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THE LONELINESS CAFÉ

by

Richard Dokey

The store was open until ten. A small café was tucked into one corner. As long as he purchased something, the security guard, whose name was Gus, let him stay as long as he liked.

He pushed a cart up and down the aisles. He looked at the brightly labeled cans, bags, cartons, and bottles. There were so many things. He bought only the same things. A loaf of high fiber, multi-grain bread. A quart of non-fat milk. Toilet tissue. Cat food. Bananas. Sometimes, because he wanted to, he bought a tub of ice cream or a package of Hydrox cookies or a few candy bars. He gave these things away.

Old people were in the aisles. They pushed their carts, deciding about what they had already decided.

He enjoyed sitting in the café sipping a decaf and nibbling a Danish. The light was good. He watched the people. They were all there for the same reason. He was careful not to be too judgmental, but they made him believe he was a patient in a waiting room. Sometimes he was more objective and removed himself like a book from a shelf. He had many books at home and spent hours each
day reading. History. Psychology. Literature. Philosophy. He underlined the books and made notes in the margins.

He had just set the cup of decaf down with the warmed Danish on a white, porcelain plate when a voice behind him said, “Well, hello there again.”

He turned.

An elderly woman in a soft blue dress stood beside a silver shopping cart. A white cotton sweater was pulled across her shoulders. She was carefully, but tastefully, made up. Her lip gloss was so pale that he thought her lips must be naturally bright. Her eyes were blue, as blue as a morning sky, and her face, though lined, was not hidden by rouge or powder. She was elegant, if a bit out of date.

“Hello,” he said. He stood up.

“I noticed you the first time I was here,” she said. “You were so nicely dressed.” She extended her hand. “My name is Juliet. Juliet Ames. Please call me Julie.”

“I’m Fred Stanley. Would you care for a cup of coffee?”

“If it’s decaf. I can’t drink regular coffee past noon. It keeps me awake.”

“It’s decaf,” he said.

“I would be delighted to have a cup of coffee, then. Thank you.” She sat down. He went to the counter and filled a porcelain cup. When he returned, she said, “Fred. That’s Frederick, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said. “But please call me Fred.”

“Frederick is such a lovely name. That was Chopin’s name. Imagine calling Frederick Chopin Fred Chopin.” She laughed, in a pleasing, puffy way. “May I call you Frederick, then?”

“Of course,” he said.
“He was so young when he died,” she said.
“Yes, he was.”
“Thirty-nine, I believe. Isn’t that awful?”
“I suppose it is,” he said.
“But think of what he accomplished. More than the rest of us who live to be a hundred.” She wet her lips with the coffee. “Think of that music. All that lovely music.”

He thought about it, but it didn’t make any difference.
“I’ve just come into the neighborhood,” she said. “My children found me a nice cottage in a place called Connor Woods by the park. Do you know it?”
“Yes,” he said. “That’s very nice.”
“I don’t much like restaurant coffee, do you?”
“It’s all right in a pinch, I suppose.”
“Yes, that’s so. I make a full pot every morning, though I only drink two cups or so. It’s the only way I can make coffee. My Arthur was a great coffee drinker. It’s wasteful, but I can’t stand those coffee crystals. Can you?”
“No,” he said.

He looked past her. He saw people he recognized; the old man, for example, in the brown jacket, the same brown jacket the old man always wore. A felt hat, one that someone might wear in a James Cagney black and white movie, was crushed upon his head. The old man shuffled, picking things from the shelves, reading the labels, putting things back. A pair of drugstore glasses sat perched on the tip of his nose. There was that woman again with the heavy gray coat down to her ankles and the paisley scarf cinched against
gray, wiry hair. She stopped, looked, rolled the cart a bit, stopped. The cart was empty.

He looked at the woman named Juliet. She was charming. She was not like Ellen at all, and he would never have picked her out of a crowd. But she was pleasant. It was very pleasant sitting there in the clean light of the café sipping coffee and listening to her talk.

“My mother named me Juliet,” the woman said, “because her sister was named Juliet, though everybody called her Jutat. Well, Jutat’s husband Bill died, and she lived on in that big house by herself. Then her arthritis got so bad that her children moved her into one of those assisted living places. She didn’t want to go there, of course. Bill was in the old house with all the furniture and the pictures and the lawn and the flowers out back that he took such good care of. She said sometimes it was as though he still might come in to wash up for lunch. It seemed that way to Aunt Jutat anyway. I never felt like that when Arthur died.”

He swallowed and blinked his eyes.

“Well, perhaps later, then?” he offered.

“You mean heaven or something?”

“Something,” he said.

“I don’t know about it,” she said. “I just know when something’s over in this world, it’s over. It’s sad but comforting in a way, too, don’t you think? Even if your name is Chopin?”

He tried to pull a book from the shelves. He tried to find something he had underlined. Everyone was equal. Everyone vanished. That was fair, it seemed, yet maybe it wasn’t. How could you live without hope?
“They set her up—my Aunt Jutat—at the assisted living. They put the old furniture the same way with all the pictures and things, and that was better than a nursing home, with one little room, noise in the hallway and a patio the size of a bath. Then she met Victor, a retired Presbyterian minister, who lived there too. They visited together. They went for walks and ate together and watched television together. It was so nice. Victor helped her fasten her brassiere because she couldn’t reach around any more. When Victor died, she sat in that room with all those things from the old house. That’s when, she said, Uncle Bill truly was gone. It was a museum, she said, and she was the caretaker.”

She looked at the aisles, which gave off a technicolor of choice.

“When Aunt Jutat died, my daughter Alison and her family came up from Southern California for the funeral. Alison wore a tight-fitting black dress cut above the knee, and I said, ‘Alison, do you think that kind of thing is appropriate?’ and Alison said, ‘Mom, Jutat loved it when I wore things like this.’ Looking back, I can see that was really sweet—I mean, really touching. Jutat always did enjoy young people and young things. She never had a bad word about anybody or anything. That was Aunt Jutat.” She laughed. “Listen to me. On and on.”

“That’s fine,” he smiled. “I like listening to you talk.”

She blushed. It was pleasant seeing the color fill the lines of her face.

“Would you care for a refill?” he asked.

“Yes. Please.”

He walked to the coffee urn.
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When he returned, she said, “Everyone these days has one of those cell things. They carry them everywhere, chattering away like magpies, in stores and on the street and anywhere. I imagine it's convenient, but I don’t have one. Do you?”

“No,” he said. “I never did.”

“People just chattering away.”

“It isn’t talking,” he said.

She smiled and bent forward.

“Isn’t that so?” she said. “If someone wants to talk to you, they should come see you. They should sit down in a chair so you can look at them and watch their faces. See that woman over there by the cereal?”

“Yes,” he said.

“She was in here the first time I came in. She’s wearing the very same thing she was wearing then, the same dress and the same shawl and those flat-heeled shoes. It’s no bother to take a little time to look nice. I wanted to say hello, but she wouldn’t look at me. I don’t think she even saw me.”

“Perhaps she did,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“She sees you, but she doesn’t want you to see that she sees you. She’s embarrassed. Everybody here this time of night is embarrassed. There’s no place else. Nobody’s home. The light is here. People are here. Everything is on the shelves. You take the faces of the people and the few things you buy home with you. You feel a little better when you go to bed.”

He hesitated, confused.
“Frederick,” she said, “would you care to come to dinner some evening?”

He looked at her kind old face. “I would like that very much.”

“I do so love to cook, but now I don’t get a chance. I can waste a pot of coffee, but I just can’t waste good food. There’s no point in cooking a nice dinner with all the trimmings, and it’s just me. Would Saturday night be all right? Say, around six?”

“That would be fine,” he said.

She gave him her address. They exchanged telephone numbers.

“I’ll have to pick up a few more things, then,” she said. “After I finish this cup of coffee, that is.”

“Would you like me to bring anything?” he asked.

“Just yourself. I’ll have everything else.”

“Not even wine, perhaps?”

“Well, wine, then,” she said. “That would be nice.”

“White or red?”

“A nice zinfandel, I think. You pick it.”

“All right,” he said, “Julie.” It was odd saying her name.

“Well, all right then, Frederick.”

She raised her cup, looking at him over the rim.

Later, he bought an old vine zinfandel from Black Rock Winery in Napa. He set the bottle on the table near the front door of the house. It was not the same house in which Ellen and he had lived. That house was too large. Memories lurked in the corners and shadows. He purchased this tiny three-bedroom place in an older, quieter neighborhood. He used one bedroom for a study, another for the children when they visited and the other for sleep. He often
Inscape

slept, though, on the sofa in the living room, where he could open the curtains and watch the garden in the moonlight.

He arrived at her place precisely at six. An iron gate opened into a courtyard. Cottages were around the courtyard. Unmarked roads led through a grove of large oak trees to other cottages. A man in olive coveralls mowed a patch of lawn. Another man bent into a flower bed. He found her cottage and touched the door bell.

He was pleasantly surprised. She wore a pale organdy dress, close above the waist, but soft and full below the hips. A single red rose was fastened at her left shoulder. He held the bottle of wine in a brown paper bag.

“Hello, Frederick,” she said. “Do come in.”

It was a very pleasant place, spotlessly clean and larger than he had expected. To his right a flowered print sofa flanked by two cushioned, matching chairs faced a screened hearth upon which a small fire burned. The room smelled pleasantly of burning wood and the white scented candle upon the dining room table to his left. The table was tastefully set and reminded him of a picture he had seen in a magazine.

“Would you like a drink?” she asked.

“Yes, very much,” he said.

“Scotch, I’ll bet.”

“Scotch it is.”

She laughed. “Go in and sit down. I’ll be right with you.”

He handed her the wine.

It was even more pleasant in the living room. He tried to decide where to sit. He picked the chair to the right of the sofa.
Photographs of young people and children were on the wall. Her family, he supposed. There were some prints and a poster in a gold frame that said Naples across the bottom. There were no other photographs.

She brought the drinks and sat down in the other chair.

"Do you like roast?" she said.

"I love roast."

"That's good because I have a roast ready like no roast you've ever eaten."

"I can't wait," he said, raising the glass to his lips.

They chatted for a time and went in to the dining room.

"Sit here, at the head," she said. "I'll sit next to you. When the children were with us, I, of course, sat at the other end, but when they went off to their own lives, it seemed rather silly to sit way over there to talk. And then we could watch the television that Arthur bought for the buffet there against the wall."

A roast surrounded by carrots and potatoes sat on the table between them. Slices of fresh-baked bread were in a wicker basket. A tossed salad sat next to the bread.

"Would you like to do the honors, Frederick?" she said, handing him a large-bladed knife with a black handle. "I'll open the wine."

He sliced the meat carefully. She opened the wine and said, "We'll let it sit a moment, don't you think?"

"All right," he said.

He ate the meat, potatoes, and carrots. He spread a patina of butter upon the bread and ate that. The meat was very good, and the bread was delicious. He caught himself remembering. He drank the wine and tried not to remember too much. At the end,
she produced an angel food cake with peppermint cream cheese frosting. In all his life, he had not tasted a flavor like that.

"That was so good, Julie," he said. "You are a very fine cook."

"I told you," she laughed. "Wait until you taste my spaghetti sauce. Let's go in by the fire and have our coffee."

"All right," he said.

He sat in the same chair. It was very pleasant sitting by the fire and being so full and sipping a cup of coffee.

"This is decaf?" he asked.

"Of course," she said.

"It's so very good. I couldn't tell."

"I buy it from the State Street Coffee Barn."

"Oh, yes," he said.

"You know," she said, "Arthur came home from the hospital. Then, one day, he was sitting in that very chair where you're sitting now reading his newspaper. I was sitting right here in my own chair reading my magazine. The newspaper fell. I looked up. He was gone."

He set the coffee cup upon the end table and shifted his weight.

"I am so sorry," he said.

"Oh, no, Frederick. I didn't mean it that way. That was just how it happened, that's all. I thought about becoming a volunteer. I have a friend who is a Gray Lady at St. Joseph's. But everyone in a hospital is sick or hurt or something. I went with her one day to see about it. All those sick or hurt people in double rooms with curtains between the beds and people on gurneys in the corridors waiting for help. It was all so very depressing. I don't see how my friend Nancy tolerates it."

“Oh, I know they do, of course. But what happens happens, eventually. Everything is so much of a struggle. There you are in the hospital watching everyone struggle so much more. Somehow, finally, there should be rest, don’t you think? But there is no rest that I can see. Do you see any, Frederick?”

He looked at her.

“So you have to accept things,” she said. “Finally, I mean.”

He was angry, though he had decided long ago that it was futile to be angry about anything. He was reading Carl Jung. He was reading Otto Rank. The human race was a myth, which was fine, as long as you didn’t wake up.

He understood. It had nothing to do with him, not in a way that went back through a life and came forward to the end. He sat in Arthur’s chair. He ate Arthur’s food. He heard the voice that Arthur heard. He loved Ellen then. He loved Ellen now. Ellen was all that he loved. And this woman, this kindly old woman, laying in wood for the winter, brought him home for dinner and warmth by the fire.

“Yes,” he replied.