

# Mama at 21

JUST when I reconcile myself to the fact that my mama is dead and gone and I myself am one foot closer to the grave, there she is again. Her pretty young face splashed all over the centre section of the Sunday paper and Elvis Presley kissing her like there is no tomorrow. No wonder she looks happy.

I hold the section between my outstretched hands, squinting a bit to make sure. Yep. That is Mama.

I call my sister Laree, because she does not subscribe to the newspaper. She doesn't believe in the news, she says. It hasn't done her a lick of good this far, so why bother? Laree is a lot like my Daddy, Larry Jeanette, for whom she is named. Although no one ever makes that connection. No matter how often Mama insisted on every teacher in our school or any friend that ever visited our house calling her Lair-ree, it always came out as La-Ree.

"How do you know it's Mama?" Laree asks me first thing.

"It's the same hairstyle she wore all her life. The same dress we wore for dress-up when we were kids. The one Mama wore for her high school baccalaureate services."

"You don't think that was the only dress like that in existence, do you, Mim?"

"No." I myself was named for Mamie Eisenhower, which is hardly worth discussing in polite company. I'm sure Daddy is to blame for that name choice as well. "It looks like Mama all right. She's wearing the same crystal earrings she wore to her Senior Prom. Remember them?"

"So what's your point?"

"I want to see the photos, Laree. I want to see these photos in the flesh while they're on exhibit in Winchester."

"Oh, for godsakes."

"Do you want to go or not?" More than anything, Laree hates to miss out on any adventure she thinks I might be having. To this day, she brings up those times I did something that she did not. Like Girl Scout Camp when I was twelve or an overnight trip to Virginia Beach with my high school boyfriend or the time I drove to Atlantic City with friends from work. "I'm thinking I'll go next Tuesday, Laree. You let me know."

For all our lives we have heard the story of Mama meeting Elvis Presley. How his cab was stopped in Richmond lunchtime traffic and he spotted her coming out of Thalhimers with her sassy walk and her sweet little smile. How he sent one of his boys chasing after her with a backstage pass to the Mosque. How she had to sneak out of work early to get herself home and changed and back to the theatre before our grandparents knew what she was up to.

Daddy is always the one to tell this story of Mama and Elvis. His tone is boastful and teasing, because he is the one she chose, after all. The man to triumph over Elvis. Our Mama only ever smiled, not once offering her own commentary.

"I think we should take Daddy with us," Laree says when she calls me back. "I think seeing Mama with Elvis will make his day."

"I was thinking we'd do a quick run up to Winchester, have lunch, and come right back. Taking Daddy would add hours to our day. Do you have that kind of time to spare?" I know for a fact that Laree has more things going at this

time of year than anyone you can imagine. Her own husband says she puts him in mind of a squirrel getting ready for winter with her scurrying around to plant more daffodil bulbs and drag out all her Halloween décor and send care packages to her grandchildren in Seattle.

"I always have time for our Daddy," she says. "What if he doesn't want to come?"

"I can talk Daddy into anything I put my mind to." Which is unfortunately true. "Okay, Laree," I say. "You make the arrangements with the assisted living people."

When we go to Sycamore Shore, Laree makes a point of showing everyone what good and considerate daughters we are by taking our Daddy off their hands for a few hours. "Why there he is now!" Her voice rises into the bubbly range as an aide wheels out our father. "What a lovely day for a drive, Daddy. We are gonna have ourselves a good time, aren't we now?"

"I doubt it," Daddy says as Laree takes over the wheelchair.

"How are you doing, Daddy?" I ask. "You look good." Which he does. Like all the folks at Sycamore Shore, our father has that smoothed over, air-brushed quality that makes him seem less real.

"Looks are deceiving," Daddy says. "I'm not good at all."

"That's too bad." I hold the door for Laree and the wheelchair.

"Now, Daddy," she says, "you are just fine, and you know it."

It takes both of us to help Daddy into the car and stow his back-breaking wheelchair in the trunk, but once we drive away into the green valley splashed with colourful fall trees, I'm beginning to think it might be a good day after all. Even when Daddy complains about his Sycamore Shore tablemates and Laree begins her lecture on doing the Christian thing under the worst of circumstances, I am able to tune them out, and when Daddy falls asleep near Staunton and begins to snooze, I only have to turn up Z-Rock to drown him out.

The Alfred Wertheimer display of photographs is on the second floor of the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley, and rather than look around for ourselves, which is my natural tendency, Laree makes demands of the volunteer working behind the ticket counter. "My father requires an elevator. He is unable to walk."

"Certainly." The volunteer points over her shoulder.

"Does Daddy know why we're here?" I ask on the ride up.

"It's a surprise, isn't it, Daddy?" Laree bends down to croon in his ear.

Daddy yawns.

"Let's hope it's not a shock." I whisper as the door opens. Laree pushes forward.

The exhibit, *Elvis at 21*, is really only a handful of photographs taken in one week's time in three different places. They fill up such a small section of space, we could almost park Daddy in one spot and let him take it all in at once, but Laree propels him along from one photo to the next. "Never liked that music," Daddy says when he recognizes Elvis. "That fella was always too big for his britches."

Then we are looking at Elvis in the Jefferson Hotel, and we know we are getting close.

"Remember that story you always told about Mama?" Laree says. "The one where she met Elvis Presley in Richmond?"

Daddy says nothing. He is looking at Elvis with the waitress. Elvis' hand wrapped around her waist like he has known her forever. He is so young, so clean cut and hopeful, and she is younger still and doubtful, uncertain maybe as to



who this stranger might be with his fingers resting on her hip.

Then there is Mama with Elvis. His hands are laced around her waist, pulling her in close. Her hands press against his shiny black lapels, and I recognize the sparkly ring on her right ring finger. Their faces are inches apart, his soulful eyes fixed on her in as he moves in for the kiss. They look like they are in love.

In the next photo, Mama is now pressed against the metal banister of a backstage walkway, her arms braced behind her, her face turned away from us to kiss Elvis. "Heere she is, Daddy," Laree swings the wheelchair to face the scene before us. "Here's Mama with Elvis Presley in 1956. Isn't that something?"

It is more than a kiss. I can see that now. It's playful, each one teasing the other by sticking out their tongues. Except their tongues meet in mid-air. In real life it is far more suggestive that the image in the Sunday paper. My Mama and Elvis.

Their eyes are closed, their noses are mashed together, their tongues are touching. We all know what must happen next. After Elvis finishes singing his heart out in front of all those screaming, crying, mascara-smeared girls who want him so bad they could die.

Daddy is studying the photo intently, his mouth hanging open in his effort to concentrate. "Your Mama met Elvis Presley in Richmond. She came out of the department store on her lunch break, and he saw she was the prettiest girl in town." He turns his head slightly, and Laree bends down to hear him. "Sorry, honey, but that's not your Mama. Doesn't look a thing like her."

I wait for Laree to point out the dress and the earrings and the hairstyle. I wait for her to insist that Daddy is mistaken. For her to convince him of anything she wants.

"You're right, Daddy." Her kiss leaves a smear of lipstick on his forehead. "You are absolutely right."

# BROADSHEET STORIES

Tales to last a coffee or two



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We publish a story a month, printed on newspaper-sized sheets (hence the name) and distributed free at venues in the south of England.

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