

On John Lennon
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Mother, you had me but I never had you

I wanted you but you didn't want me

So I got to tell you

Goodbye goodbye

Father, you left me but I never left you

I needed you but you didn't need me

So I just got to tell you

Goodbye goodbye

Children, don't do what I have done

I couldn't walk and I tried to run

So I got to tell you

Goodbye goodbye

Mama don't go

Daddy come home

--lyrics from the song "Mother" by John Lennon.

Recently, I saw two films on the assassination of ex-Beatle John Lennon on December 8th, 1980: "The Killing of John Lennon" and "Chapter 27." The title of the second one is a reference to a chapter in the book *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, which Lennon's killer, 25-year-old Mark David Chapman, saw as justifying his extinguishing the life of "phony" John Lennon. After shooting Lennon in the back in the entrance to the Dakota Apartments in

New York City where Lennon lived, Chapman stood reading the book until police arrived.

Both films were based on Jack Jones' book on Chapman, *Let Me Take You Down*, but they take very different approaches to telling Chapman's story. And it is Chapman's story they tell; Chapman is the star of both movies in the Hollywood sense, not a bit player in Lennon's life. I found both films compelling to watch and thought provoking, and I consider both cinematically worthy efforts. I'm struck by the fact that neither film has been given the favorable critical response I believe it deserves. Perhaps in part it is because both films portray Chapman as a complex and layered individual and strong and attractive at the same time he is sniveling and repellent, and as someone who, in his own way, was on the same human plane as Lennon. Even though it is almost thirty years later, we may not be ready to deal with that depiction, but I believe it is a legitimate, and courageous, artistic choice that these filmmakers have made to take us in this direction and let us experience what comes up for us when we go down that path.

With that said, this thought isn't about the merits of these two films or an analysis of how they have been received. Rather, it is a report on the investigation into John Lennon's life that the films prompted me to undertake. After watching "The Killing of John Lennon" and "Chapter 27," I read a number of books on Lennon, who would be exactly my age now if he had lived, among them Albert Goldman's biography (*The Lives of John Lennon*) and Lennon's assistant Fred Seaman's memoir of Lennon's last years (*Living With Lennon*).

At the end of one of the books I read was a quote that struck me from Lennon's son Julian after his father's death. I have tried to find the quote for this writing and been unsuccessful, but I remember the gist of what Julian said: that his father was a lost and vulnerable soul, and that his second wife, Yoko Ono, had hurtfully, destructively, taken advantage of that reality. I was taken by this characterization as a damaged and fragile human being a rock star icon that, as we were led to believe, "had things together" in his life. It is this reality behind the media image that I deal with in this writing. In particular, I consider a relationship Lennon had near the end of his life with a young woman by the name of May Pang. Pang,

it seems to me, threw Lennon a lifeline, as it were, that might have saved him from drowning; but after grabbing hold of it for a few months, Lennon let it go.

The story for public consumption the last decade of John Lennon's life was that he was living in domestic tranquility at the Dakota as the househusband of his loving wife, Yoko Ono. The Goldman book in particular paints a starkly different reality. In those years, Ono discounted Lennon's musical accomplishments and discouraged his artistic impulses. Remarkably given the obvious disparity in their two talents, he accepted her definition of him as essentially a prop to her own musical career. He all but stopped creating music. Ono literally avoided Lennon. Wherever he was in their multi-room Dakota complex, she wasn't. He spent much of his time attempting, and failing, to get her attention. He was often left trying to make contact with her by telephone. Ono sexually rejected and disconfirmed Lennon, which included cuckolding him with other men. Lennon became for all practical purposes a sexless being, a pattern broken by occasional forays into pornography. He broke off contact with people and spent most of his time alone in his bedroom with three cats, drinking coffee and consuming alcohol and drugs and writing constantly in a personal journal that as far as I know has never been published. He developed a raging eating disorder, alternatively binging and vomiting and fasting, and his weight dropped to a startling 130 pounds on his 5'11" body. Increasingly he became an eccentric and underling to be scornfully endured by Ono and a joke to be ignored to the extent possible by the staff, housekeepers and cooks and such.

The official word at the time was that finally Yoko got so fed up with "bad John" that she exiled him from the Dakota for a nine-month period and then deigned to allow him to return. This was in the mid 1970s. Lennon spent most of that time in Los Angeles with a young assistant of his and Yoko's by the name of May Pang. The truth of it was that while Yoko had indeed had it with John and encouraged him to leave with Pang, the larger reality was, whether Lennon fully realized it or not, the west coast sojourn was his attempt to escape from a life that was killing him as a man and as an artist.

Pang wrote a memoir of those months published in 1983 entitled *Loving John*. The following is drawn from her book.

As John and my relationship progressed, he changed. He stopped drinking. He had the time of his life with Julian. He stopped being a recluse and learned to have friends once again. He was writing music.

“John, I love you so very, very much.” “I love you too.”

To this day I wonder if I could have done anything differently. Another human being might have. Given the human being I was at the time that I met John and the things I knew, I could only do what I had the capacity to do. As for myself, John brought a touch of greatness and adventure into my life, and I miss him. I will always miss him. I miss him very much.

In New York, John and Yoko never seemed to be in the same room together, and when they did meet they hardly spoke.

During the filming of one of Yoko’s short films, when John made a suggestion of a camera angle, Yoko silenced him with “You don’t know anything about it, John.”

They rarely kissed or touched. As far as I could see there was nothing sensual about their relationship.

John was playing a Chuck Berry album. Chuck Berry was John’s favorite rock ‘n’ roll artist. Yoko said, “Get that off. I don’t want that played around here.”

At the Dakota, when John spent time with anyone it was with Yoko’s friends or with people she thought he should meet.

Yoko had the uncanny ability to make John do anything she wanted. She was able to convince him that whatever she wanted was in his best interest. She had the power to speak directly to the deepest, most insecure part of John, and it was essential to him to do what she said. Although I hated to admit it, deep down I believed that Yoko knew how to get John to do what she wanted and that he would return to her.

During lovemaking it seemed as if our bodies were able to talk to each other. There was an amazing give-and-take as we responded to each other's caresses and sexual sounds. I could not believe how responsive we were to each other. "We make love with our hearts and souls as well as our bodies," John explained.

Listening to rock 'n' roll was a passion we shared. For both of us, the music symbolized escape from childhoods that were confining and limited—it meant freedom. We would turn on the radio and switch from station to station, searching for singles we both liked.

John looked at me and laughed. He kissed me, and then we made love. Later that night we got hungry and went out for a walk. It was a mild summer night, and we felt wonderful. We ate and then went back to the apartment. We undressed and I climbed into bed beside him. I said, "I've never been happier in my life." "It's great!" John replied. We drifted off to sleep.

"Aren't you happier now making new friends?" I asked.

I did not want to be John's new mother. He had already begun to ask my opinion about his every move. He wanted me to be Mother, but I would not do it. I wanted John to stand on his own and I wanted to play straight with him.

I can't tell you not to drink. I'd like you not to, but I can't tell you what to do. I love keeping you organized. I love taking care of you. But I can't control you. You've got to control yourself.

You said you drink because you are nervous. Drinking lets you get your anger out. When you are sober you always look away. You push everything to one side. John, I'll help you. Let's start dealing with things as they occur.

At his core, John was a very frightened man.

I heard John's voice cut through the night: "No one loves me. . . . No one cares about me. . . . Why doesn't anyone love me?"

John, I really love you.

I put my arms around him and held him tight. I cradled him in my arms and rocked him gently until his sobbing finally subsided. I got some Kleenex and wiped away his tears. Finally, he calmed down and we went to sleep, holding each other gently throughout the night.

John reached over and smiled at me. "Do you know I love you?" he said softly. "I love you," I replied.

I got a cookbook, and I started a ritual that John adored. I made an English Sunday breakfast consisting of bacon and eggs, stewed tomatoes, beans on toast, and fried potatoes. I found a newsstand that got the English newspapers and had them delivered to the apartment. After our breakfast, we read the newspapers.

Early on Saturday mornings John and I would set out on a boat. We'd cast off and just lie quietly in the sun, letting the boat drift. After a picnic lunch, we'd spend the rest of the afternoon swimming.

The John I loved the most was the productive John, a man deeply committed to making good music. John told me that Yoko had told him repeatedly that he need not worry that he wasn't recording. She told him he did not have to prove himself anymore, because he was already there. I replied, "I think your spirit dies unless you keep challenging yourself to learn and grow. . . .The truth is, John, I think you are very depressed." We watched television for a while, and then drifted off to sleep. In the morning, as soon as John woke up he wrote on his pad. Every so often, he stopped to play me what he had written to get my reactions. He was working on a sad song that he called "Tennessee." It had been inspired by his rereading of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I loved it and told him so. It later became the song "Watching the Wheels."

At night when John was recording, he always took Julian to the studio. It was Julian's summer holiday, so we didn't think it wrong to keep him up to eleven or twelve at night, as he could sleep the next day.

“We’ll go to New Orleans next week, he said, and then come back and I’ll finish masterin’ Rock ‘n’ Roll [the album he was doing], and then we’ll start a new one. What do you think?”

I was convinced that a whole world of touring had opened for John. He had experienced the love of his audience first-hand, and he had been able to communicate his love to them. I could tell that he was deeply moved.

“Do you know what I’d like to do this weekend?” I said. I’d like to look for a house. Just the two of us. It will be beautiful.”

John loved the ocean and wanted to live near it, and we found a large house on Santa Monica Beach. It was a large, airy, two-storied house with a pool behind it, and it had direct access to the beach.

But in the end, John Lennon left May Pang and went back to New York City and Yoko Ono and to meet his ultimate destiny with Mark David Chapman.