

# Learning to Tell Time with Elvis

By Harvey Huddleston

## 1

I arrived at book club with some wine that held promise if you could believe that guy behind the counter. She opened the door with Theo next to her doing handsprings like St. John Bosco had performed to become the patron saint of actors. Then, bending down to calm Theo, she looked up at me and said, “I’m so sorry about Herman.”

Herman, I thought, now where did that come from?

A few months ago I was leaving my apartment when I’d seen Herman having trouble getting up to his place on the couch so I’d placed a box in front. Then on my return, I found that he’d fallen off the box and his front claws had stuck in the couch. I freed him but saw that he couldn’t move his lower body so I lifted him up to his water bowl on the coffee table. I was encouraged when he took some sips but then he still couldn’t move and as I watched him it became clear that he never would again.

I made the call and put him in his carrier and took him out into the fresh air which he’d always loved. The car came and we went and when I got back it didn’t seem possible that he wasn’t with me. I cleaned the apartment as it had begun to smell from his many bowel leaks that I hadn’t been able to keep up with. But when it came to his things, I couldn’t get rid of them all. His litter scoop still lies on the closet floor, half-way visible.

Herman had spent his first few years in an alley and even though he liked people, the only way he knew how to play was to lash out with his claws. He wanted human contact so badly but something inside him just wouldn’t allow for it so I knew how much he’d depended on me. I didn’t know though how much I’d depended on him. I still see him in the dim light across the room, peeking at me from around the corner. He’s there but not really so I’ve tried to get on with things like everyone else has had to do since the beginning of time.

But then our host said she was sorry about him and she’d said it with such concern and like it happened only yesterday that I was taken aback. A wave of joy came over me—not the kind that makes you stop to take it in but the kind that propels you forward into the simple act of living. We opened the wine and the other book club members arrived and for the rest of that evening it felt like Herman was there with us.

I wondered where that joy had come from and why it had come at the mere mention of his name. I wondered what might sustain it or if it could be sustained. Then a theory formed in my mind. It seemed that time itself had dissolved in that moment; that is, the distance between now and then contracted to the point where it vanished, leaving only what is and always will be.

## 2

It was confusing the way some people would look at a clock and make a pronouncement like “I have to be there by eight.” Even my sister who was only two years older than me could do it. I’d ask when Howdy Doody was coming on and she’d answer by just glancing at the clock. It seemed so natural that I assumed she’d been born with this power and some like her had it

while others like me didn't. That was bother- some but what really had me worried was the thought that this might be a permanent con- dition and I'd forever be at her mercy. I decided to ask.

"So how did you know it was fifteen minutes after two?"

"Because that's what the clock said."

"But how did you know what the clock said?"

"I looked."

"But how did you know what it said?"

At that she just looked at me. "Oh, you mean how do I tell time?"

"Yeah."

Now might come the answer I'd been dread- ing but instead she asked me a question, "You wanna learn?"

"... Yeah."

"Come on."

I followed her to the clock and she said there were two hands. "The short hand tells the hour and the long hand tells the minutes so all you have to do is see how many minutes it is before or after the hour that the short hand is pointing to." Then she told me to tell her what time it was so I did.

"See? It's easy."

"What's the skinny hand for?"

"It's for seconds but you don't have to worry about that."

"What does it do?"

Now she was annoyed. "Sixty seconds make a minute and sixty minutes make an hour. That's all you need to know," and then she was gone, leaving me counting the marks around the clock. But then I realized I didn't have to count them because the numbers already said what they were.

It amazed me that not only did we have clocks to tell time but I'd never be confused by one again. I wondered if all those things I didn't understand were because no one had explained them yet. Then I thought that maybe we were supposed to figure things out for ourselves since that was how I'd found out about music.

I knew that music was supposed to make you feel good but what was it supposed to sound like and what kind of good feeling was it supposed to give you? There was Lawrence Welk on TV with his "champagne music-makers" and bubbles ev- erywhere. The way he kept smiling I figured his music was supposed to make you happy but it didn't do that for me. Tommy down the block told me his father said the woman on Lawrence Welk was so pretty that he wanted to run out in the street and kiss her. That seemed like a strange thing for his father to say but even if he did, that didn't mean he was any happier and it sure didn't explain anything about music. So it re- mained a mystery until one night on the back porch.

I'd sit out there after dark when they'd let me and on this night I was watching and listen- ing to the teenagers next door. The teenager who lived there didn't pay any attention to me, but I liked him because of the time he'd walked around on his hands with his feet up in the air.

I sat there watching the reds, blues and yel- lows reflect off their faces. Their faces were all I could see because the hedge between our yards cut off everything else below their necks. And even though I couldn't see it, I knew a jukebox was there the way the colored lights kept shifting and the songs kept changing.

Then it happened.

Don't be cruel, ooh, ooh, ooh,

To a heart that's true.

I don't want no other love,

Baby, it's you I'm thinking of.

I said to myself, this must be music. And that was Elvis. I knew about him because he was from Memphis and had made a big splash on TV. He's telling this girl to not be cruel to him and I wondered what she'd done that was so cruel but he never says and then I realized he didn't have to

because no matter how cruel she was, all that mattered is how much he loves her.

Then it felt like I'd gone somewhere else and whenever after that on a hot summer day with the fan up high and Elvis on the radio, I knew exactly what I was hearing.

### 3

After first grade we moved to a bigger house in the suburbs and right after that Elvis moved out there too. He was getting more famous and had enough money to buy anything he wanted so I guess that house on Audubon was it. We drove by to see it like everyone else and it wasn't much bigger than ours except only Elvis lived there while our house was for the whole family. You could tell which one it was by the music notes stuck on the fence in front.

It had a swimming pool in the backyard which we only knew about because of my sister. Her friend in third grade had invited her over and it turned out she lived right next door to Elvis. This friend showed her how she spied on him through the backyard fence and I imagined Elvis in his pool with all these girls swimming around. But then my sister said all he did back there was work on his motorcycle and it was kind of boring.

Pretty soon so many people were driving down Audubon that his neighbors complained so Elvis moved to a new house called Graceland and I wondered what kind of house had its own name. A picture in the paper showed it with columns and a long driveway curving up to the house. There were still music notes on the fence in front but these were big ones on a fancy gate that closed the driveway off from the street.

Then he got drafted into the army and I don't remember much else from then except lots of new music coming out. One day I'm walking past Elvis's old house and this song called "The Locomotion" was in my head. It had this grinding horn and felt like a freight train coming with this girl singer who sounded black and sexy.

Everyone is doing a brand new dance now,  
Come on baby, do the Locomotion.  
Chugga chugga motion now, let's make a chain now,  
Come on baby, do the Locomotion.

Then Elvis was out of the army and had brought back to Memphis with him a young girl he wasn't married to. The paper said she'd come with her father's blessing and was already enrolled in a private school but it was still pretty weird. Memphians though chose to believe the best and then I found out this private school was the same Catholic girls school where my sister went. My sister said she was nice but didn't hang out with them much. A chauffeur dropped her off in the morning and then picked her up in the afternoon but that changed one day when she drove up in a brand new Mustang.

So with Elvis collecting young girls and no one thinking about him much, he starts popping up in the movies. What? I mean I knew he could sing but who said he could act. You didn't just decide one day to start acting and I figured that had to be especially true for this guy from Humes High

but that's exactly what Elvis did because then he was starring in more and more movies. He mostly sang and danced but he had to be doing something right for them to keep making them.

Then around when the Beatles came out he disappeared again and it seemed like a long time before he showed back up for what they called his "Comeback Tour." His hair wasn't slicked back anymore and he had these thick sideburns like some motorcycle greaser from the fifties. It was all a big success though and his music came back on the radio but that was different too now, slower and more old fashioned. All I knew for

sure was that it wasn't for me.

One day some friends and I were driving down Bellevue when we saw Elvis out at his gate talking to some fans. None of us had ever seen him up close so we decided to stop but by the time we parked and got over there, the crowd had grown a lot bigger. We stood at the back but then the gates opened up and the crowd began moving inside towards one of the stone walls surrounding the grounds.

In New Orleans once this guy asked what I thought of Elvis and I'd answered, "Just a Memphis hick who made it big," and I'd felt bad about that ever since. I mean, who knew what he was really like but then I thought maybe I could find out if I got up to the front of this crowd. A friend motioned to where two more friends were climbing up onto the stone wall so I climbed up too and followed behind them along the top of the wall to just above Elvis. We all sat down there just a few feet from his head.

He had on a shiny gold shirt and white pants as he sat there talking to his fans. Maybe it was how his dyed black hair was so puffed out but his head looked twice as big as any I'd ever seen. He didn't know we were there and I thought how easy it would be to just smack him. Then I saw a bodyguard type in the crowd watching us and someone else taking pictures and thought what a great shot with the crowd down below and us up above and that's why they were letting us sit there. Then I guess someone tipped him off because Elvis twisted his head around to look up at us and said, "Hey up there, how you fellas doin'?"

I answered, "pretty good," and that's all we said. He then turned back to his fans and we walked back around the wall to climb down. His voice had been that same one we all knew but there'd also been a Mississippi twang to it I'd never heard before. I was glad he'd felt comfortable enough out there in his front yard to not worry about how he sounded. It was like it was hard for him to relax and you felt that from him too. It came off as a sensitivity that made you like him.

He sang everything, love songs, ballads, gospel, jazz. But as his success grew so did his drug problems. During one of his stays at Baptist Hospital with the aluminum foil in the windows, a girlfriend and I were driving down Union when she told me her aunt was his nurse up there and all he did was brush his teeth. He'd brush them and then ten minutes later he'd brush them again. It went on like that all night and the only other thing her aunt said about it was that it was sad.

I'd just turned onto the ramp on I-240 when it came on the radio that Elvis was dead. They hinted at an overdose and the problems that came with addiction. One report said that he'd had a pill doctor who'd given him anything he wanted and that made sense as I knew plenty of those doctors in Memphis.

It was normal for Memphians to mourn him but what didn't seem normal at all was so many people coming from other places to mourn him too. I moved away the next year and watched from a distance as his celebrity grew. At first it surprised me and then I was shocked by how many people traveled there. But then I too, whenever I took a trip back to Memphis, went to Graceland to load up on the Elvis junk that I then gave out back in New York. It was like you just couldn't go wrong with Elvis.

So after dozens of movies and documentaries, a new biopic on him had just come out that's been nominated for several awards. His widow, Priscilla, the same girl my sister went to high school with, and their daughter, Lisa Marie, spoke so highly of the actor playing Elvis that I'd made a point

of seeing it. That was during the week before our next book club, the one I'd just arrived at.

## 4

As usual, some of us liked the book while others didn't. This latter group, of whom I was one, kept our comments mostly to ourselves so as to not dampen the cordial atmosphere created by our host. By that same token, there's no reason I can't say what I thought now. I hated *The Prince* and reading it was just as excruciating as my first time through fifty years earlier. I should have said, "tried" reading because I chucked it aside again just like in the good old days, convinced once and for all that the only reason to read Machiavelli was in its proof that, unlike the cheese our host laid out, he didn't get better with age.

Book club ended in a consensus—which I have to admit Machiavelli had no small part in— that humanity hasn't changed much in the last four centuries. The talk then turned to other things. One of our members hadn't completely recovered from being hit by a car while jogging but she went on to explain that even though she still had some headaches, her doctors expected a full recovery.

Someone asked me about my medical condition. The previous spring I'd spent two weeks in an ICU after my aorta burst. That and the collateral damage had been repaired over the course of four major surgeries but it still had me a bit rattled. Now whenever I'm asked how I am, I usually just say "better." That's all most people want to hear anyway and can't say I blame them.

Other books, plays and movies came up and the new biopic about Elvis was mentioned. Not all of us had seen it but one who had told of the scene where Elvis as a young boy heard Gospel music for the first time and began vibrating with it. I told of some real footage from Elvis' last concert used near the end of the film. "So Elvis is at his piano singing. His face is extremely bloated and his eyes are so glazed you think he might collapse when—"

But then I caught myself, realizing I was about to commit my usual "spoiler" blunder. The conversation then moved to other things but even as I joined in with it, I wanted to finish telling about the "Elvis" ending. So just as I did with Machiavelli, I'll tell it now but first, something about spoilers.

I've never understood them. How can saying what happens in a story ruin it for someone else? If you tell me a person jumped off a bridge, how can that have meaning if I don't know what went before it? And if it doesn't have any meaning, how can it spoil anything? But others don't like spoilers. It really is that simple so I try not to do it. In this case though, no harm was done so for anyone who hasn't seen the "Elvis" ending yet, consider this your spoiler alert because I'm going to reveal it now.

As I was saying, in some real footage from his last concert Elvis is at his piano singing "Unchained Melody." Massive amounts of moisture have welled up on his face and you're unsure whether it's sweat or tears or both. But then, just when it seems that he can't go on, he peeks out at his mostly female audience who are screaming their hearts out in love and adoration. His voice gains strength as he looks out again and then again and we follow along with him to the end of that much loved classic.

Lonely river flows to the sea, to the sea,  
To the open arms of the sea,  
Lonely river sighs, wait for me, wait for me,  
I'll be coming home, wait for me.

Archival footage has mostly been used to fill in the narrative when recreating a scene is prohibitive but that wasn't the case here. Everything in the film up to that point had been recreated but then this real footage is used without any attempt to disguise it. It signals a change in the film and serves as a kind of coda in the way that a su-

perscript is sometimes used at the end to tie up loose ends.

This is our last image of Elvis. And a remarkable image it is indeed; him up on stage doing what he's always done best, singing his heart out with every last bit of heart he has left. Taking that lonely trip with his audience down the river to the sea, to the open arms of the sea, as he looks out again and then again at those women who still embrace him to make sure they're still there. In that moment they are all his mothers and lovers, just as it's always been.

More archival footage is interspersed. In one clip he tells an audience that we need only a song to make it to the end and we realize that "Un-chained Melody" is that song in that moment when he knows better than anyone how close to the end he is.

And time goes by so slowly,  
And time can do so much,  
Are you still mine?

And every woman there screams back that she is. In that moment, form and content came together for the perfect ending. That was what I was going to say to book club but now I see how it might have been more of a spoiler than I'd thought.

## 5

Emma was my nurse in the ICU the night before my most critical surgery. She told me about her longtime boyfriend, Dan. He sounded like a nice guy but she seemed unsure about that "rest of her life" part of getting married. They had plans for two destination weddings coming up that summer in the Caribbean. The weddings were only two weeks apart though and she was having second thoughts about traveling to almost the same place twice in such quick succession. It conflicted with her sense of economy and efficiency. But marriage was in the air for her group and she'd begun to feel that it was time for her to kick out at least some of the stops.

Steam was rising from the corner of my cubicle and I saw that it was from a small autoclave as she stacked layers of steaming towels next to it. She then brought them to the table next to my bed and began placing them on my chest. When that steamy heat hit my skin it was like nothing I'd ever felt before. It had been days since anything clean and warm had touched my body. My second surgery had come right after the first and since both had been emergencies no attention had been paid to "niceties." Aside from that penetrating warmth, washing or having it done for me felt almost like healing.

Emma folded half the towel already in place back onto itself before applying the next one to the same area while covering a new area of the same size. In that way she proceeded across my chest, stomach and legs. This solemn progression over my body combined with the opiates in my system lulled me into an almost fugue like state as I savored each second. The parts of my body still untouched seemed to cry out in anticipation of that delicious warmth. It all seemed so masterful and beyond the ability of a normal human that I finally had to tell her.

"Emma, I can't get over how well you do that. Did someone teach you or did you learn it

yourself?"

"Hmmm, a little of both."

"Did you always want to be a nurse?"

"I'd always wanted to do something in medicine."

"Have you ever thought about becoming a surgeon?"

"Well, my hands aren't really precise enough for that. But something I've thought about is becoming a sales rep. You've probably seen them out there at my station."

"I have."

"They work for the medical suppliers and are here to make sure we have everything we need, even if they have to go get it themselves. They're good that way. It's interesting and you get to travel so a lot of us end up doing that. You have to know a lot more about medicine than I do now, but then you advance really fast and make tons of money."

"I see."

"So how about you? What do you do?"

"... I'm a legal assistant... and a writer. That's why I came to New York... more than forty years ago now... to get my plays produced. Back then you could get original plays done in other places but you had to be a New York playwright for people to take you seriously."

"So you're a playwright. That sounds inter- esting."

"I guess."

"You know, I saw my first play ever last month on Broadway."

"Really? What was it?"

"The Lion King."

"No kidding, how'd you like it?"

"Oh my God, the theater was packed and Dan and I were there in the dark when all these animals were in the aisle and started coming out of the shadows talking to us. I was holding Dan's hand and I felt his hand squeezing mine and I was squeezing his. Then we looked at each other and started laughing and we were lost in that other world... and it was one of the most fun nights I've ever had... ."

"Wow!"

"And you know the funniest part? It was my birthday and Dan had been trying to decide for months what to give me. And then... for some reason he took a chance and bought those tickets... ."

"And you had one of the best nights of your life. Now you know why I became a playwright."

"I do."

"Sounds like Dan did good."

"He did real good."

She'd finished up with the towels and was collecting them back on the table.

"...Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"... I think I'll sleep now."

"I'll check back."

"... Goodnight.. ."

"Goodnight."

## 6

In the subway after book club I thought of the time between coming home from the hospi- tal and having to put Herman to sleep. It seemed right that in the same week I'd finally gotten some good news from the doctors, Herman had taken a turn for the worse. It was almost like he'd stuck

around for the bad part and then when I was better, he felt like he could go.

A few years back we were watching TV when he'd jumped off the couch and staggered into the kitchen. From my previous cats, I knew it was probably a stroke. But then he was able to eat his late night snack even as he leaned to one side. Over the next few days, he regained his strength and I was sure it had been a small stroke that had now cleared up.

I considered taking him to the vet but decided against it. Even though he was almost twenty, he'd only been a few times. The last time about ten years earlier they didn't let me in the examining room so I'd watched through the door window. Two assistants wearing shoulder length gloves held him with his stomach turned up while another gave him an injection. I almost couldn't believe it when I saw a stream of piss shooting straight up from him and splashing all three. After he was back in his carrier, the Vet told me they usually keep cats overnight but that wasn't such a good idea with Herman. The last thing he said was, "Take Herman home and

enjoy him," and that was exactly what I did.

So there'd be no Vet since nothing could be done anyway and just going there might traumatize him enough to cause another stroke. It went on like that for another year until his next stroke which was a lot like the first except that he moved more slowly afterward.

When he was younger I'd roll him around the apartment on my desk chair. He'd hunker down on the seat while I pushed him up and down the hall faster and faster before ending it with a few good spins. But after his first stroke I was afraid that might cause another one so I stopped. The only thing I still did like that was when he'd come up onto my chest I'd hold him over my head and rock him down like he was hanging from a parachute. But then one time I was letting him down when he yelled in my face, "No! I'm too old now so you can't do this any- more!" Whenever he came up after that I'd just let him settle down with his head on my shoulder.

When I got home from the hospital Herman was still doing fine. Then in the summer he didn't want his late night dry snack which had always been his favorite ritual. Then he didn't want his dry food at all anymore so I replaced it with wet food. With his habits changing so fast, I knew that he was getting worse and then in the fall I saw that he was losing weight.

I'd always had strict rules for him because when he'd first come to live with me that was the only way to keep him from ripping me apart but now all those rules were broken. He was eating, or at least tasting, four different kinds of wet food a day and getting constant attention. One day we were watching a basketball game on the couch and he seemed so happy I couldn't help but think he knew what was happening to him. It occurred to me that this was how it should be for everyone. Herman was simply enjoying the time he had left. That day with Herman began taking on more importance as I thought it might hold an answer to something I'd asked myself in the hospital.

It was just before they came to get me for a surgery that I knew I might not come back from. I'd soon be under anesthesia so I looked around for something to be the last thing I'd see but couldn't find anything. I wondered if I'd had a wife or a kid there would it have helped and decided that it would but I also knew that in my case, it wouldn't be enough. So what would? All I knew for sure was that it had to do with accomplishing something. It wasn't the fact of having accomplished it but feeling like I had on some basic level, like the way Herman had been that day on the couch. To be so completely there that no matter how the surgery turned out, I'd be okay with it because I already had what I needed. I told myself that if I came out of this surgery I'd live every second after it to be able to say that.

I thought of what happened before leaving book club earlier. I was in the living room when the NBA playoffs came on TV. Our host's daughter was watching and it surprised me that she was a Milwaukee Bucks fan as I'd never met a Bucks fan before. I asked her why and she said they had some rookies she liked but since the Bucks had already been eliminated she was looking for another team to follow. Then she began listing different players from around the league and I was impressed that she had such definite opinions. She talked about talent, character and maturity, this last being especially surprising given her young age.

It reminded me of something that happened that night in the ICU with Emma. This guy out in the hall was going past my cubicle when I heard him say something about basketball. I commented on it to Emma so she ran out and called down the hall for him to come back. In a few minutes

three extremely tall ex-basketball players were in my cubicle discussing the upcoming play-

offs. When I told them who my team was, they looked at me like I'd looked at our host's daughter as these guys had never met a Grizzlies fan before. But then I told them I'd been a New York Knicks fan back during the Starks era and that gave me some credibility as they'd all grown up with that team. We reminisced about our favorite old Knick players and then they asked if I thought the Griz actually had a chance to win the championship. I knew none of them did so I decided to play my ace.

"Well, I saw Jordan and even Bird back in the day and I was in the Garden just last month to watch Ja when the Griz were in town. That's all I'm saying." "Wait, you saw Ja in the Garden?"

"I did."

"Live and in person?"

"I did."

"So let's hear it."

I let an appropriate silence settle in before answering.

"I'll put it this way. It's impossible to even describe how good he was."

At that, their hoots and laughter shook my small cubicle. Now these guys had all played at a high level plus they were huge NBA fans. They knew more about basketball than I ever would but their favorite players were the big stars from big city markets like LeBron and Steph, not this new guy, Ja, who might be talented but still ain't won shit. Then one of them named Corey spoke up in his quiet way.

"Your man, Ja, I'll give you. He's good but he's young and playoffs are a whole different animal."

The other two then threw down. "Damn right. You listen to Corey cause he knows."

And he did too because the Griz ended up losing in the second round just like Corey said. But what I remember most about those guys was them stopping back in that night a few more times. And they didn't do it just as a favor to Emma. It was like they came back to share in the intensity of my situation. Maybe for them it was like being back on the court in a close game with the clock ticking down and all that matters is making that shot. To be completely in that moment when everything else falls away...

That's what I'd wanted that day before surgery, to be like Herman had been on the couch when all that mattered was just being there. If I could truly take in a moment like that, then that's all there would ever have to be. All the rest, the what-ifs, half-lies, half-truths, recriminations and regrets, none of it would matter. And there wouldn't have to be anything beyond it either. It had already been done so it wouldn't have to be done again. Anything extra would just be icing on the cake.

And that brings me again to that last scene in "Elvis." He's singing to his adoring fans while knowing that the end is near. That's why he keeps looking out at those women who still embrace him. He's simply taking it in while all the rest, even the possibility that he might not get up from that piano, drifts away. He's already paid the price a thousand times over so he's going to enjoy that moment and take refuge in it and revel in it for as long as it lasts.

It reminds him of when the world was young and held unlimited possibility. Not like now when each new day brings only new problems and new pain. How much will it cost to go on? And does he want to pay that price even if he could? If all the lights were suddenly shut off or even if the whole

world hated him and tried to take it all back, it wouldn't matter. He's already paid in full so it's his now. That's what his grin is saying. He sees those faces out there filled with such love for him that he knows he already has everything he needs and will ever need again right there with him.

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