

A VISIT FROM THE KING

As the human Extinction loomed, people sank deeper into denial. Most remained oblivious to the encroaching end. But a few embraced it after their own fashion, albeit if only as a means of coping. Some scientific, if fatalistic minds ruled that it was the course of nature for a sentient species to bring about its own demise (this proved to be untrue about half a million years later with the ascension of the cephalopods, but that's another story). Certain cranks supposed that all reality existed inside of a computer simulation, which would soon be reset. Not too distantly related to these theorists were the ones holding out for extraterrestrials to rescue humanity from itself. And then of course, there were the Faithful.

Since most religions included some version of the world ending, it wasn't much of a surprise that people would misinterpret what was happening. So instead of working to repair matters on Earth, the Faithful everywhere began praying for an expedient end—along with their own salvation, of course.

By this point, the Management's call centers were inundated with all manner of requests and emergency calls. They were trying to patch together a solution to the human problem as best they could. Worldwide disasters had henceforth failed to eliminate humanity. Now the crises intended to remove humanity threatened to do more lasting harm to the planet than that offending species. Management was fielding every sort of suggestion from consultants, field offices, and informants on how human extinction might be achieved without any further collateral damage. Hell had some straightforward, if Draconian solutions, and the Atlanteans' pitch for doubling down on rising sea-levels held some poetic justice. The vampires, liches, and other ruling members of the Underworld proposed that if the Overworld were placed under their authority, the resource issues would vanish overnight, what with the undead being so much less

taxing on the grid. Everybody suddenly had a stake in the outcome. It was like the reading of some bizarre will, with all the obscure relations hungry for a slice of the deceased.

Meanwhile the switchboards were lit up with prayers and invocations from every religion, sect, and cult. Extreme requests were easy to dismiss as zealotry. All requests for fiery chariots, tides of blood, the smiting of this demographic or another were flatly denied. Some of the more nuanced miracles, however, made it past the filters.

One such glitch occurred as an oversight regarding New Testament scripture. During a Bible study, an old lady got her wires crossed and, combining elements of universal resurrection which she had gleaned from the book of Acts, along with a reference to the saints rising in Mathew and the general second coming of Christ, she put in a request for the return of “the once and future king.” She had encountered this last phrase at some point and naturally assumed it was from the King James Version. She was feeling unusually poetic in the moment and eager to impress her little prayer circle, so she included a flourish, “that we might hear his sweet music in this world again.” When this prayer reached the Management’s infrastructure, it was clearly recognized as a prayer concerning the End Times, which the algorithms accepted as a metaphorical substitution for the Extinction. The Management had put a freeze on major requests by this point, in an effort to keep the humans from destroying the world on their way out the door. But this little prayer, miraculous in nature and yet lacking any cataclysmic keywords, slipped the net and made it through the approval process. What precisely the author of this prayer had in mind remains a mystery, because the miracle in practice almost certainly did not work as intended.

Pauline Kilpatrick, widowed homemaker of eighty-one, canned her own peaches from the tree in the yard, called her grandchildren on their birthdays, and held a weekly Bible study out of

her living room. She decimated people in Scrabble, and took unmistakable joy in it. She had two daughters and her son in laws couldn't stand her.

One morning after Bible study, Pauline waved goodbye to the departing members and went back into the living room to gather up coffee cups. Her mind wandered, reliving with some embarrassment her odd closing prayer concerning The King. How had such a phrase even entered her mind? Had she passed by Darryl's unread copy of T.H. White on the shelf, and gotten the title mixed up with King James? No one had said anything, but her embarrassment had been palpable. To distract herself, she focused on a rakish smear of purple lipstick on one of the cups. In her mind's eye she tried to correlate the seating plan with the guest most likely to wear such a whorish color. It was that newly widowed Eleanor, she was pretty sure, always such a thirsty—

The telephone rang. Pauline went to the little cabinet between the living room and the kitchen where the telephone sat. She lifted the receiver to one ear.

“Hello, Kilpatrick residence,” she announced.

“Hey there, pretty mama,” came the reply. “I'm comin' to your house today!”

Pauline was so shocked by this announcement that she dropped the coffee cup with the purple lipstick on it.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked. “Who, may I ask, is calling?”

“Don't you know me, little lady?” the voice crooned. “It's me, the King, baby. I'm coming to your house, so get ready!”

Pauline hung up with a jerk. She picked up the broken cup and carried it to the trash. For a moment she stood in the kitchen, thinking. Who did she know who spoke in such a way, and had such a deep and soulful voice? She thought the caller might be a black man, because of his

drawling baritone, but couldn't recall having any black acquaintances. There must have been some at church, but none she knew by name. He had said he was The King. The King of what? In the end, she decided that it must have been a wrong number, and she went back to clearing up the cups.

Half an hour later, Pauline sat at her kitchen table, sipping from a fresh pot of coffee and munching a wafer cookie. She had just worked the word jumble from the Sunday paper when a knock sounded at the front door. It startled her a bit, as she had been deep in thought that a wholesome word like "compassion" should contain such a sinful one as "passion." It was true that passion could refer to artistic expression, although she had her reservations about the moral stature of history's so-called artists. It was also true that the word was in some cases conjoined with Christ's name, as in the "Passion of Christ." But of course, it was primarily the Catholics who spoke in such terms, and they were all—

The knock took her by surprise at this point, such that she jumped a little in her seat. The call from the man with the deep voice had unsettled her, and she went to the door with great caution, grateful that the sheer drapes were in place to prevent anyone seeing clearly inside the living room. Steeling her nerves, she leaned against the front door and peered through the peephole. The man who stood on her front porch was dressed all in glittering white, with a shimmering coil of black hair. She felt certain that she did not know him personally, and yet his image struck her as undeniably familiar. In any case, his appearance, to say nothing of this visitation, disturbed her no small amount. She had just decided that she would stand very still saying nothing and wait for the stranger to go away, when he spoke.

"I know you're there, mama," the man said. It was the voice of the man who had called himself the King over the phone. "I can feel your heat. You're giving me fever!"

This statement upset Pauline to such an extent that she simply shrank down in the threshold and held her knees in silence. She wanted to cry for help, but then the man would know for certain she was there. It was possible, after all that his statement had been a ruse. She was too afraid to even crawl for the phone, and the thought of prayer never entered her mind. Eventually she heard the man on the porch turn away and head back down the driveway toward the sidewalk. She could hear him humming a little tune about hound dogs as he receded. Still, it was an hour before she stirred from her position.

The house was a split-level ranch style. It had no basement, but the lower level was half-submerged below ground so that its windows were even with the yard. This level formed a kind of den with adjacent rooms for the furnace, laundry, and Darryl's old study. At least, Darryl had called it his study. Really, it was a kind of escape from Pauline, a function which she had embraced in the final years—or was it decades—of their marriage. It was in this space that Darryl read his war novels, drank from the bottle in the desk's file drawer, and slaved over elaborate and erroneous genealogies (the Kilpatrick's never descended from William Wallace, she was certain of that). And of course it was there that he ritualistically dismantled, cleaned, oiled, reassembled, and generally fondled the Colt .45 service revolver which had never been fired. The weapon had been awarded for some tour of duty "flying a desk." But its origins were hardly of any concern to Pauline now. Self-defense overrode any latent contempt for boys and their toys.

She found the gun in its wooden box, still wrapped in the cloth that Darryl had last used to polish it. Polish seemed an ill-fitting word, as Pauline beheld the dull gray finish, like the icy driveway. She had never liked guns, though not on any moral grounds. Guns were loud, and

blunt, and only good for one thing. Just like men. And yet like men, they had their moments.

This was one of them.

There was no need to assemble the weapon, no hasty search for ammunition. Darryl had always kept the Colt ready and loaded in its box. Even storing the piece had been a concession on his part, a hard-fought, minor victory for Pauline who wouldn't suffer the thing in their bedroom. He could play with it down in the study. At least there he would only shoot himself.

Now she took up the gun and brought it with her to the forbidden realm. The split level had one flight of stairs up from the lower level to the ground floor, then another that reached up to a half top-floor. She walked with the gun held at eye level, pointed carefully into the air. She did not want to forget that she was carrying it for reasons of safety or reassurance. The gravity of the day made her move with a deliberate step, and she passed the upstairs sewing room, the linen closet, the guest room as though she were pacing out a duel. At last she reached the master bedroom and shut the door behind her. She climbed into the bed, placed the gun on a pillow beside her, and waited.

Waiting has a way of drawing out tension, but only up to a point. Even mortal terror grows dull with enough time. By three in the afternoon, Pauline had forgotten the heavy gun on a pillow, and put on *The Price is Right* on the little television that stood opposite the bed. By five o'clock in the evening, she had fallen asleep.

When Pauline awoke, it was with a start. Her pulse fluttered in her throat, and she had the uncanny sense that a noise in the house had awakened her. It was dark outside, and the room convulsed in the changing light of the television set. It was that dreadfully tacky commercial for the carpet store where the actors rode on rolls of carpet like buckaroos. They were called the Rug-ed Riders. She switched off the TV and the room fell into darkness. Immediately she turned

it back on. The darkness was eerie enough, but it occurred to her that anyone lurking in the house might notice the sudden silence. She turned the volume of the television down a few clicks and, taking up the gun in her hand, crept to the door. She heard nothing on the other side, and wondered if she had made a mistake leaving the television on. With a sudden, self-recriminating pang of regret, she realized that if anyone were standing on the other side, they would have seen her feet silhouetted in the crack of light cast by the screen along the bottom of the bedroom door. She decided that if anyone had ventured this far into the house, then by this point they should have had ample opportunity to murder her in her sleep. That meant she still had the initiative if she acted now. Grasping the doorknob, she rotated it slowly, compensating for every little click in the mechanism. Once the latch was fully retracted, she took a deep breath, and with the gun pointed at chest height, she opened the door.

The hallway was empty. It was dark, but the television behind her caught every odd surface in its pulsating light. She waited a moment, listening to see if opening the door or the sound of the television had spurred any audible movement in the house. She detected none. With the noise of the television to muffle her movements, she shuffled into the hallway.

Despite her apprehension, Pauline felt strangely in control. She possessed intimate battlefield knowledge of every creak and groan in the house. She knew that just standing on a given patch of floor would dampen the rattle of the heater when it came on. She knew the windows all stuck and wouldn't open or shut smoothly because Darryl hadn't known his way around a damned paintbrush. She knew the hum of the refrigerator when it stood open because Darryl was sneaking another beer or helping himself to a late-night pickle.

The fridge—she could hear it. She knew it from as far away as the upstairs hall—knew it best from there. Someone was standing in front of the open fridge. It had a telltale hum when it stood open like that, the pitch ever so slightly dampened by a man’s loitering bulk.

So she knew where her antagonist stood now. She had the upper hand. Still frightened, but resolved to press her advantage, Pauline moved to the end of the hall, where the corner met the top of the stairs. She took a deep breath and wrapped both hands around the grip of the gun. Then she stepped around the corner and pointed the gun down the stairs. She could see at an angle into the kitchen below, through the little archway to a spot of floor before the refrigerator which was now bathed in light. A pair of pants legs glowed white and she could hear the clink of mason jars. Pauline took one step down the stairs, then another, and the intruder came into full view. She had planned to say “freeze” or “hold it,” but could now only gasp.

Elvis Presley stood in her kitchen.

“Oh hey, little mama,” said the King, glancing over at her. “Thought I heard you get up. Why not put aside that popgun and come have a bite.” His hands were filled with jars of condiments and there were a few cans of Darryl’s old beers tucked under his white leather-fringed arms. Rhinestones and gold linkages twinkled in the light of the fridge. The King kicked the door of the fridge shut and gestured for Pauline to follow him with a come-hither inclination of his head.

Pauline descended into the kitchen. She could now see that Elvis was headed into the dining room, which was connected on the far side. The light was on in there, and the King had spread a little midnight feast upon it. She followed in wonder and stood at the edge of the dining room.

“What are you doing here?” Pauline asked. Her voice held a dreamlike quality, but she had not let go of the gun.

The King was already several bites into a peanut butter and banana sandwich, and the preparations for another lay on a plate before him. It took some effort for him to swallow the mouthful before responding. It was strangely intimate, communal.

“Now why wouldn’t I be here, baby?” he asked her, spreading his arms wide. He held a knife with a pat of peanut butter in one hand and honey dripped from the remaining sandwich in his other. “You invited me, remember?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Pauline said. This was nothing like the home invasions she had seen on *Unsolved Mysteries*. She felt certain that she was awake, and was therefore thoroughly aware of the inherent danger of the situation. Yet something in the King’s manner put her at ease. That drawl, that deep voice, the homespun gentility put any sense of danger from her mind.

“You’re not afraid of me now, are you mama?” said the King.

“No,” Pauline answered, letting the truth slip. “But how did you get here? I mean, I can just tell, you’re really him aren’t you? The real one. How is this even possible?”

The King had moved onto bologna, and was now squeezing out the last sputtering contents of a bottle of French’s onto one of the round slices.

“It’s what you prayed for,” Elvis said. “Like the man said, if you have faith like a mustard bottle, you’ll move mountains. Nothing’s impossible.”

“Mustard seed,” Pauline corrected him.

“Shucks,” Elvis said with a wink. “You ever even seen a mustard seed? Now how about a little bologna with me?”

“This isn’t right,” Pauline said, shaking her head. “I know this isn’t a dream, but there’s something unnatural about it.”

The King held out one hand in a halting gesture. “Now hold on, mama,” he said. “Are you tellin’ me you don’t believe in the power of prayer?”

“No,” Pauline said, flustered. “I mean, I do. But it doesn’t work this way. It’s more...mysterious.”

“You want a demonstration?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t want that,” she told him. “I think I just...Mr. Presley, I want you to leave.”

The King let his gaze fall to the table. He nodded sadly. Then he looked up at her with a playful little curl in his lip and said, “Mr. Presley is my father, honey.” But his heart wasn’t in it, and they could both tell. He rose to his feet. Pauline tensed and took a step back, lifting the gun a little as she did, but the King gestured for her to be calm.

“It’s alright, mama,” he said. “I’ll go.” He shuffled out from between his chair and the edge of the table and walked into the living room headed for the front door. Pauline followed him at a cautious distance, keeping him in her line of sight. As he passed before the wide front window with its sheer drapes, he paused, and looked up with a coy expression.

“I wanna thank you, ma’am, for your hospitality,” he said, patting his stomach. “So let me leave you with a little something-something.”

The King planted his feet in a wide stance. He held his hands out to either side of him, palms down, as if to still troubled waters. Angelic light shone through the living room window, illuminating it brighter than day. As the light surged, a chorus of beautiful voices arose, filling the air with a cherubic backup track. The little end tables and armchairs dissolved in the pearly

light. Soon the walls and ceiling, the very floor had drifted away. They were floating in a celestial space, full of light, and yet in the cosmic distance, Pauline could see stars shimmering, as if on a perfectly clear night. Light and sound built to a crescendo. The King swung his arm in a glimmering arc above his head, then down again. His hand struck the strings of an invisible guitar, and a holy power chord blasted through all of creation. In an instant, Pauline was filled with fear and awe. She screamed, and a clap of thunder joined the heavenly cacophony.

In an instant, the light faded. The walls reappeared as the room shrank back to its earthly dimensions. Pauline blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dim light of the dining room's overhead lamp. Then she let out a cry and dropped the gun. The King lay dead with a bullet hole through his chest.

For the police it was all very straightforward. Things like this happened, they said. There was no telling what a home intruder might do, and Pauline had done the right thing by shooting before it was too late. They cleaned up the scene and left her in peace. The next morning her daughters came to visit. She never told anyone about her conversation with the King.

An overworked Medical Examiner received the task of identifying the unknown man. Given the circumstances, no one really expected him to turn up a positive ID on the deceased. He took a few photographs to check against some missing persons cases and ran a fruitless Google search for any nearby costume shops that rented Elvis outfits. It got late, and on a lark, he sent a DNA sample to a colleague with access to the database. The next day, he received an unexpected confirmation of the dead man's identity.

He tore up the confirmation and skipped out for an early martini.

END