

JENNY DISKI

THE  
SIXTIES





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# THE SIXTIES

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# BIG IDEAS

*General editor: Lisa Appignanesi*

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For Roger with love

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## INTRODUCTION

Now that it has gone, the twentieth century has become an idea. The past is always an idea which people have about it after the event. Those whose job it is to tell the story of the past in their own present call it history. To generations born later, receiving the recollections of their parents or grandparents, or reading the historians, the past is a story, a myth handily packaged into an era, bounded by a particular event – a war, a financial crisis, a reign, a decade, a century – anything that conveniently breaks the ongoing tick of time into a manageable narrative. Those people who were alive during the period in question, looking back, call it memory – memory being just another instance of the many ways in which we make stories. But although the past always belongs to the present and future, the later third of the twentieth century we know as the Sixties was one of those particular periods that was an idea to many even before it became the past. The Sixties were an idea in the minds, perhaps even more powerful than the experience, of those who were actually living through them.

As a rule, life has a quotidian way about it. Later, we tell ourselves we made decisions, thought this or that, came to a conclusion, but in each actual present moment we generally just react, and only afterwards name our reaction decision or thought, and designate it a place in what we like to think of as the continuum of our opinions, or belief or personality. It still feels to me as if life is an ongoing series of discrete moments, like the breaths we take, however much we want to solidify time, after the event, into something more consequential. Nevertheless, those of us who lived through the Sixties were as beguiled by our present then, as we are now that it is our past. It's not at all clear *whose* idea the Sixties was: but I suspect, as I repeatedly suggest in the following pages, that our parents, the generation whose youth was cut short by the Second World War and who so complained about their wild children's doings, had more to do with dreaming up and even sustaining the Sixties than we think. At any rate, the idea of the Sixties was pretty well in place by the time I got there in my mid-adolescence, and the concept strengthened as we lived it, moment by moment, and then told it in increasingly large episodes, played its music, moved through quite other present times, defended it (even while we sometimes mocked it) and passed the whole securely wrapped parcel on to new generations as the ideal of a time when it was really something to be young.

Looked at through our eyes – the baby boomers born immediately around and after the end of the war – things certainly have changed a good deal since the Sixties. Where we took mind-altering drugs to change our consciousness and find other ways of thinking about how to live, today the young take Ecstasy in order to dance longer without tiring, binge-drink until they fall over in the street, or snort cocaine in order to keep life a party. Where we dropped out of university, fought against any establishment we could find and travelled the world to encounter different traditions of living, the present generation take a gap year to pop into the developing world before getting on with training for degrees to boost their income potential. Where we explored sexual freedom and began to think about the political nature of gender roles, the young clamour to be on *Big Brother* and have sex casually on TV in order to become fatuously famous...Unless, of course, that is as simplistic and establishment as our view of the present world as we believed our parents' views of us to be. In truth, the only thing that is absolutely certain is that the music then was better.

The Sixties, of course, were not the decade of the same name. They began in the mid-1960s with the

rise of popular culture (not with the Beatles, as Larkin said, nor with fucking, which had started even before the Stones were young), aided by a generation of people who did not have an urgent economic fear, nor (in Britain) a war to deal with, and it ended in the mid-1970s when all the open-ended possibilities we saw began to narrow, as disillusion, right-wing politicians, and the rest of our lives started to loom unexpectedly large. In his novel *Kensington Gardens*, Rodrigo Fresà<sup>1</sup> suggests that the Sixties generation were the first fully to understand and try to live out Peter Pan's imperative never to grow up. We kept telling ourselves and each other that we were young, but now I think we had no idea what that meant (either that or I have no idea now) – because we had no notion, even if we vaguely knew we had to grow old, of ever not being young. Perhaps it was simply that a fortunate set of political and economic circumstances gave us the longest gap year in history. Perhaps the alternative ways of thinking and living were little more than an extended rave. And perhaps in the end we wearied of all that dispiriting casual sex, the trips to the STD clinic and the communal rows about who was going to do the washing-up and pay the gas bill, and began to like the idea of bourgeois homes, families and jobs. Who filled the planet with noxious gases and tore a hole in the ozone layer who presided over a grasping globalisation that our children have taken to the streets to protest against? The music, however, was undeniably as great as we thought it was.

The Fifties, that long gasp after the end of the war, when so much had been damaged and so little had been mended, did not expire until the Sixties were well on in years. The generation that had won the war for us owned the world they had fought for and expected their children to take full advantage of the peace and plenty that was, surely, just around the corner. They suffered the war, they suffered the post-war austerity while making sure that we had the eggs and most of the meat rations. We were ready-made to fulfil a dream that seems to afflict parents in all times and places, that their children should be materially successful and therefore, by definition, happy. So it wasn't until the tough times had turned the corner and we were old enough to spit out the food they set aside for us, to scorn the careers they had to interrupt so that we could have better ones, to refuse to take advantage of the nicely made world they had arranged for us, that you could say the Sixties really started. We looked at the apparent calm, at the possibility of an untroubled suburban life that trickled properly and uneventfully to the grave, and didn't like what we saw at all. The higher education our parents were so proud to have achieved for some of us gave us time to wonder why we had to recreate the desired world of our parents. And those who did not go to university wondered why they had to spend their lives in factories replicating the passive acceptance of the status quo. It wasn't at all obvious to many of us, of many classes, why we had to go on going on. The Sixties when they finally came to each of us were a time of striving for individuality and a nagging urge to rebel against the dead middle of the twentieth century. Two generations before us had been involved in war. You need to go back to the young of the Twenties to find any similarity to the Sixties generation in the desire to hang on to irresponsibility, or childhood, whatever you want to call it; and to the young of the Thirties to find a serious attempt to take on an alternative politics. It may be that in the end, or from a present-day perspective, we were more like the generation of the Twenties.

But there was also the Cold War. The peaceful world our parents kept saying they had bequeathed to us was daily on the verge of exploding into the worst and final conflict. We expected it to happen. We considered what we would do with the four minutes that the early warning system promised us when a nuclear weapon was heading our way. The 'everything is all right now' our parents told us about was always being undercut by the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction. An ever-darkening mushroom cloud loomed over the endlessly blue horizon.

The argument we had with our parents was the initial key to the Sixties, but perhaps (because in

Britain we had no national catastrophe to battle against and the Cold War was entirely out of our control) we were the first youth cohort to feel free enough from guilt and obligation to repudiate the old ways. Of course, we acted in the shadow of the Beats and Existentialists of the previous decade, and the distinction between them and us in terms of opposition was slighter than we imagined. It may be that even the distinction between us and our parents was slighter than we imagined. Quite without irony, in walking away from the domestic and cultural structures of the Fifties and before, we found and formed our own quite rigid self-affirming groups in order to demand the right to express our individuality. Though all reactionaries were reactionary in much the same way, there were many ways to be radical in the Sixties. But, unsurprisingly, they were often mutually exclusive. We recreated the old divisions in what only seemed to be new forms. It was just a matter of time (and our later reading of Foucault) before it turned out (to our unacknowledged relief, perhaps?) that the over-arching structures had been built to survive our (or any) assault on them, and the world remained unrocked – except, of course, let us never forget, by the music.

The early years of the twenty-first century are the right time to look at the idea that was the Sixties and to examine the intentions and legacy of the generation that lived it, because we are old enough now to see where we went in relation to where we thought we were going. The Sixties people are in their sixties. It has been more than forty years since the world was ours for the taking and shaping. We can look back with nostalgia to the simple fact of being young or we can try and tease out what, actually, we were up to and why; whether the influences on us and our own ideas were as new as they seemed, and whether we were as serious as we thought we were about changing the world. And to what extent there was any reality to the idea we once had and to the idea our children have received, of that time when we were young.

What follows is a personal memoir to a very large extent – and after all, weren't the Sixties accused above all of having consolidated the sense of the self which created that most monstrous beast: the Me Generation? I'm qualified only to speak about the Sixties then and now as I lived them then and now. I lived in London during that period, regretting the Beats, buying clothes, going to movies, dropping out, reading, taking drugs, spending time in mental hospitals, demonstrating, having sex, teaching. America was very far away. My first visit was in 1974 (where I place the end of the Sixties), and there was a powerful sense of aftermath by the time I arrived as the Watergate hearings were coming to an end. But what happened there, in the Sixties, mattered very much, as the news arrived, or the drugs or the songs. I listened very carefully to the messages from across the ocean. I couldn't begin to live the reality of the Vietnam war or the civil rights movement, but they rippled through my daily life and thought. America was a backcloth, a colour wash in my Sixties, its ever-presence was how I enlarged the small world of London and the slightly larger world of Europe, and how I developed my sense of who I was and where in the world I belonged. Nevertheless, being in London was very particular.

What the American and British baby boomers, who inhabited the Sixties as if they were building a new planet, have in common is that we watched the radicalism we thought we understood and embodied turn into a radicalism we (ignorantly and naively) never dreamed of. Perhaps all the hope and disappointment hung on a simple definition of a word or two. The big idea we had – though heaven knows it wasn't new – was freedom, liberty, permission, a great enlarging of human possibilities beyond the old politenesses and restrictions. But it was an idea we failed to think through. It was a failure of thought essentially, rather than a failure of imagination. We were completely wrong-footed when the Sixties turned inexorably into the Eighties. With Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan presiding, our favourite words – freedom, liberty, permission – were bandied about anew and dressed in clothes that made them unrecognisable to us. But even back then, in the Sixties,

while we used the word 'liberty' there were others who also used it, sometimes varying it to 'libertarian', who meant something quite different from what we intended, and we nodded and smiled taking them to our bosom, and completely failing to understand that they meant a world that was diametrically opposed to the one we intended to inhabit.

We really didn't see it coming, the new world of rabid individualism and the sanctity of profit. But perhaps that is only to be expected. It's possible after all that we were simply young, and now we are simply old and looking back as every generation does nostalgically to our best of times. Perhaps the Sixties are an idea that has had its day and lingers long after its time. Except, of course, for the music.

## CONSUMING THE SIXTIES

Making money is art, and working is art and good business is the best art.

*The Philosophy of Andy Warhol, 1975*

It was a black crêpe dress, implacably black was how I thought of it, cut like a skating dress, long-waisted, with a very short skirt. It zipped from the small of the back to a high close-fitting turtle-neck that matched the tubelike, skin-tight long black sleeves. The bodice outlined my small breasts and skimmed my torso, continuing smoothly down to my jutting hipbones from where the dropped waist attached to a skirt that flared out very gently, just enough to fall loosely to the hem. It was completely unadorned, no decoration, nothing to alleviate the dense, unreflective blackness. It might have been a dress for mourning in, the most severe imaginable, except for the way it silhouetted my body and the fact that it stopped ten inches and more above my knees. My legs were covered in sheer cobweb-grey tights and I wore a pair of chisel-toed black patent flat shoes with a sharply squared brass buckle on the front. The buckle was the only colour or detail I wore apart from several geometric silver rings on my fingers. My long hair was pulled tightly back and twisted into the nape of my neck, like a ballerina. I wore my usual make-up: deathly pale foundation, white lipstick, white eyeshadow, my lips thickly outlined in painted black, with several layers of mascara emphasising my upper and lower lashes. Under my lower eyelids I had painted extra fine, vertical black lines, sunray style. I, like my dress, looked implacable.

When I checked myself in the mirror before going out, what I saw was the reincarnation of a girl I had spoken to once when I was a child at the skating rink my mother took me to every day. The girl and I practised spins and figures in the more or less empty centre, while less constrained skaters whizzed round and round us at the edges of the rink. She was at least fourteen or fifteen, and I was just six or seven. To me, she was a goddess, skating like a champion, spinning on the spot, her head dropped back looking up at her fingertips just touching each other to form an arch over herself. She was the most perfect age I could imagine, and all the more worthy of worship because she was dressed incomprehensibly from head to foot in black – her hair-enclosing snood, short dress, thick tights, skating boots and gloves were all relentlessly black. It was a colour only old ladies wore in those days. I finally got up courage to ask her at the end of one of her spins why she was all in black. She looked down at me for a moment with a wonderfully melancholic expression, and told me solemn-faced, ‘I am in mourning for my life.’ I was far too young to recognise the adolescent melodrama of her dress or the existentially induced world-weary self-description. She was the most magnificent, most mysteriously glamorous creature I had ever seen.

My version of her dress fourteen years on had come from Biba in Kensington Church Street. Swirl, art deco, black and gold interior, dim lights, loud psychedelic pop music, feather boas, wild hats, floaty garments for drifting around in at home or at parties, slick mini-dresses to snap about the streets in, everything hung from wooden coatstands – oh, and another memorable treasure on which I

spent all my money one week: a silver and black striped, Regency-cut trouser suit for £7. The black crêpe dress wasn't a very typical Biba dress, except in its shortness (and I may well have taken it up a bit myself). Biba clothes were usually coloured, patterned even, though only in sludgy tones, plums, earthy browns, dusty blues, never anything bright. I found this utterly black dress hanging on one of the coatstands, grabbed the size eight (I'm not sure Biba made anything above a size ten – I couldn't then imagine anyone being above a size ten), and as I stepped into it and watched, as one of my fellow shoppers zipped up the back for me in the multi-mirrored communal dressing room, the floor of which was ankle-deep with discarded items, I saw the image of my marvellous skating girl appear in the icy glass.

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Growing up is partly about trying on superficial looks to match how you want people to see you, and how you want to see yourself. Controlling how people literally view you is a way of learning to construct a sense of self, until you become confident enough to proceed the other way around. Everyone does it, from the moment they look into a mirror and realise that they can see themselves and therefore other people can see them, and that they have a body which, with a bit of effort, can be brought under the mind's control. It is in the nature of youth to play with style in an effort to come to terms with substance. Easy enough, too, to get stuck there. Narcissism meets the mirror stage and neither condition actually stops in infancy, especially when the times collude. Though there has probably never been a period when young men and women did not look sideways at themselves to catch a glimpse of how they looked to others, the Sixties catered for the concern with the self and how it was to be seen better than most eras, because they coincided with the post-war, post-austerity Western world: a rare island of perceived well-being and a belief in the future as progress, after a long, dark hiatus when no one could be quite sure that the future would not be unimaginably bleak. A time, then, to indulge the children – for a while. A time also for peacetime capitalism to consolidate. *The personal is the political*, people began to say, although not until quite a long way into that period designated as the Sixties. But from the start to their end and well beyond, it is truer to say that more than anything for the post-war bulge generation *the personal was the personal*. If the body was to become increasingly regarded as merely the superficial layer outside an infinitely questing mind and spreading social conscience, it was nonetheless, throughout the Sixties, wrapped and tied with the utmost care and attention to detail.

After the war and the austerity years, the means to control how you were seen were newly available to the young. And so was the ability to distinguish yourself visually from your parents. From the Teddy Boys in the Fifties to the Mods and Rockers who took over, and on to the mini-skirted dollybirds of the mid-Sixties and the diaphanous hippies of the later Sixties, many more young people than ever before had, for various reasons, enough money to pay for dramatic self-definition. If they left school at fifteen without qualifications, they found jobs, lost them, found them again, easily earning money while often still living at home. At any rate, there was enough surplus after paying the parents for your keep to buy a long, velvet-collared jacket and drainpipes, a sharp Italian-styled suit, tiny scrap of a frock from Biba, Bus Stop or even, if you saved up, Bazaar, though only the genuinely well-off could afford any of the painted silks and velvets from Granny Takes A Trip. Those who stayed on at school and went to university were rewarded with enough pocket money or a decent local authority student grant that was designed to be lived on. Even being broke, unemployed and living in

damp bedsitter didn't present an impossible bar to style. The easy availability of social security and the dole are a forgotten but vital factor during the whole of the Sixties, and well into the Seventies. Unconsciously, as it might have been, the welfare system that the newly elected government brought in after the war in order to ensure a fair and just society was also the way in which the older generation were to indulge their post-war children. The Forties turned to the Fifties, the Fifties became the Sixties, and the Sixties seemed to go on for ever, but even then, as the old ones gnashed their teeth and tore out their hair at the goings-on of their wild, rebellious young, they continued to pay them a state stipend, unemployment benefit or a generous student grant, underwriting, as it were, their worst fears. There was always a way to get something you really wanted. Or so it seemed. One trick (with clothes then and relationships later) was to jettison the notion our parents had of the well-made, the built-to-last, the long-term, the good investment. Clothes that were made badly and cheaply didn't last, sometimes not more than a few weeks without coming apart at the seams, but if they had style and wit, it was of no consequence; it was a new way to have what you wanted when you wanted it, and then to have the repeated satisfaction of finding the next new thing. Older people of all classes were horrified at the waste and lack of quality, but that was part of the pleasure for us: to see the shock and disapproval and bafflement in the eyes of the generation who had scraped by and lost all kinds of treasures during the war, and discovered when it was over that they still had to make do and mend: a generation who genuinely valued the patina of age.

If in fact we really only began to develop new kinds of uniform, they were at least dictated by our own generation. The static fashion of our elders was dreary and camouflaging. When we put on the clothes they approved of we automatically looked middle-aged. We rejected the neat pleats and the matching suits, battled against twinsets and pearls, refused in various ways to look respectable – and thereby developed the freedom to look like everyone else under twenty-five. You really couldn't be seen wearing a skirt that was a couple of inches too long. It made you feel wretched. On a camping holiday in Assisi I was persuaded to be sensible and to lower my hem two inches, still short enough for me to be refused entry to the Basilica of St Francis, and felt for the entire two weeks like an old woman shuffling about in widow's weeds. As far as I was concerned, only a properly minuscule skirt could distinguish me from the nuns queuing up to see the Grotto.

I knew well enough my extraordinary good fortune in having a Biba size eight body\* and that life was miserable for those who didn't. I knew this because of my hair. After the backcombed beehives of the Fifties and very early Sixties had deflated, only Vidal Sassoon's new geometrically precise version of the 1920s bob – dead straight hair that fell to a knife edge at the jawline – would do. My hair was thick and curly: I ironed it straight, I spent hours rolling it, pulling it painfully as it dried to achieve only a half-hearted version of the desired look that immediately sprang back to catastrophe at the first sign of rain. I was well aware of the dismalness of the never-quite-right. Finally, I gave up and dragged it tightly back so that it was at least sort of invisible and made me look severe enough to see not to care. My hair caused me misery and shame. Self-presentation didn't diminish as we turned down the legacy of our parents' wardrobes. Very little mattered more than how you looked. Social approval was quite as powerful as it ever had been and has remained. We simply readjusted the idea of whose approval we were after.

And if that was, in retrospect, no different from any other youth cohort, neither was the means by which our style became available to us. All those ground-breaking, cheap and cheerful garments were made in order to fulfil and incite demand, by the same old system that has since the end of feudalism specialised in generating and then granting the wishes of human beings and thereby ruling the world. The clothes were designed and initially made by the young, but they were sold in shops – renamed

boutiques: tiny spaces, sometimes, with a handful of dresses or trousers – whose rents had to be paid, where turnover was required, and profits were taken or the shops closed. A new market in boutiques, opening and closing within weeks sometimes, played out a speeded-up capitalism, which proceeded as it had always done. Youthful entrepreneurs, their vision in sync with their generation, their ambition the same as generations before them, offered their contemporaries clothes, music, information and other things to want at the price they could afford. Richard Branson with the sexily named Virgin record shops, Felix Dennis at the radical *Oz* magazine and Tony Elliott's cool listings magazine *Time Out* sold the young packages that looked like amateurish rejections of the old way, and seeded their later conventional media empires. John Stephen opened a little shop called His Clothes, selling Mod suits in an alley behind Regent Street in the late Fifties, and to this day tourists wander down Carnaby Street, soaking up the 'atmosphere'. The tiny boutique Biba, in Abingdon Road, thrived in 1964 and moved to a much more visible and larger site in Kensington Church Street, then, bigger still, to Kensington High Street, until it finally over-reached itself (with City funding), in a veritable parody capitalism, by taking over the huge department store Derry & Tom's, selling bedsheets, paint, kitchenware and cocktails as well as frocks and maternity dresses, and went bust within two years.

The economy was booming, finally, and in the first half of the 1960s, at least, there was no dissent from the young about the conventionally capitalist manner in which their desired goods were made available to them. Nothing much radical was going on here apart from cheapness and short-termism – hardly anathema to capitalism. The revolution was a long way off. We were the first generation who could shop till we dropped without anxiety or much regard for the size of our income, and, just like now, our desire for style was catered for by designers, manufacturers, retail outlets, advertisers, public relations companies, photographers, celebrities, models, fashion magazines and financial backers. The taxman was paid, so the state received some of the money. The same old system was operating in the same old manner, doing what it does best: taking advantage of whatever circumstances exist. It is the way of the market. At that early stage we weren't, for the most part, after a different way, just different things. But because we were young, and being catered for so attentively, it felt brand new; and because we were young and are now no longer, we are inclined to remember it as quite different from anything that has happened since.

The art world (no shortage of art schools and grants to attend them for young people who didn't fancy university) joined in the fun and called itself Pop. The word 'popular' in relation to the arts might conceivably have a twang of the radical about it; a bold rejection of the traditionalist understanding of it as meaning a loss of quality. But the diminutive 'pop' merely suggested 'new' and 'fun'. And 'throwaway'. It wasn't confronting, only absorbing, and consuming. If occasionally some works commented on or liberated themselves from this apparent fact of life (Lichtenstein, Warhol, Hockney), they were soon enough reincorporated into commerce. Warhol's Campbell's Soup tins returned to advertising as advertising itself became the sexiest industry and took all the new talent it could find – photographers, designers, writers, artists, film-makers – to its bosom. Pop Art belonged to the same world as pop music in the early Sixties (the corporate-managed and decidedly unradical Sandie Shaw, Billy J. Kramer, Cilla Black and Dave Clark Five were topping the charts); it was as much about the market as clothes were, and as such became an essential part of our everyday life. Clothes were overprinted with motifs from pictures hanging in galleries, pictures and sculpture reflected passing style (advertising, comics, pornography) and the cheap, throwaway attitudes of fashion that felt so much like fresh air. Record covers became art, art became tea towels. Things got mixed up in a way that was original and amusing to us. Our parents kept things separate and appropriate: art in galleries, certain clothes for particular occasions, work marked off from play,

private walled away from public, formal dissociated from casual. Their mores derived from the old rules, the strictures of Leviticus: *Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee.*<sup>2</sup> That ancient terror of mixing things up, of losing the order of things. One thing must be one thing, never another too. Pop Art, in its very shallowness, rejected the old way. Separated, actually, the young from their elders. The freedom to try new things, to play, to incorporate, extended to the arts and bounced back again to daily existence in a quite novel, non-Judaeo-Christian way.



Was it *all* only about style and its marketing? Was nothing to be taken seriously in those days up to the mid-Sixties, when London was deemed by *Time magazine* in 1966 to have started ‘swinging’? Between the ages of fifteen and eighteen I may have spent an inordinate amount of energy worrying about my hair and shortening my skirts (though not much has changed there, apart from the length of the skirts), but between visits to the mirror other things were impinging on my life. Most of it wasn’t quite so brand new, however, as the asymmetric Sassoon cut or a pair of Courrèges boots. Those more cerebral, less sartorial matters that gained my attention during this time were almost entirely developments or continuations of what had been happening in the 1950s and before. The recent war, immediately prior to my birth, I paid almost no attention to, since, being the most vivid years of my parents’ life, it was more archaic to me than the English Civil War. But I was powerfully aware of having missed out on the doings of the youthful generation just before mine. While I was still pushing a toy Coronation coach and horses across the living room floor, some very interesting things had been going on in the world outside the four enclosing walls of our small flat in Tottenham Court Road. There weren’t just the Teddy Boys ripping up cinema seats with their flick knives, and people sipping Brown Windsor soup in dismal English dining rooms, there were also the Beats, a Cold War in full frost, and a collapsing British Empire hanging on to its genteel skirts, the results of all of which were beginning to make the rest of the world, no longer merely to be dismissed as ‘abroad’, look very interesting.

I became aware of the Beats, jazz, poetry, cool, and muddled them properly with the existentialism of Sartre and Camus’ fiction while I was at boarding school, mixing with the wrong crowd from the local town who had designated a corporation bench near a roundabout just outside the centre the ‘Bea Seat’. There we sat while they, older than me – in their late teens while I was thirteen and fourteen – told me to read the books any self-respecting wannabe Beat had to know. *Jude the Obscure*, *Ulysses*, *Crime and Punishment*. Not bad reading recommendations as bad-friends go. I found *Lolita* for myself, listened to *Red Bird*, poetry and modern jazz from Christopher Logue via Pablo Neruda, and discovered that in America some, like Allen Ginsberg, were already howling most ungentlely about the state of the world. If it was a little downbeat, that was fine by me. I was already angry and sullen a gift from my dysfunctional family, as well as, doubtless, a dash of biochemistry – and ready to argue with any form of authority that came my way. Just before I was fifteen, I was expelled from the co-educational, progressive boarding school the local council had paid for me to attend in order to improve my character and absent me from my mother – not for reading those books, but for sniffing ether, and getting caught after attending an all-night party. In various ways, I was the Sixties waiting to happen.

After the Beat Seat and expulsion, my Sixties continued in a psychiatric hospital near Brighton, but in 1963 I went back to live in London, invited by the mother of a former fellow-pupil, who, the following year, sent me to another school, where the plan was to do my O and A levels and become, in spite of the educational blip, one of those of my generation who went to university. It seemed, after a somewhat turbulent childhood, fairly straightforward. But I took the book-and-poetry reading and the anger along with me to London. There was still an awful lot of reading to catch up on, some terrible poetry to write, and I also discovered, in the culturally rich atmosphere of the house I had fetched up in, a world of film. Not that films were new to me. My childhood block of flats was attached to a cinema. Movies were at my back door. I went to everything I could get into, as well as finding cunning, illegal routes into those I was forbidden by law to see. They were westerns, soupy romances, Fifties comedies and British B movies. Now I filled in the gaps of the past at the National Film Theatre, going to classic silents and Hollywood marvels of the Thirties and Forties. In addition, there was an entirely new cinema to me, from Europe and beyond, to discover. Godard, Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman, Kurosawa, Ozu, Ray, Truffaut, Malle, Pasolini, Polanski, Jiri Menzel. They mattered enough for me to take illicit afternoons off school in order to get to the first matinée showing of *8½* or *The Silence* at the crucial Academy Cinema in Oxford Street, where I'd sit in the smoky auditorium with fifteen or so other film fanatics, and one or two flashers, overwhelmed by the potent sexual narratives and social critiques, Marxist, psychoanalytic, libertarian or simply different and, to me, astonishing. I absorbed the complexities of relationship, and spiritual or cultural emptiness, played out in tones of grey, with echoes of poets, writers and philosophers. Godard's intensely charming, hopeless and crazy about love film, *Pierrot Le Fou*, had me returning eight times during its run. I couldn't take my eyes off a single frame, or miss one step of Monica Vitti's slow, despairing walks through the blighted urban wasteland in Antonioni's *Red Desert*. I wept sometimes with exaltation, sometimes rage, at the visions coming at me from the Academy screen. And, let me say, all this lived quite easily with my despair at my unsatisfactory hair and concern for the precise shortness of my skirt.

There was music, too. Older friends introduced me to Mozart and Beethoven string quartets, opera, Brecht and Weill. I discovered Ives and Copland. And, of course, all the while listened to pirate radio Caroline and London, and watched *Ready Steady Go* and *Top of the Pops* religiously. Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, the Everly Brothers, the Beach Boys, the Four Tops, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Thelon-ius Monk, Charlie Mingus, the Beatles (though I was disdainful until *Rubber Soul* came along), the Stones, the Animals, the Kinks, all either accompanied me from the beginning of the decade or had emerged by the middle of it and were essential: the rhythm inside my head, the beat of my heart, the tuning of my sentiments.

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The Fifties are often characterised by a lack of colour. Like most of the movies, they were, everyone agrees, in black and white. In memory, the streets, the clothes, the prospects of the Fifties were in shades of grey. The arrival of colour was no more than implied in the early Sixties. The boldness, at first, was all about the insistent use of monochrome. Black and white was style, art and commentary. Aubrey Beardsley reproductions decorated walls and Bridget Riley paintings shimmered into fabric, Richard Avedon took pictures documenting the civil rights movement and mental hospital patients, David Bailey portrayed the rich and the influential. All of it in a kind of mockery of the 1950s lack of

colour. Each of them using the dramatic contrast of black and white, or the grey tones between as a bridge from where we had been to where we were going. White lips, black eyes; implacable black dress, white Courrèges cut-out boots. Bergman, Antonioni, Pasolini. All of this spoke of the colour that wasn't there, of an absence that until then we hadn't really noticed. All that insistent black and white screamed the lack of colour that we had put up with and worked its way into forms of art and expression. Colour was possible before the Sixties, but it took time before the world needed to be represented by the full spectrum. Did colour explode into being with the increasing use of drugs? Or did the stark simplicity of black and white finally pall? The middle Sixties was that moment when Dorothy stepped through her front door, out of Kansas, on to the undreamed-of yellowness of the brick road on the way to the Emerald City, and the heart burst with pleasure at the sudden busting out of a full-blown Technicolor world.

Pop and culture came together for people of my age who had encouragement and the opportunity to explore. It was always the case that middle-class young people were able to discover the arts if they were so inclined, but now the stuff that was coming at all young people from youth-oriented popular media pointed to other things and mixed it all up so much more than had happened before.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the more militant Committee of 100 were political organisations devoted to unilateral nuclear disarmament. But the Aldermaston March and the sit-down demonstrations organised by the Committee of 100 became culturally and socially desirable for the young who wanted not only to create a sense of peace and security for the world but also to meet each other and rebel against the elders. Our parents, and the papers they read, hated the marchers with their long hair, jeans, resistance songs and clashes with the police. What more could an angry fifteen-year-old want? I had waited, along with the rest of the world, to be blown to pieces on 11–12 October 1962. While I sat on the snowy pebble beach watching the grim-grey sea in Brighton, America and Russia played chicken in what became known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. It wasn't history happening at the time – it was perfectly clear to me, and to others, that my world was very likely to end within forty-eight hours. There seemed every reason, once I got to London and my liberal new household, to join in the marches and sit down in the street. There was also the promise of tens of thousands of people of my age and older, like-minded, looking scruffy and cool, having, as the *Daily Mail* and the *People* promised, sex like rabbits, and really annoying, actually scaring, vast numbers of the majority we were so intent on being different from. I had ached to go when I was under my parents' control and couldn't. When I finally set off on my first Aldermaston in 1963, it was my version of the debutantes coming-out ball.

Along with anger and style, mockery was another way to identify who we were and who we were not. Satire revived, and even those who considered themselves the majority sat down every Saturday night to watch *That Was the Week That Was*, either to huff and puff about the loss of respect or to cheer on the biting opposition to the abominable, reactionary Tory Home Secretary, Henry Brooke, the Cold War and the new Labour government's collusion in the American war in Vietnam. Astonishing things had happened in the US. Over there, people of our age had grown up with nuclear drill, learning how to crouch under their desks in case of a nuclear attack. America became a synonym for violence and structural racism. Kennedy was killed, then Martin Luther King, another Kennedy and Malcolm X. As the struggle for civil rights began to gather momentum, and radical student movements of the Left both in America and in Europe started to make themselves known. The Vietnam war drafted people of our age into a monstrous and unjust battle. Less violently but just as angrily, Bob Dylan went electric in 1965, and the early skirmishes commenced between the pure and the down and dirty of popular music. America was the beginning of all things new and forthcoming to parochial Britain, swinging a

it might have been, and it seemed, looking across the Atlantic, as if the world was wobbling on its axis. It was dangerous, but it was exciting. It felt as if it was not just our time, my time as a young person, but that it was like no time ever before. A snowball had started its progress and had rolled hugely towards the generation born after the Second World War. Us, me. It was full of promise, and we developed an increasing sense of responsibility to use our time of being young – to indulge ourselves, golden generation that we were, but also to give warning that when our lot grew to be old enough to take charge, things were going to be radically, *radically* different.

\* Though Barbara Hulanicki herself, the actual Biba, imagined that ‘everyone’ was as thin as a stick because of being the generation born into post-war food shortages. It doesn’t seem to have occurred to her that fat girls wouldn’t have wanted to suffer the humiliation of not finding anything to fit, or the shame of the communal dressing rooms.

## ALTERING REALITIES

And the ones that mother gives you  
Don't do anything at all...

Jefferson Airplane, 'White Rabbit'

Drugs: my mother in the 1950s standing at the window of our fifth-floor flat clutching a huge white cardboard box of soluble codeine and aspirin tablets. She got them from the doctor on prescription, 100 at a time. Headaches. Later, early in 1962, when I was fifteen, I ran away from my father to her bed-sitting room in Hove, where she had a much smaller box containing Nembutal on the chest of drawers. Insomnia. There were eight left in it when I swallowed them a couple of days later, certain that we couldn't survive each other in the tiny room, and that there was and never would be anywhere else to go. Not enough to kill me, but sufficient, it turned out, to get me out of the room, into the care of a hospital and away from both parents for good.

Before that I had been in Banbury with my father, working in a series of shops on the high street, not allowed to go back to school as punishment for my expulsion. At first I'd stolen the ether from the school chemistry lab, then bought it in bottles from local chemists, telling them it was for killing butterflies. I can't remember how I knew about sniffing ether – the only prohibited drug used at the school in those days was tobacco – but when I tried it I was entranced – precisely – by the immensity of the time I seemed to have been unconscious in a fathomless and dreameasy world. I liked the aeon away from *real* it gave me, though in reality it was only minutes. But it wasn't very long before the endless nether ether-world became inhabited by monsters. An eternity of bad dreams was not what I was after at all.

Five years later, and in another hospital, not the one in Hove they sent me to after the Nembutal overdose, I discovered methylamphetamine – Methedrine. I was nineteen or twenty and a fellow patient shared a glass ampoule of it with me and showed me how to use a syringe to skin-pop into a muscle. Time stretched out again, marvellously, though now without a loss of consciousness. Thoughts paraded in front of me like actors taking their bows on stage, stopping for a time to be considered and then passing on. I watched them while I sat back, my favourite way of being in the world, as audience to my own but autonomous mind. A time-traveller's way of inhabiting my own interior. I liked that very much. A lot better than the coal gas we bubbled through milk in the patients' kitchen to get a cheap and available high.

A year later, in a third psychiatric hospital, the Maudsley, I was admitted by the dour Dr Krapl Taylor, who told me that I was a typical addictive personality, and (in a strange non-sequitur) that he would treat my depressed, disordered personality with – I couldn't believe my luck – Methedrine therapy. Twice a week I saw his crew-cut houseman, who injected Methedrine directly into my vein and then set about trying to get me to 'abreact'. The idea was to make me distressed enough to have a crisis, which, magically, like a fever breaking, was supposed to relieve me of my depression. 'You're

worthless,' he would tell me. 'I know,' I'd say. 'Can I have some more Methedrine, please?'

Eventually, I left the Maudsley in a rage (abreacting, you might say) and found my way to the much-talked-of Arts Lab in Drury Lane. Upstairs in the café, above the exhibition space (Yoko Ono, think, a little-known avant-garde artist), I turned around in my chair and said to the man who happened to be behind me, 'Do you know where I can get some Methedrine?' He did. I had found one of the speed kings of central London, it turned out, and for a while (until the Methedrine high got very much worse than the ether horrors) I mainlined the stuff. I moved into a flat in Long Acre in Covent Garden in which friends of my dealer lived and found myself my first home, at home as I had never experienced it before. Even as a small child with my parents, I had felt like I was in the wrong place with the wrong people. Now, I sat cross-legged on the floor with my back to the wall and watched the thoughts dancing across my brain, in a smoky room of stoned strangers or friends I'd known for only weeks, and in a way that was completely new to me, I was at last where I really belonged.

Of course, I smoked dope, too. I always had a joint ready-rolled by the bed for first thing in the morning, and couldn't imagine a time – when I tried to picture a future – when I would not smoke cannabis. It seemed ridiculous to choose not to be stoned. I also dropped acid, though with much more trepidation than any of the other drugs I used. I was sure, the first time I sucked on an LSD-soaked sugar cube, that it would be the end of me. I knew my depressive tendencies. I had had bad trips even on cannabis. The ether and the Methedrine had turned nasty. I was certain that my chances of becoming irredeemably psychotic on acid were very high. I said a serious goodbye to myself as I put the sugar cube on my tongue.

Nonetheless, I took it. Was it because taking a risk was worth the marvellous insights I believed I would get if the trip happened to go the other way? Or, more likely, because risk was by definition good, or at any rate necessary? There was no choice but to take whatever risk was on offer. Or perhaps it was because I really didn't care whether I was mad or sane, or more accurately, alive or dead? It's hard to say, but during that time I was also taking Seconal capsules (a barbiturate, like Nembutal) all day and night, a high dose, prescribed, every four hours. I had discovered another way with Seconal, and sometimes injected myself with it in solution, the effect of which was instant and vacant unconsciousness. There was no other pleasure to be had out of shooting it, except the rush of blankness that filled me up the instant the Seconal hit my brain. I was after exactly that blankness, and also as importantly that millisecond of knowledge that I was becoming unconscious. It certainly wasn't the permanent madness that a bad trip threatened. But apparently even the risk of madness was preferable to being on nothing at all.

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No one thought of the drug-taking as 'recreational'. That was a later concept. Even if my particular bent for self-negation was untypical, the drug-taking young of the Sixties I lived with and met also took their drugs very seriously. Not that we didn't have fun, but having fun wasn't recreational. We didn't do recreation. Well, we didn't do work very much. At our most pompous we told ourselves that we worked at finding out how best or better to be alive. But however we justified it, we really didn't make the distinction between work and recreation that shaped our parents' daily existence. We didn't have to, because, to reiterate, one way or another the State was paying for us to study or take paid work (waitressing in the café in the Arts Lab, dealing hash, bookshop assistant, selling the *International Times*) very lightly. There was no need to worry, as our parents did on our behalf, about

‘getting on’, because we had no plan to live in a world in which getting on was of any importance. If there was a plan at all, it was precisely to prevent such a world from structuring our future. We were brainstorming ways of deconstructing everything to suit ourselves. We were almost grown-ups, it was inevitable that the world would become fully ours eventually, and therefore, with ourselves in charge it would be completely different.

We were certainly not in the majority, not even in our own generation. There were far more ‘straight’ young people than those of us living self-consciously outside the law, dotted about London as well as most other towns and cities in the country. There were enough of us to produce underground papers to pass the news around, to fill the Roundhouse so that we could celebrate the crowd we made to keep headshops selling pipes and joint papers, and bookshops like Indica and Compendium, busy if not in profit. But, of course, most people took on the world as it was offered to them. This is always the case. Possibly apart from the generations that came to adulthood around the start of the First and Second World Wars, most people aren’t actively engaged in what any given era is later characterised by. Not everyone in France was fomenting revolution in 1789; only a tiny proportion of the new generation were Bright Young Things of the 1920s. What may have been different by 1967 was how easy it was to opt out of the world of adults and yet find ready-made social networks to support our dissent. That the majority chose not to, made them, in our eyes, wilfully blind. The world was in fact going on as it always had, but it seemed to me and the people I knew that it had no idea what it was in for.

The Stones’ two-and-a-half-minute sneer, ‘Mother’s Little Helper’, accurately reflected the way in which we turned our backs on the ‘straights’. We didn’t take drugs to get by, we took drugs to see the world entirely differently. The straight world had our contempt. It wasn’t drugs as such that separated us and them. It was the kind of drugs and the reason for taking them. The Valium-popping wives isolated from reality, trying to keep up with phantom materialism in their suburban villas on Acacia Road or any of the other suitably pastorally referenced streets. The differently isolated working-class women who were also being dished out prescription tranquillisers, to help them cope with their children on the twentieth floor of the high-rise council blocks that were springing up everywhere. Those who colluded with stasis brought about their own doom. We were doing something with drugs, they were just surviving the intolerable world that they had either created or acquiesced in.

Our youthful cruelty was boundless. Youth does cruelty quite easily, not having the accretions of time to deal with, but I remember a glaring clarity as I looked at the bourgeois life and its compromises, the working life and its compliance, and what seemed the direct consequences of both, that may have demanded cruelty to reassure ourselves that we could stay clear of it. Some of the generation that had come to their young adulthood in the Fifties had seen it too and hit the road. It’s a kind of laser-guided vision, a pure beam of light in a crepuscular landscape, that is available to the young when they look at the world that has been made ready for them, which they are about to step on into. You see it in your children when they get that pitying, disdainful smile on their face and don’t bother to argue with you because you can’t possibly grasp what they know. Which is, simply, that they are new and you are old, and that what they see is being seen accurately for the first time ever. And they are right. The compromises that adults make cause much of the suffering in the world, or, at best, fail to deal with the suffering. Acceptance of one’s lot, maintaining a silence about what can’t be said, lowering your expectations for your own life and for others, and understanding that nothing about the way the world works will ever change, is the very marrow of maturity, and no wonder the newly-fledged children look at it with horror and know that it won’t happen to them – or turn their backs on it for fear it will. They know it’s too late for you to ‘get it’, so they smile and leave the room, away

from your reasoning, well, actually, increasingly shrill voice. It's unnerving – especially if you remember that same smile on your own face when you were young. Not everyone, of course not everyone, but that terrible clarity of vision is available to the young of every generation, and those who look become the trouble-makers, the difficult ones, that the elders complain about eternally.

In the second half of the Sixties, if you were of the party that chose to look, you were either hell-bent on getting out of that world, as I perhaps was, or you were going to re-vision it and live the vision. Drugs were just one means, like a spaceship or a spell, of getting through the fog of what 'they' called reality. A presently available technology for bypassing what they assumed was the ineluctable way of the world. It seemed pellucidly obvious that it could, with a bit of effort, become our way of our world, of a kind we chose to live the rest of our lives in, not theirs. It was necessary, therefore, like explorers through the centuries who mapped routes to new worlds, to make extreme, ill-considered efforts to find it. I say this with a slight smile aged sixty in 2008. There were, in fact, many moments when it felt exactly like that in the flat in Covent Garden in 1968. Smiling gently on your younger self is one way of dealing with the astonishing lack of change. Timothy Leary describes the knowledge we had that the time had come 'for far-out visions, knowing that America had run out of philosophy, that a new, empirical, tangible metaphysics was desperately needed, knowing in our hearts that the old mechanical myths had died at Hiroshima, that the past was over, that politics could not fill the spiritual vacuum...Politics, religion, economics, social structure are based on shared states of consciousness. The cause of social conflict is usually neurological. The cure is biochemical.'<sup>3</sup>

It was easy to be seduced away from a politics which had palpably failed – even a just war had failed to provide peace, and those who had saved the world from Hitler had not prevented the next horror signalled by the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan. In 1967, if you looked around, you saw the continuing confrontation of East and West, the Berlin Wall still standing, mass starvation in Biafra, race riots in the States, the war in Vietnam. Fear, hunger, deprivation, the oppression by the strong of the weak. Nothing had changed, for all that we were told how a generation had sacrificed its youth in order to make a decent world for us. And even if that were true, how could that generation sit back with a sense of a job well done when terrible things were happening to people all over the planet? In any case, it is not the job of the young to be grateful, it is their job to tear up the world and start again.

What happened when you smoked a joint and to a far greater extent when you dropped acid was that the world outside your head was utterly changed. It looked, I and others would say over and over again as we tripped, so *real*. By which, I suppose, we must have meant *unreal*, except that is not how it seemed. We watched reality become a conundrum as the chemicals we ingested altered the chemicals in our brains. Change and reality were as easy to make and unmake as swallowing a pill or drawing smoke into our lungs. The 'one pill makes you larger, one pill makes you small' of Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit' was a perfect description of the astonishment at the changes we made happen inside our own heads. We had a childlike wonder that we could produce such weirdness from ourselves – that our own familiar minds had the latent capacity to see the world entirely anew. Drugs were also an unfathomable, fascinating, magical toy – it wasn't coincidental that we took to blowing bubbles through plastic hoops and making morphing patterns in bright colours with oil and heat. And notice how taking acid dripped on to sugar cubes or blotting paper combined the magical contraption with the favoured, forbidden foodstuffs of our childhoods.

There were still books to read, but now they were the *Vedas*, *Gita*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *I Ching*, books on Buddhism by Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki, novels and essays informed by Eastern philosophy or drug use by Herman Hesse, Aldous Huxley, Carlos Casteneda, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, as well as John Lilly, writing from his sensory deprivation tanks, and Dr Leary, the

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sample content of The Sixties (BIG IDEAS//small books)

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