

Wildcat

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I was on a night bus home from Brixton at about four o'clock in the morning when I got talking to Dan. He had long, dirty hair and dried spit in the corners of his mouth, but I immediately felt safer, as if the other vaguely threatening anonymous men on the bus stopped considering me prey now that I had been picked off.

A few months prior, a man had followed me from my bus, jumped me with a knife, and wrestled me to the ground, scampering when someone shouted from a passing car's window. I still travelled that same route and at that same time, alone, because I didn't see why I should have to pay for my attempted rape, and I couldn't afford to anyway. I was an hourly-paid lecturer, and had only been given one module that term. Being perceived as a woman becomes more precarious the less money you have.

I don't remember what Dan and I spoke about that night on our journey, or later. He doesn't really take up any space or have any shapes in my memory. I just remember the dried white in the corners of his mouth. We got off at the same stop, outside the bingo hall in Tooting Broadway, where there was a man asleep in a wheelchair.

I had been at home that morning, nursing a hangover. In the afternoon, a friend came over with two bottles of wine. I was adamant that I would stay in that night, but Bottle Number One weakened my resolve, and by the end of Bottle Number Two I was made up and wearing a dress. By this time I presented as, and considered myself, female.

My friend and I headed into Mayfair, to mill and swill with the kinds of people we hated, and buy drinks we couldn't afford. My friend's dad had died, and we were drinking the few grand that he left her.

We had cocktails at the Ice Bar, a few quarts of whiskey at a bus stop, and a bottle of wine somewhere else. Out the front of "somewhere else" we met a homeless man called Toby, as he came round asking people for change. We gave Toby a glass of wine and he told us about his dog and his life. Childhood abuse, poverty and a broken heart had driven him to the streets, and his dog was sick and all he wanted was to get back the girl his best friend stole, but he couldn't do it from under a bridge. My friend grabbed Toby by his shoulders, and told him firmly that he could do it. He could get everything back. That it was a fine line between sickness and health. He didn't have to lose, like her dad did, her dad was a warning to Toby. Toby reminded her of her dad, but Toby had a chance.

We both believed her.

Hugging Toby goodbye, we headed to Brixton, talking about Toby, the way the whole foul system was stacked against him. That Toby would probably die, like her dad died, like Capote and Fitzgerald died. No one would care, but we would. We would drink to them and we would try not to die too soon so that someone would care. We then laughed in frenzy, miming the bombing of Mayfair.

In Brixton we drank and danced for a little while more, then I left and got on the bus where I met Dan, and saw the man in a wheelchair outside the bingo hall at Tooting Broadway.

The man in the wheelchair was immensely obese, spilling over the sides of his seat. He had a shiny bald head and small pointy features.

He wore stained brown corduroy trousers and a cracked leather jacket. Thinking that it wouldn't be in his best interests to remain there, sleeping in the middle of the pavement outside the bingo hall in Tooting Broadway, I prodded him awake and asked if he needed assistance.

"Change... ? Beer... ?" he mumbled.

I gave him some change and told him that he should get off the main road. He grunted and moaned. Dan stood and watched, happy to let me do my bidding. After some vague attempt to grab at my hips, the man in the wheelchair revealed that he lived in a flat by Sainsbury's, but was too drunk and incapable to get there. I decided that I would take him safely home.

I started pushing the wheelchair, but it was very heavy. I was almost parallel to the pavement as I heaved and grunted, putting all of my weight into every step. Dan and I took turns to push.

We had gone about one hundred metres and were outside a glasses shop when the man in the wheelchair dug his feet into the ground and shouted, 'No!' I was pushing.

I tried to persuade him that we were close, but his feet were firmly planted. He began screaming, "I'M A WILDCAT, A WILDCAT, I'M A WIIIIILDCAAAAAT!"

We left him there, howling at the moon, and sat on a bench outside the market, drinking Dragon Stout and talking. It started to drizzle. Eventually, I noticed the grey was getting lighter; it was too cloudy for the sun to rise.

Dan asked me to come to his flat and I thought about it, but, eyeing up the dried spit in the corners of his mouth, I decided against it. I told him I'd see him around and wandered down Garratt Lane, towards home.

I didn't see him around. I wouldn't have recognised him if I did. But I did see the Wildcat again. One summer weekday, on my way to the station, I heard a shout and was almost run over on the pavement by a hurtling mass of sour denim and shining metal. He was in a brand-new, souped-up electric wheelchair, and he had people jumping out of his way like he was a runaway train.

