

The Day They Shot Edward

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Press

Prologue

The car drew up at the cemetery gates. Dressed in full evening dress a young man stepped out, violin case in hand. He stood waiting, listening intently to the creamy cadences of a magpie's song and moving his lips as if identifying the notes on a scale. An elderly man carefully lifted a sheaf of red roses from the back seat and came to his side.

'Maybe you should not have come here tonight, Matthew ...'

The young man shook his head. 'Oh no, Mr Werther. Tonight it is right to remember. At times I have come here as a traveller who has walked long distances but is still reluctant to arrive. But not tonight.'

Together they entered the cemetery, turning into the first aisle and halting before a small granite gravestone at the end of the row, a humble memorial dwarfed by surrounding marble pillars and statuesque angels. Matthew placed his violin case on the grass mound while his friend arranged the roses against the headstone and glanced at his watch.

'You mustn't stay too long.'

Lost in thought, Matthew only nodded. The magpie still warbled. A soft breeze stirred the rose petals, and a butterfly caught on a warm air current dipped and fluted across his vision. A pinch between finger and thumb would destroy it. He had the power. Its fragility saddened him. As a child he had not understood finality. Sometimes

it frightened him but always it was a surprise. In his idyllic childhood world nothing had destroyed the intensity of the moment. Remote as snippets of fancy he recalled those hot days when he dozed on grass crisped by the sun. His certainty that while he slept time stood still. That beneath their leafy canopy birds also slept, tiny ants froze in their military stance, in the stillness of the river nothing moved.

Had surprise ceased that tragic night? Or did his understanding as a man mark that moment as his step into awareness. Maybe guilt, now fuelled by his adult sense of injustice and beauty wasted, demanded a time before and a time after the event.

He took a folded white handkerchief from his pocket, stooped and carefully cleaned the inscription.

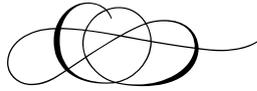
‘Do you recall, Mr Werther, how Gran said that since we only have one life we are bound by lack of experience and practice to make a mess of it? She said we are merely actors in our time and on our stage rehearsing for others a life they will not understand. I know I played a role in Edward’s death but did I rehearse it for others or for myself?’

Mr Werther touched his arm. ‘Gran’s words were not meant for you, my young friend. The guilt has gone on too long. You were a child. Children cannot understand these things. Now Mendelssohn’s Concerto is waiting for you and you must forget.’

‘How can I forget? Maybe on this special night my audience will hear the sadness in great music.’

‘Yes, Matthew, maybe they will, but there is also exaltation and exquisite beauty. Now take your violin.’ He picked it up and handed it to his young friend.

‘I wonder,’ Matthew said, as they made their return to the car, ‘if Edward cared for music. I never asked him. Children know so little about those they love.’



Matthew lay on his stomach on the bank. He felt the tug on his finger, prickling along his hand and up his arm. He tightened his forefinger under the thrust of string and lifted it fractionally above the water. It slid clear. Slowly, slowly with inching patience he drew it towards him.

The hunter in him was shrewd, the boy fighting impatience. Resisting the urge to leap up, yank the string and flick the creature on the bank fuelled his excitement. He saw himself in this excess of energy gambling on success or failure with one rushed and careless gesture. He wouldn't do it. He willed himself to wait.

It was still there. He could feel the tug that told him it was there. The line joined them. They should be friends. He grinned at the thought. The line tugged again, gently like a persistent knock demanding his attention, his action.

He waited. With his free hand he separated some dry grass from a clump and drew it across his hand. Low down, against the mud of the bank, secret, dangerous, his hand held the bait.

He rested and felt the line tauten.

It was still there, testing him. He pulled slightly, the weight remained steady. He inched it towards him. He could imagine this delicate knowledgeable creature with its shiny purple claws, tender

antennae, and tiny watchful eyes. It would be clutching the sodden maggot. Matthew enticed some more, breath held, hand strong. It wasn't necessary to breathe; he fought not to breathe, not to breathe. If you wanted something you could defy need. The vacuum built up in his chest, emptiness became a weight he must heave off.

The yabby was close to the bank. He could see the sheen of its back, a shadow wrinkling beneath the light brown water. Stifled, he choked. His mouth opened, he wrenched air from space and as it exploded into his lungs he sprang to his feet, flipped the string and flicked the yabby on its back onto the bank. It scabbled, twisted, waved claws and antennae, righted itself and slithered backwards toward the water.

Matthew snatched at it, fingers pincer tight behind its head, and dropped it in the bucket of muddy water at his side. It struggled for a moment, hoisting itself on the backs of those already caught, and then, with a last feeble wave of its antennae, sank from view. Matthew peered into the bucket with pride but the last glimpse of the yabby, its futile protest, saddened him.

It was a shiny day. The light shimmered hotly in the sky and the water in the flooded estuary reflected the tawny ragged gums. A mirror image of blueness stretched as far as he could see, as if trees and reeds and fallen logs grew upside down in a space lost in the deep recesses of the water. Very little stirred. Frogs and tadpoles sheltered silently under grass protruding from the bank. Birds hid in the flickering silver foliage of the trees. Only the occasional insect skittered across the water, trailing a skirt of ripples on the surface.

He looked again into the bucket of yabbies; an eye surfaced and sank. The water was as still now as the river. But with evening the river would start again, and life would emerge from trees, banks and reeds to feed, sing and sport. He thought of cooking the yabbies, their twitching in the hot water. He remembered 'Clicketty' Tonkin bringing a crayfish for supper. When Clicketty dropped it into

boiling water it had screamed – a sound of high, thin agony. Matthew had covered his ears and run, and when he saw it on the table, eyes dead, claws perched over the rim of the plate, he had been sick.

He tilted the bucket so water dribbled out. With a stick he separated and counted his conquests, categorising their sizes and ages – the heavy girthed yabby with one claw had escaped many times before. He was proud of catching that one. He tilted the bucket a little more and a couple of the yabbies slithered onto the muddy bank, confused, uncertain. They hesitated, hunched and doubtful, antennae immobilised. Then, the instinct for freedom asserted, they scabbled backwards into the water and with a few deft strokes disappeared into the mud.

Matthew let them go regretfully. The self-sacrifice warmed him.

Mother would not be pleased. She would have served them for supper at her card evening, a cut-glass dish holding white flesh, each piece curled and plump like witchetty grubs, vinegar in a matching glass jug, salt for dipping, the sweet taste of fresh flesh.

He tipped the bucket further. More yabbies disengaging themselves from each other fell onto the bank. Finally the old fat one lumbered awkwardly into his watery home.

But Gran would be tickled, not that he had let them go but that he knew why he had let them go. She would put her arm around him and say, ‘Go on, tell me, so I understand.’ He sometimes thought she already knew but she said she didn’t. If he told her about the warmth and the trees with trunks climbing into the sky and then downwards into the river she would listen and smile and then ask again: ‘And the yabbies? Tell me why you let them go.’

All the way home he thought about it. He didn’t think in sentences but in images: of eyes, waving antennae, shiny purple backs sinking into water, stillness, the breathing stillness of the river in which everything lived coolly, comfortably. He thought of the saucepan of boiling water, the thick steam that wet the walls near the stove, the

creatures sinking into hot water, leaping and twitching, the high thin scream and the damp silence afterward.

He reached the small sandstone house with the Cloth of Gold roses swarming up the walls and burst through the kitchen door.

‘Gran!’ he shouted, ‘I let them go, all of them! I let them go! They cried in the hot water!’ And he burst into tears.

Sarah was not an old grandmother. She had been a small neat child with a plump face, her blue eyes well-spaced, a small straight nose and firm prim mouth. Her fair hair parted in the middle had been tied in two neat plaits. Now the plaits were rolled into buns over her ears and the round blue eyes wore a pair of rimless spectacles. But the general impression remained, of a compact and self-contained woman. There was no sense of frailty in her slightness, only of a lack of waste, as if by design she took up just the space in the universe she required and no more.

By contrast, her daughter Margaret was a blaze of petulant glory from her wildfire hair to loose indulgent stride – a woman who knew her own beauty and bargained with it as often as possible. She was one of life’s ironies, the beautiful wilful frippery daughter of intelligent, temperate and loving parents.

Both women paused in their tasks as he stopped, sobbing, at the kitchen door. Sarah was bread-making, her long black skirt and plain white high-necked blouse tented in a white cotton apron. Below sleeves rolled to the elbow her forearms were white with flour. Flour dusted the scrubbed wooden table and flitted in motes of sunlight from the window across the green linoleum floor.

The bottle of yeast, a living presence usually crouched behind the kitchen door, bubbling and burping a layer of thick yellow froth, now rested beside the table. It continued to mouth silently foaming words, which spawned in its belly rose to the surface in soft little protests to burst fruitlessly.

‘Just like a lot of conversation,’ Gran had said dryly on one occasion

when Matthew squatting to observe the yeast had remarked that ‘it was talking’. He didn’t understand her tartness. That something could move constantly of its own accord fascinated him.

‘Can it hurt?’ he had asked.

‘No.’

‘But it moves.’

‘Yes.’

‘Things that move are alive.’

‘Not all things. If you throw a stone it moves.’

He sat back on his heels, wrestling with that idea, unaware that she watched him, wondering if he could think through the difference.

‘But I throw the stone, Gran. It moves because of me. It can’t move on its own. The yeast moves from inside like I do.’

She put an arm about him. ‘So it does. So it does.’ And she hugged him and laughed. ‘But it doesn’t hurt, Matthew. Not all sorts of living are the same.’

Now Matthew looked at the talking yeast from the doorway, at Gran, and at his mother who, also shrouded in a white apron, stirred a pot of jam. He sniffed the hot toffee-sweet smell of spilled sugar burnt upon the stove.

Their arrested arm movements gave them a fixed waxy appearance, like figures caught in time later to be paraded as examples of earlier life. All the artefacts were there: the blacked wood-fire range, with heavy iron-spouted kettle at one side and red polished stonework about its base; the small narrow window with lace curtains above the sink, its single tap and wooden draining board; the central wooden table and four wooden chairs painted dark green to match the linoleum; the wooden wire-meshed door letting in a few shafts of morning light.

A floury warm sweet gloom pervaded the room and the grey light in which the women moved, used to rooms which like themselves were merely adjuncts, the kitchen to the house and its central living areas, they to society and its important members.

Matthew, caught in his own fragment of time, recognised none of this. His perceptions grasped the familiar. Memory had told him it would be like this. He had visualised it as he ran home. Certainly the arrangements might have altered, like flowers in a bowl can be arranged in different modes, but the bowl and the flowers themselves could not change. This he believed with all the knowledge of his nine years. And of course it would be like this always. Time was not change to Matthew: only a repetition of the present.

Gran wiped her hands across her apron and held out her arms. Matthew threw himself against her stomach and chest so that she rocked on her feet and had to fix her back against the table.

‘I let them go, Gran, the yabbies. They aren’t like yeast. They stare at you and wave their claws and fronds above the water like this,’ and he lifted his hands and crooked his fingers and swayed his arms above his head. ‘And the crayfish Clicketty Tonkin brought screamed in the hot water. It’s nice and cool in the river.’

‘So it is.’ Sarah smoothed his hair from his forehead and smiled down into his hot anxious face. ‘So it is, nice and cool. I’ve often thought that myself on a hot day and waggled my toes on the edge. Cool and soft and kind. And you let the poor things go?’

He gulped.

‘And you were glad *and* upset and didn’t want to choose? It was hard to let them go after you’d been smart enough to catch them?’

He nodded.

‘And you didn’t want to choose?’

He shook his head and sobbed.

‘Poor Matthew,’ she sighed, and rocked him against her and crooned. ‘Ah, choices are terrible things to make.’

‘It took so long to catch them, Gran. I waited for hours and hours and hours. And Mother wanted yabby tails for her party. But they looked so sad. If you’d been there, Gran, you’d have told me what to

do, wouldn't you?' He clung. Next time, he was certain, Gran would save him from such agony.

For a moment Gran stopped her rocking and her gentle indulgent smile left her face. He didn't like it when adults changed their moods in this way. Something unpredictable had entered the room, a finger extended from somewhere unknown had touched him lightly on the shoulder in warning. Although of what he couldn't tell.

A second passed and Gran's eyes refocused on him. 'Wash your face and hands and you can help me make bread rolls.' She released him and gently pushed him in the direction of the outside laundry. With a hand on the door he hesitated and turned back towards her. His expression, without guile, was still confused, still distressed. She had not answered the question he most needed an answer for – not whether his choice had been correct, he wasn't ready for that, but whether she would always be there to help him make his choices.

'I'll be there most times, Matthew. We'll decide together.'

'You and me, Gran.'

'Yes, you and me, darling.'

He smiled, shoved the door open and with a whoop cleared the step in a leap. Flouncing to the crockery cabinet, his mother snatched a bowl with a clattering of dishes and strode back to the stove. She stirred the jam with fierce jabs, dug in the ladle, hauled it out brimming with froth-flecked jam and slopped it into the bowl. Her carelessness left a dark trail of red stickiness across the stove and hot burnt sugary fumes smoking in the kitchen.

'I don't know why you have to spoil him. All that fuss over a few yabbies.'

'It wasn't about yabbies.'

'It seemed like it was about yabbies to me. He caught them. They got away and then he comes crying to you to help him catch them next time.'

'He let them go. They didn't escape.'

Margaret scoffed. 'If you will believe all that rigmarole.'

'Don't be stupid, Margaret. Some people are troubled by decisions – unlike you. If you'd been more troubled by decisions you wouldn't have that encumbrance on the side verandah.'

'You always blame me. How was I to know? Did I have a crystal ball?'

'You were warned.'

Margaret sniffed. 'I was young. I'm still young.'

'Yes, you were young. That's true. And so is Matthew – very young. He needs security. Let him live with the angels a little longer. His Paradise is already tainted.'

'Like mine. Gone years ago. You couldn't say fate had been kind to me.'

'Fate! What had fate to do with your choice?'

Margaret's voice rose: 'Everything. Everything! It's a wonder I can be as brave as friends say I am – vital, courageous, making the best of my personal tragedy.'

It was Gran's turn to sniff. 'Then be more understanding of Matthew. His burdens should come a little at a time.'

Matthew washed himself half-listening to their bickering. He did not return to the kitchen preferring to avoid its risky eddies of feeling. Instead he took the little path that passed around the side of the house. The captured yabbies and their pitiful helplessness had left him troubled. Only yesterday he had come upon the cat growling over the body of a bird, softly dead with feathers plastered, askew. When he appeared the cat grabbed its prey, the deep mewling in its throat a subterranean threat to Matthew not to intrude.

A few days earlier he had rescued a tiny drop-tail lizard from the same cat. Cunningly, this time, he had offered the cat some of his yabby meat, dropping it on a string and then twitching it out of reach. Tantalised the cat dropped the truncated lizard, which then skittered into the warm recesses of the stones by the path. It had looked ignoble

without its tail, mutilated, only half a creature. But it was alive, like the yabby with one huge claw.

Matthew wondered if it had hurt the lizard to lose its tail and once or twice he experimented by pulling his own hand as hard as he could. He wondered what it would be like to have a detachable hand and visualised the skin folding over to close the hole. The lizard didn't bleed when the tail dropped off. He wondered why. In his imagination he saw his hand lying on the path and shuddered. There was something threatening in wholeness being destroyed. It was like a worm in an apple, insidious, disgusting, a message from the present intruding into the future.

As he approached the side verandah his step slowed and he sidled forward. The verandah was sealed three quarters of the way up the outer and end walls. Above the wooden slats heavy canvas covers closed but did not seal the entrance between roof and wall. A wooden door at one end was partially covered by wire mesh. Another door from the inside wall of the verandah opened into the house.

Matthew's father lived in this improvised room. The doctor had said he needed plenty of fresh air but he must be kept away from the rest of the family. He had his own plates and knives and forks, always kept in a special place in the kitchen and washed separately. His apartness worried Matthew. Gran and his mother were whole people not just because they were healthy but because they lived each day in a normal, predictable, undisturbing routine. The security they gave to Matthew did not merely rest on his relationship with them. It was acquired through his feelings about their relationship with the house, the garden, the neighbours, the streets where they shopped and the river and the beach where they sometimes indulged their leisure. They belonged comfortably in the busy world of sunshine and the quieter world of moonlight. The outside world filled their lives and made them whole.

His father lay forever in one place – a little grey room – cocooned

and entrapped in his bed. Its half light was the half light of death.

Matthew tiptoed to the door and holding his breath peeped through the wire mesh into the room.

‘Piss off, you little bugger!’ the breathless voice with its suppressed rage sent him scrambling backwards. He fled to the sound of thin rasping coughs interspersed with the high whine of breaths caught in bronchial tubes, thrumming like wind protesting in high wires.

Matthew had never been inside the room on the verandah. His father had lain there for a long time now. Sometimes he emerged, a gaunt shuffling creature leaning on Margaret’s or Sarah’s arm to visit the lavatory at the end of the garden. He wore an old brown dressing gown in all weathers, and a towel, draped over his head and around his neck, gave him the hooded look of a large bird with hunched white head and long brown back. The clothes hung on his frame as if the body inside them had dissolved.

Sometimes Matthew watched covertly these painful and exhausted efforts to maintain the remnants of privacy and dignity. He tried, as he had tried with the lizard, to imagine what his father’s feelings must be. But he could not overcome his aversion and fear. The lizard had been little and vulnerable lying in the sun amid the glossy pink pig-faces. It was a part of the brilliance of the morning. His father he could never imagine in sunlight. His father was a creature of greyness, of half-light, something you trembled to meet when you scuttled out to the lavatory in the night, seeing his grotesque shape in the shadows across the path, expecting it to loom over you and reach out greenish half-dead hands.

His mother and grandmother never knew it but for Matthew death became an evil and terrifying presence in the house. Sometimes he imagined the women as angels in heaven in their tented white aprons and his father in the grey room as the devil. When they told him at school that the devil tempted people to come to him Matthew saw himself creeping up to the hellish outside room and

wondered what would happen if ever he opened that door and stepped inside. He suspected he would die. His fears were augmented by his grandmother's anxiety and constant warnings to not go near his sick father, to never use the plates or utensils he ate from.

His dread of being shut away from others as his father was became Matthew's understanding of hell.

He had other memories of his father but in the selectivity of memory they were all part of his picture of the devil. He remembered how, very long ago, there had been a thunderous hammering on the door and how his mother in a long white nightdress, her flaming unbraided hair reaching to her waist, had sprung from her bed. She thought he was asleep but he had crept to the door, trembling and watchful. He had seen her standing in the middle of the kitchen, her terrified eyes on the outer door which shuddered beneath the blows someone outside inflicted on it. Suddenly the sharp edge of an axe broke through the wood and jammed. She screamed as the axe was dragged free and struck again.

It was winter and the range dampened for the night. She snatched an unburnt log and little specks of fire leapt into life as she hauled it into the air. With the smouldering log she waited. For Matthew the scene was set – the angel with the burning brand, the devil at the door reaching in from blackness. When he burst through she shrieked and rushed at him. The axe fell to the floor, he howled with pain and fled into the night. His mother sat in the kitchen all night guarding the damaged door but he did not return. Several days later Gran had arrived, her luggage piled on a cart.

To Matthew the scene had no human dimension. His mother had not been a frightened wife, his father had not been a violent drunkard. His mother was an angel, his father an intruding devil. Heaven and Hell had their counterparts in Matthew's home. He knew Heaven had the warm, yeasty, floury smell of a kitchen and breadmaking. He knew Hell was the sectioned-off verandah where the devil was

trapped; the devil who might for his amusement entice you to enter, who might perceive your secret fascination to discover his face.

It was the same fascination that enthralled him when he stood on the edge of a cliff or high step or bridge. He could jump. The power was there to destroy himself if he so willed. It was a shuddery feeling seeing himself stepping into nothingness. How would he fall? Would he dive like a gannet, plummeting into the water, or would he float, drift like tumbleweed caught in wind currents?

But he hadn't jumped and he didn't enter the room. Whatever the fascination he could resist and must.

Gran did not fear his father. Gran had a box and in it she kept some sort of magic. Matthew had asked her about the box one day and she had told him that it held the 'keys to the shades'. He said he did not understand and she had told him quite seriously that it was her circle of privacy and she would not invite him into it. He was hurt. Gran did not usually exclude him. She saw his hurt, tipped her head sideways and sighed.

'The shades are no place for you, Matthew. The young live in the present but as we grow older the past and the future intrude more. We distort the past by what we choose to remember and we measure the future by what we desire. Past, present and future become the shades of each other and these,' she took some cardboard cutouts of letters of the alphabet from her box and laid them in a circle on the table, 'these are my keys to the shades of the past and the future.

'To be free of time, Matthew, to control it by perceiving it in some other way. Chronos, clock, timepiece, chronology. The chains of sequence which bind us to inevitability. To have every day a surprise. What would that be like, eh? To see the sun rise upside down?'

He struggled to follow her and gave up.

He liked her words although his mother disparaged them. They stretched his mind, made him wonder, made him wrestle with meanings that reached beyond a series of sounds on the tongue.

Sometimes he felt that in catching the yearning in her he was able through an osmosis of feeling to share her thinking. But he had no words to express what it was he understood. He could not step from the filmy world of feeling into the clearer atmosphere of the mind, could not draw up his perceptions from the depths of the river of his consciousness to the shallower, brighter surfaces where things were clearer, but less mysterious, beautiful and subtle.

He knew that she used the ouija board to speak to her husband and he had heard her murmuring conversations. She would sit for hours while the glass slithered and bumped across the surface of the table. She did not invite him to share these occasions and ignored his peeping presence at the window. She accepted his curiosity without feeling compelled to satisfy it. Knowing to her was important, but so too were these moments when she acknowledged none of the demands of the present.

He knew Gran's husband was dead but this death had nothing to do with the little grey room. Whatever Gran did was safe. Her secrets did not trouble him. He would have taken her hand and slipped with her through the magic circle into the shades with confidence.

Once he had asked what and where he had been before his birth. His mother had responded coyly 'a twinkle in the eye of God' to which Gran countered abruptly: 'Nothing, as far as we know.' Since he could not imagine himself without a body, since indeed he could not imagine himself without an 'I', he assumed that Gran meant that he floated in nothing. The loneliness of it horrified him.

To return to nothingness, to such imagined isolation, was unthinkable. He shuddered and grew sticky with sweat at the thought of it.