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## Barely Human

THE FACTORY MADE SPORTS EQUIPMENT, though what is manufactured in a factory is irrelevant as all factories are the same. The factory was near Ely, out in the Fens, that watery wildness of sedge and sky and mournful birdsong. I was assigned to the cleaning department, which was where I reported, after receiving a pair of black steel toe-capped boots, a beige lab coat and two pints of milk. My boss, Tom Guilder, was a large choleric man with a huge taut belly, the narrow-shoulders and a drinker's face. His tongue was lilac, like a giraffe's.

"Do you like milk then?" he asked pointing to the two pints of milk slipping from my hands.

"Yes, well, that's to say, it's all right," I stuttered.

"You'll be sick of the sight of the stuff inside a month. Management says it lines the lungs against the fumes. Management is arseholes."

He looked me up and down with his raw, bloody eyes, snorted and gestured for me to follow him down a dim greasy corridor the sides of which were shored up with cardboard boxes. Somewhere in the bowels of the building he switched on a strip light over a gouged desk where he solemnly handed me a light, a clipboard and an old bristle-less broom. He explained to me that I should have one or two of these items on me at all times.

"I'll see you at lunch in The White Horse," he said and hobbled off.

"But what do I *do*?" I asked earnestly.

He looked at me in disbelief.

"Bloody students!" He scoffed and disappeared down the cardboard passage.

I wandered around the shop floor that morning with a suitably intent look on my face and asked a number of the workers if they needed light bulbs replacing.

What does it fucking look like?" they said, so I stopped asking.

The factory shook with noise and trembled with heat. In the dark corners sparks flew and the air was heavy and sticky with the overpowering smell of oil. The noises were regular, monotonous, pounding, and eventually they got down into your subconscious and became part of you. Only when you stepped outside did you realize the crushing evil of it all. Up above the shop floor was a gallery of glass where clerks, secretaries and management worked: a kind of white-collar heaven we might all pass on to if we were good. Really though they looked like insects, their thoughtless faces pressed to the glass.

I became friendly with a young cretin called Mifsud who was of Maltese extraction. He operated a ping-pong ball-sorting machine, which shuddered playfully as he worked. One time I pressed myself up against the vibrating rubber band, which agitated the balls, and moaned in mock ecstasy. Mifsud stood and stared at me in stupefied disbelief. He ran his small tongue over his protruding front teeth as he studied me.

"You're mad, you lot ... you stewdents ...." He had a heavy local accent, which was as flat and charged as the eerie landscape that surrounded the factory. I wasn't a student but in the factory anyone who hadn't left school at sixteen was 'a stewdent,' which was also code for intellectual or gay.

"Why don't you try it, Mifsud?" I asked.

At which point he got a narrow-eyed animal look. He shook his head and said nothing, just carried on staring.

"You won't regret it," I said.

Mifsud approached the machine like a man about to leap out of an airplane without a parachute. I was astounded he had never pressed himself up against the machine before, as a joke at least. He fiddled with the button on his shirt, sniffed the oily air and touched, brushed really, his shirt cuffs against the vibrating machine. A fascinated look crossed his face from left to right like the wipe in an old black and white film and then he pressed himself forcefully up against it. He went rigid, his eyes flared, his mouth melted and his cheeks coloured. He looked at me with a mixture of gratitude and reproach as if I had just slipped some acid in his tea.

"What the bloody hell are you doing!" bellowed a small, swarthy man with greying corrugated-iron hair. It was the supervisor of the section, Mifsud's father. He gave his son a crack across the face with the flat of his hand. Mifsud junior shook his head like a cuffed cat. Nothing registered in his soft-boiled eyes and as he ran his small pink tongue over his teeth, I thought, life is wasted on some people.

At ten a steam whistle rent the air. Everywhere people stopped and leaning against their machines, unwrapped tinfoil packages of damp sandwiches and unscrewed the tops of flasks of tea. The noise abated somewhat and a peaceful throb replaced the cantankerous racket everywhere and the workers chewed their sandwiches like cows in a barn. A fat woman with a face like a bag of pegs and an unsuitable perm pushed a trolley around and handed out more milk for our lungs. I saw a foreman wagging his finger at a worker who had three full pints undrunk on the floor next to his canvas bag. All over the factory you saw hymns of praise to milk and childish illustrations of happy workers drinking milk and leading blameless lives.

Just before lunch I needed to go to the toilet. As I neared them I passed a huge unshaven bonehead operating some sort of lathe. He had that physique peculiar to a certain type of Englishman: he was fat with a large belly that rose solidly up from his belt, but he was bursting with a meaty good health that made you think of a butcher's shop. He had the flat nose, widely dispersed eyes and long elegant fingers of a boxer and he glowered at me as I went past, showering sparks over his heavily tattooed forearms without blinking an eye.

In the grimy toilet I came upon an unsettling scene. I had just unzipped and trained my manhood on the Shanks Vitreous China logo at the back of the cracked urinal when I heard an erratic, violent shuffling behind me. As men's toilet etiquette demands, I kept my eyes front and center and concentrated on a curlicue of pubic hair trapped in the join between two tiles.

"Owroight, buh?"

I turned my head and saw a painfully twisted creature trying manfully to free his member from his immaculately pressed overalls. My first instinct was to offer assistance but it immediately struck me that it would be impossible to do so without giving offence in a thousand ways.

"How's it going?" I replied.

He was some sort of spastic and it was hard to tell how old he was, anywhere between twenty-eight and forty-five, I thought. His head was a strange shape, squashed on one side and so rather pointed at one end like an egg, and he was balding in a way I had not seen before, moulting in patches like a stray dog. His eyes were wild, rolling about in his mask-like face like pinballs and he spoke exactly the way you did when you took the piss out of spastics in school. I shrunk from him instinctively.

At that moment two men came in talking loudly. One of the men was the enormous bonehead who had screwed me out earlier.

"Alright, Colin?" he said amiably.

"Owroight!" mumbled Colin phlegmily.

In excitedly acknowledging what must have been a rare greeting from a colleague, Colin jerked piss all over himself, and as he turned his bobbing head and tried to focus his wayward eyes on the origin of the unexpected friendliness, he continued to leak on his shiny plastic shoes. The look on his face as he waited for more from the bonehead was heartbreaking.

"Mind your shoes, Colin!" jeered the other man, a thin, sour-looking teenager.

"You need to look where you're going, son," the bonehead said, and he put his hand on top of Colin's head and turned it savagely until it faced the wall of the urinal. Colin stared straight ahead, his eyes now at rest; his arms limp by his sides, a look of great sorrow on his face. His prick protruded slackly from his overalls like a shelled prawn. There was piss all down his trouser leg and a puddle had gathered on the floor around him.

"See you later, Col," said the bonehead and slapped him hard on the back. The teenager flicked one of his ears and the two men left laughing merrily. Colin stood there gurning, a bubble of saliva blowing from the corner of his mouth.

"They're my m-mates," he spluttered.

At lunchtime Tom took me down to The White Horse. We walked past Colin who was sitting on a bench trying to eat a sandwich. Tom nodded casually as we passed him.

In the pub I saw some faces from the factory nursing their pints. Tom strode to the bar and leant on it and threw back double whiskies until his face grew dark and fierce. The drink transformed him: he took in great lusty drafts of air as we walked back and on his great flaming face there was a smile that was beautiful to behold. I tacked behind, in his great wake, my head full of fuzzy logic and shaggy notions.

Back on the shop floor I stood swaying, watching the machines, which were like enormous monsters from some dark, sulphurous Victorian novel. I threw up and had to step outside for some fresh air. Tom found me there leaning against the great sliding iron door with a string of drool flapping from my mouth in the light breeze. He showed me my afternoon duties, which lay through another smaller sliding door that opened to reveal a large shed full of flat-packed cardboard boxes.

"What do I do?" I asked shakily.

"You sleep," he said and ambled off happily trailing a tail of spirits behind him like Halley's comet.

I climbed into the boxy-smelling shed and lay down on my richly upholstered bed and closed the door behind me.

That night whilst listening to a Howling Wolf tape I finally understood something. Howling Wolf had worked in a factory. It was all there in the clanking machine-like rhythms, in the metallic scrapings of the guitar, in the sour harmonica and in the rasping bellow of that prehistoric voice. But Howling Wolf had got out of the factory and turned his fury into sound, whereas Tom, an educated man who read books and played backgammon had not. He was aristocracy in the factory, an aloof curmudgeon, who the workers looked up to, a man who might have been a symbol of hope for these drones, if they had known what a symbol was. For all his fierce pride and regal bearing though, he was an unhappy man.

Over and above the factory din they sometimes played the radio. It was generally tuned to the oldies station, and that day they kept playing Dylan's "Baby Please Stop Crying."

"Is that your song?" I asked Mifsud.

"What are you on about?" he said.

"Here she comes now."

Mifsud fancied one of the factory girls. From a distance she almost looked pretty: long dark hair, a petite, trim body, a handsome, square-jawed face. But up close, her exaggerated features were all huddled together in the center of her face. Her jaw was misshapen and she was cross-eyed and all the limbs on her body were too short for her long torso so that she looked like a dwarf. She sidled past shyly with another girl, throwing glances our way. Mifsud gawped but made neither comment nor move.

"Are you going to ask her out?" I said.

"No."

"I'll help you plan something to say."

"No."

"You like her though, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"She doesn't fancy me."

"How do you know?"

"My mate told me."

"How can that be?" I asked, innocently.

"What do you mean?"

"You haven't got any mates," I said and laughed cruelly. And it was true.

The next time Cindy the dwarf came past I saw that she didn't fancy Mifsud. She wasn't looking at Mifsud at all: she was looking at me.

Her arms were so short as to be almost thalidomide. When she finally got up the courage to look up and smile at me I saw that her eyes were so deeply embedded in her head that she looked like she had no eyes, just dark empty sockets. She stopped and pretended to talk to her friend all the while glancing over the friend's shoulder at me and I had to turn away and my chest filled up with that old lie—pity. It struck me that in that unforgiving factory I must have been golden to her and the look which had troubled me so had been worshipful in the fullest sense of the word: a look full of supplication and yearning and a deep deep longing. Her look described distance as much as anything. It was a sad sight and I looked over at Mifsud to see if the idiot had registered anything deep down in the thick soup of his being, anything beyond his own small longing. I was surprised too that this misshapen girl should be out of Mifsud's reach. They seemed a match.

When her friend finally got up the courage to ask me out on Cindy's behalf I told her I was a student. She never talked to me again.

It happened one Friday at five, just after the whistle blew. A long sustained bubbling shriek of steam that cut through the oily torpor of the shop floor; the first note in a song of freedom that would last two days and two nights. Within seconds the machines were silent and I marvelled at the sound not of silence but of humanity—soft chatter, the rustle of crisp bags, the changing of shoes. These ordinary sounds were miraculous. A great and terrible weight had been lifted from the workers' shoulders: their heads felt looser, they stretched and drew themselves up to their full height, raised and pressed back their shoulders, twisted their necks, pulled in their stomachs, stuck out their chests, breathed deeply, smiled. Then they stripped off their oppressive overalls, washed their hands, threw some water on their faces, combed their hair. They hung around for a while, awkwardly, quietly, unable to believe their good fortune.

Above this sound of relief, of what would be as near contentment as they would ever know, I heard a bad sound, a choppy flat sound, the sound of punching. Over by a huge crushing machine there was a fight in progress. A few of the factory hands had gathered in a loose semicircle around the combatants. Being human, I wandered over for a look. It was Tom and the huge bonehead who were fighting and it didn't look good. Fighting is normally a harmless business, an ineffective, brief pantomime of missed punches, stumbles and loose grapples between two reluctant men. Friends or passersby soon step in to save the dignity of one or both. This was not one of those. Both men were in deadly earnest and both men had fought before. Punches found their mark with sickening force. Tom was

furious and so more reckless than the other; he was also giving away twenty years and a stone and a half in weight. It was only a matter of time before the larger, younger man knocked him down.

"What's going on?" I asked a man.

"Tom found out what Del was doing to Colin."

I took it Del was the bonehead but couldn't work out what Colin had to do with Tom.

"What was he doing to Colin?"

"You know," said the man.

Lovely, I thought, but I had to know what it was to Tom.

"Tom's Colin's dad," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know," I said.

The man looked at me and said, "What are you fucking talking about?"

At some point Del started knocking Tom down with some regularity. There was blood everywhere but he just kept getting back up. He was tiring Del out but the effort was killing him. A man can only take so much punishment before he lies down. The punch that did Tom in came brutal and low, a short hook into his bloated stomach. He went down and when his head hit the concrete floor his eyes rolled back into his head in a truly puppet-like way.

"I do what I like, see?" Del said, looking down into Tom's blank face.

We carried him out on a piece of flat packed cardboard. I held his hand and felt the faint stirrings of that wasted life. Some of the secretaries from upstairs had a bird's eye view of it. I wonder what they were thinking. His face was as grey as clinker. No one said anything.