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Preface

WE ALL MAKE mistakes, but starting the Third World War would have been a rather large one. To this day, I still maintain it was not entirely my fault. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

During the course of my life, I've barely escaped the wrath of an arms dealer in Hamburg, been strafed by a MiG during the Nigerian civil war and landed during a bloody coup in Guinea-Bissau. The Stasi arrested me, the Israelis regaled me, the IRA prompted a quick move from Ireland to England, and a certain attractive Czech secret police agent – well, her actions were a bit more intimate. And that's just for starters.

All of that I saw from the inside. But all that time I was, nonetheless, an outsider.

To be honest, I never intended to be a writer at all. Long periods of solitude were first a circumstance, then a preference and finally a necessity.

After all, writers are odd creatures, and if they try to make a living at it, even more so. There are reasons for this.

The first is that a writer lives half his life inside his own

head. In this tiny space, entire worlds are created or erased and probably both. People come into being, work, love, fight, die and are replaced. Plots are devised, developed, amended and come to fruition or are frustrated. It is a completely different world from the one outside the window. In children, day-dreaming is rebuked; in a writer, it is indispensable.

The result is a need for long periods of peace and quiet, often in complete silence without even gentle music, and that requires solitude as an absolute necessity, the first of the reasons behind our oddness.

When you think about it, with the abolition of lighthouse keepers, writing is the only job that has to be undertaken wholly alone. Other professions afford colleagues. The airline captain has his crew, the actor the rest of the cast, the soldier his mates, the office worker his colleagues grouped around the water cooler. Only the writer closes the door, takes the phone off the hook, draws down the blinds and withdraws into a private world alone. Man is a gregarious beast and has been since the hunter-gatherers. The hermit is unusual, odd and sometimes weird.

You may occasionally see a writer out on the town: wining, dining, partying; being affable, sociable, even merry. Beware, this is only half of him. The other half is detached, watching, taking notes. That is the second reason for the oddness – the compulsive detachment.

Behind his mask the writer is always watching; he cannot help it. He observes, analyses, takes mental notes, stores nuggets of the talk and behaviour around him for later use. Actors do the same for the same reasons – for later use. But the writer has only words to use, more rigorous than the film set or stage,

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with its colours, movements, gestures, facial expressions, props and music.

The absolute need for extensive solitude and the permanent detachment from what Malraux called 'the human condition' explain why a writer can never really enter in. Membership involves self-revelation, conformity and obedience. But a writer must be a loner and thus always an outsider.

As a boy, I was obsessed by aeroplanes and just wanted to be a pilot. But even then, not one of an aircrew. I wanted to fly single-seaters, which was probably a warning sign, had anyone noticed. But no one did.

Three factors contributed to my later appreciation of silence in an increasingly noisy world, and solitude where the modern world demands jostling crowds. For one thing, I was my parents' first born and remained an only child, and they are always slightly different. My parents might have had more children but the war intervened in 1939, and by the time it was over it was, for my mother, too late.

So I grew into little boyhood largely alone. A boy alone in his playroom can invent his own games and ensure they are played by his rules and come to their desired conclusion. He becomes accustomed to winning and on his own terms. The preference for solitude is beginning.

The second factor in my isolation was occasioned by the Second World War itself. My town of Ashford was very close to the coast and the English Channel. Just twenty-two miles across that water was Nazi-occupied France. For a while, the mighty Wehrmacht waited across that strip of grey water for the chance to cross, invade, conquer and occupy. The bombers of the Luftwaffe droned overhead to raid London, or, fearing the

waiting fighters of the Royal Air Force, to turn back and dump their loads anywhere on to Kent. Other raids sought to destroy the great Ashford railway junction, just 500 yards from my family home.

The result was that for most of the war, many of the children of Ashford were evacuated to foster homes far away. Apart from a brief departure during the summer of 1940, I spent the whole war in Ashford, and there was no one else to play with anyway. Not that I minded. This is no poor-little-me narrative. Silence and solitude became not my bane, but my dear and lasting friends.

The third factor was the public school (meaning of course the private school) to which I was sent at thirteen. Nowadays, Tonbridge School is a fine and humane academy but back then it had a harsh reputation. The house to which I was allocated, Parkside, was the most brutal of all, its internal philosophy dedicated to bullying and the cane.

Faced with that, a boy has only three choices: to capitulate and become a fawning toady, to fight back, or to withdraw into some mental carapace like a turtle in a shell. You can survive, you just don't enjoy it. I survived.

I recall the Leavers Concert in December 1955 when those departing had to stand up and sing the 'Carmen Tonbridgiensis', the Tonbridge Song. One of the lines records that 'I am shut out of the garden, the dusty high road waits'. I mimed the words without singing, aware that the 'garden' had been a loveless, monastic prison and the 'dusty high road' was a broad and sunlit path that was going to lead to much fun and many adventures.

So why, eventually, become a writer? It was a fluke. I wanted

not to write but to travel the world. I wanted to see it all, from the snows of the Arctic to the sands of the Sahara, from the jungles of Asia to the plains of Africa. Having no private funds, I opted for the job I thought would enable me to do this.

During my boyhood my father took the *Daily Express*, then a broadsheet newspaper owned by Lord Beaverbrook and edited by Arthur Christiansen. Both were extremely proud of their foreign coverage. At the breakfast hour, I would stand at my father's elbow and note the headlines and the datelines. Singapore, Beirut, Moscow. Where were these places? What were they like?

Patient as ever and always encouraging, my dad would take me to the family atlas and point them out. Then to the twenty-four-volume *Collins Encyclopaedia*, which would describe the cities, the countries and the people who lived there. And I vowed that one day I would see them all. I would become a foreign correspondent. And I did, and I saw them.

But it was not the writing, it was the travelling. It was not until I was thirty-one that, home from an African war, and stony-broke as usual, with no job and no chance of one, I hit on the idea of writing a novel to clear my debts. It was a crazy idea.

There are several ways of making quick money but in the general list, writing a novel rates well below robbing a bank. But I did not know that and I suppose I must have got something right. My publisher told me, to my complete surprise, that it seemed I could tell a story. And that is what I have done for the past forty-five years, still travelling, no longer to report foreign news stories but to research the material needed for the next novel. That was when the preference for solitude and detachment became absolute necessities.

At seventy-six, I think I also remain part-journalist, retaining the two other qualities a reporter must have: insatiable curiosity and a gritty scepticism. Show me a journo who does not care to discover the reason why, and who believes what he is told, and I will show you a bad one.

A journalist should never join the Establishment, no matter how tempting the blandishments. It is our job to hold power to account, not join it. In a world that increasingly obsesses over the gods of power, money and fame, a journalist and a writer must remain detached, like a bird on a rail, watching, noting, probing, commenting but never joining. In short, an outsider.

For years I have fended off suggestions that I should pen an autobiography. And I still do. This is not a life story and certainly not a self-justification. But I am aware that I have been to many places and seen many things: some amusing, some gruesome, some moving, some scary.

My life has been blessed by extraordinary good fortune, for which I have no explanation. More times than I can count, a lucky break has got me out of a tight spot, or procured me an advantage. Unlike the moaners in every Sunday tabloid, I had two wonderful parents and a happy childhood in the fields of Kent. I managed to fulfil my earlier ambitions to fly and to travel and the much later one to write stories. The latter has brought enough material success to live comfortably, which is all I ever wanted anyway.

I have been married to two beautiful women and raised two fine sons, while enjoying so far robust good health. For all this, I remain deeply grateful, though to what fate, fortune or deity I am not quite sure. Perhaps I should make my mind up. After all, I may have to meet Him soon.

Whispered Words

MY FATHER WAS born in 1906, the eldest son of a frequently absent chief petty officer, Royal Navy, in Chatham, Kent, and emerged at twenty from the Dockyard School to an economy that was creating one job for every ten young men in the labour pool. The other nine were destined for the dole queue.

He had studied to be a naval architect but as the Great Depression loomed no one wanted ships to be built. The Hitlerian threat had not materialized and there were more merchant ships than anyone needed to carry the diminishing industrial product. After five years scraping a living from little more than odd jobs, he followed the popular advice of the age: Go East, Young Man. He applied for and secured a post as a rubber planter in Malaya.

Today it would seem strange to appoint a young man with not a word of Malay nor knowledge of the Orient to go to the other end of the world to manage many thousands of acres of plantation and a large labour force of Malays and Chinese. But those were the days of empire, when such challenges were perfectly normal.

So he packed his things, said goodbye to his parents and took ship for Singapore. He learned Malay and the intricacies of estate management and rubber production, and ran his estate for five years. Each day he wrote a love letter to the girl with whom he had been ‘walking out’, as they called dating back then, and she wrote to him. The next liner from Britain to Singapore brought the week’s supply of letters and they came to the estate in Johore on the weekly river boat.

Life was lonely and isolated, illuminated by the weekly motorcycle ride south through the jungle, out on to the main road, across the causeway and into Changi for a convivial evening at the planters’ club. His estate consisted of a huge tract of rubber trees set in parallel rows and surrounded by jungle that was home to tigers, black panthers and the much-feared hamadryad or king cobra. There was no car because the track to the main road ten miles through the jungle was a narrow, winding line of red laterite gravel, so he rode a motorcycle.

And there was the village in which the labour force of Chinese tappers lived with their wives and families. And like any village there were a few craftsmen – a butcher, a baker, a blacksmith and so forth.

He stuck it for four years until it became plain there was little enough future in it. Rubber had slumped on the market. European rearmament had not yet started but the new synthetics were taking more and more market share. The planters were asked to take a 20 per cent salary cut as a condition of continued employment. For the bachelors the choice was either to send for their fiancées to come and join them or to go home to England. By 1935 he was hawing between the two when something happened.

One night his houseboy roused him with a request.

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‘Tuan, the village carpenter is outside. He begs to see you.’

The routine was usually rise at five, tour the estate for two hours, then the morning reception when he would sit on the verandah and hear any petitions, complaints or adjudications in quarrels. Because of the early rise, he turned in at 9 p.m. and this request was after ten o’clock. He was about to say ‘In the morning’ when it occurred to him that if it could not wait it might be serious.

‘Bring him in,’ he said. The houseboy demurred.

‘He will not come, tuan. He is not worthy.’

My father rose, opened the screen door and went out to the verandah. Outside, the tropical night was warm velvet and the mosquitoes voracious. Standing in a pool of light below the verandah was the village carpenter, a Japanese, the only one in the village. My father knew he had a wife and child and they never mixed with anyone. The man bowed deeply.

‘It is my son, tuan. The boy is very ill. I fear for him.’

Dad called for lanterns and they went to the village. The child was about ten and racked with pain from his stomach. His mother, an agonized face, crouched in the corner.

My father was no doctor, not even a paramedic, but a compulsory course of first aid and a clutch of medical textbooks gave him enough knowledge to recognize acute appendicitis. It was pitch black and closing on midnight. Changi hospital was eighty miles away, but he knew that if appendicitis turned to peritonitis it would kill.

He ordered his motorcycle brought out, fully fuelled. The father used his wife’s broad sash, the obi, to fasten the child on the pillion, tied to my father’s back, and he set off. He told me it was a hellish journey, for all the predators hunt at night. It

was nearly an hour down the rutted track to the main road, then due south for the causeway.

Dawn was close to breaking some hours later when he rolled into the forecourt of Changi General Hospital, yelling for someone to come and help him. Nursing staff appeared and wheeled the child away. By luck a British doctor was coming off night-shift but took one look and rushed the boy to surgery.

The doctor joined my father for tiffin in the canteen and told him he had been just in time. The appendix was about to burst with probably lethal results. But the boy would live and was even then asleep. He gave the obi back.

After refuelling, my father rode back to his estate to reassure the impassive but hollow-eyed parents and catch up with the delayed day's work. A fortnight later the river boat brought the mail package, the usual stores and a small Japanese boy with a shy smile and a scar.

Four days later the carpenter appeared again, this time in daylight. He was waiting near the bungalow when Dad returned from the latex store for tea. He kept his eyes on the ground as he spoke.

'Tuan, my son will live. In my culture when a man owes what I owe you, he must offer the most valuable thing he has. But I am a poor man and have nothing to offer, save one thing. Advice.'

Then he raised his eyes and stared my father in the face.

'Leave Malaya, tuan. If you value your life, leave Malaya.'

To the end of his days in 1991 my father never knew if those words caused his decision or merely reinforced it. But the next year, 1936, instead of sending for his fiancée he resigned

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and came home. In 1941 imperial Japanese forces invaded Malaya. In 1945, of all his contemporaries, not one came home from the camps.

There was nothing spontaneous about the Japanese invasion of Malaya. It was meticulously planned and the imperial forces swept down the peninsula as an unstoppable tide. British and Australian troops were rushed up the spine of the colony to man defensive points along the main roads south. But the Japanese did not come that way.

Out of the rubber estates came scores of sleeper agents, infiltrated years before. On hundreds of bicycles the Japanese rode south along tiny, unknown jungle tracks, guided by the agents. Others came by sea, leapfrogging down the coast, guided inshore by winking lanterns held by fellow countrymen who knew the coast and all the inlets.

The British and Australians were outflanked over and over again as the Japanese appeared behind them, and in strength, always guided by the agents. It was all over in days and the supposedly impregnable fortress of Singapore was taken from the landward side, her massive guns facing out to sea.

When I was a child, but old enough to understand, my father told me this story and swore it was absolutely true and it happened nearly seven years before the invasion of December 1941. But he was never quite certain that his village carpenter was one of those agents, only that had he been taken, he too would have died.

So perhaps only a few whispered words from a grateful carpenter caused me to appear on this earth at all. Since 1945 the Japanese have been held responsible for many things, but surely not this as well?