

No Problems

by Matthew Belmonte

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AUTHOR'S COMMENTARY

No Problems is a play about two Americans who are running away – one from the ghost of his father, the other from the dreary twilight of a life. Each of them has been brought up on a democratic ideology, the peculiarly American faith that a person can be anyone or do anything they want, as long as they work hard enough for it. Having such power over one's own destiny, of course, brings an uncomfortable realisation that one must be responsible for one's own limits and shortcomings. We all resent being controlled, yet we all crave it. A fear of death, of being smothered and negated, drives us to separate ourselves from parents (or institutions, or governments). And a fear of life, of being responsible for ourselves in an indifferent world, brings us back to seek out their protection.

The central character in this play is a young man named Percy. If he's a hero, he doesn't know it yet. His great great grandfather was an unsuccessful revolutionary in 1848. One hundred twenty years later, his father was lost in another war, on the other side of the world, also waged in the name of democracy. Raised by an overprotective mother and unable to get away from the shadow of his dead father, Percy sees his life as a series of decisions over which he has no control. To escape from this he's left his mother's house in Madison, Wisconsin and set off across Europe with some muddled idea of discovering his roots and getting a better idea of who he is. Though he doesn't realise it, in setting forth on this quest for control of his own destiny he's taken up the mantle of his ancestors.

Like most heroes, Percy receives encouragement from the forces of good and is tempted by the forces of evil. In this case it's Elvis, the King of Rock and Roll and the leader of a new American revolution, who turns up to tell him that the call to adventure is one that he can't refuse. Conversely, Richard Nixon, the man who sent Percy's father to die in a Vietnamese jungle, cannot be anything but evil – or can he? Dualities like that of good and evil are the intellectual equivalents of our parents. They allow us to make some sense of the chaotic world in which we find ourselves. Like our parents, they protect us. But, like our parents, they limit us. Percy's ancestors have given themselves to various struggles in the name of liberty, but if absolute liberty is what he's after then he'll have to travel beyond such dualities.

The play opens as Percy is sitting on a train on his way to Paris, his nose buried in a biography of Marcel Proust...

Cast:

LANCE, an old man.
PERCY, a young man.
ELVIS PRESLEY.
RICHARD NIXON.
A FRENCHMAN.
Two WOMEN.
Several MAGYARS.

ACT I. Proust and Elvis on the mystery train to Paris.

SCENE I.

[PERCY is alone in a train compartment, reading a book on Proust. LANCE enters.]

LANCE: Ce siège est libre?

PERCY: Oui.

LANCE: Vous... faites la connaissance de... des œuvres de Proust?

PERCY: J'essaie.

LANCE: Uh... mon français... n'est pas bon.

PERCY: Neither is mine.

LANCE: American?

PERCY: Don't accuse me.

LANCE: Not accusing, no, I wouldn't use that word, accusing.

PERCY: What word, then?

LANCE: Suggesting? Maybe I was suggesting.

PERCY: Pointing the finger.

LANCE: Hypothesising.

PERCY: Butting in.

LANCE: If you like. Language is a tricky thing. You seemed out of place somehow, so I filled in the details. Where are you headed?

PERCY: This train is headed for Paris, and I, being on this train, am also headed for Paris.

LANCE: I mean do you know anybody there?

PERCY: Not a soul.

LANCE: Better off that way. No entangling alliances.

PERCY: Just so.

LANCE: Staying long?

PERCY: Till it starts to get old.

LANCE: It gets old so fast.

PERCY: It does.

LANCE: Planning on seeing anything in particular?

PERCY: You seem to have gained the advantage in this conversation.

LANCE: How's that?

PERCY: You interrogate, and I respond. I still know nothing about you.

LANCE: What do you want to know?

PERCY: Whatever's important. Why are you here?

LANCE: Why is any of us here?

PERCY: Don't play games. I mean why are *you* here, on this train.

LANCE: I retired. This is what I'm supposed to do now, right? Travel, see the world, just by myself.

PERCY: No entangling alliances.

LANCE: Just so. Got myself one of those go-anywhere tickets. Anywhere in Europe, for a whole month. That the kind you have? Sorry, I forgot; you're the one asking the questions now.

PERCY: That's okay. Yeah, that's the kind I have.

LANCE: You're doing right to travel when you're young, boy, I wish I'd been that smart.

PERCY: I guess wanderlust runs in my family. My ancestors came from Hungary. Budapest.

LANCE: You're going back there? A pilgrimage to the old country?

PERCY: You could call it that. I picked up this brochure from the state tourist bureau before I left.

LANCE: *[reads]* 'Hungary: NO PROBLEMS'. Living history, fascinating architecture, alluring natural beauty, and inexpensive accommodation. Everything you need. There's nothing as alluring as what you read about in a book.

PERCY: No, books I've had too much of. That's why I came out here. To really experience life, you know, instead of imagining it through the library window.

LANCE: So you're one of these college boys. You seemed like a college boy.

PERCY: Not any more. I'm done. Finished. I mean, graduated.

LANCE: So you drag yourself out here into the middle of the European wilderness. Heard stories about broadening horizons, it's what you're supposed to do, it's in the script.

PERCY: Well isn't it? I mean shouldn't I? I mean, wouldn't you?

LANCE: I don't know. Nothing else to do, nothing satisfies, all these places get to be the same. Yes, probably I would. I did. I am. I'm Lance.

PERCY: My name is Percy.

LANCE: That your instrument?

PERCY: Yeah.

LANCE: A banjo?

PERCY: Four-string.

LANCE: You play?

PERCY: I try, when I have the time. Are you a musician?

LANCE: No, I don't know the first thing. My mother always said I should take up an instrument when I was young. But then, there were a lot of things she always said.

PERCY: You could always start now.

LANCE: If only I had the time.

PERCY: I thought you said you were retired.

LANCE: Some things you have to do when you're young, otherwise you never get a second chance. Learning a skill is one of them.

PERCY: You shouldn't concede so easily.

LANCE: What's there to concede? I've read up on this stuff. You know scientists have found that the brain loses its ability to adapt, to pick up new skills? By the time you hit twenty it's just about all over.

PERCY: And how old do you think I am?

LANCE: Early twenties, I'd say. I know. Terrible, isn't it, the prospect of growing old alone? And the knowledge that you can't change any of it. It's all downhill from here, boy. Downhill like a runaway train.

PERCY: I only just learned to play it, you know.

LANCE: Play?

PERCY: The banjo. I only just learned.

LANCE: Then you'll never play it well.

PERCY: Thanks.

LANCE: Factual, boy, I'm being factual! You can't say anything against the scientific facts, can you?

PERCY: I suppose not. Not if it's a scientific fact.

LANCE: Exactly. But play away, boy; you gotta have something to be proud of.

[PERCY begins playing a common practice tune on the banjo, haltingly and repetitively. LANCE tolerates it for a while, reading a newspaper, then begins to let his irritation show.]

LANCE: Percy! Percy, tell me more about yourself. I like to know who I'm travelling with.

PERCY: Well, I'm from Madison.

LANCE: Wisconsin?

PERCY: Wisconsin.

LANCE: Percy's a peculiar name for a middle-American kid.

PERCY: It was my mother picked it. Out of a book.

LANCE: Unusual, the Hungarian thing. You don't hear about a lot of eastern European blood in middle America.

PERCY: You don't?

LANCE: Scandinavians, Germans, they're the ones you hear about. I told you, you see, that you seemed out of place.

PERCY: My great great grandfather showed up in Milwaukee on the Erie Canal. He'd got off the ship in New York and couldn't stop moving.

LANCE: Motion in your blood. You're a wanderer.

PERCY: I try to make progress.

LANCE: You were born?

PERCY: 1971. May.

LANCE: Parents' occupations?

PERCY: Factory work. My mother was a sewing machine operator, my father a machinist.

LANCE: She drew the first shift, he got the second. Hardly a waking moment together, *et cetera*. A dreary life, could have been anyone's. Then, something happened.

PERCY: He was drafted. As my mother tells the story, it was the end of summer, 1970, and he was home on leave before shipping out to Vietnam.

LANCE: Combat?

PERCY: Infantry.

LANCE: Ordinary man, ordinary life, utterly unremarkable until something in his blood calls him to greatness.

PERCY: On their last night together, a building was blown up by the anti-war radicals on the University of Wisconsin campus. She swears that the shock wave hit them just at the moment when I was conceived.

LANCE: Hey that's good. This is interesting. You're a interesting character, Percy. [*whips out a pen and notepad*] You don't mind if I take a few notes, do you?

PERCY: Notes?

LANCE: I always keep a journal. I like to have a record of things; otherwise what's the use of travelling?

PERCY: The use? You pick up experiences, new ways of looking at the world. That's what makes it an adventure: when you return from it you're a different person.

LANCE: I like that. Youthful idealism. [*scribbles on notepad*] But soon you'll be learning, boy, that rocketing across Europe in a railway compartment can't change who you are.

PERCY: What are you writing?

LANCE: Notes, I told you. I want to make this trip useful. Might write a book someday. Maybe I'll make a character of you. Immortalise you. How'd you like that? Don't answer now; think about it some. We'll have a lot of time together.

PERCY: It's just an ordinary life, Lance, there are millions of them.

LANCE: That's why it's so important. Yes, yes an ordinary life from middle America. A classic. That's the kind of thing that needs preservation. You see everybody worries about all the rarities of life to the point where they ignore what's right under their noses. We stopped with your father.

PERCY: My father. He was a machinist, that's all I know. Three months after he showed up in Vietnam he was listed as missing in action, never heard from again. Fill in the blanks yourself; you seem good at that. The veterans' organisation gave me a scholarship, that's how I got through school.

LANCE: Cute, isn't it, the way Determinism works? A random bullet hits your father, you end up a college boy, we end up together on this train. Two souls hanging on Fortune's wheel.

PERCY: I can't take that phrase seriously. Every time I hear it images of Chuck Woolery and Vanna White invade my brain.

LANCE: Memory's a tricky thing.

PERCY: It is.

LANCE: An unpredictable thing.

PERCY: Often an annoyance.

LANCE: Watched a lot of television as a boy? Not much else to do there in the Midwest?

PERCY: My mother was a faithful viewer; I couldn't avoid it.

LANCE: You resented that habit of hers.

PERCY: I didn't say that. No one can fault my mother's taste if there were things she'd never been exposed to. But popularity doesn't imply quality. In fact it's usually the opposite.

LANCE: That's not very democratic of you. You'd better watch that attitude, boy. You'll end up squandering your attention on the rarities.

PERCY: If literature were as quotidian as life it'd be as dismal.

LANCE: I guess you gotta have something to be proud of.

PERCY: What's that supposed to mean?

LANCE: We stopped with your father.

PERCY: MIA in Vietnam. Nothing else to say.

LANCE: Your mother.

PERCY: She sewed. Watched too much TV, perhaps. Nothing else.

LANCE: What'd she sew?

PERCY: Work clothes. Uniforms. Look, I'd prefer not to talk about my family.

LANCE: Your occupation?

PERCY: Occupation. Nothing. Traveller.

LANCE: But what is it that you want to do?

PERCY: Well I'd like to be an author.

LANCE: An author! He wants to write! Traumatic childhood and he wants to write about it. Absent father, domineering mother, classic stuff.

PERCY: Look I said I'd prefer it if we didn't talk about my family; can't you understand that? And why are you so anxious to attach an occupation to me?

LANCE: Alienated young man from middle America drinking black coffee in all-night diners, thrown by accident into the educated class, deserts his country and his culture, reads Proust, heads for Paris to discuss literature in the cafés. Classic stuff. Do you by chance own a motorcycle?

PERCY: I'd appreciate it if you'd answer my question. Why is it so very important for you to hang all these labels on me?

LANCE: It's necessary for you to have a history. I can't predict where we'll go until I know where you've come from.

PERCY: That's important to you. Knowing what's going to happen.

LANCE: Knowing what's going to happen is important to everyone, boy. Whether or not you admit it. If we couldn't see five minutes ahead of ourselves we'd be no better off than animals.

PERCY: Fine. You give me your history.

LANCE: Me? I'm nobody special. I'm an old man, Percy, with not much left ahead of him. You're the one we should be concerned with.

PERCY: Stop avoiding the issue. I spilled my guts, now it's your turn.

LANCE: At that university of yours, did they ever teach you about Laplace?

PERCY: I think I remember the name from a math book.

LANCE: Tragedy. Nobody can teach anybody anything anymore. It's a miracle these days that anyone learns to count.

PERCY: Laplace. What about him?

LANCE: He was obsessed with determinism. He thought that if a person could know the position and motion of everything in the world, then everything happening in the future could be predicted.

PERCY: What does this have to do with your history? He was talking about objects, not people.

LANCE: Objects, people, what's the difference? A city sidewalk, a crowded subway car, ships that pass in the night and all that. They did teach you physics at that university, didn't they, boy?

PERCY: Yeah, I did my science requirement.

LANCE: Laplace and his buddies invented a name for a person who's the sum of forces. L'homme moyen. The average man. Nothing more than the total of all the influences on him.

PERCY: My mother always just used to call a person like that a schlemiel.

LANCE: If you like. Language is a tricky thing. Anyway I'm nothing out of the ordinary, not much for you to get to know.

PERCY: I thought you said it's the ordinary things that count most.

LANCE: I was talking about the interesting ordinary things.

[PERCY begins to strum his banjo again; LANCE stares out the window. Just as PERCY is beginning to get into it, LANCE speaks up again:]

LANCE: I'm from New York.

PERCY: Never been there.

LANCE: Where your great great grandfather landed.

PERCY: What did you do in New York?

LANCE: Lived. Worked.

PERCY: You worked in an office?

LANCE: In an office.

PERCY: What sort?

LANCE: An office like any other. Four walls, no windows. Old men behind desks. A break room with a coffee pot and the stench of nicotine. The particulars aren't important. Every morning I'd glare up at that grey building and swear to myself, 'I'm going to remember who I am. As long as I remember who I am it doesn't matter what they make me do.'

PERCY: So you were glad to get out.

LANCE: You know, I do miss the place. I hated it but it gave me a routine. It's important to have a routine, you understand. Something to make you feel comfortable, like a pair of old shoes. You know where you're going.

PERCY: Like this train. We don't have to decide where we're going, or anything we're doing. We just let the rails carry us along.

LANCE: There was this pneumatic tube on my desk. Sometimes a canister would pop out of it. When that happened, I had to open it, stamp the contents 'RECEIVED', and send it along to the relevant bureau.

PERCY: What was in the tubes?

LANCE: Lists of numbers. I don't know what they did with them. Got a citation for efficiency, though.

PERCY: But what's the point of doing a good job if you don't even know what you're producing?

LANCE: Well you gotta have something to be proud of; otherwise what'd be the point. You don't really understand people, do you? I mean, the mechanics, the way things work. At that university of yours, did you ever have a girl?

PERCY: Uh, no.

LANCE: Then you wouldn't understand. I had a routine. I had instructions. I wish... No, I don't.

PERCY: You wish.

LANCE: That I had some instructions.

PERCY: You've got your freedom now.

LANCE: What good is freedom without instructions?

PERCY: You can do anything.

LANCE: I can do nothing. Nobody can do anything. There's a general paralysis and nobody's getting anywhere. It's a miracle these days if you paint your fucking garage! ... Have I offended you?

PERCY: I understand.

LANCE: No, you can't. You only think you do.

PERCY: It's difficult, isn't it?

LANCE: I thought I might have offended you. Just let me know if I do. I don't want any bad feelings. It's nice in here, just us.

PERCY: Like a pair of old shoes.

LANCE: I want to hold onto this.

PERCY: Memory is a tricky thing.

[A FRENCHMAN enters.]

FRENCHMAN: Ce siège est libre?

LANCE and PERCY: Oui.

LANCE: If you really want it.

PERCY: Si... Si vous vraiment la desirez. Vous avez compris?

FRENCHMAN: Je ne suis pas sûr. Est-ce que personne d'autre va s'asseoir ici?

PERCY: Not exactly. Pas exactement, you understand.

LANCE: We were here first.

PERCY: Nous sommes ici.

FRENCHMAN: D'accord, vous êtes ici. Je suis ici aussi. Nous sommes ici ensemble. Je voudrais m'asseoir ici.

PERCY: I mean nous sommes ici pendant que tu... pendant que vous sommes ici, I mean que vous êtes ici, no not pendant que, avant que, that is...

LANCE: You're shattering our privacy!

PERCY: ... notre priveté, you understand. Vous brisez.

LANCE: Just when I thought I was really going to have a chance to know the boy, just when I thought we were on the point of interacting, here in this pod, this cocoon, you come along.

PERCY: Au moment que nous étions en train de...

LANCE: Oh, nobody gives you a chance anymore, everything's too fast, we're submerged in a world of fast trains and telephones, it's a miracle these days if you say hello to someone on the sidewalk, the subway car, ships that pass in the night...

PERCY: ... hang on, will you, I'm still on the last bit. Au moment que nous étions en train de... d'entracter, I'm not sure if that's a word, vous êtes venu, et...

FRENCHMAN: Désolé , messieurs. Je vous laisserai seuls. *[exits]*

LANCE: Attaboy. We got rid of him.

PERCY: Were we trying to get rid of him?

LANCE: What else was there to do?

PERCY: Uh, maybe talk to him? Interact.

LANCE: There's no such thing as interaction, boy. Everybody's got a script to follow. That's the price we pay for being able to make sense of the world. It's a miracle these days—

PERCY:—that we can make any sense of anything at all, yes, I know. It seemed like we were interacting with him.

LANCE: Now I once read—

PERCY: No more history lessons, please. I told you I've had enough of books; that's why I'm here.

LANCE: You'll appreciate this one, though.

PERCY: I—

LANCE: Listen when I talk to you, boy. I once read about a man in Baltimore who suffers from something called apragmatism. They didn't teach you about that at that fancy university, did they, boy?

PERCY: Is it anything like idealism?

LANCE: Like idealism. That's good. I like that. Classic stuff. Born in middle America, leaves his country, wants to be a writer, says it's like idealism. I like that.

PERCY: So this man in Baltimore.

LANCE: The man's brain is wired wrong. He has a terrible time stringing words together. Everything else is fine, better than average, in fact, but he just can't put the words into sentences.

PERCY: So he can't really talk to anybody.

LANCE: That's the thing. He talks just as well as you or I. What he does is he makes up sentences in advance and memorises them, and when he gets into a situation where he can't avoid interacting with someone he picks out the appropriate ones.

PERCY: Like some kind of robot.

LANCE: But you see he's no different from any of us.

PERCY: I guess in a sense we all live in desperate fear of forgetting our lines.

LANCE: Forgetting our lines, I like that. Classic stuff.

PERCY: Are you some kind of armchair scientist?

LANCE: Why do you ask?

PERCY: You seem to know a lot. The brain and so forth.

LANCE: I like to study anatomy. It's impossible to know anyone unless you know their anatomy.

PERCY: It's a miracle these days if anyone knows anyone.

LANCE: Just so.

PERCY: I've found that the harder you try to understand something or someone, the closer you come to the conclusion that there isn't anything there to understand.

LANCE: Now you're getting the picture.

PERCY: Yeah, I guess. But I'm also getting hungry. Think I'll take a walk to the restaurant car.

LANCE: I'll fetch us something. What would you like?

PERCY: I'll fend for myself, thanks.

LANCE: No, no, I'm the old man; I should take care of you.

PERCY: But we've only just met.

LANCE: We've only just met, and I like you, and I'd like to see to your lunch. You can't live on a student's budget; you'll be skin and bones by the time you reach Budapest.

PERCY: I don't want to argue.

LANCE: Neither do I. Please. Do the old man a favour.

PERCY: Maybe some fish would be nice.

LANCE: Fish. Got it. I'll be right back.

PERCY: *[reads from Proust book:]*

Soon afterwards he was again reduced to tears in a quarrel with his parents... .
[H]e wanted to wear pale-yellow gloves for a late-December outing..., but his mother had bought him grey ones.

[flips pages]

Afterwards, he was ill, as he'd expected to be. On Wednesday he thought he'd still need another week in bed, and on Sunday the fourteenth he still wasn't getting up.

[flips pages]

Experiences are less real when you have them than when you either remember them or imagine them.

[LANCE enters with two grease-spotted packages; PERCY, flipping pages, fails to notice.]

'But at the very instant that the mingled taste of morsels touched my palate, I trembled, attentive to the extraordinary happenings within me.'

LANCE: It's fish and chips and he makes it sound like communion. That's what I'm talking about. The value in ordinary things. Right out of middle America, goes to Europe, makes communion of fish and chips. A fresh way of looking at the world.

PERCY: I didn't hear you come in.

LANCE: Here, you'll want some vinegar.

[They eat. LANCE devours his food, without regard for appearances. He looks and sounds vulgar.]

PERCY: Napkin?

LANCE: Thanks. Didn't realise how hungry I was. Is there extra salt? Thanks.

PERCY: Must you eat like that?

LANCE: What's the problem?

PERCY: That sound you make with your lips, it's rather vulgar.

LANCE: Sorry. If I offend—

PERCY: You can count on me to let you know.

LANCE: Eating is a filthy habit, isn't it? So fleshy and animalistic. It's a miracle we don't all starve.

PERCY: Some things are unavoidable. You have to make concessions.

LANCE: Just now you were telling me that I shouldn't concede so easily.

PERCY: That was different. Some things we don't have much of a choice.

LANCE: We never have much of a choice.

PERCY: Unpredictability just bothers you, doesn't it?

LANCE: There has to be some order in the world, Percy. And usually we have very little say as to what that order is.

[They finish eating.]

LANCE: I'm always so tired after I eat. When you get to be as old as I am, time catches up with you. You know there's a place in the middle of the brain that controls sleep?

PERCY: I'll take your word for it. *[turns out the light]*

SCENE II.

[LANCE and PERCY, in the darkened compartment.]

PERCY: Cosy in here, isn't it?

LANCE: It's nice.

PERCY: Something about the rhythm of those wheels. It tends to mask everything else.

LANCE: Like a lullaby.

PERCY: Or like Proust's bedroom. He lined the walls with cork to keep out the universe.

LANCE: You never did tell me much about your family. You don't have to. I know how it is.

PERCY: No, it's all right. My first memory is of my mother playing a record as I fell asleep. In addition to watching Chuck Woolery on Wheel of Fortune every night, she was a big Elvis fan. I can still hear the song on that scratchy old record player. *[sings]*

Are you lonesome tonight?

Do you miss me tonight?

Are you sorry we drifted apart?

[ELVIS comes in on the second triplet. He moves slowly into the light while singing.]

ELVIS and PERCY: Does your memory stray
To a bright summer day
When I kissed you and called you sweetheart?
Do the chairs in your parlour
Seem empty and bare?
Do you gaze at your doorstep
And picture me there?
Is your heart filled with pain?
Shall I come back again?
Tell me dear, are you lonesome tonight?

ELVIS: Bein' on the road like this brings back a lotta memories.

PERCY: Memory's a tricky thing.

ELVIS: When I was a kid back in Tupelo I used to play ball with the Negro kids on a field by the highway. And every truck that rolled down that road I'd look up from that ball game and think to myself, man, someday I'm gonna be on that road, I'm gettin' outta here!

PERCY: I must've been more tired than I knew. One second I'm talking to the old man and the next I'm in a dream. Either that or there's a convention of Elvis impersonators somewhere in Paris.

ELVIS: No bullshit, man, I'm Elvis Presley. You recognise me. Same face like you got on that stamp now.

PERCY: I'm not one to confuse dreams and reality.

ELVIS: Then how'd you get here? Some of the most important things happen in dreams, man. In the gospel of Matthew the Lord came to Joseph in a dream and warned him about Herod. People gotta pay more attention to their dreams, 'cause that's where we get all the good stories, and all the great heroes.

PERCY: Okay, okay, lots of people have had odd visions when half-asleep on a train. It happened to Carl Jung once. Perfectly natural. Stranger things have occurred.

ELVIS: I know the Lord put me on earth to send some kinda message, and maybe now that all my songs are over he wants me to go on talkin' in dreams.

PERCY: So what is it that you have to say to me? Give me the spiel, whatever it is.

ELVIS: Percy, sometimes a guy needs a little push in the right direction. He knows what his destiny's gonna be, but he needs a voice to tell him he's right. So I'm just here to tell you don't give up, you got the right idea.

PERCY: I got the right idea?

ELVIS: You got it.

PERCY: Then maybe you could clue me in as to what it is.

ELVIS: Keep movin', Percy, you just gotta keep movin', and it'll all shake out. Like when I went into the studio, I never planned anything out in advance, just went in there and kept movin' with the tape rollin'.

PERCY: Yeah, but at least you had a goal. I mean, how can I keep moving when I don't even know what's happening?

ELVIS: Hell, I never thought that far ahead. I knew somethin' good was gonna happen to me someday; I just didn't know what. Percy, guys like us never have to worry about gettin' someplace.

PERCY: Like us?

ELVIS: You got it in your blood, man. You ever thought about who your great great grandfather was?

PERCY: I know he was born in Hungary. Mom never said much about that side of the family. I guess she never really had time to learn.

ELVIS: Back in 1848 there was a family called the Hapsburgs who ruled Hungary from Austria.

PERCY: That much is in the history books. 1848 was the year of revolutions in Europe.

ELVIS: Your great great granddaddy fought on the rebel side.

PERCY: They lost.

ELVIS: That's why he had to split, and that's how come you ended up in Madison instead of Budapest.

PERCY: It does kinda figure that I come from a line of losers, doesn't it?

ELVIS: That ain't the point, man. Your great great granddaddy was a revolutionary. Hell, I betcha he was the Hungarian version of George Washington. He was king of the bad-asses.

PERCY: George Washington was a nobody who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Like most idols. This is going nowhere, and now I really am tired. Are we done?

ELVIS: Ever seen that movie *Patton*?

PERCY: I don't watch a lot of films.

ELVIS: George C Scott. Man, he didn't take no shit from nobody. He was a bad-ass. Just rolled across Europe with the Third Army. Just like we're doin' now. Hell, if we were back at Graceland right now I'd rent that flick and we'd watch it.

PERCY: Elvis, I'm sure it was a great film, but this is a railway car in 1994, not a Sherman tank in 1945. Or a Hungarian battlefield in 1848 or a southeast Asian jungle in 1970, for that matter.

ELVIS: Tank, train, horse, it don't matter. What's important is you. Like in those old westerns, John Wayne, man, he'd just ride off across the range any which way and you knew, adventure was gonna meet up with him. He couldn't avoid it even if he wanted to.

PERCY: Are you sure those angels or whatever up there sent you to the right train?

ELVIS: No doubt in my mind. We know what we're doin'.

PERCY: I'd like to think that somebody does. But I really didn't come looking for any of this.

ELVIS: Then explain to me what got you on this train four thousand miles away from your momma in Madison.

PERCY: I needed to get away for a while. But I was never your adventuring type.

ELVIS: You are now. That's America, man, you become whatever you want.

PERCY: I was just looking for something to do. A comfortable sense of purpose.

ELVIS: When I first walked into Sun Records and cut that four-dollar disc I was a white-trash truck driver. See, some people it's just in their blood. You learn the signs. Hell man, when I was conceived, my daddy knew the exact minute, 'cause he passed out right then. That's when the Lord came into my momma.

PERCY: The divine conception. Classic stuff.

ELVIS: When I was born my daddy walked outside and saw this heavenly blue light in a ring around the sky. And even though he was away from my momma and me when I was little, he was with us in spirit.

PERCY: He was drafted?

ELVIS: Naw, he went to jail for forgin' a cheque.

PERCY: Same difference, I guess. Listen. Elvis. All this is okay for you, you're the King of Rock'n'Roll and all that, but I don't think anything like that's in the cards for me.

ELVIS: Man, you think I ever set out to be a legend? I'm tellin' you, Percy, you can't avoid it. I woke up one morning in Memphis, 'That's All Right Mama' was on the charts, and I was the King of Rock'n'Roll. Just like that. Shit, I never even learned to play a guitar right.

PERCY: [*glances at banjo*] Well, okay, assuming for the moment that this is unavoidable—which I haven't yet conceded, by the way—what do I do now?

ELVIS: You'll know what to do. *[light begins fading on ELVIS]*

PERCY: Hey! Where are you going?

ELVIS: I'll be around when you need a hand.

PERCY: Hey man, don't pull this Jiminy Cricket bullshit! You can't just show up and lay this on me, and then split! Elvis! I need some instructions!

ELVIS: Pay some mind to the old man, but don't trust him. That was the mistake I made with my manager. *[vanishes]*

PERCY: *[turns on light]* Lance, did you see all that? Lance?

[Blackout.]

ACT II. From Paris to Zürich with Tricky Dick and the Democratic Ideology.

SCENE I.

[A train compartment much like the first one. PERCY gazes out the window, haltingly strumming 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?' on his banjo, until LANCE speaks. LANCE gazes at PERCY.]

LANCE: Paris, au revoir!

PERCY: And good riddance.

LANCE: Glad to be under way again?

PERCY: I think Zürich'll be more interesting.

LANCE: Why?

PERCY: Why. I don't know. Because I haven't been there yet.

LANCE: I thought you'd never been in Paris, either.

PERCY: Well, no, but as soon as I got there I was, you know, just there.

LANCE: It was raining, that was the problem.

PERCY: It was impersonal like all cities. And I felt that I should do something, that there was something that I had to do, I'd come all this way.

LANCE: It's important to set goals.

PERCY: We tried to find Beckett's flat—remember?—and ended up wandering the streets, being taunted by prisoners in Santé.

LANCE: Nothing seems as interesting as when you're on your way to it.

PERCY: That's not it, not entirely.

LANCE: What, then?

PERCY: I didn't find what I was looking for there. I think I really am going someplace, you know? Like I'm on some kind of journey—more than just the physical journey down these railroad tracks.

LANCE: I guess you gotta have something to be proud of.

PERCY: Well what would you know about it, anyway? You who spent all those years sorting papers.

LANCE: It's not my fault, is it? I tried to take you places. But you wouldn't co-operate. The way you stormed out of Notre Dame.

PERCY: I don't like churches.

LANCE: What's wrong with them?

PERCY: Nothing's wrong with them. Churches have just always made me uncomfortable, that's all. Maybe it's the childhood memory of interminable sermons and pews that were too big for me and kneelers that hurt my shins.

LANCE: Your mother was religious?

PERCY: Let's not start with my mother again, please?

LANCE: If you ever want to know where you're going you've got to know where you've come from. She was religious?

PERCY: She kept on insisting that my father was alive in a prison somewhere. She had this idea that if we prayed hard enough we could bring him back. It didn't work.

LANCE: I took some photographs. Notre Dame and the rest of it. Would you like to see them?

PERCY: Pictures are lies. Just like words.

LANCE: Am I to take that as a 'no'?

PERCY: Why'd you bother with a camera, anyway?

LANCE: Memory. I want to remember the place, you see? [*shows PERCY the photographs*] Eiffel Tower, Champs-Elysees, Louvre, Ile de la Cité.

PERCY: Names and images. You get as much out of a travel guide.

LANCE: It's different when you've been the one snapping the pictures.

PERCY: I don't think so.

LANCE: Look at that composition. Not everyone can do that. It takes a special kind of man, you see.

PERCY: I guess you gotta have something to be proud of.

LANCE: You know the part of the brain that handles memory is the part that's most vulnerable to age? Like a fragile mirror. When you get to be as old as I am you start needing pictures to remind yourself of where you've been, who you are.

PERCY: Your two hobbies are photography and anatomy, and I don't think you know a lot about either one.

LANCE: At least a photograph is more concrete, doesn't pass away. A brain, a hunk of flesh, is such a changeable thing, boy, it's a miracle we remember our own names from day to day.

PERCY: I remember dust motes in the afternoon sun, that blood-red shag carpet, my mother in the kitchen banging pots and pans, like she did when she was trying not to think. The TV was blaring The Six Million Dollar Man, and I imagined I were made like Steve Austin, out of superhuman parts, that I could never die, that I could keep her from being sad.

LANCE: You know if you cut out the right part of a person's brain they become totally unable to form new memories? I mean if I did that to you, if I pulled out a knife and axed that little piece of your brain, you'd be living in 1994 for the rest of your life. It's happened to people, you know. The Government used to do it to people in the fifties.

PERCY: I wonder what it'd be like to live all one's life in the fifties?

LANCE: Still waiting for the war to end in Korea; it seems like it'll drag on forever. Ho Chi Minh is beating the French in Indochina, and you've heard people saying that the US'll have to get into that one eventually. The Russians have missiles pointed at us and the red tide threatens to overwhelm democracy in every corner of the world.

PERCY: Little beady-eyed, bearded Communists bristle in the shadows with a socialist newspaper and a big round black anarchist bomb, ready to drop it in your lap with the fuse already lit.

LANCE: You trust President Eisenhower but you're not so sure about that Nixon fellow.

PERCY: Elvis Presley has broken out of Memphis, Tennessee onto the national charts with a Sun Records single called 'That's All Right, Mama'.

LANCE: Rumours circulate that rock'n'roll and the civil rights movement are in league with the Communists, some plot to subvert America from out of the shadows, out of the depths of its own blackness.

PERCY: But J Edgar Hoover and the FBI are on top of it, and Ike says it'll all work out, we just have to keep moving forward, and Ike, well, he's the kinda guy you can trust, got us through that War okay.

LANCE: And somehow you knew that you could believe him, that it would all work out, and you went on with your life and good times and prosperity, and kept the darkness locked outside. We really had no problems back then. Some people would give a lot to live a memory.

PERCY: Wouldn't you?

LANCE: What's in the past is safer that way.

PERCY: Safe but boring. A lot can happen to a person out in the world, good and bad.

LANCE: Good, bad, what's the difference. It's too precarious out there; it's unpredictable. We're safe in this compartment, you understand. Got a nice little siege going here. Us and them. Proust with the cork on his walls. In here and outside.

PERCY: It doesn't always have to be us and them.

LANCE: Without polarisation you can't get any work done, any scientist can tell you that. It's the Law of the Excluded Middle. They did teach you about that at that university, didn't they, boy?

PERCY: They did. Anyway being safe in this compartment is like being safe in the belly of the beast. Like being tucked into bed after Walter Cronkite finishes talking about all the missiles pointed at you.

LANCE: You can always leave.

PERCY: I wish. I'm afraid none of us can leave.

LANCE: What do you mean? You've got your ticket. You can go anywhere! You are limited only by the extent of the rails. No problems! As long as you can bail out whenever you want you don't have to be bound by anything.

PERCY: It's not that simple.

LANCE: It is that simple, only you don't want it to be that simple.

PERCY: I can't just pick up and leave without any place to go.

LANCE: How would it be any different? You think you're going anywhere right now?

PERCY: Budapest.

LANCE: Budapest-schmudapest. What do you expect to find there? Streets paved with gold? A welcoming committee, brass band, drum majorettes? You think they'll tout you as their long-lost son and give you the key to the city? You're headed for a fall, boy.

PERCY: I wish you wouldn't call me 'boy'.

LANCE: It upsets you.

PERCY: I'd rather you wouldn't.

LANCE: Don't you think I've earned the right? I am a lot older than you are. Been through a lot more.

PERCY: I know that.

LANCE: Don't you think I've earned the right, at least, to call a young man 'boy'?

PERCY: Suppose I did leave. Suppose I walked right out that door.

LANCE: You can't. You won't let yourself.

PERCY: I'm not dependent on you.

LANCE: You gotta have something to be proud of.

PERCY: I could get off at the next station, how would you feel about that?

LANCE: You can't leave, boy, but good for you if you believe that you can. I won't burst your bubble.

PERCY: I could open this window and jump out, right now.

LANCE: No. The brake man would see you; he'd stop the train and you'd be interrogated by the police. And fined. And you'd probably break several bones in the process.

PERCY: I could throw myself under the train, making sure I bought it.

LANCE: No. Instinct would prevail. You'd crawl halfway out and end up clinging to the side of the car, begging to be pulled back in. Beseeking your tormentors.

PERCY: Wasn't it Patrick Henry who said 'Give me liberty or give me death'?

LANCE: A lot of people said that. Most of them are dead.

PERCY: You think I'm funny, don't you? You think it's cute. I'm not going to stick around just to keep you amused all the way through Europe.

LANCE: Go ahead then. Leave the old man. I knew it couldn't last, anyway. Nothing ever does. It's a miracle these days that anything can go for more than a few seconds without falling apart. The only thing solid is memory. To live a memory.

SCENE II.

[LANCE is on stage but outside the light. PERCY seems alone in the compartment. NIXON begins speaking from outside the light, and enters as he talks.]

NIXON: The public memory's a tricky thing. I've gone from hero to villain and back again so many times now I should probably stop counting. I remember— I remember those kids on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. They were nice kids, not like those Abbie Hoffman types, good-looking kids from middle America, come to the capital to stop the war. Travel, I told them, while you're still young. Japan, Mexico, China—if possible—Indochina, India, Iran, the former Soviet states, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia...

PERCY: Now wait just a damn minute! You're hardly in the grave!

NIXON: I was in my grave in 1974. I'm past that now. Anyway who says I have to be long dead to have an opinion? It's you doing the dreaming, not me.

PERCY: So it is a dream?

[A train whistle sounds.]

NIXON: That train whistle was the sweetest music I ever heard. As a kid in Yorba Linda I dreamed of going places. We were dirt poor, but my mother taught me that in America, with hard work and determination a man can achieve anything.

PERCY: I think you should know I'm not a Republican.

NIXON: Republican, Democrat, when you get right down to it it's who you are that matters, not the label those sons of bitches hang on you. Connally was a Democrat and if only those sons of bitches in Congress would have gone along with it he'd have been my replacement for Agnew.

PERCY: Not a Democrat either.

NIXON: Almost always there have been two major parties in America, and there's a reason for that: you can't get any work done without polarisation. The people need a well-defined dialogue.

PERCY: What happens to everyone in the middle?

NIXON: Percy, there are two schools of thought in America these days. One, descended from the New Deal, is government control regulating our lives. The other calls for individual freedom and all that initiative can produce. I can tell that you hold with the latter view, as do I.

PERCY: You can't tell a damn thing about me.

NIXON: From your great great grandfather in Hungary to your father in Vietnam, you come from a line of freedom fighters.

PERCY: I'm tired of being respected for my father. I mean, jeez, I never knew the guy, he's been dead for twenty-two years and he's still controlling my life.

NIXON: It was the great personal sacrifice of him and men like him that kept Communism contained.

PERCY: I never knew him. He's not a real person to me. Get it? And anyway I'm anti-war. I was conceived when they blew up the Army Math Research Center in Madison. Born under the right sign, y'know?

NIXON: You know, you see these bums—you know, blowing up the campuses. Listen, the boys on the college campuses today are the luckiest people in the world, going to the greatest universities, and here they are burning up the books, I mean storming around about this issue. I mean you name it, get rid of the war. There'll be another one.

PERCY: Grenada, Libya, Nicaragua, Panama, Iraq...

NIXON: There is no cause that justifies the use of violence or lawlessness.

PERCY: That's what everybody was trying to tell you.

NIXON: Listen, I know you think I'm a son-of-a-bitch.

PERCY: It stands to reason if they sent an angel to watch over me that they'd also send a devil to tempt me.

NIXON: It's never as simple as that, angels and devils. By alienating your opponents you only increase tensions.

PERCY: So I can't get anything done without polarisation, but at the same time I have to avoid alienating people.

NIXON: Right.

PERCY: Well that makes a lot of sense.

NIXON: There's an art to politics, Percy, an art that you're going to have to understand if you're going to succeed.

PERCY: What I understand, Mr Nixon, is that you killed tens of thousands of people, people you never even knew, because you didn't want to be seen as a loser. You compelled people to fight in a war that they had no stake in, against people they had no quarrel with. Does that sound like fostering individual initiative?

NIXON: Every American needs to understand that in order to maintain freedom certain sacrifices must be made.

PERCY: Yeah, well I'm not an American. I never asked to be an American. I ended up there because my great great grandfather fucked up choosing sides.

NIXON: Uprooting yourself isn't as easy as it may seem. If I were you, I wouldn't be so hasty in my declarations.

PERCY: You never did a damn thing for individual initiative. You did a great job of fostering the initiative of Pepsi-Cola and the oil companies, but you didn't do jack for people like me.

NIXON: You've been listening to those bastards at *The Washington Post*. I was a private citizen when I had the Pepsi contract. There was no conflict of interest.

PERCY: Big government, big corporations, what's the difference? Whether I'm being controlled by Bill Clinton or by Pepsi-Cola the effect is the same.

NIXON: You're a very fiery young man. I like that. When I was just out of school, like you, I tried to get a job with those New York types. If those sons of bitches would have hired me that's where I would have been all the time: a corporate lawyer instead of President of the United States. Funny the way life steers you into things.

PERCY: I don't think it's funny at all. I think it sucks.

NIXON: You have to learn how to take charge of what's happening to you. That's the difference between leaders and followers. Ever see a movie called *Patton*? George C Scott. He really knew how to kick some ass. I made Kissinger watch that film several times.

PERCY: Elvis mentioned it, actually.

NIXON: Who?

PERCY: Elvis Presley, you know, the guy on the stamp. He's been here, too.

NIXON: Yes, Presley. Met him at the White House in 1970. We talked about solutions to the drug problem.

PERCY: His?

NIXON: The country's. As I told him then, he had the kind of power over people that could have gotten him into high office.

PERCY: He didn't need high office. He was already the King of Rock'n'Roll. The leader of a new American revolution.

NIXON: Hey, that was my line, 'new American revolution'.

PERCY: But you never really meant it.

NIXON: They never gave me a chance. While we were busy with the Communists these people snuck in the back door with this degenerate culture—free love, drugs, this African jungle beat. It was the twenties all over again. You do your best to escape from the cycle of history but in the end you find yourself passing through the same old stations.

PERCY: Like a runaway train.

NIXON: You can have whatever you want, Percy, just keep moving, and don't listen to the Harvard types. That was the mistake I made with Kissinger.

PERCY: I guess this means you're about to split? Will it be just you and the King, or am I due for a third visitor?

NIXON: Read my book, *Six Crises*. Hell of a book. Everything you need to know is in it.

[Nixon vanishes. Lights up on LANCE.]

LANCE: Go on then. I promise not to follow you.

PERCY: Look, I'm sorry for being so crass.

LANCE: Best to be blunt. If we're going to have any chance at all of knowing each other we can't hold back; we have to be blunt.

PERCY: I'll stay.

LANCE: That's when you lose control, you start living a fantasy, when you allow the person close to you to get away with these little white lies, that's how it starts. Best to make a clean break. You don't have to stay.

PERCY: I'll stay.

LANCE: If you stay you'll go eventually.

PERCY: If I do it'll be my decision.

LANCE: Why is it that you want to stay all of a sudden?

PERCY: I like to sit on fences.

LANCE: Have it your way. There's nothing that says you can't chase a few rainbows in your youth. Give it some time and you'll be properly jaded.

PERCY: *[reads from the Proust book]*

“If you like, we could just as well go out for the afternoon and go to the Guermantes by Méséglise, that's the nicer way”, a sentence that shattered all the ideas of my childhood and made me realise that the two paths were not as irreconcilable as I had believed.’

ACT III. Riding the dream world from Zürich to Vienna.

SCENE I.

[LANCE and PERCY in another compartment.]

LANCE: Zürich-shmürich. I told you, all these places are the same.

PERCY: I really had my heart set on seeing Jung's house.

LANCE: Didn't you half-expect that there'd be a fence around it?

PERCY: I felt like an intruder.

LANCE: You always feel like an intruder. The fence has nothing to do with it. You were the same way with Notre Dame.

PERCY: I don't trust things that are bigger than I am.

LANCE: Churches, philosophies, governments...

PERCY: It's a sensible way to be, isn't it? I mean sometimes I feel like they're all out to control me.

LANCE: A little paranoia is healthy. Until it begins to control you.

PERCY: I'm not paranoid; I'm just sensible.

LANCE: When we get to Vienna we'll see Freud's house. It'll be pretty much the same.

PERCY: Not the same at all. Freud took the mystery out of myth.

LANCE: A great man. His goal was to explain the mind solely in terms of biology.

PERCY: One of your anatomists.

LANCE: I told you, if you want to understand anything you've got to know how it's structured. There isn't anything else.

PERCY: You're fooling yourself. Little white lies, like you said. You create something out of thin air and then claim to have discovered its structure.

LANCE: A phenomenologist.

PERCY: I don't know what you call it.

LANCE: I thought you were a fan of Jung.

PERCY: I'm more on his side than on Freud's, if that's what you mean.

LANCE: Ha! There, you see, another polarity. Two sides. X and not-X. You can't avoid it.

PERCY: It's not that simple. Jung recognised the X in the not-X, the female in the male. I told you, didn't I? Words, names, they're lies. Fetishes.

LANCE: Who said anything about fetishes?

PERCY: You're a fetishist. Attaching values to meaningless objects. Those photographs of yours. A gift from your mother. A lock of hair from your sweetheart. A piece of clothing.

LANCE: Don't say any more.

PERCY: It upsets you. It hits too close to home?

LANCE: Some personal matters are better not spoken of.

PERCY: I'm only trying for a little interaction. I told you all about me; it should go both ways.

LANCE: I'm not fond of tearing down the curtain.

PERCY: We stopped with your office. A depressing grey building. You shuffled papers without ever knowing what any of it was for. Even then you were looking for an escape, something to give your life meaning.

LANCE: She was a bagging girl in the supermarket. Her name tag said 'Jennifer'. I used to see her every day at the checkout. I always bought groceries on my way back from the office.

PERCY: It was your routine.

LANCE: And so was she. She became part of it. Day after day, in her uniform, that same crisp white blouse, overlaid with that same red apron, hair tied back with a bow, would I like to pull my car around. I didn't have a car. She always asked, though. It was in the script. Running through those same lines over and over

again, she was tolerant. The situation was tolerant. I could get it wrong a hundred times, say the wrong thing, say nothing, stumble, return the next day and take it from the top. I began to feel—comfortable. That hadn't happened to me since I was a small child. That uniform of hers, it was so ridiculous, so belittling. Even as she stood over me I felt superior. Unlike her I still had my identity. I remembered who I was.

PERCY: It seemed an ideal match.

LANCE: There were gains on both sides. She told me I made her feel powerful.

PERCY: And she made you feel comfortable.

LANCE: As long as she kept playing the part. That's not too much to ask of a woman, is it?

PERCY: I wouldn't know.

LANCE: The bow in her hair, the starch in her collar. Everything just as it ought to be.

PERCY: No children?

LANCE: No. I mean we never could... I can't stand the thought.

PERCY: I'm not particularly partial to it either.

LANCE: It's some circuit in my brain, you see. Abnormal connections in the temporal lobe. Her crisp white blouse, her apron. I've done a lot of reading on the anatomy.

PERCY: Anatomy's an easy scapegoat.

LANCE: What would you blame it on? I never asked to be the way I am.

PERCY: That's not very democratic of you.

LANCE: Who said anything about democracy, this is anatomy. If you wanted democracy you wouldn't be here. I never asked for anything.

PERCY: Neither did I. I mean, neither did any of us.

LANCE: I know what it is, though. If you could look inside my head you'd find—

PERCY: Has anyone ever actually examined your head?

LANCE: Never had the opportunity. But it doesn't matter. I know well enough. All the symptoms are there.

PERCY: I guess you gotta have something to be proud of.

LANCE: What's that supposed to mean?

[Two WOMEN enter. They are wearing crisp white blouses and their hair is tied back with bows. During the following exchange, as they become more and more confident that the WOMEN do not understand what's being said about them and will not react, LANCE and PERCY begin touching them, not in any lascivious way, but using them as if they were props, rag-dolls.]

WOMEN: Können wir hier sitzen?

LANCE: Uh...

PERCY: Oui, I mean, ja, sitzen.

LANCE: Ask them if they speak English.

PERCY: Why don't you ask them?

LANCE: Because I don't speak German.

PERCY: You think I can do any better? Anyway if they spoke English they'd have understood us and replied by now.

LANCE: Well ask them where they're headed.

PERCY: I don't speak German, either.

LANCE: Didn't they teach you anything useful at that school of yours?

PERCY: I was a literature major; that's a foregone conclusion.

LANCE: How can you claim descent from an Austro-Hungarian exile and not know a word of German?

PERCY: Just because my great great grandfather got booted out of the Hapsburg empire doesn't mean I should know how to speak their language.

LANCE: Well what do you know?

PERCY: Besides French, I have a smattering of Old English.

LANCE: Try that.

PERCY: That's ridiculous.

LANCE: Try it anyway.

PERCY: Why should I be the one to embarrass myself?

LANCE: Because you know how and I don't. And anyway I'm a lot older than you.

PERCY: We sind gecwom frum geanleacode ricum—United States, that is. Hwær goeth git? This isn't working very well.

LANCE: Keep trying.

PERCY: Ic spræc non Deutsch, ac ic cann sum dæl eald anglisc.

[The WOMEN laugh.]

LANCE: Are you sure you're pronouncing that right?

PERCY: That's the beauty of it, Lance: when all the native speakers have been dead for nine centuries, no one can tell you you're wrong. You ought to appreciate that.

LANCE: I wonder where they're going.

PERCY: You always have to know where everything is going.

LANCE: I'm curious. I wonder who they are. Don't they interest you?

PERCY: I could do without them.

LANCE: For me they bring back memories.

PERCY: Memory's a tricky thing. Anyway you're married.

LANCE: Why do you think I showed up here without her?

PERCY: Oh. I'm sorry.

LANCE: What is there to be sorry about? I knew it was coming. It was predictable. All of it was predictable.

PERCY: You miss her?

LANCE: In a way. I miss— certain things about her. The way her hair flowed down her back, the way her nose wiggled when she laughed. The scent in her clothes. Everything is so out of control now, it makes me nervous.

PERCY: You left. Ran away across the ocean. A lot could happen out here. Suppose you never come home again. How would you feel then?

LANCE: Stop trying to trip me up, boy. I loved her and I still do. But it couldn't be avoided. Nothing can. Anyway aren't you as guilty as I am? You left your mother back in Madison.

PERCY: That's different.

LANCE: How is it different? Wife, mother, what's the difference. All women are the same.

PERCY: Including these two?

LANCE: Especially these two.

PERCY: They've been staring at me. *[to the WOMEN:]* Why are you staring at me?

LANCE: You're dreaming. They probably have their pick of men in all the cities of Europe.

PERCY: Don't be vulgar. That's not what I mean. And anyway I wouldn't be interested.

LANCE: I would if I were your age. You have strange taste.

PERCY: As you're fond of saying it's the way my brain is wired.

LANCE: Oh.

PERCY: There! See, she was looking at me. You saw her looking at me.

LANCE: Why are you so preoccupied with them?

PERCY: You're the one who's preoccupied.

LANCE: I'm just wondering where they're going.

WOMAN 1: Linz.

WOMAN 2: Mauthausen, more precisely.

LANCE: If you know English so well why didn't you speak up from the start?

WOMAN 1: What reason for travelling is there if one cannot be a foreigner sometimes?

WOMAN 2: We wanted to hear what you had to say about us.

PERCY: That wasn't very polite.

WOMAN 2: Neither were you.

LANCE: Nobody is. It's a miracle these days that we're all still on speaking terms with one another.

PERCY: What's in Mauthausen?

WOMAN 1: You seem as if you should already know.

PERCY: Me?

WOMAN 1: A rock quarry, among other things.

PERCY: You're geologists?

WOMAN 1: In a way.

WOMAN 2: We like to uncover what's buried.

LANCE: We've had too much of that already.

WOMAN 1: *[to Percy]* But you have buried so much – your history, your family, your faith.

PERCY: Never had much faith to begin with. I mean, my parents were Lutherans, but I never liked churches.

WOMAN 2: Many of your great great grandfather's generation deserted their religion at the same time that they deserted their families. Jews became Christians as a matter of expediency. At first it was only theatre, but then, like so much else about the new culture, it stuck.

LANCE: I thought you looked Jewish. It's the nose that gives it away – all in the anatomy. Didn't want to say anything, you understand, didn't want to make assumptions.

PERCY: Have you two been hanging out with Elvis?

WOMAN 1: We heard you a minute ago speaking of your descent.

WOMAN 2: We thought perhaps this is why you have come.

PERCY: You have, haven't you?

WOMAN 1: Budapest was the beginning of our researches.

WOMAN 2: Mauthausen will be the end.

WOMAN 1: We've been following one man in particular, a soldier in the uprisings of 1848.

WOMAN 2: His mother had worried about him in the war, and all the time kept a candle burning for him. She knew that if the flame died, her son would be lost.

LANCE: A candle fetish. It happens with everyone, you see.

PERCY: Why did he leave? Did he have to? He was drafted?

WOMAN 1: When he returned from the war she begged him not to leave for America, for she knew that she would never see him again.

WOMAN 2: But he was too angry. He said he'd rather die than stay in Hungary under the Hapsburgs.

WOMAN 1: After he got on the train she fell ill immediately, and died of sorrow.

LANCE: What has all this got to do with the boy?

WOMAN 2: That's what he must decide.

PERCY: At least she knew where he was going, didn't she? I mean at least he didn't sail across the ocean and disappear.

WOMAN 1: The family never heard from him again. Friends in New York said he'd gone west.

PERCY: That's not necessarily his fault. A lot of things can happen when you're on the road.

WOMAN 2: The family was still in Budapest when Hitler came to power.

PERCY: I'm warning you, this has nothing at all to do with me. I am not responsible.

WOMAN 1: Fifty years ago the last of them disappeared into Mauthausen. They were erased from memory, as though they'd never been. The only connection left was the one who had tried to escape all connections.

LANCE: How do you know all this?

WOMAN 1: It's simple to see, where we're going. One has only to follow the track to the last station.

WOMAN 2: It's important to us to preserve the memory.

LANCE: Memory's a tricky thing.

PERCY: You're temptresses, is that it? You think I'll abandon my quest and come with you.

LANCE: How can you abandon it when you don't even know what it is? It's been a hundred and fifty years and you still haven't figured it out.

WOMAN 1: Soon you will be home.

LANCE: It's not his home anymore. It'll be the same as all these other places.

WOMAN 1: For you, perhaps. But you can't speak for the boy.

PERCY: I am not a boy.

WOMAN 2: For the young man.

PERCY: Thank you.

LANCE: Look. You obviously want the boy to stay with you. But he won't follow you to Mauthausen. So why don't you come with us?

WOMAN 1: Our way is already mapped.

LANCE: You phrase it so mysteriously.

PERCY: They're not mysterious, just obstinately fatalistic. You should understand that.

LANCE: Yes, charming, isn't it?

PERCY: In every bad sense of the word. *[to WOMEN:]* Drop the femmes fatales shtick. It'll get you nowhere. Except possibly with him.

LANCE: I know that two charming young ladies like yourselves must have better things to do than slog through the mud of some dirty old abandoned quarry in Mauthausen.

PERCY: Speaking of dirty old things, Lance—

LANCE: Have you always worn your hair like that? With the bow, I mean?

WOMAN 2: For some time.

LANCE: It looks very... comfortable. Doesn't it make you feel comfortable?

WOMAN 1: It keeps the hair out of our faces.

LANCE: A good thing when you're mucking about in quarries. I'm sure you have a lot of stories. What an adventure it must be. You seem like adventuresome ladies. Percy here owns a motorcycle, you know.

PERCY: I do not.

LANCE: If you come back with us you could ride it. You really should come with us. We'd like to have you, I mean, I'm sure you'd be great company, and maybe we could stop in Vienna and buy groceries. There must be a market.

PERCY: We'll have time for that later. Tell me about this soldier of yours. What was his name?

LANCE: You don't mind if I take a few notes, do you?

[loudspeaker: Saint-Valentin!]

PERCY: Where are you going?

WOMAN 1: We change here.

LANCE: You can't leave now!

PERCY: Please.

WOMAN 2: It's you who have left.

[The WOMEN exit.]

SCENE II.

[PERCY again seems alone in the compartment. ELVIS sings his 1955 hit 'Mystery Train':]

ELVIS: Train I ride, sixteen coaches long.
Train I ride, sixteen coaches long.
Well that long black train, got my baby and gone.
Train, train, comin' round, round the bend.
Train, train, comin' round, round the bend.
Well it took my baby, but it never will again.

[NIXON enters.]

NIXON: My mother was a saint. I remember her telling me, it is difficult at times to understand the ways of our Lord, but we know that there is a plan and that the best happens for each individual.

PERCY: Trash. The world's given up on God.

ELVIS: Hey, man, you're talkin' to a former President of the United States.

PERCY: He resigned. God, President, it's all the same. You can't trust anyone.

NIXON: Those sons of bitches were out to get me. I couldn't trust anybody in Washington.

ELVIS: That's how I felt about L.A. That place is crazy, man. I used to get death threats.

NIXON: You have to watch your back.

ELVIS: I always liked to keep a few guns handy.

NIXON: That pearl-handled revolver you gave me at the White House in 1970, that was a beauty.

PERCY: Everything is out of control.

NIXON: The kids on the campuses were saturated with drugs and this degenerate counterculture.

ELVIS: It was the Beatles. That's what did it. I never understood how so much myth could be made outta so little talent.

NIXON: I felt the same way about Jack Kennedy.

ELVIS: It was the junkies.

NIXON: The liberals.

ELVIS: The Communists.

NIXON: The press.

ELVIS: One of the greatest honours I received was when President Nixon made me a special agent of the Drug Enforcement Agency. Got a badge and everything.

PERCY: How stoked were you on quaaludes at the time?

ELVIS: You read that book, didn't you? Never trust the people workin' for you. That was the mistake I made with Red and Sonny. Then they went and wrote that book. Listen, I had medication that was prescribed for me that I had to take. That's all it ever was.

NIXON: It's not what the facts are but what they appear to be that counts when you're under fire in a political campaign.

ELVIS: Percy, the Lord loves all of us, but I know he ain't gonna have no blasphemers walkin' through the gates of the holy city.

PERCY: I've dragged myself halfway through Europe on that hope and I've found a pile of dreary cities but nothing holy.

ELVIS: You gotta have faith.

PERCY: That's a fact. God, presidents, pop singers, pills, anatomy, whatever. You gotta have something to keep faith in.

ELVIS: I told you, Percy, they were medicinal.

NIXON: *[to Elvis]* He's been reading the *Post*.

PERCY: Which did you have at your bedside more often, the Bible or the Physician's Desk Reference?

ELVIS: That ain't a fair question.

PERCY: The world ain't very fair, is it?

ELVIS: That's a fact. People turn on you. My friends, Red and Sonny.

NIXON: My administration was full of leaks. I couldn't even trust my own cabinet.

ELVIS: New cars, rings, anything they needed. I was good to them.

NIXON: Hush money, oil kickbacks, anything they needed. I am not a crook. I didn't do anything that hadn't already been done by all the others. Kennedy made tapes. Johnson made tapes. Even Ike made tapes.

ELVIS: What did James Dean do that I couldn't do? I mean why did I have to be the one to get stuck in all them lousy movies? I mean what was all the fuss about the Beatles, anyway? I was doin' it before they ever picked up a guitar.

NIXON: I couldn't even keep a goddamn dog without the press getting on my ass about it.

ELVIS: You know me and the President were born under the same sign?

NIXON: Capricorn.

ELVIS: Ambitious and persevering.

NIXON: As my dear mother used to tell me, the Lord has a plan for everyone.

ELVIS: When I see my old movies, something is always happening to me, someone's always telling me what to do. Girls are chasing me. Bad guys are after me.

NIXON: It may be impossible for us to make sense of, but we have to keep our faith.

ELVIS: Priscilla left me for Mike Stone. Mike Stone!

NIXON: The staff began dropping like flies. Eventually even Haldeman and Ehrlichmann were gone.

ELVIS: Nobody to give rings to. No movies. No girls.

NIXON: No daily news summary.

ELVIS: No more takin' care of business.

NIXON: This has been fun, you know. I really miss the theatre. That's how I met Pat. In a play called The Dark Tower I take her away from another man. I got so used to it that I took her away and married her in real life.

ELVIS: But every movie rolls the credits eventually.

NIXON: And now even you say you don't need us.

PERCY: I never asked for you two to invade my dreams.

ELVIS: You don't ask for dreams. They come to you from God.

PERCY: I'll tell you one more time. This is not my dream. It may be yours but it's not mine. So you can tell your God to get the hell out of my head.

NIXON: This great dream is not yours or mine, but America's.

PERCY: And you can tell America to get the hell out of my head, too.

NIXON: Percy, you're an American.

PERCY: I hate America. And I'm not too crazy about God, either. I mean, what did they ever do for me?

ELVIS: I remember President Kennedy said, 'Ask not what your country can do for you —'

NIXON: That shitty-ass bastard got more mileage outta that cheesy line!

ELVIS: Sorry, I wasn't thinkin'.

NIXON: How would you like it if I walked up to you and started quoting 'Strawberry Fields'?

ELVIS: *[to PERCY]* I know you think I'm a son-of-a-bitch.

PERCY: It's just that I came here to get away from everything I knew. And I don't like the idea of you guys following me around wherever I go.

NIXON: A young man wants nothing so much as independence.

ELVIS: We can understand that. There are things you gotta do for yourself.

NIXON: Clinton was the same way, after he invited me back to the White House.

ELVIS: From here, you're on your own.

NIXON: You'll succeed or fail without us.

ELVIS: We won't get in the way.

NIXON: There'll be nobody to steal your thunder, understand?

ELVIS: All the credit'll be yours.

NIXON: But when those bastards start slinging mud, don't come to us for sympathy.

ELVIS: And when you get to the shootout and you're down to your last bullet, don't count on no movie hero to come ridin' in off the plains.

PERCY: I never have.

ACT IV. The final frontier.

SCENE I.

[LANCE and PERCY in another compartment. A sign on the window is printed in Magyar, Russian, and German. The place is filthy. Across the window is scrawled 'ELVIS LIVES'.]

LANCE: I suppose I should have expected to be leaving Vienna in a hurry.

PERCY: I wanted to be on the train early enough to be sure of finding seats.

LANCE: It doesn't seem very crowded.

PERCY: Lance, I'm so close to the border now, I can't stop moving. You can understand that, can't you?

LANCE: The final frontier.

PERCY: That's for Captain Kirk, not us.

LANCE: Your mother watched a lot of Star Trek, too?

PERCY: It came on between Wheel of Fortune and The Six Million Dollar Man. I always liked the idea of being able to fly around the universe in a starship.

LANCE: You can fly all you want but you've got to stop somewhere. I wish we'd had more time here. They call this place the crossroads to the East.

PERCY: It's a façade. The Opera, the Parliament, they've gone to great lengths to disguise the place. But as soon as you step off the Ringstraße you're in the middle of the same old urban gloom.

LANCE: You might have felt differently if we'd spent more time inside the buildings than wandering the streets. I think you could have learned a lot from the Freud House.

PERCY: It's a house like any other. Freud happened to live in it. He might as well have lived somewhere else. It's nonessential.

LANCE: There's no law against sentimentality.

PERCY: The place got on my nerves, okay? It felt like a church. I had to get out of there and get moving again.

LANCE: Always back to motion, motion for its own sake. I wish you'd slow down and take the time to appreciate things once in a while.

PERCY: I do appreciate things.

LANCE: You hardly make an effort.

PERCY: You're the one who keeps going on about how there's nothing new under the sun.

LANCE: There isn't. But you could at least try to fake it sometimes like all the rest of us.

PERCY: I'm not interested in illusions anymore.

LANCE: Then what are you interested in? I mean storming around Europe, bold as brass, what're you gonna do when you step off this train and find yourself, finally, in Budapest? Call in your armies and storm the old city wall?

PERCY: I'll find whatever's waiting for me there.

LANCE: You don't even speak the language.

PERCY: I'll get along. It's my home.

LANCE: You don't want to go home. If you had wanted to stay home you'd never have left in the first place.

PERCY: That was my great great grandfather.

LANCE: I'm talking about Madison, not Budapest.

PERCY: Madison, Budapest, what's the difference.

LANCE: My point exactly.

PERCY: You don't understand. This is something Elvis was trying to tell me.

LANCE: Funny how the farther east we go the farther back in time we are. I've seen this Elvis graffiti in at least three places on this train. I guess you gotta have someone to look up to.

PERCY: It's not just that. I think there really is something to this Elvis myth.

LANCE: Well of course there is. There's something to every myth. That's why the communists couldn't get rid of the churches. People need saints and heroes.

PERCY: People need Elvis.

LANCE: Elvis, Jesus, space aliens, anyone to look up to. It's the fin-de-siècle, the new millennium, and people are looking for a change. The particulars don't matter. What do you think got Bill Clinton elected?

PERCY: I've been dreaming of him.

LANCE: Clinton?

PERCY: Elvis.

LANCE: Not much difference. They even talk the same way.

PERCY: This past week he's been showing up in my dreams. Trying to give me advice.

LANCE: What does he say?

PERCY: I don't know. Not much that I didn't know already, really. That I'm on my way someplace, I'm on some kind of journey.

LANCE: Alienated young man from middle America out to re-invent his father. Classic stuff.

PERCY: That's not it at all.

LANCE: You're wrong, that's exactly what it is. I know.

PERCY: You don't know. You like to think that you know.

LANCE: Have you looked at that book I bought for you at the Freud House?

PERCY: I've been a little preoccupied. And anyway I didn't ask you to buy me any book.

LANCE: I know you didn't ask me. I gave it to you. Because I like you. Or would you prefer to be without my friendship?

PERCY: I can buy my own books.

LANCE: I know, congratulations, you can buy your own books, you're an American, rugged individualist, rose from the working class, never had to depend on anyone. But that's not the issue.

PERCY: What is the issue?

LANCE: You can't go around all the time treating anybody who wants to do you a favour the way you treat your father.

PERCY: That's not a fair thing to say.

LANCE: Why not?

PERCY: My father is dead.

LANCE: Your father will never lie down and die until you stop being obsessed with him.

PERCY: I'm not obsessed. In fact I'd like nothing better than for him to get lost.

LANCE: Freud tells us that dreams are wish-fulfillments.

PERCY: Then why in the hell would I dream of Elvis Presley? He was before my time, I never got into his music, and even before he got fat I don't see how anyone could find him attractive. I mean I didn't even bother to vote for which stamp I preferred.

LANCE: Your mother liked him, didn't she?

PERCY: She listened to his records.

LANCE: She played them all the time, religiously.

PERCY: She had nothing else to do.

LANCE: He was the one man left in her life who could offer her a little comfort.

PERCY: I offered her comfort.

LANCE: You were a baby. And now you've run away. Didn't she know, all along, that you were going to run away? Didn't you?

PERCY: My mother was a saint.

LANCE: But try as she might she couldn't keep you under her thumb. Now Elvis, he was another matter. She had him trapped on vinyl. She could call him up with a phonograph needle any time she wanted.

PERCY: Rubbish. Why him, then? Why not Chuck Woolery? Why not Captain Kirk? Why not Steve Austin?

LANCE: Not even the bionic man could compare to Elvis the Pelvis.

PERCY: You and your anatomy, you're disgusting.

LANCE: Factual, boy, I'm being factual! You can't deny a scientific fact, can you?

PERCY: It doesn't strike me as very scientific. And neither do you.

LANCE: You'll believe what you want to believe. I can't burst your bubble.

PERCY: I also dreamed of Richard Nixon. If I want my father so badly why would I dream of the man who killed him?

LANCE: Well, Percy, you've read all the books; I don't think you need me to answer that one.

PERCY: This whole thing is crazy! Here I am buried in a train compartment somewhere in the bowels of eastern Europe, discussing a man I never knew with another man I don't know.

LANCE: We never know anybody. It's a miracle—

PERCY: Shut up! I knew you were gonna say that. That's all you ever say. You and your pre-packaged, fatalistic lines. I mean where the hell do you come from, man? If anybody had told me a few weeks ago that this is what I'd be doing on my trip through Europe I'd've said they were crazy.

LANCE: You're picking up experiences, new ways of looking at the world. Isn't that what you said?

PERCY: I never asked for this. It was you who latched on to me. You who walked into that compartment in Brittany, all innocently, 'Ce siège est libre?', parked yourself next to me and proceeded to dog me all the way across the continent.

[A MAGYAR enters, carrying several large boxes.]

LANCE: Now where do you suppose he's going?

PERCY: Back to Budapest. Since the border's been open they come to the West to shop.

[Another MAGYAR enters, carrying several large boxes.]

LANCE: All of a sudden everybody wants a piece of the American Dream. Typewriters, electric can-openers, CD players, computers.

PERCY: I hate computers.

LANCE: You hate everything.

PERCY: They're bigger than me and they're going to take over the world.

LANCE: Maybe so. But you can't do anything about it, anyway.

[Two more MAGYARS enter, carrying boxes, one of which they proceed to open. They extract from it a bottle of alcohol and begin to drink. The other MAGYARS are all smoking by this point.]

PERCY: How would you know?

LANCE: I've been around a lot longer than you.

PERCY: Not that long.

LANCE: Long enough to be pretty sure of myself.

PERCY: I'll say.

[Another MAGYAR enters, carrying a stack of Elvis albums, which he proceeds to unwrap and examine.]

PERCY: What the hell is this, the freight car?

LANCE: Look at all these prizes! Fabulous merchandise! Just waiting to be won, here on Wheel of Fortune!

PERCY: It's disgusting.

LANCE: Come on, it's what you've been fighting for, the democratic ideal, everybody ends up with a prize, we've got some lovely parting gifts for you.

[One of the drinking MAGYARS makes their way offstage, with difficulty. A tinkle of urine is heard. After a time the MAGYAR re-enters.]

PERCY: This is no democracy. This is the same old greed. They've only just thrown off totalitarianism and already they're labelling each other, Christians, Muslims, Magyars, Czechs. I told you, these words are all lies.

LANCE: What did you expect? Spontaneous utopia?

PERCY: It'll be Karl Lueger all over again.

LANCE: Nothing ever changes. The level crossing, the small-town station-master holding his signal, the rusted water-tower. We've seen them all before. We're moving in circles, I tell you.

PERCY: We're going beyond all that. We're about to cross the border.

LANCE: The border is only an idea.

PERCY: You always know better, don't you? Anything I try to say, you always know better.

LANCE: I'm just trying to save you the trouble, Percy.

PERCY: I never asked you to save me the trouble. In fact, I never asked you for anything. It was you who latched onto me.

LANCE: I know you think I'm a son-of-a-bitch.

PERCY: You left your wife and went looking for someone else to torment, and there I was, all alone in a railway compartment. Vulnerable.

LANCE: You'll learn eventually. You have to learn to accept things. I mean we can't change the world, so there's no sense going on banging your head against it. Percy, you don't belong on this train. You have nothing in common with these people. We'll find the next train west and head back to Madison. You don't have to prove anything to me.

PERCY: I do belong on this train! If I don't belong on this train then I don't belong anywhere. Because I sure as hell don't belong back where I started from, if that's what you're trying to tell me.

LANCE: None of us belongs anywhere. We try to fit in where we can.

PERCY: If there's anyone who doesn't belong on this train it's you. Look at you! Lance, you're a feeble old man. A lot can happen out here. This is my journey.

LANCE: Just get off the train!

PERCY: You get off the train!

LANCE: We'll get off the train together!

PERCY: You stop trying to boss me around!

LANCE: I'm a lot older than you!

PERCY: You are not my father!

LANCE: Get off the train!

PERCY: You cannot be my father!

[In a struggle they stumble over the drinking MAGYARS and various boxes, crashing to the floor of the compartment.]

PERCY: No problems, that's what the book said, no problems. And I wouldn't have had any, not without you!

LANCE: Percy, I don't want to see you come to grief.

PERCY: Get off! You fat bastard.

LANCE: I love you.

PERCY: Not my type.

LANCE: I mean, Jennifer and I, we never had a child. You know, I wanted to leave something behind before I die, just working, working, and to think all of it'll come to nothing after all.

PERCY: You'll disappear. Nobody can stop it. Nobody's ever been able to stop it.

LANCE: Percy, your ancestors were wrong, you understand, they were wrong. The world is flat, and it doesn't get any rounder no matter how far you go. You can't go on pretending that a change of scene can force a change in state.

PERCY: If I've got everything so ass-backwards then why do you stick around?

LANCE: I don't want to be left alone.

PERCY: Come on, old man, you know the way it goes. Only the one whose soul is prepared gets to enter.

LANCE: You're full of yourself. Your soul is as black as mine. You're an ungrateful child.

PERCY: I'm going all the way on this train. And you're not coming with me. Even if you stay on board I'll slip away in the crowd at Budapest.

LANCE: You're leaving me nothing, you understand.

PERCY: I'm leaving you everything. I'm leaving you the whole world. You've got your ticket. You can go anywhere you want. Anywhere! *[exits, leaving the Proust book on the seat]*

[The MAGYAR has unwrapped the CD and started it playing. It is Elvis's 'Heartbreak Hotel':]

ELVIS: *[on disc]*
Since my baby left me
I found a new place to dwell.
It's down at the end of Lonely Street,
The Heartbreak Hotel.
...

[Curtain.]