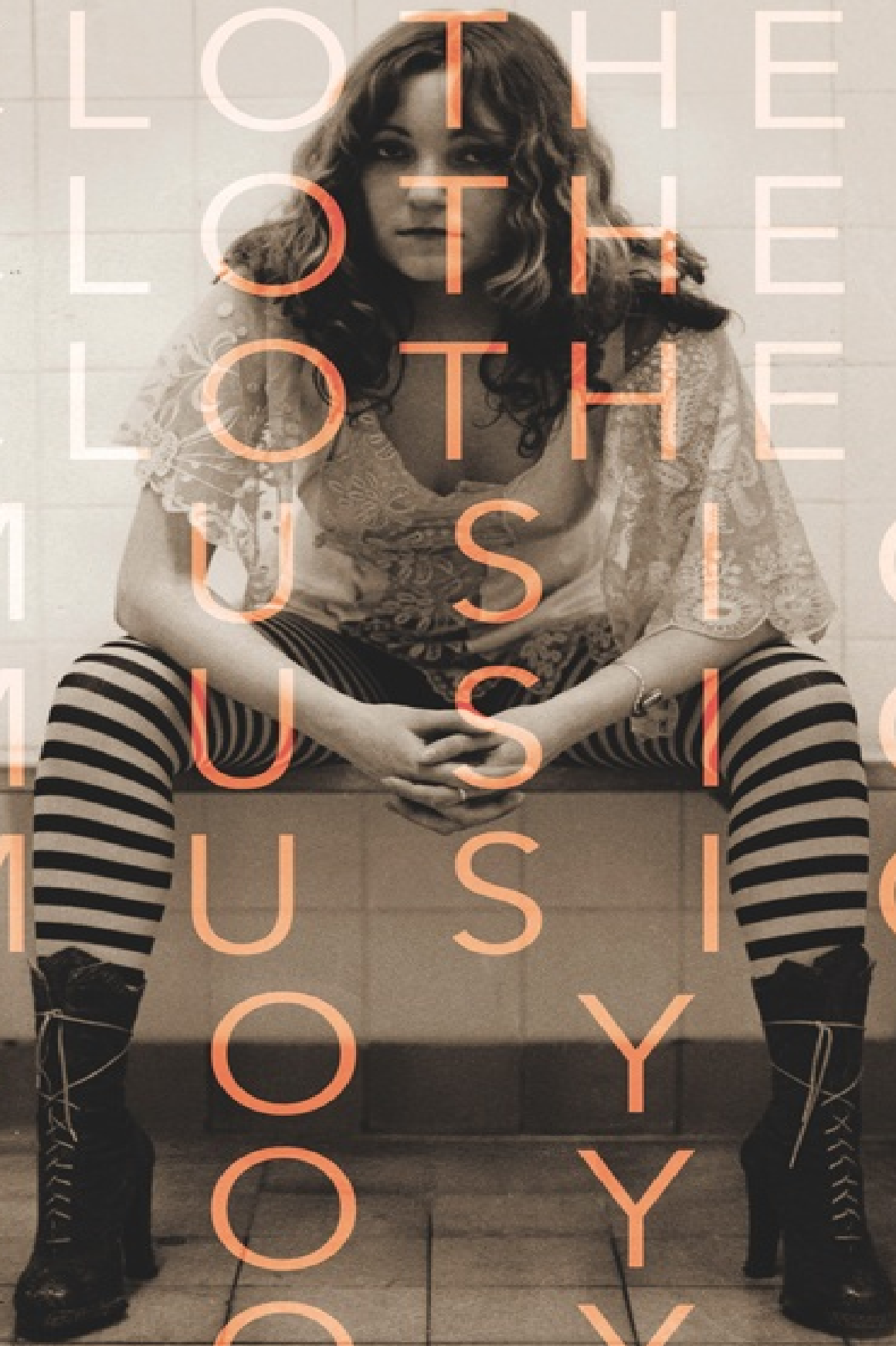


VIV ALBERTINE

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VIV ALBERTINE
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BOYS

Thomas Dunne Books
St. Martin's Press
New York



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For Arla

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INTRODUCTION

If you don't want to slip up tomorrow, speak the truth today.

Bruce Lee

Anyone who writes an autobiography is either a twat or broke. I'm a bit of both. Once I got going, I did make myself laugh a couple of times and learnt a few things, as patterns emerged that I hadn't noticed before. Hopefully you'll have a bit of a laugh and learn a few things too.

The title comes from something my mother used to say to me: 'Clothes, clothes, clothes, music, music, boys, boys, boys – that's all you ever think about!' She would chant this refrain when I came home from school every day with no clue about the content of my lessons but able to describe in minute detail what the teacher was wearing, raving about the boys I fancied and predicting which records were going to be hits.

This is an extremely subjective book, a scrapbook of memories. The experiences documented here have left an indelible emotional imprint on me; they shaped and scarred me. And I was present at every one. Let others who were there tell their versions if they want to. This is mine.

Some names have been changed to protect the guilty.

For those in a hurry ...

Sex references: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)

Drugs references: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)

Punk rock references: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)

Side One

1 MASTURBATION

Never did it. Never wanted to do it. There was no reason not to, no oppression, I wasn't told it was wrong and I don't think it's wrong. I just didn't think of it at all. I didn't naturally want to do it, so I didn't know it existed. By the time my hormones kicked in, at about thirteen years old, I was being felt-up by boys and that was enough for me. Bit by bit the experimentation went further until I finally had sex with my regular boyfriend when I was fifteen. We were together for three years and are still friends now, which I think is nice. In all the time since my first sexual experience I haven't masturbated, although I did try once after being nagged by friends when I complained I was lonely. But to me, masturbating when lonely is like drinking alcohol when you're sad: it exacerbates the pain. It's not that I don't touch my breasts (they're much nicer now I've put on a little weight) or touch between my legs or smell my fingers, I do all that, I like doing that, tucked up all warm and cosy in bed at night. But it never leads on to masturbation. Can't be bothered. I don't have fantasies much either – except once when I was pregnant and all hormoned up. I felt very aroused and had a violent fantasy about being fucked by a pack of rabid, wild dogs in the front garden. I later miscarried – that taught me. This fantasy didn't make me want to masturbate, I ran the scenario through my head a couple of times, wrote it down and never had a thought like it again. Honest.

(Please god let that old computer I wrote it on be smashed into a million pieces and not lying on its side in a landfill site somewhere, waiting to be dug up and analysed sometime in the future, like Lucy the Australopithecus fossil.)

Here we go then, (genital) warts an' all ...

2 ARCADIA

1958

My family arrived in England from Sydney, Australia, when I was four years old. My sister and I had three toys each: a Chinese rag doll, a teddy bear and a koala bear. We were not precious about our toys. The dolls were repeatedly buried in the back garden, eventually we forgot where they were and they perished in the earth. The teddies we would hold by their feet and smash them at each other in vicious fights until they were torn and mangled, with eyes and ears missing. We didn't touch the koalas because they were covered in real fur and felt creepy.

We sailed from Australia to England on a ship called the *Arcadia*, according to a miniature red and-white life-belt hanging on a nail in the bathroom. It was a six-week journey. One of my earliest memories is of my mother and father tucking my sister and me up in bunk beds in our cabin. They told us they were going to dinner, they wouldn't be long, and if we were worried about anything, to press the buzzer by the bed and someone would go and get them. This all sounded perfectly reasonable to us, so we snuggled down and off they went.

About thirty seconds later, we were gripped by terror. I was four, my sister was two. Once the door was shut and my parents had gone, the reality of being alone at night in this strange place was unbearable. We started crying. I pressed the buzzer. After what seemed like ages and quite a lot of pressing, a steward appeared and told us everything was fine and we should go back to sleep. He left. Still scared, I pressed the buzzer again. For a very long time no one came, so I carried on. Eventually the steward came back and shouted, '*If you press that buzzer once more, the ship will sink and you, mummy and daddy will drown.*' I didn't stop pressing and Mum and Dad didn't drown, they came back from dinner to find us bawling.



Mum and Dad

At four years old I learnt an important lesson: grown-ups lie.

3 PET SOUNDS

I wish I were a girl again, half-savage and hardy and free.

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

My sister and I were quite feral little girls. We weren't like girls at all for a few years, quite unemotional, verging on cruel. We had a dog called Candy. She was a white Yorkshire terrier and she ate her own poo. Her breath smelt. After she had an operation (so she couldn't have puppies), she lay in her basket trying to chew the scab off her wound. I suppose we all do that in a way.

My sister and I taught Candy to sleep on her back, tucked up under a blanket with her front paws peeping over the top. On Guy Fawkes Night we dressed her up in a bonnet and a long white dress (one of our christening gowns), sat her in a doll's pushchair and wheeled her round Muswell Hill Broadway asking for 'a penny for the guy'. We didn't get much, but that wasn't the point.

We got bored with Candy quite quickly and stopped taking her for walks. The only time we called out 'Walkies!' and rattled her lead was when we couldn't get her in from the back garden at night. Eventually she caught on and wouldn't come in at all.

One day somebody put an anonymous note through our door, 'You don't know me but I know your poor little dog...' Telling us off for being mean to Candy. We gave her away.

We had a cat too, Tippy. We used to build traps for her in the garden. We would dig a pit, cover it with leaves and twigs, then wait for her to fall into it, which of course she never did. So we tried to push her in instead. She ran away.

Lastly we had three goldfish, Flamingo, Flipper and Ringo, all from the local fair. Flamingo died after a few days, Flipper died a couple of weeks later and was eaten by Ringo. Ringo had a nervous breakdown (no doubt guilty about eating Flipper) and started standing on his head at the bottom of the fish tank for hours at a time. Eventually I couldn't stand it any more so I flushed him down the loo. When the bowl cleared, he was still there, standing on his head. It took lots of flushes to get rid of him. That image of Ringo on his head at the bottom of the loo still haunts me.



With my little sister

4 BAD BOYS

1962

The classroom door opens and in strides our headmaster, flanked by two identical, scruffy boys. Mr Mitchell announces to the class that the boys' names are Colin and Raymond and they've been expelled from their last school for bad behaviour. He looks down at the twins and says:

'St James' is a church school: we believe in redemption and we are going to give you another chance.'

Colin and Raymond scowl up at him; they are not happy to be here or grateful for their second chance. They look at us clean-haired, well-behaved children in our maroon blazers, starched white shirts and striped ties with contempt. Their holey grey socks are crumpled around their ankles, they don't wear silly short-shorts like all the other boys in my class – their shorts are long, right down to their scabby knees. They have greasy brown fringes hanging in their eyes. One of them has a scar on his freckled cheek. I think to myself, *Thank goodness, two good-looking boys at school at last.* I want to clap my hands together with glee. I don't know where this thought comes from. I don't recognise it. I've never cared about boys before, up until now they've been invisible to me, not important in my world. No one's ever told me about bad boys, that they're sexy and compelling, or to stay away from them. I work all this out by myself, today – at eight years old, in Class Three.

As our class marches in a crocodile through the leafy streets of Muswell Hill to the dining hall, I can't take my eyes off these two delinquents. I want to drink them in. I screw my neck round and end up walking backwards just to stare at them. I'm disappointed that we're not at the same table at lunch but at least I'm directly behind Colin, sitting at a long trestle table with my back to him. I feel excited, a new kind of excitement, a bubbling, choking, gurgling feeling rises up from my navy-blue regulation school knickers into my chest. The effort of keeping this energy contained is revving me up even more. There's only one thing I can think of doing to release the tension and get Colin's attention: I poke him in the back. He takes no notice, so I poke him again. This time he spins round and snarls at me, baring his teeth like an animal under attack, but I'm buzzing on this new feeling and once he's turned away from me, I poke him again.



In junior-school uniform, 1963

‘If you do that again I’ll smash your face in.’

I’ve never been threatened by a boy before and I don’t like it, I think I might cry. I have a feeling that this is not how it’s supposed to go if you like someone, but the adrenalin coursing through my blood obliterates my common sense. I can’t believe what I’m doing, I must be out of my mind, I risk everything, pushing all feelings of fear, pride and self-protection aside – I stretch out my arm and poke him again.

Colin swivels round. Everyone stops chattering and stares at us. I look for a teacher to come and save me but nobody’s near so I grip the bench tightly and stare straight back at Colin, waiting for the punch. His mouth twists into a sly smile.

‘I think she likes me.’

From this moment on, we are inseparable.

5 THE BELT

1963

But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper
Than the strong man in his wrath.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'The Cry of the Children'

I live with my mother, father and little sister, on the ground floor of my grandmother's house in Muswell Hill, North London. The house smells of moth balls and we have to be quiet all the time, even in the garden – *I really identify with Anne Frank tiptoeing around her loft* – because of the nerves of Miss Cole, the tenant living on the top floor. Our flat has no living room and we share a bathroom with my grandmother. There are no carpets, just bare boards and a threadbare oriental rug in the kitchen. The only furniture we have is three beds, a mottled green Formica-topped dining table with tubular steel legs and four dining chairs covered with torn yellow plastic with hairy black stuffing poking out of the slits. This dining-room set was shipped over with us from Australia.

I can't imagine what a happy home is like: parents cuddling and laughing, music playing, books on the shelves, discussions round the table? We don't have any of that, but if Mum's happy, I'm happy. The trouble is, she isn't happy very often because my dad is odd and difficult and not as quick-minded as her – and also we're poor. Every night I lie in bed listening through the wall to Mum tidying up the kitchen. She opens and closes cupboard doors, bangs pots and pans, and I try to interpret the sounds, gauge by the strength of the door slams, the ferociousness of plates clattering together, the way the knives and forks are tossed into a drawer, if she's in a good mood or not. Usually not. Occasionally I think, *That door was closed gently, that saucepan was put away softly, she's feeling OK*, and I go off to sleep, happy.

Tonight, my eyes are swollen from crying and there are red welts across the back of my legs; the marks hurt so badly I have to lie on my side. Mum's tucked me and my sister up in bed, given us both a kiss and turned off the light but I'm wide awake, straining to hear through the bedroom wall. I close my eyes, concentrating on the sounds to see if she's got over the upset earlier. I can hear Dad talking to her. *What's he doing in our home, this big hairy beast?* Lots of dads seem like that to me: awkward in the way, out of place, filling up the rooms with their clumsy bodies. They should've gone off into the wild to hunt bison after their children were born and not come back; that's how it was meant to be. My dad's not like other dads though, he's worse: hairy all over his body, with a stubbly chin that's sprinkled with shaving cuts. He sticks little bits of toilet paper onto the nicks to stem the bleeding. Most of the time his neck and chin are covered in tiny white petals with red specks in the middle of each one. Halfway through the day, little black dots begin to reappear on his chin and he goes back to the sink for another shave. His deep voice, made even stranger by his French accent, rumbles and reverberates through the walls and he's always clearing his throat of what sounds like great gobs of phlegm. He's so ... masculine, so ... foreign – a cross between Fred Flintstone and a French version of Stanley Kowalski from *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Earlier today two things happened, one that's never happened before and one that happens a lot. We had people round, not friends – I don't think Mum and Dad have any friends – but a couple of aunts and uncles. I was so excited, rushing round picking all the bits of fluff off the threadbare rug under the table – *Oh no! it's so bare you can see right through to the strings* – as we don't have a vacuum cleaner, straightening the chairs, making the beds. That's the first time I'd seen our floor through other people's eyes and I realised we lived in a dump.

By about three o'clock, everyone had arrived. I was in the kitchen putting homemade rock cakes onto a plate when I heard my dad telling a story about how him and Mum ran a fish-and-chip shop when they lived in Canada and everything that went wrong with it. They burnt the chips, made the batter out of the wrong flour, couldn't feed a coach party that came in, told them to come back tomorrow. Mum and Dad laughed their heads off about it. That's the thing that's never happened before: Mum and Dad laughed together.

I stopped what I was doing and went to have a look. Standing in the kitchen doorway I gaped open-mouthed at them. Tears poured down my face and ran into my mouth, as I drank in this extraordinary sight. I was so happy and so scared, scared that I would never see such a wonderful thing again.

I never did.

Four hours later I'm lying in the dark, listening. I can tell from the noises coming from the kitchen that Mum is angrier than usual and I know why. After everybody left, me or my sister, I can't remember which, said something that irritated Dad, just something silly, but he flipped.

'Go and get the belt.'

This happens a lot. I go to the cellar, open the door – no need to switch the light bulb on, I know this ritual by heart – and unhook the brown leather belt from a nail banged into the bare brick wall. As I breathe in the brick and coal dust, my throat tightens. Then I walk back to Dad, trailing the buckle along the floor behind me, letting it bang and clunk against the furniture. This act of defiance makes him even angrier. I hand the belt over. He tells me to turn round with my back to him and hits me three times across the back of my bare legs. It's my sister's turn next. We howl with the unfairness and the pain of it all. We cry as loud as we can, hoping Mum will stop him or the neighbours will hear us and come round and tell him off or have him sent to prison. But no one interferes once you've shown the front door of your home. The house next door could be in a different country for all they care.

Dad orders us to our bedroom as extra punishment. It's always freezing in there. As soon as he's gone, we root around in the bedside-table drawer, find an old biro and draw around each other's swollen red welts in blue ink, so even when the marks heal, the squiggly blue outlines will be a record of what he did. We promise each other: we'll never wash the biro off and we'll draw over the outlines every day. Our homemade tattoos will be permanent reminders – to him and to us – of what a bully he is. Yep, we'll show him.

A bit later Dad comes in to see us. We're sitting on our beds drawing, having got over the worst of the pain and the tears. He cries and hugs us, tells us he's sorry and asks us to forgive him.

'Yes, we forgive you, Daddy!' we chorus.

We have to forgive him, we've got to see him every day, life's going to be even more uncomfortable if we don't forgive him; it's a matter of survival. We just want everything to be all right, or seem to be all right. Mum calls out that tea's ready, Dad tells us to wash off the silly biro and

come and sit at the table.

We leave a few blue traces behind on our red skin on purpose, not enough to get him worked up again but enough to salvage our pride, then troop into the tiny steamed-up kitchen to eat stew: lumps on our plates, lumps in our throats, red eyes, red legs. Dad makes a joke and we laugh to please him then we all chomp away in silence. When no one's looking, I spit the chewed-up meat into my hand and flush down the toilet later. The radio's on, the theme tune of *Sing Something Simple* with the Swing Singers seeps into the room, the vocal harmonies – sweet and sickly – pour out into the air and fill up the silences.

I still can't stand the sound of those 1950s harmonies – like a drink you got drunk on as a teenager just the smell of it brings back the nausea.

6 YOU CAN'T DO THAT

1964

I'm at my babysitter Kristina's house, my first time in a big girl's room. There are no dolls or teddy bears anywhere. On her bed is a 'gonk', a round red cushion with a long black felt fringe, no mouth, big feet. Her bedspread is purple and she's painted her furniture purple too. In the middle of the floor is a record player, a neat little box covered in white leatherette, it looks a bit like a vanity case. Floor paper squares with circles cut out of the middle are scattered around the floor. Kristina opens the lid of the record player and takes a shiny liquorice-black disc out of one of the wrappers, puts it onto the central spindle and carefully lowers a plastic arm onto the grooves. There's a scratching sound. I have no idea what's going to happen next.

Boys' voices leap out of the little speaker – 'Can't buy me love!' No warning. No introduction. Straight into the room. It's the Beatles.

I don't move a muscle whilst the song plays. I don't want to miss one second of it. I listen with every fibre of my being. The voices are so alive. I love that they don't finish the word *love* – they give up on it halfway through and turn it into a grunt. The song careens along, only stopping once for a scream. I know what that scream means: *Wake up! We've arrived! We're changing the world!* I feel like if I've jammed my finger into an electricity socket, every part of me is fizzing.

When the song finishes, Kristina turns the record over – *What's she doing?* – and plays the B-side 'You Can't Do That'.

This song pierces my heart, and I don't think it will ever heal. John Lennon's voice is so close, so real, it's like he's in the room. He has a normal boy's voice, no high-falutin' warbling or smoothed-out, creamy harmonies like the stuff Mum and Dad listen to on the radio. He uses everyday language to tell me, his girlfriend, to stop messing around. I can feel his pain, I can hear it in his raspy voice; I can't hide it. He seesaws between bravado and vulnerability, trying to act cool but occasionally losing control. And it's all my fault. It makes me feel so powerful, affecting a boy this way – it's intoxicating. I ache to tell him, *I'm so sorry I hurt you, John, I'll never do it again.* I have a funny feeling between my legs, it feels good. I play the song over and over again for an hour until Kristina can't stand it any more and takes me home.

I already know 'You Can't Do That' by heart and sing it to myself as I trail my hand along the privet hedges, pulling off the leaves and digging my thumbnail into the rubbery green flesh every time. I get to the chorus, 'Ooooh, you can't do that!' I can still hear John Lennon's voice in my head. Not that scary rumble like my dad's, but familiar and approachable, a bit nasal, like mine. That's it! He's like me, except a *boy*. Through tree-lined streets, past the terraced houses, I float, catching glimpses of those other, happier, families through the illuminated squares of their little brick boxes. But today I'm not jealous, I'm not looking in windows for comfort any more. Under lamp posts and cherry trees I glide, stepping on the cracks between the paving stones and squashing pink blossom under my Clarks sandals – I no longer have time for childish things. Until today I thought life was always going to be

made up of sad, angry grown-ups, dreary music, stewed meat, boiled vegetables, church and school. Now everything's changed: I've found the meaning of life, hidden in the grooves of a flat black plastic disc. I promise myself I will get to that new world, but I don't know how to make it happen. What, who, could possibly help me get closer to that parallel universe? I look up and down the street as if someone might pop out of a doorway and whisk me away, but all I can see are houses, houses, houses stretching off into infinity. I feel sick. I hate them.

7 CHIC

1965

It's a Sunday afternoon, I have long, straight, light brown hair and a fringe tickling my eyelashes. I'm wearing a purple corduroy mini skirt, my grey school jumper, knee-length white socks and black school shoes. I am eleven years old and my dad and I are walking along Muswell Hill Broadway, past the Wimpy Bar, where I always stop and look longingly at the faded, greenish photos of Wimpy burgers and chips in the window. I've only been in there once. I loved everything about it. The red plastic chairs all joined together, the plain white tiled walls, which look so modern and clean compared to my home. The chips, so thin there's no room for any potato inside, just crispy golden sticks. The rubbery meat of the burger, I liked that it wasn't like real meat, didn't look like part of an animal. My teeth bounced off the brown disc in a very satisfying way. It was like eating a toy, made up and fun. Fantasy food. Perfect for a picky eater like me, uniform, bland, no surprises.

Next we pass the toyshop, where I choose my Christmas present every year, and the school uniform shop, where we buy the maroon skirt, yellow blouse and grey jumper every September. Muswell Hill is my universe. Today we've been to Cherry Tree Woods to play on the swings and Dad has bought me a *Jackie* comic. I feel relaxed with him for the first time in ages, I slip my arm through his and say:

'Daddy, I want to be a pop singer when I grow up.'

There, it's out, I've dared to voice my dream, to say it out loud. Dad is the only adult I know who has some interest in music, even if it is Petula Clark, and now I've told him, I've taken the first step towards making my dream real. Dad will know what to do, how to get me started, point me in the right direction.

'You're not chic enough.'

I don't know what the word *chic* means but I know what *he* means. I understand from the tone of his voice that I'm having ideas about myself that are way above my looks, capabilities and charm and I believe him. He must be right, he's my father.

Dad and I walk along in silence. I think, *He didn't ask me if I can sing* – but obviously that doesn't matter. I'm just not chic enough.

8 JOHN AND YOKO

I grew up with John Lennon at my side, like a big brother. When I first heard him sing, I had no idea what he looked like, what he wore, that there was a group of cool-looking guys in the band with him and nothing. The music and the words said it all.

Year by year, he unfolded to me, and he did not disappoint. He just went on getting better and better. He kept changing his clothes and hair, experimented with drugs, spiritual enlightenment, religion and psychology, and the music got more sophisticated, record by record. Then he met Yoko Ono. At last there was a girl in my life who intrigued and inspired me. The English press hated Yoko but I was fascinated by her and so were my friends. We thought she was fantastic. She wore a white mini dress and white knee-length boots to her wedding. I read her book, *Grapefruit*, she had ideas that I had never encountered before; her thoughts and her concepts were like mind-altering drugs to me. A poem would consist of one word. Simple doodles were art. Her philosophical statements and instructions made me think differently about how to live my life. I liked that the Beatles – well, John and Paul (who was with Jane Asher then) – dated women with ideas, who had interesting faces and strong personalities (the Stones were all dating dazzling beauties). When John and Yoko took their clothes off for the *Two Virgins* picture, their sweet, normal bodies all naked and wobbly were shocking because they were so imperfect. It was an especially brave move for Yoko; her body was dissected and derided by the press. But I got it. At last, a girl being interesting and brave.

I thought John was funny, clever and wise. The only problem with him being my muse was that he was so open about his emotions – he wrote and talked about his mother, Yoko, even his *aunt*, all the time, acknowledging how important women were in his life – so I assumed all boys were like this and to my huge disappointment, almost none of them were or are.

9 GONE

1965

My mother, sister and I arrive back home on a Saturday afternoon in late August after staying with my aunt for two weeks. Mum and I dump our plastic bags and rucksacks in the hall whilst my sister races upstairs to say hello to Dad. We hear her charging in and out of rooms and banging doors: she's very excited, it's the first time we've been away for years. Then her voice, a little panicky, shouts from the top of the stairs:

'He's gone!'

I run up, Mum follows, all three of us stand staring at the door to my father's study, which was always kept locked, but today is hanging open. We are never allowed in there, so it takes us a moment to shuffle forward and peep round the door. His precious study is completely empty. The wooden desk with sharp corners he made, the turquoise Anglepoise lamp, the books on engineering, the ties hanging on the back of the door, all gone. We walk back into the hallway and look around. Pictures have disappeared from the walls, the big trunk with all the photographs has vanished, and gradually we realise loads of stuff is missing – it feels like a robbery. My sister and I look at Mum, waiting for her to make sense of it. We have no doubt she will make sense of it: she makes sense of everything.

'Oh thank goodness for that, he's gone,' she says, smiling. 'What a relief.'

My sister and I laugh nervously. We are not convinced. We don't take our eyes off Mum's face for a second, looking for a flicker of doubt in her expression. When we're sure that she's OK, we relax and agree, yes, it's great that the big hairy nuisance has gone. It's all perfectly normal and right. Let's go and make a cup of tea!

Mum must have been so shocked to discover Dad had done a bunk – even if things were going badly, it's never nice to be deserted. I wonder how much self-control and acting (mothers are very underrated actors) it took for her to quickly arrange her features into a composed expression and modify her voice so she sounded calm and reassuring. Or maybe it was all planned? Maybe it was arranged that we'd go away for two weeks whilst Dad packed up and left. When I ask Mum she refuses to talk about it. I don't want to upset her, so I'll just have to live with the not knowing.

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