



Six-Year-Old Elvis

01.03.2019, Episode 12

A Thousand Words

Hi. Welcome to the podcast, “A Thousand Words”, for March 1st, 2019. Today I have a story, as the title says, about a six-year-old Elvis Presley.

When I was about six years old, I used to sing Elvis Presley songs to my grandparents in their living room. They lived an hour away, and we visited them every Sunday.

On those days, my sisters became my managers. They looked for songs for me in the volumes of sheet music [1] that my grandfather had in his music room. He was a musician, an accordion player, and he had polka versions of nearly every Elvis song. I sang two songs every Sunday, and my sisters helped me remember the lyrics [2]. It wasn't hard. I was six. My memory was a sponge [3] then, and it was easy to memorize [4] the words and what order they came in. We were all big Elvis fans. My father and his brother especially. They both had Elvis hair – big and black and combed back, and somehow it magically stayed back. Because they loved Elvis, I grew up loving Elvis. His voice and his songs filled our home.

An early song I learned was All Shook Up. I remember when I sang it, when I ended with the line [5] “I'm all shook up,” the house shook from a small earthquake right then. My grandfather joked [6] that I caused the earthquake with my words. They weren't my words. And I really didn't understand what they meant. For the longest time, I thought the song was about the earth shaking, and feeling shaken up by it.

I didn't know that Elvis was singing about how it felt to fall in love; that it's a private earthquake inside you; that it makes your hands shake and your knees weak – you can hardly stand on your own two feet. You get chills [7], your mind is mixed up [8] – and your heart beats so it scares you to death. I was too young to know those feelings.



Another song was Blue Suede Shoes. I didn't know what suede [9] was. And I didn't get the joke. Here was a guy who would let you do just about anything you wanted to him – you could knock him down [10], step on his face, slander [11] his name all over the place (I didn't know what slander meant). Go ahead, burn his house, steal his car – fine with him. Everything's cool, as long as you lay off [12] his blue suede shoes. Respect the man's fashion. At the time, my fashion was sneakers [13] and shorts and T-shirts with superheroes on them.

Another song, I Can't Help Falling in Love. When I hear the words now, it's clear what they mean – a man who can't control himself, who can't stop feeling love for someone. He thinks it may be wrong, a sin [14] to act on his feelings, but he just can't stop himself. He's an addict [15]. And he's singing directly to his love, not to us about her – he doesn't sing: “I can't help falling in love with HER”, but to her. We're listening to a private confession that really someone else should be hearing, not us. Again, I memorized the words. I sang out the vocabulary. But I had no idea what I was letting out of my mouth. At six years old, ideas of addiction were beyond me [16]. But were they?

I spent a lot of time at my grandparents' house when I was young. The weekends were special, because sometimes my aunts and uncles would come and I'd have a bigger audience to sing to.

Both of my grandparents lived in New York, and their children were born there. My grandfather was an accordion player, and on weekends he went to the city and played in nightclubs. That was back in the 1930s. My father was the last of three children. He was born on the very day World War II ended. He often joked that he stopped the war. When he was a teenager, the whole family drove

west across the country to California and moved into a house in Orange County, when there were still thousands of orange trees there. But there were no nightclubs to play his accordion in. So he became an accordion teacher, and he converted [17] his garage into a music studio. He didn't want to leave New York. Neither did my father. They were both New Yorkers. On my father's first day at school in California, the principal [18] called him into his office and made him take off his finger rings. "We know you boys from New York like to wear rings and fight," he said. "Not in my school."

My parents divorced [19] when I was young, and I stayed at my grandparents' house a lot after that. I spent a good amount of time around my grandfather. Almost every day, after lunch, he disappeared into his studio for a couple of hours and came out smelling like wine. He'd tell us some jokes, and then go outside to water his garden. He started in the back, watered all his fruit trees, came inside for more wine, and then went out to the front of the house. There, he stood for hours and drowned [20] the grass. I always wondered what he was thinking as the grass overflowed with water. Was he daydreaming about his life in New York?

About an hour before going to bed, he would turn the water on himself and drink liters of it. It was a nightly ritual. When I slept there, I remember hearing him getting out of bed during the night to use the toilet. It was like he knew the wine wasn't good for him, that it was probably killing him, and so he tried to clean himself at the end of each day by flushing [21] his body with water. But he just couldn't help drinking the wine all day. I watched addiction, I just didn't know what it meant.

Another song - Teddy Bear. "Put a chain [22] around my neck," he sings, "and lead me anywhere; oh, let me be your teddy bear."

Again, it wasn't the vocabulary I didn't understand – chain, neck, teddy bear. It was the meaning behind the words, what they meant in another context. Sodomasochistic relationships were not on my radar [23] then.

I wonder what my grandparents thought while watching me, this six year-old, singing songs they listened to Elvis sing when they were younger. Such radical lyrics they were at the time. Filled with sex and addiction. Elvis would later go on to become a symbol of addiction and drug overdose. Did they watch me and think – It's ok; he doesn't understand what he's singing. No harm, no foul [24]. When I was older, in my 20s, I was riding a bus in San Francisco and a boy got on. He was by himself. He had headphones on and sat in the back of the bus singing along to a rap song no one but he could hear. His eyes were closed as he rapped to an invisible [25] woman all the ways he wanted to have sex with her. Most of the adults on the bus turned back to look at him, shocked and wondering how much he understood what he was singing.

Are you really using a language when you don't know the meaning behind the words?

Thanks for listening.

If you liked this podcast, or others you've listened to on our website podclub.ch, tell a friend. You can also write us a message. As well, you can download our app if you'd like, and we have a vocabulary trainer to help you practice some of the new words you hear.

I'll be back on March 15th with a story about curves and a woman who tried to warn me about them.

Bye for now.

Glossar: A Thousand Words

[1] **sheet music**: printed music with notes and lyrics

[2] **lyrics**: the words of a song

[3] **a sponge**: used in the kitchen or bath to absorb water

[4] **to memorize** : to remember without having to look at the words ; to learn by heart

[5] **the line**: a phrase or sentence of dialogue or music

[6] **to joke**: to say something funny

[7] **to get chills**: to feel cold suddenly

[8] **to get mixed up**: to become confused

[9] **suede**: leather that has been rubbed to make it soft and not shiny

[10] **to knock someone down**: to cause someone to fall onto the floor

[11] **to slander:** to say things about a person which are not true

[12] **to lay off something:** to keep off or away from something

[13] **sneakers:** shoes you wear to do exercise in

[14] **a sin:** something morally wrong; to do something against nature

[15] **an addict:** a person who cannot stop doing something that is not good for themselves

[16] **to be beyond someone:** to be not able to understand; outside of a person's experience

[17] **to convert:** to transform; to change something so it can be used for something different

[18] **the principal:** the headmaster of a school

[19] **to divorce:** when married people stop being legally married

[20] **to drown something:** to overwater

[21] **to flush (out):** to clean something by sending water through it

[22] **a chain:** connected rings used as a necklace around the neck

[23] **not on my radar:** not aware of something

[24] **no harm, no foul:** if what happens does not cause a problem, then there is no problem

[25] **to be invisible:** unable to be seen; hidden from one's view