

MATT INGOLDBY

WILD MEN OF YAKUTSK

WAKE WITH A KICK TO THE HEAD. Scramble up, cold marble, everything blurry. Swing and deliver a knockout blow to thin air, topple and sprawl out, hearing bells. Who wants some?

But it's Stu, kicking in his sleep again. Stu in his fifties, writhing on the station floor like the world's angriest baby. Commuters body-swerve round him, spilling lattes.

Wake Stu tit for tat. Stu's trousers darken as he sits up, as per routine.

"Baghdad?"

"Fallujah," he groans. "They were shooting dogs."

Hard to stay mad at a guy like that. Been through enough.

A lad on a Zamboni sees what's pooling under Stu, lifts a walkie-talkie to his lips.

"Get up, numpty," tell Stu. "You've blown it, moron. Idiot."

No more sheltered station floor tonight—not once you've been noticed.

Outside the station, winter has drowned the butts on the pavement and blown last night's lagers into traffic. What a waste. And it's freezing. Ripped shoes fill with slush, the breeze mauls your ears. How many days until it's warm again? Don't count. That's rule two. Go as long as you can without counting so the number seems less hopeless when you do obviously end up counting.

Grab Stu's ear and twist. "Today's the day, Stu."

Stu folds, wincing, tries to close his eyes but sees more dead dogs there. "What's the plan?" he croaks.

Show Stu an advert in *Metro* for a new Waitrose supermarket in Battersea. Thing about Waitrose: no security beepers by the doors.

Thing about Stu: CCTV can spot a derelict before one gets a whiff of the booze aisle. So first it's new clothes—business clothes—from the clothing bin behind City University. Stu (skinny) can fit in, pass them out.

"Who's looking out for you, dummy?"

"You are," Stu whines, rubbing his ear.

Vamoose, letting Stu learn his lesson by catching up with his bad leg. The lesson is: never attract attention. That's rule one. No one else on Euston Road is on your side.

"Slow down," Stu begs, dragging his leg with both hands. Cross the road without him to speed up the learning.

That's when it happens. Stu slips in the slush by the lights and a red Peugeot boots him upstreet with a loud crunch. A woman screams.

She gets out of the car still screaming.

This is bad juju. This attracts attention.

Two dogs leave the vehicle to bark at Stu, whose eyes are clamped shut, lying on the tarmac, hissing through his teeth.

Get up, Stu!

Oh, god. Sharks are circling. They're running into traffic from all sides, phones raised, blocking your escape. Get up, man! They want you in an ambulance, Stu. They want your organs. They'll put your brain on a website and sell your blood to Big Pharma.

Stu's completely still as the woman kneels to listen to his chest. Can barely see him through her legs. And now, sirens! Oh, god. This is too much. It's too loud, too risky. There are too many phones.

Oh, Jesus. Don't want to be a part of this, not here.

On your own, Stu.

Sorry, Stu. Sorry.

Need a drink. Need to toast a fallen friend. If anyone deserves one . . .

Somehow arrive at City University but can't fit inside the clothing bin without Stu. Can only squeeze an arm in and over a painful half-hour tease out a woman's blouse and use it to dry a sudden storm of tears.

Life goes on, Stu. What's it all for? Every day spent hiding from predators, one false move, one crummy bladder, and bam! You're over. Swatted like a fly. Where's the bloody justice in that?

Could spit! Do, in fact, spit!

UT8 4HX. That's the registration of the red Peugeot that killed him. So what? Track down the driver? *Listen, miss, him in the stained trousers was a personal friend, time to cough up.*

Ha ha.

Trudge automatically towards the new Waitrose in Battersea. Notice

the bench by Holy Cross Church where Stu once found half a bottle of Jack. Now some kid is yawning on it, peeling frosted sheets of *Metro* off his legs.

Seen him before. He's a young, lanky Stu, if you squint, wearing a smart shirt with a collar under a Christmas fleece—business clothes, Waitrose clothes.

Stu, even you would have clocked this one!

His name is Jerry—not a fake name either—and he explains that he left home after a fight, crapped out of some computer job, and can't face telling his dad. He is new to the game and still wears an expensive watch.

Waitrose can wait. After Jerry pawns the watch and splits the cash, we get three nights in a hostel each. Then two because the price of bunks is up near Christmas. Then one because of whisky. Then Jerry says he needs to dryclean his clothes if he's going to get another job. Tell him to sell them, put survival first, but he doesn't listen. He forfeits his night and sleeps in a coach station on a pillow of freshly pressed shirts. Next morning, he looks miserable. Someone tripped and spilled beer over his pillow. He's learned his lesson, poor bugger. Slap him on the back. "Today's the day, Jerry!"

The Waitrose plan is back on. Young Jerry joins the trek to Battersea with a glum face, fondling his bare wrist. He only firms up after crossing the bridge and seeing the shiny green shopsign for himself.

Watch him through the doors as he hovers near the booze aisle in his least ruined shirt. Watch him wrestle a bottle down the waistband of his trousers. Watch it shoot out the bottom of his trousers and smash on the floor in front of Waitrose security.

Jesus, time to go.

On your own, Jerry.

That boy wouldn't last a week in Afghanistan. Stu was never that dopey. He knew when to run. He should have been there today.

The universe whispers, *UT8 4HX* . . .

Nothing else for it. By hook or by crook, Stu, you shall be avenged. And may the gods of justice rustle up some Jack for their man in the field.

Your old friend is coming, Stu.

Christ, need a drink. Twelve miles of darkening streets where hail gores everything between it and the frost-scabbed puddles is no picnic for a sober man.

At Holborn library, a search engine coughs up the owner's name from

the car registration, then Facebook coughs up a landline, then a directory spits out an address. Hours later, footsore and squinting through red mist at the rain-soaked map printout, this neighbourhood, with its cozy brick terraces, represents the whole callous apparatus that turned Stu into roadkill and went home with a story about traffic.

Outside number 57, Palace Road, Streatham, the red Peugeot rattles in the hail.

Knock on the door loudly. She—it's her—opens the door on a chain. She is stout, grey, maybe sixty, wearing a t-shirt fluffy with dog hair.

"Um?" she says.

The Big Speech is so well-rehearsed it comes out garbled. "Him you killed was a personal friend. You pretend you're a good person. Are you going to pay or not?"

"Wait. Someone's died?"

"Stu! His name was Stu!"

"Stuart? Oh, my word. I just saw him two hours ago."

Both parties confused. The hail beating on one party's hat is not helping.

"You saw Stu?"

"Yeah, he works with us at the dog pound now. We let him stay in a cage for two nights while we pooled on a deposit for a bedsit. Are you a friend of his?"

"His best and only." Give my name.

"Funny, I don't remember him mentioning you . . ."

Hail drills holes in the front step. Ice cold.

"I can give you his address if you like," she adds.

"Yes, please."

She comes back with a scribble. "Have everything you need?"

Chance it. "Do you have any whisky?"

She frowns. "I have sherry for Christmas, I think."

She comes back with a bottle and a glass half-full. Drain the glass, eye on the bottle. Could ask for it. Compensation? But after all that rehearsal, can't summon the words.

"Merry Christmas then," she says.

"Merry Christmas."

The door slams.

Leave the warm doorway, leave Streatham, trudge through freezing

slush back to God knows where.

Forget me, would he? Merry bleeding Christmas.

All the bushes around that give shelter are in somebody's garden.

Wake around six in the recess of a carwash fire exit. Arm is wet. Hat is wet. Not from Stu this time, just the rain.

Bet you slept well, Stu. You rat! Bet you were searching every nook on Euston Road for your old friend, ha ha. Bastard! Good for you, etc., etc.

Jerry, though! He deserves all this anger. Young Jerry is a parasite. He fails to subsist. He accepts a fortnightly dole from the nation without shame. He believes hope comes from what people owe him.

Jerry carries the bags-for-life on the trek to Stu's new address. Jerry is all tics and are-we-okay smiles, promising never to neglect a lesson. He doesn't mention the Waitrose screw-up.

Stu's estate turns out to be three lumps of concrete and more so the closer you get. Jerry holds the door on the ground floor as someone comes out, then slips in and calls the lift. Straight to the fourth floor. Jerry's knock leaves a sweaty blank in the door's frost.

Stu's twin brother opens the door, barefoot, beardless, and wearing a shirt made entirely of dog hair. His mouth falls open, and the teeth, at least, are Stu's.

"Hello, dummy."

Stu stares.

"Can Jerry come in too?"

After a delay Stu sort of nods and steps aside. "Hello," he manages after Jerry has already shut the door and set down the bags-for-life.

He backs through a second door, which opens six inches then hits a minifridge. Inside: a toilet, sink, and kitchenette surround a small mattress. You could sleep, shit, and boil an egg without barely moving. Bags-for-life function as a wardrobe under the sink.

Sit on the bed, tactfully moving the pillow. Stu stays by the door. Jerry takes the toilet and rubs his pink hands.

"That's Jerry," explain to Stu. "He's learning the ropes. Thought he'd want to see a success story, ha ha."

Stu just keeps staring—a soldier flummoxed by conflicting orders. Want to shake him, shake the glass out of his stare.

"Jerry's smart, Stu. Went to university, unlike you. What university did

you go to, son?"

"Swansea," answers Jerry.

"That's a good one, eh? Jerry's an egghead. Proper friend with brains. Diamond rare these days."

Stu doesn't move, doesn't blink.

"Tell Stu how old you are, Jerry."

"I'm 22," chirps Jerry.

"And how old are you, Stu?"

"53," he says.

53! Let that hang in the air. "High bloody time you got a place like this, Stu, although a man of your age ought to have a place even bigger and not some titchy radiator like that. But then it's a handout, isn't it? Not bad for a handout."

Stu bites a fingernail. "I'm glad," he murmurs.

Glad! "About what?"

"Glad you've found someone," he says, turning to gaze out the window.

Feel like crying. Damn you, Stu. Why don't you know it's still you, always you? All these years together. How dare you not know.

Look out the window to hide tears. Stu keeps looking out there, saying nothing.

Jerry chimes in. "Later we're going to start making money ourselves. If we put coins in a cup and place it just round a corner, people will kick it and feel guilty and add more coins, and after a while we'll have enough for a deposit. What do you think, Stu?"

Good work on looking pathetic, Jerry. Already tried that with Stu. Nobody stops.

Stu nods. He is losing interest in Jerry, and he's right. What a bloody fool Jerry is, through Stu's eyes.

"Why don't you sod off, Jerry?" snap at him.

Jerry gives an uncomfortable laugh. "What?"

"Take a hint, son," tell him. "Don't embarrass yourself. Get out!"

Jerry's smile slowly dies. Painstakingly he drags himself up, murmurs "what the fuck man," and shuffles out of the room. Hear him unlatch the door, shoulder his bag-for-life, and start sobbing. Jesus Christ. Then the door shuts without a word from Stu.

"Did me a favour there, mate," tell Stu.

Stu still looks outside.

Can already feel it coming: seconds left of the warmth of Stu's room. Count them down, these lovely warm seconds.

"You have a plan then?" Stu coughs.

Start talking too fast. "In Kingston there are whole flats owned by oligarchs that are empty all year. Easy just to find one and sneak inside. Luxury awaits, Stu. Not too late to come with."

Stu nods, gently opening the door. "Another time."

Walk backward into the hall. Shoulders hit the front door. Please, you bastard, please.

"Today's the day, Stu."

Stu calmly holds out coat and hat. Mr. Big Host.

"Mean it, Stu. All these years, who was the only one looking out for you?"

Stu sighs with his hand on the lock. "Those were bad times for me, those years. They scare me, looking back. And, mate, you've always been a bully. It's just who you are. So I'm not going back, but I'm sorry."

"Mate. Stu . . ."

The door slams. He's gone.

Kick it in? No point. Retreat slowly to the lift that goes back to the lonely endless freezing horror of no fixed address.

In the lift, think: this lift is so warm. Why can't I have this lift with its door that stays shut while I go down? I could hide here for winter, go up and down, and be so small and quiet and good that no one would mind or notice or make me go back outside. If I were really good and polite, maybe I could just live here forever. Please let me stay for one more heartbeat, please.

The doors open, and a couple with a pram have to get in.

Find Jerry sitting with his head in his hands on a frosty wall around a herd of bins. His phone is pressed to his ear so tightly that the top of his ear is white.

"I'm sorry, dad," he sobs. "Yes, I'll be here. Merry Christmas." He hangs up and bawls from the bottom of his skinny guts, rousing the local dogs.

Fare thee well, Jerry. Lesson learned. You're welcome.

Back to Euston Road, near where Stu tripped, cheeks raw and ears aching. Pitch dark already but can't sit down. Need to bank tiredness to make it through the below-freezing hours before dawn.

One hundred and sixteen days until the sun is warm again. That's how many. One hundred and sixteen nights like this.

Before Molly kicked me out, back when she drank too, there was a thing on TV about the Wild Men of Yakutsk, who lived in freezing wastes with nothing around for hundreds of miles except snow, starved dogs, forests full of bears, and not much else. "Why don't they just go somewhere else?" Molly asked.

Eight years later, I know why they didn't go somewhere else. It's the last lesson Stu never learned.

Double over, too sober to ride out the cramps. How many days since the last meal? It's getting hard to think.

Stumble. Stumble again.

By the lights where Stu fell, traffic is starting up. The ribbon of slush by the curb gets thinner, carried off in the grooves of tires. By morning, anything that falls in will be somewhere else.