



THE  
REUNION  
OF  
LAST RESORT

A SHORT STORY

RALPH CISSNE

Published in American Way, February, 1994

## **The Reunion of Last Resort**

Short Story by Ralph Cissne

The headline of the *Weekly Resort Times* was set in the boldest type possible: MAYOR'S WIFE AND ELVIS IMPERSONATOR CAUGHT WITH PANTS DOWN AS CLASS OF '68 LOOKS ON. But that's not exactly what happened.

Sometimes I feel like the Rodney Dangerfield of Elvis impersonators. No matter how hard I work, no matter how many miles I log in the interest of Elvis, I can't get the respect I deserve. So why would my twenty-fifth year high school reunion be any different?

If there's anything I have learned from my travels it's that there are two kinds of people in this world, it was true in 1968 and it's true today. There are the people who get respect and those who don't. There are those who have and those who have not. And a mere proximity to the wrong side of the railroad tracks can scar a soul for life. The only reason I was even halfway accepted in high school was my singing ability. At every dance from 1966 through 1968, my band, Johnny Bellew and the True Blues, kept everybody hopping. And, although there might have been some laughter behind my back, the dancing fools even enjoyed the Elvis impersonation I always used to start our second set. How would I know Elvis would die in 1977 and launch my career? I guess I was ahead of my time, an impersonating prodigy longing for some respect.

Over 200 graduates in 1968 marked the largest Last Resort High class. The baby boom resulted in about half our class sitting in prefabricated buildings from elementary

through high school. The local politicians would never dare suggest raising taxes to expand schools because of a little post-war population explosion. Last Resort remained, after all, a tourist destination and everything designed to bring families into the lodges and onto the lake, amuse them, take their money and send them home with reservations for the next season. Preserving the quiet status quo became the foundation of the local economy.

Many of my classmates had graduated and escaped the gravity of the tourist trade. Because of our unfortunate destiny of being born to poor parents, we didn't really have a lot of choice but to leave. Those who remained either inherited their parent's businesses, tried to marry someone that did or went into politics.

The president of our senior class and prom king, Douglas Carson served as mayor of Last Resort and had his mind set on running for his father's old state senate seat. His wife Carol Anne had reigned as our prom queen, and every boy's drive-in fantasy both then and now. The smiling faces of the Carson family had ruled over Last Resort for twenty-five years. And they were the proud owners and operators of the Ozark Heaven Inn, the setting for our class reunion dance.

Enid Ferret photographed the graduates as we came in the door. One of the have-nots who had left town, Enid returned six years ago with enough money to buy the *Weekly Resort Times* newspaper. Editor, publisher and photographer, she eagerly promoted the interests of the local community with the exception of anything concerning Douglas Carson. In high school Douglas and Enid dated, but he dumped her to go back with Carol Anne two nights before our senior prom. I took Enid to the prom, which meant she sat and listened to the True Blues and me while everyone else danced the

mashed potato and the boogaloo. The entire evening she sat with legs crossed, grinding her teeth and staring daggers at Douglas Carson and Carol Anne. Enid began to look kind of scary so I asked the boys to play a couple of slow instrumental tunes and we danced.

“I’m going to get even with Douglas Carson if it takes me the rest of my life,” Enid said. At the time this surprised me because I’m not a bad dancer. Of course later I figured out she must have really loved the guy, but I can’t imagine why.

I arrived late for the reunion. Enid almost dropped her camera. She gave me a big hug, took my photograph and promised we would catch up later. I straightened my sport coat and entered the ballroom filled with the ghosts of days gone by and a disc jockey playing solid gold Sixties tunes by The Beatles, The Beach Boys, and The Rolling Stones. There was a buffet line and lots of balloons and hellos and how-have-you-been. I’m not putting it down or anything, after all these are my roots, my people, the aging sock hoppers who helped make me who I am today. But somehow I expected something more.

I made the rounds and started having a good time catching up with everyone. I tried not to be too conspicuous, which is difficult wearing a white sequined sport coat and my signature Elvis sunglasses. I can’t deny I’m an attraction. This is not just my profession. This is who I am.

I warmed up to being there and everything was going fine until Carol Anne Carson emerged from the crowd wearing a pink chiffon party dress clutching a tumbler filled with ice and Southern Comfort. Accustomed to getting whatever she wants in a matter of seconds Carol Anne had me backed up against the wall.

“Johnny, honey you look so good.” She slurred her words, wrapped her free arm around my neck and kissed me square on the lips.

“Thank you Carol Anne,” I said, pushing her away to keep things as polite as possible. “You’re lookin’ pretty fine yourself.”

And she did look good, unsteady maybe, but good. She put her arm through mine and burped. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s dance.”

“No thanks. I only dance to slow ones, and never with married women.”

“Oh come on, loosen up and have some fun.” She nudged me into a corner behind some curtains beside a couple of tanks of helium and started playing with my sideburns. “Johnny honey, this may be your last chance. Ever.”

“You know me,” I said. “When it comes to the ladies I’ve never been much of a gambler.” I tried to maneuver around her, but she was having her say.

“Oh come on, you’re a man of the world, aren’t you Johnny?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’ve been around, you’ve seen things. Douglas and I have traveled, but I don’t think I’ve gone very far with him.” She looked back toward the dance floor, then up at her face reflected in my sunglasses. “You know what I mean?”

“I wouldn’t hazard a guess.”

She drank from the tumbler. “A month ago I drove to Kansas City with my girlfriends and we went into this adult entertainment store. I could not believe my eyes. How can a girl live past, I can hardly speak the words, her fortieth birthday and not know there’s a whole other world to be explored?”

“I can’t answer that.”

I should have excused myself, but she pressed against me. I didn't want to be rude or have her fall flat on her face. I stood there and listened.

"I guess I could order from one of those catalogs, but Douglas would have a coronary if the postman delivered a parcel filled with marital aids. He would just die."

"Everybody has always thought of you and Douglas as the perfect couple." I lowered my voice for effect. "Maybe you haven't given him a chance."

"A chance? What would you call twenty-five years?" She tilted the tumbler and took a long drink. "My lips are like rubber, feel them."

"I think it's time to go find your husband."

"To hell with Douglas. He's over there trying to talk Bill Baxter's wife Betty into being his campaign treasurer." She pointed to the dance floor where Douglas and Betty performed the twist like a couple of thirteen-year-olds. "In case you didn't know, Bill Baxter is the county sheriff and Betty's family owns half the valley."

Douglas and Betty stopped twisting, approached the deejay booth and made a request. With a "ye-haw" the deejay proclaimed it time for country line dancing. The dance floor crowd whooped and hollered as if the rodeo had just rolled into town.

"Oh my god, no." Carol Anne turned pale and fell against me. "Country line dancing makes me sick. I think I'm going to vomit."

"Let's get some fresh air."

Without thinking I grabbed Carol Anne and walked her onto the balcony. The country line dancing began with a fevered pitch behind us. A cool breeze came off the lake and the crescent moon appeared from behind high clouds. I held Carol Anne as she heaved and puked over the rail onto the manicured lawn of her Ozark Heaven Inn. When

she finished I gave her my scarf. She wiped her mouth. Some color returned to her face, but she still staggered.

“Johnny, what are ben-gay balls?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

“Honey, I want to know.”

“You mean ‘ben-wa’ balls. You roll them in a closed fist for relaxation.”

“You’re such a liar.”

“No, I am not.”

“You’re lying, but I’ll let you make it up to me.”

She stumbled against me and tried to slip her hands in the front pockets of my trousers.

“People can see us!” I grabbed her arms.

“I can’t believe you. For a guy who makes a living grinding his pelvis, you are so up tight.”

“We should go inside.”

“But I have a little favor to ask.”

“No.”

“I’ll get down on my knees.”

Carol Anne stepped back toward the rail and knelt in front of me. “Johnny honey, I’m begging. Just sing me one song like you’re Elvis.”

“Please, Carol Anne. Get up.”

“I’m not moving until you start singing.” She fumbled for my pant legs.

“Okay, but stay there and don’t touch. I can’t sing if you’re touching me.”

She lowered her hands. I took a deep breath, twitched my upper lip and began to sing in my deepest Elvis voice, “Treat me like a fool, ...” And that’s when all hell broke loose.

From behind me flashed a light and then another. I turned to see what had happened. Carol Anne jumped up and lost her balance. The light flashed. Carol Anne screamed and, as I turned toward her, fell backward. Everything went into slow motion. I grabbed her arm. We crashed through the wood railing, clutched each other and rolled down the grassy hill. The lights continued to flash from above. We stopped rolling just short of the lake.

“Are you hurt?” I asked.

“Not sure.” Carol Anne groaned. “I think I’m okay.”

I helped her to her feet. We straightened our clothes and picked grass out of our hair. Lucky neither of us broke anything. As we struggled up the hill the lights flashed again. On the landing Enid Ferret stood triumphant clutching her Nikon camera and strobe. Behind her stood most of the class of 1968.

Douglas Carson declared Carol Anne in no condition to make a statement and took her home. Sheriff Baxter considered it his solemn duty to place me under arrest and did just that. “The safety of other decent women in the county had to be protected,” he said. Enid Ferret took notes, imagined possible headlines and tried not to laugh.

I spent what remained of that glorious night in the Last Resort county jail. The accommodations weren’t bad except for the old deputy snickering and asking me to sing *Jailhouse Rock*, which I refused to do.

Enid had her sweet revenge. She published a special edition. The photographs were spectacular, especially the ones with the camera angle from behind with Carol Anne on her knees in front of me. Enid published the entire spread: Carol Anne and me rolling on the grass with her pink chiffon dress over her head, the two of us wandering up the hill in a daze, the sheriff taking me away. Enid's good fortune became my nightmare.

First thing next morning, Carol Anne called the sheriff and demanded my release. No charges were filed. I proceeded straight to the motel and packed my bags, drove my rental car to St. Louis and took the next flight out.

The editorial in the *Weekly Resort Times* cleared my name. In the next to last paragraph my dear friend Enid wrote: "In fact, Johnny Bellew was only attempting to save the mayor's intoxicated wife from falling to her death. Bellew is a true hometown hero who was falsely accused, the victim of an embarrassed mayor and an overzealous sheriff."

The entire county reverberated in an apparent state of shock. Enid sent me copies of the photos with a note that read: "Thanks for being my friend and making our class reunion such a huge success. Presently, there are no plans for another reunion, but how could we top this one?" Love, Enid.

At least one person from my side of town got what they wanted in Last Resort. As for yours truly, I was happy to be back in Las Vegas where I am appreciated and no one asks me to sing for free.

e n d

