

New Fiction by Eldridge Thomas III: Glitter



Sometimes I wonder if there's more Elvis in Vegas at Christmastime or if it's just my daddy getting to me again.

They got him on electronic billboards wishing everybody happy holidays. He sings "Silent Night" or "Silver Bells" *everywhere you go*. You can't walk the Strip without seeing ten Elvises in red coats and pointed hats on a unicycle or skateboard or making giraffes or big-boobed girls out of balloons.

Each year, they put out a twelve-foot Elvis in front of the Westgate. He's hunched, arms out, stuck mid hip shake. He's got on Santa's suit and pom-poms, but no white bushy hair or beard, and his coat's unbuttoned enough for everybody to see his muscled mannequin chest. His pom-poms and gold buckle bedazzle. Little red-nose Rudolph stands over to the side and stares up at him meekly, waiting for a pat, some kind of kindness.

I do the same: stare at him, not so much as twitch an eye, while tourists roll luggage around me or head out to wherever they're going, wherever that might be.

It's Christmas Eve, the only time there's a quiet, warm hum in the ER. Somebody's got hot chocolate. Somebody brought candy canes and sugar cookies with sprinkles. The overheads are at half-mast. Elvis sings "Jingle Bells" somewhere down the hallway. Hattrup is hanging lights in a window. He's only got one string, which isn't enough for anything, but I don't chastise. Today, I'm letting the spirit in.

"Georgia Boy is back," Hattrup says. He has a high, wispy voice and aluminum-colored eyes that flicker, making him seem

anxious at every second.

"We call state troopers Georgia Boys," I correct him. "Where?"

"Four."

"Thank you."

"You visit Elvis today?"

I walk, don't answer.

Georgia's asleep when I find him. With his hair and beard and bird chest, he looks like Gregg Allman Jesus. He's shirtless—left arm blue, blotchy, swollen—and hooked to an IV and air. He's from Valdosta, about an hour from Waycross, where I'm from, and we're only a few years apart, so we got connections.

Georgia's a frequent flyer and has already been told he'll lose the arm to sepsis if he can't keep it clean. It's hard for him, because he lives on the Strip, plays 90s alternative, hoping passersby will toss money into his guitar case. He sang "Come as You Are" for us once. His whole shtick was rasp. Hattrup didn't think much of it. I thought it was fine.

I pull his chart, and he stirs.

"Hey, Georgia," he says.

"When'd you come in, Georgia?" I ask.

"Last night."

"I was on last night."

"Tonight, then? Is it Christmas?"

I tell him there's about five hours yet.

"It always feels like Christmas," he says. "They keep the lights up year-round in these parts."

"We had some neighbors like that."

He giggles, says "Us too."

"At least the weather's Christmasy," I say. It's the only time of year South Georgia and South Nevada share a similar temperature, a frigid fifty/sixty degrees.

"Did it snow Christmas Day," he asks, "when you were about thirteen, fourteen?"

"Heck yeah. We got at least six, seven flakes."

"Us too." He smiles. "It was magical."

Winter is the time for clouds in the desert, when I sometimes drive ninety miles to lie on my car's hood and watch the sky. I get there at least a full hour before sunset, when the earth's the color of Spanish moss in October and the sky old beat-up jeans, and the chunky clouds billow up like skyscrapers, and the thin ones stretch across quilt-patterned, each bumping into the next. It's just like home, just right there, like you could touch them if only your arms were three times as long.

In swampy flat Waycross, you can see a storm's advance miles away with its gray showgirl's curtain.

Then the glittery night. They always said you can go into the Okefenokee and see the Milky Way with your own bare eyes, but I never did.

I miss the pines, how their branches hide with the moonlight, except for those at the tippy top. Under the moon, they smell like wood and mint and look like stick figures with triangle heads that lean with the wind, threatening to break.

At ten, the ER is called to attention, and Col. Mihata arrives to wish everybody a merry Christmas. Col. Mihata's husky,

wears wire eyeglasses, and comes across as friendly even though he smiles with gritted teeth. When he leaves, Hattrup is in my ear.

"You can't," he says. "Not safe."

"Mission already accomplished."

I walk back to the nurses' station with him on my heels.

"I don't mean the plane ticket."

"He doesn't have an ID, so I got him a Greyhound."

"To Georgia? How long is that?"

"Two and a half days."

"He's an addict. He won't make it."

"He says he's got enough stash for a few days."

"Jesus Christ."

"The reason for the season."

I open Georgia's songbook. He doesn't remember his dad's number, and he's scared to talk to him anyway. He said call his Sunday school teacher: the number's scribbled somewhere in the book. I learned this when we talked about how, growing up, we both liked Sunday school but hated church. His teacher was a gentle man who also taught him guitar.

"You can't drive him to the airport, a bus station, or anywhere. What if he has a flashback and kills you?"

"He's a heroin junkie."

"He was in Iraq and Afghanistan and wherever the hell else. Put him in an Uber."

"You're free to come with."

The songbook is a mixture of random ink and pencil sentences and lyrics, his handwriting sometimes large and curvy, sometimes tiny and all caps. There're sketches of objects throughout: a fire hydrant, a traffic light, a Coke can.

"No, I'm going home to my sweet thing."

I find the number on the third page, at the bottom. He literally wrote out *Sunday School teacher*, then a colon, then the guy's name, Carl Thornton, then the ten-digit number. He drew a little guitar beside the digits.

"Call me and leave your phone on speaker the whole way."

"He's harmless." I turn to Hattrup, to his fluttering tin foil eyes. "It's Christmas. Let me do some good in the world."

I dial before he can say something else.

It's just after midnight when I hear a radio voice down the hallway. *Spend Christmas right here with Elvis. Put a country ham in the oven, an angel on the tree, and the King's songs—White Christmas or Blue—*

Georgia's awake, stares blankly at the TV, flips channels.

I tell him I talked to Carl, and he sits up. I tell him I talked to his daddy, too, and he rubs his face one-handed, hides his eyes. I tell him: Both men will be there when his bus pulls in. They've looked for him, knew he was in Vegas, even flew out a couple times, never could find an address.

I tell him the hard part: His momma died last year. Heart attacked her. She worried every day for him.

His shoulders heave. I hand him a box of tissues. He smacks it away, pulls out the IV, pulls off the nasal tube. He jumps up and bangs a leg against a chair, tumbles headfirst into the wall, clinches a fist, wants to punch the wall, needs to punch

something, slaps the wall open-handed instead. Slaps it a few times.

He turns to face me.

"What happened in Iraq," he says, "he never understood I couldn't be normal after that."

I wait for him to say something else. He doesn't. I ask if I can give him a hug. He thinks on it, his eyes droop then blink, then he says *please*.

It's just after seven when we walk outside, where the sun already blazes, and I remember Hattrup saying we might set a record.

"Hot damn," Georgia says. "You know how many times I wore shorts on a Christmas?"

His bus doesn't leave until nine something, so I say let's go see Elvis. He nods, doesn't even ask.

We stare and listen to slot machines beep and chime their way across the Westgate's breezeway, hear someone win a jackpot.

Georgia's shirt hangs over his shoulders like a cape. He took a shower at the hospital, but his clothes are still filthy. Tourists make a point to walk around us.

"You dig the King?" he asks, finally.

"My daddy did," I say. "Liked him so much he wanted to be him. Had the wave haircut, the sideburns. Even impersonated him."

Georgia sniggers.

"Back home, the ladies' auxiliary put on a Hee-Haw-type show every Christmas. The mayor dressed up like a woman, and everybody thought that was funny. They set a pig loose, and

some idiot chased him through the audience. Some beauty queen sang, and Daddy did Elvis."

"Something happened to your old man?"

"I came home from bootcamp and told him I who I was, and he told me I was no child of his, and that was that."

"Deep South strikes again."

"So, I actually hate the King."

He laughs.

"What you're doing for me," he says. "Thank you, Georgia."

"You gone make it, Georgia?"

He shrugs. He's honest.

He says he needs his music to live, so he has to keep his arm. I can't tell if he really wants to get clean.

I just know he wants to get home.