

That's All Right

by Larry Strattner

That's All Right

It's nine o'clock on a Thursday night in jerkwater Broadalbin Village in upstate New York. I've come thirty five hundred miles from Nampa, Idaho to see my mother. She's ninety two years old, unwell of late and gets crotchety around seven thirty in the evening. We all lose our charms in the end, don't we?

On this, my third night in Broadalbin, I sit for an hour while Mom settles down. I watch TV, some reality show. I hate reality shows. The choices are a reality show, a quiz show or a politician claiming it's not his fault. The reality people are in a jungle, running through ferns and eating bugs. I have the sound turned off, only giving cursory attention to the bug eating. Even this show is more appetizing than any politician, except maybe the part where the reality people chew the bug, bug-chewing makes it a toss-up.

My friend Elwood told me reality shows are scripted anyway. Writers try to organize what would happen in reality. I wonder if anyone told the bugs about this. They don't seem to be enjoying themselves. In any case, I don't know how Elwood would know about scripting reality shows. He's just a rack and oil-change guy down at Roy's garage. What could he know about scripting a reality show? Although an oil filter is arguably one of life's realities.

When the clock gets to nine the house is quiet except for an occasional strangled snore from Mom upstairs. Over the years I lived at home I learned this is the signal she's officially comatose for the night.

After Dad passed I tried to talk her out of this house with its steep stairs and too many rooms but she was damned if she'd move. She put in a baseboard mounted, single seat elevator to go up and down. A visiting nurse drops by twice a week to check if there's a pile of Mom and her elevator at the bottom of the stairs. But, so far, no wrecks. No one has ever been able to tell Mom anything, let alone get her to actually comply with a reasonable request. I also suspect

a State Trooper stops by to service the nurse, but have no admissible proof. One of these days I'll hide and watch.

I turn off the TV. When I drove in, I saw a new bowling alley a block and a half before I got to Moms. Usually, bowling alleys have a bar. I can walk over, get a few pops and not have to drive. Drinking and driving are risky these days. Maybe there will be a few week-night partiers and I can socialize. I was born when Mom was twenty and can still party 'till about eleven. Who knows what might happen? Maybe I haven't lost my charms yet. If the bowling alley is a place where everyone is losing his or her charm on a similar schedule, interesting things might happen. maybe we can join the Trooper and the Nurse.

Closing the door on the Mom-snores I step out under starry skies and a sliver of a moon. It's warm. I walk toward the neon sign a block and a half away. The sign says, *Sportsman Bowl*. *Sportsman* indeed. That might be me.

The bar is immediately inside the front door on the right. Bowling lanes stretch down the left, enough of them so distant bowlers look smaller.

In the raucous bar people are yelling, glass is clinking and some weird-looking little four-foot-tall guy with pomaded black hair and sideburns on a cramped stage plays guitar, accompanied by a drum machine. A sign proclaims he is *Little Elvis*. He plays *Wake up Little Susie*. Then he plays *Rock Around the Clock*. Where is *Blue Suede Shoes*, I wonder? These are not Elvis songs. These are Don and Phil and Bill songs. Maybe Little Elvis is warming up.

I shove my way through the crowd and luck into a seat at the bar. I swivel around with my drink and realize the crowd is at least ninety eight percent women, older women, women who spent some time on rugged roads when younger and now show tread marks on their faces. Most have not been resurfaced. Some have had repairs that have failed and some have kept faces, or bodies, or both, that have fallen or hang at will. This last group seems to expect nothing in the way of attention and is unconcerned when receiving none.

All these women are packed into the Sportsman Bowl bar as if a drag-net trawler spilled them out of the catch net like some load of assorted fish, each uglier or smellier than the next. The collection disturbs me. I'm no spring chicken but remain hopeful I won't act, smell or look this way as I approach my dotage. I'm not sure how I'm doing with this particular personal goal. Up here in Broadalbin as they say, *A dog can't smell his own shit.*

A huge damsel lumbers toward me, various things squirming under her loose muumuu dress. She appears intent upon something. *Sweet Jesus*, she asks me to dance.

She leads. We lumber around the postage stamp dance floor amidst multi-colored geometric shapes thrown off by a disco ball. Whenever my dance partner wrenches me in the wrong direction I stare into the spotlight supposedly trained on Little Elvis, but low enough in the ill-suited room to shrink the iris of my eye into a black dot while my partner bulldozes other dancers and treads on my toes. She steers me by grabbing a handful of the fast-food fat at my waist and pushing it back or pulling it forward.

After our dance, returning to my seat at the bar I feel sexually violated; if not by the usurping of my manhood through control of my love handles, then by the blatant careening through other dancers while being steered backward by her, in effect putting me on the bottom and keeping me there while she pursues orgasm alone. Getting yanked around for as long as this song lasted must be in violation of some sexual predation law.

Little Elvis breaks into *Heartbreak Hotel* and the biddies begin jumping and screaming. He is damn good with the exception of one or two minor key-change errors. I applaud heartily. The guy is a trouper.

After a seven-song set Little Elvis breathes into the mike in his best Elvis voice, "A special guest is joining us tonight. He is the best of the best. Come on down partner." A fellow appearing to be about one hundred years old appears in the back of the room and walks to the stage. He's a scaled-up Little Elvis, complete with tight pants, a white satin shirt with puffy sleeves, red scarf tie, and ornate belt.

His near-mutton-chop sideburns look pasted on and dyed. He has a comb-over and has possibly sprayed his scalp black to prevent show-through. What hair he has left is carefully coifed and pomaded. Vaulting onto the foot-high stage he takes the microphone from Little Elvis.

"Down at the end of Lonely Street..." he picks up the *Heartbreak Hotel* Little Elvis had been doing a creditable job on, and blows the room out of the water. He is fabulous. You can smell the estrogen buildup. Hormones get rocking. Occasional screeches pierce the air like there are '50s teenyboppers prowling the crowd. He spins into *Big Hunk O' Love*, *"Hey Baby I ain't asking much of you, just a big, a big a hunk of your love will do,"* the crowd is going nuts again as he nails it. His legs are twitching, his hips grinding and I'm nervous if any of the supersize audience faints we'll all be sucked into the cellar through the resultant hole in the floor. He segues into *Viva Las Vegas*, slams it home, Little Elvis shouts "Let's hear it, folks!" and women cry and scream. I never heard anything remotely like it, unless you count the time more than forty years ago when I saw the real, fat Elvis in concert in Las Vegas. Elvis in live performance was a stopper. *Thank you*, the old guy says *Thank you very much*, stepping off the stage with a little smile that turns up a bit on the left side of his lips, I had forgotten that smile.

As the frenetic crowd cools down I have a couple more drinks among the sweaty heifers, then get off my barstool to hit the road. I push through the Sportsman's front door to head for home and there stands the old man in his white satin shirt and red tie. "Wow," I say to him, "you were terrific. The only guy I ever heard who was even close was the genuine article I saw in Vegas around fifty years ago."

"Thank you," he replies. *"Thank you very much. I should sound as good. Good night to you, and again, thank you very much."* He turns and walks away into the parking lot humming a tune I suddenly realize is *My Way*. He fades into the upstate New York dark, his cigarette glowing. Gone again.

