

## A Pair of Lobsters

*Nicole Matthews*

A French poet once led a lobster through the streets of Paris – as a gesture. The lobster deserved honour, he said. It knew the secrets of the deep and did not bark or snarl.

*–The Adelaide Advertiser, 1953.*

I'm going to tell this story from end to beginning: that's how you do it in genealogy circles.

Working back from the present – so richly known, so hard to talk about – I rummage through death notices, war records, birth certificates, where things (certain things) are laid out in black and white. The deeper I plunge into the pile of yellowed newspapers, the calmer I feel. Whatever happened back in the day, it's a relief to know, right from the start, how it all worked out. Of course, you can't really be sure about the past. You might know the shake-down, but you're still left guessing about what people felt and said, their late-night rages, implausible promises, absurd hopes. Who was blamed when things went wrong. Who felt ashamed. Honestly, for most, it's easier not to know. Better to stay out of murky waters. But sometimes you don't get a choice.

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My great-grandmother, Emily Matthews (née Lambe) lived for a prodigiously long time, 'til she was ninety-five. My granddad used to say that there was something about being nasty that kept you alive that long. Meanness pickled you. I know I met her once, a family get-together. I must have been in primary school at the time. I remember a table set up on the oil-stained concrete of the carport, and the adults eating in the shade of the big walnut tree. There would have been kids watching the goldfish in the half-barrel by the back door and talking to the chickens at the bottom of the little suburban orchard. The old ladies were probably nattering – my grandma was a tremendous talker. I know she was there, my great grandmother Emily, but in fact, I don't remember her at all.

Her husband, Bertram Matthews, sounded much more intriguing, though he died long before I was born. He worked as a piano demonstrator in a city-centre store selling instruments and sheet music. As a child I imagined him formally dressed, sitting in the shop window, swaying as he played. Later, the story goes, during the Depression, he somehow

disappeared. I envisioned a swag-man, still dressed in the same battered suit, walking down a dusty road. He vanished from the family stories, but not from the archives, where he and his wife leave a trail a mile wide.

Now and then, in these difficult times, I can see the appeal of just slipping off, like he seemed to, out of the family, or at least out of the family stories. But instead, I chase him, and Emily, and their surprisingly public strife, down a rabbit hole of old newspapers. Even calamity, given enough time, makes for a good yarn, I reckon. And the local press of a hundred years ago is full of ridiculous detail and comic turns of phrase. You can't help but be amused or at least diverted by stories about even the most serious things. So I run away into the archives, away from my unmade decisions, my chaotic house, my waiting children, to the done deals of the past.

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It was this story from that got me started: 'Constable called a lobster: says he was insulted in Pirie Street'. A policeman had seen Bertram strolling along with a pair of white shoes, wrapped in newspaper, under one arm. Questioned about the provenance of the footwear, Bertram went off! The policeman got a stream of invective: he was a 'goat!', a 'mug!' and finally 'a big lobster'. After all that Bertram was nicked, though he was released later when the police worked out that the shoes he was carrying had been his all along. You can't help but warm to him, the cheeky bugger. It wasn't the first or last time he was arrested on suspicion of theft, usually drunk and mouthy. And he usually got off too.

I ask my dad why the constable would have been so annoyed to be called a lobster. He laughs and says it was a swearword he heard while he was in the Army Reserve in the seventies: 'It means you have a fat arse and shit in your head'. No wonder the cop was mad.

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Bertram was in the Army too, volunteering for the Australian Imperial Forces, though he rapidly seemed to change his mind about the military, even before his younger brother Thomas, who signed up first, went missing on the Western Front. His laughably long military record is mostly absences without leave and corresponding punishments. He went AWOL for the first time before he even got on a ship, and then again after his arrival in England, in October 1916, November 1916, January, March, May, August, September and December

1917, May and July 2018 and January 1919. In between he spent time in hospital for scabies, myalgia, a sprained ankle, influenza (twice) and a bullet in the right thigh. In August 1917, sandwiched between two periods of AWOL, he married Emily in the Kensington Registry office in London.

He came from money, it seems. Bertram's mother was descended from an affluent South Australian settler whose 'fine freehold lands' were bickered over by the old man's great grandchildren in the High Court for decades. Reading through the press about the court cases, I see one branch of the family married into the British nobility and moved back to Blighty. Ernest Matthews, Bertram's father, was a bit of a big wheel, at least in his country town. He and his wife lived in a house which had its own name, 'Umatilla'. There would have been a piano in the front room, since the eldest son made a living out of tinkling the ivories, though I'm not sure what that tells you about how rich they were. Still, I suspect as a kid Bertram didn't want for much.

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The dangers besetting these creatures are terrific. The very young must for months swim about near the surface of the sea, the easy prey of hosts of enemies, not least of whom are their kith and kin, for they are voracious cannibals. Then come the troubles of moulting. Should his armor prove too rigid he dies, like the martyrs of old encased in the Iron Virgin. (*The Port Pirie Recorder* 4).

Ages and ages ago, my sister, who has her own problems, said, 'You're stuck'. I'm not sure which of the two of us she was talking about. But I think she was right.

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Now, this amazed me. In 1929, Bertram made a complaint against his wife, protesting that he shouldn't have to pay her maintenance. The court found against him. Here we are, back in the twenties. Emily, still young, halfway round the world from home, braves the court system, not once but repeatedly. Maybe her reputation in the family as tight with money starts right here. Whatever – the judges never find against her, even when Bertram implies that she's been sleeping with someone else, that she's given him grounds for divorce.

Then I found out about the allotment system for soldiers' wives in the First World War. While troops were on overseas service, new military rules meant that two-fifths of a married soldier's pay would be sent fortnightly by the Defence Department to his wife. Emily didn't arrive in Australia 'til well after Armistice Day, but by then, the allotment system would have set the expectations of wives and judges, if not always husbands.

The same year, Bertram and his wife hit their moment of greatest tabloid fame. 'Family lives on bread and jam,' reads one headline. Emily tells the magistrate that she and her five children are hungry, 'there hasn't been butter in the house for a long time' (*The Register*, 1929). Her husband came to see the children sometimes, and gave them presents of sweets and biscuits, always outside the gate. Bertram told the court he tramped Adelaide and the suburbs twenty times looking for odd jobs, and had no money to pay his wife. He was convicted but the newspapers report he doesn't pay a penalty. That sounds about right.

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The pantry at my grandfather's house was always full of Nan's preserves, made of excess apricots and peaches from the backyard, and on-the-way-out soft fruit, sold off cheap at the Central Market. If you turned up in their kitchen, he would always offer a slice of home-made bread and jam or a bowl of the cheapest ice-cream from their over-stuffed chest freezer. After Nan died, when he lived alone in the house in his nineties, I think that might well have been all he ate.

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Alcoholics Anonymous call alcoholism a family disease. They don't mean it's in your genes – children of alcoholics don't always become alcoholics too, though I fear kids learn many other sorry lessons. AA mean that the madness and mood swings, maudlin tears and anxious mornings are shared with the whole family. Some people say the wives of alcoholics are already damaged, are looking for broken men to save. I don't know what to say about this. I think of Emily, at the London Registry Office to record the birth of her first child, Grace, in June 1916. No husband, no parents, no fixed address. Then she marries an Aussie soldier, a musician and a salesman, with a great aunt called Her Ladyship, a year later. And, when the war ends, ships out on a boat full of married English housewives to the sunlit plains of South Australia.

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In 1928, Emily takes Bertram to court, claiming that he's 'dangerous to others and incapable of managing his own affairs'. The reporter comments: 'the Magistrate intimates that the Court could not come to a unanimous decision' (*The Advertiser*, 1928). The Court can't decide if she's imperilled or if she's money grubbing. It decides to do nothing.

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I ask my father about Emily. Dad's a wise and witty talker, the kindest of men, but after fifty years as a country GP (often the only one in town), he's always on the clock. I get one anecdote out of him, before he heads back to his power-tools. Before she married, he says, Emily added a final 'e' to her maiden name – 'Lambe' – just to sound more refined.

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Names can be deceptive: there are no true lobsters in Australia. They're a northern hemisphere thing – a crustacean that lives in deep cold waters and sports enormous, unequal claws they use to tear apart crabs, sea urchins and sea stars. Instead we have rock lobsters – a species that inhabits coral reefs and tropical seas and has no claws at all. And then there are crayfish, found in fresh water all over the world. Quite different species, hardly related, but all of them good eating.

I wonder if Dad's army insult is a US import, brought to Australia after one war or another. It's not so implausible. Tinned American lobster was cheap enough by the Second World War for the US Army to use it for rations. These days Aussies use 'lobster' and 'crayfish' interchangeably. I guess it doesn't matter what you call something when you're viewing it mainly as a feed. Lobsters, crayfish, they're colourful animals – purple, blue, brown, orange – but they all look alike – bright red – after they've been in the pot.

I've read David Foster Wallace on the story of how lobsters went from low-class chow – prison food, fit only for animals – to opulent meal. Their value has varied so wildly, it's almost as if they're an empty symbol, a spooned-out shell, waiting to be filled with meaning. Not so much a stand in for luxury, or penury, but of uncertainty, of doubt.

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In 1927 Bertram was sent to jail for four weeks. Emily and the five children were all in court as the prosecutor told the story. He'd come home very late, roughly waking his wife. He asked her for money. When she didn't produce it, he punched her in the face. Another swing missed Emily and hit the baby who was with her. The child was hurt and its face was bleeding (this outraged the magistrate). Then Bertram grabbed his wife by a leg and dragged her violently out of the bed.

Five children. Five. Emily was an unwed mother when she first met Bertram, and went on to have four more children with him. Why is this the part of the story that grabs me first? Why am I asking myself, 'what she was still doing there?' Why is it her character that I'm questioning?

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Lobsters can live to be a hundred years old, live longer than even Emily, or my grandfather. At least once a year they have to moult. Underneath the old protective carapace they grow another – if they've lost any legs, they can even regenerate them. This process of escaping from the old armour is known as *ecdysis*, from the Greek word for 'getting out'.

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The psychologist reconsiders, and draws a simple diagram in the shape of a V. He points at the base of it, 'This is you, right now.' He points in one direction, 'This way, you give up drinking, go to AA, get to stay at home with your family.' He points to the other, 'This way, you move to a shed in Mangrove Creek, keep drinking, and probably die.'

Or that's what I was told, by someone who was drunk at the time.

It isn't like that, is it? A single moment of decision, where one life is left behind and another begins. It wasn't like that for Emily. Or for me.

Perhaps I shouldn't have told you about this. I'm not sure it's my story to tell.

And anyway, how do I assemble the facts to tell it? We can't agree on what happened, let alone why. I'm always upset, his memory is patchy. Last century's police reports give a more convincing timeline.

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In 1925, Bertram is in court, charged with leaving his wife without sufficient lawful means of support. He pleads guilty, can't offer any reason not to support his three children, is ordered to pay maintenance. Again.

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Emily's first child as a married woman, Edith Joan, was born soon after she arrived in Australia. Her third, who came along when she had already been granted a judicial separation, she called Kathleen Boadercia. Hard not to see that misspelt middle name as the battle-cry of an English woman assailed. Her fourth, my grandfather, was named Bertram on his birth certificate, after his father, but changed it by deed poll to 'George' in his twenties. And then Thomas, who died at nineteen in a terrible motorcycle accident. Died young just like the uncle who shared his name. I'm ruminating, again, on repetition. And on reinvention, getting out.

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I catch Dad again, and ask him about his grandma. He tells me that Edith's husband Eric was a mechanic and for as long as Dad remembers, Emily lived on the premises of his workshop. There was a kitchen and bathroom behind and a bedroom above. It was done up really nicely. I feel a bit ashamed. This was his grandmother, not just my plot device. He tells me when he was a kid, he got chickenpox, and went to stay with her for a week. She lived near the best chip shop in Adelaide. Chips every night for dinner – it was heaven!

I'm still swimming through that pile of papers, washed backwards, in retreat. But Emily didn't keep going back, doing the same thing again and again. She made some gutsy decisions and stuck with them, eventually. What a bitch, eh?

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Back in 1921, Bertram's in court for failing to pay maintenance. He tells the magistrate he's been away at the soldier's settlement in Berri. He had been in debt but recently he'd seen his

wife and the court reports say, he'd 'like the opportunity to come to an arrangement with her' (*The Register* 5).

Here we go. Around and around. I think of 'the merry go round of denial' – a way of describing how drinkers and their families play out a drama of embittering self-soothing, of forgetting, remembering and repeating. 'One person drinks too much and gets drunk and others react to her drinking and its consequences. The drinker responds to this reaction and drinks again. This sets up a Merry-Go-Round of blame and denial, a downward-spiral which characterizes alcoholism' (Kellerman 1).

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My youngest says about her father, 'He doesn't understand time.'

For him, it's no arrow, it's recursive. Wake up with a hangover; get through the day; find a drink; then back, if not to bed, at least to sleep. Spinning down into the unfathomable heart of the ocean where somewhere, surely to God, there must be a rocky bottom. When he gets there, maybe he'll find those cold-loving Atlantic lobsters. They seem to keep turning up – a curse or a gift? I really can't decide.

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But I keep forgetting: Bertram was coming to his new arrangement with Emily fifteen years before Alcoholics Anonymous and a good fifty before Reverend Joseph L Kellerman gave his talk about the merry-go-round. The metaphor I'm using to tell their story hasn't been invented yet. I think I'm developing a co-dependent relationship with the past. I need to enforce some historical boundaries.

With cash in the bank and a job that pays decent wages, it's easier to get off that merry-go-round. If you're not afraid you'll be punched in the face it's easier, for sure. With a family to turn to, and fewer children, I tell myself, it's easier, so much easier. Emily had better excuses for her years on the merry-go-round than me.

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The very first time Emily took Bertram to court, she'd only been in Australia for a year. Her husband, she told the magistrate, had been drunk, night and day, since his payout from the army had come through. He was an accountant and a salesman, he could be a big earner, but she'd had near enough nothing from him. One day he came home drunk and told her she should go out to work. She had the baby in her arms when he knocked her down with his fist, then he grabbed her by the shoulder and shoved her out of the house. She asked for a separation order, the custody of the child and maintenance, and she got it too.

One of the witnesses described meeting Bertram at the State Children's Department. He was drunk. He said, 'I've got a crayfish here and another parcel which I want you to give to my wife.' (*The News and Telegraph*, 1920, 1)

The witness, unsurprisingly, refused to do home deliveries.

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When I first read this story, I thought of this gift of crayfish as a poignant alcoholic promise. Something valuable and wonderful that you want to give, you think you'll give, you plan to give, but won't ever be given. But of course, that's a twenty-first century vision, back-read onto the nineteen twenties. That's the trouble with genealogies and stories told scuttling backwards at speed. That's how they escape, you know, spiny lobsters, the clawless ones: tail first, retreating from present danger. When a story's told in reverse it's easy to muddle up where you've come from and where you're going.

A hundred years ago, lobsters hadn't been eaten to expensive scarcity. In a city by the sea, rock lobster was not a rare, impossible luxury but cheap, available food you could catch yourself, even if you were an alcoholic living in a Salvation Army shelter. An ordinary gift he could easily have given, but probably never did.

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