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Beginnings

Before there was anything there was the One.
When the universe came into being,
The One became many.

—*Rig-Veda*

Years later, looking back, George Harrison found it strange that his soul entered his mother's womb in Liverpool in 1943 amid the sounds of battle—air raid sirens, German bomb attacks, English Spitfires shrieking by overhead racing to meet enemy planes—and wondered how he came to be in that family, in that house, at that time.

The final months of World War II were days of scarcity and rationing, and people of every class were scraping by. Harold Harrison's bus-driver salary barely covered basics, so when his wife, Louise, was pregnant with their first child, Harold and his brother-in-law Johnny built her a radio. They twisted wires and connected tubes and screwed the whole concoction into a wooden enclosure. After giving up her job at a local greengrocer's, Louise spent much of her time listening. She twisted the wooden dial to broadcasts of Irish folk songs, English dance-hall tunes, and music of foreign lands, wearing down the batteries until Harold had to leave them at a nearby electrical shop to be recharged. Louise gave birth to a daughter, whom they named after her. Three years later came Harold Jr., and then their second son, Peter. During her fourth and last pregnancy—with

George—Louise's favorite program was a weekly broadcast called Radio India. Every Sunday she tuned in to mystical sounds evoked by sitars and tablas, hoping that the exotic music would bring peace and calm to the baby in her womb.

George Harrison was born on February 25, 1943, at 12:10 A.M. in his family's house in a working-class section of Liverpool called Wavertree. By age three he had already developed the large ears, thick eyebrows, and lopsided smile that would be signature features throughout his life. "A tiny, squalling, miniature replica of myself," Harold proclaimed proudly, not foreseeing all the ways his youngest would break the mold. Harold was a man of his generation, a father for whom there was a right way and a wrong way to all things and who was determined to see his daughter and sons grow to adulthood as respected and productive members of their community. Louise, a careful housekeeper, was unstintingly considerate of everyone's feelings and dedicated to providing as sane a home for her children as their modest circumstances would allow. Behind their house she planted an apple tree and tall purple delphinium and fragrant lavender bushes. She kept a henhouse and cooked and cleaned and dedicated herself to the enterprise of raising healthy, happy offspring.

"Even though there wasn't much money," George's sister, Louise, recalled, "Mum made sure we knew we weren't peasants, that we came from educated stock and had great potential in life. She taught us to think, to question things, to always be kind, never kowtow to big shots or lord over the lowly. We were never to cringe in fear but neither were we to become bullies toward anyone. And we took care of one another. If there was only one apple, we'd each get a quarter."

Not many homes had central heating in postwar Britain, so George's mother bathed him in a battered zinc tub filled with water heated on the stove. Scrubbed and dressed, he would entertain a constant traffic of family and friends with songs and skits. Like many Liverpudlians, Louise came from a large Irish family; when the Harrisons gathered for parties they crowded

around Harold's wind-up gramophone and let loose with full-throated renditions of old favorites. One of George's earliest memories was standing on a leather stool and singing folksinger Josh White's "One Meatball" to his family's great delight.

"He had these animal puppets," his sister, Louise, said, "and he'd do skits with them for us. He was funny and outgoing and the family doted on him. He had fun growing up and was always the center of attention." Inside their little house, childhood was a pleasant time.

Outside, life was not as happy. German bombs had left Liverpool in ruins, and the city struggled under the weight of its own debris. George and his friends played in the remains of buildings and shops, rummaged through wreckage, dared one another to jump from demolished roofs, and manufactured bows and arrows from bits of broken wood and flattened bottle caps. Dodging cars and trucks was a popular game, although it often left slower kids with broken legs or worse. "It was rough then," remembered Bill Harry, who grew up near George and later founded *Mersey Beat* magazine. "There were gangs—the Chain Gang, the Peanut Gang. On your way to school, they'd stop you and search your pockets for money. I remember one guy throwing me to the ground while three others kicked the hell out of me. They'd smash bottles and stick them in people's faces. The violence was extreme because kids imagined themselves stuck there for the rest of their lives and felt hopeless."

George kept his defenses up. In Dovedale Junior School he practiced running fast and kicking a soccer ball hard. In those days, solving problems lacked subtlety, and a quick punch was the most expedient way of dealing with bullies.

In 1949, after being on a waiting list for several years, the Harrisons moved to a larger house in Speke, a state-subsidized development forty-five minutes by bus from central Liverpool. When six-year-old George walked out of his new house and looked up, he saw planes arriving at Liverpool Airport to the south, descending with a drone through skies tinted dark gray by smoke from a nearby industrial zone.

To the north, cars kept up a constant hum on the A561 highway. To get away, George would hop on his brother Peter's bike and pedal off. There were places a young boy could bike to, such as Carr Mill Dam, big as a lake with grassy slopes, where the sky overhead regained some of its natural blue. He watched long-tailed ducks land with unceremonious belly flops on the placid water and tracked white-fronted geese as they glided by in search of food. At other times he would walk to Halewood, near the spot where his school bus stopped, to skim rocks across a pond that sprouted sticklebacks like wayward tufts of hair. Occasionally Harold bundled his wife and children off to a little rented cottage in the countryside, where George ran after bugs and forest animals, picked wildflowers, and luxuriated in open spaces while Harold and Louise supervised.

"He had a lot to thank his parents for," George's sister-in-law Irene said years later, considering how carefully they protected him. "They worried constantly." In their eyes, their youngest was a trusting, soft-natured child who needed looking after.

As a boy, George had dreams that frightened him. The dreams started with a sensation of being very small. The sensation grew more and more intense, and things around him went faster and faster until he awoke, scared. It was an experience that followed him into adulthood. During recording sessions at Abbey Road Studios, when no one was around, he would use the sound booth as a place to meditate, and the sensation would return. In boyhood he shook away such uncomfortable thoughts by hopping on his bike and riding off through the farmlands of the Cheshire plain to the east or along the mud cliffs that stretched out along the Mersey River. Back in nature, he felt good again. He loved plants. With his keen powers of observation, he might have become a botanist if school hadn't been so boring.

More interesting to him were fast cars, which also promised escape from the debris of Liverpool. On weekends, as a kid he would take a box camera to racetracks and snap photos, and if

he found a manufacturer's plate welded to any of the cars, he would send off a letter asking for brochures and pictures.

But more than cars, more than biking away from the mud and rubble, more than anything else, George wanted to make music. Arriving back home from junior school, he'd crank up the gramophone and sing along to country songs by Jimmie Rodgers, urban blues tunes by Big Bill Broonzy, ballads by country-and-western singer Slim Whitman, and a wide assortment of English music-hall numbers. "It's hard to realize that there are kids like I was," he said, "where the only thing in their lives is to get home and play their favorite records." He warbled lyrics to songs about broken hearts and lonely nights and waiting for trains that never came. He sang silly tunes with names such as "I'm a Pink Toothbrush, You're a Blue Toothbrush" and yodeled along with Hank Williams on "Blue Yodel 94" until the musical stew grew so mouthwatering that he couldn't be without it for long.

When George was ten, a classmate offered to sell him a beginner's guitar for three pounds, ten shillings. It was a lot of money in those days, but George's mother bought it for him. His father had a friend who ran a pub and played guitar, and he showed George how to finger chords to tunes from the twenties and thirties such as "Dinah" and "Whispering." George tried the new chords out for his mother, twisting the guitar pegs until each string came as close to true as he could manage, positioning his fingers to best effect. The instrument's cheap wooden neck bent, and his fingers bled from pushing down on the strings.

"I'll never learn this," he said.

"You will, son," Louise encouraged. "Just keep at it." She sat up with him until he quit, teary-eyed, at two o'clock in the morning. He looked at the toy instrument and chafed.

"You don't understand about guitars, do you, Mum," he said.

"No," she admitted, "but if you stick to it I'm sure you'll make it." Louise remembered all the things she had wanted as a girl, but with so many children needing attention, her parents

hadn't encouraged her. "I'll help you buy a new guitar," she told her youngest.

As a young man, before joining the Liverpool bus company, Harold Harrison had trained to be a bursar for the Cunard Steamship Lines. Then he saw how much more money stewards earned working in first class and managed to get himself transferred. He knew the value of a solid job and, despite having offered some initial encouragement, balked at his son's growing interest in music.

The other Harrison children were practical about their careers. Their daughter attended teachers' training college. Harry and Peter completed full apprenticeships, and by 1955 Harry was a mechanic, while Peter did panel beating and welding. If all else failed, Harold reasoned, maybe George could become an electrician and open a repair shop with his brothers. His Christmas gifts to twelve-year-old George included a set of electrical tools. The war had taken its toll, and screwdrivers were what a sane man gave his youngest son, something dependable.

George had no taste for manual labor, but he did benefit from his father's ability to reason problems out to their solution. Popular myth has painted George as a bus driver's son, but Harold was more than just a driver—he was in charge of scheduling all the buses in Liverpool: nearly six thousand buses and eighty different routes through town. "He scheduled them all so that connections were made in the most efficient manner," daughter Louise said. "Not many people understand how brilliant he was."

As for religion, George had as little interest in it as he did in manual labor. His dad was a lapsed Anglican, while his mother maintained her Roman Catholic traditions and did what she could to instill a sense of faith in her children. Still, religion made no sense to George. "I was raised Catholic," he told photographer Murray Silver, "but even as a kid I couldn't understand the claim that Jesus was the only Son of God when, in fact, we all are."

Young George appreciated that Christ died for the sins of others but snickered at the irony of seeing pubs located across

from every church in the city. How convenient, he thought. People can drink themselves under the table and then cross the street to make amends with a fiver on the collection plate. By the time of his first Holy Communion at age eleven, he had grown sufficiently disenchanted to skip Confirmation, deciding that he'd "confirm it later" for himself.

Despite his lack of interest in formal education, George was a bright child and the only one in his family to gain admission to Liverpool Institute, a local secondary school that catered to the city's academic elite, those who passed the Eleven Plus examination. Acceptance to the institute meant possibly gaining entrance to a university. Those who failed the entrance exam usually left school to look for an apprenticeship or earn money as laborers electrifying the railways between Liverpool and London. For George, starting at Liverpool Institute at age twelve was "when the darkness began." Even physically, the place was dark. Once it may have boasted an imposing Greek facade, carved balustrades, elegant wooden railings, and bright natural light, but years of neglect had robbed it of its grace. Chips of paint drooped from window ledges and clouds of dust blanketed corners and corridors. He felt that his new teachers, most of them aging war veterans or inexperienced college graduates, had nothing to teach him. They only wanted to turn students into "rows of little toffees" with their meaningless lessons in algebra and history. He would arrive at school in one of his brother Harry's hand-me-down sports jackets, pointy blue suede shoes, hair stacked and combed to perfection, take a seat in the rear, and begin doodling cello guitars with big "f" holes. Warnings from his teachers followed: start working or you'll be expelled. George replied with silence.

Arthur Evans, one of George's teachers, remembered, "Harrison was the greatest surprise to me of all during the Beatles' meteoric rise to fame. My memory of him was of a very quiet, if not even introverted little boy who would sit in the farthest corner and never say a word, or even look up."

Friends, though, saw him in a different light. "He had a wicked sense of humor," remembered schoolmate Rod Othen, "always in mischief—and he didn't suffer fools gladly." The headmaster's threats, Othen recalled, merely drove George farther away from any interest in studies and provoked his nascent sense of righteous anger. "George was antibullying. There was a kid in school who smelled so bad that the master's punishment for anyone who disobeyed was to make the offender sit next to him. George would voluntarily take the chair next to the smelly kid. He befriended him."

The institute's reputation as one of Liverpool's finer schools did nothing to diminish George's disgust at being there, and he failed one class after another. Often he would sneak off to spend his days at the movies—another place of escape that would later become important in his life. "I cannot tell you what his work is like," wrote the headmaster, "because he has not done any." Eventually, having received one too many miserable report cards, he dropped out of school completely.

"Hadn't you better get a job or something?" his father hinted again and again, until George finally interviewed with the Youth Employment Centre and took a position as apprentice electrician at a shop called Blackler's for one pound, fifty pence per week. At Blackler's he barely did his work, preferring darts in the basement while waiting for the day to end so he could race home to play his guitar.

Young George was frequently ill, and his poor health provided him with plenty of sick days and consequent practice time. He suffered from tonsillitis and at thirteen developed nephritis, an inflammation of the kidneys that sent him to the hospital for six weeks.

He hated the hospital. Cockroaches crawled across the floor and up onto his sheets while he slept, and the doctors were not the best: good ones left Liverpool in search of better pay.

He couldn't have blamed them. Detesting confinement, he believed in getting out, too, and in moving on to places ripe with opportunity. Childhood in Liverpool was an impatient time, made bearable by imagining the possibilities of something more. Like

many young people in Britain after the war, George dreamed of discovering bigger worlds. And though the day would come when he could imagine nothing worse, at age thirteen, he could imagine nothing better than a career in rock and roll.

Over British radio in 1956 came a new kind of music. Rock and roll was earthy, sexual, angry, loud, self-absorbed, defiant—a perfect outlet for adolescents seeking freedom from postwar constraints. Grownups looking for calm after World War II were outraged. Psychologist Francis J. Braceland, then president of the American Psychiatric Association, called the new music "a communicable disease . . . cannibalistic." Proper children should be studying science and math, the argument went, not gyrating their hips and screaming at the top of their lungs.

George was thirteen and out of the hospital when rock and roll entered his life by way of Fats Domino's "I'm in Love Again," Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel," and Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti." The music sent shivers down his spine and fueled a desire to join a band. In those days anybody could put a band together. One kid drummed on a washboard, another plunked a broom-handle bass, a third faked chords on guitar, another blew into a gob iron (which was what they called a harmonica), and they dubbed themselves a band. By the end of the 1950s, more than three hundred bands across Liverpool were scratching out hit tunes in "jive hives," ballrooms and town halls booked by enterprising local promoters, as well as in youth clubs, ice rinks, church halls, coffee bars, and pubs. Records from America arrived in the seaport city before anywhere else in Britain. George listened carefully to these new tunes at parties and record shops, puzzling through unfamiliar chords and guitar licks. While parents swooned over Bing Crosby and dreamed of earning more money, boys such as George swooned over Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog" and dreamed of becoming musicians.

The bus that had taken George back and forth to his dreary school was a double-decker like the one his dad drove. George met Paul McCartney in 1956 on the upper deck, where Paul sat

so he could smoke a pipe and feel like the poet Dylan Thomas. Paul was nine months older and a grade ahead at Liverpool Institute. He read plays by Samuel Beckett and Tennessee Williams, loved musicals and Fred Astaire, and imitated his dad's renditions of "Lullaby of the Leaves" and "Stairway to Paradise" on their piano. "If you want to learn," Paul's dad said, "you've got to learn properly—and if you do, you'll get invited to parties." When George demonstrated for Paul how many guitar chords he knew, they began practicing together. Paul was playing with a group called the Quarry Men.

"I got this friend," he told the group's leader, John Lennon. "He's a bit young, but he can play 'Raunchy' really well."

John was three years older than George and attended the nearby College of Art. Not sure whether he was an artist or a rebel, John wore a beret by day and a leather jacket by night. George strummed "Raunchy" for John on a bus ride home in February 1958, and it sounded just like the rock instrumental by Alabama guitarist Bill Justis.

"You're in," John said.

Joining a band in 1950s Liverpool meant becoming part of a team. Joey Molland, who went on to fame as guitarist in the band Badfinger, remembered what it was like. "There was a sense of staying together and not deserting the ship. Your band was like your family. You worked with them. We were raised like that," he said, "with the history of England and the commitment to the English way of life and character. An Englishman is known for sticking it out through good and bad and believing that things will work out in the end. We had to have that attitude in Liverpool because you'd be taking your dad's suit to the pawnshop on Monday and getting it out on Friday when he got paid, and during those four days in between the family had to survive. I guess the sense of loyalty is an extension of that."

That loyalty came in handy, especially when dances ended in a brawl, as they often did. Boyfriends had a hard time tolerating the attention their girls gave to band members.

George, Paul, and John tried rehearsing at John's house, where he lived with his aunt Mimi. John's father had deserted the family when John was four. John's mother, Julia, funny and gorgeous with long red hair, pursued a social life that made raising a child impractical. Julia's sister Mimi was well off, but she never had children of her own and insisted on chastising her nephew and his musician friends. "The guitar is all right for a hobby, John," she said, "but it won't earn you any money." Her judgment of George Harrison was just as severe. "You always seem to like the lower-class types, don't you, John," she said.

"Shut up, Mimi," John said, and then he screamed. Screaming was real. It made people's hair stand on end. He loved Little Richard's scream *"Oooooo tutti frutti,"* but didn't like living at his aunt's. He preferred being with his mother, who was witty and played banjo and let the boys practice in her bathroom, where the acoustics were good. Mimi put brakes on him, he felt, and never let his band in the front door. "You watched your p's and q's around her," said Quarry Man bass player Len Garry.

George wanted to find the group some place other than Mimi's to rehearse and convinced his parents to let them practice at their house, where the group could play records on brother Harry's portable player. During rehearsals, Louise cheered them on and fed them cookies and sometimes a little taste of whiskey.

At first John made fun of younger George, who had big ears and was always fawning over him and his girlfriend, Cynthia. John "was a bit embarrassed about that," George recalled, "because I was so tiny. I only looked about ten years old." One way to even the odds, George surmised, was to wear the right clothes. Harold went into shock one day on discovering his son wedged into an old pair of John's hand-me-down jeans. They were the tightest pants Harold had ever seen. Seeing a look of disapproval on his father's face, George leaped into the air and landed at his feet. "How can I do my ballet without tight jeans?" he asked, prancing around some more until his parents had to laugh.

"George never gave us any cheek," said his mother, Louise, "but he always got round us."

The youngest band member admired John's worldliness, his apparent sexual prowess and aggressive self-assurance, but he never let John's sarcasm get the better of him. George would simply talk back and "give him a taste of his own," as George said.

A few months after George and John met, John's mother, Julia, died in a car crash. A drunken policeman was behind the wheel. After that, "John always had a thing about authority," his half-sister Julia said.

George offered his condolences. It was George's first encounter with death, and it shook him. "George was terrified that I was going to die next," his mother recalled. "He'd watch me carefully all the time. I told him not to be so silly. I wasn't going to die." George had come on the scene after John and Paul had already built a friendship, one that grew stronger with Julia's death. Paul's mother had died of breast cancer when he was fourteen. When John's mother died, it created "an almost inseparable bond between him and Paul," said John's half-sister Julia. They practically "grew into each other's pockets. It cemented their friendship in a deep way."

George was the only Beatle to grow up without divorce or early death—Ringo's mother divorced when Ringo was three—and George's happy childhood helped compensate for being the youngest in the group. As a band, they grew better. As friends, they grew closer, and despite the unique bond between John and Paul, there was no mistaking their cohesiveness, never any uncertainty over their commitment to one another. George thrived in the industry of their musicmaking and the intimacy of their shared lives. If they fought, they made up, usually with a laugh. "That was one thing to be said about us," he said. "We were really tight, as friends. We could argue a lot, but . . . in the company of other people or other situations we'd always stick together."

Friendship between George and his new bandmates was reinforced by hard work. They rehearsed constantly. If one of them heard a good new song, he'd tell the others and they'd take a bus to NEMS, Liverpool's largest record shop, where cus-

tomers could play records before deciding to buy. The biggest song of 1956 was Bill Haley's "Rock Around the Clock," the theme song to the film *Blackboard Jungle.* Liverpool theaters admitted no one under sixteen. In later years Paul remembered helping baby-faced George get in by grabbing a fingerful of soil from Louise's garden and painting a mustache on George's upper lip. The ruse worked, and off they went to the movies to learn another tune for their repertoire.

As for gigs, they accepted any offer that allowed them to play for an audience. If a sponsor complained about their not having a drummer, they would argue that the rhythm was "in the guitars." Their ambition knew no limits—any venue would do, including men's clubs, pubs, and amateur competitions. They were nearly the last to audition at one talent show when, by 11:00 P.M., the judges were too drunk to tell one group from another and awarded top prize to an old lady who played spoons.

"We shouldn't have lost to her," the boys grumbled on the bus home. "She wasn't that good."

George had recently turned seventeen when the Silver Beatles, as they called themselves then, were offered a two-week gig in Scotland. It was a big opportunity, a chance to see how they could do on the road. But if George were going to spend that much time away, he would have to quit his job. "Would you pack in work and have a go at this if you were me?" he asked his brother Peter.

"You might as well," Peter said, thinking of his younger brother's passion for music and his misery at work. "There's nothing to lose."

George turned in his overalls at Blackler's electrical store. G. J. Peat, one of the managers, wagged a finger. "Mark my words, George Harrison. One day you'll crawl back on your knees pleading for your job." It was a chance George was quite willing to take.

George, John, and Paul enlisted a friend, Stuart Sutcliffe, who played bass, and a drummer who worked a forklift at a nearby bottling company, and the group set out for Scotland with visions

of their name in lights. The tour turned out to be a depressing string of one-night stands, scarce food, and an abundance of misfortunes. A near-fatal car accident, coldwater flats, and meager publicity brought the tour to a less than glamorous end, and they returned to Liverpool disappointed and hungry but not defeated.

Allan Williams, who ran a coffee bar and managed a few local bands, offered them a slot at his club, the Jacaranda. "The night they first played here," he said, "George came up to me earlier in the day—he was only seventeen at the time—and said, 'Hey, Al, have you got a broom?' I told him the floor was clean enough, but he said, 'and a mop as well?' I found out why that evening. You see, they were so poor in those days that they didn't have microphone stands. Their girlfriends used to tie the mikes on the broomsticks and they'd be sitting in the front row holding up these brushes and things all night long."

Girlfriends came with the territory. If girls flocked to the front of the stage when a band played, if they let themselves be impressed into service holding broom handles or ironing a band member's clothes, it was because rock and roll struck hard below the belt.

"I don't think teenagers get that sensation anymore," said *Mersey Beat* magazine founder Bill Harry. "There are too many choices. Back then we focused our whole attention on the Beatles or Rory Storm and the Hurricanes or Kingsize Taylor and the Dominoes because they were unbelievable. They took your breath away."

George had plenty of girlfriends. When he was younger, there was Jennifer Brewer, who had a beaming white smile and wore her hair in a pageboy. Then there was Rory Storm's sister, Iris Caldwell, who filled out her bra by stuffing it with cotton padding. A few years later, there was a girl who studied with John at the Art College. George thought she looked like his favorite actress, Brigitte Bardot, with blond pigtails, and managed to "shag" her at a party one night. John found out, and after that he paid George a little more respect.

"Don't get yourself trapped alone with a female you don't know," Harold warned his youngest son, always cautious about that sort of thing, "or with a female you can't trust. You'll find yourself in a paternity suit."

"We weren't promiscuous," Bill Harry explained. "First of all, it was hard to get condoms. Plus, there was no place to go. Where would a boy go with his girlfriend if they wanted to make love? There were alleys—we used to call them jiggers—but if a fellow took a girl there and tried to do it with her, she'd usually say, 'I'd get off at Edge Hill.' Edge Hill was the station just before the last train station, which was Lime Street. So when a girl said that, she was saying, 'you'd better be satisfied with coitus interruptus, because that's as far as I go.' To be pregnant and unmarried was such a stigma that families would have the daughter move away for a time and make some excuse about going on vacation."

Satisfied by their trial run at the Jacaranda, a few weeks later Allan Williams gave the Silver Beatles the oddest engagement of their young career: playing backup for Janice, a stripper who would only disrobe to live music and who referred to George as "that nice boy with the bony face."

Williams had booked a few Liverpool groups at clubs in Hamburg and was looking for new acts to send across the English Channel. He offered the Silver Beatles a chance to travel, provided they could find a permanent drummer. George contacted Pete Best, a friend who played with a group called the Blackjacks, and the band was ready for Germany.

Harold Harrison bristled at the thought of his son in such a place. Germany was dangerous and a wartime enemy only a few years back. Besides, there were no guarantees in the music business.

Still, a salaried job, however modest, at least offered some security. George's mother convinced Harold to let him go, and George loved her for it, for defending his right to choose his own way in life even if there were risks, for helping his father

understand that this was something he had to do, that it was useless trying to keep him tied to Liverpool. His mom and dad were no strangers to entertainment—they enjoyed a reputation as two of Liverpool's best ballroom dancers—and Harold could even take pride in seeing his son transform a passion into a career.

George's parents swallowed their fear, handed him a can of scones, made him promise to write, and waved their son goodbye. Seventeen-year-old George Harrison's world of familiar, predictable routines was about to give way to an unfamiliar, unpredictable world—of sex, drugs, and rock and roll.