

Suspicious Minds

In his striped black and white prison fatigues, looking not unlike an agitated zebra, Elvis paced as best he could, restricted by the dimensions of the cramped backstage dressing room. The glistening metal chain around his ankle, trailed him, tinkling against the floor. The odour of sweat mingled with the stale despair of decades of under-appreciated entertainers. The walls were adorned with dozens of ancient yellowing photographs of performers who had the misfortune of trudging through this venue. Their poses were all remarkably similar; fingers pointed at the camera and plastered-on smiles, failing to camouflage weary eyes. A museum of desperation.

Elvis cursed under his breath and leapt up on to a stool. The chain followed him loyally, clanging. With a grunt, he forced open a tiny window in the corner of the room above a photo of an eighties game-show host he vaguely recognised. A window that paradoxically seemed to bring darkness into the already dim, dungeon of a room. He dug out a packet of cigarettes and threw one into his mouth.

“Come on. You know you can’t smoke in here.”

Elvis yelped. The stool wobbled. He hadn’t even noticed the tubby man on the sofa, despite his conspicuous white jumpsuit. The man pulled off his huge black quiffed wig and winced as he stripped off his furry sideburns. Massaging his bald head, he let out a sigh which stretched into a groan.

“James, Elvis is not Indian,” Elvis barked back. He flicked at his plastic lighter, which nonchalantly spat out the occasional spark.

“Well, maybe its good to have a bit of diversity for once. With Black Lives Matter shenanigans and all that. The world is sensitive right now.”

“Elvis. Is. *Not*. Indian.” Elvis’ teeth clenched as if barely containing the venom inside, as he shook his lighter ferociously, before flinging it against the wall. It bounced back and hit him on the chin. The eighties game-show host’s grin mocked him through the frame.

“Elvis *was* not Indian, Elvis. *Was*. You need to stop talking about him in the present. Its not healthy.”

The tiny door creaked open and a lanky, ghostly-pale man with a straggly beard ducked through it. His costume was very similar to James’. He surveyed the scene dark, behind glittery glasses. “Is the cry-baby spitting out his dummy?” he scoffed, before taking a swig from a can of Fosters.

“Take it easy Dewie. He’s not in a good mood,” James muttered.

Elvis turned around carefully, poised on his stool, and marvelled at the two men. One obese, one emaciated. One bald, one hirsute. Both in white jumpsuits, with red lapels and golden tassels on their shoulders. He shook his head slowly. “Look at you two. You’re like opposite ends of an eating disorder.”

James emitted a nervous chuckle.

“Its not funny!” screamed Elvis. The stool creaked. “You’re bloody amateurs. The King doesn’t have a beard, Dewie. And going on stage in the same bloody outfits! You couldn’t have checked, beforehand?”

“Mine’s got a cape,” James mumbled.

“Oh, get off your high horse,” Dewie said, just as Elvis climbed down from the stool. “It’s just a bit of fun.” He lifted the can and gulped several long swigs.

“Fun?” Elvis’ hands contracted into fists. “Do you want the Annual Norwich Elvis Impersonation Contest to turn into some kind of novelty? Do you want some... random man in a tacky party outfit to bring shame upon the King? Massacring one of his songs to a bunch of baying imbeciles?”

The question was rhetorical, yet still, the lack of response filled Elvis with wrath. The room seemed to shrink. “I can’t believe you guys aren’t *more* angry!” He pulled out his pack of cigarettes, then remembering that his lighter didn’t work, tossed them onto the table. “When *real* dedicated fans of the King, people devoted to him, to this craft, *we* just get overlooked.”

The buzzing strip-light above flickered, as if concurring. Performers grinned inanely from the walls, unphased.

“Oh I get it,” said Dewie. “You’re miffed because a brown man won.”

“Did he put the hours in? Does he have a bloody internet webby page... thingy? Does he drive three hours to Hull and back every month for a show?”

“Oh, and you just assume you should have won, Elvis? Your arrogance is astounding.”

“I would have beaten *you!* With your second-rate rendition of Suspicious Minds and white jumpsuit. How unoriginal. My outfit is *official* Jailhouse Rock prison fatigues.” He shuffled his feet and the chain clunked with a heavy authenticity. I did a lesser-known song for *true* Elvis fans. Not those ruddy buffoons!” Elvis ran his fingers through his thickly-gelled hair. “Besides, I owe him,” he whispered.

“Owe who?”

Elvis looked up and snarled.

Dewie’s opened his mouth. His brow furrowed above his dark glasses, but his face was pacified by James’ pleading eyes. He sighed, and grabbed another can of Fosters from behind a bin. Elvis’ stare stalked him across the room, though lingered on the beer. It looked so very tempting. But he would not slip up. Not again.

Elvis leapt forward and knocked the can out of Dewie’s hand, onto the ancient cupboard. His face had turned a darker shade of crimson, creasing up, around his remarkably inert eyebrows. He had instinctively taken on his stage stance, with his pelvis jutting forward and his legs splayed out. One hand went to his hip, as the other threw a finger in Dewie’s face. “You don’t even *look* like the King. You’re two feet too tall and have you seen your skin? You look like you *died* six months ago.”

“My skin’s too light, and the winner’s skin’s too dark? Can’t you at least be a consistent racist?”

“How dare you!” Elvis’ quiff quivered, as if itself outraged. “I’m not a racist. Some of my friends...” His top lip curled microscopically. “...Some of my favourite takeaways are... You’re trying to confuse me! I voted against Brexit.”

“Look mate, you’re taking this far too seriously,” Dewie said, rescuing his fallen can, as it haemorrhaged beer.

“Yeah,” said James reticently, as if unsure if the others were even still aware of his presence. “There are plenty of other competitions.”

“I meant this *whole* thing,” said Dewie. “Your life. Changing your name to Elvis. That weird shrine you’ve got in your living room, that creepy enormous tattoo. And don’t think we haven’t noticed the botox around your forehead. It’s too much, mate. I know you’ve managed to quit... to get over your...” He slowly moved the beer can behind him. “And that’s admiral. But, maybe you’ve got an addictive personality. Just replacing one vice with another.”

Elvis kicked off one shoe. The other one did not cooperate.

“We liked you when you were Barry, mate. Barry was far more... stable.”

Elvis shook his leg vigorously, rattling his chain, but the obstinate shoe remained. He limped closer to Dewie until their nose and chin were almost touching. “When you met me five years ago on the Norwich Elvis

circuit you were *nothing!* I took you under my wing. I told you about all the gigs. Showed you how to spread out the hits, to keep up the momentum of your set. *Me!*”

Dewie leant backwards and took an awkward sip of his beer. His legs were planted in defiance, but his upper body betrayed fear. “Elvis, I don’t want to fight. I just think it’s better, healthier, if this isn’t your... everything.”

As Elvis stared into Dewie’s dark shades, he found himself thrust back, inside a flashback of the incident, a month ago. An overwhelming disgrace churned inside him. From his bones. *How could I have slipped up?* He tasted it again. The harsh whisky, deep in the back of his throat. He remembered the blood dripping, meandering down the side of his hand. Shame boiled and fermented into rage. *How could I have even considered turning my back on the King?*

The cramped room shrunk and shrunk and dissolved into oblivion. All he knew was that memory. That harsh whisky. All he saw was glass shards across over the floor. Pieces of the King’s face smiling, pouting. Infuriatingly nonchalant. Pieces from within a multitude of ripped photos, strewn across the bedroom, tinged with pink smudges of blood and remorse. And his one true prized possession, an actual autographed photo of the King, which cost him five grand and his marriage, torn and tattered, all over his bed.

The slice of pain that shot through Elvis' scalp pulled him out of his trance. Only then, did he realise James was yanking back on his heavily gelled quiff. Only then, did he find himself lying on top of Dewie, watching his own hands gripping his friends' throat. Only then, was Elvis aware of the demons inside of him, that must have usurped his body.

He heard a gargling noise, a soft whimpering and a rumbling growl and it took several moments to decipher which noise originated from which man. He clambered to his feet and smelled his own lemon fresh Brylcreem, smudged across his face by James' fingers, during the struggle.

Reassuringly citrus, the aptly named flavour. Elvis needed a cigarette.

Dewie stood up. His face was rosy, scratched and terrified. His wig had turned 90 degrees and its quiff protruded, perpendicularly. Elvis looked down at his hands. They felt alien. Borrowed He was holding a clump of gold tassels from Dewie's shoulder.

Elvis wanted to apologise, but all the words he could conjure up felt ludicrous. He allowed James to push him out of the door.

Elvis shuffled through the long corridor around the back of the stage. He heard the cacophony of the crowd. He usually made efforts to mingle with them after the show. Give out the odd autograph. Ostensibly for the fans, but in reality to nourish his withered ego. But not now. He heard Tom Jones' voice crooning that it was not unusual. He heard chatter, laughter

and glasses clinking. They were not true fans of the King, and he hated every single one of them.

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Before the incident, a month ago, before the guilt, and the overwhelming shame, Elvis had actually been having a good day. He had won twenty pounds on a scratch-card. His 'best of' compilation video had surpassed a hundred views, finally. And he had even been enjoying the gig that night. Maybe it was his shades or the low lighting. Or maybe it was just the shadow that his ego had cast. But he had mis-read the facial expressions of the crowd. All he saw was two-hundred or so grins. All was good.

He might have expected it from a stag-do. He was profoundly aware of the debauchery and the lack of dignity they brought. Only literal starvation would make him even consider them. Or worse, that hen-do four years ago, when he had been asked to do unspeakable things, just because the stripper hadn't shown up. But a wedding! And he had said, he had emphasised, *three times* when he had the initial conversation with the bride-to-be over the phone, that he was *not* a novelty act. He played for true fans of the King. He had calculated that three times would be the maximum to make his point, and not come across as weird. And three times she had reassured him.

Elvis wondered if she had intentionally lied to him, as he waited impotently at the side of the stage. He stared into those deceitful smiles, moments after the Best Man had pushed him to the side, grabbed the microphone off him and bullied the Groom to come on stage to sing. The crowd had roared. Much louder than they did for Elvis' own meticulously choreographed entrance. *Pushed* and *grabbed*. Not requested. Not agreed. Not courteous. During that initial phone conversation with the bride-to-be, Elvis had specifically offered to allow either her or the Groom to do a duet with him. But it would need to be organised, practiced. Respectful to the King. Not just ad hoc. Not like this. With the Groom crucifying 'Love Me Tender'. With those two-hundred or so grins, that had now lost their disguises. All treacherous and deceitful.

On the lengthy drizzly car journey home, the words circles around, in his head. An intrusive mantra. Not a novelty. *Not* a novelty. *NOT* a novelty. Three times, he had made it clear to her. And a thousand times before her, to all of those customers, over the years. Did *any* of them listen? Did they even care?

Elvis recalled the car journey and had vague images of later waking up with a razor next to him and two bottles of whisky. There were some memories in between but they felt alien. Borrowed. He could not remember his synapses firing, making the decision to betray him. And only six days away from achieving five years of sobriety. And now he would never forget the awkward telephone call to his sponsor the next morning. The

disappointment she had tried to secrete, but was nonetheless deafening to Elvis.

He had only a vague recollection of screaming at the King. At his smug chiselled, handsome face and those eyes. Nonchalant. All treacherous and dreamy. Only wisps of punching the walls and smashing so many of the photographs. Of yanking open his bedroom cupboard door, to his secret shrine. Not the one in the living room, for visitors. But the hidden one, for his one truly valued possession. The autographed photo. He held only a dream-like array of sequences of him ripping open his shirt, and staring at his tattoo of the King across his chest. How could he have carried it for twelve years and only now just noticed that it was so hideous?

He remembered picking up his blade with a trembling hand and he remembered vowing to get rid of the inked monstrosity. He had intended to use whisky as an anaesthetic. But, it knocked him unconscious. Praise the King.

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The second he stepped outside into the alleyway, Elvis remembered that he had left his cigarettes in the dressing room. He pictured the eighties talk-show host's grinning face and cursed. He looked up and saw him. The Indian Elvis. He was smoking with a couple of friends, in his red jumpsuit. Up close, Elvis immediately recognised the cheap polyester and tacky golden

stars down the leg: Adult Elvis Fancy Dress Costume, by George at Asda. £15.99. *Of course it was.*

The Indian man and his friends turned around and stared at him with incredulous faces. For the briefest of moments, Elvis fantasised that they thought he was the real King, as preposterous as he knew it was.

“Mate, your nose is bleeding.”

“Yeah,” said Elvis. His brain scrambled around. “I just... er, had a nosebleed.”

“And one of your shoes is missing.”

“Yeah, I... well, I lost my... you know.”

As if reading his mind, the Asian Elvis offered him a cigarette. “My name’s Ravi, mate.”

Elvis shook his hand and pushed his lips into something resembling a smile. He puffed ferociously on the cigarette. His bloodstream readily welcomed the nicotine and the relief.

“And your name is...?”

“Sorry, yeah. Its Elvis.”

“Ha, good one!” Ravi said with an uncertain smirk. “You were really good man, *really* good. I mean I didn’t know that second song, but you aced it. Way better than me.”

Elvis wanted to say thank you, but he wanted more to scream. He did neither.

“You probably could do this for real, you know, like professionally,” Ravi said.

“Yes, I’ve been told.”

Ravi blew out thick white jets from his nostrils. “So, I saw you handing out flyers to some Elvis convention. You going?”

“I organise it.” Elvis saw the man exchange furtive glances with his friends. “You interested?” he asked, unsure why.

Ravi guffawed. “A convention? No way man, that sounds totally...” His grin dropped. “I mean, no thanks, sorry. I’m not... that’s probably more for like *proper* Elvis fans. To be honest, I just did this for a dare.” Ravi’s voice sounded distant and muffled, as if he was floating away. “My mate Jason here bet me fifty quid. Plus there’s the hundred from winning. I didn’t actually think...”

Elvis shut his eyes for a small eternity. He felt blood trickle down his chin.

“Hey, are you sure you don’t need a tissue or something?”

With his eyes still closed, Elvis shook his head slowly, and Ravi stopped talking. For the briefest of seconds, he pretended this was a dream and he would wake up in his bed. He opened his eyes, and glanced over at Ravi and his friends like they were mosquitos, buzzing around his head. They gradually drifted away into their own conversation. He found himself humming ‘I can’t help falling in love’, even though he didn’t remember thinking about that particular song.

He looked down and saw drops of blood all over one shoe and one sock. The gold tassels were still in his hand. He marvelled at the thickness of the material. At least it felt authentic. He smiled. *Authentic*. The word resonated somewhere deep. In his bones. NOT a novelty.

He threw his head back and burst into song. In his peripheral vision, the pesky mosquitos drifted away. One of them guffawed. Another one shushed him. “TAKE MY HAND, TAKE MY WHOLE LIFE TOO. FOR I CANT HELP FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOOOOOOOOOU,” he bellowed, somewhere between singing and screaming.

How could he have known that song, those words, intimately for decades, have performed it on stage for perhaps fifteen years and only *now* just realise? Those words were for *him*. Only for him. A phrase to sing to the King to show him how he truly felt. To emphasis his pure dedication. And he knew then. He *knew*, that the King had forgiven him. All was good.