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Fiction

Shorn Glory

20 pages

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5,000 words

Short Story

### Shorn Glory

As the sun neared the noon mark on the skydial bleached by August, Clifford staggered alongside his bicycle down the dun dirt road. The rear fender rasped in rhythm with the locusts, and the spokes clicked in time with the grasshoppers, flitting from ditches to dogfennels.

The road swarmed before him in patterns of waves and bursting stars as he darted his tongue to the ridge between his nose and mouth. He stopped, leaning the bicycle on his jutted hip, while mopping perspiration with his red neckerchief. He felt the stubbles of his beard penetrate it and heard the rattle, but the effect registered muddled and muffled in his mind. From his back pocket he slid the pint of whiskey, uncapping it as it drew near his mouth, tasting its acrid-sweetness before he guzzled, burped, and replaced it.

Then he rode off again, weaving into the waves, following the road defined by the lines, high above the washboard ruts and straight into the brick well.

"Woo-oo-o!" he said, laughing like a fool as the jolt sent him sprawling back from the blurry russet bricks, the mortar appearing to run and puddle in the white sand.

Framed against the blue sky, angel faces reeled in carousel colors of pewter and pink.

Clifford chuckled, shook his head and focussed on the sand-and-mortar rushing at his feet. Suddenly, a shock of cold water crashed on his head, cascading over his face like a crystal veil, rilling, rilling to his hands splayed in the sand. Shuddering, sputtering, on the fringe of his calamity, he heard the angel voices above him.

"He's coming to hisself," one said.

He gathered his numb self to his feet, meeting them eye to eye as he rose. Three sets of blue eyes encircled him, like a ring of sapphire gemspounded into a white wall. Concentrating on the solid well, he waited.

"He's bad drunk," said one.

He snapped toward the face before it could spin, a fat girlface with cheeks aflame.

"You throwed water on me!" he stammered,

"Gloriann done it to bring you to," she said, nodding toward her double on the other side of him.

He focussed rapidly on the other one, who nodded an affirmative double chin on her chest. Flashing back to the first, waist-high to him, his eyes snagged yet another, in front of him, who seemed also to struggle beneath a fingertip mantle of molten silver.

He looked behind him for another and saw the sobering shade of a Chinaberry tree. Behind it a crude cabin squatted

cockeyed.

"You ladies mind if I set a spell?"

They shrugged their chubby shoulders indifferently.

He staggered off towards the paisley shade of the tree - which insisted on taking two giant steps back as he approached - looking back, all the while, at the threesome clustering and creeping behind.

"Yall ain't all that friendly. Are you?" he called back, dabbing his face with his kerchief as he examined the scars of mouths for smiles. They were fixed with frowns, their eyes rigid and unyielding, even as he smiled at them.

Finally the tree stayed long enough for him to collapse against it and slide into its soothing curve. One knee popped up for his hand to rest and wave the red kerchief at them as he coaxed them to the shade with garbled remarks.

"I bet yall think I'm a plum mess. Don't yall?"

They huddled together like sheep and stopped on the fringe of the shade strobing leafy shadows on their molded heads.

"Where's yalles Mommer and Popper at?" he asked.

"Gone to Valdosta to take off the tobaccer," said Gloriann, hesitating as the other icy eyes bore down on her.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Gloriann. She done told you," she said, nodding toward

her sister on the other side, while openly observing him like a butterfly.

"All yall named Gloriann?"

They shook their heads.

"What's yalles names?" he asked the others.

"That's Annie Bell and this'un here's Janie Ruth," said Gloriann.

"Let's see, now. We got us a Gloriann, got us a Janie Ruth and a Annie Bell," he said, cocking two fingers, like rabbit ears, in the air above his knee. "So they is three of yall, huh?"

They nodded in perfect unison, blue-sprigged shifts swaying in harmony with the mocking bird's chant above him.

He looked up, and the bird defecated on his nose and fled. He screwed his chapped mouth, laughed and smeared the dingy droppings with his kerchief, flapping it back to his knee.

"They ain't nothing more despitiful than a dadbumped mocking bird!" he said, looking at the three faces fractured with smiles.

"One of yall younguns want to run go get me a dipper've water?"

Gloriann twisted, looked at her sisters, and ambled

toward the well. They watched her, twisting sideways to see her draw the bucket to the top and dunk the pint jar that stayed on the ledge.

When she returned to the edge of the shade, she paused for the other two to inch alongside her, stopped and extended the jar to his outstretched hand.

He grunted as he took it, touching her fingers, which jerked back reflexively to her waist, like a reverse snake strike. They stepped back to watch him guzzle, a fine line of water trickling down his scrawny neck to his frayed shirt collar.

He burped, sighed, long and heavy, and thrust the jar back toward them; but they backed away, so he ground the base of it into the dirt between twin roots.

"Thank you, Mam," he said, leaning back to watch the settling leaves above. "How old are yall?" he asked, absently.

"Going on ten," said Gloriann.

"Going on ten, huh?" he said. "All of yall?" he added, looking back at them.

"Yessir," said Gloriann.

"Oh! Yall must be what they call triplets!" he said, enlightened green eyes glistening. "I ain't never had the chance to meet up with no triplets before."

"Yessir," said Gloriann, twisting self-consciously. The others joined her; one of them sucking on her fingers provided the only distinguishing characteristic.

"Cat got your tongues?" he asked the other two, laughing. They laughed timidly, looking down.

"Yall got shoes?" he asked, looking at their dirt-pied pink toes.

"For Sunday School," Gloriann said, clasping her hands behind her as she swayed.

"Sunday School, huh?" he said, looking up as if he were drawing reminiscence from a cloud. "I used to go to Sunday School, my ownself, when I was a little bitty boy."

"You did?" asked one of them.

"Yep," he said. "Shore as Sunday rolled around, Ma'd light out to church, dragging me by the hand up the old sawmill road. Church of God, I believe it was. Remember it like yesterday."

"Us too," one said.

"Where bouts you from?" asked another one.

He looked quickly to see who spoke and saw only the three tight faces framed with platinum.

"Over yonder at Tarver," he said. "Yall ever been around them parts?"

They shook their heads.

"Well, you ain't missed all that much. Ain't nothing but a train track and shutdown tur'tentine commissary, now. Back before the war, they was a right smart going on."

They had moved nearer as he had gradually sat forward,

clutching his knee.

"Listen here," he said earnestly. "Yall younguns is needing a haircütting bad."

"A hair cutting?" said Gloriann, combing her fingers through the silken strands to her thighs. Another one twisted hers around in a belt. And the third only looked at hers hanging like shred silk.

"Ain't yall hot?"

"Yessir," said Gloriann, looking out at the white sand seared by the sun.

"Well, run on in yonder and get your Mommer's cutting scissors, and I'll get shed of it for yall."

"Nosir!" said Gloriann.

The other sculpted heads flicked in agreement.

"How come?" he asked.

They shrugged, still glaring at him.

"Well, I'd hate like hell...uh...heck to have to be the one toting around them headfuls of hair in this here heat," he said, and lay back against the tree, watching them from beneath his eyelids as they fingered their hair.

One of them flipped her head and the hair undulated in waves to her thighs.

"Yep," he said, with a sanguine air. "I'd shore get shed of that stuff if it was mine. Course I can keep mine cut close cause I'm a barber. Been to barbering school and everything," he said, raking his fingers through his spiked hair.



"You a real barber?" one asked.

"Yep. Got my Georgia license and all," he said, whistling low as he peered up into the tree.

"Georgia, huh?"

"Yep," he said. "Got'em in Valdosta some years back. Cut more heads of hair than I can count on my two hands."

"Run go get Ma's scissors, Janie Ruth,"

"Huh uh. I ain't afixing to!" said Janie Ruth.

"We gonna get in trouble with Ma," said Annie Bell.

"No we ain't. Go on," said Gloriann, again.

"You go."

"Scardy cat!"

"I ain't ascared've nothing," said Gloriann. "It's yall two that's scared to go to the toilet by yourself. Not me!"

"I ain't!"

"Me neither!"

"Well, go get Ma's cutting scissors," said Gloriann, waiting. "Awright, I'll do it," she added bravely as she skipped away in their stretching gazes.

While they remained watching for her return, Clifford swiftly removed the bottle from his hip pocket, where his crafty hand poised. He emptied and replaced it before they could look back on his repose.

"He's done and dozed off again, anyhow," whispered one.

"No, I ain't," he said, sitting up. "I'll do it, just like I said I would. For free," he added, scrambling up and brushing Chinaberries from his wet seat.

They backed away and stopped.

"Yall ain't scared, are you?" he asked, halting in the midst of the brushing.

"Huh uh," they said.

The door slammed and Gloriann dashed through the span of sun with the glaring scissors reflecting prisms of light to the shade. She rushed up to him with an excited yet somber expression. She turned around and backed to him, squinting her eyes shut.

He flapped his arms and exercised the yawning scissors, with a broad exaggerated air, as the others gaped.

With the first snip, they gasped and stood motionlessly.

"My Mommer used to have long hair, just like this," he said.

The sound merged, like grinding sand, with the locusts' rustle, as the silver strands snaked on the roots of the Chinaberry tree. A faint odor of stale perspiration stole on the air - not unpleasant, but vulnerable as the nape of the childneck.

He snipped the hair in a jagged band around her head, the released ends flying and frizzing around her face and neck.

"Ma's gonna kill us!" said one!e Be

"Not if yall don't run tattle," said Gloriann between gritted teeth.

"Who's up next?" Clifford asked on the final snap, as he released the sheaf of hair to the ground, sliding on it.

He grabbed the tree as the next girl was pushed forward. She backed also and scrunched her shoulders as he repeated the warming-up exercise, slurring a command for "a little more water to get hisself going."

The next shorn girl scuttled off and clasped her arms over her boyish-bobbed hair as the final one backed to the barber.

"I'm gonna give you a extra treatment cause of you having to wait on me," he said, and snipped above one ear, losing his originally conjured design, sloping to a diagonal below the other ear. She resembled a doll whose head had been screwed sideways.

He sprawled on the mat of hair and began snoring before his head fell back to the trunk of the tree. One hand clasped a bouquet of hair and the other still latched onto the scissors.

When he awoke, despairingly sober, the sun shone straight ahead of him, and the girls were gone. Not a strand of hair remained, nor the scissors, and he thought he had only imagined it in his drunken stupor.

The house was still and appeared vacant, but at the window overlooking the tree, a pyramid of melon heads peered

through the wavy panes. He waved, but they remained planted, almost eerie and sad in the final stance of evening with their tiers of odd-cropped hair.

He shook his head and mopped his face with the kerchief as he straddled his bicycle and tooled east with the heat to his back.

When he bolted onto the Farver highway, clumps of gravel seemed to jump to his eyes and thud with his head, a pulsing pain that promised relief from the bottle waiting on the table at his trailer. He pedaled faster as the sunset flashed saffron on the flanks of pines and sank to a steely dusk. A band of lame woodsmoke lay in his path; he penetrated it and closed the distance, swerving alongside the blue metal wall that separated him from the bottle on the other side.

Through the door, in the dropped dusk and the creaks his movements made, he tred in the welcome isolation where the pine's rustling pushed back the world. He drained the bottle and collapsed on the pallet beneath a span of windows open to the dusky woods, sparked with fireflies. There was no sound, just silence and his pain surrendering to the placid night.

But at the onset of relief came a distant whirring of an automobile. He would have ignored it, but as it approached, it cut in the thick dusk, and the clap of the car door made him start. He grained and padded on socked feet to the window on the other side, seeing Sheriff Phillips planted beside

the official car of Duran County, with his arm propped on top.

"What the hell...?" Clifford mumbled.

"Weeks! You in there?" Sheriff Phillips called.

"Yep! What you want?"

"I need to talk with you. Get out here!"

Clifford ambled to the door and opened it to the tepid air that brought a numbing sensation to his tongue.

"Howdy do, Shurf," he slurred, cleared his throat and groped for sober thoughts.

"Weeks, what's this I hear about you messing around with them little gals of Hubert Sims, this morning?"

"Huh?" Clifford responded, leaning on the door as he scratched his head.

"Don't play dumb on me. Their Ma's about ready to string you up."

"I ain't got nary notion what your're talking about, Shurf," Clifford said, sobering rapidly.

"Well, they're waiting back yonder at the courthouse for me to haul you in. Get right and let's go," Sheriff Phillips said, getting back into his car to wait.

"I hope they ain't counting on me to lay the blame on for something I ain't had nothing to do with," mumbled Clifford as he tugged his brogans on, leaving the laces to trail behind the stuck-out tongues.

In the Sheriff's Office, the white light above blinded Clifford, and he paused at the door, rubbing his grainy eyes. When he looked up, he saw his accusers lined up along one wall in straight chairs, with straight faces, and pious stares that pinned him down.

He laughed and Sheriff Phillips jerked his arm, forcing him to sit across from them. Going on to his desk, removing his felt hat and rearing back, Sheriff Phillips made a teepee with his hands under his blunt chin.

"I wouldn't be laughing if I was you," he said, eyeing the wall where Clifford sat alone. "You gonna find out you can't just come back here and run harum-scarum over people's feelings, just cause you think you done gone off and got smart."

Clifford laughed again and watched the first of the five sets of eyes drop. Hubert Sims looked down at his laced fingers, tapping his brogans on the floor.

"What you got to say for yourself?" asked his wife - not asking so much as bursting with the need to say something, as her tight mouth opened and it fell out.

Like stacked cow patties, brown braids coiled on the crown of her head. Her red-scrubbed face exuded contempt, and her stuffed shoulders emphasized it, broader with her muscular arms crossed in a huff beneath her swollen breasts. One hand clutched a white handkerchief.

On the other side of her, the three little girls, with cow-gnawed hair, in varying styles, leaned toward her, three sets of accusing eyes bearing down, unblinking, on him. They appeared familiar to him, yet foreign in the strange surroundings.

"Hey, little girls," he said.

They blinked and shifted, but resumed their bent postures toward the large lap of their Mama.

"Is he the one, girls?" asked Sheriff Phillips, tapping his lips with two fingers while he rocked on the swivel chair.

All three nodded.

"A woman's hair is her crown and glory!" erupted from the Mama's mouth, stern and rigid as a preacher. "I want that good-for-nothing drunk locked up for what he done!"

"Well, Miss Barbran, to tell the honest-to-God-truth, I ain't shore they's no law again what he done," said Sheriff Phillips, rocking forward and clanking his elbows to the desk.

"Well, you just find one then, or I'll have to take the law in my own hands!" she spat.

"Yessum," said Sheriff Phillips, rising. "Let me see if I can't borry one of Judge Weverington's law books and look it up. I hate like the dickens to bother him at suppertime."

He left the office, and his steps reverberating down the corridor were all that comprised the sounds in the flat brick building.

Clifford looked at the three sets of blue eyes punched in the children's mute clay faces, and they drew them inward to slits - all scowling, yet different: Annie Bell, next to her mama, looked like she wore a white silk cap askew; Janie Ruth, with her back pressed to the wall, appeared startled, with sprigs of hair belying her composed eyes; and Gloriann, on one end, whose random style was the best of the three, looked cute and relieved with a slight page-boy, chin length.

Their mama nudged their daddy and he sank lower into his neutral position, hunched over his knees with propped elbows, surveying the pattern of the black-and-white tile floor.

"Y'all don't pay that old drunk no 'tention!" Miss Barbran said of Clifford, to Clifford. Then her face tipped up to the ceiling, leaving one complacent chin.

The girls lay their odd-bobbed heads back to the wall and swung their stubby legs to the rhythm of the returning footsteps down the hall.

"I found one on younguns," said Sheriff Phillips, going back to his desk through the scents of mingled chlorine bleach and whiskey. "Lemme see," he said, as he sat scanning the tissue pages he flipped in the gray bound book. "Child... child...child neglect...child abusion...child MO-lestation..."

"Hold it just a G.D. minute!" shouted Clifford, rising to his feet. "You bunch've hicks ain't saddling me with



no such a charge. I ain't been in the army for nothing. I know what child MOlestation means, and I ain't done it. As a matter of fact, I ain't done nothing but give them lil ole gals a bad-needed haircutting.

"Look at'em, setting over there, scared plum to death of that old broad. I may've got carried away and cut off a little more than I set out to, but they was burning up. I done'em a favor and didn't charge ary cent. Fixed'em where at least they's some difference between'em. And that's all I done!" he finished and sat just as Miss Barbran rose.

"I'm fixing to lay you out, you sorry drunk!" she shouted, and as he leaned with a smirk into the wall, she socked him in the mouth.

Stars burst and behind them he saw Hubert and Sheriff Phillips shuffling to restrain her, ngrabbing hold of an arm on each side.

"Now, Miss Barbran, I expect we can handle this without that," said the Sheriff, his baby pink face luminous with exertion.

"I reckon you just better!" she shouted. "Look at them lil ole heads. They're ruint. And he done it."

Clifford cowered beneath his uplifted arms as the shuffling neared him again.

"A woman's hair is her crown and glory!" she spat at him as the room swelled with her fury. "Hit him, Hubert!" she hollered.

Laugharty

"Let the shurf handle it, Sug," whimpered Hubert.

"He ain't adoing it. Is he?" she yelled.

"Give him time, Hon," said Hubert. "He's checking out the law."

"Awright," she said, backing to her chair. "I'll give him ten minutes to figger it out, and then I'm lighting into him, my ownself."

"Now, Miss Barbran, it ain't all that simple," said Sheriff Phillips, going back to the desk for the gray book and striding back through the middle.

"Well, it's simple to me!" she shouted, rose and sat.

"See heah, he's just a smart alec, and they ain't no law agin that. If he'd harmed ary one of'em, we'd have us a air-tight case. We could lock him up and throw away the key. But he didn't. Don't you see? Did he, girls?" he asked where he stopped in front of the three who fidgeted silently.

They signaled their nosirs.

"Did he make yall let him whack off your hair?" he inquired.

"Yeh, what about that?" ventured Clifford.

Again they shook their heads.

"He didn't hurt yall in no way, did he?"

"Nosir," Gloriann said.

"Just look at'em, Shurf! They don't even look alike nomore!" shouted Miss Barbran, flapping her handkerchief at them in exasperation.

"I am looking," Sheriff Phillips shouted at her. "And,

for a fact, their heads is skint, but they, everyone, admitted he didn't hold'em down and cut it off.

"You girls like your new haircuts?" he asked softly, looking back at them.

They shrugged their shoulders in unison.

"Speak up," he said.

"Some," Gloriann said, leaning away from the direction of her mama.

"All except for Gloriann, they ain't even had no chance to see theirselves in the looking glass. When we come home from town, he was long gone, and they was just setting, pitiful as could be, by the winder. Weren't they, Hubert?" she prodded.

Hubert nodded unenthusiastically.

"What was you doing messing around Mr. Hubert's place?" Sheriff Phillips asked, turning to Clifford who craned his neck from side to side to interpret the proceedings.

"I just happened back along there and stopped by for a swig of water - it being hot and all. And they give me some. That's all they was to it," he said, watching them watch him.

"You was drinking bad. Weren't you?" asked Sheriff Phillips, jangling change in his pockets as he stood over him.

"Some," Clifford said, scratching his head. "To tell the truth, I was, Shurf. I probably wouldn't no more've

thought of cutting no hair than nothing if I hadn't been. Been on it going on two weeks," he confessed, looking around at the girls. "I used to be a good hand to barber when I was in the army."

"Well, you might've used to been, but you ain't no more!" shouted Miss Barbran.

"Don't look like it, Mam," he said, looking down again.

"Well, let me ask yall this. What'll it take to satisfy yall so I can settle this up and go home to supper?" asked Sheriff Phillips, rocking on the sides of his feet with his arms crossed.

"Lock him up!" shouted Miss Barbran.

"Can't do it, Mam," Sheriff Phillips explained, walking now to and fro. "Ain't no law agin' what he done."

"Make one up," she shouted.

"Awright," he said. "We'll make us up one. Being as how to get to the Florida line beer joint - which was about where he was headed from - he ain't got no choice but to come by your place. What if yall was to come up with something to remind him of what he done, everlast'ing time he takes a notion to set in a drinking?"

"Yeh!" said Miss Barbran. "Remind him of his sins!"

"That's right, Miss Barbran. You could have one of them lil ole gals run out and shine her skint head at'em when he comes by."

"What about when it growed out?" she queried.

"I hadn't thought about that," he said, tapping his mouth with his fingers. "What you think about it, Hubert?"

"One thing's about as good as another, best of my estimation," Hubert said, dropping his chin to his chest.

"You don't even care that your own younguns is ruint! Do you?" Miss Barbran said, turning on him.

"Yeh, shore I do, Sug," he said. "I just ain't got no fitten idears that'll grow it back like it was."

"Girls, let me put it to yall," Sheriff Phillips said, propping his hands on his bent knees to lower his face to theirs. "What yall think'd make old Clifford there not never take it on hisself to chop off no little girlses' hair nomore? Huh?"

They shrugged their shoulders, again.

"Well, I'm gonna give yall a few minutes to come up with something. And they ain't nobody gonna get into it, neither. Yall just step right out yonder in the hall and mull it over and come back in here and tell us. And we'll abide by it. You understand?" he asked.

"Yessir," said Gloriann eagerly.

"Just come on with me," he said, leading as they dropped to their barefeet and padded behind him like a tribunal of miniature monks.

He went out and returned, silently pacing in the aisle, then went to his desk where he mused in the creaking of his chair.

The clock over the desk lapsed fifteen minutes before the doorknob turned and the door swung inward, only enough to reveal a solemn, cherub face.

Janie Ruth pushed it, ever so slowly, and entered, trailed by Annie Bell and Gloriann, all cradling their hands and looking down at their toes scrunching on the tile floor.

"Well, what'd yall come up with?" Sheriff Phillips asked.

"Gloriann's gonna tell it," Annie Bell said and sat.

Janie Ruth sat also, leaving Gloriann twisting with her hands clasped behind.

She stopped and thrust her chest forward, plump as duck breasts, releasing her bottom lip, clamped by a crescent of tiny teeth, and began her steady oration:

"Well, what we tried to come up with, Mister Shurf, was something Ma could still feel proud of, and me and Janie Ruth and Annie Bell could get some good out of, too," she began, turning to face Clifford. "And something that'd learn the barber here a lesson, at the same time. He ain't all that handly with hair," she said, reaching up to touch the evidence. "Probably don't no more have a Georgia license than the man in the moon do. But he cut it off, and we let him.

"Ma, here, ain't afixing to let him off without no lesson, neither," she said, facing her mama, then looking back at the sheriff. "We bunched everlast hair up and cram-

med'em in a croker sack so Ma wouldn't find it. So we still got it. And we figgered on making him glue it back on. But first washing, it'd fall off, I reckon. And besides that, he wouldn't a learnt nothing. Ma wouldn't have no satisfaction from it, neither.

"Mister," she said, eyeing Clifford, who sat forward for the judgment. "We want you to make us one long pigtail out've it. Everlast hair plaited till you get a rope that'll decorate Ma's porch so she can look at it, fiddle with it if she takes a notion, while she's setting rocking. Then everytime you come by a hankering for some likker, you'll see it hanging there in the wind to remind you.

"We figger you could put that down in your lawyering book, Mister Shurf, just in case you come up on another'un like this. And that's about all we got to say," she finished, faced each with an adamant stare and sat.

Sheriff Phillips wrote it on the half-blank page in the back of the law book, slapped it shut, and looked at Clifford.

"Come tomorrow morning, Clifford, you be a setting in that smokehouse at Sim's place, making a pigtail. When you get done, I want to see it hanging out on the front porch. You hear?"

"Yessir," said Clifford, nodding to Gloriann.

She nodded back with a faint smile of familiarity, and gratitude more than scorn.