Chapter 1

It's Christmas Eve 1967. A Saturday. Four o'clock in the afternoon. I'm waiting for Mike.

Mrs Kenny's large flat in Hamlet Gardens, Hammersmith, is empty except for me, cocooned in the room I rent at the elbow of the L-shaped passage.

I am seventeen years old, a shelf-stacker at Anthony Jackson's supermarket on the Upper Richmond Road in East Sheen – a temporary measure, I tell myself, to fill the interval between school and rock stardom. Ahead lies 1968, plump with promise. I am convinced that for the band I'm with, the In-Betweens, this will be the year we hit the big time.

What actually lay ahead in 1968 was the end of my nascent music career, marriage, fatherhood, a new job as a postman and a return to my home turf – London W10.

Anthony Jackson's had closed that lunchtime. Johnny Farugia, its larger-than-life Maltese manager, had taken his devoted staff (Kath, Sandra and me) to the pub opposite for a Christmas drink.

The store was more of a self-service corner shop than a fully fledged supermarket, but its single cash register had been

ringing almost permanently throughout the Christmas period. We'd worked hard and our boss wanted to show his appreciation. I explained that I had to be home by 3.30pm because Mike, my brother-in-law, was picking me up in his Rover 110 to drive me to Watford, where I was to spend Christmas with him, my sister Linda and my four-month-old niece.

Johnny Farugia fussed over us in the pub, insisting on buying all the drinks. After clinking our glasses in a Christmas toast he distributed our presents.

'Hard work – is all I asking,' he announced in the English that remained eccentric after fifteen years in the country he adored. ('You fuckin' Brits, you dun deserve dis country. Always you moan. You dun appreciate wad you got.')

I knew what my present was as soon as I saw the shape of the package. Johnny was well aware that I idolized the Beatles. He'd heard me wax lyrical about *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the album that had astounded and delighted the world on its release in June, becoming the soundtrack to the summer of love. And we'd stood together in the warehouse at the back of the store, like mourners at a funeral, as 'A Day in the Life', the final song on the album, wafted its beauty from the big, blue portable radio. During the year the pirate stations that had been our only source of continuous pop had been outlawed by an Act of Parliament and Radio 1 had been launched by the BBC to replace them. In a final act of defiance, Radio London had gone off the air to the strains of this track, which had been banned by the BBC on the grounds that it glorified the drug LSD. Dear old Auntie apparently had no such reservations about another number from the album, 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds', which they happily and unsuspectingly played.

The highlight of the three-channel television schedules that Christmas was to be the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* film on Boxing Day, the soundtrack for which had been released as a six-track EP (extended play) disc.

My magical mystery Christmas present had cost Johnny Farugia 19s 6d. I knew that because the Fab Four had insisted that the record must be sold for under a quid. The band always showed huge consideration for their fans, rarely lifting singles (or even 'B' sides) from their albums, printing the lyrics on their LP sleeves (commonplace now but unheard of prior to *Sergeant Pepper*) and demanding that the prices of their masterpieces be kept as low as possible.

Now, a few hours after that Christmas drink, I sat in the fusty, damask comfort of my room, waiting for Mike.

Mike Whitaker. Dear Mike. He'd been a hero to me from the moment we met and my brother-in-law since he'd married Linda in September 1966.

Mike had come into our lives just as my mother's heart condition worsened and entered its final phase. It was he who quietly and solidly supported Linda and me through our mother's last illness and her death; he who had paid for the rose bush and the little plaque marking the spot in Kensal Green cemetery where her ashes were scattered:

Lilian May Johnson
Born: 11th May 1921
Died: 4th March 1964
Rest in Peace

There were, and remain, three great passions in my life – music,

books and football – and Mike shared the first two. Like me he was largely autodidactic, having left school at fifteen to work for Henry's Radios, an electrical store in Praed Street off the Edgware Road, where he was now the manager, earning extra money from private work he did on the side.

He devoured historical biographies and science fiction, particularly the books of Ray Bradbury, introducing me to *The Illustrated Man* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. He loved Aubrey Beardsley's drawings and posters and the records of Bob Dylan, discovered by Mike before hardly anyone else in England had heard of him.

Mike longed to look like his cinematic hero James Dean. His kind, open face certainly had the required cleft chin and dimples. But with his sky-blue eyes and corn-blond hair – angelic looks that, as far as I was concerned, matched his personality – he always reminded me of the actor David McCallum who starred in *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* TV series.

Kind, thoughtful, intelligent – and late. I'd been back in my room by 2.30pm but an hour later he still hadn't arrived. In those pre-mobile phone days, if somebody got delayed or failed to turn up there was nothing to do but wait. With the widowed Mrs Kenny and her grown-up son (who lived with her but was seldom seen) spending Christmas in Ireland, I had the run of the place. Nevertheless I stuck to my room as usual. I'd moved into these digs at sixteen and my landlady and I had the perfect understanding. I would put my £2-a-week rent on the kitchen table for her every Friday and she left me to my own devices to do what I wanted, when I wanted and with whom I wanted in my room.

Right now, with Mike more than two hours late, what I wanted to do was strum my much-loved Spanish guitar, bought for me by my mother ten years before after a modest win on the pools. As the winter light faded the table lamps illuminated the furniture – bed, wardrobe, plush armchair – that belonged to a previous age. I was reluctant to put another shilling in the meter which fed the two-bar electric heater, as the flat seemed somehow to generate its own warmth.

I still remember the song I wrote in the gathering dusk as I waited for Mike that Christmas Eve afternoon. It was based on a real experience I'd had a few weeks earlier. I'd been going somewhere on the tube ('Home again, the people crushed and crammed inside the train,') at the height of the rush hour ('squeezed a seat, staring at my feet to hide the strain') when a dazzling girl got on. I hadn't been able to take my eyes off her ('My eyes were raised, I gazed amazed as she walked in the door. In midi-mac, her auburn hair just flowed across her back'). I watched her light a cigarette ('Reached in her bag, and found a fag amongst her bric-a-brac') but then, a few stops on, she melted into the jostling crowd of passengers ('As the doors flew back, like a hunting pack, swarms of people left the train. Lost from sight, she wasn't there when I looked back again.')

The song was long finished by the time Mike eventually rang my doorbell just after 7pm. I wasn't angry. I could never be angry with Mike. In any case the hours had not been wasted. The delay had allowed me to write a half-decent new song that I was pleased with.

Mike's smile was infectious and, as always, he immediately offered one of his untipped Senior Service cigarettes.

'Sorry I'm late,' he said as we walked down the stairs to his car. 'I went for a drink after work.'

As we approached the Rover I could see that there was somebody sitting in the front passenger seat.

'Oh, this is Harry,' said Mike, by way of introduction to an elderly Irish gentleman who exuded a tipsy bonhomie. 'He's coming home with us for Christmas.'

I learned that Harry had been a fixture in the pubs on the Edgware Road for years. Hearing him bemoan the fact that he'd be spending Christmas on his own, Mike insisted on taking him to Watford to spend Christmas Day with him and Linda. And me.

This was not untypical of my brother-in-law. He'd already rung Linda from the pub to warn her. Her response had been that there was plenty of food and that Harry (who she'd never met before) would be welcome, which was not untypical of my sister. I remembered the childhood Christmases Linda had rescued for me when our mother had been in hospital and we'd found ourselves alone. Now she was rescuing Harry's.

First, though, we had to get to Watford. I can't remember how much motorway, if any, actually existed south of Watford then. The stretch of the M1, Britain's first inter-city motorway, carrying traffic from the north to the outskirts of London, was still under construction at the time. Whatever the case, Mike stuck to the ordinary roads. It was just as well.

As I sat on the stitched leather of the plush rear seat it began to dawn on me, to my increasing horror, that Mike was very, very drunk. I was already aware that Harry had over-imbibed but that didn't matter so much – he wasn't behind the steering wheel. All the same, it would have been helpful if he'd uttered

the odd word of caution to encourage Mike to modify his reckless driving. As it was, alcohol had made him equally oblivious of danger.

Through the city our progress was disciplined by traffic lights and zebra crossings, but once we were out of London we careered round bends, skirted ditches and accelerated at every opportunity on the dark, wet roads of Hertfordshire. While I cowered, terrified, in the back, Harry was chatting away as if perched at the bar of the Coach and Horses telling yarns. Every five or ten minutes Harry would ceremoniously produce a small bottle of whisky from the pocket of his raincoat, take a good slug and offer it round. Thankfully, Mike declined, as did I.

There was no legal requirement then for seat belts even to be fitted, let alone for drivers or their passengers actually to wear them. (Drink-driving, on the other hand, was definitely illegal, though the blood alcohol limit for driving had been in force for only a couple of years and social attitudes were slow to catch up. The breathalyser had been brought in just two months earlier, amid protests about infringements of civil liberties.) I remonstrated with Mike as best I could as I was thrown from side to side in the back of this unguided missile, which could have been fuelled by the fumes emanating from the front seats. In response to my exhortations to slow down, Mike told me soothingly to stop worrying. We needed to step on it as he'd be in big trouble with Linda if we didn't get home soon.

When the car finally pulled up in the suburban peace of St James' Road, Watford, the relief was overwhelming. I felt like James Stewart in the final scene of *It's a Wonderful Life*: exhilarated by the knowledge that I was now more certain to

live beyond the age of seventeen and to experience all that life still had in store for me.

The future I had mapped out in my mind had taken a different course before 1968 had even dawned when, at a pre-New Year party at Mike and Linda's, I met Judith Elizabeth Cox. Within a few months I had asked her to be my wife. Judy was a single mother. Her daughter Natalie, born in 1966, would complete the picture of domestic bliss that we'd begun to paint in our imaginations. Judy and Natalie lived with Judy's grandmother in Camelford Road back in Notting Hill, just off Ladbroke Grove, amid the streets where Linda and I had spent our childhood. Our plan was to put our names down for a council house as soon as we were married. Until that materialized we would make Camelford Road our first marital home.

I took advantage of my weekly half-day off to catch the train up to Watford and break the news to Linda. Anthony Jackson's, in common with every other shop on the Upper Richmond Road, closed at lunchtime on Wednesdays. Half-day closing was still a British institution. It gave shop workers a welcome break and was cheerfully tolerated by an inconvenienced public, who had never known things any other way.

I often stayed overnight in Watford in the spare room that had been earmarked for my permanent residency when Linda married Mike and left the council flat we'd shared on the Wilberforce estate in Battersea. We'd argued then about my insistence on remaining in London instead of moving with Linda out to what I regarded as the northern countryside.

Initially I had stayed with kindly Mr and Mrs Cox (no relation to Judy), the parents of my primary-school best friend, whose home had been a sanctuary for me as a child. When the Coxes were rehoused I had moved on to my room at Mrs Kenny's.

That had been a mild disagreement compared with her reaction to the news that Judy and I had entered the quaint institution known as engagement and were planning to be married in July.

Linda was horrified. My whole future would be ruined, she told me. It wasn't that she had anything against Judy – indeed they were good friends, having met at Brixton College where they had both trained to be nursery nurses. She'd also known Beppe, Natalie's Italian father, who'd been engaged to Judy for three years before fleeing back to his homeland when he found out she was pregnant. What would I do if Beppe wanted access to the child? she wanted to know. How would I cope with being a teenage father? Did I realize how unusual it was for a husband to be four years younger than his wife?

Linda was impassioned but unconvincing. She herself had married a month or so after her nineteenth birthday and Mike was four years older than she was. Just as Linda had found happiness with him, so I would with Judy. The age difference wasn't a problem between Linda and Mike. Why should it be a problem between Judy and me?

I remember deploying all of these arguments in my smart-arse way as Linda stomped around the kitchen of her neat semi, desperately trying to find the line of argument that would prevent a breach of what she saw as her duty of care.

There was something about my sister that I only came to appreciate much later. I didn't realize quite how intensely she

missed our mother. For me, under the shelter of Linda's wing, recovering from Lily's death had been easier. It was Linda who had shared that big double bed with our mother after our father left and listened every night as she talked about her life, her regrets, her sorrows, her fears, her hopes for our future.

Linda had taken responsibility for eradicating the fears and fulfilling the hopes. She worked to clear the debts in an effort to ensure that when Lily was allowed home from hospital she'd have an easier life – one that didn't involve scrubbing and cleaning for other people. She strove for a future in which our mother would find joy and solace in the grandchildren Linda so desperately wanted her to live to see.

But Lily had died. And part of Linda died with her.

Bereft of Lily's physical presence, Linda clung to the belief that her mother was still with her in spirit. At her own wedding reception, where she felt Lily's absence acutely, she had taken me to one side and told me she was convinced our mother was there in the room with us. She looked for signs in everything, visiting fortune-tellers, reading horoscopes, consulting mediums. One of her more eccentric pursuits was scanning the number plates of passing cars in search of my mother's initials, LMJ. Whether travelling on a bus, sitting in the passenger seat of Mike's car or walking to the shops, she'd feel compelled to search for that exact combination.

The house Mike had bought in Watford was only a few doors away from his parents' home but if Linda had harboured any hopes that her sense of loss might be eased by forging a bond with her mother-in-law she was to be sadly disappointed. She found no echo of Lily's maternal love in Irene Whitaker. Far from viewing Linda as a surrogate daughter, Irene had always

seemed resentful of the intrusion into the close relationship she had with her son and matters did not improve after their marriage.

There was no trace of Mike's placid temperament in Irene. She was already estranged from her own daughter, after cutting her off because she didn't like her lifestyle. Linda was thrilled to find out she was pregnant three months after her wedding. She was married, the pregnancy was planned and, expecting her delight to be shared by the grandmother-to-be, she went to tell her the news.

'You stupid cow,' spluttered Irene. 'How could you get pregnant so soon? Haven't you heard of birth control? You should have waited at least three years before even thinking of having children.'

Thus this joyful event – one that had actually involved the willing participation of her son – was condemned by Irene as some kind of terrible error of judgement on Linda's part. The relationship never recovered.

Irene's nature had without doubt been shaped by the terrible trauma she had suffered as a small child. Her mother had committed suicide after discovering that Irene's father was having an affair. She had been found with her throat and both wrists slit and four-year-old Irene sitting quietly beside her.

With Mike's parents living so close my sister had little escape from the hostile atmosphere created by Irene and not much fraternal support from me, the brother who continually defied her wishes.

Linda was well aware of what Lily had wanted for me – that I should qualify as a draughtsman and lead a happy life free of squalor and debt – and she saw it as her job to support me

towards that goal. To date I hadn't exactly been co-operative. I'd left school at fifteen when Linda urged me to stay on. I'd refused to move to Watford with her and Mike. Now I was adding to her sense of having failed Lily, and of having failed me, by announcing that, at the tender age of eighteen, I would be marrying a woman with a child and moving back to the mean streets where we'd grown up, with no prospects of becoming a draughtsman or indeed of entering any other qualified profession.

But there was nothing she could do to overcome my resolve. Perhaps she tried to get Mike to speak to me 'man to man', I don't know. If she did, the mission would have foundered on his natural geniality and reluctance to engage in any kind of confrontation.

My mind was made up. I would be married in the summer of 1968.