

# Arrhythmia

by  
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– and the music floods in, sluicing away the dreams of silence. It’s the percussive chink of dishes, the rustle and snap of Dad’s newspaper, the excited kettle, the burbling wireless ... and from the street outside the window, the muted, muttered march of the workforce heading out to the Factory.

Steve’s eyes shutter open like aluminium blinds.

“Work, work, work,” the workers drone. Their insistent rhythm heaves Steve out from the clingy embrace of the nylon sheets. “Work, work, work.” He scratches the seam of his y-fronts, *scritch, scritch, scritch*, and hates that he did it in time with the song.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck*, he thinks.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he sings in the bathroom as he pisses, flushes, splashes his face with water.

“What’s that, Son?” growls his dad from the kitchen. “Better get a shift on or you’ll be late.”

“Just humming a song,” Steve mumbles as he dresses, wondering why his dad always says that. He’s never late. He leaves half an hour earlier than his old dears for a start and, even if he didn’t, no-one’s ever late for the Factory.

Mum beams at him through a cloud of ironing-board steam. “Sit down, Son,” she trills. “It’s on the plate.”

Two eggs, a pair of frazzled rashers and a chubby sausage arranged in a greasy face smile up at him, the latest in the daily parade of fixed breakfast grins. He slices through one yolky eye, but any satisfaction it might have given him is nullified by the scrape of the unyielding crockery behind the façade.

Steve chews his food, punctuating with grunts his dad’s judgement on the contents of the paper, which amounts to little more than

parroted the Governor's pronouncements on everything from efficiency and productivity to popular culture. He eats slowly, not because he's savouring the taste but because when he swallows, everything – the music, the chatter – sort of equals out. He's almost able to pretend it's real silence.

From within the music, there's a squeal of electric guitar feedback, and a cup clatters. A spill of milky tea spreads across the formica.

"Who does she think she is?" Dad baritone. His face is redder than the tabloid masthead scrunched in his fist. "Jumped up little strumpet." He brandishes the paper. A grainy photograph of the miniskirted singer from last night's Top Of The Pops is the evident object of this outburst. "Thinks she's better than the rest of us? Tarty little crumpet."

Steve looks at the picture and remembers the spiky flaming hair, the pvc boots, the screaming, the attitude, and the mercifully brief snippet of something that bore scant resemblance to music.

*Arrhythmia.* Jimmy Jensen had called her that when he'd introduced the band, before the TV was occluded by Dad's fat arse and that 'music' was abruptly by the click of the dial.

"*Sub-vers-ive*, that's what they're calling it." Dad throws the newspaper down on the table. "It's not *subversive*, it's obscene!"

"Subversive?" Mum looks perplexed. "I don't follow. What does that word mean?"

"It means..." Dad's face goes even redder because he doesn't know, not really. "It means..." The old boy's voice wavers as he casts angrily around the kitchen for something to vent his anger on.

Recognising trouble, Steve pushes his plate away, downs his tea and stands. "God save the Queen!"

Jerked out of his aimless rage, his father also stumbles to his feet, and his mother at her ironing board straightens herself smartly. "God save the Queen!" they intone together.

Mum's habitual, "And God bless us, every one," follows Steve through to the hall where he throws his donkey jacket over his overalls and grabs his satchel. "Have a lovely day at work, Son." The front door clatters shut behind him.

There are eight paving slabs between the door and the gate. The path exactly bisects the lawn and is bordered by roses. The plants are budding, but will not blossom until the first of May, signalling the start of summer. Their garden, and their neighbours', and all the gardens in the street, in the town. An orchestrated unfolding of colour. Steve hates summer because that's when the music quickens

its pace, making the endless routine of *work, eat, play, sleep*, even harder to bear.

“Work, work, work.” There are still workers filing past the gate, heading for the bus stop at the end of the street. As soon as Steve joins them, his feet fall into step. There is no escaping the compulsion to walk in time with the rest, to chant their morning mantra.

“Work, work, work,” they all sing, but in Steve’s mind the words are: *fuck, fuck, fuck*.

A gargantuan, multi-storied bus, red as a dragon in its Factory livery, lumbers away as he approaches the stop, but that doesn’t matter because there will be another soon enough. There’s always another bus for the Factory. A small crowd is already gathering and, while they wait, a portly man decides it’s time for a song. He climbs up onto a low wall, sticks his thumbs under the bib of his overalls, and tenors: “Every morning at the count of eight, my friends and I all congregate, at our old street corner where we stand and wait for the daily ride to The Factory.” It’s an old music hall song, but it’s eternally popular. People start to clap in time; a few hum along, encouraging the man to continue with the second verse.

“Well, we all pile in ‘fore the toot at nine, and I takes my place on the production line, and consider it my fortune fine, to make my living at The Factory. But there’s something on my mind all day. That I value more’n my penny’s pay.”

“I...” Some of the crowd join in, swelling the protracted note and beneath their voices the music too gathers for the chorus. “*Work, work, work* with all my might. So I can *munch, munch, munch* with my fork and knife. And then I’ll *dance, dance, dance* to my heart’s delight, before I *sleep, sleep, sleep* a peaceful night.”

Since the bus has still not made an appearance, the man rolls on with the next verse and by the time the vehicle arrives most of the crowd appear to be in the singing mood.

“I’ll *work, work, work* my natural life. So I can *munch, munch, munch* on gravy pie. And then I’ll *dance, dance, dance* with my neighbour’s wife, and only *sleep, sleep, sleep* when it gets light.”

It’s a song of optimistic fantasy whose many verses become progressively more ridiculous, developing from a hymn to duty and hard graft to claims of the kind of hedonism that none of these people have encountered outside of saucy postcards and the Lenny Harris show on TV. One reason that Steve leaves for work earlier than his parents is that he cringes at the gusto with which his father

sings this song. And wants to die when his mum joins in with the actions.

“I *work, work, work* my blasted life. So I can *munch, munch, munch* til I split my sides. And then I’ll *dance, dance, dance* throughout the night, before I *sleep, sleep, sleep* with my neighbour’s wife.”

The song continues as the bus jostles them through the city’s ordered streets of identical red brick walls and postage stamp lawns, picking up more passengers, more singers of the song, until the enormous vehicle is full and it heads straight for the centre of town, for the towering stacks of The Factory.

“I’ll *work, work, work* my neighbour’s wife. And I’ll *munch, munch, munch* on her gravy pie.”

The last chorus resounds around Steve as the bus rumbles through the imposing gates.

“And then I’ll *dance, dance, dance* til I’m beserk, and I’ll *sleep, sleep, sleep* when it’s time to...*work.*”

The workers spill out of the bus in good humour, traipsing up the steps and following the colour coded corridors towards their assigned hall of the day. The music blends seamlessly with the pounding of the engines of production. Inside the Factory, the two are inextricable.

Steve is a blue, and today his route is a long meandering one that leads him down to a sublevel of the west wing that he is unfamiliar with. He half hopes that today will bring an interesting, even comprehensible assignment, but he’s been at the Factory long enough to know how likely that is, so he contents himself with the fervent hope of agreeable companions for the day’s toil.

His thoughts circle around one particularly agreeable companion. Half a hope, half a fear. He knows exactly what his mother’s response would be if he told her that he’d been stationed next to Sandra McReady three times this month. *Governor’s got his matchmaking hat on, Son*, she’d say. *Is she pretty? I bet she’s pretty.* In Steve’s view, Sandra is in fact very pretty, but he doesn’t see what business it is of anyone else’s. Especially not the Governor’s.

People like Steve’s mum believe that everything that happens in life from birth to death – how well you do at school, what grade you’ll rise to in the Factory, who you’ll marry, and all points in between – are decided by the Governor. Steve can’t think of anything more horrible and tells himself that such notions are for the weak-willed, the sheep who have never had an original thought in their lives.

Today's manufactory is a long room. There are narrow windows high on one wall, their light striping the face of the huge clock that hangs from the ceiling, and falling on the spaghetti nest of rubberised conveyor belts below. When Steve finds his assigned place in the assembly line he can't believe his luck, because there she is, already at her station. The trim, blonde figure of Sandra McReady.

She's reading the day's instructions, hazel eyes flicking over the numbered pictures as she memorises the steps. Steve watches her for a few extra seconds as he hangs his jacket on the peg behind his stool, before climbing up beside her. Sandra, he notices, is smiling. A small private smile. A deep, glossy, red smile. The kind of smile you'd expect to see dazzling the boys at a Friday social. Although, that lipstick— There's an off-pitch squeal that might be some misalignment in the factory's machinery, but which really sounds like someone badly abusing a guitar. The sound lingers, fades only reluctantly.

Sandra glances up and catches him staring. Her smile gets wider.

Then the hands of the clock tick on to the hour and the whistles pierce the air. The pulse of the Factory intensifies and the conveyors jerk into life. Steve has barely enough time to adjust the height of his stool and glance at his own instructions before Sandra is placing the first of her finished pieces back on the belt and it's Steve's turn. The module is a lump of grey plastic with moulded apertures, a few already plugged by components, looking like the surviving teeth in a centenarian's mouth. Sandra's contribution is a cream-coloured bakelite plug, Steve's is to twist into place two smoky glass bulbs that resemble the valves that glow orange in the back of the television set. His other neighbour will add a further contribution, and so on. What happens to the module once it is completed is none of their concern.

It isn't difficult work. It requires speed and dexterity, but it is easy enough once you get into the rhythm. And in the Factory, the music is at its most compelling. On the huge booming *one* of the great engines, the squeaking conveyor delivers a new module and Steve grabs a handful of components. On the *two* and *three* and *four*, he *inserts-twists, inserts-twists* his bulbs, and then the belt rolls forward again carrying the finished module on, and delivering a new one on the down beat of the next bar. Around the manufactory hall bodies move in time: reaching, tooling, assembling with the beat; breathing on the off-beat. At some point a bell will chime, the belts will still and the workers will be permitted to drink water or visit the toilet, but absorbed as they are by their tasks, compelled as they are by the

music, no-one thinks about that until it happens. For now they work, and while they work, they sing.

“We don’t know what we’re making. We don’t know what it’s for. If it’s destined for a hospital or’ll end up in a war. We only know we’re working. From dawn til end of day. An honest day’s effort for an honest day’s pay.”

The song carries them through their shift. When their arms tire it lends them strength. When their muscles ache, it soothes them. It moves the hands of the clock around in stealthy intervals so that the morning passes almost without notice. The song thickens with harmonies, complicates with counterpoints. The hall resounds with impromptu calls and responses, but the basic song remains the same. The beat remains constant. The work gets done.

“Did you?” Sandra’s eyes are fixed on her work, but this contrapuntal aside is pitched to carry to Steve and no further. “Did you see? Last night on the TV?” She risks a second of eye contact to make sure that Steve has heard her. When she sees that she has his attention, those red lips breathe: “Arrhythmia...”

Steve almost misses a bulb.

Sandra smiles.

The break bell sounds, the conveyors grind to a standstill and the worksong dwindles out, leaving only the boom of the deep engines resounding in the air, vibrating through their feet.

Sandra retrieves her handbag and her pretty beige macintosh. A nod of the head, a promise in her eyes. Steve stumbles after her. He follows her beyond the line for the water cooler, past the queue for the toilets. There is door, and a corridor, and then another door. And then stairs, stairs and more stairs. The astonishing silver-tipped heels of her ankle boots rimshot on the risers. Below the hem of her workdress, the pale flash of skin in the outrageously ripped stocking sizzles like a cymbal. The blue tail of a tattoo catches him off beat, makes him breathless by the time they reach the door at the top.

“We only have,” Steve begins, but his voice comes out flat, atonal, in search of melody and scansion. “Fifteen minutes...” His words drift away over the flat roof, over the pipes and ducts and chimneys, up into the grey, silent air. Because here, by some quirk of architecture, some acoustic accident, there is silence. Or at least as close to it as Steve has ever experienced outside of his dreams. He can still *feel* the thud of the engines. It vibrates the tarmac beneath his feet, jumps through his fingers when he touches the brick chimney breast. But in his ears, there is nothing.

“Hey!”

“What?”

Sandra’s red lips are a snarl. “You’re the one,” she accuses, her words spilling fast and angry. “You’re the one! You’re the one who’s worried about time. Take this home.” She’s holding out a package. It’s square, wrapped in a white polythene bag decorated with a poorly rendered skull and the words *Anarchy Records*. “Take it home. Take it home and listen to it tonight.” Her eyes are blazing with something entirely alien to Steve. “And play it fuck-ing loud, all right?”

Steve takes the bag. Then Sandra smiles, stretches up on the toes of her wicked little boots and kisses him. The kiss is short and brutal, and Sandra’s lipstick is smeared when it is over. Without another word she re-enters the Factory and disappears down the stairs.

Part of Steve already knows what is in the bag, and part of him doesn’t want to confirm his suspicion. He just wants to stand here in the silence a little longer, but there, faintly, is the warning bell that signals the imminent resumption of the shift.

Steve sighs. He flaps open the bag, acknowledges the mini-skirted harridan, the bilious spatter of her name. He closes the bag quickly, slips it inside his coat and reluctantly goes back to the beat.

“Are you sure, Son, that you don’t want to come?” Mum fastens the top button of her coat, pats her hair into place. It’s the second Tuesday of the month and that means drinks with the Hendersons. Steve stares at his pork chop and colourless, diced vegetables, shakes his head.

Dad enters from the hall. “Come on lad, it’ll be fun.” He winks and pats Mum’s bottom, yolking the word *fun* with lurid potential.

“You can talk to...” Mum hefts a gift-wrapped box of Matchmakers.

“You can talk to...” Dad grabs the bottle of plonk.

“Jennifer.”

“Veronica.”

Steve’s parents share a look of consternation. Of the Hendersons’ two daughters, Jennifer is a year older than Steve and timid as a rabbit, while Veronica is a year younger and a precocious tease.

“No, thanks.” Steve snaps his reply, forestalling his parents from saying any more.

When the front door snicks shut, Steve breathes out. One long, slow stream of air. He keeps on blowing out until he is empty, until

his lungs ache, but he can still feel his heart. The music, reduced to its lowest volume. *Beat, beat, beat.*

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Steve clears his dinner into the bin, rinses off the plate and cutlery, puts the things away. Then he goes into the living room and lifts the lid on the record player. To one side of the machine are Dad's records. Cheesy covers depicting men in dinner suits and bowties or women in lamé gowns and towering hair. Burt Goodman, Sylvia Hammond, and Dad's favourite, Charlie Montgomery. On the other side of the turntable, his mother's, much smaller collection of heartthrob charttoppers. All hair oil, leather jackets with the collars turned up and 'dangerous' winks. To watch his parents listen to them you'd think this music was capable of transporting you, but how can it? There are four measured beats to every one of those bars. No matter how chirpy and bright, how croony and swoony. Four beats. *Work, Eat, Play, Sleep.* Transportation? You'd be as well putting your ear to the factory wall.

Steve slips Sandra's record from the polythene. Holds the garish cardboard square by the corners, by his fingertips. He stares at the sleeve, drinks in the clashing colours, the jagged lettering, the snarling girl frozen in the act of smashing her fist through a pane of glass, teeth bared and red lips parted in a yell. He flips it over, devours the other side too. The track listings: A/ Smash Your Way Out, B/ Tear It Up. The writing credits, the copyright notice, the logo and business address of the record company. Behind the text, a close-up photograph of a bluebottle sandwiched between two plates of glass.

Steve's fingers are shaking as he slides the vinyl out of the sleeve. He tilts it, and the light swims around its glossy grooves. He rotates the knurled switch with a satisfying clunk. The turntable begins to move, and the speaker issues that expectant noise that is part hum and part hiss. Steve turns the volume knob from 2 to 3. The expectation rises. He feels sick, but he doesn't know why. It's just a record. It can't possibly give him what he dreams of. This will be anything but silence.

He drops the record onto the machine. It shrugs reluctantly, rebelliously down the spindle. He watches it for one, five, ten revolutions before plucking up the courage to place the stylus onto the leader.

He realises he is holding his breath.

There's a percussive chunk, followed by a wire-thin whistle of feedback that sounds taut, like a restraint. Then, off microphone:

“*onetwothreefour*”, and then a crazed, enraged musical beast is released. Growls of guitar, slashing steel claws of cymbals, raging, inchoate screams, barely comprehensible. “Kick 'em down. Beat 'em up. To a pulp. Scream and shout. Smash it. Smash it. Smash it. Smash your way out. Out. Out. Out!”

Steve recognises the hook. On Top Of The Pops that two seconds had been two seconds too long, but now he can't get enough of it. “Smash it. Smash it. Smash it.” The song goes on forever. The song lasts two minutes and nine seconds precisely. It finishes with a final foundering thrash, and that is followed by silence.

Steve starts the record again. Nudges the volume up one more notch.

Some time later he is lying on the floor, and shouting: “Smash it. Smash it. Smash it. Out. Out. Out.” He's lost track of the number of times he has played the song. The record player's volume is at ten now, and even though the ducks are jouncing against the wallpaper and the crystal ornaments jumping on the mantelpiece, it still isn't loud enough.

Then the music cuts in with a soap-opera melodrama that easily drowns the record out. The room fills with a sickening swell of impending familial discord and framed in the doorway are his parents faces: Dad's red, Mum's ashen.

“Your old man? He actually broke it, man? Snapped the plastic. Like elastic?”

On the Factory roof the next day, Sandra's face is impossible to read. She's done something with her hair, it looks weirdly asymmetrical at the front, ragged at the back.

“I'm so sorry.” Steve sings low and earnest, and is perplexed by the huge grin he receives.

“That's so...so...fuckin' cool! Your 'rents are cardboard cut-out cruel. What a pair of waa-aaa-aaankers.”

Steve thinks that's going a bit far, but he's not about to admit that right now, so he imitates her melody. “Waa-aaa-aaankers!”

“Too right.” She looks up at him through her lopsided fringe. “You know, you're all right. What you doing Friday night?”

“Nothing.” Which is true. If Steve had friends that he regularly went out with, or had ever shown any interest in attending the weekend socials at the Factory, no doubt his parents would have added restriction of his movements to the punishment that banned his use of the television and the record player for the rest of the

month. But since all Steve ever did was go to work then come home, it had clearly never occurred to them.

For the rest of the week Steve does what is expected of him. He goes to work at eight, he eats at six, he puts his light out and sleeps at eleven. His mother tries to interest him in conciliatory after-dinner board games, but the living room is radiant with Dad's constant glare, so he opts to retire early with a book whose pages he turns but doesn't remember. He doesn't see Sandra again that week, but that doesn't matter. She's written the details down for him on a scrap of paper that is pressed between the pages of his book. On Friday it is a simple matter to repeat the pattern of the previous evenings, then lie awake until the rest of the house has retired before stealing downstairs and slipping out.

The Makers Mark is located at the lower rent end of the Parade. It's a cold night, needles of rain prickling Steve's face and a ragged wind plucking at the tails of his workshirt. He's familiar with the Parade from helping Mum with the Saturday shopping, but that's during the day. These night time shuttered frontages are alien to him, like turned cheeks. The warmly lit windows above, blind eyes.

The segs of his workboots beat their ingrained, infuriating four on the pavement. Steve forces himself to break the rhythm, interspersing lopes and shuffles into his gait. Nothing calamitous happens. but the novelty quickly wears off. It's simply easier to go with the music.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.* Steve's breath mists the air, becomes a song he hadn't known was there. "I feel." His melody is low, threaded with minor intervals. "Outside of everything. Outside of living and dying, and laughing and crying. And anything that matters." Near the grocer's there are some broken food crates. Steve scoops up a piece of wood, drags it along the wall as he continues to sing. "I feel ... unreal. Brittle and paper thin. Fragile as butterfly wings, the most delicate things. Touch me..." As Steve rounds a corner he belts the stave satisfyingly against a lamppost. "...and I'll shatter." The upper third of the wood snaps and dangles by jagged splinters. He swings it around in circles as he advances down a side street. "I feel my own rhythm but I'm ruled by the beat. I'm light as a feather, yet chained by my feet."

Ahead he sees a pub. It must be the one he's looking for because there's nothing else out here.

"I know where I'm going from the first step to the last," he murmurs, "but the bus that I'm riding is going too fast." He comes to a halt, throws the broken stick away. He wishes he hadn't come,

wants to go home. He wants to be anywhere but home. “I just want to make it stop. I just want to breathe. Jam the hands upon the clock. Hide between the beats.” He hasn’t a clue where he wants to be.

“I just want to be me,” Steve whispers, and finds that he is moving again, closing step by step on the beery lights, the well of muted noise. “I just want to be me. Me. Me ...”

Steve breaks off when he realises that there is someone leaning against the wall beneath the swinging pub sign. The corpulent man is wrapped in a woollen coat. He takes a puff of a chubby cigar and blows out exotic smoke. If he heard Steve’s song, he gives no indication, but when Steve falters at the door, he glances at last his way. “And if you can’t stop moving?” The melody apes Steve’s down to the last note, but the clear tenor voice, unmistakable from the television, is what is amazing. “If there’s no such thing as silence? Why not indulge in a little noise and violence?”

“You’re the – ” Steve begins, but the Governor raises a fat finger to his lips. Then with a tap of glowing ash, he straightens up and saunters off down the Parade, apparently oblivious to the muffled blare that has been issuing from the building all this time.

There is perhaps a measure less of anticipation in Steve’s heart as he eases open the pub door and walks into the buffeting cacophony, but it is quickly forgotten when he finds Sandra’s hand and manages to lose himself completely in the all consuming noise that, in the end, is almost as good as silence.

It is only many years later, when he and Sandra are married, that he will look back and feel cheated. Sandra and the others will remember a genuine moment of rebellion. Even if the only thing that gets *torn up* and *smashed out* are the walls of the old Factory, making way for a shinier, sleeker, more productive replacement. Even if people still spend their lives doing the same meaningless, incomprehensible jobs. Even if the changes to come that will feel so fundamental at the time are acknowledged in the end as merely superficial. They will remember Arrhythmia and claim a small part in what they’ll call a revolution.

A revolution that began: *onetwothreefour*.

But Steve won’t have that. Instead he’ll remember the Governor’s words. The way they lingered in the air like the cigar smoke, staining everything to come. The way they fell in perfect time with both the music and the pub’s muffled chaos, equally bound by those four simple, inescapable, beats.

One, two, three, four.

Work, eat, play, sleep.

Live, marry, fuck, die.

It is only all those years later that he will acknowledge the truth that it seems he has always known. Sometimes, the music might change its tune, but it will never end.