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And Still We Laugh

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T.H.E. King

by Gord Grisenthwaite

In this town, a butterfly fart makes the *Hope Standard's* local news column, cos almost no one ever moves here--at least by choice--this big guy moving into the old di Lucci house should have been front page news, but it didn't even make a ripple in the gossip pool. He was parked at the end of the lunch counter, on the stool closest to the jukebox. At first we wrote him off as another fat American tourist who'd just stepped out of *American Graffiti*. He was two-fisting enough food to feed a family of four, shovelling down pork chops, mashed potatoes and gravy like it was his last meal. Every now and then he inhaled a margarine-smothered slice of white bread from the stack beside his dinner plate. He ate like a pig but he didn't make any eating noises, and he looked polished. Except for his socks, everything from his black D. A. to his short, pointy black boots shone. His red shirt hugged his belly rolls. A row of chrome beach beauties decorated his black belt. His black pants fit so tight they made you feel like you were just punched in the

crotch. Even though it was cloudy, he wore brown, gold-framed sunglasses, but they weren't the kind of glasses cool guys wore. He looked like Elvis would in twenty years, if Elvis ate the same way as this guy. In my mind he was now and forever Fat Elvis.

"If you don't mind my saying so, ma'am, those were the best pork chops I've ever had the pleasure of eating," he said. He sounded a little like Elvis. Agnes stood frozen across the counter from the fat man. His neatly stacked dishes, maybe a foot above the counter, rattled in her hands.

"They say food cooked and served with love is nutrition for the body and the soul. I believe my soul has never been more satisfied than it is right now." He leaned back and patted his rolling belly. "As you can plainly see, I've got a lot of space to fill at meal times, and like no one before, you've filled me up."

He smiled the kind of smile that sleeps in a glass beside your bed. His hand slid into his pocket and came out with a wad of bills fatter than a logger's just home from camp. The outside one was a fifty. Then there were some twenties, but most of his wad looked like it was ones and twos. He slid out three twos and a one and put them on the counter, even though his bill couldn't have been more than two-ninety-five. I guess he felt me staring at him cos he turned and looked straight at me over the top of his shades. He smiled and winked.

"Well, you boys are indigenes, aren't you?" he said looking from me to Skinny to JimJim and then back to me again.

"You mean *Indians*?" Skinny said. "We're Indians. I mean me and JimJim are. 'Squito there's a 'breed." He smiled a big poop-eating grin. "But he's one of the good ones."

I choked back a laugh. It leaked out my nose in a yellow snot bubble that burned like bleach.

"A breed? What's a breed? You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"He means that my mom was white," I said, my hand over my snot-face.

"So you're interracial, then?"

I shrugged, clueless.

"Well, son, that is nothing to be ashamed of. Nothing to be ashamed of at all." He peeled off three more deuces and put them on top of the other money.

Looking at Agnes, he said, "Will that be enough to pay the tab of my new friends, ma'am?"

"I guess," Agnes said. She hadn't moved at all. Her voice, usually hard and sharp, was limp. She had paled, as if suddenly sick. He turned his smile on her and said it was all settled then. Agnes maybe-nodded and then she wobbled away, leaving the money on the counter. Agnes never left money behind.

"Boys," he said, standing and offering his hand, "please allow me to introduce myself. I am Terrance Herbert Edgar King. All my friends call me The King. I'd like to count you among my friends. May I?"

I nodded. What could it hurt? He seemed mostly harmless and he sure wasn't cheap.

"Skinny," he said, shaking Skinny's hand.

"JimJim," he said, shaking JimJim's hand.

"Squito? That's a helluva name," he said, shaking my hand. If he asked, I'd tell my name's story for the zillionth time, but only if he asked. His grip was firm, but damp. Then he put a pile of change into the jukebox and selected two songs. "You boys go ahead and choose the rest of the songs. Make them good ones. I must get back to work."

Dressed like that, there was no way he worked for the railroad and no way he worked for the sawmill, and loggers didn't start this late in the day.

"What's your job?" Skinny said.

"I'm glad you asked, Skinny," The King said. "I'm a weather observer."

"Someone pays you to watch the weather?" Skinny said.

"To observe the weather, yes. The government pays me well for this service."

"But why? All you gotta do is look out the window and there it is," Skinny said.

"Tell me then, how is a truck driver or airplane pilot in Calgary or even Kamloops going to see the weather here?"

"Everyone I know looks at the CFJC."

"Where do you think CFJC and other media get their information? I'll tell you. They get it from me and the other weather observers across the country."

"O," Skinny said. "And you really get paid to just watch the weather?"

"Yes. It's a lonely job and the weather can be a cruel taskmaster, but it's an important job."

As he finished talking, the real Elvis' "Love Me Tender" popped and crackled to life. The King one-man strolled to the till, half-bowed to Agnes John and then dipped out the front door. We punched in selections without reading the list cos the old juke usually played whatever it felt like playing and since the hotel didn't give refunds we almost always let people like The King pay.

He was barely outside when Skinny spat laughter, slapping the tabletop with one hand and holding in his guts with the other.

"Are you *indigenes*?' What the hell-- --"

"Watch your mouth, Bernard Paul," Agnes said, almost yelling. When she yelled, her voice was a Skilsaw. Her mad-voice cleared a room the way logging companies cleared mountains. Skinny hated being called by his real name. Most people couldn't get away with it. "I'll bar you," she said. It was no idle threat, cos her word was final, and she had a crust on her a crow couldn't peck through.

#

Agnes had worked at the hotel coffee shop so long we called it her place. During the week she was the first person in and the last person to leave. Except for lunch, until a little after school let out, she worked the front alone. Sometimes you heard the other waitresses talking to each other about how hard she was to work with. Even the hotel manager, Alister "Sinister" Snook, watched his mean mouth around Agnes John. He had to be nice to her at least twice a day cos she lived upstairs, in one of the only rooms with its own bathroom. No matter who you were, Sinister would take the room key from you like it was a used tissue. Not Agnes', not since the first time he tried it. They say he even apologized to her.

She'd lived upstairs since that forest fire ate her house, husband and son. I was about five when it happened, so I don't really remember it. The Johns had a ranch across the river, at Sixteen Mile. Agnes wasn't on the ranch when it happened. They say she wished she was there with her family, but, as far as anyone knew, she never went back after the fire. She never said. I doubt anyone ever asked her, either. There are some things you just don't talk about. She took the room at the hotel when she got back and pretty much only left it to work. She didn't yack at you the way the other girls did and she didn't work with the top buttons of her dress open, either. You never had to ask her for a refill and you never sat at a dirty booth, no matter how busy the coffee shop got. Agnes knew who you were, who your family was, what you liked and didn't like to eat and how you took your coffee. Sometimes she would even give you free refills. No matter what happened around her she was the same as she always was, until The King paid for his first pork chop.

Every weekday, either coming from or going to work, The King walked into the coffee shop at one-thirty, smiled and half-bowed to Agnes and then put a few dollars into the juke. He always

played "Love Me Tender," "Gentle on My Mind," "I Want You I Need You I Love You," "Love Me," "Power of My Love," "True Love Travels on a Gravel Road," "Teddy Bear," "Always on My Mind" and "I'll Hold You in My Heart Until I Can Hold You in My Arms." They played in almost the same order every time. Sometimes he added a song or two. Sometimes he played "Power of My Love" or "Gentle on My Mind" twice. At least when we were there, the juke always seemed to play what The King paid it to.

After choosing his songs he took the stool at the far end of the counter. That stool, no matter how busy the coffee shop was, sat empty and cleared by half-past one. Agnes never wrote his order down. After a few weeks she'd even stopped asking him if he was having the usual. After the first month, The King's lunch was at his stool by the time he punched in the last tune. The King only ate pork chops and apple sauce, mashed potatoes with gravy, at least four slices of white bread gobbled with margarine, apple pie with a scoop of vanilla ice cream and two Cokes--bottled, because the hotel's fountain was Pepsi. He'd talk to us about his work and about his cats, or as he called them, his boys. He talked to us like we were his best friends in the whole world. His words might have been pointed at us, but his eyes tracked Agnes' every move. When she was near, his voice grew deeper and more musical. He grew noticeably taller and thinner, too.

Every day he counted out nine dollars in ones and twos from the wad that never shrunk, said something corny to Agnes and then Elvised out the front door in perfect time to his music. He did that every weekday for maybe seven months.

#

The di Lucci's had kept their house and yard prettier than the cover of Home & Garden. The King didn't. The grass was long and dandelioned. Death crept over it. Starting with the flowers near the house, it gnawed at the lawn. All of the windows were closed and curtained, except the

one in the mud room. Its glass had been replaced by a chunk of black-painted plywood, with a small, curtained hole in the far corner that opened to a tiny ramp switchbacking to the sidewalk. He said it was so his cats Aaron and Garon could get in and out when he was at work.

It was one of Spring's first Sundays and I was finishing up my paper route. Being alone in the early morning was the only thing I liked about my job cos I had some peace and quiet. But if there was any noise in the morning, it seemed louder. I practically jumped out of my skin when I heard The King singing and humming to his cats. He was sitting on the curb in front of his house, his cats walking around him with their tails up and their backs arched and butting their heads against his arms and rubbing against him. He stared out into space, his mouth open and his tongue out like a kid trying to catch snowflakes.

"It's a beautiful morning," he said, as I neared. He didn't look at me. His cats skittered into the dying hedge overgrowing the fence. "Enjoy it. Today, it won't last long." He turned and looked at me. I guess my face said what my head was thinking.

"I can taste the storm that's coming," he said. I snorted and tried to make my face smile nicely at the crazy man on the curb in front of me. "Don't criticize what you don't understand, son. You never walked in that man's shoes," he said.

"I'm ... I'm sorry, sir," I said. He looked like I'd just broken his favourite toy. I didn't know what to do with my face, my hands. His eye watered up.

"Remember, I'm the weather observer. I can actually taste the weather, son. Taste it long before I see it. Not just anyone can do that." He wiped his eyes with his pointer's knuckle.

"It's Spring and the weather's changing. Any fool with a calendar can tell that, but, the weather is changing today."

"What?" I said. The weather was always changing, especially in Spring. Even I knew that. I thought, this guy is nuts.

"Don't look so surprised, son. I've been doing this a long, long time." He smiled and stood with liquid smoothness. "By four this afternoon, this town will have had all of its rain for the season. It tastes like nine millimetres, maybe nine-decimal-five."

He paused for a second, looked me up and down. "I've taken enough of your time and you've a job to do. Take an umbrella to school, Darryll," he said over his shoulder.

I knew millimetres from Chem. Nine of them would add up to less than a mouthful of spit. The King might have been be a real weather observer, but he didn't know anything.

He started singing "It's Now or Never." For a second, I'd thought someone had put on an Elvis record, but the only music came from Wind and River, and they were singing backup for The King.

#

He was right about the rain, but it was way more than a few millimetres. On my way to Chem I made a wrong turn and wound up at the hotel coffee shop. I was soaked. If I'd've remembered my homework, it would've been ruined. Rain had firehosed us for at least a half hour, making it like trying to see through a closed bathroom window. The rain was warm.

The door closed behind me and Agnes said, "I shouldn't let you in, you. You're going to make a mess of my floors."

The jukebox played "It's Now or Never." The King sat at his usual stool, mopping up gravy with the last slice of his white bread.

"Aw, Agnes, please," I said. She rolled her eyes, but she smiled, and pointed to the stool nearest the cash register, put two sugar dispensers and a thing of cream in front of me. I frowned

at her. I wanted to ask her what she thought she was doing, but my mouth refused to say those words. She looked at me as if expecting me to say this or that.

"Would you like some coffee with your sugar today?"

She cackled as she filled my cup, spilling some onto the saucer, something she'd never done as long as I'd known her. Agnes never made jokes, especially about food. Even though it wasn't that funny, I laughed. She always complained about how much sugar we, mostly I, took in our coffee.

The King wiped his mouth with a napkin, swallowed and spun his stool so he could face me. Through my rain-wet eyes he looked exactly like Elvis.

"Son," he said. "'Truth is like the sun. You can shut it out for a time, but it isn't going away.' Weather is truth, in its way. And, Mosquito, it's a powerful gift, truth."

"Thank you, sir," I said. I think I smiled. "It's Now or Never" whirred to life on the jukebox again, for at least the second time in a row. I dripped into my coffee and my jeans clung to me and the plastic stool.

Agnes handed me a dry dish towel. I looked at it. I didn't work there. What did she expect me to do?

"What?" I said.

"It's a towel. Wipe your head before you get the pneumonia," she said.

"O," I said, "Thank you."

A small pile of dishes clattered by, and crashed onto the bus cart. The King had bussted himself, maybe for the first time, and now stood beside the till.

"Once again, Miss Agnes, you have made me the happiest man in the world by serving up the finest meal a man could eat. How some other man hasn't whisked you off to Vegas for the fastest, spiritually beautiful 'I dos' is a mystery to me."

"Power of My Love" filled the coffee shop.

"This song is my gift to you, Miss Agnes," The King said.

I tried not to watch The King and Agnes. They needed to be alone. I was stuck to my seat and even if I swivelled to face the juke box, I had their words all around me and their bodies reflected in the big picture window.

Her head was down and a little sideways. She smiled. Her smile made her twenty years younger. She turned her eyes up to The King. I'd seen that look a hundred times before. The girl would flash that look and then she'd melt onto the dance floor with Skinny or some other guy and you wouldn't see either of them again, maybe for a little while, maybe for the rest of the night. "Power of My Love" faded into pops and crackles and then the room got quiet, except for the juke's clicks and whirs, and then "Wearin' That Loved on Look" crackled to life.

The King blinked, and looked like he'd just noticed his wallet was gone. "This can't be right," he said. "That's not the song in my heart. That's not my message to you at all, Miss Agnes."

The colour bleached from his face. "Is it yours to me?" he said, his words drowning in nine millimetres of tears.

Agnes' smile withered. She took a step back from him. Some of the colour drained from her face.

"Is it yours to me?" The King's hands shook as he counted out five twos and dropped them near the till.

Agnes stepped back, arms folded across her chest. That smile she had worn ripped away, adding maybe forty years to her face. She owled at him, lips pulled tight, jaw set.

"I ... I've given you my heart, Miss Agnes," The King said. He watched his feet shuffle and twist. "I was hoping for an answer, one way or another, that's true, but I didn't expect you to break my heart with such cruelty."

His look danced between his feet and Agnes' face, now as white and cold as stone. She looked like she'd just gotten the wind knocked out of her, but she wasn't Angry Agnes.

"I must get to work," The King said. "The weather can be a prima donna. She needs an appreciative audience."

He bowed his head a tiny bit, turned and nodded a bow at me. "Good day to you, both of you."

There was no song to dance him out the door. He walked out stiff and formal. Agnes snatched back the towel and then hurried the nearly empty bus cart to the back. Dishes and cutlery slammed and clanged and clattered and banged. I peeled myself free of the stool, left all of my coins, enough for my coffee and at least a piece of pie and two refills. I left the coffee shop like I was sneaking out the basement window at my father's house.

#

The King missed lunch two days in a row. The coffee shop was different without him sitting at the end of the lunch counter, eating in time to Elvis' songs. And Agnes, by the end of the second day, was ornery and mean as she'd ever been. Showing up for Chem was looking like a better way to spend my time.

Around three, The King walked in wearing a white suit, white shoes, white socks, white shirt, white belt and a white scarf thing. Only the belt and shoes shone. In one hand he held a small

vase with one red rose and one white rose. In the other, he held a shiny black six-string guitar with a wide, black strap decorated with chrome beach beauties.

"These are for you, Miss Agnes," The King said. He handed her the vase and then, stepping back, he brought the guitar up and tuned it a bit. Agnes whispered thanks and put them on the counter behind her.

"When I was a child I was a dreamer," The King said. He quietly strummed as he spoke. "I read comic books, and I was the hero of the comic book. I saw movies, and I was the hero in the movie. So every dream I have ever dreamed has come true a thousand times." He palmed the guitar to silence. "Until now, I mean."

He started playing a song that sounded really 1950s. He played a few chords and Agnes' feet began to shuffle. Mine did, too. And then The King started to sing.

The ending was like Elvis himself singing to Agnes: "... That's 'cause I'm no good, I'm no good to anyone after loving you."

As the sustain of the last chord faded, The King slid the guitar behind his back, bowed a little, turned and walked out.

"Bravo," a little clapping voice said from the door to the hotel lobby. "Elvis has left the building." The little voice was Alister Snook. A coffee cup smashed on the jamb near his head. He shrieked, "Crazy woman," and ran back the way he'd come. I wasn't so sure Agnes missed on purpose.

"What are you looking at?" she said, glaring at me. She dropped the roses into the garbage and hefted another coffee cup. "Get out, Darryll Bob. You're barred for a week."

I knew better than to argue with Angry Agnes. So I put a dollar bill on the counter and walked out without looking at her, without saying a word.

By the time I'd finished delivering my papers the next morning, The King's house stood empty, its curtains wide open. All that was left of him was the switchback ramp and dead yard.

Peeking through the coffee shop window on my way back to the house, I saw The King's roses sitting on top of the juke. It blared an Elvis song.

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