



Recognition

AN ANTHOLOGY OF SOUTH AFRICAN SHORT STORIES
SELECTED AND INTRODUCED BY DAVID MEDALIE

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*For Elizabeth and Terry Leaver,
Rosemary, Charles, Kerry and Adam
with my love.*

*And in loving memory of
Chris and Kathy van Wyk.*

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'Stay irresponsible,' you once told me. You thought great universal thoughts. I tried to keep up. That book is closed now, I guess. Time to begin another one.

You purposely lost us once, just to prove that it could be done. I don't know if I can capture those moments again. In their place is a layer of loneliness which pushes down on me. It may suffocate me if I'm not careful. Maybe that's good. If I give myself over to despair, then I won't have to venture out in the sunshine like the world hasn't noticed: the leaves, the flowers.

I emptied a tub of frozen yoghurt into the sink last night. It was the last thing you ate before time stopped. Time stops when your heart stops beating. The doctor said that you didn't suffer. Thank death for that small mercy. No joy in observing that terrible monster. You joked about the ignominy of slipping in the bathtub. My feet were flat, like a hobbit's feet, you said. We pressed our feet together, yours brown, mine pale. We waltzed around the flat then, high on cheap champagne and the joy of being close.

I stub my toe when I return the towel to the rack. No matter. It reminds me, I think, that I am alive.

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LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

KOBUS MOOLMAN

WE ALL HAD TO wait. While he waited for his toast to cool down. To get ice cold, in fact. So that he would be able to spread the butter. (One hundred per cent butter, mind you. Mooi River Choice Salted. Never margarine.) Spreading it right to the edge, all the way round the slice of bread, then folding back any portion of butter that had slipped over the edge with a quick movement of his knife and smearing it into place. The bread that by now was so cold it was hard and brittle and in danger of breaking under the force of his knife.

And all because our father claimed that eating toast which had become soft following the application of butter when the bread was still hot gave him constipation.

'Pain in the arse, more like it,' our mother said behind his back, and we all giggled because she had used a dirty word. Something the family was forbidden to do. Together with taking the Lord's Name in vain. And wearing jeans. ('Only druggies do that.') And slamming the car door.

And ...

Even 'damn' and 'hell' were off limits to us. Unless, of course, they were used in the context of the Bible. As in, 'All sinners (here read masturbators / loose women / communists and atheists / people who wore jeans) will be damned to hell!'

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The shameful parts of the body were also strictly controlled through language. So that 'bottom' took the place of 'bum', and 'little Johnnie' or 'winkie' were used by the boys in the family (my brother and I, even our father) to refer to our penises. I cannot remember the word we were allowed to use for our mother and our sister's genitals. Probably because this part of their bodies was never referred to. At least not in mixed company.

No doubt this accounted for the blank space between their legs that I was raised to believe differentiated all women from men. No doubt, too, this was the reason why – sitting opposite my father at the formica kitchen table, hands folded in my lap, waiting for his toast to cool down, my head bowed, staring at the bowl of ProNutro in front of me, watching the pale-brown powder darken and dry as it absorbed all of the milk – this was the reason why I couldn't stop thinking about the naked mannequin in John Orr's street window.

I was in Standard Three. I wore a little black cap and a black blazer to school, with a black-and-red striped tie. The crest on my little black cap, and on the pocket of my blazer, was a bright orange flowering aloe. I did not know how to do a tie. My mother would do it for me. She would first put the tie around her own neck and do it (left over right, right under left, take the long end and slip it through . . . and there I would get lost) before opening it carefully, just enough so that it could slide over her head, and then placing the still fastened loop over my head and tightening the knot. My mother had done this for me every day of my young school career. Silently. Without protest. Then she would run her hand quickly through my hair – not in a perfunctory way, but more as if she were doing something she could be caught out for – and pat me on the bottom.

'Run along now,' she would say. 'Don't keep your father waiting.'

Our father drove us to school – my sister and I. Sitting in the back of his brown Ford Cortina, each of us staring out of our respective windows while he intoned:

'Remember to walk, not run, when you cross the road.'

'Remember to always be grateful for what you have.'

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'Remember to stand up and give your seat to an older person.'
(Unless, of course, they were the black maid, Sweetness, or her husband, Pancreas, who was the garden boy for the Bothas next door.)

'Remember to say your prayers in the morning and in the evening.'

'And to pray for those in authority over you. That they may be protected from those who wish to do them harm.'

'And remember never ever slam the car door.'

I wished our mother had learned to drive. So that we didn't have to listen to this lecture every single day. And so that we could get to school at a normal time; instead of an hour and a half earlier, when, in winter, the school building was still closed and we had to wait outside the gate in the cold and the dark. But father refused to let mother learn in his vehicle. What if she reversed into a streetlight? Or turned in front of an oncoming car? How would we be able to pay for the damages on his meagre storeman's salary?

'Let me get a job then,' she would always counter when he came up with this argument. 'Then I can buy my own car. And bump it as many times as I like.'

But her impertinence only got her an icy stare.

Father never once raised his hand against our mother. (He reserved that privilege for my brother and me.) He had other ways of getting her to do what he wanted. Chief among these alternative strategies was his stare. The Dead Eye, my sister and I called it. It was a hard, feelingless look. A look that took over the whole of his face, not just his eyes. A look that sat in his mouth and in his jaw and in his narrow cheeks even. It was a look more frightening than a chicken's small red eyes. More frightening because sometimes, if you were close enough, then you might actually see yourself standing small and dark in the centre of his pupil. As if you had been swallowed somehow, without your knowledge, and trapped there.

Forever.

Of course, thinking back upon it now, from the sad heights of adulthood, I can see that my father probably wore that stare of his more as a mask than a

weapon. It was something he used to cover up his own deep insecurities. Over his pathetic salary. (More than forty years, eventually, in the same unvaried job.) Over his sad fashion sense. (Safari suits and cravats and long polyester socks.) And his wretched education. (A mere Standard Eight.)

But that knowledge did not help me when I was ten years old; my first year of writing double digits on the front page of my exercise books. When I was more afraid of his Dead Eye than of his small pale hands. No matter how many coat hangers he broke upon my back.

Because, despite all his faults, when it came to the members of his family, father was impartial to the T. It did not matter that my brother was only six. He got the same thrashing as I did. It did not matter that I wore special boots – raised six inches because my right leg was shorter than the left. I got the same thrashing as my brother. No matter what we had done. And my sister and mother got punished equally with exactly the same icy stare.

‘All right. Let us say grace. Then we can eat,’ father said. *‘Vir spys en drank sê ons U lofen dank, liewe Here. Amen.’*

Father was the only one in the family allowed to say grace. He used an old prayer of his own father, who had lived with us in the front room of the house until his death two years earlier. In the same room. The room that my brother and I now shared. With our matching single pine beds and pine bedside tables.

We called our father’s father Oupa. He had lived on a farm for most of his life. He hardly spoke. At least not to us children, who only spoke English. He worked every day in his small vegetable garden at the back of our property, crouched over the bare brown earth in his matching long pants and long-sleeved khaki shirt. He belittled our father for wearing a short safari suit. According to him only boys wore short pants – of any description.

‘Would you like more milk in that?’ mother asked me, referring to my bowl of solid ProNutro.

‘Me too,’ chimed my little brother, who always copied everything I did.

My sister said nothing. As the eldest she always did what was expected of

her. Because father never allowed us to have any more. You ate what was on your plate as it was served to you, whether it was cold or hard or dry or bitter or salt-less. And you ate it all.

The only way I could swallow that dry paste was to think of something else. So I told myself a story. It was a trick I used to help me fall asleep at night. I would recall episodes from my favourite radio programme with myself as the lead. Or I would invent fancy combat vehicles that could fly or go underwater, and then I would choose from my friends at school who would be the driver, who would be the navigator, the machine-gun operator, the big cannon worker, the radio controller ... But I did not have enough friends to adequately staff these elaborate vehicles. So I was forced to come up with simpler designs.

My favourite story, however, involved the discovery of a secret formula for turning myself invisible. I would imagine drinking this fizzing green stuff in a test tube and then walking into the girls’ change-room at school or the public swimming pool in Pine Street, where I would sit quietly in a corner (holding my breath, of course, so that they did not hear me) and watch them getting undressed. An interesting feature of this story, though, was that I never got to see what the girls looked like when they were naked; whether there was indeed a blank space between their legs, or something else. And this was not because I fell asleep before I reached that point. Every time the girls in the story were about to take off their small underpants (that was how I thought of them), something would jolt my narrative and jerk it back to the beginning, right back to me drinking the fizzy green potion.

It was like what happened sometimes during the school films screened at the end of term in the cold assembly hall when the film snapped or the reel came to an end, and everything would go bright suddenly and flicker with strange patterns and there would be a slapping sound from the loose end of the film going round and round, before the teacher switched the projector off and called, ‘Lights, please!’, and one of the prefects roused himself and flicked the room back into colour.

A jarring disorientation.

I never got to see what the girls looked like when they were naked because I could not imagine what they would look like. Because I did not know, and so had nothing to imagine with.

But since having seen the naked mannequin in John Orr's street window a few days earlier I now had something concrete to make my story out of.

Mother liked to do what she called 'window shopping'. On a Friday evening, after supper, the whole family would jump into father's Ford Cortina – my sister and I at our respective windows, and our little brother sitting in the front on mother's lap – and we would drive to the centre of town, to Church Street, slowly so as to conserve petrol. ('Money doesn't grow on trees,' father loved saying.) We would look for a parking space more or less in the middle of the street. OK Bazaars was the ideal spot, where they sold lucky packets in three sizes: Jumbo, Regular and Small. Throughout our childhood, our parents could only ever afford the Small one for us each. The stores, of course, had all closed at five o'clock, but that didn't matter. We weren't there to actually buy anything. We just walked down the street looking into all the shop windows and going 'ooooh' and 'aaaah' over all the special deals, discount, reduced, half-price, final clearance sale (which we still couldn't afford); saying 'Check that out' and 'Check at this' over all the brand-new, first-in-the-country, only-two-per-customer products like toasters that popped your bread up once it was ready (so that you didn't have to open the little doors every few minutes to check on your toast and risk burning your fingers), or alarm clocks that made you coffee when they went off and were a radio at the same time, and washing machines that did not require you to take everything out after the first cycle and transfer it to the next tub to be spun.

Once we got to the bottom of Church Street, we would cross over onto the other side (only at the robots, of course) and walk slowly back up looking into all the shop windows on that side, making more or less the same sounds and exclamations over more or less the same special deals and new products. At the top of the street we would cross back to the side we had started on,

and walk down to the mid-point, from where we had originally set out. In this way we would cover both sides of the main street and not miss a single shop – even though it might take us two hours.

The whole thing bored me and I quickly grew tired, falling further and further behind the others. Until it seemed that I was not part of their group at all but belonged entirely to myself. Mother loved window shopping so much that she hardly noticed how far back I dropped. But I didn't mind. I liked pretending that I didn't belong to them. That that was not my mother in her crimplene dress below the knee (my father forbade her to wear pants) and her flat shoes, transfixed by all the beautiful outfits that she would never be able to afford; that the man in the short brown safari suit carrying my little brother (in his own small blue suit) was definitely not my father; that it was not my sister, trying so very hard not to want all the short skirts and long boots and eye-shadow in blues and greens and fancy eye-liner that she would only ever be able to wear over our father's dead body.

Apart from Jackson's Sports store with its show of cricket equipment (I often felt a twinge of shame outside this window because the closest I ever got to playing for the school cricket team was as official scorer) and Reggie's Toys where I always stopped to stare at a set of plastic Cowboy and Indian figurines fighting around a small wagon, none of the shop displays interested me at all.

The little plastic figurines in Reggie's fascinated me, although I knew it was pointless drawing my parents' attention to them. It would just elicit the same tired argument from my father: 'We can't afford it. Money doesn't grow on trees, you know. I work hard to put food on the table and clothes on your back.' On and on.

Perhaps the little figures fascinated me because they reminded me of a picture I had seen as a young child in the musty lounge of my father's cousin who lived on the outskirts of a small town about three hours away from us. (Actually only an hour and a half away but father drove so slowly it always took us twice the time to get there.)

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The picture hung above the fireplace. It was in a heavy black frame, and it depicted a group of men with long beards and women with dresses that reached down to the ground and bonnets (father called them *kappies*) who were struggling to get a small wagon down the steep slope of a mountain. The men were holding onto the wagon with long ropes. Their backs were bent as they strained against the taut ropes. They were in their rolled-up shirt sleeves. The muscles in their arms were bulging. The tent on the wagon was flapping crazily in the wind. Any moment the ropes would break.

And right then the Indians attacked!

Spears and arrows were flying everywhere. The women were screaming. The men with long beards could not hold on to their wagon and defend themselves and their women at the same time. One bare-chested brown warrior dashed forward and grabbed a young girl in a faded pink dress. Whooping, he threw her over his shoulder. Her bonnet came undone, her long brown hair loosed in the wind, as the half-naked savage ran off with her.

'Come along! Stop daydreaming.'

Mother had halted in front of John Orr's, and was standing waiting for me. It was dark just there where she stood because the streetlight was out. But the bright store window lit up her face. Her floral dress, which previously had seemed to me so ordinary and inferior, shone now with a translucency I had not seen before.

'Hurry up,' she said, though with a smile, and turned and walked after my father who was carrying my brother in his right arm and holding the hand of my sister with his left.

I hurried after her. Half-skipping, half-dragging my heavy right shoe.

In the unlit spot where she had been standing I stopped and caught my breath. The street was silent. A slight wind stirred some dry leaves and pieces of old newspaper in the gutter. I looked into the window of the shop that had illuminated the face of my mother a few moments earlier. The display was unfinished. A fluorescent tube flickered above two mannequins – a boy and a girl – in school wear. Grey shorts, grey skirt, grey socks, black shoes and white

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shirts. There were balls of paper and plastic wrapping and pieces of brown tape scattered across the red-carpeted floor. It seemed to me that whoever had been working on the display had been called away suddenly to answer a telephone – perhaps their child had fallen on the concrete quadrangle at school and broken an arm. Behind the two children stood a male figure in a long safari suit. He had a brown tweed golf cap on his head. Father owned just such a cap. Though he never played golf. He was a rugby man. He wore his cap always, to protect his bald head from the sun. He was frightened of getting skin cancer and went regularly to have the moles and freckles on his arms and hands checked. His own father – Oupa – laughed at him for this. Oupa did not believe that the sun could cause cancer. Cigarettes did. (But not smoking a pipe.) And eating processed food, of course, any fool could see that.

Beside the male figure in his safari suit was the bottom half of a woman. Stark naked.

She had been sawn completely in half. With one quick slash of a very sharp blade. The blade had left no mark whatsoever. No tears. No jagged edges to the skin where the teeth of the blade had caught and pulled against her pale, pink flesh.

The bottom half of the woman stood there all by itself and looked at me. Its skin was smooth all over.

There was nothing between the legs.

Just smooth and constant flesh all the way from the instep of the slightly raised left foot to the flat top just above the hips.

'Stop playing with your food!' father said, and clipped me across the head with the spoon he had been using to scoop the red mixed-fruit jam onto his toast. 'Oupa's spoon' we called it, because it was the one he had used every morning and every night to eat the mealie-meal porridge made for him by mother each day twice a day. And heaven help anyone else who used it.

I wiped the sticky jam from my hair.

'Sorry, pa.'

I put another spoon of ProNutro into my mouth. But the dry paste would not go down. I thought of the naked mannequin again. Was that really what girls looked like? A doll, basically. Like one of my sister's dolls that now accumulated dust on the lilac pelmet in her room. But how did they urinate then?

'Hurry up! We haven't got all day.' Father again. 'Just because it's Saturday doesn't mean you can sit around doing nothing. I want to cut the grass today. So you've all got your chores to do.'

Father's weekend duty was cutting the grass. We had an old reel-type push lawnmower. ('Petrol costs money, you know, but muscle power is free,' father used to say.) Mother's job was to come after him and rake the grass into piles. My sister then put the piles into cocoa sacks which father had got from the Nestlé factory where he worked. My little brother helped her, when he wasn't playing in the piles, or crying because he had been clipped across the head for playing in the piles. Because I could not stand for a long time, my job was to sit on my bottom and trim the edge of the lawn with a pair of rusted clippers.

This was what every Saturday morning looked like in summer in our house.

And then, in the afternoon, father would sit in his Lazy-Boy chair in the lounge and listen to Gerhard Viviers commentate rugby on the Afrikaans service of the SABC.

'Can't we do something different today?' mother said, looking around the table, her eyes bright with adventure. 'What about going for a drive somewhere? It's such a lovely day. We can go to Midmar Dam or Petie's Lake or Albert Falls. What do you think, kids?'

It was a mistake on mother's part to draw us children into an argument between her and father. And it was an even worse mistake to think that the sacred weekend routine could be altered.

We didn't dare say anything. Though we were all dying to do something different, too. And Midmar Dam had girls in costumes who water-skied

behind fast boats, and Albert Falls Dam had fishermen and yachts, and Petie's Lake ... I'd never heard of Petie's Lake.

My little brother got all excited and tried to say something, but my sister kicked him under the table.

Father stood up slowly. We all looked down. We did not want to see his Dead Eye. We did not want to see what the Dead Eye did to mother. How the light in her green eyes collapsed and went cold. Like his.

'Sweetness!' he called.

Sweetness hurried in from the back stoep. She had an apron over her short pink skirt and a pink *doek* on her head. I did not lift my head, but stared instead at the bottom half of her body.

'Ja, *baas*?'

'Clear my plate. I'm finished.'

Sweetness had been ironing our clothes for the week ahead: a pair of grey shorts and a white shirt for me, and a grey skirt and white shirt for my sister. Plus a pair of brown, and a pair of blue, safari suits for my father, which he wore throughout the week on alternative days, beginning with the brown pair on Monday.

Father's life was held together by routine. The routine of cold toast. The routine of short safari suits in blue and brown. Of black Rooibos tea with one and a half sugars. Of *Spys en Drank en Lof en Dank*. Of buckling up and sitting still and not slamming the doors of the Ford Cortina. Of the push lawnmower that got stuck over and over again on a clump of grass or jammed by a stone or clod of sand and had to be pulled back and cleaned and pushed again. And jammed again.

On a hot Saturday morning.

Stuffy with the smell of mown grass. The damp smell of the earth where I sat on my bottom and trimmed the lawn edges with the rusted clippers that gave me blisters on the insides of my soft hands. Thinking. Clip-clip. Of the fizzy green potion that would make me invisible. Clip-clip. Thinking of the naked mannequin. Was that really what girls looked like underneath? Clip-

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clip. The coconut smell of mother's suntan lotion that she put on before she raked the grass. Up and down. The tiny blades of grass that left no tear, no mark whatsoever. Only smooth, only constant skin, all over.

Clip-clip.

And right then I made a decision. I would just ask my sister to lift up her long skirt and pull down her underpants and show me. Yes. Simple as that. That is what I would do. To find out.

If I could find the right way to approach the subject I knew she would not be able to refuse me.

So afterwards, when the cocoa sacks of grass were neatly stacked at the back of the garage, to be taken to the municipal dump in the boot of father's car the next weekend, lying on sheets of newspaper so that they did not make a mess, when mother was lying down with a damp cloth across her forehead (for her headaches, which were becoming more frequent and more intense) and father had showered and changed and was listening to Gerhard Viviers on the radio, I decided to lure my sister to the bottom of the garden.

And ask her to show me.

Simple as that.

The bottom of the garden was where father kept the old wooden poles and metal rods and bricks and sheets of corrugated iron that he was saving for one-day-you-never-know-when. I was terrified of this part of the garden. There were spiders and lizards that skittered over everything. There were invisible webs. And large beetles. And big birds with hooked beaks and black wings. Birds that called your name. Over and over.

'I want to show you something,' I said. 'Come with me.'

'Where are we going?' she asked.

'Just come with me, I'll show you.'

'Tell me first.'

I didn't want to tell her. Father had said we were not allowed to go to the bottom of the garden, where the corrugated iron could cut us and the metal rods could pierce our soft white skin.

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'I'll show you.'

'No. Tell me first,' she insisted.

'No. I'll show you.'

'No. Tell me first.'

'I can't.'

'Why?'

'I can't.'

'Tell me why.'

'It's a secret.'

'I know your kind of secrets,' she said. 'And I don't like them. They just end up with someone getting hurt.'

I didn't know what she was talking about.

'No. This is different. You have to come with me.'

'Why?'

'Because Mommy said so.' I had her now. Oh, yes. 'Because Mommy said you must look after me.'

But when she saw where we were going, where I was taking her, past the fig tree and the plum tree and the tap that dripped perpetually, past the wash-line (deliberately out of sight) with its hanging vests and petticoats and underwear, past Oupa's vegetable garden that was overgrown with tall weeds, then my sister stopped and refused to go any further.

'No! Daddy said we not allowed to go there.'

'Come on.'

'No!'

And that was that. She stomped off.

I sat down on the grass. It was long and it pricked my bare legs. Father did not like to mow here at the back of the garden. It was where Oupa had held sway, amongst his tall mealies and his potatoes and green beans. Where there were invisible webs.

I lay back in the grass. The sky was a blue sheet that hung still. A pale blue sheet put out to dry by Sweetness because I had wet my bed again. I

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remembered lying like this years before. After one of my operations. When mother had spread an old blue blanket at the back for me, so that I could get out of my stuffy room and get some sunlight on my skin. She took my shirt off. The clouds moved slowly that day. Father was at work. I could hear trains shunting in the distance. There was the heavy smell of chocolate in the air from the factory some blocks away where father worked. Mother left me alone. She went inside to talk on the old Bakelite telephone to one of her friends. Or to make a cup of tea for Mr Fletcher, who made the build-ups on my shoe and came around often when father was at work. The sky moved slowly above me. Sweetness came out with a basket of washing to hang on the line. It was my pyjamas and my blue sheet.

'Hello, *kleinbaas*,' she said.

Sweetness had come as a young girl with Oupa when he had arrived from the farm after his wife died. She always used the Afrikaans term *kleinbaas* when talking to me because I was the second eldest male in the family. This made me feel important, because it confirmed that I was the inheritor of something. Even though I wore special boots.

And now there she was again. Coming down the path, past the fig tree and the plum tree, past the tap that dripped perpetually. Carrying her basket of washing: the vests and petticoats and the underwear, underpants for the boys and underpants for the girls, to hang them up out of sight to dry.

The sky held its breath.

The sky waited to see what would happen next. When I asked her.

'Sweetness,' I said, 'you know I am the *kleinbaas*?'

'Ja, *kleinbaas*,' she said.

'You know you must always do what I tell you?'

'Ja.'

I did not look at her face. She had been sawn completely in half. With one quick slash of a very sharp blade. A blade that had left no mark. No jagged edges to the skin where the teeth had caught and pulled against her flesh.

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I stared only at the bottom part of her body. I could smell Palmolive soap all over. I was the *kleinbaas*. There was no way she could refuse me and still keep her job.

'*Ukhamba lufuza imbiza*,' was all that she said afterwards.

But of course I did not have the faintest idea what she was saying.

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