

CHAPTER TWO



RADIO DREAMS



JOE GRACEY

It is daytime and I am out on the street, two blocks away from the radio station. There is a gray metal public address horn on the corner of the building where I work, inexplicably broadcasting my radio show out into the parking lot. I realize that the record that I had put on is now about to run out and I am out here for some reason, much too far away to get back in time, even if I run. I listen helplessly as the sound of the needle in the end grooves begins to repeat endlessly. It is the DJ's worst nightmare. I wake up. . . .

When you work on the radio, especially in 1960s-era Top 40 radio, you learn that dead air is the cardinal sin for the operator of the control board. Everything has to move fast, fast, fast, be overlapped and slammed home and yelled loud and insistent. No gaps or pauses allowed. Dead air is anathema, not tolerated. Being a DJ in a format like this is exhilarating, a mad dash from the beginning of your show to the end, slugging coffee (or worse) and lighting cigs and talking fast and moving your hands over the controls in a constant ballet, a

coordinated, practiced caressing that never stops. Records are cued up by rocking them back and forth by hand, then rolled back to a precise point before the start of the music so that when I touch the turntable start switch, the song starts exactly when I know it will. Ads are on endless tape loops inside plastic cartridges shoved into automated tape players in correct order, cued and awaiting my finger on the start button, their last line typed on the label so I know when to jump in. Everything is within easy reach of my hands, the microphone suspended a certain exact distance from my mouth always the same spot in relation to my face, my ashtray and coffee cup always exactly where my hand falls to them, my ad copy and promos positioned exactly eye level on a pedestal over the board, where all of the volume and start/stop controls are. It is my world for four hours every day, my reason for being, my connection to people that is much more intimate than I can ever be face-to-face. When I turn on the microphone switch, I can feel the electrons coursing through the giant power tubes in the transmitter on top of the hill, pausing just that tiny moment to listen to the sound of air before I begin to speak, my deep resonant voice causing the massive tubes to pulse purple and red in the night, the antenna tower blinking red and the wind singing in the wires. Oh, baby, I love being on the radio. . . .



It is 1956 in Fort Worth, Texas, in a suburban frame house in a new part of town. In the kitchen, a five-year-old boy hears “Heartbreak Hotel” come on the radio and is swept up into it. “Mommy, why don’t you like Elvis?” he asks. Mommy, whose strong opinions on everything from Communists to Christmas include frequent denunciations of Elvis, is only able to say, “Well, I like his singing, but I don’t like the way he moves,” which means nothing to the boy. The boy,—me, Joe Ellsworth Gracey, Jr.—loved the way music sounded on the radio. Everything sounded good on the radio.

I was born in Breckinridge, a West Texas town in the middle of oil fields and cattle ranches. My first memory is of the smell of burning