

In the Beginning

Dixon C. Hollis

CHAPTER ONE

I been told that confession is good for the soul. That you should tell the truth on your deathbed so as you can get into heaven. I don't reckon I will be getting into heaven but I would like to set down the truth so that anybody that ever did know me or maybe even liked me some will know why I acted like I did on a cold day in December last year. The lady from the Catholic Church that visits me every day offered to help me write it down just the way I tell it. She used to only visit once a week, but now that the Day is getting closer, she comes every day and sits with me for hours, even when I don't talk none. Sometimes I just ain't got nothing to say.

I don't hold with religion much, mostly on a count of my family, but she is a good woman. And I ain't saying this just because she is the one writing this thing. She really is and she seems to have a different god than the one I was always told about. He seems nicer and not as concerned with rules and stuff. Maybe if I had knowed Him sooner, things wouldn't have turned out like this. Anyway, this is my story and even if Sister Mary Peters is helping me some with the commas and periods and spelling, this is still my story. She promised she wouldn't change my words. She says that means this will sound just like I am talking to you while we drink coffee and smoke cigarettes. Nobody got no call to blame her for nothing I write. This is *my* story.

My momma always wanted me to be an Elvis impersonator. Hell, my Mama wanted me to *be* Elvis. But she was used to taking second best. She done it all her life. I know this because she told me, over and over and over, sometimes when she was talking about me, sometimes when she was talking about my daddy, and always when she was talking about her job. I will come back to this part cause it is important but you have to know a lot of other stuff first. My mama was not a sweet woman. My mama wasn't even nice really. I don't think it was cause she meant to be mean or uncaring; more like she just couldn't see nothing but herself. I blame that on her parents.

See, her parents had waited for a child for a long time before little Angel Noel Purdy fell into their laps. Ok, well, she didn't exactly fall into their laps. It was more like she was bought, kinda like a remnant in a fabric store, hidden in the back on the sale table and not useable for much. Angel Noel Purdy was born Fannie Mae Comstock in a tiny fold in the road in the mountains of North Carolina, near Chestnut Dale. At that point, there weren't no skiing in North Carolina or a Land of Oz or even a Tweetsie Railroad. Mostly there were just a lot of hungry farmers, loggers and coal miners; hungry for food and hungry for salvation.

Mostly in the mountains, you didn't do nothing but work from when you got up til you when went to bed. The only time you didn't work was on Sundays and then Wednesday nights. Those were Church days. Course, judging by the number of half-dressed and half-starved children running around, nights were given over to a different kind of work.

But I digress. Sister Mary Peters taught me that word. It means sometimes I tend to get off my story and tell too much. But it is hard to remember or know what is important and what is not. It all gets crowded together in my head, like a table at a flea market. It seems to me you got to know it all to understand, but she says I should get straight to the point. I was just never very good at getting to the point. Except that one time. And you can see where that got me. So I will stop digressing and keep telling.

Fannie Mae was the eighth child born to the Comstocks. And there just weren't much left for her by that time. Not much food, not much room, not much love and maybe not much in the way of kindness nor brains neither. Her daddy was a miner and not much else. Work didn't leave him with a lot to talk about. Didn't leave him with anything but a tired face, bloodshot eyes

and gnarled hands that had scars from the pickaxe. I am not sure if he ever put together his actions between the sheets and the children that came every year. I don't know if he would have stopped even if he knew. None of them did even when they didn't have food for the kids already sitting around the table. Guess maybe they thought it would be another pair of hands to help out. Or maybe they was too tired to think.

Isaiah Comstock was 25 the year my momma was born and his wife, Hattie, was 23. They both looked a lot older, dried up and worn out like all the juice had been squeezed out of them. They would be raisins not grapes. I never seened a picture of them when they was young. Maybe they looked like grapes then. I don't know. You may wonder how I know this stuff. Some of it I got listening at doors when I was supposed to be in bed or going through drawers in my granddaddy's desk when I was left alone. A lot of it my Mama used to tell me when I was little. She would tell me stories when she was bored. Most of the important stuff I got later, when I was grown up and wanted to see for myself.

Mr. Purdy wasn't a miner or a farmer; instead, he saved them. Or rather the Blood of the Lamb Jesus Christ saved them and the Reverend Ezekiel Purdy brought them closer to it by preaching it to them three times a week. Unless it was near Easter or Christmas or a Revival and then those tired workers would hike down from their cabins and houses and get the message shouted at them every night for a week. I never heard him preach in that church, but I got lots of long and loud sermons at his house after he quit preaching to the workers. They was given to me right before he had one of his fits. That was what we called them, his fits. I wonder sometimes if he looked like that to them people with his eyes all coming out of his head and slobber flying away from his mouth while it was stretched real wide. All kinds of words would come pouring out about heaven and Jesus and what happened when you strayed from the path of the righteous. Maybe they didn't stray as much as I did.

By the time I knew my granddaddy, he had moved away from the mountains. He lived in Indiana, still in the country, even if it was a different kind of country. He had moved to be near my mama. She didn't know that for a long time. Things mighta happened differently if she had knowed sooner. But I can tell from the way Sister Mary Peters is alookin' at me right now that I am digressing.

Back to my mama. She was five years old when the Purdys saw her at a Christmas pageant. She was a beautiful, blond haired angel. Those are her words. There is a picture of her in her angel costume; it always hung up in my mama's bedroom no matter where we lived. It is only black and white and is kinda faded, but you can still see that she was a pretty little thang, even though her halo had the tinsel falling off of about half of it and the angel robe looked like somebody had taken a pillowcase and cut a hole in for her head. The wings look like spray painted cardboard with glitter. But she did look like an angel.

The Purdys must have thought so. They were there cause he had been asked to give the sermon. Guess the church needed to be taken closer to the Lord on His birthday than the regular minister could get 'em. Anyways, according to my mama, the preacher's lady never took her eyes off her; she just stared and stared. And when the service was done, the lady pushed through lots a people to get over to her. She knelt down and asked her name. My mama didn't say nothing, just looked down at her beat up, hand me down shoes. She said she remembered they was a dirty white color and too big for her. She hated those shoes. When her mama came over to get her, the lady took her mama by the arm and took her down the aisle, whispering to her. I always wonder what that lady said to Fannie Mae's mama. How do you tell some stranger that you think you are supposed to have their kid?

Mama is not sure what exactly happened next. Her mama came and got her and the rest of the kids where they was playing near the back of the church and they went and found her daddy outside with the men smoking. He didn't want to leave yet, but after her mama started to almost scream, he changed his mind. There was no talking in the car back to the house and when they got there, mama says her parents disappeared for most of the night and the kids

were left alone to figure out what to do with themselves. Even when a fight broke out about who got to ride the only bike around and there was yelling and squawking, her parents didn't come out of the bedroom. The kids finally just went to bed.

The next morning, mama says her parents acted real funny and didn't talk nor look at each other. Her daddy just ate breakfast and left. But when he got home that night, they went to the church again and took her with them. When they got there, her parents went inside and told her to play in the church yard and not to go anywhere. But my mama crept up to the door and tried to listen in. She couldn't hear nuthin' but her mama crying. After a long time, her parents came out. Her mama tried to smile at her. She took her by the hand and said, "Come on, let's go on a little walk, Fannie Mae."

My mama said she knew something was bad cause she ain't never gone on a walk like that, when it was almost dark and pretty cold outside. They walked around to the back of the church and stopped by the big wooden cross that was planted in the ground.

"Now Fannie Mae, I got some real excitin' news for you. You seen that preacher that was here last night? And the lady with him? With the real shiny hair?"

"Yes, mama. She kept staring at me last night. She asked me my name, but I didn't talk to her none. I don't talk to no strangers."

"Well, Fannie Mae, she is not going to be a stranger to you. She wants you to go to her real nice house and have your own bedroom and your own toys and go to a real nice school. She ain't got no kids of her own and they are lonely. They need a little angel like you to make them happy. The Lord told them that you are that little angel, come to bring them Christian love and joy."

My mama told me she remembered every word like she could hear it right now cause that was the most she had ever heard her mama say all at once. She didn't understand what any of it meant. She had never had a bedroom by herself. And the only toys they had at the house got beaten up pretty bad by her brothers.

"Are we all going to live with the Preacher, Mama?"

"No, Fannie Mae. You are the only one good enough and pretty enough to go live with a preacher man."

That didn't make no sense to my mama. Nobody had ever told her she was pretty and she knew she wasn't really all that good. "Where will ya'll be, Mama? How will I see you?"

"We will be right here, Fannie Mae. You can come visit us anytime you want to. But you will be busy with school and being a good angel to these people. It will be alright. I promise."

The tears on her mama's face and the way she talked too fast made my mama's stomach hurt but she nodded. She was taken by the hand and led back around to the front of the church. Her daddy was standing there, shaking hands with the preacher.

"You won't regret this. She will have a much better life than you could give her. I promise."

Her daddy didn't say nothing. He just looked more tired than normal and drawn in to himself, with his shoulders bowed and his head down. He wouldn't even look at Fannie when she ran over and tried to put her hand in his. He just took that little hand and pressed it into the stranger lady's hand, who wasn't supposed to be a stranger lady no more.

"This is Fannie Mae. She is a good, Christian girl. "

"Oh, this is my little Angel, my little Christmas Angel," said the stranger lady, holding my mama's hand so tight it hurt. "I got her just in time for Christmas, praise Jesus."

The Preacher looked down and then passed her daddy a thick envelope. He took it and stuck it in his coat pocket so fast that mama thought it must be hot.

"You be a good girl, Fannie Mae Comstock. You make us proud. Don't be a cry baby," her daddy said as he touched her head and then walked away towards the car. Her mama was already at the car with her head bowed. They both got in and my mama watched as they drove

away, the tail lights looking like Christmas lights in the dusk. She told me she never saw them again.

CHAPTER TWO

Mama's name was Angel Noel Purdy from then on. Nobody ever called her Fannie Mae Comstock again. I'm pretty sure the Purdys didn't mean to hurt her by changing her name and telling the story every year at Christmas about how the Lord had led them to her and given her to them for their faithful service. It wasn't til years later that my mama figured out that her parents had sold her to these people and what had been in that envelope her daddy so quickly put in his pocket. She told me she understood what a difference money would have made to her family. And how her life was better after she moved to Ruby City. But I could see the way her face tightened up when she talked about it. Her eyes would get kinda squinty and her mouth would draw up funny, like it did when I didn't do something fast enough when she told me to. I don't think she ever got over that. Some people might have felt like they was really worth something, for somebody to have picked 'em out and paid to have 'em. Not Angel. But she would still taunt me with that. When I was bad or lippy, she would always say, "Boy, nobody would buy you for nothing."

I don't mean to paint my mama's life as a glamorous one or a rich one. Sure, Ruby City, being near Willets, was a step up. And her new parents did have a nicer house with real floors and indoor plumbing, but it wasn't a big step up. But to her eyes, it seemed like she was rich. She used to laugh about it.

"I thought I had been transported, boy. I saw those curtains in the windows and some books on a shelf and thought my parents were rich. But they was poor, just not poor as dirt. And yes, the Preacher did go to college, but it was just a little two year Bible college in the middle of some woods in a holler. All said and done, we were still red necks and the Preacher was still a preacher to hillbillies."

But they did send mama to school up until she was in the 12th grade. Nobody could see why a girl needed more education than that to get married and have babies. But mama wanted to do more than get married and have babies. Mama wanted Elvis.

Mama first heard an Elvis record when she was 15 years old, walking down the street with her mama in Willets, North Carolina. By that time, Ruby City had pretty much died away to nothing. The Depression had hit it hard and the little mines weren't producing like they had been. The Preacher had seen this coming and had moved his church to Willets about the time Angel needed to go to high school. I guess if you do it right, the offerings in church can add up over the years, even when they ain't much to speak of. He had toned down his message some and gotten a few of the respectable families in the little town to join. Nobody could question his integrity or his piety, even if later they started questioning his sanity. Maybe that's where I get my weirdness from. He didn't hold with black music or hillybilly music. I remember him telling me that the only music that a body oughta listen to came from God, so we never listened to anything but gospel music and hymns at his house.

Mama came to be embarrassed by him. She had never been close to him like she came to be to Mrs. Purdy. She called her Mama, but she never called my granddaddy nothin' but Preacher or sir. He was not a friendly man, even when I knew him and by all accounts, he had softened up some by then, crazy as he was. He ran his household with an iron fist and the list of rules was short but wide. No books were to be in the house but the Bible, school books and some history books. There weren't no pictures on the walls, except of Bible scenes. He thought anything else was idolatry.

"God don't want us looking at pictures of things. If you want to see something, go out and look at it. Pictures of Jesus are just wrong. We are not good enough to look at God in the face."

Course there weren't no liquor or cards or dancing, but at least there weren't no snake holding either. Thank god for small blessings.

Mama first found out she weren't rich when they moved to Willets and she started school as a freshman. For the first time, there were lots of people who had more than she did. Her clothes didn't look right cause they'd been homemade. She wasn't the only kid like that. There were lots of other kids who wore mostly homemade clothes, too. But for the first time, there were some kids that didn't. According to Mama, there was a set of cool kids who had all store bought clothes and went shopping in Asheville or even Raleigh. Their daddies drove nice cars and their houses were two stories and painted white. It was like it always is in the movies: the doctors, the banker, the Mayor and the owners of the stores were the only ones with any money to speak of. I spent a lot of time looking at mama's high school yearbooks and you can pick out those kids. They had better teeth and they showed 'em off a lot. None of them came to my granddaddy's church. They went to a Presbyterian church in the middle of town.

There weren't a lot of new kids in Willets. And everybody already knew the lay of the land. So mama's place was already like predetermined. Did you know the Presbyterian church runs the same way? It is already predetermined if'n you're going to Heaven or Hell. Sister Mary Peters says that ain't the truth. That it is what you do and believe that determine where you will be going. I am thinking we all know where I am going.

I am digressing again and I ain't even got to the real story yet. I am still in the prologue. That word means it is the part before the story, even though right now, as I am saying it, it seems like the story. I promise you, it ain't.

So anyways, my mama's place was not to be with the cool kids. But she watched 'em and listened to 'em. She studied them as much as she studied any of her school books. She was only an OK student of book learning, but she was a master at people. She could listen to anybody and talk like them in no time flat. She ended up not fittin' in anywhere. The kids like her, in her same circumstances, didn't like her cause they thought she was stuck up and trying too hard. And the cool kids didn't give her a second look. But that didn't stop Mama; she never thought she would stay in Willets anyway, not once she heard Elvis.

Angel Purdy had a beautiful voice. I remember hearing her singing around the house when she thought nobody was listening. She learned to sing in church. The Preacher said God gave her that voice to praise him and that she did when she was young. She sang a song almost every Sunday she said. I never heard her sing anything but Elvis songs. I knew every word to every one of his songs by the time I could walk. They put me to bed and they woke me up.

I guess it's time to talk about my daddy. Which is kinda a short story, cause I never really knew him much. He was gone by the time I turned four. I do remember he laughed a lot. And laughed at my Mama a lot, which used to make her mad as a steam engine. I think I can remember his voice, low and gentle, but I might have made that up. I found a picture of us at one of my birthdays. I have cake all over my face and my daddy is laughing. Mama just looks like she doesn't know where she is. I've seen his picture in the year book and I do look like him. I sometimes wonder exactly how it is my Mama and him got together. She won't talk about it none. I don't wonder why; he looks as close to Elvis as probably anybody she had ever seen. But he didn't fit in with what she was trying to do. Not if she was trying to better herself. And Mama never did anything without a plan. I think maybe he just kinda snuck up on her. He wasn't one of the cool kids, you can tell that in his picture in the yearbook. There was only the one picture and the cool kids always appear in lots of pictures. I don't think he was a bad kid either, but that might just be me and some wishful thinking. All I know for sure is that at some point, he and Mama spent some time together when she was 18. I showed up right after she turned 19. Course by then, she had left the Preacher's house and moved to Indiana with Robert Matthew Maylen, my daddy. Maybe that was her plan. To escape.

CHAPTER THREE

Mama was not meant to be an army wife or a mother at 19. She had wanted glamor and money and Elvis. Instead, she got Crane Ammunition base, a baby and a husband she didn't

really know. She did get a house on the base and a regular income though. And most of the wives of the other men could not have been much different. I don't know what her life was like then. It is a part she don't talk about. I am assuming it was uneventful and boring. When my daddy got shipped off to Vietnam, she moved off the base and into a little, tiny apartment with just one bedroom in Bloomington, Indiana. She might not have liked my daddy that much, but I am thinking she was lonely. I guess little kids aren't much company. She would take me out on walks and repaint the walls and move furniture around a lot. She would make me sing parts of Elvis songs to her, holding a wooden spoon like a microphone. She played some of those Elvis records over and over. Records don't wear out, even if I did sometimes.

I asked mama once, when she was being sweet after a couple of drinks, why she didn't name me Elvis. She said my daddy wouldn't let her, but he did let her name me Presley Aaron Maylen, so that's pretty close. I asked her if she loved my daddy. She said she never had time to find out, what with me being there and then him being gone. I never asked her if she loved me. I was too scared of the answer.

Three things happened in 1967. Most important, mama got word that daddy wasn't coming back from the war. I only saw her cry about it one time, but she may have cried more alone. Knowing her, I doubt it. I cried with her, more cause she was crying than cause I was going to miss my daddy. I had gotten over missing him a few years before. Then, I finally started school, a year later than the other kids, but Mama said I was too little and needed the extra year to grow. I don't know who she had to convince, but nobody ever came around to ask questions. And then, Mama took a job at the Otis Elevator factory when I started school. She started on the floor but studied at night to learn shorthand and typing. I guess I should make that four things that happened, cause that is the year she started seeing Darin Morris, one of the managers at Otis. I didn't know who he was then, only that when he would come by, he would bring me a candy bar and tell me that one day we would go out and throw around a baseball. Said I looked like I needed toughening up. They would leave me at the apartment and tell me to be good and not get in any trouble. I never got caught. I would put on my Mama's Elvis records and sing my heart out, pretending to be on stage. I had already seen more than 15 Elvis movies and I studied each one. Nothing made my mama happier than when I could move just like him. And I always wanted to make my mama happy back then. It was a hard habit to break.

Mama got promoted to the office about a year after she started seeing Mr. Morris. She didn't see him much after that. She started seeing another man, Mr. Brien. He was the office manager. He didn't talk to me too much when he came over. He would give me a dollar and send me to the movies. I was eight by that time and nobody questioned me going to the movies by myself. Guess that couldn't happen nowadays, but back then, Bloomington was small and nobody thought nuthin' about it. He was always gone when I got home and Mama would be in the bathtub. I would sit outside the door and tell her about the movie. She said I was too old to see her naked.

I guess I should tell you about school before I tell you about my career as an ETA. That stands for Elvis Tribute Artist. They sorta happened together and one put a stop to the other. You probably think school put a stop to my Elvis, but it ain't so. Maybe it should have, then I would talk better and know how to write my own story. But then I would not have met Sister Mary Peters. And right now, she is the only thing keeping me from going crazy in this cell. Then again, maybe I wouldn't be in this cell if I had stayed in school and stayed off the stage.

I think school is hard for anybody that is different. And I was different. My hair was longer than most of the other boys and I always wore it slicked back and in a ducktail. I looked like a reject from the 50s but what I really looked like was a baby Elvis. I was shorter and smaller than the other boys, too. Luckily, I had learned from my Mama how to be polite and quiet and mostly I got by in school without much problem. I never made good grades, but I always passed. The teachers ignored me, which was better than if they had been mean. I had a few friends but I never brought nobody home. Mama didn't like kids. She said privacy and goals are more

important than friends. Unless those friends could help you achieve those goals. I am trying to look for a nice word to describe mama and Sister Mary Peters said maybe I could say she was a great believer in Utilitarianism. That means that she was very good at using anything she could find to get what she wanted. It does sound way better than ruthless and selfish. Mama woulda liked that.

I didn't play sports; I was too short and didn't really like 'em anyway. I was in the Glee Club and the Drama Club. I lived for the Talent Show once a year. And I bet you can guess what my talent was. Well, I was in school full time til I was 16. Mama had a few boyfriends as she moved up at the plant and none of them ever seemed to last more'n a year. She had a real nice one when I was about 15. He took us to Indianapolis for a weekend once, to see an Elvis Impersonator that came from Chicago. Mama and me didn't even know people did that. Like a job, I mean. That night Mama was a weird mix of happy and bitter. She was thrilled to go see this act, but afterwards, she tore that Elvis up. Nothing he did was as good as what I could do. It should be me up there, not some kid out of Chicago who couldn't even really sing the songs. He had to just move his mouth like he was singing. I didn't agree. I thought the act was great, even if he couldn't sing. It did make me want to do it, be up on stage I mean. That was the night that ended my schooling and started a whole nother life.