

This perhaps needs a word of introduction: in the UK, in the halcyon days of radio before commercial radio was introduced, there were three BBC radio stations; the Light Programme, largely for music and comedy, the Third Programme, mainly for classical music, and the Home Service, for more serious spoken word shows. One of the staple items of the Home Service was the 'Morning Story', so this story should be accepted as belonging to those days, in the 1950s/early 60s.

Morning Story

Walter Brown was a tall distinguished looking man in his late 70s. He walked with a slight limp, which went almost unnoticed among the small circle of people who knew him well, but his back was as straight as ever. His bearing and his small, neatly clipped moustache bore witness to the fact that he had seen service in one of the Guards regiments, both before, and during, World War II.

A keen observer of life and of human nature, he had read the signs and realised that war was likely, perhaps inevitable, long before the politicians had been forced to admit it, and in a strange way had almost welcomed it when it finally arrived.

In spite of the horror of taking part in some of the bloodiest fighting of that war, he still had some fond memories of those days. When the war ended however, he found that the changes which peace brought about in the army were not to his liking. He left, but found it difficult to adjust to civilian life. In the end, after a succession of unsuccessful attempts at other forms of employment, he decided to become an English teacher and found a post with one of the many lesser public 'boys only' schools which flourished then.

He had not had a brilliant career, but had been respected, and frequently liked, by the colleagues with whom he had worked and the pupils he had taught. He had been a stickler for discipline, regarded as firm but fair. If he ever felt that a pupil had been unfairly punished, he would take up his case with the Headmaster in question, even though, on occasion, it had cost him promotion. He had little or no respect for any teacher who kept quiet and in consequence, abandoned a pupil to his fate.

When the time finally came for him to retire, his last class bought him a beautiful cutglass bowl in which to display the roses which were the abiding passion of his life. His wife used to chide him laughingly, saying that he loved his roses more than he loved her. He, with equal good humour, always replied that they never nagged him (which in all fairness, nor did she) and were always there when he wanted them.

He had enjoyed the routine of school life; the fact that, albeit subject to alteration, there was a timetable to work to, an order and purpose to his existence. In retirement, he had devised his own timetable, his own schedule, to which he scrupulously adhered. He was always punctual, to the extent that his few friends said they could set their clocks by him and, it was rumoured, occasionally did!

Every morning he would rise at 7am, be showered, shaved and dressed by 7:30am, walk briskly to the local newsagent and buy his usual paper. He would return home to enjoy a hearty breakfast, then spend 2 hours, no more, no less, wet or fine, with his roses.

By 10:30am, he would be in his favourite armchair, cup of coffee on a table by his side, ready to switch on the radio to listen to the morning story. He didn't always enjoy the stories, but he always listened to them. He loved his wife dearly, and told her so frequently, but his one complaint was that she did not always observe his timetable as strictly as he did, though she usually respected his 'story time', as she called it.

He was a little annoyed then, that on that particular Thursday she chose 10:30am as the time to look in on her way to the shops and ask if there was anything special he would like for their evening meal. By the time she had left and he had switched on the radio, the story had already begun. Irritated, his immediate thought was to turn it off, but something, some indefinable quality in the speaker's voice, made him listen.

"The conductor raised his baton," the voice continued, "tapped the edge of his music stand and an expectant hush fell on the vast concert hall." Walter sank back into the deep chair. "...began to play, and one after another, in rapid succession, notes filled the air, like a myriad butterflies dancing in brilliant sunlight."

What was it about that voice? Why did it seem so familiar? As he listened, slowly the years slipped away and he felt himself being drawn back to a grim, Victorian style classroom in a bleak northern town. He was listening to a class reading the essays which the boys had written as their latest homework for him. He had given them a number of subjects from which to choose, one of them being 'The story of a violin'.

One of the boys had chosen that subject and was reading the result of his efforts. That was it; that was why the voice seemed so familiar. It wasn't only the voice which he recognised out of so many which he had taught; he had heard the story, although in a much simpler form, as well. What was the boy's name, he wondered.

The narrator continued, *"As the last haunting notes died away, there was a momentary silence, then the audience, as one body, rose to its feet and clapped loudly and appreciatively, applauding the beauty of the music and the talent of the young man who had not only produced it, but had somehow drawn them into it, allowing them for a few brief moments to forget themselves and their problems."*

As Walter listened, he heard, in his imagination, the thunderous applause and felt himself, almost against his will, being drawn in, absorbed, by the story.

"This man, whose music could captivate thousands, was unable to form a lasting relationship with anyone in his personal life. He began to feel increasingly lonely and isolated, and turned to drink in order to numb the pain in his heart. Once started on that slippery road, his downhill journey was rapid."

He now needed to take a drink 'to steady his nerves' before each performance and, as a consequence, his concentration in the most vital passages sometimes lapsed and his playing became more and more erratic. Bookings became fewer and eventually ceased altogether.

He retired into a shadowy world where drink induced nightmares and reality seemed sometimes indistinguishable.

His interest in music never died however, though his violin now hung, untouched, where he had placed it on the wall when he 'retired'. Looking at it one day, in one of his brief moments of sobriety, a sudden impulse made him take it down, coax it back into tune and begin to play. His playing was stiff and mechanical, but even so, there were glimpses of his earlier brilliance.

He laid the violin down, turned to the newly opened bottle by his side and, as if in a trance, walked to the kitchen and poured its contents down the sink

For a moment, he was seized by panic. Then, crossing to the 'phone, he feverishly searched through the directory until he found the entry for 'Alcoholics Anonymous'. He dialled and waited, for what seemed a lifetime, until a voice at the other end, very calm and reassuring, answered. His first instinct was to put the 'phone down and grab a drink, but he took a deep breath, then poured out his story.

His recovery took much longer than his decline, but eventually the evening came when he once again walked onto the concert platform, to a rapturous greeting. Once again, the wait for the conductor, the hush, the tap of the baton, and then he began to play. As he played, it seemed that he poured out through his music all the pain and anguish he had felt.

After the performance, which was received with even greater enthusiasm than those in his earlier career, he went back to his dressing room and sat down, trying to relax, but his heart was racing wildly. The strain which his drinking had placed on his heart, together with the excitement of the evening, proved too much. His breath started to come in short gasps as the pain in his chest became unbearable, then, with a choking gasp, he slumped forward. His body was dead, but his music would never die."

At 11am, Mrs Brown returned from the shops and called cheerily to Walter, but there was no reply. She looked into the lounge and found him, still sitting in his chair, but quite still and lifeless, with one tear on his cheek.

The End