

February 1964

by Michael K. White

New York, New York

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The winter drizzle left the streets shiny like in movies and this night Manhattan looked like it should look, vibrant, clean and sparkling. It was evening, just after dusk and outside the Ed Sullivan Theatre on Broadway a crowd restlessly churned like wheat on a windy day.

"Are they already in there? Did you see them drive in? Are they there in this building? Just these walls away?" A tiny girl beseeched Myra Centingal, her face twisted and desperate. Myra had no answer. She had heard from some other girls that a black Cadillac limousine had indeed pulled into the service entrance behind the alley of the theatre but she didn't want to say anything. This was her first trip into the city from Queens, where she lived in a brownstone walk up with her parents.

Myra had told her parents that she was going to her friend Joyce Johnson's house to study for a history test. It was about the Jamestown colony and the early days of the settlement there. She told her mother that she and Joyce were doing a presentation on the Lost Colony of Roanoke. She had lied.

Myra was not used to lying to her parents. Indeed this was the very first time, but she couldn't help it. She knew they would not allow her to come into New York on a Sunday night. They didn't understand. They could never understand. They did not know that everything was different now. Everything.

When her mother first heard the music on the radio she had tusked tusked and right away she had started to complain about it. "If they're so English how come they sing in American accents?"

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She had accused. Myra's father had said even less. He didn't care about music at all. It was all just noise to him. He only knew two songs. One was "The Ballad Of Ira Hays" and the other was not. The only record album he owned was a solemn record of Douglas Mc Arthur's farewell speech to congress which always made her giggle because it was so corny.

Myra had collected her babysitting money, fifteen dollars and some change, and rode the subway into the city. She felt like Dorothy coming into Oz. She had never done anything like this before. She didn't even have a ticket to the show. Just being there was enough. She understood what the tiny girl had meant when she had said, "Just these walls away?" Myra felt that she was a part of something important.

The police were putting up barricades around the theatre now. Several of them were astride horses who clip clopped on the hard pavement of Broadway. The crowd had grown bigger and the drizzle seemed to vanish in a haze until the evening turned cold crisp and sharp. Myra clutched a Quarter in her hand, just in case she needed it to call home. She had run out of nickels after treating herself to a dinner at the Automat. There you put nickels into slots and slid open a tiny glass door that held whatever it was you wanted to eat, from roast beef with gravy to apple cake. She had gotten a cheese sandwich and tomato soup but she hardly ate at all. She was way too excited. It was like a dream.

In the past month she had collected every picture of them she could. Her mother disapproved, but Myra didn't care anymore. She didn't care about anything except the Beatles. They had become her whole life and it seemed like it happened over night. She knew that at fourteen she was way too old to be crushing on singers, but she couldn't help it. When she had first heard them on the radio ("That boy/ took my love away...") it spoke to something deep inside of her. Not necessarily a feeling as much as an urge. An urge to scream.

"Here ya trowe dese at 'em. Dey like it in Engal land." A fat girl with braces and pimples thrust a handful of warm slimy jelly beans into Myra's hand and moved off through the crowd repeating the mantra to every girl in her path. "Dey like it in Engal land.." Myra opened her hand and looked at the jelly beans, sodden from sweat, sticky and fragrant and leaving brightly colored stains on the inside of her palm smearing the shiny Quarter she clutched.

Suddenly a man was standing before her with thick black glasses. He was frowning down at her. "You." he said as a quickening, cascading twirl of girls started to surround him like a funnel cloud. "You. You. Over there. You and you." He said to a few other girls who were stamping and pawing the pavement with their feet. He jerked his head to the side indicating that the chosen should follow him and they did, the rest of the girls wailing and protesting, boiling and churning.

Myra and the others mutely followed the man right into the front of the Ed Sullivan Theatre. The woman at the box office nodded to the man and allowed them to pass amid the buzzing furious crowd of older people in suits and dresses, smoking and coughing and chit chatting like it was any other regular day. Myra was annoyed. Didn't they know?

One of the girls was talking, asking the man a million questions in a strained voice but he kept walking as if not hearing her. He led them into the auditorium itself, surprisingly smaller than it seemed on TV. Myra could see the stage with its closed curtain and the two huge cameras mounted on wheeled dollies. She saw the monitors that ringed the stage and just as it hit her where she was she realized that the man had led them to the front row.

"Stay here if you know what's good for you." He said and they obeyed, because they knew what was happening. "Oh my God," one of the girls said with wild eyes and shaking hands to Myra, clutching at her. "Oh my God!"

The rest of the audience filed in fairly quickly. there were many more girls but a lot of older people too. The stage got busier too with headphoned technicians walking back and forth. The

murmur of the audience was now like the ocean and everyone jumped when a sharp CRACK of a drum behind the curtain went off like a shot. There was scattered laughs. Myra wondered if they were already there, behind the curtain, waiting. She wondered if that was Ringo testing his snare drum. It could be. It could be.

Suddenly the room changed. The energy level increased and time and space seemed to shrink. The lights changed, grew brighter and music blared. She could see the titles on the TV monitor right above her and she looked down into her hand and looked at the squished mess of the jelly beans and her Quarter and her multi colored hand. Suddenly there he was, the man himself, Ed Sullivan standing right in front of her talking about the Beatles. He was wearing a gray suit and was much taller in person. She was telling herself in her mind that hey there was Ed Sullivan right there when suddenly he waved his arm and shouted ".....the Beatles!"

And Myra shrieked.

The keening was a physical thing, a blast as the curtain rose quickly and there they were. The Beatles. Paul, who was already sweating counted fast and began singing "Close your eyes and I'll kiss you/ Tomorrow I'll miss you.."

She was so close that Myra could hear his voice as it went into the microphone. She was so close she could see George's pimples. She was so close that John looked right at her. RIGHT AT HER. He laughed when she screamed. She was so close she could feel the thud of Ringo's drums in her chest, like an extra heart.

Myra was surprised to discover herself screaming, shrieking herself hoarse, tears running down her face, her throat a hard lump. The music came back at them but it was not as powerful. All around her Girls were crying, pleading, reaching with out stretched hands. Myra could see Ed Sullivan off to the side, talking out of the corner of his mouth to a woman and smiling a sly snaky smile at the stage.

Myra realized she was being pelted with something; people from the back were throwing things. A yellow jelly bean hit

her in the face when she turned to see what it was. It stung and she remembers her own jelly beans and flung them at the stage as hard as she could, her face contorted with such emotion it hardly seemed to be real. All she could see was the Beatles singing their song, her life changing right before her.

She did not know that the cameras had caught her in that moment of throwing her jelly beans and had broadcast her streaked and stricken face into millions of homes, including her own, where her shocked parents watched in amazement at their sweet little daughter's utter and irrevocable transformation. She did not know that the cameras had caught her in that moment of throwing her jelly beans and had recorded for history the greatest moment of her entire life.

Ringo was tapping away at his drums trying to get his mind around the fact that they were in America! And they were just as daft as England when he was volleyed by flying jelly beans. He kept smiling even though he hated the fooking jelly beans because they fooking hurt you when they hit you in the fooking face. Something harder than a jellybean hit him the face now and he got mad but he didn't know if he was on camera or not she he kept smiling. Glancing down he saw the object bouncing on his snare drum. It was an American coin. Ringo saw that it had some old lady engraved on it. He didn't know American money very well yet. Oh well he thought, watching the Quarter dance on his snare drum. At least they're throwing money now.

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