

The First Two Pages: “Farewell to the King”
by Rosemary McCracken
From the Mesdames of Mayhem’s *In the Key of 13*
(Carrick Publishing)

An Essay by Rosemary McCracken

When the news broke that the King of Rock ’n’ Roll had died, Les Moms were beyond consolation. We knew the words to every song the King had recorded. We’d lost our dearest friend.

The four of us gathered at Toni’s apartment that morning. Elvis was singing “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” on the record player when I arrived.

“There’ll never be another like him,” Mai-Lei wailed. “Elvis was the King. He was ours!” Her pretty face was wet with tears.

“We should hold a wake,” Cécile said. “Stay up all night to show how much we miss him.”

I lowered myself onto the sofa with Robbie strapped to my chest in his Snugli. “Sleep tonight, my friends,” I told them. “Tomorrow, we go to the King’s funeral.”

They stopped what they were doing and stared at me.

Toni, jiggling little Gabriella on her hip, was the first to speak. “The funeral is in Memphis, Paula. And in case you don’t know, Memphis is south of the border in the U.S. of A.”

“Toni’s right,” Mai-Lei said. “There’s no way we can get from Montreal to Memphis for the funeral tomorrow afternoon.”

I waved off their protests. “Bon Voyage Travel is offering a charter flight to Elvis Presley’s funeral. The first 150 people who put their money down will leave Dorval Airport at 7:30 tomorrow morning.”

They stared at me with wide eyes and open mouths.

“A bus will take us to the Elvis sites in Memphis,” I told them. “And we’ll be back in Montreal tomorrow night. What do you say?”

When Elvis Presley died in August 1977, I was a cub reporter at the *Montreal Star*. A local travel agency announced a day trip to Memphis on the day of Elvis’s funeral, and I convinced my editors to send me on it.

The King of Rock 'n' Roll had many fans in French Canada during his lifetime, and still has today. Most of the passengers on that flight out of Montreal (the largest city in Quebec, Canada's predominately francophone province) on August 18, 1977, were francophone women who spoke little English but knew every word of Elvis's songs that were playing over airplane's sound system. And they belted them out with gusto. They were beyond excited to be on their way to the city where Elvis had lived most of his life and where he had died. I got to know several of his Montreal fans on the airplane, and in Memphis I met more Elvis fans who had travelled from all over North America to be with him when he was laid to rest.

As a newspaper reporter, I had been trained to deliver the news to readers in the classic inverted triangle structure, putting the essential and attention-grabbing facts in the opening paragraphs, followed by supporting information in order of diminishing importance. And I opened "Farewell to the King," my fictional account of that trip to Memphis, in the same way. I gave the important details: I introduced the four main characters and their predicament. The opening paragraphs are heavy in dialogue to convey what is going through these young women's minds and their high energy.

But more than just grabbing attention, I wanted an opening that would resonate with readers. As young people, we've all experienced a degree of hero

worship: glorifying a special teacher, a mentor, or a glamorous actor or rock star.

It's part of growing up.

The four friends in the short story are twentysomething moms. Still girls really, they are more than a little star-struck by hot, handsome Elvis Presley. When the news of his death reaches them, their reaction is sorrow and a feeling of dislocation. As Paula, the first-person narrator, says, "We had lost our dearest friend." His passing has left a big void; it looks like there'll be a lot less color and excitement in their lives. I wanted readers to feel their loss.

The trip that Paula proposes is a magical escape from their humdrum lives. It's also beyond the wildest dreams of these young working-class women. Mai-Lei raises the obvious question:

"What would that cost us?" Mai-Lei asked.

"One hundred and sixty-five dollars each."

"*Mon dieu!*" Cécile cried.

"And a babysitter on top of that?" Mai-Lei said. "Dream on."

"It's not impossible," I told them. "One hundred and sixty-five dollars is five dollars a week for the next 33 weeks. We'll give up smoking for Elvis. And we all know someone we can leave our kids with for a day."

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"We have to do this," I told them. "For *us*. We can tell our kids we were at Elvis Presley's funeral in 1977."

"We'd need the money today," Mai-Lei said. "That won't be easy."

But we managed to get it. Toni raided the joint bank account she had with Rocco, her husband. Cécile wheedled it out of her horny father-in-law. Mai-Lei dipped into the till at her brother's restaurant. And I cleaned out the emergency fund I'd created by squirreling away money from Pierre's grocery allowance.

That afternoon, we took the Métro to Bon Voyage Travel and bought our tickets.

The trip to Memphis is a coming-of-age journey for the women. As Paula has told her friends, this is something they have to do—for *themselves*. They have to prove to themselves that they can set goals, work toward them, and, if necessary, step outside their boundaries. Even if only for one day.

Back in 1977, I wouldn't have been able to write "Farewell to the King." The newspaper article I wrote when I returned to the *Montreal Star* newsroom late that evening was a factual account of the huge gathering of Elvis fans to mourn his passing. I wrote about people who had travelled from Florida, California, Alaska, and, of course, Montreal to be in Memphis when the King was laid to rest. None of the men and women I spoke to that day attended the funeral service in Graceland or the interment in Forest Hill Cemetery; attendance at those was by invitation only. The people I spoke to stood on the streets of Memphis and watched the funeral procession go by and told me how they felt about being there. I shared their stories as objectively as I could, letting newspaper readers interpret them on their own. In other words, I withheld my own opinion and let the words I quoted speak for themselves.

Forty years later, in August of 2017, I heard a radio newscast about events being planned around the world to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Elvis's

death. He still had devoted fans, some of whom weren't even born when he died. *It's been 40 years since that trip to Memphis!* That thought niggled me until I sat down at my laptop and began writing about Paula and her friends.

As a retired journalist, I had started writing fiction instead of fact. I had come to believe that was way to convey the truth about a place, a time, an event.

Fiction gave me the license to create the composite characters in "Farewell to the King." The four friends were inspired by my fellow passengers on the flight from Montreal and the fans I met in Memphis. The characters then took on lives of their own.

Music is the theme of all the stories *In the Key of 13*, hence the collection's title. And what would a story that revolves around Elvis Presley be without his wonderful songs? The lyrics, of course, are protected by copyright, but the songs are so familiar to many people that their very titles will start the words and the music playing in readers' heads. I brought Elvis's songs into the story from the very beginning; when the four friends meet up in Toni's apartment, "Are You Lonesome Tonight" is playing on the record player. And Elvis songs are woven into the entire story. The friends have come to view the world through Elvis's eyes.

The opening section of "Farewell to the King" ends with Paula giving readers a glimpse of her own situation and setting up a way to remedy it. This is the goal she pursues through the rest of the story.

As soon as I got home, I made the call. “Change of plans,” I said. “Gonna say farewell to the King in Memphis. I’ll be behind the buses outside Forest Hill Cemetery.”

“Suspicious Minds” was on the radio when I hung up. Elvis was singing about being caught in a trap. I was determined to get out of mine.

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Rosemary McCracken hails from Montreal, and has worked as a reporter, editor, and reviewer at newspapers across Canada. Her first mystery novel, *Safe Harbor*, was a finalist for Britain’s Debut Dagger Award. It was published by Imajin Books in 2012, and was followed by *Black Water* in 2013 and *Raven Lake* in 2016. Rosemary’s short fiction has appeared in numerous Canadian and American anthologies and magazines. “The Sweetheart Scamster,” in the crime fiction collection *Thirteen*, was a Derringer Award finalist in 2014. Rosemary now lives in Toronto, and teaches novel writing at George Brown College.
<https://rosemarymccracken.wordpress.com/>