

Lara Markstein – Open Division, 1st Place

Good Men

My name is Jacobus Marthinus Francois du Preez and I am ten years old and a master beskuit baker and when I grow up I'm going to live in America.

“Everyone calls you Koos,” my cousin Saartjie says when we meet each other in the koppies north of the Fourie farm.

“It's easier to say.” Obviously. Our new town is in the platteland and the people are real jaapies, so I don't expect them to memorize my full name, though it originated in 1688 with the first Francois Dupré as he stumbled off a ship from France with his Huguenot brothers seeking to protect their immortal souls. My namesake, Ouma tells me, was a good, God-fearing man.

The boys at school call me Stink Broeke. There's no reason for that.

We moved into Ouma's house, which is on Saartjie's father's angora farm, because my pa lost his job as a construction foreman. I have not had much success making friends.

Saartjie, at thirteen, claims she is too old to be my friend.

She is, however, over the next three months, my only companion.

Not by my choice. I range through the bush after the thunderstorms, picking up quills and spent cartridges from the Boer war — and boom! Saartjie leaps from behind a boulder insisting she can show me art.

We're in the veldt. There's no blerrie gallery until Joburg.

“There,” she says, triumphant, when I follow her into a dark cave that is covered in bat shit and so cold I can see the sweat from our bodies rising like ghosts.

She points to moss-eaten red lines. “Lindiwe says the Khoisan painted these centuries ago.” Lindiwe is the Fourie family's maid. She doesn't know much. Centuries ago, our families laid these farms, sowing seeds into the sweet earth.

“Ag, that's not *art*. Don't you know nothing about France and where our family's from?”

Saartjie tromps off, which serves her right. She doesn't understand that a man likes to be left to his own thoughts. This is because her siblings had grown by the time she was born. If she had to live with my two Hell-hounds, she'd appreciate peace, too.

Back in the sunlight, I squint at the Groot Karoo, stretching north in tinder plains towards the Kalahari. The bitterbos sways, rattling its bright-yellow flowers in the wind.

The Hell-hounds have names: Willie and Hansie. They share the bottom bunk and kick my mattress. They are skinny, but all that has grown on them is sharp and sore. "Voetsek," I say Saturday mornings, though it is me who runs away.

At Saartjie's house, Lindiwe feeds me cookies and milk tea. Lindiwe does not skimp on the sugar though she gets in trouble with Tannie Elsabe, who calls Lindiwe a greedy girl. Lindiwe has two grown sons.

Saartjie's bedroom is filled with jigsaws and Lego and Barbie dolls. "Hand-me-downs," she explains, flopping on her bed. "Even from my niece." I join her on the stack of blankets, none of which are made of mohair. "Want to see something though?" She roots in a desk drawer to pull out a slim gold tube.

My cheeks grow hot. Ouma prays for the type of girl who wears lipstick.

"Ballerinas wear lipstick." She pulls out a book from the shelf. "Here's your precious French art." The book has been leaved through many times and the pages are crinkled. But I can feel the warmth of the stage lights on the figures' soft skin and I trace the girls in white skirts that bloom like frost. I'm sure Ouma wouldn't approve. Not at the way their arms are flung back baring their pale throats.

"You're not a ballerina," I say.

"Ja?" She jumps with toes pointed as though to hide the dirt on her feet. "You try."

"Ballet is for girls."

Saartjie leaps again. It looks fun, testing how far you can float. Saartjie's body seems longer suspended in the air.

"You must push more with your back foot," I sigh. Then I hitch my shoulders for a running start, working my arms like rotor blades, and propel myself upwards, until I'm gliding, a Blackhawk helicopter on dark currents, my chest sawn open wide.

"Bravo!" Saartjie claps. "That's a jeté. I'm learning French," she explains.

“Everything important is in English.”

“Don’t tell Pa. Only Afrikaans here.” Saartjie reaches for the gold tube and smears the red paste across her lips. She looks like one of the pictures in her book. “Your turn.” She grabs me and applies the lipstick. “Can you pirouette?”

She pivots on one foot and ag, it looks easy, spinning like that, so I copy her and then we’re both whirling around, like dust in a storm.

“Jislaaik, it’s early, hey,” her father says, opening the door.

His skin tightens across the bones in his face.

“Wipe your mouth, Koos.”

Oom Bertus calls my pa, who does not speak to me on the walk home through the noor, standing like grey guards, a crown of yellow flowers on their thorns.

He pulls at his belt. I pull at my pants. My arse cheeks sting even before the leather licks my skin. I grip the back of Oupa’s armchair, which in places is threadbare. I cry. I cry and cry so long, I am surprised to find myself alone and I waddle to bed, where even the Hell-hounds leave me alone.

“You have to understand,” Ouma says. She rubs gobs of Vaseline across my bum, though I’m too old for her to see my arse. “He loves you.”

Then she strokes my hair, even though I stare at the peeling wallpaper and pretend she is not there. “Siestog. He’s looking after your soul.”

My soul is in need of whipping. Like cream. He must beat me until my spirit glistens in firm peaks.

I dunk the beskuit she leaves into my rooibos. The rusk crumbles and soggy biscuit bits float in the tea. So I push aside the tray and watch the hawks hover across the pale spring sky instead.

At school, we learn cursive: connect the k to the o and loop the line to the s, which reminds me of a belt coming undone, strips of skin flayed. The letters stare back at me, dumb. “Be neater, Koos,” the teacher says.

“Be neater, Stink Broeke,” says Schalk as he jams me into the corner of a desk.

“You alright?” the new kid asks when the boys have left the chilly prefab to chase each other in circles around the field. “You play marbles?”

Ronnie is black — Xhosa — but Ouma says we’re all God’s creatures when Oom Bertus goes on about his thieving gardener, so I decide we will be friends and I lose two cat’s eyes to him on the concrete behind the toilet block.

Ronnie is not big, but he’s blerrie quick, I learn playing rugby.

He is the Springboks and I am the All Blacks, though I note he’s the Black. Ronnie says he’s better at rugby and what would I rather? New Zealand win? He makes a good point, so I’m Richie McCaw, racing through the infield, until I’m tackled by a stand of agave, the spears from their hearts quivering in the breeze.

“My turn,” Saartjie says.

“Girls aren’t in any teams,” Ronnie says. Saartjie’s nostrils flare and Ronnie quick-steps into a sprint.

Over the bossies, around the aloes, past the thorn bush and the square-eyed goats, across the sweet grasses bursting from the rain, and through the sun-flooded plains, I follow him.

We collapse at a wind pump dug deep into the earth.

“I wanted to be a Springbok when I was little,” Ronnie says between gulps of air.

“Now?”

“I’ll be a government official like my Dad...” he says as though he’s already bored of his crisp suit. “You?”

I can’t tell him I want to go to America when his father represents our country. “Film. Not an actor,” I quickly add, in case he thinks I’m dumb enough to cast myself in a lead role. “Behind the camera.”

“A director?” He whistles. “You’ll know all the stars. Brad Pitt. Angelina Jolie. Shit!” His back stiffens. “You’ll direct naked women.”

My cheeks burn. “Not me.”

“Yes! You’ll coach women how to wiggle their boobs.”

I glance about as though Ouma can hear. I’m sure I’ll go to Hell for directing sex scenes. She turns off the TV if there’s a kiss. I can’t imagine how much beating it would take to set my soul right then.

Ronnie pats my shoulder. “You’re smart. Good job, boetie.”

I know I shouldn’t be so pleased.

I find Saartjie later staring at the squawking chickens in their pen.

“Ronnie’s real good at running, hey?”

She mumbles something I can’t hear. “Also smart. His dad speaks seven languages.”

More than her one and a half.

Saartjie doesn’t answer. “Look, you mustn’t be mad. If I hang out with you I’ll go soft.”

“Ja?” Saartjie swings herself over the fence. The chickens are scrawny mean things and they peck at her toes until she boots them off. “He shouldn’t hit you.” I try to explain that I must harden if I’m to survive. “It’s wrong, Koos.” Saartjie is a girl and cannot understand.

“Want a go?” She holds out the handle of an axe and I shake my head. We’re from Joburg, where we buy chicken in plastic-wrapped portions, the way God intended.

So she grabs a hen one-handed and whacks. When she lets go, the chicken runs, squirting blood. I choke back the vomit in my throat and Saartjie laughs.

“Play your little games with Ronnie. I don’t care.”

Then she picks up the bird where it fell so she can boil the body and pluck the feathers one by one. The pen stinks of baked chicken shit.

At home, I help Ouma make beskuit. I sift flour, weigh butter, stir through buttermilk until a dough resembling wet concrete forms. Ouma tells stories of Oupa and the villages he built for starving people in Sudan. Then she asks me to mind the Hell-hounds and takes the tray because her oven is temperamental. I mind them while she bakes, cleans, studies her Bible and visits the poor. Ma and Pa lie in the back room with the curtains closed. Since moving, they’ve suffered from migraines.

I teach Willie and Hansie English. “How else are you going to watch the good movies on TV?”

This catches their attention. They like the cartoons with anvils dropping from the sky, bodies squeaking down glass panes. But when I start on conjugation Hansie twists Willie’s bare nipple and then they’re rolling on the carpet again.

“Fok,” I say. They freeze. “It’s an English word.” Along with bastard, cock, twat, shit, son-of-a-motherfucking-bitch. I make some of the meanings up.

They repeat the words carefully, as if I’ve given them gold. English is like that.

Ronnie taught me some of these words. He knows English and Afrikaans and everything. I can say hamba in Xhosa, bafuna in Zulu, and nkosi sikelel in both languages, but that doesn’t count because we have to sing the national anthem in school.

At school, he slings his English around, so effortless, no one knows they should be mad. “Hey, whoreson,” “Howzit, fuckhead?” Ronnie has some magic charm, because when Schalk turns and sees me instead, his hands, which are already gristled like meat, tighten into fists. Ronnie and I run.

Ronnie’s house is in town, along the untarred Kerk Straat, where the buildings are painted apricot and turquoise and ox blood. His maid, Martha, feeds us apples dripping honey and serves tall glasses of Coke.

“At my uncle’s,” Ronnie says, “they have a pool.”

I’d be happy with my own room. Like Saartjie, Ronnie doesn’t have to share and he’s covered his walls with posters of the Springboks and The Rock.

“Have you seen him wrestle?” Ronnie twists my arm and pins me in a chokehold against the soft carpet. His sweat wets my cheek. “We can play him on the PlayStation.”

I have not used a controller before but I mash the knobs so that the figure on screen moves.

“Yuss,” Ronnie yells as his character pounds me until my head bursts and blood spurts in a pixel-fountain like Saartjie’s chicken. Ronnie leaps up, breathless.

I do not want to go home.

Ronnie says I can play the next day. But the next day is church, which, as Ouma tells everyone, I have not missed once in my life. Now that we live with Ouma, in the pews I hold her hand, which reminds me of the stick bones of a little bird, and I sit straighter, pleased to look after her like this.

I like listening to the Dominee's sermons: stories from far away and long ago of war and famine and unshakeable faith. In the Dominee's thick voice, it seems these things might have happened in our back yard and I feel warm inside, though the church, which is old and made of stone, is cold from the morning frosts. There is nothing more that I want.

So of course I will not go to Ronnie's.

But.

But what if I skipped just once? Ma and Pa have missed services many times and I've heard Ouma tell Oom Bertus her son is a good man.

Surely my soul would not be condemned if I am not there? Besides, the Dominee says we must speak directly to God. I can think about the Lord on my way to Ronnie's. I can worship him really, really well.

I ask Saartjie if Lindiwe will drive me to Ronnie's.

"You owe me," she says. I say I haven't told anyone she's learning French. We agree that now we're even and shake hands.

A kestrel circles overhead.

"Hurry up," Pa says. "We're leaving," Ma yells. "Do you need muti?" Ouma asks.

No one comes into the bathroom, because I claim to have diarrhoea. Finally the house quiets and I creep out to wait for Lindiwe, who is late.

Not that she says sorry when she arrives. She talks instead about the Minister, the grocery, her son. I screw up my eyes and try to focus on God.

Lindiwe drives off in a spray of dust and I brush down my shorts. Then I smile really, really wide. My palms are clammy and leave wet marks on my shirt. I ring the bell.

Martha opens the door. "Koos!" she says, surprised.

Then Ronnie appears, dressed in his own neatly creased pants. I move forward, eager to hide from prying eyes.

But Ronnie says, "My father has officials for lunch. Next time, boetie, hey." He slaps me on the back and my smile starts to ache.

On the long walk home, I clench my toes, my fingers, my arse, as if I can make myself small coiling tight, invisible to the bakkies on the road, the houses with their peeling paint. I stretch out my smile though it is sore, so sore. It stings, like iodine.

I have a long time to consider all the ways I have failed God.

Tannie Elsabe sets the table nice for Sunday lunch, with flowers and delicate doilies and a glass of Coke, which I have the American way, on ice. “You get less Coke then, domkop,” Saartjie says.

Ouma fusses over my stomach, ladling boiled pumpkin and rice onto my plate. My mouth waters as the shanks pass by. Ma doesn’t stop Willie and Hansie from taking my share. In fact, she also spears herself an extra chop, though I’ve heard Ouma say she could do without. Ma likes to say Ouma is a stick and no one can live on God alone. “It wouldn’t hurt for her try,” Pa says.

“I hear you’ve found a friend.” Oom Bertus laughs so hard at this I can count the silver fillings in his mouth.

“Ronnie,” I say, just so Oom Bertus will stop making that horrible rumbling, which reminds me of the earth shuddering as trucks speed by.

“English?” Oom Bertus’ jaws work like a machine. “Next you’ll drink milk tea with your pinkie raised. There no good Afrikaners at school?”

“Ronnie’s Xhosa,” I say.

Oom Bertus spits out his half chewed meat. “A Black?”

“He’s super smart. They have a big house with a PlayStation and lunches with politicians and...”

Oom Bertus smirks. “Afs always grease the wheel.”

“Jislaaik,” Pa says. I think the look on his face is one of disgust.

“I’m not complaining.” Oom Bertus point his knife at Pa. “Maybe your boy can help you get a job so I won’t have to feed your sorry mouths.”

“I am glad to have Daan and his family visiting, Bertus,” Ouma says.

She doesn’t say stay.

I push the food across my plate. I hate pumpkin.

Saartjie stares up at me from the half moon of water. The swimming hole is hidden by a shelf of rock. “Dolerite.” Saartjie says the rock meant that once the veldt had been volcanic. Earth turned to liquid that had spread over the crust like cream before it cooled.

“I know about magma,” I say, though I think she’s lying. Our Oupas didn’t dodge lava flows when they stamped the *mist* into floors. It’s not as if the planet reknits beneath your feet and what is South Africa becomes Zimbabwe overnight.

I bomb into the pool with a splash. “Where’d you learn this kak?”

“The library.” Saartjie spends a lot of time at the library. It’s there she reads her French grammar. She only has a small dictionary in her room, which she says is mostly useless. “Just words.”

“Why doesn’t your Pa like French?” Through the water, my voice sounds strange. Like it’s come from somewhere far away.

“It’s not Afrikaans.”

“What about English? Everyone needs to know it for their careers.” My father knows only a smattering of words. “And then you could watch all the best movies!”

“The best movies are in French,” Saartjie says, though she hasn’t seen any of them. She does a flip and pins herself down, down as far as she can go until I can’t even see her fingertips.

Schalk stalks me to the bus stop. I glance up the white gravel road, but Roos drives me back. From the school yard, Henrik appears. I can tell from the way their mouths curl hungrily that this is no coincidence.

“Going somewhere, Stink Broeke?” Schalk asks. As if he’s in a movie.

If we were in a movie, I would whip out a porcupine quill and stab Schalk in the heart. Then I’d pirouette and fling two quills like darts into Henrik’s nose. I’d jeté while sticking a spine into Roos’ neck.

This is not a movie and, because I have been here before, I know how it will go. Schalk slams his fist in the fat of my belly. Roos and Henrik haul me to my feet so that Schalk can use my body as a punching bag. He pounds at me, one-two... Then I piss myself and they leap back as though the urine burns. “Sies, man.”

This time, there is a pause after Schalk's first hit. A scream. I prize open one eye and see Ronnie's nails clawing at Schalk's skull. Roos throws Ronnie from Schalk's back but Ronnie jabs him in the nuts with his fist.

We run. I am grinning and I run and run.

"You should have seen him," I say, describing Ronnie's ninja moves.

"Not at the table, kleintjie."

"He's learning to look after himself." Pa dunks bread into the potjiekos.

"Against good Afrikaner boys. Ronnie isn't a good influence," Ma says. Ma does not turn away from Pa's look. "Ouma Betje agrees."

Ma doesn't want me to be friends with Ronnie because of what Oom Bertus said. Ma worries about the roof over our head. Pa thinks she should get a job then. But Ma's never worked before and what would Pa have her do, she asks? Stand in the Pick'n'Pay checkout line like a fool? Who would look after his sons? This is all through the bedroom door late at night after a few bottles of Le Roux.

Ma's never looked after us boys. Still, I study the roof, and it seems pretty sturdy.

I track Saartjie to one of the long trenches from which the Boer fought the British to prove this was our land.

"Can you say we're swimming tomorrow?"

She lowers the book she's reading over her nose. "Doesn't God disapprove of lying?"

God does. But God also disapproves of parents not liking Ronnie because he's Black.

And Ronnie and I have things to do.

"Fine," Saartjie sighs.

I drop into the fold of the koppie. "What you reading?"

"Rimbaud."

"You understand all that?"

Saartjie shrugs.

Not that it matters. The words can't possibly mean anything worthwhile out here. They're too pretty, wasted on our cracked dirt. No wonder the Huguenots chose to lose their language and became Boere with hard t's and gutturals instead.

At Ronnie's house, we engage in high-stakes military campaigns. He is the Xhosa in the kraal, armed with an assegai, and I am the Boer with my wagon and flintlock, loping over the land, which crunches beneath my shoes. When the battle begins, I take cover behind a willow, clutching at the stick I'm using for a gun.

Ronnie lobs his branch into the ground. "You're dead," he says.

I explain that this is not correct. According to history, I win. I do not add that his spear fell short.

"Nee, boet," Ronnie claps a consoling arm around my shoulders. "It just took a long time for you dom Afrikaners to realize we won."

As if to make up for the failure of my people, Ronnie offers to teach me to shoot a real rifle.

So we line up peaches and when they're blasted to a sticky pulp, beer-bottle caps we've scrounged.

We shoot the big, blue sky.

One night, I tire of the Hell-hounds. "I should shoot the both of you," I say and grab my blanket so I can lie on the living-room couch.

I am surprised to see my pa still awake and at first I think he is a ghost. Pa passes an empty bottle of mampoer from hand to hand. The bottle rolls back and forth. The plastic clock on the wall ticks. I pull the cover over my head and pretend to sleep.

"The world is shit, you know?"

I do know this. I am called Stink Broeke.

"The world is shit and it's filled with shit-eaters and they want me to eat shit, too."

I nod. He hasn't found work. Pa stares at the ceiling as though the universe exhausts him.

The next morning, Saartjie stands beside Ouma, squeezing butter into a flour crumble though that is my role. I am Ouma's mixer and kneader and measurer.

“But you must have tried a macaron at a cafe?” Saartjie insists.

“I still had to clean the apartment,” Ouma says. Saartjie is disappointed and she crushes the butter between her fingers.

I must have knocked the table because Saartjie turns on me. “Ouma lived in Paris,” she says, as though I’d thought otherwise.

“Cornelius worked for the South African military,” Ouma explains.

“Do you speak French?” I ask, thinking of Saartjie’s dictionary.

“We were only there three years. Besides, it wasn’t as if Cornelius couldn’t understand Afrikaans.”

“Still!” Saartjie cries. Her butter mixture is too fine and the rusks will be ruined.

“I missed home,” Ouma says.

Oom Bertus can give orders on fetching goats and treating wool in five languages. He can also say, go faster, go home, and God bless. “What more do I need?

“All these languages are crowding out Afrikaans. Our children won’t know how to greet their grootouers,” he says to my Pa.

Lindiwe calls him a jackass in Tswana because he did not give her leave to see her sick aunt. But Oom Bertus does not understand.

“See,” I say to Saartjie later. “Paris isn’t so great.” Though what do I care if there’s a big ocean between us? She’s too old to be my friend.

“Everyone here looks after a stupid little house and gets drunk every Friday when they braai and goes to church each Sunday until they die,” Saartjie says from the Hell-hounds’ bed. I don’t see what’s wrong with owning some property and being a man of God. “Even my niece has a house and kids.”

I change tack. “New York is great. Los Angeles.” Our people might have come from France, but they left. They moved on to wider skies.

“Maybe. But the language doesn’t remind me of Afrikaans.”

Occasionally I beat Ronnie at PlayStation. “I’m a good teacher, hey.” He slaps me on the back and I guzzle my Coke to hide how proud I feel. “You coming tomorrow? We didn’t shoot anything.”

“Tomorrow’s Church.”

“Shooting rabbits is more fun. I’m going to kill two and have Martha cook one for dinner. You can have the other if you like.”

I would like to slap the carcass on the table at home so Ouma won’t need to argue about who owes what for groceries, the coins clinking in her little knit purse. But I don’t want to disappoint her again by missing service. I know she wasn’t punishing me, baking beskuit with Saartjie. I know Saartjie must have spent loads of time with her before we arrived. And I wonder if Saartjie was angry when she no longer had Ouma to herself.

“Church isn’t bad,” I say. “What’s wrong with yours?”

Ronnie cocks his head and I get a funny feeling in my belly. “We’re atheists.”

Atheist. Nonbeliever. Damned.

Ronnie is going to Hell.

The sky fills with kestrels migrating from steppes far away in Kazakhstan.

But he talked about sex. He picked fights.

It is possible the Devil has Ronnie’s soul.

The sky flaps and flaps.

It is a long, hot walk home.

“So?” Saartjie says when I tell her that Ronnie does not believe. She finds me in that cave of hers with the red drawings because I could not bear to enter our house. Ouma would know that I have shared food with a boy who will tumble at his death in torment. She will know that I have been grazed by the Devil’s own hands.

“You like him?”

I do. I like that he is fast and smart and handsome. I like that he chose me to be his friend.

“Then who cares?”

“God.” And who’s to say how I might transgress if I play with Ronnie every day?

Saartjie sighs. “Jislaaik. I didn’t expect you to make a big deal of this.”

It takes me a moment to understand. “You *knew*?”

“Ja, man. Ronnie’s pa gave a talk at school. He grew up overseas in Russia or Botswana or somewhere. They’re all communists.”

“You knew.” And she hadn’t said anything. She’d let me injure my immortal soul, while she sneaked into our house and baked. She probably hoped I’d turn from God and be cast from the farm. No more strangers on her land.

She’d told me she was not my friend.

I screw my hands into fists and do not wipe the tears scalding my cheek.

She’s wrong, of course. Her paintings aren’t art. They’re a record of dead things.

I run. Over the grasses, through the aloes, the noor, between koppies and past mean goats, chewing everything. I run over this ocean of dirt because I am Koos du Preez and I know what I must do.

“Where you racing?” Oom Bertus yells.

“Saartjie is learning French,” I scream so his stupid, smug smile turns to mush.

I tell Ronnie I cannot be friends with him because he is a heathen and going to Hell. I lick the salt from my cracked lips.

Ronnie blinks. Then he shuts the door on my face.

Something in my chest snaps. I am sore, very sore, but I make myself walk the whole way home though I cannot see the road through my tears. There’s something trembling beneath the painful bits in my heart. Something hard and strong, sawing at my bone to get out. And I know I am not eating shit like Pa.

Saartjie waits for me at the gate, though the sky has turned raw and red. She pulls out a string of porcupine quills she’s tied into a circle as if this can make her lies right. I don’t move when she places the spines over my head and they rattle, hollow boned, as she ties them tight.

Then I hear the rumble of a motor and we turn to see Oom Bertus’ ute churning gravel.

Pa and Oom Bertus are momentarily stunned by my brilliance — my crown of quills. I am glowing with God in my veins.

Then Oom Bertus raises his hand as if to bless me and I close my eyes. I do not see Saartjie fall to the dirt.

He yanks her by her skinny arm so that he can punch her again, this time with a fist to her belly. He does not bother unbuckling his belt. Blood pours like autumn rain from Saartjie's nose and mouth.

For a moment, there is time to walk away. There is time to turn from this scene towards the house, where the vetkoek and burnt coffee will be on the stove. There is time to pretend not to see what is Fourie business after all. But I don't.

My pa and I stand between the aloes that have bloomed and are now turning to bone. We watch the kestrels fly, and I feel myself taking on his shape: the curve to his shoulders, the half frown, the sorry smile, as I become a good man, too.