

## *Prologue*

### THE TONIGHT SHOW

THE LIGHTS. THEY WERE THE FIRST THING Elliott noticed. How could she not? They were *blinding*, so bright that her first impulse had been to shield her eyes with her hands. But she couldn't do that! She'd have come out from behind the curtain looking like she'd just awakened from a dream in the dead of night.

Elliott squinted as she moved left to right across the stage. Don't forget about the step, she kept repeating to herself. Remember the step. The step.

The thunderous applause from the cavernous studio theater was exhilarating. Striding toward the trim, slender funnyman and his enormous sidekick, Elliott flashed a smile and waved diffidently to the audience. Against the constellation of blazing lights, she could barely make out the forms of several people scattered in the front rows. They were nodding and clapping. Darald was out there somewhere, but these were strangers, at least the ones whose faces she could make out. And they were welcoming her! Elliott could see, hear, and feel that.

The raised platform ahead of her was a stage on a stage. That's where Johnny Carson, the most popular man in America, and second banana Ed McMahon were waiting for her.

All the while, Elliott could see out of the corner of her eye the neon audience APPLAUSE signs blinking maniacally. By the sound of the clapping, everyone was looking forward to the teacher from someplace somewhere about to say something. Everyone liked Johnny Carson, and who doesn't like teachers? A night with America's premier court jester and his special guest. This would be fun!

It turned out that Elliott didn't need to remember to step up to greet Carson. For the thirty feet she had to traverse across the TV studio stage, Elliott had the eerie sensation that she was *floating*.

She shook Carson's hand first, then McMahon's. Carson's felt like a slippery eel, McMahon's like an enormous mitten. Quick and business-like. A trio of nods and smiles. She got comfortable in the gray-upholstered chair to Carson's right. Shimming a little, she tugged at the bottom of her dress so that the hem might drop a little closer to her knees. Was it *too* short?

As the applause died down, Carson opened by tossing a throwaway line about Elliott's trip to New York, a big-city rip to anyone from America's interior.

"I understand this is the first time you've flown?"

"On an airplane, it is," Elliott answered straight up, not missing a beat, which made for a ripple, then in a second or two a delayed reaction, and finally a wave of knee-slapping laughter from the audience.<sup>1</sup>

Elliott hadn't realized what it was she'd said or what it could possibly have meant. But that didn't make any difference. She had scored. This thirty-four-year-old teacher with the short brunette bob had a sense of humor. Carson and the hayseed from Iowa or Ohio or Indiana or wherever she was from ought to be good. Carson extracted the best from everyone, especially from civilians. When it came to non-Hollywood types, Carson's shtick could border on the cruel, but viewers loved it anyway.

With those five words, Elliott had already become a hit.

When she'd been in makeup earlier, while two young women in mini-skirts applied pancake to her cheeks, *Tonight Show* producer John Carsey had welcomed Elliott this way: "Mrs. Elliott, the people who watch *The Tonight Show* don't want to think. They want to be entertained. So *please* don't say anything thought-provoking. And, *please*, don't say anything depressing. Got it?"

Elliott being Elliott wasn't going to let any of that go unanswered.

"I can't think of anything that *isn't* depressing about racism," she remembered shooting back.

"Don't worry," Carsey replied smoothly. "We're gonna punch it up."

Elliott wasn't quite sure how an experiment designed to show the impact of discrimination on third-grade children could be punched up, but she was willing to see what Carson and his merry-makers had in mind.

Carsey told Elliott that she'd be the show's first guest, the warm-up act to the night's main attraction, winsome actor James Garner, promoting his new movie, *How Sweet It Is!*, costarring bouncy ingénue Debbie Reynolds. The Box Tops, a Nashville band that had run the *Billboard* charts to No. 2 with their hit "Cry Like a Baby," would also be appearing. It sounded like a fun

Friday night, something for everyone. The beginning of the long Memorial Day weekend.

The show would start taping at six thirty and would be aired at eleven thirty on both coasts, ten thirty Central time. No one knows whose idea it had been to invite Elliott, but surely *Tonight Show* producer Rudy Tellez had approved of her appearance, and certainly Carson, compulsively hands-on, had signed off on the invitation. Carson wouldn't have personally called Elliott to invite her if he hadn't.

Carson and Elliott shared more than a little in common. Not only were they Midwesterners, but both were Iowa natives. Carson had been born in the southwestern corner of the state, in Corning. His family had lived in three other rural Iowa towns, Avoca, Clarinda, and Red Oak, before moving to Norfolk, Nebraska, when Carson was eight. If Carson ever were to be cast as mischievous Frank Hardy from the Hardy Boys, then Elliott would be intrepid Nancy Drew. Both were smart and inquisitive, pushing to make more of themselves than their Iowa roots nominally might allow. At this point in their respective careers, forty-three-year-old Carson's dream of fame had already been realized; Elliott's was about to start.

Carson had been intrigued by Elliott's classroom experiment. Despite an aversion to tackling provocative, topical issues, Carson was well read and politically aware. *Tonight* wasn't a political show, and if Carson ever turned it into one, his ratings would have tanked. If Americans wanted politics before they slid off to visit the sandman, Carson wasn't the man to deliver it. But every once in a while, Carson liked to surprise late-night TV viewers. Carson's version of a poke in the ribs, a way to say, "Don't go to sleep *yet*." *Tonight* would be one of those times.

Elliott wasn't politics, per se. She was a teacher from the middle of America who had done something extraordinary. No one outside of miniscule Riceville, Iowa, had yet heard about Elliott's little experiment. At this point, the only ink about Elliott and what she'd done had appeared in the *Riceville Recorder*. Why not have the spunky teacher explain the experiment to the rest of the nation?

Carson's people had banked on Elliott. That, though, would depend on her. She could talk in the opening slot for as long as she'd be entertaining. Within reason, of course. If she bombed, Carsey would give her the hook.

At least, the producers had been optimistic enough not to give Elliott the "death slot," the long minutes ticking to the show's close at one a.m., reserved for "serious conversation," when writers like Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, or

William Saroyan invaded the show and made night owl appearances. Elliott, the producers reasoned, could be a quirky, offbeat hit—a third-grade teacher from Flyover Country dropped into the mix with a gee-whiz story. There was room on the show every now and then for someone like that.

Upbeat. Breezy. Snappy. That was the key, as Carsey had advised Elliott in makeup. Don't be somber about whatever it was you did back wherever you came from. Make it light. We don't want serious. *The Tonight Show* is entertainment. We're here to *entertain*.

Certainly Elliott had an important story to impart, given Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination seven weeks earlier and the endemic racism that continued to ravage the United States, which had escalated into violence and looting in dozens of cities at the time. *The Tonight Show* had to do *something* to pay homage to King. Maybe the schoolteacher and her offbeat story would be the ticket. It wouldn't be much, but Carson's people never intended it to be. A nod and no more. Fade to commercial.

Would she ramble? Would she freeze? Or would she go gaga, never getting anywhere except to mug to ten million viewers how awestruck she felt sitting in America's living room?

None of this would be bad for *The Tonight Show*, by the way. But in moderation. It was the reason civilians were asked to appear on the show in the first place. Nonprofessionals offered verbal miscues, pratfalls, and occasionally, yes, sincerity and insight. Every once in a while a visit from a non-Hollywood type actually worked. An everyday American who shared a nugget of wisdom with the folks back home. In moderation. If the guest turned out to be funny, that'd be even better. *Tonight* viewers liked Don Rickles and Buddy Hackett, but really, how much boozy Vegas humor could Carson's mainstream audience take? Viewers loved plain-folks heroes. Just as long as Elliott didn't turn serious.

Carson was Everyman—only smarter, quicker, funnier, richer, thinner, and handsomer. Americans valued what he said, and by extension, listened to what his guests had to say. Anyone who had a message wanted to get on *Tonight*. Getting on the Carson show was getting to America.

Carson veered toward the safe and comfortable. Night after night, he projected a reassuring presence that made him, for better or worse, a national bellwether. While he was uncontested as America's master of the come back one-liner, he also was the litmus test of all things American. For better or worse, Carson was the nation's *prima facie* spokesman. That *The Tonight Show* aired at a time when viewers were unwinding, about to sleep, stew, or

frolic, also was an ingredient in the ninety-minute program's rat-a-tat-tat recipe. Carson was cool, as was the medium, per Marshall McLuhan's a/courant observation. How many other middle-aged males could get away with being called "Johnny" if they weren't?

What those on the Studio 6B set seemed to worry about was whether Elliott would turn her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity into a guilt-tripping polemic about race. Yes, King had been murdered. Yes, American cities were going up in flames. But if Elliott went there, it'd be the kiss of death. Keep it simple. Answer Johnny's questions. Keep it light. *Banter.*

At exactly six thirty the show began, first with Paul Anka's upbeat instrumental, which had been Carson's signature since his first show in 1962, followed by sidekick McMahan's booming "And now—here's Johnny!"

Carson, looking a little lost, sauntered onstage, beaming like a dressed-up, buttoned-down version of Huck Finn. McMahan, at his perch, offered his signature greeting—fingertips joined, hands flattened, bowing in mock Buddhist benediction to sensei Carson. McMahan let fly a couple of *Hi-YOOOOOH's!*, his bromantic cry to the boss. Band leader Doc Severinsen, clad in his usual eye-popping getup of a sequined shirt and shiny bell-bottoms, followed suit, bidding Carson a bemused smile as he raised the index finger of his right hand and twirled it from head to waist while bowing his head, his nightly trademark.

Dressed in a worsted-wool dark-brown Hart Schaffner and Marx suit that looked too snug, loose-limbed Carson began his monologue center stage.

There was a lot to make fun of that day. Carson started by zinging political candidates elbowing for the lead in the year's presidential primaries, which would culminate next week in winner-take-all California. A month earlier, President Johnson, in his slow, molasses-thick Texas drawl, had announced his decision not to seek a second term, leaving the Democrats scrambling to run against Republican front-runner, jowly Richard Nixon. Tenacious Bobby Kennedy was rising meteorically against antiwar candidate Minnesota senator Eugene McCarthy, while Johnson's heir apparent, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, was turning more and more pugnacious, fearing defeat.

Carson avoided in-the-trenches politics, but no way could he not lob a few grenades tonight, particularly at Nixon. Carson deadpanned three quick one-liners, broke into a puckish smile, then rolled his eyes skyward. Classic Carson. A few canned guffaws, followed by a round of eager applause from the audience. It was going to be a good night.

Carson touched his Windsor tie, pulled at his shirt cuffs, and leaned back on his heels. Playing the modest Midwesterner, acting as though he was embarrassed by all the attention, Carson cracked four more jokes, mimed his famous half golf swing, then broke for a commercial, intoning *The Tonight Show's* groan-worthy stanza: "We'll be right back."

During the break, Carson moved left to greet McMahon at the desk and chair on the stage on a stage; the furniture set looked like it came from some discount wholesaler in the bowels of New Jersey. The two men feinted and dodged, exchanging warm-up patter, acting like teenage boys at a junior high dance. "Ten seconds," a man with a board suddenly shouted, and Carson on cue turned serious, tap-tapping out what seemed like Morse code with the pink eraser top of a yellow no. 2 pencil. Three, two, one.

Back on, Carson teased the appearance of tonight's headliner, nice-guy Garner, a wife-pleaser pajama-clad husbands could tolerate. But, in the meantime, Johnny had a special guest.

After another commercial break, producer Carsey, standing next to Elliott backstage, touched the small of her back. It was time.

As the show's rainbow curtains parted, Elliott squared her shoulders and inhaled. As Severinsen and his band struck up a folksy tune, America was introduced to Jane Elliott.

When the applause died down, Carson asked a setup about what had brought Elliott the thousand miles from Iowa—he first said she was from Ohio, then corrected himself—to New York. It was Elliott's prompt to present the classroom experiment.

This was her moment. And she went for broke.

Carefully, even meticulously, Elliott explained the experiment, how she had come up with the idea to split her third-grade class into two groups—one of children with blue eyes and the other, children with brown eyes. She explained how she gave privileges, such as extra time for lunch and recess, to the brown-eyed students just because of the color of their eyes. She said the blue-eyed students had to use paper cups if they wanted to drink from the water fountain. She slowed her speech, then nodded, for all this to sink in. Elliott was a teacher, after all.

She described how she had instructed the blue-eyed students not even to think about doing their homework because they were too dumb to get any of the answers right, and even if they managed to finish it, they were too lazy to remember to hand it in the next day. "That's just the way blue-eyed children