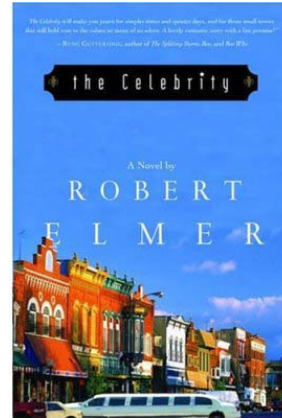


The Celebrity

by Robert Elmer

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Excerpt:

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Fame lost its appeal for me when I went into a public restroom and an autograph seeker handed me a pen and paper under the stall door.
—MARLO THOMAS

Five minutes, Jamie.” The stage manager hurried through the set with his clipboard, brushing the red-velvet curtain as he flew by. Jamie took his place and let the sound tech adjust his headset-style wireless mike as once more he mentally ran through the words of their opening number: a jazzier updated version of an old choral favorite.

I will not cease from mental fight, nor shall my sword sleep in my hand, till we have built Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land.

Okay, got it. They wanted British; he could do British. Around him members of the London Symphony Orchestra adjusted their instruments, while 103 red-and-white-robed kids from the Oxford Boys’ Choir fidgeted on special risers set up behind him.

Ready? The choir director glanced his way and adjusted his headset as Jamie returned the nod. They’d been promised a larger than usual audience for this special summer coproduction with the BBC and one of the big East Coast public broadcasting stations, WNET, New York. We’ll see. But even Nick had told him over and over how the crowd would eat it up.

Maybe agents were supposed to say that kind of thing. But Mom would have loved it, a few years back. Now they might wheel her in front of the TV set and tell her that her boy was singing, again. In England, no less. Live from London on the Fourth of July. Look, they’re going to sing a special arrangement of “God Save the Queen,” combined with him singing the American song “My Country, ’Tis of Thee,” which of course shared the same tune. And his mother would stare blankly at the wooden man on the screen who had long ago lost the thrill but had become very good at faking it. She would not see the puppet strings that made Jamie’s arms wave and his jaw move up and down while they lifted the corners of his mouth in

a Pinocchio smile.

“Four minutes. Choir ready?”

Jamie took his place and tried to breathe in the excitement the way he once did. Only now it was like trying to suck oxygen at the top of Mount Everest. And as he gasped for life before the curtain went up, he tried not to remind himself of everything he'd left behind.

It had been Mom's idea to enter him in the North Angeles Young Talent Show fifteen years ago. At age seventeen he'd come on like a young, blond Frank Sinatra, blowing away the judges with his clear-as-a-bell, soulful delivery. And right from the start he knew his mother had been right, that he'd been given The Gift: an amazing set of pipes that did everything he asked them to do, and more.

“I told you so! I told you so!” Back then Mom had fallen apart in front of everybody when he'd collected the grand prize, a five-hundred-dollar U.S. Savings Bond he'd had framed. It still hung on the living room wall of his Santa Barbara beach home, a reminder of the ambitious single mother who had first recognized The Gift and despite all odds just wanted the best for her son.

The best for her son. He could say that now. Back then he'd only felt her two hands on his back, pushing him through a maze of singing contests, interviews, and performances. Back then she worked all day as a hotel maid and got home late to make a hot dog or mac-and-cheese dinner for the two of them in their little West Covina apartment. (He never told anybody about the mac-and-cheese details though. Sounded too much like a rags-to-riches cliché in a made-for-TV movie.)

But Mom didn't know anything about clichés. Back then she'd been too busy saving her nickels, dimes, and tips to pay publicists and managers and voice coaches—people who eventually demanded all of Jamie's after-school time. People who became his life and eventually convinced him he had no other.

“Three minutes, Mr. Lane. How's your mike?”

Mom used to giggle at how her son used more makeup than she did. She teased him about the hairdressers and the handlers. Now she had her own, even if she hardly knew it. Now the fifty-four-year-old skeleton just sat in her wheelchair at the Belle-Aire Convalescent Center and fantasized about the place where she had grown up—this little nothing town in Washington State Jamie had never been to and had no intention of ever visiting.

Riverdale. Sounded like something out of a comic book, a name from the distant past. And that seemed strangely appropriate, seeing as Jamie's mother over the last year had successfully retreated into her own past. She called her nurses imaginary names such as Jasper and Maryanne and wondered why Virge was late delivering the milk. She worried who would feed her chickens, until the nurses assured her it was all taken care of as well. Even worse—if there could be worse—they all knew that as early-onset Alzheimer's robbed her of her mind, emphysema would strip away whatever was left.

And yet Jamie watched from a distance, knowing that no amount of money could change a thing about his mother's condition. He could pay the thirty-five hundred dollars a month for her care at the Belle-Aire, but in her mind she would still be living in their five-hundred-a-month

apartment back in West Covina, with the harvest gold linoleum and the lime shag carpet and the olive green refrigerator that never kept things cool. Of course she hadn't lived there in years, but she seemed to prefer the memory—even over the nice condo he'd bought her before they'd had to move her into the Belle-Aire. Some things didn't change, couldn't change.

So Mom coughed a lot, and they didn't know how much longer she would live. Through the summer, maybe not that long. Meanwhile Jamie could only keep writing the checks for the most expensive nursing care in the San Fernando Valley.

As if that would make up for what he'd never said. He did forgive her for pushing him into the spotlight that had sucked away his life. Even so, he had to hate the crippling disease that had sucked away hers. And he couldn't help resenting her just a little for checking out too early, far too early.

"In thirty seconds, please." If nothing else, the British stage crew seemed to have their act together, so while Jamie daydreamed, he let them be as efficient as they wanted to be. But the note they'd brought him just before rehearsal only reminded him of everything he'd never said to Mom, so he crumpled it into a tight little ball, tighter and tighter.

"Are you quite all right, Mr. Lane?"

Jamie shook the cobwebs from his mind, tried to focus on the now, tried to forget the words of the e-mail from the nursing home supervisor.

"I'm ready." He wasn't sure he'd convinced anyone. Still, the picture of his mother staring at the big-screen TV would not leave him. He thought he saw her reflection in the lens of a boom camera swinging into place. Seconds later he noticed her face in the front row of the theater audience, so he closed his eyes until the lights hit, the music came up, and the applause began.

"Live, from the historic Prince Albert Hall in London..." A timpani roll backed up the very British announcer. "It's a Hands-Across-the-Atlantic Patriotic Extravaganza, featuring the American mezzo-soprano Jolene DuBois..."

Jamie let the intro fade away to background until the little green light on the camera told him he was on and his mother was watching from the Belle-Aire. Normally she didn't miss it; he'd made sure his publicity people had faxed the home a local schedule with airtimes and channels. So normally, yes, she would be watching—if one could be allowed a rather loose definition of the word. At least she would be facing the television, and it would be tuned to the right channel. Only this time...

"...and the incomparable Jamie D. Lane!"

This time he reacted on pure instinct, singing through the applause and the cheering the opening numbers with the choir and orchestra. And of course he added his signature blend: a little bit of pop, a little bit of opera, the way Mom had taught him. Last month one of the nurses at the rest home told him Mom had clapped after watching him perform "This Is the Moment" for a Good Morning America concert in New York City. So he sang to her after the introductions and the orchestral interludes with the big finishes. And he remembered the time she had stood in the kitchen, back when he was fifteen or sixteen, listening quietly to him

practice over and over.

“You’re singing from here.” She had stepped up and pointed to his lips. “Sing from here, instead.” With that she had rested her gentle hand on his heart—her own pledge of allegiance.

That was a long time ago, but how could he forget? So, for the first time in years, he poured what remained of his heart into the songs, one after the next, until he had no heart left, only his hand to cover the spot where it had once beaten.

That’s it, Mom. I sure hope you were watching, ’cause that’s all I’ve got.

By then Jolene DuBois arrived to revive the program. But the “Hands Across the Waters” duet slipped through his fingers when he missed one of his cues, and then he didn’t remember actually singing “God Save the Queen” with his singing partner. As far as Jamie was concerned, God could save her or not, and it didn’t really matter either way.

All he really remembered was apologizing silently and holding Jolene’s hand afterward as they bowed together and smiled. How could the audience not like it? Or rather, her. His performance had quickly slipped into amateur night at the karaoke bar.

Mercifully, only two songs remained after Jolene left the stage. So when at last he stood alone in the spotlight, he knew the orchestra strings were due back in four beats, just as they had rehearsed. He also knew he should have let it happen, just like everything else up to that point in the program.

But the tears streaming down his face wouldn’t let him, and even Nick had told him a little emotion was good. A strategic tear or two would be fine once in a while, if he could manage it. Emotion sells records, kid. Connect with the audience. Listen to your manager.

But this? Jamie willed himself not to look backstage, where Nick had surely dropped his jaw on the floor. The orchestra played gamely on even as the conductor glared at Jamie over and again. Shall we try this once more, please? Jamie took another breath, but whatever had stopped him still held his lips in check and his voice in a vise grip.

And for the first time he could remember, he looked out into a deathly quiet sea of faces...and envied them.

That older couple, there in the front row: They would return home after the show, without the permission of their agent, perhaps with the young girl seated beside them. A granddaughter? He stared at them through the white glare and wondered if they might not agree to trade places with him for just a couple of days. In fact, for a moment he seriously thought about walking over to them and making them an offer. You come deal with Nick and the firestorm of critics sure to consume him after this performance from purgatory. I’ll take the Underground train home to your comfortable little flat in a comfortable little London suburb, where the dog will be waiting with his tail wagging, ready for a quiet walk in the rain before bed.

A fair swap? Instead, he closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and unplugged his microphone headset. The crowd gasped as he shuffled across the stage, over to where the orchestra conductor stood staring, his arms now at his sides. Jamie took up a smaller mike perched on a stand by the wind section. He took another deep breath and looked straight at

the older couple.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I guess I...”

He sighed and rubbed his eyes with a free hand. In the sudden stillness of the ornate Prince Albert, he might not have needed amplification. Someone coughed from several rows back. And he knew of course that he would not be going home to the comfortable, anonymous flat in South Kensington. So he glanced at the unblinking camera once again, wishing he had a signal or something that would get through to his mother. A tug on the ear, a wink, anything. “Hey, Mom, I made it. You okay?” He might have shouted at her if it would have done any good. Instead, he turned from the stage and simply stepped out of the light, his footsteps echoing in the shocked silence.

So this is what burnout feels like. Utter, poof-I’m-done burnout. He might have stumbled in the darkness had Nick not grabbed him by the arm and hissed in his ear.

“What are you, sick or something?” Sick as in ill, or sick as in crazy? Jamie could guess which one his manager meant. And Nick didn’t let go of him. “You can’t just walk out of the show like that! You’re not done yet!”

Jamie looked back over his shoulder at the pool of light still bathing the orchestra conductor. And really he could not have cared less if no one applauded. Not this time. In fact, it sounded kind of nice, this silence. He’d never heard it like that before. Quiet as a cathedral and just as empty, and he imagined that was quiet enough.

But as he stood watching and Nick stood grousing...there! The first lonely clapping started out with a brave trickle, then a few more joined before it ultimately exploded into thunder. Nick paused long enough to realize what was happening.

“I can’t believe it.” He shook his head and mumbled, barely loud enough to hear over the thunder. “I can’t believe it.”

Granted, this applause probably came more out of sympathy and surprise than appreciation. But it continued on, demanding more, an encore, something Jamie could not give even if he’d had it. Nick even tried to lead him back out, but he dug in his heels.

“No.” Jamie shook his head and broke free, checking again for the crumpled note in his pocket. He knew the way to the back door, back to the hotel. If he left right away, he might be able to get back to the Belle-Aire in time.