Hives [1]

May 11, 2015 Short Stories [2]

Short Story by Douglas Cole



I broke out in hives. They appeared out of nowhere, big red welts. At first, they were just these little itchy pinpricks. They came and went, and I didn't pay much attention to them. Then they started to "spread," if that's the right way to say it, becoming these swollen, hot itchy patches that lingered for several hours, whole nights sometimes. But they would come and go. Not every day. Just sometimes. And I never knew when they were coming or what brought them on. I didn't tell anyone about it.

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Jimmy's dad picked us up in his convertible. We were heading to his place for the weekend. Jimmy's folks were split, and his dad had started a counseling practice up in Santa Rosa. He had this nice little house on a cul de sac, with a pool and a big screen TV. When we arrived, we immediately went swimming. His dad opened a beer and sat off under the shade of the awning that came out over the screen door, and his girlfriend Julie came out and sat with him.

"You boys having a good vacation?" she called to us.

Jimmy ignored her. I swam over to the side and said, "Great! And thanks again for having me up here."

"You bet, honey." She winked and grinned in a provocative way.

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Now, see, Jimmy's dad had already gone gray, and he moved like he was a thousand years old, although he worked out "like a madman," Jimmy said, and was in great shape. But his girlfriend had to be at least fifteen years younger than he was. She was short and thin at the waist and tan and "stacked," like Jimmy said. And she sat there watching us, laughing and sipping a beer, while Jimmy's dad seemed to slip off into a nap, his head back on the chair, his hands clasped on his belly.

"I'm coming in," Julie said, and she sauntered, yes, like a model in a commercial and made a graceful dive into the deep end. Jimmy pulled himself up onto the edge and smiled at me, shaking his head.

"How about some sharks and minnows?" Julie said when she came up for air.

"Sure," I said. Jimmy jumped back in.

We swam around, chasing each other, tagging each other, and there was a definite borderline blur on some of the contact. Julie would brush a thigh a little high near the waist. Once I brushed her breast. If either of us crossed a boundary, she didn't seem to care. She just kept playing with us, enjoying her vacation, since she wasn't working at the time.

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Jimmy's dad and Julie went to town to get some frozen pizzas, and Jimmy took me on a "tour" of the place, which led straight to his dad and Julie's bedroom, where he opened a drawer in the nightstand and took out a handful of photographs and said, "Here, look at these!" The pictures were mostly of Julie posing naked, like you'd see in a magazine, but many of them had her going down on Jimmy's dad or opening her legs and smiling. Jimmy laughed his high-pitched, creepy laugh. I looked at them, but I didn't like looking at them with Jimmy there. I didn't really want to see pictures of his dad, but Julie…I didn't mind seeing the pictures of her.

Sitting around watching a movie and eating pizza was a little strange after that. Of course those images were in my mind, superimposed, you might say, whenever I looked at Julie or Jimmy's dad. I tried just to watch the movie.

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After the movie, Jimmy's dad and Julie wanted to get a drink in town. Actually, it was at a little roadside bar just outside of town. I don't know why Jimmy and I went. What were we going to do? We rode in the back of the car out along dark roads to a tavern on the edge of an empty field.

"You boys can come in and play some video games or pool if you want to," Jimmy's dad said. He and Julie were all decked out in their country finest, jeans and boots and leather jackets.

"We'll just hike around a bit and then come back," Jimmy said. And I followed him out of the bar and into the dark.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You'll see," he said.

And I followed him across the lumpy field.

Stars were up and bright. The field was a morass that we waded through toward Jimmy's goal. And that goal turned out to be an apartment building in the middle of nowhere. It had a little parking lot off the side of the road. It was a sad, two-story affair with a stairway on one side and a long walkway across the top floor.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

"You'll see," Jimmy said, and he laughed that guttural laugh that meant something no good.

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We went up the stairs to the walkway, and then Jimmy climbed up a 4 x 4 to the edge of the roof and hooked one foot on the gutter and hauled himself up.

“What the fuck?” I said. But I went after him and climbed onto the roof.

With the dark field spread out around us, stars like a ballroom up above, Jimmy said, “Check it out.”

He light-stepped over to a skylight and knelt down beside it. I climbed over next to him. And we looked down into the half-lit room below. “Maybe we’ll see something,” he said. And so we waited. We waited and the air grew cold, and nothing happened. No one came into the room. No action appeared. The apartment did not become a living set of pictures.

“Nothing’s going on,” I said. I wanted out of there.

“All right,” Jimmy said.

We scuttled over to the corner of the roof where we had come up and then climbed back down to the walkway, but as we did, someone came out of the apartment we’d just been climbing over. He must have heard us.

“Hey! What are you doing?” he said.

We ran past him down the stairs. He didn’t try to stop us. And we ran out across that lumpy field, legs jarring on the uneven ground, near stumbling. We ran back to the bar and found Jimmy’s dad and Julie sitting there, and we just went and stood beside them.

“What’s up?” Julie said. We were panting, out of breath.

Then the guy came in. He must have followed us. He came straight over to the bar where we were standing. Jimmy froze. The guy looked like he was ready to kill us. “What the fuck…,” he started to say, and I felt this strange calm descend into me. I was freaking out, make no mistake, but I entered what I kind of think athletes say when they talk about being “in the zone.” My body went into this calm, cool space.

“Hey,” I said to him. “We were just messing around. We like to climb shit, and we just wanted to climb up on the roof. When we came down, we saw you and just…we got scared.”

The guy didn’t say anything for a moment, and I realized, what could he say? What could he really say? I had presented a reality, and I had presented it in such a way and with a certain kind of voice and energy that he just couldn’t respond. I mean, he could have called me a liar. He could have said anything. But he didn’t, and I felt something in me that sort of flowed around us that, for lack of a better way to say it, neutralized everything else.

The guy looked at us, looked at Jimmy’s dad and Julie, then he just turned and left.

“What was that all about?” Jimmy’s dad said.

“Oh, man,” Jimmy said, “We just wanted to climb up onto the roof and see the sky.”

Jimmy’s dad grinned. He may or may not have believed a word of it, but he didn’t ask any more questions.

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The house was hot that night. I was in the room right next to Jimmy’s dad and Julie’s room. I kept thinking I heard noises, giggles, sex sounds, but who knows. And then the hives started showing up. I knew it the second they started to appear. At first, I tried just to relax because sometimes when I did that they would fade more quickly or not come on as strong. But this was a big wave, and I could feel them spreading out along my legs and stomach and arms. The

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itching was furious.

I went into the bathroom and turned on the light and was shocked by what I saw. Monster welts. They had never been that big before. My body was covered in them. My skin felt stiff and swollen. I got a washcloth and soaked it with cold water and tried to cool my skin. It didn't help much, though. The cool water lessened the itching a bit, but the swelling continued, and it seemed like the cloth just got hot after a few minutes and then didn't do any good at all.

I went back to bed. The house was silent now. I lay there, unable to sleep, feeling paralyzed, my body twitching and hot. Why was this happening? I kept wondering that. But I also kept thinking, there's nothing you can do about it.

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I didn't really sleep. Maybe near dawn I drifted off, because I "woke up," and found the welts were gone. This was a big relief. I didn't know what I would have done if I had to face Jimmy or his folks with my skin broken out like that. But I was tentative all day. We went to play basketball, and I put as little effort into it as I could without looking like an idiot because I was afraid the heat or the exertion might bring on the hives again. And I made it through the afternoon without the hives, even though I was thinking about them all the time, worried they would come on at any moment. And Jimmy's dad drove us back home, back to the city, in his convertible, and the whole way I concentrated on the cool air flowing over us, cooling everything down.

Art Information

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Douglas Cole has had work in the *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Red Rock Review*, and *Midwest Quarterly*. More of his work is available online in the *Adirondack Review*, *Salt River Review*, and *Avatar Review*, as well as a recorded story in *Bound Off.* He's published two poetry collections—*Interstate* (Night Ballet Press) and *Western Dream* (Finishing Line Press)—as well as a novella called *Ghost* (Blue Cubicle Press).

He is the winner of several awards, including the Leslie Hunt Memorial Prize in Poetry, the Best of Poetry Award from Clapboard House, First Prize in the "Picture Worth 500 Words" from Tattoo Highway, and an honorable mention from *Glimmer Train*. He was also recently the featured poet in *Poetry Quarterly*. He is currently on the faculty at Seattle Central College in Seattle, Washington.

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