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ODD MAN OUT

The story of Ronald Ryan

A three part mini-series for television

Story outline

by

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PART ONE:

Ronald Joseph Ryan is born on a sultry February day in a working class Melbourne suburb. It is 1925. His alcoholic Irish father, "Big Jack", is an ex-coalminer, now dying slowly of the lung disease silicosis. Ronald's mother Cecilia is a small, strong woman. After Ronald arrives, three daughters are born: Violet, Irma and Gloria, at intervals of two years each. His elder half-brother, George, has fled years before.

When Jack is completely unable to work, with most of his invalid pension going on drink, the family move to a tiny cottage in Brunswick. Things become even more desperate. Severe, neglected ulceration leaves Ronald almost blind in his left eye. Finally Mrs Ryan can no longer keep the welfare authorities at bay. At the age of ten Ron is sent to the Salesian Fathers' orphanage school, at Sunbury, on the outskirts of Melbourne. His sisters go to a convent at Abbotsford.

Young Ronald quickly becomes a well-liked figure at Sunbury, captain of the football and cricket teams, and known as a protector of smaller children unable to defend themselves. At one stage a younger boy, John King, runs away from the dormitory and is lost. When Ron wakes in the night and notices John gone, he tracks and finds the boy sleeping beneath a bush some miles away.

Without waking him or raising the alarm, Ron carries the boy home. Ron and John become close friends. Ron often speaks of his great ambition to get his little sisters out of the convent and his mother away from Jack, but it doesn't seem possible. Already an intense young man and a serious thinker, the most likely vocation for Ronald appears to be the priesthood.

But the boy has other plans.

At the age of fourteen, Ron runs away from Sunbury and "jumps the rattler" to faraway Balranald, on the Victoria/NSW border. For the next few years he works as a sleeper-cutter and charcoal-burner. By his eighteenth birthday he has managed to save 200 pounds, a small fortune.

A few days later, early in 1943, Ronald catches the train back to Melbourne. He picks his sisters up from the convent and buys them new clothes. Excitedly, he tells the girls about the wide open spaces "outback", and his plans to move them and their mother away from the violence and bad memories of the big city. Later that year, after months of hard work to prove his ability to support his sisters, the child welfare authorities agree to young Ronald's plans. That Christmas the family are joyfully reunited at Balranald. Soon afterwards, Big Jack dies in Melbourne.

Ron is now the sole breadwinner for the family. While his sisters go to school and Mrs Ryan looks after the house, he takes on some farm work as well as his other jobs, and learns to ride horses, with a vague notion of becoming a jockey. Heavy, physical work toughens his light but muscular body. In his spare time Ronald wins trophies for running and cycling. When Ron falls in love with a Balranald girl, Clara, everything seems to be coming together at last.

She waits for him by the Murrumbidgee each night after work. He gives her all his trophies. They plan to be married. Then a temporary job comes up in Gippsland. Ronald promises Clara he will come back to her.

After two months working in the bush, Ronald does come back - to find Clara married to another man. At 21, Ronald's whole world seems to have fallen down around him. He is totally crushed. With his sisters and mother now established in Balranald, he leaves the little town and returns to Melbourne.

A year or so later he meets and falls in love with a girl called Dorothy. Her family is Church of England, his Catholic. She is the daughter of a prominent figure in local government, from an old Melbourne family. His origins are firmly working class. After much thought, Ryan abandons the church he served as an altar boy and becomes a Protestant. Despite disapproval from Dorothy's family, the couple are married. Ronald Ryan is 23 years old.

Although he still has no trade, and lacks education, Ryan is a versatile worker, managing to support a wife and one, then two, then three daughters. Each summer he works as a timber-cutter for a man named Keith Johanson, a logging and pulpwood contractor, in the mountains near Matlock, eighty miles from Melbourne. Gradually, he works up to a position as subforeman, responsible for paying and organising a number of other men. Every second weekend, he hitch-hikes home to Melbourne with a cheque for his family, but the precious hours with his wife and daughters are never long enough. Early Monday morning he must always be back in the forest.

Ryan works harder than ever, earning the respect of his employers and the men under him, if not that of his in-laws. When his daughters begin going to school, and the timber-cutting season ends, there is not enough money. Now 31, and too proud to ask Dorothy's parents for help, Ryan begins passing forged cheques. He is soon caught. The court decide to pass off the offence as an inexplicable lapse, and release Ryan on a bond. Some months later he is caught again, this time for passing cheques in Warrnambool, Western Victoria. Ryan pleads guilty. Again convicted of forgery, this time in Melbourne, he is released on a five-year good behaviour bond.

Both in police interviews and in court, Ryan demonstrates his ability to charm. Although he isn't particularly tall, he wears his clothes well. The slight droop in his damaged eye makes him look vulnerable, if anything, and people of both sexes tend to find him disarmingly likeable. Even arresting police plead on Ryan's behalf in court. In one report a detective describes him as "highly intelligent".

Ryan works in a series of straight jobs, closer to home, including a stint running a fruit shop. For three years he avoids crime, instead turning to gambling as a way to give his family what he believes they deserve. However this leads inevitably back to the old ways. After walking home from the 1959 Melbourne Cup penniless, without even enough for a tram fare, Ryan begins store-breaking, then stealing, then factory-breaking.

Again he is caught.

While on remand in the Melbourne City Watch House, Ryan escapes through the roof with four other men, but is soon recaptured and sentenced to gaol.

In Bendigo Prison he studies assiduously, passing first the Intermediate examination, and then the Leaving in 1962. At the Bendigo Cultural Festival Ryan performs to local acclaim in *The Valiant*, a play written by other prisoners, in which he plays a warder looking after a man on death row. The Governor of Bendigo, Ian Grindlay, is particularly impressed with Ryan's efforts to educate himself, and personally acts to bring forward Ryan's release date. Ryan is just about to complete his Matriculation, and qualify for university, when he is released on parole. It is 1965. On the outside, Dorothy has maintained her faith in her husband and kept the family together by falling back on her own savings.

Once released, Ryan swears he will go straight. He works in a clerical job in the city, then as a house-painter. However gambling and impatience lead him spiralling back into crime, this time as a specialist safe-blower.

In 1964, at the age of 39, Ryan is sentenced to fourteen years in Pentridge Prison.

PART TWO:

Dorothy Ryan finally reaches the end of her patience with her wayward husband. Deciding that her daughters need something better than a father in prison, she finally accepts her parents' advice and divorces Ryan. Soon after, she re-marries.

In Pentridge's B Division, Ryan refuses to believe the news. When he does accept that she is gone, he becomes convinced that he can recapture her if only he can somehow amass enough wealth to escape from prison and then Australia. Ryan begins reading everything he can get his hands on. He discovers that Australia has no extradition treaty with Brazil. A plan is evolved: escape from Pentridge, then a series of quick bank jobs, then flight to Brazil, where the family could follow and live happily ever after.

Slowly, methodically, Ryan sets about making his dream as tangible as the concrete walls around him. He memorises all the warders' rosters and gets to know their individual weaknesses. He behaves impeccably, earning little extra freedoms. He measures the walls. The inner wall is eighteen feet, beyond that, no-man's land. Beyond that, an outer bluestone wall at least three feet higher than the first. Then forty feet on a catwalk, fully exposed, to reach the armed sentry on the guard tower, in which a lever opens the outer gate to the street. Once outside a car could be stolen, and then... freedom.

He will have to be extremely fit, and will need an accomplice, someone expert at starting cars. For months Ryan exercises, running the plan over and over in his head, checking for weaknesses, ironing out problems. He steals a nail file and hides it in his cell. From the jail's wire factory he takes a length of thick wire. Over many nights, Ryan hand-carves a screw-like thread on to the end of the wire, using the file. The other end of the wire becomes a hook. Ryan screws the hook into one end of a stolen broom handle. One day, while no one is looking, Ryan throws the whole contraption into the no-man's land between the walls.

Ryan learns that the warders' Christmas party is to be on the following Sunday, 19 December. Prisoners will be kept in the B Division exercise yard, with only a skeleton staff on duty. Ryan makes contact with Peter Walker, a handsome, hardened criminal of 24. Walker is athletic, knows cars, and has the "nothing to lose" courage necessary to see an escape through. When Ryan explains the plan Walker agrees to join him. A stray piece of water pipe, a potential weapon, joins the broom-hook between the walls.

Sunday is warm and sunny. The cars of holiday-makers stream past the main high-way to Sydney just outside the prison walls. Tower 1 is occupied by Helmut Lange, sleepy after a big lunch. At 2pm Ryan gives Walker the signal to begin. Two benches go up against the first wall, one atop the other. The bedspreads from their cells are thrown over.

Ryan's first running jump takes him up the benches to the top of the wall, like an acrobat. No one sees him as he drops down into the tall grass of no-man's land. Walker follows. Bedspreads are tied end to end and then attached to the broom-hook. The hook is used to grip a long pipe near the top of the second wall, making a rope of bedspreads to the top. Ryan goes up first, carrying the short piece of water pipe in his teeth. He is on to the catwalk. Walker is behind him. Warder Lange's attention is distracted by some prisoners banging milk bottles near the exit gate.

Before Lange knows what is happening, Ryan has the M1 rifle from the warder's rack levelled at him. Walker is armed with the pipe. By mistake, Ryan ejects the live round from the gun. Lange does not notice. Under duress, he opens the door to the street. Ryan sees there is no getaway car outside. He demands car keys from a Salvation Army Brigadier named Hewitt at the entrance. Hewitt refuses.

Meanwhile the alarm is raised. Ryan knocks the man down. As warders fire from the towers, Ryan and Walker run out into the busy stream of traffic on Sydney Road. Some motorists drive straight at the escapees. Few stop, despite the threat from Ryan's carbine. Ryan gets into one car, then leaves it again when he realises one of his hostages is pregnant. Walker, lagging behind, is about to be caught by an older warder, George Hodson, when shots ring out. Hodson falls, dead, on the tram tracks. Walker and Ryan leap into a blue Vanguard and get away.

With a lack of other news over the quiet Christmas period, the Pentridge escape and Hodson's "murder" are the biggest media stories in Australia.

False leads bamboozle the police as Ryan and Walker lie low in the Elwood house of Christine Aitkin, a female sympathiser with a small baby. A PMG man who looks like Ryan is arrested by armed police. Five police cars full of detectives converge on an abandoned water pistol in Yarraville. In New Zealand, a sea captain is detained in connection with the case and then released.

Meanwhile the real Ryan and Walker rob an ANZ bank in suburban Ormond, netting 4,500 pounds. A large official reward is posted in Victoria for information leading to the capture of the pair. As the police commit one bungle after another, Ryan and Walker become more confident, going to real estate agencies and hairdressers with Aitkin during the day, and busy pubs every second night.

On Christmas Eve Christine goes to a party, leaving Ryan and Walker at home baby-sitting. She meets a young tow-truck driver, James "Boofhead" Henderson, and brings him home to find an inebriated Ryan sitting on the floor with a guitar, singing folk songs.

All goes well until the group run out of liquor. While Walker and Henderson are driving to the bottle shop, Henderson tells Walker that Christine's friend looks a lot like Ronald Ryan, and asks him if he knows about the reward. Soon after, Walker shoots Henderson dead and leaves him in a public toilet in Albert Park.

Christine goes to the police. Ryan and Walker are back on the run.

From Balranald, Ryan's mother appears on television with a Christmas card from her son. She implores Ronald to give himself up. Meanwhile Ryan and Walker are driving up the coast towards Sydney in a car bought with money from the ANZ robbery. When they arrive they move into a flat near the beach at Coogee. Unfortunately for them, the New South Wales police are far better organised than their Victorian colleagues. Suspecting the pair have crossed the border, a false media campaign is instituted to make Ryan and Walker believe the search is still concentrated in Melbourne.

Meanwhile the real search heats up north of the border. Starved of female company, Walker wants to organise a date with a nurse, Simone Hurley, who he previously knew under another name. Ryan doesn't like the idea, but Walker manages to convince him there is no danger for them in Sydney. He rings Simone at Concord Repatriation Hospital and organises a double-date.

From the television news reports, Simone Hurley knows who Walker actually is. She phones the police. An elaborate trap is organised by Detective Inspector Ray Kelly.

Ryan's blind date is played by Sergeant Adelle Fricker, of the Sydney CIB. The meeting place, at the hospital, is surrounded by plainclothes police disguised as couples, hospital staff and passers-by. Snipers hide on top of nearby buildings and in trees.

Simone and Sergeant Fricker wait by the gate. The men are late for their date. Kelly is about to call off the trap when Ryan and Walker pull up in a car. A voice on a loud hailer tells them to give up - they are surrounded. The two men look at each other, bewildered. Waiting police rush the car. There is a violent struggle, which ends with Detective Inspector Kelly levelling a shotgun at Ryan's head.

After seventeen days, the manhunt is over.

PART THREE:

In a Sydney court, Ronald Ryan and Peter Walker are extradited to Victoria. Police armed with automatic weapons and tear gas see them off at Kingsford Smith Airport and then accompany them from Tullamarine back to Pentridge, where Ian Grindlay, Ryan's mentor at Bendigo, is now Governor.

Hundreds of newspaper column inches and hours of electronic media reports have already tried Ryan and found him guilty. At an inquest into the death of warder George Hodson, Ryan and Walker are formally charged with his murder.

Public Solicitor Allen Douglas briefs Philip Opas QC, a brilliant, high-profile barrister (and supporter of capital punishment), to defend Ronald Ryan. From their first meeting, Ryan impresses Opas with his courage, cheerfulness and belief in his own innocence. With thirteen hostile eyewitnesses, the defence case is considered unwinnable.

Opas goes to a firing range and learns everything he can about the weapon Ryan allegedly used to kill Hodson. He finds that, contrary to eyewitness depositions, the M1 carbine is smokeless, and has no recoil. Studying the forensic evidence, he discovers that the passage of the bullet through Hodson's body seems to indicate it was fired from a great height. There is no forensic evidence that Ryan's weapon has been fired.

On 15 March 1966 the trial opens in Melbourne. The judge is Mr Justice Starke, a lifelong friend of Opas (and opponent of capital punishment). As expected, the prosecution case relies heavily on the large number of eyewitnesses on the day of the escape; warders and passers-by. Opas is able to undermine the foundation of the prosecution's case by demonstrating major inconsistencies between witnesses' evidence and basic errors of fact regarding the properties of the M1 carbine.

It begins to look as though the shot that killed Hodson may have actually come from one of the warders' towers, probably no. 2 (all warders were armed with identical carbines). Ryan's case is not helped by the mysterious absence of several key pieces of evidence, such as the bullet that actually killed Hodson.

Back in prison each night after court, Ryan is harassed by particular warders and woken at all times of night. Key communications with Opas regarding the case are censored. The press is temporarily gagged from reporting Ryan's complaints by a special court order. Meanwhile Ryan's mother, Cecilia, prays for her son each day from a church near the prison. Pentridge priest Father John Brosnan becomes closer to Ryan (the two had originally met at a legendary underworld wedding in 1962). Religion is not discussed.

The defence case opens with Ryan in the witness box. He impresses the jury with his honest, direct telling of his side of the story. Co-escapee Walker confirms Ryan's impressions of confusion on the day of the escape. Opas calls an eminent mathematician who demonstrates with diagrams and a model skeleton that the shot which killed Hodson could almost certainly not have come from ground level. Opas closes the defence case with a strong appeal to the jury to look to the facts of the case, not the media hype.

Fifteen days after the case began, the jury finds Ryan guilty of murder. Walker is found guilty of manslaughter. Mr Justice Starke pronounces the mandatory sentence of death on Ryan. It is expected that this will be automatically commuted to life imprison-ment, as no one has been executed in Victoria since 1951. Walker is sentenced to twelve years, (and later another twelve years for the "man-slaughter" of Henderson).

Opas' first appeal on behalf of Ryan, to the Victorian Court of Criminal Appeal, is dismissed. In October a second appeal is rejected. Two months later, the Victorian government, led by Sir Henry Bolte, announces that Ryan's death sentence will not be commuted. Soon after, legal aid to Ryan is cut.

Now deeply emotionally involved in the case, Opas agrees to work without pay. The Anti-Hanging Committee becomes active, funding a solicitor, Ralph Freadman, to replace the axed Legal Aid lawyer.

Opas begins preparing an appeal case for the Privy Council (equivalent to today's High Court) in London. The state government ignores the pending appeal and announces the hanging will be carried out on 9 January 1967. Philip Opas and his family are subject-ed to death threats and harassment. Henry Bolte declares to the press that the life of a prison warder is worth more than an ordinary citizen and that is why Ryan must hang.

After much pressure, Ryan's execution is re-scheduled after the date of the appeal. Opas flies to London to present Ryan's case to the highest judges in the Commonwealth. Despite Opas' efforts, the Privy Council refuses Ryan leave to appeal.

On 26 January, Ryan makes a personal appeal to the Queen. It is unsuccessful. Ryan is to be executed on 31 January 1967. The prison psychiatrist, Dr Allen Bartholomew, describes Ryan as an "amusing... sane, likeable, man of intelligence. Very engaging... without remorse."

Three thousand anti-hanging demonstrators converge on Parliament House in Melbourne and hundreds attempt to break into the barricaded building. Opas is utterly exhausted and dispirited. The rigours of the case have almost destroyed him. Convinced Ryan will hang, he cannot face returning to Australia for the execution, but detours sadly back through Spain, Ethiopia and Thailand. On the way he is caught up in a civil war.

The night before his execution, Ryan is reprieved due to new evidence from a Pentridge inmate. Opas immediately flies home from Bangkok.

Justice Starke refuses Opas' plea for appeal. The new date for the execution is Feb-ruary 3 1967. The anti-hanging press builds to a peak, but Bolte is unrelenting. Seven jurors from the trial publicly state that they would not have found Ryan guilty of murder had they known the death sentence would actually be carried out. Ronald Ryan's ex-wife, Dorothy, secretly visits him in Pentridge to say goodbye (the girls are not allowed to come). Days before Ryan's execution, Dorothy's second husband dies of a heart attack.

From the condemned cell in D Division, Ryan warns the authorities that a well-organised, armed breakout attempt is being planned for him by criminal associates on the outside. After investigation it is discovered he is telling the truth. To avoid further blood-shed, Ryan calls off the escape attempt through an intermediary. Ryan's mother and Pentridge chaplain Father Brosnan are overjoyed when Ryan returns to the Catholic faith.

Opas and Father Brosnan attempt to make personal appeals to Henry Bolte. Bolte avoids them. Ryan writes a long and moving final letter to his family, on toilet paper.

3 February 1967. 3500 protesters wait outside Pentridge Prison as the time of execution approaches. Ryan's daughter Wendy wags school and wanders the streets, crying. It is a warm sunny morning. Birds flit around the grey walls. Inside, Governor Ian Grindlay, Father Brosnan and fourteen invited journalists stand to witness the hanging. Ryan is emotionless, pale, childlike. The hangman is disguised, ruthlessly professional and fast. At 8am Ryan falls through the trap and dies from the same gallows bar as Ned Kelly.

Philip Opas is swimming at Elwood beach with his wife when the moment passes. A stranger, swimming past, says: "S'pose they've strung up that useless bastard by now. Bloody good job." Ronald Ryan is buried in quicklime within the grounds of Pentridge.

His family are not allowed to visit the unmarked grave.

* * *

Postscript information: Soon after Ryan's execution, three of the warders whose testimony helped convict Ryan died suddenly in separate incidents. Governor **Grindlay** retired prematurely. **Opas** left the Bar at the height of his career. Ryan's daughters **Rhonda** and **Wendy** married policemen. **Peter Walker** was released in 1983. In 1986 exwarder **Robert Pascoe**, now a born-again Christian, admitted firing the shot which killed George Hodson. Unknown to anyone at the time, he had been on Tower 3 on the day of the escape.