

Ruby, Jesus and Elvis

Karen Dill

I met Ruby, the red-necked beauty long before Conway Twitty sang about a girl named Ruby in “Play, Ruby, Play.” She was Ruby Pressley, a rough and raw beauty who grew up in the hollows of Bethel (a small village in the mountains of western North Carolina) and lived in a sad plank shack with an older sister who had a couple of kids and her mama, who drank a little too much moonshine.

Ruby’s daddy had left or had never actually been there—no one seemed to know. Her mama hiked out of the hollow every Saturday night to sample the local hooch and after a few drinks, to call Pastor Chuck—our preacher who worked in the paper mill by day—to ask if he was going to hold church the next morning. If so, she’d take a bath, if not, she wouldn’t waste the water—a story the preacher loved to tell. She came to church a few times but gave it up in exchange for sleeping late on Sunday morning. Ruby’s mother wanted her youngest daughter to go to church. She was fearful that she’d end up like her sister with a couple of illegitimate kids at 17 with no education and, worse, no man to help her carry the load.

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bus that was forever breaking down. Ruby was part of a mission plan to bring all the poor youth to Jesus.

My daddy, in one of his manic phases, had joined this small Missionary Baptist Church and with his fervent passion of the moment volunteered to be the bus driver. My father could not hold any job or belong to any organization for long—he would join with zealous and maniacal energy only to soon find angry fault and leave in a huff or, worse, get thrown out. It was only a matter of time. His stint with the Missionary Baptist Church in Bethel lasted a couple of years—a record of sorts. My mother went to church faithfully and was thrilled with my father’s new devotion and pretended that it just might last forever. Preacher Chuck probably knew better, and I knew for sure this was not a permanent gig.

And so, as we pulled up to Ruby’s small frame house perched on the side of a rocky, dirt bank, my daddy sat in the driver’s seat of the bus and lit a cigarette while we waited for Ruby to emerge. It was a cool morning with no sign of smoke coming from the crooked rock chimney. My daddy blew the horn a couple of times and was ready to back the bus out from the weed-covered yard when Ruby sauntered out of the house wearing a thin sleeveless blouse and short skirt.

Ruby climbed on the bus and scooted in beside me in the front seat. I stared at her small frame, her wispy blonde hair and her face smeared with make-up (my mother called it face paint) a shade too dark for her pale skin. She had pale blue eyes that seemed to boldly stare right through me, and later I would notice that the right eye turned in a little, giving her a sweet and slightly goofy look when she smiled.

“Lordy,” she exclaimed as she pushed me over to the window with her hip, “I ain’t never got ready so fast. Mama and the babies was still asleep when I got myself up.”

I stared at her wild blonde hair as she dug in her plastic pocketbook for a stick of bright red lipstick. She peered up into the bus mirror and applied the lipstick liberally, blotting her lips on an old piece of Kleenex that she pulled from the bottom of the pocketbook.

“I’ll swan, they say I’m the spittin’ image of Marilyn Mun-row,” she sighed. I knew little of Marilyn Monroe or any other movie stars. My mother was a devout Christian who would not tolerate such nonsense. We had neither television nor telephone, and we took a wide berth past the magazine display in the local A & P store. I didn’t know what to say to Ruby, and that certainly didn’t seem to matter to her.

“You know,” she said as she leaned in close to me, “Elvis, he’s my brother by my daddy’s other wife. We’s kin and all, but not to where I couldn’t marry him myself if I wanted to. Lordy, I love that man.”

Speechless, I stared. I didn’t know a lot about Elvis Presley, but I was pretty sure he wasn’t Ruby’s brother. I wasn’t a worldly girl, by any means, but I was a voracious reader. I had been sneaking adult fiction books home from the Canton Library for the past year, hiding the books under my bed and reading them by flashlight in the night. I had also read the Webster Dictionary and had

been learning five new words a day in the effort to increase my vocabulary and someday get into college. I had plans.

“Well,” I told her, “I just happen to know that Elvis doesn’t spell his name with two S’s, so I don’t really think he can be your brother.”

Ruby glared at me and then squinted in thought with her clear blue eyes. “Lordy,” she exclaimed as she reached for her red tube of lipstick, “I reckon I can spell my own brother’s name.”

She then proceeded to write Elvis’ name across her arm with the lipstick. “Looky,” she said as she scrawled E-L-V-I-S across her thin arm. “One S!” she proclaimed. And that was that. I tried in vain to explain that it was his last name with the one S, but she had already turned away.

Ruby knew little about the social graces that were learned by the rest of us at an early age in small Baptist churches. She clomped noisily down the aisle in her cheap pointed-toed shoes; slumped down in the pew with her long skinny legs propped up on the hymnal rack, short skirt hiked up above her thighs. She knew none of the words to hymns or recitals, whispered loudly during the prayers and chomped her bubble gum. And she was oblivious to stares from the congregation as she pulled her gum from between her painted lips and twirled it around her bright red fingernails before popping it back into her mouth.

“Woo-boy!” my daddy laughed as he dropped her off that first Sunday. “That Ruby’s a character.”

But my mother immediately saw Ruby Pressley as her new project. She was determined to look beyond her crudeness and find the sweet Christian girl that lurked beneath the facade. My mother smiled in amusement when Ruby listened to the Sunday school lesson about Jonah and the whale and exclaimed in wide-eyed astonishment, “Now how in the dickens did that little feller git hisself swallowed up by that fish? I reckon how that Jesus was a lookin’ out fer him.”

I looked up in amazement, but my mother was staring at Ruby with a twinkle of hope in her eyes. She could save this girl. And Ruby grinned back winningly when my mother promised to bring her some new clothes and shoes the following Sunday.

My mother doted on her, and Ruby loved the attention. When Ruby opened the new Children’s Bible given to new church attendees that first Sunday morning, she pulled the bright red lipstick from her pocketbook and scrawled “I Love Jesus” and encircled the new revelation in a heart with little arrows on each side. I gasped in horror, but when Ruby glanced up, my mother simply smiled weakly at her, casting her eyes toward Heaven. “Bless her little heart” my mother was most likely saying to Jesus.

“That little girl loves Jesus,” my mama trilled as she sewed a couple of skirts for Ruby. Ruby needed proper clothes for church, and despite having little money herself, my mother had determined she would have them. She even found a pair of sensible brown shoes for her on sale at Belk and Hudson’s that week while we were in the nearby town of Canton for our weekly trip to buy

groceries.

Even as Ruby opened the bag of new clothes—skirts of a decent below-the-knee length and gingham blouses with ruffles—and smiled angelically at my mother, I knew she'd never be caught dead in them. And even as she said, "I shore could use me a new tote-bag," I knew she'd never carry the purse my mother would buy her.

When my mother later asked about the shoes, Ruby would explain that she gave them to her granny. Granny had "knifed out the sides with a butcher knife for her bad onions." Neither Ruby nor my mother noticed as I dully corrected with "its bunions, not onions."

Ruby not only loved Jesus, but she was generous, and so the gifts kept coming her way. My mother even gave her a home-perm, and her limp blonde hair became a mass of frizzy curls that rounded her thin face like a halo.

Ruby would continue coming to church sporadically through the spring, though it became clear to me that her world was larger than our simple baptist church. She saw me at school one afternoon as I was headed to the bus, and in typical Ruby-fashion, hooked her arm through mine and pulled me toward her friends as she danced a little jig. She was holding a vinyl 45 rpm record that I was pretty sure she had stolen from one of the cheerleaders' lockers.

"This here's my smart little friend," she announced. "She goes to my church."

Ruby's friends stared at me, not impressed with a girl wearing thick glasses, short bangs and skirts below her knees.

But Ruby was unabashed. She began telling me about a new movie that Elvis had made and commenced singing "Vita, Vita , Lost Vegas" as her hips swayed Elvis-style to the music in her head.

I had learned that it would not be worth the effort to explain that it was *Viva* and that *Las Vegas* was a city in the state of Nevada. It would be lost on Ruby and on the girls who could never accept nor understand a girl like me. As her friends turned away, sullen and bored with Ruby's new friend, Ruby squeezed my arm and said that she'd see me on the church bus.

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Ruby did come back to church long enough to mark out Jesus' name on the inside cover of her Children's Bible and replace it with the name Elvis. "I Love Elvis," it read. So, I thought, it was that easy for Ruby. She could cross out the name of Jesus and write Elvis in his place. I also began noticing that Ruby not only lied about big and small things, she stole ink pens from the plastic cup in the Sunday school class and took money from the collection plate. She had also started wearing blue eye shadow.

If my mother noticed Ruby's backsliding ways, she didn't let on. She continued to work on Ruby, bringing her small gifts and handing her slips of paper with Bible verses printed on them. My mother even convinced Ruby to come to Bible school in the summer.

Ruby reluctantly attended Bible school, though it was clear that she was bored with the endless Bible sword drills, the Popsicle sticks and macaroni crafts, and the Kool-Aid and cookies for snacks. But to give her credit, she endured the tedium and even marched to the altar on commencement night for a formal declaration of salvation. I had patiently explained to Ruby that once she was saved, she would be baptized and be forever spared an afterlife in Hell. While this promise did not seem to especially impress her, she did seem interested in the promise of a new white Bible and a certificate.

"So this ce-tif-cate?" Ruby asked. "What's that about?"

"It's like a diploma to get into Heaven," I explained. "Plus you get to be baptized in the river, and everyone hugs and makes over you when you come out."

Ruby seemed satisfied, and though she didn't come back to church for a couple of weeks, she was waiting for the church/school bus on Baptismal Sunday. She looked a little pale and tired and her breath smelled of cigarette smoke, but she was game enough for the day's events.

"You will get wet," I promised, "but my mother brings towels." I was to be baptized myself so I was feeling generous with old Ruby.

Earlier that week, I noticed that my mother had taken a new white chenille robe from her closet that she had never worn, and I was sure this would be used to wrap around my shoulders as I emerged from the cold Pigeon River. She had kept the robe since I was a baby—a rare gift from my father and, as most of her nicer gifts, it had remained wrapped up on the top shelf of her closet. I had coveted this robe for years, and today it would most likely be mine to wear.

In the spirit of friendship and goodwill, I leaned in to Ruby and confided that I was going to announce my intentions to become a missionary after the baptism. This would surely not only please and impress my mother, but warrant her gift of the wonderful robe for the day.

"You see," I patiently explained to Ruby. "Our Lord has called me to be a missionary in a foreign field—that's where you go when you want to be a missionary."

"Why?" she asked blankly, and I rushed to explain my noble words.

"Well, I'll travel around the world and help people." I stumbled on, a little unsure of what would happen next in the big plan for my future. Becoming a missionary had never really appealed to me, but it seemed to be the right thing to

announce on this day, and I did like the idea of traveling around the world.

Ruby, in the spirit of sharing secrets between girlfriends, pulled me close and whispered in my ear. “I got me a boyfriend,” she gushed, “And I’ll swear if he ain’t the in-can-tay-shun of Elvis.”

“I think you mean reincarnation,” I replied slowly, “And I ‘m pretty sure that Elvis would have to be dead to be reincarnated.”

Ruby stared at me. “Well, Elvis ain’t dead, you idiot, or else we’d done heard from my daddy.”

She thought for a second and in the spirit of sisterhood stopped and looked frankly into my eyes. “You know, he ain’t really my brother,” she confided. “He’s actually my third cousin, twice removed, or sumthin’ like that. But he’s purt near kin,” she insisted as she squinted her blue eyes at me in a threatening manner. And then just as quickly her eyes softened.

“Looky here,” she whispered and quickly pulled back her thin white blouse to reveal a series of dark red marks that began under her chin and ended at the swell of her small breasts. I stared at the marks only partially covered by her cheap cotton bra.

“Whoa,” I gasped, thinking of the dark red welts that lined the back of my legs when my daddy erupted in anger and had his belt handy. “Did your boyfriend hit you with his belt on the neck?”

“Gawd, no!” Ruby stared at me in horror. “He put his mouth right here,” as she pointed to one of the marks “and just kissed the snot outta me. Them’s hickies,” she proclaimed.

I had never heard of the word. I knew of Mr. Doo-Hickey who played a goofy character on a local cartoon show that I had watched at my Aunt Faye’s house. I had never even seen my parents kiss, so the thought of that much intimacy was unimaginable. Yet my stomach did a funny little turn, like when I had eaten too much fried okra and I felt a warm flush run up my spine to the tip of my freckled nose.

I closed my eyes, leaned against the bus window and tried to think of good works and foreign mission fields. And with the banks of the Pigeon River approaching, I headed for what would most likely be a glorious day. I was to be baptized—held down in the clear cold water of the Pigeon until my sins were washed downstream to Canton.

As we awaited the immersion by the river, Pastor Chuck explained the gravity of the ceremony and had the baptismal candidates line up in alphabetical order even though there were only five of us. I came after Ruby Pressley and before Dean Warren. I watched as Ruby carefully waded into the knee-deep water and gasped at the shock of the cold water.

Poor Ruby could not swim, and she nervously grasped Pastor Chuck’s white shirt as he steadied her beside him. When he announced that Ruby was baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, Ruby let out a yelp and went down fighting like a wild cat—skinny arms and legs splayed every which direction. Pastor Chuck held her under for a long minute—perhaps to make sure the baptism took—and she came up spitting and sputtering.

She stood up and shook herself like a wet dog. As she limped toward me, I reached out my hand to help her across the wet rocks, and she clutched my arm desperately.

“Lordy,” she gasped. “He almost kilt me.” The terror on her face and the tears in her eyes were real until Ruby’s sense of vanity set in. “I reckon I look like a drowned rat,” she bemoaned, reaching for her frizzy wet hair.

But Ruby looked like anything but a drowned rat. Her face was washed clean of makeup, and her wet blonde hair sprang up with tiny curls around her bright blue eyes. With the sun at her back and her hair a halo of light, she looked for the world like a tiny angel. She looked young, fresh and alive in a sweet and reverent way.

As she headed to the river bank, her thin white blouse clinging to her breasts and her nipples outlined through her bra, she shouted, “Thank ye Jesus, I’m bound for glory.”

And at the same moment, the congregation clapped for her, my mother grabbed the white chenille robe to cover Ruby and a song of praise erupted from the makeshift choir. And Ruby, in her moment of stardom and adoration, blurted out: “Jesus—he done called me to be a mission-fairy. In a farming field. Lordy, yes, I’m a’ready to go and help them people.”

Another cheer went up around the river bank and not one eye was dry. In the meantime, I waited for Pastor Chuck’s attention, and I realized in dismay that my baptism was a mere afterthought in an otherwise glorious afternoon for Ruby. As I meekly held my breath and arose gently from the water, the rejoicing over Ruby’s commitment to the mission field rose to pandemonium and continued while I waded through the water and my mother casually threw my daddy’s old army blanket, used to cover moonshine in the back of his panel station wagon, over my shoulders.

“Thank you for this miracle today, Lord,” Pastor Chuck ranted on as Ruby glowed beneath my mother’s beautiful white chenille robe. “And we thank you ’specially for this precious child of God, Ruby. You have great things in store for her, Lord, and we give you the praise. In Jesus name. Amen.”

And it was over. We loaded the bus and I sat in stony silence while Ruby basked in the warmth of the robe and adoring eyes of the others.

“I feel just like Marilyn Mun-row,” she cooed as she snuggled into the plush material.

“Well, you don’t look like her!” I snapped sarcastically, but Ruby was not listening to me and as she climbed from the bus, hugging the robe to her chest, I knew we’d never see that beautiful white robe again.

I sat stiffly in our old panel truck on the ride back to our house. I was cold and wet, but I could feel the heat of anger rising in my chest.

“Lord, bless her soul,” my mother gushed. “Have you ever?”

“Well,” I began. “So old Ruby, she can cuss and smoke cigarettes and steal things and act a fool, but long as she says she’s been baptized now, she’ll go right on into Heaven like everybody else in the church. Is that the way this baptism thing works?”

“Kar-ren Ya-vonne,” my mother began in her no-nonsense tone, and my daddy shot me a warning glance.

“Let ’er go,” he warned ,but I was never the type to let anything go, and so I plowed on.

“You know,” I spat, clearly working myself up into a spell, “Ruby loves Elvis more than Jesus. She wrote it in lipstick in her Bible.” And I snarled, “She has doo-hickeys all over her neck and chest from kissing a boy. And she sticks bubble gum under the church pew.”

My mother and daddy exchanged glances, and I caught a slight smile tugging at the corner of daddy’s mouth.

“Missionary in a foreign field, my foot,” I sputtered. “Why, she can’t even hardly read and write, and how in hell is she going to be a missionary in a foreign field?” I carefully enunciated “missionary” and “foreign,” then closed my eyes to await the fallout from my mother. I had never said hell except when I read it from the Bible.

But when I opened my eyes, my daddy was turned toward the window, cigarette in his mouth, shaking his head, and my mother was staring at me with a look of pure sweet amusement. She did not say a word nor did she mention Ruby again to me.

I sat back in my seat, spent from my verbal barrage, and felt hot tears course down my fevered face. I had self-righteously made my point, but I only felt small and mean-spirited.

Ruby came back to church one last time to collect her certificate and white baptism Bible. She promptly opened the Bible and with a stolen red ink pen wrote “I Love Jimmie” on the inside cover. As she sashayed out the church door for the last time, my mother’s arm happily looped through hers, she stopped and slowly reflected, “I sure could use me some new bloomers.”

My mother smiled patiently at her, and I looked away, embarrassed with Ruby’s brazen use of the word bloomers in church.

The next time I saw Ruby, she was running toward the parked school buses in the dirt lot beside Bethel school at the end of a warm May afternoon. I was sitting patiently in my bus seat by the window, my face pressing against the cold pane. She had on a short cotton skirt and wore a blue corduroy oversized boy’s FFA (Future Farmers of America) jacket. A group of bus drivers—young boys barely 16 could

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drive buses then—were standing and smoking behind Bus 26.

Ruby ran up to Jimmie Hightower, and he handed her his cigarette as he lit a new one for himself. Ruby laughed up at him, and the group of boys laughed with her. I took off my thick glasses and squinted at Jimmie. From a distance and without my glasses, he did look a little like Elvis—a tall, lanky frame with hair slicked back into a ducktail. As Ruby carelessly blew smoke from the side of her mouth, he grinned down at her, one lip higher than the other. And when the principal blew his whistle for the buses to start up, Ruby stood on her tiptoes while Jimmie leaned over and kissed her on the lips in a long, slow, passionate drag of mouth against mouth.

I stared from the window as my breath, hot and humid, fogged up the thick pane and the lens of my glasses. I felt the now familiar warmth move through my body and melt my insides. I would give anything to have been Ruby at that moment. I realized how little I really knew about her. She had visited my world briefly, but I knew nothing of hers.

I dreamed of that kiss for years. I would think of Ruby and yearn for a boy to stare in my eyes the way Jimmie stared into hers. I would long for that slow, perfect kiss even after Ruby left school in ninth grade and I eventually left for college. Even after the small baptist church dissolved and my daddy sank into another long and predictable depression. Even after my mother and I joined yet another baptist church closer to home.

I would stand in front of the mirror and toss my hair a certain way. I would filch a cigarette from my daddy's pack of Kools, hold it in the corner of my mouth and unsuccessfully attempt to flirt nonchalantly with my mirrored image. I would smear

Chapstick mixed with red food coloring on my lips and sing “Love Me Tender” into my fist. I would kiss the inside of my arm until a red blotch would appear. I would try to find the part of Ruby that inspired passionate kisses inside me.

But the truth was that the Jimmies of the world did not kiss girls like me. The boys who rode motorcycles and drank beer straight from the cans and ground their cigarette butts into the dirt with their boots would not kiss me. The boys who kissed me were boys who loved books and big words and whose glasses clanged against my own when their soft sweet lips gently kissed mine. I would love carefully. I would not proclaim love for Jesus, Elvis or anyone else with bright red lipstick or with Ruby’s wild abandonment.

At Christmas that year, my mother would save her money and sacrifice to buy me a white chenille robe. While my daddy—debilitated by a dark mood—would stay in bed for the day, I would hold the beautiful robe to my chest and my throat would tighten.

“You can use it to stay warm while you study at night,” my mother said shyly. “You’ll need to study to make a missionary someday.”

“I love you, Mama,” I whispered. But I knew that I would never be a missionary. Like Ruby, life and other interests would pull me in a different direction. I knew that I would choose college and a life far away from the Rubys and Jimmies and the tiny baptist churches that dot the landscape in the mountains.

But I would never forget Ruby and her indomitable spirit. I would listen for her laughter and her hillbilly accent among my group of new friends. I would try on short skirts and my inner-Ruby would encourage me to wear them proudly. I would try to dance like Elvis and to live a bit more passionately. And during long nights alone, I would long for the kiss that Jimmie gave Ruby Pressley on a warm afternoon in a dirt parking lot full of school buses.

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