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KING ELVIS

WHEN BUDDY TURNER WAS NINE YEARS OLD, he wanted to see Elvis Presley *Live! In Concert* at the Hofheinz Pavilion. The show was a month away, but the ad in the *Houston Post* warned that tickets would soon be sold out. When Buddy told his mother about the concert, and the price of the tickets, she said they would have to ask his father.

“What’s he got to do with it?” Buddy said.

His mother gave him a look. “He’s your father.”

“So?”

“So we’ll have to ask him first.”

For almost a year his father had been away, and Buddy had impersonated the King, donning a white vest trimmed with gold brocade and colored beads, singing and gyrating his hips on the front porch for the neighbor girls, Cara and Darlene Knight. Some of the older neighbors, retirees from Hughes Tool up the street, who his mother said had earned the right to eternal silence, complained about what they called his caterwauling. Buddy wanted to remind them that the King Himself had sung on street corners in Tupelo, Mississippi, but his mother said sometimes people didn’t care to be persuaded.

His mother had made the vest for his birthday. She’d also made him

lion tamer and mad scientist and magician outfits. When Buddy was very young, and his father was still in Galveston at medical school, she had made Buddy a kind of smock he wore around the neighborhood, in imitation of St. Francis of Assisi, whose story she'd just read to him from *The Lives of the Saints*. One day, when he was using a shamrock to explain to his mother the Holy Trinity (by then he was St. Patrick), he realized that he did not believe what he was saying, and worse, that he did not believe in God. The thought had struck him mute with shame and terror, and he never revealed it.

His mother was very religious. In a window above the kitchen sink, where she often stood and watched the sunset, there was a stained-glass mobile of the Holy Family; a picture of a church that said, "Go to Him, visit with Him, pray to Him;" a small plastic adolescent Jesus which had somehow been beheaded, but which she kept, anyway.

Each weekday she picked Buddy up from school in their dusty car, wearing her white hospital uniform, smelling of laboratory chemicals; sometimes they stopped at the grocery store, or at McDonald's for his favorite, a quarter pounder with cheese. Weekends they took stacks of newspapers to Queen of Peace for the church drive, or bought barbecue after Mass. Because she was religious, his mother met most events calmly. Her favorite saying, it seemed, was that God would provide. Only when his father called did her face, usually placid, and her eyes, curious and sometimes sharp, become worried. The phone rang, and the air in the house changed, turned heavy and still.

His father had gone to Detroit to finish medical school. Soon, he would have to enter the Army to serve out his draft deferment. He had chosen to go to Detroit because it was a better residency than Galveston; but with the Army, Buddy's mother said, he had no choice. For months before he'd moved to Detroit, she and his father had talked in their room at night. Their voices sounded as if they belonged to people he didn't know. Hers was thin and pleading, his father's flat and deep, like the shutting of a door. Now it would be another year, at least, until he returned.

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The week his father left, Buddy had watched Elvis's comeback concert,

Elvis's Blue Hawaii, on TV. The Elvis there didn't look like the Elvis his father had pointed out to him in Saturday afternoon movies, who curled his lip and swung his guitar while women screamed. The new Elvis gazed distantly at the audience, his movements slow and sad, as if he did not quite know where he was. Women did not scream. Heads bowed, they approached the stage, and Elvis, kneeling, hung garlands around their necks, like a kind of priest.

And yet, Elvis was still the King. Buddy's father had said so when he called later that week and Buddy told him what he thought of the concert.

"He's a fake," Buddy said. "He's been retired too long."

"What would the King say about that?" His father's voice sank, grew woolly over the long-distance line. "Hold on." His father put his hand over the receiver. A muffled conversation ensued. "This is Evvis," his father said. "I hear you been callin' me a fake. I'm gonna sic the Memphis Mafia on you."

"You do that," Buddy said. "You aren't tough enough to do it yourself."

"Uh-huh-huh," said Elvis. "I'm comin' back."

"I don't believe you," Buddy had said.

TWICE, BUDDY HAD VISITED his father in Detroit. The first time was at Christmas, not long after he'd seen the comeback concert. On the plane, his mother gripped Buddy's hand and told him not to worry, that God would provide. He hadn't worried, until she said that. When they got to Detroit, his father cursed the snow and the traffic as they drove toward downtown, where he lived. He seemed to be in a great hurry, though why this was so, Buddy couldn't tell; he said he didn't like where he lived, that he was lonely there.

Over the next few days, his mother took pictures of Buddy standing outside his father's crumbling brownstone, and of Buddy and his father opening gifts at the kitchen table, and of his father showing Buddy stillborn babies in glass jars at the hospital lab, which was decorated with tinsel streamers. The babies made Buddy think of Jesse Garon, Elvis' stillborn twin. His father's apartment smelled of sweat and roach spray, and he'd put a sickly green electric sign in his window that said ROOMS. His father lived, Buddy imagined, in Heartbreak Hotel.

Pipes pinged and sighed as his mother and father's low voices seeped through the walls at night.

I'll wait for you, his mother said. But I can't just leave. There's the house, my job, his friends. Our whole life. If you loved me, his father said, none of that would matter. It's not that simple, his mother said. That was one goddamned nurse, his father said. That was a long time ago. I want to trust you, his mother said. But I need to be sure. This is why I left, his father said. Because you don't believe in me.

In the spring, Buddy went to Detroit by himself. Because he was a big boy, his mother said. Buddy didn't believe her, though he didn't know what else to believe. Between Christmas and then, his mother had cried each time she talked on the phone to his father. She cried when she took Buddy to the airport, too. On the plane, Buddy imagined he was a spy on a mission so secret that he did not know what it was.

In Detroit, his father did not seem exactly himself. He walked stiffly, as if pulled by invisible strings. When Buddy tested his Elvis trivia — how many movies had he made? how many gold singles? when was he drafted? — his father stumbled over his answers, though the questions were easy.

Each morning, his father cooked scrambled eggs, occasionally ordered pizza; then they set out to visit places: the Ford Motor Museum, the fairgrounds at Grosse Ile, the Indian Theater. Everything was new and slightly exotic. But on Sunday, Buddy missed bundling newspapers for the church drive, and buying barbecue after Mass, though not Mass itself. How bland and stuffy it was: Father Peron's long, droning homilies, and the crying room which he'd once thought was Purgatory, and the cream-colored walls of the church itself, which echoed like a bathroom. His father didn't go to Mass. But every once in a while, he said he needed to use the phone, and he spoke on it in a voice so quiet that Buddy couldn't understand his words.

The last day he was there, Buddy and his father visited the laboratory where Thomas Edison had invented the light bulb and phonograph, though the building itself had been moved from Deerborn. After the tour, they sat on a bench and kept their hands in the pockets of their jackets. Beyond the park stood a dark line of trees whose bare branches reminded Buddy of skeletons.

"How do you like living with your mother?" his father asked, not looking at him, his breath making scraps of steam in the gray air.

"Fine," Buddy said.

"You think you might like living here?" his father said.

Buddy stared at a yellow leaf on a path of black asphalt in front of them. Beyond it, the trees seemed to take a step closer. "I don't know," he said.

"Think about it," his father said.

"I will."

They were silent awhile.

"When I get to wherever the Army is going to send me, maybe you can live with me there," his father said, more loudly. "How'd you like that?"

"Maybe," Buddy said.

His father shook his head. "With my luck, they'll send me to some shithole, just like they did Elvis. Fort Hood, Killeen. Jesus H. Christ. He was never the same."

Buddy said nothing.

His father turned to him. His boyish face was frightened. Buddy thought of the quiet voice he used on the phone, and looked away. "Things are going to change, Buddy," his father said. "I might not live at our house when I get back. You're going to need to decide where you want to live. Understand?"

"Yes, dad," Buddy said, keeping his eyes on the leaf.

THE THURSDAY AFTER HE FOUND THE AD for the concert, Buddy stood between his mother and the phone in the kitchen, glaring at her. They were waiting for his father to call, as he did at the same time each week. Buddy had already hinted to Cara and Darlene and some boys at school that he was going to see Elvis, though he hadn't mentioned this to his mother. They should have bought tickets the day he'd seen the ad, he said; they might already be gone. His mother pointed out that, aside from the tickets' outrageous price, the concert was on a school night. If his father lived with them, he would definitely have something to say about that. But he didn't live with them, Buddy said, so why should he have anything to say about anything? "That's irrelevant," his mother said.

"I think it is," Buddy said, unsure what she meant.

The phone rang.

"Move it or lose it, Buster," his mother said, reaching for the phone

Buddy stood aside.

"Honey?" his mother said. "Is that you? Hold on a second." She cupped her hand over the receiver; her mouth was already fretful, her eyes clouded. "You can talk to daddy later," she said.

Slowly, Buddy left the kitchen and went to the corner of the hallway in the dining room where he always listened to his mother talk to his father on the phone. As usual, his mother asked how much call his father was taking, and if his apartment was warm.

"He's got some idea about an Elvis concert," his mother said. "You know I don't like that kind of music, honey, but he's just crazy to go. I think he wants to go with you. I'm not trying to play games with you. I'm not trying to turn him against you. Every day, he gets angrier and sadder and further away from God — I'm telling you about your son. I know it was my decision, but we can't do anything about that now. That won't change. I need to know what you're going to do when you come back."

Buddy went to his room. They were not going to talk about the concert at all, and the tickets would be sold out. His mother kept asking his father the same question. And almost as often, his father asked Buddy where he wanted to live when he came back from the Army. Months ago, when he'd returned from Detroit, he could have told his mother what his father had asked him, but he hadn't. He kept waiting for something to happen, though he didn't know what it would be.

The walls of his room were dingy yellow. In his closet were an Army surplus helmet and gas mask his father had sent him. On a low table near a window were ranged the bottles and vials of his laboratory. Above his bed, his mother's picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe regarded him mildly. Leaning against the opposite wall was a thin mattress, whose shiny blue material was worn at the center in a dull, stained oval.

Buddy grabbed an imaginary microphone, clutched the neck of an imaginary guitar. He shut his eyes and saw a giant dark hall of screaming fans. He waved to acknowledge their applause. "Thank-yuh, thank-

yuh," he said, curling his lip; the crowd went wild. A beat pulsed through him, like a bed sheet snapping in the wind. *You ain't nothin' but a hound-dog*, he sang, grinding his toes into the carpet, shaking his rear. He turned to the Virgin, watching her through slitted eyes. *Cryin' all the time. You know you ain't nothin' and you ain't no friend of mine.* He spun into the mattress, bounced off it, crouched in a karate stance. *You said you were high-class, well that was just a lie. You know you ain't nothin' and you ain't no friend of mine.* He lunged at the mattress, whacked it with the edge of his hand. He beat it until his hand stung, until his mother called him to the phone.

UNTIL BUDDY TALKED TO HIS FATHER, his mother wouldn't buy the tickets, though his father had said she could. By then, it was two Saturdays before the concert. His mother had told Buddy he'd hurt his father's feelings by not coming to the phone that Thursday. Buddy wasn't sure he wanted to see Elvis anymore; he thought of the slow, sad Elvis he'd seen in the comeback concert, and some of the boys at school had called Elvis a fat hick. Even if he didn't want to see Elvis, his mother said, he owed his father an apology.

"We're still a family," she said. "We have to act like one."

She tried phoning his father that afternoon, then again later that night, then several times on Sunday. "I'm sorry to bother you, honey," she said, when she finally reached him. "Did they keep you on call?"

His father's voice crackled through the receiver, loud enough for Buddy to hear, though not to understand what he said. His mother flinched. "Buddy has something he wants to say to you," she said.

She held out the receiver, then went to the kitchen sink. She stood, looking out the window where the Holy Family and the broken Jesus and the picture of the church were, her lips silently moving. On the phone, his father's voice was flat and harsh.

"What's on your mind?" he said.

"I'm sorry," Buddy said.

"What are you sorry for?"

"I'm sorry I didn't talk to you."

His father made a dismissive noise. "You still want to see Elvis?"

"I think so."

"Tell your mother to get the tickets. Tell her I'll pay for them."

"Thank you," Buddy said.

"Have you thought any more about what we talked about?"

Buddy twisted the phone cord around his index finger and turned his back on his mother. "No," he said.

"You need to think about it. Is your mother listening?"

"I think so."

"Tell her to leave. Tell her I want to talk to you alone."

"I can't."

"Why not?" his father said. "I'm getting tired of this bullshit."

"I'm sorry, dad," Buddy said. "Thank you for the tickets. I need to go."

When he hung up, his mother's lips were still moving. She stared out the window, her eyes narrowed, as if watching something approach.

B UDDY AND HIS MOTHER hurried across the dim parking lot to Hofheinz Pavilion. Buddy wore his white vest. Cara and Darlene had told him to try and remember every song, so he could do the concert for them afterward; even the boys at school had seemed impressed that he was going out on a school night. When they'd gone to the box office two weeks ago, his mother had stopped and crouched in front of Buddy, searching his face. She asked if he was sure he wanted to do this. He was sure, he'd said. And then he'd felt something cold and terrible, like when he'd known he didn't believe in God, like the shutting of a final door. The last two Thursdays, his father had called, and his mother asked the same question she always did, but to Buddy it didn't seem like she expected an answer. His father hadn't asked Buddy if he'd thought about what he wanted to do, but Buddy knew he would again, soon.

At the Hofheinz Pavilion, men in fluorescent orange vests told them to hurry; it was almost time for the show. His mother had warned Buddy that he would make a spectacle out of himself in his vest, but she was wrong. The glass-walled rotunda outside the auditorium swarmed with

people, many of whom looked old enough to be their retired neighbors, and many of them dressed like Elvis, too. There were early Elvises in pink silk shirts, checkered coats, and blue suede shoes, late Elvises in white jumpsuits and mirrored sunglasses; one late Elvis gave Buddy the secret TCB hand signal, and Buddy wondered if he'd just seen The King incognito. Booths sold Elvis T-shirts, hats, silk jackets, lamps, lunch boxes, velvet wall hangings, coffee mugs, commemorative plaques, alarm clocks and wall clocks, records, and even life-sized inflatable replicas of The King. A painting of a weeping Elvis made Buddy stop; it reminded him of a picture his mother had of Jesus, and of something else he couldn't name. "Come on," his mother said, tugging his arm.

They found their seats at the lip of the auditorium, which smelled of popcorn and tennis shoes from the basketball games that were usually played there. Beneath them, tiny people milled, their voices echoing, almost like at church. At one end of the arena, facing the floor seats, was a giant black curtain. Buddy's mother took a crochet hook out of her purse and began to work on a scarf for his father. After she had picked Buddy up from school, she'd dropped him off at home, then had to go back to the hospital to finish work; then she'd changed her clothes and taken a shower and they'd had just enough time to go to McDonald's before the show.

Buddy sat on the edge of his seat and peered down into the crowd. "We're too far away," he said. "We won't see anything."

"We can see just fine," his mother said, squinting as she pearlyed.

"I bet all those people down there didn't have to ask anybody if they could go. I bet they didn't have to waste a bunch of time waiting to talk to somebody."

"You should be grateful we're here at all."

A giddy ache tickled his throat. "I bet all those people down there don't have to say they're grateful. I bet they don't kowtow to some big fake."

His mother lay the scarf in her lap and stared him straight in the eye. "If you're not satisfied, then we can leave. I mean it. I've had about enough of you."

He turned from her, and looked down at the people. "I don't see why we have to do what he says."

"If you don't want to go home right now, you'll stop pushing me. He is

your father, and we can't just run away from him."

"What if he doesn't come back?" Buddy said.

His mother stiffened. "I don't want to discuss it. We can go home, and then you can tell daddy what you've done with his tickets."

He couldn't resist; it was like touching a cut. "Maybe he won't come back. Maybe I should just go live with him."

His mother studied him, opened her mouth, turned away.

The lights fell and a gentle roar arose from the audience. His mother, next to him, was lost in darkness, and for a moment he was afraid she'd disappear. A band started to play fast music, then a spotlight illuminated a man in a loud checkered coat. The man did not look anything like Elvis; Buddy felt cheated, afraid they'd gone to the wrong place. The man started to tell jokes that Buddy didn't understand, but which by his mother's stiff mouth, silvered in the reflected light, he judged to be dirty. When he was finished, a line of men in blue suits swiveled to jumpy music. By then, Buddy was tired, and the whole thing seemed like a mistake. He wanted to tell his mother that he'd been kidding, that he would never leave, but he didn't know if that was true.

The curtains closed, and there was a hushed, whispering silence. Kettle-drums pounded and trumpets blared and the crowd let out a gasp, as if they had all held their breath until that moment. Then the curtains parted, and Elvis — it was unmistakably clear that he was The King — prowled the stage, a tiny figure in a shining white jumpsuit with flared bell-bottoms and a red cape. *I'm just a hunk-a, hunk-a burnin' love*, he sang. The crowd went wild. Elvis fell to his knees, swept out his arm to command the orchestra, held his microphone with the tips of his jeweled fingers; he bowed deeply, panting.

Most of the songs were unknown to Buddy, and the ones he did know had turned into something slower and older, like furniture in his great aunt's living room. He rested his head against his mother's arm and thought of Elvis's stillborn brother, Jesse Garon, and wished he had a ghostly twin whom he could send to live with his father. Maybe his twin was already there. Maybe his father was listening, as Vernon, Elvis's father, had to Elvis's first performance on the radio. His father's question returned, unanswered, and he remembered what his father had said to him about Elvis after he'd left the Army — that he'd never been the same.

Something caught in his chest. He knew he could not leave his fragile life with his mother. And yet he also knew that everything would change in ways he could not imagine.

Deep blue light bathed the stage. Yellow flames speckled the darkness, and an organ moaned. The crowd whispered expectantly; even his mother leaned forward in her seat. Elvis knelt, his cape outspread like the wings of a giant bird. In the vast hall, his voice echoed: *Amazing Grace*. A line of women stood before the stage. Even from far away, Buddy could see their upturned, supplicant faces. From around his own neck, Elvis drew white scarves, then placed them around the necks of the women.

Buddy stood and tugged at his mother's hand, trying to pull her from her seat; she shushed him, told him to sit down. He ignored her. It was too important to stop, too important to explain. He kept pulling at his mother's immovable weight.