

THE BRIDE OF ELVIS

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Finding the tomb of Elvis empty was a big shock for Darlene.

She usually rose just before dawn, the nicest time of day here at Graceland, when it was all misty and as pretty as the Day of Instantaneous Redemption was going to be.

But this particular Sunday, the hot sun coming in the nine-foot-high window hit Darlene square in the face as she lay dreaming of *mana*, white and lovely. She stirred, blinked, and then slipped back into the dream, where she was a child again, eating as much *mana* as she could stuff down, while the others laughed at her greed and urged her on.

She rolled over and luxuriated atop the warmth of her round, leather-rimmed waterbed, resting her ear against the black satin sheet to hear the soothing slosh within.

Then she opened her eyes.

The readout on her alarm was blinking. Power must have gone out. Either that or she had messed it up again. Shoot. It was probably after eight, and Lu Ellen would have gone off-shift at seven.

So?

It was Sunday. Darlene went limp again. A slow day. Graceland wouldn't open until 9:30. She had plenty of time to check Elvis' readouts, and she had given Ella Mae in the Gift Shop a stockpile of hair snippings and skin scrapings, all ready in their little plastic twist-boxes (Ella Mae couldn't accuse her of being lazy *this* time and leaving all the work for someone else), so she wouldn't have to fool with *that* this morning.

But after five more minutes of sloth, she heaved herself out of bed, put on her plastic cap and showered, then sat down at her white French Provincial dressing table.

She pulled big rollers out of her long, honey-colored hair and put on foundation, cool and smooth against her skin, powder, and red lipstick. She touched on the comp-sphere, and the Hearings began to play.

The King, the King

Will rise again

Through air of gold and fire.

Her favorite. She hummed along with the ethereal voices of the Elvis Choir, then it got into the Prophecies, about the ship coming back with plenteous *mana* for all.

As Darlene listened, she put on her eye makeup, which she especially loved. Mermaid Green eyeshadow, with little sparkles in it, right after the black eyeliner. She shopped at the Rex-Mart down on Magnolia. That was the only place she could find Mermaid Green.

Fake eyelashes and lots of thick, black mascara. There. When the daily Prophecy was over, she turned on the radio and looked in the closet.

"Love me tender, love me true, never let me go," The King sang via KYNG, right across the river.

You bet, honey. Oh, you bet.

As she buttoned her lace blouse, a public service message urged the latest solution to help everyone stay prepared for the Great Return in case it took much longer, head-freezing. For the ones who didn't want to put up with any more bull while they waited. Elizabeth Taylor was going to do it, apparently, and some other humans, like Timothy Leary and Michael Jackson.

Darlene laughed out loud when she heard that, but it was really kind of sad. There was always that seepage between them and humans, but head-freezing wouldn't *work* for humans, of course. Tiny, but crucial, things about their physiology were entirely different; they couldn't regenerate. Not to mention that their technology was so primitive.

She gave her curls a final, swift brush and fastened back one side of her hair with a rhinestone barrette that spelled out ELVIS.

She felt a bit haughty as she left her room in the Bride's Hall. If you didn't have the Lineage, you had nothing. And she had it. In spades. It was one reason she was a Bride.

In the kitchen, which was empty, she fixed herself some instant coffee, all she liked in the morning unless she was a tad hungry, and then she had ten or eleven microwave sausage biscuits. The four other Brides were still asleep, of course, but there were usually some snotty Techs running around in their slick gray suits and belts jammed with all kinds of what-not and gadgets. They thought they were so great. They didn't realize that without the Brides, the race just couldn't continue. Rita in particular was a jerk. She always got on Darlene's nerves, stepping aside and bowing when she went by, saying, "Make way, everyone, wow, it's a *Bride*."

Darlene lit her first Marlboro of the day and opened the cooler door to get a fresh sheaf of gladiola to put in the vases around Elvis' pedestal. The thick, dark green stalks were cool in her hand. She slipped her feet into the white satin heels she'd carried with her, opened the back door, and walked down the path to the Tomb.

The small pavilion that held Elvis was in the Meditation Garden. She reflected, as usual, as she passed the perfectly manicured trees that lined the path, on how fortunate she was to be a Bride. That, along with the Hearings, always got her in the proper frame of mind for putting up with all the fat, sweating mutants (and some thin, pretty ones too, now, Darlene, don't be evil) for the next eight hours.

It was always comforting to see Him there, all ready for the coming Redemption. He'd been put in a plexiglass pyramid showcase years ago, once they realized that the Redemption might take longer than they thought. That was the best way, the Committee had decided, to keep control of everything. A bunch of rabble-rousers who called themselves the Band of the King were always demanding more access, but they were just ineffective young upstarts for the most part, jealous because the Lineage of many of the members was human-tinged, though they weren't full-blown mutants. Ugly folks, ugly in the way they acted. Darlene shivered.

Calmed by the spring flowers that flanked the pavilion, Darlene saw that the sky was becoming overcast. The sun was hidden now, and the air smelled like rain. She climbed the five low marble steps up to the stone door, which was inscribed with angels and guitars. She raised her wrist to scan the door open, stopped. Her arm hung in the air.

The door was already open, just an inch. Her breath stuck in her throat: she stood on the threshold as fear flooded through her. The lights weren't working; she fumbled around on the wall next to the door and got the backup panel open, found the light button and flicked it with her long fingernail.

The plexiglass lid was propped open. Someone, *someone* with access... Darlene began to shake. The fat old guy just *wasn't there*. Lead wires dangled over the guitar-embossed pedestal.

Her cigarette fell from her fingers and smoldered on the pink shag rug. Maybe, she told Koell later, when she had to explain, she felt that it was her fault and that all their plans and dreams were ruined, blasted by the indigenous idiots on this backward planet they had to live on. Mingled in the back of her mind were the threats of the Band of the King. They kept saying they had to take matters into their own hands if anyone ever wanted to see the ship again -- that is, they said, if such a ship even existed. Some of them, backsliders, were idiots enough to doubt.

Struck by waves of anxiety, she didn't stop to think that security was the Tech's job, or about *anything*, except that the other Brides would have *her* head as soon as they saw this, and if they froze it, they'd do it in a way so that she couldn't regenerate.

All her fear soul rose up through her throat, white-hot, as pure as a Gospel wail. "He's gone. He's *gone!*"

She ran right out through the Music Gate, using her wrist scanner to open it without thinking twice. Didn't care who was looking. Panicked. She ran right out onto Elvis Presley Boulevard, screaming her fool head off. And met Roy.

He pulled up in front of her at the stoplight in a battered white F-100 Ford pickup with double back wheels and a custom extra-long bed. She was breathing hard and letting out a little sob at the end of each breath and knew, in the back of her mind, that she was quite a sight in her silver miniskirt, lacy blouse, and white satin heels, still holding the glads in her left hand.

She stared right through the window at the kind-faced man, who was handsome too, let's not mince words here, with keen blue eyes, black hair, and a short, black beard. His wide shoulders were hunched over the wheel, and his long lanky arms stopped while reaching up for the column shift as he stared right back at her. He leaned over and opened the door. "Get in, little lady, get right on in here."

Darlene didn't think twice. She got right in there and started bawling hard. He reached across her and then had to slide right next to her to reach the door and close it since she was holding on tight to that bouquet with both hands now, worried about Mars, her talking cat, not having had any breakfast at all, not any, then remembering that the bag of pellets was open behind the kitchen door.

The light changed, and he ground the gears, apparently not concerned about his transmission, and whatever he had in the back of the truck crashed against the tailgate.

"Jason took my tie-down, the little creep. Wait till I get my hands on him, I'll warm his fanny good. His mom lets him do whatever he wants. I'm just the mean daddy." He sighed, and his eyes, when he looked at Darlene, were sad and lost. "He stays mostly with her anyway."

Darlene was still crying some, just little snorts and a few tears. He leaned down and fished under the seat and came up with an old wrecked box of Kleenex. He pulled one out and handed it to her. "Here," he said. "Blow hard."

She put the flowers up on the dash and blew hard, not feeling at all embarrassed.

"Now, I want you to tell me what this here is all about," he said. "Have a fight with your boyfriend?"

"No," she gasped, so upset that she didn't even think twice about what to say. "It's Elvis. He's gone!" And she started to cry again, even harder. They'd waited for so long, and now that He was gone, no one would ever return, and they would never get home again. The ship wouldn't have any reason to come back for them. Stuck on this Kingforsaken planet through all millennia. And no more kiddies either! They couldn't have kiddies without Him! Those little twist-boxes of hair clippings would be used up real fast. She started to cry again. It was too awful. Darlene had never felt so rattled in all her born days, not even when she had had to leave her kiddies behind to take up her duties as a Bride.

"Oh," he said. "I see." But she could tell by the set of his jaw and the crinkle beneath his eye that he didn't see, not at all, and she was enraged that she'd told all this to a stranger, a *human*, who would only laugh at her.

But he didn't. He just drove through the empty downtown Memphis blocks, past the Peabody, through the ramshackle part of town with its run-down blues dives, until they got to the river.

"Maybe it would calm you down some to go for a little ride. Sometimes that's the best thing to do, it's real soothing, you know, especially after we get out into the country. I live over in Arkansas. It's right pretty over there, and the apple blossoms are all out. Well, you might not want to go anywhere with me--" he looked at her and she stared back --

"I might as well tell you I got real drunk last night and pretty much passed out here in the front seat. But there's no reason to hold that against me. Sometimes a person has to have a drink or two."

She didn't say anything while they crossed the gray Mississippi beneath the darkening sky, thinking furiously. What the hell was going on? Why was He gone? Why hadn't the security system worked? Because of the power failure, probably, the one that put her alarm clock on the blink. That Tech Rita, strutting around in her militaristic gear. She'd like it if Darlene was blamed, wouldn't she? Wouldn't be too hard to keep her from waking up on time. Maybe she was in cahoots with the Band of the King.

Yeah, sure. But what about the backup system?

She'd almost forgotten where she was when he said, "Well, really, I could use some breakfast, couldn't you? You sure look like you could."

He pulled into a little place that advertised "Home Cooking" and helped her jump down from the seat. The truck cab was pretty high off the ground, not like her low, sleek, red 'Vette with the plate that read *Bride 1*.

She followed him inside, drained and tired. Well, of course she was ravenous. It was their one weakness -- they needed to eat, and a lot; they needed these substances produced by Earth to survive. Not as good as *mana*, not nearly as powerful or longevity-producing, but they could get by if they got enough. That's why they hit the grocery stores so often. Two, three times a day, full carts each time. Too many of them to feed on the ship after the drive went bad, not enough energy to run the ship and make *mana* too. A skeleton crew had gone on. They'd be back. Someday. Or maybe never, now, because of her. Because of her failure.

They had discovered that they couldn't all live together here, though -- they simply ate too much. At least four times as much as humans, so they spread out over a couple of states so as not to attract notice.

They kept in touch at the grocery stores, of course. Those aisles were their domain, the sound of rattling grocery carts as familiar as breathing, the memorized foodgrids of a dozen big grocery chains each one knew like the back of her hand. A lot of them doubted whether the fleet would come back for them, but Darlene had never wavered in her faith. Until today.

She'd never trusted the Techs, with all their fancy gear and snotty ways. She once even requested a few pit bulls to stand guard. That point in her favor was on the record. A pretty slim defense, now that the worst had happened. "You have no *idea*," she had told the Committee, her days full of sobbing women flinging themselves against the velvet rope, smearing lipstick on the pyramid. But they weren't the real problem. Earth was such an odd place, full of criminals and just pure *weirdness*, you never knew what might happen, and now the worst, the absolute worst had happened. There were plenty of people who'd like to get hold of Elvis. But without Techs, he wouldn't last long.

She slid into the booth still trying to figure things out. She stared out the window while the black-haired man ordered coffee and hash browns and ham and biscuits and gravy and cheese omelets and grits for both of them just as if he knew, although she could see at a glance that he couldn't and that he was just a normal old human. But a good one, she saw that too. She wouldn't have even gotten into his truck if she hadn't been able to see that, but she didn't even have to think about those sorts of things because humans were really such simple beings. She kind of liked them, they made things so homey. They knew how to live -- except that they scarcely lived longer than an insect. Hardly a tragedy, as far as she was concerned.

Still, sometimes she got tired of being a Bride and wanted to just be a human, instead of taking care of Elvis and longing for her kiddies. She'd had two before she was eleven, the process triggered by the sweat on the scarf she'd grabbed at her first concert.

Elvis had thrown it right at her. God, how lucky she'd been! Chosen! If the ship ever did come back, she was first in line for Elvis. She'd been activated at just the right age; she was one of the few who could actually mate with Elvis and conceive another King.

But it wasn't all fun. She'd had to leave those cute kiddies with her mother in order to be a Bride. That was hard. Being a Bride wasn't all it was cut out to be -- checking all those meters and charts every day, letting them know if something was just a hair off so's the Techs could rush over and make a big deal out of it and blame it on the Bride in charge. Techs didn't think much of Brides, that was for sure. And now He was gone, and it was all her fault!

Or if it wasn't, best to hide out till they figured out whose fault it really was. She shivered to think how mean the other Brides would be when they found the King gone. It was pretty much like murder, or maybe killing somebody with a runaway car, because they wouldn't live much longer without him. Maybe not even a full human lifespan, puny as that was. Shit.

The man was watching her. He smiled. "You know, I'm not making fun of you or anything, but you sure look silly with all that stuff running down your face. Whenever we cried, Ma used to make us look in the mirror and see how funny we looked. 'See that monkey?' she'd say, and by God if that wouldn't make you laugh out loud to see your own red little face all screwed up--"

Shut up, she felt like saying, What do you know? but instead slid out of the seat.

"Wait," he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean--"

She let the door of the ladies' room whoosh shut behind her and leaned with straight elbows on the white, scummy sink.

He was right. She *did* look funny. Like a clown that had been caught out in the rain. Green stuff dribbled from the corner of one eye down onto her cheek, and there was a big black smear across her nose. And as for her mouth...

She leaned over and splashed her face with water. It took soap to get it all off, and then her face felt stiff and dry without her Rose-Soft Moisturizer, and she didn't even have her emergency touch-up kit because she didn't have her purse with her. Her purse held not only her make-up but her bracelet, the bracelet that shielded them from the human

pheromones which the males gave off when they had sex, pheromones powerful enough to trigger conception. The conception of mutants, that is. "Never go out without your bracelet," she could almost hear her mother warning. She never had. She'd never done *anything* like she'd done today.

She lifted her chin. The hell with them. She'd done her best. It *wasn't* her fault that He was gone, even though they'd blame it on her. Who cared? They'd be looking for her, but they'd never find her. She'd bury herself in this Kingforsaken country and she wouldn't go back, that's all. She just wouldn't. Not till she was good and ready. Maybe never.

She went back out and the plate of steaming food was there.

She slid into the booth. The ham was good and salty, real country stuff: she wondered where they got it. The omelet was plasticky but not bad, and the biscuits dripped with gravy full of cracklins. She shoved food in her mouth just about as fast as she could get it on the fork, elbows wide on the formica table, not caring if he stared at her, and he did.

"I never seen a lady eat so fast -- now wait, sorry, I just seem to say the wrong thing, but it's true."

He offered her one of his Marlboros as they talked over coffee.

"So what was that you were saying now?" he asked. "Elvis is gone? Something about you being a bride?"

"Yeah, well, a Bride is just a caretaker, that's what we call ourselves, see? The estate hired us to take care of the shrine there, that's all. You know how many people come visit that?" Millions, and there was a damned good reason too.

"Even my ma has been," he said.

"What's your name?"

"Elroy. Elroy Juster. I live over in Sudden. That's a little town not too far away." He rose up out of the booth a little and reached over and lit her second cigarette.

His face was close to hers for a moment. She liked the way he smelled. His eyes were blue.

Intensely blue.

As she looked into them, she saw that he was very kind, with a degree of kindness she'd rarely sensed before. She never had spent much time with humans. She'd better get used to them now.

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Juster?"

"Call me Roy," he said, and frowned a little, and she liked the fleeting crease between his eyes. Some of these humans could be mighty attractive, and he was one of them for sure. Too bad, she thought, she'd left her purse behind. She wondered how he looked naked, how that long, lean body would feel next to hers, what those nice, big hands would do -- oh hell, Darlene. You know that's dumb. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Get some nose plugs or something. You don't want to tie yourself down with mutants.

"Just any little thing I can. My daddy raised tobacco, but it killed him. I mean, he smoked too damn much. Ma's mighty sick now from something or other. Pulmonary something or other, the doctor said. She'd like you, I know; she likes a girl that knows how to eat. She could cook up a meal in her day, and that's for sure." Well, that sounded attractive to Darlene. She was getting hungry again already.

But she felt sad, for a minute, listening to all that. There just wasn't any rest anywhere in the universe, that was all there was to it. You would think that these simple creatures would be able to have a nice life, but no, sireebob, they had their troubles too, just as bad troubles as if you had to keep the King ready for the Redemption. Thinking of the King reminded her that they'd have to go clear to another galaxy to get another King, and really, it was too late for that... she rested her forehead in her hands. They were shaking.

Roy reached over, pried one of her hands loose, squeezed it, held it until it stopped shaking, then let go. "I hope you don't mind, I mean it won't affect my driving none or anything," he said, "but I have this horrible headache and it might help if I had a beer..."

"No, that's OK. I'll have one too."

"Can't serve it before noon on Sunday," said the waitress.

Roy got out two dollars. "Only twenty minutes. This change the little hand on the clock any?" he asked.

"You're gonna make us lose our license," she said, but brought them both draft Buds.

The beer tasted good and tingly to Darlene. She didn't drink much but sometimes she really tied one on. It was starting to rain outside and everything was dark and cozy inside. It wouldn't be a bad day for that sort of thing, she thought. Sometimes it was all you could do, to keep from thinking about things.

"You know, I always wondered what this Elvis attraction was," he said. "Now don't get all huffy, I don't mean to hurt your feelings or nothing, but really, what do all these people see in Elvis?"

"Well, he's the King," she said, well into her third beer, which had just about completely obliterated her concern about what the other Brides might do to her. She felt kind of whoozy.

"So what?" he said. "He sang a few songs, he got fat, he died."

"Those weren't just any old songs," she flared. "Those were--" then she stopped. She'd said too much already, way too much.

"You know, you sure are a funny lady," he said. "They must pay you pretty good to be one of those Brides. I never heard of such a thing, really. I had no idea. I guess I just never paid much attention to Elvis, that's all. You're cute, though."

She was more than cute, she knew. She was gorgeous. They all were, with that long-legged, slim-hipped, big-breasted Southern style. Most of them favored white-blond hair and spoke in that exaggerated accent that rolled off the tongue so smooth and full. They matured fast, but didn't start looking old for a long, long time. Not unless they

wanted too, but a lot of them did. It kept the men away. Between shopping, cooking, and eating, they mostly watched TV and kept up with things through their supermarket newspapers and KYNG. It made the time pass.

But she wasn't ready to look old yet. Roy was mighty attractive, she thought for about the tenth time. And very sweet, too. Damn it!

She had to pee. She walked toward the bathroom, then paused at the end of the lunch counter.

A little black and white portable flickered at the end of the lunch counter, and she heard the word Elvis. An earnest reporter stood in front of Graceland with a microphone in her hand.

"Not only has Elvis disappeared, but his caretaker along with him. Police suspect foul play. There's been a massive power outage at Graceland and the surrounding area which a spokesman for the power company says can't be traced to any known reason."

Idiots. Next thing you know they'd be flashing her picture around the state. If the other Brides got hold of her, they'd tear her hair out by the roots. She turned around, went back to Roy, and leaned on the table. "I'm about ready to go," she said. "Are you?"

He smiled, and she was drawn into those blue eyes. He pushed himself out of the booth. She swayed, and he caught her arm. Had she only had three beers?

They walked out to the truck through a light rain which patterned the brown puddles in the parking lot, and she could *feel* him walking next to her, almost as if he were some sort of twin she ought to return with to whatever it was happened before you were born. Though it was only a little bit after noon, they both looked together at the flashing motel sign the next parking lot over. A semi hissed by on its way down to the river.

They stood there for a moment, and he looked helpless as he gazed at her. Then, before she could say a word, the hell with her purse and the bracelet inside, the hell with her Mission and being a Bride (but the King was gone anyway, nobody needed Brides now), he reached across her and unlocked the door, stammered "Sorry" when his arm brushed against her breast, as she'd intended, and hurried around to his side of the truck.

"Didn't mean to leave you standing in the rain like that," he said, and started up the truck and flipped on the heater. "It'll be cold for a few minutes," he said, and took off down the road.

She felt pretty much on edge. She turned on the radio, which crackled with distant lightning.

"I get so lonesome when you're gone," He crooned, and she whispered, "Elvis."

"Now don't you go all dreamy-faced and eyes-rolled-up on me," he joked, stealing a glance at her. As he looked at her, his smile froze.

She knew something showed in her eyes, then, a distant galaxy she barely remembered, and then only when she heard His voice. Cold-sleep had blanked it out. She'd been just a kiddie. She blanked it out some more; she blinked, then laughed.

"I'm OK," she said.

"You look pale," he said, and rubbed her arm with the back of his hand. Then he pulled off the road in a flail of flying gravel and grabbed both her shoulders.

"Shit," he said, as the truck began to move. He let go of her and set the brake. Then he was kissing her, she was kissing him, O God, O, *Elvis*...

"No," he said and pulled back. "I don't know why I'm doing this. I've never done anything like this before, believe me. Well, not quite. Like this. What I mean--"

So what? But it seemed important to him for some reason. "I believe you," she said, which was what he wanted to hear, and she did, she knew this man inside out. She could. She just never bothered. Humans were usually so boring, especially the men who came on to her in the bars of Memphis.

She drew back and looked at Roy for a moment. She was breathing real fast and her chest felt funny.

He was full of beautiful resonance, with avenues of thought and being and pure kindness and innocence she could almost see down and touch, they were so real to her. Maybe she'd just never taken the time to look at a human before. Was this what Elvis was singing about in all those songs? Good god, what a feeling! No wonder Kings acted so nutty. They just lost their fool minds. She felt like singing herself. The hell with being a Bride. The ship would never be back.

She knew that lots had fallen by the wayside, forgotten their bracelets in a moment like this with no part of the King around, no sweat-soaked scarf, no little plastic twist-box of cells or hair to align the gene sequences correctly. What got born three months later were mutant half-human kiddies. Human birth control didn't work for them because it was the pheromones that allowed the sperm and eggs already in them to join. The powerful spray of pheromones human males gave off during love-making did that too, but things got just a little twisted with those alien pheromones.

Those mutants, and she might conceive one any minute, if she kept on like this, were the thousands of women -- always women -- with sad, yearning faces who trudged past the coffin, not quite sure why they felt so strongly about Elvis. They were good for the budget, though, and it took a heck of a big bankroll to fund the checks that got sent out every two weeks so that everyone could get enough to eat. The full-lined ones matured quickly, almost twice as fast as humans, so there were a few generations now, and where they came from was dim legend to new kiddies. She had her mother to thank for being so strict and making sure she listened every morning and kept the faith, though sometimes she had her doubts too. She'd been lucky to be a Bride, which kept it all fresh and real in her mind.

And now all hell had broken loose, and she wanted to stay with this human man. "Roy," she whispered, and he drew her close against his chest. All her yearning loneliness was gone. She'd never have a man on the ship, except that one strictly delineated time. They were simply obsolete. All but one. There was always one King. But this particular King had gotten much too rowdy toward the end, what with a whole weird alien planet spread out before Him. Best to

keep Him in cold-sleep, all His vital parts preserved, all the necessary genetic information still intact, before He ruined it altogether with his silly drugs and wild ways. Just a big kid, but Kings always were. Spoiled and rebellious. Never listening.

Darlene looked into Roy's eyes. This guy was different. Maybe the human way *was* better.

She kissed Roy back. She opened her mouth and drew in his tongue, felt his breath become deep and slow as hers. His lips were soft on her face, his hands felt so good on her breast, on her thigh--

Afterward, without saying anything, he turned on the truck and drove as if he were in kind of a daze. She buttoned her blouse, bent down to snag her panties from off the floor and pulled them back on.

Finally, he said, "Damn." But that was all he said.

She didn't feel much like talking either. She could feel the conception within her body, just like she had when she'd grabbed His scarf, and it didn't feel horrible like they said it would. Her mother had told her how creepy it would feel, how sickening and awful when the mutation was taking place.

It felt good.

It only took another forty-five minutes to get there. They drove past fields fringed over with new green growth, through a little town which had an old wooden grocery store with a faded red Coca-Cola sign. "Closed on Sunday," the sign on the door said. A few pickups were parked next door at the Bar and Grill, and a black dog lay under one of them, trying to stay out of the rain. The courthouse was the nicest building in town, which was only two blocks long, with its dome and pillars.

"This is Sudden," Roy said. "It's the county seat." He turned just past the courthouse onto a narrow asphalt road which changed to dirt after a few miles and climbed the narrow rim of a red clay hillside. At the top was a doublewide with a screened-in porch and rose bushes blooming all around, pink, red, yellow. A black satellite dish was right next to it. "It's not much, I guess," Roy said.

It's not, she thought, but said, "It's nice."

"This is Ma's," he said. "That cabin over there is mine. I built it from a kit."

"Really," she said.

She looked all around, at the low green hills below them, the fields laid out so sure and true, with all those neighbors down little back roads. She felt good here, more at home than at Graceland, watching those meters, seeing that throng of sightseers file by, putting up with the jealousy of the other Brides because she was first in line once they got back to the ship, and they were just backups. Hell. It was all a stupid fantasy. Why not stay here? It seemed like home, and Roy felt like home too. She could have a future here. Not forever, or even close. But no one would have forever, now that the King was gone.

Roy took her hand, as if he knew what she was thinking. They got close to the doublewide and heard the drone of the TV.

"Good," he said, and she felt his relief run up her spine and spread out through her body like a cool breeze. "I guess she's OK. I shouldn't have left her alone all night; you just never know."

He knocked, then opened the door. "Ma," he said, "how you doing? I brought somebody I want you to meet. Darlene, this is Zinnea, my mother."

He stopped so suddenly that Darlene ran right into the back of him. "What's wrong?" Roy asked his mother. Darlene looked around and saw an old lady dressed in a faded print dress. She was crying. "Look," she said.

Darlene looked, and her mouth fell open. There it was, right on the Cable News Network: Graceland, from the air. About a million people were there, under the helicopter's whup whup whup, as the reporter said, "It's unbelievable, just unbelievable."

"What happened?" Darlene asked, but she didn't really have to. Of course it was on national news.

The old woman had a pale, sweet face. Darlene knew she used to be fat and full of piss and vinegar. She knew lots of things. She knew Roy's mother was seventy-one, and had arthritis, adult-onset diabetes, and plaque in her left anterior descending coronary artery. Not to mention pulmonary lesions.

"If it don't beat all," Zinnea said. "I mean, that I've lived to see the day. Elvis is gone. Simply gone from his tomb, you know. Just look at that crowd."

"Darlene here is one of the--" but Darlene kicked him sharp behind his knee and he shut up. She'd been a fool to tell him a thing. She was just a pure and entire fool anyway. She'd really have to play things down if she wanted to stay around here.

Roy touched her arm, and that *something* flooded through her. Maybe she wasn't entirely a fool. It all made sense when he touched her, anyway.

Darlene sat down on the worn green couch next to Zinnea and took her hand. "You kinda liked Elvis, huh?"

"Oh, I cut my teeth on that man," she said, and she wheezed as she spoke. "Why, you know, I even saw him once, it was at the County Fair back in the '50s when he was just getting started. Roy's father had a hissy fit about it; said I shouldn't be so interested in how the hips of any other man moved. But there was a lot of goodness in him."

"There was," said Darlene. And some mighty strange DNA too, lady.

Still holding the old lady's hand in both of hers, she looked into her frail face. She could feel Roy sitting on her other side, knew his eyes were glued to the TV.

Darlene didn't do this much because, frankly, she didn't often care enough to do it.

But it was just a matter of restoring a balance, and then removing that plaque from the left ventricle. Darlene healed her, then let go of her hand.

Zinnea looked at her with an open, innocent look, as if she were a kiddie herself, just born. Her cheeks grew pink.

She leaned back against the couch, coughed once, then breathed deeply with wonder on her face. She squinted at Darlene. "I *do* feel good, all of a sudden." She stood up. "Real good. I must have forgot my manners. Let me get you some ice tea. Lemon or sugar, honey?"

"Both," said Darlene, and wondered if maybe Zinnea had a few pies stored away that she could polish off as a little snack.

"It will take me a few minutes," Zinnea said. "None of that instant stuff around here." She went around a paneled partition.

"There seems to be something white coming down from the sky," said the commentator, his voice choked with fear.

Darlene jumped up and stared at the television. "Of course," she said. "Of course."

They'd finally got the drive working again. Took them long enough. Only about sixty years. Naturally they'd take the King first -- they had to hook Him in. They'd taken no chances with Him. Why tell the Brides? Those Techs always treated Brides like dirt and were so smug about their jobs and always saying nothing could go on without them. They must have just planned to wake the Brides up when everything was ready, to keep them from getting underfoot. She thought of her kiddies, suddenly, her beautiful, fast-growing full-lined kiddies. They must be here, along with her mother. There were no men, of course, in that heaving, thronging crowd.

"I have to get back to Memphis, Roy," she said.

"No," he whispered, and she felt his pain. He jumped up and his arms went around her, held her tight. "I won't let you go. So what if He's back? They don't need you there. I *do*. Oh God, honey, sweetheart, I do."

Her eyes filled with tears when she heard the passion in his voice, which matched hers in strength and depth.

Then Elvis, *live*, she knew it, launched into a song she'd never heard before. It must be patched through from the ship. The *call*. What they'd always been waiting for.

It was like she was hearing two things when she listened, the human words, and beneath them, ancient, powerful directions.

The spark of the unknown past surged through her. *Mana*, pure white as if distilled from starlight. Long, incredibly long life; planets beyond her ken, a homeland she couldn't even imagine, but which pulled at every cell.

Roy never looked frightened, no, not for an instant, as he reached back to turn off the TV, almost like he knew it all and what was going to happen.

"I won't let you go," he said. He held her even more closely, and she knew it was true. She drew back a little and just looked at him, with Elvis' lovely voice in her ears, and he started to gasp. He let go of her. His hands went to his throat, and he fell to the floor, writhing and choking.

Darlene reached down and picked up the keys he'd dropped, then stepped over him.

Elvis stopped singing as she walked out the door. She walked across the gravel lot, climbed into the truck, and heard Zinnea scream.

"Sorry, honey," she said, as she turned the ignition key and slammed the truck into reverse, even though she knew he couldn't hear her. But he'd be breathing again now. She'd only meant to make him let go of her. As she sped down the driveway, toward Him, *mana*, her kiddies, the ship, *everything*, she whispered, blinking back tears, "It never would have worked. It *never* would have worked anyway, Roy, sweetie. Never."

-end-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Ann Goonan's first SF novel, *Queen City Jazz*, was published in 1995 bearing endorsements from William Gibson and Lucius Shepard, and was a widely praised *New York Times* Notable Book. Her second novel, *The Bones of Time*, appeared in 1996, also to widespread acclaim, and late in 1997 the sequel to her first novel, *Mississippi Blues*, will appear. She is one of the bright new stars of the mid-1990s. And for the last several years she has been publishing short fiction of high quality in *Interzone*, *Asimov's*, and *Omni*. She has a droll wit and a complicated approach to storytelling that usually includes loads of SF details, shows a fascination with history and popular culture, and has lots of things happening. "The Bride of Elvis" first appeared in *SF Age*. This story is another tonic in the face of films of alien invasion and the anti-science of television shows such as *The X-Files*. Elvis, you see, was more than just King of rock and roll....