

The memoirs of a middle-aged Englishman who has ended up in a Portuguese Old People's Home. Early childhood in France and Germany is followed by boarding school and further education in the UK. Work experiences take the reader from the cities and deserts of North Africa to the atmospheric streets of Lisbon and Porto. It is also about traumatic illness and describes the writer's struggle to deal with his physical and psychological disabilities in a culturally alien environment.

THE WAITING ROOM

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A sunset over a beach with large rocks in the foreground. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a golden glow over the sky and the water. The sky is filled with soft, colorful clouds in shades of orange, yellow, and purple. The beach is sandy and has several large, smooth rocks scattered across it. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

THE WAITING ROOM

Thomas Milner

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LIFE IN THE LAR I

My room has a view of the western sea.

I sometimes dream that I am running along one of those little streets just off the *Rotunda de Boavista* desperately searching for my parked car. I sleep in the north-south position and my three bamboo canes are arranged in a V-formation in the glass vase. So what am I doing wrong?

Saturday, Sept. 27th 2008

The weekends are the worst times in this place. There is an increased torpor in the dining room with the occasional brief flare-up like the sudden squawking of chickens in a farm-yard. Sometimes I look up from my book and gaze, despondent and unseeing, out into the bright sunny garden. The soup trolley emerges from the kitchen like an underground train exploding from a tunnel – an intolerable level of noise which goes straight through my skull. It is attended by a brace of quarrelsome care-workers - strident creatures whose people skills would perhaps be more in keeping with a factory-floor (or even a prison) than an Old People's Home. I foresee a time when such people will no longer work in places like this, replaced by more qualified and better-paid personnel – after all, geriatric care is a growth sector in Western Europe. Am I dreaming or did one of them, in answer to a request from some old dear to be helped to the

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bathroom, look at her watch and snap *it's not two o'clock yet you'll just have to wait!* (Sweet).

I look a bit of a fright by the way. Never particularly prepossessing, my various illnesses and treatments have rendered me nearly bald, revealing the scars of two brain procedures on my poor head. The unflattering lines of my face have deepened and my smile has become a grimace. I avoid mirrors. I have recently reread *The Heart of Darkness* and, on being confronted with my own image, I sometimes mutter Kurtz' last words: *the horror the horror*.

My personality has taken a beating too. What remains of my sense of humour has taken a mordant turn. I have become a witless slow-thinker and my words sometimes come out all jumbled up. I am nervous, obsessive, impatient, bad-tempered, misanthropic, withdrawn, jumpy and grumpy. (Other than that I'm a just a normal, calm and well adjusted Englishman who has, by a series of twists and turns, ended up in an Old People's Home on the coast of northern Portugal). Naturally I'm trying to build up a philosophical construct to encompass the situation and I dare say I'll get there in the end; meanwhile I've settled into a state of mild psychosis and contemplate the world *as through a glass, darkly*.

Sunday 28th September 2008

Beside me at the table in the dining room sits Sr. Carlos. He is a tiny sweet old man so terribly disabled that he has to be fed his soup and usually his main course as well. During lunch I feel protective of him as he can hardly speak and I sometimes call over one of the staff

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whenever I perceive his need. I can only imagine the difficulties and frustration of living in a world of silence – I can see it in his expressive, burning eyes.

After the meal I go for a spin in my wheel chair, pausing by D. Madalena to ask her how she is and to tell her the time:

- Hello Donna Madalena, how are you?
- Can you tell me what the time is?
- It's ten past two.
- What time?
- Ten past two.
- Two ...
- And ten.
- Ten past two?
- Yes that's right. Anyway how are you today?
- I'm sad and sick ...
- Don't be sad. Your daughter's coming today; it is Sunday today don't forget.
- Perhaps she won't be coming ... oh dear, how sad I am ...

Monday 29th September 2008

It is after lunch. Sr. Bernardo is approaching me at a snail's pace (in fact a snail would probably overtake him), so I have time to finish considering the implications for the outcome on the Second Crusade of the battle before The Horns of Hattin in the Syrian desert, where the great general Saladin routed the heavily-armoured but exhausted Frankish knights. After the battle the principal captives,

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which included King Guy of Jerusalem and most of the important barons of Outremer, were brought before Saladin's tent, together with the knights of the fighting Orders – the Templers and the Hospitallers ... ah here he is:

- Good afternoon Sr. Bernardo.
- Good afternoon, might I ask you a question.
- Yes of course.
- Where exactly are you from?
- London, you know, in England.
- Ah that explains it.
- Explains what?
- Why you make so many mistakes when you speak Portuguese.
- Yes, I suppose that *does* explain it.

Tuesday 30th September 2008

After lunch I get to thinking, following various trains of thought, about reading aloud bedtime stories to young children. Those moments, so fleeting in retrospect, represent some of the many joys of parenthood. I soon learned, first with James then with William, that one doesn't necessarily have to read from infantile books – *ooh look! There's a train, can you see the little trainy-wainy etc.* it can be *anything*. They just like the comforting sound of your voice as they drift off to sleep. I used to read them favourite poems by Blake and Coleridge ... *can we have Tiger tiger again tonight dad ...*

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*Tyger tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

And by the end of the first verse he's fast asleep. Of course most dads and mums, after a long and tiring day at work, cannot hide the odd yawn hoping that baby won't notice. No such luck – babies notice everything. NASA could use babies in their spy-satellites. Sure enough one evening I crept to the door of his bedroom to check if he was asleep; I peeped in and there was baby James sitting up in his cot and telling his favourite teddy-bear a story: *Once upon a time there was a beautiful ... (yawn) ... princess who lived in a castle ... (yawn) ... at the top a mountain.*

(Cherish those moments – they won't ever come again).

Wednesday 1st October 2008

My physiotherapy session went quite well this morning and I'm encouraged. A wheel-chair is a poor place from which to view the world but it is better than from a stretcher. As for me, I miss no opportunity to stand up on my own two feet as a good Christian should.

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Thursday 2nd October 2008

Lunch today was that typical Portuguese dish called *cozido a Portuguesa* which is comprised of beef, chicken, the anatomically not uninteresting parts of the face and trotters of a pig, chouriço, blood sausage, white rice, a potato or two, carrots and finally cabbage; *everything is boiled*. Well, after eating that little lot you really know that you've just had lunch. When I first came across this dish at the house of my future in-laws twenty years ago, I made an instant life-changing decision to go vegetarian. But during the intervening years I've grown to quite like it, always eschewing of course those interesting bits of pork.

There is German proverb: *Mann ist was mann esse* (or as George Harrison sang *You know that what you eat, you are*). Yesterday I was a medieval fish-pond, today I am an animal cemetery, tomorrow shall I be a Thai rice-field?

Friday 3rd October 2008

And in the darkness of my brain my third little tumour is growing.
Timor mortis conturbat me.

Tuesday 8th October 2008

At lunch, which is the ubiquitous yellow soup followed by a riot of food – a mountain of wet white rice with some leaves of cabbage climbing up the sides and a slab of white fish perched precariously

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on the top – the only colour on the pallid plate is the green of the cabbage. I get to consider the colour *green*. Did you know that 75% of people, on being asked what their favourite colour is, will reply either blue or green? How can one possibly measure that percentage – why did I not simply write most people? Green is the colour of growth, the chosen colour of ecology (the Green Party, Going green, Green Politics). It is the colour of innocence and of hope. For Muslims green is a holy colour and is the predominant colour on the flags of most Islamic nations. Islam was born in the deserts of Arabia and the early followers of the Prophet, surrounded as they were by the hot dryness of sand and rock yearned for the cool, green hanging gardens of Paradise.

Wednesday 9th October 2008

After lunch I look up from my (Martin Amis) novel and look out of the window struck by a new idea. Why not do the whole thing properly and start at the very beginning? It could provide me with another escape along with my painting therapy. I could write the material in tandem with the little stories set for me each week by Filipa, my physiotherapist. I warmed to the idea. I'd already hacked out a thing about my time in Algeria; I could refine it, add to it and insert the improved version into the text. I could give the thing a suitably vague title like *Notes from the Waiting Room*.

One evening last year I absent-mindedly asked a helper to turn on the light with the words *fiat lux* and she was a bit mystified and asked me to explain. I apologized, explaining that it was Latin for *let there be light* – *séja luz*. For a while she would greet me with a smile

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saying *fiat lux* Sr. Thomas. The phrase stuck in my mind, one of those little hooks of memory that simply won't go away and eventually I hashed up a short, inaccurate and amateurish version of the reality behind the *Book of Genesis*.

FIAT LUX

In the beginning is silence. In our quadrant of the galaxy there is only the empty blackness of space - dark energy absorbing all matter and light. Eons pass. The black hole becomes so dense that it implodes – a super nova, the birth of a star. This star - our sun - proceeds to explode incandescently, furiously spitting out matter and gases into the darkness of space in an outpouring of spectacular light and colour. Gradually, over the course of billions of solar years, the system solidifies into the sun with its ten or so spinning planets locked in orbit around it. Most of the planets have their own attendant satellites or moons. The third planet from the sun, a beautiful blue world encased under a canopy of light is the jewel, is the pick of the bunch, consisting as it does of the more obvious constituent elements for organic life.

Billions of solar years pass on this world. Certain tiny creatures evolve at the bottom of the vast ocean, soft and boneless – our ancestors. Yet more millions of years go by as the planet spins patiently. Great storms rise up and rage and rage and the planet itself trembles and shakes and shatters and cracks and erupts and separates and re-aligns itself into water and land on which a kind of moss begins to grow.

Eventually with the emergence of sentient humanity and the subsequent groupings into tribes, first in the valleys of the great rivers and then developing into the earliest civilizations, religio-philosophical constructs spring up to explain the meaning and nature of existence. In one of these, in its Inspired Scripture, an attempt is made to explain the creation of the World. In a simple and

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understandable parable a putative god utters on the first day of creation (in an as yet unformulated language): FIAT LUX.

BIRTH

My mother bore me in the southern wild. My skin is black but oh, my soul is white. (No not really, just kidding). My mother actually bore me in a pleasant villa in a pleasant street of a pleasant village just outside Paris, which, as is well known, is the capital of that very pleasant country France. My earliest memory is of sitting in a meadow full of wild strawberries. What a pleasant first memory that is, is it not? I was the fifth child and the second son. I was not the baby of the family for long however, for after me came another boy and, in the fullness of time, two more girls. Being part of *une famille nombreuse* living in a small village outside Paris seemed completely normal to us (we didn't know anything different). There was a lilac tree at the back of the garden, the fragrant perfume of its blossom in the spring forming part of the olfactory memory of my earliest childhood. When I was about five I joined my brother at the village primary school which at that time was housed in a small dilapidated chateau with a dusty playground. The classrooms had little wooden desks, each one with a white ceramic ink-well at the top right-hand corner. According to our mother we would continue to speak in French after coming home for tea for about half an hour before calming down and reverting to English. My first little scuffle came when a group of (French) boys asserted boastfully that Napoleon had won the battle of Waterloo; when I timidly suggested otherwise they rounded on me and shoved me into the dust and then convinced me by sheer moral force that I was wrong. (*Zut alors!* it was my first example of historical revisionism).

I must have been about six when I broke my collar-bone for the first time. (The second time was playing rugby at school when most of

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the scrum decided to use me as a cushion and the third time was after a brain operation, the result of hanging around the theatre/intensive care unit area for too long; it came as a bonus, part of a bag of goodies which also included secondary pneumonia and a bladder infection). My brother was in the vicinity when snap – I had evidently broken (or dislocated) my collar bone. I don't remember that it was particularly painful but my brother took the rap. I milked the situation for all it was worth, snivelling and grizzling all the way to the village doctor who reset the little bone and strapped the arm into a bandage slung around my neck. Then came the moment, (which I seized), for my reward. Returning along the quiet village street, I loitered longingly in front of the window of the shop which we called *Un Peu de Tous*; there, in pride of place at the centre of the window display, was a large imposing grey 2CV van. I looked beseechingly up at my Mum and pointed wordlessly at the object of my desires. We went into the shop and she purchased the toy. Happiness welled up in my heart – just wait until my brother sees this!

NICKING DYE FROM THE NAAFI

When I was about eight years old my father was transferred from Paris to Cologne in West Germany. Unreal city: we lived in a pleasant detached house with a large garden in a leafy suburb of Cologne. At that time Germany was still notionally under Four-Power occupation, and so we lived in an enclave (or ghetto) for British serving personnel. It had an English school, which we attended, the head master of which was our neighbour across the road, a cinema showing mostly black-and-white Westerns and a shop known in the jargon as the NAAFI. The school was rather mediocre; the teachers were mostly bored (or neurotic) expatriates – I remember the desolate concrete playground that we used to ride around on our bikes at the weekends. We also used to ride around a small park, which had a curious gazebo with a green roof which we predictably called *Hitler's Hat*. Perhaps surprisingly I used to go alone twice a week on the tram which rattled up the *Bonner Strasse* for my piano lesson in an octagonal room overlooking, no doubt, some busy confluence of streets near the city centre. This dusty old room was furnished with two pianos, one old harmonium, an assortment of flutes and recorders, sheet music and metronomes, in other words all the paraphernalia of a working composer who is obliged to give music lessons to tone-deaf kids to supplement his income. My teacher was the Director of Music and organist of our local church in an affluent district of Cologne. The church itself was in the modern minimalist style with one whole wall made of plate glass on which were stained scenes from the gospels. It was rumoured that over the Easter period, collections and donations were gathered to the value of either one Mercedes car or two Volkswagens. *West Germany had taken full advantage of the American initiative known as the Marshal*

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Plan – *financial aid to kick-start the economies of a shattered post-war Europe - and with her industry, organisation and mechanical brilliance the «Economical Miracle» was in full flood. The banks in Cologne's city centre had little fountains sprinkling Eau-de-Cologne into marble bowls into which the clients would discreetly dip the corners of their handkerchiefs as they passed through the great polished foyers, (I think you will agree that, for that time, it was a class act).* Back to the piano lessons: I had little talent for the instrument and plodded and plonked my way hurriedly through the practise pieces he had set for me; at the end of each piece he would tap me resonantly on the top of my head with his tuning fork and say *nochmal über langsame.*

Our house was roomy with a pleasant drawing-room giving out onto the garden which ran, unchecked by any fence, into our neighbour's garden, on the lawn of which stood a bird-table. Each day the soft-hearted neighbour used to place water and seeds on the little table for them. Easily the most wicked thing that I had done in my short life up to that point was to crouch behind a bush in our part of the garden, armed with a lead-pellet air-gun, aim carefully at a small bird pecking seeds on the table (only meaning to scare it you understand) and shoot it stone dead. I skulked around for days expecting awful retribution to descend on my shoulders, but I seemed to have got away with it. Another form of (psychologically less easily classified) criminality, involved me and my brother riding to the NAAFI and surreptitiously shoplifting small tins of powdered dye in bright colours and then riding to the nearby wood and releasing the dyes into a stream, watching the water turn bright blue or green or red and hiding behind a tree to observe the reactions of the passers-by down-stream. (Go figure that one).

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Later that year, aged 11 and 9, my elder brother and I were sent to a boarding school in England, in the Hertfordshire countryside half way between London and Cambridge, where they soon drummed that kind of nonsense out of us: our innocent childhood was over.

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