

GET OFF ME

by Berren Thamper

WHY WE LIKE IT: *English and Afrikaans are used to powerful affect in this moving metafiction story within a story that brilliantly details the suffering of a young South African woman and her struggle for some kind of closure. But it's as much about the strength and nobility of language as about conflict and there are breathtakingly beautiful passages throughout. Characters rise from the page as if conjured and the author's effortless facility with different levels of reality is the stuff of envy. And while there is no question the writing is sophisticated; we sense in some places a struggle to express through an obstructing patois—a hard won fight for the right word. There are a few typos and misspells along the way but as is our style with such outsider stories we left them uncorrected in the interest of authenticity and voice. The dialogue puts the 'A' in astonishing. Quote: 'This rant when (sic) on for a while until the for once mute principal faded to grey. She woke up screaming, which frightened the Hadedas on the lawn outside away. Their arm flapping and squawking were as real as her parched mouth. And, 'Almaria's blood had been boiling on the sun for some time. The solar flares were bitchin' for space.' And 'Death was a kindly visitor who wanted to make friends, who offered her safety from the body that kept letting her down.'*

Berren brushed her teeth in front of the mirror, thinking about her twin. Almaria stood staring out the window behind Berren. She struggled to coax her out. She kept fading stubbornly into Berren's dope of a brain. But the men were the worst. They would hardly answer questions, so they always felt a bit flaccid on camera. Berren took a nap at 12:24. The blunt swords of sleep paralysis quietly closed in.

She was dreaming of being stuck in high school, distressed that she had to redo it, she was sure she finished school. Why was she back in this place? Did she commit a crime, and this was her punishment? She fought hard, and then woke up and rolled out of bed onto the floor, but she

couldn't walk, she was stuck on the ground. Berren was still asleep and increasingly distressed. The REM curtain for the next scene drew apart.

She was sitting for an exam. She hadn't studied for it, and she had no idea what the subject was. 'Shit, I have no stationery. Don't panic.' Panic.

She didn't recognize the invigilators, but she was wearing that deplorable, embarrassing grey and mid-tone green school uniform. The skirt was too tight in her last year at school, and it was even tighter now. She looked down and saw the sole of her right shoe cracked in two in the same way it had been 14 years ago.

Back on the bed. 'Thank heaven!' But the theatre of the absurd is never really over. She couldn't move. She fought, but she was tied to a hospital bed and swearing at the nurses to untie her. She thrashed, but they said she'd pull her tubes out again. The same doctor came by with his invariable disapproving look. She was misbehaving and not worth his time.

She looked at the TV playing arcade video games. The TV, she knew from experience, would turn out to be the patient monitor screen. It was only when half-comatose and shot through with sedatives that she perceived it as more colorful and animated. She turned away from it, feeling the tug against her wrists so that she could not fold her arms over herself and feel more human.

The final scene was her taking on her high school principal with all the words she never knew how to say as a child. She marched up to him where he stood one storey up, always looking down at the kids below him. He enjoyed keeping them after school and making them stand in the hot sun. Even if someone fainted from the heat, he was not moved.

He was using that word 'gutter' again when she launched at him. She told him he was a bully and he didn't care about any of the kids unless they were boys who played rugby. This rant went on for a while until the for once mute principal faded to grey. She woke up screaming, which frightened the Hadedas¹ on the lawn outside away. Their arm flapping and squawking were as real as her parched mouth.

¹ Ibis species found in Southern Africa.

A little while later, she sat down in front of her desk. She'd way overslept, but she was in the zone. Clickedy, clickedy...

'Get off me. I can't do this now.'

Zander dismounted.

'I'm so sorry babe. I just can't now. Please, I'm sorry. I am sorry if I hurt you.'

'It's ok. You don't have to apologize for everything.'

Almaria pulled her panties over her legs and bum and let the elastic snap around her waist. She took her t-shirt and held it up against her breasts. Her head dropped to the side, and her breath became shallow. She reached down to touch the tattoo of an iced twirl of a Chelsea bun on her ankle. She planned to get a circlet of flowers around the bun. It was healed but would never stop hurting.

Zander went into the bathroom and started trimming his beard. Almaria liked it with its few wiry coppers in a sheaf of dark blonde. Zander wondered what might happen if he said what he was thinking. 'Just speak your mind, Zee,' she had said, 'I do.'

'I got a bit of a strange call from your dad.'

'What did he say?' Frowning, in a lower tone she said, '*Bel om te preek?*'²

'Yeah, there's always some of that. But he said that he was talking with Johan. He had to try calm him down. He was ranting about *kak*.³ Johan has all those mommy issues, ya know... He said *kak* about everyone. Even told your dad that we have a problem in our marriage.'

Now poor Zander. He did not know what he gone done.

'The fuck!?' Almaria's blood had been boiling on the sun for some time. The solar flares were bitchin' for space.

² 'Called to preach?'

³ You know what it means.

‘Yeah, I don’t know where he got that idea... I think he’s just pissed your sister left him.’ Zander stared wide-eyed at his twin. Possibilities for salvaging things at this point would come no more to the one than they would ever to the other.

‘W h a t t h e f u c k i s h e! He! fuck!’ She growled with clenched teeth, ‘Grrrrrr, AAAAAA!’

Almaria stood up and grabbed the *sjambok*⁴ that leaned against the wall next to Zander’s side of the bed. It was for self-defense, and Almaria had the rifle under her side of the bed. She turned and whipped the clotheshorse, thrashing the *sjambok* against the half-dry t-shirts and jocks. Rabid rabbit foaming obscene word pairs with each strike:

‘Jou⁵-bitch!

and-fuck!

and-slut!

and-whore!

and-hell!’

She stopped and threw the whip at the wall. Her small hands clutched into fists. She looked like a round-eight featherweight. ‘And *poes*⁶ ALSO!’ She sat down on the bed. The distance was over in minutes.

Watching, frightened, not of, but for her, Zander padded across the room and said, ‘Alley, no. Don’t *liefie*.⁷ You gotta calm down.’

‘I can’t!’ Almaria burst into hot tears, digging her nails into her palms.

Zander sat next to her and lightly took her hand. ‘This is not you. You are really not yourself.’

‘I’m so tired, so tired,’ she sobbed, lips apart and joined by spit.

⁴ A whip. Some antique *sjamboks* are hippo or rhino hide. Mostly made from cowhide now, or from plastic. /sham-bok/. Afrikaans borrowing from Malay *cambuk*.

⁵ ‘You’ /yo/.

⁶ Afrikaans swearword for lady part. /puss/.

⁷ ‘Love’. /lee-fee/.

Zander worried for her sanity. Almaria ended up a meltdown mess by way of four things. Actually, five things. The first was an unlucky collection of genes which made for faulty proteins (which, bitches, you can't fix with bean sprout juice, Jesus, hormone therapy, and what all la la land nonsense works for your 'rhoids). Discombobulation happens.

The second reason was Chelsea. Though Almaria was about nine years older, that seemed to boost their friendship. Chelsea lived on a farm in Oudtshoorn.⁸ Remote, non-working, red dirt plot. Too far from people for conversation or for smiling at. Stimulating as a legs-in-the-air Christmas beetle in February.⁹

There are still whites in South Africa who believe that a white woman only works because she's greedy. It's ok for black women to work though because they are poor. Many think women belong at home. They don't really know why, but when you ask them, this is the kind of answer they come up with. If Chelsea got a job, she would need to be taken to work or learn to drive and have a car of her own. Young ladies don't need such things. They just need pretty dresses for church.

Chelsea needed medication like Almaria, but it didn't move her father's heart to take her to the pharmacy once a month. When he did, he would grouse about the cost anyway, and there is a fear of a father, a specific type, that only a young daughter can know. She didn't know how to drive, and public transport also runs on profit the same as private companies. So she rationed.

Chelsea found a dusty old box of slug pellets in a cupboard in the wendy house.

You probably wouldn't find the variety with metaldehyde so easily on the shelves of gardening shops in nanny states. South Africa is somewhat still wild country. Although Parliament is starting to become an exasperating dai these days!

⁸ Explaining pronunciation is a complicated affair. I will make a note and come back to this. But it's a place in the Western Cape of South Africa. Name is Afrikaans and means 'old horn'. P.S.: try /oats/ who/run/.

⁹ Christmas beetles are harmless copper-colored critters abundant in December all around South Africa. They wait underground all year for a few days or weeks in the sun.

Nevertheless, people resist mollycoddling nonsense about wearing your seatbelt, or driving a 'roadworthy' vehicle (whatever that means – it's either working or it's not!). And pedestrians mind and move out the way of the cars, like they're supposed to, not the other way around!

We don't ban Squishies, novelty cigarette lighters (WTF?), or toys with tiny metal balls. They offer some hope for population control, especially of stupid kids and stupid parents who never stop breeding so that they can't provide for all their runts. We did ban matador Barbie though, coz that's pure evil!

The pellets stayed under Chelsea's bed for a while in a Checkers packet. She didn't touch them again for some days, but she thought about them as she loaded the washing machine, as she waited for the machine to finish, as she hung the wet clothes, as she waited for them to dry, as she folded them and put them away.

It made sense. She felt there was beauty and comfort in death. Death was a kindly visitor who wanted to make friends, who offered her safety from the body that kept letting her down. If only it would work again. She waited, hoping the medication would just get her through one more day, make her mind her ally for the moment, but rationing it was a risky strategy.

Waiting for sanity is *Waiting for Godot*. You need a whole new play for him to arrive, and even then, he might abandon you again. Chelsea was effervescing away slowly in tiny bubbles and bits of her humanity, escaping into the ether. When this process started, her crying stopped. She watched her human-being dissolve without emotion. Although her tongue seemed to stay in place for the moment, it wouldn't move. It was too thick and heavy.

She stopped playing with the soccer ball. When it rolled her vertigo made it feel like she was being pulled towards it, like she would get stuck to it, roll underneath it, and be crushed. Music was also a terrifying and painful experience. Any beat made her heart thunder inside like racehorse hooves.

When Chelsea was a kid, one time she found a long strand of hair on her shoulder. She took it and looped it around the handle of her father's empty briefcase and lifted it slightly. The hair snapped in the time between four and five seconds, but it was strong enough to lift it. That was pretty amazing to her. She must have strong hair. It was in the time between four and five seconds. At least that's how she remembered it.

She would stop sometimes and count the seconds, and then she would simply exist between four and five seconds. Ordinary life was nought to four seconds. In the brief moment following, she gazed at her mind, and in the corner of it, death smiled with sympathetic kindness. At five, she would break.

And so a young woman's everything hung by a strand of hair, and the hair was now nanoseconds from five.

Chelsea. Almaria. Chelsea. Why had the one survived and the other not?

Almaria's sister started dating Johan with the mommy issues. Actually, it was all women issues. Things would go well for a little while, but then he'd get angry that she looked across the room at some guy. She said she didn't even know who she was looking at, it was a vacant look. He eventually decided to throw her out the house. He put her things outside and told her to leave. Later he was sorry and wanted her back. She left him finally, but he wasn't done with her.

Johan phoned Almaria's granny. He was doing the rounds telling everyone how hard done by he was. Gossip is a bat-shit crazy affair, especially when it crosses through the brains of unoccupied little old ladies. Almaria's granny was half deaf and senile too.

So when Almaria told her granny that she and Zander had a silly spat about what wine to buy, granny's later interpretation to Johan was that Almaria hit Zander because Zander wouldn't stop drinking. This is how Johan came to think that they had a problem in their marriage and, in his rounds, he told Almaria's father, who then called Zander to give marriage counseling. And so it goes...

The Johan-granny muddle was the strand of hair that broke Almaria's equanimity. This came a few weeks after Chelsea died. Now there were other things which troubled Almaria, but I think I've said enough for now.

Berren pulled out the roller, Rizlas, and bankie¹⁰ from her desk. 'Your mama's so fat,' was how Berren rolled. Almost in high society style, she noticed it was 4:18 as she lit up.

Almaria, Almaria, why do you elude me so? Always escaping into the mist just when I think I am starting to understand you. Chelsea. Almaria. Chelsea. Chelsea. One had survived and the other not. Chelsea was a little more accessible. Why?

What a thing it is to stand outside yourself. Berren. Chelsea. Almaria. The three women stood before her briefly, and many more men, women and children in the deep shadows behind them. Berren. Chelsea. Almaria. Mute, receding into the grey mist, enveloped, gone. Eyes closed, shallow breath. In the time between four seconds and five, she joined them in the darkness.

Author's notes on the text

This story is about struggles with characterization. I place a premium on characters with depth. I try to get them to answer questions and draw them out. Often they elude me, especially male characters. This reveals the personal areas I need to work on, particularly my understanding of men, which is constrained by bad experiences. There's a lot more to 'the male' which I need to learn to flesh out. Perhaps it helps to realize that the differences between men and women are not as great as one might think.

The story is also about my struggle to accept the suicide of a close friend. They say you cannot really lie to yourself, you can only choose to focus on other things. Hence, for me, 'Chelsea' is always in the time between four seconds and five. The story deals with the nightmares I have about high school and hospitals, as well as the incorrigible nature of gossip.

¹⁰ Rolling paper brand; weed is typically sold by bank bag in South Africa.

Bio

Alive, despite ambitionless agoraphobia and cataleptic vermiphobia. Even bad ankles, communistphobia, and hives can't keep this girl down! I enjoy making up names for my cats. My big cat loves to be held like a baby and dribble on my shoulder.

He is called 'Oemus'
pronounced like 'Seamus'
mistook for 'Homeless'
which made mama 'Hiss!'

Oemus fulfills my maternal needs by being independent, save for when he wants to be fed, babied and told he's a mama's boy. Mommy opens her arms and he jumps into them.

Graduated from talking to herself aloud at home, to continuing the conversation on the occasion she does go out. The Mall Soliloquy Berren invented will become an art form of its own to take the fight to consumerism, and spawn ever more dumbass YouTube vids.

Born into a fundamentalist Christian home, rose to become a huge disappointment, now rolls in the long grass of agnostic limbo. Persecuted as a youth for membership with the Itty Bitty Titty Committee. On account of the first Krispy Kreme outlet to reach Africa, Berren is no longer a member.

When high, Berren gets lost on the staircase. Right now trying to write! But scrapping with husband about her boots left in the basin. Loves her husband to death, who was her last hope for a cure from haphephobia. Please pray for her.