



THE BEATLES

THE BIOGRAPHY

BOB SPITZ

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

"Irresistible....A captivating picture that hasn't been seen before." —*New York Times*

BOB SPITZ



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for
Sandy & Angie D'Amato

and Lily

And for all those whose lives are enriched
by the Beatles' music

*When the mode of the music changes,
the walls of the city shake.*

—PLATO

December 27, 1960

They had begun to pour into the village of Litherland as they always did, half an hour before the doors opened. Nightcrawlers: their bodies young and liquid, legs spidering along the sidewalks, exaggerated by the blue glare of the streetlamps. This time of year, Sefton Road at 6:30 was already dark; evening pressed down early from the desolate sky, raked by gunmetal gray clouds drifting east across the river toward the stagnating city of Liverpool.

Tuesdays at Litherland's town hall were usually what promoters referred to as "soft nights"—that is, midweek affairs attracting a reasonable 600 or 700 jivers, as opposed to the weekend crush of 1,500—but tonight's shindig was billed as a Christmas dance, which accounted for the unusually large crowd. Every few minutes another double-decker bus groaned to a halt outside the hall and emptied a heaving load of teenagers onto the pavement. The crowd, moving erratically in the brittle night air, swelled like a balloon waiting for a dart.

The main attraction, *ex post facto*, had not yet arrived. Running customarily behind schedule, the band had left West Derby Village later than anticipated after choosing, by consensus, a playlist for that night's performance. The selection process was no mean feat, considering their repertoire of well over 150 rock 'n roll songs, from the seminal hits ("Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," "What'd I Say") to pop standards ("Better Luck Next Time," "Red Sails in the Sunset") to obscure gems ("You Don't Understand Me"); each demanded brief consideration. Afterward, equipment was loaded into the old bottle green van that had been recruited for service only that morning.

"[The four boys, riding in the dark, grimy cargo hold like astronauts](#) in a cramped space capsule, braced themselves with experienced hands as the old crate rattled north along the Stanley Road, past shops splashed with a waxy fluorescence. The road hugged the shoreline, where they could see harbor lights and the wharves of the distant port, then broke inland along the Leeds & Liverpool Canal. Even to a native, which they all were, it was difficult to tell where one borough ended and another began: Crosby became Kirkdale and eventually Bootle, then Litherland, their boundaries marked only by wide-mouthed intersections and the occasional shop sign incorporating a piece of local heritage into its name.

They stared silently out the back window for a while, absorbing the hallucinatory darkness. Paul McCartney and George Harrison, both prodigiously handsome, straddled two boxy amplifiers, while Pete Best, shifting and elusive, posted like a cowboy atop a bass drum case. Unspeaking also, John Lennon, who had been to Litherland twice before, rode shotgun in order to direct their driver to the proper location.

Chas Newby knew he was the odd man out. Crouched perilously on an enameled wheel arch, he regarded his mates with respectful detachment. Until a week before, nearly half a year had passed since he'd last heard them play. Those few months ago, they were like most other aspiring Liverpool bands, talented but unexceptional, performing identical cover versions of current hits that everyone else was doing. "I certainly didn't think they would make much of an impression," he says, recalling their muddy sound, their clumsy, mechanical attack, their unintentional anarchy. In fact, his former band, the Blackjacks, in which Pete Best had played, was no better or worse at entertaining the kids

who followed local groups from dance club to dance club to dance club. On any given night, five bands on a bill would perform the same set of songs—the same way. Homogeneity was the criterion on which the whole scene turned.

Now suddenly everything had changed. When Chas had arrived at Pete's house in West Derby Village the week before, he was quite unprepared for the scene inside. The living room was overheated and brighter than usual. An umbrella of purple smoke hung over the coffee table, Coke bottles lay scattered like chess pieces. As Newby moved toward the couch, his eyes filled with a vision that looked like one of Rouault's Gothic monochromes: four ravenlike figures were grouped there, clad in ominous bruised leather and blackness—trousers, T-shirts, jackets, boots, a riot of black. It took him a few seconds, reading the faces of the caped quartet, to realize they belonged to Pete Best and musicians he'd previously known collectively as the Quarry Men.

The band hadn't played a date in weeks, owing to a creeping malaise that nearly rendered them extinct. Then, a week ago, four decent gigs materialized, which they'd hungrily accepted, despite one glaring obstacle: their bass player, Stuart Sutcliffe, was spending the holiday in Germany with his girlfriend.

"We need a bass player," one of the musicians complained, courting Newby.

Best nodded significantly. "Get yourself a bass and practice with us," he said. Newby was amused and touched by their invitation. His know-how extended only to rhythm guitar, but he was familiar with droning bass figures, and George Harrison, the band's true technician, volunteered to simplify it for him.

Newby borrowed a bass from his friend Tommy McGurk and agreed to an impromptu practice. They set up shop in the Bests' capacious basement—a room that moonlighted as the Casbah jive club where kids came to hang out and dance—and ran down some songs. "The sort of music they played was fairly easy to pick up," Newby says. But the sound they made unnerved him. It was still dependent on cover versions of current hits, but unlike the reverential copies performed by all other Liverpool bands, they burst through an entirely new dimension. These songs were not meticulous imitations, there was nothing neat or controlled about them. They were fierce, rip-roaring, they had real muscle, underscored by Best's vigorous drumming—a lusty, propulsive volley that drove each song over a cliff—and the vocal acrobatics of McCartney. Newby was amazed at how Paul, especially, had transformed himself from an able crooner into a belter whose vocal range seemed to spiral off the charts. "Paul had developed this way of falsetto singing that knocked me for a loop," he says. "No one in Liverpool sang like that, like Little Richard—*no one*."



Lennon, more than anyone, knew they had made great strides. (Years later he would acknowledge as much, saying, "[We thought we were the best](#) before anybody else had even heard us, back in Hamburg and Liverpool.") But only that August the band had left Liverpool a virtual embarrassment. Their playing was haphazard, their direction uncharted. [The word around town](#) was that their band was the worst outfit on the circuit—not even a band, if you took into account that they were unable to hold a drummer. Howie Casey, who fronted the Seniors and would one day play for Wings, says, "[We sure didn't know them](#), and I don't think anybody else... knew them either." Only one bandleader of significance was able to recall a nightmarish triple bill they'd played that May at Lathom Hall, in the Liverpool suburb of Seaforth. "[They were so bad](#)," he said, "[the promoter] just shut the curtains on them!"

So it had been off to Hamburg and then, afterward, the bleak likelihood of an apprenticeship on the Liverpool docks, a clerk's position at the Cotton Exchange or British Rail, or rivet duty at one of the automobile plants sprouting in the suburbs. No doubt about it, after Germany there would be no further high life. John Lennon had been chucked out of art college for extreme indifference, a disgrace he seemed to court, as if a dark diagnosis had been confirmed. [Paul McCartney had squandered](#) his early academic promise by performing so poorly on his exams that teachers abandoned any hope that he'd advance to the university level. [George Harrison, who regarded school](#) as a terrific inconvenience, had decided to sit for exams—and failed *every one* of them. [Thrilled by performing,](#) [Pete Best](#) had drifted away from plans to attend a teachers training college. Only Stuart Sutcliffe, who was an impassioned, proven artist, had any hope of success, and his bandmates knew he would eventually forsake music to pursue his destiny as a serious painter.

But Hamburg had thrown them all a powerful curve. Something strangely significant had happened there, something intangible opened a small window of hope and gave their dreams an unpredictable new lift. Their shows took on an excitement that bordered on anarchy. Frustrated by the feeble drone that English rock 'n roll bands had settled into, they exploited their notoriety as “[a gang of scruffs](#)” and pumped up the volume. They began retooling their show to reach the audience through antics gleaned from hell-raisers like Gene Vincent and Jerry Lee Lewis. In the process, they became not only rigorously proficient onstage but immensely popular with the German nightclub crawlers.

Then, just as mercurially, it all came crashing down.

The Hamburg gig had ended in tumultuous disarray, with the boys being deported in an unbecoming fashion and shipped north again in irregular, onerous shifts. For two weeks they bummed around Liverpool, sad and aimless, avoiding one another like animals forced to share a cage in a zoo. Evidence that their dream had ended loomed starkly, and the freight of one another's company made that much harder to bear.

It was in the midst of this deepening depression that John and Pete turned up together at the tiny Jacaranda coffee bar. They had come for a coffee and, by chance, encountered Bob Wooler, a nappy, courtly man of twenty-eight with no youth left to him aside from a passion for popular music. No one nurtured the Liverpool rock 'n roll community more ably than Wooler, a failed songwriter, until it was jerked sideways by the vise grip of Brian Epstein a few years later. He projected the dazzling eloquence of an actor and anchored his voice with a facile, flowery resonance that gave his young protégés a sense of confidence. All afternoon Lennon and Best sat sulking, ill at ease, at one of the tiny postage-stamp-size tables, surrounded by clusters of bearded university students, and whined to Wooler about their professional situation. They wanted to work again—badly. Anything would do: a show, a dance, a club date, even a party. He had to help them, he just *had* to, they insisted.

The only event of significance was the upcoming Christmas dance at Litherland Town Hall. Wooler called promoter Brian Kelly from the Jacaranda's kitchen, while Lennon and Best stood nearby, hanging on his every word. On the other end of the line, Kelly's stagy sigh leached impatience. A cantankerous entrepreneur who was among the small band of missionaries spreading the gospel of rock 'n roll, he had heard it all before and was used to the gale force of Wooler's rhetoric when it came to plugging musicians. As far as Kelly was concerned, Wooler was trying to pick his pocket. Besides, he had already booked three bands to entertain. But Wooler was persuasive.

“[They're fantastic](#),” he assured Kelly, who deflected the compliment with a discernible grunt. “Could you possibly put them on as an extra? Like I said, they've been to Hamburg.”

To punctuate this distinction, Wooler asked him for a fee of £8 for the band, an extraordinary amount for a local attraction. Kelly didn't take more than a second to respond. “Ridiculous!”

Determinedly, Wooler pursued another line of argument to help further his case. “Yes, but they’re professionals now,” he said. This made Kelly sputter in disgust. “*Professional!* I don’t give a sod about them being professional,” he said.

Wooler cast an uneasy eye over his shoulder at the vigilant boys, their faces slipping in and out of the late-afternoon shadows. Hamburg had aged them, he thought. Best, the taller of the two, was bristle-haired, with a ghostly transference in his eyes and the type of soft, matinee-idol features that could quicken a girl’s pulse; Lennon, although a few inches shorter, seemed more in command by the hard glare he threw and the pitch of his face, set in an expression of thin-lipped satisfaction. And it was apparent to both of them that the conversation was not going as planned. Momentarily distracted, Wooler threw them a swift, professional smile before returning to his sales pitch.

He and Brian Kelly went at it for another five minutes, feinting and jabbing with particulars that served their respective causes, until they had brokered an acceptable deal. Afterward, Wooler faced another uphill battle, persuading Best and Lennon to accept Kelly’s £6 offer. It was considerably less than they had made overseas, nothing that would give them much incentive. But after all, it was a gig; it was another opportunity to play rock ’n roll. For the moment, they were back in business.

Past the old container dock in Bootle, Stanley Road broke up into a couple of two-lane tributaries that fed into Linacre Road. The road began a descent, and rounding a curve, they saw the town itself, stretched haggard beneath the unflattering winter light. [Litherland had a great many shops](#), with a Methodist mission whose solid buff-and-red brick hulk was used as a mortuary during the Blitz. The floodlit Richmond sausage works sign, with its giddy neon pig marching off with a string of pork links, provided a beacon to the south; the stubby marquee outside the Regal Cinema glowed at the opposite end; the rest of the town existed obliquely behind the main road. There was no visible horizon, just block after block of wafer-thin terrace houses joined at the hip and strung together like shabby plastic beads. There had been a time when Litherland, with its rich green farms, stood proudly at the mouth of the Mersey, but the Luftwaffe had ruined its dreams. The brick-faced match works, hit by German incendiaries, remained a bombed-out blackened shell, while farther on, flattened gaps in row houses and caved-in church roofs stood as signposts to the area’s tumultuous past.

Frank Garner, the band’s driver (none of their families owned a car), pulled the van as close as he could to the entrance so the boys could unload their gear. In the gathering darkness, they could see a dozen or so teenagers lingering by the doors. The lack of a dense queue made the band uneasy until they realized that everyone had already gone inside to avoid the gamy stench seeping from the tannery on Field Lane, just beyond the hall.

In a scramble, they climbed out, lugging their equipment, and hurried in through an old wooden corridor cobbled to an open cloakroom that reeked of Minor’s hair lacquer and disinfectant. The town council chamber and auxiliary offices, where villagers paid their bills, had been closed since 5:30, so the band wound along a hallway lined with deserted rooms to the backstage area, where Bob Wooler fussed over the evening’s playlist.

Wooler was pleasantly surprised to see them. In the course of booking the date, John Lennon had bristled that the fee wasn’t worth all the effort, and Wooler pleaded, “For God’s sake, don’t let me down.” Lennon assured him they would turn up, but Wooler was skeptical.

Still, he decided to put them on at nine o’clock—the “center spot,” as it was known—between the Deltones and the Searchers. “It meant that everyone would be inside the hall,” Wooler recalls, “no one entering late or leaving early. For a half hour, they would have Liverpool’s complete attention.” Why Wooler did this remains a mystery—even to himself. Although he’d heard the band on an earlier occasion, it was only for a song before he fled to the refuge of a pub, leaving him without much of an

opinion. Nor was he encouraged by their attitude. But as a victim of artistic frustration, Bob was drawn inexorably to the band's sorry predicament, especially to John's vulnerability. Wooler sensed in Lennon a person of awesome complexity and ambition; the boy seemed to emanate heat, signaling some kind of raw, restless talent. There was something there worth exploring, he concluded. "So I just trusted my instinct that they would go down in an unusual, important way."

The house was full, framed in hazy silhouette—not a fleet of drunken sailors, like in Hamburg, but local teenagers, many of whom they had gone to school with. Wooler busied himself with preparations, but between the second and third records of the intermission (there was a rule: three songs between sets, no more, to avoid the possibility of fights), he walked over to deliver some last-minute advice. "I'll announce you," he hastened to tell them, "then go straight into a number as soon as the curtain opens." He watched the recognition register on the boys' faces but noted a faint disapproval in their manner. So be it, he thought.

Out front, they could hear the overheated crowd, its attention span slipping away. The throng of teenagers wanted action. They had danced distractedly between acts; the records were no substitute for the real thing, and now, in the rambling fade, their liquid laughter and stridence signaled an excitement that sought to condense into impatience. Besides, there was a general curiosity about the next band, which had been added at the eleventh hour and was advertised as being "Direct from Hamburg." A German act. It would be interesting, from the pitch of their accents and their delivery, to see how they contrasted with the sharpness of Liverpool's top bands.

The hall was packed with teenagers, many of whom had gathered at card tables along both sidewalls to await the next act. The majority were attired in what was respectfully called "fancy dress" for what remained of the holiday festivities. The well-scrubbed boys, whose dark suits were also their school uniforms, looked stiff and self-conscious, while girls, sheathed in tight calf-length skirts and white shirts, paraded gaily to and from the upstairs bathroom, applying last-minute retouches to their makeup. Those who danced drifted casually across the big, open dance floor, keeping an eye on the stage as the band shuffled into place behind the curtain. Promptly, amps crackled in resistance: John and George plugged into a shared Truvoice that saw them through infancy, while Paul switched on his trusty seafoam green Ampigo. The audience stirred and half turned while Bob Wooler crooned into an open mike: "And now, everybody, the band you've been waiting for. Direct from Hamburg—"

[But before he got their name out](#), Paul McCartney jumped the gun and, in a raw, shrill burst as the curtain swung open, hollered: "*I'm gonna tell Aunt Mary / 'bout Uncle John / he said he had the mis'ry / buthegotalotoffun...*"

Oh, baby! The aimless shuffle stopped dead in its tracks. The reaction of the audience was so unexpected that Wooler had failed, in the first few seconds, to take note of it. Part of the reason was the shocking explosion that shook the hall. A whomp of bass drum accompanied each quarter note beat with terrific force. The first one struck after Paul screamed, "*Tell,*" so that the charge ricocheted wildly off the walls. There was a second on *Mary*, and then another, then a terrible volley that had the familiar *bam-bam-bam* of a Messerschmitt wreaking all hell on a local target: an assault innocent of madness. The pounding came in rhythmic waves and once it started, it did not stop. There was nowhere to take cover on the open floor. All heads snapped forward and stared wild-eyed at the deafening ambush. The music crashing around them was discernibly a species of rock 'n roll but played unlike they had ever heard it before. *Oh ba-by, yeahhhhhh / now ba-by, woooooo...* It was convulsive, ugly, frightening, and visceral in the way it touched off frenzy in the crowd.

[The band's physical appearance](#) created another commotion. For a tense moment, the crowd just stared, awestruck, trying to take in the whole disturbing scene. Four of the musicians were dressed in

the black suits they'd bought at the Texas Shop in Hamburg: beautiful cracked-leather jackets with padded shoulders and artificial sheepskin lining that proved sweltering under the lights, black T-shirts and silky skintight pants. With instruments slung low across their bodies, they looked like a teenage-rebel fantasy come to life. Nor could anyone take his eyes off the rude cowboy boots with flat, chopped heels that each man wore, especially John Lennon's, which were ornate Twin Eagles, emblazoned with birds carved on both the front and back and outlined with white stitching.

"[I'd never seen any band look like this](#) before," says Dave Foreshaw, a Liverpool promoter, who gazed on the spectacle in utter astonishment. "I thought: 'What are they? *Who* are they?'"

As if someone had flashed a prearranged cue, the entire crowd rushed the stage, pressing feverishly toward the footlights. Impetuous girls and boys alike abandoned their social proprieties to a purely emotional response. Everyone had stopped dancing; there was now a total gravitation toward the stage. Sensing that a fight had broken out, Brian Kelly rushed inside with several bouncers in tow. The promoter experienced a moment of real panic. According to Bob Wooler, "Long afterwards, [Kelly] told me they were seconds away from using brute force when he finally realized what the fuss was about."

The band, too, arrived at the same conclusion and began working the crowd into a sweat. They turned up the juice and tore into a wild jam. Drawing upon stage antics they'd devised while in Germany, they twisted and jerked their bodies with indignant energy. John and George proceeded to lunge around like snapping dogs and stomp loudly on the bandstand in time to the music. (Newby, forced to watch Harrison's hands for chord changes, joined in the fun at irregular intervals, although to his dismay, the lack of decent cowboy boots made his part in the clowning "far less effective.") "[I was just so different](#)," recalls Bill Ashton, an apprentice fitter for British Rail, who sang part-time as Billy Kramer with a band called the Coasters and had come to Litherland to size up the "foreign" competition. "To act that way onstage and make that kind of sound—I was absolutely staggered."

Like everyone else, Kramer was used to bands that patterned themselves after Cliff Richard and the Shadows, England's top rock 'n roll act and practitioners of smooth, carefully tended choreography. Up till then, everyone had followed in the Shadows' dainty footsteps. This band, however, was a beast of a different nature. According to Dave Foreshaw, "Normally, [popular Liverpool bands such as] the Remo Four or the Dominoes would come on and... perform in a polite, orderly way. This band's performance attacked the crowd. They [played] aggressively and with a lot less respect. They just *attacked* them!" And when John Lennon stepped to the mike and challenged the crowd to "[get your knickers down!](#)" the audience, in a state of unconscious, indiscriminate euphoria, screamed and raised their arms in delight.

Brian Kelly, especially, perceived a seismic shift in the landscape and moved fast to contain it by posting bouncers at the doors to prohibit rival promoters like Foreshaw from poaching his bounty. But it was too late for such empty measures. The house erupted in hysteria as the band concluded its half-hour set with a rousing version of "What'd I Say," in which Paul McCartney jackknifed through the crowd, whipping the kids into rapturous confrontation. Over the last wild applause, Bob Wooler managed to say, "That was fantastic, fellas," but it was doubtful anyone paid much attention to him. They were too busy trying to connect with what had just gone down on that stage, what had turned their little Christmas dance into a full-scale epiphany.

This much was inevitable: the band had somehow squeezed every nerve of the local rock 'n roll scene, and that scene would never be the same. In the wall of grinding sound and the veil of black leather, they had staked their claim to history. And in that instant, they had become the Beatles.

[I]

Water. Those who were drawn to it—the seafarers to whom the infinitesimal lap against a bow and the white blown spray prefigured a window on the world, the merchants and craftsmen who plied goods from the North and Midlands into commercial dynasties, and the dockhands and laborers bred to keep the machinery moving—allowed the mystery of the Mersey to lay hold of their imagination. The river, with its dark, brooding magnetism, drove the city as if throughout its existence it had been waiting for a subject as pliant and as pure as these shores, those spiny timber docks, that rim of sea. This wasn't a typical Lancashire shoreline, fashioned for pleasure boats and sunbathers, but a remarkable seven-and-a-half-mile natural harbor studded with chocolate-dark rock that clung to Liverpool's lofty townscape like a dressmaker's hem. The nucleus of the dock system, with its imposing mass of antique structures—warehouses, embankments, swing bridges, overhead railways, and gates—fed a humped dense center of red brick and church spires, itself a sort of iron splash that provided a nicely supporting symmetry all around.

The people living within these confines saw the seaport as a threshold on the horizon. Beyond it, an invisible world beckoned. Not a day passed when detachments of tall-masted ships weren't diligently on the move, bound for one of the globe's imagined corners.

Liverpool considered itself “the [Gateway to the British Empire](#)” for its mastery of imperial trade. And yet to the rest of the country, especially those living in tweedy London, Liverpool was an anglicized Siberia: desolate, insular, meaningless—out of sight, out of mind. Hardworking, dressed darkly, and forgotten. The prejudice was no secret, and it made those men and women of the North fierce and intimate. People from Liverpool called themselves “[Scousers](#),” giving their common kinship an exalted magic, in much the way that Ozark Mountain dwellers are called hillbillies. The term was derived from the nautical *lobscouse*, a sailor's dish consisting of meat stewed with vegetables and a ship biscuit but revised over the years by the Irish custom of keeping a pan of scous stew simmering on the stove all week, to which table scraps and leftovers were added as they became available. “[Scousers have a fierce local patriotism](#),” says *Mersey Beat* founder Bill Harry, who grew up in the center of town at the same time as the Beatles. “It's like belonging to your own country. A real Scouser believes he is fighting everybody else in the world, and that everyone is against him, especially Londoners. He defends this position eloquently—with his fists.”

Like many seaside boys, the four young men who would form the Beatles were absurdly modest, considering the outlet water provided: “to be the best band in Liverpool” was all they ever wanted. The Mersey was their only river.

Two hundred years before the Beatles crossed the water to “take America by storm,” the ships of Liverpool rode the seas in service to the upstart colonies, whose landowners coveted burly African slaves. Merseyside magnates, loathing the practice of slavery but drunk on its profits, sent “[stout little ships](#)” laden with blue and green Manchester cottons and striped loincloths called “anabasses” down the Atlantic to West Africa, where, on the swampy, malaria-ridden island of Gorée, they bartered textiles with Arab and African flesh peddlers for human cargo. This, according to ships' logs and harbor records, was the first leg of a triangular route for the so-called African trade, a twelve-month

journey that required an arduous “middle passage,” docking next in either Virginia or the West Indies where cotton or sugar, respectively, was then dispatched to Liverpool.

Liverpool thrived on the backs of slaves—thrived and thickened. Historian J. A. Picton points out how new structures expressed [an elaborate Grecian influence](#), with ornamental columns and peaked roofs, so that “everything was modeled on the Parthenon.” The city’s growth mushroomed dramatically, and sailors and dockworkers, trusting in the promise of wealth, came to claim it. By 1800, Liverpool had become [the richest city in Britain](#) and second only to Lyon in all of Europe. A determined new race of longshoremen scuttled along the Kings Dock’s great tobacco bonded warehouse and into the mazy Duke’s Warehouse terminal, where barges were unloaded as they floated through its unorthodox arched brick caverns. The sunstruck warehouses thronging Jamaica Street bulged embarrassingly with lavish cargo. New construction abounded like milkweed.

Normally, where money and success flowed, civic pride followed, but not in this case. The slave trade, made grotesque and untenable by public indignation, was finally abolished in 1807. The merchant princes conveniently converted their ships to carry produce, and for a few years prosperity endured. Eventually, however, fruit proved no match.

Their conscience was rescued by American cronies, whose unflinching resilience defied all reason. Cultivated on plantations scattered throughout the West Indies, odd lots of silky, long staple cotton had always been mixed in with larger cargoes containing sugar, rum, tobacco, ginger, and coffee that came in exchange for slaves. Most of it was unprocessed and used for hosiery and candlewicks, but in nearby Manchester, home to an influx of textile workers who, centuries earlier, had been driven out of Flanders by the Duke of Alva, the manufacture of cloth developed at an enormous rate. By 1800, 60.3 million pounds of cotton were being imported by Great Britain, every last bit of it bound for Manchester and rerouted by dealers there to mills in southeastern Lancashire, which were working at full capacity. As England’s industrial revolution exploded, so, too, did the market for textiles. And Liverpool, waiting for just such an opportunity, was ideally situated, financially and geographically, to handle the business. Cotton poured into Liverpool to such an extent that boats bottlenecked in the Narrows, an exposed channel between the city and Birkenhead, and were forced to queue, awaiting their turn to unload. Practically overnight, the stubby line of docks grew to five, pushing north along the river, while port facilities ate into the streets surrounding the harbor like sets of teeth. Banks, customhouses, mercantile exchanges, and insurance and solicitors’ offices were knit into the jungled fabric of new warehouses, whose vastness, Picton writes, “[surpasses the pyramid of Cheops.](#)” Three magnificent churches, constructed entirely of prefabricated iron, were built between 1812 and 1814, allowing the fortunate to give thanks for this affluence. Civic buildings, skillfully mimicking the palazzi of the Medici, provided the grandeur and versatility due a thriving commercial hub.

Cotton brought respectability to Liverpool. But the water was dominant, and while its infinite resource steered opportunity toward the seaport, it also engulfed her. From 1845 to 1849, nearly fifty thousand Irish refugees thronged into Liverpool, causing near-civic collapse. The potato famine forced entire villages from their homes and deposited wave after wave of its victims onto the Merseyside docks, dumping them there like some whaler’s squalid catch waiting to be claimed. Among them were the families of John O’Leannain (their name was changed to skirt the sectarian divide) and James McCartney II. A total of 1.5 million Irish crossed, some merely stopping long enough to get a ship to America, while others, made vulnerable by sickness and sudden poverty, sought permanent residence in what was already an overpopulated boom town. In a disparaging reference that nonetheless has some truth to it, historian Quentin Hughes says that “Liverpool wound up with the dross.” Entire families, whose assets were often limited to the clothes on their back, crammed into living quarters

unfit for human occupancy. “Many places that had one family in residence now had... five families,” Hughes points out, “with some living in the basement, where the floor was soil and [there was] no cross ventilation.” In a hasty attempt to remedy the situation, developers relocated people in tracts of back-to-back terrace houses—dwellings backed onto each other and connected on either side, so that the only windows and ventilation were in the front. For both the townspeople and newcomers alike, Liverpool became a grim, confrontational city. The Irish were blamed for creating a raft of social problems, not the least of which were fire, mob violence, and an outbreak of cholera that ravaged the whole of downtown. Conversely, it was the public’s cold insensitivity, the new arrivals argued, that fed these conditions and fears.

The McCartneys, who were handymen by trade, found temporary housing near the docks, where Joseph, Paul’s grandfather, was born in 1866. The Lennons gravitated to nearby Vauxhall, a neighborhood of mostly Irish immigrants, just north of the city, on the waterfront. To John’s maternal grandfather, George Earnest Stanley, the power of water was more alluring and secure than anything sheltered land could provide. Described as “[a real old sea sailor](#)” in the mold of Ishmael, he spent three-fourths of his life aboard merchant ships in service to the Crown.

There was nothing unusual about young men from the area being gone for months, sometimes years, on end. Indeed, it was often a reasonable alternative to the nimbus of misery on the streets back home. Stanley had no intention of scratching out a living in the poxy factories and slaughterhouses along the wharf. Life at sea meant fewer hardships and a chance to pursue his spiritual quest for “seeing the civilized world.” Although he never rose up the chain of command, George became an accomplished sailmaker assigned to one of the first three-masted ships to sail around the world. That left little opportunity for proper courtship, but by 1885, George Stanley had met and married a twenty-two-year-old Welsh girl named Annie Jane Millward, one of three daughters from a severely strict Methodist clan whose matriarch, Mary, refused to utter a word of the devil’s English. A devout churchgoer herself, with little tolerance for worldliness, Annie risked her piety by working for a common lawyer in Chester, and it was there, in the bustling old Roman seaport, that she eventually encountered George Stanley. George was “a tough character”: relentless without leniency, demanding without compromise. But he was responsible and well disposed to supporting a family. After watching four of her uncles die of tuberculosis contracted from milk produced on the family’s dairy farm, Annie was determined, almost obsessively so, to reseed the family tree, and once married, she devoted herself almost exclusively to childbearing.

In quick succession—at least, in the timetable allowed by George’s stints at sea—Annie gave birth to five children, all girls: Mary Elizabeth, called Mimi; Elizabeth, known affectionately as Betty and later, Mater; Anne; Harriet; and the youngest, [Julia, nicknamed Judy](#), John Lennon’s mother, born in 1914.*

Conscientious husband that he was, George Stanley eventually surrendered to domestic reality, retiring grudgingly from sailing, and took a shoreside job with the Liverpool and Glasgow Tug Salvage Company, recovering the scattered wreckage of submarines from treacherous ocean beds. Rather than live in Liverpool center, which was still astonishingly dangerous, the Stanleys settled in Woolton, a grassy suburb outlined by dirt roads and farms.

All five sisters grew strong and inflexibly tight in a modest row house at 9 Newcastle Road, in the district known as [Penny Lane](#). Years later, John would say: “[Those women were fantastic](#)... five *strong, intelligent, beautiful* women, five sisters,” as if they were a stage act: the Stanley Girls. He relished their collective spirit, and from what history has shown, they were indeed a remarkable bunch. Mimi, the eldest, assumed a matriarchal role, taking charge of her siblings in a way that elude

their abstracted mother. Mimi was grounded: a practical nurse, a lover of culture, a sharp-tongued, high-principled, duty-bound young woman who wore the kind of sensible dresses that looked as if they had been picked out for the weekly garden club meeting. “[She was born with a keen sense of propriety](#),” recalled one of her nephews. Her method was very simple: everything operated on the axis of decorum and honesty. It was all black-and-white: either you measured up or you didn’t. “[She had a great sense of what was right and wrong](#),” recalls John Lennon’s boyhood friend Pete Shotton. There was nothing, no situation or dilemma, that Mimi was unequipped to handle. And where the younger girls dreamed of starting families, Mimi dreamed of challenges and adventure—the kind that demanded an unusually stubborn independence. “[I had no intention of getting married](#),” she told a curious admirer, dreading the prospect of “being tied to a kitchen or a sink.”

As she approached her twentieth birthday, Mimi Stanley’s aspirations appeared to be right on track. Her pursuit of a respectable vocation met with early success, first as a resident nurse at a Woolton convalescent hospital and later as the private secretary to Ernest Vickers, an industrial magnate with posh residences in Manchester and Wales. Out of personal necessity, Mimi devoted herself entirely to her employer, certain that as soon as the opportunity availed itself, she would invest her savings “in a modest estate from which she could entertain scholars and dignitaries from a cross section of Liverpool society.”

A confluence of events, however, placed Mimi’s dream just out of reach. In the spring of 1932, when she was twenty-six years old, a short but powerfully built dairy farmer named George Smith, who lived just opposite the hospital and delivered raw milk there each morning, began courting Mimi with a vengeance. His efforts were made difficult by Mimi’s frustrating indifference and her eagle-eyed father, who treated all of his daughters’ suitors as adversaries. “[Grandfather made it impossible for Mimi and George](#),” according to Stanley Parkes, Mimi’s nephew, who remembered watching his aunt with keen, admiring eyes. Night after night, he observed the young couple sitting in the back room at Newcastle Road, “under constant chaperone: my grandfather and grandmother always in the next room.” At a ridiculously early hour, old George Stanley would barge into the parlor, shouting, “[That’s long enough!](#) Away you go—*home!*” making it impossible for the relationship to develop. The courtship dragged on this way for almost seven years until, finally, George Smith delivered an ultimatum along with the milk. “Look here! I’ve had enough of you! Either marry me, or nothing at all!”

The marriage of such a headstrong young career woman to a relatively commonplace and unassuming man might have had more of a disruptive effect on the Stanley family were it not for another, more upheaving union among the close-knit sisters. Six months earlier, on December 3, 1933, [Julia, George Stanley’s favorite](#) and most high-spirited daughter, stunned her father when she arrived home after a date with a longtime boyfriend and announced, “There! I’ve married him,” waving a license as proof. It was only reluctantly, after her father threatened Julia with expulsion if she cohabited with a lover, that she proposed to—and married—the dapper young man with a “[perfect profile](#)” and nimble spirit named Freddie Lennon.

[II]

If John Lennon romanticized the memory of his mother, he took an altogether opposite view of his father. Freddie Lennon remained a vague shadow figure, an outcast, throughout John’s life and, except for two brief appearances, had no direct influence on his son’s upbringing. Aside from the resentment that lingered as a result of this circumstance, John’s knowledge of his father grew fainter with every

year. “[I soon forgot my father](#),” he told Hunter Davies in 1968. “It was like he was dead.”

The Stanleys did a good job helping to put Freddie Lennon to rest. “[They wanted nothing to do with him](#) from the start,” said his niece Leila Harvey. Julia’s father considered him below their station, “certainly not middle class,” and Mimi later said that “[we knew he would be no use](#) to anyone, certainly not our Julia.”

Though not genteel by any stretch of the imagination, Freddie was “[very intelligent... a clever boy](#),” no doubt the consequence of long years spent surviving by his wits. The son of Jack Lennon, a refined British minstrel who died in 1919 when Freddie was seven, he and an elder brother, Charles, had landed in the Bluecoat Hospital, a prestigious Liverpool orphanage around the corner from Newcastle Road that prided itself on the impressive, independent-minded education provided to its young charges. There, amid a class that competed feverishly for top academic honors, Freddie earned a reputation for being happy-go-lucky. “[Anywhere Freddie turned up](#) always meant fun was about to start,” said a relative. “He couldn’t resist having a good time.” There wasn’t a room he couldn’t light up with a witty remark or well-timed rejoinder. Repartee came naturally to him, carried off with such endearing joie de vivre that friends assumed he would ultimately capitalize on his personality. But he was never able to put it all together. Too frivolous to master a vocation, he bounced from office job to odd job, cadging money off friends or his eldest brother, Sydney, who worked long hours hemming pants in a tailor shop on Ranelagh Place. He spent endless nights attending any one of the city’s two dozen vaudeville houses, where he was on a first-name basis with the pretty, long-legged usherettes who paraded along the aisles. At the Trocadero, a converted cinema on Camden Road, he’d often caught sight of its most beautiful attendant, a head-turner with high cheekbones and an engaging smile framed by cascading auburn hair, but he’d never actually spoken to Julia Stanley.

It wasn’t until a chance meeting in Sefton Park, where he and a friend had gone one midsummer afternoon to pick up girls, that Freddie and Julia struck up a fast acquaintance. Their encounter, as Freddie related it, read like a romantic-comedy script. He was strolling jauntily along a cobblestone path, dressed in a black bowler and fingering a cigarette holder, when he came upon “this little waif” perched on a wrought-iron bench. “[As I walked past her](#), she said, ‘You look silly,’ ” he recalled. “I said, ‘You look lovely!’ and I sat down beside her.” Casting him a playful sidelong glance, Julia insisted he remove his “silly hat,” so, with impeccable timing, Freddie promptly flung it into the lake. It was the perfect gesture to win an invitation to go dancing and, ultimately, her heart. Julia had long been attracted to the kind of slapstick sensibility that Freddie Lennon personified. Like Freddie, “[she would get a joke](#) out of anything,” recalled an adoring nephew. “If the house was burning down around Judy, she’d come out laughing and smiling—she’d make a joke of it.”

Of all the Stanley sisters—all “real beauties... real stunners,” according to a relative—only Julia knew how to exploit her precious asset. Instead of turning up her chin when a stranger gave her the once-over, Julia would flash a broad smile and wink knowingly at him. [Men ogled her](#) as often as they passed her. Only five foot two in high heels, with a full figure and large brown eyes that seemed to float in her face, Julia had an obvious, provocative beauty that exaggerated her appeal. “[Judy was very feminine](#), she was beautiful,” explained her niece, “... never untidy. You never saw her with her hair undone. She went to bed with makeup on so that she’d look beautiful in the morning.”

But all the makeup in the world couldn’t attract the right kind of man. From the time she stepped out from her family’s grasp, Julia Stanley kept company with a succession of good-looking rascals with fast come-on lines and even faster escapes. Night after night, humming with energy, she made the rounds of local dance halls and breezy clubs, where the rootless crowd of dockers, soldiers, waiters, laborers, and after-hours sharks congregated. A spry dancer with a carefree sensuality, Julia

found herself in great demand as a partner in the stylish jitterbug competitions that lasted into the early hours of morning. She could tell a joke as hard and bawdy as any man, which won her no shortage of admirers. And she sang—"with a voice like Vera Lynn," it was said—at the drop of a hat.

At first glance, Freddie and Julia seemed like an improbable pair, but from the moment they met they were inseparable. Both tireless dreamers, they spent long days walking around Liverpool, hatching improbable schemes. They would open a shop, a pub, a café, a club where they'd take turns performing, Julia cracking one-liners, Freddie singing and playing the banjo. He had a pretty good voice, a husky tenor, and no shortage of charisma. The legendary Satchmo was a favorite, and Freddie had Jolson down cold, with all the gesticulations. Given the chance, he could rattle off crowd-pleasers all night. *Given the chance*. But Julia's father not only disapproved of the marriage but demanded some sign of the couple's self-support. Despite Freddie's extravagant plans to perform, which earned his father-in-law's indignation, there was nothing concrete. [Instead of working](#), he spent his afternoons taking Julia's young nephew, Stanley, for walks in the park: talking, thinking, dreaming, worrying.

Finally, Freddie escaped the dilemma by the route chosen most often by Liverpool men: he put to sea. He signed on to a ship headed toward the Mediterranean, working as a merchant navy steward. On board a succession of ocean liners, traveling between the Greek Islands, North Africa, and the West Indies, Freddie gained security, first as a bellboy and later as a headwaiter. He became a crew favorite because of his personable nature. Freddie was "a real charmer," Julia told Mimi, "a people pleaser," who never forgot a name or a passenger's favorite song. People remembered seeing him weave among tables, "with a smile that sparkled in a room." But seafaring, though pleasant, was an erratic interlude. Relatives recalled seeing Freddie back in Liverpool a few months after his first voyage, hoping without any real prospects to sail on another steamer. In the meantime, Freddie moved in with Julia's family, [allegedly at George Stanley's behest](#), living off the fumes of his last paycheck. Calling himself by some stretch of imagination a "ship's entertainer," he auditioned for local theater managers, but without any luck. Julia urged Freddie to get something more solid, if only to appease her irascible father, but the situation became more dire by January 1940, at which time it was discovered that Julia had become pregnant.



The war arrived early on Liverpool's front doorstep. [Entire neighborhoods were destroyed in the initial air strikes that pounded the city; families would wake to find their streets "just gone,"](#) especially blocks in and around the Penny Lane area, where the heavy artillery, the ten-pound whistling bombs aimed at the docks, had drifted. Menlove Avenue, where Mimi and George had bought a handsome semi-detached house, suffered tremendous damage. "There were fifty-six people blown to pieces in an air raid shelter not fifty yards from Mary's house," according to a relative, who remembered watching emergency service patrols "just burying over" the charred site. Mimi constantly grappled with a rash of incendiary bombs, those big, phosphorous flares, which fell regularly in her garden, throwing blankets over them and stamping them out.

During a succession of brutal air raids in early October 1940, the entire Stanley clan gathered nightly at Newcastle Road, determined to support one another through the terrifying uncertainty. Julia, who was almost two weeks overdue, had been ordered to hospital by her doctor, where she languished in a second-floor ward at Oxford Street Maternity Hospital. The days were long and boring, the nights even worse, a result of having the lights extinguished to avoid detection from the air. It might have

helped pass the time if Julia had Freddie by her side—he would have made her laugh in that loopy, screwball way of his—[but Freddie was gone](#), having shipped out on a troop transport earlier that month, doing his part for the war effort.

The first week in October brought an escalation of the bombing, according to newspaper accounts wave after wave of German sorties strafing the south docks and downtown district. Still, when Mimi called the hospital on October 9, shortly after nightfall, and was told that “[Mrs. Lennon has just had a boy](#),” nothing—neither curfew nor bomb nor German technology—was going to stop her from gazing at her new nephew. Later, Mimi gave an intrepid, if somewhat suspect, account of her crosstown sprint: “[I was dodging in doorways](#) between running as fast as my legs would carry me.” In the distance she could hear the thunderous echo of bombs pounding the countryside. “There was shrapnel falling and gunfire,” she recalled, “and when there was a little lull I ran into the hospital ward and there was this beautiful little baby.”

John Winston Lennon was a beautiful little baby, indeed. He was named after his talented grandfather in the hope that he could fulfill the Lennon legacy for stardom. (Julia offered the middle name in honor of his country’s awe-inspiring leader, Winston Churchill.) His eyes were perfectly matched brown crescents set above a feminine, almost bow-shaped mouth, a pointed little nose, and the soft, dimpled chin of his father. He had his mother’s fair complexion, which, later in life, made him look a shade or two paler in contrast to the other Beatles.

For the first few years of his life, Julia threw herself into motherhood, devoting all her efforts to raising her son. Freddie reappeared every now and again, but it was only for a day or two and then he was off once more, on some woolly seaborne adventure. At least money was no longer an issue: Freddie provided for his family, sending a regular check for their support, and as long as Julia and John lived at Newcastle Road, there wasn’t much that lay beyond their needs.

In 1945 Julia’s mother died, leaving her father, who had become “frail and old,” under her uncertain care. “[Mary would, on occasion](#), come over and help out,” remembered a nephew, “but she was out working as a nurse,” which left the burden of responsibility in Julia’s hands. With John demanding more attention, balancing these obligations became too much for her. Julia, by her very nature, was a social creature. She needed distraction, laughs, excitement. And a fellow—“[she would have always had a fellow](#), Judy.” This had always been part of Julia’s makeup, something that couldn’t be denied, not even when it came to a young boy. Any sensitive child would pick up the signals, and John, who was especially perceptive, interpreted his mother’s frustrations as being his fault. Reminiscences about his childhood were always filled with unconsolable guilt. It was the rejection he remembered most, the feeling that he was in the way, a source of Julia’s unhappiness and Freddie’s absenteeism. “The worst [pain is that of not being wanted](#),” John confessed, “of realizing your parents do not need you in the way you need them.”

Julia’s longing for conviviality was heightened by Liverpool’s bustling nightlife, which raged almost as fiercely as the war. The city jumped to the tempo of big bands along with the guys and dolls who followed them. At the center of this scene were the all-night dance halls, where the revelry never stopped. Soldiers and civilians, wary of an uncertain future, collected under the low-slung rafters, determined to let off some steam before the full impact of the war hit.

It was probably sometime in 1942 that Julia first ventured out dancing on her own, and thereafter she stepped out frequently, first alone, then later with two neighbors whose husbands were in the service. Freddie later claimed this peccadillo was his fault, the result of a remark in a letter he sent her. “[I said to her, there’s a war on](#); go out and enjoy yourself, pet,” he recalled, never realizing the extent to which she’d take him up on it.

It was only a matter of time before Julia met another man, a Welsh soldier named Taffy Williams who was stationed in a barracks at Mossley Hill. They hit all the pubs and dance halls that catered specially to soldiers, and Julia would often bring back from these outings a rare, precious treat—a chunk of chocolate or a sugar pastry—which she'd present to John the next morning during breakfast.

The relationship remained innocent, or at least innocent enough to escape scrutiny. Julia continued to receive regular correspondence from Freddie, which she'd read aloud to John, along with a check that underwrote her modest living expenses. John hung on every frivolous word his father wrote, then repackaged them for his cousins in the form of frothy seafaring adventures. To John, Freddie was a mysterious, romantic figure, a father of great consequence, away doing a man's work.

But, in truth, Freddie Lennon was a screwup. He constantly signed on the “wrong type” of ship, sailing as a glorified bartender or with crews that functioned as modern-day pirates. After a typical mishap in New York, [he set out on the *Sammex*](#) in February 1944, bound for the Algerian port of Bône where he was arrested and imprisoned for “broaching the cargo,” or more precisely, pilfering a bottle of contraband beer. Freddie subsequently disappeared for six months—undergoing adventures in the Dutch underground, from North Africa to Naples, he claimed—during which time his family assumed he'd deserted them.

Julia hardly needed convincing. She was living it up with Taffy Williams, and was pregnant with his child. Yet, however much she loved the soldier, she was unable—or simply unwilling—to marry him. For one thing, she was already married. And for another, there was John to worry about. Williams wasn't prepared to take on a young boy along with Julia, and abandoning John was out of the question—at least for now.

Just when it seemed that things couldn't get any worse, Freddie returned home, understandably despondent. For all of his superficiality, Freddie Lennon remained a proud man, proud enough to be wounded by an unfaithful wife. Julia treated her husband with disdain, regarding the awkward situation as if it were somehow Freddie's fault. Her personality had always been jaunty and outgoing. Now it became harsh and brittle, her words unnecessarily cruel and venomous, her mood fluctuating between irrationality and deceit. “[She claimed that she was raped](#) by a soldier,” according to Freddie's brother Charles, who attempted to mediate for the couple. Ready to defend her honor, the Lennon brothers actually confronted Taffy Williams, just before Christmas 1945, but his account of the facts stood up. It was clear that Julia had been his lover for more than half a year. There was no point in pretending any longer. Freddie accepted that she was going to have another man's baby and offered to stand by her side. But there was something broken about him now.

Broken—but not finished. Holding Freddie Lennon together was the welfare of his son, John. Responsibility was called for now, and responsibility was neither Freddie's nor Julia's strong suit. In fact, the Lennons had courted these very circumstances by putting their own selfish interests before those of their son. Freddie leaped into action by removing John to his brother Sydney's house in the suburb of Maghull while Julia came to term. This may have been a practical, sober-minded decision, or it may have been designed to give him the opportunity to resolve his differences with Julia. It is impossible to say.

In any event, Freddie ran out of yardage. He offered to help raise the baby but was spurned. There was too much resentment, no trace of love left in Julia's heart. Besides, “[she was told quite categorically](#) by the family that this child would have to be adopted,” recalled her niece. Julia's long-

suffering father, indignant, refused to allow her to remain in his house. As a result, Mimi helped move her to the Elmswood Nursing Home, in Mossley Hill, where, on June 19, 1945, a girl was born, named Victoria. “[She was a beautiful baby](#),” recalled Julia’s sister Anne, “but we never knew who the father was.” The whole seamy affair was hushed up and was never discussed among the rest of the Stanley family. “We didn’t even know that she’d had [another] baby,” said Leila Harvey. Certainly, John wasn’t told anything about it, much less that he had a sister. (By all accounts, he never discovered her existence.) Without further delay, the baby was taken away from Julia and given to [a Norwegian Salvation Army captain](#), who removed the newborn to Scandinavia, which was the last anyone ever heard of her.

Freed from this latest imposition, Julia spun back into the vibrant social scene, which, by Liverpool standards, had become livelier than ever. American soldiers, stationed at a sprawling base in nearby Burtonwood, brought their irrepressible exuberance to the mix. Julia had always been a good-time girl; now, as good times became harder to afford, she sought out a sugar daddy to secure her stake. It took no longer than a few weeks for Julia to land a new suitor.

Julia and Bobby Dykins had met a year earlier, while they were involved with different partners in an ongoing double date. Dykins, whose given name was John, had been seeing Julia’s neighbor Ann Stout, but there was never any doubt as to where his affections lay. He “[would always wink at \[Julia\]](#)” which “she enjoyed, laughing it off,” as one would a playful flirtation. They met again, soon after Julia left the nursing home, and with her no longer encumbered, things turned serious right out of the box.

A Liverpool native several years Julia’s senior, Dykins was a smooth, dapper Irish Catholic wine steward at the Adelphi Hotel, who was as dedicated to pursuing the high life as Julia was to living it. Bobby was “very good looking,” according to those who crossed his path. A dark-skinned, wiry man who held himself erect, he was nicknamed [Spiv](#) by the Stanley kids because he reminded them so much of Arthur English, the British music hall comedian, famous for his “little pencil moustache and porkpie hat.” John’s memory of him wasn’t as flattering, nicknaming Dykins “Twitchy” because of “[nervous cough and... thinning, margarine-coated hair](#).” Few men had better access to such tightly restricted luxuries: liquor, chocolate, silks, cigarettes. “[He was certainly earning good money](#),” said Stanley Parkes, and he never failed to lavish it, along with charm, on his appreciative new woman. “He was worldly, he’d seen a lot of life... and he was always very open and cheerful.”

Not always: Julia’s family and friends remember a seismic temper that could erupt without warning. Dykins, they recalled, was moody, unpredictable, even violent when drunk and something did not please him. “[He had a very short fuse](#). Julia knew when to get out of his way, but occasionally he would lash out and slap her.” John himself remembered a time when “[my mother came to see us](#) in a black coat with her face bleeding.” And there were other scattered recollections of abuse.

Still, Julia was committed to her new lover, and she and Bobby moved in together in an attempt to give their illicit affair an aura of respectability. This brought new complications to bear—especially on John. The appearance of yet another strange man in the house proved unsettling, to say nothing of the hostile flare-ups he witnessed between the adults, and he was shuttled from one sister to another while Julia devoted all her efforts to making the relationship work. This and other neglect took an early toll on John. “[It confused him](#), and he often ran away,” Mimi told an interviewer, enumerating the times she opened the door to find her distraught nephew cowering there in tears, unable to speak. More than once Mimi marched John back to Julia’s, where she gave her younger sister a piece of her mind. Fuming angrily, she would shout, “[Oh, for heaven’s sake](#), Judy, *behave yourself!*” Another time Leila Harvey recalled “being in Mimi’s morning room, with John behind her in the chair, and Judy

being told, ‘[You are not fit](#) to have this child!’ ” Not only did the family “[disagree with the way she was living](#) her life,” but they considered Julia “frivolous and unreliable,” a woman who never took anything seriously, even when it came to mundane household chores. Relatives who visited might find her sweeping out the kitchen while wearing a pair of knickers on her head. And as for cooking, “she was absolutely crackpot,” mixing ingredients like a mad scientist. “[A little bit of tea](#) went in the stew,” recalled her niece. In fact, “a bit of everything went in [there].”

In June 1946 Freddie took an unexpected leave of absence from his job and returned to Liverpool to rescue John from the pressures that had been building up at home. There was no objection from Julia when he asked to visit his boy; Mimi, who was acting as [John’s unofficial guardian](#), also obliged. Father and son set off on a reunion, ostensibly for a seaside holiday in Blackpool but, as Freddie later admitted, “[intending never to come back](#).” After two weeks cruising the boardwalk, a plan materialized: they decided to emigrate to New Zealand. It seemed like the perfect place for a man like Freddie Lennon to start over, and above all, he would have John with him.

It has been said that John was delighted at the prospect of traveling with his father, although there is nothing, other than Freddie’s unreliable account, that expresses such a sentiment. But in all probability, John craved a man’s loving attention—to say nothing of a sailor, to say nothing of his *father*—and Freddie’s dreams were always suffused with layers of romantic fantasy. How could a boy resist? What seemed to make this episode so important for John was not the relocation or the adventure of going abroad, but that he had finally gotten his father’s attention. Having suffered through [five years of indifference](#) and neglect during which his parents pursued their own pleasures, that is what he wanted most.

Shortly before the long journey south, late in July 1946, Julia and Bobby Dykins appeared unexpectedly in Blackpool to take John back home to Liverpool. One can only imagine the scene this touched off. As Freddie later recounted it, an argument ensued, in which he offered to take Julia with them to New Zealand. “[She said no](#). All she wanted was John.” Freddie could not persuade her to reconsider, much less abandon her son. Sensing a standoff, he suggested that John choose between them.

It was a horrible, thoughtless decision to ask a five-year-old boy to make. And while the incident seems improbable (John never recalled it as an adult), it has an affecting, if pitiful, resonance. According to Freddie’s oft-reported version: “[He had to decide](#) whether to stay with me or go with her. He said me. Julia asked again, but John still said me. Julia went out of the door and was about to go up the street when John ran after her. That was the last I saw or heard of him till I was told he’d become Beatle.”

[III]

Back in Liverpool, John Lennon soon found himself embroiled in another new melodrama, one even more traumatic and gut-wrenching than the last.

That summer, intending to give John the kind of love and stability he sorely needed, Julia organized a model of family life and enrolled him in a school near her home. But within weeks of their return, he was no longer living with her. The exact circumstances surrounding this development have been blurred by speculation and myth. There may have been some friction between Julia and Bobby Dykins that led to John’s removal; perhaps the intrusion of a young boy put too much strain on their relationship. Some relatives have suggested that Julia simply wasn’t up to the responsibility of full-time motherhood. Leila Harvey believed [a decision “was forced” on Julia](#) by Mimi and her

tyrannical father as punishment for sinful behavior. “She wouldn’t have parted with John unless she was told,” Leila insisted.

None of this made any difference to John. He seemed to accept the idea that it was somehow his fault, that he was to blame for her incompetence. “[My mother... couldn’t cope](#) with me” was the way he later explained it. Whatever the reason, at some point that August, John was sent outright to Mimi’s, once and for all, where it was determined he would receive “[a proper upbringing.](#)”

Mimi Smith easily made up for her sister’s slack attention to raising John. Unlike Julia in every way, Mimi was a proud, [no-nonsense, if “difficult,” housewife](#) with a steely determination who brought great reserves of discipline to the role of surrogate parent. “[Mimi was a sensible, dignified lady...](#) the absolute rock of the family,” recalled a family member with a mixture of admiration and awe. Anyone who crossed her could expect to earn the full measure of her wrath—perhaps a sharp tongue-lashing or, worse, the dreaded silent treatment. Determined to “bring John up right,” she had strong ideas about what was appropriate behavior that bordered on intolerance. People use words like *stubborn, impatient, authoritarian, and uncompromising* to describe her forceful nature. But if Mimi was a “[merciless disciplinarian,](#)” as conveyed by a childhood friend of John’s who knew her, she could also be an easy touch with a big heart. “She had a terrific sense of humor, which John could crack into and make her laugh in situations where she was trying to discipline him,” says Pete Shotton. One minute she’d be giving John a frosty piece of her mind; the next minute “you’d find them rolling around, laughing together.”

In almost no time, John settled comfortably into the Smith household. The family residence on Menlove Avenue—nicknamed Mendips, after a mountain range—was as familiar as any he’d ever known, a cozy seven-room stucco-and-brick cottage with an extra bedroom that Mimi later rented to students as a means of income after George’s death. Thanks to the unobstructed expanse of a golf course across the street, sunlight filled the pleasant interior, warming an endless warren of nooks where John often curled up and paged dreamily through picture books. His bedroom was in a small but peaceful alcove over the porch, and on most mornings he was awakened early by a clatter of hoofbeats as an old dray horse made milk deliveries along the rutted road.

Aunt Mimi and Uncle George made it easy for John to feel loved there. Mimi told a close relative that she’d never wanted children, but “[she wanted John.](#)” From the moment he arrived at Mendips, she showered him with attention. She bought him books and read him stories, especially those from a tattered, lavishly illustrated volume of [Wind in the Willows](#) that had been passed down from his cousin Stanley to cousin Leila and finally to John. [Mimi’s morning room was always filled](#) with the sweet smells of apple tarts and crumbles, which she baked almost as capably and effortlessly as John later wrote songs. And there were always enough toys and sketch pads to entertain him. Besides, Julia visited – often, practically every day, which in some ways made it better for John, in other ways, worse.

If Mimi could at times be prickly and irascible, her moods were balanced out by her husband. Little is known about George Smith other than the sketchiest of details offered by his relatives. He was “[a quiet and jolly man,](#)” as one person described him, who had left the milk trade (he operated a dairy farm and retail milk outlet with his brother Frank that spanned four generations of their prominent Woolton family) to run a small-time bookmaking business, taking bets on the gee-gees, as they called racehorses, running at the local track. (He’d let John bet on the Grand National each year, remembers a cousin.) No one was sure how Uncle George squared such activities with upright Mimi, but one thing was clear: he doted on his nephew. “[Uncle George absolutely adored John,](#)” insisted another cousin who often visited Mendips. “[I had no time](#) to go playing ducks in the bath with him,”

Mimi sniffed, whereas “George would see him to bed with a smile most nights.” Any time of the day George might grab his nephew by the shoulder and sing out, “Give me a squeaker,” which usually earned him a loud, slurpy kiss. Even though George worked nights, “he took us all to the pictures [and] to the park,” recalled Leila. And on those occasions when all three cousins played outside, he allowed them to have meals in the garden shed, where they demanded to “eat just like an animal, with [their] hands.”

However unlike Mimi he may have been in other respects, the two both stressed the absolute necessity, if not compulsion, for constant self-education, especially through their love of words. In the parlor, behind the couch, [Mimi shelved “twenty volumes](#) of the world’s best short stories,” which she claimed “John... read... over and over again,” along with “most of the classics.” George recited John’s favorite nursery rhymes and, later, when he was old enough, taught John how to solve crossword puzzles. “Words needn’t have to be taken at their face value,” he explained. “They had many meanings”—valuable advice saved for later. That is not to imply, as some books claim, that John’s time with Mimi was housebound. He was devoted to his cousin Stanley and remained so throughout his life. Although Stanley was seven years older than John and away most months at prep school, they enjoyed an easy, undemanding friendship that functioned on equal footing. John was sent for most vacations on a ten-hour bus ride to his cousin’s home in Scotland, where the boys wandered around Loch Madie, an old anglers’ haunt, and fished for trout in the icy burns. Stanley had an air rifle that fired lead pellets and he taught John how to shoot. “[My mother had a .22](#),” he recalled, “and John and I would do some target practice. We’d go out shooting rabbits... or [at] tin cans and bottles.” If they got bored with that, as invariably happened after several hours, they’d head down to one of the five beautiful white sand beaches, where Stanley eventually taught John how to swim. The boys copied speedway riding on their bicycles, building small dirt tracks and then, recalled Leila, “peddling like hell down the straightaway before putting the bike into a slide.” Afterward, they would pack picnic lunches and go to the all-day marionette shows or to the open-air baths in Blackpool. Stanley recalled “drag[ging] Leila and John to the cinema as often as three times in a day—out of one cinema and into another.”

Unlike the loner persona he cultivated later on as a teenager, John Lennon’s childhood seems marked by frivolity and happiness. “He was such a happy-go-lucky, good-humored, easygoing, lively lad,” recalled Leila. Contrary to popular opinion, the preadolescent John Lennon wasn’t an outcast. He might not have “[fit in](#)” with kids less artistically curious, as he argued incessantly with his interviewers. He might have languished “[in a trance for twenty years](#),” owing to a lack of intellectual stimulation. But he wasn’t “[very deprived](#)” as a child, as Yoko Ono later tried to assert. “[This image of me being the orphan](#) is garbage,” John confessed in his last published interview, “because I was well protected by my auntie and my uncle, and they looked after me very well, thanks.”

He was also looked after at Quarry Bank, the state grammar school (comparable to high school) he entered in 1952, although not in the manner that one is proud of. Quickly earning the reputation as “a clown in class,” he attracted the attention of Quarry Bank’s stern, authoritarian masters, who prided themselves on scholarship and discipline. John, bored stiff, prized neither, flouting the rules. Not even the threats of corporal punishment fazed him. He couldn’t have cared less.

Instead, the questions he grappled with later while growing up were why he was *different*, how he could cultivate the unformed ideas churning inside of him. And what, if anything, would open up the world for a well-adjusted but bored middle-class kid from suburban Liverpool? He found the answer quite by chance one night in the privacy of his bedroom as he was scanning the radio dial.

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