The Hidden Kingdom

I had the kind of job, throwing crap into boxes and slapping on addresses, where clearheadedness was overrated. That is, the night before, I'd tied one on, and now I muddled through. Once or twice, I nearly sliced off a finger on the tape machine, and Sam Olney, the supervisor, threw me a look. By morning break I was doing all right.

Monica Bowser, my girlfriend of four months, had dropped me cold. So I drowned my sorrows, or celebrated my freedom—take your pick. Anyhow, I woke up alone, and my head hurt.

"I made a study of it, Eddie," Monica said, when she dumped me. "I took a poll with my many online friends. Your modern-day romantic relationship—you and me, Eddie—lasts just about four months."

How cynical can you be, I said, the voice of the trusting public, of the television audience, but I feared she was right. In the beginning, everything Monica said was brilliant, and we both had promising futures. We saw some serious movies, attended some serious concerts, and agreed on many vital subjects. She cooked her one, special recipe, just like her great-grandmother in Italy. It goes without saying that the sex was fantastic.

After four months we grew bored. I hoped for a secret compartment, an exit that we both could duck through, where we'd find ourselves holding hands in a field of daisies. My timeless new world never appeared. Always, my hopes glowed bright, then faded, and Monica—and Olivia, and Kayla—dissolved into memory.

Meanwhile, I shifted my route to work, and changed where I bought burritos, and spotted a cute redhead named Jessica. Ever the optimist, I was convinced Jessica was the

one. In four months it was over—well, we had a pregnancy scare, and stuck it out for five months. By then Jessica and I were screaming at each other.

Newton's Fourth Law of Motion: a relationship spins for four months, until gravity pulls it to a stop. Any woman you can think of: four months. Four months with the most beautiful woman in Georgia, or anyhow Valdosta, or anyhow the south side of town encompassing several fulfillment centers, strip malls, and franchise eating establishments, and then it's over.

So what the hell am I doing here, I asked myself with a clear head, as the little hand inched past eleven on that strange, white clock big as a wading pool. Shouldn't I plan for years, rather than months? For marriage, for kids? Oh, the curse of a world in which everything is known! Where there's only sex and bad food, jobs you sleep through, and people you wear out in four months. Surely, there's more, but I can't see it! Organic farming, or saving the polar bears, or a career in law enforcement. Something that means something. Maybe, for God's sake, God.

Just as the little hand reached 12:00 noon, Sam Olney squeezed my shoulder. You can't talk on the line, with those conveyor belts whipping off northwest, and sideways. Sam motioned to our break room, a glass cage over in the corner. I had a call on the land line.

Which usually meant somebody had died, but my mom had already passed, and there was no one else in my life except those four-month women. It was my old girlfriend, Monica Bowser.

"I thought you hated me," I said.

"Oh, you're a good guy, Eddie, but our four months are done. We're helpless. It's a force of nature."

"Okay, force of nature. So why'd you call me?"

Well, the damndest thing. I'd won the lottery.

You've heard the stories, how suddenly you have relatives you didn't know you had. Monica didn't call again, but Kelsey did, and Jane, and several more, I'm ashamed to say, whom I didn't remember. Men I'd hardly spoken to at work wanted to get together for coffee. A realtor offered a tantalizing proposition in the Cherokee Hills. Insurance people, car dealers, worthy causes all made their pitches. I grew depressed, and almost called back Kelsey, from whom I'd rebounded to Monica. Then I remembered the arguments we'd had in our fourth month, and my head began to throb all over again.

I yanked out the phone and walked to the movies, where no one recognized me. Walking back, I saw my face through a store window, on the evening news, with "Winner!" and "Mystery Man!" flashing. Mystery man, because I had yet to deal with the media.

I went down to see my landlord, Maria. Unfortunately, we'd had an affair long ago, lasting approximately four months. She invited me in, tried to fix me something to eat, threw her arms around my neck. This was how it was going to be everywhere, I thought, but Maria was a good sort. After we had sex I paid the rent, bought out my lease, and wrote her a generous check in addition, to handle my calls. Where are you bound? Maria asked.

I said, "Somewhere they won't call."

By the end of the week I fixed things with the lottery folks, signing papers, routing payments, posing for pictures. I was your ideal winner, explaining to the media all the good deeds I'd do, and meaning it. I'd do good deeds, if I could find any worth doing.

The reporters and bloggers filed out, satisfied for the moment. I waved to a last camera, and excused myself. I used the restroom, poured a mug of coffee, and hit the road for Alabama.

Little towns, big towns. Vast, abandoned parking lots, busted up with Johnson grass. Empty motels, gas stations, big box stores, still standing amid piles of bricks dropped by the tornadoes. Tall buildings, dead or alive, with shiny windows that blinded the blackbirds. Trying to gain entrance, they killed themselves.

Old black men in wheel chairs, some of them blind, sold boiled peanuts. White people, eyes protruding, teeth lost to drugs, stumbled along the highway in hopes of a free meal. White trash, we used to call them.

But to the west, in the highlands near the Piney Woods, I almost escaped. I saw no one, or no one who counted. Just good old boys in rattling pickup trucks, and some dusty vans delivering potato chips to diners and convenience stores. Maybe here you could buy a little house, grow vegetables, go fishing every day.

In that country you looked out for twenty miles, until the horizon dissolved into blue-green nothingness. I watched a potato chip truck as it made a turn down a narrow blacktop, then fluttered from sight, as if a great curtain dropped from the sky. I drove the same rolling blacktop, and parked beneath a rusty water tower that poked out of the woods where once there had been a town. Broken machinery lay on either side of me, and deer grazed under the limestone bluffs.

Maybe you came to this woebegone, dreamy place before entering Heaven. You walked through the deserted town, and topped a hill. You looked back, and couldn't remember where you parked. You walked on, free at last, toward the singing.

I found a motel south of Graceland. Walking up His boulevard, I listened to Him sing "Peace in the Valley," beckoning all of Memphis to His kingdom. You had to admire a man who had risen from public housing to become the most famous hillbilly of all—but after that, the true question, what good was fame? I'd experienced fifteen minutes of it in Valdosta. In another fifteen, I'd have hanged myself.

I stepped into a van filled with pilgrims: Two middle-aged, Minneapolis librarians on a tour of Civil War battlefields, armed with guidebooks and fancy cameras; a smiling Englishman who claimed to be writing a book; and a short-haired, tough-looking young woman from Boston, who stared at me, hapless Eddie, with mounting disapproval. And, from Frisco, Texas, a man and wife with their little blonde daughter, who clutched at a teddy bear and sang, "Doan wanna be a TYE-*gah!"*

Our guide, Darrel, a decadent-seeming young man from a local Christian college, with shiny, black hair like the King's, clapped his hands and drawled, "How sa-weet!"

As we descended the great stairway, and the King smiled down from the high wall, the Englishman interrupted Darrel's syrupy speech to ask where it was, *exactly*, that the King played his games with naked girls. Exactly everywhere, I thought, because rich men needn't bother with permanent, that is to say, four-month relationships. Elvis went through women like peanut butter and banana sandwiches.

The librarians sighed with disgust. The Texas couple shrank back. The woman from Boston smiled knowingly, and murmured, "Good question."

"For queries of that nature, sir," Darrel said, rolling his eyes, but not shocked in the least, "You'll need to contact the estate." A bad moment, but then the daughter of Texas gaily sang out, "TYE-gahs play too rough!" and everyone laughed.

We entered the famous room with its long couch and wall of televisions. What loneliness, I thought. Like me, searching for something on the Internet besides endless chatter. Every night, two in the morning, the King found himself awake. So He turned on the TV, and another one, and another. Jesus, lover of my soul, are you out there?

"The very place!" the Englishman cried triumphantly, pointing at the long couch.

"Pitiful," the Boston woman said, eying me carefully.

Later, in the great hall of trophies, I managed to isolate myself from the easy criticisms of my group, and duck behind the gang of blue-haired ladies, with their blue-haired guide, who followed us. I stood silently by the silk handkerchiefs, the golden records, and the bogus F.B.I. badge. Maybe for the first time, I understood how it must have been. I was rich, I'd been famous for fifteen minutes, and I'd done nothing of merit.

Elvis, however, was a revolutionary force.

Before He lost His way. Think of Him alone, in the small hours, stoned, bewildered. His friends, if you could call them that, had all gone. Perhaps Miss Tennessee lasted longer than four months, but she was gone, too.

"Ah did that," the King announced to His empty hall. He pressed a finger to the glass case containing His golden good luck charm. "Me and the Jordannaires."

Darrel ducked around the corner and beckoned churlishly, as if I, like the Englishman, were a saboteur. We came out onto the terrace and looked across at the stables where Elvis had been interviewed when He was discharged from the army.

He stepped out here, stared up at the moon, and urinated. A country boy who always pissed in the back yard, then staggered under the big oaks, gulping beer and trying to comprehend His garish life. *Where Could I Go?* he sang to Jesus, ha ha ha.

Yes, the joke would occur to Him, and He'd laugh, and hear the echo of His laughter in the pre-dawn, and He'd sob.

He didn't want to be King. He didn't want to be Elvis. He dragged his fat carcass over the wall, and walked up the street like the nobody He used to be. He strolled joyously down the aisles of the Piggly Wiggly, knowing He could buy anything he saw, a case of peanut butter, a truckload of bananas.

Best of all, the sleepy clerk didn't recognize Him. How glorious to be unknown! Wolfing oatmeal cookies and pecan pies, Elvis walked onward, seeking a refuge for His soul in silent Memphis. As day dawned, the King sat in a grove of pines, watching the sun fill up the sky with new hope. *Where could I go?* He sang, *but to the Lord?*

Or maybe, up all night, He staggered about in the daytime. Maybe his soul never found refuge; maybe he was light years from the Jesus He loved. He squinted up at that gigantic, orange sun, then leveled His government-issue .38, aiming at the paper target on the barn door. Which, judging from the splintered wood to the right and left, Special Agent Presley never managed to hit.

That's why people loved Him, I thought. He couldn't hit the broad side of a barn.

Four a.m. I'd fallen aleep with the TV on, and now Mr. Ed was busy making a fool of Wilbur. For a moment I couldn't remember where I was.

An Indian-owned motel in South Memphis. Where you'd hide out after you robbed a bank, at least in the movies.

In the movies, I'd find a reason to go back. People knew me in Valdosta. Obviously, I had money, and could do good deeds. I'd give all my money to the Salvation Army, and then I'd counsel the poor. I'd tell them, buy a lottery ticket every week.

What, in fact, was the money good for?

For escaping. I'd escaped.

I carried my bags to the car. It had rained, and oil slicks gleamed dully on the King's Highway, also known as Elvis Presley Boulevard. Turning north, I spied the blinking neon of a Piggly Wiggly—the King's own grocery. Never again would I visit Memphis. I parked, and stumbled through the doors, surely the only customer. I grabbed orange juice, grapes, and then stood, as though paralyzed, my half-awake brain studying the display of cookies.

Me, an ordinary, unworthy jerk. My life a meaningless bore. Even with money, I hadn't truly escaped.

"Help you, suh?"

I hadn't pulled on socks or shaved, and my hair needed combing. The clerk didn't know I was rich, and bound off on a mission that would benefit all of humanity. He probably dealt with crazies every night.

I reached for molasses cookies. "I was thinking Elvis must have come in here, sometimes. Bananas, cookies, He loved 'em. Late at night, see, He wouldn't cause a stir. Molasses cookies. Poor kid, maybe He grew up on molasses. Don't you think?"

The clerk stared.

"Some people think Elvis is alive. And if He is, like any other guy, He's gotta eat. What more likely place to run into Him than right here by the cookies?"

"Shee-ut," the clerk said, backing away.

"You've heard of Elvis, haven't you? 'Hound Dog?' 'It's Now or Never?'"

The clerk went around the corner. "Everybody heard of Elvis," he called back. "They say He *did* come in here, sometimes. But He'd be eighty, man. He's dead!"

"He's alive," I said. "He's alive if you—"

A woman turned abruptly on heel, and marched up the aisle. Her image, her briskness hung on in the air and seemed to accost me; involuntarily, my eyes followed her pretty legs, and fastened on her swaying hips. So little was nonetheless all it took, sometimes, to begin sleeping together, and regretting it. Generally speaking, as attested to by my friend Monica Bowser's scientific study, it takes four months to disentangle yourself.

I caught her face in profile as she paused to select a bottle of wine and some fancy cheese. She glanced back as if seeing me for the first time, then jerked her head toward the wine again. She must be desperate, I thought, to leave such a hot trail at such an unlikely, though prescient, hour. A lawyer, perhaps, in that trim gray—slightly rumpled—suit. Went from work to a party, and the party had just broken up. Or was drinking wine how she greeted Saturday mornings?

I ran my hands through my sweaty hair. She was my age, which is to say, no longer young. Formerly, before I became rich, before I became a pilgrim, she'd have been out of my league.

Beside her, I began an inspection of the imported beers. "You like Elvis?" I asked, somewhat innocently.

She wheeled away, and waved at the clerk, who put down his mop and joined her at the register. She laughed merrily at his chatter, but I knew it was a diversion. Subtle, these rules of engagement. Well, half an hour before dawn, maybe not.

I stood by the magazines, near her once again. Her eyes drifted up to mine, but not flirtatiously. She merely seemed weary, and I must have looked homeless.

Suddenly, she was gone, and I faced the empty day, my long and pointless journey, by myself.

Maybe I'd catch her in the parking lot, I thought half-heartedly. *Hello, Miss. Don't be misled by my slovenly appearance. I'm rich.*

The clerk began ringing me up, but as if responding to some silent signal, we both paused, and turned our heads toward the parking lot. I bolted toward the exit. The lawyer stumbled endearingly.

Out of the shadows, a great white limousine, its long, dark windows reflecting the Piggly Wiggly neon, drew inexorably near, and the farthest door opened. A silhouette leaned forward, and one sequined white leg dropped to the pavement.

"Shee-ut," the clerk said. "It's *Him."*

The electric doors whirred half-open, and closed, behind me. The woman stood transfixed, hands fluttering, as if she awaited the rapture. A big, turbaned chauffeur came around the long white hood, and motioned to the open door. Then he stood with his arms folded and his feet apart, like a cartoon genie.

The woman pointed toward her chest. *Me?* her lips said. *Me? Me?*

The chauffeur nodded.

This is not happening, I thought. That car is a UFO.

The woman slipped into the black interior, and the chauffeur closed the door. He turned, slid behind the wheel, and the great car plunged down a side street toward a dark grove of trees. I blinked, and the limosine vanished.

Munching oatmeal cookies and slurping coffee, I crossed the Mississippi as the sun came up behind me. I played the King's gospel: "Peace in the Valley," and "So High," and I thought, there's a hidden kingdom on the Alabama line. And in Memphis, in the Piggly Wiggly parking lot. And in the West, where I'm bound.

As the day heated up, I dropped into the lowlands of Arkansas. What a sad place this was! Wrecked cars, and gutted trailers, and abandoned sharecropper's shacks. Black people and white with nothing to do, their faces wrinkled and twisted from drugs, stumbling down the streets to visit the doctor, to beg a meal.

I lost my way. I broke into sweat by the putrid swamp, and mosquitoes attacked me. I had entered the outskirts of Hell, and drove frantically toward the horizon, never sleeping, into a land where the hills heaved up and the air smelled of grapes.

Clear rivers dropped out of the hills, and great oaks and hickories marched on for miles, broken up by pretty little orchards. Maybe I dropped back in time. Maybe you had to.

I followed a blacktop under the trees, crossing and recrossing the Piney River, and found a cabin for sale by what long before had been a grist mill. I began a business renting canoes and kayaks, and studied my customers to see if people had changed. I listened to

their tales of the great world, and it seemed just as implausible as when I lived in it. I found solace in the words of a great poet: “That’s all right, Mama. Any way you do.”

This is a good, simple place. I grow vegetables, and fish every day. I am well-liked in the town. A school teacher, Laura Dale, laughs at my jokes, and sometimes cooks for me. She, too, is from somewhere to the east, as are many here. She, too, has dreamed of a better world.

We have been together for many years, but sometimes do not remember each other, and she says, “Eddie, it has only been four months.” I believe that this anomaly can be explained. It is natural to begin again, and again, until we have finished.

The Piney flows into a great inland sea. Fierce storms rage, and I have yet to meet anyone who has sailed all the way across, and returned. I have built a sturdy boat, and provisioned it. When the summer comes, and we are feeling strong, Laura and I will sail to the west, into the brand-new world we dream of.