THE LONELINESS ZONE

I COME FROM A LONG LINE of lonely men. Some of these men knew they were lonely, admitted as much in heartfelt letters to loved ones. Others may have known but never gave it much thought or, if pressed, used a different word or denied outright that they had ever been lonely in any serious or lasting way. One man in the long line of lonely men I come from used his loneliness as a kind of torniquet to check the flow of other painful emotions until the torniquet worked so well that his loneliness killed him. I truly believe this man believed a loner life would save him. It's quite possible he confused his loneliness with the artful practice of being alone.

Lonely people are everywhere, navigating their chronic (for some transient) loneliness as they go about their lives in a world both familiar and frightfully strange. Behind the condition is a perception, a disconnect between preferred and actual experiences of social connection. Half of U.S. adults report feeling this disconnect, with some of the highest rates among young adults, young men in particular. None of this is static or necessarily permanent. Loneliness flows in and out, or rather we flow back and forth on a loneliness continuum as amounts and qualities of social interaction change over time. In small doses loneliness can be good for us. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, fleeting loneliness or brief stretches of solitude can help us "manage social demands" and motivate movement toward social reconnection. Chronic loneliness, however, is seriously debilitating and can be deadly, among adult men especially. The

probability of dying by suicide more than doubles for middle-aged men who live alone.

Not just a feeling or "subjective internal state," loneliness structures experience and regulates lifetimes through a shared system of signs and values. In flux and ever dynamic, loneliness spreads like a virus, affecting bodies, minds, and cultures trapped in what can only be described as a loneliness ecosystem. Occupying the imagination with depth and contour (what a lonely place), loneliness stimulates the economy, and a fair number of us trade in a specialized loneliness currency. It's not always clear what's for sale and to what end, so lonely people are not just exploitable but vulnerable. For those living on the far end of the loneliness spectrum, loneliness may feel like a refuge, for others a prison. For some, including the long line of lonely men I come from, the refuge and the prison may feel like the same thing.

Much of this comes straight from the Surgeon General's 2023 *Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.* But I'm also drawing inspiration from another dimension, one as vast as space, as timeless as infinity. Season one, episode one of *The Twilight Zone* (first aired October 2, 1957) offers what no government advisory ever could: a loneliness paradigm situated somewhere between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge, all in the space of twenty-five mind-bending minutes. The show opens with a man—young, white, physically fit, nameless—walking alone down a dusty gravel road. *The place is here, the time is now*, but the man has no idea where he is or how he got there. The empty roadside café he steps into—juke box blaring, coffee steaming—offers no ready answers. His voice empties into the void when he cries out, "Hey, you got a customer out here!" A hungry "cash customer," he goes on to say, and viewers watching "Where Is Everybody?" today might be surprised by the boldness with which, hearing no response, the man leaps over the counter

and helps himself to a cup of coffee. "I'm not sure who I am," he confesses to no one, "but I've got two dollars and eighty-five cents and I'm hungry. That much is established."

It's all a bad dream, of course (spoiling it here), a delusion playing out at the tail end of a space-age isolation experiment pushed to the extreme. In the episode's real world the man is Sergeant Mike Ferris, astronaut in training, and the smalltown setting he's conjured after nearly three weeks alone inside a box not much bigger than a phone booth is many things—clean, bright, quaint, resource rich—but it drives him crazy in the end because, in his own words, it's a world "without people, without anybody." Despite his breakdown, or maybe because of it, the experiment proves a success, confirming what the military brass in the room (an air force hangar) must have known all along. "You see, Ferris," the commanding officer explains (to us and his exhausted subject, now strapped to a gurney), "there's one thing we can't simulate. That's a pretty basic need—man's hunger for companionship. The barrier of loneliness. That's one thing we haven't licked yet."

On the level of data collection, "Where Is Everybody?" and the Surgeon General's *Advisory* have a few things in common. Both establish, for example, that the loneliness conundrum cannot be solved with "simulations," even high-tech, post-Internet simulations that take need gratification and the pretense of "social connection" to a whole new level. Both make clear, as well, that loneliness frustrates and fiddles with some basic laws of human behavior, making it difficult for the desperately lonely to know where to go, what to do, and who to believe. This is especially true for the solitary white man with money to spend and a raging hunger he can't quite satisfy. For him and other men in a long line of lonely men, loneliness really is a psychological barrier, something we haven't quite licked yet. Or as Rod Serling puts in the first of his many closing glosses: "Up there is an enemy known as isolation. It sits there in the stars waiting, waiting with

the patience of eons, forever waiting…." Waiting for what, I have no idea, but the show ends, as all episodes will, in the realm of mystery, straddling the line between science and superstition. This is, after all, the dimension of imagination. An area we may want to call *the loneliness zone*.

Like Sergeant Ferris, I'm all alone as I write this. But writing alone is not necessarily a lonely place to be. Creative work may be a "child of solitude" (Goethe), but it grows into adulthood in the presence of helpful others, including other writers and writings. It helps, too, that my alone time this week is not long-term but temporary, by design, as my fellow traveler travels west to spend time with family while I stay home to work the job, water plants, feed our lonely cat, and tend daily to our eight new backyard chickens. The ten of us—cat, chickens, and I—are very much connected in our little community, thanks in large part to relationships built and maintained over time. As the Surgeon General notes, however, this sense of communal bonding is shaped not just by interpersonal dynamics but by "social infrastructure," namely the policies, programs, and physical assets in place to help nurture our healthy connections. Back in the Zone, Mike Ferris loses his long-suffering mind because, for all its readily available material abundance, the dream town he's invented lacks the human assets he most desperately needs.

I can't help but feel for the guy—meaning I understand my role as a viewer is to feel his feelings, to walk in his shoes as he wanders the empty streets with no one to talk to, not even a stray cat to help pass the time. Strangely enough my anxiety also manifests as a kind of envy or longing, and that worries me too as day turns to night and a hazy twilight deepens. Behind ambient feelings of loneliness—or worry, longing, envy for that matter—is an unruly archetype reinforcing the disconnect between *preferred* and *actual*. Writers writing about loneliness these days (some in response to the widely publicized advisory) refer to this type in any number of ways, but at heart is the

oft-mythologized loner sensibility central to the "tall tale," as journalist Ted Anthony phrases it, of American-style rugged individualism. Riding the trails and roaming the dusty backroads of a much different kind of social infrastructure, these men "suck it up, do what needs to be done, ride off into the sunset and like it that way."

Importantly, the male lead in this tall tale never bumps up against the loneliness barrier. Distressing to him is not a perceived lack of social connection but social connection itself—or more precisely (if you watch him closely) any threat of encroachment, confinement, or foreclosure in an otherwise open field of unfettered, self-guided action. This quasi-fictional man, who pretty much defines the long line of lonely men I come from, lives for his solitude and rarely admits to feeling lonely. If he does fess up he may require special "conditions," as one study of global loneliness trends suggests, to speak freely about his loneliness. In the real world, unfortunately, all this self-isolation has the net effect of pulling the rug out from under rugged individuals. The same study found that young men growing up in individualistic cultures are especially vulnerable, experiencing not just more frequent but "more intense and longer lasting" bouts of loneliness.

So feeling sorry for the man is understandable, but how do I reconcile the envy? Ted Anthony places some of the blame on a "built-in loneliness gene" that prefigures a male-dominated national storyline "filled with loners." Not all Americans carry this dubious DNA since many younger voices, notably women and people of color, are changing the narrative with fresh alternatives to the old myths. Indeed, disaggregating the "built-in" along lines of age, race, and gender makes good sense because if there is a loneliness gene—or bug, trait, predilection—it tends to present in those most acculturated to it, whose self-perception, itself a kind of cultural mutation, seems to require it.

I know in my own case the mutation runs deep. Growing up

I was taught to appreciate (at times *prefer*) my alone time and to respect the right of others, older male others especially, to do the same. There's nothing wrong with spending quality time alone (much to be gained, according to the research), but lately I've been wondering if a homespun rhetoric of elective solitude served as cover for something else going on inside. My only support for this claim, beyond the ample evidence summarized in the Surgeon General's report, is the force of an inherited dichotomy pitting one canned identity against another. Lonely men, I was led to believe, are weak, timid, pathological. Men who embrace solitude (and like it that way) are strong, stable, the stuff of legend. One inspires pity, the other envy. As a boy I always understood where to draw the line.

All of which helps explain why the glorified loner type just won't go away. The image on offer is too appealing, the world he inhabits too enticing. Consider, for example, the imaginary loneliness zone into which Mike Ferris drops his troubled, teetering psyche. It won't be long (in TV time) before an overpowering panic sets in, but in the episode's opening moments he walks and talks with the cool self-assurance of one who knows what he wants and where he belongs. This is a late-fifties Hollywood dreamscape, after all, and what Ferris sees when he ventures into town—what we see as the camera pans left across a sanitized mockup of mid-century middle America (shot at Universal Studios)—brings a smile to his face as he basks in the hometown familiar. There's a hardware store, grocery, movie theater, bookstore, bakery. Church bells ring in the distance. In one funny scene he debates his own mirrored reflection while devouring an ice cream sundae. All told, the fantasy backdrop he constructs to help navigate his internal suffering provides everything he could possibly need.

With one crucial exception, and that missing piece is not to be taken lightly because all the ice cream in the world can't satisfy the lonely man's hunger for human connection. Absent a

living foil, his loneliness crisis defaults to a much deeper identity crisis. He needs to know who he is and where he stands, but a town without people is a town without edges, without interplay, without sounding. What good is his voice—at turns anxious, pleading, bitter, scared, sad, sarcastic, incredulous, critical—if there's no one around to listen? He could walk for miles without running into anyone, and, equally terrifying, no one would ever run into him. That friendly *bump* into a responsive, sympathetic other is what he really craves. Not just hot breakfast but someone behind the counter to cook and serve it. Not just cash on hand but a helping hand to reach out and take it. Denied this accommodating other, he confronts his own frazzled reflection and finds it lacking, pathetic, not quite so heroic.

In today's male loneliness zone, surface amenities may look different, but the underlying appetites remain the same. It's as if they don't know "how to *be*," columnist Christina Emba writes for *The Washington Post*, drawing on recent loneliness data but also tapping into the "general mood" of a post-Trump male identity crisis. Spawned in the laboratory of chronic worry and resentment, the mood creeps like a low-hanging fog down Main Street, USA, clogging up social infrastructures and spoiling the latest mental health statistics. Demoralized and adrift, "cut loose from a stable identity as patriarchs deserving of respect," men find themselves "lonely, depressed, anxious and directionless," clinging to a version of the tall tale in which the world "is meant to be under their control." For conservatives looking to capitalize on the gap between preferred and actual (Jordan Peterson, Josh Hawley, among others), the best way to lick this male identity problem is to retrofit the broken patriarch and bolster his illusion of control. Rightwing visions of masculinity may differ in the details, but central to the sales pitch, Emba writes, is the "impossible suggestion" that men "reenact the lives their grandfathers led, followed by encouragement to blame society when that inevitably fails."

And fail it will, miserably, when the man ends up lonely and adrift on the streets of Ferristown, night falling on abandoned storefronts as he waits for someone—anyone—to heed his desperate call. Before failure and blame, however, is the power of suggestion, impossible though it may be. That power can only deepen the misery because under its influence delusion overwhelms clear-eyed perception, becomes full-blown hallucination. White manhood in particular may be on a "suicide mission," locked into "cycles of fear and violence," as Ijeoma Oluo writes in *Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America*, but a considerable number of lonely white men still sign up for this mission impossible, convinced there is only one way for them to *be*. Everything about the advertised reenactment is false, contrived, hyper-simulated, but the mood and madness—and the fear and violence—persist all the same. No child of heroic solitude can escape the zone's creeping fog.

The problem for me, of course, is that I too am that child, so who's to say I'm not prone to the same delusion? How can I know what's going on outside the box (from a viewer's perspective, as it were) if I'm still trapped inside it? Riddles of this kind don't trouble the likes of Hawley and Peterson, for whom the twilight sensibility of white male America is nothing but a trick of light and shadow, a figment hovering somewhere between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. The place is here, the time is now, but directionless men willing to follow their directions will find refuge back then and there, in a revamped manosphere. As this strained logic demonstrates, life in the box often produces a number of unfortunate side effects: cognitive dissonance, perceptual parallax, rhetorical caginess—the list goes on, suspended in the funhouse mirror.

As it turns out, much of the important action happens inside the mirror, which functions sometimes like a window, sometimes like a screen. Men watching themselves watching other men also watching themselves step into the loneliness

zone already primed for some wicked dizziness. Even those of us actively searching for a way out may find ourselves bumping headlong into a twisted version of ourselves as we head with abandon for the mirror-shaped door. Given all the reaction and refraction, few enter the conversation prepared to articulate a more practical and "positive" (i.e., less regressive) vision. To the contrary, much recent writing on the male identity crisis "ends at the diagnosis stage," as Christine Emba points out toward the end of her own thorough diagnosis. Women writers in particular, busy enough contending with the history and currency of twisted masculinity, are understandably reluctant to spend their alone time "worrying about men." Mapping the paradigm is one thing, prognosis and treatment another.

For the benighted figure known as Mike Ferris, that post-diagnostic work has already been done—or will be, I presume, in future installments of the Zone. You see, there's a pretty basic need, and that's all he really needs. "Up there" in the stars, beyond our earthly simulations, is an enemy known as isolation, and getting to know that enemy—how he ticks, where it hurts, what his weaknesses are—is the first step, down here, in breaking through the dreaded barrier. But lonely people are everywhere, lonely men in the highest numbers, and the hurt they feel, for whatever reasons, does considerable damage to them and those around them. For all my talk of the funhouse and its glaring side effects, there's nothing funny at all about the lived experience of loneliness, whose first condition is the unshakable feeling that something basic is, and maybe always has been, missing.

I'm getting that feeling now, in fact, as I reach the final stages of this little experiment. So after feeding the cat and putting the chickens to bed, I settle in for another pass through "Where Is Everybody?" to see if I can spot what I missed the first time around. The show opens, once again, with a man young enough to be my grandfather walking nowhere and talking to no one, but the biggest problem he faces is not a town without people

but the radical emptiness substituting for his sense of self. "There seems to be some question about my identity," he says, and the question cuts like a knife because the world of his dreams, for all its ubiquitous whitewashed splendor, responds to his anxious pleading with a stony silence. Panic sets in when he realizes, as if for the first time, that the life he's now living (in his head) is nothing but a shadowy replica of the life he (thought he) once had. Staring down his own beleaguered reflection, he blames himself for this predicament in the absence of some suitable other to blame. He pesters, belittles, and ridicules himself. Tries and fails to be clever and outwit himself. Not a soul to talk to but plenty to say, evidently, as he aggresses and acquiesces from both sides of the funhouse mirror. Here's where the man with no discernible identity starts losing his twilit mind. "I'll tell you what my problem is," he tells himself. "I'm in the middle of a nightmare I can't wake up from. And you're part of it." You with the shaky demeanor and terrified look in your eyes. You who even you refer to as "suspicious" when, wandering into the town's vacant police station, you narrowly escape locking yourself up in jail.

He's running away from it all—tripping over himself, actually—when the last mirror he encounters breaks on impact into a thousand tiny pieces, a startling moment that marks the beginning of the end of this agonizing episode. In most any classic Hollywood western, the hero at this point gets up, sucks it up, tips his hat to an admiring public, and rides off into a bloodred sunset. To do otherwise would shatter the myth and violate every rule in the tall tale playbook. In this particular loneliness zone, however, the storyline flips when the town he rides into won't let him go, when it swallows him whole.

"Somebody help me!" he cries, sprawled on the ground, and sure enough help is on the way, but not the kind of help he may want to imagine. To viewers on the outside the man's a nervous wreck, a mess of twisted fragments, wallowing in the aftermath of

a misinformed, misguided adventure. But here on the inside one parting thought comes to mind: What a relief to be rid, finally, of that unruly reflection. In this state of irredeemable fracture, he may even catch a glimpse of what life is like beyond the barrier.