

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/3

Jim Parks

Jitterbug, September 9, 1956

Robert and Susan watched from their perch atop the brick planter while Johnny fanned a broom as if it was a guitar and crooned "Love me tender, love me sweet, never smell my feet..."

It was the end of the summer when almost everyone in his world was seven years old.

Punkin! You get done with that sweeping yet?

His father had put him to work sweeping up the grass clippings from his weekly weekend chore of grooming the lawn. The boy did know how to dawdle; it really did provoke his father.

"Yes, mama." He shouted back through the breezeway of the garage and the back porch where she transferred wet washing from the machine to a basket perched on her hip.

"All right, then, get on in here and get yourself in the bathtub before Ed Sullivan comes on the television. I want you cleaned up pea perfect, mister."

His audience also began to croon the day's modified hit pop song, to the tune of the Smoky Mountain ballad, "Annabelle Lee."

Love me tender, love me sweet, never smell my feet...

They all cracked up, giggled.

Punkin'!

This time she sounded strident, harrassed.

Johnny started moving.

In the hallway, his father stood under the attic fan trying to dry himself

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in the steamy humidity. Sweat streamed off his body and scalp in the unconditioned air. The roaring four square-foot fan set up a draft strong enough to pull air in from the opened windows and propel mosquitoes upward and into the attic spaces, then out the vents on the roof.

He popped Johnny with his towel, hitching up his trunks. Johnny tried to punch him in the groin and buttocks, circling around him playfully.

Johnny ran to his chest of drawers and got his pajamas. Printed poplin with figures of Superman in bright colors. In the bathtub, he played with a small plastic boat and a couple of green figurines of Army men until the water grew tepid.

His mother came in and inspected his burr head. She scrubbed the dirt off his scalp, rubbing vigorously at a scab he'd gotten in a rock fight with the boys from next door.

"How do you get your head so dirty, boy? Do you still stand on your head in the dirt?"

"Yes."

She had battled lice and ringworm, scabies and impetigo.

She smacked the back of his head, saying, "Well, you'd better quit it. Now get dried off and get those PJ's on."

In the living room, his little sister sat in her diaper and played baby girl games on the floor with a doll and some rags. She cooed and smiled at him when he came to sit down on the couch. He got up and kissed her baby head and tousled hair and she pushed him away with one of her fat little hands.

His mother was sitting in a corner of the sofa with a glass of iced coffee and a cigarette.

"All right, kids, tonight Elvis Presley is going to be on Ed Sullivan. So, let's pay attention. This will be history in the making." She said it wryly.

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Pundits and preachers, columnists and critics alike had attacked Elvis for his hip- gyrating, stiff-legged pelvic histrionics for weeks in the press and broadcast media. He was a boy sensation that had all the women talking and the men scowling.

It was clear to even the little kids that the concept of free swinging sex was up for grabs and absolutely for sale.

His father came in and sat down in his armchair with a long-necked bottle of beer, propping his bare feet up on a foot stool.

"What's on?"

"Elvis Presley," his mother said with excitement.

"Ugh! One thing I don't need is a white boy that knows how to make like a colored man. No percentage in that."

"Now, honey, listen. He went in this place over there in Memphis to make a record for his mother. It's one of those places where you pay to have your own record made. He wanted her to have a record of him singing and they discovered him. He can sing and dance like a colored boy and that's what's selling. It's driving the bobby soxers crazy. They scream and carry on, they..." She used that sincere tone matrons use when they are trying to reason with a child or a truculent man.

"What kind of carnival did you get this from?" His father said it with a scowl. "Or was it some Ku Klux Klan meeting? Do you really have to believe all the hype the show biz people can come up with?"

"Oh, you're ruined, man. You're rotten!" She took a drag on her unfiltered king size cigarette and French inhaled it. He tipped his bottle of beer up high and drained it.

"Get me a beer, boy."

In the kitchen, the old Frigidaire chattered and sweated through the early

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evening. The sink dripped. Outside the mimosa leaves folded up in the evening cool and the birds chirped to one another as they sought out their roosts.

The boy put the empty in the container and got another wet, amber-colored bottle out of the box, popping the top with an opener, a "church key," that was hung on a string from a nail on the wall.

In the living room, all was sullen silence as Sullivan strolled back and forth onstage arms akimbo, his dour countenance building the Elvis excitement through warmup juggling and comic acts, advertisements for headache remedies and automobiles.

When the moment came, the youthful performer bounced onstage with a crooked, sneering grin and did a few numbers.

It was over before it began. There were no hip gyrations, no suggestive hootchy kootchy moves, just a hard-rocking rendition, a cross between delta blues and rock-a-billy blue-eyed soul.

Johnny's father stood up and sneered at the television.

"I'm gonna go listen to the ball game," he said. He headed for the bedroom and the old Philco with its glowing dial and resonating mahogany case. "You say that old boy is a truck driver?"

"That's what they said."

"Now I done seen it all. If he's a truck driver, I'm an aviator." He popped the elastic waist band on his trunks and stalked across the bare hardwood floor into the dim hallway under the thundering attic fan.

He called over his shoulder, "Shoot, that little old jitterbug is so full of goofballs he couldn't hardly scratch his head."

Johnny's little sister stared after him, frowning from where she sat on the floor with her doll. She was afraid.

Suddenly, she began to cry. Her mother scooped her up and patted her

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back, saying "There, there, baby girl. Don't worry. Daddy not mad at you.
Uh uh. Mama loves you.
Daddy, too." [☞]

[☞] *Jim Parks lives in Texas. He writes stories.*