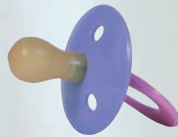


Out of the Ordinary





Introduction

This booklet is about the ordinary everyday things that make up most of our lives. The possessions, the routines, the activities that fill our days and make everything feel comfortable and safe and predictable. Every now and again, however, something extraordinary and surprising can be created out of the ordinary.

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In the attic

This extract is the opening of a novel. Barney tells of the time he climbed to the top of his house into the attic to find something.

I know exactly where he is.

I stand at the top of the stairs, the darkest, innermost place in the house, with daylight hidden behind bedroom doors, and sunlight trapped in the bathroom, sieved through the frosting of the window, bouncing off chrome, mirrors and glass. I pull the stepladders down from the loft with the long-handled hook. They slide into my hands, cold to the touch, creaking and rickety as I climb.

The blackness is dazzling, as if I've stuck my head through the roof into outer space. I reach for the light cord, somewhere to the left. A low-energy bulb brightens softly and slowly like an old valve, and the attic falls into place. Thick cobwebs flutter. My breath steams in front of my face.

I haul myself up, treading carefully. Suitcases are piled on top of wooden crates. I slide between them, past old banana boxes crammed with books and magazines, past bin bags sealed with masking tape or tied with string, then duck beneath the frame of a bike hung from a six-inch nail banged into the main beam. How did we get that in here? Some of the slates have slipped or cracked. It's hard to believe that the outside is just inches away, that these thin sheets of stone tacked on to flimsy wood can keep out the sky.

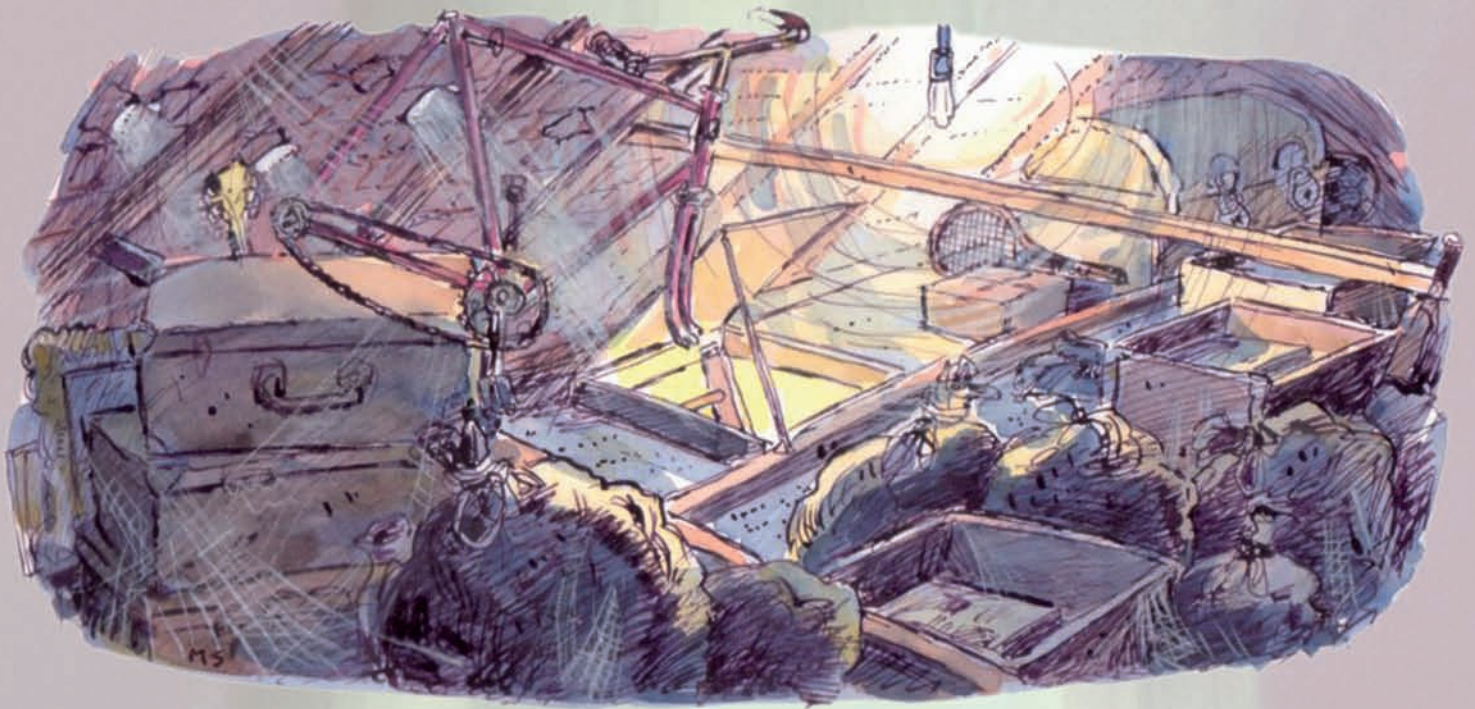
I know exactly where he is. In the far corner I open the two locks of the big trunk and lift its giant lid. My name stares me in the face, neatly stencilled onto the lining, and the long list of my address, beginning with this house and this street, then running all the way into the universe. A smell drifts up from the trunk – the smell of the past. Memory. More books and magazines, a bag of golf balls, a dartboard with stubble sprouting through the wire frame, a pair of goalkeeping gloves, a commemorative wallet for a full set of coins – all prised out of the holder and spent. Rolled-up papers are slotted in a cardboard tube: a cycling-proficiency certificate, exam results, a football programme, second prize in a photography competition, a catalogue. Loads of pencils bundled together, tins of pens and crayons like rounds of ammunition. A modelling knife. Scrapbooks and albums full of drawings and doodles, sheets and sheets of loose paper. Paintings, sketches, tracings, prints, all held in the grip of a bulldog clip. A kid's radio in the shape of an electric shaver. A compass. A fob watch with my grandfather's name etched on the cover. I pile them all to one side.

He's heavier than I remember, but smaller – no bigger than a pepper pot – and he's cold, like a piece of carved, green ice. I can feel the blood bumping in my head, in my ears, and feel blood flooding the engine in my heart, and blood driving the little turbines in my wrists and thumbs, rising to the stop-tap under my throat.

Lying awake some mornings, I hear a click in the airing cupboard under the stairs – the central heating clocking on – and the boiler, calling for gas, drawing gas from under the North Sea. Then the ignition, when the sleeping genie of the pilot light explodes into life – whap! Then the ticking of the junctions and joints as the pipework rouses itself, stiffens with heat. And an airlock gargles and chokes under the floorboards in the spare room. And the radiators swell up, engorged, and the cistern sounds like it could blast into orbit around the Earth. That's how it feels. It feels like this.

I stand the little green man on the flat of my hand, show him his new freedom, his new life. Shadows fall on his curious face, his blank eyes. Does he approve? I slip him into my pocket, let the lid of the trunk fall, then snap the locks.

Descending the ladders, I re-enter the world of windows and walls, the world of furniture, natural light, and the warmth of the house.



Night Music *by Brian Lee*

The mail train south fades out into the dark.
The clock ticks, tocks, downstairs in the hall.
Conversations come in murmurs through the wall.
The dog barks once that only gives one bark.
The leaves are rustling all around the empty park.

The staircase creaks, as though somebody was there.
Dad's bike ticks down the path; the shed doors close.
Knocking floorboards groan: mutters of radios.
Someone clears his throat – a match scrapes, to flare
Where fat moths whirl in the wheezy streetlamp's glare.

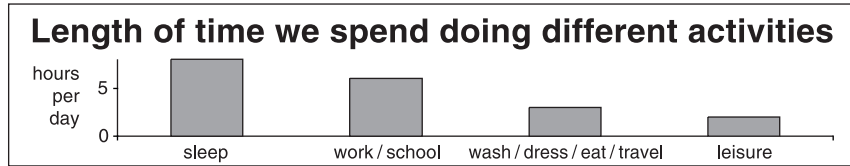
A door clicks; and swishes open, on its own ...
Milk-bottles tinkle on a step. A window shrieks
Upwards; the bath-tap whispers as it leaks

And always there, behind, a ceaseless monotone,
The steady stir, the sound of everyone.

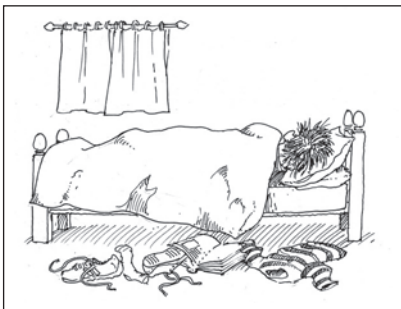


How do we fill our day?

Emily Hollis reports findings from a recent survey investigating how we spend our time.



Do you often wonder where the hours in the day go or feel that you never have enough time? The UK Time Use survey sought to uncover exactly where the 24 hours in the day do go. The survey did this by breaking the day into 10 minute slots and asking people aged 8 and over to record how they spent their time. Perhaps not surprisingly, the survey revealed that it is those mundane daily activities – sleeping, working, and doing household chores – that eat into our day and leave us precious little time for anything else.



Sleeping away a third of our life

The survey discovered that on average adults spend over 8 hours a day sleeping – almost 60 hours a week, 257 hours a month and 3,120 hours a year! Even more of a child's life is spent asleep. Eight year olds tend to sleep for nearly 11 hours a night. However, despite parents complaining about teenagers not seeing enough daylight, by the time we become teenagers the amount of time we spend asleep in fact reduces to less than 10 hours a night. Once we reach our mid 20s we sleep for less than 9 hours and this doesn't usually increase until we're drawing our pensions.

It is not only the younger and more elderly among us who sleep for longer; on average females spend a little longer tucked up in bed than males and this is particularly true for 30 to 60 year olds. We all, however, like to relax a little more at the weekends and those Sunday morning lie-ins provide many of us with an extra 43 minutes in bed.

What about when we're awake?

So if we're sleeping for a third of our life, that still leaves us with two-thirds to fill. How we spend our waking hours seems to largely depend on whether it's a weekday or not. Monday to Friday certainly involves more work, and therefore less play, with many of us spending at least 6 hours a day at work or at school. But it's not all play at the weekend; while we're working or studying during the week we are letting the dust build up at home and end up spending more than 3 hours on a Saturday and Sunday doing housework.

Women may spend a little longer sleeping than men, but this certainly doesn't make them lazy – they spend nearly twice as long as men doing household chores – averaging 21 hours a week. This means women spend over one thousand hours a year doing housework! Luckily for the youngsters amongst us, most housework is done by adults, but that is not to say the kids are completely off the hook. On average children still help out around the house for approximately 45 minutes a day – enough to earn the same amount of time in bed on Sunday!



So once we've been to work or school, done the housework and had a good night's sleep there doesn't seem to be a lot of time left. We do manage to squeeze in other activities though. Washing, dressing, eating and travelling can take more than 3 hours out of the 24. That leaves us just a couple of hours for fun. Much of this free time is spent in front of the television, with the average 65 year old having spent nearly 7 years of their life watching TV! Given these findings it's not surprising we often wonder where the hours in the day go.



Acknowledgements:

'In the attic', pages 4–5, from *Little Green Man* by Simon Armitage, Penguin Books, 2002.
'Night Music', page 6, by Brian Lee from *Six of the Best*, ed. Anne Harvey, Puffin Books, 1989.

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