

M Y S T E R Y T R A I N

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

AS HE CLIMBED the stairs, Elvis popped the cap off the pill bottle and shook a couple more Dexedrines into his palm. They looked like pink candy hearts, lying there. He tossed them into the back of his throat and swallowed them dry.

“Hey, Elvis, man, are you sure you want to keep taking those things?” Charlie was half a flight behind, drunk and out of breath. “I mean, you been flying on that shit all weekend.”

“I can handle it, man. Don’t sweat it.” Actually the last round of pills hadn’t affected him at all, and now his muscles burned and his head felt like a bowling ball. He collapsed in an armchair in the third floor bedroom, as far as possible from the noise of the reporters and the kids and the girls who always stood outside the house. “In three weeks we’re out of here, man. Out of Germany, out of the Army, out of these goddamn uniforms.” He untied his shoes and kicked them off.

“Amen, brother.”

“Charlie, turn on the goddamn TV, will you?”

“Come on, man, that thing’s got a remote control, and I ain’t it.”

“Okay, okay.” Elvis lunged for the remote control box and switched on the brand-new RCA color console. It was the best money could buy, the height of American technology, even if Germany didn’t have any color transmissions to pick up with it.

Charlie had collapsed across the bed. “Hey, Elvis. When you get home, man, you ought to get yourself three different TVs. I mean, you’re the king, right? That way, not only can you fuck more girls than anybody and make more money than anybody and take more pills than anybody, you can watch more TV than anybody, too. You can have a different goddamn TV for every channel. One for ABC...” He yawned. “One for NBC...” He was asleep.

“Charlie?” Elvis said. “Charlie, you lightweight.” He looked around the edge of the chair and saw Charlie’s feet hanging off the end of the bed, heel up and perfectly still.

To hell with it, Elvis thought, flipping through the channels. Let him sleep. They’d had a rough weekend, driving into Frankfurt in the BMW and picking up some girls, skating on the icy roads all across the north end of Germany, hitting the booze and pills. In the old days it had annoyed Elvis mightily that his body couldn’t tolerate alcohol, but ever since one of his sergeants had given him his first Dexedrine he hadn’t missed booze at all. Charlie still liked the bottle, but for Elvis there was nothing like that rush of power he got from the pills.

Well, there was one thing, of course, and that was being on stage. It was not quite two years now since he’d been inducted—since Monday, March 24, 1958, and he’d been counting the days. The Colonel had said no USO shows, no nothing until he was out. Nobody got Elvis for free.

The Colonel had come to take the place of his mother, who had died while Elvis was still in basic, and his father, who had betrayed Gladys's memory by seeing other women. There was no one else that Elvis could respect, that he could look to for advice. If the Colonel said no shows then that was it.

Something flashed on the TV screen. Elvis backed through the dead channels to find it again, ending up with a screen full of electronic snow. He got up and played with the fine tuning ring to see if he could sharpen it any.

Memories of his early years haunted him. Those had been the best times, hitting the small towns with just Scotty and Bill, the equipment strapped to the top of Scotty's brand-new, red-and-white '56 Chevy. Warming the audience up with something slow, like "Old Shep," then laying them out, ripping the joint with "Good Rockin' Tonight." Getting out of control, his legs shaking like he had epilepsy, forgetting to play the guitar, his long hair sticking out in front like the bill of a cap, taking that mike stand all the way to the floor and making love to it, shaking and sweating and feeling the force and power of the music hit those kids in the guts like cannon fire.

He gave up on the TV picture and paced the room, feeling the first pricklings of the drug. His eyelids had started to vibrate and he could feel each of the individual hairs on his arms.

When he sat down again there was something on the screen.

It looked like a parade, with crowds on both sides of the street and a line of cars approaching. They were black limousines, convertibles, with people waving from the back seats. Elvis thought he recognized one of the faces, a Senator from up north, the one everybody said was going to run for President.

He tried the sound. It was in German and he couldn't make any sense of it. The only German words he'd learned had been in bed, and they weren't the kind that would show up on television.

The amphetamine hit him just as the senator's head blew apart.

Elvis watched the chunks of brain and blood fly through the air in slow motion. For a second he couldn't believe what he was seeing, then he jumped up and grabbed Charlie by the shoulder.

"Charlie, wake up! C'mon man, this is serious!" Charlie rolled onto his back, eyes firmly shut, a soft snore buzzing in his throat. No amount of shaking could wake him up.

On the television, men in dark suits swarmed over the car as it picked up speed and disappeared down the road. The piece of film ran out, hanging in the projector for a moment, then the screen turned white.

He went back to the chair and stood with his hands resting on its high, curved back. Had he really seen what he thought he saw? Or was it just the drugs? He dug his fingers into the dingy gray-green fabric of the chair, the same fabric that he'd seen by the mile all through Europe. He was tired of old things: old chairs, old wood-floored houses, Frau Gross, the old woman who lived with them, the old buildings and cobbled streets of Bad Nauheim.

America, he thought, here I come. Clean your glass and polish your chrome and wax your linoleum tile.

The TV flickered and showed a hotel room with an unmade bed and clothes all around. On the nightstand was an overflowing ashtray and an empty

bottle. Elvis recognized the Southern Comfort label even in the grainy picture. A woman sat on the floor with her back against the bed. She had ratty hair and flabby, pinched sort of face. The nipples of her small breasts showed through her T-shirt, which looked like somebody had spilled paint and bleach all over it.

Elvis thought she must be some kind of down-and-out hooker. He was a little disgusted by the sight of her. Still he couldn't look away as she brought a loaded hypodermic up to her arm and found a vein.

Static shot across the screen and the image broke up. Diagonal lines scrolled past a field of fuzzy gray. Elvis felt the Dexedrine bounce his heart against the conga drum of his chest. He sat down to steady himself, his fingers rattling lightly against the arm of the chair.

"Man," Elvis said to the room, "I am really fucked up."

A new voice came out of the TV. It must have originally belonged to some German girl, breathy and sexual, but bad recording had turned it into a mechanical whisper. Another room took shape, another rumpled bed, this one with a black man lying in it, long frizzy hair pressed against the pillow, a trickle of vomit running out of his mouth. He bucked twice, his long, muscular fingers clawing at the air, and lay still.

Elvis pushed the heels of his hands into his burning eyes. It's the drugs, he thought. The drugs and not sleeping and knowing I'm going home in a couple of weeks...

He wandered into the hall, one hand on the crumbling plaster wall to steady himself. He tried the handle on the room next to his but the door refused to open.

"Red? Hey, Red, get your ass up and answer this door." He slapped the wood a couple of times and then gave up, afraid to deal with Frau Gross when he was so far gone. He went into the bathroom instead and splashed cold water on his face, letting it soak the collar of his shirt. He wouldn't miss this screwy European plumbing, either.

"I feel so good," he sang to himself, "I'm living in the USA..." He looked like shit. With his green fatigues and sallow skin he looked like a fucking Christmas tree, with two red ornaments where his eyes were supposed to be.

He went back to the bedroom and sat down again. He needed sleep. He'd find something boring, like *Bonanza* in German, and maybe he could doze off in the chair.

As he reached for the remote, another film started. It was scratched and grainy and not quite in focus. Some fat guy in a white suit was hanging on to a mike stand and mumbling. It was impossible to understand what he said, especially with the nasal German narration that ran on top. Elvis made out a lot of "you knows" and "well, wells."

The camera moved in and Elvis went cold. Despite his age and his blubber and his long, girlish hair, the guy was trying to do an Elvis imitation. A band started up in the background and the fat man began to sing.

The Colonel had warned him this might happen. You don't drop out for two years and not expect somebody to try and cut you. Bobby Darin with all his finger-popping and that simpering Ricky Nelson had been bad enough, but

this was really the end. Elvis had never heard the song that the fat guy was trying to sing. He was obviously being carried by the size of the orchestra behind him. Pathetic, Elvis thought. A joke. The fat guy curled his lip, threw a couple karate punches, and let one leg begin to shake.

Dear God, Elvis thought.

It wasn't possible.

Elvis lurched out of the chair and yanked Charlie out of bed by the ankles. "Wha...?" Charlie moaned.

"Get up. Get up and look at this shit."

Charlie struggled to a sitting position and scrubbed his eyes with his hands. "I don't see nothing."

"On the t v , man. You got eyes in your head?"

"There's nothing there, man. Nothing."

Elvis turned, saw snowy interference blocking out the signal again. "Get a chair," Elvis said.

"Aw, man, I'm really whacked..."

"Get the goddamn chair."

Elvis sat back in front of the t v , his heels pounding jump time against the hardwood floor. He heard Charlie dragging a chair up the stairs as the screen cleared and a caption flashed below the singer's face.

Rapid City, South Dakota, it said.

June, 1977.

Elvis didn't know he was on his feet, didn't know he had the service automatic in his hand until his finger went tight on the trigger.

Huge white letters filled the screen.

ELVIS, they said.

He fired. The roar of the gun seemed make the entire building jump. The picture tube blew in with a sharp crack and a shower of glass. Sparks hissed out on the floor and a single breath of sour smoke wafted out of the ruined set.

Elvis felt the room buzz with hostile forces. He had to get out. Charlie stood in the doorway, staring open-mouthed at the ruins of the set as Elvis shoved past him, letting the gun drop from his nerveless fingers and clatter across the floor. It wasn't until he was downstairs and the cold air hit him that he realized he'd left his shoes and coat inside. The sidewalk was slick with ice and a mixture of sleet and rain fell as he stood there, eyes jerking back and forth, fingers twitching, legs tensed to run and go on running.

It had to be a mistake, he thought. Something from a burlesque show over in Frankfurt, maybe. Somebody had just screwed up the titles, gotten the date wrong.

Yeah, and the name wrong too.

The silence closed in on him. For the first time since they'd moved into the house on Goethestrasse there weren't any people on the street. In the distance, whining high and faint like a mosquito's wings, he heard a motorcycle approaching. It was the only sound in the night.

He started to feel the cold. Still it wasn't bad enough to make him go back inside, to face the empty, staring socket of the t v set. He shivered, lifted one foot off the icy pavement.

A light winked at him from the end of the street. The motorcycle, coming toward him, rattled like machine gun fire and echoed off the wet streets and flat brick walls. It was moving too fast for the icy roads and the driver seemed barely in control. He slid in and out of the streetlamps' circles of light, shadowy in leather and denim.

Something like a premonition made Elvis start to turn and run back inside. The cold had numbed him and he couldn't seem to get the message through to his legs.

The bike skidded to a stop in front of the house and its engine died.

For a second Elvis and the rider stared at each other in the silent moonlight. The rider had no helmet or goggles, just a pair of round, tortoise-shell glasses. Frost and bits of ice had clumped in his hair and the creases of his jacket. A cigarette hung out of the corner of his mouth, and Elvis was sure that if he could have seen the man's face he would have recognized him.

But the man's face was gone. Scars flowed and branched like rivers across the dead white skin of his cheeks. He had no eyebrows, and patches of hair were missing from his temples and forehead. One eye was permanently half-closed and the other was low enough to throw the ruined face off balance. The nose was little more than a flat place and the mouth smiled on one side and frowned on the other.

"Hey," the rider said.

"What?" Elvis was startled by the man's American accent.

"Hey, man. What happened to your shoes?"

The voice was maddeningly familiar. "Who are you?"

"You look shook, man." The scarred mouth stretched in what might have been a grin. "Like, 'All Shook Up,' right?"

"Dean," Elvis said, stunned. "Jimmy Dean, the actor."

The rider shrugged.

"You're dead," Elvis said. "I saw the pictures in the paper. That car was torn to pieces, man."

Dean, if that was truly who it was, touched the underside of his mutilated eye and rubbed it softly, as if remembering pain that Elvis could not even imagine.

"What are you doing here?"

Dean shrugged again. "They just, like, wanted me to come by and check up on you. It looks like you already got the message." He rose up on the bike, about to kick the starter, and Elvis moved toward him.

"Wait! Who's 'they?' What do you know about..." He stopped himself. Dean couldn't possibly know anything about what Elvis had seen on *TV*.

"Hey, be cool, man. If *they* wanted you to know who *they* were, then *they* would tell you, dig? I mean, they didn't even tell *me* shit, you know?" Dean looked him over. "But I can take a guess, man. I can take a real good guess what they want with you. I seen you on *TV*, the way you shake your legs and all that. The way you dress like a spade and sing all those raunchy songs. You scare people, man. People think you want to fuck all their daughters and turn their sons into hoods. *They* don't like that, man."

"I never tried to scare nobody," Elvis said.

Dean giggled. Coming out of that scarred mouth, it was terrifying. “Yeah, right. That’s what I used to say.”

“What do you mean? Are you threatening me?”

“No threats, man. You’re the King. You know? You’re the fucking King of America. King of all the cheeseburgers and pink Cadillacs and prescription drugs and handguns in the greatest country in the world. Shit, you *are* America. They don’t have to threaten you. They don’t have to hurt you. Just a little nudge here and a nudge there, and you’ll fall right in line.”

A door slammed and Charlie came staggering down the sidewalk. “Elvis? What the fuck, man?”

Dean looked like he wanted to say something else, then changed his mind. He started the bike, hunched his shoulders, and sped away.

“Jesus Christ,” Charlie said. “You know who that was?”

“It was nobody,” Elvis said. He put his hand in the middle of Charlie’s chest and shoved him back toward the house. “Understand? It was nobody.”

“THERE’S GOING TO BE a new Elvis, brand new. I don’t think he will go back to sideburns or ducktails. He’s twenty-five now, and he has genuine adult appeal. I think he’s going to surprise everyone...”

—Colonel Tom Parker on Elvis’s return from Germany

DURING REHEARSALS ELVIS kept the windows of his hotel room covered with aluminum foil. It kept out the light and there was something comforting about having it there. It might even keep his TV set from picking up weird, lying broadcasts that would mess with his head. Just in case, he kept a loaded .45 on the bedside table, ready to blow the whole thing away. When forced to go out of the hotel, he kept his bodyguards with him at all times, the ones the papers had started to call his “Memphis Mafia.”

He stayed inside as much as he could. The Florida air was hot and dead, seemed to pull the life right out of him. It had been the same in California and Las Vegas, everywhere he’d been since he came home from Germany. Everything was dry and hot and still. He was starting to believe it would be dry and hot and still forever.

As they taped the opening of the show he fought, without much success, to control his unease. They had him in his Army uniform again, walking out onstage to shake hands with Sinatra and his entire Rat Pack, all of them in tuxedos, mugging the camera, slapping each other on the back.

Over and over he caught himself thinking: What am I doing here?

He worked his way through the crowd, the faces blurring together into single entity with Bishop’s mocking smile, Davis’s processed hair and hideous rings, Lawford’s limp handshake and Martin’s whiskey breath. He had to learn to be comfortable with them. The Colonel had told him how it was going to be, and it was far too late to argue with the Colonel.

It happened while they were taping his duet with Sinatra, Sinatra who had called rock and roll “phony” and the singers “goons” just a couple of years before. Now they were trading verses, Elvis singing “Witchcraft” and Sinatra doing “Love Me Tender.”

The scream came from somewhere toward the front of the audience. “That’s not him!” It was a girl’s voice, and it sounded at least as frightened as it was angry. The stage lights were blinding and Elvis couldn’t see her face. “That’s not Elvis!” she screamed. “What did you do with him?” The orchestra stopped and the girl’s voice carried on unaccompanied. “Where is he? *Where’s Elvis?*”

Elvis saw Sinatra make a gesture toward the wings. A moment later there were muffled noises from the audience and then a vast and empty silence.

“Don’t worry,” Sinatra said. “You’re one of us now. We’ll take good care of you.”

“Yes, sir.” Elvis nodded and closed his eyes. “Yes, sir,” he said.

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