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Prologue

Stephen Fry – entertainer, wit and self-professed geek – was explaining on the radio the other day that blog is short for 'web log', which is just like an on-line diary. You cried: *No, Stephen, it is not!*

In a fundamental way a diary is the very opposite of a blog. A handwritten diary is something private and personal, a secret friend in whom you may confide. Some may lock it, some hide it away. Samuel Pepys wrote his in code.

There are of course some diaries that were intended for posthumous publication, but the diaries of ordinary people are for their eyes only, a record, a therapy, a way of enjoying the moment – or enjoying it again, as they write it up.

A blog, on the other hand, is public the instant it is written. It is intended to be read by strangers as well as fans. It may well have its uses: publicity, information, sales, the logging of a voyage or a project… More often than not it is an expression of pure exhibitionism by the writer, though perhaps not so obviously egotistical and self-delusional as some of the social networking sites – and Twitter is that affliction taken to extremes. Anyone who wrote in a blog or on Facebook, say, what they would write in a diary, their intimate thoughts and observations perhaps on loved ones, even a record of their more shameful actions, must at the very least be an attention seeker, at worst very sick indeed.

The pleasure in writing a diary, however, is that you can be entirely free; you have no image to project, be it true, false or imaginary. You can be honest. You can be yourself. This does not exclude description, narrative, record, but you can also give vent to your emotions; you can confess your weaknesses, explore your doubts, investigate your failings and give yourself a pat on the back for a deed or job well done. You can say what you like as long as it is true.

If you were intending these same words for the blogging public or for posterity you might lie, omit or embellish. In a diary the incident is stripped bare, as is your soul. Your diary is the shell without which you would be utterly vulnerable.

You had your first diary when you were quite small, and you were determined to fill every page. Many days have one word, “school”, written across them. Others: “play with Mice”, which is how you spelled Mike, your friend’s name. Often in those days of post-war rationing you recorded the meals you ate.

Then, when you were nine, a family friend who passed as an aunt gave you a five year diary with the challenge that she “bet you cannot keep this going for five years”. Five years seemed a life time then, though now it rushes by as quickly as five weeks. You kept the diary going though, and when you had finished the aunt had disappeared or died. She never knew she had lost her bet.

You still have all your diaries in a chest. You will never re-read them and you suppose you will destroy them before you die. You do not want to experience again, let alone have anyone else read those pages of adolescent introspection, of fumbling encounters with the opposite sex, of moral and ethical dilemmas which would now seem laughable in our more enlightened times.

You squirm even to think what you wrote as a student, night after night, though no doubt your views would throw light on the social attitudes of the time towards race, religion and behaviour, politics and the arts. You have long ceased to believe that we are individually capable of original thought, so probably just as much could be gleaned from contemporary newspapers. You are but the product of your times.

As a writer it is tempting, however, to mine the diaries of a particular year for such local or period colour, but you never want to discover what kind of person you were. It is bad enough living with the person you have become.

There is one constant. You always have kept, and always will keep, a diary.

1

On Keeping A Holiday Diary

Your parents used a box brownie to take black and white photographs of their two weeks a year at the seaside. Your own first camera was a Bakelite development of this, the Kodak Brownie 127. A roll of film stretched at most to a dozen photos. Later you took up 35mm photography and built a cumbersome library of transparencies, but this was expensive. A film took only 36 pictures. Prints were more expensive still and so early holiday photos are limited and precious, stored in bulky photo albums. Then came digital photography, and mobile phones that functioned as cameras. The value of the permanent image was devalued, if not lost for good, among such a promiscuous abundance of photos – if that is still the correct term for disposable e-snaps.

But you also have better pictures, better than any taken by traditional or digital cameras; pictures that cannot fade or get deleted – for you have always kept a holiday diary.

Looking at an old-fashioned, two-dimensional snapshot you might laugh at the clothes and the hair styles, wonder at how young your parents looked, admire the old cars or struggle to remember the time and place of a pose. Names of beaches, villages, whole cities are lost to your memory. Years later you do not easily recall the names of other people either, hosts, friends or lovers, who occupy the frame.

In your diaries you may not often have described appearances, fashion per se has never been important to you, but occasionally you did try to capture the likeness of a person or describe a scene particularly significant in that moment. These sketches you now treasure. Your diary evokes, better than a physical picture, the feel of a place: the sound of the sheep's bells in the Norwegian mountains; the scent of a French bakery with that mix of distinctive disinfectant from the floor and the chocolaty aroma coming from the jar of *Caram'bars* when the heavy glass lid is lifted; the oppressive humidity you first encounter in the tropics as you step out of the dehydration of the aircraft

and swim across the tarmac like a fish in a tank – an almost liquid envelope in which you will live and work until you reboard the plane, but an ambiance that appears in none of the photos except perhaps for a dampening darkness of clothes around the waist, across the chest and beneath the armpits. Still in the tropics, in the remotest depths of an African forest that looks pristine in the photo, your diary records the awful, tearing scream of the illegal chainsaw felling another distant tree.

Your diary will also have captured other sounds, perhaps in that same forest at night, or perhaps the total lack of sound: the silence of the Norwegian *vidda* broken only by the regular sliding of your cross-country skis uphill, or the uninterrupted scraping on the downhill slopes. Occasionally you have recorded meals, or attempted to capture the taste of a particular mango after a thirsty drive; the pleasure of that first swig of cold beer on returning from a trek.

But a diary is not simply a record of the five senses. It records also the hundred moods of the traveller, the dejection and the elation, the occasional boredom, the irritation with a spouse or a child. Anticipation, excitement; the misery of four days of migraine or an incapacitating bout of Delhi belly.

These diaries are certainly not literary works. They tell no story, merely note down scenes that take your fancy – mostly fleeting moments or incidents, the occasional anecdote perhaps. Sometimes you are as elaborate as a painter trying to fix a particularly striking scene, sometimes you simply list the places visited that day, that month, that year; or the things you might have bought on Tuesday, the cost of a meal on Wednesday night, or a tank of petrol on the way home.

Sometimes this is useful as a reference tool months or years later, to settle an argument about whether you saw minke or finn whales, or – wasn't it humpback that you watched blowing bubbles and breaching through a shoal of fish?

Sometimes, as a writer, you refer to your dairies for conversations recorded to capture the speech habits of East Coast waitresses, Australian farmers or African politicians. Some incidents you might take as written, fresh in their emotion and immediacy, and incorporate them into a story.

On the other hand, you still have a vivid three page

account of a near shipwreck of the coast of Lanzarote written the same day, and for which years later you still have to invent a tale that would do it justice. Like so many other episodes, this one has remained buried. Only by browsing through the diary years later do you chance upon it with pleasure, having forgotten, if not the event, certainly the details.

The fundamental difference, however, between the holiday photos and the diary is that the albums show how much you have changed, and the diaries how little. Re-reading them is a pleasure tinged perhaps with shame and guilt; and very, very secret.

2

The Morning Post

A striking feature of Wilkie Collins' 1860 novel *The Woman in White* is the absolute reliability of the Royal Mail, depending as it did on a fast and regular rail service. Overnight letters fly back and forth between Cumberland and London without anyone doubting they would arrive by first post the next day. On one occasion Laura is at Blackwater Park in the north and requires an immediate response from her London solicitor. She writes to him on Day One beseeching him to send his reply on the 11 o'clock train the next morning. By 2 pm on Day Two she has received her reply, delivered to her home. The Victorians hardly needed email.

Today few of us still write letters by hand. Email is cheaper, easier and informal. Even so, however immediate, there is no guarantee anyone will open your message, or if they do they may not look at it the same day. For domestic purposes within these shores a First Class letter, though an expensive luxury, will probably be just as quickly read and, being more personal, better appreciated.

Although less and less correspondence arrives by “snail mail”, you still await the sound of the red Post van in the lane, the click of the latch on your garden gate and the thump of letters on the mat. Much of the delivery comprises junk mail: catalogues, holiday brochures, and whole forests of offers from the ever optimistic *Readers’ Digest*, but there is enough of a personal nature most mornings to give you a pleasurable sense of anticipation that your less charismatic electronic mail box fails to rouse.

It may be the memories of letters past, letters from the days of first post, second post – and in the village where you lived there was also an afternoon post that came at tea time. Now that there is only one daily delivery it seems unpredictably to fill all or any of these time slots, carrying with it past associations.

One quality of real mail is that it is more individual and therefore more personal. For a start, the envelopes come in all shapes and sizes and are easy to sort at a glance. Not all are welcome, but even some of the business ones are informative: utilities bills, credit and bank accounts, invoices… some of these formal envelopes might even contain a pleasant surprise: a £50 win on the premium bonds, a rebate from the Inland Revenue, or a windfall from an insurance company.

Most welcome of all are those written and addressed by hand. In some cases this is handwriting you have known all your life. Like a voice, the writing of a relative, a lover or a friend is instantly recognisable. Like a voice, too, the handwriting may become quivery and shaky with age, but the character is not lost. You have sometimes noticed that children and grandchildren inherit the handwriting of their parents as they do their looks, their voices and other mannerisms.

Seasoning the pleasurable anticipation of the morning post is a certain clinging dread. Bad news usually travels fast and will have arrived by telephone or by a policeman at the door. Sometimes, though, you tear open a daughter’s or a parent’s letter to be sure that everything is all right.

Your real dread stems from the vestiges of a fifteen year barrage of threats and admonitions from a neurotic ex-wife. Her letters have long stopped, but the poison hangs in the otherwise pleasantly scented miasma wafted in on the post. In your mind’s eye you still see your address on the envelope, big and brazen, written in whatever the demented

woman had to hand: pen, biro, pencil, crayon, felt tip, lipstick. And on the reverse, every second word underlined three times, her afterthoughts or second thoughts or third thoughts scrawled across the paper for all to see.

Inside it was always worse, saccharine sweet but sprinkled with accusation, menace and demands. The woman who stole your children continued for twenty years to steal what little peace of mind she had left you.

But the bitter increases the sweet, and over the years you have received many more pleasant than unpleasant letters, and still expect to do so: your Godmother, who for half a century has never forgotten you on your birthday or at Christmas; birthdays and Christmases themselves, when old friends and far flung family still send cards written and addressed in their own hand, often with unintentionally hilarious accounts of their doings over the year. Then there is the daughter who is predictably early, and the son who is always a week late. The joy is that they remember you at all.

Fairly often it is your own handwriting you recognise on the A5 envelopes that drop onto the mat. Though most of your literary correspondence takes place now by email, there are still those small journals and publishers, those competitions, that require one or more printed copies of your manuscripts. Ninety percent of these are returned; your working life is one long and regular rejection, but it is just this that adds spice, because once in a while a contract, a cheque or an acknowledgement arrives. Three lines of appreciation, one or more noughts on a cheque or a letter forwarded from someone who has enjoyed something you have written; any of these communications wipes out a score of rejections, if not the cost of your initial postage.

The clatter of the flap, the tumble of falling mail, carry resonances also of other acceptances and rejections – of exam results and university acceptance, of job interviews and ensuing results, of hospital admissions and of medical reports condemning you to life.

Despite technological change, the volume of mail and with it the promise of some life-changing decision, event or visit still fills your morning with a familiar *frisson*. You cannot go out until the morning post has arrived, with all of life's disappointments… and sometimes with a few of its rewards.

3

Hello, It's Me...

And you know it is. You know *who* it is. Probably the 'hello' alone, whether spoken in the next street or from the furthest continent, clear or down a crackling phone line, is enough to reveal the identity of the caller.

Hello, it's me. Wherein lies the clue?

We all have an accent, particularly in England; an accent that betrays our social class or aspirations, our regional origins, even sometimes the countries or counties we have resided in for long periods – a different mother tongue even… but in the landscape of the voice these traces form only the background scenery; we all, too, have an idiolect, our individual manner of speaking. After all other features have been taken into account, this is the recipe that makes our speech our own, gives it a special flavour.

Yes, it contains accent, vocabulary, syntax, our unique way of expressing ourselves; but when you hear *Hello, it's me*, it is the tone and timbre of the voice that you recognise. Your voice is your oral fingerprint, your iris, your spectrum of sound. It is just as possible to be turned off by a voice as it is to fall in love with one.

Hello, it's me offers the briefest of pleasures. The rest of the call is far less important. What matters is that your lover, your child, your friend or your colleague has called and that you have immediately recognised him or her.

Hello, it's me. What follows may not be a pleasure. It may be a call for help, a distress signal; it may be disappointing news or simply a time-wasting chat. On the other hand it may be a huge relief. The missing child that has finally made contact; your mother to say that everything is all right now; a colleague to say your project has been accepted.

Hello, it's me may be practical information. *I'm on the*

train and am arriving at Etchingham at 19:11.

It may be good news. *I've passed my exams, I'm getting married, Julia has had twins and mother and babies are all doing well.*

It may be a welcome inquiry. *Are you free to come to the theatre next Thursday? Stay for the weekend? Would you like to come on holiday with us?*

Hello, it's me may be something more intimate. *Hello it's me. I just wanted to tell you I love you.*

Except sadly nowadays, more often than not, such messages are texted; and a printed or digital text is devoid of just those qualities that make the spoken voice so special.

4

On Not Having A Headache

You wake up knowing immediately something extraordinary has happened. You are relaxed, but no longer sleepy. There is a lightness about your body, about your head. As you swing your legs out of bed and stand up you are aware that the cape of pain has been lifted from your shoulders, the heavy hood thrown back from your temples and skull. You are as light-hearted as you are light-headed. For the first time in weeks your mouth explores a smile and you realise it is going to be one of those rare days of remission: you have no headache.

A gentle euphoria as you brush your teeth and take your shower; a sense of amazement that this is how most people must feel most of the time – pain free. Free, too, of the dreary muzziness of a clogged brain.

The clear-headedness is the best of it, and this clarity of thought leads to all kinds of possibilities. You feel hungry again, a hunger for food and a hunger for life. Your whole mood has risen, borne on albatross spirits and a soufflé heart.

At first you catch up on the backlog of little jobs, still not quite believing your luck. You tidy your desk, sort your more pressing bills and business, but your body, trapped for days in tension, demands a job to do too. So you clear up in the kitchen or in the garage, you turn the compost, mow the lawn. And while you relish this life-affirming activity your mind, like a sheepdog, chases after plans that have long gone astray.

Now is the time to see that play, film or concert, visit those friends you keep letting down, even to risk a glass of wine. Perhaps there will be time to throw a party, to plan a long weekend away, to take a holiday. You dare to contemplate the future.

Sometimes in this early stage of recovery you are truly inspired. Lines of verse or story, like flies that have been caught in the web of pain, now float free and drop into your imagination. You snatch at them, examine them and sink into such concentration of composition that a whole morning has gone by, lunch time too, and the sun is going down – before you resurface and wonder whether you are not squandering this gift, this precious space between migraines.

For always you are aware, deep down, that your parole is short. Nonetheless this pain-free mind is quite separate from the one usually thrashing about in torment and mist. You understand only too well that you are inhabiting this healthy body only temporarily… or perhaps that this happy being is only visiting you, and that the tyrant will sooner or later make his return, as unwelcome as a cancer. Those thoughts of long term plans, of holidays and of commitment are merely pipe dreams. All the more reason now, then, to get on with the present, to regain a life.

Depending on season and circumstance you may just luxuriate in the sheer comfort of not having a headache, of being able to think and dream and to write letters and poems; or you may pack your rucksack and go for a day's hike. You may rush up to town and take in an exhibition or a theatre, or you may even chance a long weekend away.

What adds piquancy to any of these options is the knowledge that at best you are only out on bail, that there will be no escaping another spell inside the throbbing, nauseous cage of your next migraine. But that, at the moment, is a distant threat. For now, it is only *this* very moment that

matters. *Carpe diem.* The pure, unadulterated happiness of not having a headache offers up a day to be snatched, run with, and treasured.

5

Simplicity

You were once stranded for three days in a small town in the rocky wastes of Andhra Pradesh, Southern India. An old man winkled you out of the small hotel where you had taken refuge from the heat, with an invitation to his home. You no longer remember how you travelled from the hotel to his house. You might have walked; or perhaps this upright old man in a white dhoti and sandals drove you there in an old Ambassador car.

You do remember, as you entered his house, that you were hot and thirsty and that he took you into a room that you have never forgotten.

On the way there he told you he was a retired judge and currently president of the town's Shaw Society. As a young man, he had been privileged to meet George Bernard Shaw off the boat in Bombay. The writer was to make a triumphal tour of the subcontinent, presumably spawning Shaw societies along the way.

The judge's house was a small bungalow: two or three rooms at most. The room he led you into welcomed you like a blessing. To this day you recall the whiteness, the coolness and the simplicity. The four walls and the floor were bare; there was an unpolished wooden table in the centre of the room, and two plain wooden chairs.

You sat opposite one another and drank tea, brought to you by a silent woman from the other side of a beaded curtain. There was nothing else in the room and the old man's mind was similarly uncluttered, if a little one-tracked.

"I had an ulterior motive," he confessed with great charm, "in inviting you here."

"It's nice to be here all the same," you replied guardedly but sincerely, enjoying the respite from the glare of the sun.

"Good. Now I have mentioned the Shaw Society to you. Always we are looking for fresh speakers, and today the gods have thrown an Englishman into our laps."

Pity you were not an Irishman, you thought, and protested that apart from having studied Pygmalion for "O" Level, you knew next to nothing about the great man.

"That I find hard to believe. You are too modest."

"No, really," you said, "and I certainly know less about him than do the members of your Shaw Society."

The judge saw that you were in earnest and said, "It does not matter. You may choose any literary topic."

You had taken with you a pirated copy of *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* by John Fowles, on your trek into the *mofussil*. You suggested a talk on that, and once he was reassured that it contained no bad language he accepted your offer.

When you both rose to leave you peeped into the other room. The walls were just as bare and white, the stone floor uncarpeted, and the only furniture was a bed and a chair. There were no clothes, no bookshelves. It was as simple as the sitting room – minus the slow turning ceiling fan.

You had a day to re-read Fowles' clever novel and to prepare your talk. You no longer remember what you said or how it went down. Looking back on those lost days you see an upright old man in his home-spun *dhoti* and *jibba* and the two rooms, beautiful in their simplicity inside the white bungalow kissed by dark green bougainvillea fronds, and bloodied with deep red flowers.

Ever since, you have attempted to clear your desk before and after getting down to work so that the surface at least is free of distraction. One day perhaps you will go a step further and build a cabin in the garden with only a chair and a table in it. Come to think of it, didn't the great GBS do something similar himself?

6

A Private Reading

The best poetry readings are small and intimate and enjoyed among friends. Then it is like a conspiracy. The one reading you will always remember was given by Nissim Ezekiel at the home of R. Parthasarathy, then editor of the Oxford University Press in Madras, as Chennai was still called.

The sound of your leather *chappals* on the concrete steps leading to Partha's first floor flat announced your arrival during a power cut to the quiet group within. When your eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness you recognised that those present were mainly your friends. They were reclining on low seats and cushions around a long coffee table on which two candles wrestled listlessly with the evening breeze. While you all waited for the power to return you chatted pleasantly, oblivious of the occasion for which you had all come and so savouring the informality all the more.

Eventually it was decided not to wait for the capricious electricity, and the poet/professor agreed that he would be able to see quite well enough by the candlelight. He sat sideways on the floor at the end of the table and Partha moved both candles up for him. Their halos encircled the poet's face and the untidy sheaf of hand-written papers which he held in his right hand. His thin rimmed, gold spectacles leaning slightly out and away from his bony nose seemed to balance on it like a pair of fragile scales.

He began quietly to speak.

He said that magicians usually kept up a patter during their performance, but he intended reading his poems as they came to hand. At the mention of magic the lights silently and swiftly flooded the room, making everyone and everything less attractive. The room, stripped of its shadows, took on an austere appearance. The straight edges of the few pieces of furniture redefined the symmetrical, pink-walled space in which we sat; the white refrigerator and hand basin at the far end glittered beneath the bare bulb. A slow ceiling fan began to stir the air.

Nissim took no notice of the change.

All these poems, he continued, had been written during the previous two years. He had been trying to write poems in themes, such as family, love, his “unreality” set and the poems in Indian English, some of which had already appeared in *The London Magazine.*

He read at random in a clear, conversational tone. It was rather as if he were speaking about himself in an unostentatious way. The confessions of a gentle man. His audience liked the poems because they liked the voice that read them and they liked the man who had experienced them. But they listened mainly in silence, and no-one spoke while he fingered through the papers, mischievous under the fan, for the next poem.

Some were narrative, some descriptive, some were a little bitter, some a little sad. Several were ironically amusing, and then you softly laughed. He timed these readings like a professional and his eyes twinkled when he announced the occasional love poem which, he said, could not possibly be read in public. You were all flattered, of course, at the inference that you were his friends and not his public.

Before anyone had time to fidget, or wonder when dinner was to be served, he stopped reading and returned to his original place on the settee, leaving his papers to dance lightly on the table top. The empty space this bird-like figure had occupied seemed absurdly exaggerated by the two heavy ladies who flanked it, each spilling out of her chair and bright pink sari.

Because it was an intimate circle the poet was not particularly on show, and you talked almost privately. He must have been asked the same questions a hundred times before, but he gave the impression he was answering them for the first time. He wrote in English because he did not know Marathi, his mother tongue, well enough to be able to write in it.

When he wanted to write he shut himself away for four or five hours at a spell. He rarely managed a poem at one effort but constantly wrote and rewrote, although strangely enough the latest Indian English offering, the poignant and delightful portrayal of a simple old professor, had come quickly at the end of a day’s hard and fruitless work at a more serious one.

Ambition? He had often thought of writing an Indian

Inferno, “but I am not good enough, not ‘great’ enough.” Despite the growing assurance of his verse and the objectivity with which he was able to discuss it, this modest statement was like a stone thrown into a pool, whose ripples spread throughout his poetry. He recognised that he was only a minor poet, a poet who wrote detached but accessible verse. And yet in so many of the experiences he was describing – his loves, both family and sexual; encounters, friendships – there was already an anxiety that the fire would burn out. As his technique and assurance increased, his preoccupation was to keep the spark alive.

Nissim Ezekiel was to remain prolific for many years. In his poem *The Professor* he wrote:

How is your health keeping?
Nicely? I am happy for that.
This year I am sixty-nine
And hope to score a century.

As it turned out, Nissim’s fears were realised when he fell victim to Alzheimer’s disease. He lived only another ten years, and you miss his gentle voice. In the same poem quoted above he finished:

If you are coming again this side by chance,
Visit please my humble residence also.
I am living just opposite house’s backside.

7

On Being Carefree

You cannot consciously be carefree: it would be too much to worry about. No, carefree moments in adulthood (in this troubled world) catch you by surprise, and are fleeting. Like happiness, being carefree cannot be

sought after; only enjoyed incidentally.

It was not always so. An infant's demands are basic and urgent. A baby bawls for milk, enjoys warmth and love – not free of but instead completely dependent upon care of another kind.

The years from two or three to eleven, though, as far as your memory goes, were carefree in the sense of being free from anxiety. School was an adventure, a place of exploration. Your mind was limpid and receptive, your friendships spontaneous.

Then came secondary school, a bigger society in which some boys were bad and some masters worse. There were other pressures: exams, competitive activities, building a CV, setting out the starting blocks for the rat race. In your studies you learned about the problems your world faced, and you felt you had to do something about them. You might have been challenged at times, stimulated, but in those turbulent days of youth and innocence lost you could not have been carefree. What adolescent is not troubled?

There followed university, a career, a family, all with their rewards but also bearing a heavy weight of responsibility. You despised material wealth, and wealth creators, and consequently always were (and still are) laid low by money worries. And all the while the world was getting more violent, weapons ”improved”, society fragmented. Your own values were regarded as quaint and old-fashioned.

You became care *worn,* rather than care *free*.

This was the norm, you thought, for most responsible, thinking people. In your naivité you assumed you should and would continue to shoulder the burden, whether by composting your waste, signing petitions, going on marches or joining *Médecins sans Frontières*. You still cared. Action, however despairing, was better than no action, was a positive force. You could no longer be carefree but life could still be enjoyed. It was not all doom and gloom – but how could it be carefree?

Nevertheless there do remain routes to reaching a carefree state of mind, without becoming an out-and-out Buddhist. They can be various, and variously effective. Some choose drugs and alcohol, others attain it through study or meditation, sex, religion or mountaineering.

But the simple moment of *being carefree* is not ecstasy, nirvana, engrossment, or any sense of elation. Neither is it

a conscious escape from the realities of life. It is neither a physical nor a deep psychological state. It is more a soufflé of emotion, a short lived breeze of contentment. For a few brief minutes you are free of care; that's all.

You might capture this in a waking mood, in a dream, coming round from an anaesthetic just before full consciousness sets in; it might appear after a busy day when you come in, make yourself a drink and settle down for a few minutes to relax and enjoy it at leisure before turning in for the night; or conversely you may experience it when you set off on a short break. You feel the weight of responsibility slip from your neck and shoulders, you feel light-headed, you have for a weekend out-paced your cares.

Provided, that is, you have not left your passport behind or forgotten to make arrangements for the cat.

8

The Fleeting Moment

The idea comes to you in a waking moment, in the shower or during a walk. Sometimes it comes in the shape of a poem, sometimes a story or a situation, sometimes it is just a line, one line full of promise. For a second or two you brim with bliss. If you turn over and go back to sleep, if you carry on washing your hair or you stride on to the next landmark, the idea will slip away, never to be recalled. If you were better organised you might have a notebook beside the bed or in your pocket (though probably not in the shower). It is sometimes possible, if you are so prepared, to jot down a phrase, a sentence or some memory of the fleeting idea. And perhaps later you will work something up from it. This is better than nothing, but it will not be the same. You will never quite recapture that original thought, any more than an enchanted toddler can catch hold of a soap bubble.

What is this *coup de foudre,* this rare moment when some apparently original and brilliant idea strikes you like lightening, burns through your imagination and sends out sizzling sparks? When it is a whole poem, a drama or a story that has never been told, it appears as a distillation of all that you have ever wished to write. It is the purest and simplest truth. It may be as short as a sonnet or as long as a saga. No matter, it is perfect and you have glimpsed it all. It is there for the taking.

When this happens to you, you will spring from your bed, you will emerge from your shower, you will pause in your rambling, and try to pin this vision down. You are radiant, excited. You are the medium. Your pen is poised over the paper, or your fingers hover over the keyboard…

And you can write nothing. To write it down would not do it justice, would damage it; to capture this elusive angel of inspiration would mean clipping its wings. It would no longer fly, no longer soar. On the other hand you do not want to let it go, you cannot bear to watch your vision dissolve.

You try again. Your mind's eye still holds the complete, the perfect picture, but the thinking brain, the hand, the fingers cannot find the words that will capture it. If ever proof were needed that thought preceded language, this is it. Yet how else other than with language can a writer convey his thoughts, his vision? A composer has music, an artist paint, but perhaps even to them at times sound and colour seem as inadequate as words so often do for the writer.

You go on trying nevertheless, and the more you try the more the concept shrivels up. You try a word, one word, just to pin a corner of it down, but the word diminishes it. You rush out a whole sentence, sometimes quite a good sentence; but dull as dirt compared with the shimmering purity of the original concentrate. Whatever you try, a summary, a description, a few keywords, a critique – all complicate the awful simplicity of the insight that jolted you from sleep, in the shower, in a rambler's reverie. All your interpretation does is to drip water onto whisky. A dilution, a pollution.

All the same, you cannot give up now. You may even write for hours. Possessed. Your efforts may result in the rough draft of something useful, good even. But you know

that it is only the shadow of a shadow of the inspiration that touched you. You will continue your search for a personal holy grail, for it is in these fleeting moments you find inspiration and a certain cruel satisfaction.

This, after all, is what keeps you going.

9

BBC World Service

You are in Southern India: your only personal communication with the outside world is by weekly aerogramme, a flimsy letter folded in on itself and sent by airmail. Your work correspondence similarly you write in longhand, and give to an Anglo-Indian stenographer to copytype and despatch. There is a telex machine that occasionally rattles into life, but no-one has ever thought of telephoning London and you have never rung friends or family in the UK. Fax, which also will depend on a good phone line, is twenty years into the future; email and the internet await the turn of a new century.

Your news, then, comes from All India Radio, the local press, and from visitors. The British papers are usually a week out of date by the time they reach the British Council Library. This does not matter much. The centre of your world has shifted. You go on leave only every eighteen months. Between times, none of that exists. Your life, and a rich and varied life it is, is very much centred in South India. Your work is a mere distraction, a means of earning a living.

Then suddenly there is war in the north. East Pakistan, formerly East Bengal, breaks away from Pakistan. The Pakistani army invades. India intervenes to protect her fellow Bengalis, ten million of whom flee across the border. There are blackouts in the northern cities – New Delhi, Calcutta and Bombay. You are assured that Madras, where you are, is beyond the reach of Pakistani missiles and bombers.

Nevertheless the papers are full of scare stories about Pakistani atrocities, of soldiers biting through the cheeks of the women they have raped; of prisoners being hung by the ankles from ceiling fans and spun around until the blood bursts from their ears; of children slaughtered.

You realise much of this is propaganda. But how much? You want the truth. You want to know what is really going on. You want to keep up to date. So do millions of Indians. The solution is to turn to the BBC World Service.

Reception on your Yachtsman Short Wave Radio is poor. The BBC obligingly sends you a length of thin, white aerial and a complicated diagram on how to rig it to suit local conditions. You and your gardener climb onto your flat roof and rig up posts to the water tank and the coping. Run the first length east/west, you read. The one thing you do not have is a compass, but you imagine your *mali* with his local knowledge would know.

"Moses, which way is north?"

Moses eyes you in astonishment, takes the diagram from your hands, studies it and points with his finger at the illustration of the points of the compass.

"N means north, other way south, I am thinking, Master," he says.

You know that, but cannot get him to relate the diagram to the location. He climbs down the ladder, shaking his head at your stupidity, you make a guess based on the position of the sun and rig up your aerial on your own. It works. You get a signal.

You are now able to listen not only to news of the war, but to news about Britain, to quiz shows, comedy, drama and even to *Match of the Day*. The signal rises and falls in volume rather like the noise from a football stadium heard from a distance, it pipes and whistles and crackles. But somehow you feel you are in touch again, the BBC is your umbilical cord pumping a pulse from the Mother Country into your increasingly foreign body.

Fifteen or so years later the reception has not improved. You are now in an even more remote area, where there is not even the luxury of electricity or of fans. And you are listening to another war. Argentina has invaded the Malvinas, Britain recaptures the Falkland Islands. From the centre of Africa, where your watchman guards your compound with a bow and arrows, the progress of this modern war is as

exciting as any drama.

Now, back in Britain with the entire world's media in your lap, you still tune in to the BBC World Service. Not the fatuous, time-filling TV offspring, but the radio version. When you are tired of being talked down to by local radio and bored with the parochialism of national radio, you can still get a more or less objective account of what is happening elsewhere in the world (or in those parts where there are still correspondents).

There is no longer any problem with reception. Sometimes you wish the technicians would enhance the even digital signal with a few squeaks and whistles and sudden fades. There is, after all, still a time warp. Is Nicholas Parsons really still alive? Sadly, Alistair Cook is not. But the very act of listening to the BBC World Service is another link in the chain of circumstances and events that has been your life.

10

On Finishing A Swim

Once a week you go for a swim. You do not enjoy it. Sometimes you have to force yourself to make the effort. You will feel better for it, you tell yourself, and you know this is true. It is for this psychological – and the physical – afterglow that you go.

Of course you pretend the whole exercise is to keep fit. But where else but the swimming pool do you ever catch athlete's foot, ear ache, colds, coughs and sore throats? Despite the ritual removal of footwear at the entrance, padding through the damp in dirty socks or bare feet, despite the compulsory shower before you enter, the heavy chlorination of the tepid (31°) water, you are fully aware of everyone else's spittle and expectoration (not to mention likely seepage from other orifices), shed skin and dislodged

hairs. Worse than the human contamination of the water is the infection of the air that hangs over it, heavy with chlorine fumes and often further polluted by booming muzak.

Nevertheless the pool is better than most: modern, functional and popular. Its popularity is the main problem. You do not go there to play, to splash about, to chat or to do aerobic exercises. You go to swim. You therefore choose the hours for lane swimming. During this time swimmers plough up and down in a straight line along clearly marked channels. There are two slow lanes, two medium, and two fast, each with its Up or Down direction. There is no room to overtake or to be overtaken.

The slow lanes are occupied by beginners, or those recovering from illness or accident. The fast lanes are for serious swimmers, sleek as seals, who effortlessly cleave the water, length after relentless length, clearly in training.

You are too quick and impatient for the slow lanes and nothing like fit or proficient enough for the fast lanes. You slot into the medium lanes, sandwiched between the incompetent and the achievers. The story of your life. The story of most people's lives, for these are the most crowded lanes.

Sometimes you find a large enough gap to do your thirty lengths unhindered, counting them down as if each were a day until the end of a prison sentence. Usually there is someone in front of you who is that bit too slow, or worse, someone behind you who keeps catching up, swimming that bit faster than you find comfortable. You could of course pause at the shallow end and let him pass, but then invariably someone else will jump in to fill the space you have created; rather like trying to maintain six clear car lengths between you and the next car on a motorway.

On a slack day you can forget everybody else and fall into a rhythm. The counting becomes hypnotic, until with relief you realise that there is only one more length to do. You like to finish with a fast crawl, imagining you are winning a gold medal. As a result you are sometimes too breathless, your muscles too weak, to haul yourself out of the pool and up onto your feet. When you do, you sway and pant. For a minute or two becoming vertical again is a challenge: distant ancestral memories of life emerging from the sea, perhaps.

Now the pleasurable part of the exercise begins. First

the hot shower and a shampoo; the warm water eases your shoulders, and by the time you are dressed and back in the car your body radiates relaxation. It is as though you are centrally heated. This effect will last for the rest of the day; all aches and pains and many worries have been sluiced away. A drowsy lethargy comes over you. You could doze off but a sharp appetite needs satisfying. You prepare a lunch that contains twice as many calories as you have just burned off, but each calorie tastes better after a swim than on other days.

To add to your sense of wellbeing is the knowledge that you have not got to go for a swim again for another week. You have done it.

11

Smile Of A Baby

Hastings, England

Late summer, and wife and daughter, grandson and you sit at a pavement table on the Stade in Hastings Old Town. You are waiting to be served “traditional” fish and chips.

Although the Old Town itself is attractive the beach front this end is kitsch, vulgar and loud. The clientèle of the pubs and cafés are mainly fat, poor, shapeless women who have never given up smoking cigarettes, and men with beer bellies and oaths for their dogs and children.

Charlie, your grandson sitting in a high chair, has no social prejudice or preconception. The stream of day trippers along the pavements, the constant passage of plates and people, the screech of gulls, all hold his attention, as mother and grandparents simply enjoy the sunshine.

At the next table a particularly hardened group of middle-aged women sit smoking and drinking, their gravelly voices making Marge Simpson and her sisters sound

sweet and sophisticated. They complain about the cost of living, the government, the schools, the traffic. Their jaws are set, their mouths grim straight lines, their eyes narrow behind the cigarette smoke.

Charlie watches these old witches in fascination. Only fourteen months old, he already knows a trick or two. Studying each woman in turn, he tries to catch an eye, a look. When the first woman does notice him he smiles. She turns away in disgust as though the infant were something dumped by a dog.

Undismayed, Charlie tries his charm on the second woman, catches her attention for a second, smiles – and she cannot help herself: she smiles back, and Charlie chuckles in delight. You, noticing the interplay, smile too and inadvertently catch the woman's eye as well. For two or three seconds you all hold the moment.

Southern Sudan

You had driven out onto the plains with your two year old daughter for an evening walk: an exercise and concept impossible to explain to anyone not European in that poor African town, and especially difficult to the Arab soldiers who kept the curfew and manned the checkpoints.

You had lifted Emily into the front passenger seat of your Land Rover and fastened her into the child seat; when you slammed the door shut she was invisible from outside. You climbed into the driving seat and set off back for Juba, confident of arriving well before the six o'clock curfew and the darkness that half an hour later would fall like a shutter.

At the bridge you were stopped by two young soldiers who normally would have waved you through. However one of them, eyes red from drink and dust and boredom, pointed his rifle and ordered you to accompany him to the little hut twenty metres from the road, where the militia logged the coming and going of vehicles and tried to extract favours and bribes.

You did not object in principle to accompanying him to his cabin, but not knowing how long it would take, you had no intention of leaving a baby alone in the heat of the stationary vehicle. The only way to reach and release her

was to walk around to the offside and open the passenger door.

You tried to explain this to the soldier, but as soon as you stepped around to the front of the Land Rover he stopped you and called for reinforcements. Now three soldiers were prodding you with their weapons, angry that a white man should refuse to obey their orders.

You talked, you gesticulated, you pointed. One of them at last understood that you had something urgent to impart.

"Come," you pleaded.

You led him to the door, climbed up and, turning, stepped back down into their midst holding your drowsy daughter. The movement woke her and, seeing all these new faces, she smiled. The soldiers laughed and smiled back. One of them pinched her cheek. She cried and her animation made them laugh again. All the surliness and the threat evaporated. The men signalled you to carry on, one even waving goodbye.

You realised you were smiling, too, at the power of a baby's smile.

12

On Meeting Yourself

A mail order catalogue advertises a radio for use in the shower. Your first reaction is one of disbelief. How long, then, do other people spend in the shower? Longer than an average pop song, an aria, surely not a symphony? *Thought for Today* perhaps, but not an episode of *The Archers.* The only reason you might spend longer than a few minutes, surely, is to wash your hair, and if washing your hair it would be difficult to hear the radio, shower proof or not.

No, having a shower radio is a symptom of some-

thing else. You have noticed how people cannot go jogging without an iPod, make a journey without a car radio or go to bed without TV. Many younger people are unable to sit in a room, even when there is a TV turned on, without texting or consulting the internet. Why? Perhaps because they are frightened of meeting themselves, of confronting the person they really are.

And yet it is a pleasure to be free of noise, of distraction. It is a pleasure to be alone with yourself and to get to know what you are really like. You might meet yourself briefly even in the shower, as you stand and let the water massage the tension out of your neck and shoulders. On a run, on a hike… it is an opportunity to spend several hours in your own company, to sift through your concerns, explore ideas together.

Je ne suis jamais seul avec ma solitude, sang Georges Moustaki *(I am never alone with my solitude).* Certainly the best way to start the day is on your own, by and with yourself. The only disadvantage of having visitors to stay is that you have to talk to them at breakfast, a meal that should be taken in silence. You want to concentrate on the flavour and texture of the grapefruit, the cereal, the coffee – whatever it may be. After all, you must surface slowly from the depths of unconsciousness, or you will get the psychological bends – a condition most injurious to your wellbeing. The radio, the TV, even a newspaper detract from this slow and peaceful acclimatisation to a new day. Guests are a bigger threat, hard work that encroaches too soon on your ascent.

A car journey for many is a chore. If it is routine this is understandable, and you see why many drivers lend half an ear to their radios. For you, however, the drivel so often spewed out by illiterate local radio presenters is more of an irritant than a pleasant distraction. If you resorted to the banality of local radio you would miss the opportunity to spend valuable time with yourself.

You may daydream together, you and your self, yet you remain more alert to the traffic and its inherent risks than does the driver with a mind drugged by the dross of, for example, a phone-in programme. Covering the ground towards your destination in silence you filter out the inessential. You can have a heart to heart with yourself in the privacy of the cell that is your car. And you will both emerge from that metal retreat refreshed and invigorated.

Often the self you encounter is not a person you would like to spend much time with, but occasionally the melding of minds into one can be helpful, even a pleasure. Many people like the sound of their own voice. How many, you wonder, listen to their own inner voice?

13

When Letters Mattered

Before email and GPS the world was a bigger place. It was easier to get lost in it, and time stretched like elastic. In the wonderful solitude of the traveller a letter could be a lifeline.

To be in a strange place then was to be ahead of habit, was to have to invent the pattern of each day, was to have to force momentum on it. There could be no falling back on the familiar, no riding along on routine. Such a life required a constant effort of will, of forcing that will on others and on circumstances.

It meant repeated exposure of, and sometimes damage to, whatever "self" it was that had to be asserted. This could be quite enervating. One pause for mental breath and despondency or depression could soak in to stain the day. So a letter from a loved one, from a friend, carried special significance.

In more remote places the arrival of the mail bag was infrequent. In the heightened state of mind in which the true traveller lived, the absence of an expected letter could be a serious blow. For, lacking conversation, you lived largely in your own mind. Problems "back home" (if you still had some point in geography and the past that you still called home), if they did not seem entirely distant, loomed larger; worries that should at most only have gnawed began to bite deep. No letter from A. Has she had an accident? No news from B. What can have happened to him? C has not sent a

letter for a long time. Is anyone looking after her?

The truth probably was that they all had written or intended writing; that in their full and clockwork lives it had not seemed to them time to write to you again so soon. Or, unaware of how precious their words were, they were unmindful too of the intricacies of the route the letter must take and the weeks it would need to reach its destination. And so, in time, the letters would arrive, never singly, never spaced, nor even in the order in which they were written. But usually they would arrive in a batch, later rather than sooner. Like Number 9 buses across a wilderness.

And what mattered of course, was the letter that did come. A letter that, received at home from a friend and read hurriedly over breakfast with a quick nod and a smile and tossed aside among the toast crumbs, possibly never to get another reading – that same letter read at a poste restante in a lonely place, or inside a baking Land Rover outside some agent's office in a bush town – that letter carried an altogether different load.

A word of encouragement, a bit of news, a simple, "we thought of you the other night when…", could charge you with great strength, renew your spirits. And the charge was repeatable on re-reading in whatever shelter you found that night, on waking from your makeshift bed in the first light of a yet-to-be-imagined day.

A word of love that spoken in a restaurant or on a train might be acknowledged by a squeeze of the hand or a decent kiss, when sung across continents from a letter lit up the savannah, coloured a whole day of your travelling life.

Some friends boast that they "never write letters" or today never bother with email; some relatives are "always too busy" but expect some mystic family tie to bind and to excuse them.

To the traveller, that is not friendship, that is not love, for it is lacking in imagination. Travelling, you learned the difference between love and duty, between friendship and simply liking. Real loved ones, real friends knew this instinctively. Their letters came into existence as a means of communication across the gap, but they were created, they were called to life as a result of their love. Theirs were the letters you waited for; they were your emotional food and drink.

They were, perhaps, why you travelled.