

Sunday Mornings

Randy Bates

Sunday mornings I take my granddaughters for a ride. Their mother, my loving daughter, recently divorced their father who repeatedly had wronged her and, implicitly, their daughters. At ages seven and five, Liliana and Lucia know little of this. For their sake, our family will keep it that way for as long as we can. Our ride spans the mile or so from their house to their second home, the welcoming apartment of their grandmother, Sally, to whom I was married long ago and whom, as ever, I love and respect. Because of a restraining order that prevents the girls' father from being near his former wife, *Papa*—as he's known to the girls—picks them up from Sally's for court-approved visits on Sundays. Early on in this arrangement, in the absence of witnesses, *Papa* was loutish and threatening toward Sally who, from her career in psychiatric nursing, clinically understands him. Although she appreciates that he's been damaged by an unfortunate boyhood and youth, for our granddaughters, she's terrified and incensed by what she understands. I'm the driver and, now, the witness.

For a few early hours on Sundays, an Oldies station plays only The Beatles. When The Beatles and I were young, I didn't pay much attention to their music. Now I marvel at it: so many originals and such a range of them—as well as *hommage* covers of hits by great rock n rollers. Their fresh voices soar from the replacement radio in my ancient little Asian pick-up. The girls critique the shabbiness of its crowded cab, squabble about whose week it is to sit in the middle and work the gear shift, and pretend with me that I don't remember the way to Grandma's. The one not shifting, usually Lili, becomes Siri and guides my feeble efforts to stay on track.

On several Sundays on our route up broad Claiborne Avenue, we pass a skinny, seemingly afflicted man who stands at the corner of an intersection, soliciting change. *Stands* isn't exactly what he does. The first time I stopped for the light near him and extended a dollar, he tottered toward us, arms mantis-like, torso a-shimmy, his sun-weathered smile, I sensed, gentle and kind. Lili's and Lucia's dark eyes warily regarded him as he peered into the cab and greeted them. *Good morning, girls!*

Once we were back underway, Lucia murmured with conviction: *Papa doesn't give his money to anybody!* Which reminded me that, so far, she's more her father's child than her older sister is. Before we set out on subsequent Sundays I hand each of them a dollar for this man, whom one weekday I sighted expertly riding a bicycle, but who regardless is unfortunate, and whose name we learn is *Mike*. I address him as *Mister Mike*, so the girls will.

Good morning, girls! he sings out, smiling and appreciative as they give him their dollars. Today Lili appears distracted, but she mouths, *Hey, Mister Mike*. He wishes us a *good one*, we pull away, and The Beatles start in on something from what I now understand was a dark, earlier period of John's. The song's anger and disturbing lyrics, which John later renounced, never registered with me before: *Well, I'd rather see you dead, little girl / Than to be with another man / You better keep your head, little girl / Or you won't know where I am // You'd better run for your life if you can, little girl / Hide your head in the sand, little girl / Catch you with another man / That's the end'a, little girl...*

When we pick up speed on the long stretch of Claiborne that's free of intersections, Lili cranks down the passenger window as she usually does at this point in our ride. Wind



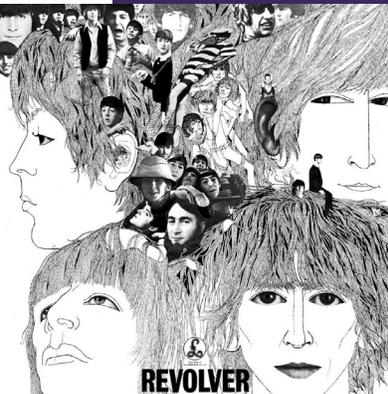
The Beatles

"Run For Your Life"

Rubber Soul

12/1965

Parlophone / Capitol



The Beatles

"Good Day Sunshine"

Revolver

08/1966

Parlophone

buffets the close quarters of the cab and blows our hair all around. Lucia, bored with shifting, grooms a doll in her lap. Lashes flickering, Lili gazes through the wind wumping in her window. In months to come, this family catastrophe will become harder on her than anyone. But this morning she abruptly turns to me and, like the child she still is, smiles and chirps: *Siri says, "Turn left at the next corner."*

Alerted, my eyes sweep the neutral ground and the cypress tree that stands tallest on it, marking our turn, its feathery spiral leaves alight in the bright morning. I'd like to hear "Let It Be," but the deejay chooses something else, though also one of Paul's: *I need to laugh, and when the sun is out / I've got something I can laugh about, / I feel good, in a special way. / I'm in love and it's a sunny day. // Good day sunshine / Good day sunshine / Good day sunshine....*

Despite the sadness and sorry drama that caused these rides, I love them—the childish hubbub, our play en route, Mister Mike, the music.... I wonder what, if anything, when the girls are grown, they'll remember of our riding together on Sundays. Lili and I glance sidewise at each other and lip-sync Paul's three-word refrain before her final instruction: *Siri says, "Turn right at the next corner."*

We hurry and reach Grandma's, where she waits in her open doorway, long before Papa rolls up, late again, in a mammoth new truck, its windows tinted dark as its shining black paint, as the new sleeve of ink sheathing his whole arm—treats he's bought for himself rather than maintain child support. But for now, that's small matter. For now, this Sunday's a good one.