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It was quarter past six in the evening and the siren had just sounded for lunch: a loud noise pumped through loudspeakers into every corner of the cold and drab warehouse. It sounded like a cheap musical doorbell, or a grotesque parody of the tune a plastic ballerina plays as she slowly spins on top of a jewellery box.

While I stood in the queue, hands in pockets, waiting to get out, a well-built security guard darted forward and made a signal for me to put my arms in the air. 'Move forward, mate, I haven't got all afternoon,' he said firmly in a broad West Midlands accent. I moved along and received a brisk pat-down from the guard. I was followed by a long undulating line of around thirty exhausted-looking men and women of mostly Eastern European nationalities who were shuffling through the security scanners as fast as the three guards could process them. We were in too much of a hurry to talk. We were also emptying pockets and tearing off various items of clothing that were liable to set off the temperamental metal detectors – a belt, a watch or even a sticky cough sweet clinging limply to the inside of a trouser pocket.

There was some sort of commotion at the front of the line: a quarrel had suddenly erupted between a security guard and a haggard-looking young Romanian man over the presence of a mobile phone. We all looked on in befuddled silence.

> **Security guard:** You know you're not supposed to bring those in here. You were told that on your first day.
>
> **Romanian:** I have to wait for important call. My landlord want to speak with me.
>
> **Security guard:** Why can't you make personal calls in your own time like everybody else? For the umpteenth time, I'll tell you again. No ... mobile ... phones ...in ... here! Do you understand me? Now, I'll have to tell your manager.[1]

The place had the atmosphere of what I imagined a prison would feel like. Most of the rules were concerned with petty theft. You had to pass in and out of gigantic airport-style security gates at the end of every shift and each time you went on a break or needed to use the toilet. It could take ten or fifteen minutes to pass through these huge metal scanners. You were never paid for the time you spent waiting to have your pockets checked. Hooded tops were banned in the warehouse and so were sunglasses. 'We might need to see your eyes in case you've had too much to drink the night before,' a large, red- and waxy-faced woman named Vicky had warned us ominously on the first day. 'Your eyes give you away.'[2]

For hour after sweating hour we had traipsed up and down this enormous warehouse – the size of ten football pitches – tucked away in the Staffordshire countryside. Each day this short break came as temporary relief.

Lunch – we still called it lunch despite it being dished out at six o'clock in the evening – marked the halfway point in a ten-

and-a-half-hour shift. After going through the usual rigmarole of security, the men and women would spill into the large dining hall and fan out in every direction like an army of ants in flight from the nest. Most of us rushed headlong into the hall to grab a tray and establish a respectable position in the lunch queue. The whole panicked dash was punctuated by a chorus of yells and fiery laments. The best of the hot food had usually gone by the time the first twenty or so men and women had hurriedly passed through the canteen. It was therefore of great importance to secure a spot in the queue as quickly as possible, even if it meant shoving one of your co-workers out of the way in order to do so. Solidarity and the brotherhood of man did not exist in this world. You trampled on the other guy before he walked over you. If you were that sorry unkempt Romanian who had fallen foul of security – yelled at incoherently in a language you barely understood – you might be waiting six or seven hours before you got to see another inviting plate of mincemeat soaked in gravy and stodgy carbohydrates.

Eastern European languages filled the air of the shiny-floored dining hall, which was brightly lit like an operating theatre and always smelt strongly of disinfectant. There were around fifty men and women perched at the canteen tables, hunched over little black lunch trays furtively shovelling huge dollops of meat and fistfuls of chips into their mouths. The Romanians would always unfailingly clean up after themselves. They were, in fact, the most fastidious workers I had ever come across. Along with those of us who sat at the tables, another ten or so men stood milling around next to the coffee machines – head to toe in sportswear, hands in pockets and surreptitiously following every woman who

shimmied past with leering eyes. On the opposite side of the dining hall was a huge window which looked out onto the big grey cooling towers of the local power station. 'Proper work,' you would think as you gazed up at the vast chimneys that puked white clouds of steam into the sky as jackdaws glided round and round like burnt pieces of paper.

One of the perks of the job was the relatively cheap food and the free teas and coffees available from the many vending machines. Mincemeat, potatoes or greasy chips plus a can of drink and a Mars bar for £4.10 – not a great deal more than the cost of preparing food beforehand, and most of it piping hot, unlike sandwiches made at home. The challenge was finding sufficient time to eat and drink during the short window allocated for break. I could count on one hand the number of times I managed to finish a full cup of tea.

We were allocated half an hour for lunch, but in practice spent only around half of that in a state of anything resembling relaxation. By the time you made it to the canteen and elbowed your way through a throng of ravenous workers, you had around fifteen minutes to bolt down the food before you started the long walk back to the warehouse. Two or three English managers would invariably be waiting for you back at the work station, pointing at imaginary watches and bellowing peremptorily at anyone who returned even thirty seconds late: 'Extended lunch break today, is it?' 'We don't pay you to sit around jabbering.'[3]

This was life at Amazon, the world's largest retailer. I was an order picker in one of its huge distribution centres in the small Staffordshire town of Rugeley. The warehouse employed around

1,200 people. The majority of my co-workers were from Eastern Europe and most of those were from Romania. The Romanians were often dumbfounded as to why any English person would want to degrade themselves doing such lowly work. 'Excuse me if this sounds offensive, but are you English? Born here?' *Yes, I am English.* 'Then why are you picking? No offence,' asked a chubby young red-haired girl on my second day.[4] A week later the same girl grabbed me by the arm, shook me violently and told me she wanted to pack her bags and return home as soon as possible. 'I hate it, I hate it here,' she hissed through chipped teeth. She said that she had only planned to stay at Amazon for a month, and that she had come here with her boyfriend to save money to take back to her small village just outside Transylvania. But neither the work nor the city she had ended up in – Birmingham – had matched her expectations of what Britain was supposed to be. 'I hate the people, I hate the dirt and I hate the work ... I don't like this country ... Too many Indian people. Indian people everywhere!'

Amazon's vast warehouse sat on waste ground between the local canal and the power station. Down the road was a company that bought and sold dead cattle. The massive shoebox-like structure of the building in which we worked was the pale blue colour of a swimming pool, and looked incongruous amid the industrial landscape of belching chimneys and sodden green fields. It contained four floors, and Amazon's workforce was similarly split up into four main groups. There were those who checked and unpacked the incoming orders; those who stowed the items on shelves; another group – which I was part of – that picked the orders; and finally the workers who packed the products up

ready for delivery. It was the picker's job to march up and down the long narrow aisles selecting items from the two-metre-high shelves before putting them in big yellow plastic boxes – or 'totes', as they were called. These totes were wheeled around on blue metal trolleys before being sent down huge, seemingly never-ending conveyor belts that followed the length of the building the way a stream makes its way towards the sea. On an average day you would expect to send around forty totes down the conveyors, each one filled with books, DVDs and assorted miscellanea.

We lacked a manager in the usual sense of the word; or a flesh and blood manager, at any rate. Instead, each of us carried around with us a hand-held device that tracked our every move as if we were convicts out on house arrest. For every dozen or so workers, somewhere in the warehouse a line manager would be huddled over a desk tapping orders into a computer screen. These instructions, usually an admonishment to speed up, would filter through to our devices in an instant: 'Please report to the pick desk immediately' or 'Your rates are down this hour, please speed up.' We were ranked from highest to lowest in terms of the speed at which we collected our items from the shelves and filled our totes. For example, I was informed during my first week that I was in the bottom 10 per cent in terms of my picking rate. 'You'll have to speed up!' I was told by one of the agency reps. When you allowed your mind to wander, it was easy to imagine a future in which human beings were wired up to devices like this twenty-four hours a day.

As well as a potential forewarning of things to come, this algorithmic system of management was a throwback to the

'scientific management' theories of Frederick W. Taylor. In seeking to root out idleness and inefficient toil, in 1911 the wealthy mechanical engineer from Philadelphia published a monograph on what he saw as the potential for the scientific perfectibility of labour activity. Scientific management held that every workplace task ought to be meticulously monitored: watched, timed and recorded. Workers were units of production whose output ought to be measured in the same way as the machines on which they worked, and were to be directed down to the finest detail. Along with other prominent intellectuals of his day, Taylor did not consider the working class to be fully human: they were more usefully viewed as a resource to be exploited for profit. 'The writer firmly believes that it would be possible to train an intelligent gorilla so as to become a more efficient pig-iron handler than any man can be,' Taylor wrote disparagingly of the men whom he believed 'incapable' through 'lack of mental capacity' of understanding the theories they were to be subjected to.[5] The 'boss-class' has enthusiastically embraced Taylor's theories. In 2001, the Fellows of the Academies of Management voted *The Principles of Scientific Management* the most influential management book of the twentieth century.[6]

Twentieth-century communism also finds its echo in the modern workplace, both in modern *corporatese* and in the admonishments to feel joyful at the prospect of struggle. Socialist realism has mutated into rosy corporate uplift. Feel-good slogans were plastered across the interior walls of Amazon's warehouse next to photographs of beaming workers whose radiant countenances proclaimed that everyone at work was having a wonderful time. *We love coming to*

work and miss it when we're not here! declared a life-sized cardboard cut-out of a woman named 'Bez'. Similarly, almost everything that had a name was given a euphemism. Even calling the place a warehouse was a minor transgression. Instead, you were informed on the first day that the building would henceforth be known as a 'Fulfilment Centre' – or FC for short. You were not fired or sacked; instead you were 'released'. Significantly, the potentially antagonistic categories of Boss and Worker had also been abolished. You were all 'Associates' – both high and lowly alike.

Over the course of a single morning the average picker could earn around £29 carting totes back and forth along the dimly lit aisles of the warehouse. Meanwhile Jeff Bezos, Amazon's CEO, who at the time of writing is worth around $60.7 billion, once increased his wealth by a cool £1.4 billion over the course of a similar amount of time. Calling everyone 'associates' was, it seemed, a ruse designed to foster the illusion that you were all one big happy family. 'Jeff Bezos is an associate and so are all of you,' an Amazon supervisor cheerily informed us on the very first day.[7] Which is fine as far as it goes; though the vernacular seemed purposely designed to blur the distinction between the life of a seven-pound-an-hour picker and the sort of life you can lead with £1.4 billion in the bank. The 'associates' who walked home at midnight, heavy legs supporting suppurating feet which over the course of the day had puffed up half a size bigger, were treated at every juncture as lesser human beings than men like Jeff Bezos. This was all the more reason, perhaps, for those who do so well out of such a state of affairs to create a rhetorical universe distinct from the flesh and blood reality.

Amazon's recruitment process ran strictly through two agencies – PMP Recruitment and Transline Group. I landed the job at Amazon through Transline. This agency shot to notoriety in 2013 after one of the company's employees was suspended for cruelly boasting about her apparent ability to 'stop' Jobseeker's Allowance: 'If people from the JC [job centre] don't turn up to an appointment, I stop their benefits for thirteen weeks ... suckers ... I get so much pleasure knowing what I can do if [they] mess me round. I'm going to be shot for it one day I bet!' The employee would later be suspended and never returned.[8]

I encountered a similar relish for lording it over subordinates from several people in minor positions of authority at Transline. Petty führers were ubiquitous, and if you had the temerity to ask why you had not been paid your full wages for that week they would talk to you as if you were something they had scraped off the bottom of their shoe.

Every contract that we pickers were on at Transline was zero-hours and temporary. Despite requesting it several times, I was never given a copy of my actual employment contract, and was eventually told by a Transline rep that a contract did not exist because I was on a zero-hours contract. The documents I *did* see on the day I was invited in for the interview were quickly whisked away as soon as I had filled out the requisite details. After nine months, Amazon would either take you on permanently or cast you aside with no more compunction than if you had been a sack of rotten potatoes. In practice, you were extremely lucky even to make it to nine months. We were informed on our first day that if we were 'outstanding' then Amazon might conceivably

retain us. However, we were also told that we should be 'under no illusions that this is a temporary job'.[9] This was drummed into us *ad nauseam* over the course of the first afternoon. A reward was dangled in front of us – 'we do keep on the best performing staff' – and quickly snatched away like a juicy steak pulled from the jaws of a salivating dog. 'About seventy people are waiting for these jobs, so don't get your hopes up,' a Transline rep said with supercilious relish during the induction. The stream of eager-looking men and women who flooded into the brightly lit office seemed to lend force to the rep's gloomy message.

To be kept on by Amazon as a permanent employee was to find oneself in possession of a coveted 'blue badge'. I was told by several Amazon employees that the prospect of attaining a badge was often used to coax workers into doing things they would not have otherwise entertained.

'Basically, they lie to everybody to get them to do things,' said my housemate Chris, a balding thirty-three-year-old Romanian with soft eyes and the husky voice of a heavy smoker. 'There were some blue badges [available], and [the Amazon managers] said to me, "Hey, you have to change your shift to get a blue badge. Not for a long time, but for a few weeks" ... It turned out to be for three months. Oh, and they gave the blue badges to everyone else anyway.'[10]

We were stood about in the kitchen of the small house we were renting along with three others. It was a blackened red-brick shoebox at the end of a gap-toothed terrace which half a century ago would have housed local miners: the 'barracks of an industry', as such settlements were once called. There were clusters of these

cramped and huddled houses spread right across the Cannock Chase district. Rugeley was situated in the north, and down the A460 were the towns of Cannock and Hednesford.

It was early spring, and due to the dilapidated state of the house you could never fully escape the dank and filthy weather outside. Everything on the side of the kitchen nearest the window had the same silver film of dew that glazed the small lawn and the black and wet pavement outside. At the bottom of the front garden was a tall hedge where little black bags left by dog-walkers would hang until the sacks broke and spilled their foul contents onto the pavement below.

Chris was frying some potatoes in a pan on the hob to go with the luminous pink sausage he had just pulled out of the fridge. You can usually discern the nationalities of the residents of a house like this by the contents of the kitchen. Cured meat and beer and they are from Eastern Europe. Bacon, eggs and a few ready meals and they are English. Yellow-stained potato and rice dishes and the South Asians have arrived. Rather than traipsing around an old English town all day looking furtively for the signs of multiculturalism, you might save yourself the time by simply opening the door of a fridge.

As is common in rented dwellings, the lounge had been summarily ripped out and turned into an extra bedroom. The house functioned as a cash cow rather than a comfortable place to live. The landlord was one of the better sorts, yet every appliance and article of furniture had been purchased on the cheap – and was thus liable to break down or fall apart at the first opportunity. I slept in a room that permanently reeked of cheap, nauseating

paint. The electrics shorted several times over the course of the month, and as a consequence there was often no hot water with which to take a shower before work. There was a stinking toilet with a malfunctioning flush and a grimy washbasin. On one occasion all the lights in the kitchen stopped working because someone had over-run the bath and water had poured down through the light fittings and into the kitchen below. Cockroaches would occasionally scurry out from under the skirting and roam around the overflowing bin, which was permanently stuffed with the filthy wrappers from several days' worth of food. The heating was controlled centrally by a single switch, meaning it was either swelteringly hot or bitterly cold.

Living in the house alongside Chris and myself were three others: another Romanian named Claudiu and an Englishman named Joe who lived in his poky room together with his wife. I rarely saw Claudiu, whereas Joe would often linger outside the side door of the house smoking and spitting large splashes of catarrh onto the pavement. He was bald, heavily tattooed and his face was wrinkled and yellow. He had a nervous disposition and the rapid movements of a bird. The first thing he did when I moved in was to ceremonially shake my hand and greet me as a 'fellow English'. 'We English, we've gotta stick together,' he said, before telling me what an improvement I was on the previous tenant. 'Blinking heck, the last bloke here before you was a right mardy bum.'

Everyone living in the house worked at Amazon, which was about forty minutes away on foot. Chris had worked as a process guide at Amazon for eleven months. A process guide is essentially an assistant manager, and it was Chris's job to monitor fellow workers and to

pick up any production quality issues that might occur during the course of a shift. Chris told me that he was a 'respectable guy' back in Romania; yet over here he was a tiny cog in Amazon's giant global distribution machine, a behemoth that employed almost 8,000 people in the UK alone.[11] Like many of the Romanians I met, Chris had been sold an idea of Britain which only vaguely corresponded with the reality he encountered when he arrived.

'There are some agencies that are getting [workers] from Romania, and they're getting a commission for them. It's an English guy who's doing this ... John I think is his name. I came to the UK through this company ... They're lying to you, so they're gonna say, "Hey, you go to John Lewis or somewhere else," but they're sending people to Amazon. OK, maybe their first intention was to send people to John Lewis and they don't have places available, but they're saying this to everyone – even to guys with a better resumé like me.'

The employment agencies constantly drum it into workers like Chris that if they kick up a fuss about the conditions at work there is a vast reserve army of their fellow countrymen ready to take their place. Hearing stories like this brought to mind the words of the working-class writer B. L. Coombes, who in his 1939 novel on Welsh colliery life *These Poor Hands* wrote:

> It is a rotten feeling for a man who is working to come outside and see that a crowd of men are waiting for work. It warns him that the masters can treat him as they wish, for he dare not insist on his rights when there are so many waiting for a chance to start.

The house I shared with Chris was one of the better places he had lived since coming to England, at least in the sense that the landlord wasn't constantly scheming to dip his hand into Chris's shallow pockets. The buy-to-let market in the UK has boomed in recent years. There are good landlords, and then there are those for whom acquiring a property 'portfolio' is mostly about ripping off tenants and making a fast buck. Home ownership in Britain is at a thirty-year low.[12] More than a third of former council homes are now owned by private landlords. Meanwhile, between 2007 and 2016 total mortgage lending for buy-to-let properties doubled from 8.5 per cent to 17 per cent.[13] It has become harder to own a house but far easier to find a landlord. Buying-to-let can also be a lucrative occupation in itself. In 2015, 38 per cent of workers earned less than the amount the average homeowner made from the increase in the value of their house.[14]

Men like Chris, who, when they first come to Britain are unaware of their rights as tenants, are walking wedges of currency for this rising class of rapacious rentiers. Unscrupulous landlords – sometimes first- or second-generation migrants themselves – reel in the Eastern Europeans with conviviality and a thin veneer of respectability before their hand darts swiftly towards their new tenant's wallet. They earn your trust before swooping like a ravenous hawk whose eye has locked on to a corpulent vole. Everything sounds reasonable and above board until your feet are comfortably placed under the table and moving out becomes an oppressive chore. Then the landlord ups the ante, demanding ever-more money for rent and deposits – £300, £400, sometimes as much as £1,000. This had been the experience of Chris and many of his friends.

'For many Romanian tenants you're gonna have rats in your house, really small rooms; a single room is gonna be just a bed, and that's it for £65 a week – everything included. And they try to scam you for money – for more money. A lot of these [property] agencies, they're not quite legal, so when they suddenly told me I had to pay £360–£370 more, even if I paid in advance for one more week, I left in a couple of days. I was really disgusted. They suddenly said, "Hey, you have to pay us more." Basically, working for Amazon you don't have time for many other things, and I didn't have time to go and argue with them ... so I just left.'

As we talked, Chris upended the frying pan and poured the crispy discs of potato he was frying onto the plate. Some of them jumped out of the pan and onto the floor, a meal for the various creatures that would dart out from under the skirting boards as soon as it got dark.

'They're just trying to make more money for their pockets. Forcing people to pay more. All of my friends had this problem. Even now, after I left the house, there's one guy there, still living there, and he's having the same issue right now. He's having exactly the same issue. He's having to pay £340 in advance. [They're] suddenly demanding three or four weeks' rent in advance.'

When the agency had unsavoury tenants, they dumped those on the Romanians too.

'They put some drug addicts with us in the house, and another guy was on trial, or waiting for his sentence. If someone is going to pay them money for two weeks, three weeks in advance, they just don't care, they just want money and that's it. There was an addict who was really filthy, and the garbage in his room was like

twenty centimetres high. And I was shocked because that smell was really bad, and it was impossible to live there. And then they're stealing the food from the freezer, the drug addicts. And when I told the agency about it, they didn't reply; they just ignored it.'

Unlike Chris, I had walked into the job at Amazon freely, with a viable route out. But more importantly, I knew where to find my next meal if things became unbearable. The alternative for many of the Eastern Europeans was much starker. The average net monthly salary in Romania as of April 2016 was £413. In rural areas it was even less.[15]

'We need the money to survive ... right now I'm helping my family. From time to time I'm helping them to survive. I mean, we can stay in the forest and live but we need more money, that's the problem.'

Chris and the other Romanians realised that what they were doing was wretched work – hence their incredulity when I, an English national, chose willingly to put myself through it. 'Why you do this fucking shit?' 'Why don't you get another job?' 'You English!' I had questions like this fired at me nearly every day. For many of my workmates, however, the alternative was £143 a month and a fairly spartan existence supported by a threadbare social safety net. The cracks in the pavement in Eastern Europe were deeper and the squalor that poverty brought there was more wretched than anything you would have found in our grimy kitchen with its foul-smelling bin. But to say that men like Chris were infinitely glad of the work they were doing at Amazon, as it has become so fashionable to do – *These immigrants want to get on and I say good luck to them* – would not be quite truthful. As

another young Romanian put it to me in the pub a few days later: 'You can work here like an animal; you work four days, you know, and you have £240. I am a nobody here, yes; but back in Romania I am a nobody without enough money to eat.'

2

Rugeley is a small Staffordshire town with a population of around 24,000, sandwiched between Stafford and Cannock Chase. Depending on whom you speak to, its name is pronounced either Rudge-ley (rhyming with sludge) or Rouge-ley (as in the make-up). It is one of those down-at-heel market towns that exist as a sort of perpetually ill-treated younger sibling to the bigger local towns and cities like Birmingham or Shrewsbury. Nothing ever seems to happen in places like this. An atomic bomb could go off over London and things would probably carry on much as before. The same pale and slatternly people would still be found floating languidly in and out of the charity shops and takeaway restaurants that pepper the high street. The scrawled-on bedsheets calling attention to 'Sue's 40th' would still be found draped from the local landmarks. And the anonymous wretches who flit in and out of precarious and poorly paid employment would be as invisible to the politicians of the apocalyptic future as they are to the politicians of today. Rugeley is never likely to receive the attention bestowed on a really destitute part of the country like Jaywick, say, or Glasgow. But in a sense it is more instructive. There are towns like it dotted across the Midlands and the North of England. On my days off I would sometimes stop for a cup of tea at a small local cafe on the high street. The shop was brightly

lit and welcoming, with the morning sun flooding in through the large front windows onto the red and white checked tablecloths, giving off a dull pink glare. The menu was rudimentary as far as it goes – full English breakfast, bacon and sausage cobs finished off with apple crumble and custard for dessert – and the antiquated feeling of the little shop was augmented by two plastic towers of penny chews and rhubarb and custards which snaked up the back wall. The homely atmosphere would have been complete with the addition of a fly-blown sign perched in the front window advertising 'Tuck Shop Favourites'. The sleepy tea shop existed in restful contrast to the swanky Costa further down the high street, which teemed with people.

The high street in Rugeley is a narrow and winding street of little red-brick shops that leans ever-so-slightly inward, as if trying to squeeze the life out of the cobbled walkway that runs reluctantly down the middle. A little further down the sleepy high street is the pub where the notorious physician William Palmer, aka the Rugeley Poisoner, once did away with several people using strychnine. Charles Dickens described Palmer as 'the greatest villain that ever stood in the Old Bailey'. Thirty-five thousand spectators travelled to Stafford Gaol in 1856 to watch Palmer hang. Above the door of the pub, a dilapidated sign hangs as it would have during the nineteenth century, only today it carries the name of *The Shrew* rather than *The Talbot Arms*. In 1856, one local journalist wrote that the old sign's 'creaking at night must have wearied William Palmer's wife when she lay dying'.

The little tea shop never had more than three or four people in it at any one time. Those who did pass through were almost always

on familiar terms with the owner. A radio hummed faintly in the background, but such was the hushed atmosphere of the place that any conversation was invariably started with the entire shop.

'There's a rollover on the National Lottery tonight. Thirty-three million,' announced a fair-haired young woman one afternoon as she wheeled a pushchair through the front door, her overcoat flapping mournfully behind her in the breeze. 'How many have you had in?' she asked the owner, a plump woman of around fifty who always wore a fearful expression.

'It's been quiet around town,' the owner replied. 'Morrisons ain't half as packed as it normally is.'

I asked the women about work in the town, and the lady with the pushchair insisted firmly (and truthfully, from what I had gathered) that it was 'mostly Eastern Europeans' who worked at Amazon.

'They get on the train from Birmingham, and when they get off you'd think you were in a foreign country. They say there's people sleeping under the canal bridge and all sorts.'

Listening keenly, another of the tea shop's patrons, a stooping lady of around seventy with rimless glasses and a sandy-coloured perm, piped in, and tried to explain in a sympathetic tone of voice what was behind the apparent influx of migrants to Rugeley.

'I don't think it's their culture ... I mean, they've just got no money. They're skint ... like us in a way, but they hop on a bus and come over here and go up to Amazon. You feel for them a bit, really.'

She then straightened her shoulders a little, removed her glasses, narrowed her eyes and began to shake her head very slowly. 'You do

feel for them, especially when you see them young girls, eighteen or nineteen, traipsing up and down the road to go and do them long hours.'

The woman with the pushchair informed me that when Amazon first arrived in Rugeley in 2011, it had been a 'massive thing for the community'.

'There was gonna be all these jobs, but no one ended up getting one, did they? There's a hell of a lot of anger round here about it now. It's the breaks and things, I've heard. They say it's stopping people wanting to work there ... People are putting those things on their arms checking how many steps they've done.'

But the woman's anger was not directed at the migrants themselves, so much as at the thought that Amazon might be favouring foreigners over the locals. She went on again to tell me stories of migrants sleeping under the bridge that runs over the Trent and Mersey Canal; though I never found any evidence of this on the several occasions I went down to have a look.

'They don't employ local people, do they?' she said accusingly before I left.

'*Can't* or *won't*?' I asked.

'Well, they never seem to take any locals on, that's all I'm saying.'

I asked what year the local Lea Hall Colliery closed.

'Blimey, that's been gone a while now, ain't it? The power station's going altogether.'

'In June,' the owner interposed.

'How many jobs will that be going, then?' I asked finally.

Lady with pushchair: 'About a hundred and fifty, didn't they say? [Or] two hundred at the power station?'

The owner: 'Yeah, two hundred.'

A couple of unemployed twenty-something men would sometimes congregate in the cafe, sipping mugs of tea and furtively poring over copies of the *Sun* and the *Rugeley Chronicle*. Lunchtime arguments occasionally moved next door to the pub, where a frequent topic of conversation would be the 'scroungers' who preferred 'sitting on the sofa snacking to working', and also, inevitably, the migrants. One beer-soaked man whom I regularly bumped into – an out-of-work carpenter with spindly limbs and a rasping voice – grabbed me by the arm several times to recite a story about how his son was unable to find somewhere to live because of – he would lower his voice at this point – 'all them Eastern Europeans'.

According to the 2011 census, Rugeley has fewer foreign-born residents than the national average.[16] Yet peeping out through the frosted glass of the little pub on the high street, the threat of 'the Romanians' loomed ominously over the town like a fearsome raincloud. The handful of migrants the man knew personally were another matter entirely. They were 'not like the rest of them', he told me. Some were even 'decent blokes' who you could have a drink and a laugh with. But given the chance the carpenter would 'shut the door' on the others. 'The lot of them coming in, down the train station and that. Where's the working man supposed to live?' he would ask emphatically, jabbing a tobacco-stained finger into my chest. 'Where's he supposed to work?'

The spread of precarious work, propped up by an army of exploited labourers speaking in incomprehensible tongues, inevitably fuels these sorts of concerns. But there is a feeling of English culture being overwhelmed by capitalism, too. The forces

that have ruthlessly turned almost every British high street into a cultural wasteland of dull and identikit chain stores offering the same sensory experience are now so vast and incomprehensible that it is the single *Polski sklep* that is singled out. If English culture is being trampled on then Ronald McDonald should take more of the blame than Eastern European fruit pickers.

One of the first things to catch your eye on arriving in Rugeley is the obtrusively large red shopfront advertising private detectives. *Is your partner cheating? Ask about our tracking service*, reads the huge white lettering in the window. The shop also advertises lie-detector tests for hire. This is the paranoid world of *The Jeremy Kyle Show* writ large. Fidelity and faithfulness have been slowly chipped away by more ephemeral, market-driven principles promising instant gratification. You ditch one lover and take another, just as you might throw away an iPhone and buy a newer model in an emotional flight of fancy. For working-class communities this adds yet another layer of impermanence to an already insecure existence, especially for those men whose sense of masculine inadequacy is reinforced by the lack of any purposeful employment.

On several occasions I saw the same forlorn-looking young man hanging around outside the red-fronted shop. He was thin and gaunt, with protruding cheek bones and nervous-looking soft eyes that would dart about rapidly while he spoke. He was twenty-eight but looked much older. His face was clammy and grey, and he had lost one of his front teeth. He worked in a local shop and had been offered a job at Amazon but had turned it down.

'It was the first job I ever turned down,' he said proudly between short and rapid drags on a cigarette. 'It's foreigners' work, you

know? You get in on a job in a place like that and there ain't no one to talk to. They [the Eastern Europeans] keep themselves to themselves, don't they? You try to be friendly and that, but they ain't that interested; they just don't wanna know. It's sort of like they look down on us, because we're English, you know? I don't know why it is, but it always feels like they look down on us.'

I learned soon enough why the young man was always loitering around the Jeremy Kyle shop.

'Women, they end up leaving me for no reason and then going off with another lad. Always happens to me, like. I don't know how I can change that. I'm a man of truth ... I think I'm a nice guy, but they automatically treat me like I'm a pushover, you know.'

He relayed to me the story of how he had met a twenty-three-year-old woman on Facebook. She lived in Blackburn. For the first few weeks, at least, things went well. But it was clear from what the man said that he soon became possessive and domineering. At the first sign of disinterest on the part of the object of his affections he started bombarding her with text messages – around 100 a day.

'She used me. She used me for my money for two months and a half. I accused her of cheating before that. And they [her and her friends] told me, "You better stop texting or you'll be in deep shit." But I ain't scared of anyone. I've got a sword and axes in my house [grinning]. If they come to my house, I'll just take it outside, scare the shit out of them, and then take it back in the house.'

The man expelled the last breath of smoke through the gap in his front teeth and slipped into a lament about the state of the town.

'There's fucking nothing about here. There's like betting shops, Ladbrokes and that, a few pubs, hardly any clothes shops whatsoever – we've got JD Sports and then a few others – and that's it. I wouldn't work at fucking Amazon.'

He crushed the cigarette under his foot and lurched back into the private detective store. In the recent past a man often found a sense of identity through his work. But for those besieged by hostile economic forces today it can be hard to find a sense of belonging in the world. With the decline of trade unionism, discontent is expressed through ephemeral and individual modes of expression or it is driven inward. From the outside, an illusion is fostered that the working classes are the architects of their own destinies. You might be stacking shelves in Tesco or flogging useless junk to pensioners from a cow-shed converted into a call centre, but when you get a tattoo or a celebrity haircut, you feel a temporary affinity with the pop stars, rock stars and footballers who strut across the pages of the tabloids like peacocks. But the conceit at the bottom of this is that, unlike the icons of popular culture you wish to imitate, you invariably have to drag yourself back to the grim drudgery of it all the very next morning.

As for Amazon, I got a sense from the people I spoke to in the town that locals did initially get jobs there. Indeed, the ease with which I got in proved that there was no conspiracy to lock English workers out. Nor, strictly speaking, were there a limited number of jobs on offer. The sheer rapidity at which people dropped out after starting resulted in a constant stream of fresh openings. But few English locals I spoke to were willing to put up with the conditions for any significant period of time. The more I looked

into it, the more this did not appear to be a problem confined to Rugeley. According to a recent survey of Amazon's staff by the GMB union:[17]

- 91 per cent would not recommend working for Amazon to a friend.
- 70 per cent of staff felt that they were given disciplinary points unfairly.
- 89 per cent felt exploited.
- 78 per cent felt that their breaks were too short.
- 71 per cent reported that they walked more than 10 miles a day at work.

'Everyone I started with, they're all gone now. I'm the only one left out of eight,' said Claire, a chubby nineteen-year-old with red streaks in her hair, who combined packing at Amazon with a job in a local pub.[18]

I sat with Claire at a table on the upstairs floor of Wetherspoons in Cannock. The pub was dimly lit and the air was heavy with the smell of sugar and hop residue. It was early afternoon on a weekday, and the pub teemed with pensioners, young mothers and the unemployed. Behind the table where we were sat, the luminous plastic spoon a young woman was using to feed her baby stood out against the chestnut-coloured Mock-Tudor interior. Further back, next to the fruit machine, were two slovenly-looking men, one clasping a pint tight to his chest while the other searched anxiously for coins in every pocket of his baggy denim jeans.

Over an orange juice, Claire told me that many of her friends had started working at Amazon with high hopes, but that these were soon dashed when the reality of the job smacked them in the face.

'A few of them left because they got better jobs, but the rest of them, they hated it.'

Claire could have been the poster girl for a younger generation for whom the concept of a job for life feels as antiquated as floppy disks and VHS tapes. She had been forced out of a job at another pub because her hours had suddenly been reduced. She heard that Amazon were recruiting so she applied for one of the packing positions through the Transline agency. There were regular headlines in the paper about Amazon creating hundreds of new jobs in Rugeley, and for a nineteen-year-old the money – £7 an hour – did not seem particularly bad. She turned up at the agency's office in Cannock, filled out the pile of papers and underwent the obligatory drug and alcohol test.

And so Claire started working at Amazon. It was the end of October and Claire had previously been worried about how to pay for Christmas. She lived at home with her mum but still had to pay rent as well as monthly direct debits for a mobile phone. A job at Amazon held out the prospect of at least some seasonal cheer: drinks with friends and presents for the family. Claire had 'got on her bike' (or on a coach laid on by Amazon in this case) and had gone looking for work. She did everything that was asked of her. She had even refused to sign on while she was looking for a job. Yet, as with many others I would go on to meet, her hopes were soon dashed.

'They [Transline] underpaid me multiple times over Christmas, and then it took eight weeks to get [the money] back. All in all, I think it worked out at like twenty-seven hours over three weeks that they'd underpaid me. My mum ... she contacted ACAS a few times to try and resolve it. And when I mentioned it to Amazon that ACAS had been contacted, I got my money back the next week ... After three months, anything that you're owed they [the agency] won't pay it.'

But soon after Claire had wrestled back the first lot of money, the underpayments from Transline started again.

'I got paid eighteen pounds two weeks ago for forty hours. I got paid for two-and-a-half hours.'

During the week in question Claire had effectively been paid 45p an hour. Again, though, it took several weeks to get the money back.

'I should've got £262, I think ... They said, "Sorry, but everyone's pay has been messed up." I was told when I got my wage slip, "Don't worry, it's just the wage slips that are wrong." ... I've been there six months and I've been underpaid about seven times.'

Taking Transline to an employment tribunal might have been an option for Claire, were it not so prohibitively expensive. Employment tribunal fees were introduced in July 2013, meaning that a disgruntled employee must now fork out up to £1,200 to bring a case to a tribunal. The result has been a precipitous fall in the number of claimants coming forward, from 5,847 before fees were introduced to 1,740 in the year afterwards (2014–15) – a drop of 70 per cent.[19]

When you get a professional job you invariably graduate from weekly to monthly pay packets. It is cheaper for companies to

do it this way. To do payroll fifty-two times a year is costlier and more time consuming than doing it twelve times. But if you are living hand to mouth, you cannot afford to wait a month before you get your first pay cheque. You need it right away. The idea of falling back on savings is as otherworldly to those at the bottom end of the labour market as taking a loan out from Wonga is to the middle classes. Thus, agencies like Transline pay their workers each week. Or at least that's how it is supposed to work.

'I've had to [borrow] money off my mum quite a few times to pay the rent because of them. If I lived with a landlord I'd be fucked, basically. But yeah, when they paid in that £18 I had a direct debit going out of £40 ... I think they also gave me £140 instead of £260. I had to pay £80 out, and I had to pay a £40 direct debit, so I only had £20 for the week. Luckily, I've got another job, so I had £100 coming in that week on the Sunday, but Amazon and Transline didn't know that. I said to them, "Look, when am I getting the rest of my money?" "Oh, next week," they said. This was because they couldn't do same-day transfers, apparently.'

The limited employment rights conferred on Amazon's workforce by the agencies was one thing; however, even these insubstantial safeguards were regularly flouted. Management could also be needlessly capricious, especially with its points-based disciplinary system whereby workers accrued points for things like days off with illness, not hitting pick rates or being late.

'You're allowed six points before release [before you're sacked]. One of my friends had four, and they pointed her for clocking out early when she hadn't. They pointed her [again] because the Amazon bus broke down and she was late for work; [and then

again] because her child was in hospital so she had to leave work. When I first started, I was in a car accident ... I managed to get into work but they sent me home and pointed me for it. And I was like, "I've just been in a car accident; you're the ones who sent me home. Why am I being pointed?"'

Claire did not expect to be at Amazon for much longer. She had already clocked up five points, and so was just one point away from being 'released'. The first point was for the car accident; then she received a point for not hitting her productivity rates ('On pack it's ridiculous'); she picked up another when the bus laid on by Amazon was late again; she picked up a point when Amazon tried to force her to do overtime ('they said it was compulsory and I was like, "I've done my five weeks of compulsory overtime, I'm not doing any more"'); and she picked up another point when she was off with a migraine. ('I suffer with really bad migraines, and I said to them, "Can I bring a doctor's note in?" And they were like, "No, you'll still get pointed."')

Claire also told me a story about a friend of hers who was transgender. Before he stopped working for Transline he was on the receiving end of jibes about this.

'To me that's just as bad as being racist,' Claire said firmly, refuting in one breath the lazy stereotype that working-class people are hopelessly unreconstructed on every social issue under the sun.

'He was transgender, and his real name was Elise but he asked to be called Elliot, and Transline point blank refused. They called him Elise, so he just wouldn't answer them. I was like, "He's transgender, he's on testosterone, so he technically is a male. And what does it matter if you call him Elliot or Elise?"'

'Did they say why?'

'Because *she* was a girl, they said. Because *she* "didn't have the bits".'

'Who said that?'

'One of the Transline managers.'

To get one of Amazon's coveted blue badges was fiendishly difficult. You had to be exceptional and even minor infractions seemed to disqualify you.

'You can't have any time off,' Claire told me, 'and you have to have perfect rates all the time ... like 100 per cent all the time on anything.'

Another friend of Claire's was all set to get a blue badge as the end of his nine months approached. He had worn himself out, Claire said, pulling what must have amounted to hundreds of thousands of items off the shelves for Amazon's customers, from books to kitchen appliances. He had hit all his pick rates, had always turned up to work on time and, crucially, had somehow managed not to flout the innumerable petty rules which governed nearly every aspect of the job. Yet this brave new economy – the Darwinian world in which illness was an unpardonable sin – spat him out like a betel nut. His crime was having the temerity to get sick. He even phoned the office an hour before work, in accordance with Transline's rules, to let his manager know. Not that this stopped the agency from getting rid of him.

3

I was back at work and had started to get sick. It was my second week. Because being ill was a punishable offence, I was about to earn myself a 'point'. Never mind that working an obscenely long ten-and-a-half-hour day on a diet of stodge and grease was liable to leave even the healthiest worker ailing. If you were sick you lost a day's pay, which tended to make you even sicker, due to the penurious lifestyle it encouraged. Not that Amazon seemed to worry. They had, after all, developed this cruel system, which saw workers punished for any kind of ailment that kept you at home.

As with so many of the rules at Amazon, the automatic assumption from higher up was that in every aspect of the job you were trying to pull a fast one. All illness was synonymous with a layabout whose sickness is the result of a drunken night on the town. You were not *really ill*; it was obvious that you just didn't want to be at work. Thus, if you informed the agency in good time that you were going to be absent you were still punished for it. *Thanks for letting us know, now here is your point.* If you failed to phone in and give forewarning you were (albeit with rather more justification) sanctioned with three points. A week of notified illness accrued five points, which was a whisker away from getting the sack. Similarly, if you were one minute late for work, as well as being given a point, you risked losing pay equivalent to fifteen

minutes. On the whole, sympathy was in short supply. 'You'll just have to self-medicate because we need you here,' an Amazon supervisor had told us on the first day.[20] The canteen was heavily stocked with cough lozenges and it was soon obvious why.

On my return to work an awkward man in gold-rimmed spectacles came looking for me on behalf of Transline. I caught sight of him wending his way in and out of the aisles, clipboard tucked under one arm, looking down each of the long walkways for – as it turned out – me. For the agency's apparent enforcer (it was this man's job to go around informing people of their mistakes and misdemeanours) the man was a surprisingly yielding character. He looked on you with submissive hang-dog eyes as he reeled off your charge sheet. Unlike some of the other managers, he evidently did the job reluctantly. He stuttered and prevaricated, and every attempt at admonishment was rendered feeble by his mousy apprehension. He ought to have been a librarian rather than a person wielding any sort of authority over others.

Nevertheless, he did eventually manage to expostulate that I was to be given a point for the previous day's absence. He did not say it was a punishment but that was effectively what it was. The anger welled up in me as the man was droning on and I was forced to bite my tongue. I did, however, ask if it was legal to discipline me like this merely for being ill – especially when I had gone through the correct procedure of phoning the office an hour before my shift began. He gave me the sort of answer a school teacher would give you when you were five years old. 'It is what Amazon have always done,' he replied, looking at me more in sorrow than in

anger, which made the whole thing worse. He might just as well have said, 'Because I said so.'[21]

According to the pedometer I wore on my wrist, I was walking around ten miles a day. The greatest distance I travelled was fourteen miles and the shortest distance was seven. To give some concrete sense of what that entailed, setting off on my first day from the heart of London and heading east, by the evening I would have arrived in Sidcup. By the end of day two I would be approaching Rochester. By the end of the week the coast of Dover would be in sight, and at the end of the month I would have walked to Antwerp in Belgium. The cumulative effect of the monstrous amounts of walking you are expected to undertake is felt most keenly on your feet, which in my case began to resemble two ragged clods of wax gone over with a cheese grater. Traipsing around for ten miles when your feet are soft and you've eaten well and slept soundly is one thing. Doing it for four consecutive days (and that's before any overtime is factored in) with very little let-up and on a diet of ready meals is another thing altogether.

Over the course of a week the tiredness crept up on me to the point where it felt as if someone had fastened manacles around my ankles. Any vitality new employees might possess falls away from them like an old coat within a couple of days. When they start, cordial, bright-eyed young Romanian men and women are so busy running around that they don't even have time to wipe the sweat from their faces. Just a few days later they'll be curled over their trolleys, covertly trying to snatch a morsel of sleep out of sight of the roving supervisors.

This was how I first met Nirmal, a forty-year-old British Indian man from Wolverhampton who had once owned his own business. One evening I had gone charging round a corner in the darkness of the warehouse to retrieve a box of grass seed to complete a customer's order. As I dashed around the bend my trolley went careering into Nirmal's. There was a loud crash and the big man in front of me jerked up like a spring that had been uncoiled. He had evidently been asleep, though for how long it was impossible to tell. Nirmal had a physique like Obelix in the *Asterix* comic strips. His corpulence reminded you of a walrus, but his manner always conveyed an air of amiable good humour that meant you instantly warmed to him. Nirmal had run a corner shop in a previous life, yet it had gone to the wall when the recession of 2008 hit. Since then, he had worked as a van driver for a couple of years, and after tiring of that – 'It was really hard work and mind-numbingly boring after a bit' – had decided to give Amazon a go.

I had first noticed Nirmal when, on the very first day, I saw him scanning the room during the induction, looking around at the assembled young Eastern Europeans with a mixture of disdain and jocularity. A smirk was constantly curving up one side of his face, the way a crease adorns a crumpled shirt. Once you had registered it you could hardly imagine Nirmal with any other expression. His approach to work was characterised by what Richard Hoggart described in *The Uses of Literacy* as a 'go slow – don't put the other man out of a job' attitude. 'It's like a bank,' Nirmal told me cryptically, 'when one person speeds up it ruins it for everyone.'

I immediately liked Nirmal. You could tell, however, that he was not going to last long in the job. By the end of the first week

I was picking around 180 items a session and averaging about ninety items per hour. My score wasn't particularly impressive, either – the red-haired Romanian girl who claimed to 'hate' the job was hitting 230 items per session. Nirmal approached me at lunch on the second day with a wider grin than usual to boast about how he was hitting forty items an hour. I didn't have the heart to tell him just how bad that was, so instead I lied, telling him that I had 'just about managed fifty but that was walking fast'.

The problem, of course, was Nirmal's weight. If you were out of shape at all the work was torturous. The same was true if you were over a certain age. On one occasion[22] I witnessed a particularly disgusting scene. Wheeling a trolley down a deserted corner of the warehouse one dull afternoon, I saw a supervisor – a dead-eyed young middle manager who was puffed up from the gym and pungent with aftershave – set upon an older man.

Shaking his finger at him, the young man called the older worker every name he could think of. The words came out of his mouth like sour milk poured from a jug. He might as well have knocked the old man over with scorn. The man on the receiving end, who must have been at least sixty, grew pale and tense as he cowered under the wave of cruel invective. The wrath of the manager – whose face had turned from red to purple and back to red again – was only abated when he was summoned downstairs by a muffled voice on his walkie-talkie. The old man he left behind had by that time shrivelled up like a melted crisp packet. Nirmal, who had been watching the spectacle unfold from further back, sidled up to me, shaking his head. 'Fucking hell,' he chuckled softly. 'He ain't gonna last long.'

And he didn't. While I was stood outside smoking a cigarette at lunch that day, I watched the old man stagger out of the building and through the second set of tall metal security gates. These sat between hulking black metal fences at the end of the car park. This ungainly man with bloodshot eyes moved as if all the life had been drained out of him. He teetered into the car park and towards a little red Nissan Micra which was sat with its lights on, engine purring away quietly. As he approached the car a dishevelled old lady climbed out of the driver's door as quickly as she could move. Looking fixedly at the man's grief-stricken face, she pulled out a handkerchief from the pocket of her duffel coat and scampered towards him. She dabbed the man's face with her brown mottled hand as she pleaded with him to disclose what had happened. The entire scene, which could not have lasted more than a minute or two, made you want to cry. Off they trundled in the car, heads bobbing like plastic ducks in a bath as they disappeared out through the gate. I never saw either of them again.

The top floor on which I worked was a gloomy place, with the only natural light coming in through small rectangular windows located far above on the high ceiling. Most of the light was provided by grey steel lamps the shape of rugby balls and about the same size. These were dotted about the ceilings on every floor and cast a peculiar yellow glow about the place. During the course of the night – because as soon as we clocked off at 11:30 p.m. another group of workers were bussed in to start their shifts – many of the motion-sensitive lights would malfunction, meaning that a dozen or so workers would be left scuttling around in the dark on the

top floor of a warehouse at three o'clock in the morning. Who, when they purchase an iPhone charger or an Adele album with a click on Amazon's website, imagines anything like this?

You discover almost as soon as you begin the job that the admonishment to 'never run' was not meant literally. Rather, it was an illusory prohibition of something which was a necessary requirement if you were to avoid the sack. Like a totalitarian state, rules were laid down that it was impossible not to flout. Dashing around was obligatory if you were to meet the exacting targets set for every worker. Similarly, water breaks were permitted, but to go off in search of a water dispenser was to run the risk of 'idling', another transgression you were often warned about. There were around twelve water machines on each floor, yet in a labyrinth of aisles spread over 700,000 square feet it was nearly always impossible to locate one nearby when you needed it.

I would begin work each day at one o'clock in the afternoon along with the rest of my shift cohort. We would swipe through the outer security gates, walk to our lockers and dispose of our belongings – mobile phones, keys and anything else liable to delay your exit through security later on – and head towards the pick desk. It was impossible to take a recording device into the warehouse (or to be more precise, it would have been impossible to get it back out through the security gates at the end of a shift), and so I carried an innocuous-looking notepad and pen around with me in my back pocket. The security guards at Amazon were endowed with a great deal of power, which included the right to search your car if they suspected you of stealing something. Such was the weight of suspicion falling on you from day one that

even carrying the little pen and paper in my pocket felt like I was committing some disgraceful crime.

There is something unusually oppressive about an environment like that. I suspect it makes a person more rather than less likely to misbehave. The entire time I was working at Amazon I felt as though I was under a dark cloud of suspicion. I would find myself cringing under the accusatory questions of a supervisor or security guard when I had done nothing wrong. The sheer oppressiveness of the place built up over time to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: you soon began to fantasise about scheming against the company and its petty rules. The first time you were accused of idling you felt a burning sense of injustice. The second or third time it happened you would be annoyed only because you had been caught. You would soon find yourself carrying out small rebellions against authority: a misplaced item you would once have picked up, you now left on the floor. You would snack in the warehouse and defile the floor with the empty wrapper, or deliver a satisfying boot to the spines of a row of tightly packed books or DVDs.

Arriving at the pick desk to start a shift, you would typically receive something between a briefing and a telling-off from one of the Amazon line managers. Prizes would be offered for the best-performing pickers – though I never did see anyone win anything – and a manager would run through all the mistakes your shift had made on the previous day. These would include things like not stowing boxes properly after picking an item and taking too much idle time. Most of what was disparagingly called 'idle time' involved things like going to the toilet, yet the wickedness

of 'idling' was brought up unfailingly at every briefing, as if the need to perform bodily functions would eventually melt away in the name of productivity. 'You need to get your productivity up, guys,' intoned various managers in the corporate jargonese that seeks to sugar-coat admonishments. 'You're clocking up too much idle time.'[23] Rather than complaining when people had the temerity to go to the toilet, productivity-obsessed Amazon might instead have installed more toilets. For those of us who worked on the top floor of this huge building, the closest toilets were down four flights of stairs. So far, in fact, that on one occasion I came across a bottle of straw-coloured liquid perched inauspiciously on a shelf next to a box of Christmas decorations.

'They put me on pick the other day and asked me why I had fifteen minutes' idle time,' Claire had told me in the pub. 'I was like … I needed to go to the toilet. I had to walk all the way down the stairs – like four floors – to go to the toilet. It's like, what do you expect?!'

You soon found yourself in trouble if you began to dwell too much on the passage of time during your shift. For the first two or three hours there were plenty of things for a person – and especially an educated person – to think about in order to distract you from the mind-numbing tedium of the job. You might dwell on the books you were going to buy when you had the money, or the eccentric present you might get for your girlfriend or boyfriend on returning to civilisation. Five or six hours later and your thoughts were generally preoccupied with food. After eight or nine hours, however, it became a real struggle to find things to daydream about. You became oppressively tired

of rolling the same thoughts over and over in your mind. As the afternoons wore on, you would see the young Romanian men looking furtively down the aisles in the hope of catching sight of one of the pretty girls who worked there. You would also see the disappointment etched on their faces when I stumbled clumsily around the corner. The sheer misery of the work left you craving cigarettes and alcohol and everything else that offered the promise of any kind of emotional kick.

A wretched and miserable job does not appal the middle classes so much as the behaviour exhibited by a person who does such a job – never mind that it is the dismal work that has often driven them to such behaviour in the first place. From the perspective of a middle-class professional cocooned in a London office, the belief that workers gorge themselves on stodge, grease and sugar because they are feckless and irresolute makes sense. After all, a middle-class person only indulges like this in a moment of weakness or as part of a rational cost/benefit calculation. He or she will 'treat themselves' to a chocolate bar or a slice of cake because they feel that they deserve it. It is the cherry placed on top of life itself; a rational decision representing a sugary pat on the back. A working-class person, on the other hand, will buy a greasy packet of chips as an emotional escape from the present. As Nirmal put it to me one afternoon, 'This work makes you want to drink.'

And it did. It was not only because it was physically exhausting, but because it was mentally deadening too. The job required an emotional palliative in the same sense that your burning and suppurating feet required sticking plasters at the end of the day. Unlike professional jobs, where there is usually some aspect of the

work that is enjoyable, working on the bottom rung of the ladder at Amazon was no fun at all. Five pence on a can of Coke or a Mars bar is never likely to change that. Instead, it will simply make the lives of the people who float in and out of these jobs a little more miserable. When we walked through the door at midnight at the end of a shift, we kicked off our boots and collapsed onto our beds with a bag of McDonald's and a can of beer. We did not – and nor have I met anyone in a similar job who behaves in this way – come home and stand about in the kitchen for half an hour boiling broccoli. Regularity of dietary habit is simply incompatible with irregularity of work and income. As far as we were concerned the 'foodies' – those who appear on television to fetishise the over-intricacy of food made with expensive ingredients – could go to hell.

Rules, as I have already stated, were not really rules at all at Amazon. A good example of what I mean by this was the time allocated for break. Over the course of a normal day, workers were entitled to one break of half an hour and two ten-minute breaks. The half-hour break was unpaid but the shorter breaks were paid. The ten-minute breaks were actually fifteen minutes in total, but an extra five minutes (which you were not paid for) was tacked on to the ten in order to account for walking from the further reaches of the warehouse to the canteen. In practice it took around seven minutes to walk from the back of the warehouse (ten football pitches, remember) and through the airport-style security scanners to the break area. When the two minutes it took to get back to the pick desk at the end of the break were factored in, the 'fifteen-minute break' totalled about six minutes.

'The breaks are ridiculous,' said Claire. 'You obviously get your half an hour, because you get walking time for that. But on each break I'd say I'd get five minutes each time, because by the time I've got to my locker to get my fags or my phone and then gone outside it's time to go back in and walk back to pick.'

I never did receive an employment contract, so I have no idea as to my rights or anything else I might have been entitled to at work. Any knowledge I did possess was general and had been acquired beforehand. As for my Romanian co-workers, most of them lacked even a rudimentary understanding of the rights bestowed on a typical British worker. However harshly they were treated, in their minds such a regime was normal; it was simply what happened in England, a country where there were two types of people: those who wanted you to go home and those who wrote letters to liberal newspapers waxing colourfully about how wonderful and hard-working you were.

4

The Lea Hall Colliery, which opened in 1960, was the first modern coal mine opened by the National Coal Board. It closed on 25 January 1991, immediately throwing 1,250 men out of work. By the end it was losing £300,000 a week. The Cannock Chase coalfields once supported forty-eight mines. The last, Littleton, closed in 1993. Those working at the pit lost jobs that paid the equivalent of between £380 and £900 a week in today's money. In terms of the sheer numbers made redundant, there were also add-ons. Lea Hall had been the biggest colliery of its type in Europe. When the pit closed many people in the support industries also lost their jobs. The man who delivered ice-cold milk to the pit lost his franchise when the men stopped drinking gallons of it at the end of their shifts. In between the rows of blackened brick dwellings leading to the pit there once stood thriving little shops and tobacconists where the men would pick up newspapers, fags and packets of crisps during the early-morning shift changeovers. Gradually these disappeared too.

Following millions of pounds of investment old mining communities are being transformed, declared one headline in a local paper from 2011 when Amazon first came to the town.[24] The transition in Rugeley is one that is replicated across Britain. Amazon has other fulfilment centres in Hemel Hempstead,

Hertfordshire, Swansea, Doncaster and South Yorkshire – all former mining areas. Sports Direct's biggest warehouse, which was compared to a 'workhouse' and a 'gulag' by the trade union Unite,[25] is located in Shirebrook, Derbyshire, the site of the old Shirebrook Colliery, which closed in 1993. The UK's former mining areas are home to around 5.5 million people – about 9 per cent of the population. Typically, the pits there would close, a period of time would elapse where people were expected to survive on benefits, and when economic 'regeneration' eventually arrived it often came in the form of multinational companies offering precarious and low-paid work. Perhaps more humiliating for the communities in question was the fact that they were expected to bow and scrape to companies like Amazon because they needed the jobs.

Alex, a former pit mechanic and member of the rescue service at Lea Hall Colliery, told me that Rugeley had 'never recovered'[26] from the closure of the pit.

'There are no jobs. Or they're minimum-wage jobs and they're jobs based on short-term contracts and fear.'

I met Alex one evening when I stopped at Lea Hall Miners' Social Club,[27] a box-shaped, sandy-coloured building with a large conservatory incongruently jutting out of its front. The club was situated 400 yards up the road from the Globe Island roundabout, where four nine-foot, 2,000-kilogram concrete statues were erected in 2015 to commemorate 115 miners who had died at the Lea Hall and Brereton collieries during the working lives of the two pits. A modest plinth engraved with the names of the men stood nearby. One drinker told me that Rugeley's local Tory MP attended the miners' march for the old statues only to vote

for anti-trade union legislation in parliament the very next day. While I was cocooned in Amazon's warehouse, the government was trying to push through legislation that would have lifted the ban on companies using agency workers during strikes and made it compulsory for strike leaders to wear special armbands or risk a £20,000 fine.

The club had a mixed crowd, though a handful of former miners drank their beer there every night. The atmosphere of a social club is much friendlier than that of an ordinary pub. You can imagine being in there on a crisp Saturday afternoon in November, sinking into one of the mauve chairs with a pint and a packet of crisps with the heating turned up while mist envelops everything outside and a reassuring voice on the radio reels off the football results from the three o'clock kick-offs. Everyone knows everyone else and you are never short of conversation. To paraphrase George Orwell's description of working-class interiors, you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere that it is difficult to find elsewhere. It is the socialism of leisure time: the elites had their private members' clubs and so working men wanted their own private spaces too. Fittingly, there was a 'do it yourself' feel about most working men's clubs and the profit motive was largely absent. Unlike a pub, where you get a pint and perhaps a bite to eat before being ushered out onto the street after last orders, twentieth-century working men's clubs offered various self-improvement opportunities to members, such as lectures and keep-fit classes. Today, however, clubland is in its death throes. More than 2,000 working men's clubs have closed their doors since the mid-1970s, and more are shutting up shop every year.[28]

'People actually say, "I'm only at Amazon," and in the past they would've never said, "I'm only at the pit,"' Alex told me. 'You'd have said, "I'm a collier," because that's what you were and you were proud of it.'

The largest employers in Rugeley today are Amazon and Tesco – as well as what remains of the power station. In 1986 the main employers had been Lea Hall Colliery, the two power stations, Armitage Shanks, Thorn Automation and Celcon.[29] The excitement when Amazon first came to the town had long since dissipated by the time I arrived. Now the company was forced to bus in people – predominantly Eastern Europeans – from places like Wolverhampton, Walsall and Birmingham.

The fact that a growing number of British people are unwilling to be treated like animals by unscrupulous employers is often viewed as shameful, when it really ought to be considered a sign of progress. British workers have minimum standards with respect to what they will put up with – standards that many of the precarious and poorly paid jobs our economy now relies upon fail to satisfy.

'I wouldn't do that work. I'll make no bones about it,' Alex said of the work I was doing at Amazon. 'I wouldn't do it because I'd fall out with them [the managers] over how they treat people.' Instead, you had to commute out of towns like Rugeley to find decent work.

Drinking in the social club one evening was Jeff Winter, a local Labour councillor. Jeff was a big gregarious man in his mid-fifties whose long hair and check shirt made him look more like an ageing rock star than a councillor. He stood me a drink and started to reminisce about the Rugeley of old.[30]

'I mean, what is a decent job today? What have these former mining companies become? The warehouse was empty for about two years before Amazon came here. But are we grovelling then? Are we grovelling by saying yes, we'll accept anything [i.e. Amazon]? Because we're desperate for our people. The other thing is, you're not going to buy houses and you're not going to help your families on that, up there [at Amazon]. The uncertainty – can you get a mortgage on a zero-hours contract? What can you get?'

While we talked, the television suspended high up on the wall of the club was showing football. Liverpool were playing in the European Cup. It could almost have been the 1970s. As you moved a little closer to the screen, however, the generational transformation dawned on you. The names of the sponsors were garishly emblazoned across shirts and boots and all over the stadium in luminous colours. Gladiatorial music boomed over the loudspeakers at half-time. Money had saturated the game, and former miners who once sweated their guts out so that those above ground could heat their homes sat passively and watched these preened and primped working-class heroes kick a ball about. Today the common man is celebrated so long as he is no longer common. Respect isn't automatically granted to people who do working-class jobs. Instead, it goes to those who grab the slippery levers of social mobility and climb out on the backs of those they leave behind.

'I work around Stoke-on-Trent and you see a lot of people working on checkouts,' said Jeff. 'In Tesco and that ... You see a lot of older guys who have been made redundant, and they're not reaching retirement, they're having to work, they're having to go

on checkouts and that. You never saw that years ago. I know it's changed, and I can accept it's changed, but that doesn't make it right.'

According to a 2016 report from Royal London, workers in some parts of the UK will have to work into their eighties in order to maintain a decent standard of living when they retire.[31] Between 1993 and 2012, the number of people working beyond the state pension age increased by 85 per cent.[32]

'If you went back forty years, and I know you can't, but you had a pit which employed a lot of skilled men, and a lot of people providing good machinery to that pit as well ... there was [sic] mechanics; there were electricians. There were labouring jobs at the pit ... but they were *still good jobs*. You had the power station with the skilled men. You had Thorn EMI over the road. That employed hundreds and hundreds and they were good, good jobs ... In the sixties we were rich – in proportion, you know. Working class and vote Labour yes, but we were rich. This was a happening place.'

And then, like steam from a kettle, the skilled jobs began to disappear. Together with the closure of the collieries, manufacturing jobs have disappeared right across the Midlands over the last thirty years, as firms have relocated their production lines to countries with fewer scruples about workers' rights. One in five working people had a job in manufacturing in Britain in the mid-1980s. By 2013 that figure had fallen to just one in twelve.[33] Thus when Amazon came to Rugeley in 2011 the local excitement was palpable. There was a sense that the town was about to regain its dignity. The local *Express & Star* newspaper reported shortly before

it opened that the new depot was 'swamped' with applicants.[34] It was a 'massive thing for the community', as the lady in the cafe had told me wistfully. The creation of 900 jobs by Amazon also fitted neatly into the political narrative of economic regeneration: Britain's former industrial areas were going to be invigorated and twenty years of decline were going to be arrested. Yet this sunny optimism rested on a faulty assumption: that all jobs were created equal, and that, because an area had got back to work, the work itself was on a par with the jobs lost during the 1980s and early '90s.

It is easy to stray too far down the path of nostalgia, conjuring up a lost world of robust men in shirtsleeves going off to work happy while at home a dog curls up on a hearth rug and contented wives send the rich smell of Yorkshire puddings and gravy piping out of every kitchen on a Sunday. There are political tendencies of both left and right that yearn for this supposedly happy era. The most obvious objection to wistful romanticism of this sort is the advances in safety at work over recent decades (not to mention women's liberation from the shackles of the stove). I would have to be incredibly unlucky or foolish to be killed in an Amazon warehouse, whereas horrific injuries and sometimes death occurred regularly down the pit. The mania for the past is usually the preserve of those who know it won't be their sons who may end up buried under several tons of rock while the wife slaves away at home.

In some parts of the country the benefits of recent 'regeneration' projects have been obvious. With the creation of high-skilled tech jobs, cities like Manchester and Leeds have thrived in recent

times. However, towns like Rugeley have 'merely replicated their economies', as a 2015 report by the Centre for Cities put it. 'They have replaced jobs in declining industries with lower-skilled, more routinised jobs, swapping cotton mills for call centres and dock yards for distribution sheds.'[35]

Nor were the respectable jobs the only thing that disappeared at the tail end of the twentieth century. The in-work training and the value afforded to the learning of skills vanished too. The academically gifted were encouraged to move away to university, while those without qualifications could do little more than stay put and take whatever was on offer locally.

'I mean, if you want good employment you've got to become a commuter,' said Jeff as he took a sip of his pint. 'You've got to commute out of this town to find the real jobs, whatever the real jobs are. If [you're] Romanian ... you can cross the border [and] you can come to work. And you know something, they love it these business people, don't they? You go to Stafford and you see the fruit-picking farms. All Eastern Europeans there. It's all around you ... Is that what you've got to compete against?'

Most of the men I spoke to that evening planned to vote Leave in the forthcoming European Referendum, though almost all of them had voted Labour all their adult lives. It was the noticeable decline of Rugeley that seemed to bother them more than the presence of Eastern European immigrants, however.

'The thing is, you go from pit to power station, you're talking about skilled men, apprenticeships, and all this,' said Jeff. 'This town has had this since the sixties, you know: the power station, good jobs, good money. And in 2016 what are we becoming as a

town? Realistically we're becoming poorer as a town than we were forty, fifty years ago ... What does this [Amazon] provide? And someone mentioned [this] to me earlier today: capitalism relies on debt. You don't want these jobs so you go to university and take on £30,000 worth of debt. Fuelling capitalism. You buy the car on hire purchase. Fuelling capitalism. That's how it survives. And so you're living with your parents because you can't get a house. There's no social housing. Is that what we've accepted? It's a total wotsit from what happened in this town forty years ago when there was good jobs and this and that. All these clubs were full every night; the pubs were full every night. You know, there was people about, there was people doing things. Now it's a totally different society. And kids obviously don't know because they've never been part of that. But it don't make it *right*; it don't make what we've come to *right*.'

Later on that evening Alex, the ex-pit mechanic, told me the story of a friend of his who had lost his job when the pit closed. He managed to find occasional work but nothing regular. He was unemployed for around seven years before he eventually found something.

'He was desperate; I mean, he was *down*, and Tesco opened two or three years ago. And he got taken on. He works on nights, filling shelves. And he was over the moon, because he got a full-time job. All right, minimum wage and what have you, and it's not good, but that's the way the country is.'

Alex was happy for him. His old friend had got some of his dignity and self-respect back. He seemed to have a sense of purpose again. But then, ominously, Tesco began to cut his hours and the

old fear reared its head again almost as before.

'He worked about nine months and then they reduced his hours from thirty-eight down to thirty-two,' Alex said in the cynical tone I was growing accustomed to hearing. 'But that's what they do.'

5

For me at least life soon settled into a routine. I spent each morning before my shift eating a hideous ready meal in my room. Sausage and mash from the Co-op. Beef lasagne. Macaroni cheese. Once I even ate a Birds Eye traditional chicken dinner thirty minutes after waking. I stopped buying milk and bread because they went off before I had the chance to eat them. 'The difference ... between the man with money and the man without is simply this,' the downtrodden novelist Edward Reardon declared in George Gissing's novel *New Grub Street*, 'the one thinks, "How shall I use my life?" and the other, "How shall I keep myself alive?"'

It is easy to slip into an unhealthy regime like this. You get up each morning at eleven, you have breakfast, shower and prepare your feet for the day ahead – several sticking plasters, two pairs of socks – and then you drag yourself out of the door by twelve thirty. You return home at midnight and you are usually in bed by one. Wash, rinse, repeat. Fastidiousness rapidly goes out the window. You have two meals a day and it is incumbent on you to get as much food inside you as possible at each sitting because it is impossible to know when you will next get the chance to eat a proper meal. Some snare-up in the security line on your lunch break could easily result in you missing out on a hot meal that

day. 'I feel like I'm getting more and more tired,' my housemate Chris said to me on the first morning I met him in the kitchen. I soon understood why.

Managing on the salary paid by Amazon was theoretically feasible in a town like Rugeley. My salary worked out at £245 per week for thirty-five hours before tax (at £7p/h). It was tough, but it was possible to keep your head above water. In London you would pay £500 a month for a functional box-room like mine, whereas in Rugeley I paid £300, which included all of the bills.

In theory, then, I ought to have had a fairly ample sum to put towards food and other necessities – over £100 a week. Yet things rarely panned out like that. For one thing, at the end of my first week instead of being paid £245 I was paid £185.20. I expected to be taxed but not as heavily as £60 on a wage of less than £250. On seeking out a Transline rep to speak to about the discrepancy, I was pre-empted by a 'Yeah, yeah, we know about that',[36] as soon as I opened my mouth. I had been put on an emergency tax code along with several others. For some reason this had only happened to my British co-workers – al the Romanians had been paid the full and proper amount (o at least they had for that week).

At the end of week two I was underpaid again. This time received just £150: almost £100 short. It turned out that I ha again been taxed at a higher rate; however, Transline had als underpaid me along with every other picker, including th migrant workers. The sense of a shambles was reinforced b the fact that Transline refused to give out payslips that wee

The pieces of paper we finally received a week later were plastered with byzantine additions and subtractions, making it impossible to calculate whether or not we had been remunerated properly. After my weekly rent had been subtracted, the remaining £75 I had at the end of my second week was a good deal less than I had envisioned when I first got the job. I was confidently told by a Transline rep at my induction that I would see '£240–250 a week, easy'. I also earned less that week because on the Friday an Amazon rep had informed us[37] at extremely short notice that the warehouse would be closed the next day for 'maintenance'.

We were given the chance to work the following Wednesday to make up the shortfall; however, I had already made plans to visit my grandmother that day and was thus unable to do it. Others who I chatted to were in the same boat. Had they been given more than twenty-four hours' notice, they might conceivably have changed their shifts. As things stood, their wage packets were short by some £72 that week with little in the way of forewarning.

As to the difficulty of living on £75 a week, I am reminded of an article in the *Daily Mail* about a woman who survived on £1 a day. 'Frugal Kath Kelly, 51, ate at free buffets, shopped at church jumble sales and scrounged leftovers from grocery stores and restaurants,' ran the story.[38] This woman reportedly amassed a further £117 by rooting among the cigarette butts and dog mess, picking up loose change dropped in the street. This sort of thriftiness is typically jumped on by people who have always wanted to ration the poor. It is held up as the final 'proof' that poverty is really not as bad as all that: as long as you have a bit of

middle-class pluck and ingenuity tucked away in reserve. If you are too useless to be able to survive on such a lowly amount, it is put down to some piteous deficiency in one's character.

In reality, most people could, I suspect, survive on, if not £1 a day, then certainly £50, £60 or £70 a week if they really had to. But the trouble with bold proclamations of this sort is that they are nearly always made from the standpoint of people with professional jobs and a regular income. Put another way, if you are at home or sat in an office for all or part of the day, you *can* survive on a fairly small sum. However, as soon as you enter the cheerless world of low-paid work you might as well be comparing oranges with pears. As I have already mentioned, the need to offset the physical and emotional drain of manual work is one thing – fags, booze and junk food are some of the few pleasures left to you. But time is another.

The speedy efficiency which characterises middle-class life is non-existent in many working-class homes. Poverty is the thief of time. You wait around for buses and landlords. You are forced to do overtime at the drop of a hat. You hang around for an eternity waiting for the person who has told you they will sort out the administrative error in your payslip. You go searching for a shop to print the wad of documents you need to start work. You must traipse around the supermarket looking for special offers with the diligence of a librarian searching for that rare first edition. You have to walk home afterwards. And so on and so forth. The point is that you are constantly wasting time, and it nearly always ends up costing you money: eventually it seems almost to melt off you wherever you go. Whereas a middle-

class person will spend their Sunday afternoons eating a roast dinner before cooking another huge meal and putting it into little containers for the week ahead, a worker at the bottom of the economy will either be winding down or chasing down one of the company bureaucrats who seem to exist in order to thwart the smooth running of their life.

My typical budget over seven days was as follows:

Item	Cost
Rent incl. bills	£75.00
Meals in the Amazon cafeteria x 4	£16.40
Snacks at work	£4.00
Tea	£0.50
Cereals and milk	£5.00
McDonald's x 2	£9.98
Ready meals x 4	£6.00
Other provisions (coffee, cheese, butter, etc.)	£10.00
Rolling tobacco	£4.89
Beer	£10.00
Public transport*	£6.00
Total	£147.77

*(The cost of public transport would have been considerably higher had I lived somewhere further away like Wolverhampton.)

There are of course items here that any middle-class person will immediately say ought to be cut out. Neither the beer nor the tobacco was absolutely necessary to my survival. However, I wanted to convey an idea of the sorts of things that the average person doing a job like this is *likely* to spend money on (as opposed

to what he or she might theoretically spend it on). It is all very well crossing luxuries like alcohol and cigarettes off the list when you yourself are not oppressed by the same forces that drive people to take up such things in the first place. Anyone can do that, just as any middle-class person who starts at the gym can draw up a programme to strip almost every ounce of fat from their body inside of six months. I am more interested in how human beings *actually behave in practice*. The above list best represents my typical expenditure over the course of a week. I might have been *more* extravagant, yet still I burned through £150. I also probably spent more than this each week due to depreciated monthly expenses. For example, one week I got my hair cut and another week I had to buy a train ticket to Somerset (£70) to visit family. Broken down over a year, this is sure to add several pounds here and there.

Deducting £150 from the Amazon take-home figure of £227 (£245 a week minus tax) left a sum of £77. Emergency expenditure such as a visit to the dentist would undoubtedly have required overtime or some sort of loan; but on the whole there was a bit of elbow room. However, the gap between this and those at the very bottom is probably diminishing. Many of those I met in Rugeley and Cannock already had one foot in this subterranean world of dirt and fear. Life was characterised by the constant circling presence of an ominous grey cloud of landlords and capricious employers. A missed pay cheque, a debtor or some trivial misdemeanour at work were often all it took for a once respectable individual to be kicked down from a modicum of freedom and security into the hole of a soggy cardboard box on a

street corner. Stopping there also fails to do justice to the reality of living on this amount of money. For one thing, the cost of living in Rugeley was relatively inexpensive, whereas in Hemel Hempstead, where Amazon had another of its warehouses, the cheapest rent for a room of comparable size was £112 a week. This is one of the reasons why the Joseph Rowntree Foundation calculated in 2015 that a single person needed £17,100 a year before tax to achieve a minimum standard of living.[39] My annual salary at Amazon before tax was £12,740.

There was also the small matter of not being paid correctly. It is just about possible to live tolerably provided there are no unexpected catastrophes. But in life there sometimes are, and they were occasionally a product of the incompetency of one of the agencies. When you bring home just £150 because of an administrative error (and such errors were common) you were left, after my budgeting, with £2.23 at the end of the week. In parts of the country where your rent costs more, it is at this point that you invariably sink deep into the red. A twenty-year-old Amazon employee called Lydia told me that she and many of her friends had all been underpaid at some point by the agencies employed by Amazon.

'I was expecting to wake up to a nice healthy bank balance, but it wasn't there,' she said. 'My friend ... she still hasn't been paid ... she's got £160 now in total but they still owe her like £200-ish. And the lady that I give lifts to, she hasn't been paid properly either.'

It is also worth asking what living on a paltry income does to a person's long-term health. When I started at Amazon I was a slim twelve-and-a-half stone. Despite walking around ten miles a day, by the end of the month I had put on a stone in fat. I

was smoking again too: cigarettes were another of the vices that provided a momentary morale boost, like chocolate bars and cups of strong tea.

Norbert, a twenty-five-year-old man from Alesd, in western Romania, was one of the first migrants I had spoken to after being taken on by Amazon. He had approached me in the canteen one day and randomly blurted out that he liked cars, girls and Vladimir Putin. He was evidently lonely, and had seen me watching the news in the canteen and used it as a pretext for swaggering over and starting a conversation.

'Putin, he's a great guy. You like Putin? Strong. Fights judo. Good, strong leader.'

I asked him if he was interested in politics.

'Yes, a little; though I don't watch TV. It's bullshit, you know. For the sheep.'

We went for a drink one day in Wolverhampton where Norbert was living. We met in a bar called the Royal London,[40] a soulless modern establishment with The Smiths blaring from the stereo and St George's Day posters proclaiming '£1 drinks all night' pinned to every wall. Random decor hung from various spots on the ceiling – a flower pot, a child's bike and a selection of kitchen utensils, among other things.

'It was very fucked up,' Norbert said as he related to me how he ended up living in the Midlands and working for Amazon. They were told they were being brought to London. And so on a frost-bitten January morning, he and a friend had stepped blinking out of a Romanian bedsit and into the early-morning English sunshine. Where were the skyscrapers? Where was the River

Thames or Big Ben? And why was it so quiet?

'When I wake up I ask, "Where are we?" You know? "Where are we?" "Wol-Wol-Wolver-ham-ton." "Where is this?" Then we say, "OK, we will stay here for one month." It's a lot of Russians who have flats, but we find Romanian. Because we want to go to London, and when we [first] arrived at Luton, they [the people from the agency that brought us here] picked us up, and they come here [to Wolverhampton] with us.'

Like a lot of the Romanians I met, Norbert saw himself as a cut above his fellow countrymen. *They* had come to England out of desperation, whereas *he* had travelled here just for fun. Others came from a 'bullshit life', he said, whereas he wanted to take home some extra spending money for booze and cars.

'I look at all the Romanians at Amazon, and everybody is here just for money,' Norbert told me. 'I don't feel what they feel, you know. I don't know how it is not to have. When I quit from Amazon tomorrow I don't care, you know. Their situation is fucked up, that's why they come here. [In Romania] there is a good life for us, but you need money. For us is not problem, but for others it's a problem. For 90 per cent it's difficult.'

In 1935, George Dangerfield wrote of the 'uncouth toilers' who 'sweated and starved to bring to some comfortable little householder in Upper Tooting his pleasant five per cent'. The middle classes have long accepted the necessity of the working classes 'sweating and starving' for the sake of life's little luxuries. Yet many British workers are no longer inclined to play their allotted role. There exists a hypothetical floor, below which they will not allow themselves to sink. However benighted they may

be, and however much those situated above might curse them as idle and impetuous, they appear to understand that in a civilised country they should no longer have to bow and scrape before so-called captains of industry. The conventional response is to disparage and ridicule the very idea of the English working class having any standards at all. There is apparently some mysterious virtue in people (always other people) being exploited by wealthy employers. In contrast, liberals will often lionise migrant workers for putting up with exploitative conditions, as if there really were no more to life than filling somebody else's pockets.

It was, at the end of the day, men and women like Norbert who kept Amazon going. If they found a good job in Britain they would stay because, as Norbert kept telling me, life at home was 'bullshit'. Life for many had become a treadmill in which they came to Britain and worked like dogs, took the money home, then came back again a few months later. Others treated it as a sort of working holiday.

'They [the others] will go back home, maybe stay one or two months, and then come back; because they'll just spend the money.'

For Norbert, the worst part of the work was the indignity of how the agencies treated you.

'They talk to us like we are slaves, you know. If you are a banker in England and you come to Romania, you will be a nobody. That's like me here – I am a nothing here. But you will come to Romania and you will be a nothing too. You're English people, but who cares, you know? Here, [we] are slaves; there you will be the slaves, because that's the world.'

This seemed somewhat delusional – realistically, a banker could live like a king in Romania – but I understood why Norbert might want to tell himself a story like this. It was hardly cheering to acknowledge that you could be treated the way you were for no other reason than your nationality.

Norbert was a gregarious man who looked younger than his twenty-five years. He was tall and muscular yet softly spoken. Since arriving in England he had found it difficult to make friends. He had one Romanian friend – 'Johnny', who had accompanied him to the UK – plus a few acquaintances he had made at work. Apart from that he was on his own. Most of the locals in Wolverhampton didn't want to know. Back in Romania life was more fun – there was more laughter. You may have been poor, but you knew how to have a good time.

'Here you can't have friends ... everybody look another way, you know. There [in Romania] you can have friends. You need help, you can call somebody and they will come to help, and they don't want anything, they don't want something; they just want to help and that's it. The English, they try to be friendly, but they're not. They don't make friends; everybody is just quiet, you know. But people, they try to smile, they try to be friendly but they're not. They don't know how to be friendly to us.'

Whereas in the past the men of the Lea Hall working men's club worked so the middle classes could enjoy more prosperous lives, today it is people like Norbert who sweat and starve to fill the pockets of some and deliver consumer goods to the rest of us on the cheap. Yet Norbert and others like him lack even the rudimentary political rights bestowed on their British

working-class forefathers. At Amazon it was largely the task of this invisible army of downtrodden migrant labour, hidden in a rural warehouse away from any centre of civilisation, to process the internet shopping of Britain's burgeoning middle class – a middle class that would, unlike the Eastern Europeans further down the ladder, get a vote on who governed them and made the laws when a general election came around. In this respect Britain was re-shoring a slightly more tolerable version of the backwater sweatshop. Life at companies like Amazon increasingly resembles the separation of the Eloi and the Morlocks in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*: 'Above ground you must have the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort and beauty, and below ground the Have Nots, the Workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour.'

You can, if you like, punch your credit card details into Amazon's website without ever having to see what goes on in this idyllic little corner of Staffordshire. It suits the English to have some anonymous foreign drudge, invisible to the outside world, tucked away in an enormous warehouse carting stuff back and forth with perspiration dripping from his brow. In truth, we want to ignore it as our grandparents turned contentedly away from what went on 4,000 miles away in an Indian sweatshop. It is in some ways easier today to wall yourself off from the outside world. You can sit, feet up and kettle on, turn on the computer and order something to arrive the next day with a mere click of the mouse. We have grown accustomed to cheap products that are cheap precisely because they have been produced in conditions such as I have described here. Our standard of living

has come to depend on it. The people in this warehouse may a
well not exist to the outside world, just as the coolies who brok
their backs in the red splodges on the map did not exist in th
minds of those who quaffed sherry in England's drawing room
a century ago. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*