

Miss Edna's Lace

by Gerri Giovanelli Bauer

When Elvis died, I felt so empty that I headed straight for Jimmy Choo's, but quietly, with the half-veil of my pillbox hat draped low over my face. I didn't want to draw attention to my vintage Dior mourning outfit, since I normally wear pants, even here. The voices followed me all the way uptown, which I reckon was because I was thinking about Elvis and I can't think about Elvis without thinking about home.

"Rufus, have you lost your mind?" I can still hear Mama ask me the day she found me sliding around the house in her heeled pumps and carrying her purse. Maybe I had. Maybe it was the time I ate all those larval worms before learning they were Black Swallowtail butterfly babies. I worried for a week they'd start fluttering in my stomach. Honey, I was only 8. The worms were chomping on Granny's parsley plants and I knew she needed the parsley to decorate her Ladies' Luncheon plates after she arranged the chicken salad atop the lettuce leaves. She was right then in the kitchen fussing with the ladyfinger dessert. I was just trying to help.

Those lunches are where I first figured out I might be more interested in tatting than toxicology, which was something Mama said I ought to think about going into because her 3rd cousin's 2nd husband's son by his 1st wife was making a good living at it down in Atlanta. Even then, I think Mama knew I'd have to leave Fannin County. What else could you do with a son who preferred to serve chicken salad instead of ride his bike? The first time I helped Granny I was so fascinated with the lace collar and cuffs on Miss Edna's dress that I begged her to will them to me. Miss Edna made that lace. I am still in awe.

There weren't a whole lot of folks around who shared my passions, especially when it became known that I occasionally tried on

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Mama's finery. Except for Elvis, who was as interested in diesel engines as in dolls, maybe more so. We understood each other. Elvis, back home, was Edwina. I was Rufus before I became Raphaella.

Elvis was my best friend. Her Great Aunt Edna and my Granny were cousins once removed. The first time I met Elvis she was shoving chicken salad around her plate with such vigor it slid right off and plopped on the floor, lettuce and all. Yves St. Laurent -- he was my beagle -- lapped it up and immediately barfed and Miss Edna turned red and dragged Elvis away before Granny had time to offer more iced tea. When Mama called to tell me Elvis died, the ache was sudden and fierce and required an immediate fix. In Elvis' honor, I picked out the Jimmy Choo Black Velvet Clue Peep Toe Heels, with jeweled buckle, for only \$640.

Atlanta hadn't been far enough away for me. I needed New York City, with its anything-goes mentality. But let me tell you something. The first time I showed my *haute couture* at New York Fashion Week, I spent hours on my own ensemble. Even matched my lipstick and eye shadow with my shoes and bag. It was a mistake, and I'm not talking about the color coordination. The society ladies, who back then were the only ones who could afford my prices, voiced their displeasure through raised eyebrows, pressed lips, and closed pocketbooks. After that mishap I did all right by myself, which is why I can pay for a pair of Jimmy Choo's, but also why I no longer prance about in women's wear. Might as well be back in Fannin County in some ways.

I took a few turns around the shoe store before remembering why I never wore 4-inch stilettos longer than needed to make a statement. The discomfort reminded me of the time Elvis and I, or rather Elvis, hatched the grandiose plan of hiking the entire Appalachian Trail in hopes of walking off what the family called our eccentricities. We started with a trial excursion from Springer Mountain the summer we turned 18. Elvis probably could've made it to Maine. Me, I

couldn't make it a mile. After graduation, we opted for a short hike at Neels Gap, cause folks had told us the view there is like God's country and we felt in need of some blessings. That was the day Elvis decided to set out for San Francisco and I for New York.

I told the clerk to box up my Jimmy Choo's. I hailed a cab and headed to 57th Street Frame & Border Supply, where I had them right then and there make me a lighted display box. The shoes became an *objet d'art*. When I got back to the loft, I hung them on the wall between the framed cover of the September 1989 issue of Vogue and the poster-size photo of Neels Gap.

Folks ask me sometimes about the picture of Neels Gap. Once, at an after-show party, I pushed the hors d'oeuvres table against the wall just beneath the photo because the light bouncing off the crystal decanter and silver serving trays reflected the cool tones of the blue-gray mist hovering over the hills. Nice, one woman said, but you should put up a picture of the Rockies, they're so much more majestic. I noticed she was wearing her Stella McCartney a size too small. Of course she wouldn't understand sublimity.

Elvis would not have said such a thing. She was the one who bugged me to trade my high-top sneakers for North Face boots so we could escape. She lured me out for the trail run on the pretext of seeing rhododendrons in bloom. The trail was rocky, uneven and slick with mud. I named one of my color palettes Terra Cotta Blood in remembrance of that day of Georgia red clay. It sells well. The hike was less successful. Within an hour, I was limping from blisters. Forget this stupid idea, I told Elvis. Skip the rhododendrons. I'll buy a copy of Southern Living.

But all wasn't well in my Fannin County world. Granny had died, Daddy kept bellowing at me to start earning my keep by taking the job he'd lined up at the carpet mill, and Mama's mouth grew more pinched every time we were all in the same room together. Daddy

muttered about her raising a girl and she sputtered that maybe he should have spent more time at home if he'd thought he could have done a better job. I missed the days of Ladies Luncheons and hated the way Daddy kept asking if I wanted to hunt down a deer and drink its blood so I could be initiated into the brotherhood. He stood over me for hours at forced target practice before walking away in disgust. Miss Edna died and left her lace to Elvis. I was miserably unhappy.

Being at that age of uncertainty, I wondered that, if I wouldn't shoot a deer, maybe I could at least be a woodsman to see what drew Daddy and his cronies away for weeks at a time. So I told Elvis I was game for another hiking expedition. Not without some training, she said. She drilled me by making me walk around the yard wearing my North Faces and lugging a backpack stuffed with No. 2 cans of White Acre peas.

Elvis and I set out for our hike on a perfect morning. My nature sprite persona vanished the second I was swallowed up by buckeyes and tulip poplars pressing in from either side of the trail. Behind me the path faded to a point of green. Ahead, beyond the distance Elvis was rapidly putting between us, it did the same, only on a steep, narrow incline.

"Elvis! Wait up! What if we see a bear?"

"Quit worrying. We won't see any bears. They're hibernating."

"In summer?"

"Yeah, they're hiding from the tourists."

We were in the high-traffic zone of the Appalachian Trail. Hikers, picnickers, bird watchers, mushroom hunters, you name it, they converge where the trail overlaps the outfitters place on the

highway at Neels Gap. We avoided as many as possible at the crossing, and stumbled our way up to Blood Mountain, where I declared a time-out.

"I'm staying right here. Not going another foot." We were just off the trail, on a flat, slanted boulder overlooking the Blue Ridge and hemmed by Catawba rhododendrons. The sun had heated the slab of rock, and I felt cradled in a natural sauna when I laid back and gazed up at the cloudless sky. A trickle of water formed rivulets in a crevice, making just enough of a gurgle to lull me into thinking all was right with the world.

"Ain't it beautiful?" Elvis said, munching on a piece of the fried chicken we'd packed.

We hadn't seen anybody in more than half an hour. The sun was high, and a bee buzzed around some milkweed. I was in that comfortable state of half-awareness when a rebel yell scared me so much I almost slid off the boulder. Elvis grabbed me by the strap of my new overalls. "Somebody must be fooling around up in the shelter," she said.

I heard the hiss of a beer top being snapped off, and doubted her. Still lying down, I rolled over to see E.J. Ellis, the wildest man in Fannin County, grinning down at us.

I'd known E.J. since we were in first grade. If he had called me faggot once, he'd done it more times than I could count. He was hell-raiser from way back, and always got away with it because his uncles were lawyers and his daddy owned the county's largest construction company and the carpet mill. Everybody in town worked at that mill, including my father.

E.J. waved his beer bottle by way of greeting. "Wake up. It's E.J. Time. 11:11. That's when I pop my first beer. Except I started a little

early today." Two more men wandered over. They all appeared to have slept in their clothes. Together, they blocked our access to the trail. Behind us was a guaranteed free-fall with a hard landing. To the sides were jagged, uneven outcroppings.

"Say, you're Rufus, Miss Wilma's boy," E. J. said. "I didn't recognize you at first, wearing pants like you are." He smirked in a way that made me wish I'd paid more heed to Daddy's target-practice lessons even if I wasn't the type to carry a gun. E.J. squatted down as though ready for conversation. He looked wilder than usual. His overalls were shabby, his Henley shirt was faded and frayed, and he'd let his sideburns and beard bush out so far they were worthy of Thomas Eakins' painting of Walt Whitman. I half expected to find hay in his hair.

"What'd you do, follow us up here?" I asked.

"Hell, no. We're looking our best for tourists. Then after they think they've sneaked a picture of us, we hit 'em up for money, being poor mountain folk and all. Got the idea from a bush tribe I saw on a National Geographic TV special."

One of his buddies, a pristine corncob pipe in his mouth, kept glaring at me. E.J. followed my gaze.

"That there is a fine pipe," he said. "Had to go clear down to Dahlenega to find it."

"Probably made in Japan," I said.

Corn Cob Man took the pipe out of his mouth. "I've heard about you. We don't like your kind here," he said.

"I believe he's right," E.J. said. He wasn't smiling anymore. "You know the only reason you're still breathing is because your mama

and mine go to church together. I got tired of your faggot ways a long time ago. Right now, you two are messing up our money-making plan just by being here. I'm fixing to find a way to solve that problem." He took a step sideways as though catching his balance.

"You're right," I said. "You did start drinking too early today." But I was uneasy. E.J. was hard to control under normal circumstances, and worse when drunk.

The bee's buzzing seemed amplified, and the trickle of water was uncommonly loud. The trio started advancing toward us.

"Yes, sir, Sheriff, it sure was a terrible accident the way those two slid off that rock up on Blood Mountain," E.J. said, tossing his beer bottle into the brush-covered edge of a boulder. The neck shattered as the bottle rolled to a rest in a far ledge.

"Just hold on a minute!" Elvis stood up. Her sudden determination stirred something in me and I scrambled to my feet, too. Maybe it was the altitude. Or Daddy's taunts. Or being tired of everybody thinking I was gay. Or my confusion or apprehension or just plain annoyance over not fitting in.

"E.J., stop your bullshit," I said. "You want to call me out, go ahead. I'll fight you. Or aren't you man enough?" I had no idea who was talking. Surely it wasn't me.

"*You* are asking *me* about being a man?"

"You push us off this mountain you'll give the Sheriff the excuse he needs to lock you up for the next hundred years."

He scratched his sideburns. "How so?"

I pointed to the beer bottle. "How long have you been brewing your

beer in those bottles? You think the Sheriff won't recognize it? And it's too late to hide the evidence. It's out of reach."

E.J. spit a wad of tobacco and juice that landed in the trickle of water and stained it a squalid, rubbery brown. "You know, this might be your lucky day," he said. "You ain't worth my time anyway. Come on, boys." They were gone as quickly as they had arrived.

Elvis and I didn't stick around either. We backtracked without stopping once to check our *Wildflowers of the Appalachian Trail* field guide.

"That was brave of you," she said.

"I couldn't let you take on E.J. in my defense."

"Your defense? I was going to holler at him about littering."

We walked the rest of the way in silence. When we reached the parking lot, I, still hyper-vigilant, noticed for the first time that it was named after a Byron Reece.

"Who's that? Think he's named after the poet?" I asked. Elvis didn't know, either, so we stopped at the outfitters, where the owners sent us up to Blairsville, where the general store had a special section devoted to the mountain poet-farmer. He'd been named after a hog farmer, not Lord Byron, but I felt a kinship to another local boy trying to live true to himself. I was upset when the clerk told us he committed suicide in 1958. "He had depression," the clerk said.

Elvis and I sat out in the courtyard square and finished the lunches we'd stuffed back into our packs in a hurry up on Blood Mountain. The chicken was soggy.

"I'm thinking about moving to San Francisco," Elvis said.

"Do you have to tell me this today?"

"There's nothing here for me." She looked at me, as though waiting for something.

"Mama wants me to try Atlanta," I said. "I dunno, I'm thinking New York City might be better. Want to check it out with me?"

"No. Maybe it's time for both of us to follow her advice and move on."

The poet-farmer's depression settled on us.

"Sleep on it, Elvis. We can drive down to Atlanta tomorrow. You can see if you like city life and I'll figure if it's the right destination for me."

"I can't go tomorrow," she said.

"OK, next day, then."

Two days later, I drove up to the house where Elvis lived alone since her Great Aunt Edna had died. It was locked and shuttered. Elvis was gone.

* * *

The silence seemed endless even in that summer of cicadas. Remember these were days before Internet and smart phones. I can't figure how we lived either, but it's like the time Granny told me how she refused to get rid of her wood-burning stove when the power lines were run in. Poor Granny, how did you ever get by without electricity, I asked, glad I hadn't been born into such a primitive world. She looked at me like I was a simpleton. Easy, she

said, a comment I didn't understand until years later.

So I waited to hear from Elvis. We had two means of long-distance communication, maybe three if you count Mr. Hawkins down the road who swore he was re-breeding carrier pigeons and did anybody want to try a test flight. I holed up in Mama's sewing room while I waited for Southern Bell and the U.S. Postal Service to deliver.

"Rufus, dear, do you need to see a doctor?" Mrs. Grant asked me the day I bought foundation garments in the intimate apparel department of Woolworth's and the store's entire stock of satin and Chantilly lace. She looked at me over the top of her glasses as she was ringing up the sale. "You could ask Reverend Worth to pray over you," she suggested, and double-bagged the items so that it was impossible to see what I'd purchased.

Honey, if you could have seen the dress that emerged from that crisis. No, it wasn't even my size. It was the forerunner of the piece that made me Raphaëla. Surely you know that gown, I mean, does anyone not? The strapless corselet sheath gown with my signature décolleté styling, made of my own Mountain Laurel white silk overlaid with handmade Breton lace that's almost as fine as what Great Aunt Edna used to make? The silhouette is as famous a shape as a Chanel. Well, you just run uptown to the Costume Institute at the Met. It's on display there as part of the "Quarter Century of Vogue" exhibit of clothing featured on the magazine's covers between 1975 and 2000.

I became Raphaëla the day Anna Wintour's assistant called wanting my dress for a photo shoot. You don't tell the assistant to the editor of Vogue that your name is Rufus. Wintour was both the most deified and detested power broker of fashion in those days. Seems so silly now. But, like I said, those were the days before instant global connections diluted any one person's ability to arbitrarily dictate trends. Would Andy Warhol become famous today if he just

now wandered into the city?

New York City is a place of excess and I indulged. I became so famous so fast that I acted the fool, partying at The Limelight, dancing on stage with Devo at Madison Square Garden, and making sure paparazzi saw me in the most outrageous outfits.

Elvis, now, it turns out she'd gone to San Fran just like she wanted to do. She joined Greenpeace and spent years saving whales. She'd write long letters filled with details on the gestation times and feeding habits of humpbacks and the species of barnacles found on their flippers. Mama kept me filled in on Fannin County. Daddy's attitude came around after I matured and people no longer had occasion to mail him photos of me as honorary chair of the annual drag queen parade.

I even got an email from E.J. Ellis after I was a guest judge on "Project Runway."

"Open up a branch of your store down here," he wrote. "I'll build it for you in the new development Ellis Construction just launched -- Catawba Trails. North Carolina's getting crowded and the Floridians are looking here in Georgia. I could draw a lot of them in if we had a Southern branch of Raphaella's. There's real good money in it for both of us."

Lord, how times change.

Raphaella's is undergoing a renaissance just as I'm thinking about slowing down. My Poplar Green and Terra Cotta Blood color palettes, the Mountain Laurel and Sienna Reece fabric lines, my organically derived designs, they've all made my brand suddenly eco-chic. After the San Francisco Chronicle did an article about my greenness, Elvis emailed wanting to know if I paid living wages and where I was doing production. Not in any Honduran or Guatemalan

sweatshops, I hope, she wrote.

I didn't answer that email. Then Mama called with the news about Elvis. I bought the Jimmy Choo's but it was an empty pleasure. They were as shallow as the box they were displayed in.

"Mr. Raphaela, sir, your mother is on the line." My secretary peered into the workshop end of the loft. "Unless you need me, I'm leaving now. It's after 5."

I waved an OK at her and picked up the receiver of the land-line. Mama doesn't favor the sounds of voices on cell phones.

"Rufus, have you heard?" She sounded agitated. "The carpet mill is closing down. No more production, no showroom, no retail, nothing. They're outsourcing to India. No, we don't know yet what it means for your father's pension. The company claims the money's safe. But you never know. Think how many people are going to be out of work. Hundreds, Rufus, hundreds. I'm heartsick over this."

The carpet mill loomed over life back home. It didn't take much to envision Main Street shuttered, the factory vandalized, and people turning to meth production to survive.

I sat for a long time after hanging up the phone, listening to the sounds of the city at night rise from the street 10 floors below my window.

A week later, Elvis spoke from the dead. It was like she planned it. The delivery service dropped off a package with apologies for misrouting it to Alaska and then losing it in a warehouse before finally shipping it to me. In the box were a collection of Grateful Dead CDs, a letter, a small, sealed urn, and Great Aunt Edna's lace, yellowed, fragile, frayed but still intact, and preserved between layers of acid-free paper.

"Hey, Rufus

Didn't want to do this by email or by phone. I'm pretty sick. It's an aggressive cancer and my time's running out. Hush up, that's exactly why I didn't tell you or anybody else. No fussing, OK? I've arranged to have my ashes sent in this box. (Yeah, I'm finally making it to New York.) Sprinkle them over Blood Mountain, will you? Give my love to your folks and my best to everybody else in town. They'll know when I'm gone because Ellis & Ellis still handles my legal affairs. We had some fun, huh, you and me? It's been a good life. I always loved you.

Elvis

P.S. The CD collection is a gift. Profits go to a microcredit project down in the valley here. Kinda cool, right? Jerry Garcia's been gone for 15 years and the Dead are still social activists."

That was it. I turned the letter over, hoping to find more, and I re-read it, searching between the lines. The woman writes from her deathbed and all she has to tell me is about the social consciousness of the Grateful Dead?

I don't know how you feel about paranormal connections and mysticism but I'm not willing to completely write them off. Within a couple of hours — I do so love the Internet — I made an offer on the carpet mill and hired a search firm to find people who know how to re-tool a factory and re-train staff. I started conversations about transferring half my production from Puerto Castilla, that's in Honduras, I'm embarrassed to say, and into Fannin County, and about raising wages for my Central American workers. Even paid nearly full price by booking a ticket on Orbitz without comparison shopping -- I was in that much of a hurry.

I drew out the lace, unfolded it, and studied the fine weave and interlocking threads. Then I wrapped it around the urn. You'd have thought they were made to go together. I tucked the urn under my arm, and headed for the door.

