

BIG HIT



by Tom
Bradley

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'Big Hit' was first published in 2003 by Reed Publishing as part of their Australasian "Personal Best" sporting anthology, edited by Tessa Duder.

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ISBN: 978-0-9951254-6-9

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What this story is about

Greg has some big challenges. He's about to play an important game of cricket for his dad's team, and he's spending hours with his cricket bat, practising in front of the mirror.

Being bowled at by the fastest bowler in the world, the dreaded Drac, and smashing him to the boundary to win the game.

Greg really wants to do well, and he really, really wants to impress someone who will be there watching.

Flawless Fiona. The girl who Greg thinks is the most perfect girl at school.

But Greg has a problem. So big he even wonders if he should play, because if Fiona sees him, he's sure she'll laugh.

It feels like the biggest problem he's ever faced.

Right on the end of his nose.

Chapter One

I glare at myself in the bedroom mirror, the problem as plain as the nose on my face. More than a problem. The biggest crisis of my life. Why today of all days?

So far, I've come up with two solutions - swim out to sea and never come back, or throw myself off the roof.

I grab the hunk of wood leaning against my bed. My trusty cricket bat. It's capable of doing serious damage.

It can also be an inspiration. Some of my best ideas have come while I've been swinging it. Especially if the outcome of the game depends on me performing a match winning feat.

Like right now. I prepare to take guard in front of the mirror, first slipping on my gloves. Bat handles get slippery when your palms start to sweat and control is everything.

I plop on my helmet and lower the visor before crouching over the bat, nestling it in the hole I've worn in the carpet from thousands of previous innings.

I glance around to check the opposition field placings. A chest of drawers at square leg. A school bag at point. A pair of sneakers in the covers. A table lamp at slip. Nothing I can't deal with.

The last day of the final test, and this series - like all the others - is resting on my shoulders. The crowd's chanting, 'Greg! Greg! Greg!' (That's me, if you've just joined the telecast.)

Three balls left, 12 runs needed. Three fours or two sixes will do it. I'm facing their fastest bowler, the one with the evil grin and teeth so pointy they look as though they've been filed.

His nickname's Dracula. He's proud of it, but he hates it when I call him Drac.

Drac grips the blood-red leather ball tightly, runs in, bowls. It pitches well up. I'm ready, and meet it on the half volley with an expert flick of the wrists. Enough to send the ball flying over the boundary for six. The crowd goes wild.

'Thanks, Drac,' I call back along the pitch. He scowls and lengthens his run-up.

Six runs needed for victory. Second last ball. It's short of a length and I step down the track to meet it. Bang, a glorious straight drive. It's a certain four, but Drac manages to get his foot in the way and stops it.

For a few seconds, I'm out of my ground. Drac tries to throw down the stumps and run me out, but I scramble back to safety.

Drac gives me an extra-evil grin and I can read his mind. His last ball will be a bouncer. He's going to try and knock my head off.

I laugh at him, which gets him angry, especially when I taunt him by casually taking off my protective helmet and tossing it to the umpire to hold.

Drac smells blood.

What a game. Six runs needed, last ball. The crowd hushes. I take my guard, watching, waiting. Drac's extended his run again. A little dot in the distance as he starts to steam in towards me.

His arm comes over in a blur and it's the bouncer all right, dug in short, rearing up at my unprotected face.

But Drac (the fool) has forgotten I'm the master of the improvised shot. I sway back and, rather than a full-blooded swing, I use the bat to punch at the ball with a short jabbing motion.

The ball flies off the blade of the bat. The umpire's arms go straight up in the air. Six runs.

The blood drains from Drac's face as the ball keeps going, like a bullet, over the fence and the grandstand.

Thousands of spectators at the ground rise to give me a standing ovation as the ball heads for the clouds. Millions of viewers around the world follow the flight of the spinning leather meteor as it goes into orbit, the shiny red blob...

The shiny red blob!

I drop my bat and gloves on the carpet as reality comes back with a rush!

Chapter Two

The only shiny red blob in my real life is the one on the end of my nose. The biggest, ugliest pimple I've ever seen.

And today of all days! Tonight, I have my first date with the most perfect girl at school. Fiona. Flawless Fiona who's never had a pimple in her life.

I give my monster zit a serious squeeze, digging my fingers in around the edges to blow the top off the volcano.

But it isn't ripe enough to explode and the pressure only makes it redder.

I look like that reindeer who pulls Santa's sleigh. Forget Flawless Fiona, I tell myself. Try for a date with Donner or Blitzen.

A whole tube of Cover-Zit proves useless. It not only doesn't hide the redness, it forms a thick crust on the surface that makes me look as though I've dipped my nose in a cherry pie.

Cherry pie! Tonight, I'll need to buy popcorn and burgers as well as movie tickets.

I grab my wallet, hoping by some miracle a hundred-dollar note has got caught in the lining. Nothing. Just a few miserly coins.

What an idiot. I should have made sure I had enough cash before I asked Fiona out in the first place.

And Dad's dug his toes in - no more loans. Not until I repay the last two.

As I flop down on my bed, the man himself knocks and walks in, dressed for his afternoon of Business-League cricket. He looks like he's just stepped out of a TV soap-powder commercial. Snow white from head to foot.

Except for his black hair which disappears during the game under a floppy white hat, and his freckly nose which disappears under a thick layer of sunblock.

Dad comes straight to the point. Their captain is sick. Would I like a game?

Would I ever! Our school cricket team has a bye and I have the afternoon free, but then I remember my problem. How can I go out in public looking like this?

I don't explain this to Dad. I just shake my head.

I pick up my bat and start fiddling with it as he tries again.

'This is important, Greg. I'm acting captain today. And whoever wins this game, wins the grade. The way you hit a cricket ball, you'd be worth your weight in gold.'

I tense. 'What about cash?'

He starts to laugh, then realises I'm deadly serious. 'You want me to pay you?'

'A lot of people get paid to play sport,' I remind him. 'It's called professionalism.'

'This is more like bribery.'

'Call it desperation.'

'Ah,' he says, knowingly. 'I'd forgotten. Tonight's the hot date. The one I haven't met. Fiona what's-her-name. And you're broke again.'

'Fifty dollars would un-break me.'

He keeps his face straight. 'I could probably justify 10 dollars, but from next week you start raking the lawns after you've cut them.'

'Forty dollars,' I counter-offer, 'and we buy a new catcher for the mower.'

While we haggle over the price, he notices the pimple.

'You know you shouldn't squeeze those things,' he tells me in his best fatherly tones.

'Why don't you put a bit of sticking plaster over it?'

'Come on, Dad. That would be like wearing a bumper sticker saying, "Pimple in Progress - Please Honk".'

Plastering pimples might have fooled people when he was my age, but not today. Fiona would see right through any such pathetic disguise.

Dad looks at his watch. 'Forget raking the lawns. Final offer. Twenty dollars.'

It won't solve my pimple problem, but it'll pay for a couple of movie tickets.

I jump up, throw the bat into my cricket bag with my whites, helmet and gloves and grin at Dad, saying, 'May the best team win.'

He grins back. 'That's what the 20 dollars is for.'

I stare at him. 'You mean I only get paid if we beat them?'

He nods.

'What if they win?'

'Then, Greg, my boy, we both lose.'

Chapter Three

The sun beats down as Dad drives up to the venue and pulls into the parking area. That's when I realise who we're playing. Some of their team has arrived in a company van with their logo on the side. "McCarthy Industries".

My stomach flips.

A car pulls in beside the van and the driver gets out.

'That's Dennis McCarthy,' says Dad, pointing. 'Owns the company and captains the team. That must be his daughter with him.'

I know that! Looking as stunning as ever even from a distance - Flawless Fiona. Tonight's hot date!

I'm trapped. Any minute, she'll look over in our direction and see me. Probably come running over or expect me to do the same. Then she'll see the pimple and feel sick at the thought of dating someone so imperfect, and...

As Dad starts to get out of the car, I let out a groan and slump forward in my seat, clutching my right knee.

'What's wrong with you?'

'My knee's locked up, Dad. Old injury.'

'What do you mean, old? How old?'

'About half an hour,' I explain. 'I hit it with the bat.'

'The way you wave that thing around in your bedroom, I'm surprised you haven't knocked your head off.'

I moan again. 'Sorry dad. No way I can play now.'

He starts to get angry. 'I hope you're not just trying to get more money...'

I shake my head. 'All the money in the world wouldn't get me out there on that field today, Dad. You enjoy your game. I'll just slip away quietly and hobble home.'

'You're not hobbling anywhere on that knee. You've come this far, you can at least stay and watch. Why don't you sit over there with the McCarthy girl?'

My leg suddenly twitches. 'Look, Dad. It's unlocked. I can play. It's a miracle!'

'Teenagers,' I hear him mutter as he gets out of the car, shaking his head. He walks over to meet the opposition and toss the coin to see who'll bat first.

A minute later, I see him shake his head again. He's obviously lost the toss. McCarthy Industries will bat first.

Which means I can't stay hidden in the car. In a few minutes, Fiona will see me out on the field.

Dad and I have thrown our gear in the back seat. I turn around and grab my bat.

'I need another brilliant idea,' I tell it. 'Real quick!'

Dad's bag has a broken zip. Inside, I can see his stuff - pads, gloves, floppy hat and...

Chapter Four

The afternoon has flown by, and the game is poised for a cliffhanger finish. McCarthy Industries batted first, but now we've almost chased down their modest total.

I'm still batting, but I've been joined by our last man, Ted, who's a bit of a batting bunny and now he's facing.

The opposition have kept their best quickie to bowl at the death. He's not as fast as my old adversary, Drac, but he's quick enough.

Ted barely manages to survive the first two balls by swinging wildly, missing them completely. If the bowler gets one in line, it's all over.

I call an emergency mid-pitch conference, whisper to Ted what I plan to do, and when the next ball whistles past him, missing the stumps by a whisker, I yell 'Yes' and take off for a cheeky bye.

The wicketkeeper gets such a shock, he fumbles the ball giving me time to scramble home.

Three balls left. Six runs needed.

Their bowler holds the next one back. A well disguised slower delivery, which I mistime, spooning it into the air. Luckily, it drops in front of the nearest fieldsman.

Ted starts to run towards me for what could be an easy single, but I have to keep the strike.

I scream 'No', and send him diving back to his crease.

Two balls left. Six runs needed. Can I do it with one glorious shot?

No, but I manage to clip the second last ball backward of point and race through for two. That keeps me on strike with one ball left, and four runs needed to win. A boundary or nothing.

In the excitement, I pull off my helmet and wipe my face again, forgetting not to touch my nose.

My sleeve comes away covered in sunblock.

What can I do? Even if I hit a four and win the game and become a hero and collect Dad's win bonus, the first person I'll see when I walk off the field will be Flawless Fiona, and I'll have to take my helmet off at some stage and she'll see the gigantic pimple on the end of my nose and say, Sorry, Rudolph, I don't date Reindeers, and...

I slip my helmet back on and settle down over my bat. I need another good idea. And fast.

And fast is the way the bowler intends to deliver his last ball. I can tell by the way he lengthens his run.

Just like Drac.

Drac!

The bowler's already steaming in as I step away from my stumps. He stops, puzzled.

The square leg umpire's wondering too as I take off my helmet and hand it to him. I mutter something about it acting like an oven about to cook my brains.

I look around the field. I can see a gap in the covers. That's where I intend to hit the ball.

I crouch over my bat, bareheaded, as the bowler runs in again. I tighten my grip on the handle. His arm comes over.

I raise my bat high. A big backlift for a big shot.

The delivery's short of a length, but I'm ready and jump down the pitch to meet it. The sweetest cover drive of my career. The sharp crack of bat on ball.

I don't see it race across the grass and crash into the boundary fence. I'm busy tracking something else.

Chapter Five

'Dad reckons you deserved "Man of the Match",' says Fiona, later that evening as we queue for movie tickets.

I nod and touch my nose. It still hurts. Everyone thinks my gloves got sweaty and I lost control of the bat on the follow through. No shame in that. Accidents happen. And just after I'd taken my helmet off.

Bad luck? Nah.

It wasn't an accident or bad luck. It was the best shot I'd ever improvised. Just enough of a whack to split the skin on my nose and make it bleed without breaking anything.

Thinking about Drac had given me the idea. I'd thanked him, under my breath, as I walked off the field, a blood-soaked handkerchief hiding my pimple.

Now, covered by a big slab of sticking plaster. An honourable dressing for an honourable wound. Fiona would never know the truth.

I glance over at her. She still seems a bit edgy. After the game, she'd been the last one to come up and see if I was okay.

I can't blame her. I know how she must have felt, sitting there under the umbrella, watching me. Wondering how I'd react.

I watch Fiona now as her fingers brush her chin. I tell her not to worry.

The first pimple is always the worst!

The End