

Skin Deep

A Short Story

by

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Skin Deep

*There she is, Miss America
There she is, your ideal
The dream of a million girls who are more than pretty
can come true in Atlantic City
For she may turn out to be the Queen of Femininity
There she is, Miss America
There she is, your ideal
With so many beauties she took the town by storm
With her All-American face and form
And there she is
Walking on air, she is
Fairest of the fair, she is
There she is — Miss America*

Miss America song lyrics by Bernie Wayne

The atmosphere was electric. Pressed together at the bottom of the stairs leading to Home Room were the senior girls of the Patriot School in Pennsylvania proper.

“Who do you think it will be?” gushed Bobbie Brown to the chorus of girls gathered round her.

“Veronica!” they all said.

Veronica, who stood next to Bobbie, blushed and protested. “It won’t be me. There’s nothing special about me.”

Of course it was not true. Veronica was the prettiest, the smartest, the girl that Mom and Dad always wanted their son to bring home.

Veronica was surrounded by the other girls, books held to their chests, stomping their feet and whispering with excitement. Having spent their lives together from the time they were babies, there was no jealousy among the girls. Instead, anticipation reigned.

Veronica shook her head. "It won't be me. It can't."

Just then Miss Anderson, the Home Room teacher for the group, arrived at the top of the stairs. "Come on, girls, you don't want to be late. There's lots to do today. We have the assembly this afternoon!"

The boys were already seated in the Home Room, having their own discussions about who would be chosen queen. "She's hot, man," Johnny Martin said from his slouch. When the girls came running into the room, the boys sat up and watched them take their seats.

The Selection

It was tradition. A pageant of sorts possible only in a community where people were born and raised in the same place as their parents and grandparents, and known to everyone in the town.

It was what many of us Baby Boomers remember life was like growing up, but which was now an unfamiliar era for most of our children and certainly our grandchildren.

The local K-12 school had a dress code. Dresses for girls, slacks and a collared shirt for boys. No jeans. No tennis shoes. No cell phones.

Each year the high school faculty of the Patriot School that taught members of the senior class met to select the top five female students. The girls were chosen and

ranked on intelligence, maturity, personality, beauty, femininity, gracefulness, and reputation in the community — in that order.

After the vote, the names of the five would be passed to the faculty that taught the junior class. They ranked the girls using the same criteria, based on how they performed the previous year and whether they lived up to their potential. They then passed the names to the teachers of the sophomore class, who repeated the process.

And so it went until there were thirteen rankings, one for each year of school from Kindergarten through twelfth grade.

The principal in the presence of the Mayor and City Council opened the ballots and counted the points for each girl. One point for first place, two for second, and so on for each of the thirteen rankings.

A final ranking was made by adding all the scores for each girl, and the girl with the lowest score would be crowned "Queen". The other four girls would be crowned "Princess".

The Mayor and the City Council had to bless the winner for her to be declared "Miss Patriot".

"I think we have a winner," said the principal. "And it's rare when we get a consensus like this for one candidate."

The Mayor and his City Council smiled their agreement, nodding their heads in unison.

"She is the epitome of the excellent high school student and promising young woman," said Mayor Thompson.

The Announcement

It was the last period of the day. The girls of the senior class had hardly been able to concentrate.

The school loud speaker buzzed. "Testing, testing. Can you hear me?" the principal was heard calling to his secretary.

"Boys and girls, this is Mister Polanski. I have an important announcement to make."

A hush came over the school.

"The following senior girls have been nominated by their teachers as Patriot Princesses. Before I announce their names, I want to remind you that we have an assembly in half an hour, when we will pronounce who was chosen Queen and will reign at the Junior-Senior Prom. Your parents have been invited to the assembly, and the gymnasium is already full. When your teachers dismiss you, please sit in the area designated for your class. It will be crowded." The principal cleared his voice. "And now for the names of our lovely princesses."

Each name was read by the principal and met with polite applause. "And the last name is Veronica Berlisconi." The senior girls cheered while Veronica lowered and shook her head. Unable to contain themselves any longer, the senior girls jumped from their chairs and ran from their classrooms around the school to converge on the physics class where Veronica sat in the front row. They surrounded Veronica as if she had already been crowned

Queen, laying their arms across her shoulders and leaning in close.

As the mob of budding young women leaned forward and swayed as one to show their support for their favorite friend, the boys looked at each other, raising eyebrows to show their pleasure at having an unobstructed view of the panties worn by the most beautiful girls in the school.

Within the half hour the entire town and student body had gathered in the gymnasium. The mayor stood with the principal down in front with arms crossed. On the first row of benches sat twenty-six former Patriot Queens. Five were teachers at the Patriot School. Two sat on City Council. One was a doctor, another a nurse practitioner. Four owned their own businesses. Six had flown in from other parts of the state to rejoin their "sisters". The remaining were married to the prominent men of the town: the owner of the local paper factory, the pastor of the Lutheran Church, the owner of the largest car dealership, the partner of the largest legal firm, the leading surgeon at the hospital, the owner of the golf course, and the proprietors of the local Mom and Pop stores and franchises that made up the majority of small businesses on Main Street.

Reserved for the newly named princesses were five large chairs that formed a line at midcourt. In front of the chairs stood a single microphone.

The high school band launched into a rendition of "Miss America", and the five intelligent, mature, congenial, beautiful, feminine, graceful and reputable young women walked in to thunderous applause and assumed their places in front of the chairs.

When the music stopped, each girl walked to the microphone, stated her name, smiled during the applause and cheers, and returned to her place. After the last girl spoke, the young women sat in unison.

Across from the five, Kindergarten girls sat on the floor of the gym with chins in hands and elbows on knees, each dreaming of someday sitting in those chairs.

Heads were pressed together in the bleachers, each person trying to guess who was picked from this stellar group to be Queen.

The front row group of former queens wiped their eyes as they remembered what had been for them a defining moment.

The principal walked to the microphone. "It is that time again when we honor the most outstanding young women in the senior class of the Patriot School. Before we pronounce who was chosen queen by the faculty, I want to say that I would be proud to have any of the young women sitting here represent the Patriot School as our queen." Spontaneous applause broke out, and the crowd rose to its feet. Cheers and whistles ran across and around the gymnasium, creating a deafening roar.

Mister Polanski removed a piece of paper from his pocket. "Our fourth runner-up is Libby Jones!" Libby occupied the middle chair and walked up to the principal amidst applause and hysterical screams. By then the current Miss Patriot, Gayle Johnson, was waiting next to the principal with a bouquet of flowers. Libby took the flowers, curtseyed, and returned to her seat.

"Our third runner-up is Debbie Berman!" She also received flowers, curtseyed, and returned to her seat. The routine was repeated for the second runner-up, leaving Veronica Berlisconi and Shawna Davis as the final two.

"Our first runner-up is Shawna Davis, and the new Miss Patriot is Veronica Berlisconi!" The crowd went wild. Veronica's mother was a former Miss Patriot, and she went out on the floor and hugged her daughter. Photographers from the local paper took pictures, and a reporter from the local television station talked into her microphone while the camera captured the crowning of Veronica as Patriot Queen.

As if on cue, the entire senior class left the stands and crowded around the princesses. Pairs of boys lifted Veronica and each of the princesses onto their shoulders, and they paraded the five of them around the basketball court while the crowd cheered and celebrated the goodness of small town life and the quality of the young people who grew up there.

Preparations

"What are you going to wear for your evening gown?" asked Veronica's best friend, Debbie.

"I made a dress out of mauve-colored satin. My mom helped, of course, but I did most of the sewing myself." Like all the girls at the Patriot School, Veronica had taken home economics where she learned to sew, cook healthy meals, and maintain a home.

"It sounds beautiful. I know you'll look absolutely wonderful." She hesitated. "What about your talent? What will you do for the talent presentation?"

"I don't know," said Veronica. "My mom wants me to sing. But I can't sing."

"So what will you do? A cheerleader routine?"

Veronica shook her head. "I have to think about it."

At home that evening Veronica's mother helped her try on her evening gown. "It's lovely, Veronica," she said.

"Thanks, Mom. But I still don't know what to do for the talent presentation. Everyone is expecting something amazing, but I don't have any special talent."

"I think you should sing. Everyone sings."

"Mom, you know I can't sing. It would be horrible."

"Gayle Johnson sang last year, and she couldn't sing, either. She even forgot the lyrics. No one cared."

"Mom, I can't sing. I have to do something else."

As time passed, the problem of the talent presentation loomed ever larger. Teachers and friends alike asked at least once a day what she intended to do.

"It's going to be a surprise," Veronica insisted. The truth was that she still had no idea.

The knock was quiet. Her face buried in her pillow, Veronica was crying quietly on her bed. She sat up, wiped her eyes, and called out, "Come in."

Veronica's mother opened the door to Veronica's bedroom and walked in. She sat on the bed next to Veronica and hugged her. "Worried?"

Veronica nodded her head.

"Still won't sing?"

She shook her head.

"So what will you do? Crying isn't going to help."

"Why did they choose me as Miss Patriot? Shawna Davis can sing. They should have chosen her."

"Miss Patriot is about more than talent. It's about intelligence and poise and the kind of person you are."

Veronica put her head in her mother's chest and started crying again.

Inspiration

Veronica's dad sat at the breakfast table with his daughter. "Mom tells me you're having trouble deciding what to do for your talent presentation."

Veronica nodded.

"You love nature. Is there something you can do with nature that might be appropriate?"

Veronica shook her head. "I don't know. I guess I need to think about it."

"Do that. I bet you can come up with something."

That night Veronica had a dream about rabbits.

After school the next day Veronica went directly to the local hardware store and bought chicken wire, wood, brads and a bale of straw. She had drawn up a very detailed set of directions and was in the garage at her father's workbench.

Veronica's mother walked into the garage from the kitchen. "What are you up to this evening?"

"Practicing my talent."

"Your talent?" Veronica's mom surveyed the table. "Wire? Wood? A hammer? What in the world are you planning to do?"

"Dad said I should do something with nature. Remember when Dad and I built a rabbit pen when I was in Middle School? I bought the stuff to build a rabbit pen."

Veronica's mother still did not get it.

"I'm going to build a rabbit pen for my talent presentation."

"You're going to go on stage and build a rabbit pen?"

"Well, I can't think of anything else."

Veronica's mom grabbed Veronica's arm and pulled her toward the kitchen door. "I think we need to talk."

The two women sat down at the kitchen table. Veronica's mom reached out and grabbed her daughter's hands. "I'm not sure that building a rabbit pen is a talent. I mean it is, sort of, but it's not something that tells people what makes Veronica Berlisconi a unique young lady."

"Building a rabbit pen isn't a talent?"

Now it was Veronica's mother's turn to shake her head.

"So what do I do?"

"I think you should sing."

"Mom, I can't sing." Veronica dropped her head. "So it has to be something creative?"

"I think so."

"Something unique?"

Veronica's mom nodded.

"I think I know what I can do."

The Big Night

The evening the town had waited for finally arrived.

Miss Patriot and the Patriot Princesses would each wear their evening gowns on stage and receive formal recognition for their achievements.

Afterward, Veronica Berlisconi would give a talent presentation to the entire town. For the first time in memory, no one knew what the talent presentation of the Patriot Queen would consist of. Veronica had told no one, not even her parents. "Trust me, Mom," she said.

When Veronica finished her presentation the stage would be cleared, the band would set up, and the students would stay in the gymnasium for the Junior-Senior Prom.

Veronica's date was Travis Berman, her best friend's twin brother. "What are you going to do for your talent tonight?" he asked. "You haven't even told Debbie. She's mad at you, you know."

"I know. But I was afraid to say. I didn't want anyone to talk me out of what I've got planned."

"So what is it?"

Veronica ignored the question. "Will you help me get ready?"

"Of course. What do you want me to do?"

Veronica led him to a back room. There stood a stainless steel cart covered with a stack of over a hundred packages of Gummi Bears. "Will you open the packages for me?"

"Is your talent going to be eating a bunch of Gummi Bears?"

Veronica laughed. "Of course not. I'm going to sculpture something."

"You're going to build a sculpture out of Gummi Bears?"

"You got it," Veronica said. She took a package, ripped it open, and squeezed a handful of the soft Gummi Bears so that it became a single mass of malleable candy. She held it out for Travis to inspect. "Are you going to open the packages for me or not?"

"Sure. Did you want me to separate the colors?"

"No. I think the sculpture will be more beautiful if the colors are mixed together."

On Stage

Cheers erupted when the curtain opened, and they became louder when the five intelligent, mature,

congenial, beautiful, feminine, graceful and reputable young Patriot beauties walked out on stage.

Following the ladies onto the stage was the Patriot School principal, Mister Polanski, holding a microphone. "What a great night this is for our community," he called out to the crowd. "Tonight we will honor five of the finest young women in our community." The crowd cheered.

"The Master of Ceremonies tonight is Mayor Thompson. As you know, he has served our community as a businessman, member of the City Council, and of course now as mayor. Under his leadership our town has lowered property taxes, improved its infrastructure, and hired more police and firemen. He has been just about the best mayor our town has ever had, and it's my pleasure to turn the stage over to him for the rest of the evening. Mayor! Come on out here!" The principal turned to his left and gave a wave with his hand for the mayor to join him. "Let's give it up for the mayor!" The principal tucked the microphone under his arm and joined the applause.

Arriving in a run, the Mayor shook the principal's hand and took the mic. Younger looking than his age and extremely athletic, he was one of the most popular members of the community. "Let's hear it for the best principal of the best school in the state of Pennsylvania!" The mayor led the audience in a round of cheers. The principal gave a wave and walked off the stage.

"Boy, what an introduction," said the mayor.

"I'm going to have to say two prayers before I go to bed tonight. First, I'll have to pray for our principal because

he's a liar. And second, I'll have to pray for myself because I enjoyed hearing his lies so much." The crowd roared its approval.

"Welcome to one of the biggest nights of the year. What a great honor it is for me to be the Master of Ceremonies for the Patriot Prom again.

"This morning I was talking to Mrs. Malone, who is celebrating her 104th birthday today. Where are you Mrs. Malone? There you are! Let's give her a round of applause!" Everyone cheered.

"I asked her what she liked most about being 104. She told me, 'no peer pressure'." The crowd roared again.

"Well, here we are to honor these very fine young ladies gracing our stage. We will present each of them a framed certificate, and our very own Miss Patriot, Veronica Berlisconi, will then entertain us with her talent presentation. I hear that it is going to be a surprise."

Holding the certificates were frames made of handcrafted Koa wood from Hawaii. The glass that covered the certificate was blown in Italy. The paper the certificate was printed on was produced at the local paper factory, which employed many of the town's men and women. The paper came from a special limited production.

The mayor's voice took on an almost mysterious tone. "The frames that hold each certificate are made of the most exotic wood in the world. It comes from the Koa tree on the island of Oahu in Hawaii. The glass is made at the famous Murano factory near Venice, Italy, which produces the world's most beautiful glass. And the paper is the finest quality we produce right here in our own

town. These framed certificates are a blending of the exotic, the beautiful and the best our community has to offer. They are fitting awards for these exotic, beautiful and accomplished women sitting here before us." The mayor held his arm out in the direction of the young ladies on stage. Applause erupted and filled the gym.

The mayor presented each girl with her framed certificate. "Thank you, ladies." Long applause ended the ceremony. The mayor stepped out onto the very front of the stage, and the curtain closed behind him.

"Please relax a few minutes while Miss Patriot prepares her talent presentation." The mayor walked off the stage and into the waiting crowd.

The Talent Presentation

Veronica ran into the back room where Travis was still waiting. "Did you unwrap all the Gummi Bears for me?"

Travis nodded. "I did. I even ate a couple. I hope that's OK."

Veronica shrugged. "I don't mind."

"So what are you going to sculpture?"

"The Last Supper."

"You're going to sculpture the Last Supper out of Gummi Bears?"

Veronica laughed. "Yeah, me and Leonardo da Vinci."

"You're kidding, aren't you?"

"I guess you're just going to have to be part of the audience if you want to see my talent presentation."

Veronica gave Travis a peck on his cheek. "Wish me luck."

Blushing, Travis gave a wave with his hand.

Veronica crossed the fingers on each hand and crossed her arms. She gave Travis her best smile.

"Good luck!" he finally said.

"Thanks. I think I'm going to need it."

Leaving the small room and pushing the cart filled with soft, squishy candy bears, Veronica smiled at the staring faces and open mouths that formed a gauntlet as she walked to the stage. Several teachers covered their mouths to hide their surprise as she walked by.

She strolled up to the young man holding onto the rope that would open the curtain. He looked at her as if waiting for a command to open the gates of Heaven.

"OK," Veronica said. "I'm ready."

The young man pulled, the curtain opened, and Veronica pushed her cart onto the stage into the waiting bright lights.