

Graceland

ELVIS PRESLEY is lying on his back in bed, with a baby Lisa-Marie curled up asleep on his chest. He is wearing jeans and a plain red jumper, and his hair is flat, not styled. He looks both content and exhausted, like any young father. It is a rare candid shot, hanging up on a wall alongside photographs of Elvis on stage or in the studio or otherwise charmingly posed for the camera. But this photo stands out from the rest. It captures a moment when his guard is down, a very intimate and private moment. And there is something so ordinary about it too. His bedroom is plain and unadorned. It could be anyone's bedroom, really, and it occurs to me just how starkly this bedroom contrasts with all the other rooms I have just walked through: the impressive art deco lounge room with its amazing furniture and mirrored walls, Elvis's recreation room with its squash court and grand piano, and of course the famous 'jungle room' – a second lounge room decked out in 1950s African-kitsch, complete with a real waterfall running down the wall.

I would love to see the bedroom in the photo but I've been informed that the upstairs floor is closed off to the public. Apparently the family wants to keep that part of the house private. I think about that word: *private*. It seems a rather strange concept to associate with a man whose very name has become a kind of archetypal symbol of the twentieth century. It is easy to assume that such an iconic person should be deemed public property, so in that sense there is something nice about the thought that part of his house is kept respectfully off-limits (even though the rest of the house and the grounds have thousands of people constantly traipsing through it!). I stand looking at the photograph for a long time, while crowds of middle-aged tourists shuffle past behind me.

When I told several Americans that I was planning to use part of my precious few days in their country to make a detour across to Memphis to visit Graceland, they became rather surprised. One guy even seemed a little insulted.

"You mean to tell me you've got the whole of the United States to choose from, and yet that's the place you want to go? I don't get it."

However, Graceland is not the reason why I came to the USA. It was, in fact, merely an afterthought. It was a whim. My wife and I were over here to attend a friend's wedding in San Francisco, and after it was over we decided to spend a few extra days checking out a little more of this rather enormous place they call the United States.

And so, with very little deliberation, we divvied up our remaining ten days like this: three days in LA, three in New York, two in Washington DC, and two in Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis was my suggestion. I have had a fascination with the place ever since I was ten years old, when my dad first showed me his vinyl record collection. Back then I used to spend hours listening to album after album of classic rock 'n' roll and blues artists from the 1950s and 60s. I especially loved Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and, of course, the King of rock 'n' roll himself, Elvis Presley. And I remember noticing that one thing these guys used to sing about all the time was Memphis. *Memphis*. In fact, I was surprised to later learn that Memphis is mentioned in the lyrics of more songs than any other

city in the world. I actually prefer to call it 'Memphis, Tennessee' myself, saying both the city and the state together, the way the Americans often do. I like how the two words roll off the tongue, almost insisting that the speaker slip into a southern drawl.

I leave the photographs of Elvis and follow the procession of tourists out into the backyard. My wife is leaning on a white post-and-rail fence watching the horses. She has suddenly become interested in Elvis now that she's learnt he used to love riding (the sign at the ticket booth was right. It said: *If you don't already love Elvis, you will by the end of today*). His favourite horse was a palomino quarter horse named Rising Sun, whom he used to often ride around the property. Sometimes he would ride up to the front gate to sign autographs over the fence.

They still keep horses on the property, and the stables look immaculate and beautiful. In fact, the whole estate looks amazing, the epitome of an old-style American ranch, with its white fences, lush grass and rows of pine trees. I feel as if Graceland is a kind of picturesque oasis nestled amidst the dilapidated ruins that are the rest of Memphis. It is even situated atop a hill, as if the king is towering above the poor peasants below him.

In the taxi on the way here the animated black driver delivered his theatrical spiel.

"When you come to Memphis," he said, "you have a date with the King." It was obviously rehearsed; he'd probably said it a thousand times before. But I wondered, considering Graceland's \$40 entry fee, if this guy had ever actually been there himself.

Leaning on the fence watching the horses, I feel relaxed for the first time since we arrived in this city. Yesterday morning we left a warm and sunny California in an empty airplane and touched down four hours later at the tiny – and freezing! – Memphis airport, which seemed to me more like a stuffy little RSL club than a real airport, with its out-dated 70s furniture and brown bricks. The airport was virtually empty, and the conveyer belt was empty too. Although for some reason it still took forever for our bags to come out.

Sitting in the ancient beat-up taxi on the way to our hotel, it occurred to me why those hip San Franciscans weren't all that impressed with my desire to visit the Deep South. This is the America you don't see; or perhaps even the America you're not supposed to see. Because, even though I must have watched a million American films in my life, I was completely unprepared for the unadulterated shock that was the real-life Memphis, Tennessee.

My wife and I sat silent in the back seat as we drove past one derelict house after another, exchanging looks of ever-increasing horror. Some were burnt out, others had all their windows boarded up, and still other houses were simply in various stages of falling apart. The absence of fences or any other adornments caused each property to just blend into the next, giving the whole place a vast, flat, desolate feel. There was not a garden or flowerbed to be seen anywhere, and I wondered if the threat of tornados meant that everybody had simply given up trying to put any effort into their yards.

The CBD was no different. It was probably comparable in size to, say, Adelaide, in that there were only a handful of skyscrapers and the rest were smallish buildings. But what made my heart sink was seeing how many of the shopfronts were boarded up. There were literally entire main streets filled with abandoned buildings – and this was right in the middle of the city!

The taxi driver pulled up outside our hotel and helped us carry our bags into the lobby. Now, up until that point, every single person I had seen in Memphis had been black: the girl at the airport coffee shop, the baggage handlers, the taxi driver, groups of homeless guys huddled together on street corners, and whatever other stragglers were out braving the cold. But in the hotel lobby I saw my first white Memphian (and, yes, that's what they call themselves). However, at first I thought I was imagining things. He was a thirty-something white man perched up on an antique barbers chair, and he had an old black guy kneeling down on the floor in front of him shining his shoes. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief as I walked past the two of them, trying as best as I could to take in the anachronistic scene without staring too conspicuously.

After checking in to our hotel, we decided to catch a cable car down the street to look for something to eat. As we were sitting in the decrepit rickety old cable car, a large black woman waddled into the carriage dressed in a large fur coat and hat. She shook her head and looked up at us.

“Oh my Lord, that wind'll nearly blow ya'll away,” she cried out, almost sang it really, with the most amazing southern accent I'd ever heard. It was such an incredible sight to witness that I felt as if she must in fact be an actress playing a southern black woman instead of the real thing. She said hello to us – as did all the other people who boarded the carriage – and sat up the front to talk to the driver. As I listened to the two of them chatter away, I glimpsed in their friendly humour a sense of kindness and warmth that must be buried underneath this otherwise barren landscape.

We sat in the cable car for a few blocks until it rode through a section of town that appeared to have a flicker of life in it – there were actually businesses in operation and a handful of people walking about – and we got off to check things out. What we discovered was actually the lobby of a different hotel, which had a restaurant and a few shops attached to it.

I lean against the white fence and smile to myself, imagining that the only businesses still open in this city are hotels – which would make sense considering the number of tourists who are pouring through this place. I didn't see any of these chubby white folks yesterday, so I can only assume they were hiding away in their hotel rooms resting up for their pilgrimage. These tourists are a talkative and friendly lot, rotund women with beaming smiles, and excited husbands with giant SLR cameras hanging from their necks. And the way they all gape, starry-eyed, as they examine every inch of the place makes me suspect they must be interstate sojourners fulfilling some lifelong dream.

I contrast this with the scenes from last night, with the empty restaurant, with the obsequious black waiters, with the homeless men and women hunched over in the freezing night, and how we hurried back in the dark to the safety of our hotel room. Memphis is a sad place – there is no other way to describe it – and I understand now why it became known as the ‘home of the blues’. All those

songs I had listened to during stinking hot Christmas holidays in the front room of my parents' house suddenly come flooding back to me. But they sound different now, much colder, harsher, and lonelier, as I associate them for the first time with the place they originated from.

I walk around to the side of the house and look down the hill. In the distance I can see Elvis's two private jets, the *Lisa-Marie* and the *Hound Dog 2*, which we will get to see as soon as the shuttle bus takes us back across the road. You see, the house itself, whilst the main attraction, is only the beginning; there is so much more to the Graceland experience. The Presley family have purchased the property opposite the house and have set up a whole complex consisting of museums, an art gallery, gift shops, a large building housing all of Elvis's cars and motorbikes, and a 1950s-style diner where you can order Elvis's favourite snack: fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches (some believe these are what killed him!). There is also a large car park, ticket booths, and a little bus depot shuttling customers across the road to the house and back. The road, which is one of the main highways going through Memphis, has been renamed Elvis Presley Boulevard.

I look at the house. The home is not huge by today's standards. There are plenty of McMansions bigger than this back in Melbourne. But there is definitely something special about it. Like the rest of Memphis, Graceland is frozen in time. It is frozen in a time when America was busy proving itself to the world – as the leading superpower, as a land of growing prosperity and exciting change (just down the road from here is the hotel where Martin Luther King Jnr was shot), as the land of the Cadillac and the teenager and Hollywood and rock 'n' roll – and, of course, television. *Television!* I remember that Elvis himself was obsessed with television, and it suddenly occurs to me how appropriate and symbolic this fact is. There are indeed TVs in almost every room of Elvis's home. Amazing vintage sets from the 1950s. Some rooms even contain two or three, as he often liked to watch a few different shows at the same time. And in his basement studio there are four television sets mounted next to each other along the far wall.

I walk over to Elvis's tombstone, where a crowd is gathered. I wait for them to disperse and then I step up close and read the inscription: *Elvis Aaron Presley, b. January 8, 1935, d. August 16, 1977*. Suddenly a thought occurs to me. Elvis was just a regular guy. He was just a regular, good-looking white kid who took black music and sold it to the world. I look down the hill again. I watch the traffic flying past the front gates of Graceland, and I think about this country – this huge, fascinating place they call the USA. I realise that it, too, is just a regular country, filled with a whole bunch of regular people. And it, too, has areas that are closed off to the public, places a visitor like me can never really see, places no TV show or film or rock 'n' roll song could ever begin to describe. Things y'all aint never s'posed ta see. You know, like them private rooms.