



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION

Queensland Branch

PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION
2021

Highly Commended in the Open Division

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The hitman and the Elvis box

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The hitman and the Elvis box

Reg leans into the window of a strange prestige car, another sticky beaker. They come every weekend to look at the display homes. He's been talking for ages, gesturing wildly with one hand while holding my Elvis box in the other, and the driver's hanging on his every word. I step closer to listen in.

"Then you take the second left, keep going for ages, then another left..."

The driver thanks him profusely and takes off in the direction Reg was gesturing.

"What were you saying?" I ask.

He keeps smiling and waving as the prestige car disappears down the road.

"Just giving him directions."

"But Reg... you have no idea where you are." I say.

This is the first time he's been to Dad's fancy neighbourhood. He's from the industrial suburbs out East - Doveton, Dandenong, Noble Park. Anywhere it's unsafe to walk at night, he roams freely.

"Where did you send him?" I ask. He laughs.

"No idea, Flea Boy. No idea."

Reg is always doing pranks like this for his own amusement, because he fears nothing and no one. As someone who values 'being a good boy', I find it intoxicating.

"Don't you feel bad?" I ask.

"Nah. Look at his expensive car, Flea Boy - a Holden Statesman. He's a Holden man. A fucking...nancy boy."

I laugh. While 'Flea Boy' is a term of endearment for me, because I'm little, 'Holden Man' is a grave insult in Reg's world. It means someone who's soft, a sissy-boy who spends his days crying and being bad at fighting. Reg says there's two types of men in this world — those who drive Fords and those who drive Holdens, and he feels very strongly that Ford is the correct choice. He says the Ford men at the V8 races and illegal street drags are always 'way tougher and way more handsome and cool' than the Holden men. Reg is the only person I've met who knows this stuff.

We keep moving around the block — Mum's told him to park far away from Dad's house because she doesn't like Dad knowing her business, and Reg seems fine with it. He's pretty much fine with whatever Mum says.

Our stretched reflections approach his deep green polished and overpowered Ford — a giant oafish man with a number two buzzcut and punched-in face, thick scarred arms and faded tattoos, beside an undersized boy with a daggy comb over, freckled face and cardboard box in his skinny arms. An unexpected gang.

He gently lowers my box onto the back seat. To the untrained eye it's just a shoe box, but inside is Reg's Mum's treasures. Her Elvis treasures. There's Elvis fan club magazines, Elvis playing cards, weathered print articles, everything Elvis — gathered over decades. And it's time for me to return it.

Reg's Mum lent it to me for a school project. I chose Elvis because I knew she'd like it and, while the project isn't technically finished, I'm eager to return it safely before Mum and Reg inevitably bust up and Mum sets fire to it.

He hurls a thick roadmap book from the passenger seat so I can strap in, and he can awaken his beast. With a flick of his wrist Reg rips my father's silent suburb apart with the howling of a V8 engine, 80s hair metal and a devil-may-care puff of cigarette smoke from the driver's window.

I like the smell of this car. While Dad's house smells like dusty books and detergent, and Mum's house reeks of stale animal urine and bong water, Reg's car is thick with cheap aftershave, tobacco and a little cardboard tree swinging from the rear-view mirror that claims to smell like 'new car'.

He's done his hair today, greased up with Brylcreem. I've started using Brylcreem in my hair too because Reg says that the Fonzie used it and Elvis used it "...and they both knew what the fuck they were doing". I don't look like the Fonzie or Elvis though, just a boy with a wet curly comber, but Reg says it looks good.

We tear off. Past neat homes and green lawns with straight edges, through farmland soon to be crammed with identical homes, then past factories, overgrown yellow lawns, then lawns covered in dismantled Fords and Holdens.

It's a long way from Dad's house to Mum's, but I'm always happy to ride with Reg. He opens up when he's driving, telling wild stories and old Rodney Rude jokes. I try to retell them at school, where I can swear, but they never land like when he tells them. Grade 5 just isn't ready for this sort of blue humour and to be honest I don't understand it either.

"Big day today Flea Boy. Your Mum's having a rest so we're hitting the town," he says.

I'm not exactly sure what 'having a rest' means, I don't know what happens on the weekends I'm at Dad's house, but it's not generally good. Maybe she was working all night, but more likely snorting and smoking drugs with colourful characters in the flat, or she's had another meltdown and he's giving her space. I don't really care though, because hitting the town with Reg is the best.

"Cool. What are we gonna do?" I ask.

I'd normally feel rude asking a direct question like that, conscious he's doing Mum a favour — a 24-year-old man giving up the best days of his life to hang out with a 10-year-old boy. But now I know that he likes hanging out with me because he loves doing kid stuff, and he needs a break from Mum too. God I hope we're going to Timezone.

"Let's take The King home, grab a feed, go to Timezone..." he says.

He switches the stereo to Elvis and croons along. I notice fresh cuts on his knuckles as he reaches again for the volume knob.

"What happened?" I ask innocently, pretending not to have guessed. He barely skips a beat.

"Oh nothing, just a little altercation. Had to touch someone up. Teach him some manners."

Reg has to 'touch people up' quite frequently. On paper he's a security patrolman, but the company boss sends him off on a lot of odd jobs. Debt collecting. The boss owns a brothel too, and an old limousine that moves sex workers and cocaine around. I'm pretty sure Reg isn't involved in that side of things but it's best not to ask. Still, it's hard to explain to the kids at school why I've started getting dropped off in a clapped-out limousine.

I know Reg would never kill but he's very happy to biff. I don't know how much he gets paid for it, I don't even think he gets paid every time because Reg just loves helping his mates. He was once enlisted by the Doveton Football Club even though he couldn't kick the ball straight - they'd just send him out to deck people until he was sent off. He was fine with it, because violence is his currency.

"Is there anyone you're afraid of, Reg?" I ask.

He thinks about it, but not for long.

"Clint Eastwood. If anyone gives him sass, he just FUCKS EM UP!"

He pretends to be Clint Eastwood, steering with his knees while kung fu chopping invisible enemies and screaming "Bam! Fuck ya up! Pow! Pow!" to my delight. He's still pretending to be Clint Eastwood as someone cuts in front of him at the traffic lights, and his demeanour switches quickly.

“HEY MATE! DO YOU LIKE HOSPITAL FOOD? YOU WANT TO EAT THROUGH A STRAW??” he shouts while glaring at the other driver.

They get out of his way quickly. I feel torn, as someone who hates conflict but appreciates wit. I’ve now learned to appreciate it from a safe distance.

Violence is how Reg met Mum.

With the help of her boss, Mum hired Reg to ‘touch up’ her last violent boyfriend, a real piece of work. Apparently Reg just gave him ‘a little talking to’ and ‘a slap’, but then ‘his arms and legs got in the way’ and the guy ended up in the emergency ward.

Then Mum started dating Reg.

I hope this chapter lasts forever. Reg is keen for it — he’s proposed to Mum three times now but she always says no, blaming the twelve-year age gap. She’s kept him around a while though, longer than most, but I can see the signs. She’s got him too well trained, she’s bored. The flat got pretty awkward when I gave him a Father’s Day present.

It’s pretty clear that, even at 24, all Reg wants is a family. I think that’s why he shows me off to his parents. They’re desperate for grandchildren and after his older brother went to prison, the burden fell on him.

He turns the volume down as we pull into his parent’s humble but tidy home. Small house, neat garden, lots of concrete, three cars on the front lawn but all clean and polished. He kisses his parents in the driveway — even his dad, who’s also named Reg. He’s short and stocky and looks like Richie Cunningham’s Dad on Happy Days. He’s a top manager at a glass factory and, while he’s very soft around the family, isn’t afraid of a scrap either. He once knocked a man out cold for calling him ‘pal’, which is very disrespectful out here apparently.

They usher us into the house which looks like the 1950s — doilies on every surface, protective covers on the couches, photos of Elvis amongst portraits of the boys, always roast meat in the fridge. Reg tries not to swear around his Mum and she raps him over the head if one slips out. It’s quite a sight, a giggling hitman cowering before a 50-year-old woman.

I lower the Elvis box onto the coffee table with care, opening it slowly so Reg’s Mum can witness her treasures still intact. This box has been a stress ever since she lent it to me.

“How’d the project go Darl? Did he give you a good grade? Do we need to send Reggie in there to have a word?” she asks, half joking.

“It’s going well thanks Mrs Kelly, I’m nearly finished.”

“Oh — you’re still working? Just hold onto it love, I’m in no rush.”

Fuck. Just take the box Mrs Kelly, you don't understand. If Mum and Reg bust up she'll probably try to destroy your life as well as your son's, and your Elvis box won't last two seconds.

"Oh no that's fine thank you Mrs Kelly, it's been very helpful already. I've got some great facts, so I should give it back." I say.

"Nonsense, keep it until you're done. Now let's have a cup of tea."

I sit patiently through several cups of tea, updates on the extended family and conjecture about whatever led the Channel Nine news last night. This is what I do best, sit quietly and nod along with the adults, trying not to look nervous. Maybe it'll be fine, I'll just hide the Elvis box under my bed. Maybe they won't bust up, maybe nothing crazy will happen, maybe things will stay good.

We say a long goodbye, full of kisses and snacks for the road, before returning to Reg's Ford. In its glistening paint I see the reflection of a nice family — an oafish loving stepfather, lovely grandparents and a small boy holding an Elvis box, which his Mum will soon make him burn in the backyard.

"Do you ever worry you'll lose a fight, Reg?" I ask as we drive away.

"Nah. I've lost plenty, being smacked around isn't nice but it's not the end of the world. No one's as tough as they think they are, they can't hurt you that much."

"One person can."

"Oh yeah...WHO Flea Boy?"

"Clint Eastwood. He'll FUCK YA UP!"

I kung fu chop invisible enemies, which gets a good belly laugh from Reg who's never heard me swear before. It feels good. We're going to Timezone.