

HEARTBREAK HOTEL

One day at the end of August, I was lying on the back seat of my mom's car with my eyes closed, listening to the radio as we cruised home to Duluth. It was an ordinary, lazy afternoon until the song was interrupted.

"This is an important news bulletin," said a tense male voice, filling the airwaves. It hesitated as if struggling, then: "The King is dead. Elvis Presley died today at his home in Memphis, Tennessee. Mr. Presley was found unconscious in the bedroom of his home wearing light blue pajamas..."

I immediately sat up. Elvis, my first ever pop-star crush, was dead? Unlike my father who'd seen the King at his best, I had willingly overlooked Elvis's imperfections (mainly, cramming himself into a white vinyl pantsuit) in favor of girlish admiration. To me, Elvis was incredibly handsome, a musical god, and someone Bigger Than Life. The fact that he could just....*die* left me confused. As my mother continued driving, I sat perfectly still, alarmed by how God could let someone so famous hightail it towards the Pearly Gates.

I looked out the window at the trees speeding past, toying with the uncomfortable truth. I was nine, so I already knew death was real and inevitable, and it didn't just happen to grandparents and goldfish. But I also knew that if death ever tried to find me, I would outsmart it. I sat there considering my situation. If Elvis could die....that meant *everyone did* and I struggled, realizing this included me. My mind raced: I wasn't invincible, even though I excelled at the monkey bars. Like Elvis's, my days were numbered.

On the back seat spotted in sunlight, I tried to imagine what death was like and that's when fear entered my head and rattled around it like a broken lunchbox. In my mind's eye, death was like being locked in a dark closet. Forever. This thought already made my stomach heavy. I got as far as, "There's no more me! There's no more me!" before getting angry. Death was just too final for my liking.

"Mom," I asked from the back seat, pushing up against the slippery velour. "Can't death be avoided? Elvis is rich and famous, "I said. I couldn't bear saying *was*, it was too soon. "Couldn't he just pay someone off?"

"It doesn't work like that, honey. It was his time *to go*—everyone has his *time*," she said, slightly lost in thought. Mom was often vague about the messy things in life, preferring to tackle them sideways.

"But what's the point of living if you just *die!*" I said, mad, anticipating all the future losses life would serve me, and the unfairness of the whole game. What about all the fairy tales I'd read where characters constantly cheated death? Sleeping Beauty might have slept too long, but she was always awoken with a kiss.

"Death is a part of life, sweetheart, and it comes in many forms. You can't avoid it," she said as we pulled into the driveway, where our conversation stopped.

That night, my dad played his Elvis albums one after the other, taking them from his record collection stacked in the corner of the living room. Most of the albums were older than I was so he never let me touch them, afraid I might damage one. Dad put on the Blue Hawaii album and we listened to it together as Elvis's silky voice broke through the humid silence. If my father was sad, he didn't say anything.

Elvis died before the autumn leaves changed color, falling off the trees to signal winter. Within weeks of his death, I started school at a new school. My parents had separated for a year but decided to give their marriage one last try. Living with both under the same roof, I felt hopeful. Life was normal again.

Like Elvis, my dad was a handsome country boy, a poor boy who chased the American Dream by becoming a salesman, constantly exploring whatever lay beyond the horizon. Dad either laughed a lot or grew easily irritated, it really depended on the day. He mostly yelled when my brother and I started chasing mosquitos in the hallway, our claps interrupting the nightly news. I didn't think Elvis would ever get irritated, though, because he was always breaking into song, showing those beautiful teeth of his.

I loved our new house. It was large and inviting because the family that lived there had also loved it, and their warm energy ran reassuringly through its rooms. The house sat on a hill that commanded a view across the lake, a small bay full of bushy trees lining the shore. But the best thing about it was it was all ours.

When we moved in that summer, my brother and I spent almost every waking moment at the lake, where we'd swim as our parents lay nearby on a lawn chair, reading. Sometimes Mom would stroke Dad's forearms. Dad wasn't physically affectionate like Mom, whose hands curled around our limbs whenever we were in range. He seemed to like it, but he never responded that much.

After school, I spent most afternoons in my bedroom, staring at my wall full of posters of horses, leafy fall landscapes and Elvis, when he was young and astonishingly beautiful. I would look at his full, soft lips curled into a snarl; a gesture that made me ache for something I had no words for yet. As I looked at his image, I wondered if the King was still dead. There were pictures of him everywhere, endless black and white television tributes of him throwing girls into hysterics, and song after song on the radio. The longer Elvis was dead, the more it felt like he was still alive. "Heartbreak Hotel," played thousands of times, and the more I listened to it, the more I wondered what the words really meant.

"You make me so lonely, baby, I get so lonely I could die," Elvis crooned into the airwaves. Maybe he'd really meant it.

Elvis wasn't the only thing I loved. I also loved learning big words to pass the time. Anything was better than playing with my neighbors, who were also at my school. Their last name was White, but they all black hair and lived in dark house full of black, foreboding furniture that creeped me out, so I lied, saying I had to do homework. Most days, I sat glued to a dictionary eager to learn new, complicated words because I sensed I would grow into them one day and use them to my advantage. I also spent hours flipping through my mother's magazines around the house, making lists of words to memorize. I wanted Dad to test me, but he preferred things like numbers. Still, I tried to wear him down until one day he yelled, "Stop it. Enough now! I have to run some errands." He laid the list back on my bed and left the house.

One day after school I was down by the lake, lying on my stomach swirling a stick in the water to attract fish. Nothing was happening. As I was daydreaming, I noticed my father's watery reflection next to mine.

"Hi Dad," I said without looking up.

"Sweetheart, you're not going to catch anything with that. If you want, I can get you a fishing pole."

"I don't want to catch anything. I just like looking at the water, thinking about stuff," I said, staring at the patterns along the surface.

"Like what?" he asked.

I hesitated, wondering if he would think I was stupid. I was considering how fish stayed under water all the time, who "*Anonymous*" was because he kept creeping into my reading at school (though I was pretty sure he was Greek) and why the moon sometimes appeared fat and orange over the horizon.

So instead I said, "Lots of things. Like what do I need to learn long division for?"

My father told me that math was good for managing time and money, for solving problems and making decisions, and as he continued, I stopped listening, more interested in looking at the lake and all the slippery things living down there. He kept talking, ending by saying something about how sales was all about calculating numbers and then he was silent.

“What does any of this have to do with me?!” I whined because I still had no idea how to finish my homework. He laughed and offered to help. Just as I was answering, the telephone rang off in the distance.

“Hey, I’ll get that,” he said, rushing inside. He didn’t return so I eventually went inside, where I found my brother watching TV. “Dad’s doing some errands,” he told me, eyes glued to the screen. I joined him.

My parents started staying in their room, trying to hide conversations that rapidly turned worse. One night, Dad came home late. He was supposed to be looking after us but instead dropped us off home with a bag full of McDonalds. My mother returned from work to find us alone again.

“Where were you? You were supposed to be looking after them!” My mother’s temper flared immediately as my father walked in. She slammed a heavy gallon of milk down on the dinner table where we were eating. “What if something happened to them?” she said, and her eyes narrowed.

“Listen, I just had to run an errand and it took longer than I expected,” he said, walking away towards their bedroom. My mother followed, slamming the door behind them. I stared as the milk spread into a wide, uneven patch on the table. It looked just like the bay behind our house.

“Where were you?” I could hear my mother’s muffled voice rise sharply like an alarm clock.

My brother looked at me silently and pushed his plate away. We both wiggled out of our chairs and headed to the television.

Many days after school when I got off at the bus near our house, I’d walk across the street to the small graveyard there. It was an oddly steep hill filled with family graves, and I was hoping to catch Elvis there among the tombstones. There had already been several Elvis sightings across the country, tales that the King was not dead but just the opposite, alive and well. Elvis had been spotted in a supermarket checkout line. He was seen cursing while riding a tractor in Wyoming. Someone witnessed him dealing at a Memphis casino, and he’d even been spotted hitchhiking his way across the Missouri state line. He had to be alive because why would adults make this stuff up? I figured if he was pretending to be dead, he would probably turn up in a graveyard, so as I walked through the gravestones, I practiced what I would say to the King when he finally materialized.

And then one day, when the sky was dull and gray, he did.

“Elvis, is that you? You never had a moustache before!” I ran up to him, excited. He looked like a garage mechanic, with black grease stuck under his fingernails. He quickly put a soiled finger to lips, motioning for me to crouch down.

“Yes, ma’am, it is, but I’m wearing a disguise. Traveling *incognito*,” he said, and I smiled back proudly because I knew exactly what *incognito* meant.

“Why did you run away? I ran away once for a few hours, but my mom didn’t even notice!”

“Well, I don’t see it as running away; it’s more like trying something new. It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a while,” he said.

“Don’t you miss everyone who loves you, like Lisa Marie or your fans? They all think you’re dead!” I said, and the words just kept spilling out of my mouth because I couldn’t believe I was talking to the King.

“Of course, I miss them, yes Ma’am, but it’s just better this way,” he said, looking off into the distance and going quiet. He asked me to keep our conversation a secret and as I nodded yes, he got ready to leave.

“Please don’t go! Please stay longer!” I cried. A wave of sadness hit me, and my lower lip trembled. I gripped at his mechanic’s uniform, which smelled of a mixture of autumn air, engine oil and polyester. All the hours I had spent staring at posters of him, day dreaming about the songs he’d sing me, made me sob even harder. “You can’t leave! You... you just got here!”

“I can’t stay, baby, I just can’t,” he whispered, standing up and straightening his legs.

I wiped my tears on my sleeves, trying to be a big girl because I knew I shouldn’t cry every time things upset me. “Wait, before you go, tell me why do you always sing ‘baby’ in your songs? Babies cry and have diapers and besides, I can’t wait to grow up!”

Elvis laughed and as he did, his lips widened into a glorious smile.

“You’ll understand one day, sweetheart,” he said, warmly tousling my hair with his fingers. “And once you do, all the songs in the world will make sense.”

One afternoon at home, the phone rang. My brother picked it up from its cradle and after listening for a few seconds, handed it to our mother. I was on the floor spread out in front of the television on our thick carpet, flipping through my homework.

“Hi, this is Mrs. L, can I help you?”

“Hello?” Mom repeated into the receiver, raising her voice and repeating it. “Hello?”

She paused. Then, after several seconds, she said, “What? How do you know him exactly?”

The tone she used was the one for when I was in trouble and I looked up, confused. But she wasn’t looking at me. She stretched the telephone phone cord to its full length, walking with it into the next room, and shut the door behind her. Ten minutes later she came out. She looked at us blankly then went upstairs to make dinner.

At dinner, she was oddly silent. When Dad half way through, she served him but the air between them was unpleasant. My father ate quickly as if to ignore the fog descending on him, but it remained there and grew larger, thickening above us like a storm cloud. I didn’t dare look up from my plate.

Three months after Elvis died, my parents invited my brother and me into their bedroom one day after school.

“We can’t make our marriage work, as much as we’d like to for you,” my mother said lovingly, trying to stay calm. But her beautiful eyes were red and full of tears. My brother and I were sitting at the foot of their bed, staring silently out the window at the greenish lake below, whose cold waters had just begun to freeze. It was happening all over again.

“I’m sorry, kids. But your Mom and I are getting a divorce,” my father added dispassionately. As he looked up, a flash of emotion darted across his eyes. I couldn’t understand what it was.

As I sat there, I thought about how my parent’s relationship was just like the Minnesota landscape. The running joke in Minnesota is that we only had two seasons: winter and construction, because the weather changed so quickly. In the spring, you could wear a T-shirt one day only for it to snow the next and this was like my parents, whose emotions seemed to freeze or thaw, depending on the season. The phone call, my mother would tell me when I was old enough to understand, had triggered an eternal frost.

“Kids, your dad’s going to stay here, and we’re moving downtown again, on Monday,” she told us.

I grabbed my father as big sloppy tears ran down my cheeks. He held onto me tightly and I could feel the struggle within him, the one that never found a voice. As I sobbed against his shirt, leaving a small goeey stain there, he said, “I love you, sweetheart,” grazing the top of my head with a kiss.

Whenever he said, “I love you,” it sounded hurried, like he was uncomfortable with the weight of the words in his mouth. For a second, I recognized the little boy in him, and I understood because I wanted to be loved, too. But I couldn’t move or speak. I couldn’t return his words. I belonged to both of my parents only they never belonged together, so where did I fit in the world? The world was such a very big place.

I couldn’t speak because the life we were supposed to have was rapidly slipping away. We had to leave our house and the life within its walls I imagined we would share together. The life with my father. The life of a family, growing together.

I couldn’t move and I couldn’t speak, all I could do was stare at my fingers. Because I felt so lonely, I could die.