

The Naked Eye

All the Lonely People

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*It's nice to have a warm body
by your side—but at any cost?*

I just got off the phone with a friend of mine who's been debasing herself in an on-again, off-again relationship with a married man for more than a year. He's not even a nice married man, from what she tells me, but a certifiable son of a bitch who stands her up, insults her, lies to her face, and has other girlfriends on the side. She swears again and again that she'll stop seeing him, but when he calls she can't resist, and ends up miserable.

"Why do you keep doing this to yourself?" I ask when she calls with the latest horrible report. I'm boggled by her behavior; she's not the doormat type. If anything, my friend is a live wire ready to blast anyone who rubs her the wrong way. She's financially secure and successful as an artist, with a rich life full of friends, travel, hobbies. What's more, she doesn't even love this loser. How in the world, then, does she volunteer for such abuse?

Her answer isn't all that surprising. "I'm lonely," she says. "And sometimes he's tender."

This breaks my heart, not only for her but for all the lonely people I know. Maybe it's the '90s, or New York City, or AIDS, or the divorce epidemic, or the lack of community, or the fallout of the sexual revolution, or selfishness, or cynicism, or Mars and Venus in permanent retrograde, but the number of outstanding, eligible single people I know has reached an all-time high. Ranging in age from 40 to 70, male and female, straight, gay, and otherwise, they have nothing in common but their loneliness and the

inability to meet a decent partner, no matter how hard they try.

Take my cousin Fran. When she lost her husband of 40 years, Fran was on the prowl within a month, to the consternation of sentimental relatives. "He's barely cold in the grave," they whispered, "and already she's out at Hadassah mixers." When they asked Fran what her hurry was, she said she had too



much love to give to live alone. This was true, but she was also afraid to be lonely, and the thought of moving into deep senescence without a partner was unthinkable.

Unfortunately, the world had changed since Fran was a vixen in Poland, and trying to fill the widow's gap was surprisingly hard. After her first few weeks of dating, we talked. "Where do you meet a whole man these days?" she asked me, as if I knew. I thought Fran was referring to psychology, but she wasn't. "If the legs work, the eyes don't work. If the eyes work, the penis doesn't work. I don't want to be a nurse." After a year, she got

lucky(ish) and met someone with working parts who shared her lefty politics and was willing to live under the same roof. The trouble was that he was 70 going on 15 and made her life extremely unhappy. Still, she said, she wasn't alone—meaning he was better than nothing. This reminded me of my mother's response when I asked her how she'd managed to cohabit for 20 years with a boyfriend she couldn't stand: "There's someone else breathing in the house."

This sounds pathetic and extreme, but at the end of the day I suspect that lots of us value this in our relationships, however successful they may be. There's someone else to cook for, to have morning coffee with, to share the toothpaste. The bottom line is: We're not alone. Another person's presence may have more to do with survival than with love, but on Sundays, holidays, sick days, or long wintry afternoons, an oxygenated body is nothing to sneeze at. My-friend-the-mistress reminds me of this when I have marital problems and fantasize about single life. "There's someone next to you in bed—don't be greedy." Of course, it's possible to be lonely inside a terrible marriage, and I'm not advocating companionship at any cost. But watching my single friends struggle through the match game and come up empty-handed year after year does make me feel lucky.

In spite of their failures, they keep on trying against the odds, heroically throwing themselves
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again and again into the mix, hoping to bring home a winner. From the safety of my marital perch, I watch them get knocked down, dust themselves off, and move on to the next match, like athletes in a complex, brutal game (or kamikaze pilots), taking courage between their teeth, driven by an unstoppable need.

My closest guy friend, Robert, is the Schwarzenegger of dating, a veritable warrior of one-night stands and cocktail patter, come-ons pursued and flat-out rejections. There's no reason in the world that Robert, who longs for a relationship more than anything, should have such rotten luck—he's tall, handsome, cultured, and adventurous, with the physique, at 46, of a college swimmer—yet nothing seems to do the trick. I'm awed by Robert's willingness to keep up the good fight, but he's a diehard optimist. "What's the alternative?" he asks.

"Saltpeter," I say.

"It's not just sex," Robert reminds me, although he is voracious. "It's tenderness." That word again. "I want to share my life with someone."

I understand that Robert is lonely, however many dates he has, however many intimate friends, but in his place I think I'd give up. I'm cowardly at courtship; I have no stomach for rejection, competition, or uncertainty—the very prerequisites for seeking out a lover. I don't know what it means to be casual, especially when sex is involved, which is why I'm a jumpy dater. Needy, possessive, grotesquely insecure, I'm pushing for a commitment by the end of the second date. Courtship requires a gut of steel and the patience of a big-game hunter, which is why every relationship I've been in has been long-term and established almost immediately. While these past relationships have been far from healthy, I've been lucky at least to *have* them, serially, since I was 18.

Still, if I were ever single again, I wouldn't have Robert's guts; I'd

probably close up shop and play like a monk, no matter how lonely I was. I made the decision years ago that I'd rather be alone in middle age than spend my prime years craving love. Observing people over 40 lusting after babes or bruisers, I'd think, Please God, save me from that humiliation. (This is no reflection on Robert at all—he carries off his pursuits with great style—but for a leadfoot like me, his lifestyle would be disastrous.) Pursuing love is the business of the young, I thought, correctly or not, and more than anything I wanted

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to age gracefully. This meant that if providence didn't grant me a partner in middle age, I'd sublimate my romantic and sexual needs to the quieter passions: God, art, Barbara Walters. I'd be celibate rather than tormented by the manic craving that used to obsess me in single times, and could easily obsess me again. I would not be ruled by loneliness; I'd learn what it had to teach about compassion, impermanence, solitude, and seek other avenues of love.

Like Florence does. While beautiful, Florence isn't young; rather than spend her tremendous *joie de vivre* on men unworthy of her time, she prefers her solitude. After her divorce 15 years ago, and a string of affairs with much younger men who satisfied her just so far, Florence decided to let her loneliness

be. Though she speaks now and then in an offhand, wouldn't-it-be-nice sort of way about meeting a man, she doesn't allow the hunger to possess her. She also has no illusions about love. "Men don't look at me the way they used to," she admits without self-pity. She's learned to adapt, not in a resigned way but with humor and panache. She puts her passion into her work as a therapist, and her loneliness into her spiritual practice. The romantic longing she felt violently when young has shifted to a longing for the Divine, where she now finds true reward.

That's how I'd like to be, if life took my lover away. But would I retreat that wisely, or would my dignified plans collapse with the first whiff of loneliness? Would pride disappear and send me out to pound the pavement, surf the Net, rummage through the personal ads, hire matchmakers, compelled to meet someone—anyone—rather than be alone? Hounded by the prospect of a solitary future, would I sacrifice my peace of mind for companionship at any price, even if it meant half-honest liaisons, subterfuge, and spending time with other people's lovers? I'd like to think not, but who wouldn't? Certainly my-friend-the-mistress ~~never~~ intended to be where she is. ~~But~~ you just never know.

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