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How to Disappear/Stay Safe

by Victoria Watson

I don't run in the mornings. Not because of the cold or the rain, or even the pull of the duvet. I don't run in the mornings because dawn has not yet shaken off its velvety cover of darkness. I don't run in the dark because of you. I know you as soon as I see you. You are there when we least expect it, you are there when we see you from far away, walking towards us. You are always there. You take the strength that running gives me and make me feel weak. You ruin a run. You undermine me. You decide what I wear and where I go and when I do it. So I wait. I wait until daylight comes and I wait to feel safe.

I will run alongside commuter traffic, breathing in their exhaust fumes because it makes me feel safe. I will run in ridiculous neon colours so I will be seen and remembered. I will run near crowds just to feel safe.

You are always there though aren't you? Like you have always been. No time or place is without you. When I run on deserted country paths there you are walking towards me. When I walk home at night there you are, standing in the shadows. We all recognise you straight away, we all know who you are.

You are walking, just walking, towards me. The high hedge protects me from the busy traffic but not from you. You could be walking to work, you could be taking a stroll, figuring out how to pay off your mortgage. But you could also be other. And you are always a threat. You are always the same question. Will you hurt me?

I used to not look at you, deliberately turn my gaze away and study the ground before me so as to remain unnoticed. I learnt how to disappear. But now I look you in the eye as our paths cross, I may even give a nod, a sharp smile or a clipped hello. I want you to know I have seen you, and I know you have seen me. I want you to see a person look at you not a victim of circumstance.

I do it to feel stronger, I know I can outrun you, but then the moment comes when we pass, and I find myself waiting for the arm about my neck, the punch to my face. I maybe faster but you are always stronger, heavier.

I don't sit in an empty train carriage. I choose my seat carefully in a busy pub and I walk home in the middle of the empty road, safe because of the halo of street lamps. I take the night bus home I don't take the night bus home. I stay with my friends and I take a mini cab. I don't take a mini cab. I check the door is unlocked when I get in the mini cab. I walk and I wait to hear the echo of your footsteps behind me. I pretend to be on my phone even when I am not. I wear a long coat over my short dress. I make eye contact but not too much. I talk back I don't talk back, nothing to show any interest. I ignore wolf whistles and taunts. I look away when you flash at me and pretend I did not see you masturbating, I ignore your shaking hand as you draw nearer to me then pass me in the narrow passageway.

I invert myself away from the groping hand on the underground train, yet cannot even see the body it belongs to. I move away, I sit down, I stare out at the black window looking at my frightened face staring back at me.

I remember not to sit next to the accounts guy who spits when he talks and pushed me against the technical library to ask me if I had a boyfriend. I look away. I go home first, I walk out with the secretaries and feel safe in their bubble of banter.

I wear a hat and baggy clothes when I walk late at night. I look like a boy. I wear trainers. I run on. I run fast. I try not to think about it, even though it shapes my journeys, decides my wardrobe and ruins plenty of evenings out. It's hard knowing that policemen are not safe too.

We all know you. We all see you. We just try to forget about you.

Getting to work. Going for a run. Walking the dog. Meeting a friend. We all want the same thing. We just want to get home.

For Sarah and Sabina and for every woman who just wants to get home.