

Unintentional Hermits/ Animal Cities- The General Woman

by verity healey

She lived a good life she told herself. She lived a good life because she demanded little- little materialistic comforts that is- at least this is what she thought- and what she demanded anyway was simple, aesthetic; sophisticated and perhaps even neat. Yes she was a neat person. A neat sophisticated person just trying to live her way- that's how she saw herself and how others saw her too.

It was true that if she missed her coffee- like 1,000s of other Londoners ordering their flat whites or lattes early in the morning- she'd become a cross puss. A slight frown would hover around her brow which would then- if the need had not been satiated by mid afternoon-develop into a scowl, pulling down the corners of her mouth; making her droop forward and throwing her hair onto her face so it caught in her teeth; causing her further irritation. She'd walk more slowly, become vague- leaving sentences half finished and hanging in the air, staring at the floor. If this happened she would have to correct it at once and she'd even cancel meetings with friends to make a trip to a favoured coffee shop or sometimes she'd just not show up at all with no prior warning- and her friends, if they were so inclined; could work their way through London's coffee houses trying to find her, for she never answered her phone.

But apart from this she was quite simple minded- or so others thought. She ate little- nibbled would be a better word; purchased her wares at the health food shop on Poland Street, sat quietly in her room if she had nothing to do, wore the same clothes and did not visit pubs or clubs; enter into sexual relations either with others or herself and had a group of friends she visited every week (she had a

list of who they were in her head, as if a vicar visiting members of his parish).

Mondays she met with Matilda who lived in the trendy part of Peckham and fed her on coffee and cake, on Tuesdays she met Stavros who dashed her off to a fancy eating house, or on a river boat cruise trip; on Wednesday she met with Ed at a cinema for a tea and a chat, Thursday was time for herself where she would hang out in a cafe or library talking to people, Friday she went to Joanna's in Primrose Hill for dinner and weekends she spent alone.

And it was the weekends she dreaded the most. Two empty stretching days waiting to be filled by something or someone- they stretched out like long sheets of blank paper that went on as far as the eye could see and she dreaded them. So she spent these days walking around London, its parks; endlessly around the Isabella Plantation amongst carefully dressed children with their parents, or sometimes she ended up in a bar alone or sometimes her predicament would force tears from her and she'd wander through Leicester Square or from bus stop to bus stop until she found some vagabond to talk to or her grief was silenced by the night sky and the stars- something about their glittery indifference made her peaceful- or if it were summer, the grasses rushing to meet the overhanging yellow flame boughs of the laburnum trees or the London Planes. Such things as this, or the call of a heron or an owl quieted her spirit and her torment would be over.

Yet what was her torment? She couldn't work it out- if indeed she saw it as a torment- for her it was simply feeling down and not having any where to go. She worked five days a week as a gallery assistant at a place in South Kensington and she had friends. So everyone was surprised then when it was suddenly announced that she had died on her own at home.

'I really don't believe it', said Ed; at a small gathering of her friends at Matilda's place in Peckham.

As soon as they had heard they had all come round for coffee. Matilda spooned the froth from her latte and sucked it hard and loud as was her custom- she was wondering how she could delay her friends to stay longer so they could try her new walnut cake, now that Lucy was gone she needed new cake tasters!

'And to think no one knew for three weeks', said Joanna. 'I mean that's what's really frightening. In this day and age, one can be dead for so long and...'

And they all privately thought with horror of their own deaths, thinking well I'll never let myself get into that state and I'll never be alone either. For there were some sad circumstances surrounding Lucy's death. And because of their various complaints about her and their individual relationships with her, they each had a tiny secret thought that went something like- well I'm glad it wasn't me- and together they all sat there and commiserated with each other- Stavros, her special friend; the one she had courted especially and relied upon more;

'You are my special friend and I am so glad I know you!'

she had said so often that he had been embarrassed- he had to pretend he felt the same way- had a fleeting sense of pity and agony for her.

He remembered the first time they met. He had been taking a stroll in Kensington Gardens as it was summer and he lived nearby and on this particular night he became aware of a presence- a shadow in his right eye as he walked. Finally he sat down near the ponds and the shadow materialised into Lucy who came and sat down near him.

'Oh I hope you don't mind me saying,' she began, 'but I can see you are reading Castaneda. He's one of my favourite authors!'

Stavros had indeed been carrying a book on Castaneda but it was for his PhD - he did not like Castaneda particularly - but looking at Lucy's rather attractive face he had not wanted to resist. So he engaged her in conversation and at the end of it she politely thanked him and said

'Well thanks, it's been so nice! May be I'll see you here again soon!'

Stavros said he doubted it and they parted and he didn't see her for three weeks and when they met again in the park she said,

'I had a feeling you'd be here. I've been thinking about you and Castaneda and I think you should go to South America. I mean it might help with your studying.'

Stavros was flattered and confused to hear she'd been thinking about him and he found he wanted to listen to more about himself from her. So it was easy for him to accept an invite for a coffee or a tea and that's how the relationship progressed.

The others were slightly uncomfortable when they heard this.

'Sounds like she was stalking you', joked Ed.

Stavros remembered that he'd seen Lucy several times before they actually met and suddenly he was angry. Why had she ever bothered with him? he thought. He remembered how he found her so tiresome to entertain- trying to work out what suited her best, the places she might like as she complained so often-

'Oh not here, the music's too loud', OR 'I don't like the coffee, let's go.'

He put up with this so he could talk to her about himself.

The others thought back to their own meetings with Lucy. With Ed for instance, they had met at work- they were both flyering for a comedy club in Central London but both being introverted, were entirely useless. They found consolation in each other and this spilled over into long walks and tea breaks until their meetings became daily almost. And Ed convinced himself it had all come from Lucy. He couldn't admit to himself that he partook willingly in the friendship because now talking with the others, Lucy seemed very odd, and to admit to liking Lucy would be to paint himself with the same brush.

'She didn't seem to know about boundaries', said Ed, 'I always felt she was forcing herself on me. It wasn't always mutual.'

There was a silence within the group as they all thought about this and eyes were fastened on Matilda and Joanna who had not yet commented.

'Well you know', said Joanna, 'She was a bit lost. But my door was always open. Lots of problems, lots of problems,' she said; not wanting to go into detail.

It was worth noting she had a dinner date to get to and she did not want to be delayed at this coffee party for much longer.

Joanna did not explain to the group how she had met Lucy. Frustrated with her life- the jobs she was having to put up with in order to fund her lifestyle on Primrose Hill made her cry sometimes and this was exactly how Lucy had found her one day in Regents Park, crying and clutching a half empty bottle of red. Lucy had simply walked up to her and asked her what was wrong and Joanna, having nobody to talk to; found herself babbling about her job and it ended up with Lucy escorting her home and staying the night. But she was ashamed and did not tell the group. Lucy had saved her at a critical moment and Joanna had felt in her debt ever since.

Matilda though was more forthright.

Well normally I would never come into contact with anyone like Lucy (and by default she meant everyone else around the table too).

She was a cake maker and chef in the highest social circles and wrote books and gave talks, and it was at a talk that Lucy came up to her and said how much she admired her and could she have her autograph?

'You know, I really like you;' she said, 'I get a good energy from you, I feel you are a good person.'

And Matilda, having had a little to drink had smiled back and said

'Yes, I'm setting up a kids' project actually, teaching children from the poorer families how to bake! In Barking you know, it's like a third world..'

And Lucy had said, Oh I know someone who is desperate to work with kids (meaning Joanna) and may be you could be in touch and somehow Matilda had been so beguiled by Lucy, that she agreed to meet her the next day and slowly it became a regular thing- Lucy had a sweet tooth and Matilda used her to test all the new cakes she baked. Now all Matilda could worry about was who she could find to replace her.

'She was a stalker,' Ed insisted again.

For no one could understand how real friendship may happen. Not in this way anyway, everyone thought.

'Poor Lucy,' said Joanna, 'she always seemed lost.'

'Yes, I kept trying to get her to move on in her life', said Ed accusingly, 'And she never wanted to know.'

He fidgeted in his chair- he had an audition in an hour where he had to play a bereaved brother and he wondered if he could use this as inspiration.

'What I don't understand,' said Stavros, 'is how she was gone for three weeks and no one noticed.'

'Well you know what she 's like, she never answers her phone;' said Matilda.

But the truth was that Matilda had had 'cake' block and had not needed Lucy to try anything and so had not been in touch. Joanna struggled.

'Life happens you know,' she said.

She'd met a new man and she'd actually been relieved when Lucy had stopped coming for dinner as she wanted to be with her new date and it could have made things awkward.

'Yeah,' said Ed, 'I just thought she was off doing her own thing.'

Stavros was the one who remained quiet. Out of all the friends he was the last one to see Lucy alive. He'd met her as usual on the Tuesday to have a meal at his place and then may be watch a film. But it had all back fired. Lucy had come and enjoyed the dinner,

'It's so nice, so nice!'

and Stavros, relaxed from the wine; expected half an hour or so of talking which he had hoped would be about himself and his latest woman problem but instead all that had happened was that Lucy said she was tired and that she needed to sleep, where upon at 8pm she fell asleep on his sofa.

Stavros was furious!

He'd looked forward to a good talk and here she was fast asleep on the couch. How dare she! What thanks did he get!? Didn't she understand the unwritten unspoken bargain?
His need was so great he leaned over and shook her.

'What? What?' she said crossly.

'Look!' he could barely get the words out, such was his anger, 'I need to talk to you! You come here, drink my wine and eat my food and with barely any thanks, fall asleep!'

'Well come on, what were you expecting?' she said, 'I'm tired OK? I've been working since 7am.'

'Well at least take the trouble to talk to me,' said Stavros.

'Look I'm tired, leave me alone.'

'No, no!', shouted Stavros and he gripped her by the shoulders, forcing her up. He could barely contain himself, spitting in her face. 'You're here to talk about me! Me!', he yelled.

And Lucy, taking one look at his shouting face, pushed him away and went to the door.

'I'll do what I want!' she said, 'if I want to sleep I will. It's how I am. If you don't like it, you don't like it.'

'You're a sponger, that's what you are!', yelled Stavros, 'and you stalked me, you're a stalker too. I'd never choose to be friends with you ordinarily. Taking advantage of my hospitality and money. Unable to form natural relationships for yourself.'

'Oh look at you!', Lucy shouted back, 'all you talk about is you you you! I just want to come here and have a nice time but you put all these conditions on me.'

'We're friends!', yelled Stavros.

'Yeah and that means just giving and not expecting!'

And with that Lucy slammed the door. And Stavros shouted after her.

'But you expect your food from me! Otherwise you wouldn't come!'

And Stavros did not see Lucy again. In fact, Lucy was upset at the accusation of stalking. What is this? thought Lucy. This modern concept of stalking? What about Kierkegaard? Was he ever accused of stalking? So what if she went off after people to be friends with them? So she stepped out of the natural boundaries but surely she was just thinking outside the box, surely her spirit was just open to others- she wasn't concerned with careers or what another did, she believed she just liked people. Sure she got 'rewards' for her companionship-fed and taken out- and she liked that- though she didn't want to admit it. But her smile when she was being offered the best Creme Brulee or premium seats at the Opera House said it all- she liked the aesthetic of it, the beauty of it all and being made a fuss of. She loved being in the spotlight when others asked her advice- she felt she had meaning, she was alive- she was saying- what? are you interested in my wisdom? I like it, I like it. So when Stavros said she stalked him it hurt. Mostly because it was true, but only depending on how you looked at things. For her she was just trying to follow her instinct and make new friends, for others; for those friends, they were so only because she was persistent and listened to them and gave them time of day.

And what happened after that argument with Stavros? She slammed out and walked the streets and began to think-

'Yes really, I can't have relationships in the normal way.'

She saw couples hugging and kissing and friends clutching each other's arms- she couldn't imagine that kind of spontaneity, that kind of physical relationship with anyone. If she did not 'force' friendship it did not happen but her forcing it made it happen for the worst reasons and she did not see it. She must have people! For we all must have people! Anyway she could not bear what Stavros was saying. She examined all her friendships and saw them fall apart one

by one- this one existed because of this, and this one because of that...

But how then should friendship be? she thought. What were the laws which governed it?

After Stavros she went home and lay in bed. Slowly it came to her she might have been trying to take control too much instead of allowing spontaneity. She was guilt ridden and rang each friend- a fact each one of them did not admit to each other when they met after her death- to say she was sorry if she was forcing herself onto them, she had not meant to.

And none of them had picked up or returned her call. And Lucy- Lucy lay in bed waiting for their calls which did not come. And fretting, forgetting to eat or drink but thinking only of them and how she'd been too controlling; she lay back with a gasp one day, seeing a hovering white light before her which said

'Come, come!'

and relinquished everything, let go of all bodily control and gave herself up to that finite anonymous power we call death.

