



STALK

Stephanie Ellyne

Do you think she's a nutter? Not me. She's the one we'd all secretly like to be – in spirit if not method. A fighter! Cool. Relentless. Before it began, her whisper-fed fame, misspelled speculations spattering the headlines like arterial blood, I'll wager she was just like anyone. Just another blonde. Flyaway, pale as hay, fine strands whip at her lipsticked mouth. Men write elegies to those buttery curls, the hue of old marmalade. No-one believes a mind dwells under that baby-chick down. Not that anyone's actually said it. But she knows what they think.

Yanking the rare comb through hair brittle as uncooked spaghetti, she curses the soured milk sheen dripping from her roots. Men think they know what will make her happy, seeing in each flush, every flutter, the jerk of some dead sex goddess. She humours them, but likes the telly more. It expects nothing from her.

She twirls before the mirror swathed in pale towels, arches as they fall. Picking fretfully at her elbows, mournful toads of her sleek body, she fluffs her transparent hair. Her brain bubbles behind her teacake smile. She's tried this,

abandoned that, her dissatisfaction the only constant, a continual burnt sugar in her mouth.

Shining, her shoes precede her into a landscape of capital city concrete. She picks her way through broken bottles, bricks, beings; careful not to stare.

Her wishes turn in circles. She fled the north, the south is failing her. Dreams of technicolour sunsets beckon.

She forgets herself as she walks; oblivious to the eyes that mark her careless trail, this disdainful flaxen angel in their midst.

She's met one of them, long forgotten him, will describe them all as strangers. Nothing could be stranger than the things they do.

The police aren't surprised. These things happen to girls like her.

For hours after it happens she sits and writes her name, fearful lest she forget it. Her fingers tremble through the barbed intricacies of the capitals, halting occasionally, wonderingly to touch her face. Her hair still curls, lips curve in an uncomplicated cover-girl grin. Time won't heal this wound that no-one sees. It festers, bright ball of blood and bile. She croons to it, cradles her pain like a long-lost thing.

Her thoughts prickle with delicious speculation. This won't hurt enough. That's too easily traced. If it's that, they won't know what's happening to them. She needs them to know what's happening to them. She needs them to know why.

(I'd like to think that's how it started.)

On the very first day of Spring, she struck. The Strand. A small man, police gauged from the height of the attack, but powerful.

It was after the second (Hackney, April) that the letters began.

*When springtime comes
The birds tweet-tweet
When men come
We're just slabs of meat
– Just another blonde*

They're written in lipstick – a different shade each time. Mostly Chanel, upon analysis, with Clinique close behind. Detectives wet themselves over details like that.

Some refuse to believe it. Lipstick? So? A particularly vicious drag queen! A woman wouldn't have the strength, they snort. Or the will to keep at it. Over and over and over.

*The screams of women grate on men
Too nervous, naked, shrill
The screams of men will fill this town
I've many left to kill*

The papers are having a field day – there's only so much mileage to be got from randy royals or the latest war. Female serial killers are the rarest of the breed. And women usually deal in poison. On occasion, the blade.

They'd love to call her Jill the Ripper. But hatchets don't. They cleave, hack, mince.

'Blonde Butcher.'

'Hackney Hatchet Hag.'

'Chesty Chopper Strikes Again.'

'London Lizzie' is favoured though she's yet to stop at 40 whacks.

People keep thinking they see her – crouched low on the top deck of a bus, eyeing the patrons outside porn theatres in Soho, hustling her dulled weapon home by taxi from Leadenhall Market beneath a packet of mince.

'Did you see the look on her face?', someone I know heard whispered as she passed. 'I'll bet you anything that's her!' It was even said of me the other night, and I'm hardly noted for the ferocity of my appearance.

*There's no fog left in London town,
Victoria's dead and gone
But the fury of a woman wronged
Goes on and on and on*

They won't own up to it, but men are travelling in packs. Not like football fans; more like medieval pilgrims, guarded only by their faith. They laugh about her, the lads. Of course! But the boys-together bellows are suspiciously sharp-edged.

We talk about her constantly, but without the wariness of men. There's a certain amount of moral indignation making the rounds. Is this what feminism has brought us to? runs one predictable lament, is this what happens when we get in touch with our anger: violence, vengeance, death?

Of course one abhors her methods, and yet – and yet... be honest. What you hear when we discuss her is the breathlessness of thrill. For once we've nothing to fear.

More of us are out at night. Alone. What man would dare attack what might be London Lizzie?

These nights, cool nights... There's a triumphant beauty in the ring of my own footsteps echoing through the streets I've almost come to crave.

*My smile is bright
My thoughts extreme
When I strike
There's no time to scream*

Some believe I take an unhealthy interest in her. Not that anyone's actually said it. But I know what they think.

I will admit to a certain ... fascination. I've an entire book of clippings on her now, and if there's a special report or panel discussion I feel honour-bound to tape it. It somehow seems that if I absorb enough theories, poke and pick over the facts, I can forge myself a key the experts are forced to fumble by without.

There are things I need to understand.

I'd hate to give the wrong impression. I've always been a gentle soul.

Rather than kill them, I trap spiders in wine goblets and put them out; address them softly as they speed about under the glass. I know every veggie

cafe in town, and give away my spare change on the mountain-bike ride there.
I'm a petition signer, an easy crier, a pacifist.

But if, to this savage cosmos, I offer up any prayer at all, it's that they never catch her. Each day that goes by without leads, each clue that proves unfounded, small weights float off my heart. I grin into the mirror. I treat myself to chips.

*As long as she's out there they watch themselves.
Little girls must smile and please
While boys have all the fun
But comes a time their fun must cease –
I could be anyone.*

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