

BEFORE AND AFTER

Before and after photographs don't tell what happens after "after" is over. Is she still a slender and attractive 115 pounds, or did some unexpected emotional crisis drive her back to the strawberry shortcake? Even as I write this, she could be making a pilgrimage to Elvis' grave, taking up two seats on the bus as she opens the Enquirer to the ad she posed for eight months ago. The "after" photograph shows her pulling out her waistband to signify all the fat that isn't there. She remembers being told to suck in her stomach and hold it for the flash.

Elvis' grave is only thirteen miles away. The rural southern scenery gives way to the quasi-cosmopolitan landscape of Memphis. She sees a basset hound baring its teeth and biting itself on the leg to get rid of some ticks. The driver stops outside a correctional facility to pick up some wives returning home after conjugal visits. They're barely able to board without assistance. Some of them start to cry as soon as they sit down. If it weren't for the diversion provided by their tabloids, if it weren't for a certain before and after photograph, the future would seem to hold out no hope at all.

THE FAST TRACK

According to my appointment book, I wouldn't have a single free moment until Thursday of the following week. Every page was crowded with names and times. Asterisks. Stars. The only opening was a tiny slot at 11:00 A.M. on December 17, where somebody had cancelled because of a death in the family. I stared at this empty white space in disbelief. It seemed to glow. Too impatient to wait for the day, I took a pencil and drew a tiny stick figure of myself in the space. Gave myself a pair of sunglasses and a tropical fruit drink. Put a fishing rod in my hand. It was heaven to see myself having a halfway decent time. Then, of course, the phone rang. It was somebody demanding to see me because of a major screw-up down at the printing plant. My mind raced. Was I to blame? All the old instincts returned, and I erased myself without thinking.