

EDITED BY
JOANNE HICHENS

DIE

LAUGHING.

Short.
Sharp. Stories

ADULTS ONLY

WINNER OF
2016 NIHSS
AWARD

STORIES OF WIT,
SATIRE AND HUMOUR.

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Burnet Media



Ozzie was overcome by a deep sense of relief when he reached his Oranjezicht home. Below him the Molteno Reservoir had turned to a pane of pink glass. The city was stretched out in front of his house. It felt good to be home. He unlocked the front door and trudged towards his bedroom. His footsteps echoed over the Oregon floorboards. The house felt barren, as if its soul had departed a long time ago. Ronit's clothes were still hanging in her wardrobe. Ozzie had left everything as it was. He could hear the ticking of her wristwatch on his bedside table. He took the painting and hung it carefully above the headboard of his bed, making small adjustments to its position.

He stared at Saskia van Uylenburgh for some time, marveling at her enigmatic gaze that held a secret he would never know. He thought of his life, his many infidelities and the thirty-five years he had shared with Ronit, and the countless other lovers. He closed his eyes and fell into a dreamless sleep for the first time in many months.

*

The blue Delftware bowl was filling with olive pits. Cronje couldn't help himself, they tasted of summer, and their salty aftertaste hinted of long lost afternoons of ocean spray and sandy socks. He sucked the last olive between pursed lips, wiped his fingers on a damp tea towel and looked at the Rembrandt he'd placed on a small artist's easel. Saskia's milky thighs prompted a sigh of delight, luring his mind's hand to darker territories. He released a throatful of laughter, took a deep breath and felt something no larger than an olive pit catch. Cronje coughed hard, hammering at his chest as an invisible belt tightened around his throat. A mad swipe unsteadied the easel. It tottered and then Saskia crashed to the floor, followed by Cronje. The painting fell inches from Cronje's twisted face, and for a fraction, the pit that had grown to a boulder in his throat was gone as his eyes caught the beauty of Saskia's form.

Death paused as Cronje marveled one last time at the symphony of paint that had become so much more than fantasy. Minutes later his face was the colour of the shattered porcelain bowl. Two days later a fastidious policeman with a bad hip would count thirty-three olive pits besides Cronje's stiffened body.



ANGEL HEART

KOBUS MOOLMAN

KOBUS MOOLMAN is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of the Western Cape. He has published seven collections of poetry and two collections of plays, and has edited an anthology of poetry, prose and art by South African writers living with disabilities. He has won numerous awards, including the 2015 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry, the 2013 European Union Sol Plaatje Award for Poetry, the PANSAs award (Performing Arts Network of South Africa) for scriptwriting, and the Ingrid Jonker award. In 2013 he was the Mellon Writer in Residence for three months at Rhodes University. He has presented his work at literary festivals in South Africa, Ireland and Canada. He is currently working on his first collection of short stories, which will include *Angel Heart*.

"Humour is, for me, difficult to write," says Kobus. "I personally have a very odd and unconventional sense of humour. I find Dostoyevsky and Beckett very funny. And I often laugh out loud when I realise I'm going to be doing something terrible to a character."

Of *Angel Heart* he writes, "This surprised me. I didn't plan to write something funny. I actually wanted to write a spiritual piece about Jesus, and the next thing I knew he was eating candyfloss and wearing a baseball cap on backwards, and was actually a reluctant voyeur!"

Find Kobus at www.kobusmoolman.com

JESUS WOKE ME UP THE other night. He had something on his mind. It had been bugging him for a long time and he wanted to get it off his chest, he said. Make a clean breast of it like. Etc.

He was eating candyfloss. Spookasem Pa called it – in Afrikaans. Ghost-breath. White or baby-pink it didn't matter, Jesus said. Long as it wasn't green. The green just didn't go. Go with what, I wanted to know. My Roman sandals, he said and laughed.

Jesus woke me up by whispering the same word over and over in my ear.

"Cardiomyopathy. Cardiomyopathy."

Then he sat down on the end of my single bed and began shoving handfuls of that sweet sticky substance into his mouth.

Licking his fingers that had become sticky.

Licking the corners of his mouth that had turned red. With his blood-red tongue.

*

Jesus was pretty plain-looking to be honest. You'd walk right past him in the supermarket and never know who he was. The perfect PI. Or undercover agent. In the movies they call them spooks. Jesus is the perfect spook. LOL.

When he woke me up that night. In the middle of the night. He was wearing a tracksuit and large red basketball sneakers. All Stars. I don't think they were original. But I didn't hold that against him. (A matter of economics, I thought.) And a baseball cap on backwards.

His voice was delicious. It tasted like Saturday afternoons with freshly cut grass. Like a big fat black koki pen.

"Cardiomyopathy. Cardiomyopathy," he whispered in my ear.

Breath of a bird.

Breath of 95 octane.

I thought I was dreaming.

I went to the bathroom. Tried to have a piss. Just a few drops. Looked at my face in the mirror. The lines. The lines and cracks. Scratches and red blotches. When I came back Jesus was still there. On the end of my old pine bed. Left leg over right. Leaning back against the bedroom wall. Real as hell. And just as ordinary.

"Did you wash your hands?" he asked.

"Of course," I lied.

Lying came naturally to me. As naturally as farting. Ever since I was small, way back in Boom Street, next to the sheds and the shunting yard, I'd always found lying easier than telling the truth. Even if the truth was ordinary and harmless. Maybe I should say especially. Especially if the truth was harmless and ordinary.

I sat down on the bed. It was the only furniture in the room. That and a heavy old wardrobe in imbuia. All that I had left of growing up in boring old Boom Street. A wardrobe with bugger all inside except dust and blackness and the smell of mothballs.

And anyway, there was nothing left in my life to hang up inside it.

Jesus was eating candyfloss by the handful. And he didn't offer me any. I'm not complaining. I can't stand the stuff. But how the hell do you turn down candyfloss offered to you by Jesus with his big sticky brown hand?

Tell me that.

*

When I was a kid. I'm not sure how old. We went to the Royal Show. Our once a year official family outing. Ma, Pa, my little sister, Jeanie, and me. I liked going those days. Even if it meant I had to leave the little room I shared with Jeanie and face the eyes of the world.

The Show would be too much for me now though. All that walking. And standing. Anyway. It was bearable then. When I was a kid. Not sure how old. My pins were stronger then. That's what he called them. Mr Botha. "Why you always so slow, boy? Can't you move those bladdy pins of yours any faster, hey?" Anyway. What did we do? We checked

out the rabbits and the chickens, the sheep judging, the dog trials, the farm implements, craft hall, food stands, on and on, the displays of electrical ware on special offer, the bathroom ware on special offer, wooden toilet seats and wooden toilet roll holders, furniture at low prices, beds, chairs, dining room suites, mirrors, lights, Tupperware, you name it, the whole fucking lot discounted, special offer, for one week only. And then I got lost. One minute they were there. Ma, Pa, baby Jeanie and me. Next minute. Poof. They were gone. Into thin air. I was standing looking up at a man inside a red and white striped cart who was selling toffee apples and candyfloss and fudge in little packets with three large squares in each packet. And I didn't have a cent on me. And nobody was holding my hand anymore. And big boys don't cry Pa always said.

Not sure what the point of that story was.

Anyway.

Back to Jesus.

*

"There's something I got to get off my chest, son. You don't mind if I call you son, do you? I know we're not related. But I'm using it in the extended sense. Like a big happy family. Anyway. There's something that's been bugging me for a while. I've been meaning to speak to you about it. But somehow the right opportunity never presented itself. And time just went by. You know how it is. So much to do. Anyway. I knew if I didn't make the effort. Do something about it. Nothing would happen. And ... I'd regret it later. Because ... Well, just because. So that's why I'm here. Hope I didn't startle you."

"It's cool," I said. Though it wasn't. I knew something was up. I could feel it with the hairs on the back of my clenched hands. In the pit of my empty stomach. Like a big fat fart.

"Cool," he repeated. As if he was trying out the word for the first time. "Anyway. So here goes. I'll just dive right in if that's okay with you?"

"No probs."

"Well - umm - the whole thing's a bit awkward. Anyway. It goes like this."

"I'm listening."

"Okay." He took a deep breath.

"I'm waiting."

"Okay," he repeated. Then, "You remember that girl?"

I nearly fell off the bed.

"Which one? You got to be a bit more specific here. I was a popular guy, you know. Once. In my heyday. Way back – The life and soul of the party everyone used to say. Ja ... Okay. I'll admit things have slipped a bit. Judging from present circumstances and all ... I know. But I'll be back in the saddle soon –"

"Bunty I think her name was. Yes. Bunty."

KA-BAM!

I walked straight into that one.

I tried to act all cool like. Like I didn't have mud on my knees and gravel in the palms of my hands. Like I was still Mr Super-Kool and Super-Kwik. The man of the street. In his zooty suit and his shiny shoes. The man of the street with an answer for everything at the snap of his fingers.

Even if he had absolutely bugger all.

Especially if he had absolutely bugger all.

"Maybe. I'm not sure. Like I said. Look ... I was a popular guy. Once upon a time ... In my heyday ... The life and soul of the party ... But that was a helluva long time ago. The old memory's not as good as it used to be – not so good with names anymore."

*

It wasn't that long ago. A couple of years maybe. Five max. I still remember what she tasted like. The taste of her on my fingers. That I kept licking for weeks afterwards. Like the cows I'd seen once as a kid. On TV. Licking the rocks for the sea salt. What's that stupid KFC by-line? Some kid wrote it on my cast way back at school. Standard five. Gert Maritz Primary. I think it was Koos. I'm sure it was him. Koos the big fat Doos with no neck. Finger lickin' good he wrote. I scratched it out with a nail afterwards. Scratched the dirty white plaster of Paris nearly right down to the bandage.

Wish I hadn't thought of that stupid slogan now. Finger lickin' – wish

I could take it back. 'Cause that's not how I ever thought of Bunty.

Even if she was salty. And she was sweet and sour and sticky. All rolled into one. Like a big juicy vetkoek. Or a dripping koeksuster. All down your chin and down your thumb and your index finger. Head to toe and from back to front all one sticky jerking trembling –

"Look – this is awkward for both of us. I mean – I wasn't spying. I want you to know that. Really. I'd have preferred not to have seen or heard a thing. But I did. And I do. That's my problem. It's always been my problem. I see and hear and know too much. And then what can I do about it, hey? Tell me. I don't know what to do with everything I know. Help me."

I felt sorry for him then, I'll admit. All that knowledge pouring in every day. Through every holy orifice in his body. Pouring in every second for how many thousands and thousands of years? More bytes of information crammed into his little brain than there are grains of sand on the shore. And no way at all to ignore it or delete any of it.

That's hectic shit, I'll admit.

But I was also poep-scared. I mean ...

How much did he know?

"Anyway. So I just want to make a clean breast of it," he continued. "Get it all out in the open, you know. Between you and me. So you didn't think I was hiding something from you. What's that saying? Confession purifies the soul. Yes. I think that's it. I just wanted to tell you – I'm sorry – To let you know – I know everything. Everything that happened ..."

And just like that I was a fish with no innards. A fish with no feelings. Just glass all the way through. And cold cold eyes.

"I like that picture. Where'd you get it?" he suddenly asked.

He wasn't looking at me. He was staring at that cheap-shit picture I had on the wall. I'd picked it up long ago in a pawn shop downtown. When I worked in that Tattersalls. Can you imagine? Me trying to count and remember all at the same time. I barely lasted a month. Anyway. There was something about it that fascinated me. That old picture. The way you kept seeing different things every time you looked at it. Like only recently. Maybe a few weeks ago. I noticed the little figure in the bottom right hand corner disappearing into the sea. Just his pale white legs sticking out of the green water. The silent splash. Cool.

"I like it. Where'd you get it?" Jesus asked. "I like the way nobody notices anything. Nobody cares. I like that. Even the animals just carry on doing what animals do. And all the time that kid has just fallen out of the sky."

Is that what happened?

"Anyway – look – so I know you don't want to talk about it. I know you've been trying to forget about it all this time."

But things like that you don't ever forget. Do you? Things like Bunty. With her short hair and her flat chest and her swollen feet and ankles. Bunty, shaking and jerking and panting on the baby-pink motel sheet. What the hell does a man do to forget something like that? That kind of crazy mad freedom. That kind of deliriousness. Tell me. How does a man just carry on with his boring old life afterwards without some part of him looking back all the time? Some part inside him turned to salt and stuck there in the past.

Like a LP on the old gramophone in the lounge. Me lying on the cold linoleum. Listening to the Bee Gees over and over:

When I was small

And Christmas trees were tall ...

Bunty! Bunty!

What did you do to me, hey? Way back in boring old Boom Street.

What did you do to me to make me do to you?

That night.

"So that's what I wanted to talk to you about," Jesus said. And his large hands, his long thin fingers, moved through the air waving the empty plastic packet. Moved slowly. Like an empty packet waving on a breeze. And they were almost smiling. But not smiling. More like embarrassed. Because he was disappointed. Embarrassed because I had seen that he was disappointed. Now that he had eaten up all the candyfloss.

"So I just wanted to tell you I was there. I saw. I heard. I was so close I even smelled her. I wanted to tell you so you wouldn't have to keep trying to forget. Trying to be silent all the time. Because now somebody else in the world knows. And you know what they say. A burden is always lighter if it's shared ..."

*

There's an old photograph somewhere. Black and white. Dog-eared. Me at one of my birthday parties. I'm maybe five. Six. Thereabouts. Dressed in a cowboy suit. You know, the long-sleeved button-down shirt, little gun in its holster, slouch hat. (I think the hat belonged to Oupa. It was greasy on the inside. And smelled of rum and maple tobacco.) I'm grinning from ear to ear. For once I'm not in plaster. I'm standing in front of a cake. One of Ma's vanilla sponge cakes. And there beside me. As usual. In the little pink dress. That's Bunty.

*

She lived in the house opposite. With her mother, her father, a rat in a cage, called Schulz, and an old Ford Escort that backfired every bladdy morning when her pa drove off to the shunting yards. And most important of all, a little heart that didn't know how to do its job properly. An only child in a one-bedroom corrugated iron house with sheets across the windows and bricks all along the edge of the empty flower beds.

And she gave me an ultimatum. Marry me. Or eat me.

I chose marriage.

Then she moved away. And I never thought I'd see her again.

*

A memory: Winter. Dry brown grass. The smell of burning garden refuse. Hadedahs on the roof and Ma's klipsop on the stove. Pa called it that because everything went into it except stones. Or perhaps because everything went into it *including* stones. I'm not sure. But that's me there sitting at the formica kitchen table in my favourite purple plastic helmet. And that's Bunty. Her tiny hand open. As I share out the little musk sweets she liked so much. Angel Hearts. One for you. One for me.

For you.

For me.

For you.

For you and me.

You can do to me

whatever you want to do.

That's what she said. Just like that. True's Bob. In the other memory. The one that doesn't know how to go away. The one turned to salt that Jesus was referring to. The Night in Question. That's what they always said in those radio programmes I used to listen to late at night in the cramped bedroom after little Jeanie had fallen asleep, her thumb in her mouth. On my portable transistor radio. The one I got after my big operation. Way back when. When I was a good boy. Springbok radio. Remember? *High Adventure*. And *Squad Cars*. *Consider Your Verdict*. So where were you on the Night in Question, Mr Van der Merwe? I was with the deceased, your Honour. And what were you and the deceased doing, Mr Van der Merwe? On the Night in Question. I can't quite say, your Honour. Then I repeat, What were you and the deceased doing, Mr Van der Merwe? We were eating Angel Hearts, your Honour. One Heart for you ...

*

Eat me.

Eat me quickly. Before I go stale.

Before I grow old and cold and my blood is too weak to reach my heart.

And my heart stops beating for you.

Eat me, she said.

*

I don't know how. But she found me. On Facebook.

She inboxed me. Hey, stranger, I see we're in the same city. Wanna meet up later?

It was a new century. New country. New bladdy everything in the beginning. Except the same old me. Inside and out. All the time. Same old dirty tricks and feeble lines that were getting more stale and tired by the night. Nights staggering home, vomit on my shirt and my trousers pissed. Nights when the fresh little cherries in their little crop tops and skirts just smiled at me and turned away and rolled their painted eyes at each other. Like I was their dirty old grandpa.

I got there first.

SAFE OFF-STREET PARKING

COLOUR TELEVISION

COMPLIMENTARY TEA/COFFEE

I picked up a key at the reception, on a string with a heavy wooden block.

The room smelled musty. Like wet towels. I sat on the big bed and waited. I was always early for everything. Because I was so slow. Rather wait than rush, I argued. I held my hand up to my mouth and smelled my breath. Pilchards in tomato sauce. Chili flavour.

Then suddenly she was there. My angel in hot pants with a shiny little tank top stretched over her swollen stomach. JUST DO IT across her flat chest. An oxygen cylinder on wheels bumping along behind her.

"The doctors want me to have a heart transplant," she said. "But I said they can go fuck themselves. I'm not having somebody else's heart in my chest that hasn't beaten its whole life just for you."

That's when I had to tell her. I mean she was going to find out anyway. That I couldn't do it anymore. That it didn't work anymore. Down there. Where it really mattered. And hadn't for a bladdy long time.

But she just laughed. And unhitched herself from her pump.

I don't know if she was the cream and I was the cat. Or the other way round. It didn't really matter. We lapped all night at the bowl of our bodies until our tongues were raw.

Afterwards, when the first birds started up, she opened her bag and took out a packet of the little musk sweets she liked so much.

"One for you. And one for me. Eat me! Eat me now! Quickly! Quick! Before I grow cold."

*

"Okay, okay. I've had enough!" I was tired. I could feel the cold coming up off the floor. Up my pins. There was no way I'd get back to sleep after this. With the whole of me so cold, so cold no firebox, no furnace, no electric chair would ever warm me up.

"So what happens now?" I said.

"Nothing," Jesus said. "I've said what I wanted to say. That's it. The rest is up to you."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means whatever you want it to mean. Honestly. This isn't about you. Or what you did. It's about me. I came to get something off my chest. So that you didn't think I was perverted or something. You know. Like a voyeur. Because I knew that you knew that I knew everything. And so if I didn't say something to you – about what I knew – then you'd think I was ... well, weird."

"I didn't know – that you knew, I mean. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but to be honest I didn't even think about you."

That wasn't true. And Jesus knew that. But it felt quite liberating lying to him. When both of us knew it was a lie. And knew that the other knew. It somehow made it necessary. Like some special type of manners. Like what you do with your knife and your fork afterwards. After you've licked the plate clean. Licked your fingers too.

"Okay. But aren't you going to – you know – like – tell me it's going to be okay ..."

"You mean, forgive you?"

"Ja, ja. That's what I mean. Forgive me."

"I can't. It's not up to me."

"But I thought you were Jesus!"

"I am. But I don't work miracles."

"What do you do then?"

"I just look. I listen. I remember. That's all. I can't do any more than that. That's my problem."

"And Bunty?"

"What about her?"

I didn't know how to say it. What does one say? How does one say it? I don't know if there are any words in any language on the face of this flat earth to explain what I did when her oxygen ran out.

Because – if I have to tell the truth just once in my life – my appetite for her was too timid and self-conscious for what she demanded. I could no more gouge her heart out and eat it, all shuddering and red, than I could run around the block. For in the end I was made of fish eyes and salt. Not fire and flooding. Like her.

"The op was a success," Jesus said. "She's living in Benoni now."

Then he got up. He took out his slim phone from his tracksuit pants. It was too dark for me to see the model.

"Mind if I take a selfie with that picture of yours?"