

Janice Daugharty
Rt. 1
Stockton, Ga. 31649
(912) 242-5917
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"Shorn Glory"

While the sun approached the eleven mark on the sky-dial bleached by summer, 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 in white waves and sparkled with bursting stars as he darted his tongue to the ridge between his nose and mouth. He stopped, leaning the bicycle on his jutted hip as he mopped perspiration with his 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 wash-board ruts and straight into the brick well.

The jolt sent him sailing back from the blurry red bricks where mortar ran and puddled in the white sand.

Looking up into the sky, which reeled with angel faces streaming silver hair, he chuckled, shook his head and focused on the sand and mortar rushing at his feet.

Suddenly, a cold shock of water cascaded over his head. He shook himself like a dog and sputtered, hearing the angel voices above him.

"He's coming to himself," 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 gems pounded into a white wall. Focusing 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 like candied apples.

"You th'owed water on me," he stammered.

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

He focused rapidly on the other one who nodded an affirmative double chin on her chest. Quickly, he switched back to the first, waist-high to him, and his blurry eyes snagged yet another, in front of him, who also seemed to struggle beneath a head weighted with molten silver running to her thighs.

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 that insisted on taking two giant steps back as he approached, looking back, all the while, at the threesome which clustered and crept behind him.

"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

cocked up for his hand to rest and wave the red kerchief at them while he coaxed them to the shade with garbled statements.

"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 that strobed leafy shadows on their molded heads.

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

"Gone to Val'osta 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 to her sister on the other side.

"All yall named Gloriann?"

They ~~nodded~~ 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 it on the kerchief that flapped back to his knee.

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

"One of yall younguns want to 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 far-reaching hand.

He grunted as he took it, touching her fingers, which

reflexively drew back like a reverse snake strike to her waist. They stepped back to watch him guzzle it as it trickled along 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. "I ain't never had the chance to meet up with no triplets before."

"Yessir," said Gloriann, twisting selfconsciously. The others joined her, one of them sucking on her fingers.

"Cat got your tongues?" he asked the other two, laughing. They laughed meekly, 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 reminiscing. "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 adragging me by the hand up the old sawmill road. Church of God, 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 ~~nodded~~ *SHOOK THEIR HEADS.*

"Well, you ain't missed all that much. Ain't nothing but a train track and a shutdown tur'tentine commissary, now."

They had moved nearer as he had slowly sat up, clutching his knee.

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

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

"Ain't yall hot?"

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

"Well, run on in yonder and git your Mommer's cutting scissors, and I'll git 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 atoting around them headfuls of hair in this here heat," he said, and laid 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 evanescent waves to her square 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 ever'thing," he said, running his fingers through his spikey hair.

"You a real barber?" one asked.

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

"Georgie, huh?"

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

"Run go git Ma's scissors, Janie Ruth."

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

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

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

"You go."

"Scardy cat."

"I ain't ascaired'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 git 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 rear pocket where his crafty hand poised. He emptied and replaced it before they looked back on his repose.

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

"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 eager,

reticent grin pasted on her face. 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 tearing silk with the locusts' rustle as the silver tresses snaked on the roots of the china-berry 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 Annie Bell.

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

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

He grabbed the tree as the next girl was pushed for-

ward. She backed, also, and scrunched her shoulders as he repeated the warming up exercise, slurring a command for "a little more water to git hisself going."

The next shorn girl scuttled off and clasped her arms over her head as the final one backed to the barber.

"I'm gonna give you a extré treatment cause of you having to wait on me," he said, and snipped high above the ears, losing his originally conjured design and sloping it to a diagonal on completion. 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, the sun was straight in front 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 pane. 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 on his back.

~~When~~ he bolted onto the Tarver highway, clumps of gravel seemed to jump to his eyes and thud with his head, a pulsing pain that promised relief from the bottle that waited 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 aluminum wall that separated him from the bottle on the other side.

Through the door, in the drooped dusk and the creaks his movements made, he tred in the welcome isolation where the pines' rustling pushed back the world. He drained the bottle and collapsed on the pallet beneath a span of windows open to the dusk filled with the flurry of fireflies

SPARKING the woods, like the aftermath of fire. 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 it was dying in the thick dusk, and the clap of the car door made him start. He groaned and padded on socked feet to the window on the other side, seeing Sheriff Sol planted beside the official car of Duran County with his arm propped on top.

"What the hell?" Clifford mumbled.

"Weeks! You in there?" Sheriff Sol 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 seemed to bring on a numbing sensation of his tongue.

"How de 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 you're atalking about, Shurf," Clifford said, sobering rapidly.

"Well, they're awaiting back yonder at the courthouse for me to haul you in. Get right and let's go," Sheriff Sol said with finality as he got back into the car and waited.

"I hope they ain't accounting 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 blinded him, and he hesitated at the door, rubbing his bleary eyes. When he looked up, he saw his accusers lined up along one wall in straight chairs, with straight faces, and eyes that *pinned Him Down.*

He laughed and Sheriff Sol jerked his arm, forcing him to sit across from them, *going* on to his desk, *removing*

(no cape)

HIS HAT, AND rearing back on his seat of authority, a padded chair that squeaked *IN PROTEST OF HIS ROLLED THIGHS.*

"I wouldn't be alau~~ghing~~ if I was you," he said, focusing on the wall where Clifford sat alone. "You gonna find out you can't just come back here and run harum-scarum over people, just cause you gone off and come back smart."

Clifford laughed again and watched the first of the five sets of eyes drop. Hubert Sims looked down at the laced fingers of his weathered hands and tapped the toe of his shoe on the floor.

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

Like stacked cow patties, rows of brown braids nestled on the crown of her head. Her red face exuded contempt, and her staunch shoulders shored it up, broader with her big arms crossed in a huff beneath her *SAPPED* breasts. One hand clutched a balled, white handkerchief.

On the other side of her, the three little girls with cow-gnawed heads leaned toward her with three sets of accusing eyes bearing down, unblinking, on him.

"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 Sol, tapping his lips with two fingers while he rocked on the swivel chair.

All three nodded affirmatively.

"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 agin what he done," said Sheriff Sol, 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 Sol, 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 wake him up to ask him."

He left the office, and his steps echoing from the corridor were all that comprised the sounds in the room.

Clifford looked at the three sets of blue eyes punched in the children's clay faces, and they drew them inward to slits.

Their Mama nudged their Papa and he sank lower into his neutral position, hunched between his knees over the black tile floor.

"Yall don't pay that ole 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 bobbed heads back to the wall and swung their stubby legs to the rhythm of the returning footsteps.

"I fount one on younguns," said Sheriff Sol, going back to his desk through the scents of chlorine bleach and whiskey wafting in the aisle. "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~~-les-tation..."

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

(no caps)

NO SECH a charge. I ain't been in the army for nothing. I know what child ~~mo~~-lestation is 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, skeared plum to death of that old broad. Look at their lil ole skint heads. I may've got carried away and cut off a little more'n I set out to, but they was aburning up. I done'em a favor and didn't charge ary cent. 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 Sol shuffling with a fat arm in each hand.

"Now, Miss Barbran, I expect we can handle this without that," said Sheriff Sol, his baby pink skin 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.

"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 achecking out the law."

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

"Now Miss Barbran, it ain't all that simple," said Sheriff Sol, 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's aharmed one of'em, we'd have us a airtight case. We could lock him up and th'ow 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 quietly.

They ^{SIGMALED} ~~noded~~ their nosirs..

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

"Yeh, what about that?" ventured Clifford.

Again they ~~noded~~ *SHOOK THEIR HEADS.*

"He didn't hurt yall in no way. Did he?"

"Nosir," one of them said.

"Just look at'em, shurf!" shouted Miss Barbran.

"I am alooking," Sheriff Sol shouted at her. "And, for a fact, their heads is skint, but they, everone, 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," one said, leaning away from her Mama.

"They ain't even had no chance to see their selfs in the looking glass. When we come home from town, he was long gone, and they was just asetting, pitiful as could be, by the winder. Waen't they, Hubert?" she prodded.

Hubert nodded unenthusiastically.

"What was you doing messing around Mr. Hubert's place?"

Sheriff Sol 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 adrinking bad. Wadn't you?" asked Sheriff Sol, jangling change in his pockets as he stood over him.

"Some," Clifford said, scratching his head. "To tell the truth, I was, Shurf. I pro'bly wouldn't no more've thought of cutting no hair than nothing if I hadn't abeen. 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 in fifty-two."

"Well, in two years, you lost it. You ain't no more!" shouted Miss Barbran.

"Don't look like hit, 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 Sol, rocking on the sides of his feet with his arms crossed.

"Lock him up!" shouted Miss Barbran.

"Can't do it, Mam," Sheriff Sol 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, ever last time he TAKES a notion to SET in adrinking?"

"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 yore own younguns is ruint. Do you?" ejaculated Miss Barbran.

"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 Sol 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 one, 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 door knob turned and ^{THE DOOR} swung inward, only enough to reveal a timid, cherub face.

She pushed it, ever so slowly, and entered, trailed by the other two, cradling their hands and looking down at their toes scrunching on the tile floor.

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

"Gloriann's gonna tell it," one said, and sat. The other followed suit, 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 handy with hair," she said, reaching up to touch the evidence. "Pro'bly 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 withoutn a lesson, neither," she said, facing her Mama, then looking back at Sheriff Sol. "We bunched everlast hair up and crammed'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 alearnt nothing. Ma wouldn't have no satisfaction from hit, neither.

"Mister," she said, eyeing Clifford who sat forward for the judgment. "We want you to make us one long pigtail out've it. Ever last hair plaited til 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 arocking. Then ever'time you come by ahankering for some likker, you'll see it hanging there in the wind to remind you. ^(PARAGRAPH) "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 Sol wrote it on the half-blank page in the back of the law book, slapped it shut, and looked at Clifford.

"Come tomorrer morning, you be asetting in that smoke-house at Sim's place, making a pigtail. When you get done, I want to see it ahanging out on the front porch. You hear?"

"Yessir," said Clifford.

The next two weeks passed in gnawing timelessness, spent by Clifford - in waning sobriety - braiding the platinum hairs together. Tediously, he had separated the mangled tresses and spread them on a board placed between two sawhorses, like precious threads of gold. When the outside light dimmed, he slept, rising when it bloomed again and grew like vines through the open plank door and cracks. Then he wove, reweaving when he discovered a lost strand in some corner, brightening the dusk. At last, he dumped his sack and found it depleted. He looped the braid around his arm and exited the gray building that had housed his energy for fourteen days. It was midmorning, overcast, and heavy with the threat of rain.

They were waiting beside the doorsteps, *ARMS* linked like paper dolls, as he plodded past with his head lowered.

On an existing nail above the rocker at the end of the austere porch, he hung it and stepped back to watch it brighten the musty morning.

"You girls is got you a play pretty, now," Clifford said, proudly, his eyes riveted on it as he stepped back and mopped his brow. "I got ever last dab of yalles crown and glory in it."

It swayed in the breeze, bright and bold, shimmering with nuances of silver to a core of pewter, from ceiling to floor, a ubiquitous part of them, severed but not lost.

THE END.