

Perry Glasser
from *Iowa Black Dirt*

Jessica and I were together three days in Iowa when I realize I am inept. She was being noble to spare my feelings. Wrapped in a green towel, her bare shoulders still shining with bath water, she sat with her back to me. Like her mother's, my 8-year-old daughter's hair fell several inches below her shoulders. I worked the brush along the line her part should follow, pushed the brush to her scalp, tugged, and my kid tried not to cry out. She did whimper.

It was not courage. Jessica had not had a good year with her mother or her mother's husband, and in her last hope for a place that could be hers, she would not complain to me. Until that moment the hairbrush tangled, I'd not realized the degree to which my kid was at some psychological risk. She'd endure any amount of pain rather than allow Daddy to think she needed attention. What if Daddy did not want her, either?

I'd planned hot breakfasts against the Iowa winters. I stocked up on oatmeal. I dedicated myself to being sure Jessica's clothing would be ironed crisp and washed spotless, for which purpose I'd bought a washer and dryer within days of moving into the house. I practiced ironing. Jessica's complexion would be creamy, she'd never, ever, catch cold, and her hair, her glorious hair, would always be lustrous.

But my idylls of perfect parenthood were being wrecked by a hairbrush. Knotted about two inches from her scalp above her ear, it rested five inches from the tangled ends of her hair and a light-year from all I had imagined. I recalled my mother telling my sister it took a little pain to be beautiful, but pulling Jessica's hair by the roots from her scalp seemed too great a price to pay.

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I gave up. I carefully scissored out the brush. Jessica's hair dried where it fell. Within days, her head resembled a bird's nest in molting season. She looked like a perfectly happy child raised by wolves.

Coming from Arizona, Jessica had no cold weather wardrobe. Shortly after school started stuff.

Whether in Iowa or Irkutsk, I advise any father who stands outside the try-on room in the Girl's Department not to peer anxiously toward the entrance. Mothers get to pass beyond the curtains into the little cubical rooms; Dads are sequestered near the entrance because good family-oriented people are wary of the kind of creep that stares into the children's try-on rooms.

That afternoon, I shrug off the stares from women who eyeball a man pushing his hand through racks of girls' clothing, but there is no ignoring the mall security rent-a-cop who politely, but firmly, asks to have a few words with me. I suppose the biddy who'd alerted the guard to the perv in the kids' department was in the small group of onlookers. "What do you think you are doing?" the guy asks me as he hitches his pants.

I have no idea what is going on. Did I leave my lights on in the parking lot? I tell him I am shopping.

"But you keep staring into the try-on room. What do you hope you'll see?"

Jessica chooses that moment to emerge in salmon pink size 6X jeans. I ask her to turn around to examine how the seat fits. From the corner of my eye, I see a woman turn away, and it finally dawns on me what this little show of community concern is about. The seat is baggy, but with the onlookers and the guard watching my every move I do not

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dare grab at my kid's bottom to see how much loose material is there. The mood of the Midwest, that innocent gesture might have bought me hard time. But since Jessica is obviously a happy kid, clean and, except for a head of hair that might be jungle undergrowth, the guard lets it drop. I receive no apology, of course. All this episode meant was that I would be caught red-handed another day.

Weeks before the shopping mall shakedown, I register Jessica in school. On school's first day, as we walk the tree-lined Des Moines streets we are joined by dozens of decent-looking kids. Jessica glows. Back with Daddy, she will be attending a new school. Lots of houses on the route prominently display a poster of a blue leaf in a front window or behind the screen that encloses a front porch, and a few days later Jessica informs me that Blue Leaf houses are safe havens. Any kid in trouble or who needs a bathroom can stop there.

Terrific! I call the school to ask if my house can be a Blue Leaf house. Forms come by mail; I fill them out. A few days later, I am rejected.

I am unmarried. "Policy," the police sergeant explains when I call. "Don't take it personally."

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