

Something's Wrong

Sam Smith

Something's Wrong: Part One

One

tape 1. side 1.

Something's wrong.

<pause-click>

I had to stop there. Just saying that out loud. No, just thinking it aloud. Yes, just thinking it is highly dangerous. Dangerous for me.

<pause-click>

I stopped again. Stopped talking that is. Let the tape run on, had to rewind.

I expect I'll get used to it, learn to work with it. Because this is a tool. A tool. Like a saw, a hammer, a chisel. A spanner. Is a tool. Is the reason I got this machine and all these tapes.

<pause-click>

Usually I have no trouble talking. Get going and can't stop. Don't want to stop. The words all tumbling out. Coming from the air above my thatch and out through my mouth. Don't know what I'm going to say next. And there it is. What I've said. Makes me laugh mostly. With surprise.

Doesn't amuse others. Usually they get up and walk away. Have seen them roll their eyes. So I turn to the person the other side of me. Got to be seen to be talking to someone. Or else.

Now I've got this machine.

<pause-click>

You see I can talk till the quiet cows come plodding home. If they ever do. And the vocabulary is certainly all there. I am, after all, the product of a very expensive private education. So.... talking about myself is fine. It's what I've been used to doing. My difficulty now, a considerable difficulty, is in remembering. And remembering in a sensible order. Which is why I have acquired this machine. My short term memory is shot.

<pause-click>

To say what I've just said, to explain what had gone before, I replayed the whole tape to listen to exactly what I'd gone on about. Because going on is what I usually do. "You do go on." Oh yes, I do. Go on.

<pause-click>

But I got this machine because something's wrong.

Wrong with me?

Wrong with where I am?

Wrong with the people here?

If it's me, and it could well be me, then I have to be careful. Could be the beginning of another episode.

Though it certainly doesn't feel like that.

....Strange to mention my episodes, without the subject being immediately changed. Or a sudden interest being taken in what I am saying. But the subject getting quickly changed by me or they either way.

<pause-click>

No, it doesn't feel like the beginning of an episode. It's more something without a name.

Maybe it's just the strangeness of this place — having a belated impact?

Strange to me. Normal, maybe, to others. But I haven't been in a place like this before. Haven't had a room to myself before. Although the room isn't quite 'to myself'. I can't lock myself in here. Can't come and go quite as I please. But I do have streets I can walk down. Shops I can go in....

<pause-click>

Wish I could hold my thoughts together. All together at once. Examine them as a whole piece. Draw arrows, little circles around this thought, around that one, join them up, make patterns, see how they all fit together. But that.... that idea is already slipping away from me, another treading on its toes, pushing it in the back....

If I could write. maybe on a page it would all make some kind of reassuring sense. This word connected to that word, following this word, leading to that word. But the thoughts, the ideas, won't come down my arm to my pen. A few get as far as my elbow, and I look at the pen between my thumb and my fingers and I think it hasn't moved. So I think to tell it something else to write, and this time it gets no further than my shoulder. Then I forget to look at the pen, forget even that I'm supposed to be writing.

<pause-click>

It won't bother them to hear me talking in my room. Not the only one here does it. Funny thing is — and at this point I hear myself whisper, don't want any listeners to know — funny thing is that whenever I play the tape back I

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listen to it through earphones. Very small earphones. Like the children here wear.

I didn't know what they were at first. Thought they were some new kind of plastic jewellery. Worn dangling from both ears Same with the silver phones the taxi drivers down the hill wear clipped to their ears. I initially thought they were some new kind of vulgar jewellery too. Crass self-decoration, like their tattoos and their huge signet rings....

And the taxi drivers, standing beside their cars, to all appearances loudly talking to themselves in public. All so very different....

<pause-click>

No, something's wrong. But maybe it's because it simply is all so new. I'm just not used to it. But new's new. And the new is curious. And the new is interesting first time I come across it. And it doesn't worry me.

So what does worry me? I don't know what it is that's worrying me. And that's what's worrying me. All I know is that something's wrong.

<pause-click>

I was becoming agitated there. Let the tape run on. I had to remind myself that I'm doing this to stop myself becoming agitated. Something is wrong. This machine is a tool. Doing this is a means to an end. Not an end in itself. No sirree.

And as long as I'm heard just mumbling away in here no-one will bother. They'll just whisper together outside the door and walk away. No, they don't whisper. They lower their voices. One low voice answered by another low voice. Low voice question. low voice answer. When they agree they walk on. And when they get to the stairs, past everyone's door, their voices come back to normal and they start to talk of themselves. They prefer to talk about themselves. And if we're clever we remember to ask about themselves. Ask about their children. Ask about their new car. "New to me. Ha ha." Ask about their holiday. And they tell us. About their car, about their children, about their holiday. As if we're truly interested. As if we have no life of our own. As if we have to live their lives....

<pause-click>

Getting excited again. But not agitated. Just running away with an idea. And they're all in here. Inside this head. All the ideas. Just a matter of bringing them together. Then I'll know.

But mustn't get agitated. Mustn't sound agitated. Which is why I daren't say to any of them that I think something's wrong. They'll be bound to take it the wrong way. As a symptom. And I'm sure, this time, that it is not a symptom.

If I'm to solve this I mustn't get myself put back on the injections. Even on some of the new dark blue tablets. Can't have one thought on its own then, let alone hold a whole lot together. Be Robert as robot again. Told to get up. Told to go to breakfast. No, told to wash. Told to dry myself. Told to get dressed. Asked what I'm wearing. They choose. Lay it out on the bed. Maybe they made the bed while I washed. The bed smooth. Not rumpled where I got out of it. Told to comb my hair.

My hair.

My hair is yellow. Very thick and very yellow. Bald nurses have envied me my hair. "Something wrong with this world when you're stuck in here with that thatch and I'm out there, with my gleaming dome, trying to impress and pull nubile young ladies." Laughing themselves at what they've just said.

As if I don't deserve my hair. Wherever I've been. Whatever I've done.

One nurse, a girl, liked to comb my hair. She used to comb it into different styles, different shapes. Gave me different partings. Made my scalp sore. Which was why, dumb as I was that time, I knocked the comb out of her hand. Frightened her. Which was why I was put back on injections....

Or did they just increase the dose that time?

They were right. I can see the shock on her face. I don't deserve my hair.

<pause-click>

Here the nurses are called 'carers'. None of them have combed my hair, yet. One — he's left now — did take me down to the barbers. So the barber would know where I was from? But that realisation didn't come until after. Medication makes me slow like that. Like this.

The barber is actually a very nice man. He knows the town's history. And the town was always better back in those days, he says. He doesn't like today. Even if it's tomorrow when he says it. He doesn't like things today. Doesn't like the way things are today. And when he says he doesn't like something, of whatever it is he doesn't like, he says, "No offence." No offence just in case whoever hair he's cutting is a part of the something he doesn't like. "No offence." Or if they're sat behind him awaiting their turn in the chair — he talks to them in the mirror — "No offence." Or if any of their family are somehow involved in what he doesn't like and he doesn't know if they're anything to do with it. "No offence."

No offence if you too drive like a maniac. No offence if you too like this rubbish rap music. "Call it music?" No offence if you like a drink. We all like a drink — no offence — but.

No offence if you're divorced. No offence if you're a regular churchgoer. No offence...

Two

tape 1. side 2.

When I talked about my hair I meant to say also that the barber is bald. He shaves his head so that it doesn't show. But you can see where the bristles end and the brown shiny patch begins.

Sitting there, in his chair, while he snips and talks, "No offence," one gets plenty of time to study his head. In the big mirror that is. And I suppose he's right to shave his head. A barber suffering premature hair loss can hardly be a recommendation to potential customers.

No, that can't matter. Whether he has his own hair or not. One would still trust a sick doctor to give one the correct pills for one's own illness. Although, having said that, there's many a few I've shared wards with would dispute that assertion.

<pause-click>

Back to the barbershop. And I love the smell in there. Shampoo and shaving soap. And the cold shiny floor, hair sweepings....

His is altogether an interesting shop. He goes to great pains to make it interesting. In his window he sometimes has displays of ancient cut-throat razors. Or there's a white bust portioned into differently named parts. He told me once (or was he telling someone else? Yes, it was someone else. Not the kind of subject he'd broach with me. Probably forgot I was sat waiting with the others.) Yes, he told how barbers used to do bloodletting, how they used mostly leeches.

"No offence," he said — that's right — when he did see me. Maybe he assumed, given where I come from, I was a self-harmer. And I never wear short-sleeve shirts. Or tee-shirts. I prefer the secure feel of a collar about the back of my neck. A done-up shirt collar that is, buttoned at the throat. Not that I ever wear a tie. Got out of that habit in Secure. Don't let you have ties in Secure. Or belts. In one they gave us all brown velcro slippers.

<pause-click>

I didn't mean to talk about the barber. I can't think he's important. Standing in his doorway like he does. Watching the street.

Maybe he is important. Maybe because he sees everything. Knows so much. But knows what?

That's it. In his window sometimes — when it doesn't have flags and old war helmets — he has a glass bust. A model of a man's head. One can see into and through the skull. I've crouched down to look into it. Could read the old tobacco tin, 'Nosegay', on its side behind it.

And that's what I want to do, have to do — to see into my head. As if it too is made of blue glass. Blue glass with a yellow thatch. There's a thought.

<pause-click>

Something's wrong. And what I need to see is what's wrong. And it could be with me. Always has been. Well, not always. Was a time, when I was but a cub, when it was all outside me and all I had to do was work out what was what.

Although I didn't, as a child, think that I was working things out. I did mostly as I was told, did what I thought was expected of me. It didn't have to be worked out. Thought on. Not like this.

Something's wrong.

Something's gone wrong.

<pause-click>

What's wrong now is that this isn't working. To listen to what I was saying beforehand I've got to take this tape out of the machine, turn it over, rewind it, listen to what I was saying, skip some bits, find what I was saying that I think could have some bearing, then take the tape out, turn it over, rewind it, then fast forward to where I was before. By which time I've forgotten what it was I was going to say.

What's wrong, I know this, is my short term memory. How could I have forgotten? Ha Ha!

....The object, the singular object of this exercise, is to have in front of me all that I remember so that I can work out what is wrong. If anything is wrong.

No, something is definitely wrong. And I won't need all, every single thing, that I can remember. Just that which might be relevant. Except that.... I won't know what is relevant until I have worked out what is wrong.

<pause-click>

These are to be my spoken jottings. And I have to speak them. If I have a pen in my hand I'll get halfway through a sentence and start doodling. Then I'll realise, an hour, maybe two later, that I've doodled all over the page. I might then spend the rest of the day trying to divine what those doodles could possibly mean.

Once I start talking though.... Well I just go on and on. Until I run out of thought....

<pause-click>

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I think what I'm going to have to do is get myself another machine. Then I can listen to one tape while talking into another. Do a commentary on what I've already said. That way I can hold at least two things together.

Possibly.

Each tape is 45 minutes long. On each side that is. But I know that I won't be talking non-stop for the whole 45 minutes. Already, sometimes, I pause. Then I forget to start talking again. So I rewind to where I thought I was when I paused. But, because there are more than a few pauses, I can't be sure when I finished pausing. Nor do I want to tape over something that prove to be crucial.

Why am I telling myself this?

<pause-click>

Because it might get complicated. Physically I'll have to swap the earphone jack from machine to machine in order to listen to what I've just said — on the tape I will have been talking into on the new machine. And I will have to remember to turn off the tape on the other machine.

I'll go down and buy that tomorrow. Too late today....

Yes, tomorrow. In my yellow and green trousers. I've got them on this day. And I'll wear them again tomorrow. Green on the front and yellow down the backs of the legs. They're a bit long even for me, rumple around the ankles. But I like to go striding in them. Yellow before green. Green before yellow. Yellow before green.

If it was winter now I'd wear my long black coat with these trousers. The black coat with a split up the back. Then the yellow flashes out the black split as my leg goes back.

My black coat is seen to best advantage worn unbuttoned. Even on the coldest of winter days. Have it flapping out like a cape behind me.

Couldn't get much of a forward motion in the grounds. But here.... It being a warm spring, now summer, I haven't worn it yet. Inappropriate, they'd call my wearing it now. And — Whoa! Look out! "A change in your medication regime, Robert. Just to keep you level."

Level!? Levelled out more like.

<pause-click>

I haven't listened back. Just caught myself there.

I'm going to have to be careful with this — not to excite myself. Not if I'm going to find out what I think is wrong.

Think is wrong?

Think?

I think it? Not feel it?

No, I think it. This is not unfounded suspicion. Not paranoia. Somewhere in this walnut-noodle of mine is the thought I've got to dig out.

Something important has slipped by me. Something seen? Something heard?
Something only part-registered....

Think!

<pause-click>

It is here. It is here where something is wrong. I didn't have this idea before I came here.

Here?

What is here? Where is here? Here.

Here we are at the top of a steep hill. And when I say We I mean this house. And when I say Top, well we're not at the top precisely.

Well, yes we are. We are at the top of the steep street that comes straight up from the main street. That is the hill, park, carpark and rooftops that this window looks down over. In that order. That is the hill I usually walk down to go to the shops. And that street is over to the side of the carpark, past the recycling skips.

And that will be the street that I will first walk down with my black coat flying out behind me. In the winter.

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There is another hill. Not so steep. But longer. It comes up past the back of the house and goes on up and out of town. I rarely use that hill....

Tomorrow, when I go down the steep street, I will wear my green and yellow trousers and my baggy blue sailor's smock. I say Blue, the smock has however faded across the top of the shoulders. And I say Sailors, but real sailors I have discovered don't wear sailor smocks anymore. Just go down the harbour now and cast an eye over the sailors on their boats. If they happen to be wearing anything that even closely resembles a sailor's smock it will be but a cold synthetic waterproof. Not that the sailor wearing the waterproof will be cold. Many wear fleeces under their waterproofs. And when I say Cold it is the waterproof material that looks cold....

I have taken myself down to the harbour here, I try to go on weekdays, when there are fewer holidaymakers. The trippers walk ever so slowly where the holiday shops are, the ice cream and the burger shops. And the cheapo shops. That sell everything. But which is not where I'm going to get the new recorder from. I'm going to get that from the card and paper shop. Where I got this one. The stationery and artists' materials shop. It's in the main street. On the opposite side to the barber's.

In the main street I can get a good stride going. Especially on the barber's side. Not so many shoppers walking slow on that side.

<pause-click>

It's the racks of postcards outside the harbour shops that make the trippers walk slow. Impossible to get a decent rhythm going there. Got to stop and edge around those looking at the postcards, or queuing for ice cream. Or for

Something's Wrong Free Extract

chips. And it's by no means easy getting past them. The pavement's not wide, and the road's narrow, and there's a carpark at the end of the harbour. So, what with cars being parked in the road as well — on double yellow lines, no offence, park anywhere they like these days, see a traffic warden once in a blue moon, no offence. Once in a blue skull. No offence.

<pause-click>

No way can I get a good rhythm along by the harbour. Although there is a good march up the spiral road at the end. Up around to the lighthouse chapel on its little hill. One way up, another way down. Vary, choose, according to wind direction.

Been inside the chapel once or twice. Upstairs, duck your head, look up to see the light above its little white gate. A small room there with a crib. Downstairs is an altar with dry flowers. But no church people. Just someone who wants to tell you who lived there. Yes, yes, I say, as if I too am a visitor to the town. Yes, yes, I say, and I bend forward, hands behind my back like a professor. Like my father. Like the Duke of Edinburgh on a factory visit. Yes, yes, most interesting. A laundry, you say. How many children? Goodness. And no water up here...?

The Duke of Edinburgh, though, nowhere near as tall as my father.

Three

tape 2. side 1.

As soon as I came to this the second tape I realised that I had a problem. Well, a problem that is, aside from my forgetfulness.

No, that's not true. It's not my forgetfulness that's the problem. The problem is in arranging what I can remember. It's my inability to follow a train of thought. My lack of concentration.

Recall, appropriate recall. That's it. Recall at the appropriate time. Apropos appropriate....

<pause-click>

I am doing this to help me organise my thinking. So I need to regularly go back over what I have so far recorded to see what I was thinking. To hear, to listen to, what I was thinking. To have it all in one place outside of me. To not go over and over the same thoughts, and then to wander off at a tangent.

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And what I found....

....what I found was that, with the only the one tape machine I kept having to unload this second cassette, put in the first one, find out what I thought I had said and where I thought it was, listen, reload this cassette, by which time I'd forgotten what it was I was going to say and I was off on some other track and, realising it, was becoming increasingly irritated with myself. So I decided to go and get myself a second machine.

One would think that'd be straightforward enough.

I wore my blue sailor's smock. Not that the sailors I've seen down the harbour wear them anymore. They wear lycra, like the cyclists. Only not so tight as the cyclists, where you can see their bum cheeks wobble when they go over bumps in the road. You can even make out the dimple in the side of their bum cheeks.

<pause-click>

Not all of the harbour sailors wear the latest yachtsmen weatherproofs — discreet designer labels on velcro collar and cuffs. Like Nazi insignia, but in the best possible taste. Although some yachtsmen do seem to favour old woollen jumpers and chinos. Especially brown jumpers with a white and blue fleck.

One only sees the yachtsmen, however, when all the yachts are stranded at low tide, when each yacht is standing up on its two flat legs. Then the yachtsmen drive their cars down the lifeboat ramp, and park under the boats.

In the open backs of their cars they have lengths of loose rope and gas canisters, petrol cans, crumpled bits of sail.... fascinating paraphernalia.

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Nice word that, paraphernalia.

I saw a paddle in one car. Which I figured must be for when it's full tide and they have to get their little boats — called prams, or so I've been unreliably informed — out of the cage by the lifeboat station and they row out to their yacht.

. . . .

The yachts, afloat, are moored in three lines. Each yacht is tied to one orange buoy in front and one orange buoy behind.

Why does that interest me...?

Could be because untying the mooring ropes is such a tricky manoeuvre. They have to lean out of their little flat-bottomed boats and sometimes reach right down in the water to unknot the wet ropes. I spent a whole week recently waiting on the tides and watching for one of the lycra-clad yachtsmen to tip headfirst into the green water.

It will happen. But not, I have decided, while I am watching.

<pause-click>

I went down the shop to buy another recorder exactly like the first. And, as I said, I wore my blue sailor's smock, topped off with my peaked hat. Or should that be cap? Brown corduroy. Which wasn't what I'd been wearing when I'd bought the first recorder. Even so the shop assistant recognised me — when I told him what I wanted to buy. And I had to tell him, couldn't just take it off the shelf, as in a supermarket.

All of the cassette recorders and the electric calculators are locked in a glass cabinet, next to the inks and above the envelopes. That isn't all that the shop sells. There's wrapping paper and Lever Arch files, and — at the back of the shop — racks of greeting cards. In the front end of the shop they've got boxes of local fudge, jigsaws, pictures and small china figures. Plus lots of different pens and pencil sharpeners. All colours. Bright colours. Some like hedgehogs even. Green hedgehogs. Hedgehogs with thick bendy spines.

<pause-click>

The shop assistant.... That shop assistant has a round shiny face and his hair is gelled into little spikes. Not spikes with round ends like the hedgehog pencil sharpeners. No, these spikes end in what look like sharp points. Though, unless the gel sets really hard, I'm pretty confident that they can't actually be sharp. The gel still looks wet.

<pause-click>

Above the harbour, on the side where they keep the nets and the lobster pots — which they keep in another cage like the prams....

The prams are kept stood on their ends. Dominoes about to topple in a line. Behind high wire netting, like around a building site. Not that they can think that the prams, or the lobster pots, will escape. Ha! More to stop them being stolen.

No, what I wanted to say was that the two trawlers moor along that side of the harbour. I don't know which one of the trawlers it is owns the cage. Or whether they both do.

If it's just one trawler owns the cage he must suspect the other boat of planning to steal the pots from him. If, on the other hand, the cage belongs to both boats then they must suspect that a trawler from somewhere else is going to steal nets and pots from their cage.

Or do they suspect the roaming youth pack? When they drop down from the park above, bring their flicked cigarettes and cider bottles, create havoc? The cage, though, isn't that often closed, let alone locked. So they must be pretty relaxed over security....

A bit like this place.

<pause-click>

Over on that side of the harbour, was what I was going to say, all along there, right up to the other carpark, is what's nearly a cliff, but with trees growing all the way along. From one of the trees there's a long blue rope hanging.

I don't know if that rope's important. It's frayed a bit half way down. Figures large in my thoughts....

<pause-click>

Between the cage for the lobster pots and the cage for the prams there is a public lavatory. The roof has wooden slates and a skylight. If one stands on the path above one can see into the lavatory. Although one can't see any people. Not even the tops of their heads. Not even shadows coming and going.

<pause-click>

The shop assistant recognised me, and when I asked for another dictaphone he asked if the one I'd bought last week had broken. It's still under warranty, he told me. Bring it back and I'll send it to the manufacturers. No need to buy another one.

"It's OK," I said. "I just want another dictaphone."

"Really," he said, "if it's not damaged, just bring it back and we'll replace it."

The back of the shop had other people in it. A white-haired woman was looking through the racks of birthday cards and giving off little O-my giggles.

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I shook my head. Didn't know there and then what to say. I just wanted to buy another dictaphone.

"That one," I pointed to it, the twin of the one I had, "and some more tapes." I remembered to say please. I make a point of being punctiliously polite to shopkeepers.

"We're more than happy to exchange it," he said again. And he was all shiny-eyed kindness.

"I've got the money," I told him, took the notes out of my jeans. Blue jeans. With polished brown shoes. Not right that. And probably, I realised there and then, how he had worked out where I was from.

What I should have worn with my jeans were my suede desert boots. Except that they've got a fat stain on the left toe. Where Hazel spilt it down herself and me when we were rostered for washing up. I think she meant to scald herself. Except she had a plastic apron on and the worst that happened was that the fat splashed onto my desert boots. Some washed off in hot soapy water. But one spot stays. And I see it, every other step, when I walk. Gets me looking down when I don't want to be looking down.

<pause-click>

I had to tell the shop assistant a second time that I had the money.

"That one there," I said. "And another box of tapes."

They're small and fiddly the tapes, but I'm getting the hang of them. Practice makes perfect.

<pause-click>

He still wanted to talk me out of buying the dictaphone. I didn't know what to do. Just stood there, getting hot. And hot is not good in a blue sailor's smock. Certainly not good on hot days. To get cool I have to take it off completely. Over my head. Which means taking my cap off.

And all my vests are discoloured.

Don't know why.

<pause-click>

Nowhere else in town sells the dictaphones or the tapes. I didn't know what to do.

In the past being in situations like that has got me into trouble. Which is why I like to go where I don't have to speak. Or, like the newsagent, he sees me and he says, "Baccy or fags today?" And I say Baccy or Fags, and Please. If I say Baccy he says, "You OK for papers?" and I have to say Please or Am OK thanks. If it's fags he might say, "Need a lighter?" Although he only said that the once. I think he had some new ones for sale. Usually he just says, "That all?" and I say, "All thanks."

The newsagent's got a round face — something like that shop assistant. But the newsagent's chubbier and older, has to look after his toddler sometimes. Sometimes he jokes with her, laughs about her with his other customers. In the back room I've heard him shout at her. Not cruel. But she's done something naughty, made work for him.

His fat wife stands in the doorway of that back room. She is always, but always, indignant. She tells him about things that matter. He half nods to her while he serves customers.

<pause-click>

I knew that the gelled shop assistant was only trying to be helpful. But I didn't know what to do. Only that I had to see it through. So I stood my ground, just stood it, looking down on my money on the counter.

In that part of the shop the counter is the top of a glass case. Inside the case are watches and fountain pens. The fountain pens have gold nibs, and all have small white labels tied to them. The prices on the labels are in tiny handwriting. Not written, mark you, with a fountain pen.

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My money is still on the glass top. I knew how much money to bring. And I can see his chin-upwards reflection behind my banknotes.

Anyway I see him look across to the woman by the birthday cards, and he gives a shrug and gets out the key for the cabinet. He won't let it go though. He goes to a lot of bother finding the box for the dictaphone, telling me to hang on to the packaging, "...if it's not what you want." Then he puts it inside a carrier bag, holds the receipt up to me, and places that also in the bag.

By the time I got back up here I was in such a sweat. And it wasn't from coming up the hill the steps way.

Four

tape 3. side 1.

Doing this could get, as it has already got, but get yet more, confusing.

But, so that I can listen to what I've just taped, so that I don't have to take out the same tape and turn it over, then turn it back again, find my place.... What I'm going to do from now on is to record a new tape and turn it over later. And I'm going to number each side as it's recorded.

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I think that's right.

<pause-click>

I've just been listening on my other dictaphone — there! turned it off — and, what it is, what I've got to say is, Something's Wrong. And this is not paranoia. Maybe it is. But it's not like any paranoia I've had before. This has made me anxious.

It's something I've heard. Or something I've seen. And, whatever it is, it has some significance. Although it didn't register as such at the time. But it's there somewhere at the back of my mind. Something lurking deep, like a big old grey carp, in the weeds and recesses of my memory. I've got to lure it out. Got to. It wants to be known.

<pause-click>

The paranoia I had before, and I say this quietly now, was almost gleeful. Taking all sorts of odds and ends and making them fit my delusion. Manipulating each new little snippet into the overall scheme. That fits! Ha!

<pause-click>

Problem is — this is hard — the medication I'm on is designed to interfere with my thought processes. Which I've been convinced — No, I am convinced — is to the good. I don't want to go back to what happened before. But it's making this very hard.

And if I stop the medication how will I be sure that what I find out is real, is actual fact, and not delusion again? Which it was. Although I didn't think so at the time. Leastwise was happy to convince myself that it was the truth. Or I wouldn't have acted as I did.

Truths. It was more than the once. More than the one delusion.

.
This is so hard.

<pause-click>

This is not paranoia. It is more the worry of something overlooked. Something forgotten. Misplaced? Did I remember to change my socks? Put on clean ones after my bath? That sort of worry. Unease. But far more, far far more important than a change of socks.

<pause-click>

Whatever it is that's wrong, I don't want it to be extreme. I don't feel abnormal here. Or only when I try to buy two dictaphones in the same week.

A strange kindness that, that singles one out for pity.

....But enough of him. That's over, done and dusted.

Other than that I don't feel that out of the ordinary here. Even though I'm known to be from The Grove. And it's a small town. All the staff have families here. They must tell their families about us the same way they tell us all about them. And their families will talk to their friends and tell them about us.

And even if they don't know anyone who works here, if they only live close, walk past, drive past, there's a big notice outside — 'The Grove. Residential Home.' And one look at standing and staring Jim or overdressed Jenny, who are always hanging around out front, will tell them what we are here.

.....
That 'front' is actually the back of the house. All this row of houses, big old brick houses, were built with their entrances giving on to the park. Half of which is still there. The bottom half has been made into a carpark. Down below the carpark is the town. Well, all its slate roofs and chimney pots. Then the sea.

<pause-click>

This strip of park has a big tree up to my right, and down to my left are some swings. The swings are the only kiddies' stuff that's still working. Everything else in the park has been broken.

Could that be it? Could that be what's wrong?

Let's get this right. When I first came here, looked out my window and saw the swings, well, they just drew me towards them. A return to innocence? And for a while it was wonderful. It was winter and I had my big old duffel coat. It's brown and I can pull the hood up over my head and almost halfway down my face. With my hands stuffed down the pockets, or even sometimes up the opposite sleeves, it feels like I'm walking around inside my very own house. All warm and snug, with the cold air coming in through the open window of my face.

And that was what was great about the swings. I could get myself balanced, so I didn't have to take my hands out of my pockets to hold the cold chains, and, using just my legs, I could set myself swinging. Not high.

Something's Wrong Free Extract

But just so I had the wind at my back when I went backwards, in my face when I went forwards,

I spent hours down there. Free at last.

Until, that is, Danny — staff — took me aside. Well, that's what they call it. Taking to one side. Taking aside.

Actually what happened was that Danny knocked on my door in the evening. Evenings I stay in here to listen to the radio. Quite good reception here. For the stations I listen to. Can even get foreign stations. Not that that's of any use to me. I've only been able to pick out the odd English proper noun.

No, what I do is buy the Guardian on Saturdays. The Guardian is one of the few papers that lists radio programmes. And on Saturdays the Guardian has a little booklet that lists radio programmes for the whole week ahead. So what I do on a Saturday, and I enjoy doing it, is I go through the listings and I highlight — in orange — those programmes that I think might be of interest.

I bought the orange highlighter in the dictaphone shop. But that time it was a toad-faced shop assistant who served me. She just told me the price, took the money, and put the highlighter in a paper bag. One of those paper bags with swirly pastel patterns.

<pause-click>

Danny knocked on my door.

I wasn't listening to anything at that moment, had been waiting for 'Analysis' to begin. Can't remember what was being analysed. Or even if I ended up listening....

"Sorry to interrupt," Danny said. "But I've been sent to have a word."

He was still stood in the doorway.

"Can I come in?" he said. "Only it's confidential."

They said — when I first got here and was shown around — that this was to be 'my very own room.' No-one allowed in it but me. But which was, frankly, the usual bullshit. When others here have played up, or messed up, the staff have gone mobhanded into their rooms. Which they always do on the morning handover, when they've got plenty of staff. And when they've done it, whatever it was to be done, they will talk about it — among themselves, and thinking we can't hear — for the rest of the day shift.

<pause-click>

Danny said, "Can I come in?" And I expect I shrugged a Yes. Can hardly say No to staff. I do know that I turned the radio off. Only polite. And which is why I can't now recall what Analysis was about. Or did I listen to the repeat? ...Or was that the repeat?

<pause-click>

Danny leant back against the closed door, one hand behind him on the handle.

I don't think Danny's very brave. Although he has one ear pierced and his short hair is bleached blond, he is much smaller than me, and thin. He once showed me a tattoo on his upper arm. It's the face of a roaring tiger. I think I was meant to be impressed. The tiger's round head, however, is bigger than Danny's skinny arm. The tiger's whiskers go around the sides. I couldn't see if the whiskers met at the back.

<pause-click>

I think Danny might well be a junky. I've seen him coming out of the bedsits in the steep street that goes straight down to the High Street. The people I've seen him with had the look of junkies. And what, pray, is the look of a junky? Skin tight to the skull, dozy-eyed and yet jerky at the same time. A chemical thief in human guise.

And a couple of times that Danny hasn't turned in for work I've heard other staff, angry, complaining about him. And I've heard them say that so-and-so saw him off his face, out of his skull, in some club or other.

<pause-click>

Anyway Danny said to me, "You know you've been sitting on the swings? In the park?"

I said, "Yes."

Not a lot else I could say. The park is right in front of the house. Well, let's be accurate here Robert, the park is across the road. Which is not really a through road. Although it does go through. But it's one of those roads that is used more for parking than for driving through.

Its being wide the cars are parked on the slant, their noses against the hedge. Though I don't take much notice of the cars. This first floor window looks out over their gleaming tops to the park. And, it's being free parking, there's always cars there. While the carpark down below is more often than not three parts empty.

<pause-click>

Danny said, "We don't think it's a good idea. You sitting on the swings. Not with all the talk around."

"What talk?" I said.

To cut a long story short, what I didn't know, buying the Guardian only on Saturdays, and then primarily for the radio listings, was that one of the tabloids had been able to discover that — due to some new law or other

Something's Wrong Free Extract

— the town had more convicted paedophiles per head of population than any other town in England and Wales.

“What about Scotland?” I asked Danny.

“I don't know about Scotland,” he said.

“Are there Scottish paedophiles?” I asked him.

Danny, as I said, as I can remember saying (that's good), was very nervous. I think it was at this point that he started swallowing, his sticky-out Adam's apple going up and down his skinny neck.

I know what it is to swallow like that. I knew that his mouth was dry and there was nothing wet to swallow. You get the same with some medications. Your mouth's dry and you want to swallow, but there's nothing to swallow. So you drink water. Just to keep your mouth and throat wet. Gets to the point where you're frightened to go anywhere without your jug of water — one of those plastic jugs with a blue lid.

You can do ventriloquism with those flip-up lids. One ward I was on this manic chap walked up and down the corridor having conversations with his talking jug.

<pause-click>

The long and short of it was that Danny said ‘They’ thought it best, ‘given the present atmosphere,’ that I didn't hang about on the swings.

“Best give the kiddies' park a miss altogether, eh?”

The further upshot of it all was that two of our male residents — quiet ones, couldn't say that I'd paid particular attention to either: kind of people who'd walk through a room and you wouldn't know they'd been there — they were moved the week after. And the same happened, or so I heard the staff say, in a few of the other homes in the town.

It's only a small seaside town, but the big old Victorian houses here, some of them one-time hotels, lend themselves to residential homes. A local industry. Some are old people's homes, some halfway houses for ex-offenders, some for mentally handicapped, and some — like The Grove — for ex-mental patients like me.

All of which apparently accounted for there having been so many paedophiles per head of population.

....I wonder where they all went.

<pause-click>

That can't be it.