A Memoir

LISA MARIE PRESLEY
RILEY KEOUGH

STRIPE

FROM HERE TO THE GREAT UNKNOWN

A MEMOIR

LISA MARIE PRESLEY

RILEY KEOUGH

RANDOM HOUSE

NEW YORK

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the bluebird

there's a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I'm too tough for him,
I say, stay in there, I'm not going
to let anybody see
you.
there's a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I pour whiskey on him and inhale
cigarette smoke
and the whores and the bartenders
and the grocery clerks
never know that
he's
in there.

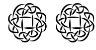
there's a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I'm too tough for him,
I say,
stay down, do you want to mess
me up?
you want to screw up the
works?
you want to blow my book sales in
Europe?

there's a bluebird in my heart that

wants to get out
but I’m too clever, I only let him out
at night sometimes
when everybody’s asleep.
I say, I know that you’re there,
so don’t be
sad.
then I put him back,
but he’s singing a little
in there, I haven’t quite let him
die
and we sleep together like
that
with our
secret pact
and it’s nice enough to
make a man
weep, but I don’t
weep, do
you?

—Charles Bukowski

Lisa Marie's voice will be in this font.



Riley's voice will be in this font.

PREFACE

In the years before she died, my mother, Lisa Marie Presley, began writing her memoir. Though she tried various approaches, and sat for many book interviews, she couldn't figure out how to write about herself. She didn't find herself interesting, even though, of course, she was. She didn't like talking about herself. She was insecure. She wasn't sure what her value to the public was other than being Elvis's daughter. She was so wracked with self-criticism that working on the book became incredibly difficult for her.

I don't think she fundamentally understood how or why her story should be told.

And yet, she felt a burning desire to tell it.

After she'd grown exceedingly frustrated, she said to me, "Pookie, I don't know how to write my book anymore. Can you write it with me?"

"Of course I can," I said.

The last ten years of her life had been so brutally hard that she was only able to look back on everything through that lens. She felt I could have a more holistic view of her life than she could. So I agreed to help her with it, not thinking much of the commitment, assuming we would write it together over time.

A month later, she died.

—

Days and weeks and months of grief drifted by. Then I got the tapes of the memoir interviews she'd done.

I was in my house, sitting on the couch. My daughter was sleeping. I was so afraid to hear my mother's voice—the physical connection we have to the voices of our loved ones is profound. I decided to lie in my bed because I know how heavy grief makes my body feel.

I began listening to her speak.

It was incredibly painful but I couldn't stop. It was like she was in the room, talking to me. I instantly felt like a child again and I burst into tears.

My mommy.

The tone of her voice.

I was eight years old again, riding in our car. Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl" came on the radio, and my dad pulled over and made us all get out to dance on the side of the road.

I thought of my mom's beautiful smile.

Her laugh.

I thought of my dad trying to resuscitate her lifeless body when he found her.

Then I was back in my car seat watching my mom's face in the rearview mirror as she sang along to Aretha Franklin, our car barreling down the Pacific Coast Highway with the windows open.

Then I was in the hospital, right after my new baby brother was born.

Bombarded by memories, like a corny flashback montage in a movie. But real.

I wanted her back.

—

The early parts of the book are mostly her voice—in the tapes she speaks at length about her Graceland childhood, the death of her father, the dreadful aftermath, her relationship with her mother, her difficult teen years. She's frank and funny about my father, Danny Keough. She talks openly about her relationship with Michael Jackson. She's painfully candid about her later drug addiction and about the perils of fame. There are times, too, where it sounds like she wants to burn the world to the ground; other times, she displays compassion and empathy—all facets of the woman who was my mother, each of those strands, beautiful and broken, forged together in early trauma, crashing together at the end of her life.

The tapes are raw, with all the starts and stops that people have when they speak. Wherever possible, I wrote it exactly as she said it. In other cases, I've edited my mother's words for clarity or to get at what I know was the root of what she was trying to convey. What mattered most to me was feeling like the end result sounded like her, that I could instantly recognize her in the pages, and I can.

But there are things she doesn't talk about in the tapes, things she didn't get to, especially in the later part of her life. We saw each other five times a week throughout my life, and we lived together full-time until I was twenty-five. Where there are gaps in her story, I fill them in. The greatest strength for this aspect of the book was also one of my mother's biggest flaws: She was constitutionally incapable of hiding anything from me.

I hope that in telling her story, my mother will resolve into a three-dimensional character, into the woman we knew and loved so dearly. I've come to understand that her burning desire to tell her story was born of a need to both understand herself and be understood by others in full, for the first time in her life. I aim not only to honor my mother, but to tell a human story in what I know is an extraordinary circumstance.

Everyone who ever met her experienced a force—passion, protection, loyalty, love, and a deep engagement with a spirit that was incredibly powerful. Whatever spiritual force my grandfather possessed undoubtedly ran through my mother's veins. When you were with her, you could feel it.

I am aware that the recordings my mother left are a gift. So often, all that's left of a loved one is a saved and re-saved voicemail, a short video on a phone, some favorite photos. I take the privilege of these tapes very seriously. I wanted this book to be as intimate as all those hours I spent listening to her, like the nights she'd spend in bed with us listening to coyotes howl.

In his poem "Binsey Poplars (felled 1879)," Gerard Manley Hopkins writes of that set of chopped-down trees, "After-comers cannot guess the beauty been."

I want this book to make clear the "beauty been" that was my mother.

ONE

UPSTAIRS AT GRACELAND

I felt my father could change the weather.

He was a god to me. A chosen human being.

He had that thing where you could see his soul. If he was in a shitty mood, it was shitty outside; if it was storming, it was because he was about to go off. I believed back then that he could make it storm.

Make him happy, make him laugh—that was my whole world. If I knew something was funny to him, I would do it as much as I could to get some mileage out of it, to entertain him. When we'd leave Graceland, the fans would always shout, "Alvis! Alvis!" in their Southern accents. I mocked someone doing it once and he fell out laughing, just died. He thought that was the funniest thing he'd ever heard.

Another time I was lying in my hamburger-shaped bed—a huge black-and-white fur bed that had steps leading up to it—and he was sitting next to me in a chair, and I looked at him and said, "How much money do you have?" He fell out of the chair laughing. I couldn't figure out why that was so funny.

I was super connected to him. Our closeness was a lot tighter than I have ever let on to anyone in the past.

He loved me dearly and was totally devoted, one thousand percent there for me as much as he could be, in spite of everyone around him. He gave me as much of himself as he possibly could, more than he could give anybody else.

And yet I feared him, too. He was intense, you didn't want him to get angry with you. If I ever upset him or if he was mad at me at all, it felt like everything was ending. I couldn't deal with that.

When he got upset with me, I took it so personally, I was just shattered. I wanted his approval on everything. There was one time I popped my knee, and he said, "Dammit, why'd you go and hurt yourself?"

It devastated me.

—

My mom was an air force brat. She met my dad at fourteen and her parents allowed it. It was a different time.

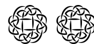
Back then, women were admitted into the hospital while they were in labor. They'd get knocked out and wake up with a baby. She went into the hospital looking glamorous, beautiful, and when she came to, she was just handed a child.

My mother told me that she'd thought about trying to fall off her horse to cause a miscarriage.

She didn't want to gain pregnancy weight. She thought that wouldn't be a good look for her as Elvis's wife. There were so many women after him, all of them beautiful. She wanted his undivided attention. She was so upset that she was pregnant that initially she'd only eat apples and eggs and never gained much weight. I was a pain in her ass immediately and I always felt she didn't want me.

I believe in energy in utero, so maybe I already felt her vibe of trying to get rid of me. Eventually she just kind of decided to keep me, but at the time, she didn't have great maternal instincts.

That might be what's wrong with me.



When I was little, I would often watch my mother do her makeup. There were two sinks in her bathroom, and in between them a huge vanity. My mother had more makeup than any little girl could dream of—MAC and Kevyn Aucoin, drawers and drawers of brushes and lip pencils, eye shadows, and the most famous of MAC lip colors: Spice. She would line her lips—the Cupid's bow she loved and that we all inherited from her father—looking into a small mirror on the vanity, and I thought they were so perfect. To me she was the most beautiful woman in the world.

I looked at her and said, "How old are you?"

It was the first time her age had ever been something I'd considered. She laughed and said, "I'm twenty-eight."

How young that was.

My mom fundamentally felt she was broken, unlovable, not beautiful. There was a profound sense of unworthiness in her, and I could never really figure out why. I've spent my whole life trying to work out the answer. My mother was an incredibly complicated person and deeply misunderstood.

In my family, there's a long history of young girls becoming mothers—my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother all had their first babies young, when they were just babies themselves.

As I got older, I remember wishing that I could have been my mother's mother and my grandmother's mother. I began to recognize what all of the young mothers were missing.

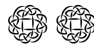
I've been told that mine was a sweet birth story. My dad was very nervous, everyone was. They had lots of dress rehearsals, trying to find the quickest route to the hospital. They had done a few test runs and everything was fine. Then Jerry Schilling, one of my dad's oldest friends, who was driving, almost went to the wrong hospital.

Then I was born.

My mom wanted to look good for my dad, so she decided to put on false eyelashes before he came in to see us. But she was still drugged out and glued them to the mirror instead of to her eyelids.

After that there was a press conference—my mom and my dad walked out of the hospital, did their wave, everyone was taking pictures. So the press was always there, right out of the gate, from the day I was born.

Then they took me home to Graceland.



Graceland was built in 1939 by a doctor and his wife, Tom and Ruth Moore. The land had been gifted to the family by the wife's aunt Grace, so they named it after her. Elvis liked the name so much that he kept it when, in 1957, he paid $102,000 for the then-ten-thousand-square-foot house and its fourteen acres.

Back then, the area was still country–there was nothing out there, five miles south of Memphis. Graceland wasn't even part of the city itself until 1969.

In May 1957, Elvis's mom, Gladys; dad, Vernon; and grandmother, Minnie Mae moved in–Elvis came a little later, on June 26, 1957 (there had been renovations to do and he was off filming *Jailhouse Rock*). After Elvis's return from his stint in the army, others came to live there, including Charlie Hodge and Joe Esposito of the so-called Memphis Mafia, Elvis's entourage who were with him at Graceland from sunrise to sunset.

Elvis's grandmother's room was upstairs, but when his mother died, Minnie Mae moved downstairs. Elvis and Priscilla built a nursery upstairs in 1967 when Priscilla became pregnant; that's where my mom's room was.

Compared to mansions now, Graceland doesn't seem like much of one–visitors are often struck by how small it is. But when Elvis bought it, it was not only a mansion, but represented so much more than mere size and acreage. Until 1953, the Presley family had lived in humble circumstances. Graceland was the physical manifestation of the most incredible American dream come to life. Elvis had been a small-town boy in a small-town family mired in poverty, but he'd made it beyond big, miraculously becoming a godlike figure, the biggest star on the planet. Yet he remained a Southern boy who simply got to buy his beloved Mama a big old house.

He was determined to make his new home an opulent place, and what you do, when you're from the South, is move the entire family in–the aunties, the cousins, everyone. When you come up from poverty, your responsibility is to bring everybody with you, and that's what he did.

The house is surrounded by a big rock wall with the famous music gates in front and a guard gate to the right. As you drive up the winding road, four giant white pillars rise in front of you, guarded by a pair of lion sculptures.

The whole place smells like the South, especially in the summertime. There is soft summer air and fireflies at night. Beautiful trees ring the house: magnolias, elms, willow oaks, red maples, pecans, black cherries.

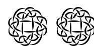
Once you enter through the front door, immediately to the right is the living room with its iconic stained-glass blue peacocks, single TV, and grand piano. In front of you, stairs lead up to Elvis's and my mom's bedrooms. On the left is the dining room, accented by plush floor-to-ceiling drapes above a black marble floor. The kitchen is also on the first floor as is the famous Jungle Room with its shag carpeting and indoor waterfall. Downstairs you'll find the pool room, with its upholstered walls and ceiling. It's another place, like the Jungle Room, to hide out.

Out back of Graceland are the stables, the racquetball court, and next to Vernon's office, a swing set that was my mom's.

My brother, Ben, and I grew up going to Graceland on the holidays. At the end of each day, when the visitor tours were finally over, we'd hang out in the house with our family, eating big dinners and running wild, jumping on the couches, playing pool. Though it was open to the public, when we were there, Graceland was just our home. It's a strange and incredible thing to have your family's history preserved forever in the place where it all happened.

It's as though all the life that was lived in that house–all the laughter, the tears, the music, the heartbreak, the love–is still being lived over and over, down the staircase, in the walls.

I feel my ancestors there.



There are apparently at least six vortices in the world—like Hawaii and Jerusalem—places with an energy that scientifically acts up.

Graceland was like that.

When you were there, you could feel it. You'd feel good, recharged. My dad went there to recharge.

The top floor of Graceland was just his suite and my room, and that's it. The door to the upstairs would usually be shut, and nobody would ever come up there except the two of us. Even as a child I knew this was super special—nobody, aside from maybe a girlfriend, had one-on-one access like that.

Upstairs at Graceland. Just my room and his room. A sanctuary to be with him.

His bedroom had giant double vinyl black and gold doors which opened out to a small hallway, and then just around the corner was my bedroom. When I came upstairs, I had to walk by his bedroom to get to mine. If the vinyl doors were shut, it meant he was asleep. If they were open and I was up to no good, which I often was, I had to sneak by. But whenever those doors were open, I always made sure to look in to see what he was doing. He'd either be watching TV or talking to people or reading.

There was a house across the pasture that my dad had bought for my grandfather. My dad was nocturnal, and once in a while he would wake me up and put me in a golf cart and take me over there to visit Vernon, who was never ready for it. We'd hang out there for an hour or two and then drive back to the house.

I couldn't get away with much when Vernon was around. He was more of an authoritative figure to me. I wasn't close to him. I would avoid him at all costs. I wish I'd had a different relationship with my grandfather. I just kind of hid from him.

Those night rides to Vernon, though, were really just a moment my dad wanted to spend alone with me.

—

My dad was very Southern.

No one says "goddamn" like a Southern person, in the right way, with the right soul to it, and the right intonation. When it's done right, it's funny. I heard it all the time. My dad and all of his guys said it the same way.

I wanted to go to the pet store, so one night, my dad shut it down and took me there, along with his entourage. We all got to pick a pet. I picked out a little white foofy dog, and my dad picked a Pomeranian named Edmund. A little while later, I was in my room and they had just brought his breakfast up to his room, which they always did. Then I heard "GODDAMN!" so loud. I ran into his room and he said, "That goddamn dog just stole my bacon!" Edmund had jumped up onto his bed, taken a piece of bacon, and run off with it downstairs. He was so fucking mad at that dog. Edmund became my aunt Delta's dog after that.

Other times I'd be up in my room watching TV and I'd hear "GODDAMN IT!" and I'd go along the hallway to his room to find out what was happening.

"GODDAMN IT I can't sneeze—I need to sneeze, and I can't do it!" I remember him saying once, until he finally got the sneeze out.

I had two cupboards full of stuffed animals in my room, and one day I thought I saw something in there—maybe a mouse or a rat or something—and it freaked me out. So, I ran and

got my dad.

"Daddy, something's in my room!"

My dad grabbed his nightstick and a cane, went into my room, and shut the door behind him. Then all I heard was a bunch of banging and thrashing noises, and him yelling, "Goddamn son of a bitch!" He was beating the shit out of the stuffed animals trying to find this thing, whatever the hell it was, but it kept running away from him. In the end he killed it, but no one moved it, and I remember there was a bad smell in there for a month after.

Another time I was in my room, another "Goddamn son of a bitch!" this time coming from the front of the house. Then a loud gunshot.

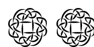
I went running downstairs and found my dad sitting underneath a tree in a lounge chair. A snake had been coming down the tree and was about to bite his foot, so he shot it.

He scared everybody else. People wouldn't laugh if he seemed upset. But I knew him, so those kinds of things were funny to me. He just had a kind of funny anger about him. It made me love him even more.

I had terrible earaches, and one time my dad rushed me in the wee hours of the morning to Dr. Cantor. I was screaming bloody murder from the pain. Dr. Cantor pulled out some kind of device to get the wax out, or whatever it was, and I was screaming so loudly my dad could not take it and left the room. He didn't want to leave, but he also couldn't bear what was going to happen. He was up against the wall in the hallway, completely white. After Dr. Cantor pulled whatever it was out of my ear, my dad picked me up and carried me out.

Later, I had to have a tonsillectomy. My dad was there in the hospital for that, too. I remember being given ice cream—which obviously no child would be upset about—but it was painful to eat anything, so I made some kind of face every time I had to swallow. My dad was sitting next to my hospital bed, just waiting for me to swallow, and then he would start laughing.

He thought that face was so funny.



Her father called her Yisa. He would replace all the *l*'s with *y*'s when he spoke to my mom.

The other night I was rocking my daughter, Tupelo, to sleep, and I found myself calling her "yitty-bitty" and singing to her, *Momma's little baby loves shortnin', shortnin',* and I stopped and thought, *I literally haven't heard this song since I was a baby.* And I realized in that moment that all of these phrases I use, and the things I say to my daughter, are the ways my mom spoke to me. She had gotten them directly from her dad. From the South. And all of them are alive in me. I can hear her saying, "Get over here, goddamn it, and give me some sugar!" She mothers my daughter through me.