

Fiction
3,220 words

Blue Christmas

“So, y'got a week to pull off yer show and yer plumb stuck without a headliner?”

“That's about the size of it, yes.”

“Christmas Eve’s a busy night, son. Usually do three, four shows Christmas Eve. “

“Right. Right. Well, I don't want to waste any more of your time.”

I'm sitting in a shitty, dilapidated booth with torn red leather seats at the *Wishing Well*, the last “nightclub” in town to allow smoking. The club's empty except for us, the bartender, and a few lingering musicians, but there's still a thick, black fog in the room.

King Cassidy smiles at me, bites down on his stogie.

“No waste, son. What time you start?”

“Eight.”

“Who's the opener?”

“I – we have jugglers. Two kids from the – from our Sunday school.”

“Mmm,” he says. “So, main show's at – ”

“Nine.”

“Mmm,” he mutters again.

And three hundred pounds of bulging white jump suit, sunglasses and an oily pompadour pulls out a tiny pocket calendar soaked in sweat. And with a swift motion, the King of Rock ‘n Roll unholsters a pen from a zippered pocket on his left shoulder.

“Now, let's see ...”

“Mr. Cassidy,” I interrupt. “Obviously you've got some – talent. Why would you possibly want to do this?”

“Fraid I don't follow.”

“I'm – I'm sorry. Could you just – could you just *stop* for a minute and be a – a regular person? It's just – it's difficult to talk to you this way.”

The bartender and a couple of Cassidy's bandmates glance over at us. I forget I'm on his turf here, not mine. He looks at me – hurt? Angry? Hard to read Elvis.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “I don't mean to waste your time. I just don't understand – ”

“Ah do this for a living, son,” he says.

“Yes, but not for *Jews*,” I say.

He takes a long, deep breath, says nothing.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “I'm sorry. This was my mistake.”

The wind in the parking lot's torrential, about sixty miles an hour. I get in the car, turn the motor over, pray it won't stall in this crappy neighborhood. There's a rapping at my window – Cassidy. He's pissed. Got a gun or a crowbar or – he gestures for me to roll down the window. I roll it down. He shoves a manila folder at me, his black hair flapping in the wind.

“Take a look,” he says.

I open the folder. It's his head shot. A huge, ultra-bright, smirking hound dog. Signed. An autograph?

“Other side,” he says.

His resume: acting, recordings, TV and stage appearances, his real name, phone, address. Real name?

I look at him, incredulous. He braces, holding his pomp for dear life.

“You're Jewish?”

He throws a DVD into the car, backs away.

“Need confirmation tomorrow, if we're a go,” he says.

“Got it,” I say and wave the resume.

Julie and I sit in the living room, eating popcorn, staring at the television, mesmerized. On the infant monitor, Eddie snores quietly in his room. On TV, King Cassidy finishes a set, bellowing to an enraptured hall of Kiwanis.

“He's good,” says Julie.

“I dunno,” I say. “Maybe we could pull it off.”

“Absolutely,” says Julie. “Look at him. Can you believe you were going to spend money on Mort Sahl? This is a jackpot, Rob. He's perfect.”

“He's just not perfect for the JCC. I mean, nobody's gonna come if I tell them it's Elvis.”

“So, tell them it's Jewish Elvis.”

I stare at her.

“Get him to sing *Blue Chanukah* or something. It's so obvious, Rob.”

I feel the pinpricks of my most reliable rash creeping up the back of my neck.

“What if he doesn't go for it?”

“He's an Elvis impersonator! He's gotta have a sense of humor! Ask him.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Seriously? You mean – ”

“Absolutely not,” says a pissed-off Presley.

“Whoa! Wait! You wanted to do this – ”

“This isn't a game to me, Mr. Chaykin – ”

“Rob – ”

“I take my profession very serious.”

“*You're Jewish and you're Elvis!* Come on! There's gotta be other Jewish Elvises out there!”

“Well, call them, then. ‘Cause I’ll be no party to mockery.”

“Cassidy – look – it's just – I'm afraid that people – members of this community won't show up for an Elvis concert. It's not that your show isn't good. It's just that this is an extremely conservative group and *Viva Las Vegas* isn't something they usually associate with.”

“Not my problem,” he sighs.

“I know. I just – I want to get an audience for you. I want the show to be good.”

“Mr. Chaykin – you bring your crowd in – with no billing as *Jewish Elvis* – and I'll give ‘em a show they'll remember. *Guaranteed.*”

I hear his deep, mammoth cave breathing waiting for me. God, I've got less than a week.

“Okay,” I say. “Okay. I’ll get them in.”

Work.

Everything is Christmas, Christmas, Christmas. Yeah, okay, they've got a tiny electric menorah, some decorations. An eighth of the staff’s Jewish after all. But really, it’s all Christmas. There's an incredible tree. The office is littered with cookies, cards, poinsettias. People have started wearing snowman pins and Christmas tree ties, collecting toys for the underprivileged. Everyone’s talking about shopping, family, holiday vacations, and the massive, upcoming office Christmas party. Carols permeate the ether.

Bobby Bloom leans into my cubicle.

“Tell me you didn’t get King Cassidy for your party?”

“Yup. Yup. I did.”

“*Score!*”

Bobby daps me, calls over to the adjacent cubes.

“You literally forget this guy isn't the real thing,” he says. “That's how good he is!”

“Really?” says Peggy Noonan, eyes lit up, leaning back from her desk. “Is he young Elvis – or –”

“Late Elvis,” says Bobby. “Almost near-death Elvis. He must weigh – what – 350 pounds?”

“250 – 275,” I say.

“He's slimmed down. But man, he could belt!”

“He’s great,” I agree.

Joey Roemer leans in.

“I saw King Cassidy at my old company's party last year. Unbelievable.”

“We should get him for our party!” says Peggy.

“I dunno,” I say. “He's got a pretty tight schedule – ”

They return to their cubes. I breathe. Back to work, work. Peggy peeks over my cube, whispers.

“Rob – could I get a ticket to your show?”

“Uhm – well – it's – it's – ”

“Jews only?”

“No! Its – its invitation only. Y'know?”

She smiles, politely.

“Okay,” she says, disappointed. “Thought you needed the money.”

Julie sorts through mail in the kitchen. In the living room, Eddie wobbles to Elvis' rendition of *here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Claus, right down Santa Claus Lane* while staring at soundless *Backyardigans* on TV. *God, what's she thinking?*

“You had to do that? It's not bad enough as it is?”

“He loves it,” she says. “Look at him.”

I turn off the music. Eddie looks at me, sad, confused. I kiss him, and turn up the cartoon.

“Hey, Sport. How are you?”

“*Here comes Santa Claus! Here comes Santa Claus!*”

“Well...he's not coming here, bud.”

“Why not?”

“Because we don’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because we just don’t, Eddie. We did Chanukah last week. Remember how great that was? We even left up the lights, the menorah – ”

He stares at me, as if I’ve ripped his most blessed *Ugly Doll* away, which I guess I have.

“I want to do Christmas.”

“I know. I know you do, honey. But we don’t – ”

The lips tremble. Here we go.

“Hey! Hey! Look what I found!” I pull a DVD out of my briefcase. “Dinosaurs! A movie about dinosaurs!”

“They celebrate Christmas?”

“No – they – they just eat things and fight and chase each other. And in this one they end up in New York! It’s got outtakes and – ”

He stares at it, deciding.

“Look, Mom!” he says. “Dinosaurs!”

“Very cool, honey. Why don’t you put it on?”

He puts it in the DVD player, settles into his bean bag chair. I go back to the kitchen.

“You’re uptight,” she says.

“Yeah? And you’re not helping.”

“Please. Half his class is Jewish. They talk Chanukah all month long.”

“If he went to Yavneh he'd never even hear about Christmas!”

“If we locked him in the closet he wouldn't either. Why don't we do that?”

“You don't have to make it more difficult.”

“By buying a record?”

“It's cruel, Julie.”

“Cruel?”

“It's bad enough he has to hear about it all day long – then you stick it in his face!”

Here comes Santa Claus, here comes

“Don't touch the CD player, Eddie!”

Julie stares at me, fuming.

“See?” I say. “He doesn't need to be more confused than he already is.”

“You hired Elvis!”

“It was that or cancel! I do everything I can to keep the community center together by myself! It would be nice if I could have a little more – ”

The house phone rings. I pick it up.

“Dr. Berman? Yes, I spoke to him. He'll work out fine. Yes, I know. No Christmas songs. I've seen him, sir. There's plenty of other material he can do. No need to be uncomfortable. He's very talented. Yes, I believe he'll take requests if they're within his repertoire. Yes. I'll get the contract signed tomorrow. Goodnight.”

I look over and see Julie's ferreted Cassidy's contract out of my brief. And she's flipping through the pages, mouth agape.

“Julie – ”

“A hundred dollars?”

“Julie – ”

“You've got eight hundred people coming – !”

“No – no – six-fifty – maybe seven hundred, tops.”

“Rob!”

“You know what the center lost this year? You know what it costs just to light that room for one night?! This barely covers expenses!”

She digs through the junk drawer, pulls out our checkbook, writes.

“What are you – ”

She rips out a check, hands it to me. \$500.

“You're kidding me.”

“We can afford it. Everyone coming to this show can afford it.”

“That's not the point.”

“You give him this check, Rob.”

“No.”

“You give it to him or *I'll* give it to him. I don't care which.”

“Jesus, Julie!”

“*Jesus!*” says Eddie, watching dinosaurs.

“He's doing you a favor!” she says. “You won't even let him sing Christmas songs!”

“It's my money!” I yell. “My money!”

“You give him the check or stay at work on Christmas,” she says and walks out of the room.

And in the living room, Eddie looks at me, hopeful.

“When are we getting the tree?”

Jelvis. Melvis. Schmelvis.

Surfing the net. 1:30 in the morning.

Elvis Prestein. Rebbe Elvis. Kosher Elvis.

I'm pissed at Julie. Pissed at the JCC, at the JCC Board of Directors, at Dr. Berman for approving Cassidy in the first place and then hamstringing me to run the thing. *I'm just the goddamn Treasurer, for Christ sake!* I'm pissed at everyone, everything, everywhere. Jews everywhere.

Klez Elvis.

I'll expense the \$500. Charge it back to them. Somehow, I'll get my money back. But – I keep telling myself – that's not the point. This shouldn't even be happening. I should've just canceled.

Surfing, I see a virtual pageant of all Jewish Elvises the world has to offer. Elvis jumpsuits with tallit, blue, white and gold lamé, huge Star of David gold chains. They sing Elvis tunes reworked with Jewish and Yiddish phrases. All are one-joke wonders. Embarrassing. Truly, utterly awful. And all are four times as expensive as Cassidy.

And what's wrong with liking Christmas? Everyone likes Christmas. It's not just a Christian holiday. Okay, the whole birth of Christ thing is Christian – but not – not what we – Americans and society have turned the holiday into. And even if it is ultimately a birth-of-Christ thing – *well, so what?* I can't appreciate the music? The decorations? *Miracle on 34th Street?*

Hey, *I* wanted a Christmas tree when I was four years old. And five. And six. And seventeen. Eighteen. Thirty-eight. Why shouldn't Eddie? So he should get screwed, because I got screwed?

Cassidy's house is normal. Smaller than mine and in a B-minus neighborhood. But nice. Not the trailer park I'd expect of a celebrity impersonator. He certainly has better Chanukah lights than I do, I'll give him that. Inside its simple. Nice. Old world. Steam heat from radiators. Dull, tan, run-down wallpaper. His two kids are normal. Cute even. Blue and white lights decorate his den and he still has a few menorahs out. And no Chanukah bush.

There are a couple pictures of the real Elvis, some framed concert tickets, a gold record – hardly the memorabilia you'd expect. Almost disappointing, really.

“There are some conditions here,” I say, as he glances through the contract. “You can't perform any Christmas songs. No Christmas, no Christ, no Santa Claus. No – no – I don't know – gospel?”

He stares at me, bored.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “I have to make this speech. If it were up to me – you could perform whatever you like. But it's not. I don't know if this will limit your act – ”

Cassidy signs, hands me the contract.

“Guess that'll do it,” he says.

“Great. Thanks,” I say, then jokingly, “Not much of a shrine.”

“More in storage,” he says.

We head to the door. I finger the envelope in my pocket. The check. My hand grips it like a vice. I can let go. I can. I can.

“Well...” I say, “you realize what a tight budget we're on. Building the new community center. Everybody donating their time. I don't take a penny, myself. It's all volunteer.”

He hands me my coat.

“I just don't want you to think we don't – appreciate – what you're doing. Because – because –”

“Mr. Chaykin,” he says. “I been trying to play yer center for ten years now. Every year I offer and every year y'turn me down. Who cancelled?”

“Mort Sahl.”

He nods, unsurprised.

“Family thing?”

“Kidney operation.”

He opens the door. The wind outside is bitter.

“I tell you my father was Cantor at Adath Israel when I was in grade school?”

“No,” I say.

“Mm. I went to Yavneh first through third grade.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Hated it. Hated the kids. Hated the temple. Thought it was unbelievably boring. Only memory I have of Yavneh – one day during recess, half the boys held me down on the slide and rolled an old tire over me. Big laughs. After my father died I said screw it. Didn't go to temple, church. Didn't do nothin'.”

From the kitchen, a tired dishwasher chugs to life.

“But having my own kids, I understand what my father did. He sang. Beautiful bright tenor. Singing was everything. He connected on his own terms.”

He looks toward the street.

“Not about money for me,” he says.

And I stand alone outside his doorway, feeling the cold night air at my neck. So, it doesn't matter. He doesn't care about money. I'm off the hook. So easy to walk away. But I leave the extra check in his mailbox.

Christmas Eve.

A packed auditorium. Every Jewish person in town is here tonight. Everyone's here because it's social, a good event, a good charity, and what else do these people have to do tonight? A well-placed weapon of destruction could take out the whole community in two seconds.

The jugglers – two kids in their late teens – close to a standing ovation.

“Thank you!” says a juggler. “King Cassidy will be up in just a minute!”

Some cheers. Some members of the crowd get up, coats in hand and file towards the exit. My good community. Ten minutes later, the lights dim. A single white spotlight shines onstage. The back of a grossly overweight white jumpsuit begins to disenvelope from a kneeling huddle. A husky, breathy baritone begins to sing, a cappella.

A-don o-lam

Julie's hand grips mine. The crowd – the crowd is – transfixed?

Asher ma-Ia

Cassidy turns towards us, in full regalia, issuing a focused, ethereal sound...

B'terem kol y'tzer nivrah

I realize everyone – myself included – is singing with him.

B-yet-hasa v-he-esa kol, a-za-ay melech sh'monekrah. A-don olam

He finishes. The audience applauds, cheers, thrilled. Julie – a lot of people, actually – are *crying*. Cassidy grins, struts across the stage.

“Thank y’very much,” he says. “Mah momma named me KC. But you kin call me Cassidy. Y’all ready for some fun?”

The crowd cheers.

“Well, then, let’s get it on.”

An orchestra of canned music bursts to life, and Cassidy begins to twitch.

Baby let me be your loving teddy bear. Put a chain around my neck and lead me anywhere. Oh let me be your teddy bear

Cassidy blows through *Jailhouse Rock, Don't be Cruel, Puppet on a String, Trouble, I Want You I Need You I Love You, Return to Sender, Don't, All Shook Up, Suspicious Minds, Stuck on You, Can't Help Falling in Love, Burning Love, Bigger Hunk of Love, Love Me Tender, Blue Suede Shoes, Are You Lonesome Tonight, Eleanor Rigby* and *Hound Dog*. And before you know it, the evening's half over. He sings *Draydel, Draydel, Draydel* and actually stops the show for a candlelit prayer of *Ma'oz-Tzur*.

He sings *Blue Chanukah*, winking and smiling at Julie and all the women in the audience. They laugh. They love it. *Such a bubby!*

After two hours and two encores of rambling and rocking, Cassidy, drenched in sweat, slows things to a halt and speaks, in confession, to the audience.

“My, my, my,” he says. “Thank y’all so much for coming together on this cold, frosty night. My final song, ladies and gentlemen, was written by a man named Israel Baline, a Jewish man who became America’s greatest modern-day composer. And no matter what words he wrote, his music spoke of a deeper understanding of faith – a faith that came right straight from the center of his heart.”

And Cassidy turns to me.

Uh oh.

“I’d like to dedicate this song to Robert Chaykin, who helped make my dream of being with you tonight, a reality.”

People look at me, some sniggering, some wary, confused. I can feel the hives creeping across my back. In a steady, quiet voice, KC begins:

I’m dreaming of a White Christmas. Just like the one I used to know. Where treetops glisten and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow

And I’m frozen. *Oh my God. He did it! He screwed me! He couldn’t let it go! How could he do this?! Bastard!* I imagine congregants setting fire to the building, the roof caving in, rocks thrown at my house. And I’m flush red – but – but – I realize – everyone’s quiet, listening. And a few seats over I hear in whisper

Irving Berlin was Jewish?

Eddie tugs on my arm. His head bobs and he smiles at me, so happy. Julie smiles and sings in her atonal warble. *Everyone’s singing, in one shining, brilliant voice. How do they all know this song? Do all Jews have Christmas albums?*

“Rob Chaykin, ladies and gentlemen,” says Cassidy.

And everyone claps for me. For me? Dumbly, I wave, smile.

“Have a good night and a very happy holiday season,” he says.

And King Cassidy leaves the building.

Julie cradles sleepy Eddie on her shoulder, her coat wrapped around him. She takes my arm and we shuffle out with the rest of the crowd. Christmas is over.

Chanukah's over.

Maybe next year we'll get a tree.