# Dancing with Eva

## Alan Judd

**ONE**

For some weeks Edith left the opened letter on the white mantelpiece in the sitting room. It would have been easy – forefinger and thumb, a flick of the wrist – to consign it to the beech-log fire she always lit in winter just before tea. Then she could have tried to forget it, since he surely would not have written again. If you don't hear from someone for half a century, then suddenly you do, you can assume he's probably not going to pester you for a reply. After all, he couldn't be certain that she was still alive, or well enough to write. Or that she would remember anything of those indistinguishable days and nights of the warm early summer of 1945.

But she left the letter exactly as she had put it down after her first and only reading, neither forgotten nor acknowledged, like the first quiet indication of serious illness. Her housekeeper, Mrs Hoath, would have lifted it to dust each Monday morning, then replaced it with reverential precision. She would have sensed that it was something special because Edith dealt with all other correspondence at the roll-topped desk in William's – her late husband's – study. Mrs Hoath could never have read it, however, even if she had known German. In Germany itself nowadays none of the post-war generation could read Sütterlin, that elaborate old script. The moment she saw the thick black ink with its curves and spikes she was struck by an ancient familiarity, at once intimate and sickening. She was reluctant to read it, even though she did not know whom it was from, but inevitably she did. It had to be from someone of her own generation, what remained of it, the last that was brought up to read and write Sütterlin. When you considered the great writers and thinkers who had used it, as well as the mass of educated people, it was extraordinary that a nation could in two generations render most of its written history inaccessible to itself.

She replied after a long delay, agreeing to receive him. But only this morning, the day of his arrival, did she take up his letter and read it again. She knew what it said, of course, and knew what he wanted, or thought she did. He wanted to see her once more, he said, before they both died. Why, she had thought; what was the point after all this time? Nothing could be undone and now, at their age, there was nothing new to be done. The past was dead and buried, so far as she was concerned.



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She wondered, as she put on her reading glasses by the sitting-room window that morning, who had first used that phrase. Shakespeare? Possibly. So much of what the English thoughtlessly said in daily life came from Shakespeare, though typically they didn't know it. They didn't deserve him.

Before allowing the ancient script to claim her again she gazed across the lawn to the dark red Sussex cattle in the field beyond the ha-ha, with the Downs looming behind them. It was a late autumn day of hurrying clouds and gusts that thrashed the clematis against the french windows, spattering raindrops in spiteful bursts that crackled like bullets. Just like bullets. For her that was no offhand expression, no shorthand of the mind. She knew better than most what bullets sounded like, and what they did. It was partly for that reason, and partly because of the myriad other unwanted recollections she had kept out of the light for fifty years, that she was still reluctant to read again what Hans Beck had written.

It was from Munich. He must have returned to his roots, as she so conspicuously had not. Not that there was much left of the old Munich they had known. It had been flattened, blasted and burnt by the British, Canadian and American bombers. Her family's apartment, the block it was in, the entire street had disappeared in a single night towards the end of the war. Luckily, her family was out of it by then, while she herself was safe in the Berghof, the mountain house. She was staying there with her mistress, another Munich girl. The bombers never found it until right at the end, after her mistress and the entourage had left it for good. But during the heavy night raids of that final year they could see the distant red glow in the sky as Munich burned. Hans Beck's home was also destroyed but earlier, she thought. His mother survived but his fourteen-year-old sister – Greta, a pretty dark-haired girl with brown eyes and a ready laugh – was killed. Her body was never found. Caught in the street, escaping the burning building, she had dissolved, a neighbour said, into a mere shower of blood. Edith had not known Hans well then, but later at the Berghof and in Berlin she remembered him mentioning his sister more than men usually did, as if she were his daughter.

His letter recalled another loss, this time an almost complete eclipse, more comprehensive than the loss of buildings or even of thousands of individual lives. It was the loss of a time, a period, a place, of that which appeared to constitute life itself. Perhaps this was inevitable with the passing years and perhaps everyone's youth seemed in later life to have been spent in a different and unrepeatable world. But the busy, retrospective innocence of the period of her own youth was even less repeatable than others. It was not just that the memories of her school, her piano lessons, her gym lessons, her dancing – how she had loved to dance – were remembered only by her, and would die with her; it was that her entire youth, and she herself, would now for all time be seen only in the context of the Armageddon that followed. It was not possible now for anyone to read that she had known Eva Braun, her future employer, simply as the blonde girl, the teacher's daughter, who worked for Hoffmann the photographer, without endowing that insignificant fact with a significance it lacked entirely at the time: that Eva Braun was to become the mistress and, briefly, the wife of Adolf Hitler, the Führer.



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Similarly, if they learned that the child Hans Beck had attended the summer camps of the Nazi Party youth wing, they would inevitably see in that a sinister harbinger of the adult. But Hans at that time – she had been mildly interested in him even then – was doing only what other boys did; he wasn't especially Nazi, especially political, especially anything; he was simply there, or thereabouts. Much closer to her life then was Hannah, daughter of the local doctor and her best friend. She had adored Hannah as she had never adored anyone since. Hannah was effortlessly brilliant at everything: her lessons, her gym, her music, her dancing – better than Edith at anything. Edith had envied her without being jealous. She loved and admired her too much for jealousy, loved her wit, her sense of fun, her generosity. When you were with Hannah everything in life seemed more exciting. When you were away from her, you smiled at the thought of her. When Hannah went to America with her family because they were Jewish, and wise or lucky enough to have got out early, Edith didn't ask why it had to be. She didn't generalize from this one instance to countless others, any more than did Hannah. Presented as necessary, it therefore seemed natural, the whole thing, the whole horrible and now incomprehensible thing. It was so big, you didn't see it. 'A crime without a name,' Mr Churchill called it. That was somehow more apt than the name subsequently given to it.

Yet no one now could imagine how you could witness an episode such as Hannah's abrupt flight without questioning its monstrous context. That was the most irretrievable part of that past. It was how one lived then. You did not need to do or be anything; all that was necessary for it to happen was that you did not ask questions. But perhaps not asking questions was still a kind of doing, or being.

Edith crossed the worn Persian carpet to the windows, holding the slightly trembling page into the light. The window pane streamed with rain and the wind chased and flattened the grass on the Downs. She would have the fire lit early, she thought.

In an even, heavy hand, he apologized for surprising her and hoped she was in good health. It had not been easy to establish that she was probably still alive and functioning, nor to discover her married name and address, but the Internet was a great help nowadays. Edith could not imagine how she could feature on the Internet and was impressed that Hans, a man of her own generation, should be so apparently familiar with it. He wrote, he said, because he would like to meet and talk, assuring her he did not seek to resurrect the past, merely to shake hands with it. His letter was frank, reasonable, straightforward, like the man he had appeared to be.

Yet his hand-shaking metaphor was troubling. She imagined actually shaking hands with him again. He would feel like a stranger, surely, despite the fact that they shared memories of great ... great what? Moment? Importance? Historical significance? No, they were too individual, haphazard, ordinary in an everyday sense, for such concepts. Great intensity, then? Days, whole periods of life could be intense without being of lasting importance, even for those involved, even when there were consequences. Perhaps it was the ordinariness that was extraordinary, the daily detail, the mundanity, the watch that ticks indifferently on your wrist throughout the greatest, most terrible events. Perhaps there was significance in that.



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But it was not really the thought of an actual handshake that troubled her. It was, as he put it, the handshake with the past that she feared. No matter that there could be few, if any, other survivors of that particular past, of that place and those people. No matter that the fiftieth, then the sixtieth, anniversaries of the ending of the Second World War had been widely recalled and celebrated. No matter that the Nazi-hunters were still in business, tracking down war criminals and making films about them. No matter that perhaps only she and Hans were left alive to say what it was really like in the bunker. For them, there was nothing to be gained from treading that ground again. Only trouble would come of it.

She looked again at the wet cattle intent on their grass, seemingly indifferent to weather. She ought to go to Lewes and shop, but it would be misery. Both driving and walking were a strain in the wet. In her reply to Hans she had suggested he came for tea, and he was due at four. She had no idea where he would travel from. Would tea become dinner? Would he wish to stay the night, or was he booked into an hotel in Lewes? Shelley's, she would have suggested if she had thought. Perhaps they should have met for tea there; it would have kept him and the past at a slightly greater distance.

She lowered the letter and considered her hand, the hand he would expect to shake. She had had fine hands, delicate and shapely; now they were scrawny and bony, like an old chicken's claw, the skin wrinkled and mottled. Were those brown spots – did people call them liver spots? – minor cellular mutations? Were they a sign of cancer, or were they what you got if you hadn't got cancer? William had had almost unblemished skin to the day he died, of cancer. He would have gone to Lewes today, no doubt about it. He enjoyed bad weather and hated shopping, so would try to shop when most people didn't. He conducted shopping expeditions like military operations: identify target, get in and get out as quickly as possible. He was the most equable and peaceful of men, yet the army – at least, the British Army – and the war had suited him well. Despite a comfortable and congenial second career in tea-broking, he probably always thought of himself as essentially the young captain in battledress she had first met near the Rhine in May 1945. If there is a period in life when people are most fully, most completely themselves, then that was his.

It had been a good marriage, on the whole – very good compared with the horror stories she felt she heard daily now – and she sometimes thought that part of the reason was his association of her with the best time of his life. That part of the past had certainly proved benign, and fecund. At least, so far as he was concerned.

Edith folded the letter and walked quickly across the hall to the study. Her steps sounded gratifyingly crisp and purposeful on the parquet hall floor, which smelled pleasantly of Mrs Hoath's polishing. She put the folded letter right at the back of the letter rack as if hiding it, or hiding from it. Despite the solidity and apparent decisiveness of her steps, she felt fragile and threatened. She wanted to say something to Mrs Hoath but for a minute she could not trust herself to speak, and her fingers trembled as she pushed the letter away. It was Michael, her son, whom she felt was threatened by this resurgence of her past. Absurd, of course, because it was nothing to do with him; he had not been born then. He was now a busy and successful commercial barrister, father of her three blessed grandchildren, living not

too far away, happily married – so far as one could tell – and well able to look after himself. Hans would never meet him and would never have the opportunity to threaten him, even in the unlikely event that he wanted to; she would see to that. But still she felt the sick panic of imminent discovery, as if she had done something wrong. It was not her fault, none of it was, she told herself.

She went to the kitchen where Mrs Hoath was mashing potatoes in a large bowl. Evidently, Mrs Hoath had decided that the visitor was going to stay to dinner. Edith had told her nothing about him, not even his gender, but Mrs Hoath had a way of sensing things. They had grown old together. Mrs Hoath had started work in the house within a week of William's arrival with his German bride. That was soon enough after the war for there still to be German prisoners-of-war on Home Farm. Edith used to see them in the afternoons as they were driven back to their camp in a slow and wheezy army lorry. They would stare, as they did at any young woman, with a sullen and resentful longing – unlike the Italian POWs who waved and laughed – but she was confident there was nothing about her to show that she was German, and they never heard her speak. Then one day, as she was returning from her walk with Gip, the Jack Russell William had given her, the lorry was even slower than usual, coughing and spluttering as it ground down through the gears almost to a standstill on the narrow S-bend around the churchyard and the shop. She waited for it to pass, holding Gip on his lead, conscious of twenty pairs of eyes searching her from head to toe and careful not to look up, when a voice from above her said, slowly and distinctly, 'Guten Tag, gnadiges Fräulein.'

'Good day, honourable lady.' In English it sounded too contrived, too obviously sarcastic, but in German in those days you could still say it and mean it, which gave the irony its penetrative power. She looked up, unable to stop herself. Twenty young faces, as young as hers, stared down at her with hard and knowing contempt. One – the speaker's she was sure – grinned with presumptuous complicity. 'I know who you are,' his grin said, 'and you know I know, gnadiges Fräulein.'

As soon as the lorry passed she ran up the drive into the manor, lips compressed in the effort to remain dry-eyed. She would have succeeded if she hadn't been caught by Mrs Hoath as she hurried upstairs to her room.

'Excuse me, Mrs Ashburnham, but there is a letter for you.'

It was from Munich, in her mother's writing.

'I thought you was in your room and I was going to bring it up, but here it is.' Mrs Hoath held it out with a smile, pleased because she thought Edith would be pleased.

Edith burst into tears.

It was the start of a state of being later known as depression. She was permanently exhausted, which at the time she attributed to the young Michael, and woke at four every morning with a draining sense of futility and hopelessness. Nothing was worth doing because whatever she did seemed bound to fail, and beneath it all was the debilitating conviction that it wasn't worth it anyway. Everyday actions such as



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getting up, going out, eating, running a bath, talking, being cheerful – above all sustaining conversation – were achievable, but only with enervating effort. She thought it didn't show but slowly came to suspect that Mrs Hoath understood. Nothing was ever said, of course. It was important that it should not be because what was unspoken was then all the more effective. Numerous little attentions, tiny, unobjectionable sympathies – a cup and saucer moved, flowers placed, tones of voice, the endless help with Michael, blouses and shirts meticulously ironed and folded – made Edith feel that she was liked and looked after. Gradually these little attentions were more restorative than a thousand frank, self-centred conversations. It was then that she and Mrs Hoath formed the bond that was to endure life-long, not only because of Edith's debilitation and Mrs Hoath's kindness, but because they were both having to cope with Dorothy, William's mother.

Formidable and direct, Dorothy was loyal to the values of her youth, which were really those of the generation before her own. She was busy, intelligent, with little imagination and no more intellectual curiosity than was necessary to cope with the world in which she found herself, but she had a ready practical sympathy once she perceived that sympathy was needed, and merited. She had not been pleased when her only son had brought home a German bride. 'I think we have had enough of Germans for a while, they should make themselves scarce for the next half century,' she said to the rector when he urged reconciliation and rejoicing. But she determined to make the best of what at first she regarded as a bad job, and kept her feelings largely to herself. When the job turned out to be not at all bad – as she later put it to Edith – she admitted that even at the time she thought it could have been worse. Better that William should have come home from the war with a charming and well-intentioned German addition to himself, rather than with bits of his body or mind missing, or with an unwelcome addition such as some dreadful English flapper he had picked up in London or somewhere, as some of his regimental colleagues had done.

But Edith's state of near-collapse passed Dorothy by. She noticed that the girl seemed always tired but put it down to the baby and the poor diet of wartime Germany, the latter with the clear implication that it was their own fault. In fact, Edith's diet in the Führer's court had been excellent, probably superior to any to be had in Britain. Certainly superior to anything enjoyed by her family and friends in Munich. She had been aware of that at the time and had felt guilty. Later it was both reassuring and disconcerting to recall that she was, therefore, capable of guilt.

Fortunately, Dorothy's attention was diverted by her growing grandchild and by having a new housekeeper to break in, as she put it. Apart from having to be broken in, Mrs Hoath anyway had ground to make up. A village girl of good repute, she had made, in Dorothy's view, a hasty wartime marriage to a man from Brighton. While not disapproving of hasty marriages – her own son's, after all, had been even more rapid – Dorothy did not approve of men from Brighton. Yet Mr Hoath, a self-employed bricklayer, appeared to be neither idle nor a ruffian nor a drunk. He improved the cottage that went with his wife's job at the manor and over the years made himself useful in many other ways. As Dorothy could no longer afford to staff the manor as it had been in her late husband's time – there were three Mrs Hoaths before the war, as well as various outside men – she came gradually to appreciate Mr



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Hoath's solid virtues. She nevertheless confessed to Edith that she always feared that if 'anything happened' Mr Hoath would be in danger of 'reverting to type'.

William, more intuitive than his mother, had been considerate and attentive, aware that something was wrong. Edith encouraged his inclination to attribute her lassitude to the baby and to post-war exhaustion, from which many people suffered. Her sudden descent into deep wells of depression – bottomless black pits from which, when in them, it was impossible to conceive release – he put down to the pressures and compromises forced upon any decent personality within the circle of the late Führer. There was perhaps some truth in that, and she was content for him to assume it, although it was only half true at best. But his very consideration made her feel worse and his tenderness was at times unendurable. She baffled and disappointed him, yet he was uncomplaining, confident that she would eventually come out of it. Gradually she did, as Michael grew and the future reasserted itself.

Michael was destined to be an only child whereas Mrs Hoath went on to produce three in almost indecently quick succession. Dorothy had to take on extra help but permitted Mrs Hoath to bring her brood to work with her, penned into the nursery with Michael. Edith and Mrs Hoath became close during those early years, while maintaining the formality of address that Dorothy took so completely for granted. Mrs Hoath was never Eileen, Dorothy was always ma'am and Edith Mrs Ashburnham while Dorothy lived, and ma'am thereafter. It could have changed after Dorothy's death and Edith made tentative opening remarks in that direction, but Mrs Hoath, perhaps fearing it might be the harbinger of other, less welcome changes, said promptly that ma'am had been so right for the old Mrs Ashburnham that it would dishonour her memory to abandon it with the new. Edith, still ignorant of changing British mores, allowed it to continue.

Now Mrs Hoath was a grey-haired old lady, like Edith only stouter, with a red, round, wrinkled face and worn but capable old hands. She mashed the potatoes with practised ease and economy of effort, necessary now that her breathing was so laboured. She wore a pink and white flowered apron, the latest of a line that went back over half a century. She wore soft old slippers for her bunions. Dorothy would never have permitted slippers, Edith reflected inconsequentially as she hesitated over what to say to Mrs Hoath. Dorothy disliked slippers on anyone anywhere, except in the bathroom and bedroom. They made people sloppy, she said.

'I just thought in case he might be staying to dinner, ma'am,' Mrs Hoath said while Edith was still forming her words.

'Yes, thank you. It is possible he might.' She had not said that the guest was a man, but Mrs Hoath knew.

'Will the gentleman be staying the night, ma'am?'

'No. Unless he asks. I suppose he could if he wishes. But there has been no mention of it. I haven't invited him.'

'Only I've made the bed up in the front guest room, just in case.'



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'Thank you.'

Edith's panic subsided in the presence of Mrs Hoath but left her still impatient to be doing and saying. She clasped her hands and looked again at their mottled skin. 'I'm worried about the flower show.'

Mrs Hoath added milk and butter to the potatoes.

Edith continued: 'One reads of so many break-ins these days. Every week there is another. Jane Oxley – you know, the retired teacher who's moved in next door to the old post office and is now our new neighbourhood watch co-ordinator – was saying that the police think the thieves use open garden days to reconnoitre houses. Well, of course, at the flower show every year there are masses of people here we don't know. It's a perfect opportunity for them to look over the place, even when they are not allowed in. And, of course, there's only me now. I couldn't do much to stop them. I'm not even sure where the keys to William's gun cabinet are.'

Mrs Hoath transferred the mashed potatoes to the large dish of cooked mutton, deftly smoothing them with an old broad-bladed knife. Famed at the monthly village market for her pies, she had fewer opportunities to show off with just Edith to cook for.

'People say it's the gyppos. Always more crime when they are in the area. But the flower show has always been here, longer than anyone can remember.'

'Yes, I know, I know.'

Clasping and unclasping her hands, Edith went to the telephone on the hall table, closing the kitchen door behind her. She was oppressed again by the unasked question of when she should hand over the manor to Michael and his family and move herself into one of the cottages. Probably the stone one by the old school house where generations of Home Farm shepherds had lived. She had always liked that, particularly the garden and the fact that it was just across the road from the church. The question remained unasked because of her anxiety as to whether her daughter-in-law, Sarah, would actually want the manor. She had made no hints, shown no sign of that interest in a house which a woman who has it cannot help betraying. Either she was being very tactful and circumspect or she really did not want the crumbling old place, with its ancient wiring, idiosyncratic plumbing and rotting window frames. She had a taste for the modern, Sarah, or at least for the efficient. There was nothing sentimental about her. It was a reversal of national stereotypes: Sarah as the modern, clinically efficient German woman, herself as the quaint and sentimental Englishwoman. She would have to speak frankly to Michael; that was the only way.

She was aware of the unreason of her action as she dialled Sarah's number on the heavy black phone in the hall, but it didn't stop her. Sarah answered, sounding harassed, the noise of the children in the background. She was always friendly enough but the briskness of her manner unnerved Edith, making her feel she was intruding. Clearly, Sarah was anxious for her mother-in-law to come to the point and

say why she was ringing. Edith felt her panic return, gripping her from within like some dreadful paralysing disease. She couldn't say what she was ringing about, not because she couldn't bring herself to say it but because its origin was fear, fear of age, fear of loneliness, fear of death, as well as a more irrational fear for Michael and the children. She again felt that Michael was in some way under threat, and that she was responsible. She rang off after saying she could hear that Sarah must be busy and would speak to her later. There was relief and puzzlement in Sarah's goodbye; Edith imagined her later saying something to Michael about his mother's odd behaviour. When she put the phone down her skin was prickling with discomfort.

She sought relief in the music room, at her piano. The impersonal absorption in technique and the attempt to give voice to emotions as full as the sea was preferable to human contact. The room was cold and the piano lid heavy. It was too long since she had practised. She chose Schubert's evocative song 'Der Vollmond Straht', a tale of love denied and of both hearts breaking, a difficult, haunting and elusive piece. She felt she was forever approaching its essence and never reaching it. It was like the scent of bluebells in a wood, enticing, tantalizing but ultimately uncapturable. For a while, her efforts to achieve what Schubert offered absorbed her entirely.



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