

First Place, 1990 Brookie & D.K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest

BIRTH OF THE BLUES

By Kristen Rogers

THE FIRST AFTERNOON, right after the registration and introductory meetings, they have a trip planned to Grace-land. It's sort of an ice-breaker. Something to show the sales reps that Memphis is good for something.

We ride out there on a bus. It's an hour's drive. August has the window, so I read my paperback.

"Get your nose out of that book, Nora," he says. "Don't you want to see what Tennessee looks like?" I can't think of a reason why I should.

I glance out the window. Tennessee, from what I can tell, is white-hot and shabby. I return to my book. The heroine has just discovered that she loves the man she despises. They are about to fall into each other's arms for the first time, about to fulfill the passion that has been relentlessly building for the last 213 pages. I try not to listen to the snuffling of August's nose, which is stuffed up with hay fever.

At the ticket office they put us into a shuttle van and drop us off at the front door. We step into a room that is a living monument to the worst of the sixties and seventies. The guide pretends to tell us the deepest secrets of the Presley lives. I look around.

"Sick," I mutter under my breath. "Totally sick."

"What?" says August.

"This place looks like vomit," I say.

He looks at me like I'm demented. "That's the whole point," he says.

We are herded through the rooms. August is enjoying himself. His mother named him Augustus. He was the ninth of ten children; I give her the benefit of the doubt—she was undoubtedly a bit wacko by the time he came along. Everyone but me calls him Gus; the name August was a private joke between us, once. In the jungle room, he nudges me and says he thinks we should decorate our bedroom just like this. He sounds hopeful, like maybe I'll think he's funny. There's a little museum in the basement, where they've saved the sequined and fringed costumes. I have seen film clips of the time when Elvis needed no costume.

I remember that Lisa Marie has had Elvis's grandchild and that people are still seeing him at K-Marts and demolition derbies. But the guide says that Elvis died on the toilet, and in the backyard is the family cemetery. August reads the inscrip-

tions and snickers. I am wondering why everything has to grow senile. Why decent things die.

Back at the ticket office we meander through endless souvenir shops.

I'm handling the Elvis mugs one by one when August calls out, "Hey, Nora!" I look over. He holds up a pair of slippers with Elvis's head on the toes. I try to smile, but when he decides to buy them for Callie, I'm not amused.

"She doesn't want a stupid thing like that," I say.

"She does too. She wants them more than anything in the world."

That night the sales reps go dancing and barhopping. I don't dance and I don't drink. August goes along for the fun of it. I myself have a low tolerance for fun, so I stay in the hotel room and watch *Dirty Harry* on the pay channel.

He comes back in a great mood and tries to wake me up, but I pretend I'm asleep. After he rolls over I lie awake and think about how hard it is to love a man who hums in his sleep.

Today August has meetings in the morning and most of the afternoon. He thinks I should get out and explore Memphis, but I'm afraid to go out in the heat. I call up August's mother so I can talk to Callie.

"She's fine. Don't you worry, she's just fine," Mother Bennett says. This trip was her idea. She insisted on paying my fare. "It will be lovely," she says. "It will be so good for both of you to get away." She worries a lot about the state of our marriage.

"But Callie misses me, doesn't she?" I say.

"Well, no, she's fine really. We've been having a wonderful time."

She puts Callie on the phone, and I tell her Mommy misses her and is sending her a big kiss over the telephone wires. She sounds happy, too happy.

"Don't worry, Mommy and Daddy will be home very soon," I tell her, slowly, so she'll understand.

In the afternoon I doze off, but in the middle of a dream about a man who wears leather pants and rattlesnake boots I hear the lock click and August comes in, blowing his nose.

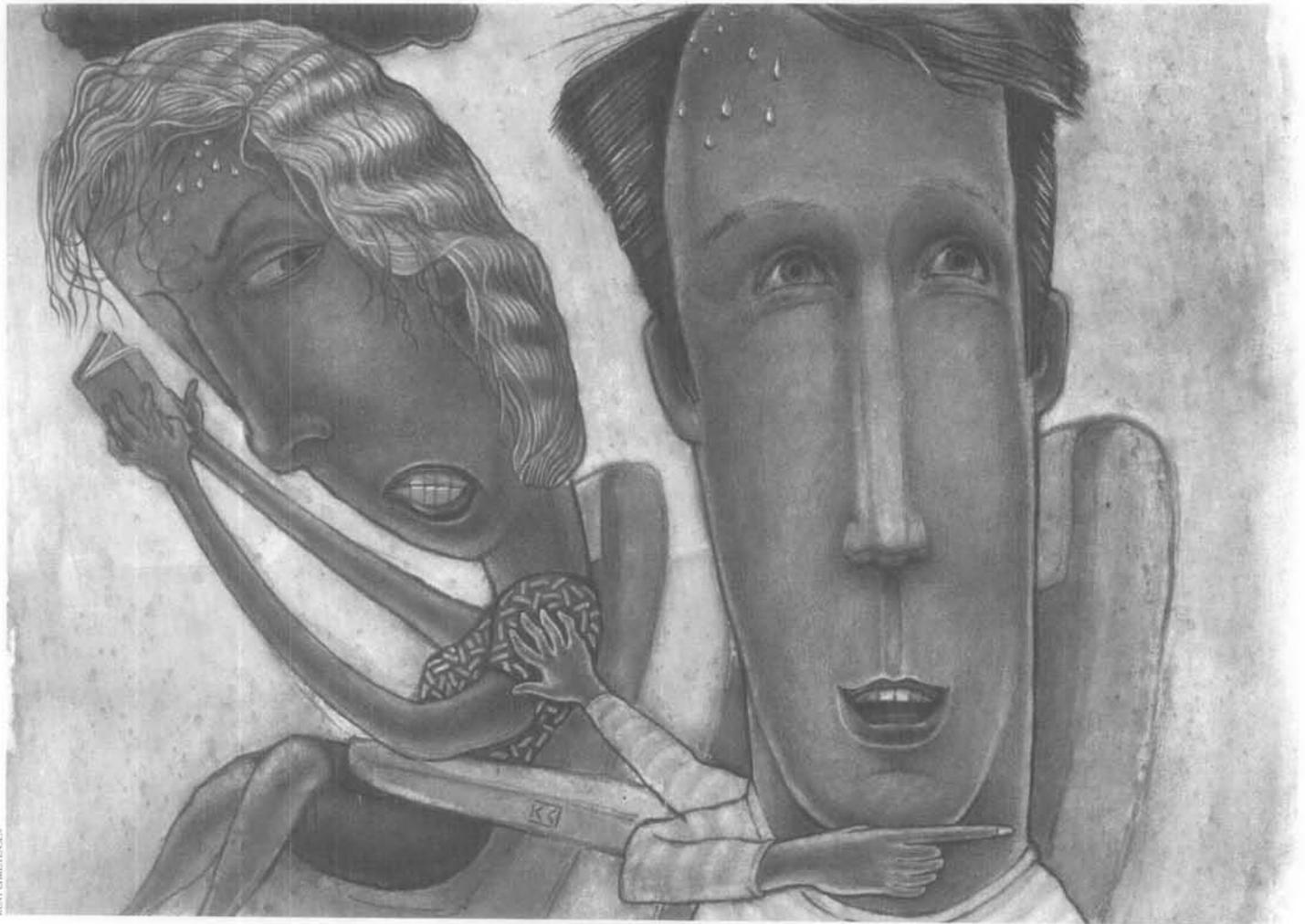
"Come on," he says loudly. "We're getting out of here."

"Go away," I mumble. "It's hot out there. We'll get mugged. There's a lot of racial tension these days. Besides, I've had a headache ever since I got up."

He sits on the bed and looks at me strangely. "What is it with you? You're as much fun as a sack of potatoes."

I sit up very fast. "Potatoes?" I yell. "Look who's talking!"

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“Dear God, let me live ’til I see my baby girl grown up.’
You make that prayer and God’s gonna do It! God’s gonna let you live.”

And then I can’t think of anything else to say to the man who took the rattlesnake cowboy out of my life.

He is taking off his shoes. He hurls them one at a time against the wall. “Okay. Fine. We’ll stay in the room till we rot.” He lies back on the bed with his hands behind his head.

I feel a surge of energy. “No,” I say. “You’ll stay in the room until you rot. I’m sick up to here with this place.” I try to believe I’m angry. I take a few swipes at my hair with the brush and slash some lipstick onto my mouth. I’m fully aware that I’m being irrational, but rationality doesn’t seem particularly important.

He doesn’t catch up with me until I’m leaving the lobby.

“Come on, Nora.” It sounds a little like begging, a little like whining. “Let’s have a good time. We’re on vacation, for crying out loud.” I don’t answer, but I let him follow me. We step outside and my clothes are suddenly soaked with sweat. I head for the shady side of the street. I have never seen so many blacks in one place before, and I feel pale in an unhealthy sort of way, but I don’t say any of this to August. We are weaving down this miserable little street, looking disinterestedly in the store windows.

“Why is everything so tacky?” I say, talking to the heavens, I suppose. “What is this, the capital of schlock?” August wipes the sweat from his forehead.

The few blocks we have walked seem like a mile. “Look,” says August. “Beale Street.” I look at the street sign.

“So what?” I say.

“It’s famous,” he says. “The blues were born here. The brochure said so.”

“Swell,” I say. So we walk down Beale Street and come to where W. C. Handy stands holding his horn, staring across the street with his round bronze face. The blacks sprawling across the benches in the park pay him no mind. They don’t look up when August walks all around him, peering at the inscriptions.

“Good news. His house is just down the street,” he says, coming back to me.

“I’m going to melt, it’s so hot,” I say. We walk on, stopping in front of a bar and grill plastered with posters of events that were and events that will be. Down low is a photo of the owner shaking hands with Lyndon B. Johnson. The smell of barbecuing fills the air. I’m getting hungry. The next store has a windowful of stuff from the Fifties: outdated dresses, old boxes

of laundry soap, lard buckets, a Hoover.

We look these items over carefully, as though we are planning a purchase. While we are looking the door opens and an old man steps out.

"How y'all doin today?" he says, tipping his straw hat so that we can see his grizzled hair. The cheer in his voice puts a sour taste in my mouth. "How y'all like Beale Street?"

I glance over at August, who is caught off guard. "We like it fine," I say. The heat is wearing down my reflexes.

"Y'all look like nice folks," he says and sticks out his hand. It feels like well-worn leather. "Proud to meet y'all. I'm Rooster, and this the second time I been alive. I was dead, now I'm alive the second time."

I smile politely and look at August to see if he's smiling. He's smiling. He introduces us.

"You seen the sights?" says the old man.

"We were just going over to see W. C. Handy's house," says August.

"I'll show you Handy's house. I knew Handy personally. Heard him play, right here on Beale Street." Sweat is falling in my eyes, but I blink it away. The old man takes my elbow and guides me across the street. "Ain't nobody can tell me nothing," he says. "I seen the seen, heard the heard, done the done, and been the been. Don't you tell me anything!"

He stops suddenly and waves his hand. "Here's the place." It's a blue house, small, nondescript, uprooted from its true habitat and plunked down here on Beale Street. August is grinning. The old man rates right up there with Graceland.

I don't like his grin. "I've got to get out of this heat," I say to August.

"Come with me," says Rooster, and he takes my arm again and then we are at the bar in the Blues Riff Saloon. It's dark and cool and nobody at all is sitting at the little round tables. We sit on the padded barstools. The bartender, a round-faced boy with a bit of a mustache, sets napkins in front of us. "Like something to drink?" His Southern voice is as cool and slow as the fan overhead.

"Coke please," I say. August orders the same. "What about you?" I ask Rooster, but he shakes his head and waves his kidskin hand.

"Naw," he says.

August is grinning like a weasel. "How long have you lived here, Rooster?" he asks.

Rooster scrunches up his face indignantly. "Why you ask a thing like that? What difference do time make? I ask you one thing. It cheaper to live, or to die?"

"I don't know. Dying's not cheap," August says, squinting like he was doing some serious figuring. "My uncle that died last year had about a five thousand dollar funeral." I look around at the walls. They are papered with pictures of celebrities and demi-celebrities. In a glass case are somebody's bright green high-heeled shoes. "Course, you don't have to get one of those fancy caskets," August goes on. "They have cheap ones you can slip inside an expensive-looking case so it will look nice for the funeral." A girl slides the chairs out to sweep under the tables.

Rooster waves his hand. "This my second time alive, you see. You don't understand that. God brought me back to life. I didn't have a thing to do with it." Rooster's pants sag around his waist. Blue-striped suspenders hold them up. He lays his hand on August's shoulder and leaves it there.

August grins at Rooster. "You mean to say God raised you from the dead?" His voice sounds full of reverence, but I know better.

"Yes, sir, He surely did."

"When did that happen, Rooster?"

The bartender sets cool glasses in front of us. He stands and looks at us for a minute. August drains most of his immediately.

"Told you," says Rooster. "Time don't mean a thing. Could of been last year, could of been three hundred years ago. Same thing."

He works his tongue over his teeth. August looks back at me with *that* look in his eyes.

"God raised me," Rooster says. "My folks all dead. He taught me to read and write. Taught me to read the Holy Bible."

The bartender looks over and winks. "Rooster telling you all kinds of stories?"

"Is he in here a lot?" I ask.

"Every morning, every noon, every night," says the boy. "Ain't you, Rooster?"

"Rooster's some character," August says.

"Let me see that," the old man says, reaching for August's napkin, which is stained with a brown ring. "I'm gonna show you what God gonna do for you." He looks over at me and lifts his eyebrows.

"Y'all got children at home?" he asks.

"One," I say. "A little girl."

The bartender comes over and wipes up where I spilled some Coke. "Y'all from somewhere out West?"

"Utah," August says.

"Um hm," says the bartender. I lean my head on my hand and watch Rooster.

August suddenly yawns and grabs my arm. "Sorry, Pop. We gotta get going now," he says. I pull my arm away.

Rooster lifts a hand. "Just set still a minute," he says. "I tell you what God gonna do for you." He tips back his straw hat and takes out a pen from his pocket and writes in shaky letters on the napkin: R-I-G-H-T. He pushes it over in front of me. "Can you read that?" he says. "It says RIGHT. And God's gonna do you right."

He pokes an old finger at August's shirt. "You, sir. You gonna take your little baby and burn her up?"

"Course not."

"Well then!" Rooster's voice grows triumphant. "No more is God gonna throw his children in hell to burn!"

He stops, starts to say something else, and begins to cough. August glances my way and gestures with his eyes toward the door. He's had enough fun. I shrug noncommittally. I'm wondering who taught Rooster to write.

"Another thing." He's talking to me. "You want to live, or die?"

I consider. I'm watching the pinkness of his mouth.

"You pray to God," he says. "Pray and say, 'Dear God, let me live til I see my baby girl grown up.'" He's staring at me with those old eyes. "You make that prayer and God is gonna *do* it! God's gonna let you *live*."

August grabs my arm hard and pulls me to my feet. "Let's go, honey." He calls me honey only when he's bored. He offers some bills to the bartender. "Mr. Rooster, sir, it's been a pleasure."

The bartender shakes his head. "Naw. Y'all kept him outta trouble awhile."

Rooster's voice grows misty. "I love y'all," he says. "And you, ma'am, I be praying that God gonna give you your wish."

I nod. There's an odd fluttering at the base of my throat and I can't say anything. August hands the money to Rooster. I glare at August, but he doesn't notice. Rooster looks at the money for moment, then he sticks out his worn hand.

"I never asked for it," says Rooster. He stuffs the bills into his pocket.

August is steering me toward the door. The brightness beyond the windows blinds my eyes. "I'll pray for you, too," I call out over my shoulder, only because I can't think of anything else to say. Then we are gasping in the heat once more. I throw a poisonous look at August and head off.

"What's the matter?" he cries, trotting after me.

"Did you *have* to give him money?" I say through clenched teeth.

"What's wrong with that?" he says.

"Everything. It's demeaning."

August rolls his eyes upward. "*Demeaning?* Geez, Nora. I try to help an old guy out . . ."

But I'm mad now. I'm steaming along the street. August shouts that I'm going the wrong direction, but I don't care. He said I should see Memphis, so I'll see Memphis. He follows behind, yelling.

"Come on, Nora," he yells. "Give me a break. Why do you take everything so serious?"

I walk faster. The street is like a yellow glare, like a hot funnel sucking me down. Maybe I take everything so serious because this is serious business. August is falling behind me now. I realize that nobody much is on the street; in fact, I haven't seen a soul for a while. Too hot for anybody to be hanging around.

I glance back. August is about a block back, walking along half-heartedly. I myself feel a little dizzy. Tight little thoughts pound in my head. What if somebody jumps me? I hold my purse a little closer. August is probably following along so that he can protect me. But what if a gang jumps us both? What if they slit our throats and drag our bodies into a side alley? I look at the blank buildings. I wonder if Rooster has forgotten about promising to pray. I see a man in one of the doorways, watching me.

I realize suddenly that a person could die here, in Memphis. I walk a little faster. A person could disappear into a back street never to be found. I think maybe it's time to turn around. I think maybe someone malicious is stalking me.

When I see the fire station, an immense relief washes over me. I almost run inside, yanking the glass door open. Three blue-shirted men, hunched over a card game, look up in surprise.

I try a wide smile. "Hi," I say. And then I feel a little foolish. They wait. I tell them I'm a tourist. I say that I was just wondering—is it safe to be walking around here?

"Y'all want a soda?" asks one of them, getting up and walking to the refrigerator. He is thin and nervous-looking, with slick greased hair. "Oh," I say. Thanks." He twists the lid off and hands it over, and I give him a smile. The soda is red and sweet and cold. I wonder if August saw me come in here.

"Safe?" says another. He cocks his head. "You alone?"

I tell them my husband is outside.

"That's good. I wouldn't keep going this away. I believe I'd turn around here."

The thin fireman says, "Hey, y'all seen where they shot Martin Luther King?"

"No," I say. August comes in then. He is scowling. I look at him gratefully.

"Y'all ought to see it," the thin fireman says. "Right in back of here."

"Who was it shot him?" says the third fireman. "I forget." He's fat, with beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Lee Harvey Oswald," says the other one, shuffling cards.

"Naw," says the fat one. "That's the guy that got JFK."

"Right in back of here," says the thin one. "The very motel."

"Seems like it was some guy with the same first and last name," says the fat one.

"Nuts to you," says the other one. "Fellow's name was Hinckley or Manson or something. I know it. It's on the tip of my tongue." I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

"I could take you there," says the thin one. "Just right back here."

I look at August to see if he's smiling. He's staring at the firemen with glazed eyes. He has lost his sense of humor.

"It's right in back, you say?" I ask. The thin fireman points the direction.

"We'll find it," I say. "Come on, honey," I say, grabbing August's arm. "Let's go see it."

We walk out of the building and across some grass and then we see it. It looks exactly like the motel I saw on T.V. back then, the motel I was too young to remember: but I remember this, all right. I remember the whitehot bullet that ripped into flesh and bone. I remember the explosion of pain, the pale hot city going hazy and red-rimmed, then dark.

I remember how innocent things grow senile. I think about dying on the toilet, dying on a motel balcony, dying in a bedroom.

"Dear God," I say under my breath, "Let me live to see my baby grown."

"What?" says August. He's looking pale and snuffling, staring glumly at the motel. He's burning up out here.

He looks so forlorn that I laugh a little and give him the rest of the soda. "Come on," I say, taking his hand. "We've got to get you out of this heat."