



Global Short Story Competition

April 2014

Winner : Martin McCaw
Burly's Ride

Highly Commended : Jeff Taylor
Bad Skin Day

Burly's Ride

Martin McCaw

Burly wasn't built like his name sounds, which made his job a challenge because he worked at Mr. Thompson's feed store. Betty Lou, the woman he loved, dealt with customers at the front counter. She would call an order to the back of the store, and Burly would drag a fifty-pound sack of horse feed to the counter, gasping for breath, sweat stinging his eyes. Then he'd watch a cowboy sling the sack over his shoulder and saunter off. Burly reckoned he had no chance with Betty Lou, competing against those cowboys. He couldn't even look her in the eye.

He knew she loved horses. One evening, as shadows crept higher on the hillsides, he'd watched her ride her horse along a ridge of wheat stubble, illuminated by the sun's last rays. The image had stayed with him. Every year at the Walla Walla Rodeo, he'd see her sitting in the grandstand with her girlfriends.

Burly had never ridden a horse. He was afraid of horses. He was also afraid of stepping in horse manure. Sometimes during his lunch break he would walk to the river with Betty Lou. She would see geese flying overhead or deer grazing in a field or a mother quail crossing the road, a dozen babies trotting single file behind her. Burly never saw those things. He kept his eyes on the road directly in front of him so he wouldn't step in manure. When they got back to the store, he'd wash off the soles of his boots under a faucet in case he might have stepped on a flake of dried-up manure too small to see.



But he had this daydream. He would fantasize that he'd entered the bucking bronco competition at the rodeo and won first place, and Betty Lou was so thrilled she said yes when he proposed.

One August day, after watching Betty Lou blush when a cowboy brought her a bouquet of yellow star thistle, Burly entered the saddle bronc riding competition at the Walla Walla Rodeo. He knew he'd get bucked off, but he hoped to impress Betty Lou with his bravery.

The morning of the competition he found out he'd drawn Mankiller, the meanest bronco on the rodeo circuit. No rider had ever stayed on him for the required eight seconds.

By now Burly knew he'd made a mistake, but he couldn't back out. Everybody in town knew he'd entered. He tried to calm his anxiety by recalling his favorite image, Betty Lou riding her horse along a ridge of wheat stubble, her body so still in the saddle she seemed to be part of the horse. An idea began to form.

He went to Doctor Hardy's drugstore and bought two tubes of the strongest glue on the shelf. That night – he was scheduled to be the last rider in the competition – he crouched behind the rodeo corrals where nobody could see him and smeared glue over the seat of his pants. He used up both tubes.

He heard the announcer say, "Next up, Burly Bode on Mankiller." The horse was already in the chute, raring to go. Burly climbed the railing and hopped onto the saddle, and the gate flew open.



On a bronco's first jump after leaving the chute, the rider has to touch the heels of his boots against the horse's neck above the point of its shoulder, and he has to do it before the front hooves hit the ground. On Mankiller's first jump, Burly was thrown back against the horse's rump, and his legs jerked up reflexively so his boots touched the neck.

For the previous three years, his fondest hope had been that someday he would stay on a bucking bronco for eight seconds. About two seconds into his ride, what Burly wanted more than anything in the world was to get bucked off. One instant he'd face the ground between Mankiller's ears, the next instant his head would snap back and he'd see stars. He toppled from side to side and whirled like a dust devil. His teeth jangled from the pounding, and his eyes felt like they were about to pop out of his head.

The eight-second whistle finally blew, and rodeo handlers ran into the arena to help Burly off his horse. But Mankiller wouldn't let them come near. He kept spinning and bucking. He'd never been ridden, and this guy was still on his back. All the people in the grandstand were on their feet, cheering and clapping. They'd never seen a ride like this.

Mankiller kept bucking for fifty-eight seconds, which must have set a world's record. Then he just stopped. He was all bucked out. Burly was slumped over the mane, his arms dangling, limp as a scarecrow.

The rodeo hands tried to pull him off the saddle, but they couldn't.



They led Mankiller out of the arena into the corral in back. They saw right away what had happened, and they had to take the saddle off with Burly still stuck to it. They pulled him out of his pants – Burly was no help at all – and someone got another pair of jeans and poked his legs into them.

By now the rodeo officials were aware of the situation, and they had a problem. The crowd was still clapping and hollering and whistling. If the officials announced that Burly had been disqualified, they would be booed, maybe pelted with Cracker Jack boxes. They would also be the laughing stock of the rodeo circuit. Nobody would ever take them seriously again.

They told the rodeo hands to take that saddle somewhere, with the pants stuck to it, burn the whole thing, and don't tell anyone. Then they announced to the audience that Burly Bode was the winner. The rodeo hands drove Burly home and put him to bed.

He stayed in bed for three days. All he could do was crawl to the bathroom. On the fourth day he staggered to the feed store. Everyone shook his hand and clapped him on the back and told him what a great ride that was. Everyone, that is, except Betty Lou. She quietly went about her work.

Burly went up to her and asked if she would walk to the river with him during their lunch break. He was hobbling so bad they only got as far as the railroad tracks. There, he looked into Betty Lou's eyes for the first time and asked her to marry him.



She said, “Burly, if you’d asked me before that rodeo, I’d have said yes. But I could never marry a man who would do such a foolhardy thing as enter a bucking bronco competition. If you would do that, you would do other reckless things. I’d be worried sick about you all the time. And we’d have our little ones to think about. I want to marry a cautious man, a prudent man, the kind of man I thought you were up until that rodeo.”

Burly stood there with his mouth hanging open. After the shock wore off, he confessed what he’d done. Betty Lou just stared at him. Then she burst out laughing, and by the time they got back to the feed store they were engaged.

The circuit’s next stop was the Pendleton Roundup, and the rodeo people were working feverishly to get Mankiller to buck. They tried all the standard tricks, twisting his tail, shocking him with electric prods, tightening the flank strap under his rib cage, which makes a horse instinctively buck to try to escape the pain. No matter what they did, he wouldn’t buck.

He wasn’t any use to the rodeo circuit anymore, so they sold him to Burly and Betty Lou for a cheap price. Burly only got on Mankiller in his nightmares, but Betty Lou rode him everywhere. When their first child reached the toddler stage, she rode in front of Betty Lou, straddling the saddle horn.

Mankiller had the sweetest disposition of any horse you ever saw. The rodeo people weren’t around to treat him mean anymore. Every summer when the Walla Walla fair came around, you’d see him outside the cow barns, walking in a circle, tiny kids riding on his back.



A friend who had studied psychology told Burly that the only way to vanquish his nightmares was to ride Mankiller again. Burly approached the horse cautiously, trying not to show fear. Betty Lou cupped her hands, ready to boost him onto the saddle. Then Mankiller turned his head and she saw the look in his eye.

“Forget it,” she told Burly. “He wants another chance.”



Highly commended

Bad Skin Day

Jeff Taylor

The big screen looms above me, and I'm looking at the surface of the some planet that's wandered too close to the sun. It's a nightmare landscape of active volcanoes and deep craters.

They are masters of humiliation, the skin specialists. Without so much as a by your leave they scan the skin of your face with their fancy camera and enlarge it a zillion times in techno-fucking colour.

But suddenly there's a flash of starched white and, I can't believe it, gorgeous Tania Manson comes into the room. Tania, from school. I had no idea she worked here. Too late, she's looking at my gruesome close-up in all its glory on the screen, and my humiliation is complete. Her lovely brown eyes widen.

'Ronald Cox! Long time no see! Wow! Hello Ronnie. I didn't realize it was you. What've you been up to since school then? Gosh, you've put on more weight, and I see you've still got skin problems.'

'More' - 'still' - The words hang in the air like bad dandruff.

She's even more beautiful now of course. Pretty. Body to die for, flawless skin, teeth brilliantly white and perfect.



I mumble something about working in the culinary business, in sales, and pray that she never has occasion to come to the counter at Burger King on the main street. One look at her slim, calorie starved body though and I know I needn't worry.

The skin doctor comes in.

'Max, Ronnie was at school with me.' Tania says.

'Well, well.' His eyes narrow, his lips purse, and he nods curtly. Suddenly for some reason we're enemies.

Dr. Maxwell Johnson, dermatologist, tall, tanned, and too suave for my liking. He looks around mid forties, and already I have less hair than him, at half his age. Rubber gloves too. What, am I contaminated!? And what's with the bow tie - has he stopped off on his way to the pox doctor's annual ball?

The plaque on the wall has every letter of the alphabet after his name. He beckons Tania closer. Too close, their heads are real close. I wonder....surely they can't be? ...Nah! What? Nah!

'Look at Ronald's scan Tania. Tell me what you see.'

Tania's frowning, concentrating hard while he breathes in her ear.

'Well, there's some pustules, and some papules, and—she peers closer, yes, I think, - no, maybe not...'

Pustules! Papules! The very words are making my heart race. I have to grit my teeth and clench my fists.



To see the screen better she has to lean over me, and her left breast is so close I can feel her body heat. Hormones that have been in long hibernation are stirring again somewhere deep inside me. I can't believe this. One half of the wonderful set that I had drooled over for years from two desks away is now inches away.

Johnson maneuvers closer, hard in on her right one. Too close for my liking. Fuck, surely not, he's old enough to be, - well, her doctor, for Christ's sake!

'Very good, Tania. You're picking up things quickly. It's important that you get to know the terminology. But what else can you see on Ronald's skin?' Now he's got his filthy paw on her arm.

I feel like a laboratory specimen, reduced onto a microscope slide, the subject of some gruesome postmortem. And what's all this crap anyway. Surely she's only the receptionist or something. Her left breast moves even closer, filling my horizon.

'Well, there's maybe one or two...I think,cysts?'

'Excellent!'

'And... ' I can sense her excitement building. -'some nodules?'

'Wonderful Tania! Yes! The complete set! You don't often see them all together on the one head!'

Fan-fucking-tastic. I'm making some sort of medical history. And for all this time I thought I was just another dude with pimples. It seems that on the poxometer scale I must be about a ten.



'This Tania, is your classic case of Acne Vulgaris. A particularly bad case.' Does he have to sound so pleased, so smug?

'You squeeze don't you.' He frowns accusingly. 'I can always tell.' He says it like I peddle child porn.

'I, er, well, maybe...occasionally.' What is he, the pimple police?

'You must never squeeze them!' That's right isn't it Tania?'

She's nodding furiously. He's looking deep into her face and I bet he's not checking hers for zits.

'You must always just gently express them.'

'So they say.' I mumble. I could have told him I tried that once, but it was like sex without the climax.

Hey. Hang on! What did he just say? Acne Vulgaris. Did he just call me vulgar?

'Is it bad?' I stammer.

'It's a serious case of adolescent acne, but it is treatable.'

Shit! So now I'm still an adolescent, at twenty two for fucks sake! Bad things seem to have come to a head – and it's my head.

'We'll get you onto a course of long term, low-dose antibiotics. And you will need to start deep cleansing your pores.' He goes out of the room to his office. I'm hoping Tania will pop out as well, just for a minute or two. I feel the deep urge. There's a mountain range on my forehead that needs exploring. But no such luck.



She's looking at me with such a tender smile my heart jumps. The big screen is now off thank goodness.

'I liked you a lot at school, you know Ronnie. But you were always with that Shelley Brown.' She screws up her face, and even scrunched, it's still pretty. 'You were suited though. She had bad skin too. And BO. We called her Smelly Shelley behind her back.'

Now I'm wishing that I'd taken a shower in the last couple of days. Then she shoots a shaft of hope straight into my heart.

'I always thought you were far too good for her. Too..... - nice.'

There is a heaven! I'll take nice. My sex life has always been that of a eunuch in a nunnery. Pimples are absolute libido-killers. Women should realize they don't always have to look at the face. That there are positions other than missionary.

Maybe there's a chance at long last with lovely Tania? Maybe she'll see past the pox to the inner me. Acne is only skin deep after all, as they say. She's now looking a bit embarrassed.

'We, er, called you Poxo Coxy. I don't know if you knew. It all seems stupid now, so mean of us..'

'I don't care,' I cry. She can call me Fester-head, Pus-face, whatever she likes, forever, if only she'll go out with me

'But I always wanted to go out with you, Tania,' I blurt. 'But you never showed any interest.'

'Well, for goodness sake then, fancy that.' She's shaking her pretty head. 'What a shame.'



I'm holding my breath.

'Life goes on.' She sighs. 'School was ages ago, it's been what, five years now. Max has been very good to me. He's training me to be his assistant.'

'I can see that. He's very, - attentive.'

'He wants me to assist him in his clinics. I'm doing a Tech course. I'll hold his instruments, and things.'

Yep, he'll want her to hold his things all right, - fucking pedophile.

'That'll be nice for you, Tania.'

'He's so very good at his profession. Does a wonderful job with skin cancers. You should see how brilliantly he burns them off with nitrogen.' Her eyes are dreamy. 'And his scalpel work, his curetting and surgical excising, is second to none.'

Yeah, yeah. So he slashes and burns. Throw in some raping and pillaging and he's up there with Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan.

'It's fantastic, to have a skill like that.' I nod agreement. What a cushy fucking job, skin specialists. Nine to five, no weekends. No emergency call-outs. He's hardly likely to be called out at 3 am to a case of terminal ringworm for fucks sake.

So I'll just carry on with my sad life then, Tania my love. Because we, the acnied of the world have to stick together you know. We gravitate to each other by default, hanging around in alleys and dark places, avoiding the unblemished. We fester about with nothing to do but pick on each other. Often we pick on ourselves.



‘D’ya know what any of the guys from school are up to Tania?’

‘One or two.’ She’s thinking hard. ‘Oh, yes, Andy Collins, he’s high up in banking now. Tim Allen’s an accountant.’

‘That’s great!’ – money-grubbing parasites!

We are addicted, you know. Squeezaholics. We can’t keep our fingers off them, they make such tantalizing targets. And after a while we start to seek out bigger blemishes. A little recreational squeezing is no longer enough, and pretty soon we have a full blown habit. Did you know that some ordinary pimples with a bit of nurturing can be mutated into rogue-- things. More desirable things – boils, carbuncles, furuncles.

‘Jenny Watson and Jacko Thomas are doing well in IT.’

‘Good on them!’ – Fucking nerds, fucking geeks!

There’s nowhere to turn for help Tania. If you’re alcoholic, or suicidal, or a drug addict, there are places. Clinics. But there’s no such thing as ‘Hickey Helpline’, or ‘Acnied Anonymous’. We have to settle for pimpled partners too, the only ones who’ll have us. We’re so revolted we have to close our eyes just to kiss, and if God forbid, we ever accidentally procreate, our kids are sure to be pimply as well.

‘And Davie Allen’s made a fortune on the stockmarket.’

‘Wow, I always knew he’d do well.’ -Arsehole!

It's a vicious circle Tania. I suffered abuse from my parents, skin abuse that is. My mother had the habit too, and she'd pounce on me at every opportunity. It'll be hard to break the cycle. I worry that down the track I'll be at the door for my kids to get home from school, waiting to see if anything interesting has come up during the day.

I decide to go for one last try.

'Dr., Max, says he can clear me up. Maybe we can go out for a coffee, or a movie or something. You know...when I'm ...cured,' I hold my breath.

She has her back to me, and I wonder whether I should risk a quick squeeze, the big one on my left cheek that I'd noticed on the screen. The one a bit like Mt Doom in Lord of the Rings and about to erupt. But she might turn around at any time. She's been pottering, tidying things, but she goes deathly still, and takes an age to answer.

'Don't be offended Ronnie.' She turns towards me. 'It's just, well, I've moved on, and don't see anyone from school much. We seem to move in, well, different circles. Would you mind, though, um, being a case study, for my course?'

Fortunately, just in time to save my complete humiliation, Johnson enters clutching a prescription form.

'Right, here we are then. Get this filled. One tablet twice a day for three months, and get some cleanser for your pores. They're very badly clogged.' He says it as if they're deep mine shafts chock full of the most deadly toxins known to man.

'We'll soon have you like a baby's bottom. And don't forget, you must never, never squeeze!'

I steal a glance at Tania, to see whether a baby's bottom might interest her, but she's turned her full attention to sugar-daddy. She's straightening his tie for fucks sake! Suddenly I feel like a weeping, open sore in the kitchen of a posh restaurant.

'Thanks doctor.' I mumble, and head for the door. 'See ya Tania.'

She doesn't even answer me.

Fuck them. I'll have a night in tonight. Life's short and I've got a lot to squeeze in.



Global Short Story Competition

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