

## **Bad Hair Bad**

by: C.A. MacConnell

Let me tell you a secret. I am bad. They call me Shelly Hopscotch because I'm the fastest at the game. I can stretch my legs, throw the smoothest stones, and make it to ten before the other girls run down the pavement to the slick playground, ponytails chasing after them like red-faced, horny boys. If it rains, I'm the first one to swallow drops. If the sun scorches us, I'm the first to pull up my skirt and dance. The other kids watch me tie someone's shoelaces together, and they follow, one by one, until we're all tripping over ourselves.

My hair is so black and straight. No waves. Sometimes, it's tied back smooth and tight, like a swimming cap. Other days, it falls down my shoulders, cupping my chin like hands could. Today, it's somewhere in between.

Last week, Bryan told me my face was as smooth as a fresh-painted wall. He'd know since his Dad's the town painter. Sometimes, after Bryan touches my chin, he looks at his hands to make sure they're not stained. Strange, because whenever I check myself out in any mirror or window, I think my skin has a rough, yellowish glow, like some joker just rubbed my face with Cheetos. Whatever.

The bell rings, and I leap from my seat, the first one out the door, to my locker, listening to the pounding feet.

The boys stick together in choppy runs, ties whipping back over their shoulders.

The girls scurry into the bathroom. They never go alone. This is their only chance. Later, they'd have to squirm in their seats and hold it. Or, raise their hands and

ask the fake-blonde Social Studies teacher if they can get up. If her husband wasn't out all night at the Do-Right Pub on the mountain, she'll let them pee, and they'll get up, looking down. Every uniformed body will stare at them. And giggle.

Slamming my locker shut, I peek at my brown bag lunch. Some fat girls will beg me for my sweets, and I'll trade them. I like the taste of something another Mom made, something that fills me more than a Hostess Cupcake. My Mom is a chef at the Highland Restaurant on the mountain. When she gets home, the last thing she wants to do is make another meal. Dad always tells Mom that her dinners are *dog food*. Nice.

Lunchtime, yeah. We're in our seats, passing food around. Some girls glare at me. I'm the only brave one who moves to a boy table. Those girls want to hate me, but I smile at them. *Kill them with kindness*, Mom always says.

Dirk pats me on the back.

I munch. He wasn't saying "hi." He wanted to feel my shirt to see if there was a bra strap there, which there wasn't. I'm still boobless, skinny Shelly. One of the boys, for real.

Bryan checks his reflection in a spoon. He is the boy leader – brown-eyed, brown-haired, tall, and a curl-headed devil. He's new. New kids on the mountain are auto-cool.

Bell rings. Our stomachs full, we run to recess. Faces trapped in grins. Little snakes. Twizzlers.

We're too old for hopscotch, but the girls still play. They try to beat my record.

Again, I win the game, one-footed and proud. You know I'm bad. You know it.

Bored, I cross the playground to the boys' side. They throw the football around.

Even Jess, the buzz-haired quiet one, is catching some.

Mike, the shortest of them all, takes off his glasses, cleans them with his shirtsleeve, and looks at me.

I feel like a loser, remembering the time I didn't dance with him in seventh grade. So I act like I don't see him. Sitting down on a log, I pull a heavy metal magazine from a hidden, inside coat pocket, flipping through pages of bands, tattoos, and tongues. Ratt is my favorite. They rock.

Bryan bounces back and forth, shouting, "I'm open!" He's always open.

Mike comes over to me, and looks over my shoulder at the pictures.

I hand him the magazine, taking his place in the football game.

"Hey!" Mike yells and laughs.

"Sorry, yeh snooze, yeh lose," I tell him, catch the football, and run.

I glance over at the Latin teacher. She shakes her head, gripping her bell like a recess boyfriend. I know she's thinking, *Shelly will be pregnant at sixteen, another kid lost in the mountains*. She's right about one thing. I'm going to end up in the mountains, living in a log cabin like Grizzly Adams. Just me and my blue-eyed, wolf-dog, Bob. I know, it's like a strange name for a dog. Whatever.

I smile at the Latin teacher. *Kill her with kindness*.

She smiles back, scaredy-cat like.

Science room. I take my assigned seat next to Christine. She's obsessed with

some book, something psycho told through an animal voice.

I pull the headband out of her hair and throw it to Bryan, who's behind us.

"Hey, give it back!" she says, feeling her hair. It's thick, like Bob's.

Bryan throws it to Jess, Jess to Mike, Mike to Lisa, Lisa to Stephanie, until everyone touches it. Everyone except Cathy, the part-albino girl who sits in the closest seat to the teacher. Cathy can't even see the big E's on eye charts.

The Science teacher runs into the room, his brown hair full of static cling.

"Sorry I'm late," he says, writing definitions on the board. There are chalk handprints on his butt.

Jess walks up to Christine, looks at the ground, hands her headband back. "Here," he says, shuffling back to his seat. He looks like Bob did when he had worms. Walked around our house, dragging his behind all over the carpets. Sick-o.

I nudge Christine and say, "Pass Jess a note."

Christine blushes, going back to her book.

She's bad too. Just not yet. It starts with the hair. Pretty soon, she'll stop blow-drying. She'll start wearing it messy, like it's supposed to be, and Jess will make her squirm like a belly-up hornet.

I pass Bryan a note that says, "Come over later."

He passes me one back that says, "You got it," with a smiley, winking face.

Cathy sits alone in the front of the room, her Science book pressed close to her face, the light hitting her skin like sun on snow. She follows the lines of words with her finger, struggling to read. Every day, on the playground, she sits on the same log, peeling an orange. Crazy, but I'm a sucker for her.

Cathy looks up, staring my way, squinting her pale, blue eyes. I know she can't see me, but I look away at the clock, just in case. Watching the second hand, my eyes and ears lose focus, and the teacher's words blur, tangled together like hair. The hand moves in its steady, slow, beat. I can almost hear it. I drift off to Neverland.

I feel a tap on my back, and open my eyes to Cathy's soft, undirected stare. Her thick, white hair blends into her skin.

"You slept through class," she says, floating out of the room, hunched over like old Sister Suzanne, the Religion teacher.

I'm supposed to be the first one out the door. I yank a hair from my head, leave it on the desk, and stand up, anxious. I grab my book pile. Book bags are gay.

Home. I put on my acid-washed jeans with zippers at the ankles, my burgundy, thrift shop sweater, and blue boots. I hear the sounds of dinner-making: the unwrapping, the beep of the microwave, Mom's pant legs rubbing together as she paces, worried about Dad again, and "DarnitMaryMothertoHell" when she cuts herself. She never cusses like Dad does. Dad practices "Super Cussing," like, "Shithead." Mom, on the other hand, takes Church seriously.

There's a knock on the door. I rub the top of my head for good luck.

Bryan stands at the screen, his face blurred by the gray, wire netting.

We run through the horse field and up the mountain to our waterfall, sitting on our favorite, wet rock. It's a biggun.

"I love you, Shell," Bryan says, kissing me sloppy.

I let him kiss me, then stand up, knowing Dad will let me have it if I'm out too

late. There's a long howl. I picture Bob stretching his neck, pointing his nose up in the air, opening his jaws, letting the sound creep out. I can almost feel the thick, fur coat.

"You know I gotta go," I say, feeling retarded.

Bryan takes my hands.

"Not yet," he says, pulling me down to him.

Bob's pitch grows higher.

Bryan pulls my sweater over my head.

I start to unbutton his shirt, get confused, and he finishes for me.

He looks at me, his mouth in a thin line, and says, "I'm like...a virgin."

"I know," I say. "Me too," I lie. I'd already done Dirk and Mike that year.

I move to a higher rock, put my arms around his neck, and kiss him, listening to the rush of water, and Bob's howl deepens to a low moan, the kind that Mom makes at night, in bed, when she thinks I'm sleeping in my attic room. When I listen to her cry, it's like metal music. I love Axl Rose.

Naked, shivering something crazy, we move to a flat, wet, grassy spot. Soon, Bryan's on top of me, making noises. I am quiet, for real, feeling him inside me.

In the distance, Bob is barking. By the sound, I can tell he's on his way home. I put my hands in my hair and grip it.

Bryan presses his weight into my ribs, his fingers moving across my skin. Insects.

When it's over, we grab clothes from the ground. As I struggle with my jeans, Bryan brushes twigs off me. Then he reaches to pick leaves from my hair.

"Don't. I'll get it," I say, making fists with my hands. Like I'm Wonder Woman about to take on the enemy with my special super golden arm cuffs.

Our boots heavy with mud, we walk, lifting our legs high, careful not to trip. When we reach the bottom, Bryan runs down the driveway, his footsteps beating like hail on the attic roof.

I look down at my hands. One, open. The other, still clenched in a fist. I spread my fingers, one at a time. A small clump of hair in the palm. I brush it away with the other hand. *Bad, Shelly, Bad.* I run fingers over my arms, legs, head, chest, until I have erased myself. I'm The Incredible Shrinking Woman.

Home. At the table, my ankles are crossed. My hands, folded.

Dad sits. His dark eyes stare hard at whatever. Dad's in serious mode. He looks handsome. Next to me, he smells crispy, like smoke and mountain air.

Mom picks at the food on my plate. If it's not on her plate, the calories don't count. Like a moron, she thinks nothing counts if people don't see it.

"How was your day?" Mom asks, dropping some peas on her lap. She laughs, nervous. Mom never stops moving. Even when she sits stuffed, leaning back in her chair, her lips quiver. Creepy.

Dad nudges me and says, "Answer you Mother."

"Okay," I say, pushing food around with my fork.

"Did you do your homework?" Dad says, shoving a roll in his mouth. He swallows without chewing hardly.

"Done," I say, studying his mechanic hands. No matter how many times he washes them, the skin cracks are still black.

"What's really for dinner?" he says to Mom, mouth full of food.

“You’re looking at it,” she says back, looking down.

I sneak away from the table before it begins.

That night, I listen to Bob’s paw scratch at the door. Nights like this are always the same. Dad's tired again. Later, he slaps Mom around. He turns into Michael Jackson. Beat it, Beat it. Carefully.

I pull the covers over my head, thinking about Bob’s eyes, blue and clear as Cathy’s. And I wonder, when Cathy strains to see, if her eyes sting like a Daddy spank. I feel the top of my head. There is a circular spot in the back that is empty. Soon, it will turn to long, jagged stubble, growing back in.

Morning is silent. Mom and Dad are gone at work. I am naked. I push the covers away and shuffle across the floor, goose bumps on my skin. I hear Bob’s paws hit the steps. Then his pounce comes. He pushes the door open, licks my face. Before I have time to wrestle with him, he's gone. Nuts.

I pick my skirt and white oxford off of the floor, then look in the mirror. I pull my hair back in a ponytail, fixing it so no one will see the empty space.

I run to the bus, taking my seat in the back, the place where I can write on the seat in front of me and no one will see. No one will see my writing. No one.

Bryan’s stop is next. He saunters down the aisle, sitting next to me. His curls are wet.

“Hi, trouble,” I say. Someday, I might want him. I might be able to want him. I think of the way Cathy can sit alone and seem so peaceful. They all talk about her. They make fun of her, say they hate her guts, but they can’t hate her. They want to be what

they most hate.

Bryan nods and says "hi" back.

I ignore him and read a little.

Bryan acts like he is reading, but I feel him touch my leg. Got him. Could throw him like a stone. Could land him on any hopscotch number, hop over him, squish him, and win the game.

Homeroom. I chew on a piece of hair, anxious. My stomach rumbles. I think of the night last week when Dad pulled me outside. He told me about his bad, bad days.

"Shelly," he said. His dark eyes were wet.

"Yeah," I said, curling up in a porch chair.

"I want you to know why I'm the way I am," he said.

He told me about being little. That he barely ate. In a basement. Left there, like a dog. Rats would crowd around. He thought about eating the rats. That his brother didn't make it. And most of the time, Dad wished he didn't.

"I'm closer to you than your Mom," he said. He put his arms around me. He held his arms around me. I couldn't pull loose.

I saw him cry. Like music. High notes. The screaming of a hard rocker. Like Skid Row. As he got up to go back inside, I felt hungry. And I couldn't find Bob. I hoped that wolf-dog didn't run away again, cause Dad said he might shoot Bob if he didn't shape up. And Dad had a loaded rifle, ready to go.

A soft tap on my shoulder snaps me back. Cathy says, "Shelly, we have to go to

class.”

"All right, Cathy," I say, looking up at her peaceful face.

"Thanks," she says.

"For what?" I asked her.

"For saying my name. No one does," Cathy says, grinning. She's almost see-through.

I nod. I don't know what to say to invisible people.

I count. Mom always says that calms her down. *Ten*. The Latin teacher walks in. Her hair is blonde, long, and thick, like a fairy tale lady. Today, we get our tests back. *Nine*. I have to get an "A." I'm bad. *Eight*. My eye twitches. I pull at the hem on my skirt. *Seven*. I look around. *Six*. Dirk carves something into his desk. *Five*. Bryan tears a piece of paper from his notebook, slowly, as if no one can hear. *Four*. Margaret and Christopher touch each other's feet. *Where am I?* Jess watches Christine, who is buried in the same book. *Yes, three*. As the Latin teacher passes the papers back, I feel them looking at me across the room, from the corners of their eyes, staring. I wonder if they can see it – the empty space. *Two*. Touching the top of my head, I remember that once, just once, in bed, when I was almost too young to remember, Bob kissed me there. It was dark, Super Dark. I could feel him above me, panting. Bob was panting. He wasn't going to run away. He kissed me there. *One, breathe*. She hands me the paper. Good enough. Saved by the scribble of someone's hand. Never use your own hands. Your own can only hurt and pull, hurt and pull, until you are left with the memory of one kiss. Then the empty space. Because Bob ran away before you could even tell it was him.

Cathy holds her paper close, trying to read the tiny writing.

I tap her back and say, "Hey, you got a hundred."

"Thanks," she says, her red lips spreading like a cut.

"How did you do?" she asks, touching me with her white hand.

"Bad," I tell her.

Recess. Cathy is nowhere. She must be at the nurse's office again.

The English teacher is in charge, the one with the bell. She's pretty with reddish-brown hair. At recess, she pays more attention to what kind of birds are out, than she does to us kids.

I stole some cigs from Dad last night. I pull two smoke treats from my bag, sneaking into the woods on the side of the playground.

Bryan follows. "Shelly! Wait!" he yells after me.

I keep running. I give his words to the wind.

It rains. I light up anyway, hearing Bryan's footsteps. He's coming.

"Why are you always running?" he says, pushing fingers through his curls.

I put out my cigarette, cough, and start to leave. I'm all head-rushy like a freak.

Bryan grabs my shirt, and some of my hair with it.

The barrette falls out, and the pieces slide down and separate.

Bryan stands closer and sees it. The empty space. He stands back, as if the bald place might be like the flu. Contagious.

"I have to go," I say, running, the rain hitting my face. Tiny fists.

Back in Science class, everyone whispers. Everyone but Cathy, who can't even see the big E's on eye charts. Bryan must've passed it around. Everyone knows. *Shelly pulls her hair out.* Soon, they'll chant. Gather and giggle and point. All but Cathy, who could never see the notes. She'll hear their whispers, but she can't see it. They laugh. *Bad, Shelly, bad.* But someday, when they sit in their rooms at home, when they hear Bob howling just outside the door, when Dad shakes a fist over something bad, when he cries and holds you and you can't get away, they'll know what it's like to put a hand to the head, and pull out hair, strand by strand, until all wolves, all dogs, are gone, gone, gone, extinct. For real.

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