



Let It Be

One spectacularly clear June morning, my friend Patrick and I met at an old fire road in Franklin Canyon where dogs can run free. The terrain was flat and easy to walk, so with my little girl, Lily, riding high on my shoulders, we took our time enjoying the bird songs, the flowering yellow mustard plants, and the pungent smells of sagebrush and buckwheat.

After we'd walked awhile, our dogs ran ahead to greet a man and a woman walking towards us. They bent down to pet our pups, but Patrick and I chatting nonstop, barely noticed. As we approached the couple, the man stood, and I found myself eye level with his tan, hairless chest.

"Having a bit of a walk, eh?" he asked in a British accent; his voice sounded familiar.

"Yes we are," I said looking up into big, puppy dog eyes.

I recognized those eyes. I knew that face. I squinted, trying to place him.

"Odd how warm it is this early," he said, wiping the sweat off his chest with a black T-shirt.

"Yes, it is," I answered, and then it hit me. He looked a little older than I remembered, with noticeable creases and well-worn lines on his well-known face -- but no. It couldn't be. It would be absurd to think -- I mean -- why would Paul McCartney be walking half naked on my dog path? This couldn't possibly be him. Could it?

Well, if it was, he looked good. His hair was dark, almost shoulder length, the way he wore it during his Wings phase, but his face was clean-shaven. The woman with him was pretty, with long blond hair and a reserved smile. She reminded me of a young Linda McCartney.

"And who is this lovely lady sitting up there on your shoulders?" he asked looking up at my daughter.

"This is Lily," I said, smiling but at the same time thinking about the stories of Paul McCartney 35 years ago in newspapers, like the *The Star*, headlined *Is Paul Really Dead?* A publicity stunt for the release of *Magical Mystery Tour*, my very first Beatles' album, the one I'd wanted for my birthday because I liked the cover with The Beatles all dressed up like animal puppets. The album looked like it would sound fun, but when I finally listened it sounded strange to my eight-year old ears. I didn't understand the lyrics to *I am A Walrus*, but then again, who did? *Strawberry Fields* fascinated me because my babysitter at the time told me that if I listened closely to the instrumental part at the end of the song, I could hear John saying, "I buried Paul." I thought that was really neat; like I was in on a secret.

If this stranger on my walking path was Paul McCartney, I knew now he wasn't dead, just older.

"You don't have a shirt on!" Lily said, pointing at Paul's chest.

"Well, I'm very hot so I took it off, he said easily, looking into my daughter's eyes.

This unexpected encounter amazed me. Not one week before, I'd purchased the Beatles #1 CD. I thought Lily might like it. I grew up loving the Beatles. When I was a little girl, I would stand next to my mom in the front seat of our family's old Chevy, and both of us would sing, "I wanna hold your ha-a-a-a-a-and. . . I wanna hold your hand!" I also watched The Beatles on TV, first on The Ed Sullivan Show, and later in their own cartoon series every Saturday morning.

Standing there, eye to chest, knowing that this moment would never come again, I knew I had to ask. I wanted him to know that I, and now Lily -- that we sing --

"Paul McCartney, right?"

"Ye-e-e-es," he dragged out his response as if to ask who else would I be?

"Right," I said definitively.

Oh my God! We were standing in the middle of nowhere, talking to Paul McCartney, my favorite Beatle. I knew Lennon was the visionary, but Paul sang all the beautiful songs, and he was so cute. And all these years later, he still was cute. My ears grew hot even as a breeze swept away the heat of the blazing sun. For an instant, time stood still -- Patrick, Lily, the dogs, Paul and his pretty friend, even the birds were quiet, and it crossed my mind that this could be a mirage that might easily disappear before my eyes. Surprisingly, I remained calm and articulate. "I just wanted to tell you that Lily loves your music," I said. "She listens to the Beatles every single day."

He looked up again at Lily, "Ah, the Beatles are a good thing," he said, smiling at her. "What's your favorite song, Lily?"

"Let It Be."

"Really?" He took her hands and clapped them together as he began to sing, "let it be, let it be-e, let it be-e-e, let it be . . . yes Lily, that's a good song."

I swallowed hard. Paul McCartney had just sung to my daughter. Okay, it was a croaky morning voice, but it was Paul McCartney's morning voice.

"She also likes Yellow Submarine. . ."

"And Love Love Me Do!" she blurted, before I could finish my sentence.

"Yes, well I wrote that one, too," he said.

Paul's girlfriend and Patrick stood by quietly as Lily pointed to a yellow flower Paul held. "Why you got that?" she asked.

"Oh Lily, that's enough," I whispered, afraid we were taking up too much time,

but Paul gave me a wink.

“I picked this pretty flower because I’m going to take it home and put it in water. Then I’m going to look at it.”

“Oh. I do that, too. You know what? Patrick said a bad word!”

We all laughed as Patrick pointed at himself. “I’m Patrick.”

The air grew hotter as the sun rose higher. Little bugs began to fly up my nose and into my mouth, and Lily restlessly bounced on my tired shoulders. Paul was so pleasant and his girlfriend so patient I felt as if we could stay there gabbing all day, except I was starting to shake. Meeting a legend was taking its toll.

“Well,” I said, “we’ll let you get back to your walk.”

We all said good-bye, and as we started to walk away, Lily turned her body around and yelled, “Goodbye Paul!” I sneaked a look and saw him wave then say, “Goodbye Lily!”

We walked down the sloping path as they ambled up in the opposite direction, and when I knew we were out of earshot, I whispered to Patrick, “Okay, I need to talk about this.”

“Okay.”

“Did I behave all right?”

“You were fine. Here, Lily,” he said, raising his arms up to her, “come sit on my shoulders for a while, I think your mommy needs a break.” Lily leaned towards Patrick, and he swooped her up onto his shoulders.

“That was Paul frigging McCartney, Patrick! Aren’t you the least bit excited? I’m practically numb. I’m not sure if I’m smiling or if my feet are even touching the ground.”

“I don’t really get excited about celebrities...”

“He’s not just a celebrity. I could handle that -- he’s a Beatle.”

Patrick nodded. “I was impressed at how down to earth he was, and how kind he was to Lily.”

“That’s my point! He was so normal. He picks flowers just like Lily does.”

The dogs chased a rabbit under a low scrub oak, sending a flock of small birds scattering. Lily squealed with delight. Patrick ran ahead with her trying to scare up more birds.

I lagged behind thinking about how The Beatles’ music was so intricately woven into my memories. I learned Yesterday on the piano and during my parents’ divorce played it over and over. In my adolescence I learned a dance combination to Come Together and performed it so well, I began to take dance more seriously, imagining it as the career it later became.

Blackbird was my favorite Beatles’ song because I always drifted back to an

evening in 1979, to New York and a gathering of artist friends at a loft in Soho. Intoxicated on wine and good food, we sat around after dinner and sang Blackbird again and again as our host strummed it, badly, on his old guitar. At first we laughed trying to remember the words, but we ended up singing in earnest, moved by the poetry. In time the AIDs epidemic took many of those friends, leaving me with the hauntingly fitting lyrics to remind me of them:

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to arise.*

And now Let It Be would no longer be an ambiguous recollection of a Beatles' movie at the end of their career together; instead it would be forever etched in my mind as the day Paul McCartney sang to my young daughter on a dog path in the Santa Monica Mountains. As I continued to walk I thought about the way music evokes memories, the way it has the power to heal, motivate, and change perception – not just of one person but of entire societies.

I stepped up my pace, focusing on Lily now, wondering what experiences or inspiring moments would be carved in her memory, what songs would remind her of important people and moments. Rounding a bend in the road I caught sight of our dogs resting in the shade of a thorny bush. Patrick and Lily were picking purple sage.

“Patrick, do you think Lily will remember meeting Paul McCartney?”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“I bet one day, when she’s older, she and her friends will rediscover The Beatles and she’ll have her own connection to their music. I bet she’ll carry those songs and memories with her into the future -- long after all the Beatles are gone.”

“Too deep, Cheryl!”

“Okay.”

I lifted Lily off Patrick’s shoulders and took her hand, and we walked on.

A week later, around the same time in the morning, Lily and I took our dog, Candy, back to our path, this time without Patrick and his dog. I secretly wondered if Paul would be there, too. Lily was talkative, and we were walking slowly, at her pace, hand in hand. As we rounded a corner sure enough, there were Paul and his girlfriend.

“Well, hello again,” I said. They stopped and petted the dog.

“Hey, I know you,” Paul said to Lily. Then he added, “and I like your hat.” Lily

put her hand on her head and giggled. It was a knitted Peruvian hat with a pink center and a green brim.

“My birthday hat.”

“Oh?”

“It was her birthday yesterday,” I said

“How old are you, Lily?”

“Three,” she said trying to arrange her fingers to show him.

He touched his finger to her nose. “Well I just had a birthday two days ago,” he said.

“Oh, you’re a Gemini!” I blurted out.

“I suppose I am,” he replied vaguely.

Why had I said that? I never say stuff like that. Maybe “Wow, you and Lily are both born in June, how auspicious!” or, “Gee, what a birthday present you turned out to be!” would have sounded better. I was glad Patrick wasn’t there to hear that line, and I silently thank God three year olds never stop talking.

“You know what?” Lily continued, “I’m going to share my babies with Bronte.” Paul looked at me for translation.

I rushed to explain, “Lily’s birthday party’s this Saturday, and she’s going to share her dollies with her friend Bronte.”

“Oh, I see,” he said to Lily.

“That’s Candy,” she said pointing to our dog who suddenly lay down in the shade of our shadows, panting hard under the heat of the sun.

“Is that your doggy?” Paul asked. Lily nodded yes.

“She’s very pretty,” he said bending down to pet her.

“She’s hot,” Lily replied.

“Aren’t we all? Well,” he said as he stood up, “we should let you keep walking her. Have a very nice day, Lily, and happy birthday. ”

“You, too.” She turned to Paul’s friend, “What’s your name?”

“My name is Heather,” she said smiling warmly at Lily.

“Okay then,” I said feeling like my small Chatty Kathy would keep on talking if I didn’t intervene, and it wasn’t just warm anymore; it was sweltering, “Enjoy the rest of your day – bye for now,” which I meant, hoping that these encounters would happen so often that sooner or later Paul would decide to invite us for tea after one of them.

“Mommy, you know what?” Lily said after started walking again, “I don’t want to share my babies with Bronte, I just don’t want to . . .”

“Oh Lily,” I said as I put her up on my shoulders for the remainder of the walk, “let it be, let it be-e’ . . . come on, sing with Mommy . . .”

About a year later, after delighting many an audience with my stories of our meetings with Paul McCartney, I was walking Candy alone when once again Paul and Heather crossed my path. By this time she was his wife.

“Oh hi,” I said casually as if we were old friends. Paul looked at me without recognition, so I laughed and said, “I guess you don’t recognize me without my daughter on my shoulders.” He brightened and said, “Ah yes, where is Lily?” I blushed, touched that he’d remembered her name.

“She’s a big girl now – she’s at pre-school.”

“Ah, well where’s the dog – Candy was it?”

Hearing her name, Candy ran up and Paul bent down and scratched her head.

“Congratulations on your marriage,” I said awkwardly, wishing Lily were with me; after all, she had been the main attraction.

They both thanked me.

Then I couldn’t stop myself. I told Paul that I had written a story about our two previous meetings.

He looked at me perplexed.

“For children?”

I shook my head no.

“For the press?” he asked sounding concerned.

“No, not exactly, although I wouldn’t mind publishing it,” I took a deep breath, hoping to explain. “I wrote about our meetings on this canyon trail. You’re both such nice people, but Paul, you’re more than that -- you were a Beatle. Your music has been touching my life since I was a little girl, and now Lily sings your songs. It’s not everyday one meets a living legend. It’s a bit like meeting the pope, that is if you’re a Catholic. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Yes, I think I do,” he said thoughtfully.

“Thank you for that.”

For what?”

“For once again being kind and generous, this time to me. Have a lovely walk, it’s cloudy today, not too hot,”

“Yes, it’s a perfect day,” he said looking around, “tell Lily hello from us.”

“I’ll be sure to,” I said as we once again went our separate ways.

When we parted, I instantly wished I’d remembered to thank Paul for all the joy and comfort he’d given the world and me. With a sense of peace and safety diminishing, especially since 9/11, I felt grateful for memories linked to listening to the Beatles, and for the delight and excitement our random meetings with Paul McCartney brought to me. Those chance encounters will always remind me that we never really know what lies ahead on the path we are walking.