

*You can't even touch a woman, not in the slightest. You cannot. Times have changed and that's what they've changed to, apparently.*

Ronnie is not completely happy with the crowd at Kings Cross station.

*Times...*

Ronnie is not a large man, not tall. If he raises himself and stands up off his heels he makes it to about five foot seven and his build is slender. He doesn't run to fat, but he doesn't precisely run to muscle, either. Still, when he walks, he seems bigger than is strictly logical. He sways largely with each step - not so's you'd think that he's drunk, but so's you'd definitely notice that he's there. He can't sit, or just placidly wait, or prop his shoulder in against some handy surface and be idle, because the preservation of his bigness lies in motion, his blur of expansion. His shoes are always the heaviest Doc Martins he can find and in mild disarray. They don't - *not quite* - make him look as if he's newly come from a factory floor - *God knows there aren't many of them any more and the ones that are left are pin clean* - nor climbed out of a coal pit - *none of them left* - but nevertheless his feet can suggest to the world that he's got stamina, inhabits an industrial grade existence. He maintains a dull finish on his toe caps, treats them with dubbin, not polish - *they are clean, I keep clean* - and has the air, the bearing, of a man who can comprehend sweat, one who can hold things the right ways and put them to craftsmanlike use. His arms maintain an extra bit of bend at the elbow and are braced out from his sides to let him occupy more space in the manner of a tiny, invading army.

You always know that Ronnie's there. He's a one man bridgehead.

And this isn't an accident - he's been practicing being there since he was 8, maybe 9 at the latest. He's got it down pat by now and doesn't notice, not often, that his body makes so many efforts additional to the norm, or that - *why not? they probably deserve it* - he leans in on other men during conversations, hovers a grinning breath too close. When he walks, he might be forcing his way through a clumsy gathering, a mob, while also kicking up leaves on a bumpy, country pathway, or else hoofing tin cans down an alley.

That kind of thing.

He occasionally thinks, has this persistent imagining of himself wearing brownish, lived-and-worked-in clothes - thick cloth, simple jacket and trousers and some kind of muffler - *not a scarf, a muffler, an old-timey muffler* - and he is swinging his big boots through leaves and heading down over the rise of a lane.

*And there's a house at the foot of the slope, an alone and peaceful house, and it's known to me and a kid's there by the opened kitchen door and he's going to run out in a minute and hug my legs. He's that kind.*

Ronnie is jiggling on the spot and searching his pockets for nothings, acting out an impatience he doesn't feel, while examining an indicator board that is, as it happens, being quite evasive about his train. There is fulsome information available on a number of other trains scheduled to depart much later than his own: platform numbers, confirmations of timeliness, even instructions to board. His service is simply listed as existing.

*So far.*

*Stuff changes. Add time to anything and it'll change.*

*And lies - if there's lying, in time all the lies are found out.*

Ronnie is so noticeable and apparently ill at ease that he has cleared a significant ring in the would-be passengers scattered and gaggled about.

He spins, yet again, to study the figures, the faces behind him. He might almost be at large in a hostile landscape - clinging fronds of alien Viet Cong wetness blocking his view, or expanses of dusty jihadi concealment, Rommelish fox holes... so many enemies are available as inspiration. He frowns, his eyes staying calm while his face approaches fury. He's a quandary to those who do not know him, is Ronnie.

*Not a woman - you can't - no touching.*

Women are present at the station, naturally. There are women standing in the open carelessly, contained in the crowds.

*Women, old blokes, a priest who might be a vicar or pastor or one of those job titles - you can't differentiate, can you? - then there's couples, kids, solo bastards with rucksacks. You always get attitude with a rucksack, you always get smugness about the feats the rucksack owner could perform. And you can see it's bollocks. You can see it's just a student taking home washing to his mum.*

*That one's fake military - he's pretending he's a squaddie on leave, but he's not, he's just a wanker with some army surplus and a fucking rucksack.*

Over towards the shop which sells shit sandwiches and pots of other shit that nobody sane would eat - *like you want to eat everything mixed in a bowl; like you're a cat, or something* - over that way towards the shop there's a man with a beard and a woman beside him. The man looks uncomfortable and Ronnie wants, quite urgently, to be absolutely sure of why.

Because the woman is shaking.

*Not a hipster bastard beard and not the full I-have-mice-in-here nonsense, either. Average beard. Not a white bloke trying to show off being Muslim. Not that. The way he looks - round shoulders and a little box-set-watcher's belly - he's just slack. The beard is because he can't be bothered shaving. That's all it is. Laziness growing across him, springing out plain on his face. Evidence.*

The woman is still shaking.

*I bet he says he's got sensitive skin. Prone to shaving rash and spots.*

*I bet he keeps ointments round the side of the bath and is full of weaknesses and talks about them.*

*I bet he hasn't got a bath - shower. Mildew in the curtain and towels with no colour left in them any more. No self-respect.*

*I bet.*

The woman is still shaking.

Ronnie does not like the man with the beard, although they haven't met and are not going to.

*Fucker.*

*Look at him.*

*Fucker.*

The man is wearing beige cargo pants, slung low beneath what will surely become an ever-larger gut. He has additionally a pair of trainers with show-off complicated laces and a purple T-shirt showing what might be Japanese characters. He is clearly afflicted by reading magazines of the most asshole sort and then adjusting himself to fit the world they show him.

The woman is still shaking.