

***This is all I Know* by James Walker.**

Part I

‘Don’t let the bastards grind you down’

Arthur Seaton, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*

- ‘According to the Heinemann English Dictionary I could possibly be dead’
- ‘These boots were made for walking’
- ‘The roller-skate fairy’
- ‘Domestic acupuncture’
- ‘Learning to be a man’
- ‘Sing your life’
- ‘How the realization of the loneliness of the Dartford Tunnel Toll Operator made me miss a digital miracle’
- ‘Courtyard with lunatics’
- ‘The ten minute race with ‘the Fantasy Channel’
- ‘The burger king’
- ‘Thought for the day’

'According to the Heinemann English Dictionary I could possibly be dead'

The alarm goes off at five thirty. It is the standard beeping noise. Apparently it can be altered so the radio comes on instead, but I have never tried. Perhaps if instead of beeping or playing the radio it shouted 'Get up for work' there would be a greater honesty in our relationship and I would show it more respect. But it doesn't and so I start the morning with my obligatory contempt. There is no time for breakfast, just a quick slurp from a cup of coffee made from a half-boiled kettle. This invariably joins me in the car where most of it gets spilt, but fortunately it's never hot enough to scald my legs.

Two joggers pass me as they do at the same time every morning and I wonder if they recognise my car as I recognise them. Speed cameras have sprung up out of nowhere and accompany me on my route. I am careful to slow down which I find ironic given everything else is rushing me on to work.

I check the time on my dashboard and it's still an hour behind from when the clocks last changed. It never fails to catch me out. I fumble around for my cigarettes but they have fallen from the dashboard, destined to remain invisible until crushed by an unsuspecting shoe. My car tax is going to run out by the end of the month. The day I am able to afford to pay a year in one go will probably be when I can be bothered to update my clock. A final traffic light blushes red as I approach it, apologising for the rush ahead.

At work I pause at the front door step and gather myself, careful not to knock over the empty milk bottles. The minute I enter I have ten seconds to decode the alarm before it goes off. I count nine beeps and then punch in the code. It is my boss's date of birth, although this is more to do with his forgetfulness than vanity. I have punched it in so many times over the years that I have made it my bank pin number as well. I switch on the hall lights and make my way down the corridor. As I pass through each door the stench of solvents gets stronger, luring me forward. It is an unmistakable smell.

I enter the production room. The floor is covered in prints, lacquered the night before and left out to dry. I roll them up so that they are out of the way, peeling off numerous insects who have succumbed to the printing cologne. Once they land in the sticky wet ink their fate is sealed. Even those that manage to fly off do so at their peril, as a limb is ripped from the body the minute they try to pull away. Judging by the length of the extracted legs, Daddy Long Legs are the most prevalent victim. The most I have found in one morning is forty-eight. Today there is a respectable thirty-three.

When the floor is cleared I boot up the computers, machines and the compressor. A few beeps can be heard as each component on the network registers the presence of the other. Perhaps it can be altered so instead of beeping, the radio comes on. Once the machine is alive the platen and back rollers have to be cleaned down with acetone. I am meant to wear a mask when I do this as over inhalation can lead to liver damage. There's no point. The filters went ages ago and the mask is so dirty it probably does more damage putting it on.

The acetone can warns that it is highly flammable but I risk a quick cigarette. The fumes make me perspire and I can feel my heartbeat increase. Everything wants you to work faster; even the internal organs are not immune from the process. But at least I will leave with all limbs intact.

Once cleaned down I take a trolley from the warehouse and load it with a roll of 5m wide pvc. Although it goes against health and safety to load a machine on your own, the Production Manager is happy to turn a blind eye if it means we don't drop behind on schedule, a distinct possibility given that my fellow printers have slept in. When one eventually turns up he kneels down in front of his Vutek 3200, raises his nose in the air and declares 'I love the smell of acetone in the morning'.

The world of printing is perfectly mapped out leaving no room for error. On the left hand side of the wall are three production boards, one for each machine. If the job number is written in yellow it means the print has to be seamed. If it is written in green it requires eyelets. If it's in blue it needs trimming to size. All boards come with an estimated print time and a wastage column so that the Production Manager can pinpoint exactly what we've done.

On the right hand side of the wall is one large production board, which is for packing and delivery. If there is one star next to the job number then it gets packed cheaply. Two stars mean it gets packed in a tube bearing the company's name. This is usually for new clients or ones who give us a lot of work. Three stars means the print must be bubblewrapped and sealed with a loving kiss. These jobs are then allocated a delivery type, with each courier designated a specific colour so that the packers don't get confused when they lay them out in the appropriate bay in the warehouse.

The phone calls start at eight a.m. The printers have to answer because Sales aren't in till nine. A client is in a panic about one of their jobs and so I politely lie; 'Sorry I can't help. I am only the cleaner.' When Sales arrive with toast in mouth and tea in hand they want to know where their client's job is, and why their client's job was wrong and have I ever seen the cleaner around? To this I reply 'I don't know I am just a machine operator'.

At around eleven my mobile rings. It is my wife informing me that I have forgotten the sandwiches she lovingly made the night before.

'Why don't you change the ring-tone?' points out my printing neighbour who operates machine number two. 'I've got *Baywatch* on mine.'

'I...'

'You don't know how to do it do you?'

'Well...'

'You can programme it to do a different ring-tone for each person in your phone book. When the missus calls me a picture of Darth Vader comes up and it plays his entrance tune.'

Dum dum da dum, dum da dum da dum da dum.

After going through his play list he takes my mobile, insisting he will programme it for me. 'It really isn't a problem,' he reassures. But it is.

‘This is an old phone - you can’t do anything with it’

‘You can ring and text’

He hands it back and returns to his machine.

I get my first hot drink at about a quarter past eleven. I click on the kettle and listen to it boil, sometimes letting the steam rise into my face to give the impression of sweat. At work I drink coffee because I don’t have time to mash teabags. At home I drink coffee because I have become a victim of habit, despite much preferring tea. This is then taken into the print room where it will eventually go cold because the machines are programmed to break whenever a printer tries to relax. On this particular occasion the jets have blocked up because the ink viscosity is too thick. I begrudgingly remove them and take them off to the jet room for a solvent bath. By the time I have cleaned them my fingers are throbbing and so encased in ink it looks like they’ve been dipped in a rainbow.

My reward for services rendered is a microwaved meal purchased from the local shop because the Production Manager wants me to take a short dinner. It is ready in one and a half minutes. When I fail to remove it immediately, the microwave makes a repetitive beeping noise like an attention deficit child.

‘It sounds just like your mobile,’ points out machine operator number two.

Once consumed, I spend the remaining ten minutes of my break flicking through a dictionary, which I keep hidden in my locker.

‘Why do you always read a dik-sh’n-ree?’

‘Because the breaks are so short, I don’t have time to read a book.’

The printers laugh in recognition and then switch on the TV, discussing which members of the *Neighbours*’ cast they would most like to fuck.

The 1984 edition of the Heinemann English Dictionary is possibly the most useful thing I got out of school. It is honest and straight to the point, which I accept is a little ironic given that I stole it. Today the word I am looking up is ‘Life’, which it defines as:

‘The condition of growth and reproduction that distinguishes plants and animals from earth, stones, etc.’

My condition, statistically at least, indicates that I have *reproduced* once. This has become a static rather than progressive state due to the cost of child rearing and my solvent induced impotence. I stopped physically *growing* when I was eighteen, though my jeans fluctuate between a 32’ and a 34’ waist. As I am no longer *growing* or *reproducing*, how come I am not dead?

Underneath the first definition of ‘Life’ is a second that reads:

‘An individual’s existence.’

Now I don’t want to get pedantic because I obviously *exist*, but I feel that this is not *individually*. Perhaps that’s where the choice of mobile phone and alarm clock rings comes in? Is my *existence* therefore ‘beep-beep?’

What worsens my *individual existence* is that I am always being hurried along and reminded to do all the things that as an *individual* I don't want to do. Perhaps a more truthful definition of my *existence* would be that which covers 'machine.'

'A mechanical device which performs a certain function.'

The Production Manager does not read dictionaries. He doesn't even have a particular favourite female member of *Neighbours* whom he'd like to fuck. He does have a watch though and by his reckoning we have had an extra minutes grace on the company.

'Get back to work you lot, you're not paid to sit around.'

He is correct. We are not paid to sit around; we are paid to stand around. We are machine watchers, the bouncers of the printing world, accepting only specific computer files into our club. Then we stand with arms folded, watching the jet heads go back and forth as they produce endless 48 sheets for the latest advertising campaigns.

Today, just as I have done for the last thirty three days, I am printing billboard posters informing the public that the Lottery is now to be known as the Lotto. To get the message across, a well-known celebrity is stood next to the new slogan grinning. This has created great consternation for machine operators one and two.

'Why dya reckon he dyed his beard?'

'So that it matched the red in the logo'

'But his beard in't red. It's magenta'

A fiercely contested debate ensues and before you know it; it's pantone books out at high noon.

'Why do you think they changed it from the lottery to the lotto?' I am asked.

'Because people are in such a rush they haven't got time to speak three syllables'

He mouths Lott-o to himself and then shakes his head.

'God, if that's true it's pathetic'

'Wait until it's called the Lot'

Occasionally a member of staff will get excited if we are printing a picture of Britney Spears or doing a campaign for the World Cup but this soon fades after print number six hundred and thirty two. These visual distractions are useful because the printer no longer has to worry about calibrating the machine or adjusting look-up tables to achieve a perfect colour match. Now this is all done in pre-press, rendering the printer nothing more than a glorified machine watcher.

When the working day is over a siren howls to remind us it is the end of the shift. Three replacement printers walk through from the rest-room kitted out in identical company clothes and we swap places. One of them has eyeleted a gold hole into the collar of his chequered shirt to celebrate ten years service to the cause.

'I don't know why they bother with that siren' complains machine operator number two 'do they think we would stay here forever if we weren't reminded to leave?'

‘Probably’

My replacement empties his bag onto the table, scattering a spicy chicken *Gingster* pasty over the cover of a *Nuts* magazine, concealing the breasts of a recent *Big Brother* contestant.

‘What’s the story, morning glory?’

‘You need to carry on with this campaign’ I inform.

‘Now there’s a surprise’ he jokes. ‘So what’s the vital statistics?’

‘Double strike at 300 dpi, keep the heat at 30 degrees and trim each one out with a 5mm bleed so that the welders can seam a pocket’

‘Anything else?’

‘You need to clear-coat the lorry curtain. I think it’s job number...’

‘Don’t worry I know exactly which one you mean. It’s that print with the model who looks like a young Nancy Sinatra’

His knowledge of the female form is astounding. He should do it as a specialist subject on *MasterMind*. Before I can leave it is the replacements responsibility to check that I have signed off all of the relevant quality control forms and that any wastage has been accounted for. He picks up his *Gingster* pasty and scans the cover of his magazine.

‘Chip off, I’ve got everything I need’

By the time I have picked up some essentials from the 24-hour Spar and returned home, my wife and son are out. They have opted for an impromptu sleep over at one of her friends, on account of me never being here. I eat the sandwiches I left earlier, shower, then rush down the local to neck a few before the last orders bell chimes, the drinking equivalent of the siren.

The 1984 edition of the Heinemann English Dictionary defines ‘entity’ as the following,

‘Anything which has a real, independent existence.’

The weekend appears *real* and again I get to *independently* choose what I do. I have two days to decorate, go shopping, then do some overtime to pay for the shopping, speak to my son and if I am lucky, maybe speak to my wife as well. I yearn for the freedom of the overgrown lawn. The way each blade of grass grows differently; some tall, some small, some that curve as if taking a bow. Then I am asked to cut it because it is too long and I must do it quickly before it rains. I nearly complete this task, thwarted only by a camouflaged *Action Man* figure who is decapitated in the process. My son is mortified.

‘Don’t worry I’ll buy you another one’

‘That’s what you said last time’

‘If it’s any consolation I think he put up a good fight. The lawn mower won’t work’

‘Can you fix it?’

‘Yes’ I reply, delivering a swift boot to the side of the mower, followed by a verbal assault. My son runs off into the house and I follow after him a few moments later.

‘Where’s the boy?’ I ask my wife.

‘Upstairs, shouting at his toys’

She expresses concern at his behaviour but more at my inability to do something as simple as cut the lawn. Then she points at Alan Tichmarsh. It is a misconception that television offers escapism. All it offers is various forms of DIY based exercise. The presenter is claiming decking is the new grass and during the advert break, B&Q are running a special weekend offer.

‘I suppose at least it wouldn’t need mowing’

Perhaps a better definition of *entity* would be something always in constant motion because my entire life has involved rushing around. That’s how I became a Dad. I filled my weekends up with one-night stands because I didn’t have time for a relationship. Then one week I ‘didn’t have time’ to put on a condom. Living life at this kind of pace I wonder how long it’ll be before women start to give birth after eight months instead of nine.

That’s how I ended up becoming a printer, to pay my way. They don’t tell you in school that this is another consequence of unprotected sex. I swear if they had showed us videos of a large format inkjet printer going back and forth instead of teenagers pushing a pram up a high street I would have been more cautious. The minute I found out I dropped out of my Joint Honours in English Literature and Philosophy. Education suddenly became an indulgence and words were never going to be enough to provide for a small family. Now all I seem to do is provide for Handy Andy and his *Changing Rooms* crew.

The Production Manager was happy to take me under his wing; ‘You’ll have plenty of time to contemplate the misery of existence on nightshift. Now when can you start?’

Apparently there is a name for our fed, I mean sped, up times. It is called Time Urgency Deficiency Syndrome and it can be cured not as you would imagine, by locking yourself in your room, drawing the curtains, and not coming out for a week, but through various exotic remedies - health spas, Indian head massages, skincare vitamin packs, body peels, woodland retreats. The Sunday supplements are full of them, which is why I’ve stopped reading them. You don’t get this kind of harassment from a dictionary. The worst thing about the remedies for T.U.D.S is that they are so expensive you need to work more overtime to enjoy them, which is the very thing which was stressing you out in the beginning. So much choice and so many options I guess this is what they mean about being an *individual* and living an *independent existence*?

My weekend is shortened because I have to start nightshift at 7pm on Sunday night to finish off an emergency job. The drone from the printing machines is relentless. It is like an incredibly loud Hoover. Sometimes I can’t stand it but occasionally I find it beautiful, like when the three machines are printing at different speeds and on different sized materials. The noise alters slightly and as they interlace it is like witnessing a printing concerto. It lulls you slowly to sleep and just as you begin to find yourself transported the Production Manager walks in and barks out new orders.

‘Fill out this form, tube up this job, empty the skip, unload this van, do a stock-check, make up some sample packs, wash up your cups’

He then walks over and puts his arm around me.

‘What are you up to next weekend?’

Before I can answer he says those familiar words which printers love and dread in equal measures.

‘Time and a half Saturday, double Sunday’

‘I don’t think I can’

‘You can’

‘But’

‘That’s £18 pound an hour on Saturday and £24 on Sunday’

‘My wife wants to...’

‘Spend the £420 you will clear’

‘Clear?’

‘That’s right, lad. It’s cash in hand this weekend. Be in for six a.m. Now Hoover the floor’

The floor has to be Hoovered every five hours with an industrial monstrosity. It is so big it is a wonder there is not a steering wheel to drive it. When I boot this beast up it means I now have four machines droning away, the concerto ruined. I walk back and forth and up and down the print room as if in unison with the jet heads. The Production Manager is in hot pursuit behind me pointing out where I’ve missed a bit. I try to hoover up Stanley Knives and tape to break it, but it is futile. Perhaps I should bring in an *Action Man*.

‘You know why we have to Hoover don’t you?’

‘Yes I know why I have to Hoover’

Because we are a versatile and dynamic company prepared to take on any challenge and therefore print on a wide variety of substrates. Some of these are so delicate they frail when dragged around and strands get lodged in the carpet. Occasionally these can get rolled up inside a polyester vinyl print and the fabric sticks to the ink. Depending upon how pedantic the client is, these can be rejected, resulting in a reprint. Consequently the Production Manager is obsessed with Hoovering and has had it written in to our job specification which glitters alluringly on my CV.

Once he leaves the factory the printers scurry off to the rest room and switch on the television. Within seconds they are debating which member of *Eastenders* they would least like to fuck. It is a two horse race between Little Mo and Pat Butcher, making it the political equivalent of Labour versus the Tories. I am denied the opportunity to hear the closing arguments in this hotly contested debate because one of the printers is beeping. The heads have got snarled on the material where it has creased up. I look up at the clock. I have eleven hours and seventeen minutes to go. This is the only time that will go slow.

'These boots were made for walking'

I never realised we had so many shoes until she laid them all out. A quick head count revealed forty, of which thirty-five were hers and the rest Stanley's. 'It's a costly business being married to a centipede' I quipped, but she was too engrossed in the polishing process to respond.

She wasn't always a shoe girl. When we first met it was boots. She had whacking great things which used to come right up her shins, leaving small grazes below her knee caps. I've got similar marks below my knees but that's through kneeling on the floor trimming out prints.

My Mother has a thing about footwear and wasn't impressed when she first clocked those boots. With a face like a bashed crab she warned that a woman who wore such impractical footwear was no good. That's when I knew she was the one.

Friends is on in the background. Now there's an insult if ever there was one. Mine aren't allowed to stay over because they create mess, smell and don't exit the spare room until midday. It's not on. I don't ask anymore.

'So how's Joey doing? Has he made up with Rebecca?'

'You mean Rachel. Maybe if you were here more often you would know their proper names'

'If I didn't work, my little centipede would be shoeless'

I sidle up to her on the sofa and reach for her hand but it is off, straight into a chamois leather. This is slowly fingered around the rim of black polish and expertly applied to the shoe. She works methodically, round and around in one spot and then on to the next, slowly working her way across the surface in equal rotations.

'So how's your day been?'

She puts the chamois down and starts to attack it with a brush, her actions more erratic.

'Why do you bother asking about my day?'

I like to think it is because I care, but I suspect it is just part of the script which comes from numerous rehearsals.

'Because I care'

'If you cared you'd come straight home to see me. Us'

'Don't be like that, I'm back now. One of the machines broke and I had to fix it'

She puts down the shoes and picks up the remote to switch over to ITV. As she presses number six she sighs.

'Can't you fix this bloody remote so the numbers correspond correctly? I'm sick of trying to figure it out'

'That thing's got a mind of its own. It took me long enough to programme it incorrectly'

'So you can fix a printer when it breaks down but you can't fix us?'

'We're not the ones who are broken'

She starts on the shoes again.

‘The Buddhists would say that the inconvenience is doing us psychological good. That duff remote is a gift from the Gods’

‘And what would the Buddhists say about the light switch in the bathroom that doesn’t work and the pots of paint that still haven’t been opened and the doors that don’t close properly and, and, oh what’s the point. Our whole life is one great big flippin’ inconvenience. What do you think the Buddhists would say to that?’

‘I don’t think the Budddhists would say anything. I think they would nip down the monastery and have a few chants’

I start to chant ‘I’m sorry’. A smile creeps up her face.

‘Hey, look at me for a moment. I’ve been staring at orange banners promoting *Easyjet* all day. It would be nice to see different colours, like those lovely blue grey eyes. Come here and let me fall into them’

She moves in closer, slowly. There is a pause as we check each other out. Then she moves her head towards mine and puts her lips softly against my ear. It makes me tingle.

‘You’ve been drinking’

‘I haven’t I...’

She runs her nostrils slowly up my neck and face.

‘Don’t lie to me, I’m not stupid. I can smell it on your breath’

‘Look it’s been a fourteen hour shift...’

‘I know it has’

‘And I didn’t want to bring back my frustration’

‘No. You just wanted to give it to me instead’

I go to respond but am halted.

‘Hasn’t it ever occurred to you that I would like to go for a drink?’

‘Well let’s go and have one then’

She stops what she is doing and glances up the stairs, then back towards me. Another shoe is taken in hand and BBC1 is selected.

‘Two people shouted at me today. One was at a traffic light and wanted to share his thoughts on my driving. The second was the Production Manager for fucking up a print. It’s lucky I’ve got small ears. Evolution has been kind to me’

‘Am I shouting at you?’

‘Not yet’ but in some ways silence has the same effect.

‘Look I’m sorry, honestly. I just needed to unwind, release the Kracken. I was in the pub for exactly twenty minutes. That’s all’

‘If I added up all of those twenty minutes, think how many days we could have spent together’

‘And if I didn’t have to work overtime to pay the bills I’d probably have an extra ten years when I retire. Remind me of that on my deathbed’

‘You like to be warm don’t you?’

‘Yes’

‘And you like to have a bath and food to eat?’

‘Of course’

‘Then what are you complaining about? If you don’t like it get a better-paid job. I knew I married the wrong Brother’

I can’t really argue with this. My Brother has his own business and can make people smile without trying. He’s got big muscles as well. I think I would marry him if I could.

‘If you had forsaken your precious beer, you might have been home in time to read our child a story’

‘I still can’

‘Can’t’.

‘Why?’

‘He’s asleep’

‘I could wake him up’

‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘Okay, well I’ll go and lie down next to him for five minutes’

‘Not stinking like that you won’t. You smell like a petrol station’

‘That’s the acetone, we use it to clean the...’

‘I know, the platen. I know all about your job darling. Some men come home with roses and chocolates. You come home smelling of chemicals’

‘Look I’m popping up to see him, that’ll give you time to catch your breath for the next argument’

‘Not smelling like that you won’t’

‘I’ll put some...’

‘Covering your body in talc does not get rid of the smell, it just disguises it. Now have a bath and stay away from his room. Besides, he’s in bed for a reason’

‘Why?’

‘I’m sure even you’ll be able to figure it out’

As I make my way upstairs I find pieces of coloured self adhesive film stuck on the wall. Then some on the doors and a few in our bedroom. Although randomly stuck up they do have one thing in common, they are all roughly placed about one meter up from the floor.

‘Honey’ I call down ‘have you seen our son’s handy-work?’

‘Yes’

‘Are you angry?’

To appease my son for killing his favourite *Action Man* with the lawn mower I got some earthy coloured self-adhesive vinyl from work and cut out some shapes and stuck it around the bottom half of his bedroom walls to create the impression of camouflage. We spent the whole afternoon applying it together and he must have liked it so much that he's decided the whole house would benefit from a makeover with the off-cuts.

Rather than dwell on this I enter the bathroom and go to the toilet. As I urinate I take one of the jade cloths off the shelf and douse it in Jiff, proving conclusively that men can do two things at once. This is then applied to one of the tiles above the toilet with the intention of removing the paint from when I did the ceiling. It will probably take two years to complete but I am in no rush. With this chore completed I then strip off, slowly peeling away my skin-tight Wrangler jeans which are the best defence I have against acetone. Once naked I have a full body wash and cover myself in talc. Then sneak slowly down the stairs and catch my wife unaware.

'I'm not an idiot I'm a ghost. The dead have feelings you know'

‘No worries, I’ll only be a minute’

‘Before you go, where did you put the scissors you used for decorating?’

I point at the Welsh Dresser.

‘Which draw?’

‘The left one’

‘Now get out of my sight’

I give her a last ‘whoooooo’ and make my way upstairs as she walks over to the dresser, opening the right draw first and retrieving the scissors. I quietly let myself into the boy’s room and find him curled up asleep with the covers between his legs and a half open book resting under his arm. I sit on the corner of his bed and take a look around. He’s got the best room in the house. I like being in here.

Around the top edges of his bedroom are prints of *Action Men* figures with his friends faces pasted on top of their shoulders, courtesy of the smart arses in pre-press at work. They’ve been labelled as well. He’s got Eagle-eyed Ian, G. I Joshua, Parachuting Karime and Deep-Sea Michael. I printed them on nightshift a few days ago. It’s the only time you can get away with a foreigner. This is why the Production Manager keeps shouting at me, because he has attributed the missing vinyl to a misprint I logged in the waste book.

‘Are you asleep?’

‘A little bit’

‘Okay, well I’ll talk quietly then. What did you do today?’

‘I just played. What about you?’

‘I just printed’

‘Did you do any good pictures?’

‘Yeah’

‘What like?’

‘Six hundred prints of a man with a smiley face talking into a mobile phone’

‘Why did you have to print so many?’

‘I meant to key in sixty on the machine, but put in six hundred by mistake’

My son starts to laugh and tap his fingers on the wall.

‘Only joking you dipasaurus. They’re getting put up all over the country so we had to print loads’

‘Will any be in Nottingham?’

‘Three’

‘Whereabouts’

‘Two at the airport and one in the centre of town by the Broadmarsh’

‘Will you show me?’

‘Of course I will’

‘Dad?’

'Yes'
 'I want to be a printer when I'm older'
 'No you don't'
 'Why?'
 'You just don't. Trust me'
 'But you are'
 'That's because I didn't do very well at school'
 'I'm going to do rubbish at school as well then'
 'I don't think so' I say as I start to tickle him.
 His laughter arouses his Mother who screams up the stairs 'you better not be in his room'
 'Quick, under the covers' I whisper and we continue our conversation there.
 'Thank you for helping me decorate, you've made a really good job of the rest of the house'
 'Aren't you angry?'
 'Why would I be angry?'
 'Because I ruined the wallpaper'
 'To be honest with you I think it looks better. But just to keep mum happy, don't do it again.
 Okay?'
 'I broke the video as well'
 'You were a busy lad today weren't you? How did you break it?'
 'I don't know. Are you angry?'
 'No'
 'Why?'
 'I never knew how to work it. If you really want to anger me, break the cooker'
 'How do you break a cooker?'
 'I'm not sure I've not broken one before'
 'Mum told me that you didn't know how to work the cooker'
 'Now that's a completely different thing altogether, though it's not quite true. I don't have
 time to make my dinner when I get in so I usually have a sandwich. Now less talk and more cuddles.
 Get in close and let's strap the daddy seatbelt on whilst I tell you a story'
 'What's the story going to be about?'
 'Give me five words and I'll make one up'
 'Any five words?'
 'Any in the whole world'
 'Angry. Wallpaper. Crying. Mum. Beer'

The Roller-Skate Fairy

I find it hard to sleep when I get back from late shifts. We live opposite a twenty-four hour supermarket, which is a favourite haunt of the local drunks. I like to sleep with the window open and so am subjected to all manner of passing conversations. Sometimes I recognise the voices. There are the old men who stop off after kicking out at the local and then the more youthful shrill of clubbers in desperate need of chewing gum, king size Rizlas and fizzy pop at half four in the morning. Sometimes stray dogs hang about, hoping for disregarded chip wrappers. They bark at the customers as they enter the shop and sometimes the customers bark back. This is one of the more civil conversations I get to witness.

Working shifts reveals the world without make-up. The television lays redundant in the front room, a half-opened magazine and an empty bottle of wine sit on the table next to a burnt down candle. A pair of roller-skates poke out suggestively from beneath the stairs. As I tiptoe around the house I feel like a stranger in my own home, careful not to reveal my presence, unsure of my purpose and place. I wash myself in the kitchen so as not to awaken my wife, ensuring the pressure from the taps is no more than a dribble. They still make an uncomfortable rumble, desperately in need of lagging. I'll sort them in a bit.

My wife is fast asleep as I enter the bedroom but she is making so much noise she might as well be awake. Over the last couple of months she has started to grind her teeth in her sleep, reminding me of *Gnasher* from *The Beano* I read as a kid. I stroke her temple to try to calm her. It is damp through sweat yet warm from where her dreams have got her thinking. Pure electricity. I place a kiss on her cheek and tell her everything will be all right but the grinding gets stronger. If she continues like this she'll be left with stumps for teeth. It will be like kissing a dolphin. I just wish there was something I could do to help.

In thirteen hours time she will be making her acting debut in town. She has landed a walk-on part or rather roll-on part, as a fairy on roller skates. She waves a wand at the baddie and then disappears off stage in a puff of smoke. I hope it goes all right because she hasn't been able to attend all of the rehearsals on account of me working shifts. I said that Mother would babysit if we got her in a box of chocolates and the *Evening Post* but she doesn't like her coming around to the house. Instead she has been roller skating around the front room with a duster for a wand. I'm sure once it is over the grinding will stop.

When I awake in the afternoon the house is empty again but this time instead of darkness, the house is full of natural light. The beam coming through the window highlights speckles of dust which are content to aimlessly drift about. It is quite beautiful and a good reason not to leave.

Downstairs the ironing is still in the basket and the plates wait to be put away. Socks are draped neatly along the radiator like a production line of decapitated rabbit ears. Everything is as

exactly as it was a few hours earlier except the roller-skates are gone. On the table is a note relaying details of tonight's opening performance, location and a small hand drawn map. The words 'don't be late' are underlined, creating a minor tear to the paper from where she has pushed the pen down too hard. I am informed that I am no longer required to take our son to the opening. This honour has been reserved for a neighbour. My first day off in ages and I can't even share it with my boy.

With five hours until her performance I utilise my time by taking a two hour bath. It is my first day off in thirty one days and I'm going to make the most of it. I give myself a well over due makeover, cleaning my ears and trimming my nails. I even manage to remove a lump of ink from behind my ear, which has been there for a good two months. All of the printers have them, usually on the back of the neck or the forearm from where the body has leant inside the machine to fix a solenoid valve or leaking pump. They are like printing birthmarks, evidence that we belong to this privileged sect.

My shirt doesn't require ironing because it is so long since I last wore it it has kept its shape. The same applies to a pair of trousers that have a perfect crease running down the middle of each leg. I feel like I have just stepped out of a shop. My hair is last on the list, benefiting from a rare blow dry and some gel. It is usually so greasy after a night at work that there is no point combing it into a style.

I have two hours until her performance and have enough time to lag the pipes but decide against it because I don't want to ruin my clothes. Instead I pick up the paper and discover so far this year 25,000 men were offered 'confidence and happiness' by various plastic surgeons. An Israeli geneticist called Avigdor Cahaner has created genetically modified featherless chickens in what he claims is the 'high-speed future of chicken farming' for the modern farmer with little plucking time to spare. I put it down and get the bus into town.

It's a five minute walk to the Playhouse from my drop and an occasion made more pleasant by a group of kids doing Le Parkour. They jump over post-boxes and do back-flips off of a telephone box and give each other advice on the best way to land properly. I could quite happily sit and watch them performing this weird kind of urban ballet but I am saved from distraction by a Community Officer. He wants them moved on, claiming they are damaging private property. After rolling a cigarette for the xylophone man sat outside H 'n' M I make my way to the Playhouse exactly one hour early and reward myself with a beer. This is served by a girl with straight blond hair who quickly returns to her stool to read.

I would have thought that more people would have been here by now, I'm sure the Playhouse can seat at least three hundred people, perhaps more. But there are only twenty-three of us. If nobody turns up it will upset my wife. She will mope about for days, blaming herself, thinking she is unworthy and all of this acting is a joke. I don't want her to think like that. It took ages to convince her she should go for it in the first place. Knowing theatre types, they are probably already down in the stalls. Reading the programme notes and evaluating the stage.

To kill time I'm tempted to go back and chat with the xylophone man. He's been banging out those three notes on his rusty instrument ever since I can remember. His contempt for perfection is seen locally as something of an inspiration. I guess that tells you a lot about Nottingham folk. He won't be around long enough to have an affect on Stanley's life, but they'll be a similar version keeping up the tradition, perhaps some nut entertaining the locals with the tunes on his mobile phone.

With five minutes before the performance I start to become a little worried. Not only are there few people here but they don't look much like theatre goers. They look like office workers stopping off for a pint before home. I make my way back over to the Blonde.

'The play does start at half past seven doesn't it?'

'What play?'

'The play?'

'There isn't a play on tonight. We've just finished our season'

'But there is. I've got a note'

After fumbling about in my pockets I realise that I have left the note on the table. Blonde finds this highly amusing.

'Do you know the name of the play?'

'Something about a woman and God'

'You mean The Woman who ate Angels?'

'Yes, that's it'

'It's not on here love. It's down town at the Theatre Royal. Why would you think it was showing here when the place is empty?'

I raise my eyebrows and place my hand over my mouth, my dramatic reaction no doubt influenced by my environment. Blond starts to laugh and quickly reaches for her mobile to share the experience via text. As insulting as it is to be mocked like this it's affirmation that this is exactly the kind of person I am. One who makes stupid, needless fuck-ups. I slam down my half empty glass and leg it out of the building. I run as fast as I can, even attempting some Le Parkour of my own. But I am too late and miss her opening scene. A fairy on roller-skates casting a spell.

'How could you? Late for my birthday, late at Christmas, late for my Sister's wedding, late home from the pub, late to work, late to pick me up, but not late for this'

Then she stopped speaking, stared at me for a moment, and roller-skated off.