

# The man who thought he was evil



**Merlin Smallbone**

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When Eddy Cochrane, a very innocent teenager, is knocked-off his bicycle and hits his head on the way to the Army Call-up medical, he tells the doctors he has an urge to be evil. A few weeks under observation at a mental hospital help him mature and broaden his horizons from being a loner quantity surveyor. From there, using the post-war upheaval and Polish emigres, he quickly develops into a successful construction manager. But an lurking ember of evil gives the nicest family man a ruthless side.

Merlin Smallbone is a prolific multi-genre author, covering crime, mediaeval history, science fiction, poems, short stories and non-fiction. Visit [vulpeculox.net/books](http://vulpeculox.net/books) for details.



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by

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There really was an oddity of a left-wing MP for Chelmsford called Ernest Millington. The Russians really were as awful as the Nazis when it came to Poland and the Polish, the difference was their dirty tricks didn't stop in 1945. Instant coffee was unknown in the early 1950s. The Bell at Little Waltham is no longer a pub.

There are international, national and local historical notes at the back if you'd like some context.

# Chapter 1

Cocky, more properly known to the military authorities as Edwin Ralph Cochrane, received the dreaded call-up letter with instructions to report to Chelmsford Drill Hall for a medical. He was gangly and needed strong glasses, stammered and was terribly shy. Hardly fit to be a clergyman let alone a guardsman or gunner. His father who had served in the Royal Artillery in the latter part of the Great War recommended the army was the arm of the services with the most opportunity for non-army activities like spending the winnings from gambling and making fortunate mistakes with map reading. Mother demanded Father should get Eddy exempted as a surveyor because they desperately needed draughtsmen and surveyors for the business. They were bursting with work already for the war effort. *Cochrane & Dawes* were well established surveyors, architects and speculative builders.

"Don't worry Doris. A bit of basic training will do him a world of good. Too many violin lessons and not enough girlfriends – that's his trouble. If we realise our mistake then I'm sure we'll be able to get him back with a word in the right ear."

"But we can't do all the work we've got at the moment. With Eddy gone we'll be even more behind."

"I'm thinking about after the war. He needs to be confident and assertive. A negotiator who knows where to get hold of materials in short supply at a good price. They're not going to give him a tank and map of Germany and tell him to find Hitler. As soon as we're back in Europe – the war can't last much longer. The night after night bomber raids must be hurting them. Say a year at the most. They don't take people like Eddy and have them ready to fight in less than nine months absolute minimum. If we can get him in the Royal Engineers that would be brilliant."

On May the First 1944, It was an emotional send-off from Bella Vista in Little Waltham as Eddy shook hands with his father and kissed his mother, then bravely swung his leg over his bicycle and went off to his medical. He wasn't actually disappearing into the army yet, merely the preliminary medical. He was determined to strike out even if inside he hated the idea of everything that would come when he was called-up for good. Father could have taken him in the truck but there was a time when a young man had to show the world how brave he could be. As he covered the four easy miles he sweated determination then shivered with funk. Fate had cast her dice and there was nothing he could do...

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...He wasn't really paying attention when... ..how did you get that mate... ..a negro face looked down at him. On the road?... ..He had to be somewhere... ..a jeep... .. An urgent appointment... .."He's coming round"... ..no glasses - blur... ..A comforting voice. "You came to the right place but you won't be fighting Hitler just yet"... ..The soldiers drove off in their jeep when a policeman arrived... ..Standing up and holding onto the telegraph pole he'd been sitting against as the world gradually stopped spinning... ..Antiseptic and blackness... .."I'll let Doctor Billings know he's on his way. Don't touch that bump on his head."...

After four days in hospital under lessening sedation, Eddy was allowed home for a week confined to bed. If after that he was alright then he could go for gentle walks but no running or cycling. He could watch cricket but not take part. He was not to resume anything mentally challenging or physically demanding until the brain expert, Doctor Billings, at Chelmsford gave the all clear.

A week after the accident the authorities wanted to know why Edwin hadn't attended his call-up medical. Father went in person to explain how Eddy was knocked off his bicycle a hundred yards from the Drill Hall by a jeep-full of GIs. And then how he carried on and was immediately hospitalised. The lady clerk said "I remember some story like this last week Sir – but I'll have to check-up."

"Here is his call-up letter with his blood on it. I'd like you to give me the name of the medic who took the necessary action so promptly. It'll be my pleasure to give him a bottle of best malt whisky. I was saving it to celebrate the end of the war but I've found a better use for it."

"We're just the clerical department here sir. I'm sure you can appreciate that we have to deal with many tall tales. Thank you for coming so promptly sir. We'll write as soon as we've verified the facts." She stood up to usher George Cochrane out. He stayed seated. There was an awful moment of war.

"OK love. I understand you have a job to do. We all do. Would you like a cigarette? He's my only child and I could have easily had him exempted on the grounds of vital war work. Sit down dear. I haven't had much sleep. Now for the first time I see how horrible having a relative in danger is. I see you have an ashtray so go on have one of mine." She reached for one with her delicate hand. He lit her cigarette with his silver lighter then lit his own. After the first exhale he said "I know you've got the facts you need to hand so why not check them now. My wife is scared the Military Police will knock on the door and take Eddy away in handcuffs. Let's put her mind at rest. If you don't have the

lists of who was officiating on the First of May then I'm sure you know who has."

"Well Mister Cochrane – as you're so polite I'll check now." She took a large cardboard file from the filing cabinet. In a few moments she was scanning the flimsy carbon copies. "There were four doctors on the panel that morning." After a hurried flick forwards and backwards she said "From the records I can't tell. The clerks on the day were the usual Mister Reynolds and Mister Clarke. They will both be there today as we speak I should think, so I can't check with them until later this afternoon – It looks busy today."

"Could I telephone you later then Miss..."

"Miss Lawson. Extension 12."

"Thank you for trying Miss Lawson." He got up but motioned Miss Lawson to stay seated. "No need to get up dear. Thank you again. Um I see you're engaged. Is your young man away on duty?"

"The Middle East with the RAF."

"In that case. Here is my card. You'll be welcome to dinner at ours if you're hungry for company – or bring your boy too if he's on leave. My boy isn't the same after his accident. I wish you the best of luck dear." He had to hurry out as this was the first time since worse things in the Flanders mud had shocked his emotions to empty denial that he'd found the wound reopened. Now he felt it and could feel for others.

As Doctor Billings had to pass Little Waltham practically every day on his way between the RAF hospital at Braintree and the civilian one at Chelmsford, he called-in at Bella Vista for a cup of tea and chat with Eddy. Mother and Father were at the office so it was just the maid to make the tea and Eddy to talk to.

"How are you young man? Let me listen to your heart... Breathe in... out... in... and relax." He liked to use this bogus routine to calm his patients. "Now the blood pressure. You call the highest the mercury gets to Eddy." Blood pressure was important but being a team together was more important. "That's fine. Now how do you feel. It's usual to feel queer. I'll never forget a girl who fell off a child's swing saying it was like there was another room in her house but now she couldn't find it. A pilot last year said he wanted to tell me something then burst into tears. That bloke was a hero. A week later he told me he'd shot his girlfriend... But he hadn't and yet he was desperate to kill himself in remorse. What I'm saying Eddy is when you get a nasty bump on the head then nine times out of ten it's a temporary confusion and a little scar that heals with nothing else but time. Sometimes our brains invent the strangest things. Before the war I had a ten year old boy who had fallen off his bicycle



a bit like you. He thought he could fly. I encouraged him with stories I'd made up of my brother who was a pilot in the RAF and how he had to study hard to get his wings. The little boy – Tommy was his name – Tommy Poyle – flapped his arms gently while I was at his bedside and described what it was like to fly. I should have put him in a special hospital for treatment – but the next morning he jumped out of the hospital window... Then I had no choice. The children's ward was on the ground floor. Now what about you? What's the scars? I can't help unless you tell me."

"I'm glad you came Doctor... I want to be evil. I think I'm allowed by something in my past to be evil. It's just a feeling. I'm not going to strangle my mother but I trust you doctor. I'm not sure whether to be triumphant that I've conquered simple morality or ask you to put me in a straight jacket."

"There's a lot of evil about at the moment Eddy. Do you want to be another Hitler? Do you want to herd women and children into a barn and burn them alive."

"Yes Doctor."

Doctor Billings recovered quickly and put his arm around Eddy's shoulders. "At least you're honest. It's not good is it."

"No Doctor. Evil."

"And you want to be that evil?"

"Yes Doctor. You did ask."

Doctor Billings was used to the bizarre aftermath of head trauma. He had learned to be as creative in a positive way as the delusions, deceptions, ambitions and guilt of his patients. He'd had no shortage of such during the last four years. "I tell you what Eddy! You might be the man we need. Evil to fight evil. Hey yes! That's where we've been going wrong isn't it? Chamberlain and Churchill being nice when Goebbells and Hitler are pure evil. Um. Can you build your strength up if I prescribe you medical rations for a couple of weeks. Cycling fifteen miles a day should do it."

"Really? I was expecting you'd want me kept safe in a hospital where I couldn't hurt anyone."

"That's a last resort Eddy. We need to get experts to check you over but you could take months off the war."

"How is that evil Doctor. Surely I should join the Germans and be their secret weapon."

"Do you speak German?"

"No. But I could learn. Can you get me a book?"

"Possibly. But first we must get your physical fitness sorted. No boxing but daily cycling as I've said and gentle PE twice a day. I'll see you get the rations if you do the exercises. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes Doctor."

"Keep it a secret Eddy. If anyone finds out then you'll be assassinated."

"Why?"

"Because you're so precious to me."

Two days later the village doctor asked to see Eddy. Their meeting was simple as Eddy only had to walk half a mile and knock on the doctor's side door. The doctor himself answered the door. He didn't so much smile as gloat. Eddy had always been afraid of the tall man in black suit, cold hands and awful sweaty cough. He was like Winston except his pale features sucked-in where Churchill's were ruddy healthy bulges of the British Popeye.

"Thank you for coming Edwin. Sit down. Now you've been in the wars I hear." He looked down at a folder and stayed looking at it. Eddy waited. "Go on." He still didn't look up, so all Eddy could see was his oiled-back black hair.

"I was knocked off my b-b-bicycle in Chelmsford and hurt my head. The doctors at the N-n-n-n... Medical board sent me straight to hospital. Doctor B-B-B./"

"/Billings"

"allowed me home after four days for a week of b-b-bed rest. He visited the day before yes-yes-y Tuesday and we had a chat."

"Yes. That's what it says here. He wants you to build up your physical strength without any strenuous exertion. That is walking and gentle swimming. No cycling up steep hills. He wants me to check your vision and you must tell me if you have any double vision or nightmares."

"Yes s-s-sir."

"Well?"

"Oh! I c-c-can see clearly with my g-g-glasses now they've been repaired and don't have any strange n-n-nightmares."

"Jolly good. Well that seems to be all. Could you see yourself out Edwin."

The next day the long-anticipated news of D-Day over the wireless stopped everyone for a while. That evening the maid and her boyfriend, a fitter from the

gas board, were invited into the parlour to share home-made plum wine on this historical moment. Father called for a toast to the might of the British people and bravery of the British army.

Lance the gas-fitter said "And to the defeat of Germany."

After they took experimental sips then proper mouthfuls of the dirty red wine, which was actually quite nice after the second or third sip, Father said. "Since Eddy had his bump I've realised how precious our nearest and dearest are. So here's to the happiness of all of us."

Later Father, Eddy and Lance went to the Bell to see if they could get any beer before it ran out. They were in luck. Eddy was only just old enough to drink in a pub and he volunteered to pay as he'd been skiving off for the last three weeks and it wasn't fair on those working hard. There was already a rowdy sing-along going with Chalkey White the coal man hammering at the piano.

A voice came from the gloom of the back bar. "Oy Cockey! Showin'-off again. Ain't you got called-up yet? Any excuse!"

"Shh-shh-shh Shutup! Shh-Shutup. I'm going to get my violin."

Lance said "We'll look after your beer. Bring Maggie."

"Wilco! Be ba-ba-back in a jif."

Twenty seconds after Eddy had left Lance had forced the unshaven and unsteady 'Count' Roger to rise from his bench by a simple grip around the throat. "E's no coward Count. E's worf ten of you. You'd better say sorry."

"It worn't meant as an insult. It's what we do."

Mrs Barker the large landlady intervened. "Both of you be quiet or you'll be out! The Count was jesting."

"Well it was poor taste."

"I don't judge Lancelot. You Londoners need to know we're a bit less touchy."

"Hey missus! Cocky didn't think it was a harmless jest did he. When people have been hurt you shouldn't make fun of them."

Father Norman said "Can we forget it on this special occasion? I'll buy the next round."

The Count said "I'm sorry. I'm a bit happy. Of course I'll apologise. I didn't realise he was hurt."

Cocky brought Mother and Maggie with him. He had intended to do the buying of drinks as the first time he was of age where he could treat them like his father had done earlier on this different occasion, but he was shoved into the saloon where Chalky now played the pedals while petite school teacher Tessie from Tyneside, sitting on his lap, hit the keys with patriotic songs while swigging whisky! He was pushed to the front. When The last of *Land of Hope and Glory* died away Cocky was ready, except the crowd was pressing too close. He needed room to swing his arms. Someone brought an empty beer crate for him to stand on. At last some order was restored and he took time to make the 'gipsy smile' around the whole room with bow poised. Many knew what was coming and cheered when it came. *In the mood* jazzed-up. He stopped and asked them to clap along. He stopped again and asked for a solo singer. He stopped again and asked for stamps and shoe tapping. He stopped again and asked for a right royal sing along. Finally he stopped and asked everyone to think of the people from the nearby airfields and bases who were now on French soil and high over Germany. Instead of *In the mood* he continued with *Moonlight Serenade* as a simple lullaby then spiced it up to encourage clapping then, without asking, a long long tremolo note stopped everyone as a clear signal... Then staccato notes with legato gaps he played the main line from *There'll always be an England*. Cheers and applause were literally deafening. He had to do one thing... Put his violin back safe in its case... Now he could sit, out of view, head in hands, on the beer crate and cry.

In the village it was generally agreed that Cocky was a brilliantly talented fiddle player but troubled in the head after his fall. The Count's jest was now universally held to be in very bad taste. It was no surprise that Cocky was being sent for a week to Oxford to see a world expert on brains. Actually an ordinary psychiatrist who happened to work closely with Doctor Billings. Doctor Billings had called in to explain that Eddy wasn't to be put off by all the white gowns, nurses and formality because underneath were very friendly humans. But Eddy was to watch out for the other patients. His was a benign case while others were shrapnel-serious. To begin with he mustn't get involved. Even holding a door open for another patient might be trouble.

"Why are you sending me Doctor?"

"Because I'm not happy you're normal. Sometime in the future you might go mad and attack a dozen people at a bus stop in a frenzy. Let's see how evil you really are. Then we can fix it."

"What about using it like you said."

"I'll be honest with you Eddy. I think you're too sensitive to be really evil. I heard about you in the Waltham Bell on D-Day and wish I was there. You're an artist not a bastard but best to be sure."

## Chapter 2

The train left Eddy and his father's old army kit-bag at the tiny station. It was a warm but threatening wet summer so he wasn't worried except that now he regretted not asking the guard for directions to the hospital. His initial request for 'the hospital' was answered by a policeman busy directing a dusty military convoy. It was only two o'clock so he had plenty of time to walk the six miles as directed. It took two minutes for the guard at the entrance to the camp to look at Eddy's letter and point out his mistake.

"Look mate you've come to the wrong place. I see what you done. You caught the train to Rushden in Northampton rather than Ruston in Oxfordshire. I can't let you in but would you like a cuppa while we try to get you sorted out."

"I'm such a fool. My f-f-father booked the ticket. Um. I'm desperate for a pee. A cuppa would be lovely. Can I sleep on a floor and start again tomorrow?"

"Nip across to that hedge over there. We're on alert waiting for our casualties anytime but you're OK if you're quick." Five minutes later the cheerful guard was making the tea. "That's a lark. You're our first patient and you walked in as happy as Larry. Alan will be along soon. He knows everything you ever wanted to know about railways. I can't put you up and the nurses huts are out of bounds to strange young men."

"It's k-kind of you to o-offer. There must be trains back to somewhere I can kick-off from tomorrow. My father gave me a five pound note at Chelmsford station this morning. I could walk back to Rushden and go from there."

"'Ere you are mate. Sorry no sugar but it's milk from the farm down the lane."

"I'm very g-grateful. I thought I'd be locked-up in a mental ward."

"Er. You ain't an orderly?"

"No. Apparently I could be a danger to society after my accident. I'd like to be but so far the worst thing I've done is stamp on a worm. I really wanted to leave the farm gate at the top of Wheeler's hill open but someone might have seen me. If I was suspected then how could I spring evil abroad at will. So I've been keeping my powder dry."

"Er Very wise young man. Let me have another look at that letter to see if there's a contact we could telephone."

"Good idea. They will be wondering where I've got to. I'll pay for the call."

"It's alright son. You enjoy your tea. You know what long distance calls are like these days – bloody nightmare. "

Then everything happened at once. The other gate guard, Alan, arrived at a shuffling run. "They're on their way. This is it!" After quick explanations it was agreed to deal with the convoy first and Cocky later. The gates were fully opened ready. "This is the moment we've been waiting for." To Cocky he said "Until now we've been empty. We've never seen a real convoy."

"I'm shit scared. We'll never cope." said the first guard.

Cocky asked if he could make himself useful. "I'll stick with you. I'm a quantity surveyor. Anything with figures and sums."

"OK mate. I'll call these four columns on this form for each truck. Let's go! I can hear them coming."

Outside Cocky said to Alan "When you said 'this is it they're on their way I thought for a second you meant Jerry." That was the last of any wandering thought for an hour. Cocky had the sub-totals ready before being asked. "143 Surgical 62 Head 4 MI. What's MI?"

"Mortally Injured. Beyond help. Took a turn for the worse on the journey. Thanks for your help Cocky. We'll get you a lift into Northampton on an 'empty' and good luck with your career as an evil dictator."

Mick said " 'Ere! You ain't poisoned my tea you evil bastard?"

Cocky said "No!"

Alan said " He was only joking."

Cocky said "Are you alright Mick? You've gone all pale."

"Yes thanks mate. I'll be alright. I may be as blind as a bat but I can't stand the sight of blood and I've just seen a lot."

Cocky said "I think you're very brave. Worrying about all that convoy for weeks and now it arrives and you stood the test. I don't think they give medals but I've got a bar of chocolate you can have on behalf of the villagers of Little Waltham."

On the way to Northampton the ambulance driver picked up a hitch-hiking American GI trying to get to see his girl one last time before being sent to

France. Cocky had always been a cyclist so hitch-hiking was strange to him. His companions said to give it a try. "How do I know what road to walk along?"

The GI said "Don't walk if you can help it. Pick a spot where the drivers have a clear view and it's easy to pull over."

"Then what? I've never even hailed a taxi."

The driver said "Ask the driver if he's going in your direction. That's all."

The GI said. "Always smile even if they say sorry. Oh and be smart."

The driver said "Don't try it at dusk or after dark or you'll get killed. It nearly happened to me a couple of weeks ago. A black shape with what I saw later was a white hand out. I nearly shit myself. Here you are Joe. Good luck with girls and Germans." They shook hands across Eddy.

"Sorry I ain't got any rations boys. Girls are fuckin' expensive. Good luck little-un."

When he'd climbed down and waved off, the driver said "The guard back there said to see you got a meal. The Sally Army van is always in the square. I'll drop you there. Ask them for how to get to Oxford or where to kip the night and I'm sure you'll be alright."

When the truck stopped and the driver pointed to the mobile canteen in the mid-summer evening light Eddy thanked him and as he didn't have anything to give him, apologised for having nothing to give except a precious five pound note his father had given him for emergencies.

"Blimey! You should have told us before mate! I'd have arranged a fairy coach an 'orses." The driver smiled and shook Eddy's hand. "Good luck mate... Um. Perhaps I'd better see you get a fish supper and... Get back in. I'll ask at the depot for the next van going that way."

"I'll be alright honestly."

"There's some not so honest guys out there. In an hour it'll be dark. Blackout. If we can't get you moving then we'll give you a blanket."

As it happened the ambulance driver made a tuppenny phone call to his transport sergeant who had train times to hand. "That's a lesson for you son. I'm Don by the way Cocky. Forget five pound notes. You need pennies for phone boxes."



"Oh yes I've got those but I didn't want to offer you a shilling. That would have been cheap. He gave me money for a meal at a Lyons Corner House and five shillings spare."

They leant against the truck eating their fish and chips. "Where you from? Essex? I had an uncle from there. Ended up in an asylum. Perhaps that's where I get my vocation from." When they'd finished and scrunched-up their greasy newspaper Don passed a cigarette to Eddy.

Eddy said "I don't smoke... Sorry... Hey! Can I buy a packet? I've got change from today's allowance."

Don put his arm around Cocky. "It's alright mate. You'll need every penny. Just keep clear of girls for as long as you can. In your case I don't think it'll be long."

"Why?"

"Because they're expensive and because you'll have them all round you like mother hens. Now your train is due in fifteen minutes. Change at Bletchley. Don't talk to strangers. Oh and by the way good luck. My uncle became a brain surgeon... in the boiler house department. He could speak all that speak about cortexes and hemispheres or was it haemorrhoids..."

"It can't be haemorrhoids."

"I know you daft idiot. Are they all as daffy as you in Essex? It was a joke."

"Oh! Now I see! Good joke! I'm sorry but I'm not used to the world outside Essex."

"Run back and find a good woman is my advice."

"A minute ago you were telling me to avoid women."

"Stop taking everything so seriously Cocky. Now I'm going to shake your hand and tell you to piss off. I'm late as it is – so I'd best get my whipping over with."

"What! They whip you?"

"No. Just get your ticket and get to where you should have been hours ago. Blame the blackout or the Fifth Column."

"But they'd never accept that!"

"Oh get on or you'll miss your train."

After being jolted through the night, which was worse, jolting or waiting in the darkness with only country smells and the noise of occasional aircraft. There was lightness in the sky before he arrived at Oxford railway station. Oxford is

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in Oxfordshire. Ruston is in Oxfordshire. There's thirty miles between them. Empowered explorer Cocky would try hitch-hiking. If that didn't work there must be a bus or a train. He regretted giving his bar of chocolate to Mick. No he didn't. Yes he did. Everyone had to make sacrifices. He should have taunted Mick with how he'd just eaten it himself to be evil. Maybe he could have been a stretcher bearer and pulled one of the drips out when nobody was looking. He could at least have mixed-up the figures when the major came round to check. He'd been called 'Useful civvy' and invited to meet the major in his jeep. "I'm doing their sums sir. I'm trying to be somewhere else sir but not until I'm let go by Mick and Alan."

"Good man." Eddy understood that as 'good imbecile' which was probably what was intended. Anyway Cocky had pulled his weight in a crisis regardless of insults. Perhaps he might get along in the army after all. But no! He had to be a secretive force of bloody evil that knew no bounds of decency.

He caught the first bus in the general direction with the first of today's allowance. It left the bus station long before there was anywhere to have breakfast. Still, count his blessings, he wasn't in a waterlogged trench in France going over the top at dawn so he shouldn't complain. No he'd definitely done the right thing giving Mick his bar of chocolate... Anyway, he'd have probably eaten it yesterday for his evening meal if Don hadn't suggested a fish supper. By chatting on the bus, he had to listen carefully to understand the accent, he began to understand the geography. By nine o'clock he was in the entrance foyer of Ruston Hall 'Neurological Unit'. Eddy could see it was really a castle of a mental hospital. Still he'd got his father's five pounds as a secret escape fund. His long explanation of why he was a day late wasn't needed. Unfortunately breakfast was over.

He would be evil! "Where's the kitchens!"

"Please wait Mister Cochrane."

"NO! You don't know what a monster I can be if I'm not fed... Look at my notes." Eddy guessed by where he'd seen the boilerhouse chimney that the kitchens might be in the same sort of area. He strode off down a wide side corridor with 'come back!' getting further away behind him. Then his nose picked up food smells. Aha! Swing doors. This was a bloody big place! At last he found the kitchens. Tiled, steamy, smelly, full of trolleys with food, ingredients, dirty washing-up, empty, waiting for who knows what. He found a cook or skivvy, he couldn't tell which, and grabbed her wrist. "I need breakfast. I haven't had anything for twenty four hours!" With her spare hand the waif found a whistle and blew it. Twenty seconds later Eddy was caught from behind. Thirty seconds later Eddy was pinioned on the floor by a crowd

of men. A woman was crying in sort of screams. The next five minutes were strange. Aprons and kitchen overalls were replaced by dark uniforms and Eddy was turned over and trussed. Then after being hoisted upright he was walked back to where he came in. A doctor, presumably a doctor by white coat and stethoscope, asked him what did he think he was doing!

"Trying to get some breakfast. I've been travelling since seven am. yesterday. I'm starving."

"This is a hospital not a hotel. Have you got any papers?"

"In my money belt. I'm Edwin Cochrane sent by Doctor Billings."

"Do you have a referral letter?"

"In my haversack. It's addressed to the Chief Psychiatrist. I'm sorry I'm late but my father sent me to Rushden not Ruston. I'm not a violent person. Can you let me go a bit."

"Um. We can't take chances. Let's look at your letter... OK this looks genuine. What have we got under Billings Mavis?" A nurse went to a very long row of filing cabinets but fortunately Billings is near the beginning of the alphabet.

Another nurse interrupted. "Billings? That rings a bell." She ferreted in a pile of papers. "Here it is. This arrived yesterday afternoon. Edwin Cochrane born 13 May 1926. Here you are sir."

"Thank you Jean. Hmm. Where are you from Edwin?"

"Little Waltham."

"Why are you here?"

"Um. I was in an accident. I bumped my head. I want to be evil."

"That'll do. Alright men. Let him loose." As soon as Eddy's arms were released from behind his back the doctor shook his hand. "I'm Doctor Tebbold. We have a rule which you weren't to know. You never touch the staff. Now you know what happens. Still no harm done. We've foiled your evil plans again haven't we Eddy." The doctor slapped Eddy on the shoulder. "Now if we can find you a bacon sandwich will you co-operate?"

"Yes sir. I came here to cooperate. I'm hoping you can make me really evil."

## Chapter 3

Unknown to Eddy he was a comfortable curiosity to compensate for the splinter cases. He was patient company for psychotic cases. He helped the staff with their chores. Once his violin had been sent he was an essential part of the Rusty Jazz band. The six of them played every Saturday night for dances away from the hospital. They got paid and often well tipped. After the official four weeks of this idyl Cocky wasn't getting any more evil despite an hour ever other day with some psychiatrist, or trick cyclist, as they were jokingly called. They tried all sorts of funny questions on him but no he'd never wanted to go to bed with his mother or kill his father. The shapes of ink blots reminded him of clouds or ink-blots. Eddy realised he was caught in a machine that didn't know what it was doing. He enjoyed the responsibility of the wards where he had to be a comfort to broken men and twisted men and men who kept throwing themselves into the heavens just to land horribly. It was a holiday from figures. Playing in the band was wonderful. Unlike all the other musical groups he'd been in, this mob of weirdos (they were all staff) accepted him for the music he could improvise. He also had that magic that could hold the attention of an audience for as long as necessary to get them hooked by the music. He wrote to Little Waltham, to the Guard House at Rushdon and Don the truck driver. He'd never had friends before. Excuses and deliberate mistakes kept him there another month to everyone's satisfaction.

He wrote to Doctor Billings. *I have tried to be evil. Deep inside I still want to be evil but I think I'm just a decent chap. You were right. I don't have the guts to be evil. Sorry to let you down.*

Eddy found it hard to cope back home in Little Waltham. His father treated him as an idiot. He couldn't understand his coldness, and worried about the suggestions of the psychiatrists at Ruston. His mother loved him in a formal way. After the weekend he was back in the business without any fear of being called-up. Nothing had been said but it was clear from his parents that he wasn't fit for the forces. Long hours of work were tedious even if now he was getting paid an allowance. Once before his accident he'd asked his father shouldn't he have a proper wage and the matter had been closed with 'I don't get paid a wage. I get paid left-overs if there are any.' The doodlebugs put everyone's nerves on edge. 'They have it worse in Kent' wasn't an answer. After five days of nobody to talk to, at last Eddy was able to go to the Bell with

Lance. Obviously D-Day had been special and Lance was a notch or two below Eddy on the social scale according to his parents, and possibly Eddy himself, but Eddy liked Lance. In the pub nobody believed all the nice things Cocky said about the mental hospital but they saw he was happy and what was the point of spoiling his dream. Shame! Just knocked off his bike by Uncle Sam's cocky drunks. Still, by his account, he was still ace on the fiddle, then when Lance snuck-out and fetched the instrument, there was no doubt. Sid and Si from the airfield were keen to have a farewell blast on their guitars as it was a matter of days before the whole base would be in France. Their girlfriends were clinging but when it came to music the girls came second to races, challenges and clever cross echoes. Dick Turvey was, amongst other things, a veteran of the classical music and contemporary jazz scene. He was known as a sharp dresser with flamboyant friends. He knew this impromptu evening couldn't be recreated on a recording. Tessie the teacher played some Chopin as contrast. Actually she was quite good. Very desirable too. But expensive in whisky by all accounts. He'd like to play a duet with her and hold her bare arms! She sat on Dick's knees and played a simple version of *We'll meet again* while his longer reach began embellishing the extremities of the keyboard. They went around and around with the guitarists and Cocky joining in parts. Dick held her hands to force silence then with a whispered one-two-three and letting go of her left hand she began the base to tease the others. Then he rattled of a Chopinesque version of *We'll meet again* while the others sipped their pints. He was rewarded by Tessie leaning right back into him. Her hair smelled of some flowers, what sort he didn't know and didn't care. They had a break. All the musicians were high and drained at the same time. Cocky promised to be back in five minutes while he nipped home. He came back with sheets of music.

"I played this with the hospital jazz band. It was a big hit. Have you heard it? *Whispering Grass*. You guys on the guitars will have to share. I've got one for you on the piano. We played it really slow. I'll sing the second time around OK? One-two-three-go! As was to be expected there were lots of fumbles but everyone wanted new songs. Cocky shouted 'mine' and gave a demonstration of his mastery of messing about with time. Smearing some notes to two or three times their proper length to end in a catch, or forcing a huge and totally outrageous pause, or mixing a phrase full of over the top vibrato with the sung words, or minute bows with legato gaps as long as he felt he could get away with. The whole thing was outrageous, but he could make the violin distract at the moment when everything had gone too far with slashes of swoops back up to soaring. The saloon bar was packed with respectful listeners to 'Their Cocky'. He might have been sent to a mental hospital for two months but he was decent sort and obviously deserved their support. Tessie and Dick went off up The Street with arms around each other. Eddy was jealous of their closeness. Sam and Simon rode off back to base together on their unlit bicycles

in the summer moonlight. Eddy was jealous of their camaraderie. Eddy walked home alone. He was inflated but empty. A violin and memories isn't the same as what the others went home with.

All Eddy's contemporaries had been called-up or vanished. He would only have asked two of them anyway, and only then on the Scout's Oath of Honour not to tell. So he'd got no one to ask about girls. Of course he'd seen enough and been warned enough but he wanted to touch for himself and take her clothes off. The others must have done it. Then he had a brainwave. The psychiatrists were obviously not letting him go completely in him in case he went wild, so he could ask one of them. His letter of general request to see a psychiatrist at Chelmsford was answered. Within a week he was invited to see Doctor George. He worked-out an opening to start the conversation going 'Was he safe to have a girlfriend?' From there he'd admit to not knowing much... or even anything. He was now used to cycling again and it wasn't as nerve-wracking as he'd supposed. It was freedom. Perhaps he should join a cycling club and meet girls that way? Why hadn't he thought of that before?

At the hospital he respectfully waited until the receptionist was free then handed his appointment card across.

"Yes?"

"E-e-edward Cochr-r-rane to see D-d-d... G-g-george."

"Why didn't you say? Have your letter back. Yes – you're on the list. Go to Myrtle Cottage."

"W-w-where's that?"

"Follow the signs. Next please."

He had to go outside then around the back to an annex in what appeared to be two farm cottages surrounded by bicycle sheds. He knocked on the door. Nothing happened. There didn't seem to be a bell. The letterbox didn't have a rattler attached. He knocked again. Aha! Below the letterbox was a handwritten sign 'Enter during office hours and report to reception upstairs.' He tried the door handle and it opened easily. Immediately he met the smell of polish and cleaning fluid, at least that's what he supposed the rather odd mix of sweet and stinging smells was as he creaked up the worn lino of the stairs. There was nobody at the desk at the top. He wondered what to do. After looking for another note and not finding one he coughed loudly. He had a choice of drab turquoise doors to knock on. While debating this, the one he

was standing next to opened. A young lady in white coat and stethoscope. Glasses with blond hair wrapped up sort of round.

"I-I-I... D-doc-doc George please."

"Do come in. You must be Eddy Cochrane." He followed her to a office more like a sitting room with well worn armchairs a desk and a sofa. She indicated an armchair, picked up a folder of notes and sat down in the armchair opposite. She didn't have to draw attention to her stockinged legs by twitching the hem of her brown pleated skirt.

"Doc-G-G-George. Can I see him?"

"I'm Doctor George. From Poland. You can call me Katrina if you like... Is there something wrong Eddy?"

"Um N-n-no. I was ex-ex-ex... hoping for a man."

"Ha ha! I know what you evil men get up together." Her smile was gorgeous. A little tweak of her glasses emphasised her eyes. "If you've got a sexual problem we often find that women psychiatrists have a better success rate than the men. We can see it from both sides. Even homosexuality is where we sooth the traumatic and guilty thoughts and then teach you how to cope."

"Oh er. I'm not homosexual – At least I don't think so. I wondered if I was safe to have a girlfriend. They asked lots of d-dirty questions at Ruston so I – er didn't want to open a c-c-can of worms. You read so many stories of women being strangled."

"Do you?"

"Well I've seen headlines in the papers."

"Did you read the story Eddy?"

"No. I could imagine some rotter having his way with a woman then being evil."

"Which do you think was the evil bit Eddy? Having his way or strangling her?"

"Strangling definitely."

"What about if the woman didn't want to have sex?"

"Um. Oh yes. I hadn't really t-t-thought. Then I suppose that would be evil."

"What did you think? Did you think all women want to have sex?"

"I d-d-don't k-k-k... hadn't thought. I supposed if they were going out together then of course."

"You say want to be evil Eddy but I can tell that's the last thing you want to be. Let me tell you the real story is often that the boyfriend and girlfriend split-up and one kills the other out of blind rage or jealousy. So it's not like you think at all."

"Um That's why I came. I-I'm a f-fraud. I was hoping to find how to get a g-g-g... fiancée. I wasn't really worried about strangling a girlfriend."

"Have you ever had jealous thoughts Eddy?"

"Yes! I wanted to kill Denny Lawson when he had a proper cowboy hat for Christmas and I only got cap guns. You've just reminded me. We were six or seven I suppose."

"Well Eddy I'm really glad you came. You're so unusual there isn't a medical name for people like you. Would you like me to deal with your first question and put your mind at rest?"

"Yes please."

"I don't think you're a danger to women. They might be a danger to you but we mustn't let that happen must we?"

"What! A d-danger to me?"

"You're so innocent and lovable. All the reports about – you and my own eyes tell me you're really nice young man. I suspect they kept you at Ruston because you were nice in a world of shatters and shards and made everybody's life a bit more bearable. What were the worst and the best bits of Ruston Eddy?"

"The worst was when all I wanted was breakfast and they trussed me up. I was tired after going to the wrong hospital and seeing two hundred casualties arrive off the D-Day beaches. Then I travelled all through the night. The best was the jazz."

"What about on the wards." She flicked through the papers in the file. "It says you tried to cheer everyone up without being coarse or cheeky." She looked up and pinned him with her smile. "I haven't seen that before."

"I'm a fraud."

"You're not. We're worried... No you're worried that you have a splinter of evil in you that will work its way to your heart. You're doing the right thing." Something in the notes caught her attention. After checking with her glasses off she said "It says here to ask you what was the most evil thing you've done in the last week." Silence. "Go on! You can tell me!" Her smile was irresistible.

Eddy looked at the floor "Um. Sh-st-stared at your legs. Sorry. Shall I leave. I'm sorry to/"



She laughed. "Oh you naughty man!" Against the rules she put her folder aside and stroked her exposed legs. It was clear she was happy and teasing. "That's nice not naughty. The sooner we can get you a girlfriend the better."

"That's why I came – er – Katrina."

"You see! Us women psychiatrists are more than a match for the men. Now don't you worry about being a strangler. There are plenty of nurses looking for boyfriends why not come to the next hospital dance Eddy?"

"Yes. But the band leader might already have a violinist."

"I meant to dance with the nice nurses not to play in the band."

"Oh."

"Why not bring your violin along in case they have an emergency."

"I think that would be better. When is the next one?"

"About two weeks time. I'll write. Have a nice hair cut but a word in your ear Eddy. Just because you dance with a girl doesn't mean she is going to be your girlfriend or fiancée or wife. It's like trying out sheet music to see if you like it."

"Do you play!"

"I used to play the piano."

"Chopin was Polish! Tessie the teacher from Tyneside bangs him out on the piano at the Bell in Little Waltham. She's my sort of woman."

"What about her in particular Eddy?" Her pen was still writing as she bobbed her focus between her notes and Eddy.

"I don't know. If she's spent all that time studying the piano and then dedicating herself to the benefit of others then she must be a decent person."

"Oh come on Eddy. You want to feel her all over. You gazed at her legs didn't you. Anyway I've learned the piano and dedicated my life to helping others by medicine. What's she got that I haven't?"

"You've got a wedding ring. Um... I was evil. I noticed a long while ago. Tessie drinks whisky which I can't afford."

"You're a very sweet boy Eddy. Perhaps I will come to Little Waltham and play my beloved Chopin. I'll write and let you know."

"Here's my b-b-business card. A-a-a-ctually my father's – but it's got the home phone number on it or I normally go back to the office after supper – seven thirty until nine or ten. Let me know if there's anything you want to play

with accompaniment and I'll ask around to see if I can get the parts and make a head start."

Why shouldn't the nurses of Chelmsford have an evening in a lively pub just four miles up the road? A truck could easily be arranged on the usual dubious terms. Why not? Because Katrina who hadn't heard any news of her husband for four years wanted to be lonely with Chopin and other loners.

Cocky told Tessie about the genuine Polish doctor lady coming to play Chopin. News travels fast in the country. Three Polish farm labourers arrived in good time. Tessie told the affable Dick Turvey. In fact the whole village knew there was going to be a concert of Chopin in the Bell. Poor Katrina was annoyed by what she took as betrayal by Eddy. He explained it was nothing to do with him and that it showed how desperate the villagers were for any sort of culture. Dick took hold of the matter. "I'll explain and we'll do something in public then back to mine. Was there something special you wanted to do."

"I wanted to be miserable and yet strong."

"OK love. I understand. Let's show them genius and then a couple of Polish folk tunes perhaps?"

Most of the locals remember that evening as the pretty Polish lady, who was apparently a doctor, playing some nice music then Eddy sent Chopin's famous minute waltz flying in all directions and then the songs that the farm labourers joined in with. The words were unpronounceable but the tears were unmistakable. Tessie played her Chopin party pieces with extra feeling after hearing the doctor's playing. She'd had half an hour's practice with Dick to prepare her for this ordeal where she would be compared with the real thing.

Eddy, Tessie and Katrina walked a couple of minutes along The Street to Dick's cottage. It was cramped and low-ceilinged. The parlour was hardly big enough for them and instruments. There were signed publicity photographs of people Eddy didn't recognise. It turned-out that Dick played the piano of course but also a whole range of novelty instruments. He didn't have wallpaper, he had books. He also had a fresh bottle of 'Edinburgh Castle' whisky and four cut-glass tumblers. "And there's water too... Fresh from my water butt this morning... Boiled just this evening." He poured neat for the ladies then a half measure for Cocky and gave a generous splash of water. "Here you are Cocky. Tonight's impresario. I've done a fair bit of that in my time so here's a christening splash." He ceremoniously put his glass to his lips. "Here's to music masters." Cocky spluttered. "Are you alright mate?"

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"I've never had whisky before. It's strange."

"Have some more water with it."

"But then there'll be more. I'll just sip a little and see how I go... Oh thank you Mister Turvey."

Katrina said "What made you suggest folk songs Dick?"

"I deal a lot with Jewish musicians who always have tears for a homeland. It seemed natural. You didn't mind Katy?"

"No. A good idea. I wish someone had warned me I was a star. I played horribly. Thank you anyway. Thank you Eddy for inviting me. And it's nice to hear the music of my land played in a simple pub in England Tessie."

Dick said "What were the words to the songs?"

"Oh all very sad. Memories of far away places."

Tessie said "We don't have that sort of song. More rousing or personal. You know – tragic lovers parted by cruel fate. I really liked the last one. It was very emotional."

Dick said "Well we're on our own – shall we play together and see what happens?"

Cocky said "That last folk tune could be a dance."

Katrina said "It's meant to be a reverie of loss."

Dick said "I think what Cocky meant Katy was it could start full of longing for days past but then become more optimistic and look to a bright future."

"Oh alright. I should be used to your ways by now. It's just when Hitler invaded Poland from the West so Stalin invaded at the same time from the East. You don't hear so much about that do you. But the history of Poland is being squashed between two giants. We even had underground universities. I learned my English there. In many places we were forbidden from speaking Polish and had to use Russian or German. Come on! I'll tell you the words later. Yes! I must hear Eddy's optimism."

They stop-started with Dick playing a melodian and smiling to encourage the others. Tessie scribbled the original translated words and tried to make a happy version. Her singing voice was strong and earthy with curious accents unlike her 'speaking' voice from the North East. Cocky nodded to Tessie to take his glass. He was intoxicated with being accepted. Tessie may be a simple school teacher but she flooded into company and could think for herself. He experimented with making his violin cry and it was working well. Then a sudden thought! Why not change the tempo to a tango to signify the new era

of hope and prosperity? Dick was straight on the tempo but the girls struggled for half a minute until Dick stopped them and gave a definite tap of the beats and then again with emphasis on beats and gaps. He unclipped his squeeze-box and took tiny Tessie in a dance hold. Cocky naturally took over to strike and draw the tango for the as they inched around in the doorway using about one square foot of space. There was no doubt of the intensity of the simple session. Cocky insisted on just water while the others had more of whatever 'Edinburgh Castle' was. Dick was happy to fill Cocky's tumbler with a smile. "Let me tell you son – I've seen many men ruined by drink. You stick to Light and Bitter."

It was boiling hot in the little room. The windows were open but the curtains had to be closed to keep the blackout. The intensity of the previous twenty minutes needed a respite. It was long gone dark. The only place for fresh air was outside. Dick said the back garden was overgrown so they'd have to walk a piece along The Street. It was sultry. In the moonlight it seemed all the houses had their windows wide open. People called various jests from inside or came out to share the lightest breeze in the hope of a bit of dew. "We heard you Dick. You're better than Henry Hall." "I hope you're not giving young Edward whisky." "Can't you whistle for rain Dick? We need the air clearing." Cocky started whistling for fun. Whatever came into his head which turned into *Pennies from Heaven* with words supplied by Tessie. Here they were in the street with open windows defying the blackout. More voices joined in with harmony and an old boy caused a commotion by playing a fiddle in starts. When there were complaints about the noise at gone ten o'clock the violinist shouted back

"We heard the message of optimism. Be optimistic for once you silly old baggage. The war's nearly over. Will nothing make you happy?" Another voice from the dark said "Nothin' will make 'er 'appy 'cept the misery of others. Shut up you old bag."

"I'll call the police Fred! That's libel. And I got witnesses." While this was going on Dick and Tessie had their arms happily around each other, as did Cocky and Katy, and the last bus to Chelmsford nudged its way through the village. When it had gone Cocky realised it was an hour later than he'd suspected. How would Katy get home? He'd have to walk her to Chelmsford.

The mood for intense music conversation had been broken. The air outside as they drifted to the Church Meadow was better for the four of them holding hands and whispering than inside. Cocky congratulated Tessie on being right on the target with the words. Dick said "I do a bit of talent spotting but you're a bit too wet behind the ears for the sort of people I know. You've got the talent but the music business is a bit rough.

# Then...

Eddy becomes deeply involved with the plight of Poles in Britain just after the war, which results in romance and business. He grows the construction business, is a very progressive employer and meets the Russian secret services head-on.

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.