

Lone Star Stories

Speculative Fiction and Poetry

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A Good Hair Day in Anarchy

by Ken Scholes

Ed the Barber looked up from his newspaper when the kid walked in, and as usual, he noticed the hair first. It was long, blond and tied back with a leather thong, underneath a white stetson. Good hair - the best he'd seen since the last transport from Houston Prime three months ago.

The second thing he noticed was the gun-belt and the fifteen notches burned into the leather.

“Heya, Pops. What about a haircut?”

Ed stood, still eyeing the belt. Pearl

handles jutted out of holsters on each hip. He waved to the single chair.

“Hop in.” The kid tossed his hat onto the low, magazine-strewn table, and climbed into the seat. “Sure those won’t get tangled up?” Ed nodded to the pistols.

The kid patted a handle, grinning. “They’re fine. I always keep ‘em close.” Winking: “You can’t be too careful in these parts.”

Ed nodded, draping the sheet around his first customer of the day. Anarchy was a small mining town, an island of life in an otherwise desolate waste, home to both bandit and beast. “What’ll it be, fella?” He spun the chair so the kid could see himself in the mirror.

“Take it down real short,” he said.

“You sure?” It took a good two years to get hair like this; best to be safe now rather than sorry later. Still, his fingers itched for the scissors, hoping he’d heard right.

“Yep. Real short.”

Ed shrugged and untied the thong, letting the hair cascade down over the white-sheeted shoulders. Then, he took up the shears and set them to snickering over the thick golden strands. Now it was time for the other part of his job -- the small talk. “So, you new in town?” Of course he was, but Ed asked anyway.

“Passing through, tending to business.”

“Oh? What do you do?”

The kid stared blankly into the mirror, locking eyes with the barber's reflection. "You don't know?"

Ed shook his head. "Nope. Sorry."

"I'm a hunter." Ed dropped the scissors, then stooped to recover them with shaking hands while he mumbled an apology. The kid grinned, then chuckled. "Don't be scared, old man. Just do a good job on my head, see?" Again, he winked. Hunters were the last line of justice in the Frontier System --an easy job to get but a hard one to keep. New Texas, vast as it was, boasted only seven hunters still on the register. There might have been two or three on New Wyoming and New Colorado, the neighboring two planets. Ed reached

back in his brain for a statistic he'd once heard: Only one in five made it through the first hunt. Only two in five, their second. The odds didn't get much better beyond that, keeping the field exclusive. Nearly a decade had passed since a hunter had come to Anarchy. Ed went back to his work, his mouth suddenly dry. He needed to call Marshal Brady, let him know about the kid. Across the room, the vid-screen's single, wide eye stared back at him. He didn't want to ask, but he did it anyway, knowing the answer. "So, who are you after?"

"Slope Dobbins."

Ed paused, his stomach knotting. "The gunslinger?" He swallowed, then went on cutting. "Haven't heard that name in

years.”

“The same. What do you know about him?” The kid’s wary eyes followed Ed’s movements in the mirror.

“A bit, I reckon.” The clippers buzzed and shook to life. “He’s known throughout the System, especially here on New Texas. Heard he was dead, though. Died in the desert, alone, gut-shot.”

“That’s what they say. I happen to know he’s here, in Anarchy.”

Again Ed stopped, straightening and moving around the chair carefully. “That’s why you’re cutting my hair.” The kid bristled at his questioning look. “I’m Kid Jackson. You know, the hair?”

The scissors went back to work,

threads of gold drifting to the floor with every metallic whisper. “I’m sorry, Kid. I don’t know who you are. News travels slow around here.”

Ed felt the shoulders tighten up, saw the impatience firming up the jaw-line. “I grow my hair long while I hunt. Once I find my prey, I get it cut. Then” He raised his hand from beneath the sheet and made a pistol with his forefinger and thumb. As the thumb-hammer fell, he clicked his tongue. “It’s my . . . trademark, my calling card.”

“Oh. I didn’t know. Sorry.” The tenseness leaked out and the shoulders softened.

“It’s okay.”

“Slope Dobbins, eh? Here in

Anarchy?" Just the name made Ed's stomach hurt.

"Yessiree," the Kid said. "Hell, I wasn't even born when he was in his prime." He grinned at Ed, slightly inclining his head. The barber gripped his temples firmly between thumb and forefinger to stop the movement. "But you probably remember the sonofabitch. You look around his age."

"Sure. I remember." He set the scissors down and picked up the antique electric clippers, checking the guard. "Came to New Texas from the Sol System --that's what they say, anyway. He was on one of the last ships before the Waygate cut out. He was a teacher, wasn't he? Then one day someone --"

The Kid interrupted. "Lightning Jeb Walker. Dobbins spilled his beer on him at the Independence Day parade and Walker challenged him." The Kid's eyes came to life and Ed let him finish the story. He didn't mind.

"They stood on Main Street, Dobbins with a borrowed gun, and when the mayor's hat hit the ground, both gunhands scrambled. Walker was faster, but his fat head got in the way. He started to say

'slowpoke,' but by the time he said 'slope,' his brain figured out there was a hole in his throat. That's the first man Slope Dobbins killed. That's what started it all."

Ed nodded, remembering the first time

he heard the story. God, I was young back then --younger even than the Kid, he thought. "I heard that was just a story – that the name came from a pronounced forehead and receding hairline...."

"Nope. Maybe it was a fluke – real lucky shot and all, but still a true story," the Kid said. "Everyone came after him, then, and he had to learn. Had to somehow live up to the legend. He became the best."

"He'd be pretty old, now, if he's still alive. What makes you think he's here, in Anarchy?"

"Old drunk up Yuma-way told me. Said he knew him. Said a couple of Aborigines found him in the desert and brought him here to swap him for liquor."

Said he stayed on, decided to tame Anarchy, eventually settled down and had a family.”

“Said all that, did he?” Ed tried to hide his shock and failed.

“Anarchy’s a small town. I’d think we’d know if Slope Dobbins was around.”

The Kid nodded, eyes narrowing with suspicion. “He said that, too. Said you all knew.”

Ed managed to keep the clippers in his hand, but they betrayed him, taking a deep bite of hair from the back of the Kid’s neck. Licking his lips, he finished up in silence and rubbed the menthol-scented hair tonic onto the neck and scalp. With a flourish he spun the chair

and waited for the Kid's approving nod. Then, Ed snapped the sheet away.

The Kid handed over a ten mark bill. "Good work, Pops."

"Glad to help, but I was wondering..." The Kid paused in the doorway, and turned, the New Texas sun glaring off his hat. "You said you get your hair cut when you've found your man." Ed waited.

"Don't you think maybe you're a bit...premature?"

Hands hitched in his gun belt, the Kid winked. "Not at all, Pops. Where can I find Marshal Obadiah Brady?"

#

"He's asking after you. Asking about Slope Dobbins."

The face on the vid-screen sobered. “How long ago?” Brady looked tired, Ed thought, his leathery skin a field of scars and wrinkles, his eyes buried in crow’s feet. His silver hair needed a trim, Ed noticed.

“He just left. I sent him to the saloon. Figured you could meet him there.”

“Kid Jackson, you say? Out of New Colorado? Let me look him up.” His face turned to the side and his fingers clacked quickly.

“Hmmm. Kid is right – I don’t remember ever being his age. How’d he find out?”

“Charlie Greenbaum. Guess he’s up in Yuma nowadays.”

The marshal stood, face then chest

sliding up and off the screen.

“Hank’s out checking into some trouble on the Reservation --some Ab stole Ike Martin’s skipper or something. I’m gonna need a hand, I reckon, with this Kid.”

“But I --“

“Ed, you and I both know I can make a call up to Brailey, get a lifter of rangers down here. But with that goddamned 'gate re-opening it could be a while.”

In all the excitement, Ed had forgotten about the Anarchy Gazette's headline. Since its first collapse thirty years ago, the Arbuckle Waygate had guttered to life three times, never for longer than a week. And each time, the System spiraled into chaos as disillusioned

settlers swapped out with starry-eyed romantics, both looking for a better life. Ed started, suddenly aware that Brady still spoke.

"Besides, I like to keep Anarchy business right here in Anarchy. We just don't need the publicity."

Ed nodded and watched Brady's gnarled hands work the buckle of a gun-belt. There were no notches carved into it. Some men looked dangerous without props.

Brady bent and pushed his face close to the screen. "So meet me at Susie's, Ed. Bring your gun. You are forth-with deputized."

"Great." The barber swallowed and absently scratched himself. "I'll see you

there.”

The screen went white, then shut itself off, and he sat down, hard, in the barber chair. He lifted a hand and watched it tremble. Then, he slowly stood, reached into his cabinet and pulled out a tarnished pistol. Shoving it into his belt, Ed the Barber locked his shop and headed west on Main.

Overhead, the sky was crisply blue and its solitary yellow eye glared down, swollen and angry. On the horizon, a line of jub-jub trees marked the meandering Mud River that cut through the wastes. Anarchy's dirt streets were quiet -- a handful of skippers tied haphazardly in front of a half-dozen storefronts, their bug-eyes wide and unblinking, rear-legs

rubbing music into the air as they waited for their owners. A few schooners were mixed in, rust-flecked, glass-chipped, parked with three tires up on the make-shift sidewalk, three on the ground. Their solar engines hummed as they fueled themselves for their next run. As he looked at the dilapidated equipment and giant insects, Ed found it hard to believe that thirty years ago he'd bought into the marketing ploy like so many others. There was nothing quaint or romantic about the New Wild West. All it took to see that was the sudden collapse of an intergalactic highway that no one understood. The sudden descent of silence on a vast, dark ocean. Of course, Ed thought, he could've left like

so many others. But it was home now.

Wiping sweating palms onto his pants, he moved with short, deliberate steps. He stopped outside Li'l Susie's and waited. Marshal Brady was a big man, taking long, confident strides. He gave Ed a grim smile and shifted the plasma rifle to his shoulder so he could shake his hand. "Good to see you, Ed. Ready?"

"No."

Brady pushed through the doors, leveling the plasma rifle as he did. Ed followed, hand on the butt of his antique blaster. They waited in the doorway as their eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room. A few frightened Abs, tall and spindly, moved for the back door, nostrils flaring. "Much going now," one said to

Susie as he flipped a coin to her. Susie's fat arm jiggled as she snatched the five-mark from the air, her angry eyes on Ed and Brady. Brady cocked his head at her, ignoring her glare. "Where's the Kid

. . . the hunter?"

A voice from the street, familiar to Ed: "Behind you, Slope Dobbins."

They both turned slowly to look out the open door. Kid Jackson stood, face painted with self-importance, both guns drawn and powered up.

Ed wondered how fast he could get to the blaster, knew it would never be fast enough, and glanced nervously at the marshal for direction. Nausea made his

bowels gurgle, watery with the moment.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Brady’s voice was calm.

“But if we could sit down and have ourselves a drink together, maybe we could sort this whole thing out.”

The Kid spat in the dirt. “I don’t need to sort anything out, Dobbins.”

Brady chuckled. “You think if I was Slope Dobbins I’d walk into an ambush like this?” He shook his head. “Son, let’s have that drink. I’ll tell you all about Slope Dobbins and his life here in Anarchy, if you really want to know.”

“But Charlie Greenbaum --”

“Charlie Greenbaum’s a drunken bum. Only in town a month before I ran him out for the card-cheat he is. Must have

one helluva grudge to sic a hunter on my ass.” Brady slowly lowered his rifle, then leaned it against the door-jam. “Susie, let’s have a bottle.” Ed watched uncertainty wash over the Kid’s face. Then, he heard Brady gasp with surprise and pleasure. “Say, aren’t you Kid Jackson?”

The uncertainty swelled into pride. “Yes,” he said. “Yes I am.”

Ed smiled inwardly. Brady always knew the tunes folks would dance to.

“I hear you’re one quick sonofabitch. Hear you took out Jake Reilly on New Colorado --your first time out, no less.” New Colorado was the greenest of the three worlds that made up the Frontier System. The Kid nodded, grin widening.

“New Colorado tamed up fast after that. Thought I’d try my hand here.” He looked them over and then slipped the guns back into their holsters. Then, he pulled out a slim metal cylinder. “Do you mind? I just want to be sure.” It was a bloodhound --a small one.

Brady shrugged. “If you need proof. Ed?”

Ed’s scissors, always in his pocket, had become a local joke. Always ready for the job, they laughed, just in case someone needed an emergency trim. He stepped up and snipped a single silver wire from Brady’s receding hairline. Kid Jackson unscrewed one end of the cylinder and held it to the barber. Carefully, Ed dropped the hair into the

bloodhound. As soon as he screwed the lid in place, the machine buzzed to life.

“Got a speck of blood,” the Kid said. “It’s twenty-some years old. Some woman --governor’s daughter, no less -- kept his bloody shirt after a shoot-out in Neo Abilene. Started out a hostage, ended up in the sack with him. She wanted a souvenir, she said, something to remember that night.” The machine blinked a red light. “Looks like you’re right, Marshal.”

“Of course I am. Now what about that drink?”

#

“So I tell him, ‘Bullshit you ain’t Tommy Cross,’ and I shoot him in the head.” The Kid broke into laughter,

pounding the table with his fist.

“You should've seen the look on his face!”

They'd been drinking the better part of the day, Ed occasionally glancing up to the clock. The saloon had filled up as miners drifted in from their shifts. In the corner, a group of Abs sat brooding over cards, their sand-gray skin and wide black eyes flat in the fluorescent light. Li'l Susie had changed into her evening wear, a see-through dress that a woman her size had no business wearing.

Ed took Brady's cue and joined in the laughter. Then, the Kid's face went as serious as a drunk man's could. “So you said you'd tell me about Dobbins and Anarchy, Marshal. He was here, wasn't

he?" His voice slurred around the question. Brady wiped his eyes as his laughter faded. Then, he poured another drink for the Kid. "Yep. Sure was."

"So?"

"Just like the story goes --some Abs found him out in the wastes, close to death, and brought him here. I traded them two bottles of Earth whiskey and doctored Slope up. I always intended to turn him in --quite a reward for the bastard back then --but I couldn't...."

Disgust filled the Kid's voice. "You were afraid."

"No." Brady laughed. "Not at all. Slope Dobbins wasn't a man who inspired fear. Legends are different from life, Kid."

The Kid turned on Ed. “What about you? Did he scare you?”

“Terrified me.” Ed’s voice was quiet in the noisy room. He’d been drinking a lot and the whiskey had burned away his queasiness. The Kid grinned. “Yeah. That’s more like it. Anyway...?”

“Anyway, that was a long time ago. You look all over Anarchy, Son, but you won’t find the legendary Slope Dobbins around these parts. Not one man matching his description.”

“So he’s dead, or moved on?”

The Marshal didn’t answer. Ed poured another drink, stared at the amber fluid, then tipped his head back and took it in. Then, Brady reached for the bottle but the Kid grabbed it away.

“Well?”

Ed cleared his voice and leaned in, toward the Kid. “What if it’s neither?”

Eyes wide, then angry, turning on Brady. “But you said --”

“No one said he wasn’t here.” Ed raised his eyebrows in Brady’s direction and smiled.

“Ed,” the Marshal started but was cut off.

“Well where is he, Goddammit?” A fist slammed into the table, making the glasses jump, while the other hand fumbled for a pistol.

“What if he decided to stay?” Ed asked. Brady shot him a warning glance and slowly lowered his hands beneath the table. Ignoring Brady, the barber

leaned in even closer and lowered his voice.

“What if the very thought of killing suddenly sickened him and he hated what he’d become, what the stories made him?” His face was near enough now to smell the whiskey on the Kid’s breath, mingled with hair tonic and sweat. “What if every time he heard his name or saw a gun his stomach knotted up and went to water?”

What if he dreamed at night, not just about the men he killed, but their wives and children and mothers and fathers, too?” Jackson’s face hung somewhere between a smile and frown as Ed continued.

“What if he decided to change? To be

someone else? Maybe settle down, start a family, even open a business...say, a barber-shop?" He gave a tight-lipped smile and sat back, hands folded across his white barber's smock, eyebrows raised. There was a moment of silence, thick as a quilt. Then, the Kid bellowed laughter like a lifting cruiser spouted smoke, and every head in the saloon turned as voices died mid-sentence.

"You? Slope Dobbins?" Again, he guffawed, leaning in, himself, eyes shifting around the room. "You know what I think?" He licked his lips.

"What?" Ed's face split into a broad grin, on the edge of laughter, himself. The warmth of the liquor in his belly felt good.

“I think you’re drunk.”

“I am, at that.”

“I’d have to agree,” Brady said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Slope Dobbins!” The Kid chuckled and Brady’s grim look gradually melted into a smile as his hands slipped back up to the table, unnoticed. Throughout the room, voices resurrected conversations.

“Only one way to find out,” Ed said, pulling out his scissors. He snipped a pinch of gray from above his ear and extended it to the hunter.

“You’re serious?”

“Why not? Can’t barbers be notorious gunslingers?”

Shrugging, the Kid pulled out the cylinder, opened it, and dropped the hair

in. When the light flashed red, he started laughing again.

“You’re a real card.”

Then, he stood. “I’m off, then, fellas. Guess my trademark’s shot to hell now.” He ran a hand through his bristling scalp before settling the hat in place.

“It’s good hair,” Ed said. “It’ll grow back fast.”

“Hopefully before I find Dobbins -- hate to lose my reputation.”

“Hopefully.” Brady stood, and Ed climbed to his wobbly legs.

“Thanks for the drink . . .and the laugh.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Kid Jackson, quite drunk, swaggered out into the night.

#

The clippers hummed over Brady's silver hair. Outside, Anarchy had started its day.

The newspaper and streets were full. The governor declared a holiday to celebrate the Waygate reopening. Twelve years of mail glutted the Skipper Express. Shiploads of merchandise moved through customs into the grasping hands shopkeepers and farmers. Eighteen of the town's children bundled off to distant relatives and fancy schools eight hundred light years away. Four families, new settlers with fresh faces and bright eyes, replaced them. All was truly right in the world. Ed felt puffy, his skull pounding and his breath sour from

last night's whiskey.

“That was close yesterday,” Brady said. “Ouch!”

“Sorry. I'm pretty hungover.” He'd actually thought about closing up the shop today --something he hadn't done in twenty years of barbering --but midweek holidays meant good business and good business was rare in Anarchy.

“Thought that damned bloodhound would do you in. You never told me about the governor's daughter.”

Ed grinned weakly into the mirror. “There was no governor's daughter. I don't know whose shirt he got ahold of, but it isn't mine. Another story, just like that whole name thing.”

Brady snorted. “I still don't know

why you didn't just shoot him, Slope.”

Ed's eyes softened, feeling the lurch in his stomach. “I just couldn't. You know that, Brady.”

“Why not, dammit? He was a threat, and there you were, sloppy drunk, spilling your soul to him --just inviting trouble. You know I would've covered for you. Could've just put a plasma charge through his head --ow, Godammit!”

That time, it was deliberate. He'd found it was the best way, by far, to make his point nowadays. “That's not my life, anymore, Brady. I'm just a barber now.” Ed Dobbins paused, inhaled the scent of electricity and oil from the humming clippers. “Damn, that

Kid had good hair, too. The kind that makes me love my work.”

Brady snorted, then yelped again as the clippers fed.

About the Author:

Ken Scholes is a native of the Pacific Northwest, growing up in a logging town southeast of Seattle. He has a degree in History from Western Washington University.

Ken started writing stories in the first grade. He started submitting stories in the tenth grade and then (after a long break to become a soldier, security guard, minister, label-gun repairman, receptionist and nonprofit manager) started selling some of them. He has work appearing in *Talebones*, *Fortean*

Bureau, Twilight Showcase and the anthologies *Best of the Rest 3: Best Unknown Science Fiction and Fantasy of 2001*, *TEL: Stories*, *44 Clowns* and *L. Ron Hubbard Presents The Writers of the Future, Volume XXI*. His speculative fiction has won honorable mention in several venues including *Year's Best Science Fiction*, and he is a winner of the Writers of the Future contest for 2004.

Ken lives in Gresham, Oregon, with his amazing wonder-wife Jen, two cats, five guitars and more books than you'd ever want to help him move.

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