Crowning Glory

Jean Anderson*
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Abstract

The family is sitting quietly at the supper table listlessly slurping up Friday’s left-over stew...
smiles, not his eyes. They remain cold, aloof, and a little contemptuous. He reaches into his raincoat pocket, pulls out a crumpled handful of yen, and the business begins.

One carton of cigarettes—one hundred yen; one candy bar—ten yen; one package of gum—five yen. One pair of cheap canvas shoes—three hundred yen. Why should you think of that? Keep your mind on what you’re doing. Check all the money, make sure he doesn’t try to pass off any Japanese yen on you, they’re no good here.

The money feels cold and greasy as he hands it to you. Your hand brushes his and you involuntarily jerk away. He feels cold and greasy too, like congealed lard. He crams everything into a child’s school bag lying at his feet, bows and smiles again, his eyes still not smiling, and scurries off into the shadows.

The two of you turn back toward the camp, walking slow, not saying much, feeling the strangeness of the yen bulging in your pocket. Back you go, back through the kids playing in the road, the kids with no shoes because shoes cost too much. Back into camp.

“Shall we try it again next week?” Alex says.

“Might as well,” you say. “We’ve got to get enough yen so we can buy some souvenirs to send home.”

You walk toward your barracks. A gust of wind blows the ever-present stench of Korea into your nostrils. You think again of the kids with no shoes. “Oh, Christ!” you say. “Christ, but I wish I was home!”

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The family is sitting quietly at the supper table listlessly slurping up Friday’s left-over stew. The atmosphere is strained. Again the family has taken sides over a vital issue. The radio. Tonight, time for the 6 p.m. news flashes, Father is hoping to hear the casualty list from a bus accident in Southern California in which two were killed (he knows a man in San Francisco and fears for his life) while Junior is perishing to know whether Daddy Warbucks and Punjab will escape the flaming
jaws of Muchiewkucho, wild Javanese volcano. So Mother, the
mediator, has made the decision.

Silence hangs heavy in the room. Then Mother speaks. “I
know what it is. Sarah Jane needs a permanent.”

All eyes focus on you, the Sarah Jane—third and middle child
of the family, now in the tender grasp of adolescence.

“But Mother, I—”

“Yes, a permanent. Her hair is getting completely out of con­
trol. Don’t you agree, Horace?”

“Mmmm? Oh, hair. Yes, certainly, Grace, any thing you
say.”

“But Mother, you’d think I didn’t put it up on rags every night
before retiring.”

“No. . . Just now I’ve been studying you. For years I’ve had
a feeling that your appearance isn’t all that it might be. Uh—
now turn your head to the side, dear. See, Horace, now if her hair
were shaped—sort of—around her ears,” and she leaves her seat,
crosses to you, removes your bobby pins and pulls your hair back
into the type of bun your matl* teacher has been showing for
the last twenty-seven years. “Now, Horace, look. If they cut it
very short all around—I’ve always loved feather bobs. Remem­
ber my hair when we were married, Horace?”

“But Mother, I—”

“Junior, stop taking the meat out of your stew. I don’t care
if your new girl is Catholic, you’re not going to waste good
food. You can be converted when you’re eighteen if you still
want.”

“Okay, okay. But if you ask me, Sarah Jane looks like a hag
with her hair back like that. Her ears hang over too far.”

In a vague way you are grateful to the brat for at least seeing
your side of it.

Father looks up again. “Grace, eat your dinner. I’m satisfied
with our daughter’s looks. Of course, she’s no beauty, but after
all, with that nose—”

“Thank you, Father,” you mumble humbly. The subject is
dropped, and only the occasional snapping of Fido’s jaws is
heard as he consumes Junior’s meat.

But the next evening the issue is introduced once more. Mother
has just turned off both radios. “Sarah Jane, I’ve made an ap­
pointment with Clarabelle for you to have a permanent
Monday.”
Sketch

"But Mother, I—"

"No 'but's.' Your father and I have talked it over, and I've decided that you can't go through the spring in that condition. April is coming."

"I remember what her hair was like last April when she had a permanent. When it rained—fuzz. Looked like a hag."

"Junior, you weren't invited to give an opinion. Monday at nine, Sarah Jane."

"I won't go." You flap your ears back stubbornly.

"You'll go."

"I won't. You can't make me. I'll leave home."

"All right. That's a bargain. Get a permanent or leave home."

"Oh."

Your older sister here comes through with a look almost sympathetic. Wisely she understands but is silent, pitifully, for once she too knew this agony. For years she suffered this harangue, and then quietly one night, shedding tears of self-pity, she shaved her head, and has not been wearing hair since.

Soberly you survey the bareness of her egg-shaped dome. You entertain mad thoughts of trying her way out, and wish passionately that your ears didn't hang over. Oh, the injustice of it all!

You try again. "Mother, I'm sure that if you'd only let me let my hair grow—if it could get long enough just to sit kind of on my shoulders—it would curl just fine. Please give me a chance."

"We've given you fourteen years, and you haven't proved it yet. Now," deep breath, "if you don't go and get your nice new permanent you can't go to the movies with Alfonso any more."

Here Father raises his knife from his bean soup. "Speaking of Alfonso, I believe I heard that he was holding your hand three Saturdays ago at the ninth chapter of "Tarzan the Ape and Batman Fight against the Sinister Forces of Evil.' Is that true?"

"Now, Horace, we're talking about Sarah Jane's hair. Let's not bring sex into this."

Bitter tears well up and burn the back of your eyes. With a small sob you moan, "I'm sure it doesn't matter. If I do have a permanent I know I shall never see Alfonso again anyway. Alfonso prefers the natural woman."

But it's no good. Sunday night you sit before your mirror combing your glamorous tresses—looking hard—last chance—remember how you look tonight for always. It will never come again. You weep softly thinking of the loveliness that was your
life—until tomorrow, that is. Then you anoint your head with olive oil, add a shower cap, and throw yourself into a fitful sleep. . . . You are Marie Antoinette wearing long white curls. The butcher at the corner grocery is chasing after you with a cleaver. You trip because you never did get around to shortening those blue jeans, and he cuts off your head. You watch objectively as it rolls down the hill and then wake up screaming. Shaking with relief you suddenly remember with a jolt your own fate, and deciding Marie A. wasn't so bad off after all, knock yourself out on the bedpost and watch your white-haired head topple off the cliff into Lake Erie.

Elegy For Tommy
Bruce Weiser

THEY handed him the letter and he began to read it, his legs dangling over the edge of the upper bunk. He had to bend forward to fit the curve of the Nissen hut, and the light from the bulb with the newspaper shade was poor for reading but it didn't really matter. He knew what the letter would say.

"Dear Mrs. Tompkins," in the eighth-grade handwriting of the team's construction sergeant, "We know how hard the news of Tommy's death will hit you and we wouldn't of wrote this letter only we wanted you to know how we all felt about Tommy in this outfit."

All but one, he thought.

"We all called him Tommy on account of his real first name was too much of a mouthful to handle all the time. And that just goes to show you we all thought a lot of your husband, Mrs. Tompkins, and us fellows talked it over and decided you might like to hear how he unfortunately met his end.

"Well, we moved up here after we finished the job at Ballan-