

As a child, I was terrified of teenage boys. ‘They make my heart beat faster when they walk past’, I tried to explain to my dad one time, and he laughed and shook his head like he knew me better than I knew myself. I’ve always blushed easily and, that afternoon, my cheeks confirmed to him the hot proof of a fact I knew not to be true: that it thrilled me when the boys on my street would whistle and call out; that the attention made me feel powerful; that there was a state of play in which *I* was one of the players and not just a ball they dribbled from toe to toe.

I’m not a child now. I can open a jar of olives with ease, and own my own flat in Brighton like one of those real grown-up people you hear about. But I still get that same sick fear in my belly when I’m out on the street on my own and men approach me. 2020 was the worst. I love my independence, but living alone during lockdown was brutal. Every day was made up of exactly the same units of activity, and not one of those units included anyone else:

I ate alone;

I slept alone;

I did my washing up alone;

I worked alone;

I stood alone

on the balcony on Thursday nights to clap the NHS, and I sobbed as I did it – it’s pathetic, I know – but, in that at least, there was something about the impact of my two palms colliding against the backdrop of a streetful of neighbours doing the same that made me feel suddenly like a bead in a necklace and not just a one pence piece someone glued to the wall for a practical joke. My one-hour outside time was my salvation. My local park is my garden, and every day that first April, I ran through the trees, did a loop of the lake and stretched by the children’s playground. I’ve never known a Springtime feel more like July, or my body feel so connected to its aliveness.

But I had forgotten how often certain beads in a necklace are more significant than others. One Monday, a young guy caught my eye at the park gates and smiled, in a strange way, with his eyebrows cocked – like he’d just heard a joke being made at my expense. I smiled back, awkwardly, caught off-guard and not wanting to be impolite. The following day, I saw him again. I had just started stretching my calves when I heard this clapping sound behind me. Turning, assuming it must be kids playing, I found him standing so close, it made me leap back involuntarily. He was applauding. ‘I love your hair. Is that your natural colour?’ He stepped forward into the space I had made. I smiled again. *Why*, I later berated myself, *do we always fucking smile?!*, but of course I knew why – because if you don’t, your compliments switch to: ‘rude bitch’, ‘you stuck up cunt’, ‘fuck you then’ – and some things just aren’t worth the risk. So, I thanked him, nicely, in an upbeat tone, calculating the number of minutes it would take me to run from that point home and how much his bulky footwear might disadvantage him. He took my initial tentative steps away as an invitation to trail me. ‘I see you in the park quite often’, he told me; then, pointedly, at my chest, ‘*jumping around*’. ‘Oh. Right. Yeah.’ I smiled again, my jaw tight, and turned to face him. ‘Look, I’ve got to get back to my flat now, sorry.’

‘Can I get your number then?’ He said it with such entitlement, like I’d suggested it already, and, after a moment’s strained silence, I caved and gave him not the number but the line every woman has used as a loophole out of the knowledge that, to men like that, our own autonomy is not enough of a reason to answer: no. ‘Sorry, I’ve got a boyfriend.’ I strode off then, keeping my head up, holding my breath, and, though the information had stopped his body, moments later, his bruised ego tore itself free and flapped for all to hear: ‘I could fuck you better than he can, you know. I’ll suck your pussy and fuck you in the arse till your arse claps’. Some kids nearby sniggered, and I did nothing, paralysed by my total disbelief that a man could talk to me in this way and nothing would happen; that it was a joke. My cheeks were bright red and, back inside my COVID prison cell, punching myself in the head with all the things I should have done differently, I howled my powerless guts up because I knew that now, on top of the indignity, and insult, and degradation, my garden was gone: I could no longer go back to my park on my own anymore, and also be safe.