

# THE RHYTHM OF TIME

## A Novel in Seven Acts

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages ...*

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

### ACT I

*St. Paul's Cathedral School, 1961*

As soon as I launched into the first verse of *The Galway Shawl*, the choirmaster looked up, big grin on his face. I sang it pretty well, and by the second verse he was nodding along. At the end he applauded!

I was gobsmacked.

“An inspired choice, Jones.” He made a note on his clipboard.

I blushed and glanced at Aunty Eileen, my accompanist, seated at the Steinway. She winked at me and I stifled a giggle.

Mr. Chapman turned to her. “Frobisher has been sadly neglected. He was actually a chorister here, you know.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Really? What a coincidence.” Our eyes met again.

“Indeed. From 1767 to 1771, to be precise. His Irish suite is rarely heard these days, but in my humble opinion, it is a remarkable setting of some lovely melodies.”

“Absolutely. Robert loves this song, don't you, Rob?”

I nodded, mumbled something, and stared at the carpet.

Mr. Chapman smiled at me. “Well, it was refreshing to hear it sung so well.” He scribbled another note and plonked the clipboard on the desk. “Thank you, Robert. We’ll be in touch.”

It was Aunt Eileen’s idea to audition for St Paul’s. From the moment I began hammering on her upright piano, aged seven, she could see my potential. I had music in my head and Mum thought I was a prodigy, but I had no idea what I was doing. It would be years before I knew Bach from Bowie. I was just pounding the keys, giddy with the sound and rhythm. I’d hit a tasty discord, stamp on the sustain pedal and let it hang there, like a fart. Then I’d take a deep breath and off I’d go again, hammering away until my fingers were sore.

Sometimes I’d sing along with the hammering: a weird, wobbly wail, swooping around like a theremin, searching for a tune. Dad said it sounded like the racket cats make in the middle of the night, when they’re shagging. Mum would giggle, then she’d tell him off. They’d yell at each other for a while, and he’d skedaddle down the pub to listen to some “real music” (skiffle and trad jazz, mainly). Once, when Mum was at her Mother’s Union meeting, he sneaked me in and I was blown away by the sheer stomping energy. It took my breath away and made my head spin. “I wanna make a noise like *THIS*,” I told Dad. “It’s what I *really* wanna do—all day long.”

Nothing could stop me. I had tunes in my head and they just *had* to come out, so I kept hammering and wailing like there was no tomorrow, until eventually, Aunt Eileen got fed up with my racket and offered to give me lessons. She was the organist at our local church and music was her passion. It turned out I had a half decent voice when I wasn’t impersonating a theremin, so she got me in the choir and I was soon singing solos. My a cappella *Silent Night* reduced Mum to tears on Christmas Eve and triggered the comment that

launched my career as a musician. (It's funny how these things work, eh?) "I reckon our Rob's just as good as those boys on telly," she told her sister. "Y'know, the midnight mass boys?"

Aunty Eileen frowned. "Well, yes, he sings like an angel, but comparing him to King's College choir? Hmm..." She tailed off into weird, tuneless humming (which sounded spookily like my weird, wobbly wailing). "Hmm." The humming stopped dead. "Actually, you know what?" She gave us one of her looks. "You might be right, Dorothy."

A week later, she invited Mum and me round to her place and showed us a glossy brochure for St. Paul's Cathedral School. "I think Rob should have a go at the audition."

Mum reminded her we lived in a council flat in Tower Hamlets.

"Yes, I know, Dorothy, but look what it says on the cover: 'Ordinary boys doing extraordinary things.' And here..." She pointed at a dog-eared page. "They have scholarships for boys from 'deprived backgrounds'."

Mum flicked through the brochure, open-mouthed. It was beyond posh—like somewhere the royals would send their kids. "Do you really think Rob has a chance?"

Aunty Eileen shrugged. "Maybe, with the right coaching." She winked at me and grinned as I blushed. (I blushed at the drop of a hat in those days.)

Mum put the brochure in her bag. "I'll show this to Ron."

As soon as she mentioned Dad, I knew he'd scoff at the idea—especially when he saw the photos of the choirboys in their frilly collars. He was the sort of bloke who made snide comments about men in tights when ballet was on TV, or "fat women with 'orns" if it was opera. But Mum and her sister ganged up and battered him into submission.

The glossy brochure had seduced Mum. She could see me on telly, singing a solo at a royal wedding, meeting the queen. I deserved my chance and she deserved her fantasy. Aunty

Eileen thought it might even kick-start a career as a musician. Dad pooh-poohed that suggestion. “No way! He’s gonna get a *proper* job. Plumber, maybe.”

In the end he gave in—but he had to have the last word, as always. “Anyway, I don’t know why we’re getting so het up. He’ll never pass the exam—and even if he *did*, they’ll never let ’im into a poncey place like that.”

Aunty Eileen rang the school and they sent her an application form. She filled it in, posted it back, and a few weeks later we got a letter with a date for my audition. She was a cunning old bird, my aunt. She did some research down the library and discovered this obscure 18th century composer, Percy Frobisher, who’d been a choirboy at St Paul’s. He was famous in his day, but pretty much forgotten now. Aunty Eileen found a suite of Irish folk songs he’d arranged, and she reckoned his setting of *The Galway Shawl* would suit my voice. The choirmaster, a Mr. Chapman, had written an article for a music magazine “eulogising” Frobisher, as my aunt put it, so he’d be bound to lap it up.

She had me practising that song until I could sing it in my sleep. It wormed its way into my dreams and I was waking up humming it. By the time it came to the audition, I was sick of that bloody tune. But it did the trick.

The aural test was scary. I nearly peed myself, and Mr. Chapman wasn’t impressed. But as soon as I launched into the first verse, he looked up, grinned at me, and made a note on his clipboard. When I finished, he applauded and told me it was an “inspired choice”. We had a brief chat, and a few minutes later, that was that. Act I of my “strange eventful history” had kicked off.