

Elvis and Me

How a world-weary musician
and a broken racehorse rescued each other

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1 It's now or never



‘Mistakes ... are the portals of discovery.’

—*Ulysses*, JAMES JOYCE

Desolate. That's the word for a university department the afternoon before Christmas Eve. There were no students cruising the corridors wielding saxophones or armfuls of percussion; the music block's newly washed corridor floor looked too clean, too pastel blue. Without the muddled din of piano scales and the sudden blast from a rock band when a door swings open, it was eerie. Still, like death.

My colleagues were at the pub. I was the only lecturer in the music department. I'd have liked the sun on my skin and a frivolous natter with my usually frazzled colleagues. But I taught several subjects: core musicianship, performance seminar and music education as well as the piano, and these classes involved more than 250 students. Instead of fraternising over a glass I had loose ends to sort and last minute results to process on yet another computerised system. The deadline of three o'clock loomed.

My tiny desk faced the open door. My feet were jammed between essay piles and discarded books. When at last the results coordinator rang to say she had 'everything she needed' and I'd filed the results correctly, my joyful relief quickly morphed into ennui. Rhys, my partner, a Professor of Painting at a Queensland university, wasn't due to pick me up for another couple of hours. Add an hour for his customary lateness and it was more likely to be three. Time enough to rearrange the bookcase, sort my computer's desktop and wash that Radiohead mug smothered in mould. I was in the small office I

shared with Hayley. Her chatty continuo irritated when I had classes to teach. But today, Hayley's tip-tip, tap-tap-tap with hot pink nails on the computer and a rant about the oddities of academe would have been more than welcome. I was in an impulsive mood. The recent purchase of acreage property on the outskirts of Brisbane had revived a longstanding desire to own a horse. I'd pushed the longing to the back of my mind for decades but, with the madness of Christmas upon me, the pattern of my usual workplace routines interrupted and with unaccustomed time on my hands, the idea of horse ownership once again hurled itself into the forefront of my mind.

I dived onto Google but what was I searching for? Last minute Christmas presents, holiday destinations, my bank balance, weather forecasts, the latest crop of just-released films and ... horses for sale. A gleaming black Clydesdale with white socks reared up on the screen just as Fred the grim-lipped janitor walked by.

'Good to see you working and not wasting taxpayers' money,' he said.

I smiled and nodded, too consumed by my searches to care. I continued to propel the keys, now rippling in rewarding choppy waves, until I found what I was looking for. What was I looking for? I can't say I even knew at the time but when that quirky ad framed by rows of alternating upper and lower case kisses flashed before me, the words leapt off the screen.

Elvis. Regretful sale. Special Thoroughbred. Ex-racehorse.
16.2 hands. Quiet. Dependable. Ridden bareback straight
off the track. Ideal for beginner.

Making an inquiry is not a commitment. What harm could there be in ringing up and finding out more? I assured myself as my finger dialled the number. It was a lark, a fantasy, an antidote to boredom, pure research, that's all. Probably no-one would answer.

But long after I should have put the phone back on the receiver – it had rung too many times – someone picked up.

‘Yes, Victor speaking,’ said the gruff voice on a crackling line.

‘Is Elvis still for sale?’

‘Look don’t waste my time if this isn’t a serious inquiry.’

‘Oh but it is,’ I said to my own surprise. ‘Why are you selling this horse?’

‘My wife walked out and moved to the city. Have to downsize. Can’t keep ‘em all. Got too many debts.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ I said.

Ten years had passed since my own divorce. On certain days, and especially at Christmas, it ached like emotional arthritis. But this man’s hurt was raw.

‘Can you come tomorrow?’ he said. It was more of a command than a question.

Panic wheeled in my gut. I needed to work out last minute Christmas plans. I promised to call in the morning and asked if he could email a photo of Elvis before then. As I put down the phone, I realised two things. One, I had no idea if this horse was worth a five-hour round trip across the Queensland border to Green Pigeon, twenty kilometres north of Kyogle, in New South Wales, on Christmas Eve because I hadn’t asked enough questions to find out; and two, for once I wasn’t beating myself up about my oversight. It was odd. I didn’t seem to care.

When Rhys arrived to drive me home I wanted him to scoff. My partner is disarmingly blunt, a tease. The combination of brisk opinion and devilish humour can bring a person down to earth faster than a rock thrown off Brisbane’s Story Bridge. But now I courted his logic and good sense because mine had clearly hopped on the next flight out of Brisbane. Rhys is also unpredictable, a trait I mostly appreciate. And when I told him about Elvis, I waited in a tickling silence, unsure what his response would be.

I was surprised. It wasn't a facetious quip, a critical one liner. His response was serious, unequivocal. Resolute.

'This is important,' he said. 'If you think this horse is the one for you, we must go and check Elvis out.'

