

*Janis* Originally appeared in *Contrary Magazine* Fall/Winter 2014

It was black-dark and pounding rain and no one was around to see her slip, barefoot, in the mud outside the car where she'd just finished the last cigarette in the pack, and not only had she muddied the knees and tattered-to-frays bell bottoms of her low-slung jeans, her hair had flattened against her head and hung down her shoulders in sappy strands and her feet and hands were slick with muck when she swung open the door of the tiny diner where Elvis was sitting alone at a corner table; and you might think she couldn't have cared about the mess she was, but you'd be wrong; in spite of what you think, she was shy and had a hard time shaking her embarrassment even long after he'd beckoned her to his table with a warm, crooked smile, handfuls of paper napkins and the flash of a monogrammed silver flask, pulled from black velvet jeans. Even though it was past midnight and the diner was supposed to have been long closed, the waitress told the cook she'd take it from there so long as they didn't order anything too fancy and then didn't bat an eyelash when they suggested in their quiet, throaty voices, that she go home herself as it'd been a very long time since either of them had slung hash and they felt a peculiar urge and don't worry, they'd clean up and here you go, he said, after a race between them to see who could get to their pockets first, handing her a wadded up hundred dollar bill that had seen better days, and out she went with barely a backward glance, and they laughed at how easy it had been. If only everything was so simple.

But don't get me started about hard times these days, she said and as they watched the waitress's tail lights fade into the wet darkness they agreed it could be worse, just ask

Mary Jo Kopechne's parents, or the kin of that poor kid Robert R. in St. Louis, dead from God-knows what dreadful disease, or all those charred Cambodians, bombed in the top secret "Operation Breakfast" (come on, how dumb do they think we are?). And after a moment spent secretly admiring Elvis's serious profile, Janis shoved her hands in her soggy pockets to keep them from caressing his face and said well you have to admit, even on the very worst night at least they hadn't come face-to-face with Charles Manson and his zombie-followers, but come on, let's not even think about that, but wait: just one more thing, she said, please tell me you think Dick *is* tricky and Elvis raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips and mocked him perfectly and they nearly spit on the window with laughter. That's more like it, they said, and even the worst night gets better when you stop and think about John and Yoko getting hitched and honeymooning in front of the world, and what about all those people camped in the rain on Max's dairy farm in the Catskills for three days of peace, if that doesn't cheer you up nothing will. And they felt happy with the new tone they'd set and then hushed long enough to hear the harsh silence and to see the nothingness out the window and Janis remembered the mud and—Christ, that she'd just told him that if she ever had a little girl she was going to name her Memphis, and by then she noticed that Elvis was lovely as an angel and she was suddenly shy again and both of them realized they were starving half to death.

Spooked by the silence and embarrassed over the rush of affection and looking for something to do with her hands now that they were out of her pockets, Janis inventoried the contents of the refrigerator, calling out: bacon (a little gray around the edges, but who isn't?), eggs (Jesus Christ, how many can they possibly need?), pork sausage (wait, we

work our fucking asses off and someone invents Saran Wrap and that's it—end of story? Why didn't we think of that?), biscuits (tell me ya didn't just see your mama at the sound of that), whipped cream (I'm gonna let Memphis have dessert before dinner, at least sometimes), and it's possible she whispered do you love me while Elvis flipped through the menu on the jukebox knowing better than to push E 5, because even though he thought 'Try (Just a Little Bit Harder)' was one of her best, he knew that hearing yourself sing only makes you cringe and that was why he skipped right over B 2, too, though he did hum a little of 'Suspicious Minds' while C 1 dropped into place and Bob Dylan took over, inviting Lady into his brass bed as Janis splashed orange juice into etched plastic cups that used to be clear but were now opaque and reached for the flask, knowing that Southern Comfort delivered as promised, at least for awhile. Elvis draped a bacon grease-scented coat he'd found on a hook beside the back door over her shoulders and they clung together and danced, closed-eyes, barely moving, speaking the lyrics reverentially until Credence Clearwater Revival took over and broke the spell and they cracked eggs into the skillet between big slugs of spiked juice while rolling on the river.