

# INTRODUCTION

## JOLSON IN THE RIVER

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*The Black River, and the Mississippi*

1945

The party boats churned up the big river from New Orleans and down from Memphis and Vicksburg, awash in good liquor and listing with revelers who dined and drank and danced to tied-down pianos and whole brass bands, as their captains skirted Concordia Parish on the way to someplace brighter. The passengers were well-off people, mostly, the officer class home from Europe and the Pacific and tourists from the Peabody, Roosevelt, and Monteleone, clinking glasses with planters and oil men who had always found riches in the dirt the poorer men could not see. Weary of the austerity of war, of rationing and victory gardens, of coastal blackouts and U-boats that hung like sharks at the river mouth, they wanted to raise a racket, spend some money, and light up the river and the entire dull, sleeping land. They floated drunk and singing past sandbars where gentlemen of Natchez once settled affairs of honor with smoothbore pistols and good claret, and around snags and whirlpools where river pirates had lured travelers to their doom.

The country people, in worn-through overalls and faded flour-sack dresses, watched from the banks of the Mississippi and Black

rivers the same way they looked through the windows of a store. In the war years, they had traded the lives of their young men for better times, but they had seen too much bad luck and broke-down history to overcome with just one big war. Reconstruction, the Great Depression, and named storms and unnamed floods had left generations hunched over another man's cotton, and in their faces you could read the one true thing: that sometimes all you could get of a good life was what you could see floating just out of reach, till it disappeared around a bend in the river or vanished behind a veil of flood-ravaged trees. And sometimes, hauntingly, even when a boat had passed them by, they could still hear the music drifting downriver as if there was a song in the water itself, Dixieland or ragtime or, before they turned away to their lives in the colorless mud, a faint, thin scrap of Jolson.

*Down among the sheltering palms  
Oh, honey, wait for me.*

He was still a boy then. One day, when he was nine or ten, he stood on the levee beside his mother and father as one more party boat pushed against the current, well-dressed people laughing on deck. Safe in the middle of the Black River, they raised their glasses in a mocking toast to the family ashore. "They tipped their mint juleps at us, tipped 'em up," he says, and smiles the faintest bit to prove how little it matters to him after so much time. But it mattered to the man and woman beside him. His daddy was indestructible then, gaunt, six foot four, with big, powerful hands that could squeeze weaker men to their knees, and a face that seemed drawn only in straight lines, like Dick Tracy in the funny papers. As the drunken revelers lifted their glasses of bourbon high in the air, Elmo Kidd Lewis pulled the boy to his hip. "Don't worry, son,' Daddy told me. 'That'll be you on there someday. That'll be you.'" He does not know if his daddy meant it would be him up there with the

rich folks, the high and mighty, or if it would be his songs they played as the boat passed by. “I think maybe,” he says, “it was both.”

Elmo knew it the way he knew wading in the river would get him wet. He had seen it, he and his wife, Mamie, when his son was barely five years old, seen a power take over the boy’s hands and guide them across a piano he had never studied or played before. For the boy, it was . . . well, he did not truly know. His fingers touched the keys and it was like he had grabbed a naked wire, but as it burned through him, it left him not scorched and scarred but cool, calm, certain. Only God did such as that, his mama said, and his daddy bought a piano for the boy, so the miracle could proceed.

Finally, something worth remembering.

He rests now in the cool dark of his bedroom and lets it draw at the old poisons in him like a poultice. He is a swaggering man by nature, but for a moment there is no strut in him.

“Mama and Daddy,” he says, “believed in me.”

He tried to pay them back, with houses and land and Cadillacs. “‘Money makes the mare trot,’ Mama always said.” But the debt will never be settled. The piano, the weight of it, tilted the world. He still has it, that first piano—the wood cracked and buckled, deep grooves worn in its keys—in a dim hallway in a house where gold records and other awards pile like old newspapers or lean against a wall. He pauses before the ruined piano now and then and taps a single key, but what he hears is different from what other people do.

The boat that taunted them is a ghost ship now.

The old songs sank beneath the water.

Elmo’s boy, scoured by a worldly hell and toasted by kings, is still here.

In the summers of 2011 and 2012, I listened in the quiet gloom of his bedroom as he told me what was worth remembering. He told me some of the rest of it, too, when he felt like it, for as long as he felt like it. He remembered it as it pleased him. That does not mean he always

remembered it the same way twice, but day after day I was reminded of a line I once read: it was like any life, really, but with the dull parts taken out. It was odd, though, how he could see the boy on that levee so much clearer than he could see all the long life in between, like he was looking across that wide river again, at himself.

Before he rocked them, before the first piano bench went hurtling across the stage and first shock of yellow hair tumbled into his snarling, pretty face and the first spellbound, beautiful girl stared up from the footlights in unmistakable intent, he played Stick McGhee songs for Coca-Cola money from the back of his daddy's beat-up flatbed Ford and sang Hank Williams before he knew what a heartache was.

Before Memphis, before he took them from the VFW and convention halls to a place they'd not been even in a fever dream, before preachers and Parliament damned him for corrupting the youth of their nations, before he made Elvis cry, he listened to the Grand Ole Opry on his mother's radio, the battery she saved all week till Saturday night finally fading to nothing at the end of a Roy Acuff song.

Before bedlam, before he stacked money and hit records to the sun and blazed up, up, to come smoking to earth only to rise and fall and rise and rise again, before he outlasted almost all of his kind and proved on ten thousand stages that no amount of self-destruction could smother his voice or quiet the thunder in his left hand, before John Lennon knelt and kissed his feet, he performed his first solo in the Texas Avenue Assembly of God, then hid under a table in Haney's Big House to see people grind to the gutbucket blues.

Before any of it, before the first needle and first million pills, before the first coffin passed him by, he walked a high bridge rail like a tight-rope between the bluffs of Natchez and the Louisiana side, laughing, loving the scare it threw into mortals below. A lifetime later, he rode across the same bridge and looked down to the muddy water of the Mississippi, to barges long as a football field; from up there, they looked like toys in a bathtub.

“I must’ve been crazy,” says Jerry Lee Lewis, but if he was, it was just the beginning.

The weather seems different now from when he was a boy, the air so hot and thick the sky looks almost white. The afternoon thunderstorms that have shaken this land across generations now hang hostage in that cotton-colored sky, leaving the air wet and steaming but the fields dry as parchment for weeks, a thing the old people attribute to the end of days. But the end of days has been coming here for a long, long time.

“I wonder what it’s like to die? I guess they give you shots and stuff, to help you with the pain. I don’t really know,” he says, softly, as *Ida Lupino* and *Beware, My Lovely* roll across a muted television screen. “Probably, you just drift off to another world. I don’t know what that world will be like. I like to think it’s Heaven. Can you imagine me in Heaven? Imagine the *orchestra* we’d have.” He tosses a macadamia nut in his mouth, unscrews an Oreo, takes a long swig of purple soda, and ponders that. “Oh, man, what a *band*. I’ll want to go twenty-four hours a day . . . won’t never get tired. Won’t never stop.”

He has never believed the grave is the end of a man, and that has been his torture. The greater part of a man walks in Glory or burns; there is no real in-between, not in the Assembly of God. Across his life, he has proclaimed on a rolling basis the kind of man he considers himself to be, shifting from world-class sinner to penitent, sometimes in the space of a single song. Now his choice seems finally made. I am warned by members of his family, before I even enter his presence, that he abides no cursing, no blasphemy. He will live the rest of his life, he hopes, without offending God. He tithes. He blesses his food and prays at night the Lord his soul to take. He knows the Holy Ghost is as real as a pillar of fire. He believes, as always, in the God of Texas Avenue, and knows he has sinned greatly, deeply. But his God is a God of miracles and redemption, and in this case that might amount to about the same thing.

“I did a lot of thinkin’ about that. . . . Still think about it, real heavy. I sure don’t want to go to Hell. If I had my life to live over, I would change a lot of things,” he says, not for the approval of man, but for the grace of God. “I believe I would. I’d probably not do a lot of things that I’ve done. . . . Jesus says, ‘Be thou perfect even as my Father in Heaven is perfect.’ But my Lord, I’m only human. And humans tend to forget. I don’t want to die and my soul go to Hell.

“There *is* a Hell,” he says. “The Bible plainly speaks of it, very big-time. The fire never quenches, the worm never dies. The weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. The lake of fire.”

But he can bear that, he believes, better than the rest of it.

“I just want to meet them, meet all my people that I have ever lost, in the new Jerusalem,” he says. “I often wonder about that. God says you will know as you are known, and if you don’t see them there, it will be as if you never knew them. That’s awful. It worries me,” the notion that if he is cast down, it will be—to his people, even his children—as if he had never lived. “That’s heavy, ain’t it?”

“The answer is written in the book of life, for me,” he says, and the heat in his eyes tells you this is not mere rhetoric but deadly serious. “Can a man play rock-and-roll music and go to Heaven? That’s the question. It’s something that won’t be known . . . that *I* won’t know, till I pass away. I think so, but it don’t matter what I think. And I will take all the prayer I can get.”

The question almost pulled him apart, as a younger man. Elvis, who would understand the question perhaps better than any other man, was haunted by it, too. Jerry Lee would have liked to talk with him about it, but Elvis hurried away, face white as bone; and then he left this world, leaving Jerry Lee to grow old with it alone.

The thing he has come to believe, to hope, is that whatever happens in this life or beyond, it is not purely the music’s fault. People blamed the music for everything.

“It’s not the devil’s music,” he says, sick and tired as he would be of any pretender, any hanger-on.

He is almost eighty years old now. He knows what he has wrought.  
“It’s rock and roll.”

The devil was no troubadour. The theater of it all, the convenient women and bottomless liquor and jet-plane parties, the whipped-out knives and waistband pistols and bags of blues and yellows, might have drawn the devil like green flies, but the devil never called a tune or found a chord, not even in the nastiest blues or most whiskey-soaked cheatin’ songs or any other music that moved a waitress to wiggle her hips or a farm boy to dance in his socks or a notary public to shake the hot rollers out of her head.

“My talent,” he says, “comes from God.”

Mamie tried to tell them, even as she worried where it would all end.

“I can lift the blues off people,” he says.

He did some meanness, God knows he did.

But the music—funny how it turned out—was the purest part.

*Mama’s cookin’ chicken fried in bacon grease*

“The only piano player in the world . . .” he says.

*Come along boys, just down the road a piece*

“ . . . to wear out his shoes.”

In the twilight of his life, in the late nights of the here-and-now, he sometimes still wonders: “Did I lead them people down the right way?”

But he did not take the people anywhere they were not ready to go. Even in the most barren times, when cigarette smoke hung like tear gas in mean little honky-tonks and he might have missed a step on his way to the stage, he gave them something they were looking for. People say a lot of things about him—“talk about me like a dog,” he says—but few

people can say he did not put on a show. They talk about seeing him and grin and shake their heads like they got caught doing something, like someone saw their car parked outside a no-tell motel in the harsh light of day. They grin and talk about it not like a thing they witnessed but like a thing they lived through, a meteorite or a stampede. It usually started without fanfare; he just walked out there, often when the band was in the middle of a song, and took a seat. "Gimme my money and show me the piano," he often said of how the experience would begin. But it ended like an M80 in a mailbox, with such a holy mother of a crack and bang that, fifty years later, an old man in a Kiwanis haircut and an American flag lapel pin will turn red to his ears and say only: "Jerry Lee Lewis? I saw him in Jackson. Whoooooooooooo, *boy!*"

Joe Fowlkes, a Tennessee lawyer, likes to tell about the time in the mid-1980s when he heard Jerry Lee do four hours at his piano without a break, after he was already supposed to have been dead at least twice. "We all went to see him at the dance hall at 100 Oaks" in Nashville, he recalls. "They called it a dance hall because it was better than calling it a beer joint." Jerry Lee showed up looking a little worn and pale, and he started off slow—"it was kind of gradual, like watching a jet taking off"—but he played and he played and he played, and it was three o'clock in the morning before he got done. "He kind of got his color back, after a while. By two-thirty in the morning, he was lookin' good. He played every song I'd ever heard in my life, including 'Jingle Bells' and the Easter Bunny song. And it was *July*."

"It was the best concert I'd ever been to. I saw Elvis. I saw James Brown." But Jerry Lee. "He was the best."

"There was rockabilly. There was Elvis. But there was no pure *rock and roll* before Jerry Lee Lewis kicked in the door," says Jerry Lee Lewis. Some historians may debate that, but there was no one like him, just the same; even the ones who claimed to be first, who claimed to be progenitors, borrowed it from some ghost who vanished in the haze of a Delta field or behind the fences of a prison farm. People who played



with him across the years say he can conjure a thousand songs and play each one seven ways. He can make your hi-heel sneakers shake the floorboards, or lift you over the rainbow, or kneel with you at the old rugged cross. He can holler “Hold on, I’m comin’” or leave you at the house of blue lights. Or he can just be still, his legend, the legend of rock and roll, already cut into history in sharper letters than the story of his life. Sam Phillips of Sun Records, a man who snagged lightning four or five times, called him “the most talented man I ever worked with, black or white . . . one of the most talented human beings to walk God’s earth.”

“I *was* perfect,” he says, “at one time. Once, I was pretty well perfect when I hit that stage.” On another man, such a claim would wear like a loud suit. On Jerry Lee Lewis, it sounds almost like understatement. Roland Janes, the great guitar man on so many Sun Records hits, once said that not even Jerry Lee knows how good he is.

He knows. He likes to use the word *stylist* when referring to some of the musical greats who came before: it is his highest compliment. A stylist is a performer—not necessarily a songwriter, yet still a creator—who can take a thing that has been done before and make it new. “I am a stylist,” he explains. “I can take a song, a song I hear on the radio, and make it *my* song.” He can remember the first time he felt that power, too. “I was fifteen years old. Back then I played the piano all day and then at night I’d lay in bed and think about what I’d play the next day. And I see records that was out there, see the way they were going, and I just thought that I could beat it. Back then, I was playing the skating rink in Natchez, on this old upright piano—I remember it wasn’t in very good shape—and I played everything. I played Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, boogie-woogie, and I turned it *all* into something else. What did I turn it into? Why, I made it rock and roll.”

He made it roll and thump in the spaces between the plaintive lyrics, a thing of rhythm impossible to describe in words. “The girls crowded around me and the boys got all upset and wanted to start a fight, but

before long *ever'body* was lovin' it. I can see 'em now. And it was love. Pure love. I loved it, and they loved it. That don't come around too often, I don't believe. And it wadn't just the song they loved, it was the *way*." At first he was struck by the power, at the rapt faces, the heaving chests, but did not marvel at it for long. "If you know you can do a thing," he says, "then you ain't never surprised."

He is not, even with the years tearing at him, a soft man. His body has been hammered by hard living, and scoured by chemicals, and pain-racked by arthritis and most of the ailments of Job, but now he is rallying again, with clean living and that mysterious thing he has always had cloaked around him, something beyond science. He is still a good-looking man, his hair faded from gold to silver; he still records and fills concert halls in the United States and Europe, though he admits it is sometimes all he can do to finish a show. Young women still push to the edge of the stage and try to follow him back to his hotel room. Now it is his prerogative to tell them no, because the shows exhaust him. What a sorry thing, a rotten choice for a good lookin' rock-and-roll singer to have to make.

"If I's fifty-one," he says, "they'd have to hide the women."

He lives near the river still, south of Memphis in the low, flat green of north Mississippi on a ranch with a piano-shaped swimming pool, behind a gate with a piano on the wrought-iron bars. Here the living history of rock and roll sits unrepentant to any living man, and even as he tells you his life story, he seems to care little what you think. "I ain't no goody-goody," he says, the Louisiana bottomland still thick on his tongue, "and I ain't no phony. I never pretended to be anything, and anything I ever did, I did it wide-open as a case knife. I've lived my life to the fullest and I had a good time doin' it. And I ain't never wanted to be no teddy bear."

He has been honored by state legislatures and dog-cussed over

clotheslines. He has disowned children and walked away from wives and girlfriends—even in the age of DNA, none has challenged his actions—and does not much care that his life and his choices might not make sense to other people. “I did what I wanted,” he says. He lived in the moment, unconcerned what those moments would add up to in the eyes of men. “Other people,” he says, “just wished they could have done what I done.” He is unconcerned with worldly redemption. He has bigger worries than that.

He has played over seven decades, from pubs to palladiums, from soccer stadiums to Hernando’s Hideaway South of Memphis, for thousands, or hundreds, or less, because even when there was no one to play for but a handful of drunks or hangers-on, there was still the talent, and when you have a jewel, you do not hide it in a sock drawer. Raw and wild in the 1950s, almost forgotten in the mid-’60s, a honky-tonk chart-topper by the early ’70s, and a Rolls-Royce–wrecking, jet plane–buying crazy man in the late ’70s and ’80s, he always played. He absorbed scandal—*Rolling Stone* virtually accused him of murder—and played when he could barely stand. He spent two decades wandering the wilderness, overmedicated, set upon by the tax man, divorce lawyers, everything but a rain of toads. There were more fights and pills and liquor and car crashes and women and discharge of firearms—accidental and on purpose—than a mortal man could be expected to survive, but he played.

I approached him with great anticipation—and one reservation, as to getting shot. People told me he was mercurial; some said he was crazy. He shot his bass player, they said. Why not shoot a book writer? Instead, across the days, he was mostly gracious, and asked about my mother. “I hit this one guy in the face with the butt of the microphone stand,” he tells me, as he eats a vanilla ice cream float. He actually hit four or five that way. He remains willing to take a swing at a man who offends him and suffer the prospect that some drunk redneck half his age will not care he is living history and knock him slap out. His bedroom door is

reinforced with steel bars. I started to ask about that but decided I did not need to. He still has a loaded long-barreled pistol behind a pillow, a small arsenal in a dresser drawer, and a compact black automatic on a bedside table. Holes in a bedroom wall and an armoire prove that all that has come to claim him in the night, ghosts, bad dreams, or time itself, has been dealt with violently. A bowie knife sticks in one door. A dog sleeps between his feet—a Chihuahua, but it bites.

He has, in old age, a stiff-necked and—all things being relative—sober dignity, but do not say he is growing old gracefully, any more than an old wolf will stop gnawing at his foot in a steel trap. It is harder, even now, to explain what he is than what he is not. He is not wistful, except in the rarest moments, and does not act wounded; he just gets mad. He does not swim in regret, even when he walks between the graves of two sons and most of the people he has ever loved. Six marriages ended in ashes, two of them in coffins. He believes he is due some things but not the right to whine. A man like him forfeits that. A Southern man—a real one, not these modern ones who have never been in a fight with a jealous husband or changed a tire or shot a game of pool outside the church basement—does not whine, anyway. “It didn’t bother me none,” or “I didn’t think much about it,” he often says when talking about things that would have torn another man down to his shoes. Then he would physically turn away. In time I came to understand that remembering, if you are him, is like playing catch with broken glass.

His friends and closest kin, most of them, are protective of him now, always polishing his legend. They will fight you if you question his generosity, or the goodness that, they assert, shines just beneath his more public persona. He has played benefit after benefit for charity, even when he himself was busted, or nearly so. That does not mean he does not expect to get his way, almost all the time. “He don’t jump on top of the piano anymore,” said guitar picker Kenny Lovelace, who played three feet away from him for forty-five years. “But still, he walks out there and sits down, and you know the Killer is here.”

“I was born to be on a stage,” says the man himself. “I couldn’t wait to be on it. I dreamed about it. And I’ve been on one all my life. That’s where I’m the happiest. That’s where I’m almost satisfied.” He knows that is what musicians say, what a musician, in his twilight, is supposed to say. “I do really love it,” he says, in a way that warns you not to doubt him. “You have to give up a lot. It’s hard on a family, on your women, on the people that loves you.

“I picked the dream.”

Even if it was worn and scarred, or hidden in some raggedy place at the end of a gravel road, or protected by chicken wire, he would drive six hundred miles, even club a man with a microphone, to possess it. And for much of his life he gave his fans more than they paid for, gave it to them slow and soulful and fast and hard, till the police came clawing through the auditorium doors, refusing to relinquish the stage even as other rock-and-roll idols, including the great Chuck Berry, waited helpless and seething in the wings. In Nashville, three hundred frenzied girls in the National Guard Armory tore his clothes off his body, “down to my drawers,” and he grumbles about it to this day, about all those crazed, adoring women, because they cut short a song, dragged him off the stage, and cut short the show.

The dream is why, when news of his marriage to his thirteen-year-old cousin, Myra, caused promoters and some fans to turn away and his rocket ship to sputter, when scandal and changing times caused record sales to sag, he filled two Cadillacs with musicians and equipment and went on the road. He played big rooms at first, then dives or beer joints where he had to fight for his money or fight his way out the door. But he played, fueled by Vienna sausages, whiskey, and uppers, and the next day he rolled out of some little motel, said good-bye to women without names, and drove all day and into the night to play again. Others became footnotes, vanished. He fought, tore at it, one motel room, one bottle, one pill, one song at a time. And it is why, in the early days of his stardom, he would come back onstage when the house was dark and the

door chained shut, to play some more. Other musicians on the bill, ones who would be legends, too, trickled back to the stage to sing with him, for that one last encore to the empty seats.

“I want to be remembered as a rock-and-roll idol, in a suit and tie or blue jeans and a ragged shirt, it don’t matter, as long as the people get that show. The show, that’s what counts,” he says. “It covers up everything. Any bad thought anyone ever had about you goes away. ‘Is that the one that married that girl? Well, forget about it, let me hear that song.’”

Hank Williams taught him this, and he never even met the man.

“It takes their sorrow, and it takes mine.”

He looks across the arc of bad-boy rockers who have come after him and laughs out loud; amateurs, pretenders, and whistle-bitches, held together with hair spray. But worse, they were not true musicians, not troubadours, who lived on the road and met the people where they lived. He crashed a dozen Cadillacs in one year *and* played the Apollo. With racial hatred burning in the headlines, the audience danced in the seats to a white boy from the bottomland, backed by pickers who talked like Ernest Tubb. “James Brown kissed me on my cheek,” he says. “Top that.”

In recent years he has recorded two new albums, both critically acclaimed, and both made the Top 100. He did them between hospital visits: viral pneumonia, a stabbing recurrence of his arthritis (in his back, neck, and shoulders, never in his hands), and broken bones in his leg and hip have left him in pain and unable to travel or even sit for more than a few minutes for much of the past few years. But even at his lowest, of course, Jerry Lee was merely between resurrections. In March 2012 he married for the seventh time, to sixty-two-year-old Judith Brown, a former basketball star who had been married to his former wife’s little brother. She had come to help care for him when he was sick. To make the proverbial long story short, he got better. “I didn’t mean to fall in love with him,” she says, “but . . .” They married

and honeymooned in Natchez, near the bridge he walked as a boy. By late summer 2013, he was back playing gigs in Europe, booking studio time in Los Angeles, buying a new Rolls-Royce and stopping for Sonic cheeseburgers before driving Judith's Buick one hundred miles an hour down Interstate 55. The laws of Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, and the United States of America have never much applied.

Once, while mulling over a difficult question, he muttered, "This feller's about to get shot." And I thought, *Well, I'm dead*. It was only *Gunsmoke* he was watching over my shoulder. He'd seen it all before, and he knew what happened next.

"You know, you can load that .357 with .38 shells," I told him, "and you won't blow such deep holes in . . . things." I waited a few flat, silent seconds, knowing I had wasted my breath.

"Naw," he finally said, "I don't think I'll do that."

One afternoon near the end of it, I told him why I wanted to write his story. I was born in the South in a time of tailfins, when young men with their hair slicked back with Rose hair oil and blast-furnace scars on their necks and arms would thunder down the blacktop with his music pouring from the windows. The great Hank Williams lifted their hearts with "Lovesick Blues" and became a kind of sin eater for their lives and pain. "That's it," says Jerry Lee. "Hank got them up off their knees, and Jerry Lee got them to dancin'." They loved Elvis, too, but there was a softness in him, a kind of beauty the men did not understand. They got Jerry Lee. He was a balled-up fist, a swinging tire iron. My people, aunts and uncles, rode ten to a car to see him in Birmingham's Boutwell Auditorium in 1964. "I was wild as a buck then," said John Couch, who made tires at Goodyear. "And he embarrassed me." His wife, Jo, was scandalized. "They got all over Elvis for shaking one leg. . . . Jerry Lee shook *everything*," Juanita Fair, a bird-like member of the Congregational Holiness Church, remembers just one thing, and has to whisper. "He played piano, with his *rear end*." They drove home to pipe shops, furnaces, and cotton sacks, somehow lighter than

when they left. I told him this one afternoon as heroes sang to their horses and bad men reached for the sky.

“I did it for them people,” he says, though a great deal of the time he did it for him, because without the music, I had come to believe, he would just cease to be, like cutting through the drop cord on an electric fan. In the still, awful nothing, he is just like everyone else. But it was still a fine thing to say. The point is, when he talked about lifting the blues off people, I knew it to be true. In the past, in telling his story, he pretty much cussed out the world. It was like the story of his life was a record warped and stuck on the wrong speed, but left on, anyway, to howl, groan, and hiss. He was, he admits, often a little bit drunk or mad in those days, and he put people on, to watch them twitch or swing on the gallows of his temper and moods. Even today, it can seem that the only people he truly trusts with his legacy are the ones who knocked over seats as they lunged to their feet in the city auditorium, who got their money’s worth in the Choctaw casino, or who begged him for one last song in some airport hotel lounge. Only they will remember him right. “I look at the faces,” he says. “I look out there, and I *know*. I know I’ve given ’em something, boy, something they did not know was out there in this *world*. And I know. They won’t forget me.”

In the dark of his room, the rock-and-roll singer watches himself on the big-screen television, watches himself in fifty-year-old black and white do that song about shakin’ that conquered the world, watches the power in that young, dangerous man. He sees the man stab the keys and kick away the bench and lift the audience from its seats to come swarming, twisting, jumping onstage, to close in a tight circle around his grand piano, all of them shakin’ and twitchin’ like he has them on a stick or a string or a jerking rubber band. He sees him vault on his young legs to the lid of the piano as if some outside force just threw him there, as the other young people snatch at him, at his hair, at the hems of his



garments. The boys seem about to lose control of themselves and break something or turn over some cars. The women, jerking and sobbing, seem about to faint, or die, or embarrass their mamas. As he watches, the old man's toes tap, tap, tap in time, and his fingers play the air. "Gr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r," he says, in duet with the young man, and grins wickedly. When the song is over and the young man takes his exaggerated bow, the old man settles back in his pillows, content. Then, from the gloom, barely loud enough to hear, comes a soft "Hee-hee-hee."

Later, on one of those quiet, weary afternoons, I have one more question before we stop for the night.

"Didn't I hear once that you . . ." But he cuts me off.

"Yeah," he says, "I probably did."



# 1

## THE FATHER OF WATERS

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*Concordia Parish, Louisiana*

THE BEGINNING

The water would rise up every few years, wash across the low, flat land, and take everything a poor man had, ruin his cotton and corn and drown his hogs, pour filth and dead fish into his home, even push the coffins from the earth and float his ancestors all the way to Avoyelles. Jerry Lee's sister, Frankie Jean, tells of a day the rains beat down, the rivers rose, and the swelling groundwater shoved the dead from the mud. "Uncle Henry and Aunt Maxine had been nippin', and they went by Uncle Will's grave and saw he'd come partway out of the ground. Uncle Henry said, 'Oh, Lord, Maxine, the Rapture has done come and the Lord has left us here. He tried to take Will and Will just wouldn't go. Oh, God, Maxine, we done been left behind. Oh, God, Maxine, I told you not to buy that whiskey. . . .'" The point is, it takes guts to stay with it when the land you owe the bank for runs liquid between your toes and balls of water moccasins form islands on the rising tide. Water was everywhere, was life, and death. A person could not live here in this low place, Jerry Lee believes, and be afraid of water.

"We were going to the backwater one day, me and Daddy," he says,

traveling as far back as his memory could reach. "I was three years old." It was late summer, the Louisiana sun hot on his blond head. Elmo, singing about trains and untrue women, swung his boy like a knot on the end of a rope. They followed the river to a place where the current slacked and died and pooled in lakes and sloughs, as still as black glass. The air smelled as it has always smelled and smells now, of a thousand years of silt, rot, and mud. His daddy pushed an old boat into the shallows, and they headed to deep water. The boy had never been out so far, never done more than wade close to the bank, toes digging into the silt and sand, his mama and daddy holding his hands. This water had no bottom, let in no light. They drifted a while, just living.

Then his daddy reached for him, lifted him high in his arms, and threw him out of the boat.

The water closed over his head. He thrashed toward the light, sank, and clawed his way up again, in panic. He kicked at it with his legs as if it was filled with devils, all twining around his skinny body, dragging him down. It was not a cruelty, he knows now, it was just his turn. It did no good to wait till a boy was older. The terror only grew with the child. You threw them both in the river and took what came out.

"Get with it, boy!" his daddy yelled.

Jerry Lee drank the water in, breathed it, choked.

"Swim," his daddy yelled, "or float!"

"Help me!" the boy hollered.

But his daddy only knelt in the boat, his arms outstretched.

"Come on, boy!"

"Help me!"

*"Come on."*

Then he felt iron fingers on his arm and he was lifted up, up, forever out of his fear. He thinks now his daddy would have saved him; surely he would, would have dove into the suffocating black and pulled him free just in time. But what kind of boy would he have held there, squalling? "It wadn't no easy place," he says now. But it was here, at the river,

that his people came to settle, to snatch once more at the good life after the high ground failed them for the last time.

“If you’re ashamed of where you’re from, then you’re ashamed of yourself,” he says of the years he lived in overalls, mud-bound. “I ain’t never been ashamed. Ferriday, Louisiana, is where I’m from. We lived a while at Black River, and lived a while down at Angola, when Daddy helped build the prison there. Daddy was up at four o’clock, and Mama was up five minutes after. Daddy followed carpentry work, so we moved all the time, moved three times in one week, to old shanty houses, mostly. He farmed cotton, corn, soybeans, split halves with my Uncle Lee, and he made some whiskey. Mama picked cotton. It was a small place, but it never seemed small to me, when I was a boy.” It is where his people, all of them, are buried, “so it’s home to me.” He has never been one of those poor Southern children who claim to have lived in blissful ignorance of their poverty and the life into which they were born; such a thing leaves no room to dream. “It kind of dawns on you after a while. It occurred to me pretty quick.” His mama and daddy never owned much of the bottomland when he was a boy, sometimes not enough to fill a teacup, but that only made it more precious. It was their last stand, this Concordia Parish, and even now, as he crosses the bridge from Natchez, he breathes easier, as if someone has lifted a heavy hand off his chest. He has to try to remember the bad of it; the good comes easy, “all good, good singin’, good eatin’, good—You know that song about the tree?”

*I’m like a tree that’s planted by the water.*

*I shall not be moved.*

People have been dying beside these waters a long time, hoping for a piece of the unsteady ground, hoping to grow something from it. Would he have been the same if he had come from a gentler place? “The talent would have come through,” he says, “even if I’d been born

in some big city. But it mighta been . . . different.” It might have been, somehow, gentler. “I think my music is like a rattlesnake. It warns you, ‘Listen to this. You better listen to this.’” That essence, the toughness and meanness and maybe even a spike of savage beauty, he believes, crawled straight out of this mud.

In *Wicked River: The Mississippi When It Last Ran Wild*, historian Lee Sandlin identifies a quality that seems to have marked Mississippi River people from earliest days: “They all lived for the spontaneous, heedless surge of wild exuberance, the sudden recourse to violence with no provocation—the violence if not of act then of thought and language. They routinely did and said extraordinarily foolish things for no reason other than *joie de vivre*.” One such character was a Bunyanesque scalawag named Mike Fink. “He was a creature of pure impulse—and yet whatever he did, no matter how bizarrely random it might be, he did perfectly. He achieved without effort what nobody else could do in a lifetime of labor. His air of godlike grace, of what in classical literature was called *arete*, transcended everything about his personality—which was in all other ways appalling.”

Figures like Mike Fink “had a ritual game they’d play called shout-boasting,” Sandlin writes, “the point of which was to make up surreally violent claims about themselves, and then dare to fight anybody who challenged them.”

But it is not boasting, as Jerry Lee says, “if you really done it.”

The Spaniards came to the river in 1541. Hernando de Soto led men in iron helmets into the malarial jungles in a bloodthirsty search for non-existent gold and was one of the first white men to die in the heat, damp, and mosquitoes thick as fog; some say his rusty conquistadores still ride in the mist. Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville et d’Ardillières, knight of the Order of Saint-Louis and founder of the Colony of Louisiana of New France, brought settlement and Bible and sword; soon the indigenous

tribes were extinct. Flags would go up and down as white men fought over it all, till the Old World finally retreated from the yellow fever and floodplain.

In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase gave the mud to a new nation, and Thomas Jefferson sent naturalist William Dunbar to see what all the dying was for. Dunbar explored the Mississippi, Black, and Ouachita rivers by boat and horseback, and in his journals he made the land sound like paradise. "Vegetation is extremely vigorous along the alluvial banks; twining vines entangle the branches of trees [with] the richest and most luxurious festoons." The result was "an impenetrable curtain, variegated and spangled with all possible gradations of color from the splendid orange to the enlivening green down to the purple and blue and interspersed with bright red and russet brown." Dunbar saw endless oak trees, red and black, along with ash, pecan, hickory, elm, and persimmon; the soil was "black marl mixed with sand," the riverbanks "clothed in rich canebreak." The forest along the river would offer "venison, bear, turkey . . . the river fowl and fish . . . [along with] geese and ducks surprisingly fat, and excellent."

And the river itself? Dunbar wrote of its unpredictability and moods, of whirlpools and crosscurrents where, "even in the thread of the stream, we can make no sense of it."

Natchez would become the seat of civilization here, and it was a city of two faces. One was gentility itself, a place of plantations that set a standard for opulence, of cotillions and white columns, of high tea and fine saddle leather, London silver and Parisian gowns, all resting on a foundation of human bondage. On the other face was a leer, a wild gateway to the West peopled by gamblers, whores, pirates, riverboat men, trappers, no-accounts, swindlers, and dope fiends, where keelboats, riverboats, and oceangoing ships lined the docks; the river was so deep that the big merchant ships could creep all the way from the English ports to the warehouses in Natchez Under the Hill. Sailors from around the world drank, fought, and cursed here in their language

of origin. Beyond the lights, pirates used lanterns and bonfires to lure boats aground, robbed passengers, and rendered their bodies to the catfish.

Across the river, in Concordia Parish, in rich bottomland fed by centuries of flood, the land was hacked and burned into vast, gray-brown fields. Small towns like Vidalia, Waterproof, and St. Joseph bustled with commerce, as great steamboats tied up to take on unending cargoes of cotton and lumber. The *Southern Belle*, *Princess*, *Magnolia*, *Natchez*, and *New Orleans* served meals to rival any restaurant in New Orleans and had staterooms to rival the grandest hotels. The Indians called them “fire canoes,” and they routinely burned to the waterline. But every arrival in Natchez or Concordia Parish was a carnival, to see what the river would bring. Their captains became mythical figures, and poets told of them as the Greeks sang of Agamemnon:

*Say, pilot, can you see that light?  
I do—where angels stand.  
Well, hold her jackstaff hard on that,  
For there I'm going to land.  
That looks like death a-bailing me  
So ghastly, grim and pale.  
I'll toll the bell—I must go in.  
I've never missed a bail.*

It took muscle to power it all, and by 1860 there were 12,542 slaves in Concordia Parish alone, compared to 1,242 free whites—a cold-blooded economy wherein many plantations were controlled by absentee owners who saw the fields as a pure business venture. Life expectancy was so poor for slaves here that slave owners in other states used Louisiana plantations as a lash to keep their own slaves in line, saying if they misbehaved, they would be sold south. With populations in such disproportion and order kept by bullwhip and rope, it was a tense and



brittle arrangement, prone to insurrection. One often-told story involves a slave, found guilty of murdering white men and kidnapping white women, who was burned on a pyre, or at least it was planned that way till he pulled his chains free of the post and staggered off—only to be shot dead, disappointing the crowd.

Violence lay thick here, like the air. Duels were so common on the sandbars that they take up fifteen pages in Robert Dabney Calhoun's *History of Concordia Parish*. Democrats shot at Republicans, husbands shot at judges in their wives' divorce claims, and physicians and generals shot at senators, congressmen, and the commanding officer of the Mexican War. In 1827, Dr. Thomas Maddox challenged planter Colonel Samuel Wells to a duel over some forgotten thing. Both men missed their first shot and honor was satisfied, but their seconds decided to settle old scores and opened fire. Two men died. One of the combatants, the planter Jim Bowie—who would go on to die famously at the Alamo—stabbed a man to death with his knife. The two sides did not consider honor satisfied and would argue for years over who among them was the biggest lout, rogue, skunk, and low-bred. Most affairs were not so bloody, as those smoothbore pistols were notoriously inaccurate, and most gentlemen would accept a clean miss as providence and pull a cork. With Concordia Parish in mind, the Constitution of 1845 tried to curtail dueling, warning its practitioners that they risked being “deprived of holding office of trust or profit.” (It is lucky, say some, that the practice was outlawed before the arrival of Jerry Lee.)

The war dismantled the old society. Ulysses S. Grant took Vicksburg midway through the war, and Natchez followed. Natchez became a gracious occupied city, while in Concordia slaves walked off the fields and headed to occupied New Orleans, some to fight for the Union, and some to bring their own music to town, where they blended it with local Creole sounds and bent it into a new music called jazz. The bottomland fell hard into a puzzling time when black men wore badges, carried guns, served in the statehouse, and stood in judgment of whites on

juries and from the bench itself. Reconstruction brought carpetbaggers, night riders, and Jim Crow, but it was still cotton that swung fortunes for rich and poor. Poor whites, who survived dysentery and grapeshot and suicide charges against the high ground, came to skin logs out of the woods; ex-slaves came to work the dirt, old stripes on their backs. The twentieth century brought the levees, so tall a man had to walk uphill to drown, but the river was indifferent still, and when hard rains came, it washed over and through and drowned the poor men's dreams anyway, and fish swam in the streets of the river towns.

But it does not take much dry ground to hold up a train track, and that is where a relative prosperity—and for some poor men and women, a promise of salvation—took hold. The Texas & Pacific and Iron Mountain railroads decided they needed a terminal in Concordia Parish to service trains that hauled wood and cotton. It would be a corporate town, drawn up by an investment company on the site of an old plantation and named for the owner of the plantation, J. C. Ferriday. It was incorporated in 1906, and for passersby it was as if a town appeared overnight. Author Elaine Dundy called it “a town with no natives,” a wide-open place with a cotton compress mill, a sawmill, a lumberyard, and a large compression plant on the pipeline from the Monroe gas fields to Baton Rouge. By 1920 there were 2,643 whites and almost 10,000 people of color in the parish, and on payday they came to Ferriday to spend their money.

Ferriday, Louisiana, would become known as one of the wickeder places on earth, a place where brothels, gambling dens, and saloons ran around the clock. “Not only a bad town . . . the baddest town,” as Dundy wrote in her biography of the place. Men beat each other to death in the street over wives or cards, or even if someone kicked a deer hound. Hogs and cattle roamed Main Street, and in winter, when forage was lean, men knocked the limbs off the trees so livestock could get at the moss. Railroads would come and go, but by the 1930s, as the Depression sucked the life out of much of the country, the Texas & Pa-

cific, the New Orleans & Northwestern, and the Memphis, Helena & Louisiana all made the village a destination. Drummers and gamblers and oil speculators arrived a trainload at a time, bound for the King Hotel, and hoboes came off the boxcars like fleas.

It was busy, and busy meant work.

“The Lewises come from Monroe” to Ferriday, said Jerry Lee, and their history was not always one of cotton sacks and shanty houses. His great-great-grandfather was Thomas C. Lewis, a landowner who became a parish judge in Monroe. His son, John Savory Lewis, Jerry Lee’s great-grandfather, was a fearsome, powerful man, a prosperous slave owner, but when the Yankees came, that dynasty fell, too. Some of his children would prosper, but one, Leroy Lewis, Jerry Lee’s grandfather, drifted in and out of professions till he settled on farming, for which he had no aptitude. His talents were in making music. He fiddled like a man on fire, fiddled as the old century gave way to the new. He passed that love of music and talent to his children, with a kind of perpetual grin that defied everything the broken South had left him. He was also prone to drink hard and often and then just disappear for a while, leaving his wife, Arilla, to wonder if he was dead. “You drunk, ain’t you?” Arilla would ask when he reappeared, wobbling. “No,” he would say, “I am intoxicated.”

In 1902, a son was born in Mangham, Louisiana. Elmo Kidd Lewis was one of eleven children, a good-looking boy with crow-black hair and that squared-off face and a permanent, inked-on grin. He was what his blood had made him, a man of great physical strength with a lovely voice and flair for music, and the thirst of generations. But there was no cruelty in him for smaller souls, say his son and others who remember him, no meanness for women or children, a lowness other men who liked a drink could not always claim. By the time he was born, there was nothing of the old family left to him but a name, so in daylight he

dragged a cotton sack and swung a hammer, and in the nighttime he picked guitar and sang. He did not fight other men; never had to, just slapped them down to the ground, “quick as nothin’,” says his son. He wore that badge of honor Southerners bestow on good men who drink, if they “didn’t bother nobody” and “never missed a day of work.” To the landowners, he was a cotton-sack-pullin’, nail-drivin’ machine. Elmo had his dreams, of someday playing music onstage, but there was such a vast distance between that and his waking life, across rows and rows of cotton that wasn’t going to pick itself, that he seldom talked about it till he was older and the dream had gone to seed, after which he talked about it all the time. Like many working-class Southerners, he felt something deep inside when he heard Jimmie Rodgers sing of lost love, shantytowns, lonesome whistles, and chain gangs, and could see himself yodeling on the radio like his hero, before tuberculosis choked him to death in a New York hotel at thirty-five.

*I'm gon' buy me a pistol, just as long as I'm tall*

*I'm gonna shoot poor Thelma, just to see her jump and fa-all*

The great flood of 1927 drowned the fields and made hard times worse, as powerful men of the state tore apart the levees to flood the land upriver and save New Orleans. It was a bitter time in Louisiana, a historically corrupt place that proudly carried those traditions into the twentieth century. In '28, ragged and angry voters put in power a kind of half-mad puppeteer, a song-leading dictator named Huey P. Long, known as the Kingfish. He swore to redistribute the wealth of giants such as Standard Oil and to make every man a king. He preached reform from the towering state capital, built by poor men on relief, and lived lavishly in a suite in the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans. He had ambitions to claim the White House and scared rich people to death. From the eve of the Depression, as governor and senator, he built 111 bridges and thousands of miles of roads, and he promised to end

the plight of hungry children, the soul-killing darkness that enveloped them, if desperate men like Elmo would just give him a little more time.

In the heartbreak of that moment, in Richland Parish, Elmo met a dark-haired girl named Mary Ethel Herron, whom everyone called Mamie. She was a lovely girl, if a little serious, and devout, which scared off the lesser rascals, but good women are naturally drawn to a rogue. She saw in the grinning, rawboned Elmo one of the most striking men she had ever met. On weekends in those days, the country people would congregate at an abandoned house, sprinkle cornmeal on the plank floor to slick it up, and dance. Elmo played his guitar and sang, and won her heart from the lesser rascals. She was a good woman, which in Southern vernacular usually means long-suffering, but Mamie was different. She was gentle on the outside but had iron in her jaw. She understood that all men have in them a certain sorriness, and she was willing to run the train if other hands were unsteady. Elmo and Mamie were married in 1929, when she was seventeen and he was ten years older, as the Depression settled on the land. He farmed other men's dirt, and she picked cotton beside him, when they could find work.

Mamie's mother's people, the Foremans, were prosperous, but her mama, Theresa Lee, married a poor farmer named Will Herron, and the prosperity had died at the bottom of that lover's leap. The only legacy the Foremans passed on was a thing in the blood, a kind of darkness that dropped across the mind and left a person to wander, haunted, till they found a way out. There are names for it now, clinical explanations of dementia and depression, but not so much back then, in the low country. No one—at least no one Jerry Lee can recall—ever refused to pick cotton or frame up a house because they felt depressed; people walked inside it, lived next to it. "I guess I get it from both sides," Jerry Lee says, and he will not talk about it much beyond that. It is just a thing that rides across the generations, landing where and when it chooses, and a man could blame all his actions on it, all his mistakes and miseries, if he chose; he chooses not to do that, any more

than he blames—except in the rarest of circumstances—the whiskey, the drugs, or the devil. He owns his mess.

Elmo's father-in-law, Will, was a hot-tempered, stumpy little man who raised excellent deer dogs and was said to be quick to pull a knife. "Kill you," says Jerry Lee, "at the drop of a hat." When Will and Elmo hunted together and came to a fence line, Elmo would just pick the little man up like a child and set him down on the other side, recalls Jerry Lee. That sometimes made Will Herron so mad he hopped like a small, agitated bear, but it was hard to cut a man like Elmo, who smiled at you without even a trace of fun. Herron was "four-foot-somethin'," says Jerry Lee, but the old man was a crack shot and could bring down deer even from the saddle of a horse. "He'd say to Daddy, 'You don't get none of this deer,' " if he was mad at his son-in-law, but Herron seldom stayed mad for long. Elmo had that gift, too; he was a magnet for forgiveness.

In the evening, after suppers of cornbread and beans, Elmo and Mamie listened to records on a wind-up Victrola, their single luxury, and sang duets from the hymnal. She had a lovely voice too, and they sounded beautiful together, but she would not sing drinking songs or hobo songs, which were sinful. They were poor but had enough to live, to eat, till the fields went fallow in Richland Parish, till there was nothing better than starvation wages. The newlyweds needed a new start, and lately all their kin had been talking about a town in Concordia Parish wedged between the river and railroads. Two of Elmo's sisters had married brothers named Gilley and moved to this place, Ferriday, and another sister, who would marry a man named Swaggart, was thinking on it. But the linchpin of it all was Mamie's lovely older sister, Stella, who had landed the richest man in all Concordia, a speculator in land and people named Lee Calhoun.

Lee was not a big man physically, or particularly handsome, and if you saw him walking down the dirt street in work-stained khakis, you might have thought less of him than he was; people regretted that. He had a voice

bigger than himself, cursed loudly and often, yet built three churches from his own pocket. He came from money, from educated people, but acted like he crawled from under a broke-down Chevrolet. He was smart as to a lot of things, but especially land. He understood that, despite what the scientists said about gravity, what really kept people from drifting off into nothing was the land. The man who controlled it controlled everything worth thinking about.

Lee Calhoun did not farm but owned dirt and seed and mules and the plain, bare houses, did not ranch but owned the grass. He saw liquor as a commodity, not as a thing he took into himself. He hired his kin to make bootleg whiskey in the deep woods, men who would absorb the risk of hard time the way other men absorbed blisters from a hoe handle. "He was the backbone of the family, I believe, Uncle Lee was." If not for him, the clan would likely have scattered, "but he held us together, definitely so." He owned oil wells and knew millionaires, but if you owed him fifteen dollars, he wrote it in a book, and he would come for it the morning it was due. He held no office, but politicians, judges, and sheriffs tipped their hats to him on the street. He rode a big horse around town; any stick he tied it to, he owned it or owned a piece of it. He was the head knocker, plain and simple, and as his wife's relatives trickled in, he put them to work.

"I loved my Uncle Lee. He was kind to us. Uncle Lee was a fine man, a great man. But if you wanted twenty dollars out of him," says Jerry Lee, "you had to get on your knees."

In time, the Lewis-Gilley-Swaggart-Calhoun clan would become a thing of some wonder here, in its personalities and configuration. Cousins and in-laws and other relatives married each other till the clan was entwined like a big, tight ball of rubber bands. Here is just one example: Willie Harry Swaggart, whom everyone called Pa, was married to Elmo's older sister, Ada. Willie Harry's son, Willie Leon, whom everyone called Son, then married Mamie's sister, Minnie Bell, Elmo's sister-in-law and Willie Leon's aunt, which made Willie Leon

into Elmo's brother-in-law and nephew and would make the progeny of Willie Leon and Elmo, when they came, double kin. "Me and Jimmy [Swaggart] are double first cousins," says Jerry Lee, his face deadpan, as if such things happen every day. Other relations were too complex to explain, except to say that future children would have not one relation to the clan but two or more. They were, all of them, singers and guitar pickers and fiddlers and piano players, and some preachers and bootleggers, and some bootleggers one month and preachers the next, or both at the same time, which was not unheard of or even that unusual on both banks of the big river, but especially on the Louisiana side.

Elmo and Mamie were expecting their first child when they arrived in Concordia Parish in time for planting season in '29 and moved onto a farm owned by Lee Calhoun in a place deep in the woods called Turtle Lake. There were 2,500 souls in Ferriday then, most of them descendants of slaves, but the Depression had a way of bleaching everything gray, and Elmo tugged a cotton sack and did any work he could. The house had no electricity, plumbing, or running water. But in a time when every other man was out of work and a place to live, out of hope and time, where loaded-down, raggedy trucks passed them on the dirt roads on the way to some vague promise of a better life a thousand miles west, Ferriday would do.

On November 11, 1929, Mamie gave birth to a golden-haired boy. They named him Elmo Kidd Lewis Jr., and even as a toddler he could sing. He was, the relations say, a beautiful boy, obedient, the good son. His mama and daddy called him Junior, and would talk of their hopes and plans for him—Elmo's dream, really, that the boy might grow up to be a singer on the radio or stage. The boy minded his mama, said sir and ma'am, and *liked* school, *liked* church, and carried around a slate and chalk or a pencil and scrap paper to practice writing and spelling. By the time he was in his first year of elementary school, he was writing songs to sing in front of the congregation.

In 1934 Elmo went to work in one of Lee Calhoun's other enter-



prises. Lee made whiskey for years in a kind of shadow corporation, in a magnificent, glowing, fifty-gallon copper still hidden in the woods not far from Elmo's front door at Turtle Lake. He had made it before Prohibition and would make it after the repeal of the Volstead Act, because such faraway things had little to do with thirst in Concordia Parish or the local law. He never, of course, paid a dime of tax—Lee had a deep disdain for the federal government and most governments and anyone who wanted to boss him the least little bit—so he hired Elmo and his brother-in-law/nephew Willie Leon Swaggart and other kin to increase production, which they did with great success, between frequent testings for quality control. "People said it was good whiskey, the best whiskey," says Jerry Lee. The local law did not care that Lee Calhoun made liquor; the fact that men would drink whether it was legal or not, taxed or not, was just what *was*. Illegal liquor made the church people happy, in a way, because it was like having invisible liquor, until a drunk staggered into the middle of Main Street and urinated in the general direction of Waterproof.

Sometimes Lee would ride to the still to check on things, but he seldom lingered, knowing that the only way the government would successfully link him to the liquor business would be if they caught him standing hip deep in the mash. In winter of '35, Elmo was in the woods with Willie Leon Swaggart and three others, running off a batch, when the trees around them started shaking and a gang of armed men crashed through and pointed shotguns in their faces. They were Treasury agents, the lowest form of life. They took an ax to the beautiful still and let the lovely whiskey flood across the ground. Then they loaded Elmo and the rest in a truck, and with another man holding a shotgun on them, took off down the road.

Then providence intervened, though not so much that it would do Elmo any good. As the truck rattled down a dirt road, it passed a very pregnant Minnie Bell Swaggart laboring along the shoulder. She saw Willie Leon sitting in back of the truck and began to sob and run,

calling his name. When the agent in charge saw the young woman waddling down the road in tears, he told the truck's driver to pull over before she gave birth there in the ditch. He asked the prisoners who she was, and Willie Leon told him. The agent thought on this, and told Willie Leon to get out and go home with his wife. Willie Leon and the pregnant Minnie Bell went down the road, praising His name.

Elmo kept his mouth shut about who owned the still. He knew his family would be cared for, and his crop would be waiting when he got out, because even if he was tighter than Dick's hatband, Lee Calhoun took care of his own, unless they did some dumb thing like talking to the federals. In January of '35 he left in chains for the federal prison in New Orleans, sentenced to a year but knowing he would be home in six months. Other men had books or prayer to pass the days, but he just sang. "Daddy told Mama it was 'nice,' and said he got three good meals a day," Jerry Lee says, and in truth the prison turnips and the beets and white beans flavored with salt pork were better than what a lot of families were subsisting on.

In late spring, he came home to Ferriday more or less untouched and unchanged, at least as far as anybody could tell, and well fed. He went back to work in the fields, but not in the woods at the still; the federals had warned him that if he was caught making or even hauling liquor again, he would do real time. At night, he showed his namesake how to play his old guitar. The three of them, Mamie and her Elmos, would pretend they were on the radio, like the Carter family, to remind themselves that short cotton and chain gangs and a rising river were not all there was. She was expecting again, and the new baby kicked Mamie hard and often.

The state was in mourning as Mamie neared her time. On September 8, 1935, Huey Long had strutted down the hallway of his capitol, intent on pushing through a redistricting plan that would remove from the bench a longtime political enemy, Judge Benjamin Pavy. The judge's son-in-law, a young doctor named Carl Weiss, stepped from the crowd

of onlookers and fired a single shot into Long's body; his bodyguards fired sixty-two rounds into Weiss, most of them after he was dead. Long, the friend of the little man, was laid out in a tuxedo, and two hundred thousand people filed by to see him in repose. One great storm in Louisiana had finally blown itself out; another one, at Turtle Lake, was just beginning.

The new baby came twenty-one days later, on September 29, 1935, after the last of the cotton was in. "Dr. Sebastian was supposed to deliver me," says Jerry Lee, who has heard so many stories of the night of his birthing that it is as if he was up there in the rafters himself, looking down. "At least, he was supposed to. . . . Well, he did make it into the house."

Mamie knew something was horribly wrong that night. The pain was awful, worse, much worse, than she remembered. Elmo went for the doctor, and she prayed.

Dr. Sebastian and Elmo could hear her wail as they neared the house.

"Thank God," Mamie said, as they came into the room.

Dr. Sebastian told her to hush, it wasn't time yet, but to Mamie he seemed a little unsteady on his feet. The doctor had been at home, relaxing with a drink or two.

Elmo offered him a drink of corn whiskey, to be polite. Dr. Sebastian looked at the clear whiskey the way a scientist could. He examined it for trash, and there was none, and for color. It looked like spring water. This was good whiskey. He unscrewed the lid—it smelled strong and rank and hard, which was also the way corn whiskey was supposed to behave—and took one long, slow, big slash, to be polite, and then another.

Sometime later, when she knew it was time, Mamie cried out for them, but found only Elmo at her side.

"Where's Dr. Sebastian?" Mamie croaked.

“Over there,” Elmo said.

“What?”

“He’s a-layin’ over there,” Elmo said, and pointed across the room.

Dr. Sebastian was asleep in a chair.

“Wake him up,” Mamie said.

Elmo had tried that.

Dr. Sebastian dreamed.

“I can handle this,” he told Mamie.

Of course the child would not be born in the usual way. The baby was breached, turned in the womb, and emerged not head- but feetfirst. Elmo did not really understand the perils of that, but Mamie did. Babies strangled this way, died horribly or were damaged for life, and mothers died in agony.

Elmo took hold of the baby’s feet and pulled.

“Watch his arm,” Mamie said, iron back in her jaw.

Elmo nodded.

“Watch his head,” she said, and did not remember much after that.

“Daddy brought me right out,” he says now. “I come out jumpin’, an’ I been jumpin’ ever since.” He likes to say that, likes the idea of it, as he likes the idea that it was his daddy and mama who brought him into the world without help from outsiders: one more little legend inside the larger one. It was a time rich in babies, and in legends. Over in Tupelo, that January, another poor woman gave birth to a son she named Elvis. In Ferriday, in March, Minnie Bell Swaggart, who had rescued her husband from the prison truck, gave birth to her son, Jimmy. Another of the extended family, Edna Gilley, soon gave birth to another cousin, whom she named Mickey. All of them came in the span of two years, all of them somehow anointed, all of them destined to sing songs and bring their gifts to the multitudes in one way or another, with great success but varying degrees of cost.

Mamie and Elmo named their second son for an actor Mamie sort of remembered, some Jerry-something, and for Lee Calhoun, whose whiskey turned out the lights on Dr. Sebastian, and perhaps a little bit for his grandfather, Leroy Lewis, though family members would argue on whom the boy was named for exactly. It was, regardless, the happiest time of their lives, and it would have stayed that way, if time could have only gone slack, somehow, right then, and pooled deep and still.