



JOHN LENNON
IS DEAD
AND IT REALLY BOTHERS ME

a short story by J.R. HELTON

I was born in 1962 in Houston, Texas, and spent most of my early childhood in a neighborhood called Pine Woods, where we had a small house on an oak-and-pine-lined street named Mulberry. My grandparents, my mother's parents, lived five blocks away on a street called Hewitt. My mother was the oldest of ten, and she gave birth to me when she was sixteen, while her own mother was having her late-in-life children. My grandmother's last two sons, Walter and Richard Gallagher, were around my age and more like brothers to me than uncles.

I never had any siblings of my own. My teenage father,

perhaps having seen my mother's gigantic family, ran out and got a vasectomy after I was born. He had to quit high school for a time, as did my mother, though both eventually got their diplomas. My mother went on to earn a master's degree and works in healthcare in Houston. Though he never finished college, my father started his own insurance business, which now reaches all of Houston and the surrounding suburbs.

But back in the sixties, when everything and everyone seemed young and unsure, my father worked at low-paying jobs: pumping gas, loading railroad cars, delivering newspapers

at night. My mother had just started her career as a nursing assistant and worked midnight shifts in the emergency room of the local hospital off the 610 Loop. What little social life they had revolved around my grandparents' house on Hewitt Street. Not a day went by that we weren't over there for dinner, or breakfast, or lunch. I often spent the night while my parents went to work. The next morning, I would walk to elementary school with my uncles Richard and Walter, the three of us escorted by my Aunt Mary Margaret, or Maggie, as everyone called her, who was on her way to high school.

I was always proud to be seen with my young aunt, as she was incredibly beautiful to me, with long blond hair parted in the middle, in the plain style of the late sixties. She had the strong chin and deep blue eyes of a Gallagher, only slightly exaggerated, her chin a tad more prominent, her eyes a deeper blue. She wore hip-hugger bell-bottoms, and when she baby-sat me, we listened to music together and she talked to me about her boyfriends and her worries for the future. Sometimes my mother would let her borrow our yellow Volkswagen convertible, and Maggie would take me for a ride with the top down and pop music on the radio. I can still see Maggie leaning over to me, the wind blowing her hair everywhere, singing along to the Archies, "Sugar, ahh, honey, honey . . ."

Like me, Maggie was a big chicken, afraid of everything, and at night we would often sleep in the same bed and tell each other scary stories until we held one another in fear, afraid even to get up because a murderer might be hiding under the bed, waiting to grab our feet and slit our throats. It didn't help that our neighborhood was considered somewhat dangerous then. Police cars regularly careened down the streets of Pine Woods, and helicopters hovered over our homes, shining searchlights into our backyards and through our windows — which, Maggie and I felt, did nothing but drive the murderers indoors, and straight into our room.

I say I was proud to be seen with my aunt, but really any of the Gallaghers would do. The fact was, I wanted to be a Gallagher. Because I was usually with my pseudobrothers Richard and Walter, and because my facial features resembled theirs, people would often assume I was a Gallagher, and I would never correct them. At school, everyone knew not to mess with the Gallagher clan. My older uncles and aunts had all been attractive and popular athletes and scholars and had collectively ruled the school. Three of those uncles were now in Vietnam. The other older uncle, Peter, was a senior in high school and had declared that he would not fight in that distant country like his brothers. Peter was a hippie, and something akin to a god to me. He had curly brown hair and a thick beard, and he appeared strong and healthy: the exact opposite of me. I

was thin and pale and always sick back then, in and out of the hospital with pneumonia or measles. Peter looked just like the picture of Jesus in my illustrated Bible. He was always flashing the peace sign, and I remember him showing me how to make one, holding my small fingers just so.

Most of my memories of that brick house on Hewitt Street date from the late sixties, when the house was filled not only with children, but with my father and his buddies, and my mother and her friends, and her sisters and their friends, and just about every person in the neighborhood, it seemed. There was a lot of drinking and smoking and dancing in their small living room. My Uncle Peter would play the guitar and sing along to Arlo Guthrie, and Father Parker, the parish priest, would let me sip from his large glass of red wine while he played cribbage with my grandfather. A former middleweight boxing champion in the navy, my grandfather was tall and lean and wore dark, horn-rimmed glasses, and all the women agreed he looked exactly like Cary Grant. My beautiful grandmother was always in the center of the room, her curly red hair practically jumping from her head, a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She was constantly laughing and moving and cutting people to the quick. All life, it seemed, emanated from her.

Their home was heaven to me. I never wanted to leave. Our house was deathly quiet by comparison, my parents often gone to work. (My mother was working the day shift by then.) Though I was a sickly child, I was considered mature for my years and at seven or eight was allowed to stay home by myself. I had a key to the house and would let myself in after school and sit at the green kitchen table and read library books. My father dropped me off at the library most Sundays, and I would stay there reading for the entire day and then bring home as many books as I could carry. My favorites were fantasies by H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Rod Serling, Ray Bradbury, and Isaac Asimov.

When I wasn't reading, I was drawing. By my first year of school it had come to my parents' notice — and before long everyone else's — that I had better-than-average drawing ability (and a compulsive need to draw everything and everyone I saw). So it was decided by general consensus that I was to be an artist when I grew up. Though my major concern was fitting in, I suppose I did like the attention, the fawning, the wonder over each new portrait or still life I produced. The best part, though, was that this artistic ability linked me in a way to my Uncle Peter, the only other member of the clan considered to be "naturally gifted." His talent was music, and though he was unable to read a note, he could play any instrument he touched: guitar, harmonica, fiddle, piano. I even had the same taste in music as he did, or just liked what he liked. Whenever

Peter was away from the house, I would go into his room, put on one of his albums and his headphones, and lean against the wall for hours, as I'd seen him do, listening to Iron Butterfly's *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* five times in a row.

Music seemed to be the driving force behind most of the action in that home. Besides the incredibly chaotic kitchen table, where it was every person for him- or herself, the large stereo in the living room was the focal point of the house. My uncles Richard and Walter and I worshiped the Beatles, and we would sit there listening to my older aunts' and uncles' albums and watching the green apple on the label spinning around. We memorized the pictures on the album covers and knew every lyric. My Aunt Maggie had actually gone to see the Beatles (my Uncle Peter had taken her when the band had come to Houston), and we would beg Maggie to tell us about the concert. When she consented, it was as though we were in catechism on Sunday, learning about the saints. She spoke of each Beatle with reverence and awe. As if producing a relic from a saint of old — a piece of cloth from his decaying robe, or a chip of sacred bone from the grave — she would show us a small Gerber baby-food jar with its lid screwed tightly shut and nothing inside. Maggie and her friends had taken jars to the concert, opened them, passed them over their heads once, shrieking, "Beatle air!" and then quickly sealed them forever.

Richard and Walter and I appreciated the Beatles on a different level. We weren't so much concerned with their looks or desirability as with their music. When we would sit in that living room and listen to their albums, we would actually *become* John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr. There were only three of us, of course, so for the most part we left Ringo out, unless a particularly great drum solo came up. My Uncle Walter was George, because he played the best air guitar. Uncle Richard was always Paul, and I was always, always John. Though I admired Paul as much as anyone, John's songs had a certain melancholy quality that touched me in some unnamable way. I would sit and listen to "Dear Prudence" again and again, strumming my imaginary guitar and singing with what must have been a laughable intensity.

When we weren't the Beatles, Richard and Walter and I played football in the front yard, or crawled down into the sewer under Hewitt Street on hot summer days and walked in the cool dark, sliding along on the algae that grew in the water, hiding from the world. Or we walked the two blocks down to White Oak Bayou and across a fifty-foot-high railroad trestle over the water, something we had been rightly forbidden to do. On the other side we caught crawdads in muddy creeks with raw bacon on a string; or played in the thick woods beneath tall loblolly pines, pelting each other with green pine cones; or filled a bucket with black dewberries that grew in thorny bushes lining the railroad tracks. Then we watched the trains go by and ate our berries and lay on the ground and talked about nothing.

I suppose I admired Richard more than I did Walter. I was more at ease with Walter, but he was needier and more vulnerable. There were times when he felt like a third wheel,

dragging behind Richard and me, lost in his own world. Walter was also accident-prone and often got seriously hurt. There was the time he was hit on the shin by a fastball, which produced giant blood clots that had to be operated on; or the time he took a baseball bat to the head while playing catcher, requiring more operations; or the time he took several bites out of a large, green, poisonous elephant-ear plant in my grandmother's front yard and had to be rushed to the hospital. Then there was the sledgehammer he dropped, breaking his toes; the broken arm he got jumping off the roof; the syrup of ipecac he drank down straight, mistaking it for the pancake variety.

Whereas Walter was sensitive and clumsy, Richard was tough and cool. The eldest of us three, he had long, straight brown hair and a leather necklace and desert boots. I had to wear penny loafers my mother had bought for me, and my father still cut off most of my hair and combed back what was left with firm strokes and liberal doses of Vitalis, so it was especially impressive to me that Richard could dress in the latest fashions. In fifth grade the girls already liked him and were sending him notes. A few even braved a romantic visit to the Gallagher house. (I say "braved" because any potential suitor — male or female — faced severe scrutiny and often ridicule from the rest of the clan.) Mainly, though, it was Richard's easy way of gliding through life that appealed to me. Whereas everything in my life scratched at me like an itchy wool sweater, nothing — absolutely nothing — seemed to bother my Uncle Richard. He was scared of no one. If a bully were to pick on Walter or me, Richard was immediately there and, without hesitation, landed several precise, powerful blows. After finishing off his opponent, he'd fling his hair out of his eyes, ask if we were OK, and then hop back on his Huffly Cheater Slick bike and ride off with pretty Susan Sullivan sitting on the handlebars, both of them laughing.

At moments like that, I think I was actually in love with my Uncle Richard. I remember telling my mother once, in all seriousness, that the one thing I wanted to do in life was make Richard laugh. It was hard to do, but if I tried, if I really tried, sometimes I could do it. She gave me a strange look and said, "Your Uncle Richard's no angel." I found her statement unfathomable and, since I believed she knew all about angels, disconcerting as well.

(end of excerpt)