

# Global short stories competition

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Winners May 09  
Claudia's Legs  
Bruce McLennan

Everyone said that Claudia had great legs. I couldn't see it back then, I was only a kid and there was lots of other stuff that just got in the way.

Claudia wasn't pretty like some of the other girls. She didn't have beautiful hair like Annie Galwey and she didn't have a lovely smile like poor Debbie Postle. Her skin wasn't smooth or clear like some of the girls. She had spots all over her face like freckles, but they weren't freckles.

I thought the way everyone said that Claudia had great legs was like giving her a consolation prize, they couldn't say anything nice about anything else so they just said the only thing they could.

Don't get me wrong, Claudia was the nicest person.

She always had a friendly smile and she always said hello or good morning, at least to me anyway and I didn't think she singled me out or anything. But I still thought that they weren't really sincere about it when they said she had great legs. I'd looked at her legs just to see if there was anything special about them, and there wasn't. They were just legs. She had that fuzz of golden hair that girls today would be taking off with a razor by the time they turned eleven or twelve, but back then in the orphanage there were no razors. Not for the girls anyway.

The orphanage was all I ever really knew of as a home. Sure I got fostered out half a dozen times but I always came back. Maybe it was just that I was so different to some of the people they tried to link me up with, or maybe it was just that they didn't try too hard. Looking back, I think that was probably it. But whenever I came back to the orphanage Claudia was still here. I think she just wasn't pretty enough to even be considered.

I was little for my age and there were plenty of bullies at the home. Every one of us learnt to fight from an early age. If you didn't, you ended up really bad.

Probably the worst of the bullies was a boy called Geoffrey Senior and he had a cretinous mate that followed him around and picked up his leavings. They were like some weird sort of symbiotic union, each one feeding off the other. Reis Willis was a really sick kid, he needed Geoffy to pick on some loser and he'd watch, dribble running down his chin, as the bigger and heavier boy pounded the poor wretch into submission. When Geoffy had finished Reis would always walk over and grind a knuckle into the bleeding kid's back, or top of his head, and he'd laugh with what I always thought of as a howling-monkey laugh.

Reis for his part always told Geoffy what a great fellow he was and Geoffy would wrap a meaty arm round the skinny moron and they'd wander off to find some other poor kid to bash.

Nobody in authority at the orphanage would stop Geoffy. Mister Dawkins could have but we all knew that he believed in survival of the fittest. He thought of himself as a modern day observer of Darwinian Theory. If you weren't prepared to fight you'd lose. There were lots of kids mentally scarred for life that came out of that place. I know that some of them committed suicide later in life because of it. I hope that Dawkins got to meet some of those poor buggers in the afterlife, but I've got the feeling that they probably went to different places.

Ellie Collins was no use either. She was just too old and silly. She'd say, "Come on you boys, stop that rough play," and then she'd just walk away ignoring the blood.

Geoffy Senior caught me one day in February when I was just turned ten. We'd been in the metalworking shop watching Mister Goodchild beating a circular cake tin into shape. Geoffy kept looking over at me with a sneering smile on his Slavic features and I knew I was in trouble.

Geoffy was big. He looked fat but most of it was muscle. He had that heavyweight boxer's physique. Not nice to look at

but very effective in a fight. His top lip was very wide compared to his thin, almost nonexistent, bottom lip and he'd lick that fat lip with a wet, disgusting tongue as he looked at me.

I got out of there fast when Goodchild let us go. I thought I'd lost him and that behind the girl's toilets was the perfect spot to sit in the shade and let him forget me. But someone must have ratted and told him where I was.

He hit me like a ton of bricks. He drove my head into the old weatherboards and nearly knocked me out with that. I was probably lucky that I was half out because I didn't really feel the beating he gave me then.

I knew that he'd punched me in the mouth, but all I could feel was wetness running out and I remember thinking I must have been dribbling awful bad.

I was going down for good when I heard the sound of hard flesh colliding and Geoffy bucking on top of me. At the time I thought Dopey Dawkins must have come to his senses and was finally taking up his responsibility.

I heard Geoffy get hit again and he roared and rolled away from me.

I was seeing double, but I could make out Claudia in the sun as she kicked Geoffy again. A high rising sweep of leg with a hard bare foot smashing into Geoffy's head, I couldn't believe it.

"Piss off, you bitch," Geoffy roared and tried to grab her leg with a meaty hand. But she was too fast for him and she danced back. I watched her foot lash out again like a snake and connect with Geoffy, this time striking him in the family jewels. He sank down, head between his legs, a shrill wail of pain from his lips.

I called out, "Wash out," from uncooperative lips. Claudia turned and took to Reis as he was about to swipe at her with a piece of timber he'd pulled off the paling fence. She kicked him hard and took the paling and broke it over his skinny shoulder. The last we saw of him was a limping crab of a thing heading for the orchard.

Geoffy caught her then but to my surprise she was equal to him. Inside his bear-hug she head-butted him in the nose and he found himself getting kicked again. Until now she hadn't said a word. Now she started to talk as she systematically reduced him to a blubbering mess.

"Your mother would have been disgusted with the way you treat little kids," she said as she drove a hard foot into his belly.

"You will never come near Billy Cortiss again," she said as she kicked him in the throat.

Finally she got him in a headlock, one leg over the other. She was sort of crouching, Geoffy lying flat on the ground, his head up at painful angle.

"Geoffy," she said. "Tell me that you won't beat up on any little kids ever again."

Geoffy only grunted. I was fascinated by the play of smooth muscles in her thigh, the sinuous curve of her calf. She hopped a little and Geoffy moaned.

"I haven't heard your answer, Geoffy."

"I'm gonna kill you when you let me up," was his muffled reply and I knew Geoffy wasn't broken.

Claudia simply sank a little lower and Geoffy started whimpering. She eased up a little.

"I'm gonna get you bitch."

Claudia sank lower and I heard the distinct sound of a bone popping in Geoffy's neck.

"Please don't kill me, Claudie. I won't do it anymore." Geoffy suddenly sounded frightened and pathetic, and I felt sorry for him, I don't know why. Claudia gave him a bit more then let him go.

He fell to the ground holding his neck and crying. I think she broke something in his spine because for a long time after that day he walked with his head crooked. I knew he longed to play the bully again for years after, but he just wasn't game. A couple of times he made as if to come at me and even though I'd grown up and was much tougher I'd just say, "Watch out for Claudia," or "Claudia's coming," and he'd look hurt, grab his neck and walk away.

After she let him go she came over all concerned for me. She had a red patch on her forehead where she'd pounded Geoffy's face.

"Are you hurt bad, Billy," she asked. I knew I'd survive but I must have looked a mess. Geoffy had knocked a tooth loose, my top lip was split open and my nose was broken and bubbling bloody snot.

I just grinned at her and said, "You've got great legs, Claudia."

She just gave me that wise, knowing smile that I came to know and love so much over the years.  
Yes, sixty-three years later and Claudia still has great legs. And don't I know it.

Highly commended  
The Blue Velvet Chair  
Louise Beech

"We're going," said Sarah, the words as crisp as her starched-cotton dress.

"I'm too tired," said Angus, his as squishy as the sofa. The 'ts came out as 'ths and he was thin and barely made a dent in the velvet upholstery.

Sarah remained in the doorway, beyond which chicken soup bubbled on the hob and bread warmed in the oven. The smell would always remind her of this. This day, this week, this year. This.

"We're going if I have to carry you." She puffed up one of the cushions, not minding how she shifted Angus like an untidy accessory. "If it's the last trip we bloody take, we're going."

She wandered into the garden and loaded the camper van with fold-up chairs, blankets and canned fruit; Angus watched "The Weakest Link," sipping tepid tea through a straw and trying to lip-read Anne Robinson's questions.

"Cancer," he rasped in answer to what was the biggest cause of death in the in most western countries, but he was wrong. It was heart disease. Anne appeared decidedly smug about it.

"What do you know, woman." He put his empty tea cup on the nestle table; it missed and smashed on the wooden floor. The pink and white straw lay atop the brown mess, like the mast of a sail-less sinking ship. He dropped Sarah's puffed-up cushion on top of the disaster to hide it; he didn't need trouble.

"I'm done," said Sarah from the doorway, her face red with exertion. Wet patches stained the under arms of her blue dress. Angus was asleep, snoring magnificently, his chest moving up and down, irregular as the ocean. She often listened for his breath at night. Listened to the gaps in between, timing them, imagining a day when the pauses were longer than the gasps. "We're going," she said softly, covering him with a blanket.

They were on the road two hours later. Sarah drove with the window down, her hair fanning like streamers in the draught.

"I'll drive," Angus had offered breathlessly as he followed her up the garden.

"You can't even climb up the bloody step without help," she snapped. "I'll drive."

"God, I hope the weather's good." He fastened the seat belt.

It started raining. The wiper blades splish-splashed rhythmically. Water drummed on the roof. Sarah thought about a long ago rhythm; a rhythm that irritated her senses while a new discord aroused them. Now, she turned on the radio to drown out the sound of the water, the pounding, the tempo. "She Loves You" by the Beatles filled the van.

Sarah knew Angus was smiling even though concave cheeks and ravaged muscles denied him the physical pleasure. He touched her knee – squeezed softly. He'd lost the strength that once excited her, but not the ability to soothe, or to remind.

"You remember the first time we heard that song?" Spittle flew away from his mouth and hit the dashboard.

Sarah smiled. "I do. Hated it then and hate it now," she said.

"You always did love and hate with equal passion," Angus whispered. "Remember the blue velvet chair?"

Sarah turned her attention from the road for a second. She looked into his eyes, right into them, past the wrinkles and the dark circles, into his history, their history.

"Of course I remember that chair," she said.

Sarah sat in the sagging blue velvet chair; Angus perched on the arm where she knew he could see straight down into her cleavage. The party was at his friend's house; the date was their fifth. She wore a too-small bra that pushed her breasts together like the wonder-bra would effortlessly do thirty years later. Straightening her back and pushing her chest forward, she looked to see if he was hard. He was. She smiled and dampened her mouth using her tongue as a lip

gloss brush.

"Do you like me?" she asked, knowing the answer but needing the response as foreplay.

"Yes," he said.

"What would you like to do to me?" she asked.

"I...we...." He gave up trying to find the words and looked out into the room where others danced, twisted, laughed. It was another world.

She wore nothing beneath the full skirt and was eager for him to find out. Taking his large, veined hand she placed it on her thigh, high up. He awaited further encouragement so she moved it to where she was wet. He pushed two clumsy fingers inside her. He was rough, unskilled, but she liked it.

"Am I hurting you?" he whispered.

"Yes," she said. "But don't stop."

His lack of rhythm excited her. He pushed deep into her warmth without warning and withdrew as senselessly, a contrast to the methodical pounding music; he was out of sync with the simplistic beat of "She Loves You" but in tune with her body. She hated the Beatles and liked him even more for opposing their mindless drivel. John Lennon might co-write songs for the biggest band in the Northwest but she doubted he could make her feel like this. She'd seen them live in Manchester six months ago and Lennon was as limp wristed as a poodle. She liked a solid wrist. She liked Angus. He pushed further inside her and she groaned against her shoulder. She bit his arm and he sucked in a sigh. None of the guests approached the dark corner where the couple discovered one another on the blue velvet chair.

"Kiss me," she instructed.

He leaned down. His breath smelt faintly of liquorice. What he lacked in dexterity with his hands he compensated for with his mouth. She was glad. Kissing alone could bring her to orgasm if done properly. She'd kissed maybe five others; two had left her almost unable to breathe, the intensity of her muscles grinding a shock.

"Hmmm," she said now.

His skin was rough with perhaps a day or two of non-shaving. He kissed her at first with barely parted lips. Impatiently she opened him further with her tongue and explored the recesses of his mouth. Their tongues danced together in harmony while his brutal fingers explored. He pulled his head back first, gasping for air. Reluctantly she surrendered his fingers so they could switch positions – he slid into the chair and she moved onto his lap, hanging one leg devilishly over the arm. He moaned as she moved against him.

"I never met anyone like you," he said.

"A man your age? I doubt that."

"I'm not that old," he said. "Be twenty-seven next month."

"You'll probably die before me then," she said.

"That's grim. I'm only ten years older than you."

"Don't you want to fuck me now?"

He put his hand over her mouth. She could taste herself on him.

"Shhhhh. Where did you learn to talk like that? Girls just don't talk that way."

"Don't you like it?" she teased. "Let's go somewhere. Is there a bedroom here?"

"You're a Catholic – you went to a convent school. Your mother thinks I'm twenty-two and I've taken you to the cinema to see Doctor Zhivago."

"So?"

"I'm not taking you to a bedroom," he said.

"I'm a virgin."

"You're not."

"I am. Why is that so hard to believe?"

She took hold of his hand.

"I love these hands," she said. "I think I might love these hands forever."

Sarah turned the radio off when she realised that Angus was asleep again. She closed the car window even though the rain had stopped, and shifted in her seat. Her back ached; months of lifting and bending had tested her spine. Her dress was ruined – angry creases slashed the front skirt. Why had she been so impractical? A dress for camping? A full-skirted dress that hardly fit any more and he'd not even noticed her effort. Full-skirted, but not underwear-less, not today.

The road ahead was clear as she neared the cliff-side park. Grit spat away from the van wheels on the uneven drive and sunlight bounced off the wet bonnet. She pulled onto the field and parked in their spot - close to the cliff edge where they could awaken to the sound of the sea and the sight of the castle on the small island opposite.

Angus stirred.

"Don't move," she said, touching his leg. "I'll get the electricity and awning sorted and I'll set your chair up where you like it. Don't go irritating me by trying to help, okay?"

He placed his cold hand on hers.

"Oh, you're chilly. I'll get a blanket."

"No," he rasped. "I just wanted to say.... I like you in that dress."

Sarah smiled and kissed his hand. She studied it. Though delicate now she still loved the veins, the palms, the mound near his thumb.

"Just rest," she said. "I'll get you when I've set up. Shout me if you want anything, anything at all."

They were the only people at the small site. Two lone campers. Sarah struggled with the awning. Angus had colour coded the poles for her so she knew what fit where and was able to erect the frame, but the wind wrestled with her for ownership of the cover. She hustled about for some time before noticing the sun dropping like orange blossom towards its twin in the sea. Inside the van were their two green chairs and she set them up near the long grass.

"Angus." Sarah opened the passenger door. "You'll need your blanket if we're to sit out a while. Where is it? Are you sitting on it? Oh, for God's sake. Get up will you."

He was still asleep, his chin resting on his chest.

"Wake up, Angus, you'll never sleep tonight otherwise." She touched his arm but he didn't move. "Angus?" She pushed his arm and he fell forward, his head hitting the dashboard with a thick thud. "Angus?" Sarah pulled him back, shook him, roughly now, angry. "You wake up, you wake up!"

He didn't. He slumped onto the driver's seat.

"Wake up."

But she knew.

She knew.

Sarah climbed into the seat and put her arm over his chest as though they were at a drive-in movie, a contented couple waiting for the end credits. Then she took his cooling hand, his slender, wasted fingers, and pushed them inside where she was warm, where she pulsed with life. She moaned against his cheek, willing him to stir, to clumsily penetrate her.

"Sit in the chair with me," she said. "Why couldn't you sit in the chair with me one last time?"

She knelt at his side, her knees bare on the cold van step, and put both his hands in hers and waited for the sun to die.