

Never Been Down to Lonely Street

by Gita M. Smith

"You've never had your heart broken? Come on, never? How can you not EVER have been jilted? You've been with like, what, 20 guys?"
I took my eyes off the road for a moment.
"The answer is never, 41, and now, shut up."

I switched on WBHM, turned north on I-65, and lit a Pall Mall 100. Felice made fingertip circles on her ipod screen. I knew she'd be back to drill for more. My niece wasn't the first to try to coax a sad love story from me. I've been worked over by some real pros. Those are the ones who tell you about all their sad break-up shit and then wait, like you're supposed to take your turn next.
Hey, what can I say? I don't have anything to tell. I go out with somebody, and, if it's nice I keep on going. If it's not, I walk.
I mean, am I missing something by not having been broken into smithereens? If you say yes, then I say you're a masochist. I say, skim along on the top of troubled waters as long as you can.

Felice and I were halfway along our drive to Memphis on a pilgrimage of sorts. She had confessed she knew nothing about Elvis Presley, and I immediately decided to take the child in hand. She might be 14, but that was no excuse.

"As her godmother, it is my duty to see to Felice's spiritual upbringing, is it not?" I had asked my brother.

Further, I pressed, "Can you stand by and allow her knowledge of pop culture to begin with Britney Spears? I realize we can't fly her to Liverpool to see the home of the Beatles or Detroit to see Motown headquarters, but Christ on a crutch, Alan, Memphis is in shouting distance."

I wore him down. Alan poneyed up half the gas and motel money, and thus we were cruising, as Paul Simon once put it, with reason to believe that we both would be received at Graceland. Lonely Street. Heartbreak Hotel. Ground zero for the saddest life a pop star ever lived, at least up to the time that Michael Jackson built Neverland. You talk about isolated from reality and being taken advantage of, those two must be sharing a double suite in the afterlife, swapping stories about the drugs their doctors gave them. Neither one ever knew what it meant to be loved -- really loved -- for himself. People fell in love, as true believers always do, with the icon they saw and the chance to be part of a legend. Now that's heartbreak, if you ask me.

Before we embarked on our hegira, I had given niece Felice the assignment of researching Elvis' life and extreme death. She watched old Ed Sullivan shows and listened to greatest hits. To her credit, she got caught up in the weirdness of the trajectory Elvis' career took — complete with Roy Orbison shoe polish hair and unfathomable subjugation to Colonel Tom Parker, his minder-cum-impresario. Felice was fascinated by Priscilla's ingénue role in the household and Elvis' rumored fetish: white cotton panties.

"This is not turning out to be a wholesome project," my brother hissed into the phone one night.

"Yo, Alan, it's ELVIS. It's American gothic, and the child needs to know the underbelly of the myth," I hissed back. "Did you, or did you not, wear makeup to school for *three days* when Freddie Mercury died?"

He knew I had him, and he hung up.

Felice and I pulled into Graceland's parking lot at 2:50 p.m., just in time for the three o'clock tour. Felice readied her Nikon, and I took stock of the women in line around us.

Late middle aged: check. Caucasian: check.

Looking fantastically sentimental: check.

The tour itself was soulless and prepackaged. We walked through

rooms containing nothing that Elvis ever cared about; the carpet, walls and furnishings postdated him. The tour guide, probably recruited from a fraternity at U of Tennessee, delivered his lines with faked expertise.

I did not have the heart to ask him to depart from script and tell us the truth about the white panties.

For my sweet Felice, this was her first brush with a celebrity, and she buzzed around happily. Her favorite item, she told me later, was a white Vegas-style jumpsuit with a star-studded cape, the kitsch level of which was in the red zone.

Graceland is, I have to say, one of the saddest places on Earth. It was Elvis' sarcophagus, his prison, and no doubt originally his idea of marvelous. But nowadays, it is as devoid of Elvis molecules as a room at a Motel 6.

Whatever hopes or musical inspiration moved the kid from Tupelo, Mississippi, to first step into a studio, they are not revealed to us at Graceland. Maybe they never existed, or maybe they got swallowed up in the first crazy tsunami of fame that enveloped him.

I had to wonder: If Elvis had known what bread of loneliness he'd be eating for the rest of his life, would he have opened his mouth to sing, at all?

