

The Hermit:

I tend to think of Kevin as being square whereas he is in fact, technically, a rectangle. With a head the size of a pumpkin carried on shoulders that extend from his ears, he is almost as wide as he is tall, and the same width around any circumference.

He is coated in layers of hard fat, thick slabs of clay whose movements are controlled by a matchstick Kevin hidden in the shadows of this man's sentinel flesh. Even shaking hands with him left me with the feeling of having been introduced to the bodyguard rather than the dignitary himself.

When I first met him I was almost certain that he wasn't a new employee. He seemed to process too quickly and to have too great a range of considered opinions to have an obvious learning disability, yet not somehow fast enough or broad enough to be a staff member.

The story of his life,
as it happens.

He's a pilgrim, Kevin. He wanders the world in a solitude that is gentler upon him than the isolation that it waylays.

Abandoned to the social services by his family, aged five, he grew up in sixteen different children's homes. He was too quick for the homes for children with learning disabilities, but too slow for the homes that were not.

In the homes that were, he felt bullied abused blamed neglected and misunderstood by the staff teams; and in the homes that were not, he felt bullied abused blamed neglected and misunderstood by the other kids. Whatever he accepted would not accept him, and no one saw him the way he saw himself.

And so it goes on.

When of an age, he had tried living alone, unsupported in the community, in a flat in a large town in Kent. Within six months he was an alcoholic, living with and paying for other alcoholics, frequently thrown out of his home for one reason or another, regularly in trouble with the police, once in prison, and generally having a rather difficult time of life. He was being consumed by the society that should have been monitoring him, and essentially because his vulnerability had been ignored in favour of his intelligence. When he left prison, he came to us.

And so it goes on.

He was at a loss to understand why he had been placed in a home with people who had learning disabilities. He was more or less polite about them, but he certainly wasn't one of them. And to prove this he showed me a fifty page book that he had written, addressed to social workers, pointing out their common errors and blindspots, offering them forgiveness in the form of a guidance that he rightly considered himself unusually qualified to offer. It was his intention to publish it and his expectation that he would live comfortably off the royalties forever.

True to his conflict, the book was very interesting, given that it had been written by a learning disabled service user, someone within the system and able to testify with the authority of direct and personal experience. But had it been written by a professional, it would not have been taken very seriously, and certainly would never have been published.

His only way of escaping diagnosis was to be seen within it.

It is interesting how often our conscious intention serves also its most feared outcome, presumably in service of the principle that we must experience what we specifically don't want ourselves to be, in order to invite the possibility of moving on from the static conflict of our fears and idealisations about who we actually are in this difficult world.

He felt humiliated by the existence of a staff team in his life, dismayed that he was not allowed to live independently, and affronted that his relationship with alcohol had been prohibited. It was a condition of his placement that he didn't get drunk, and his record suggested that he was unlikely to drink at all without getting mashed.

When Kevin has one too many it is usually several, and he becomes prone to aggression and abuse as he veers into an on-coming criminal conviction for being, at the very least, a thoroughly disrespectful and unpleasant pain in the arse.

The difficulty was that he needed alcohol. It held him together, and drowned out the rumble of his worst feelings, though of course also seducing them to the surface in that remarkably consistent alcohol-paradox.

However, he was clear that he could cope without alcohol, as he had done for the past months in prison, and that the only issue with which he had dispute was a profound dislike at being told what he could and could not do.

He only wanted to be able to have a couple of pints and a game of pool and, not being disabled like the others in the home, he couldn't understand why he was being restricted, controlled, when he was twenty one years old, had served his time in prison, and now just wanted to get on with his life. And anyway if he wanted to get drunk, it was his right and his risk.

I felt trapped.

"But if you get drunk, you will probably lose your placement here."

"I don't care. I don't want to be here. I want to live on my own."

I felt trapped.

"Why are you with us?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think you need to learn anything before you live on your own again?" *I hoped that by alluding to a process that suggested his independence I might gain a bit of trust.*

"No. Not really."

"Not really? Do you have a doubt?"

"No."

"You know everything now that you need to know?"

“No. But I’ll learn as I go along, same as other people.”

I felt trapped.

I knew that Kevin was not ready to live independently, but I couldn’t quite remember why. And the more confused I began to feel, the more imperative it seemed that he wilfully accept our help. It was absolute in my mind, despite otherwise feeling only self-doubt.

I noticed that I was leaning forward, and leant back. As my colleague spoke, I took the opportunity to deepen my awareness of Kevin.

The manner of his speech belied the definiteness of his words, his parting lips offering just enough time and space for the words to pop forth before the muscles sealed again, as airtight as his argument. Not a lot came out, but nothing much went in.

I noticed how stiff his body motility was, his joints straining against rusty hinges, his muscles abducting with the greatest reluctance, holding him in and holding him together. He was trapped. He was confused. And independence was imperative in his mind despite otherwise feeling only self-doubt.

“What if we look at this another way Kevin? The social services feel that you need the help of a residential support home, and maybe that’s not fair. And they have decided that you have a mild learning difficulty, and maybe that’s not fair either. But you are a clever and able guy, and if you spend some time showing everybody that you can be ok, that you can learn stuff, and that you can manage your alcohol, I can easily imagine you being given your own flat at some point soon. You could even look at this here as being like another prison sentence, but in a much nicer place.”

I had his attention.

“But I can look after myself now. I’ve learnt some lessons. And I would be alright, why cant I have my own flat for six months and prove it that way instead.”

“Because they wont let you. But if we are able to report that you are doing well, maybe you will be offered another chance.”

Colin, my colleague spoke:

“Anyway Kev, you cant cope on your own.”

“I can.” *I didn’t like this turn in the conversation, and felt a little annoyed at having my particular route hijacked.*

“How come you ended up in prison then Kev?” *Colin continued, and I leant back.* “I mean, whether or not you have a learning difficulty is one thing, but you are a vulnerable person. You should have been sent by the courts to someone like us, not to prison.”

“What would it have been like if you had one of us, say me or Russ, to support you with the police, the solicitor’s, with the courts. I bet it would have been easier, and less frightening, wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose so.”

“Well maybe that’s all you need us for, but you do need us for that kind of stuff.”

Colin had him gently trapped, in that he had offered him an understanding that both honoured his abilities whilst revealing his needs in a palatable form. Kevin signed up.

A week later, and the sun was burning colour from the grass. I suggested a three-a-side football match in the substantial back garden. With the reflexes of a tortoise and the turning circle of a bus, Kev was not a natural athlete; and I was impressed with how well he endured being far less able than his disabled housemates.

He laughed, apologised, teased, ran, wrestled, scored, and got a little colour and sweat on his mottled dry skin. He looked to be more or less at home, and I felt very satisfied.

A week later, and it was raining grey. Kevin brought me a cup of coffee and we sat in the conservatory talking, he explaining that he was doing well, that he was working hard, not causing any difficulties, happy to be in the home for the time being, and that he felt it was time that he be trusted with having those two pints and a game of pool. It was the only thing missing.

I foolishly relented and made a deal. Two pints and some pool, with a staff member accompanying.

Kevin got himself slaughtered, became aggressive and arrested for a disturbance of the peace, for being drunk and disorderly, for being at the very least a thoroughly disrespectful and unpleasant pain in the arse. He was very upset with himself.

Ashamed and anticipating his abandonment, Kevin turned to rage for guidance. Furniture and fittings were assaulted, staff and clients threatened, neighbours insulted in a whirlwind of panic. Calm came but never remained long.

He couldn’t hear me take responsibility for my contribution, couldn’t hear that his placement was not threatened, couldn’t hear that we liked him, wanted to help him. All he could hear was the twisted cacophonous tale of his life thus far.

He tried to abandon us, demanding from his care manager a private flat, implying that otherwise he would continue as he was, not realising of course that it was this kind of behaviour that inhibited the possibility of unsupported living. He was demanding something in a way that he knew undermined his case, and I felt sure that he was acting out his implicit wish to stay with us and his inability to acknowledge guilt without the expectation of terrible consequence.

My failure to be strong enough to resist his wishes in favour of containment had left him flailing. It was becoming apparent that Kevin needed absolutes, a sturdy wall to bang his fists against; or else he would end up needing a secure unit or a prison for just the same purpose. And he was heading rapidly for one of them.

I felt confident that we could calm him and get him back on track, but we needed his care manager to close a door before that could happen. If Kevin was categorically told that if he lost this placement with us he would not be going into a flat on his own, but more likely heading for somewhere more secure than where he already was, I was sure he would feel

more secure *as he was*. Bizarrely, and contrary to our discussions, the care manager offered to find him a flat.

If this offer was what Kevin needed, then he would calm down, not do anything to impinge upon the move that he so craved. And if it was not, then his behaviour would escalate.

When conflicts are experienced without being acted upon or acted into, the transformative potential of any person increases in parallel to the pressure felt; but when one side of the conflict is given easy satisfaction, the person is generally left immersed unknowingly in its other.

Kevin responded in largely the manner that I would have expected if we had abandoned him, rather than he us. He was not relieved, but livid and desperate..

No amount of explanation, protest, or reassurance seemed to impact. He was in a frenzy: he had to stay, that was clear by his reaction to being offered the chance to leave. Yet he clearly couldn't stay, because the implications were somehow too fearful. His conflict had gone nuclear, and nothing would appear to have a tempering effect at all. I had one more idea.

We wanted him to stay, he wanted to leave.
He wanted to stay really.

Where was the part of us that wanted him to leave? He was a bully, an aggressive manipulator, to a degree dangerous, and a thoroughly disrespectful and unpleasant pain in the arse. Staff were being totally occupied by him, and thus neglecting the needs of the other people in the house. And the once rather pleasant atmosphere was now heavy with anxiety and nervous expectation.

I arranged with the manager to visit the home again, and instructed her that I would do so with more formality. I would not spend any time with Kevin, just with her, though I wanted Kevin to know I was there. I was polite but distant from him, much as he was from his housemates.

Sitting with the manager in the conservatory, I occasionally caught glimpses of him sneaking a look at us through the window. He was wondering what we were talking about, assuming that it was about him. He looked insecure and frightened, which was exactly what I wanted, as it suggested that his wish to stay with us had been triggered. We talked for a couple of hours, and Kevin's window visits increased in frequency and duration.

This little rain-wet boy looking through the window as his parents discussed sending him away, his little face creased with yearning and confusion. He wanted us to want him.

Immediately following our meeting, the manager asked Kevin to come to the office. He was told that it was our belief that he would end up in prison if he lived alone in the community, and that we had decided, after long deliberation, that we wanted to carry on working with him. We didn't think Kevin was able to look after himself well on an emotional level, and that we wished it to be our task to support him towards developing enough maturity to make the move plausible.

I was hoping that his relief might ground him long enough in his wish to stay, for him to see a more realistic picture, and to sign up to a process. He was relieved, and anxious for

contact. He was a very small boy, and the fight seemed to have been sapped from him. I was certain that I would see him next time I visited.

The weightlessness crept upon me gradually. I was feeling clever, elevated. I had slid between the grinding volcanic plates and found myself a blind-spot within which to manipulate him and his conflict. It was a good day's work, and my body was effervescent, my mind sun bathing. I had a strange sense of peace, one which I should have taken as a warning.

That evening Kevin walked out of the home, and never returned.

I had a pint on my own the following night, thought about Kevin as I played pool against myself, and by the end of the evening had come to find what it was that drove him away when initially the strategy had seemed so successful. I had held his conflict fairly well, but had done so with manipulation. The lightness I felt was because I had gone above my station without acknowledging that I had done so. I was off the ground, dissociated from the moment, revelling, and not actually able to contain very much at all.

Kevin knew what manipulation felt like, and knew many of the worse places where it could end; and once he felt it, he had to escape. I knew it. I could see his panic, now that I looked, lurking under the skin of the relieved little boy. If I had seen it at the time, I don't think he would have run away from home.

Postscript:

Eight months later I was grabbing a fast coffee at a railway station, on the way to work, and in front of me I found Kevin, his teeth glossed in brown, and his countenance weary. He had just finished a 6 month stretch in prison, and was trying to get himself together again. We spoke for a while, which left me feeling exhausted, as weary as he, as if my flesh itself had abruptly gained weight. I knew that he was struggling.

I assumed that he was struggling to cope on his own, but he then told me, slightly sheepishly, that he had just moved into a new residential support home, and that it was actually ok. He was having a hard time, but with relationship rather than isolation.

I was aware, as I said goodbye and went on my way, that I had dishonoured his trauma by imagining for one moment that I could outwit it without Kevin himself having to pay the price; for relaxing into the serenity of my expectation and thus leaving him burdened by all the fear. And this is one of those many experiences that have taught me to be wary of nothing quite so much, when working intimately with other people, as my own confidence.