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## You Can't Have a Cigarette in Elvis's Bedroom

Benjamin Blacker

*To tell the truth, I had never heard of an "ethnography." I balked at this assignment. Go somewhere, somewhere populated by a certain prototype of people, and write about what they're thinking. This is difficult for someone whose one regret in life is that he isn't someone else. And so, after hours upon hours of sitting at my desk staring at a blank sheet of paper, drops of blood forming on my forehead, I left for my Thanksgiving break where I went to, of all places, Memphis, Tenn. The following "ethnography" is the result of that experience.*

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And my traveling companions  
 Are ghosts and empty sockets  
 I'm looking at ghosts and empties. . .  
 Paul Simon

---

As you follow Rita, your tour-guide, into *his* bedroom, you wonder who the hell these people are. Who are these throngs and masses, huddled together in a dead rock star's bedroom, his gold bedposts reflecting in a man's glasses and refracting the overhead chandelier's light into beams over the giddy crowd? Then you realize it doesn't matter who they are. They are here. And they are here for him. For the King.

You made it this far, didn't you? All the way from Syracuse, Greyhounding it to Boston, then all the way to Memphis for Thanksgiving with some family you hardly know. They suggested you go visit Graceland. So you do. And here you are, packed into the King's bedroom with about twenty strangers from all walks of life. Who comes to Graceland the day after Thanks giving? Besides you. Because *you* have an excuse, right? Of course, you *always* have an excuse. There's nothing for a person to do in Memphis if he doesn't marry his cousin. Whatever the situation, you have an excuse. You'll hand the paper in later, or just impro vise. The Red Headed Girl probably doesn't want to talk to you anyway. Get on with your life, you tell yourself. Paul Simon said he has reason to believe we all will be received at Graceland. So what're you waiting for? Nothing. Drown yourself in a rich musi cal tradition.

There is a fat woman in tight black stretch-pants and a purple sweatshirt trying to hop the felt rope that surrounds his bed. "Hop" is being generous. It's more of a clumsy lurch. She wears dark sunglasses, even inside the mansion. There are sparkles around them. She is obviously a fanatic. You are reminded of *Needful Things*, that Stephen King book, in which the woman's fantasy of the King brings her to screaming orgasm. You wonder if this woman is up nights thinking about

him. Does she imagine his gyrating pelvis, too racy for the *Ed Sullivan Show*? Can she hear his deep Memphis drawl? Does he twitch that lip and slyly entice her in her dreams? Rita politely asks the woman to not cross the rope barrier, please. The woman in the tight stretch-pants backs down in a huff, flipping her stubby middle finger at Rita's turned back and staring dag gers at the tour-guide.

The man in the thick glasses is talking in a low voice into a Dictaphone. He holds it right up to his mouth, so you can barely see his lips moving. You move in closer, straining what you always considered your somewhat super-hearing to its limits, attempt ing to discern some intelligible speech. Is he a re porter? Maybe a terrorist, taking verbal notes of this national treasure, someday hoping to plant a bomb in the King's bathtub.

Suddenly, out of the blue, your thoughts turn to Carrie, maybe back in Boston for the holiday. Posi tively back home for the holiday. You haven't spoken to her since she left for Cornell. You e-mailed her once, but there was no reply. Last time you had gotten together you had gotten along so well. There was the bud of a friendship there. Why do you think of her now? Here, of all places? Did Carrie like "Hound Dog" or "Love Me Tender?" You might never know.

You're jerked back to consciousness by someone bumping into you. What the hell? Is one of these dumb hicks so *involved* in his musical deity that he can't watch where the hell he's going? Look, you like the King as much as the next guy, as long as the next guy isn't one of these corn-growing, horse-shoe-throw ing, tractor-towing, field-hoeing, sister-marrying, pitchfork-carrying, bible-thumping, goat-humping, moonshine-drunken, test-flunking, spelunking, eye -sunken, hunken mass of glue sniffing, cow-tipping, tobacco-spitting, drool-dripping, jerky-licking, but ter-churning, cross-burning, windmill-turning, Mount Vernon, chaw-chewing, beer-brewing, UFO-sighting, cock-fighting, grits-biting, wife-harming, always -farming, never-charming, swine-slaughtering, metal -soldering, inbred-daughtering, Welcome-Back-Kottering, wife-branding, power-sanding, back-hand ing, date-inflating, masturbating, sibling-mating, ge netic-mutating, freak-creating, pelvis-gyrating, teeth -missing, cousin-kissing, beer-pissing, homeboy-dissing, wife-bruising, RV-cruising, Civil-War-losing *Deliverance* types. But it isn't.

Instead of the buck-toothed bumpkin you had expected, there is a young woman, a girl really, no older than you. She is blond. But not too blond. Her eyes are hidden behind the klunky contraption of her Kodak, and the flash goes off in your eyes as she turns around to face you.

"Oh, sorry," she says.

"That's all right," you say.

"*Say something else!*", a voice in your head screams. Talk to her!

But you don't, and she slips away into the crowd. You look again, but she's become one of them, and you don't see her any more.

You mope around for the rest of the tour, dragging your feet and following the group half-heartedly. Rita discusses the King's relationship with Priscilla. You listen with a restless ear and let your gaze fall around the room. You don't linger on anything in particular, just a wandering sweep. Nothing important. Nameless, faceless people, ears perked at Rita's every syllable. You want a cigarette. But you quit three weeks ago, and if you have one now. . . Not that you *could*. No, not in the King's bedroom.

But didn't *he*? You can just see him lighting up after a steamy evening with the wife. Maybe it was the one that would eventually herald the arrival of little Lisa Marie. And what about *that*? For some reason you can't picture a young Mrs. Michael Jackson charging the halls of Graceland, clutching her teddy-bear in one hand and maybe her father's guitar pick in the other. Or maybe her father's hand in the other. Was he a family man? You like to think so. Would he bring back souvenirs for his daughter from his various tours? Would she barrel down the sprawling lawn of Graceland, arms outstretched, as he arrived home from a gig in Vegas or LA? Would he hold her, read her stories until she fell asleep? Did he sing lullabies to her in a voice meant for Christian gospel but bastardized for Rock-and-Roll?

Again you are snapped back to consciousness. A tap on your shoulder. Who? *Her*. The blond-but-not-too-blond. She's back. But why?

"Yes?" you ask, immediately suspicious. Why are you so paranoid?

"Listen, Ah hate to ask. . ." Hm, slight Southern tint to that dripping honey voice. Green eyes. Marvelous. You shake your head, anything she wants. "Would you mind taking my picture in front of that painting. I told my boyfriend"

The world comes screeching to a halt. The earth spins on its axis as you try not to do a double-take. You are afraid that your interior grin has leaked out. Apparently you're right.

"Is something wrong?" she asks.

You blink and look back into her eyes. "No," you assure her. Silence. "Er, the picture?" you manage.

"Oh, right, thanks."

She backs up until she's almost against the wall and you snap the picture. Then another one, just in case. She smiles and thanks you as she takes the camera back. As it passes hands, your fingers barely touch. But they do. Or at least you think they do, and maybe that's more important anyway. What is reality but a further perception of make-believe?

You're suddenly very hungry. Does Graceland have a snack bar? There's a gift-shop, you saw it on your way in. There should be a snack bar.

Rita says it's time to move on. There is so much more to see and so little time in which to see it. As you follow the group back into the hallway, two steps behind the blond, you ask yourself again. Who are these people? Who comes to Graceland the day after Thanksgiving?

Are they anything like you? Alone. Looking to escape? You don't think the fat woman is. You have a feeling the fat woman in the stretch-pants is here quite often. Maybe the guy with the tape recorder is like you, but you don't think so. He looks suspicious, with those beady eyes magnified through thick lenses and the constant chatter into that machine. Maybe the blond girl is like you. Except she's got a boyfriend. She isn't alone. She probably spends every minute of her holiday in Memphis thinking about him. What are you thinking about? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. But also everything. Maybe considering the implications of Elvis rising. A rock-n-roll resurrection. Mr. Mojo risin'. Something like that.

Maybe Rita is like you, but you highly doubt that. Anyone with this much knowledge of the King is a little too off kilter. But aren't you like that? You have your weird obsessions. You know every word to *When Harry Met Sally*. . . You know when the crescendo comes in Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. And you don't even read music. We all have our little fixations. But Rita is just a *little* too enthusiastic about hers. Oh well. . .

What about the rest of them? The token Japanese tourists. The plaid kid who smells like pot. The short black woman with the two squirming children, one on her hip the other at her feet. What do you all have in common?

Just *him*. Just something, some kind of magical mystery that brought you all here together on the day after Thanksgiving. You're all strangers here, but you are strangers bonded by something stronger than

pass the time. This is, as shallow or superficial as it may sound, a piece of Americana. This place is a microcosm of the perfect world. Here, you put aside your differences and everyone gets along. And you decide that maybe rhymin' Simon was right.

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religion or conviction. People don't just come here to pass the time. This is, as shallow or superficial as it may sound, a piece of Americana. This place is a microcosm of the perfect world. Here, you put aside your differences and everyone gets along. And you decide that maybe rhymin' Simon was right.