

The Beatles at the Queens Hall Widnes, Cheshire, UK 1962

Extract from Chapter 7 'Growing up in the Sixties'

Sitting next to Barbara on the bus, Sheila combed the fringe of her short brown hair down to rest on her thick dark eyelashes. 'We were lucky to get tickets.'

They'd seen a poster at college advertising the three dances: two in September, one in October. It was the first time Barbara had been to a dance and she sat erect, fingering the tickets they'd queued for hours to get. 'I heard "Love Me Do" on the radio yesterday. It's out next month. It's fab.'

As the bus pulled up outside the Queen's Hall, Sheila wiped a circle with her palm in the steam dripping down the window. She nudged Barbara. 'Look at the crowds!'

'Wow!'

They stood in the queue that wound down Lacey Street and listened to the excited chatter of teenagers eager to get inside.

Outside the cloakroom, Barbara spotted a photo stuck on the wall by the door.

John, Paul, George and Ringo was written in biro. She stared at the grinning faces. 'I like John.

'Paul's the best-looking. He's my favourite,' Sheila said.

'Come on! Let's go in.'

They made their way along the corridor, past the refreshment stand, hardly speaking to each other. The air hummed with the sound of girls laughing and talking.

At the ballroom door, Barbara stopped, blinked her eyes and looked around the enormous dance floor, startled at the number of people standing in groups, mostly girls. 'Love Me Do' blasted from speakers on the walls at the side of the stage. She looked at Sheila, grabbed her hand and they walked across the polished wooden floor, glad to take refuge on chairs that leaned against the wall, where the lights were low.

Lily had said the Queen's Hall lacked atmosphere because the ceiling was too high and the lights too bright. It didn't matter that night: raised voices and eager young bodies filled every inch of space. Bright lights shone on expectant faces, and eyes darted to and from the stage. The lights dimmed and Barbara put her hand to her mouth. *What's going to happen?*

'Let's give a warm welcome to our supporting group Rory Storm and the Hurricanes,' the compère announced. Loud cheers and claps came from the crowd. Someone close by said Ringo used to be their drummer.

'Should we jive?' Barbara asked Sheila, hoping she'd say no.

'If you *really* want to.' Sheila looked terrified.

'Yes, come on.' Barbara took a deep breath. *I want to feel part of this.* She smoothed down the flared skirt of her rayon dress, took Sheila's hand and they edged towards the dance floor. Caught up in the music, she forgot about the boys they were there to impress and danced wildly, her heart beating in harmony with the throbbing music, until the group stopped playing.

The microphone crackled. 'The Beatles will be appearing in ten minutes.' Noise and tension increased, spreading through the crowd on a wave. Boys leaning casually against the back wall stirred; others hurried from the refreshment room onto the dance floor. Everyone moved towards the stage, leaving the back of the hall empty. Barbara and Sheila squeezed in and wriggled their way to the centre, through tightly packed bodies. Barbara, taller than Sheila, could just about see the stage. Infected with the thrill and anticipation all around her, she grinned at Sheila, who was standing on her tiptoes. 'We made it!'

The curtains opened and Barbara saw George hurriedly stubbing a cigarette out before John shouted '1-2-3-4,' and started the mournful harmonica introduction to 'Love Me Do'. Screams! Shouts! Cheers! Claps! Handsome in long-sleeved white shirts, thin black ties and

waistcoats, the Beatles shook their mop heads as they sang. Dark hair, soft and floppy, moved with the rhythm.

‘Oh God!’ Barbara yelled. ‘This is amazing! They’re fab!’

No one danced. All around them, girls screamed and jumped up and down, waving their hands and shouting.

‘Paul!’

‘George!’

‘Ringo!’

Barbara and Sheila joined in, screaming until their voices became hoarse. When John sang ‘Money (That’s What I Want)’, the screams and shouts of the crowd reached the ceiling. Every beat of the amplified music sent vibrations through Barbara’s body and she wanted it to last forever. Every time the Beatles said it was their last song, the crowd shouted for more: the intoxicating sound lingered long after they left the stage.

Pushing her way out through the crowded door, red-faced and sweating, the cool night air made Barbara shiver and she quickly put on her coat. Frenzied fans overflowed onto the pavement singing Beatles songs, their voices echoing down Lacey Street. Barbara and Sheila queued at the bus stop, watching tearful girls pull at their hair and moan, ‘I love you, John.’

‘I want to marry George.’

‘Ringo’s so cute.’

‘Can’t wait to see them next Monday,’ Sheila said.

‘And the week after.’

Lunch time session at the Cavern, Liverpool 1962

At the top of Church Street, they hopped on a bus to Mathew Street. Barbara stared out of the window at the bustling city traffic. *How lucky am I!*

Agnes sat next to her. ‘You’ll love it!’

‘It’s fab!’ Patrick held onto the strap and grinned down at them, swaying with the motion of the bus.

As they hurried down the steep stone steps to the Cavern, the noise of the group rose up to greet Barbara. ‘What’s that smell?’ she asked.

‘It’s the rotting fruit from the warehouses,’ Patrick said, rolling his eyes at the ceiling.

‘And the disinfectant they use to clean the place with,’ Agnes said. ‘You don’t notice it after a while.’

At the bottom of the stairs, she struggled to hear the cloakroom attendant ask for the 1s/3d entrance fee. Yelling over the sound of the guitars and maracas, she handed over the coins.

She scanned the room. It looked just like the cellars at work, but the heat hit her in the face and she started to sweat. Cigarette smoke hung in the air, creating a grey cloud. Moisture from body heat glistened in the dim light and trickled down the walls. Barbara looked down at the hard stone floor where puddles had formed, dampening the white slingback shoes she’d bought from C&A with her first week’s wages.

‘Damn! Mam will go mad if I ruin these shoes.’ She wrinkled her damp toes.

Rows of what looked like dining-room chairs were placed in front of the stage. ‘You two sit down and I’ll get some cokes!’ Patrick yelled. ‘They sell burgers in the café at the back. Do you want one?’

‘No! I’m too excited to eat,’ Barbara said.

‘Get me one, la.’ Agnes gave him coins. ‘The chairs are all taken. Let’s dance,’ she said. ‘Do you know the Cavern Stomp?’ Barbara shook her head. ‘You just stand in one place, swinging your arms and legs like this.’ Agnes took Barbara’s right hand in hers and flung her free left arm out to the side, at the same time her legs kicked out to the left and the right. Barbara copied, her eyes shining, hair damp with sweat, stomping until Patrick returned with the cokes.

‘The queue was so long, I ate my burger.’ He handed Barbara a coke and Agnes a soggy bun, oozing tomato ketchup. He looked at his watch. ‘Our lunch break’s nearly over, even with the extra half-hour Mr Sanderson *kindly* said we could take. We’ll cop it if we don’t leave now.’ When they got their coats, Agnes dragged Barbara by the arm and they fought their way up the stone steps.

‘Come on, tatty head!’ Patrick shouted from the top stair. Outside the air was cool on Barbara’s flushed face, and they hurried to get the bus back to work.

‘Valerie’ll tell on us if we’re late,’ Agnes said. ‘She thinks she’s somebody, but she’s dead antwacky.’ Agnes called anyone or anything she thought was outdated antwacky.

‘And she’s having it off with the old man,’ Patrick said.

‘Yes! Mind you, don’t catch them at it!’

Barbara had seen the way the boss looked at Valerie, and sometimes he looked at her like that, too. ‘Last week, I put my hair up and Mr Sanderson stared at me and said it made me look older. Valerie was extra mean to me when he’d gone, and made me wash the cups twice cos she said they weren’t clean.’

‘Miserable cow!’ Patrick said. ‘You wanna watch him. He might be getting fed up with old Val.’

‘He’s too old for me!’

They ran up Dale Street as though they were being chased. Patrick and Agnes disappeared down the cellars, like rats through a trapdoor. ‘Good luck with tatty head,’ Patrick said under his breath.

Barbara pushed the heavy wooden door open as quietly as she could. It creaked. A chair moved. Valerie jumped up. ‘You’re late!’ Her brow wrinkled into a deep crevice.

Barbara wanted to say *What about the two-and three-hour lunches you have with Mr Sanderson?* but she didn't want to lose her job. She stared at the floor. 'Sorry, we missed the bus.'

Valerie made her stand at the far end of the office filing invoices, a job she hated. She peeped across at Valerie. *She is antwacky with her bouffant hairstyle. I'd hate to be twenty-one. You're welcome to old Mr Sanderson.*

On the train home, Barbara picked up an *Echo* someone had left on her seat and thumbed through the pages reading bits of news. The Beatles had made Liverpool famous. People were coming from all over the world to listen to the groups, and while they were in Liverpool they shopped in the boutiques, and ate and drank in the restaurants and pubs. That was the Liverpool she felt part of.

Most lunchtimes, she wandered round the city, feeling the buzz, the energy and the optimism that seemed to flow through the air on the fresh breeze that came up from the river. Boys in the city copied the Beatles 'moptop' hairstyle: girls had stopped backcombing and wore their hair in a natural style. Herbert's was the place to have your hair done, but Barbara couldn't afford it. Lily cut her dark shoulder-length hair into a sort of bobbed style that was fashionable, smooth but not very even.

The Beatles last gig at the Cavern Club, Liverpool August 1963

Extract from Chapter 8 'The Cavern'

They pushed through the crowd in the Grapes, a pub close to the Cavern. Monica, who was old enough to drink alcohol, went to the bar while Barbara's eyes darted round the room looking for a space to hide. She'd memorised a false date of birth in case there was a police raid. Someone moved from a corner seat and she quickly moved into it.

Monica placed two bottles on the beer-stained table and two glasses on the soggy

beer mats. 'It's black velvet, Guinness and cider mixed.' She poured the cider into the glasses, topping it up with Guinness, creating a frothy head, without losing a drop. *She's good at everything.* After a few long gulps, Barbara's nervousness evaporated. It was August. The air in the pub was stifling, but the place throbbed with a happy vibe, everyone laughing and talking about The Beatles.

Outside the Cavern, they stood near the end of the queue. 'They'll never let this lot in,' Barbara said. *I'll owe Dad ten shillings for nothing.*

'They'll have to, if they have tickets. It holds 500,' Monica said.

'God help us if there's a fire.'

Barbara stumbled down the steps and Monica grabbed her arm. Was it the heat, the frenzied fans inside the Cavern, or the black velvet she'd drunk so quickly in the pub? Packed more tightly than at lunchtime, the crowd was too thick to penetrate, heaving with bodies, damp and sweaty. She held onto Monica's arm as they edged their way around the cellar, the soaking walls dampening the back of her cotton shift dress. Monica manoeuvred into a space by the side wall, where they listened to the Merseybeats, one of the supporting groups.

On her tiptoes above the rows of heads bobbing up and down, Barbara could barely see The Beatles when they got onto the stage. She waved her hands in the air, her shouts buried in the deafening roar from the crowd. John tapped the microphone and everyone went quiet. 'OK, tatty head, we're going to play a number for you,' John said, and the screams and shouts got louder.

The lights went out. 'Oh God!' Barbara clung to Monica. The crowd groaned.

'It's the damp, it's fused the amps,' someone announced. 'Don't panic, they'll soon be back on.'

The mutters and moans got louder. Barbara gripped tighter. *Oh no! It's too hot and crowded, and dark.*

‘John and Paul are going to sing with acoustic guitars!’ someone yelled. The room breathed a deep sigh of relief and everyone clapped. Barbara relaxed her grip on Monica’s arm, closed her eyes and listened, awestruck, to the words of ‘When I’m Sixty-Four.’

She squeezed her eyes shut. *I’ll wake up soon and it’ll all have been a dream.*

The lights flashed back on and the spellbound crowd went wild again as John and Paul belted out ‘Some Other Guy’. The heat, sweat, smell and discomfort were gone, the stage a distant blur; she was part of the sound, the energy and the vibe.

John sang ‘Twist and Shout’ to roars from the crowd. It ended suddenly and they were gone. Cries. Shouts. Moans. As though they’d lost something, everyone was sad. ‘That’s it,’ someone said, ‘they’ll never come back.’

With smudged mascara and bedraggled hair, they clamoured for the last train back to Widnes, packed with teenagers from Warrington and Manchester.