This Boy

Prologue

I'M STUDYING A photograph. A small black and white image taken with a box camera. By a friend? One of my uncles? A passerby? Two figures set in a bleak but indistinct postwar landscape, standing arm in arm in front of railings outside Kensington Register Office with what appears to be barbed wire behind them. He is in his army uniform, the single ribbon denoting merely that he'd served. He'd been a lance corporal. I don't know with which regiment, or where, or whether he killed anybody (the question asked by practically all small boys of their fathers after the war). What I do know is that it could be said he helped to kill the woman beside him.

But on that day in January 1945, they must have been full of excitement and optimism about the life that lay ahead of them. Stephen Arthur Johnson and Lilian May Gibson (when she was born, in May 1921, her grandmother said she looked like a lily in May).

His smile is slight, betraying a determination not to show his teeth. Tie beautifully knotted, beret – angled slightly too high on one side – covering his red hair. She seems happy. A pretty, petite Liverpudlian with a Doris Day nose (what she called her

'titty nose', which she insisted I had inherited); smart in her cockade hat, placed at the same rakish angle as his beret. Her suit, though, is dark; were it not for the two white carnations pinned to her lapel, she could be at a funeral rather than her wedding. In the high heels she must have been wearing, though her shoes are out of shot, she looks only a little shorter than him. He was small, but she was smaller – not much more than five feet.

Were they happy on their wedding day? Surely they must have been but the hand through his arm is curled and tense, not flat and caressing; almost a clenched fist.

The faded inscription on the back reads: 'To Jean with love from Steve and Lil xxx.' Steve and Lil. Does the fact that his name comes before hers mean he wrote it? Could that be his handwriting? Did he take charge of distributing what I believe to be the only photograph of their wedding? No, more likely it was simply the convention of putting the husband's name first. It would be my mother, Lily, writing to her sister with this record that 'Steve and Lil xxx' had decided to face their postwar future together. Although, as things turned out, they spent it together yet apart – and then just apart.

PART I

STEVE AND LILY

Chapter 1

My sister Linda and I were born either side of the creation of the National Health Service in 1948. I like to think our relative birth weights had something to do with Labour's greatest achievement.

In 1947, Linda weighed just 5lbs 4oz and was so tiny that she slept on a pillow in a drawer, which was convenient given that there was no room for a cot. By contrast, I put the 'boom' into baby boomer, weighing in at 10lbs on 17 May 1950. It was a complicated birth and it took its toll on Lily. She and I nearly died: she from the strain on what it would later emerge was already a weak heart and me because the umbilical cord was wrapped around my neck.

Lily was advised to have no more children and agreed to be sterilized. When I heard this mentioned as a child, I could only equate it with sterilized milk, bottles of which were ubiquitous on Britain's doorsteps. I had no conception of the pain and anguish that 'sterilization' must have caused an attractive woman still in her twenties.

I was to be named Robin until Alan Ladd, the Hollywood film star, made a brief but lasting intervention in my life. I've

always rather liked the idea of being Robin Johnson. But the woman in the next bed to Lily's at Paddington General Hospital was a big fan of the diminutive Mr Ladd (as, for some inexplicable reason, were most young women at the time), and rocking Robin was quickly renamed Alan, with the awful addition of my father's middle name: Arthur. Nobody calls their children 'Alan' or 'Arthur' any more. Come to think of it, there are very few Lindas under fifty, either. I hated 'Arthur' so much that I never used it: at secondary school, I pretended that the second 'A' of my initials stood for Alvis.

We lived, courtesy of the Rowe Housing Trust, at 107 Southam Street, North Kensington, London W10 – a street whose buildings had been condemned in the 1930s. At least one family occupied each of the four floors and the dank basement. Before my arrival, Lily, Steve and Linda had lived in one room, but when I was born the trust gave us two rooms on a higher floor. One for sleeping in and one for eating in. Everyone used the same front door and the single decrepit toilet in the small concrete yard that backed on to the railway line in and out of Paddington Station. There was no electricity in the house – or outside, for that matter. The street was lit by gas lamps, which a man on a pushbike came to light every evening. Lily told us he was the Sandman, come to send us to sleep.

Notting Hill has become the generic term for a whole chunk of West London, but we didn't call our bit Notting Hill then. It was North Kensington, or, to be more accurate, Kensal Town – known to us simply as 'the Town'. Notting Hill was at the other end of Ladbroke Grove.

Southam Street was famously immortalized by the

renowned photojournalist Roger Mayne in a series of photographs taken between 1956 and 1961. He recorded both the squalor and the vibrancy of life there, the spirit of survivors inhabiting the uninhabitable. The houses first condemned two decades earlier were eventually declared unfit for human habitation while we were in residence and by the 1960s they had all been demolished. In the meantime we lived in two houses in the street, moving in 1956 from number 107 to number 149, where we had three rooms and a cooker on the landing.

The street straddled both sides of the Golborne Road. Those of us in the west end of the street referred to the eastern part as 'the rough end'. Doubtless they said the same about our side. There were no cars but plenty of kids. Indeed, as I recall, Southam Street was designated a 'play street': a blue sign outside the Earl of Warwick pub, at the junction with Golborne Road, informed drivers that they could enter for access only. Since nobody in Southam Street had a car that meant a vehicle-free street teeming with children. Given the overcrowding and the lack of sanitation, it's hardly surprising that the street was where people gathered, kids and grown-ups alike, irrespective of the weather.

I'm convinced that the blurred image of a child in the background of one of Mayne's photographs is Linda. It's quite likely: she was always out playing in the road. Linda's character was completely different from mine. She had learned to walk and talk at the earliest age possible, whereas I was two years old before I uttered a word and would happily have been crawling into puberty if extra effort hadn't been put into keeping me vertical. Linda was flamboyant, a gifted raconteur who found it

difficult to stop talking and impossible to keep still. She was, and still is, a natural leader.

Steve worked – intermittently – as a painter and decorator. His employment was spasmodic not because there was a shortage of work but because he routinely failed to turn up and was continually being sacked. He hated his day job, focusing his energies instead on his alternative life as a musician. To Steve, evenings at the piano were always more important than mornings at work. A gifted pianist, he would play in pubs and clubs, at parties and at weddings. He was completely self-taught and played entirely by ear. He only had to hear a tune once to be able to recreate it. His understanding of keys and chords, of rhythm and tone, was purely instinctive.

Steve had already lost what proved to be his one chance to become a professional musician. He had been approached at an army concert by the famous bandleader Bert Ambrose, who invited him to join his band on condition that he learned to read music. Steve turned him down. According to Lily, Steve had always been averse to any kind of studying, and learning how to decipher those notes sounded to him too much like going back to school. But the missed opportunity must surely have been something he regretted.

Steve and Lily had first met at a NAAFI dance in 1944. She was waiting to be demobbed, having left Liverpool at eighteen to join the NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes) in London. During the war she had been engaged to be married to Willie Dance, a man ten years her senior – an alliance that gave rise to her friends' favourite joke: 'Willie Dance? No, but Lilian May.' Sadly, Willie contracted tuberculosis and died.

Lily was aware of Steve's reputation as a ladies' man, but it's

not difficult to see how, recovering from a broken heart, she could have been swept off her feet by his charm, his gift for music and the dashing white pianist's gloves he wore for NAAFI concerts. By the early 1950s, effectively coping alone with two children in grinding poverty, she probably already realized the mistake she'd made.

With Steve constantly out of work and the money he earned from playing the piano squandered on his clothes, beer, fags and gambling on the horses, Lily was forced, despite her poor health, to work relentlessly. She was a charlady in the posh houses of Ladbroke Grove and South Kensington, helping with the catering when the families she cleaned for entertained in the evenings. Later she took on a succession of part-time jobs in various shops and cafés. But her paltry income was rarely enough to cover our rent and food. If she managed to get any money out of Steve it was a bonus. No wonder there were fierce confrontations when he came home drunk and well fed. Lily was capable of holding her own in any slanging match but when Steve was drunk he was violent, and then it was an uneven contest.

In winter, Lily would buy coal from the yard several streets away and push it home in an old pram she'd scavenged from a scrapheap for the purpose. She'd supplement the meagre supply by going out with a shopping bag in the wake of the horse-drawn carts or lorries delivering industrial quantities to the big houses in Holland Park, picking up any coal they had dropped. We would help her, carefully following her instructions to spit on every piece we found, 'for luck'.

On cold nights we'd go to bed wearing jumpers with a pile of old coats substituting for blankets. We lived in constant dread

of not having a shilling for the meter. Time after time the gas mantles would go out and we'd light candles, or, to be more accurate, night lights – little round blobs of wax, like tiny cakes, that were cheap and portable, requiring no candlesticks.

Lily's regular 'search for a shilling' would be accompanied by constant pleas for God (in whom she had unquestioning faith) to help her. When she found one, she'd offer up her profound gratitude, eyes tightly shut, face raised to the heavens, or at any rate, to the ceiling, with its dark, damp patches and, in the summer, its covering of flies. We were so used to swarms of flies we didn't register them. Like the trains clanking past at all hours on the line in and out of Paddington, we'd only have noticed them if they'd disappeared.

With no fridge and the buckets of urine in the bedroom (to avoid having to go out to the yard in the middle of the night), our house was a more attractive venue for the discerning fly than it was for us. There were also cockroaches, beetles and all manner of bugs. During an infestation of earwigs Linda and I took to stuffing our ears with paper at night – we'd heard that these particular pests liked to crawl into people's ears, intent on eating the brain.

It is ironic that after leaving home at eighteen, Lily spent almost her entire adult life on the council waiting list, hoping for the kind of house she had left behind. In a quarter of a century she regressed from a Liverpool home with all mod cons to Southam Street with none whatsoever. From electricity to gas, from a bath to a sink, from a garden to a grotty shared yard.

Lily was the second of ten children born to John and Maria Gibson of Anfield. John was a Scotsman, Maria an Irishwoman. Maria must still have been reasonably strong for the birth of

her 'Lily in May' but by the age of thirty-eight she'd had eight more children and seen two of them die in infancy from measles leading to pneumonia – a common outcome in the days before immunization. Four years later she was dead, of cervical cancer. Her own mother, Lily's grandmother, had also died at forty-two and Lily worried all her life that she, too, was destined to go to her grave at that age.

When Lily was five the Gibsons had moved into a newly built estate in Anfield. The semi-detached house in Warham Road had three bedrooms and gardens front and back, a bath, inside toilet and electricity. This was unusually lavish accommodation for a working-class family in 1926. My Auntie Peggy, the youngest of John and Maria's children, still lives there.

While Lily would be spared the constant childbearing endured by her mother, her life was no less hard. As the eldest daughter of a large family, much was expected of her. It was Lily who had to run the household during her mother's periods of incapacity after giving birth; Lily whose own early years were spent as the child-rearing apprentice; and Lily who, as an obviously clever girl, was at the same time required by a despotic father to study for a scholarship. It's true that he recognized Lily's potential and wanted her to fulfil it, and equally true that he was in this one respect ahead of his time, since in those days it was rare in working-class families for education to be considered a priority for girls, but there was no question of her being given any respite from her other duties to aim for academic success. He drove her so hard and asked so much of her that her health suffered badly. When she contracted rheumatic fever, she went for a while to live with friends of the family called Mr and Mrs Ireland. This at least

gave her temporary relief from the increasingly overcrowded conditions at home, but there is little doubt it was this childhood disease that left her with a damaged heart valve and laid the foundations of a lifetime of physical frailty and a premature death.

Lily then developed the related complication of Sydenham's chorea, colloquially known as St Vitus' Dance, a neurological condition characterized by rapid, unco-ordinated jerking movements. She was placed in a hospital ward with elderly patients and tied down with straps to a rusty bed that creaked when she twitched. The other patients would yell and curse at Lily, urging her to lie still and let them sleep. This frightened her so much that she forced herself to stay rigid and was thus declared 'cured'. As Sydenham's chorea usually clears up eventually by itself, to what extent Lily's recovery was a triumph of mind over matter is a moot point, but whatever the case it must have been a terrifying experience for a young girl.

Against all the odds, Lily won her scholarship but her achievement coincided with her mother's final illness. That terrible blow, exacerbated by the fact that her father, having pushed her relentlessly to qualify for a good school, refused to buy the uniform necessary to secure the place, meant that she was never able to take up the scholarship.

Though I must have first encountered Grandad Gibson as a small child, I have no memory of it. I recall meeting him only once, as a teenager, by which time he could be best described as merely cantankerous, playing on his war wound (he'd developed gangrene from a bullet in his ankle in the trenches as a second lieutenant in the First World War) and revelling in his reputation for awkwardness. I remember him peeking through

the front curtains of the house in Warham Road at the neighbour opposite and telling us that 'the nosy cow is spying on me'.

Evidently he had mellowed into a comparatively benign character by then. Lily's sister Peggy describes her father as a 'mean, cruel man' who ruled his children with a rod of iron, never thinking twice about hitting, punching or kicking them, particularly the older ones, which he did regularly. He had a variety of jobs – he was a binman at one point and, during the Second World War, a firewatcher – but with his war wound, and as a widower with small children, he was mainly housebound.

Peggy tells an incredible story which illustrates his vicious character. After their mother's death, Lily's two youngest sisters, Rita and Peggy, went to live with relatives, Auntie Nin and Uncle Tom, in Bootle. When the Blitz began they returned to Warham Road. It was just as well they did: if they'd stayed in Bootle they would have been killed when Nin and Tom's house took a direct hit in May 1941. Their aunt and uncle died, along with their maternal grandfather, who had been staying with them at the time. All three were buried in a communal grave.

Nin and Tom had no children and no family apart from the Gibsons. They had managed to save a bit of money but had not left a will. So many people who perished in the Blitz were in this position that a national newspaper used to publish lists so that relatives could claim their inheritance. It was Lily, by then living in London, who spotted their names on one such list and she and the second eldest daughter, Jean, who did all the work necessary to secure the money for their two young sisters, Rita and Peggy. They each received £100 to be held in trust. It should, as Lily and Jean had intended, have given them a start

in life; a nest-egg any loving parent would have cherished and protected.

Not John Gibson. He refused point-blank to provide anything for his two little girls on the grounds that they now had money of their own. Clothes, shoes, school uniforms, bus fares, school equipment – everything had to be paid for from the legacy. By the time they left school it was all gone. In spite of the lack of care he had shown them it was, needless to say, Rita and Peggy who looked after their father as age and infirmity made him increasingly dependent on others. No wonder Lily had wanted to escape this tyranny as soon as she could.

After leaving school, she had moved first to the Norris Green district of Liverpool, where she lived with friends and got a job at the Co-op. Then she had put Liverpool behind her altogether and headed for the NAAFI in London, a bright, pretty girl embarking on a journey she hoped would lead to a future significantly better than the life she had endured so far.

Like Lily's mother, Steve's father had died long before Linda and I were born. I knew about the tragically short life of Maria Gibson in Liverpool but nothing of my paternal grandfather – not even his name. Neither can I recall Nanny Johnson's Christian name. She died when I was four or five, but the regular visits we made with Steve (Lily never came) to see her every Sunday morning are among my earliest memories.

Steve held my hand on these journeys. That sticks in my mind because it is the only time I can remember any physical contact with him. I was tiny, just old enough to walk

independently with proficiency, and he'd hold my hand all the way to Nanny Johnson's; me on the left, Linda on the right, until she cartwheeled away. We liked these visits because we considered Nanny Johnson's flat, at Peabody Buildings, Delgano Gardens, to be the height of luxury. It was always warm in winter and cool in summer. It had an indoor toilet and a bath (in the kitchen, where the wooden boards placed across it when it was not in use provided a handy extra work surface). There was carpet in something called a living room and a comfortable settee. There were no flies or bugs and it didn't smell of decay and dirt and damp.

Like all working men in those days, Steve wore his suit on a Sunday. He liked to look smart. Part of the morning ritual was watching him getting ready. Polishing his shoes, ironing his shirt, choosing his tie. It was probably the army that made him so meticulous. He always ironed his own shirt and put a crease into his trousers by placing a sheet of brown paper between the material and the flat iron, heated on the stove in the fireplace. The little Formica table served as an ironing board. After he applied the Brylcreem that ensured not a single ginger hair would be out of place, the final flourish of his toilette was the fixing in place of the elasticated silver armbands that held his shirt cuffs just so on his wrists. This was when we admired Steve the most. Linda would bring her little pair of red shoes to be polished as part of the routine, as I looked on in awe at the transformation.

Off we would go on our Sunday pilgrimage, Steve and Linda and I, turning left out of 107 Southam Street, past the crumbling façades of houses that had lost their grandeur some time in the nineteenth century. There was a lot of rubble on the

road, as well as litter and dog mess. In the days before the Clean Air Act of 1956, London's 'pea-soupers', thick, noxious miasmas of fog, soot and smoke from coal fires mixed with industrial pollution, would blacken buildings and corrode lungs. None of this discouraged Lily and the other women in the street from keeping up their own standards: they would spend hours every week scrubbing and whitening their front steps.

But on Sunday mornings all was quiet as we walked towards the top of the street, past St Andrew's Catholic Primary School, whose pupils all appeared to have freckles and red hair to match their scarlet uniforms. None of them seemed to live near the school.

On the corner was 'the Debry'. The Luftwaffe could have made a contribution to urban planning by enacting the already overdue demolition order for Southam Street, but in fact they had managed to provide us with only one reasonably sized play area, known as the Debry. It was many years before I encountered the word 'debris', made the connection and realized that it wasn't just the name of one bomb site in Southam Street. The Debry was cleared for the local Coronation celebration in 1953, when Lily covered Linda in Cherry Blossom shoe polish (at Linda's request) to enter her in the fancy dress parade as a piccaninny. With her milk-bottle-top earrings and her mother's scarf wrapped around her head, she should have won something. But the Queen Doll prize went elsewhere and Linda was forced to spend hours standing in a basin while Lily tried to scrub the polish off. Had there been a prize for the most politically incorrect costume, she would certainly have walked away with it.

Along Southam Street, I'd look into the areas, or 'airies', as we

called the sunken enclosures in front of the basement dwellings. These were dangerous places. Many of the metal railings had been removed for scrap and replaced by corrugated iron. The stairs down to the basements were steep and the poor souls who lived in them were continually bombarded with rubbish, footballs, and the occasional falling child. From Southam Street we'd walk into Southern Row, then up the Ha'penny Steps on to the top end of Ladbroke Grove and across into Barlby Road, where two huge gas towers loomed like sinister spaceships.

I can't remember anything about Nanny Johnson except that she was a formidable woman dressed in black – like the character in the old Giles cartoons. I don't know exactly how many children she had. The youngest, Uncle Jim, was a teenager still living with her at Peabody Buildings. Steve had at least two other brothers and a sister – Auntie Annie, who had married 'Tottsy' Barker. Judging by his nickname, Tottsy had presumably once been a rag-and-bone man, or 'totter', as they were called. Within a few years, these equestrian entrepreneurs would be popularized on television in the hit BBC sitcom *Steptoe and Son*, set just up the road in Shepherd's Bush. They were a common feature of my childhood. Their trusty horses pulled rickety old carts laden with all manner of unwanted tat and junk collected from local households while the totter usually stood to drive in order to get a better purchase on the reins.

At some point Tottsy must have given up totting for a more respectable occupation as by then he was the only man I knew who worked in an office and dressed in a suit on a weekday. He left for Paddington Station every morning wearing his horn-rimmed spectacles and carrying a briefcase. Lily encouraged