

Unintentional Hermits/ Animal Cities- The Helper

by verity healey

She'd been watching from the ice cream shop for a while now. Everyday for the last week she arrived and stood underneath the Ben and Jerry's sign and feasted her eyes on him. She didn't always come at the same hour, her job at the restaurant prevented that, but anyway he didn't always keep the same timetable- he was never there in the morning it was too early, and besides it took him hours to lug his speakers and microphone from where ever he was sleeping that week. And most mornings he was either stoned or hung over too, she could never work out which.

She watched him now. He had paused, mid flow, halfway through a tonal poem, his arms raised and hanging there frozen and eyes staring straight towards and through her, though she was sure he wasn't seeing her. The whites of his eyes rolled and she thought he was half mad. Yet his words- or sounds rather, hissing through the microphone, sent shivers up her spine.

In fact they weren't so much words as a kind of wailing, he seemed to start out with consonants or vowels but they would quickly fade into a kind of Om. She was entranced.

'It's so weird', She said to a friend in a cafe. 'I just feel... you know this need to go to him. I don't know what it is', She continued, smiling a little. 'I can't say that I am attracted to him but there is definitely something there.'

'But then,...' She frowned and her face, so often shining with a kind of light, darkened. She thought of his drinking and smoking, and the strange slim young men and blond girls who hung around him at night time. And his clothes were strange- it was as though he barely knew he had to dress, he always wore dark baggy track suit bottoms, a woolly striped jumper, a long black coat and white trainers. Once, when she had dared to go forward and drop money

into the box on the pavement, she saw that his nails were long and black with dirt.

'I'm not sure he's got anywhere to live,' She confided to another friend, as she could not stop talking about him. 'I mean I think he stays with different people you know.'

Irritated the friend said, 'Why don't you go and speak to him, you've been watching him for so long?'

Perhaps the friend hoped that she would then stop bothering her with her chatter about him, but Kia merely smiled and said,

'Everything when it comes, you know?'

Well everything did come and that time was now.

Now I feel ready, Kia thought to herself. I feel good and he seems more open for talking today.

'Hi,' She said finally, after standing by him for while and receiving no acknowledgement from him.

'I've been listening to you a lot- I really like your sounds you know, they're sort of calming. I mean I can hear you even at the tube station, your sounds carry on the wind. I'm Kia,'

and she held out her hand but the man ignored it, and simply retreated further into his coat.

'Oh you don't do handshakes, that's OK! Can I sit with you a while?'

He didn't say anything so Kia squatted down next to him on a step. Once a stout woman in a raincoat passed and threw coins at her uttering,

'You poor things!'

but otherwise there was quietness. He'd stopped performing and seemed dumb, holding the mic in his large hands as if the power of his art had left him. Kia looked at his face, it was bloated and undulating, the skin was smooth, the nose blunt, the lips thick and the eyes wide. She decided he had a kind face, although it also seemed blank. As though the experiences of his life had settled somewhere deep within him and left no trace of it on his body.

So this was how it started. The next day Kia returned to sit with him a bit and the next day and the day after that until the days

turned into weeks and the weeks into months. Eventually she found out his name was Saul, that he had no 'proper' job, was of no fixed abode and spent his time composing and performing, walking the streets, visiting pubs when he could afford and sleeping where he could- in shop doorways or on the floors of sympathetic friends, it was no matter to him.

Kia was intrigued by him and drawn in. She liked his slowness and long loping when he walked and the way he looked up at the sky and around at everything as if a new born baby in constant wonder, she fancied he was untroubled by the daily worries most others, including herself, were preoccupied with. She was beguiled by his reticence and natural shyness and obvious blushing when ever he saw her approaching. She was glad too because she hadn't seen his stash of blond admirers hanging around him for a while either. But she decided there was a problem.

'Why doesn't he like being touched?' She asked a friend, for it was Kia's way to hug everyone when she met them. 'It's almost as though he thinks I am going to hit him or something. He shrinks away.'

In fact, Kia was beginning to complain about him to her friends. She had started taking him food from the restaurant and free cups of coffee to keep him warm in the sharp March wind but he only ever gave her a little smile and a small mumble of thanks and sometimes barely touched it.

'It's all me,' She started saying. 'I mean of course, I don't mind talking about myself all the time and he knows so much about me now but he never offers anything of himself, he never gives me anything.'

'I'd really like it if you talked to me more,' She said to him one day. 'I mean you know, I'd like to know about you sometimes OK? It would be really nice if you could trust me. Otherwise it's just boring.'

The wind was making Kia's hair fly into her peaceful face as Saul looked up at her, scrunching his eyes.

But he only said, 'Can you watch my stuff? I need the loo.'

And before she could answer he was off, flying across the square and disappearing in amongst the crowds squeezing themselves up the city's narrow streets.

Kia settled herself grumpily, pulling herself more into her coat. She knew he had not just gone to the loo but she was too nice to say so and she knew he needed a certain kind of fortification but was too ashamed to tell her. As she sat and pondered on him, groups of men walked past looking interested, some turned and winked at her and laughed between themselves, gesticulating to their groins and conversing in Russian or Hungarian.

Time wore on, the wind howled around the roof tops, the top of Hippodrome and screamed with the fair riders in the centre of the square. Kia became more squat, sinking into the pavement.

Finally, as the clock struck 10, she saw him appear at the corner with a girl, kiss her on the lips and send her away with a smack on the behind and then trip his way slowly over to her.

'You've been drinking', she said.

But Saul just shrugged, he was dazzled with beer and even slower with his movements. He struggled to pick up the microphone and dropped it several times.

Kia hated this. She hated drink and believed you weren't pure if you drank. And she hated what it did to him, transforming him from a clear eyed artist into a gibbering hulk of a man. But she hated the girl even more with her bleached hair and gaudy leggings and low top. She represented everything Kia detested.

After this incident Kia changed towards Saul, she became harsh and critical. She thought she saw she had to rescue her friend.

'Why do you always wear the same clothes?', She would say. 'And don't you clean your nails? Do you think you look good for these girls? Well may be you look good for them, but how about other girls, may be you haven't thought about how other women may think of you?'

Or another time it was,

'Why do you like these kinds of girls? Is it just because you want sex? Because I tell you they are not beautiful these girls, they are ugly man, totally ugly.'

At first Saul did not reply to Kia's remonstrating- he simply listened and gave her a slow grin and sometimes even a friendly shove on her shoulder, but when she criticised his performances he snapped.

'You know what?' she said one day. ' You may think your sounds are original but they're not. Every day, every day man the same. The same sounds, the same notes. You're not doing anything new and you know why? It's because you're sitting around and drinking and smoking dope and nobody listens anymore. In ten years you'll still be here making the same sounds..'

At this Saul rose to his feet and slapped Kia across the face. Simply that and nothing else. Then he gathered his stuff and walked away from her without a backward glance.

Dumbstruck Kia stood swaying in the wind, her hair in her face.

'Look I wasn't pissed at him because he didn't like me like he likes those other girls', She said to a friend later, although her face had a strange and unsure look, as if she wasn't quite in control. 'No, I was just trying to help him with his life you know? And he wasn't open for it, he couldn't face it that's all. I mean what can I do? I can't do anything. If someone isn't open to what I have to say, if they are not open to the truth then...'

From then on Kia kept away from Saul. But one day when she was passing nearby she stopped to listen to him performing. His sounds had changed and had taken on a newer and more ethereal tone and when she came near she saw he was sporting a new hair cut and was wearing smarter clothes. Kia gave a little smile and once more took up her old position under the ice cream sign. She stood and watched and wondered when would be a good time to approach him and talk.

