

The Most Dangerous Woman

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Why are you so angry?

Today a white gate has appeared at the entrance to the shopping centre, with a sign above it saying 'random security checks'. The security guards watch people approach and then an arm comes out. The chosen one is directed through the gate. When it beeps you have to take off your belt, keys, money.

A man with dreads is shouting at the guards who look impassive, glad to have a job. He is angry at his selection. 'It's blatant... discrimination.' The guards don't speak. They don't explain. They just raise their arms each time he comes forward trying to avoid the gate. A policeman in a yellow jacket watches. A young black guy with hair bunched up in a top knot holds a yellow balloon to his lips and lets it deflate into his lungs, then breathes the nitrous oxide gas back into the balloon. He watches the argument and giggles. The man in dreads gets louder and sweat flicks from his chin as the security guards listen to his rant with the same fixed smile.

Glass fragments crunch under my feet, the smells of charred wood and burnt plastic sting my nostrils, as boys dodge past, whooping, their happy faces covered by scarves with slits for eyes, or hats pulled down low, beanies with holes poked out. Wild-eyed, they pick through shop-debris, yelling with triumph at anything they find... anything: there is a sudden trend for tweed, looted from Dunn and Co. the Gents' outfitter, now a burnt out mess.

The burnt wood still creaks. Sometimes the stack collapses a little further into itself and wisps of dust and ash emerge from it.

Deerstalkers are newly popular on the street. Everywhere young black Sherlocks investigate the damage done overnight and examine the evidence.

A young boy dances on a podium of crates, wearing a pair of old-man swimming trunks on his head, his locks poking through the leg-holes in heavy braids. He holds a handful of spoons and forks up high above his head, moving to a beat only he can hear.

A sour-faced woman, hair pulled tight, stuffs clothes in a suitcase, then tries to snatch the cutlery from him. He mocks her as he dodges each time. 'Coming for you... coming for you,' he sings, wiggling his hips.

A tall man in an orange T-shirt and Bermuda shorts lopes past, gathering empty bottles in a crate. Bottles and rags.

Shops have been torched, a settlement of grudges; other the shutters have caved in releasing the dreams they offer. The wig shop... people parade in shiny blue locks and silver bobs. Now everyone is happy, sitting around talking amid the rubble. We're all friends, retelling and re-enacting favourite moments from the night... the throwing motions of lucky shots... the dodges evading capture. Everyone has a new swagger.

The tall Bermuda man wanders too cockily down the end of Atlantic Road, where the police intercept him. He feigns wounded innocence as they take the bottles, syphon hose and cloth strips from him.

Then the police beat their shields in a tribal rhythm, and advance down the road in formation towards us, and we stand together laughing defiantly until the moment comes for us to disperse.

'Why am I angry? Look at that fucker.' The man rested on his Sherpa van with its sticker on the back: 'No guns are kept in this van overnight' and he pointed across the road at the guy with dreads who danced by the reggae stall in the Granville Arcade, shirtless, shoeless, relentless in his dancing. The skin on his chest was tight and tanned dark, and his eyes closed, lost in the beat, in the rhythm of the sounds, the bass loud enough to pound a rhythm in your chest.

The man jumped in the van to park on the opposite side of the road, in front of the wig shop. Silver foil extensions hang from

polystyrene heads. He adjusts the shutter mechanism at the fish-monger. 'Fucking stinks, that stuff.' He gestured to the tray of mackerel leaking icy blood onto the ground. 'Who buys it? Would you eat that shit?'

The stall holder grinned back at him.

'Every fucking day he's there. A fucking white guy and all,' he said.

White, but tanned dark brown because he danced from early morning until the evening when they slid the shutters down. Whatever the weather, shirtless, shoeless, dancing. He never stopped and he never spoke to anyone. Sometimes the woman on the fruit stall gave him a mango or a banana that she couldn't sell and he'd wave his thanks, still dancing as he ate it.

'It's a fucking disgrace.'

One day the dancing man was gone. No-one knew who he was, and why he danced every day for ten years and where or why he'd gone.

Everyone was talking about him now, asking questions.

'You want to know why I'm so angry?'

I was standing on Stockwell Road, where they'd kicked over the wall and stockpiled the bricks for ammunition when Zoe came out of the boarded-up cafe, with her friend.

'This is Brenda. She is the most dangerous woman in Britain.'

Brenda had thick glasses and straight cut hair. She nodded gravely and took out a copy of the Daily Mail, unfolding it to show herself in a big photograph on the front page. Above it the headline: *The Most Dangerous Woman in Britain*. 'It's not often the Daily Mail tells the truth.'

'In Britain? Do they include Northern Ireland?' I asked. The H block prisoners were on their phased hunger strike, the grim climax to their dirty protest.

She smiled. 'Yes. And I'm the angriest too.'

I realised who she reminded me of to look at: Ulrike Meinhof.

Brenda looked at me, sizing up whether I could be of use. 'I'm angry because no-one else is.'

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Alan drops steaming lumps of pasta into bowls. 'It's spaghetti Bolognese. You do eat meat, don't you, if that's not too forward a question? The only saving grace of my cookery is its lack of ambition.'

A thick blanket of incense hangs in the room, masking any taste the food may have had. I look at the decorative junk all around us. 'There's a lot of... stuff here.'

He laughs. 'My housemate. If it's antique, he buys it. However gross.' He holds up a wooden tray of scalpels, forceps, clamps, gleaming in the light. 'It's an eye surgery kit. We can try it out later if you like. We've got glass eyes too, in case it goes wrong.'

He sighs. 'Sometimes I worry he takes his fantasies too far.'

Alan drops his spoon, close to tears. 'When he went to hospital he expected me to visit every day. Then he told me to stop coming. He said I depressed him. It's not my fault; hospitals are depressing places. Now he says we need modifications for when he comes back. I had to wait in for them to measure for a stair-lift. I'm twenty-six. A fucking stair-lift. He said I seemed angry. I'm sorry; the pasta is burnt at the bottom. Don't eat the burnt bits. I can't cook but I can make cocktails.'

He pours the remains of the pink concoction into my glass. 'Fuck the recipe,' he says and pours more vodka in.

The last rays of sun hit the field behind the house and the bare-chested man lies flat on the grass, twitching. 'He's always there,' Alan says. 'First, he likes to dance, then he lies down flat in the grass.'

'I'm telling you everything about my life here,' he says. 'I know my invitation was out of the blue, but sometimes you go with your instincts.'

He becomes thoughtful. 'Have you seen the store detective? The one who wears the brown leather jacket? What do you think of him?'

In Brixton the police are tall, so tall they stand above the crowd, able to see in all directions at once. The minimum height is six foot five. There is no maximum. They are recruited on the basis of their charm, determination and prophetic powers. They are always watching, high above the market crowd, signalling to each other silently.

‘Go on Michael, tell her. He was there. He saw everything.’

I tell Brenda everything and she says. ‘Are you sure that’s what happened?’

‘I’m just telling you what I remember. I’m not analysing.’

Brenda nods. ‘The revolution only makes sense in retrospect. Trotsky said that.’

Brenda says, ‘Don’t ask why people are angry. Ask them why they’re not burning up with rage... how they can stand it...’

She passes me the newspaper, and points.

‘So you organised everything?’

‘Single-handedly. The howl of English paranoia.’

I’m sorry,’ Alan says, clearing the pasta bowls, with the remains of a watery Bolognese. ‘That was horrible. I can’t cook, but I can mix drinks.’ He glugs more vodka into the pink concoction in a jug and stirs it.

I am there under false pretences as he lies back on his sofa in his purple kimono and blows smoke out into the room; the love chamber he calls it. ‘We have a dungeon as well, but you don’t want to go in there.’ He smiles with forlorn hope. ‘Or maybe you do.’ He crosses his legs; they are shaved.

I go for a pee. The bathroom cabinet is full of pills and there’s a cut-throat razor and a barber’s strop hangs from a hook.

Alan is lighting candles and incense in the chamber of love when I return and as I put my hand down something makes me jump... a stuffed alligator that feels warm, alive... two feet long, jagged toothed, staring glassy-eyed.

Alan’s voice is getting higher. ‘I thought you’d done a runner. Last week I invited the store detective back for a drink. He refused to take his jacket off and left by nine.’

He laughs at the memory of it. There is some jazz playing.

‘Fuck knows what it is. I don’t buy the records round here,’ he says.

He yawns, moves closer. ‘They arrested him on Monday. They said his flat was like an Aladdin’s cave, all he’d stolen. Five identical white guitars for the band he was going to start. Five black boys all dressed in white. Crazy... he spent all his day arresting shoplifters, then in the evening he helps himself building his dreamland. Such a fucking liar.’

I pick up an orange from the fruit bowl. I haven't had an orange for a long time. 'Is it okay?' I say.

He doesn't answer. He's holding a joint, glassy-eyed, mesmerised by the orange, and his head dropping towards my groin, dipping further, then he vomits in my lap.

'Stop apologising, for fuck's sake,' I say to him as I wipe the last traces of the Bolognese sauce from my crotch. 'Just stop talking.'

The night air is a relief.

Our landlord wore a fur coat, and as he stepped into the living room he put his hands deep in his pockets, trying to look optimistic. 'It'll be alright when it's cleaned up. It took six weeks to get the eviction order, and when we came they'd already gone.'

There was a mound of epoxy resin a foot high in the middle of the floor. 'It's going to take a bit of work. The neighbours said they spent their days sniffing and tattooing each other's faces.'

We could never shift that mound of glue. Sometimes I wondered what place that glue took them to, a place they couldn't return from even to find the toilet and so they chose to shit in the cupboard opposite. Week after week.

It feels good to be out in the street. No more of Alan's talking, walking at last in the cool night air, forgetting everything, except for the stains on my suit and the smell of vomit.

I feel my gums ache... and I realise I've gone too long without fruit. My gums ache and I head down Railton Road, past bomb-damaged houses, or buildings that have just collapsed from neglect, to the shop that never closes, selling salt cod and ling... all-night ackee, through a hole in the mesh and I'm running because the scurvy feels worse. My teeth will fall out if I don't get oranges fast.

The shop bell dings and the ghost of an old man travels behind the protective layer... between the shelves and the wire mesh armoured with Makrolon. He follows my finger, ignoring my words. 'Orange. Six.' Six fingers raised. He drops them in a bag. Takes my money. I ask for my change, but he's gone.

I pick up anarchist leaflets... activist events in Spiv's cafe. Refugee women: *Raising consciousness through constant revolution... Awareness through violent action... Preparing for armed struggle.* And a

man with a mass of grey dreadlocks holds the wall for support, and watches me suspiciously as I eat an orange. He ignores me when I offer him one, and mutters contempt as I squirt the juice over my face, over my suit and fuck, I don't care... when your teeth are coming loose, you act fast, and the vitamin C is rushing through my body... to my gums. And I feel happy at last... I can head back to my flat, to take my suit off at last, to lie back on the mattress and eat the rest of the oranges.

Juice from the orange dribbles down my sleeve and a man appears out the passageway... rushing towards me, his hand stretched out... but I have no change and his eyes flick upwards and he collapses in front of me. When I roll him on his back, blood dribbles from his mouth.

'Frank,' screams a woman, and crouches next to him, looking at me for help. 'He's always doing this,' she says. 'Always.'

Frank gurgles up more blood.

The phone-box stinks of every human activity except prayer, but the phone still works, preserved for making important deals.

I look around to check for a street sign but the voice in the handset tells me where I am.

The woman stands besides and as I put the phone back she starts shouting, 'His kids, who's with his kids?' and then she runs off into the estate.

I go back to wait for the ambulance but Frank has gone, and I can't even find the puddle of blood.

A siren approaches in the distance with its flash of blue light.

I see myself from outside, as I tell a crazy rambling story involving oranges, blood, a suit stained with vomit.

The police in Brixton mean business. Operation Swamp. They don't like people who waste their time. Always know your enemy.

As the siren gets close I run off into the estate and I hide in the bin store.

We went away to Greece for a fortnight with the idea that fermented octopus and ouzo could heal the rifts in our relationship. My in-laws stayed in our Brixton flat.

When we returned my father-in-law had hacked the top off the epoxy mound and used it a foot rest or a place to rest his tea-cup.

He told us in the fortnight they had only left the flat for a morning trip to Marks and Spencer. He had stuck a map of the area onto a piece of card and marked all the murders that had taken place in the past fortnight. A red pin, except for pensioners, who had blue pins.

Murder Mile was the headline from the Daily Mail.

A serial killer was targeting old people which boosted the numbers. 'It's not that he's targeting old people that is worrying, it's that he's targeting the wrong ones,' my soon-to-be-ex wife said.

Either mentally deranged or very angry, the article said, lower down the page.

I get a letter telling me to go to the police station. The desk sergeant doesn't look happy and sends me to an interview room, where the policeman shouts. I should have been there last Friday. Why, what happened?

He grabs my collar and pulls me across the desk. Don't get lippy with me, son. He pulls me tighter so I fall across the desk, and I get the smell of his cigarettes and coffee blasting in my face. 'Do you want to know why I'm angry? Do you want to know why I'm so fucking angry?'

Then he lets go of my jacket. I straighten it. It's a new suit. He looks at his paperwork. Sorry, he says. I thought you were someone else.

I'm running, fast, really fast, and I can see the blue lights flashing on the block in front of me and I rush into the bin store, skidding into a crouch beside the giant galvanised bin with slop dripping into it from the chute and I'm gagging from the stink of vegetables rotted to putrid liquid, seeping into the concrete floor, mixing with pools of vinegary wine and beer. I tread on a carton that explodes, milk bursting out over the leg of my new suit and when I look down I see it's soya milk and I have to laugh because I'm under vegan attack, and on the wall there's a picture of a big hairy cock and underneath 'SUCK' in big letters with a redundant arrow pointing to it and 'Friday evening,' written underneath.

It is Friday evening.

The soya milk drips down my leg and the rubbish chute rattles as

someone far above empties out more debris into it and fills the air with a new set of odours.

I start to get my breath back, trapped still by the police van and the ambulance outside, engines idling while they watch and wait. A couple of police get out and I stop breathing as they come towards me, but they carry on walking, and return a few minutes later with a stack of white packages.

I can hear them talking.

‘There’s no chilli sauce on it. I asked for chilli sauce.’

‘There’s some in the van.’

‘It’s not the same. Their sauce is the proper hot fucking sauce.’

They’re taking their time. It’s Friday. All is calm.

I’m not in a hurry. I can wait forever.

On the first night after clearing the shit out of the cupboards and hacking away at the dome of epoxy, we had some ether, from a little glass vial sealed with tape. I poured some into a bag and inhaled the fumes. The music grew louder... John Lee Hooker... his heavy foot stomping swelled until it filled the room and made the air shake. The first time you have ether it takes you to heaven on fluffy clouds, then it leaves you staring down into the abyss. You spin as you stare down, so deep in the hole, on the point of falling. The second time it takes you straight to hell. Every dream was drowning in shit in that cupboard.

Are you on some kind of medication?

‘Do I seem angry? Of course I’m fucking angry. A fucking stair-lift.’ Alan points, into the hallway where it will be installed.

I look up, impressed by the space around me, thinking about my flat with its dark corridors, the epoxy mound, and the constant thudding of bass beats from below. ‘It’s a nice house though.’

Alan grins. He leans over and I feel his breaths as he whispers in my ear, ‘And one day it will be mine.’

When I took my daughter to register her birth there was an argument in the office. A woman was banging the counter in her frustration... they couldn’t find her documents, and she was irate, spitting rage with her words. They buzzed for the security guard

who came to help her to leave. The more he tried to persuade her to leave, the angrier she got. His calmness infuriated her. 'Lady, there's no place for you here, with your attitude.'

My daughter's eyes were just starting to focus. A tropical fish tank lit up a dark corner, and the guppies ganged up on an Angel fish, chasing it round the tank, darting to pick flesh fragments from the wound in its back. Then they fought each other for the meat held in their mouths.

We still had the lump of epoxy in the living room. It served as a shelf for the baby's bottle, for glasses of wine, for tired feet.

'Is that really what happened?' Brenda says. She seems angry. She stirs Fairtrade coffee with soya in a cracked mug, and it drips onto the floorboards. We sit on milk crates as she points to the map pinned to her wall.

I repeat my account of the events.

She marks with yellow dots the areas of interest, and with blue arrows the likely approach routes of the police. Red squares mark the positions she thinks we should take.

'Look... this is the point where it started. This was the flash-point. That's what I said last week.'

She sticks on new shapes – silver stars, orange rings, blue question marks without explanation.

I raise my hand. 'I was at a meeting at the town hall the other day... there were some community representatives...'

She stops me and snarls. 'Community representatives? Who appointed them?'

Her face twists. 'I'll tell you what they are. Appeasers.' She spits the words with venom. 'They make me so angry. Appeasers and collaborators.'

When the police finished their food, they left.

I emerged from my hiding place into the street.

I saw a crowd down near the junction with Coldharbour Lane. When I looked down I saw Frank's pool of blood in the pavement.

A man was standing bare-chested in the street. I could see his silhouette against the flashing orange light outside the minicab office,

his arms waving, hips swaying, rays of light heading towards me through the smoke.

A leaflet blew out from the stack at Spiv's Cafe: Chile – A lesson from history. I saw Brenda's picture on the back. The most dangerous woman in Britain.

Down the road there was an angry shout and a flash as a petrol bomb exploded. Even at that distance I could feel the heat on my face.

Suddenly the man in dreads becomes calm and compliant. The rage drops away and he heads towards the security gate. The security guards are watching him carefully, knowing this isn't going to be straightforward.

He stands in front of the gate, on the threshold of the magical kingdom, and he raises one arm and puts it through the gate. He lets it drop and raises the other. Then raises a leg, and puts that through. Then he begins to shuffle very, very slowly towards it.

The security guards mutter to each other, allowing traces of amusement to appear on their faces. One of them catches the policeman's eye. He is ready.

When the beeper sounds they are ready for action though.

The man shakes his dreads and steps away. The security guard points at the man's headphones and his belt.

The man with the balloon lets the gas escape from his lungs in a gasp, forgetting to recapture it.

The man in dreads is determined to get into that shopping centre. He takes the headphones off, hands them to the security guard. Then he takes his shirt off, hands that to him. He stands bare-chested, defiant as his locks fall down his back.

Then he takes his shoes off, unbuckles his belt and slides his trousers down. He stands there naked, gleaming in the sunshine and he raises his arms high and walks through the gate, triumphant.