

STANMORE

I am standing on some kind of stage, naked except for some kind of loin cloth. There is a doctor to one side of me explaining what is wrong with my back and what he's going to do about it. Out front there is an audience of other doctors. How am I feeling? I am numb as far as I can remember. How do I remember it? Well, here's the strange thing: I have no memory of it as seen through my own eyes; I do not see my audience, the doctors; I see myself only through the eyes of the doctors, my audience. With some effort I can dredge up a vague image of a three-quarter rear view of myself over my left shoulder -- and that's it. I have made myself the object of my memory, rather than its subject. Did I do this at the time, or only afterwards? Is it an inevitable result of trauma? Whatever the case, it wouldn't surprise me if actors on stage sometimes experience something like it -- especially when the work is not going well! I think it is so with me. Perhaps we can simply call it 'self-consciousness' -- with degrees of severity along a continuum.

The condition the doctor was accusing me of is called scoliosis, a curvature of the spine, in my case towards the side, so that fully clothed there was nothing obviously wrong with me. But it was getting worse despite a succession of remedial efforts. I have already touched upon the attempts to hang me, my weight being supported by the neck, but after a number of tries they gave up and pardoned me as, I believe, is the tradition in these matters. I was sorry about that because I had a bit of a crush on my executioner; nothing embarrassing, we just enjoyed each other's company. My physiotherapist was youngish and attractive, looking very neat and elegant in her white uniform; intelligent, with an educated voice and diction; handsome rather than pretty, and with a slight moustache. The important thing for me was that she treated me as an equal. Lord knows what we talked about. However, there was one bit of kit she had, which I was allowed to sample, had nothing whatsoever to do with my treatment, but which I could look forward to every week -- a vat of semi-liquid wax. Immersing my arm in it was a little foretaste of heaven. When you take your arm out, the wax immediately solidifies; then you just peel it off and it slithers back into the vat and becomes one with itself -- a bit like the indestructible assassin in "Terminator". Should you take the trouble to tease it out, is there a profound metaphor to be found therein? I wish I could have seen more of this lady, but in a sense perhaps I did: I think she served me as a prototype, a model for the qualities I would, in the future, unconsciously look for in women.

However, this last, and other interventions having failed, drastic action was decided upon. I was almost fifteen, and it was seen as important that any surgery be done before I stopped growing. I was to be something of a guinea-pig. The procedure had been done before, but only in the United States -- a first time for this country. It involved partially correcting and setting the spine by grafting bone (someone else's) on to it and encasing the entire torso in plaster for six months; this time to be served in hospital; after which I would be released back to Chailey wearing some steel and leather contraption for a further six months. The operation was duly performed and judged a success.

The following months were very tedious. Early on, a further humiliation as I was being given a bed-bath. It seems I had a semi-erection, not that I was aware of it, and a flighty young nurse started giggling. A more sensible nurse snapped out, "Oh, do shut up! -- He's only a little boy." I didn't quite know how to take this, as I was fancying Miss Sensible in her fetching crisp uniform. Later, I tried to make friends with the boy in the next bed, but he turned out to be a cheeky pain in the arse 'Jack-the-Lad' who made himself a pest to the nurses by lifting their skirts every time they came near him. Now, I would have loved to see up Miss Sensible's skirt, but not in such an inane, bullying manner. I froze him out, and all I ever again saw of him was his back. Which indicates that he could at least lie on his side. I couldn't: with me, it was either on my stomach, propped up on pillows, for eating and

reading, or on my back for sleeping and nursing attention. I know what it feels like to be a beached turtle. Apart from these inevitable restrictions, there were two more difficulties with the plaster cast -- nerve damage, and wasps.

Nerve damage, because the edge of the plaster under my arm-pit pressed against the main nerve to my right hand so as to render it useless. It went dead. The arm hole was enlarged, and my use of the hand was restored. But this took a couple of months and, in the meantime, I needed/wanted to write, if only as a remedial exercise, so I had to relearn this basic skill with imperfect means. Back at school, we had been coached in the newly favoured style of handwriting that we knew as 'italic'. It is an educated, calligraphic hand of the kind you will find on diplomas and certificates framed on your wall. It is legible, elegant, but yet allowing some freedom of style and expression, but which nevertheless requires some practice. I had been getting on fine with it, but now this damned plaster had ruined any proficiency achieved, and I had to resume writing as best as I could. Furthermore, since that time, I know that my right arm and hand has not been so strong as my left, and I have ever since been frustrated at the awkwardness of my handwriting. Likewise, I prefer to drive in screws with my left, and I'm quite ambidextrous with a hammer (poetry in motion!). I strum a guitar and bow a violin wrong-handedly, likewise with pouring medicine into a spoon. Since that time, I have been wondering if I had been born a southpaw, but then been beaten into writing with my right. But I recall no such leatherings nor coercion of any kind. I have just Googled the topic: it seems that I am 'cross-dominant'. So there. But it is one of the Sorrows of My Life: it still upsets me that my handwriting lacks the fluidity and ease I would wish it to have.

Wasps, because it was a good year for wasps, so a bad year for beached turtles. Mealtimes were the worst: with your nose just a few inches from the plate, you were obliged to share your dinner with the damned things. And twice I had one crawl into my plaster cast. The first time I lay there for several minutes, trying not to breath, as it wandered around between my body and the hard plaster shell. Eventually, it just nonchalantly crawled out and flew off without stinging. I wasn't so lucky the second time: a hole having to be cut in the plaster to allow access for treatment. One pleasant thing the plaster managed was to collect the autograph of Peter Sellers who happened to be making a film nearby. I don't know what film, but I would guess it was shooting at Elstree Studios.

A more serious side-effect of the surgery was that my entire digestive system seized up, presumably the result of shock; for a good three weeks I could neither ingest nor expel. I was allowed sips of water, but these had to be sucked back from my stomach by a tube inserted daily via my nostril. I don't know which was worse, this or the drip-feeding, which should have been straightforward except the staff-nurses could never find the vein to put the needle in. This had to be done twice a day, and I once counted seventeen attempts; and such simple procedures were quite painful in those days. Finally, an anaesthetist was called and it went in first time. Thank God there was one on hand every time after that. In the meantime, on my bed-side locker stood a jar of jellied chicken, a luxury item from one of Auntie Lillie and Uncle Jack's parcels. It was there as a beacon of hope and inducement to get well, something to relish and salivate over in my mind. I also whiled away these tedious hours racing a sports car around mountain roads in Sicily for the Targa Florio. On a somewhat more mundane level, I was instructed to tell a nurse if I passed wind. Eventually, I did so, and there was much rejoicing. That a fart should bring such happiness! I was on the road not to Palermo, but to recovery.

Hospital schooling scarcely existed. There were half-hearted forays by volunteer teachers, but nothing more. I hope such things are better managed these days. The Boy Scouts did a bit better; and I was given a one-inch OS map and told to plot a route around the Chilterns; it was a very welcome

diversion; I just wished I could have seen what the Chilterns really looked like. It did, moreover, give me a life-long love of maps.

Mum and Dad managed to visit just the once; nothing more could be expected of a working-class family living on the other side of the country. The same went for Chailey; I can remember only one, maybe two, occasions that they made Parents Day. I wasn't too sad about it.

CULTURE CORNER

Aside from Eagle and car magazines, I can't remember any reading except Pieces of Eight. There was a television at the other end of the ward, and ITV had recently come on air, but this was no help to me as I discovered that I had suddenly become short-sighted. I suppose the experience was like trying to enjoy an early 30-line TV demonstration by John Logie Baird. But I wasn't deaf, and I now discovered the revelation that was Pop Music. I had been aware of it at Chailey and largely ignored it, but who, now, could resist the frenzy of Little Richard and the jaunty syncopation of Lonnie Donnegan? Lonnie I particularly liked because his songs were usually about something interesting, a story even, instead of the usual slop about 'love'. Another, equally important, revelation was my first close encounter with a black man. And I mean black, not 'of colour,' but a deep, shiny ebony -- and which came with an interesting, and far from unpleasant body smell. He was a staff nurse who looked after me for a time, and I was startled by his great beauty and gentleness. I guess I was lucky, at the age of fifteen, to become prejudiced for, rather than against.

BACK TO CHAILEY

The six months came to an end and I was released back into Chailey, but not before being introduced to another instrument of torture called the Milwaukee. This Heath-Robinson contraption was a metal and leather corset around the hips from which sprang three stainless steel bars up to a metal and leather collar to hold up the head. As a concession to humanity, there was a pivot and slide mechanism that allowed limited, lateral, head movement. I could sleep only on my stomach, and I couldn't use a chair except to kneel on it. It was, of course, hideously uncomfortable, but it's surprising what you can get used to: at the end of the six months I was playing kick-about football. Here, I found I was a formidable player to tackle: I would just charge ahead, feeling the ball at my feet, knowing no one would tackle me for fear of colliding with my metal cage.

At long last, the day came for the iron maiden's removal. The doctors were pleased. "The operation has been a success. Your back is now as strong as anyone's. Just don't go jumping off brick walls". You may imagine the sense of release. I felt as light as a feather as I swayed about and floated in the back of a rickety old ambulance returning me to Chailey. But almost immediately it was the summer holidays, and I didn't get to look at myself in a full-length mirror until I got home. An enormous shock. I was appalled. A year ago I had been a normal-looking boy. Now I was a hunchback. In partially straightening the spine, they had twisted round the rib cage so that now the left shoulder blade protruded in a definite hump. Some success, huh?

What was I to make of this? What did I make of it? Since then, and up to now, as I approach my seventy-fourth birthday, I have nursed the strong and corrosive suspicion that the doctors were culpable; not of negligence, but of arrogance; the arrogance of demonstrating their prowess, of testing the limits of their expertise, of furthering their careers at the expense of my true welfare. I have suspected that it would merely have been enough to arrest and set the spine and leave the rib cage alone. It was surely enough to sabotage my already patchy education without leaving me, at the tricky age of fifteen, girls and sex in the offing, with the self-image of Quasimodo. Did such considerations

occur to them as they opened up my back and did whatever they did? I have always doubted it -- they being too busy in the mechanics of it. (And much the same applies to me being sent to Chailey in the first place -- the fledgling NHS, here, trying out its wings). In short, at the age of seventeen, when I left Chailey, I decided I was damaged goods. Some years later, a psychiatrist friend was to tell me I had a monkey on my back. I tried my best not to let it 'blight my youth'; but the monkey was always sitting there on my shoulder, and it didn't get bored and slink off until my late thirties. However, when it came to writing this, realising the subject needed some rigorous emotional effort, and a little piffling research, I piddled around the internet and concluded that I needed to revise these long-held suspicions that had ossified into articles of faith.

Deep breath! Yes -- I needed the operation at that time. Yes -- it was probably necessary to shift the rib cage out of the way of the lungs and heart; particularly as the spine itself could resume deformation, as can happen with old age. This seems to be the case with me, as it was most certainly with my Granny Dunwell. And inheritance can be a factor in the condition. So, my apologies to Mr. Manning, the surgeon. And let me remember I was a guinea-pig, so the good doctors were still feeling their way. And my apologies to myself for the resentment that my monkey had found so sustaining. Of course, my old nasty suspicions may very well be valid. But how am I to know? Unless one is intent on a lawsuit, it surely must be more beneficent, in these circumstances, to side with the Panglossian view. So, after all this time, that is what I have decided to do. All was done for the best.

Mind you, I still cannot see why I was sent to Chailey. But, although I have mouthed off about my patchy education, I see that some of these patches were just what I needed, and I doubt I would have received such stimulation at my local secondary-modern in Clevedon. So there, Hatton.

On my return from the summer holiday they made me Head Boy at St. George's. Idiots! Most of my friends had done their time and had been released back into society, and those who remained I felt awkward with, largely because of my new status. In modern political terms, I had been parachuted in, I had no power base, I was isolated. I was also faced with a gang. This new boss was just an ordinary thug who sported a lock of teddy boy hair on his forehead and worshiped Elvis Presley. I once tried, pathetically, to confront him, and was thumped for it by one of his minions. Mind you, I asked for it, not by confronting him, but by the incredible stupidity of insisting upon one of my 'privileges' -- an extra fifteen minutes in bed at wakey-wakey time. Wet flannels were applied, even by friends, not that I blame them -- I would have done the same. Everyone else went down to breakfast while I stayed in the dormitory and (for the first time since the brussels sprouts episode) wept bitterly.

There was a coda to this. A few years later, at the first of my only two attendances of Old Scholars Day, I received an apology for my being made Head Boy. It came from a nice man, Mr. Galletly, who had replaced Mr. Knott as chaplain while I was in Stanmore. He took his moment and sidled up to me. He said he realised that it had been a mistake, and how difficult it must have been for me. I can't remember what my response was, but I wish I could have been more gracious. It was unexpected and I was embarrassed. By the by, it was on this same day that Neil fell and hurt his arm. Also with, the event being a sleep-over, we old cronies got horribly drunk and the next morning, at breakfast, 'things were said' by our hosts.

I've already described my O level attempts. But furthermore, on my return from hospital, I found that I had won a National Boys Club competition for Art. The art was a painting of a racing car cornering on a Sicilian mountain road, a pre-figuring of the fantasy which would help me through my trials in hospital. I received a certificate for it, which I still have. Also, the school awarded me a copy of Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, and I still have that.

Now, the question arose, “What on earth are we to do with this boy? Where does he go from here? Brushing aside my suggestion of an apprenticeship as a motor mechanic, it was concluded that the only possible place for me was in an art college. It was a wise decision. One I am truly grateful for. For one thing, I would have hated working on my back, which seems to be de rigueur in the motor trade; for another, I can’t bear doing anything with my hands all greasy. So, without too much ado, I was accepted and signed up for a course in commercial art: a National Diploma in Design (NDD) at the West of England College of Art, Clifton, Bristol. It just remained for me to work at my O levels and serve the rest of my time. My life at Chailey ended not with a bang but a whimper, and the only emotion I felt, as I rattled past that White Horse of Westbury for the last time, was a subdued sigh and a “Thank God that’s over.”

