



strange
nervous
laughter

BRIDGET McNULTY

Hello!

And welcome to the beginning of *Strange Nervous Laughter*.
Happy reading!

Strange Nervous Laughter is a book about love. About what love makes us do when we're in love, and out of love, and on the brink between the two. It's also about Durban and food and sex and undertakers and garbagemen and whales and the sea and why we act the way we do, and a whole host of other things.

To find out more, join my fun email gang, or for super downloads, visit my website - www.bridgetmcnulty.com
Or come chat to me on my blog - www.blog.bridgetmcnulty.com
Better yet, send me an email - hello@bridgetmcnulty.com
Hell, maybe you should pop over for tea!
Just kidding.

I would love to be in touch with you, though.
I wrote this book for all those who believe that
Only Great Love Will Do.
Let me know what you think.

Much love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "bMcNulty" with a stylized flourish at the end.

Bridget McNulty

The title "strange nervous laughter" is written in a green, bubbly, hand-drawn font. The words are stacked vertically: "strange" on top, "nervous" in the middle, and "laughter" at the bottom.The author's name "BRIDGET MCNULTY" is written in a small, yellow, hand-drawn font inside a decorative, oval-shaped border.

Prelude

There are three states of love. In love, out of love, and on the precipice between the two. We all have a preference, and – surprisingly – in love is not always the hands-down winner. It is too messy, too all-consuming, too *much*. Then again, out of love can be a little lonely, and that teetering precipice – when you’re no longer in love, but not quite out of it – exhaustingly dramatic.

Each is risky.

As life itself is risky. As the most mundane activities that fill our days are risky – crossing the street, withdrawing money, shopping for groceries.

Especially, you might say, the latter.



It is all over in five minutes.

8.31 am: Beth, the cashier in a small supermarket, sits twirling a few strands of her hair and sucking on the ends thoughtfully. She seems to be floating above her chair, softly humming a love song, one of her feet pirouetting mid-air. There are only two customers in Handy Green Grocers this morning – Meryl, a woman with sleek, black hair and flawless skin, perusing the Weigh-Less Meals for One, and Mdu, a tall, dark, scowling man choosing a bunch of grapes.

It is a seedy little shop – dust particles hang suspended in the lattice of sunlight that creeps in through the burglar guards of the small window, and the *Today's Specials!* signs are clearly not today's specials. They're advertising Easter eggs in October. The overhead fan does nothing to move the stagnant air, and the display of mangoes seems to be ripening with each passing moment.

Handy Green Grocers is the kind of shop that only locals shop at. The kind of shop that has everything you could ever need, but only in small quantities for exorbitant prices. The kind of shop that somehow, always, seems to smell of curry powder and over-ripe bananas.

The kind of shop you wouldn't expect two men with hooded sweatshirts and hand guns to burst into at 8.31 am on a Tuesday morning and say, in

voices thick with fear, 'Okay, get down on the floor! We don't want to hurt anyone, we just need some money!'

Beth screams, shattering a stand of All Gold tomato sauce bottles, each one exploding messily. The man in the blue hoody spins around and aims his gun at her.

'Shut up!' he demands, crunching tomato sauce shards under his feet, while the man in the red hoody starts chanting, 'Oh shit oh shit oh shit,' under his breath.

Sleek Meryl, on the other side of the shop, drops the Weigh-Less meal she is holding, then drops to the floor, silently, swiftly, as though practised in the art of hitting the ground.

Beth immediately bursts into tears, loud gasping sobs that leave her breathless as they fill the small shop, bouncing off the windows and landing in the middle of the tinned beans display, causing it to topple over and almost crush Meryl. Luckily, she is bound so tightly in a corset of cynicism that neither emotions, nor tumbling tin cans, have any effect on her. In fact, Meryl is amazed at how calm she feels; amazed at the almost Zen-like sense of clarity that descended on her the moment the men burst into the shop. She always thought she would fall to pieces in an emergency. But she didn't. Not at all. She simply fell to the ground, kept quiet and played dead.

She pretends not to breathe. She does not move. And when ten more cans of cheap baked beans fall on her back, she refuses to flinch; braced by her intricate, tightly woven armour.

Mdu is the only other customer in the shop. His hand, still stretched out to pick up the only good bunch of grapes in the pile, remains there, frozen. The rest of his body freezes too, except for his heart, which speeds up and pounds deafeningly in his ears.

Mdu forgets how to breathe.

His mind fills with the clamour of things the other people in the shop are not saying out loud. The words behind the words.

Underneath the plump cashier's repeated plea – *Please don't kill me, please don't kill me, please don't kill me* – Mdu hears, *I don't want to die, not now, not here. Please God, don't let me die, not here, not now ...*

Just keep it together, keep it together, the dark-haired woman next to him tells herself silently, sternly, without any trace of emotion. She is still stretched out on the floor, buried under a pile of cans.

Not for the first time, Mdu wishes he did not have such exceptional hearing. Being able to hear the things that people are afraid of saying aloud is not always helpful. Like now, when he can hear the man in the red hoody thinking: *I don't want to have to shoot anybody, but, fuck me, if this woman doesn't shut up, somebody will hear. I'll shoot one of them if I have to, just to get away.*

Mdu does not want to be that one.

He knows his role in this scene; knows that he is the only man who can defend these two women; knows that he has to step forward and say, in a quiet but determined tone, 'Come on, guys, leave these good people alone.'

In his mind's eye, Mdu can see exactly what to do: disarm both men by grabbing the watermelon to his left and knocking them out, simultaneously signalling the hysterical cashier to call the police. He is young, he is strong; he has in many ways been waiting his whole life for this chance to prove that he is capable of doing something remarkable.

Instead, he remains frozen.

Frozen, as he watches the two men force the wild-eyed cashier to empty all the money from the till, watches as they wave their guns around, shouting, 'Shut the fuck up!' in increasingly loud voices, while she continues to whimper, 'Please don't kill me, please don't kill me, please don't kill me.'

He watches their hands shake as they silently tell themselves, unwittingly in unison, *Time to go, hurry the fuck up!*

And finally watches as they scan the shop one last time. Then the more confident man, the one in the blue hoody, grabs a Bar One from the check-out counter and tears it open with his teeth.

He grins mockingly at Mdu and takes a bite.

Pussy, he thinks.

The word echoes in Mdu's mind.

8.36 am: All over. Beth, still sobbing, still gasping for breath, dials the police and tells them to 'Hurry, please hurry, they might come back!'

Meryl, unharmed, stands up and makes pointed eye contact with Mdu. Then walks out calmly, past Beth who covers the phone with one hand and calls out, 'No, wait, you might have to identify them!'

Mdu finally picks up the bunch of grapes, crumples to the ground and

slowly starts eating them, not tasting anything but the lingering bitterness of cowardice.

A bird starts singing outside the door. For a moment, the air in the shop stings with relief.



Let's press pause for a minute. What do we see?

Beth, the cashier, hugging herself tightly with her arms across her chest. Eyes wide and still terrified, forehead crumpled in despair, mouth open mid-sob.

Mdu, the grape-eater, sitting on the floor with his elbows on his knees. A half-eaten bunch of grapes dangles from one hand as he covers his ears to block out Meryl's disdain.

Meryl, one hand on the door, the other tightening the laces of her stiff corset, glancing at Mdu with an undisguised look of disgust.

And outside the shop, outside where the world continues as if nothing has happened?

Pravesh, a young Indian man, sits on a bench under the large acacia on the opposite side of the road, reading the 'In Memorium' notices in the newspaper, his knees pleurably tingling as they are wont to do in the proximity of death.

Aisha, a beautiful black girl, walks past on her way to work, staring dreamily at the clouds gathering overhead, wrapped up in a private dream world.

And Harry, the local garbage man, stands on the edge of his truck just over there, sifting through an overfull black plastic bag.

Sure, they all seem preoccupied. But without a doubt, if we could crawl inside each of their heads (just for a moment, without them noticing) we would find, amidst the cobwebs and jingles and completely forgotten New Year's resolutions, an opinion or two about love. A few thoughts on relationships. One or two fervently held hopes of not dying alone.

Because, despite its inauspicious beginning, this is not a tale about crime.

Nor about the daily woes of living in South Africa.

But rather about love; and what can happen to it when combined with the hottest summer Durban has ever known.



[Beth]

A week later that summer began.

A summer so hot it was (almost) all people could talk about.

Heat had a personality that summer. And it wasn't pleasant.

Every morning when she woke up, Beth lifted her blind, looked out the window and said, 'I wonder which exciting person I'm going to meet today!'

Sometimes she lay in bed for a few minutes, imagining various romantic scenarios – a man catching her eye from across Handy Green Grocers, where she still worked, so transfixed that he walked up to her in a love-smitten daze and asked, 'Who *are* you?'; a man who couldn't bring himself to speak to her because of the depth of his passion, and thus had to slip her little love notes along with the cash he paid for his groceries; a man who lingered outside the supermarket on his way to work every morning, just so that he could stare longingly through the window at her.

At the start of that hot summer, Beth had dreamt up thirty-seven different ways that men could ask her out at work.

Pravesh was the first man in real life to actually do it.

He arrived at her house in a hearse, which was perhaps not the best omen for a first date.

What was unusual about this particular gentleman, dressed in his best suit (the same suit he wore for funerals) was not so much that he arrived in a hearse, as that he didn't think it strange. Well, that and the fact that he was wearing a suit on what was, undoubtedly, the hottest day in a decade.

Surrounded by the relentless to and fro of death, it was easy to forget that there were others untouched by it; others who did not confront corpses, coffins and grief on a daily basis; others who might, when coming to their front door in a pale pink dress, screech with fright at the sight of a hearse parked in their driveway.

Those things did not occur to Pravesh the day he drove to Beth's house for their first date.

Perhaps they should have.

Luckily, Beth was a rather forgiving soul who, after the initial shock, quickly forgot about the ghostly apparition of a man in a dark suit standing next to a hearse. She had been nervously waiting for Pravesh to arrive – absentmindedly floating an inch above the ground while looking out the window – so the relief of not being stood up led her to forgive any strangeness on his part.

She even tried to joke about it. Beth was good at making jokes; it was her #1 Tool for Attracting Men. (‘Always make them laugh,’ her mother used to tell her. ‘Make them laugh, or make them supper.’) Beth had decided on the former as a rule of thumb – cooking was not her forte. She made Pravesh laugh within the first ten minutes of their date: a good sign. Actually, it was within the first three minutes, as soon as she opened her door and they had exchanged greetings.

‘You know,’ Beth said, ‘a friend of mine and his daughter recently went to a funeral parlour to pick out a coffin for her goldfish. “Why is the coffin so big, Daddy?” the little girl asked. “Well, honey,” her father replied, avoiding eye contact, “your goldfish is inside Fluffy, the next-door neighbour’s cat!”’

Beth snorted, laughing at her own joke before Pravesh had a chance to.

He joined her with a short, sharp bark of a laugh that nonetheless made her eyes shine.



Beth had never been in a hearse before.

Perhaps that wasn’t surprising.

She stared at it curiously as they walked down the path, taking in the tinted windshield, the pink velvet curtains, and the extra-long rear section to distract herself from the nervous fluttering in her stomach. The outside of the hearse was black, as is customary, but it had large pink letters covering both flanks of the car that read, *Frankie’s Funeral Parlour: The Finest Service This Side of Heaven*.

Following her gaze, Pravesh explained that it was, in fact, one of Durban’s premier funeral parlours, and that his boss had kindly let him borrow the hearse for this special occasion.

Beth felt no need to question him – she was happy to be a special occasion.

It seemed like the perfect match: Beth was a self-confessed Saver, Pravesh a Man in Need of Saving.

She had a heart too big for her life, and he had a life too big for his heart.

Beth often wondered where her enormous capacity for love had come from; what aberrant gene in her had malfunctioned, causing her to always, always give too much. Little did she remember a certain Friday evening in the hot summer of her fourteenth year: at a school disco, being ignored by all the boys because she was slightly overweight, spotty, and dressed in a rather unflattering jeans and T-shirt combo. She felt ugly. She was unhappy. She overheard Tom du Plessis, the boy she was quietly, desperately in love with, saying to his friend, 'I just don't know how to talk to Andrea, she's so hot!'

And instead of fleeing to the bathroom and crying behind a locked door for the rest of the night, Beth decided to help Tom woo Andrea, even though it felt like weighing her shoes down with concrete.

So, you see, it was not so much an aberrant gene, as a conscious decision.

Her reasoning – subconscious though it was at the time – was that boys would like her more if she helped them; if she could make other people happy, it would make her happy.

Over a decade later, Beth's motivation hadn't changed.

In many ways, Beth was still stuck at that disco. Somehow, she still couldn't figure out why loving intensely – instead of drawing men towards her like a magnet – always scared them away. Magazine psychologists, love doctors, talk show hosts, and readers of romance novels worldwide knew exactly why, of course. They had (all, collectively) majored in Female Saviour Instinct; they had written master's dissertations on it, and had given lectures on the prevailing need of twenty-first-century women to Save Men.

This was easy stuff: Beth scared men away because she fell in love too hard, too fast, and insisted on constructing elaborate relationship fantasies in her head. Her sense of self was dramatically subverted for the benefit of the male of the species, and she relied too heavily on the necessity of a relationship in the construction of her identity. She also had a startlingly vivid imagination, and had spent many years watching romantic comedies. All of this blended together to produce a heady concoction called Beth's Recurrent Destructive Relationship Pattern (as those in the know would call it).

Those out of the know called it ‘that thing she always does’. Time after time Beth would see a man from afar, or meet him casually, and something in his manner, or look, or speech (or lack of manner/look/speech) would endear him to her.

After even the briefest, most fleeting of encounters, Beth instantly layered her unwitting prey with everything she ever wanted in a lover, coated him with her romantic dreams and desires, and dressed him up as Prince Charming (tailor-made, of course). He would be funny, caring, sweet and loving, intelligent, witty, sensitive and spiritual, phenomenal in bed, endlessly thoughtful in everyday life, and – of course – smitten with her.

And then they’d go on their first date.

During that first date, Beth would pounce on certain key phrases to prove her fantasies were grounded in reality.

‘I also like drinking tea,’ translated seamlessly into, ‘We have everything in common and will probably never fight.’

When he said, ‘I once thought about getting a puppy,’ she heard, ‘I’m ready to settle down and start having kids.’

‘What would you like for dessert?’ really meant, of course, ‘I will devote my life to making you happy.’

After they got to know each other a little bit, Beth would fall madly, deeply, hopelessly in love (the second date). This happened on every second date, regardless of whether the man was a catch or a dud or an unutterable bore; or maybe even potentially dangerous. The object of Beth’s deep love would be (hopefully) somewhat intrigued by her, but (naturally) alarmed by her ardour so early on.

This was (usually) where their paths diverged.

If this week’s Prince Charming was a fairly normal, mildly issued man who enjoyed her spirit, but found the intensity of a whole evening of constant talking a little overwhelming, he fled as quickly as his golden boots could carry him; pausing only when he found a cool, calm and collected girl who might someday deign to like him, but nothing more.

None of that emotional nonsense.

If, however, he was complex, depressed, heavily issued and near-suicidal, the Prince Charming inevitably saw sweet Beth as his guiding light –

finally The One who could change his life/pay his bills/cook his supper and generally get him back on track. Like a mom but with sex. And once this Prince Charming-in-disguise reached the back-on-track state (no longer suicidal, no longer socially inept) and had entirely sapped Beth of all her energy and will to live – after she allowed him to unload every doubt and insecurity onto her – she would be unceremoniously dumped.

Every time.

But Beth refused to get bitter about it, refused to admit defeat in the face of overwhelming evidence that each time she found a new Love it ended, and she recovered. She kept the candle of hope burning, and even though the flame wavered dangerously at times, Beth vowed never to grow cynical.

This is not to say that she didn't sometimes feel a little used. Beth was no idiot; she saw the furtive looks her friends gave each other when she said she was in love (again), noticed the false enthusiasm her siblings tried to muster when she gushed, picked up on the resigned tone her mom had started to use whenever Beth phoned in tears. But she just couldn't help it: each time she met a new man it felt like waking up to a new morning, a whole new day.

A whole new set of circumstances.

Or so Beth thought.

The trajectory of these doomed love affairs was fairly easy to follow, thanks to a little 'condition' Beth had had since birth. She floated when she was happy. Not high up in the air, not enough to notice unless you were staring at her, but definitely with her feet above the ground. Every time she met The One, she started floating, and usually stayed in a happily floating state until he started dumping on her, at which point she came back to earth with a thud.

Each of Beth's short-lived relationships followed this rainbow-like arc, with no pot of gold at the end.

Beth sometimes felt a little tired by the constant merry-go-round of emotions these relationships kept her on, sometimes wondered if she couldn't perhaps hop off and sit on a bench for a while, catching her breath. But whenever she reached that level of reasoning – the maybe-I-

don't-*need*-a-boyfriend level – she found herself gripped by a panic so intense that it left her breathless.

Those thirty-second panic attacks always centred on the same scene: Beth, at thirty-five, single, overweight, smoking heavily and drinking glass after glass of red wine in a bar, on her own, until her teeth turned red. The fact that she neither smoked nor drank red wine made no difference to the scenario. And logically, sure, Beth knew that you didn't *have* to have one boyfriend after the other just to ensure you were never alone. But whenever she thought about being single for longer than a few weeks, she got that sick feeling that maybe, somehow, if she got off the merry-go-round it would speed up and leave her behind, and she wouldn't be able to get on again until all the good men were taken.

And then she'd be right back there in that bar, drinking wine, smoking, with ghoulishly outlined teeth.

This very real fear trapped Beth in a continuous state of checking-out.

Wherever she went she kept her eyes peeled for eligible guys.

In Handy Green Grocers.

In the dentist's waiting room.

At the Blood Donor Centre (he had to be a good guy if he was willing to donate blood).

Over piles of cantaloupes in Fruit & Veg City.

Walking on the beach.

Walking down the road.

Even walking down the aisle on Sundays, at the church she occasionally popped into to see if there were any new male converts.

Beth was constantly checking out men.

It was exhausting.

And often hopeless. Take last week, for example – even as Beth pleaded for her life, and sobbed her way through the robbery, she couldn't help noticing the tall, dark, handsome man's eyes on her, and briefly wondered whether he was staring at her because she was hysterical, or because he was somehow attracted to her.

She so hoped it was the latter.

All in all, by the time Beth had a gun held to her head and realised she was not quite ready to die, she was in trouble.