the Toyota. He sidled to the back of the car and opened the boot.

Two figures emerged from either side of the Nissan. One had dreadlocks to his waist. The other a beret. Rodney cupped his cell phone in his hand and typed 10111. He wasn't going to stand and watch his own flesh and blood get hurt in a drug deal gone wrong.

James peeled a wad of notes from his wallet and handed them over. After pocketing them, the figure with the bandana pulled out a coffin-like case from the Toyota's boot, placed it on the ground and flipped the lid.

Rodney's fingers flirted with his phone's call button, then waited. The glint of metal should have been enough. So why hadn't he called? Any half-decent father would have intervened by now. Even knowing his son was a delinquent.

James reached into the case, drew something out and placed it on the ground. The driver of the Nissan got out the car and joined the others. From their body language it was clear that the other two figures were deferring to James. Rodney realised with growing horror that his son was in charge. The stakes had just got higher.

He lifted his finger from his phone. Calling the police, on second thought, was lunacy. Though a minor, James's future would be as good as ruined if he was caught pushing *tik*. Rodney felt his pulse throb in his ear. He saw his family life, already brittle, fracture: his standing in the community, his business, ruined.

As if on cue, the three figures each grabbed one of the objects. In silhouette, they looked like fire extinguishers. Rodney's pulse slowed for the first time since he'd downed his last beer. Could there be another explanation?

The three figures made a dash for the wall, stopped and conferred. James pressed his wrist watch. A light glowed. He signalled the other two to start.

Splotches of red, white and blue criss-crossed the surface, seemingly at random. Finally the puzzle was solved. The fire extinguishers were canisters of spray paint. They were defacing the wall.

Later, Rodney would often wonder why he hadn't just left. Perhaps it was the macabre fascination of seeing a public building being vandalised first-hand. He'd never paused to observe the graffiti he passed on his rare visits to the urban edge. The work of scum, riff-raff, the faceless other.

It was over in ten minutes. High fives, low fives, a whooping. One of the boys pulled out a digital camera. They took turns posing in front of the flash-lit wall. And then they were gone.

As Rodney stood before the wall, he'd never felt more alone. A train rumbled by. A siren in the distance. Before him was an image that shredded his heart. It was a Rembrandt in perfect rendition. He wanted to run but couldn't. So he stared at a loving father, his likeness, and repentant son.

# Ian Sutherland

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It's a good thing that Ian can juggle, as that is what he does between his writing and his 'real' life. Ian's affair with writing wasn't love at first start. It began almost by accident

when his wife suggested he record the bedtime stories he told their children. Since then he has written a number of short stories, and a longer, romantic suspense story set against the backdrop of the global financial crisis. He is currently in his second year of the MA in Creative Writing program at UCT whilst working as a financial director in Cape Town. His dissertation is a historical thriller set in South Africa during the Second World War. As inspiration for his writing, Ian draws on his travels, and the experience of living and working in New York and Sydney. In what remains of his spare time, he enjoys mountain biking, surfing and tango.

'Rembrandt' was the runner-up of the 2015 South African Writers College Short Story Competition.

# THAT NIGHT

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Melita Vurden

**W**eird how the freezer only makes that noise at night, like something comes alive. I used to pretend it was the little people, tinier cousins of the oompa loompas. I imagined them busy in there with little ice picks and thermometers, managing the chill factor.

Though of course it was Ma who had to chip out the ice when the oompas went on leave, wherever it was they went. Surely somewhere tropical. Defrosting was always Ma's job, her hands all red like that, bowls of boiling water set inside the ice box, layers of newspaper for the weepy spills. Bread knife at the ready, to hack off those thick, resistant chunks. *Shhhit*. What a mess. You wouldn't catch me doing that. The cash box at the Ice Rink was bad enough, and when I wasn't trapped in there working, my job was being cool.

## That Night

It was morning, but not yet light, the sea breeze still warm from the night before. We'd only ended up at Suncoast because Jess and I needed the toilet and those were the cleanest we could think of. We pulled up to the drop-off zone and ran in, racing past a zombie gambler wobbling his way out, and the dark blue uniform of a slow sweeper trying hopelessly to shepherd dust, paper and popcorn kernels. Relieved, we exited just as the others entered the entertainment world, all looking a little worse for wear after the night we'd had. We wore our go-with-the-flow outfits. Casual-like. The guys we'd met, they were in Ray-Bans and BVDs, except this guy Randy in a blue and red Detroit vest, and some Mikey person in a powder-blue soccer shirt. Us girls were cute as usual in white vests and checked shorts. Carla in her fave black and pink pumps.

Who could have known that the concert would spiral into something bigger than the last Sunday session at the rink? Or that a bottle of Hennessy would spark the desire for more things nice, causing the moon to shine so brightly on '80's', the club too empty to charge an entrance fee but still keeping the faith with their 'buy one get one free' promo. All those 500 ml bottles. All that sweaty, liquid gold. We soon lost interest in the game on the big screen and found focus in the 3.2 megapixel window of a Sony Ericsson. Posing, posing, like we were promoters and getting paid. And now here we were at our local Las Vegas, hungry.



## That Night

Three hours earlier:

The guys were whispering. I'd never met them before so I figured they were soft spoken or suffered from some collective speech impediment, or maybe there was some secret headed in my direction. Spot on. Kevo called me aside and made a proposal I couldn't refuse. Well, whether it was the thrill of the proposal or the promise in his green eyes, I'm still not certain. Either way ...

A couple of pavements, a few turns, we entered a busy street. People were hanging around outside a club. Looked Jamaican.

First buy: *zol*.

I drove slowly. Sensed some action at the back. Voices. The rear window rolled down.

“Come with the Swazi, my man.”

The window rolled up. I drove away faster. What were we getting ourselves into here?

I still didn't know where I was going. I turned where they told me to. I wanted to turn back. Carla and Jess were busy exchanging numbers with the boys in the back seat.

Second buy: *ekies*.

Randy told me to switch off the car lights as we approached – things were going down. Mikey sat comfortably in the front seat, sipping on a drink

## That Night

he'd hustled out of '80's', pulling on a Winston. The rest were squashed in the back.

I drove slowly. It was dark. We were all looking out for a guy we didn't know. Then Randy's phone rang and he motioned for me to pull over. The back window rolled down. I checked the rear-view mirror. Had to make sure I wasn't being followed.

"Where's this *ou*?"

"How are we supposed to know who he is, huh?"

"Just relax. We'll know him when we see him."

"How, bra? How!"

"I have a not-so-good feeling about all this," Carla mumbled to Jess as she held her hand. I kept looking around. For what, I don't know. Police? This guy? Left-view mirror, right-view mirror, rear-view, left again. OK. My heart started to pound ... just a bit.

"I think we should go now ..." said Jess.

And right there, out of the washed-down peach building in front of us, came a dark, round, black figure. Busy on his phone. Head down.

"There's the *ou*," said Randy.

But how did he know? What kind of intuition were these boys drinking?

## That Night

Randy jumped out. We watched him. Was this what a stake-out felt like? He gave the dark man a heads-up. Street code for 'what kind'. They shook hands, then walked towards the car. WTF! Why was he bringing this guy here? They both squashed into the back. Carla hopped on Jess. The shadow man stared at her thighs.

“What kind, my man,” said Kevo. “Let’s see what you got.”

And he showed them a few tiny pills wrapped in a cream-soda green tissue.

“*Aweh!* Top stuff. How much for six?” asked Randy.

“One twenty.”

“Don’t fuck around. I’m from South Beach, my man. How much?”

“That’s it, *laaitie*.”

“Who the fuck you calling *laaitie*?”

And with that Randy punched him in the face so hard his head cracked the window. Veins of glass spread in an instant. Have you ever seen someone go from zero to red-eyed, vein-popping one-hundred-percent angry? Like *that*? His rage grew in the back seat. Punching. Swearing. Choking. Jess and Carla on top of one another. Screaming. Kevo trying to hold Randy, but all he held was the force of an elbow in his face. Swearing. Choking. Punching.

“Who’s yar *laaitie*, huh?” screamed Randy.

## That Night

“Drive, bra! Drive!” Mikey pushed me.

I panicked. I turned the car on. I was in a high-speed chase, except what was I chasing? I didn’t want to chase. I wanted to run!

“Turn down there,” yelled Mikey.

Really? You’re gonna navigate at a time like this?

Carla and Jess were screaming louder now. I glanced over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of glass veins turned red.

“Right, stop! Stop here!” Mikey instructed. “Throw him out! Throw him out!”

Kevo leaned over and yanked the door open. Carla and Jess were bawling their eyes out. Randy, breathing heavily, pushed the dark man out the car and slammed the door.

“Fuck this *ou*, I’m not his *laaitie!*” He sat there, still enraged. Staring ahead.

“What the fuck is wrong with you, bra?” Mikey shouted. “You wanna get us in shit?”

“*Haai*, no stories, bru. He won’t remember fuck all. I smashed him.”

“No, bru, there’s ladies in the car. You wrong!”

Silence.

## That Night

“Ay, sorry, everyone, but no one calls me a *laaitie*. No one. You still got the stash, Kevo?”

“Ay, fuck you and your cream sodas. Take them! Pop them yourself!”  
Kevo holding the left side of his face.

South Beach was even more of a labyrinth at night. Every street led to the next and the main streets had become one-ways or were under construction, plus Mikey could only give blurred directions, so I drove down this one and up that one, through every side road there was. We even took the pedestrian route, ignoring the signs.

Two turns later, a road block.

“Oh, fuck!”

Suddenly everyone sat up straight. Mikey stashed his bottle. I turned down the music. Another shadow to deal with.

Of course the officer pulled us over. A man wearing that particular dark blue isn't going to bypass the opportunity to tell a female driver to stop. I stopped. Rolled down the driver's window and stared at him. He stared back.

“Your lights?” he pointed out. “You know, usually people drive with their lights on in the dark.”

And I swung easily into action. “Oh, man! Sorry, sir! I just left the flat now-now. I was in such a hurry, I must've forgot. Stupid me!” (I was taken aback for a moment. Did I just say that?)

## That Night

“Have you been drinking?”

“*No! Nooo.*” I smiled a smile of total disbelief. (What a question! Did he just ask me that?)

“Your licence?” he said.

And like a good girl, I handed it over. He looked closely, poring over the small card. Looked back at me. “Very pretty.”

I smiled too broadly. Was he being serious?

He bent down slowly and peered into the quiet car. All of us perked up bright-eyed and bushy tailed, clean as a whistle.

He shook his head. “Kids!” And then he waved us on.

Suddenly set free, in the clear, the car exploded with sound. Whoops. Exclamations. “Yoh, bra! Fuck!” “You got the things?” Voices remixed and mashed up between us, the celebratory house music pumping.

*Can we take it slow?*

*There’s no need to rush nothing, baby,*

*If I let you take control*

*With the promise you won’t enslave me.*

*We could do this all alone.*

*‘Cos I know of a place we can go, if you*

*Let me set the tone,*

*I will show you my mind and my soul if you let me know,*

*Tasting like a paradise, where you can make believe.*

## That Night

*Anything is possible and all ain't what it seems.*

*Place your mind away in time and never disbelieve.*

*Life is like a fairytale and love is just a dream.*

I was still so quiet I could barely breathe. As we drove down to the beach, I found myself thinking. How sometimes you go through a hold-your-breath situation, you know, when your short life flashes before you? Clichéd or not, that's what happens. Sometimes, you don't think you're gonna make it home. And when you do, when everything's just fine after all, when you come out alive on the other side with a bunch of people you hardly know, then there's that click moment and you realise these are your bras. Your homies.

So what now, you wonder. Where's the move? I sat there a long time, wondering for a long time. And I'm still thinking about it now, right here in my little ice-cube cash box.

# Melita Vurden

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Born and swayed by Durban, I graduated this year with a Master of Arts degree (English Studies), specialising in Creative Writing. I have no previous publications, however, 'That Night' is my first submission on record and the

story itself is based on personal experience of the North Beach area while working at the Durban Ice Rink during my undergrad. I currently tutor English Studies and a writing skills module for engineers at the University of KwaZulu- Natal, and as a creative I co-write a blog titled 'Making Lines' which also features my photography of ballet dancers. My zest, however, remains in the completion of a short story cycle which aims at putting an often overlooked area of Durban, that is North Beach, on the (literary) map! I'm an observer, and enjoy writing status updates and journaling, noting the episodic, yet intriguing life in a city.

'That Night' was the literary fiction winner of the 2014 South African Writers College Short Story Competition.



# THE FIRST TIME

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Mike Forde

**I** was eighteen the first time, tall and gaunt after a sudden growth surge, at a stage when reconciliation between appearance and experience is impossible.

Singapore is a perfect venue for any time, let alone the first. Lush, tropical vegetation adorns the city. Bougainvillea in a spectrum of colour, frangipani and wild orchid compete for space among coconut palms and papaya trees. Hot, exotic and teeming with people, the island state is clean and tidy. Density demands a special discipline and littering is an offence; even a discarded cigarette-end draws a heavy fine. And while humidity squats in the streets like a beggar, the atmosphere is rich with its cocktail of cultures.

I arrived on a flight from London one July afternoon and was to stay overnight before taking a local connection to my father's home in Brunei.

## The First Time

Outside the airport terminal, the backdrop to the taxi rank was a grove of palm trees, their fronds shaped like gigantic fans.

“Where you wanna go?” said the taxi-driver.

“The Lion City Hotel.”

Whistling cheerfully, he lane-swapped his way along the colourful boulevard leading to downtown Singapore and when he stopped for a red light near the Tiger Balm Gardens, he caught my eye in the rear-view mirror. He grinned, revealing long, yellow, broken teeth, studded with gold caps. He tossed a glance over his shoulder; it included a conspiratorial wink.

“You want girl? I get for you. Very good. No problem.”

It took me some moments to absorb his proposition. The frames of reference that allow swift assimilation of and response to such a suggestion are generally unavailable to eighteen-year-olds. He put a somewhat different interpretation on my hesitation and assumed I required more information that he would have to define the offer and provide further descriptive stimuli.

“You like big girls?” He took both hands off the steering wheel and cupped them in front of his chest in a gesture that left no doubt about the bigness he had in mind. I sat in stunned silence, groping for the words with which to begin a sensible and urbane negotiation.

“You like Chinese girl?” His teeth showed again while he scanned my face in the mirror. “Maybe Indian girl? Thai? Filipina?”

## The First Time

I tried to unhinge my tongue from the roof of my mouth, where it had been stuck by an absence of saliva. Thoughts bounced wildly inside my head. Each new suggestion, each new vision of female beauty and availability, compounded the intensity of my desire.

“Bring them all,” I wanted to tell him, “and I’ll take my pick.”

But I said nothing.

He negotiated the traffic in Orchard Road with a scowl on his face. His bewilderment at what appeared to him to be my intransigence and his lack of salesmanship turned to impatience and he stamped ferociously on the accelerator. The cab sprang forward and I was obliged to cling onto the back of his seat. Perhaps it was because I accidentally touched his shoulder that he was struck by another idea.

“You like boys,” he shouted triumphantly. “I get very nice boy for you. Slim, with muscles. No problem.”

I knew that now above all, was the time to speak. Continued silence would imply the accuracy of his final notion, that a gender issue had been the cause of my reticence while I waited for him to produce the offer I wanted. A boy would be procured and later protestations would be smilingly and indulgently ignored. I managed a single but emphatic word.

“No.”

## The First Time

With the heavy-eyed acceptance of a man thoroughly acquainted with the rules of street-market bargaining and who knows when he has lost, he grimaced and shrugged.

“You don’t like? Okay, no problem.”

The drive to the hotel proceeded without further conversation and as soon as I was shown to my room, I took a shower to wash away the staleness after the long flight. A broad jet of water hissed out of the shower head and drummed rhythmically on the tiled floor. I sighed and bowed my head beneath the rush of spray and looked forlornly at my erection.

At the time my hero was James Bond. I had read all Fleming’s tales, had seen the movies more than once. I had marvelled at Bond’s exploits and his prowess with women in the Caribbean and the playgrounds of Europe. I often struck poses I felt were *Bond-ish* and frequently raised a laconic eyebrow. Sometimes I imagined the two of us together, on assignment, having a drink in a plush bar in an exotic corner of the world, the weight of our Berettas comforting beneath our left armpits. Singapore was such a setting.

After the shower I selected the clothes I’d bought for the trip: a pair of dark blue, lightweight slacks, black slip-on shoes, a pale blue shirt, knitted tie and an off-white cotton jacket. Surveying myself in the full-length mirror, I decided I looked not unlike Bond himself, despite the fact the shirt didn’t bear Bond’s favourite Sea Island label, the jacket wasn’t from Savile

## The First Time

Row and the small bulge in one of its pockets was a pack of duty-free Camels and not a gunmetal case containing hand-rolled Turkish cigarettes.

I took the lift to the top floor of the hotel, to the Panorama cocktail lounge that promised, according to a leaflet I found in my room, one of the finest views of Singapore.

In the subdued lighting of the lounge, the horseshoe shaped bar beckoned and I sat on a padded stool that would afford me a good vantage point from which to survey the scene.

“Something to drink, sir?” The barman wore a red shirt and black bow tie.

“An Americano,” I said. I thought of adding ‘stirred, not shaken’, but was ignorant of the cocktail’s constituents and their suitability for either. Bond had ordered one at a pavement café in Paris in *Casino Royale* and I liked the sound of it.

The barman stirred the red drink vigorously and left the cocktail stick in the glass he set before me. After a little of my own stirring, I pocketed the souvenir surreptitiously; it was not the kind of thing 007 would have done.

There were perhaps two dozen customers, mostly Chinese businessmen. Three middle-aged American matrons, with blue rinses and shrill voices, sat at the table nearest the bar. Waitresses flitted between the tables, flashing in and out of the spotlights shining from the ceiling, like butterflies.

## The First Time

A big, pot-bellied man with close-cropped hair took the stool beside me. He asked the barman for a Tiger beer and I felt him surveying me.

I considered an imaginary scenario: he was an agent provocateur, an assassin dispatched by Singapore's Mister Big after I'd been spotted at the airport. My hand slipped nearer the pistol that lay snug in its holster against my ribcage. How would it end? With the barrel of my Beretta hot and smoking and him sliding down the edge of the bar, slippery with his own blood? Or after a brawl, would my final blow send him sprawling over the Americans' table, spraying glasses of Daiquiri across the startled room?

Not so.

"Are ye British?" A Scottish accent.

"Yes."

"Aye." He nodded, as though he had known it. I would discover it was a word he frequently used.

"I hav'na been back since the war," he said.

"Oh?"

"Aye."

We lapsed into silence.

"Churchill," he said suddenly, his eyes glistening. "He was the greatest man our islands have produced and they kicked him out." His arm shot out across the bar and he gestured wildly at the rows of bottles behind it. "Aye,

he won the bloody war for us and they kicked him out of office. That's when I left; that's why I left."

"He was a great man," I said. "I remember watching his funeral on television at school. Morning classes were cancelled."

The Scot ordered another beer and we watched the barman fill his glass. "Churchill drank," he said. "He was a bottle-a-day man. Ran the war on Cognac." His big hand came out and slapped me roundly across the shoulder.

"You're a decent young feller. How old are ye? Twenty-two, twenty-three?"

"Twenty-two," I lied.

"Aye, I was your age when I first came to the East in search of adventure."

We sat for an hour and had a few more drinks. I switched to beer. With each successive round, the Scot seemed to sober up, and he told me the story of his life. He had captained a pleasure junk in Hong Kong, skippered a deep-sea trawler out of Manila. He had gone into business farming oysters in Port Moresby and while there had been briefly married to an Australian woman. Now he had a job with an oil company based in Hong Kong and was the master of a tug that towed oil rigs across the South China Sea.

"I'm on local leave," he said, "in between contracts. We've just taken a rig from Yokohama to Jakarta, a bloody great bastard of a rig. We went

through the teeth of a typhoon north of Luzon, right the way up that bitch's throat and into her eye." He drained his glass, licked away the froth of beer that clung to his moustache, and looked at his watch.

"Let's get some grub and some girls."

I remembered my regrets in the shower and readily agreed. He led the way out of the hotel, hailed a taxi and gave the driver directions in fluent Chinese.

They simply materialised. It seemed they came with the food the Scot had ordered, joining us at our table in the crowded restaurant: two delicately beautiful Chinese girls, honey-coloured skin, a trace of make-up above coal-black eyes, a pale red sheen on their lips. One of them smiled at me and filled my bowl.

The meal over, taxis were hailed and money changed hands.

"Aye, you're a decent young feller," the Scot said. "It's on me; enjoy yourself."

She followed me into my hotel room. I sat on one of the twin beds and tried to imagine what Bond would have done to elegantly begin proceedings, but Fleming's novels are not handbooks on sexual technique and I was at a loss.



## The First Time

“We take shower,” she said.

Obediently, I stood up.

“No, me first.” A last smile and she disappeared into the bathroom. I went to the window. The neon lights of Singapore trembled in the warmth of the night. I breathed deeply, trying to soothe my jangling nerves. She emerged wrapped in a towel that covered her breasts and fell to her knees.

“Your turn,” she said.

I stripped, throwing my clothes onto a chair in my haste. The shower was still running and for the second time that day I stood beneath the spray cooling my body. It was then that a thought, previously suppressed, presented itself: this was a set-up. At her suggestion I was under the shower, while in the bedroom she was robbing me. The thought matured rapidly: I’d been singled out by the Scot in the Panorama lounge. No wonder he’d seemed to sober up: he wasn’t drunk in the first place; it had all been an act, the initial approach of an expatriate pimp.

I catapulted out of the bathroom. She was hanging my clothes in the wardrobe. The room was bathed in the soft light of the bedside lamp.

“Finished already?” She smiled across the room at me.

“A towel,” I stammered.

Her smile broadened, dimples deep in the corners of her mouth, as she took off the towel.

## The First Time

“You’re cold. Let me dry you.”

Her English was careful and precise and so was the attention she paid me. If Bond had not been such an accomplished lover, he might have enjoyed being made love to the way I was. When she left in the morning, I was in love with her and held her hand in the lift.

Telling me a friend would pick her up, she scanned the parking area.

“There,” she pointed, and ran to a waiting taxi. The driver waved at me and grinned: long, yellow, broken teeth, studded with gold caps.

# Mike Forde

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I caught the writing bug a few years ago while on a 6-month trip to Vietnam. Since then I've dabbled in short stories, articles, even a novel. One success: I sold a travel piece, with photographs, about Saigon. 'The First Time' needed editing to meet the required word-count, which improved it. And this is indeed, the first time I've won a prize!

'The First Time' was the popular fiction winner of the 2014 South African Writers College Short Story Competition.

# FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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Carla Lever

**T**oday I told a woman she was going to die. It didn't feel like I expected.

She took it in, pupils dilating almost imperceptibly. But I saw. Seeing as it's my job to have nowhere else to look. "How long?" she asked.

That's it. Not 'how', 'why', 'are you sure?' Not anger, resentment, resignation. Relief? Quite possibly.

How long. As if I could tell her – climb in, past the skin, cleave the flesh, sink into the bone, get down and close with cellular precision. Talk to her cancer. Hang out, have a chat. "Hey, so how long are you thinking of keeping my good client around for?"

Here's a secret. The patient wants to know. You tell them. You tend to underestimate; live anything longer and they feel like a winner, a fighter. Anything less and the doctor's the loser. But sometimes? Sometimes you

simply make that shit up. To the best of your ability, of course, using estimates and scientific graphs and statistical methodology: rate of cancer spread vs. capability of vital organs, minus any underlying symptoms, minus the will to live. That's the real wild card. Wild. Nature, red in tooth and claw. Even here in the middle of Joburg. Especially here in the middle of Joburg.

In a certain socio-economic bracket, death seems an impossible abomination. Unfeasible. Improbable. Impolite. The decays and disgraces that cause those less equipped with private healthcare, medical aid and Mercs to lose control of their bowels, to spit, to spew, to seep, seem all the more outrageous inside those four Velvaglo lavender walls.

She had beautifully manicured hands. I noticed, because the first thing she did when she sat down was to pull a gold ring from her handbag. "I don't like to drive with it on," she said as she slipped it on the fourth finger of her left hand with practised ease. "It's like having a hijack beacon flashing from your steering wheel." Patients have foibles like that. It makes it trickier to simply see my job as cellular gambling. It makes it trickier to tell them that, on this hand, they're drawing dead.

Some of them go in for faith healing. Whether they do it with aromatherapy or Jesusology, it's all the same. They still die. Eventually. I had a patient once; he insisted that he didn't need the chemo, that God had cured him in his sleep. His family buried him with full mass – said it was a metaphorical healing. Said God had cleansed him of his sins not his cancer,

he just didn't understand the message properly. I think if there is a God, metaphor shouldn't really be his style. Straight up, I think it should be. "No, I'm not going to cure you; in fact you're going to die this time next week."

That's my job, though.

Don't think I'm callous. Death is pretty bizarre. I see it a lot and it never fails to make an impressive entrance. It's a character actor, sliding into any new role like a hand in a glove. It knows its lines. None of them are good for exits.

If death comes as the end, we doctors are here to wind the curtain. Which doesn't mean we get any sense of closure. Leave work at night, death leaves with you, sticking like an over-the-counter cough syrup and with the same cloying smell. Sometimes, when I get home, I don't touch the kids for the first bit.

Adults, like kids, want a complete narrative. Like kids, their first impulse is to ask 'why?' Unlike kids, they don't understand when they're not given answers. I guess it never goes away, the need for a narrative you can hold. One that's containable within the cardboard covers of a book, within two outstretched hands, within the limits of our attention span between supper and sleep.

I find my patient narratives harder to hold since I've become a mother. The stories I spin, the little analogies, the poignant but telling pauses have all become harder to get out. Because it's not living that people do ever after. And ever after can't be held between two covers, two hands, the time

between breakfast and bed. So I cook. I make things. I ... consume them. We can't outrun death, but we can make damn sure we're too tired to worry when it comes.

Right now I'm making vegetable biryani. After twelve years of Proudly South African braaing, Tim's turned veggie on me. It wasn't the ethics of the thing; he just said he couldn't take the taste anymore. Gone, just like that. Annoying, really, the pointlessness of it. I can't even claim he's morally evolved. He's just ... difficult. I sometimes have the unworthy thought that he did it solely to piss our friends off at parties, but then I remind myself that these things happen; our bodies have pulls and responses that we just can't control. It's as medically irrational and utterly real as pregnancy cravings, although the only thing he's delivering these days is a neat end-of-year financial report. Numbers tend to behave; subtracting, dividing people is much trickier.

It's not too bad, I suppose – I find vegetables rather beautiful. Have you ever looked at one under a microscope? A whole world of pattern, a structure so perfect you'd think there was a purpose bigger than just your dinner. Maybe there is. What we take in becomes part of us. Fair trade – we'll become part of it again soon enough.

Some of the vegetables, once cleaved, hold a light, veiny blush towards the centre. Chopping through them thoughtfully, the resistance satisfying but not straining at my wrist, I think of my day job. Of secret, cellular worlds. Of cleaving and cutting. I think of God, of stories, of dinner.

I wonder, sometimes, what the right thing is to do in the face of other adults, other kids. When your diagnosis contaminates something in them, is it always the right course of action to administer it clinically, fully, from cover to cover, beginning to end? Should one follow the journey from heart line to flat line in a linear fashion, or is there a better, a softer route? My mother always told me that if I couldn't think of something nice to say, I should keep quiet. Somehow I don't think those rules apply anymore, but I can't be sure. Perhaps when there's a harsh home truth to be told, the art is in the right telling. You can't completely inoculate people against a bad truth, but you can prescribe a dose of alternative perception. Let's call it my experimental therapy. Maybe that's even crueller, in the long run. But then maybe successful policy has to be cruel to be effective.

You know there's the one kilogram rule, right? Babies under a kilogram in public hospitals aren't given drugs. Limited stock, see? Government issue rules. A fine tradition of doing things like that, us humans. Exposure therapy. Stick a kid on a hillside and come back in the morning. Problem solved, bru.

... Poor people's babies, I mean. Not you and me: we're stuck with our little terrors. We get the privilege of knowing we're going to die. In a country where so many need so much, doing the right thing becomes a measurable matter of grams. I guess that works when you're number crunching. It's not so great when the number in front of you is just one and it's up.



You can't show it. Fear, I mean. Forget dogs. Patients – now they can sniff fear. It's about acting, right? Acting you know what's wrong, acting you know the best way to fix it, acting you're not scared shitless by the impossible advance of the thing inside them. Acting's a decent profession, isn't it? People get awards for it and stuff.

I guess it comes down to choosing your role more carefully. I'd like to choose mine – pick who I'm going to be. Maybe control is picking who you're going to be in the face of this ... advance. Picking how you face things, even if just while you're alone. Maybe doing the right thing is just an issue of correct casting.

The first time I saw a terminal patient in Baraguana was also the first time I saw a patient. My hands shook. Which was a problem, you know, because he didn't speak very good English, so that's what he was looking at. As I felt his glands and filled out the report, his eyes never left my hands. Was he wondering what I was doing? Or maybe he was looking at my wedding ring. Maybe he was weighing up how much time he had to buy a better state of health care.

Her hands were smooth. Today, I mean. Smooth, like she'd just been for a really good manicure – like she went for manicures regularly. I couldn't stop looking at them. I was mesmerised by her hands that spoke of nothing but a blank white page, on which was inscribed a spouse, in which was inscribed the DNA of a very comfortable death.

I'm so tired of death. So, so tired. Maybe I should have another baby. Maybe I should make another biryani. Maybe I should tell you to fuck off out of my kitchen.

... That wasn't very nice. I'm sorry. It's just that we're nearing the end and I always get twitchy at endings. So here's biryani. Something you can hold between your two hands, something to fill the space between the pages of a book, to fill the time before the flat line. Eat it. Eat it now.

I'm sorry, I need a drink. I know I shouldn't now I'm on the tablets. Give my body a fighting chance, Tim says. Tim doesn't say much. I say a lot of things. I've been saying a lot of things. I don't know about the rest of them, but it's the right thing to do, for me.

The biryani's done now. It's all coming to an end. How funny to know that something you spend time making into one perfect form has to be broken down to be enjoyed. But that's right. I guess there's always a right time for the breaking. You've gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em. Know when to walk away, know when to run. Johnny Cash, that. Everyone remembers Kenny Rogers, but Johnny did it first. Who's the author, the protagonist? Maybe what we choose to remember comes out of what we choose to like best.

I choose to like the power of the telling best. Just for now, for while I'm alone. I choose a white coat, not a blue split gown. I choose to tell the story I see play out in my audience, not the one I feel playing out in my bones.

Tim partly chose our narrative at home, too. “Hey – it’s going to be OK. I’ve told the kids you’re just feeling a bit under the weather. No mention of the C word ‘round here! Doctor says we’ve still got some time. Here’s to time!”

Sometimes he feels my forehead with what I can only diagnose as mechanical tenderness. I think he doesn’t want to expend emotion yet. But then frugality in an accountant is invariably considered a virtue. I’m a stay-at-home mom; I appreciate a bit of extravagant emotional spend. When we have to go in to the doctor tomorrow, it will be the only time I will catch Tim looking at me anxiously. He will look to me to cover the gap, look like a man who’s lost the plot. For my doctor, I would imagine, there will be nowhere else to look. It is her job to look at endings; ours to avoid them. Me? I will look at them both blankly, like a smooth, otherwise empty page on which is written a spouse, a family, a very comfortable death.

What is the right thing to do, to say? I already know what I will say to myself. I will say stop. Turn the page. Turn to that back one, the blank one that you know is coming. To the last one, glued to the cardboard, glued to the cover. Look. Use your hands. Your hands, use your beautiful hands.

# Carla Lever

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Carla is a Capetonian writer, researcher and academic. In 2016, she completed her PhD at the University of Sydney, looking at the centrality of embodied practice to national identity in South Africa. She currently works as the Communications Manager for the Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice at UCT, while pursuing postdoctoral research about urban public space.

'Food for Thought' was the winner of the 2013 South African Writers College Short Story Competition.

# WHOLESALE

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Liam Kruger

**M**y neighbour goes to the supermarket pretty regularly, because it's there she sometimes sees the face of God. It's a new model – some no-name Mithras counterfeit, I think – but there's a pretty loyal cult building up behind it. Some marketing kids out of a think tank in Istanbul did their research, and targeted single working women in the city centre as their core faithful demographic. They wouldn't be the first.

I found her wandering the more distant aisles, the ones they tend to put in there just for show – you know, the ones with the trampolines and gardening equipment, the treadmills from a bygone era and luggage made of anything other than stainless steel.

“Are you lost, maybe?” I asked her, because I didn't want to tell her she looked doped up. “Narcotics are in the south wing.”

But she just turned that wall-eyed face of hers into a smile, and said: “No, I’m good, thanks. Just looking for Gracchus.”

It’s a neat set-up. There was some connection that convinced the church to partner up with the sales reps at a couple of supermarket branches. See the face of Gracchus and 50% off your purchase. I’ll tell you one thing, they’ve poured a lot of money into getting their deus ex machina just right; nobody’s been struck dead in the middle of a grocery list, which was a problem when Rome was still a player, and nobody’s running around with a fake stigmata either, trying to force a discount on their smoked stem cells. When people see the Divine Gracchus in the arrangement of canned tofu, they get all warm and ecstatic, post-coital and beneficent. Worst case scenario, there’s a little temporary glossolalia and relief from scrofula. All of which is hard to fake in Aisle 5.

I wasn’t surprised by the religion. For as long as I’d known her, she’d been a tourist, flitting between Militant Zen, Orthodox Sapphism and Crust Punk Buddhism without a backwards glance, sticking around only so long as their recruitment coupons got her free parking.

Which isn’t to say she was unfaithful – I mean, you can’t be. The recruitment guys can spot an atheist by their shoes. And when she was trying out Redundamentalism, you could hear her white noise speakers blasting from a block away. The new model can do three blocks. And I’m pretty sure she was planning to sacrifice me to Yog-Sothoth that time she

came over with a basket of wine coolers and a fibre-glass hunting knife. She meant it when she put her name down on the insurance forms.

I mean, I think she was just looking for the god that was right for her - and was willing to devote herself to the wrong one until hers came along. Some people are like that: can't get out of bed in the morning if they don't have somebody to thank for the bed, or the morning. I don't think more than a week went by without her being attached to one sect or another.

So I was a little surprised when she let it drop that she'd exceeded the trial period and given up her credit card details to the Church of the Divine Gracchus (Ltd).

I know all this because she had a habit of giving my address to recruiters, instead of her own. I get a small bible's worth of parables, commandments, heresies and tickets to orgies every couple of days.

Nothing on Gracchus, though. After the first week she made sure those went straight to her place; devout-eyes-only, from Gracchus with love.

And, well - I don't know, I'm Vanilla Catholic, alright? Not a hell of a lot of excitement going down at my end. Some of her pamphlets were kind of fun, if you knew better than to show up at the orgy beaches (and boy, did I know better), and the night with the wine coolers hadn't been so bad, stitches notwithstanding. Figured it probably couldn't hurt to do a little digging - caveat fidelis and all that, right?

So I started tailing her to the supermarket. I was worried she'd notice – I mean, we took the same tram from the same stop to the same building – but she was so busy psyching herself out for a brush with the divine, I could've been tugging at her sleeve and offering her discount fare on pilgrimages, and she wouldn't have batted an eyelid. Crowds parted for her, social advertising went mute, recruiters looked the other way; she walked with the calm and speed of the Faithful and it was a bitch keeping up with her.

It took seven visits, in the space of about two days; I thought she just went with the vespers, but on the second night I figured out that she'd stopped sleeping and was slipping off with the midnight crowd to look for Gracchus under the fluorescents.

At this point I'd started to acquire some qualms – I mean, if you go outdoors in the night, the newscasters don't even pretend to be outraged about the state of your corpse. You were asking for it.

But, you know, I hadn't had much sleep. And she seemed to carry it off okay. I followed her, out into the dark with its youths and its horrors, and so long as I stayed closed behind her, and more or less copied her weird, rictus expression, I didn't feel too threatened. I made it to the supermarket just a few paces behind her, sweating but unmolested by the city's indifference.

She started her usual route – along the rows of camping goods and dog food, imitation meats and drugs. I'd done this six times before, so I sort of



zoned out and tramped behind her, mostly just surprised at not being dead yet. It was when we were in the games aisle – approaching a stack of Huxley’s All-Ages Suicide Kits – that it happened. She fell to the ground, ululating, her limbs jerking in some kind of epileptic dance, her changed voice singing something unfamiliar to me; one or two other worshippers attracted by the sound rushed over and immediately collapsed too, joining her in whatever ritual this was, which I hadn’t read the catalogue for. I stared hard at the shelves around me, trying to figure out where their sudden divine puppetry was coming from.

Not a damned thing. I stood around like an idiot in Aisle 6 at midnight, waiting for my neighbour to come out of it, so I could follow her home without getting myself murdered. Worst part is she used her 50% discount to buy a stick of gum, the minimum required purchase for leaving the place. Did it with a smile.

I mean – she just looked so smug walking out past the security barrier. And there I was, out in the middle of the night without a revelation to call my own.

It’s a miracle I waited as long as I did before shoving her in front of the tram.

Anyway. Sorry about that Father; it’s been three weeks since my last confession. Do you take credit cards?

# Liam Kruger

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Liam Kruger has had award-winning stories, essays, and poetry in a range of online and print journals, including *The Rumpus*, *Brittlepaper*, *3AM*, and *Prufrock*. Some of that writing's ended up in anthologies like *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Writers* (Storytime Press), *The Ghost-Eater and Other Stories* (Umuzi), and *Bloody Satisfied* (Burnet Media).

He currently resides in the American midwest; occasionally he complains about that @liamkruger

'Wholesale' was the runner-up of the 2013 South African Writers College Short Story Competition.

