

## May Long Weekend

Janet Miller

So, I'm a kid, on the farm. Every spring after the snow is good and gone, I tromp around in my gumboots, rubbing horses' warm necks, counting eggs against chickens, followed by a straggle of cats. I explore: under the porch, wood shed, root-house, barns, fence lines, corrals, the iron-red ditch behind the house, the swampy bit behind that. I am not on the hunt for anything in particular.

What I find, almost every year, is a nail to step on. A nasty rusty nail punctures the rubber sole of my boot and stabs into the fleshy ball of my foot.

I limp back to the house, track mud, bloody up the kitchen floor. My parents sit me in a chair, grip my foot, hold it up to a good light and come up with diagnosis and course of action. A good soak in a concoction of warm water and that purple dye kept on hand to treat livestock but does for a kid as well. A train trip to Squamish Hospital sixty miles south unlikely.

There is no clinic or resident doctor in Pemberton.

I've been to Squamish for emergency medical attention already a few times in my young life; first in the PGE speeder, unconscious in my father's arms when I was three and had eaten my mother's heart pills; and when my cousin pulled my sleigh across the frozen pond, did a fancy whiplash turn and I flew off and landed my face on the ice.

I've had my tetanus shot. The Gentian Violet, a slosh of iodine, a band-aid applied. The boots okay after a swish-out with water. I get used to having at least one wet sock.

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As I get a little older I step on nails less often. This is good because my older sister and her friend connive a plan to ride their horses all the way down the road and over to the Mount Currie Rodeo on the May long weekend. I whine and beg until they say, "Okay. Okay. You can come." Our

parents agree to let us do the twelve-mile ride. Our father's precautions are few: "If you open a gate—shut it," and "Skirt the village. Be careful of cars."

Saturday morning of the long weekend, we dress in our brand new blue jeans from Mr. Pipe's store. I already have a sunburn—from the high school track meet the day before. For our horseback ride we don't wear sunglasses or pack water or sandwiches.

We saddle up, Dad has made sure the horses, my sister's, Shammy, mine, Pooch, are properly shod and the cinches tight. We wait for Margaret's whoop and holler as she rides into our yard. Her horse, Lonesome, tough old thing, is high of wither, narrow of hip. Margaret is not.

Off we go, on our bay horses; passed Erickson Road, Lex and Elenore's, Dill's straight stretch, across Ryan Creek bridge, Miller Creek Bridge and on to Uncle Morgan's where we pick up our cousin, Vera, who is riding Highlife, a dappled grey and spunky, maybe part Arabian.

Our own horses are sturdy and mostly dependable, although Shammy likes to nuzzle her rider after she stops short and sends that rider over her head into a crumple on the grass. Pooch bucks and can jump any fence he pleases.

Back out to the road with Vera we are joined by a bunch of boys on their own horses who have appeared out of nowhere. The boys I know but not the names of their scruffy horses. It was magical how they knew where we'd be and when.

Sammie, Jimmy, Eddie, and Bob bring a zesty element to the remainder of the ride to Mount Currie. They race their horses, break branches and try to whip each other, shout out yodelling cowboy songs. Tease the other girls. Nothing these wacky boys do makes any sense to me.

I know that Sammie fancies Vera. They grew up on farms on either side of the road. To his great unresolvable disappointment, Vera surpassed his five-foot-four stature a couple of years ago. What can he do with all that pointless longing but gallop his horse until foam collects around the

sides of the bridle's bit, scoop up the grassy-greenish horse slobber and throw it in Vera's direction over and over.

Although I wish to be in the midst, I keep Pooch to the side and myself out of the action. I wonder how tall I will get.

These are the kind of boys I've seen, at the winter snowmobile races, flirting with girls that they presumably have a crush on – they sneak up behind, pick the girl up and hurl her headfirst into a snowbank. I think I will never be one of those lucky girls. Never.

At Taylor's Corner, to avoid riding through the town of Pemberton, we leave the main road, take a side route back to the Lillooet River and follow along the dyke, opening and closing gates, then under the railway bridge, along, and back out to the road at Zurcher's.

At the dusty rodeo, which is really horse, chuck wagon and foot races, I sit around on Pooch in the shade with other kids who are sitting around in the shade on their horses. I give rides to kids from school who ask, get money from Mom, eat hot dogs, drink grape pop.

One year, not the first one, I enter the women's race on a borrowed sorrel horse. Tang is leggy, fast and jumpy. Although my own legs tremble when I'm up in the saddle, I think we might just win. By the halfway point of the huge round track, in a storm of pounding hooves and dust I lose my stirrups and downgrade my goal to DO NOT FALL OFF.

On Saturday and Sunday nights we drive home with the family at the end of the day. Dad arranges for Shammy and Pooch to board somewhere—that's his department—we don't give it a thought.

On the Monday we ride our horses all the way home under the hot sun, accompanied part of the way by some of the same, some different, gang of nutty boys. I am still an outlier, observing but not participating in the shenanigans. By the time we finally reach home, I am suffering an exuberant

exhaustion, sunburn on sunburn, legs rubbed raw from the seams of the new blue jeans. I look forward to next year. I'll be older. Braver. I'll do some flirting of my own.

I am fourteen when we plan our final ride to the Mount Currie Rodeo. My sister isn't sure she wants to commit and Margaret and Vera are both going off to Nursing School in the fall. If it happens, it will be the last one.

I am ready. I am so much older now. I will bat my eyes at one of those boys; I'll decide which one when I see who shows up. I can sing cowboy songs, gallop a horse. I won't complain if I get thrown in a lake or a snowbank.

Am I there to decide which boy might warrant my smile?

Am I there in my new jeans, laughing at nonsense?

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No, I am not. I have stepped on a nail.

I sit on the brown plaid couch with the dark orange curtains drawn claustrophobically against a scorching late May sun. My foot soaks in a bucket of purple dye. My whole family is at the Mount Currie Rodeo. I don't care if anyone rides anywhere.

After the nail incident, my right foot became infected and swelled up to the size of a... a small chicken.

There is no clinic or resident doctor in Pemberton. Still. My mother calls around and finds a doctor, here for the May long weekend, on his hobby farm. We don't know what sort of medicine Dr. McGillvary practices but if he's a vet, all the better. A vet will know what to do. The worry with both man and beast is always blood poisoning.

My father drives off in the truck and brings the doctor back.

My recollection is that my father sat on me. He said No that he just held me firmly so I wouldn't move when the doctor sliced into the bottom of my right foot with a freshly sterilized razor blade held in the grip of a pair of pliers from the basement.

"There's a rodeo this weekend," the doctor says, stating the obvious. He holds tightly to my ankle, looks at his incision. "No bucking broncos for you, young lady." He doesn't even have a little black bag. Maybe he is a Doctor of Divinity, a Doctor of Philosophy.

He doesn't know all that I am missing.

He doesn't know my heart is probably broken and I haven't even flirted yet.

He doesn't know I will never have a handful of horse slobber lobbed in my direction.

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