

## LONELY MAN #1,273

When you live in a crowded city, all it takes is an accidental bump of an arm or an elbow on the sidewalk.

"Hey there, young man, you should be more careful. It's pretty clear that you don't know who I am."

I don't know why I stopped, but I did and turned around. The voice had come from a man in a blue suit that had seen better decades. He also wore a patterned tie straight from a vintage clothing sale. I had ties like that, but I didn't recognize the man. "You're right. I haven't the slightest idea who you are."

"Well let me tell you then," he said. "I'm lonely man #1,273."

"Sorry, but I have no clue what that means." I made to go back on my way. I was thinking about eating some sweet potato fries at a café near my apartment. They were particularly delicious on cool evenings like this one, when you could sit at one of the sidewalk tables and take your time over them.

"Why not? Haven't you ever been lonely?"

"Of course," I said, slightly irritated at the interruption of the thought of my sweet potato fries. "Loneliness is part of the human condition."

He was non-plussed at my dismissive tone and continued talking. Couldn't this guy get the hint anyway? "Yes, but what a contradiction in a city like this!" he said, waving a hand around his head. "Haven't you ever thought to yourself, 'How can people be lonely when they're surrounded by so many other people?'"

"Not really," I replied, "but to answer your question, it does take a bit of interaction if you want to get rid of your loneliness."

"So you're not lonely are you?"

"Not at all," I said.

"That's the thing," he said, shaking his head. "I'm talking to you right now and I feel as lonely as ever. That's what makes me a lonely man."

“That’s too bad, but honestly, I don’t see what I can do about it.”

“Why don’t you buy me a drink and I can go in to more detail?”

This guy was too much. “No way,” I said. “I’m really not in the mood for conversation.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing, it’s been a long day and talking to people, especially people you don’t know, takes effort. I know what I said before about talking to people, and I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t see what I’ll get out of it.”

“That’s easy enough,” he said with a smile, rocking back on his heels and tilting his head as if he was going to lift his grin to the sky, “ I can prevent you from being lonely man #1,274. It can happen quite suddenly, you know, and you seem like a nice fellow and I’d feel a bit sorry for you if that were to occur. So really, we’d each be doing the other a favor.”

I didn’t know how to get rid of him, and as it happened, a light rain began to fall, sending people ducking indoors. The thought of my café with the sweet potato fries returned to my head, though a sidewalk table was probably out of the question now. So there wasn’t much choice. I led the old man for a few blocks until we came to the café. We had to avoid people hurrying to stay dry, and I was jostled a number of times, even though I tried staying out of people’s way. Damn, the city really was feeling more crowded than ever. The old man kept up fairly easily, though he walked a few paces behind me, and I caught glimpses of his reflection in the large glass shop windows we passed.

The café was a decent place with chairs along the front window, waiters who didn’t bother you too much, and exposed brick that made you feel like you were sitting in some café from 40 years ago. The prices had gone up recently, driving some of the regular customers away. That was business, and new arrivals to the neighborhood quickly took the place of those who had taken their money elsewhere. The café was filled more than usual today, maybe because of the rain, and we had some difficulty finding seats at the inside bar.

“I suppose you’ve met other lonely people?” I asked, after I had ordered a plate of sweet potato fries for myself and after we had poured ourselves our beers. I paid the bill upfront to make it clear to him that this was a one-drink deal.

"Naturally, that's how I know I'm number 1,273."

"Didn't they have any advice for you?"

"Oh yes, but a man could spend all day listening to people just talk and talk without getting anywhere."

"Then what are you and I doing here?"

"Sharing a good drink."

I was going to point out the inconsistency in what he was saying, but my sweet potato fries arrived at that moment and I busied myself folding a napkin onto my lap and picking through the various condiments laid out on the bar in front of us.

"So what do you do all day then?" I asked as I munched.

"Nothing special. Mostly I write and re-write my autobiography."

"What do you say about yourself?"

"Oh, this and that. The things I've done, the things I've wanted to do."

"Does it really change that much from day to day?"

"Constantly. I find that I have an enormous amount of creativity. Insatiable almost. Being lonely man #1,273 has its advantage in that way. I just re-create myself and write it down."

"Someone once told me that dying and writing are the same because you have to do both alone."

The old man didn't respond. I guess there are times when it's best to say nothing. I acted like I was thinking and concentrated on chewing. I had long ago found this to be a useful cover when I didn't have anything to say.

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I was glad to get home to my apartment that evening. I called my friend Lila. She was a girl I had met a year ago. We had dated on and off for a

few months. She was seeing someone else now, a guy who ran in the same party crowd that I had been in once.

"Did you know that there are at least 1,273 lonely people living here?" I asked her.

"In a city of 1.3 million, that number seems awfully low," she said. "I'd expect that's just a small fraction of the actual number."

"Hmm, yeah. I suppose so."

"Does that depress you?" she asked.

"No."

"You sound a bit depressed."

Maybe I was bothered by the day's events, but I didn't feel like letting her know. "Not at all. Hey, I've been listening to a new record by a guy from Nashville that I think you would like. Josh Rouse. He's really quite good. I have a copy I can give you. Why don't we get together soon so you can hear it?"

"Sure," she said. "Why don't you give me a call again? Maybe next week?"

It was Monday, and I wasn't sure if next week meant next Monday or next Friday or what, but I didn't let on.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, sorry. Okay, that sounds good. Next week then."

I hung up the phone and walked over to the balcony doors. I opened the doors, which swung and creaked back and forth, and I sat there on my small balcony late into the night, feeling the breeze and listening to the voices carried up from the crowded city below.