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## Rui Zink

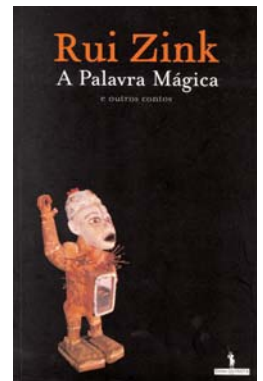
Rui Zink has written novels, short stories, essays, plays and children's books, more than twenty works in all. Comics and fantasy literature influence his work in fiction. This is evident in particular in Zink's cult novel *Apocalypse Nau* (1996, "Apocalypse Nau") whose first-person narrator is a devil. Zink has taught at the University of Michigan in the USA and translated Saul Bellow's works into Portuguese. Nowadays, he lectures on Portuguese literature at the Universidade Nova in Lisbon. He has been involved in street theatre and happenings, he wrote a libretto – *Os fugitivos* [The fugitives] – for grand opera that was performed in Lisbon last year, he was also the author of the first Portuguese e-book *Os surfistas* [The surfers].

### SYNOPSIS

*A palavra mágica* brings together 13 short stories written between 1996 and 2005, some of them already published individually. "Of these short stories, two are obviously autobiographical, six are hugely paranoid, one blatantly plagiarised..." according to the author: "Not being quite as dead as all that – now that seems like a good idea for future projects!"

### COPYRIGHT

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### *A palavra mágica e outros contos*

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### The Writing Bug

All my friends write. Great. All my friends love to write. Fantastic. Even I don't dislike writing, though I no longer do it. Ah, to write! To write words. To write things. To write the world. The world inside us. And the world outside us. All my friends write. All my friends are writers. All my friends produce books.

And it's not just my friends, it's everyone else as well. My neighbors write poems, the waitress at the café writes detective novels, the bank employee writes love stories, and the grocer writes historical romances. The man who used to deliver my mail has also taken to writing – travel books, I think it is. My mother writes science fiction, my brothers write comic books, and even our distant cousins write – best-sellers, if I'm not mistaken, or maybe they're just essays on neo-ecological hermeneutics.



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Only my father doesn't write, because he's already dead. If he were still alive, he'd write for sure, and I know just what – picaresque novels. In hospitals all the patients write, and the doctors who give them prescriptions write too. Even the nurses, the ambulance people, the police on duty and the employees at the reception desk are forever writing literature, even if it's just medical literature.

The situation is dire. The government has already announced that it's going to take measures. It's possible, admitted a government spokesman, that a national state of emergency will be declared. The spokesman no longer speaks – he himself contracted the disease. I happened to read what he wrote, but I don't know if what he said – if what he *wrote* – was serious or if it was just another chapter from his new (and utterly fascinating) political novel. In fact I was probably the only person to read it, or rather, one of the few, since there must be others like me. I mean, I have to *hope* there are. The fact that I don't know anyone else like me shouldn't be confused with the fact, still unproven, that there *is* no one else like me.

The disease is highly contagious. It makes Ebola seem like child's play, so fast does it reproduce and spread. The incubation period is three to six hours, after which the victim suddenly goes from being a normal person to a... a *writer*. The hospitals, bursting at the seams, are glutted with people aching for their next dose of pen and paper. And they have to write more and more, increasing the dosage, since they have ever more ideas, more and more love for Literature, for Beautiful Words, and for the Secret Poetry lurking behind the Beautiful Words – and even behind ugly words, say the terminal patients.

Scientists have yet to isolate the virus or find an antidote, and they can't even identify the disease's origin or describe its pathology, since... That's right, they're all too busy writing. There are even people who've wasted away and died from starvation. It's shocking but hardly surprising: they write, they don't eat, they die.

The number of traffic accidents has soared. Countless cars drive right off the road. Taxi drivers will be all set to switch into third gear when they remember a phrase, start writing, let go of the wheel and... Yes, it's frightful.

Even children are writing. Those who still haven't learned the alphabet invent one, or they scribble symbolic figures, and invent stories, stories, stories. One-year-old toddlers, even babies of just a few months, grab pens or pencils and move their tiny fists back and forth with unheard-of dexterity. Of course they end up tearing through the paper and scribbling beyond its white borders all over the floor, but they don't care, they keep on going, writing the Symbols of the World. And their parents don't care either, since they themselves are busy writing. Besides, what does a scribbled floor matter if the scribbles are a brilliant children's story about a princess who, by offering

a strand of her beautiful golden hair, is able to help a knight not get lost in the black forest where he has to fight an evil dragon? Well?

Nothing like this has ever been seen before. The situation is catastrophic and shows no signs of letting up. I'd like to say this in another way, but there's no other way to say it: the world is in danger of collapsing under the weight of so many novels, novellas, short stories, essays and poems. Poems in particular are like a plague of locusts: odes, palinodes, elegies, eclogues, epigrams, epodes, quatrains, couplets, dithyrambs, pentameters, hexameters, alexandrines, ballads, rondels, rondeaus, sonnets, sonatinas, sestinas.

I'm not exaggerating. The Earth has already shifted slightly out of orbit. And the number of writers and poets keeps growing each day. Along with the number of written words. And innovative sentences: short ones, long ones, sentences of just one word ("He. Said. To. Her."), sentences without commas that run on for two hundred pages ("There's no point in providing an example here it would have to take up two hundred pages but this little sample may give some idea or better yet I'll waste a few more lines on this idiotic sentence so that the point I was trying to make will become clearer and more convincing and I think that's enough now the point has been adequately conveyed I think"), caprices and labyrinths of syntax we wouldn't think possible or reasonable.

One always wonders: "What will they invent next?" Or: "Is there still something else to invent?" At least that's what I always used to wonder – before the epidemic. For if there's one thing the disease has proven, it's that the possibilities of invention are endless, along with our inventive capacities. It's sad but true: the human imagination is in continual expansion, like the universe. The human imagination is a black hole that consumes everything, that swallows everything. And humanity runs the risk of extinction precisely for that reason. For having too much imagination, too much talent, too much creativity.

There's a limit, for heaven's sake, to how much artistic and cultural production we can take. Or there should be, since there evidently is none.

And, what's more, it's quality work. Yes, who am I to deny it? Not only are people writing obsessively, they're writing things that are actually quite good, interesting, solid, worth reading, with a personal style, filling a space in the space of literature that hadn't yet been filled since no one knew that the space existed or was fillable until it was filled. Each person creates his or her own niche with the same anxiousness and the same millimetric precision observable in the swallow when it builds its nest. And if it's true that one swallow doesn't make a summer nor one writer a literature, many swallows together – thousands, millions, billions of swallows together – can make not >>

one but a whole slew of summers, which will include, like a free bonus, a generous helping of spring, fall and, of course, winter. And there's the rub.

There's the rub, and the genius of this virus. It makes people write – and write well. If it gave them the urge but not the talent, we could rest easy. A doctor who discovers, after hundreds of pages, that he's merely produced a bad parody of Robin Cook may well go back to practicing medicine, which is what he's really good at. And a lawyer who realizes that not every woman can be Agatha Christie has a good chance of coming to her senses and going back to helping her clients. But what about an obstetrician who writes original, beautiful pages? Or an attorney who can keep us in suspense about the killer's identity until the very last paragraph? What then? It's sad. It's tragic. It's unbearable. Well-constructed stories, with perfect control and believable characters, embodying the essence of genuine *literature* – which isn't in the words but beyond them, and which makes a piece of writing beautiful.

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At first there was a kind of collective euphoria. The newspapers spoke of a “New Renaissance”, the critics of an “Unprecedented Moment” in our literature, the political powers of a “new, exuberant generation of creators”. Before long there were some small signs suggesting that this new flowering of talent wasn't without its problems, but no one could grasp – or wished to grasp – what was happening. The fact is that many people were already contaminated and had begun to write, hesitantly and with a sense of responsibility at first, then ever more furiously – until the inevitable novel.

And now? Now the world is a dreary place. Yes, these are gloomy times, and they'll get worse when winter arrives. In summer we don't notice the absence of ants, only of grasshoppers. But when winter comes... The marketplaces are deserted, bread and other basic foods are no longer distributed, nor is bread even baked. The shops are empty – with their doors wide open to the street, but empty. With no one to look after them, no one at the cash registers, no one to turn the lights on and off. In the supermarkets you can take away whatever you want in the shopping carts, but if you don't have a coin you can't get a cart, since there's nowhere to change money.

There are, to be sure, some positive aspects. Televisions have stopped working, so that there are no more soap operas or “reality” shows. And the irony is that they ended precisely when the number of scriptwriters increased a thousandfold, such that there would at last have been some variety in the industry. The problem is that there's no one to make scripts into films: no actors, no cameramen, no makeup artists, no directors, no assistant directors, no

producers, no lighting crews, no wardrobe personnel, and no one to do postproduction or editing. They've all gone off on their own to write the novel of their life. There are also, less positively, no more weather reports. I shudder to think of boats setting out to sea with no idea of the bad weather that awaits them, but I immediately realize what an idiotic thing I've just said. There's nobody left to set out to sea. The fishermen have all abandoned their nets, harpoons, decks and baits. They're busy setting down on paper their tales of shipwrecks and adventures with fish whose names are unpronounceable, sequels to *Moby Dick*, improved and updated versions of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Did I say earlier that I'm perhaps not the only one to have read the government's latest communiqué? Perhaps I'm really not, but I don't know where the others are – the others who weren't affected by this collective insanity – nor if they're like me or if they've suffered some sort of mutation. I can't say why I've remained immune to the virus. Something to do with my DNA, with my genetic code, with my blood type, with a shortage (or excess) of cholesterol in my blood? I lack the scientific data to venture an explanation without running the risk – to be especially avoided, given the present situation – of lapsing into science fiction or into a delirious fantasy passed off as objective knowledge.

If I'm not the only person in the world who at this moment – perhaps the final moment of humanity – reads what other people write, then where are my comrades in arms? Is there a chance we can join together and create a bastion of resistance, an underground movement to fight against the epidemic, to search for a cure – through study, reading, theory and experimentation – that will restore health to mankind and get the world working again? I don't know, but I confess I'm not too optimistic.

I know what I am: I'm a reader. I read what other people write. I do it compulsively. It's a habit I've had for many years. In the morning, at breakfast, even if I don't have the pages of a newspaper with their still fresh ink alongside my cup of coffee, my eyes instinctively scan the table in search of words, letters and phrases to read: “Corn Flakes”, “rich in vitamins and minerals”, “Shop 18 – Rua Camilo Castelo Branco, 15-A”, “Margarine – 100% Vegetable Oil, 250 grams”. Going about the rest of my day, I read everything: all the newspapers, all the signs, all the numbers on all doors, all the names of all the doctors on the plaque outside the clinic on the street where I pass by – and my eyes pass by – every day. I read all the novels and poems that pass through my hands and as many essays as I can during my lunch hour while gobbling up the daily special at the counter of the snack bar near where I work, and my job at work is to read all the documents placed on top of my desk for that very purpose – for me to read them. >>

I don't know by what miracle I stayed immune to the virus. And the funny thing is that I wasn't always this way. When I was young I myself tried to write. Yes! Not even I managed to get through life without having tried my hand at writing! But the fact is that, back then, a lot less people wrote. The times were different, illiteracy was still widespread, life was mostly spent working. Later on I realized that I preferred reading to writing. It was easier, more relaxing, less time-consuming. Superior in every way. But in the past I myself, I confess, was hooked on writing. A few poems, a couple of short stories, two or three scenes for plays – nothing special. But there's no use hiding the fact: I was convinced I knew how to write.

Perhaps that's how I gained immunity. Perhaps my youthful folly – I wanted to be a writer! – functioned as a vaccine. Yes, that may be what has protected me so far, but I'm not sure if this is a blessing or a curse. I'm a reader in a world of writers, and that makes me feel – poor me! – all alone. Because everyone writes, but no one reads what others write. No one but me. They don't have time. They're so engrossed in telling their story, in conceiving their monument of Art and Imagination, that they have no time to read. In fact it's not even a question of having time, it's that they're *incapable* of making themselves do it. They can't make themselves sit down and read. And soon they won't even know how to read. Thus languages will come to an end, even before the world does, because everyone will write increasingly in his or her own language, in his or her own private code, forgetting that communication is a two-way process and that, to be understood, one has to use elements that both parties understand. No one reads. They just write. They die. Such is the potency, the demented perversion, of this virus.

\*

And you, my fellow survivor? I don't know if you exist in this world that's collapsing. If you read this, then evidently you do, and now you'll know that somewhere on the planet, perhaps in your own city, there's someone else who shares your fears and anxieties, but also your hopes. And perhaps we can meet. It would be great to exchange ideas on the subject, to join forces and to search for other people like us: readers with *immunity* to the writing bug. I know that your initial reaction will probably be to think: "This guy is trying to pull a fast one. He himself is a writer, not a true reader. He himself was contaminated and is trying to convince me otherwise, probably for some devious purpose."

You have every right to think that way, and it's what I myself would think if I ran across a story like this one. We're not suspicious by nature but we learn to be so, and a certain wariness vis-à-vis our neighbor is probably not a bad thing. All I ask you is to give me the benefit of the doubt.

Ask you? No, I beg you. Here I am on my knees, begging you to believe in me. This isn't a story, it's not a work of fiction. I am merely, genuinely, trying to make contact with someone who exists on the other side of the page.

I'm reaching out my hand to you. Please consider the possibility of reaching yours out to me.

One last thing. Don't respond in writing. I realize you're probably immune, but you never know. Just show up. I'll know how to recognize you, and you'll have no problem in recognizing me. We'll be the only ones – in a public square, in a park, on a street, in a café, or wherever it is we meet – who will be peacefully sitting there with a smile on our lips and a book, open wide, in our hands.

### The Big Tip

Two businessmen in a small restaurant.

"Isn't our waitress fantastic?"

"Yes, she's good."

"I think I'll leave her a nice big tip."

"No need to," says the other. Businessmen never forget the value of money. "The service is included."

But the first one insists: "Today I'm feeling generous."

\*

A surprised waitress.

"Excuse me, sir."

A heedless businessman: "Yes?"

"You left..."

"Yes?"

"... too much money."

An unflappable businessman: "I don't think so."

A stunned waitress: "A hundred euros? Your bill comes to fifteen euros and forty-five cents, sir."

A self-confident businessman: "I know how to add and subtract. And I left exactly what I meant to leave on the table."

A stunned waitress: "A hundred euros? To pay for a bill of fifteen euros?"

A witty businessman: "And forty-five cents. Don't forget the forty-five cents."

"Are you sure you don't want any change back?"

A magnanimous businessman: "No. You keep it all. For being so nice."

"But..."

\*

A nosy coworker.

"How much did he leave you?"

"A hundred euros. For a bill that came to fifteen..." >>

An outspoken coworker: “Wow! That’s what I call a generous tip.”

A hesitant waitress: “Should we split it?”

A coworker with her mind made up: “No. He gave it to you. That’s how we do it here, so that’s how it should be. I worked at another place where we split the tips, and it only caused problems. There was a schmuck who didn’t put his tips in the pot. This system is better.”

“All right. If you say so...”

An insidious coworker: “And you must have done something to earn that tip.”

A waitress who’s afraid she doesn’t understand what the coworker is insinuating: “What do you mean?”

A coworker cool as a cucumber: “Nothing. The tip is yours. You earned it.”

A waitress who’s afraid she understands all too clearly: “What do you mean?”

A coworker cool as a cucumber on ice: “Nothing. I don’t mean anything. Merely that you must have earned the tip that the man left you. And let me add that he wasn’t bad-looking.”

Yes, a waitress who’s afraid she understands all too clearly: “What do you mean by that?”

“Me? Nothing. Just that you’re really lucky.”

“...”

“Why are you pulling that face? I didn’t say anything.”

\*

A husband who arrives home.

“So how was your day?”

An intimidated wife: “Fine...”

“Just fine?”

A wife who’s not sure what her husband is getting at: “Fine. Normal.”

A husband who knows there’s more: “That’s not what I heard.”

A suddenly tensed-up wife: “What did you hear? From whom?”

A husband-turned-lion who won’t let go of his prey: “Are you sure there was nothing special?”

A wife who finally understands. Who understands that, even if she’d forgotten, no one would let her forget. About her fantastic luck. About the great thing that happened to her that day: “Oh, of course. You’re right, there was something.”

“And what was that?”

A wife who smiles, trying to show she’s happy: “I received an 85 euro tip.”

Why, after all, should she feel guilty? She didn’t do anything wrong.

“And that was something special, don’t you think?” she hurriedly adds. “It’s not every day we get lucky like that.”

A husband who smiles, but it’s not a friendly smile: “Oh really? Quite a tip, I must say. Splendid.”

“Thanks.”

“But I don’t understand. You received this tip?”

“Yes. That’s what I said...”

A sardonic husband: “And from whom, if I may ask? Don’t tell me it was from the Holy Spirit.”

A wife who doesn’t believe what’s happening: “No, no. It was... from a customer.”

“A customer?” repeats a husband with a nasty smile. “Well that’s just grand, darling.”

“Yes...”

A husband who hasn’t called her darling for years: “A customer.”

“A customer, of course. Who else would it be?”

A husband with venom in his words: “An appreciative customer, I dare say.”

A wife who denies it, of course. What else can she do? “I didn’t do anything to receive that tip.”

A self-respecting predator who won’t let go of his prey until its neck is broken: “A satisfied customer, right? I imagine he was quite satisfied. Correct?”

A nervous wife. A wife who knows they haven’t been getting along for some time now but who still wonders why he has to be so nasty: “But darling...”

Not only that, for once in her life she did absolutely nothing wrong. She merely received a good tip!

“It’s not really all that much money...”

Too good, that’s the problem.

“Eighty-five euros?” A husband who whistles an astonished whistle: “You must have provided him with exceptional service.”

Too good of a tip. Much too good.

“Don’t talk like that. I didn’t do anything, I just...”

A predator who, losing his patience, comes right to the point: “What did you do to satisfy your delighted customer, huh?”

“Don’t talk like that. Please...”

“TELL ME, YOU SLUT! WHAT DID YOU DO TO MAKE THAT CUSTOMER SO SATISFIED WITH YOU?”

A terrified wife: “Stop it, please. Think of the neighbors. You know they hear everything.”

“OUT WITH IT! WHAT DID YOU DO FOR HIM TO GIVE YOU THAT MONEY? YOU WENT TO THE BATHROOM WITH HIM, WAS THAT IT? YOU GOT DOWN ON YOUR KNEES, WAS THAT IT?”

A wife who doesn’t know which way to turn: “Don’t talk like that. You have no right to... Aaah!”

\*

A good lawyer: “Your honor, my client doesn’t deny the tragic events that took place.”

>>

A judge who doesn't like being taken for a ride: "The crime he committed."

A lawyer who smiles as if at a child, okay, you win: "The tragic events in which he played an active role, your honor. My client is perfectly aware of that. I merely wish to point out that there are extenuating circumstances."

A judge who looks over the top of his glasses at the lawyer. An old trick to let him know that patience has its limits. "Extenuating circumstances? Hmm. You may proceed."

A grateful lawyer: "With your consent, I call my first witness."

\*

A very good lawyer, in fact: "Is it true that the deceased received an especially generous tip on that day?"

An ex-coworker on the defensive, a fish out of water in the courtroom: "Yes... But that wasn't her fault."

A curious lawyer: "Is it common to receive tips of almost one hundred euros?"

A hesitant ex-coworker: "Well..."

"Have you ever received such a large tip?"

An ex-coworker whose honor has been insulted: "Who, me? God forbid!"

A contented lawyer: "Is that right?"

A tongue-tied ex-coworker: "I mean, I was never that lucky."

A satisfied lawyer: "Thank you. I think we've all understood. You were eminently clear. I have no more questions."

\*

A good neighbor: "Well, it's not like we put our ears to the walls, but you know how it is in old buildings..."

An understanding judge: "Just tell us, Madam, what you heard on the night in question."

A good neighbor who hesitates: "Well, they started yelling and..."

A prudent judge: "Both of them?"

A good neighbor with a fuzzy memory: "I think so, I'm not sure."

A judge in search of facts: "And what were they saying?"

A direct speech in the first person: "*Tell me, what did you do to make the customer like you so much?*"

A judge who wants facts, only facts: "Is that verbatim?" "Excuse me?"

"Is that what you heard? Are you certain that's what you heard?"

A good neighbor protesting innocence: "Yes, more or less. You could see that the husband..."

An ever-ready lawyer: "That man there in the dock?"

"Yes... You could see that the husband had his reasons for being angry at her. I mean, all that money..."

A judge trying to put the witness at ease: "Eighty euros isn't exactly a fortune, is it?"

A good neighbor brimming with honest simplicity: "I know, your honor, but it's a..."

"It's what?"

The triumph of common sense: "Your honor must admit that it was a very big tip. Anyone in his place..."

A judge arching his eyebrows: "Would commit murder? Is that what you mean?"

A good neighbor squirming like a caught fish: "No, that's not what I mean. But... A man can lose his head... Can suspect that, you know..."

\*

A just sentence. Three years.

Well, not exactly three years. An offender with no previous record and significant extenuating circumstances. The incident that prompted the tragic event, namely the exaggerated tip, was after all highly suspicious. Three years, therefore, two and a half of which were suspended, leaving the offender to serve six months in jail. At heart it was an accident, nothing but a lamentable accident. Perhaps, the judge had to admit, it was even a terrible misunderstanding. Involuntary manslaughter, in any case, and not premeditated murder, which would have resulted in a far harsher sentence – fifteen to twenty years without parole.

One of life's unlucky tragedies...

Seven blows in the head was a bit much, but the witnesses had been convincing: it was an impulse of jealous passion, leading to an unjust death but motivated by a cause that, although not just, wasn't entirely unjust. What, after all, would induce a man to give a one hundred euro tip to a mere waitress?

\*

Two men on the telephone, face-to-face and separated by a thick sheet of glass – not bulletproof but close to it.

"When do you get out?"

"Three more months."

"Must be a bitch."

"Don't worry about me. The time goes by quickly."

"Quickly?"

"Yeah, quickly."

"I'd never have guessed."

"Especially when the end is in sight."

"Well, that makes sense."

"I'm learning to work with clay. It's fun."

>>

“Glad to hear it.”

“Anyway, thanks for coming to visit.”

“I’m the one who needs to thank you. The dough we agreed on has been deposited into my account.”

“A decent wad of dough, if I say so myself.”

“But I earned it.”

“I don’t deny it,” says the imprisoned man.

“I hope not. It was a job well done.”

“Even so... Five thousand euros just to have lunch is pretty decent pay.”

A businessman never forgets the value of money. “Four thousand and nine hundred euros. Don’t forget that I had to pay for the lunch.”

“And leave the tip.”

“And leave the tip – right. A nice big tip.”

A satisfied ex-husband: “An unbelievably big tip.”

### The Magic Word

I’ll never forget my first expletive. It’s such a fond memory that I’ve even thought of framing it. But how frame a four-letter word? Especially when it begins with S, making it the dirtiest word of my childhood (which wasn’t that long ago, but long enough)?

To pronounce that word was no easy task. It took planning, strategy, and managerial skill – qualities I didn’t even know I had until then. I’m proud to say that at eight years of age I planned – and executed! – my first swearword with the maturity of an adult carrying out a difficult enterprise. Napoleon didn’t weigh the pros and cons of invading Moscow any more than I debated before uttering my first expletive. I prepared myself just as carefully as Gago Coutinho and Sacadura Cabral did, before they flew across the Atlantic. Not even Vasco da Gama, as he set sail for India, was more aware of the enormity of his undertaking than I was of mine, on the day I said my first dirty word.

Where I lived was a fringe version of Alfama, without the renown of Lisbon’s oldest neighborhood but with the rest of its characteristics: narrow streets with the air of a village, a self-contained world where cars rarely came through and where fishwives walked barefoot. In the square in front of the convent we played ball; on the curbs of the streets we pretended to bike – with rolling bottle caps – all around Portugal; we zoomed down the hill in our go-carts (the forerunners of karting), and the cheese vendors got furious when we made off with their wooden boards to build, like earnest shipwrights, our hotrods.

The local population was mixed – mostly working-class, but with other groups that rubbed shoulders there: displaced bourgeois kids (like me) and boys from dirt-poor Mouraria who hiked up the hill every day. When spring arrived, war broke out between the different streets, with

sticks, stones, slingshots and toy swords serving as our weapons. During the rest of the year a precarious peace reigned, with our soccer matches sometimes degenerating into free-for-alls of yelling and kicking each other in the shins. A happy childhood, all things considered. (Eat your heart out.)

Expletives, from the simple “Damn” to the more sophisticated “Go screw your grandmother” were a fundamental rhetorical device. Anyone who didn’t resort to them, at least occasionally, was dubbed a “faggot”. And although we didn’t know exactly what a faggot was, nobody wanted to be one, not even those of us who later discovered that it wasn’t after all such a bad thing to be.

Now guess who, for years, couldn’t bring himself to say even the slightest, mildest expletive? Right you are.

One day I decided it was time to put an end to my disgrace and become normal, like everyone else. And there was only one way to become a normal, accepted, full-fledged member of the tribe. I’d identified the problem, but its solution required action as well as know-how. I had the theoretical know-how. I was familiar with the basic lexicon of expletives and knew their function, if not their precise meaning. Through patient observation of others, I had acquired a thorough understanding of how and in what context the various swearwords should be used. I knew the right tone and intensity of voice for each. Certain swearwords expressed extreme irritation, while others merely indicated mild annoyance. Some swearwords, depending on the intonation, could even express admiration. “F---!” usually indicated extreme irritation, but “f---ing” could express wonderment, as in, “That boy’s a f---ing good writer!”

\*

Time for a break. I’m not much for jokes, but now and then I come across one that, besides being funny, offers a philosophical insight, a lesson for life. Maybe you’ve already heard this one. If not, then I think it will be worth your while.

Two men were working in the house of an old lady, who was forever complaining to their boss about the coarse language they used. So he finally told them to watch their tongues.

“At least when the poor old lady’s around. Have a heart.”

“Don’t worry, boss,” they assured him.

But two hours later the woman phoned to complain about them. One of them, in particular, had uttered one of the crudest, foulest, ugliest and dirtiest expletives imaginable.

At the end of the day, the boss chided them: “You promised no more dirty words, and the poor lady calls to say you used *that* word – a real doozy.”

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“But it’s not true, I swear it,” said one of the workers. “All that happened was that Chico was on the ladder soldering a wire, and at a certain point a drop of boiling solder fell on my hand. So I looked up at him and said, in a soft voice, ‘My dear Chico, do you realize that you carelessly let a drop of boiling hot solder fall on my hand? I don’t want to bother you, but this has caused me a pain that’s rather excruciating and consequently just a tad unpleasant.’”

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This joke demonstrates how useful words are – even swearwords, *especially* swearwords – for solving problems. In the beginning was the word, says the Bible. And there’s no culture or religion that doesn’t speak of the healing word, the soothing word, the word that’s like aspirin. I knew all about this on my street next to Alfama before I turned eight years old, even if it was only then, at eight years of age, that I had the courage to respond to the world with the balsams the world demands.

I carefully chose the occasion, a soccer match in the square in front of the convent, and waited for just the right moment. I didn’t have to wait long. It came when the

roughest and toughest of my street companions – poor guy, today he’s HIV positive – delivered me a swift kick in the shins, just as I was about to send the ball between the two stones that marked the goal. His foot rammed hard into my lower leg, the pain signaled to me that the time had come, and I got ready – determined as I was, after months of intense moral and psychological preparation – to say my first dirty word.

And I said it, though it arrived, unfortunately, a few tenths of a second too late. In matters of bad behavior, as in everything else, good timing is of the essence. I started falling to the ground, as if in slow motion, while furiously mumbling to myself: “Now, you dummy! Say it now!” But it wouldn’t come out. Incurably timid, I kept berating myself: “Go on! Say it! Now!”

Until at last I stammered: “Sh-sh-sh-shit!”

It’s true that everyone laughed and clapped. “What do you know, Zinky said a dirty word!” It’s also true that I was a bit ridiculous. And it’s true that I couldn’t brag to my mother when she called me for supper. But I’m still, almost forty years later, proud of my accomplishment.

And now I can brag about it.

Translated from the Portuguese by Richard Zenith, 2005