



# Happy Birthday, Dear Happy

*By Andrew O'Hagan*

## **Andrew O'Hagan was born in Glasgow in 1968**

In 1995 he wrote *THE MISSING* and in 1999 he published his first novel, *OUR FATHERS*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, the Whitbread First Novel Award, the International Dublin IMPAC Award, the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, and was winner of the Holtby Prize for Fiction.

His second novel *PERSONALITY* was published in 2003. He won the E.M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and was named one of *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists. *PERSONALITY* also won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction.

Andrew O'Hagan's work is published in the *London Review of Books*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The New York Review of Books*, and the *New Yorker*.

Since 2000, Andrew O'Hagan has been a UNICEF Ambassador.

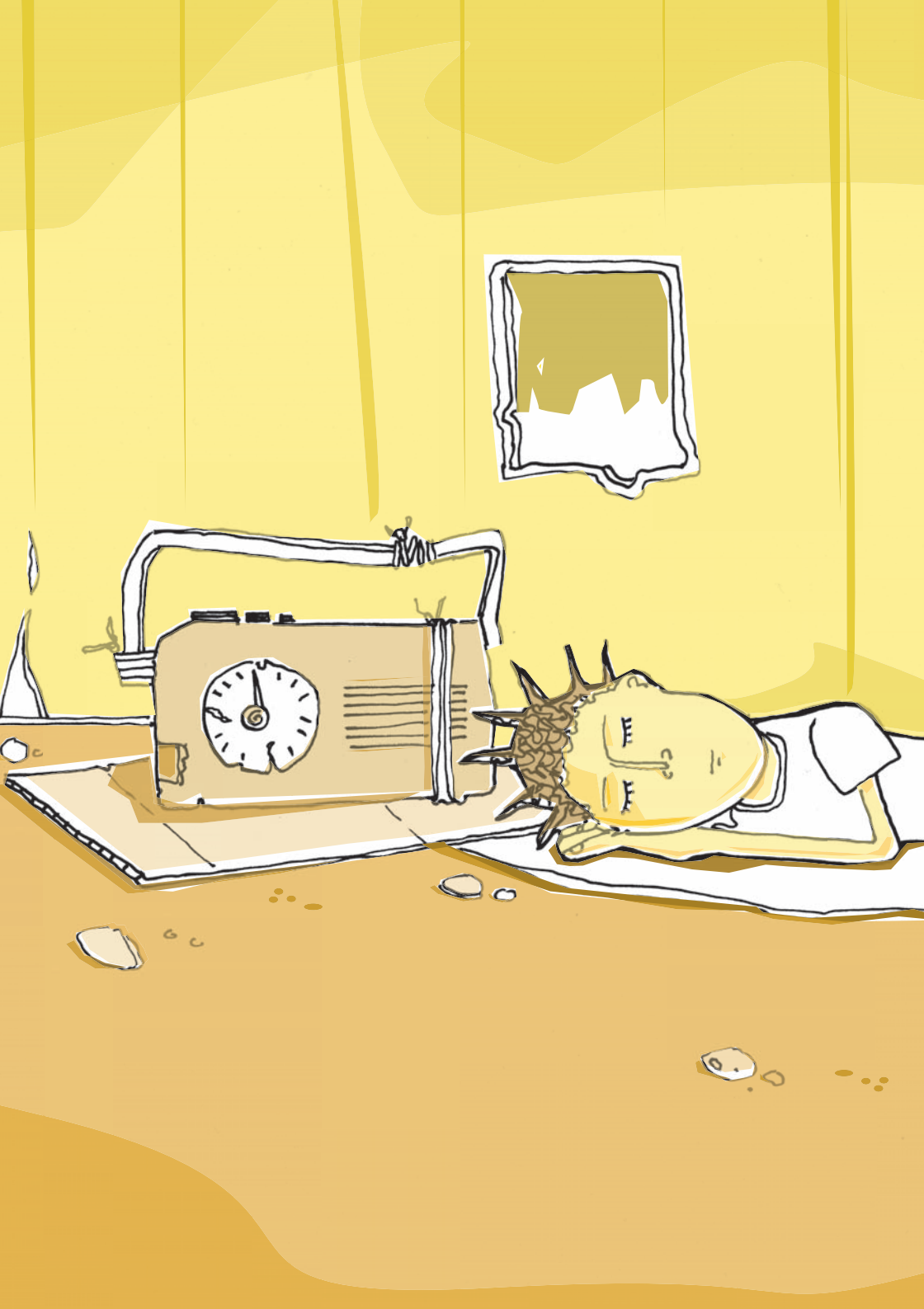
His new novel, *BE NEAR ME*, was published by Faber & Faber in August 2006.

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*Andrew O'Hagan, Malawi 2006*



## HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DEAR HAPPY

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My father is no longer here and has gone to his grave in the sand, but one night I saw him in the road and he gave me a handful of cashew-nuts and spoke of his lost spectacles. It was late and a large heron-bird flew over the fields. I was feeling strange, and could barely walk, but I had hoped to pick mangoes from the trees of an abandoned house in Namasimba. Our father was walking in the road before me and when he turned I saw he was holding a broken radio. The radio was crackling with English voices and the ghost of our father put the machine to his ear. 'Listen, my eldest son,' he said. 'David Beckham is awake tonight in Namasimba. Beckham crosses the ball. His friend scores a goal with his head and smiles at the everlasting sun.'

I said, 'Am I dreaming?'

'You may say that, Happy,' said our father. 'Once I dreamed my sons and daughters into life and now you must dream me into death.'

I said, 'We are hungry.'

He licked his cold lips in the moonlight. 'Yet there are *chomba* in Lake Malawi.'

I felt very weak as I watched him lay the radio in the dirt. He stroked it and the moonlight glanced off the aerial. 'There are plenty of fish,' he said.

I am Happy Matenje. I am fourteen today. In the morning I help a neighbour with his stall on the road to Blantyre. He sells tomatoes and charcoal, chewing gum and glass bottles of Crazy Kool. Very soon I want to be a pilot, but I know this means I must go back to school. My brother James Matenje is two years younger than me and he wants to be a lawyer. There is something wrong with his left eye and my mother, when she was alive, said that this should not halt the progress of a good lawyer. 'An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind,' she used to say. 'Yet with your one eye James you will see far.'

So this is my family now. There is James and myself, there is Bella, who is my twin, and Nancy Matenje the little one. We live in a house that my father built by the swamp in Namasimba. There is one room separated by some tattered matting we found on the road to Blantyre. Before he died, my father worked with the fishermen on Lake

Malawi, and before the sickness, when my mother was well and keeping house, he travelled to work in the mines of South Africa. That is where he caught the disease. And the teachers say he came back and lay down with my mother, which made her sick too and she would not go to the Health Centre to be tested. We are learning new words. My mother and father died of AIDS – that is what they say, as our neighbours look away – and we are left by ourselves near the swamp at Namasimba.

Each night the ghost of my father comes. Last night he brought four fishes. ‘You are now becoming a man, Happy Matenje,’ he said.

‘I want to fly,’ I said. ‘Over the fields in a wonderful plane. I could fly over the Zomba mountains and round the oceans. I could look down and see the crowds of people and David Beckham crossing the football to the man near the goal.’

‘That’s right,’ said my father. ‘You are a clever one.’

I said, ‘We are orphans.’

‘I am sorry,’ my father said. ‘We are all orphans.’

I felt his frozen hand take mine for a moment last night. I should not have gone to the road: the doctor from the medical centre and the woman from UNICEF said I must go to the hospital, but I could not face leaving my brothers and sisters, and I wanted the mangoes. So there in the dark of the long road, his frozen hand touched mine. I have noticed that people want to feel the warmth in a person’s hand, even when there is none. We imagine the progress of heat. The ghost of my father and I walked some distance along the road before I felt my hand was suddenly swinging by my side and I was walking alone. The road was silent and I could hear insects and the beating of distant drums. I was feeling weak, and my heart was not right. ‘Father,’ I said to the motionless trees and the folding dark behind them. ‘You were a man. Tell me, as a man. How many of your children are sick? Will I soon be like you, walking the road when the sun goes down? Are my brother and my sisters sick also with the disease?’ There was no answer from the trees and the night was still. How could a loving father leave his children in ignorance? My bare toes touched something on the ground. It was not a rock and I felt the cold metal – lying there in a pool of light was my father’s beloved radio. I spat in my hand and wiped the dial clean, pointing the aerial into the trees and switching it on.

‘Just Nancy,’ the radio said. ‘Goodnight.’

When I opened my eyes the next morning the world was thinner than milk. I was already standing in the hut when I woke up. James and our sisters were sleeping under a mosquito net and I saw James yawn and walk past me to lift a pot. Outside, he made a fire and placed some water to boil and added *nsima* when the water was hot. It hurt me to know that James had not mentioned my birthday the day before and was now busy with breakfast. 'James,' I said. 'When you are a lawyer you will have to speak up.'

He ignored me and rubbed his sore eye. Nancy and Bella came out of the hut and washed their hands and faces in a can of water. They ate the *nsima* and began to walk up the hill to the road in order to begin the three kilometres to school. It was then I put my hand in the fire and felt nothing. My arm hung there among the charcoals, unchanged. My heart was filled with the memories of this place and of my family and myself playing skittles, rolling a ball at bottles of sand my father had set up in the yard. But the fire could not harm me. I called to my brother and sisters and they did not turn around and soon they were gone.

The heat of the day comes quickly. The day after my birthday, when my family had gone on the long walk to school, I could not feel the sun, but I knew it must be warm because it had always been warm at that time of day. A lazy dog lay by a borehole, its ribs pulsing in the heat. I don't know how long I sat by the dying fire, but it was only a trail of smoke when I felt a presence behind me and looked up to see the ghosts of my mother and father. 'My name is Stanley Matenje,' my father said. 'And we must go fishing.'

'That is right, my eldest son,' said my mother, who stood by his side with a sweeping brush and tears like diamonds in the corners of her eyes. 'Your sister Bella will do piecework today. She will walk to get water for her neighbours after school. This will bring 50 kwacha, enough for four fishes. Go with your father to stir the fish.'

A party of red ants ran over a log by the door of the hut and I brushed some pumpkin seeds from the soles of my feet. I said, 'I am 14 years old.'

'Yes,' said my father. 'You are Happy Matenje. Come with me.'

There was much gold in the sky that morning. All along the shore of Lake Malawi, you could see the gold and red of the sky rising above the villages, like smoke in a scarlet dream, like fire up there and a song about fire that everyone knew. We rowed into the lake for a minute or an hour or maybe a year, my father and I, and the water was calm,

the water was still, as we dropped a bag of stones over the side and settled out on the lake. My father cast his net and sang an old song. It seemed the sky and the water listened to his voice, for the horizon disappeared, and we sat in the boat surrounded by one element – my father’s voice of sadness. The song remembered the workers in South Africa, the miners who died of AIDS, and it hoped the wives and sons and daughters of those men might see the future. As my father sang, mangoes began to bob out of the water and float on the surface. At first they appeared close to the boat, and then we could see them bobbing in the water for miles. As the song progressed, the sky went dark and human beings began to break through the surface of the water, their faces smiling under the lamps that shone from their hard-hats. In no time they covered the whole area, millions of men reaching up from the lower depths with the same song in their mouths, and Lake Malawi became a wise and glorious firmament of stars, a blaze of hope, shining to the shores of Mozambique.

I know of satellites that can photograph the earth. I wondered then if they could see the brilliant lights of Lake Malawi, the millions of dead men. And was there an ear out there in the heavens to pick up the sound of them singing ‘tomorrow, tomorrow’?

‘Father. What are they saying?’

‘They are singing *Africa Tomorrow*,’ he said. ‘They are saying there will be life tomorrow if the heavens hear them and the world is good.’

Those voices slowly became like the waves. Like one great wave, that gently rocked the fishing boat and collected the shape of the sky and the lands. My father looked into the sea of men and he moved his hand as if to calm the lights: they dimmed as life itself dims, but in an instant each dead man reached from the water and held up a fish, and for miles there was that sight of men’s arms reaching out of the water holding fish by the tail. Yes, their lights dimmed, and in an instant the wooden sides off the boat felt cold and the world was dark.

At the clinic in Namasimba I heard of my own death. James was having his eye checked by a visiting doctor. ‘Your mother, she died?’ asked the doctor.

‘Yes,’ said James. ‘And my father and my brother.’

‘Your brother died too?’

‘Yes. It was on his fourteenth birthday. He was sick and then one night he went out





on the road and we found him in the morning, as we walked to school. He lay on the road with his head resting on an old transistor radio.'

'He died in the night?'

'That is right. He disappeared from our lives.'

My orphan brother and sisters had blood results back from the doctor at the clinic in Namasimba. Nancy is the one who is HIV-positive but she did not cry. She stood to one side of the clinic tying her ragdoll to her back and smiling at the UNICEF workers who visited the Centre. I saw Nancy take a book from the clinic and walk over to the UNICEF woman. 'Shall I read this to you?' the woman said.

My smallest sister nodded.

'It is called *Lassie to the Rescue*,' she said. 'In the United Kingdom, where I live, we know a lot about Lassie. She is a very popular and brave dog.' My little sister nodded and looked down at the book, which showed the famous dog rescuing a man who had become injured in the snow in a land with trees and cars and televisions.

James and Bella passed me with the doctor. They could not see me.

'James,' I cried. 'Bella! It is your brother. I saw our father in the night. It is like the old fables. There will be a fish for every man and every woman in the land. It is written that Malawi will live.'

The doctor explained the drugs to my brother and my elder sister. 'They are called anti-retro-virals. You must see to it that Nancy takes them for the rest of her life.'

'The rest of her life,' wrote the woman from UNICEF in her notepad. 'For people all over the world who care about humanity, this will be a great project of child protection.'

'You can go to school,' said the doctor.

'Yes,' said James. 'I want to be a lawyer.'

'Your eye will heal.'

The woman from UNICEF wrote in her notebook: 'It is part of our plan to reduce the possibility of opportunistic infections and give these young people their lives back.'



Bella packed the containers and cartons of drugs into a sack and gathered Nancy to her side. 'Thank you,' she said.

'Bring Nancy here to the day care centre every day,' said the doctor. 'She will be cared for and you will be able to go to school.'

'We will,' she said.

'This is the way to your future,' he said.

'Yes.'

Before they left the camp, the woman from UNICEF wrapped four *chomba* in a sheet of newspaper and gave them to Nancy to carry. 'All will be well,' she said.

'Good evening,' said my brother James and my sisters, and they walked down the brown track away from the health clinic and into the trees for the journey home.

'The road to recovery in Malawi will be long and hard,' wrote the woman from UNICEF in her notebook. 'But it can be done. It is the work of all good-thinking people to save these orphans from the ravages of this terrible disease and protect them from sorrow. We must do this for the children of Malawi and for all the world's children.'

The sun grew orange in the sky above Namasimba and I felt that my father and my mother must be waiting for me. I am Happy Matenje. I am fourteen years old. None of the people in my village can see me now, but I remember my brother and sisters walking along the road as the evening came about us, and I was far above them. I know I will never be a pilot, but I could see them in the cool evening, walking hand-in-hand between the *baobab* trees, the last of my family and all of my hopes. Bella's bag was filled with the next month's medicine for our little sister. I can see the curvature of the earth and dream of its inhabitants, hoping they will find a way to care for the needs of tomorrow. There was a song and a glimmer of light from the surface of Lake Malawi, and I saw it as I rose up, my life behind me and at long last the welcome rain that seemed to fall like hope from the Zomba mountains just as the land grew white.