

Elvis Is Dead

1987

Lynn never wanted to play in the woods anymore. The lush farmland sat in the heart of Lancaster County in rural Pennsylvania, off Rock Farm Road, a dead-end surrounded by endless rows of cornfields and vast thickets of wildflowers and trees. The land didn't belong to us, but my father had been trying to buy it for as long as I could remember. It was a popular place for underage parties because the cops didn't want to drive the few extra miles out of their way to catch young couples drinking and fooling around. My parents hated finding beer cans, empty cigarette cartons, and used condoms thrown at the end of our long stone driveway.

John, Lynn, Matthew and I were all close in age, slightly more than a year separating each of us, with jet black hair and olive skin. We looked exactly like our father and his father, who immigrated over to America in 1914 from the Calabria region in Italy. Our mother's parents were immigrants, too, from Cork, Ireland, but we didn't inherit any of her features. Her fire red hair and pale skin set her apart, even in our own family. I'm not sure when they both became so obsessed with keeping us safe, but the littering on the lane by our house deluded their idea that we were in an untouchable bubble--a utopia they created to keep us safe from riffraff and worse. Their concerns grew exponentially when Tom Brokaw started reporting about young kids being kidnapped and dismembered. One little boy was found shoved into a brown garbage bag on the side of the road. His head was missing. From there on out, every time we passed a bag of trash, we could hear Mom suck in her breath as she pressed her foot to the gas pedal of her car. She began driving us to and from the bus stop, which was almost a half mile away, instead of making

us walk like we had done for years.

We only had one neighbor, Mr. Stauffer, and he was the farmer who owned everything surrounding our property. There were over a hundred acres in all, and my father wanted to buy the twenty that backed up to our yard and led to the river behind our house. I understood why both men had dug in their heels and were at an impasse. The land was rich and green. Beautiful old-growth trees canopied over smaller ones, producing so many persimmons and pawpaw fruits, branches bent under the weight. Vines dangled from the tree-line, beyond where the eye could see, and they swayed with the wind. Velvety ferns graced the mossy banks sloping to the river. Mulberry bushes and wild blackberries emerged each summer, dotting the foliage with little blooms of red and purple. The heady scent of sweet honeysuckle filled the air.

For a few short weeks each year, the woods were a Garden of Eden where I played with my two older brothers and sister. We spent hours discovering flowers and insects, making forts with the dead tree limbs which had broken off when the blanket of winter snow was too much for them to bear. Secret clubs were formed, with special handshakes and silly code words. Our fishing rods hooked little sunny brim, their shining bellies reflecting off the water, before we gently released them back into the river. But as spring blended with summer, the woods changed. The natural grassy paths grew covered with burn hazel, which quickly towered over us. Blackberries disappeared and were replaced by large spiny thorns that grabbed at the skin on our legs. His herd of cows trampled the wildflowers and they shit everywhere. We stopped playing in the woods and glared at our neighbor whenever we saw him. Every year my father proposed a new sum of money for the land and Mr. Stauffer answered, “We’ll see, Joseph. Ask me again next spring.”

When we stood on our porch, we could watch Mr. Stauffer make trips to the river with

bags of garbage. He was too cheap to pay for the city to collect his waste, so he dumped it into the water and the small rapids rushed his leftover food and trash downstream. On his back deck, pelts of foxes and other small game swung from a ceiling beam, shriveling in the summer sun after maggots had cleaned the skin of excess flesh. He had caught the animals in traps. The beautiful red furs hanging from frayed ropes sold for a paltry \$10. The money he made was used to buy more traps and some poison for the rodents inhabiting his barn. His efforts worked like a charm on our outdoor cats, too. Our yard had become a small pet cemetery. Mom glared knowingly at Dad when we'd find them seizing violently in the grass with foam and spittle draining from their lips. Sometimes, the cats returned to our yard, bleeding out in the grass, having chewed off a paw to escape the jaws of the traps. She'd gathered us into another room to have a paper airplane-making contest while Dad disappeared with a shovel.

In the cooler months, Mr. Stauffer's woods were overrun with hunters who paid to shoot the wild game on his property. Blasts from shotguns made us jump and we watched them trespass through our backyard seeking an entry way into the thick hedges of trees. They wore orange hats with ear flaps and padded vests, rifles slung over their shoulders. During this time, we weren't allowed outside unless we wore bright colors. Lynn and John weren't deterred, though. They often spent hours in the woods, looking for the fox traps, using sticks to dig under oddly placed piles of leaves and twigs. When they found the metal devices, they triggered the springs, causing the sharp jaws to snap shut. My mother was always reluctant to let them go. She put a stop to their outings after they became separated on one occasion and John came home without Lynn. He had slipped in a pile of mud and went to the river to wash off. He told Lynn to stay put beside a large upturned tree, but when he returned, she had disappeared. An hour passed and Mom lost her voice calling my sister's name over and over. She finally stumbled home with

dirt on her knees and elbows, and grass stains on her torn clothes. Lynn's eyes, which looked exactly like mine, were unusually dark and wild, and for a moment, I imagined she was a fox caught in a trap. She couldn't answer our questions about what happened or where she had gone, but she withdrew to our room, and stayed there for two days, not talking to anyone and refusing to eat. Eventually, Lynn snapped out of her funk, but she never stepped foot in the woods again.

At night, when she thought the rest of us were asleep, I heard her crying. I often whispered to the shaking body in the bed beside mine, stroking her hair. She turned her back to me, curling her knees into her chest. In the light of day, I asked again and again, what had happened that made her so sad and anxious, until at last, she became enraged at my insistence for the truth. Her anger seemed to sharpen two-fold from then on, as though something snapped deep inside. Our fights became down-right vicious, just shy of the professional wrestling matches Matthew watched on television. Behind the closed door of our bedroom, far away from our parents' eyes, we jabbed each other in the ribs and pulled hair. She knocked me to the hard floor and when I stood, I slammed her against the wall, which was papered with a soft pink gingham that matched our twin princess canopy beds. The pale green and white plaque hanging on the wall between the bedposts, had our names intertwined, Lynn and Leigh. The letter L connected us, with her name running sideways and mine running vertically. It seemed to fall every time we fought, but we hung it back up each time, coloring in the chipped paint with markers.

The fights usually began because overnight, my sister stopped giving a damn about her personal hygiene. Teen magazines covered her unmade bed. Damp towels left watermarks on the hardwood floor. Her clothes were heaped in large piles in every corner of the room. Bras and nightgowns draped over the edges of open dresser drawers. Even after our cat gave birth to a

litter of six kittens in Lynn's pajamas, staining her belongings with pink amniotic fluid and placenta, she still didn't improve her habits. Our bedroom also had a private half bath attached to it, about the size of a tiny closet. Lipstick and eye shadow stained the white countertop. The toilet had a dirty yellow ring around the inside bowl and hair balls the size of newborn bunnies clung to the doorstopper. I tried to keep our room clean, but Lynn's lack of interest made it impossible.

I suppose my parents finally grew weary of the unrelenting fights because they agreed to clear out the back part of the basement, where we stored everything no one wanted or needed, and I was given my own bedroom. The space was dark and smelled of mold despite having a poured concrete floor. The room was cluttered with a broken refrigerator, folding chairs, wooden tennis racquets and inexpensive ice skates—the kind you tightened with a key. The walls were lined with unpainted shelves holding hundreds of jars of canned food from our garden. Light struggled to make its way through the two dirty glass windowpanes facing the yard. Still, I was euphoric about getting my own bedroom and undeterred by the basement's characteristics which were somewhat reminiscent of the Stephen King novels filling my bookshelves. I had recently finished reading *It* and *Nightshift*, and both paperbacks sat on my nightstand. I tried not to think about *Pennywise*, or *Gray Matter* and *The Boogeyman* but when I did, I pulled the covers up to my chin, and the hairs on my arms prickled with fear.

My parents chose sub-grade brown polyester carpet to cover the floor and fluorescent track lighting for the ceilings. Salvaged wood beams were used to line the walls as a sort of homemade wainscoting. My mom took me to the store where I chose paint for my walls. I picked out a warm creamy flesh color that reminded me of the apricots growing on the trees in our backyard. She sewed antique white lace onto an old ivory-colored sheet which she cut in two,

and we hung those for curtains. We repainted my grandmother's 100-year old wicker rocker and put it in the corner. The surprises didn't end there. A plastic shower stall, toilet, and sink with vanity sat outside the basement patio door to be installed the following week. The storage closet was going to be my new bathroom. Dad mounted square mirrored tiles from the floor to the ceiling on the wall behind the vanity. A little storage bench with towel hooks lined the other wall and a crisp white lace shower curtain billowed from the metal rod running across the top.

Lynn wasn't jealous. She disappeared for days as she redecorated her own space, dragging furniture around the room, etching deep scratches into the hardwood floors. For once, I looked forward to coming home from school to do my homework, write in my journal, and listen to homemade tape compilations of favorite songs while I straightened my room, dusting and organizing my knickknacks. Sometimes, the room still felt a little creepy and occasionally, I was startled by a shadow passing in front of the windows. I had frequent dreams about being lost, deep in a field of green, with a hunter walking steps behind me as I sidestepped large metal traps. And, no matter how often I changed course, or how fast I ran to escape him, he was always able to find me. I would awake with a jolt, saturated with cold sweat and my heart beating wildly.

But the shadow wasn't a hunter, only our pet pony, Ginger, who stared longingly at the large ceramic carrot dangling from the middle of a Beatrix potter wind chime under my window. The dumb horse bumped her wet nose into the glass and left green snot marks which I wiped off every few days. We didn't know how old Ginger was, but she arrived on Christmas Eve, three years ago. On the night Dad called to us from outside, a fine layer of sugary snow glazed our driveway. He stood at the bottom of the stairs that led to our front door, holding an undernourished pony by the reins, faded red with scratched buckles. She was beautiful with thick, brown fur which smelled of winter air. Her mane and tail were black and coarse, and she

bristled when we buried our noses into her neck to breath her in.

We tossed around names of the horses we knew from cartoons and movies. The pony stood quietly as our hands explored her body and touched the long rib bones protruding sharply through her fur. Mom stood with her arms at her side, smiling broadly as she watched us dote on our new pet. She suggested the name Ginger because the pony's fur color was the same as gingerbread. We agreed in rare unity.

"Yep," Dad said, "She's a beauty, all right. I picked her out from a whole barn of horses going to the glue factory. She was the nicest one there."

Lynn and I were still hugging our new pony around the neck, glad she wouldn't be made into glue, when a small mew came from the back of his truck. We squealed in delight and raced to the open bed. A small black and white calf stood tied to the open window with a twine rope. His eyes were huge and fringed with long eyelashes.

"This is Elvis," Dad said. "I already named him."

We hopped back and forth between the two animals until our father led them away to the barn. It was almost time to open the family gifts we had made for each other and tucked under the tree earlier in the day, so we ran upstairs to warm our fingers by the wood fireplace. The tree was scraggly, but our ornaments and the warm bubble lights Mom had wrapped around the branches filled the bare spaces. Dad joined us in the house and washed his hands. Our mother's pile of gifts was rather large compared to the rest of ours, and we could see her excitement grow. Lynn and I exchanged glances as she gently touched the thin sheet of last Sunday's newspaper covering the first gift. We had stacked them by size. Twelve small boxes were identical in shape. My sister and I had wrapped each one in different advertising flyers and comic strips.

Mom waited until we were seated before ripping off the paper. A single-serving lemon

meringue pie from the Turkey Hill Convenience Store fell onto her lap. She opened all twelve boxes, one by one, putting them in a neat pile that grew into a small barrier between her and my father. The sewing thread came next. There were ten spools in different colors. Mom's expression didn't change as she unwrapped them all, placing them carefully beside the twelve pies. Dad handed another package to Matthew, who passed it along to his mother. Slippers. She tried them on, and they fit. There was one final gift. Dad tossed it into her lap. She opened it slowly and we circled around her to see what was inside the package. The nightgown she held up was warm and soft. It had already been washed. She stared at a small Goodwill sticker adhered to the size tag, frowned slightly, but she placed the gown next to the slippers.

We didn't have any gifts for our father. He hated Christmas and told us not to get him anything because the holiday wasn't about giving or receiving material things. But when we begged him to go to Midnight Mass with our cousins, he refused to take us to the religious service either, saying he hated church more than Christmas. Mom told us our father used to be an altar boy when he was younger, but he quit one day and never stepped foot in church again. Although none of us believed in Santa any longer, she was the one who made sure dozens of presents were under the tree Christmas morning. Dad's contributions were typically an orange or candy cane in each of our stockings. The new Christmas pets were unexpected.

Right from the beginning, Ginger and Elvis were inseparable. They grazed on the grass in the enclosed yard near the woods, the pony strangely dotting on the calf. Elvis had to be fed a special milk three times a day. We fought over who got to mix the powder formula into the warm water and who got to hold the plastic blue bucket. A long feeding nipple that looked like a cow's teat protruded from the side. We laughed when he bucked his head against the plastic tub in

excitement and his long tongue lolled around the feeding nipple when the liquid was gone. After a few weeks, the milk feedings came to a stop, much to our disappointment. Elvis needed more solid nourishment to sustain his growing frame. Dad let us carefully measure the sticky grain mixture he picked up from the feed store. He kept it in a large metal barrel which made a clanging sound when he removed the heavy lid and brought them both running for the food. Dad secured Ginger in her stall so she couldn't eat Elvis' dinner. She gazed hungrily through the windows as her companion gorged himself. When he was through and had licked all four corners of the wood feeding trough, Dad released her. Ginger's nose snorted as her velvety lips searched through the grass for the precious grains Elvis had unknowingly dropped. We asked Dad why he wouldn't let her have some of the feed.

“It's too expensive,” he said.

Still, Ginger continued to gain weight, her belly protruding a little more each week. Dad put a lock on the barrel. He said it was to keep rodents away, but we all knew he was suspicious of us sneaking her food. No one confessed to the unspoken accusation. And no one had to because one spring morning, Ginger's baby was standing beside her.

“Huh,” Dad said. “Didn't see that one coming.”

The filly had long lanky legs and knobby knees. She skittered away from us as we approached her, Ginger looking wary and protective. She snorted and neighed softly with tones we'd never heard her make before. We stared at the two ponies in astonishment.

“What are we going to name her?” Lynn asked, stretching her hand out to touch the newborn's soft, honey-colored fur. The baby moved in quick circles around her mother, desperately trying to avoid Lynn's thin fingers.

“Don't walk behind the horses,” Dad said. “You'll get kicked in the face.”

“Why would the horses kick her in the face?” I asked

“Because it’s so ugly,” Matthew said, laughing loudly.

“What about Misty?” Mom said, ignoring Matthew who was now pretending to flick boogies at John.

“We should name it Brutus Maximus,” John said.

“It’s a girl, John,” Dad answered with a sigh.

Lynn and I agreed. Misty was the perfect name for our new horse. The baby disappeared under her mother’s belly and started to nurse. We stood watching, mesmerized, forgetting that it was a school day. Mom remembered and jumped.

“Get moving! The bus will be here,” she said, pushing us away from the horses and into the house to collect lunch money, backpacks, and car keys. We packed into her car so she could drive us down the long lane to the bus stop. In her haste, she pressed the gas pedal before John had even shut his door.

“Jesus, Mom,” John said. “Wait until I at least having the fucking door closed.”

An immediate hush fell over the car as we froze at John’s slip. Mom kept on driving, completely oblivious to the fact that her older son had dropped the F-bomb.

“Wasn’t this morning special?” Mom asked, as we all stared at each other with owl-like eyes. “Ginger was getting fat all this time and we thought she was eating too much.”

“Yeah, it was so special,” John said, smirking at his own good fortune.

“It was fucking crazy,” Matthew followed, trying out the new word he just learned.

Mom slammed on the brakes and we all lurched hard against our seat belts.

“What did you just say?” Mom said, turning around. She stared at Matthew and then slapped his cheek. The bus stop was twenty feet away. Red fingerprints began to bloom across

Matthew's face.

"Where did you ever hear that word?" she hissed.

"I don't know," Matthew said, sniffing and trying to hold back tears.

"Don't you ever let me hear you say it again."

She pulled her foot off the brake and pulled the car up to the bus stop. The school bus approached the stop sign, its doors creaking loudly as they folded open like an accordion. John and Matthew moved to the back of the bus to sit with the boys. Lynn and I followed them, but we chose a seat near the front with the girls from middle school. We bubbled over telling our classmates about the baby pony born in our backyard while the morning dew was heavy, and the air was still cool.

Each day after school, we raced down our driveway and squealed with joy when we saw Misty resting in the warm grass. We laughed when a butterfly landed on the wood fence post in front of her, causing her to prance nervously around the yard.

"Look at her buck her legs," Lynn said.

"You know what rhymes with buck?" John asked.

"Oh, give it a rest," I said.

"Cluck, muck, schmuck, yuck, luck," Mathew started rhyming. He was on a roll, randomly going through the alphabet.

"You forgot the letter F," John reminded him.

"Stop it, John," Lynn said. "You're going to get him into trouble." She pointed towards Mom who was standing by the redwood tree in the center of our yard.

Elvis lumbered by, snuffing in the grass for leftover feed he may have missed. He

brushed up against Ginger gently and she neighed at him. He was now an enormous full-grown steer and his horns were growing larger by the day.

“Jacob Martin is price gouging,” we heard Dad say in the kitchen a few hours later while Mom rolled out a piecrust. “If we go with him, he wants half the meat and \$250. I’m not going to agree to his rates.”

“What are your choices?” she asked. He’s one of the only butchers in town who will take someone else’s cow for slaughter.

“I checked out a book from the library,” Dad answered. “I’ve been a hunter my whole life. It can’t be that difficult.”

“Oh no, Joe,” she whispered loudly, dropping her rolling pin down hard on the counter. “I refuse to do it.”

“I already bought everything we need,” he said, turning to Lynn and me, who had now stopped our homework to listen to their conversation. I caught a glimpse of the title, *Butcher Shop*.

“Finish up girls,” Dad said, leaving the kitchen to read his new book.

On Monday, we came home from school and saw he had dug a large hole in the back of the property, next to the edge of Mr. Stauffer’s woods where the trees cast a long shadow across the ground. Ginger, Misty, and Elvis nosed around it curiously. On Tuesday, John complained of a sore throat and he asked to stay home from school. The cumulative end-of-year math test he hadn’t studied for was being given during second period and he winked at us knowingly when Mom acquiesced, probably because she was simply too tired to argue with him.

That afternoon, the sun was unusually hot when we got off the bus, but Mom wasn’t waiting for us. We gathered up our books and began the long trek down the lane towards our

house. As we trudged towards our driveway, we saw John sitting alone at the edge of the field where patches of small purple wild violets liked to grow. He was staring off into the distance and when we got close enough, we saw his eyes were swollen and red from crying. We sat down in the flowers, forming a tight circle. When he was calm enough to talk, he told us about how he skimmed the book Dad had checked out from the library. The author recommended slitting the steer's throat and bleeding it out, but Dad decided to shoot Elvis in the brain instead. It was faster. He handed Elvis an apple. It fell to the ground and as the steer nosed it in the grass, Dad lifted the butt of his gun, placed it to Elvis' temple and pulled the trigger. Ginger and Misty jumped and ran from the sound. The steer dropped to the ground, but it continued to twitch like a flickering light bulb for another twenty minutes. Elvis was dead.

“So, you knew he was going to shoot Elvis today?” Lynn asked.

“Yes, and I didn't do anything to stop him,” John replied, slowly looking around at us. “Why are we living like this? It isn't normal. I have no friends, no girlfriend, I live in the middle of fucking nowhere with my family and some damn farm animals. We can't even get cable with MTV. Mom and Dad think they're keeping us safe, here, in this stupid bubble. Look what happened to Lynn with the hunter. It was my idea to look for those traps. He found her.”

My sister's face turned ashen and she looked down at the violets, her hands digging into the soft petals and leaves.

“We said we'd never talk about that day again. I don't want to think about it. Not ever.”

“Hey, it's going to be Ok,” I said quietly, not quite understanding the secret conversation happening between them.

John nodded and wiped the tears from his cheeks. We stood up and walked down our driveway.

When we got to our house, our cow's body had been sectioned off and dad was sawing at it like a madman to beat the flies from laying eggs on the chunks of bloody meat. Mom's face was a pale green. Her job was to wrap the chunks in white freezer paper, then plastic bags, and put the bags into the deep chest freezer. Her yellow t-shirt which read *I Climbed Pikes Peak* was flecked with blood. The white crescents of her short fingernails were now filled with dark purple pulp. Thick puddles of red sat congealed under the picnic table where Dad had accidentally sliced through the plastic sheeting. They both showed signs of frustration at taking on a project bigger than they could handle. Their race against the clock to get the whole steer butchered before their children got home from school was unsuccessful. And the flies were arriving in swarms.

"We're going to have to move this all into the bathroom," Dad said, as we gaped with open mouths at the horror scene before us. The nearest bathroom was mine and I rushed to the doorway to block anyone from entering. Dad pushed passed me with bloody hands. Lynn began to cry.

"You can't use my bathroom," I screamed. "NO!"

Dad brushed past me again, this time, with a giant roll of plastic sheeting.

"Open the door," he said to Matthew, who looked both sick and curious.

"NO!" I said again, starting to cry. Lynn was crying, too. Dad moved back and forth, laying out the plastic and taping it down into place. He placed a large sheet on the floor and then covered the bottom of my shower stall with a smaller piece. Dad then started carrying Elvis' large limbs into the bathroom and stacking them in my shower.

"Margaret, get in here," Dad called to her through the outside door. My mother shuffled into the bathroom, holding a box of plastic gallon bags. I stood in my bedroom door watching them.

“I’m going to need you kids. Help your mother,” he said to us sternly. “Carry the bagged meat from outside and put it into the chest freezer.”

John pointed at our parents, his fingers shaking with rage and shock, and his face blotchy from crying. “Fuck you. I’m leaving,” he said. He turned and ran out the door.

Mom walked towards me slowly. She held a plastic bag with a small white square of wrapped meat inside of it. I held out my hand and took it from her. The bag felt warm and heavy. She touched me gently on my arm and while I knew she was trying her best to comfort me, I pulled away from her at the sight of her blood-crusted fingernails.

“I’m so sorry, Leigh.”

I walked wordlessly towards the chest freezer. The lid was already open, and inside it, I saw other stark white squares, neatly wrapped and stacked in tight rows. I gently placed my square on top. As I started back to get more packages, a shadow crossed my window. Ginger was watching me from outside the glass pane. I reached up and ripped the wind chime from the hook that held the dangling carrot beneath the windowsill.

“Git,” I said. She snorted into the glass and turned away.