

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 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....