

Unintentional Hermits- Becky

by verity healey

Becky ran out of the club and expected rain to hammer out her disappointment, she expected a howling wind at least but she was met by breathy warm air and moonlit streets and she was looking at it, taking in the false magic when the door swung open and bland house music fell out like a drunkard with a shadow, reeking of stale beer- she could just see the shadow's face framed by stringy long hair showering in the moonlight. He had an air of bemused amusement.

I'm sorry, he said. I didn't know he was going to react like that.

She wanted to believe him but Gabriel was never convincing when he lied, he enjoyed himself too much. She couldn't see his eyes but she could hear his voice, high and excited.

Anyhow he's left, Gabriel continued. I suppose he was too embarrassed.

Gabriel started laughing but Becky was already walking, his words met her back.

Well, he shouted. It's not my fault he's married, I was only doing you a favour by telling him- it's not healthy for you Becky!

But she was running. The streets were busy, teenagers with trousers slipping down their bums and shuffling and waffling down Donor Kebabs, old tramps before their time. She bashed into a young guy, his features shiny black under the lamp light, and recognised him from the club.

Hey baby, where you going?

She doesn't answer, feeling pathetic and shrinks into her red M&S sweater, tight jeans and side steps him neatly. He follows her and they walk ten minutes, not saying a word, she skivvyng up old side streets by the castle, past the cathedral, through old Roman archways.

Come on baby, he says finally. You know you want me.

She doesn't, won't look at him. He holds a finger to his mouth and bites, it is rough skin on his fingers. Now she's on her favourite street, it runs past the red brick prison, flanks the park, goes past tall Victorian houses where an old man stands on the corner in an old mac and pulled down hat as though he 's Harry Lime and looking at girls. But it's the shop she wants. Some one said she was suffering from false pregnancy syndrome - pseudocyesis- but it's more complicated than that. In her thin nervous body which, if it belonged to a different class of girl, would be strung out and chain smoking by now, she feels an excited rebellion against the self abnegation of the daylight hours, she is person of two halves, the demanding child who comes out at night asking to be fed and the mother, indulgent and guilty, who excitedly complies. The man still follows.

Come on, he reiterates, swinging his hips, stamping on his feet like a nervous horse.

She turns into the corner shop, open 24 hours, near all the pubs, it knows what it is about with its over priced staples- milk, bread, cheese, crisps. She grabs Bombay mix, Seaweed cracker peanuts, yogurt coated bananas, chocolate frijij milkshake, she thinks it is a lot.

Holding them in her hand she's already experiencing the tightening of her throat and dryness in her mouth, already there's a dead weight inside her belly.

I'm pregnant, she says to the counter girl, who is blond and glassy eyed. She stares right through Becky and at the man who is still waiting, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Becky sees herself in the girl's glasses, in a square of reflection. She can't see what he wants, scrawny neck, thin shoulders.

Outside in the street her carrier bag makes her bold, it seems to give her back something.

Go away, she says loudly and confidently. I'm not interested.

She turns left and he follows, this time on the other side of the street, even so she feels his sweat, showering her like drops from a water fountain.

I live here, he gesticulates at a 4 storied house.

American, probably a student.

Now she pauses. There's a dark garden in front, weeds she'd have to push through. He's got sunglasses on, she notices now for the first time. He can't see jack shit. It suddenly makes her feel better. She thinks of Married Man, the one who won't come near her now he knows she has a crush. It is a hesitation and it is too late, he opens the gate and pushes her in. Climbing the stairs is like going over the top, she wants to stop but can't because he is behind her, it's always like this, someone has to be behind, digging their nails in and pushing her on. She feels she shouldn't be doing this but there is a feeling of desperation in her glance at him, he's shut the door, it's a poky top flat at the top, up some more stairs she sees two young men lying in front of MTV. She panics, makes a mental note of where to find the front door.

Suddenly she feels the urge to go, the TV lounge, with its flat Ikea furniture and black sofas where two young men glowering sprawl, is unknown territory. She can imagine those eyes, mouths, hands all over her. One of them looks up and there is an unspoken signal between him and Sunglasses. He flicks over the TV channel and Sunglasses slams shut the kitchen door, taking Becky by the hand and leading her through to the bathroom. It is clean, as far as she can tell, but as she looks he proceeds to strip.

Get your clothes off, is all he says.

And she is stood still, frozen, coming out of the fog of the club and Married Man pushing through the throngs and past her with sad watery eyes, she thinks, me being here is empty revenge. She is crying out No! at the same time he tears off her jeans, switches on the shower and lifts her in as though lifting a toddler, God she is sickened, there is no time to ask, persuade, demand, like lifting a toddler she thinks and wishes she'd never come in and climbed those stairs, she thought, like in the books she read, it would be the bed, or a sofa, and erotic, slow and erotic, and then, as he was pushing her breasts into the wall and forcing open her legs with his knee yelling,

Get them open, get them open!

she thought of someone, for it was always someone with no name or sex, flinging her down on the bed when she was how old, pushing her face into the bed clothes, pushing and throwing their weight on her until she stopped screaming. The memory came with such clarity- she'd struggled to remember before with her therapist but this was the trigger- that she didn't know what she'd done until it happened and she felt nothing was moving anymore behind her and could only hear the pit pattering of the shower which he'd turned on to wash her. The sound wasn't right. The little thwacks of water sounded dense, like hitting something harder and more solid than the edge of an enamel bath. She looks over and actually isn't surprised. One hand flung behind his head, legs sprawled, the other hand over his genitals, he wears a slight sneer on his face and she thinks of Gabriel. The shower head dangles near him, washing the bathroom floor. She can't remember, but she must have hit him with it. She can't see blood, probably just a bit knocked out she thinks. But she feels guilty but then remembers she could almost feel the thing inside her, like a red hot knife paring away at her flesh, a distant dull pain.

Quickly she pulls on her clothes, wet knickers, wet everything and steps over his head. She sees now he has a gash on his brow, there will be a bruise. Perhaps he is lying still to save face, perhaps as she walks away he will grab her calf. But he does nothing. At the door she pulls on her shoes but leaves the carrier bag. It seems indolent somehow, ungracious to take it away, though she doesn't know why. She doesn't feel hungry though.

The other men are still there, they still gaze at the TV screen though they eat pizza noisily, as though they are kissing. When had the pizza come? she wonders. During all of that? She remains at the doorway long enough for one of them to become aware. He flicks her a look, perhaps misreading the wide eyes, drooping mouth, the slight trembling on the edge of her skin, shivering like a fly ridden cow, she thought. He stood up and gestured to his crotch for his friend.

Just taking a slash, he says.

Becky hates that. Like the pee will cut into the ground, into people. Pee like a knife edge. He makes his way towards her, a grin on his face but Becky turns, opens the door and clatters down the stairs.

Hey! his voice stops her.

Discovered that quickly? she thinks.

What about your shopping?

He is in silhouette, holding up the plastic carrier bag.

I don't want it, she says and, as he begins to laugh, You'd better see to your friend in the bathroom, he is not well.

As she turns to run Becky has time to register the laughter stopping but then she is out, fumbling onto the street and away.

