DISTANT CAMPFIRES

POINTS OF LIGHT IN THE DARK

What is friendship in the modern era?

Why does modern life leave us feeling profoundly alone despite being more connected than ever? Let's explore the difference between the shallow performance of friendship and the genuine warmth of real human presence.

He had 847 friends. And he was completely alone.

Exhausted by the performance of connection, a man escapes to Montauk in January—three weeks on an empty beach to understand why proximity has often become theater, and why having everyone at a distance somehow feels safer than letting anyone close.

What he finds there changes nothing and everything: a woman selling tea from a trailer during 'optimist hours'. A teenager with 847 friends who wouldn't recognize 843 of them. A heron standing in shallow water under moonlight. A stranger who becomes less strange through the simple act of saying hello. And lights across the bay—distant campfires burning in the dark, visible but not warming.

This is a book about the gap between the connections we perform and the ones we crave. About scrolling through other people's lives while forgetting to live your own. About the difference between being seen and being known. About choosing to sit at someone's fire instead of just watching it burn from a distance.

It won't tell you how to fix modern loneliness. It won't give you five steps to authentic connection.

But it might help you understand why you feel lonely in a room full of people. Why your phone buzzes constantly but no one's really calling. Why 847 feels like fewer than seven.

And maybe—just maybe—it will give you the courage to say hello to a stranger, to call an actual friend, to put the phone down and be present.

Just this.

Sometimes that's enough.

"A quietly devastating exploration of what we've traded for convenience. Read it, then call someone you actually know."

"For anyone who's ever felt alone in a crowd, or scrolled through hundreds of lives while living none of their own."

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PREFACE

Thinking aloud...

Perhaps 'distant campfires', in the context of how we're becoming increasingly disconnected, is a metaphor... something seen from afar that provides a feeling of comfort, companionship, etcetera... an image for our current moment.

Campfires have the ancient association with gathering, warmth, storytelling, safety in the darkness—they're fundamentally about presence and connection. But when they're *distant*, you can see them, you know they're there, maybe you even feel some comfort from knowing you're not alone in the dark... but you're not actually sharing that warmth. You're observing connection rather than experiencing it.

It captures something about how we might scroll through social media and see all these glowing points of other people's lives, or how we might feel aware of communities and conversations happening around us without quite being *in* them. There's a bittersweetness to it—the comfort isn't nothing, but it's also not the same as actually sitting by the fire together.

The metaphor also suggests something about choice and distance—are the campfires distant because we've wandered away from them? Because we're each tending our own separate fires? Because the landscape has changed in ways that keep us apart?

I'm not sure.

As friendships become easier to make—and break—they're often more transitory, and shallow... we 'skim the surface' of others, without going deep. And although these relationships can be very rewarding whilst engaged, they usually lack the substance and foundation necessary for a genuine, and perhaps lasting, bond.

Maybe, in some ways, we're each a campfire. A point of light in the dark.

If we are each a campfire, then what I'm considering is the difference between someone briefly warming themselves at our fire as they pass through versus someone who sits down, adds their own wood to it, tends it with us through the night. The transitory friendships are people who see the glow, approach, enjoy the warmth for a moment, and then move on to the next light they spot. And we each

do the same—moving between fires rather than staying and building one together.

There's something about the ease of it that actually prevents depth. When friendships required more effort to form—when you couldn't just swipe or click away, when you were more bound by geography or circumstance—there was perhaps more incentive to work through difficulties, to sit with the awkward silences, to actually build something that could weather storms. The foundation you're talking about takes time and friction and commitment.

The paradox is that we can see more campfires than ever before—we're more aware of other people, more able to make contact—but we're also more alone with our individual fires. Each of us tending our own light, visible to others, but increasingly separate.

What's here began with a mental image of Montauk in winter... a solitary figure walking on a vast beach, biting wind. Etcetera. A nod to a passing stranger, a small moment of acknowledgement. Contemplative. And both a moment of connection *and* a reminder of distance. Two people acknowledging each other's existence before continuing on their separate paths. Another distant campfire.

The fact that I don't know exactly what point I'm trying to make here might actually be fine. Sometimes the most honest writing comes from exploring a question rather than delivering an answer. "Here's what I'm noticing. Here's what it feels like. Does anyone else see this? Feel this?" That can be enough.

From the outset I decided that whatever my fragmented notes become—blog, potentially a book—and knowing it won't be profitable but doing it anyway because it matters... that's actually quite fitting for the theme. I'm tending a campfire and inviting people to sit with these ideas, not because it's optimized for engagement or monetization, but because the connection itself has value.

Amid swirling thoughts... which need time to settle into something coherent... the 'distant campfires' idea is a thread to follow rather than a thesis I defend.

INTRODUCTION

This isn't a book with answers.

If you've picked it up hoping for a systematic solution to modern loneliness, or a five-step program for authentic connection, or a manifesto about how to fix what's broken in the way we relate to each other—I'm sorry. You won't find that here.

What you'll find instead are notes. Observations. The thoughts of a man who spent part of a winter on a beach, trying to make sense of something he couldn't quite articulate but felt acutely: that we are more connected than ever and more alone than ever, and somehow these two facts aren't contradictory but are actually the same fact, looked at from different angles.

I went to Montauk in January, off-season, when the beach belongs to the gulls and the wind and whoever is strange enough to want it. I went there with a vague sense that I needed space to think, and distance from the constant hum of connection that had started to feel less like connection and more like noise.

What I found there—or what found me—was a series of moments and encounters that seemed to orbit around a central question: What does friendship mean now? What does it mean to know someone, or to be known? What have we gained in our ability to connect with almost anyone, anywhere, instantly—and what have we lost?

I don't have definitive answers. But I have the beach, and the trailer where Maria sells tea to optimists, and the distant lights across the bay, and a gull that seemed to circle the same stretch of sand for weeks. I have a stranger I passed once and then again, and a teenager sitting on a jetty, and the ghost of Henry Miller whispering in my ear about what it means to be truly alive with another person.

I have campfires, burning in the dark. Distant ones. Points of light that offer comfort but not warmth, presence but not proximity.

This book is a collection of those moments—essays, really, though that word feels too formal for what they are. Think of them as notes from the edge of things. A man standing where the land meets the water, thinking about where we meet each other, and whether we really do anymore.

Some of what's here is personal. Some is observational. Some probably leans toward the mystical, though I didn't set out for that—it's just what happens when you spend enough time alone in a place like Montauk in January. The boundaries get thin. The metaphors start feeling literal. You start having conversations with people who aren't there, and somehow those feel more real than the ones you have with people who are.

Each chapter is anchored to something—a gull, a conversation, the night sky, a group of teenagers performing friendship for an invisible audience. They don't build in a linear way. This isn't that kind of book. So you can read them in order or not. Skip around if something doesn't resonate. Come back to pieces later.

What I hope, though, is that something here will feel familiar to you. That you'll recognize the loneliness I'm describing, even if—especially if—you have hundreds of friends and a full social calendar and a phone that never stops buzzing. That you'll have felt the strange distance between being in touch with everyone and being truly known by anyone.

If you're reading this, you're probably standing on your own beach somewhere, metaphorically speaking. Maybe literally. Maybe you're in a city surrounded by millions of people and feeling utterly alone. Maybe you're scrolling through your phone, seeing all those distant campfires, wondering why you can't seem to get warm.

I don't know how to close that distance. I don't know if it can be closed, or should be, or if what I'm mourning is something that never really existed the way I remember it.

But I know there are others out there. Other beaches, other cups of tea, other people standing at the edge of things trying to make sense of connection and distance and what it means to be human in this particular moment of history.

Sometimes, when I looked up at the night sky in Montauk, I wondered if someone else was looking up too. Another person on another beach, somewhere else in the world, asking the same questions. The stars offering no answers, just their ancient light, traveling across impossible distances to reach us.

We're all very far apart. We're all very alone.

And yet here we are, somehow, together in this.

Just this.

Maybe that's enough to start with.

PART ONE: LEAVING

"The opposite of connection isn't isolation. It's the exhaustion of pretending you're not alone."

The city had become unbearable in the way cities do when you've stopped being able to see past the noise. Every notification felt like an obligation. Every feed, an accusation.

Everyone seemed to be somewhere, doing something, being someone—and all of it felt very far away from anything real.

So he left. Not dramatically. Just... left.

Sometimes the only honest response to too much connection is to choose none at all, for a while.

Goodbye.

He'd been staring at his phone for twenty minutes when he realized he hadn't actually read anything.

Just scrolling. Thumb moving in that automatic pattern everyone had now—down, pause, down, pause—his eyes registering images and words without processing them. Someone's vacation photos. A think piece about something he'd already forgotten. A friend (acquaintance? former colleague? he couldn't quite remember) announcing a new job with the kind of performative humility that was designed to elicit congratulations.

He put the phone down. Picked it up again thirty seconds later.

It was 11pm on a Tuesday in January. He was sitting in his apartment—a studio in Astoria that cost too much and contained too little—surrounded by the evidence of his life. Laptop open on the couch. Half-eaten takeout on the counter. Laundry he'd been meaning to fold for three days.

The loneliness was physical. A weight in his chest. The particular kind of loneliness that came from being constantly connected.

His phone buzzed. A text from Marcus: *yo you see the game?*

He hadn't. Didn't care. But he typed back: *yeah crazy*

Marcus sent a laughing emoji. That was it. The entire exchange. Connection, supposedly.

He had 847 friends on various platforms. He'd counted once, adding them all up. Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter. Hundreds of people who could theoretically reach him at any moment. Hundreds of people whose lives he could theoretically follow.

And sitting here, in his too-expensive studio with his cold takeout, he couldn't think of a single one he wanted to actually talk to.

Not text. Talk. Actually speak to, voice to voice, about something real.

Well. Maybe six. Seven if he counted his sister, but that was different.

His phone buzzed again. A notification. Someone had liked something he'd posted three days ago. He couldn't remember what he'd posted three days ago.

He opened the app. A photo of coffee. He'd posted a photo of coffee with some caption about Monday mornings. Forty-three likes. Eight comments, all variations of 'same' and 'mood' and coffee cup emojis.

This was friendship now. This was connection. Little bursts of acknowledgment, carefully curated moments, the constant performance of having a life worth documenting.

He was so tired of it.

The thought arrived fully formed: I need to leave.

Not forever. Not dramatically. Just... away. Space. Silence. Somewhere he could think without the constant buzz of ersatz connection.

He opened his laptop, pulled up Airbnb, typed 'beach' and 'winter' and 'quiet'.

Montauk appeared in the results. End of Long Island. Off-season would be dead. Cold. Empty. Perfect.

He scrolled through listings. Found a room above a bait shop—basic, cheap, available starting this weekend. The photos showed exactly what he needed: nothing special. A bed, a window, proximity to beach.

He booked it before he could talk himself out of it.

Three weeks. He'd take three weeks. He had vacation days he never used. Work wouldn't care—his job was the kind of thing that could be done from anywhere, which meant it could be done from nowhere, which meant maybe it didn't really matter at all.

His phone buzzed. Instagram notification. Facebook notification. Email. The constant drip of other people's curated lives, the endless stream of content designed to make you feel simultaneously connected and inadequate.

He turned the phone face-down.

Then picked it up and started a group text: *Taking some time away. Will be offline for a bit. All good, just need space.*

The responses came immediately: *everything ok?? you sure you're alright? lmk if you need anything*

All kind. All concerned. All fundamentally unable to understand that the thing he needed was absence, not more messages asking if he needed anything.

He typed: *I'm fine. Really. Just need quiet.*

Then, before anyone could respond, he put the phone in a drawer.

The silence was immediate and disorienting.

When was the last time he'd sat in actual silence? No phone, no laptop, no TV, no podcast, no music. Just... quiet.

He couldn't remember.

He sat there for a moment, listening to the ambient sounds of the building. Pipes. Someone's TV through the wall. Traffic from the street below. The hum of his refrigerator.

And his own breathing. His own thoughts, suddenly loud without the constant distraction.

This was what he needed. This silence. This space.

He thought about his life—the shape of it, the texture of it. When had it become this? This constant low-level connection that somehow added up to profound isolation? When had he stopped calling people and started just liking their posts? When had conversation become texting, and texting become emojis, and emojis become the entire emotional vocabulary?

It had happened gradually. No single moment of change, just a slow drift. Like everyone else, he'd adopted the tools because they were convenient, because everyone else was using them, because it was easier than the alternative.

And now here he was. Forty-three years old, 847 friends, sitting alone in a studio apartment on a Tuesday night, feeling more lonely than he'd ever felt in his life.

Something had to change.

Not everything. He wasn't going to delete his accounts or move to a monastery or pretend the modern world didn't exist. But something. Some recalibration. Some return to... what? He didn't even know what he was looking for.

Presence, maybe. Authenticity. The kind of connection that required actual presence instead of just digital acknowledgment.

He stood up, walked to the window. Outside, Astoria continued its evening routine. Lights in windows. People walking dogs. A couple arguing on the corner. All these lives, happening simultaneously, mostly separate.

All these distant campfires.

The phrase appeared in his mind unbidden. He liked it. Distant campfires. Points of light in the darkness, each one representing warmth and life and human presence, but all of them too far away to actually warm you.

That's what his 847 friendships felt like. Visible, countable, proof that he wasn't entirely alone in the universe, but not actually warming him.

He went to his closet, pulled out a duffel bag, started packing. Clothes for three weeks in winter. His laptop, though he'd try not to use it. A few books. His phone charger, though maybe he'd leave the phone off most of the time.

What else? He looked around the apartment. What did you bring when you were trying to escape your own life?

Not much, it turned out. Most of what filled this space wasn't essential. Just... stuff. Accumulation. The material equivalent of his 847 friends—lots of things, few of them really necessary.

He packed light. One bag. Everything else could wait.

Friday morning, he'd board the LIRR at Penn Station. Three hours to Montauk. To a room above a bait shop. To a beach in winter. To whatever silence and space might teach him.

He wasn't running away, exactly. More like... running toward. Toward quiet. Toward thinking. Toward the possibility of understanding what had gone wrong, and maybe, possibly, what to do about it.

His phone buzzed in the drawer. He ignored it.

Instead he sat down, pulled out a notebook—actual paper, he couldn't remember the last time he'd written by hand—and started making a list.

Not a to-do list. Not a plan. Just... questions. Things he wanted to think about.

What is friendship? When did connection become performance? Do I actually know anyone? Does anyone actually know me? What am I so afraid of?

That last one surprised him. But it felt true. There was fear underneath all of this. Fear of being boring. Fear of being needy. Fear of asking for too much. Fear of not being enough.

So instead of asking for real connection, he settled for likes. Instead of being vulnerable, he curated. Instead of showing up as himself, he performed a version of himself that might be more acceptable.

And he was exhausted.

Three weeks in Montauk. It wasn't a solution. But it was a start.

A chance to say goodbye—not to people, not permanently, but to the way he'd been doing things. The constant connectivity. The performance. The shallow maintenance of hundreds of connections that didn't actually connect him to anything.

He'd say goodbye to all of that, for a little while.

And maybe, on the other side of the silence, he'd figure out how to say hello differently.

How to mean it when he asked someone how they were.

How to actually share something real instead of just posting something curated.

How to sit with another person without checking his phone every five minutes.

How to be a friend instead of just having friends.

The questions felt too big for one person in one studio apartment on one Tuesday night. But they also felt urgent. Necessary. The kind of questions you couldn't keep avoiding forever.

Friday couldn't come fast enough.

He closed the notebook, turned off the lights, got into bed.

His phone buzzed again in the drawer. Five times. Ten. Someone was calling now, probably worried by his cryptic message about going offline.

He let it buzz.

Tomorrow he'd respond. Reassure everyone. Make it clear he wasn't having a crisis, wasn't in danger, wasn't doing anything dramatic.

Just leaving. Just for a little while. Just to think.

Outside, Astoria settled into night. Inside, he lay in the dark, listening to the silence underneath the noise.

In three days, he'd be on a train heading east.

Away from the 847 friends.

Away from the performance.

Away from the constant, exhausting buzz of connection that somehow made him feel more alone than actual solitude ever had.

Toward a beach in winter.

Toward quiet.

Toward whatever came next.

Goodbye, he thought. To all of this. For now.

Just for now.

Long enough to remember what hello was supposed to feel like.

He fell asleep with his phone still buzzing in the drawer, with Montauk waiting at the end of a train line, with questions he didn't yet have answers to.

But for the first time in months, he felt something other than that constant low-level loneliness.

He felt... possibility.

Small. Uncertain. But there.

Three days. Then the train. Then the beach.

Then silence.

Then, maybe, answers.

Or at least better questions.

He'd take either one.

PART TWO: SEEING

"Distance reveals what proximity obscures: the difference between a light you can see and a fire that warms you."

The beach doesn't offer answers.

It offers space—enough of it that your questions can spread out, breathe, reveal their actual shape.

In the silence, you start to notice things: the way a gull circles the same patch of sand, the lights across the bay that glow but don't warm, the teenager sitting alone on a jetty scrolling through hundreds of friends.

You start to see the difference between being connected and being present. Between distant light and actual warmth.

Gull.

He'd seen the same gull three days running now, or thought he had. Hard to be certain—gulls have a sameness to them, especially in winter when they're not competing for scraps from beach blankets and abandoned sandwiches. But this one had a way of hanging in the air above the waterline, not really hunting, just... present. Circling the same stretch of beach where the refreshment trailer sat shuttered against the cold.

Except the trailer wasn't shuttered. Not entirely.

"Tea?" a voice called from the small window.

He'd been so focused on the gull he hadn't noticed the woman. She was maybe sixty, dark hair pulled back, watching him with amusement.

"I... yes. Thank you."

"Four dollars."

He paid, accepted the paper cup. The warmth was immediate and welcome.

"You're staring at that bird like it owes you money," she said.

"Just wondering if it's the same one I saw yesterday."

"Probably. They're territorial. That one's been around all week." She leaned on the counter. "You visiting?"

"For a few weeks."

"Lot of people come here to think. Something about gulls and empty beaches."

He smiled. "Is it that obvious?"

"Little bit." She disappeared back into the trailer.

He watched the gull circle, that lazy figure-eight pattern against the gray sky. Such a small thing, a single bird in all that emptiness. You could watch it for a long time and forget there were thousands of other gulls elsewhere. In the moment, it was just this one, calling occasionally, riding the wind, utterly alone up there.

Alone but not lonely, maybe. Or maybe lonely in a way that didn't bother it. Gulls didn't have the cognitive architecture for existential isolation. They just flew and ate and called out and existed, without the burden of questioning whether their connections to other gulls were sufficiently authentic or meaningful.

He envied that.

His phone was back in his room, deliberately left behind. The absence of it felt strange, like missing a limb. How many times had he already reached for his pocket, that automatic gesture? Ten? Twenty?

But watching the gull, holding the warm cup, standing on this empty beach—this was what he'd come for. This presence. This actually being here instead of documenting being here.

The gull wheeled lower, close enough that he could see individual feathers, the yellow of its beak, the black eye that seemed to assess him without judgment.

Two living things, sharing a moment. No performance required. No audience. Just existence, acknowledged.

The gull called out—that harsh, lonely sound—and climbed back into the wind.

He watched it until it was just a small dark shape against the clouds, then turned and walked south along the beach, the tea warm in his hands, the sound of waves providing rhythm to thoughts he was only beginning to have.

Maria's Trailer.

He found the trailer on his third day.

He'd been walking the beach each morning since arriving—long, aimless walks that were more about movement than destination. Trying to clear his head, or fill it, or something. Mostly just trying to be away from his phone, which sat on the dresser in his rented room, silenced, increasingly irrelevant.

The trailer sat at the edge of the beach parking lot, weathered silver aluminum with a hand-painted sign: 'Maria's—Coffee, Tea, Snacks.' The kind of place that probably did decent business in summer and questionable business the rest of the year.

It was 9am on a Thursday in January. The trailer was open.

He approached, partly curious, partly just wanting something warm to hold.

A woman appeared at the window—fifty-ish, dark hair pulled back, the kind of face that suggested she'd spent a lot of time squinting into sun and wind. She looked at him with the neutral assessment of someone who'd seen thousands of customers and had no particular expectations about any of them.

"Help you?"

"Coffee?"

"Out of coffee. Have tea."

"Tea's fine."

"What kind?"

"What kinds do you have?"

"Black."

He smiled despite himself. "Black tea it is."

She disappeared, and he heard the sounds of water, kettle, the small efficient movements of someone who'd done this ten thousand times. She reappeared with a paper cup, steam rising from it.

"Four dollars."

He paid. Wrapped his hands around the cup. The warmth was immediate and welcome.

"You're the guy staying above the bait shop," she said. It wasn't a question.

"How did you know?"

"It's January in Montauk. There's like twelve people here. You're new." She shrugged. "Process of elimination."

"Fair enough."

"Running from something or looking for something?"

The directness surprised him. "Does it matter?"

"Not really. Just curious. People don't come here this time of year unless they're one or the other." She leaned against the counter inside the window. "Sometimes both."

He thought about lying, giving some casual explanation. Instead he said, "Maybe both."

She nodded like this confirmed something. "Tea's better for that than coffee anyway. Makes you slow down."

"That why you're out of coffee?"

"No, I'm out of coffee because the supplier screwed up my order. But the tea thing's true regardless."

He laughed—actually laughed, which felt strange. When was the last time he'd laughed at something that wasn't on a screen?

"I'm Maria," she said.

"I figured."

"You got a name?"

He told her.

"You gonna be here a while?"

"Three weeks."

"Then I'll probably see you again. I'm here most days. Optimist hours."

"Optimist hours?"

"Open when I feel like it, closed when I don't. Figure if people really need tea, they'll come back." She glanced past him at the empty beach. "Not exactly overwhelming demand this time of year."

"Why stay open at all?"

She considered this. "Habit, mostly. Been doing this fifteen years. Seems weird to just close completely, even off-season. Plus, you never know who might need something warm on a cold day." She gestured at his cup. "Case in point."

He nodded, sipped the tea. It was good—actual tea, properly steeped, not the sad bag-in-lukewarm-water some places gave you.

"You make good tea."

"I make adequate tea. But I make it consistently, which counts for something."

Another car pulled into the lot—contractor van, two guys getting out. Maria straightened. "Duty calls. You need anything else?"

"No, this is perfect. Thank you."

"See you around."

He walked back to the beach, tea in hand, thinking about that exchange. Two minutes, maybe three. Nothing profound. Just a transaction, a bit of small talk, the kind of interaction you'd have a hundred times and forget.

Except he wouldn't forget it.

Because it had been *real* in a way most of his interactions weren't anymore. Maria hadn't performed friendliness—she'd just been direct, present, herself. No script, no customer service smile, no careful curation of personality. Just: here's tea, here's conversation, take it or leave it.

It reminded him of something he'd been trying to articulate. The difference between connection and performance. Maria wasn't trying to connect with him in any deep way. But she also wasn't performing. She was just... there. Available. Human.

And somehow that mattered.

He came back the next day. And the day after that.

It became a rhythm. Walk the beach, stop at the trailer, get tea, exchange a few words with Maria, continue walking.

Some days they talked more than others. She told him about her daughter—Lena, who was six and obsessed with collecting shells. About her ex-husband, who lived in the city and saw Lena every other weekend. About the trailer, which she'd bought on a whim after her mother died and left her a small inheritance.

"Everyone thought I was crazy," she said one morning, handing him his tea. "Buying a food trailer. At my age. With no experience. But my mother always said the best things in life were simple. Good conversation, shared food, time outside. Figured I could provide two out of three."

"Which two?"

"Food and outside. The conversation's optional." She smiled. "But it happens anyway, more than you'd think."

He told her a little about himself too. Not everything—not about the 847 friends or the specific contours of his loneliness—but enough. About needing space. About the city feeling too loud. About trying to figure out what mattered.

She didn't offer advice. Didn't try to solve anything. Just listened, nodded, handed him tea.

The consistency of it became important. Knowing that Maria would be there—not always, but usually. Knowing that he could walk to the trailer and find this small point of human contact. Not demanding, not complicated, just... available.

It was the opposite of his friendships back home. Those required maintenance—remembering to like posts, responding to texts promptly, keeping up the performance of availability. But this thing with Maria required nothing. He showed up or he didn't. She was there or she wasn't. No expectations, no obligations, no performance.

And yet it felt more like friendship than most of his actual friendships.

One morning he arrived to find the trailer closed. A note taped to the window: "Lena has strep. Back tomorrow probably.—M"

He stood there for a moment, surprised by his disappointment. He'd gotten used to this. The tea, yes, but more than that—the brief human contact. The knowing that someone would see him today, acknowledge his existence, offer a few words.

Without it, the beach felt emptier.

He walked anyway, but it wasn't the same. The routine had been broken. He realized how much he'd been structuring his days around that stop at the trailer. How much it anchored him.

The next day, Maria was back.

"You came yesterday," she said when he approached. Not a question—statement of fact.

"How do you know?"

She pointed at the sand near the trailer. "Your footprints. You wear those hiking boots with the distinctive tread. You stood here for a minute, then walked south." She handed him his tea. "Creature of habit."

"Lena okay?"

"She's fine. Antibiotics are magic. She's pissed she had to miss school though—they were doing something with magnets."

"She likes school?"

"Loves it. Loves everything, really. That age where the world's still mostly wonderful." Maria was quiet for a moment. "I hope she keeps that."

"You think she won't?"

"I think the world has a way of complicating things. Making simple things hard. Making presence into performance." She looked at him directly. "You know what I mean."

He did.

"That's why I like this," she said, gesturing at the trailer, the beach, the empty winter landscape. "It's simple. People come, I give them something warm, we talk or we don't. No algorithms, no optimization, no metrics. Just... this."

"Just this," he repeated.

"Yeah." She smiled. "Turns out that's enough, most days."

By the end of his second week, the pattern was set. He'd walk to the trailer, get tea, talk to Maria for five or ten minutes, then continue his walk. Sometimes Lena was there, showing him her latest finds. Sometimes other customers came and he'd step aside, wait, resume the conversation or not.

It was low-stakes and high-value. The kind of relationship that required almost nothing but gave more than it should.

One morning, Maria said, "You're different than when you got here."

"How so?"

"Quieter. In a good way. Like you're actually here instead of somewhere else in your head."

He thought about that. She was right. The constant mental noise—the wondering what people were posting, what he was missing, whether he should check his phone—had receded. Not gone, but quieter.

"I think that's the point," he said. "Being here. Actually here."

"It's harder than it sounds."

"Yeah."

Maria refilled his cup without asking—a small gesture that felt significant. The acknowledgment that he was a regular now, that she knew what he wanted, that this had become something more than random transactions.

"My mother used to say," Maria said, "that the best friendships were the ones that didn't ask anything of you except showing up. No performance, no maintenance, just... showing up when you could, being present when you did."

"She sounds wise."

"She was." Maria smiled. "Also stubborn as hell and completely incapable of small talk. If you asked her how she was, she'd actually tell you. Made people uncomfortable sometimes."

"I think I would've liked her."

"Yeah. I think you would've."

They stood in comfortable silence for a moment. A gull circled overhead—his gull, maybe, though he still couldn't be sure. The waves provided their constant rhythm. The winter sun was weak but present.

This, he thought. This was what he'd been missing. Not grand gestures or deep philosophical conversations or intense emotional bonding. Just... consistent presence. Someone who was there, regularly, without agenda or expectation. A third space that wasn't home and wasn't work, just a small aluminum trailer selling tea to whoever showed up.

A place to be seen without being judged. To talk without performing. To exist without having to prove anything.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?"

"For being here. For this." He gestured vaguely at the trailer, the tea, the conversation.

Maria shrugged, but she looked pleased. "It's just tea."

"It's not just tea."

"No," she agreed. "I guess it's not."

He finished his cup, handed it back. She took it, dropped it in the bin behind her.

"See you tomorrow?" she said.

"Yeah. See you tomorrow."

And he would. That was the point. The consistency. The showing up. The small, repeated gesture of presence that somehow added up to something real.

Not friendship in the way his 847 connections were friendship. But friendship in the way his grandmother would have recognized. The old kind. The kind that didn't require likes or comments or constant digital maintenance. Just showing up. Being there. Offering tea and conversation and the simple gift of uncomplicated human contact.

He walked south along the beach, the warmth of the tea spreading through him, and thought about third spaces. About places like Maria's trailer—neither home nor work, just... a place to be. A place to see people and be seen, without the weight of obligation or performance.

Those places were disappearing. Coffee shops had become laptop offices. Libraries had become silent study halls. Parks had become fitness venues. Everything optimized, everything purposeful, everything documented.

But Maria's trailer just... existed. Selling adequate tea during optimist hours to whoever showed up. No Instagram presence, no Yelp reviews, no online ordering. Just a woman in an aluminum box, making tea, being present.

It felt revolutionary.

Not because it was new, but because it was old. Because it remembered something about human connection that most of the world had forgotten: that sometimes the most meaningful interactions were the smallest ones. The regular ones. The ones that didn't try to be anything more than what they were.

Just this.

Tea and conversation and consistent presence.

Enough.

More than enough.

He'd come to Montauk to escape the performance of connection. And he'd found, in a weathered aluminum trailer selling tea during optimist hours, an actual connection that required no performance at all.

Just showing up.

Just being there.

Just this.

Tomorrow he'd come back. And the day after that. And Maria would be there, probably, making adequate tea and offering uncomplicated human contact.

And it would be enough.

It would be everything.

Lights Across the Bay.

There was a spot he'd found in his second week—a bench on the bay side, weathered wood facing west, positioned where the beach curved and you could see across the water to the far shore.

During the day it was pleasant enough. Boats sometimes, birds always, the gentle lap of bay water instead of ocean waves.

But at night, it was something else entirely.

He'd discovered this by accident, walking later than usual one evening, restless after a day of too much thinking. The sun had set an hour before, and the darkness was the particular kind you only got away from cities—deep and textured, the sky gradually revealing its stars.

And across the bay, the lights.

Dozens of them. Maybe hundreds, depending on how far his eye could see. Little squares of warm yellow, scattered along the opposite shore. Houses. Lives. People living them.

He sat on the bench, pulled his jacket tighter against the cold, and looked.

Each light was a story he'd never know. Someone making dinner. Watching television. Reading to a child. Fighting with a spouse. Sitting alone, like him, looking out at the darkness and maybe seeing his side of the bay, maybe not thinking about it at all.

All these lives, happening simultaneously. So close—a few miles of water, maybe fifteen minutes by car if you went around—but completely separate from his.

Distant campfires.

The metaphor had been abstract when it first came to him, but here it was literal. Points of light in the darkness, evidence of warmth and life, but too far away to warm him.

He thought about his life back in the city. His building, where he'd lived for three years and knew maybe two neighbors by name. Hundreds of people stacked vertically in the same structure, all of them close enough to hear each other's footsteps and toilets and arguments, all of them strangers.

All of them lights in windows, visible but separate.

What were they doing right now, his neighbors? It was 8pm on a Tuesday. Someone was probably cooking. Someone watching Netflix. Someone on a work call, because work never ended anymore. Someone scrolling through their phone, looking at other people's lives, other distant lights.

He pulled out his own phone—had brought it with him tonight, breaking his usual pattern. Opened Instagram. Scrolled through his feed.

There they were. His 847 friends. Posting their lights for everyone to see.

Dinner at a new restaurant—carefully photographed, carefully filtered. A beach sunset somewhere warm—far better than this January cold. A child's art project—proud parent moment, 43 likes. A political opinion—performatively passionate, designed to signal alignment with the right tribe. A gym selfie—evidence of self-improvement, of effort, of becoming.

All of them in their own way lights across the bay. Visible, countable, proof that other people were out there living their lives.

But he didn't actually know what was happening in those houses. Didn't know if the restaurant dinner was a happy anniversary or a desperate attempt to save a failing relationship. Didn't know if the sunset photo was posted from a dream vacation or a lonely business trip. Didn't know if the parent sharing the art project was proud or exhausted or hanging on by a thread.

Just the curated light. The performance of life, edited to look like living.

He put the phone away.

Looked back at the actual lights across the actual bay.

Those people weren't performing for him. Weren't curating their window light to maximize engagement. They were just... there. Living. The lights a byproduct of existence, not a broadcast of it.

There was something honest about that.

A gull called somewhere in the darkness. The water lapped quietly against the shore. The lights across the bay continued their steady glow.

He thought about what Maria had said about her mother. *The best things in life were simple. Good conversation, shared food, time with people you loved.*

The lights across the bay represented all of that, probably. Behind each one, simple human things were happening. People were sharing meals, having conversations, being present with each other or being alone in the comfortable way you could only be alone in your own home.

Not performing it. Just doing it.

When was the last time he'd done something—anything—without thinking about how it would look to others? Without mentally composing the caption, imagining the response, curating the experience even as he was having it?

He couldn't remember.

Even this—sitting on a bench, looking at lights across a bay—part of him was already thinking about how to describe it. What photo might capture it. Whether it was worth sharing.

The urge to document had become so automatic he barely noticed it anymore. Life wasn't just lived, it was recorded, edited, broadcast. Every experience was potential content.

But what if he just... didn't?

What if he just sat here, cold and alone on a bench in January, looking at distant lights, and let that be all it was? A private moment. Undocumented. Unshared. Just his, and then over, and then just a memory that would fade like all memories fade.

The thought was both liberating and terrifying.

If he didn't document it, did it matter? If no one knew he'd been here, seen this, thought these thoughts—did it count?

The lights across the bay didn't care. They just kept glowing.

He tried an experiment. Put his phone in his pocket—all the way in, deep enough that he'd have to make an effort to pull it out. Then just sat. Looked. Breathed the cold air. Listened to the water.

No photo. No mental caption. No audience.

Just this.

Minutes passed. Five, ten, fifteen. The lights across the bay didn't change much. A few went off—someone going to bed, probably. A few came on—someone arriving home, or just moving to a different room. The pattern shifted slightly but remained essentially the same.

He realized he was calm in a way he rarely felt anymore. Present. Not performing presence, just... actually here.

The thing he'd come to Montauk to find.

He thought about the people in those houses. Wondered if they ever looked across the bay and saw lights on his side. Wondered if they thought about the lives behind those lights, or if they just saw them as scenery, backdrop, part of the landscape.

Probably the latter. People didn't usually think about the stranger's interior life. Didn't wonder what was happening in the houses they could see from their own windows. The lights were just lights.

But each one was a full human life. As complex and real and meaningful as his own. Joys and sorrows and mundane concerns and private hopes. Loves and losses and the thousand small moments that constituted existence.

All of it invisible from here. All of it reduced to a point of light in the darkness.

That's what his 847 friends were, he realized. Points of light. Evidence of existence, but not the existence itself. He could see that they were there—living, posting, performing their lives—but he had no idea what was actually happening behind the light.

And they had no idea about him either.

He posted his own curated light—the good moments, the presentable thoughts, the version of himself that seemed worth sharing. But the actual living of his life, the texture and difficulty and beauty of it, that was invisible. Hidden behind the performance.

Just like these houses across the bay. He could see the light, but not what was illuminated by it.

The temperature was dropping. He should go back to his room, get warm, maybe make tea.

But he stayed a little longer.

There was something peaceful about this. Sitting in the dark, looking at distant lights, feeling the loneliness of it without trying to fix it or deny it or document it.

Just being lonely. Just being separate. Just being one small light among many, visible but unknown.

It wasn't what he wanted, exactly. The connection he craved was different—deeper, closer, warmer than these distant points.

But there was a comfort in knowing they were there. In not being entirely alone in the darkness, even if the company was distant and unknowing.

The lights across the bay had been here before he arrived. Would be here after he left. Would continue glowing whether he looked at them or not, whether he thought about them or not. They didn't need his attention or his documentation or his engagement.

They just... were.

Maybe that was enough. Not as a permanent state, not as a solution to loneliness, but as a baseline reassurance. The knowledge that other people were out there, living their lives, creating their small pools of warmth and light.

Even if he couldn't reach them. Even if he never knew them. Even if the distance remained.

They were there.

And so was he.

Both separate. Both glowing. Both trying, in whatever way they could, to hold back the dark.

He stood up, stiff from sitting in the cold. Started walking back toward his room.

Behind him, the lights across the bay continued their vigil. Steady. Reliable. Distant.

He thought about tomorrow. About the walks he'd take, the tea he'd get from Maria, the beach that had become familiar over these weeks. About the return home that was coming soon, back to his own light in his own window, visible to strangers who'd never wonder about the life behind it.

And for the first time since arriving, he felt something like acceptance.

The distance was real. The separation was real. The loneliness was real.

But so were the lights.

All of them burning. All of them holding back the dark.

All of them, in their way, together in this.

Not close enough to warm each other. But close enough to know that warmth existed. That other people were out there, trying to make their small corner of the darkness a little brighter.

It wasn't everything he wanted. But it was something.

And looking at those lights across the bay—steady, distant, real—something felt like enough.

At least for tonight.

At least for now.

He walked back in the darkness, toward his own temporary light, carrying the image of all those other lights with him.

Distant campfires.

All of them burning.

All of them, somehow, his.

Teenager.

He'd seen them four days ago—a group of maybe six or seven, loud in that particular way teenagers are when they're performing friendship for each other. They'd claimed the stretch of beach near the old jetty, music playing from someone's portable speaker, that carefully curated soundtrack to their carefully curated youth.

He'd walked past, feeling ancient at forty-three, and caught fragments of their conversation. Not the words, exactly, but the rhythm of it—the rapid-fire exchanges, the explosive laughter, the way they seemed to talk over and around each other without anyone actually finishing a thought. And the phones, of course. Constantly out, constantly recording, the moment being documented even as it was happening.

It had depressed him, though he couldn't say exactly why.

Today the beach was empty again, or nearly so. Just him and Maria's trailer and—

He stopped.

One of them. A girl, maybe sixteen or seventeen, sitting on the jetty with her legs dangling over the edge. Alone. No phone visible, no music, just sitting there watching the water.

He almost walked past. The social calculus of approaching a lone teenage girl as a middle-aged man was fraught with complications, and besides, what would he say?

But she looked up as he approached, and something in her expression—not quite sadness, but a kind of thoughtful distance—made him nod in acknowledgment.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey."

He meant to keep walking. Instead he heard himself say, "You're one of the group from the other day."

"Yeah." She smiled slightly. "We were kind of loud. Sorry."

"No, it's fine. It's a beach."

She shrugged. "They wanted to get content. For TikTok, Instagram, whatever. The whole 'squad goals' thing, you know?" She made air quotes around the phrase, a small gesture of distance from it.

He gestured to the empty jetty. "Mind if I sit?"

"It's a free country. Or a free jetty, anyway."

He sat, leaving appropriate space between them, both of them facing the water. For a moment neither spoke.

"Where are they today?" he asked. "Your squad."

Another small smile. "Probably making content somewhere else. There's a place in town that has good lighting, apparently. Better for the aesthetic."

"But you're here."

"Yeah."

The waves moved beneath them, that constant rhythm. A gull—maybe his gull, maybe not—circled overhead.

"Can I ask you something?" she said suddenly.

"Sure."

"Do you think friendship used to be different? Like, before all this?" She waved her phone vaguely, though she hadn't taken it out.

He considered the question. "I think so. But I'm not sure if that's because it actually was, or because I'm old enough to romanticize the past."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... when I was your age, if I wanted to talk to my friends, I had to call their house phone and maybe their parents would answer and I'd have to make small talk, or I'd have to actually go to their house, or we'd make plans and then stick to them because there was no way to change them last minute. It was harder. More friction."

"That sounds kind of nice, actually."

"Does it?"

She pulled her knees up, wrapped her arms around them. "I have 847 friends. On Instagram. And you know what? If 843 of them knocked on my door right now, I wouldn't know who the hell they are."

He felt something shift in his chest. His own thought, spoken back to him by someone half his age.

"That's..." he started, then stopped. "That's very honest."

"It's exhausting," she said quietly. "Everyone's always performing. Even when we're hanging out, like the other day, we're not really hanging out. We're creating the appearance of hanging out. We're making proof that we have friends, that we're having fun, that our lives are... I don't know. Worth documenting."

"But you're not doing that right now."

"No." She looked at him directly. "Right now I'm just sitting on a jetty talking to a random guy, and nobody will ever know about it, and that feels kind of revolutionary."

He laughed, surprised. "Revolutionary."

"You know what I mean. Nothing's being recorded. There's no audience. This conversation will just... exist, and then it'll be over, and it'll just be a thing that happened. Not content. Not engagement. Just a conversation."

A fishing boat moved across the horizon, small and distant.

"Do your friends feel the same way?" he asked.

"I don't know." She said it simply, factually. "We don't really talk about real stuff. We talk about other people, about drama, about what we saw online. But how we actually feel? What we're actually thinking?" She shook her head. "That's not part of the performance."

"So you don't know if they're lonely too."

She turned to look at him, and he saw something flash across her face—recognition, maybe, or relief at being understood.

"Yeah," she said. "Exactly that. We're all together all the time, and I have no idea if any of them feel the way I do. Because admitting you're lonely when you have 847 friends means there's something wrong with you, right? It means you're ungrateful, or you're not doing it right, or you're broken somehow."

"Or it means the whole system is broken."

"Maybe." She was quiet for a moment. "My mom talks about her childhood friends sometimes. She still knows some of them. Like, really knows them. They went to each other's weddings, they helped each other move, they show up when things are bad. And I think about my friends and I can't imagine..." She trailed off.

"Can't imagine what?"

"Asking them for help. Real help. Like, if something actually went wrong in my life, would I call any of them? Or would I just... deal with it alone and post something that made it seem like I was fine?"

The honesty of it was startling. He thought about his own friendships, the carefully maintained distance, the surface-level check-ins.

"I think a lot of people feel that way," he said. "Not just your generation."

"But we grew up in it. You guys at least remember something different. We don't. This is just... how it is. How it's always been, for us."

"Does that make it harder or easier?"

She thought about that. "Harder, maybe. Because we don't even know what we're missing. We just know something feels wrong, but we don't have a comparison point. Like, what's a real friendship supposed to feel like? How do you even build one when all the tools we have are designed for shallow connection?"

He didn't have an answer for that.

"The other day," she continued, "one of my friends—I mean, someone I call a friend—ghosted me mid-conversation. Just stopped responding. No explanation, no fight, nothing. And I realized I wasn't even hurt. I was just... nothing. Because that's normal now. People drift in and out. No one expects permanence. No one expects follow-through."

"That sounds lonely."

"It is." She said it plainly, without self-pity. "But everyone's lonely in the same way, so it just feels like... baseline reality."

The gull landed on the jetty about twenty feet away, folded its wings, stood watch.

"Can I tell you something weird?" she said.

"Please."

"Sometimes I see old people—sorry, I mean like, people your age—"

He smiled. "It's fine. I am old."

"—I see people your age, and they'll be having coffee or whatever, and they're just talking. Actually talking. Not checking their phones every thirty seconds, not documenting it, just... there with each other. And I get jealous. Like, really jealous. Because I don't know how to do that. I don't know how to just be present without thinking about how it looks, or what I'll say about it later, or whether I should be somewhere else, with someone else."

"You're doing it right now."

She blinked. "I guess I am."

"Maybe it's not that you don't know how. Maybe it's that you don't get the opportunity very often."

"Because everyone else is performing too."

"Yeah."

They sat with that for a while. The water moved, the gull watched, the afternoon light started to shift toward evening.

"Do you think it'll change?" she asked finally.

"I don't know. Do you want it to?"

"I want..." She hesitated. "I want to know what it feels like to have a friend who really knows me. Not my Instagram, not my Stories, not the version I perform. Just... me. The person sitting on this jetty, thinking too much about everything."

"That person seems pretty okay to me."

She smiled, a real smile this time. "Thanks."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Does it matter?"

He thought about that. "No. I guess it doesn't."

"Then let's leave it," she said. "Let this just be what it is. Two people on a jetty, talking about loneliness. No names, no follows, no connection that has to be maintained. Just this."

"Just this," he agreed.

They sat a while longer, and then without much ceremony she stood up, brushed off her jeans, gave him a small wave.

"Thanks for listening," she said.

"Thanks for talking."

She walked back toward town, and he watched her go—just another person on the beach, carrying her 847 friendships and her loneliness with her, same as everyone else.

The gull took off, circled once, flew south.

He sat there as the light changed, thinking about what she'd said. *We don't even know what we're missing.* A whole generation growing up in the performance, mistaking the map for the territory, the performance for the connection.

And yet she'd found her way to this jetty, alone, without an audience. She'd had a real conversation with a stranger. She'd been honest about her loneliness instead of curating it away.

Maybe that was something. Maybe that was how it started—not with a grand solution, but with small moments of presence. Two people on a jetty. No documentation required.

He stood up, started walking back toward the trailer. Maria would be closing soon, but maybe there was time for one more cup of tea. One more conversation that would never be content, never be documented, never be anything but what it was.

Just this.

It felt, somehow, like enough.

Heron.

He'd walked farther than usual, past the trailer, past the jetty, all the way to where the beach curved and met the bay side. There was a promenade here—weathered wood, a simple railing, probably charming in summer but in January just functional, a boundary between the walkway and the water below.

It was past ten. The kind of night where the cold had teeth.

He'd been thinking about distance again. Always distance. The way you could see lights from houses across the bay—warm yellow squares in the darkness, evidence of people living their lives, cooking dinner, watching television, arguing, laughing, going through the small domestic rituals that constituted existence. So close. Maybe a fifteen-minute drive if you went around by road. But separated by dark water, which made them feel impossibly far.

He'd stopped at the railing, looking out at those lights, when he noticed the heron.

It was standing in maybe six inches of water, twenty feet out from the promenade. Utterly still. The moon was nearly full, bright enough to cast shadows, and it caught the bird's pale plumage in a way that made it seem almost luminous against the dark water.

He froze, not wanting to startle it.

The heron turned its head. Looked directly at him.

And then... nothing. It didn't fly. Didn't move. Just stood there, looking at him looking at it.

He should have kept walking. Should have left it to its hunting or whatever herons did at night in shallow water. But something about the moment held him. The silence. The moonlight. The way the bird seemed completely unconcerned by his presence, neither threatened nor interested, just... aware.

So he stayed.

Leaned against the railing. Looked back.

Minutes passed. Five, maybe. Then ten. The heron didn't move except for the occasional slow blink. He didn't move either. The water lapped quietly against the posts of the promenade. Somewhere across the bay, a dog barked. The sound carried across the water, clear and then gone.

It occurred to him that this was absurd. He was standing in the cold, staring at a bird, and the bird was staring back, and nothing was happening. There was no purpose to it, no goal, no outcome. Just two living things, acknowledging each other's existence in the dark.

And yet it didn't feel absurd. It felt... necessary, somehow.

The heron was perfectly still in a way humans almost never achieved. No fidgeting, no restlessness, no checking of phones or adjustment of position. Just absolute presence. It existed in this moment completely, without apparent thought for the moment before or after.

He envied that.

His whole life was lived in the gaps—thinking about what he should have said earlier, planning what he'd say next, half-present in any given moment because part of him was always somewhere else. Even his friendships, such as they were, existed partly in the past (memories of better times) and partly in the future (intentions to reach out, plans to reconnect). Rarely in the actual now.

But the heron was only now. Only this. Standing in cold water under moonlight, looking at a man on a promenade.

Fifteen minutes. He checked his watch once, carefully, not wanting sudden movement. Fifteen minutes of mutual observation. It should have been boring. It wasn't.

There was something about being *seen* by something that had no agenda. The heron wasn't judging him, wasn't forming opinions, wasn't deciding whether he was worth its time or energy. It was just seeing him, the same way it saw the water and the moon and the posts of the promenade. He was part of the landscape of its night.

When was the last time a person had looked at him that way? Without assessment, without the social calculation of what this interaction meant or required? Even Maria, friendly as she was, was still engaged in the human dance of personality and presentation. But the heron was outside all that. It had no interest in who he was or what he represented. Just that he was.

Twenty minutes.

His legs were getting stiff from standing still. The cold was working its way through his jacket. He should go. He knew he should go. But breaking this felt like breaking something important, and he didn't know when or if it would happen again.

The heron shifted its weight, just slightly. One foot to the other. The movement was so economical, so perfectly calibrated, that barely a ripple disturbed the water.

And then, with no apparent trigger, no sound or movement that he could detect, it unfolded. That's the only word for it—unfolded. Wings spreading in a motion so graceful it seemed choreographed, legs extending, the whole bird lifting from the water in complete silence except for the soft sound of drops falling from its feet.

It flew low across the bay, following the shoreline, white in the moonlight, and then it was gone around the curve of the land.

He stood there for another minute, looking at the space where it had been. The water was already still again, giving no evidence that anything had stood there. Just dark water and moonlight and the distant yellow squares of other people's lives.

But something had happened. Something he couldn't quite name.

It wasn't connection, exactly—he and the heron hadn't connected in any meaningful way. They'd simply... coexisted. Witnessed each other. Been present in the same moment without asking anything of each other.

Maybe that was its own kind of connection. Not the building of relationship, not the exchange of information or emotion, but just the acknowledgment: I see you. You see me. We're both here.

No performance. No documentation. No one would ever know this had happened except him. The heron certainly wouldn't tell anyone.

He smiled at that.

When he finally turned to walk back, he looked up at the night sky. The stars were extraordinary out here, away from town lights. Thousands of them. Millions, probably, if he could see the ones too faint for his eyes. Each one a sun, possibly with planets, possibly with life looking back.

He wondered if somewhere out there, someone else was having their own version of this moment. Not with a heron, maybe, but with something else. Some other instance of unexpected presence. Standing on their own beach—literal or metaphorical—being seen by something that asked nothing of them.

Other distant campfires.

Not the human kind this time, but the cosmic kind. Points of light scattered across impossible distances, each one possibly harboring someone looking up at their own sky, feeling their own version of alone, their own version of connected.

The light from those stars had been traveling for years—decades, centuries, millennia. It had crossed inconceivable distances to reach his eyes. And in reaching his eyes, it created a connection, however tenuous. He was seeing something that had happened unimaginably far away and long ago.

Distance and connection, always both at once.

Like the heron, standing twenty feet away but somehow present in a way that most of his actual friends weren't. Like the teenager on the jetty, a stranger who'd articulated his own loneliness better than he could. Like Maria in her trailer, a fixture in his days now despite the fact that he knew almost nothing about her life.

Like the lights across the bay—people he'd never meet, living lives he'd never know, but somehow companions in the dark.

He thought about his phone, sitting in his pocket. He could pull it out right now, photograph the bay, the moonlight, the place where the heron had been. He could post it with some caption about solitude or nature or the peace of winter beaches. His 847 friends could like it. Some might comment. It would be documented, shared, part of the ongoing performance of his life.

But he didn't.

He let it stay what it was. Twenty minutes with a heron. A private moment of presence. No audience required.

Just this.

The walk back was long and cold, but he didn't mind. His footsteps on the wooden promenade, then on sand, then on pavement as he headed toward town. The sound of the bay behind him, then the ocean. Maria's trailer, dark now, closed for the night. The jetty, empty.

When he got home—his rented room above the bait shop—he made tea, stood at the window looking out at the dark ocean. Somewhere out there, the heron was probably still hunting, or roosting, or doing whatever herons did with their nights. It wouldn't remember him. Wouldn't think about their twenty minutes together.

But he would.

Not because it meant something profound, necessarily. But because for twenty minutes, he'd been perfectly present. Not performing, not documenting, not thinking about what came before or after. Just there, being seen, seeing back.

In a life increasingly lived at a distance—from himself, from others, from the actual texture of experience—twenty minutes of pure presence felt like a gift.

The tea cooled in his hands. The ocean kept its rhythm. The stars kept their distant vigil.

And somewhere in the shallow water of the bay, perhaps another heron stood, perfectly still, waiting for whatever would come next.

Or perhaps not waiting. Perhaps just being.

He could learn from that.

Maria's Daughter.

She appeared on a Tuesday, maybe Wednesday—time had started to blur together in that way it does when your days don't have structure, when one beach walk bleeds into the next.

He was at the trailer, waiting for his tea, when he heard the voice.

"Mommy, can I have the purple cup?"

He looked down. A small girl, maybe five or six, had emerged from behind the trailer. She had Maria's dark hair and something of Maria's practical demeanor, but where Maria moved with the efficiency of someone who'd spent years in the same routine, the girl moved with that particular kinetic energy children have—half bouncing, even when standing still.

"We don't have purple cups, baby," Maria said through the window. "We have white cups."

"But purple is better."

"White is what we have."

The girl considered this, seemed to accept it as a reasonable fact of existence, then noticed him.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

"Do you like the beach?"

"I do."

"Me too. I found seventeen shells yesterday. Want to see?"

Before he could answer, she was digging in the pockets of her jacket, producing a collection of broken shell fragments, beach glass, a piece of driftwood no bigger than her thumb.

"This one's my favorite," she said, holding up a shard of white shell. "It looks like a bird wing."

He took it carefully, examined it. She was right—it did look like a wing, the ridges catching the light.

"That's beautiful," he said.

"You can have it if you want."

The offer was made so simply, so without calculation. Just: I have something, you might like it, here.

"That's very kind," he said, "but I think you should keep it. It's part of your collection."

She shrugged, pocketed the shell, then turned her attention to a gull that had landed nearby. "Do you think birds get lonely?"

The question startled him. "I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"Because that one's always by itself. I see it every time we come here. The other birds are always in groups, but that one's alone."

He looked at the gull—possibly his gull, possibly not. "Maybe it likes being alone."

"Maybe." She didn't sound convinced. "But I wouldn't like it. Being alone is boring."

Maria appeared with his tea, smiled at her daughter. "Lena, stop bothering the man."

"I'm not bothering him. We're talking about birds."

"It's fine," he said. "She's not bothering me."

Lena beamed at this validation, then turned back to him. "Do you have kids?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Lena," Maria said, a warning note in her voice.

"It's okay," he said. Then to Lena: "I guess I just... didn't."

"Oh." She processed this. "My dad didn't want kids either, but then I happened anyway and Mommy says he's missing out."

Maria closed her eyes briefly. "Lena."

"What? You said that."

"Not for public discussion, baby."

Lena seemed unbothered by this correction. She'd already moved on, pointing at something down the beach. "Is that a dog or a seal?"

They all looked. It was definitely a dog.

"Dog," Maria said.

"Can I go see?"

"Stay where I can see you."

And she was off, running toward the dog with that complete unselfconsciousness children have, already calling out "Hi puppy!" even though she was still fifty feet away.

"Sorry about that," Maria said. "She's in a question phase."

"It's fine. Really."

They watched Lena reach the dog—a golden retriever that seemed delighted by the attention—and immediately begin a one-sided conversation with both the dog and its owner.

"She makes friends everywhere," Maria said. There was pride in her voice, but something else too. "Just walks up to people, starts talking. No fear, no... I don't know what you'd call it."

"Self-consciousness?"

"Yeah. That." Maria was quiet for a moment. "I wonder how long that lasts."

He knew what she meant. Lena's ease with connection was beautiful precisely because it was so unconflicted. She wanted to talk to someone, so she talked to them. She wanted to share her shells, so she offered them. She saw a dog and wanted to pet it, so she asked. No calculation, no performance, no anxiety about how she'd be perceived.

Just direct, uncomplicated presence.

"I watch her sometimes," Maria continued, still looking at her daughter, "and I think about what it's going to be like when she's older. When she gets a phone, gets on social media, starts caring about likes and follows and all that stuff."

"Does she have to?" he asked. "Get on social media, I mean?"

Maria shrugged. "Try keeping a teenager off it when all their friends are on it. Try explaining why she's the only one who can't have what everyone else has." She paused. "Her father thinks I'm being overprotective. Says it's just how kids communicate now, no different than us passing notes in class."

"But it is different."

"I know it is. You know it is. But try explaining that to a thirteen-year-old who just wants to be normal."

They watched Lena, who was now throwing a stick for the dog, her laughter carrying across the beach.

"Right now she has three best friends," Maria said. "Real ones. Kids she sees at school, plays with, has sleepovers with. They fight sometimes, make up, fight again. It's messy and complicated and real. And I just..." She stopped, seemed to be choosing her words carefully. "I just wonder if she'll still have that in ten years. Or if she'll have 500 friends she doesn't really know instead."

He didn't have an answer for that.

Lena came running back, breathless. "That dog's name is Captain and he's seven years old and he knows five tricks and his owner says I can visit him anytime because they walk here every day."

"That's wonderful, baby," Maria said.

"Can we get a dog?"

"We've talked about this."

"But I'd take care of it. I'd walk it every day. I'd—"

"Lena."

The girl deflated slightly, but rebounded quickly. She turned to him. "Do you have a dog?"

"No."

"You should get one. Then you wouldn't be lonely."

The observation was delivered without guile, just a simple statement of perceived fact.

"Lena," Maria said, more sharply this time.

"What?"

"You can't just tell people they're lonely."

"But he walks on the beach by himself every day. That seems lonely."

There was a moment of awkward silence. Then he laughed, surprising himself. "You know what? You're probably right."

Lena looked vindicated. Maria looked apologetic. He waved it off.

"Out of the mouths of babes," he said.

A customer pulled up—a van full of contractors taking an early lunch. Maria excused herself to take their order. Lena stayed, looking up at him with those direct, assessing eyes children have.

"Are you sad?" she asked.

"Sometimes. Are you?"

"Sometimes. Like when my best friend Emma said she didn't want to play with me anymore because I wouldn't let her be the princess every time. But then we made up and now we take turns."

"That sounds fair."

"Yeah." She was quiet for a moment, then: "Emma's mom says kids these days don't know how to share. But we do. We share all the time. We just also fight about it."

He smiled. "That sounds about right."

"Do grownups share?"

The question felt heavier than she probably meant it. Did grownups share? Really share—time, attention, vulnerability, the difficult parts of themselves?

"Not as much as they should," he said.

"Why not?"

"I think... maybe because it gets harder as you get older. Scarier."

She thought about this. "That's dumb."

"Yeah," he agreed. "It kind of is."

Maria finished with the contractors, came back to where they stood. "Lena, go wash your hands. They're covered in sand."

"They're always covered in sand. We live at the beach."

"And yet you still need to wash them. Go."

Lena went, but slowly, making her protest known through the deliberateness of her movements.

"Sorry," Maria said again. "She's very... direct."

"She's wonderful."

"She is." Maria's voice was soft. "I just hope she stays that way."

He understood. Lena was existing in a brief window—old enough to be a real person with thoughts and opinions, young enough to be unguarded about them. In a few years, maybe less, she'd learn to curate herself. To think about how she was perceived. To perform rather than just be.

Maybe not. Maybe she'd be one of the lucky ones who kept that directness, that ease with genuine connection. But the world didn't make it easy. The tools she'd inherit—the phones, the apps, the constant demand to document and share and perform—they all pushed in the other direction.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I think you're doing something right. The fact that she can just walk up to strangers and start conversations, share her shells, ask uncomfortable questions—that's rare. Even now. Especially now."

"She gets it from her grandmother," Maria said. "My mother was like that. Never met a stranger. Would talk to anyone, anywhere. Drove my father crazy, but she made friends everywhere we went."

"Past tense?"

"She died two years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too." Maria was quiet for a moment. "She would have loved this. Me running a tea trailer on a beach, Lena growing up with sand in her shoes. She always said the best things in life were simple. A good conversation, a shared meal, time with people you loved."

"She sounds wise."

"She was." Maria smiled. "Also stubborn as hell and completely incapable of using a computer. Refused to get on Facebook, said if people wanted to know what she was doing they could call her or come visit."

"Did they?"

"Yeah. They did. She had more real friends than anyone I've ever known. People who showed up. People who cared."

Lena came back, hands still sandy despite her alleged washing. "Mommy, can I show him my rock collection?"

"He probably needs to go, baby."

"Actually," he said, "I'd love to see your rock collection."

Lena's face lit up. She grabbed his hand unselfconsciously and started pulling him toward the trailer. "They're in the back. I have forty-three rocks. Well, forty-four if you count the one that might be a rock or might be concrete, I can't tell."

He let himself be pulled, this small hand in his, this tiny person who still believed that sharing your treasures with strangers was a natural thing to do.

Maria watched them go, and when he glanced back, she was smiling. But there was something sad in it too. The smile of someone who knew how brief this window was, how quickly the world would complicate what was currently so simple.

The rocks were, as promised, mostly just rocks. But Lena described each one with such earnest specificity—where she'd found it, what she liked about it, what it reminded her of—that they became, briefly, the most important rocks in the world.

"This one looks like a heart," she said, holding up a smooth gray stone. "So I keep it in my pocket on days when I'm sad."

"Does it help?"

"I think so. It's nice to have something to hold onto."

Yes, he thought. It is.

When he finally left, Lena waved goodbye like they'd known each other for years. "Come back tomorrow! I might find more shells!"

"I'll try," he said.

Walking back down the beach, he thought about her. About the ease with which she'd offered her favorite shell, shared her rocks, asked difficult questions. About the way she'd noticed the solitary gull and wondered if it was lonely. About how she'd diagnosed his own loneliness in a single glance and offered a simple solution: get a dog.

She was six years old and she understood something fundamental about connection that most adults had forgotten: it required vulnerability. The willingness to be direct, to risk rejection, to offer something of yourself without knowing if it would be accepted.

In ten years, would she still have that? Or would she have learned to protect herself, to perform, to maintain the careful distance that passed for friendship now?

He didn't know. Nobody did. The experiment was still running—a whole generation growing up with tools designed to connect them while somehow making genuine connection harder.

But watching Lena, he felt something he hadn't felt much lately: hope.

Not certainty. Not confidence that everything would be fine. Just... hope. That maybe some kids would keep their directness. That maybe some parents, like Maria, would fight to preserve something real against the tide of performance. That maybe the pendulum would swing back, eventually, toward presence.

A heart-shaped rock in your pocket on sad days.

Something to hold onto.

It wasn't much. But right now, walking this beach with the wind in his face and the memory of a small hand in his, it felt like enough.

Storm.

The weather alert came through on his phone at 6am—the one notification he hadn't silenced. Nor'easter approaching. Severe coastal flooding possible. High winds expected. Residents advised to stay indoors.

He looked out the window of his room above the bait shop. The sky was still dark, but he could see the ocean had changed. The waves were bigger, angrier, the spray catching what little light there was.

Maria's trailer would be closed today. The beach would be impassable. He was stuck inside.

For the first time since arriving in Montauk, he had nowhere to walk to. Nothing to do. Just his small room, his thoughts, and—he realized with something like dread—his phone.

By 9am the storm had arrived in earnest. Wind rattled the windows. Rain came in sheets, horizontal, driven by gusts that shook the building. The ocean was invisible behind a wall of gray.

He made tea with the electric kettle on the dresser. Sat on the bed. Looked around the small room that had been his refuge for two weeks.

Without the beach to walk, without Maria's trailer to visit, without the rhythm of his days, the room felt smaller. Oppressive, almost.

His phone sat on the nightstand, dark and silent.

He'd been so good about ignoring it. Checking it once a day, maybe, just to make sure nothing urgent had happened. But otherwise leaving it alone, letting the silence be silence.

But now, trapped inside with nothing to do, the pull was stronger.

Just a quick check. Just to see what was happening in the world. What was the harm?

He picked it up.

The first few minutes were fine. Messages from his sister, checking if he was okay in the storm. A work email that could wait. Nothing urgent.

Then, almost without meaning to, he opened Instagram.

The feed loaded. And suddenly he was back in it.

Someone's engagement announcement—the photo carefully staged, the ring prominently displayed, 243 likes already.

A former coworker's vacation photos from somewhere tropical and warm. Sun, beach, cocktails. Everything Montauk wasn't.

A think piece someone had shared about productivity and self-optimization.

A meme about anxiety that was supposed to be funny but just felt true.

Political outrage about something he'd successfully avoided thinking about for two weeks.

An influencer he didn't remember following, selling something he didn't need.

He scrolled. And scrolled. And scrolled.

The storm raged outside but he barely noticed. He was back in the other world. The world of constant updates, constant comparison, constant low-level anxiety about what everyone else was doing and whether he was missing something.

An hour passed. Then two.

He checked Facebook. Twitter. LinkedIn. Back to Instagram. The circuit of apps that used to consume hours of his day without him noticing.

And the feeling came back. That hollow feeling. The sense of being connected to everything and nothing at the same time. Of seeing hundreds of people's lives without being part of any of them.

The distant campfires, all glowing on his screen.

He looked at his own profile. His last post was from before he left—a photo of coffee, some caption about needing a break. Thirty-seven likes. Eight comments, all variations of 'enjoy!' and 'you deserve it!'.

Should he post something from Montauk? Let people know he was okay? The storm would make a dramatic photo, if he could get a good angle.

He actually got up, went to the window, framed a shot of the storm-dark beach.

Then stopped.

What was he doing?

He'd come here to escape this. The performance. The documentation. The constant translation of lived experience into content.

The storm was real. It was happening outside his window. It was keeping him inside, forcing him into stillness, into himself.

And his first instinct was to photograph it. To caption it. To share it. To turn it into engagement.

He put the phone down.

Sat back on the bed.

The withdrawal was physical. His hand kept reaching for the phone. His brain kept suggesting reasons to check it—maybe someone had messaged, maybe something important had happened, maybe just one more quick look.

This was the addiction he'd been avoiding for two weeks. And two hours back in it had him hooked again.

The rain intensified. The wind howled. The building creaked and groaned.

He tried to read. Picked up the Henry Miller, managed a few pages, but couldn't concentrate. The phone kept calling to him.

He tried to write—pulled out his notebook, thought about documenting his thoughts about the beach, the people he'd met, the things he'd been learning.

But the words wouldn't come. His brain was fragmented, scattered, still half-engaged with the dozen conversations and posts and updates he'd just scrolled through.

This was what it did to you. The constant connectivity. It fractured your attention, made deep focus impossible, kept you always half-present, always waiting for the next notification, the next update, the next hit of engagement.

He'd forgotten how bad it was. Two weeks of silence had let him remember what focus felt like. What presence felt like.

And two hours back in the feeds had shattered it.

Around 2pm, the power went out.

The lights died. The small heater stopped humming. The room went dark except for the gray storm light through the window.

And his phone, glowing in his hand.

He looked at it. The battery was at 47%. He should save it, probably. In case of emergency.

But the feeds were still there. Still calling.

He compromised with himself—he'd check one more time, then put it away. Just to make sure nothing urgent had come through.

The feed loaded. More of the same. Different people, same performance. Different photos, same careful curation.

A friend (acquaintance?) announcing a job promotion. Good for them. He should comment, probably. Say congratulations. That's what you did.

He typed: "Congrats!" Added a thumbs up emoji. Sent it.

There. He'd participated. He'd maintained the connection.

Except it wasn't connection. It was performance maintenance. He didn't actually care about this person's promotion. Didn't know them well enough to care. But the social contract required acknowledgment, so he acknowledged.

And they'd do the same when he posted something. The mutual performance of caring, without actual care underneath.

He closed the app.

Put the phone face-down on the bed.

Sat in the dark room with the storm outside and thought about what just happened.

He'd failed. That's what it felt like. He'd made it two weeks, and one enforced day inside had broken him. Sent him right back to the old patterns. The scrolling, the comparing, the performing.

The feeds were designed for this, he knew. Designed to be addictive. Designed to keep you coming back. Designed to make you feel like you were missing something if you weren't constantly checking.

And they worked. God, they worked.

Even knowing it was manipulation, even understanding the mechanisms, even having spent two weeks proving he could live without it—two hours of access and he was hooked again.

What did that mean for going home? For returning to his real life, where the phone was always available, where the feeds were always calling, where everyone expected you to be present and responsive and engaged?

Could he maintain what he'd found here? The clarity, the presence, the focus on real connection over performed connection?

Or would he slip back into the old patterns within days, within hours, the moment he stepped off the train at Penn Station?

The thought was depressing.

The storm continued into evening. The power stayed out. The room grew cold.

He wrapped himself in blankets, sat by the window, watched the violence of wind and water.

And thought about Maria's daughter. Lena, with her shells and her easy friendships and her uncomplicated presence.

She'd grow up with all of this. The phones, the feeds, the constant performance. She'd probably get her first device in a few years. Would be on Instagram by middle school. Would learn, like everyone else, to curate herself, to document instead of experience, to maintain hundreds of shallow connections instead of a few deep ones.

Unless someone taught her differently. Unless Maria fought for her attention. Unless she somehow learned that the phone was optional, that the performance was optional, that real life happened in the spaces between posts.

But how? How did you teach that to a kid when every other kid had a phone? When social life happened on screens? When opting out meant isolation?

He didn't know. Didn't have kids, didn't have answers.

But sitting in the dark, wrapped in blankets, watching the storm, he felt something like determination.

He couldn't save Lena from the feeds. Couldn't save the teenager from her 847 friendships. Couldn't save anyone but himself.

But he could save himself.

Could make different choices. Could be more intentional. Could fight for his own attention, his own presence, his own actual life.

It wouldn't be easy. Today had proven that. The pull was strong. The habits were deep. The addiction was real.

But it was possible.

The storm would end. The power would come back. Tomorrow he'd walk to Maria's trailer, get tea, be present with an actual human being instead of scrolling through representations of human beings.

He'd choose proximity over distance. Warmth over the promise of warmth. Real conversation over the performance of conversation.

Not perfectly. He'd fail sometimes, like he'd failed today. Would pick up his phone when he shouldn't, would scroll when he could be present, would maintain the fiction of his 847 friendships because it was easier than confronting the truth.

But he'd try. Would keep trying.

Would remember what these two weeks had taught him: that life happened in presence, not in documentation. That connection required vulnerability, not curation. That seven real friends were worth more than 840 strangers.

The power came back around 9pm. The lights flickered on. The heater resumed its hum.

His phone was at 31% battery. He plugged it in. Turned it face-down. Left it charging on the dresser.

Tomorrow the storm would be over. The beach would be scattered with debris—driftwood, seaweed, maybe shells for Lena to collect. The sky would clear. Maria would open her trailer.

And he'd walk to her, get his tea, be present.

Today had been a setback. A reminder of how strong the pull was, how easy it was to slip back into old patterns.

But it had also been a gift. A preview of what waited for him back home. A warning about how hard the fight would be.

He was grateful for it. For the storm that trapped him inside, for the phone that called to him, for the failure that reminded him what was at stake.

Because now he knew. Knew what he was up against. Knew that good intentions wouldn't be enough, that awareness wasn't sufficient, that he'd have to actively choose, every day, every hour, presence over performance.

The storm outside was fading. The wind dropping. The rain easing to a steady patter.

Inside, he made tea, wrapped in blankets, and read Henry Miller by lamplight.

The ghost didn't appear tonight. But he didn't need it to.

He knew what Miller would say: *Stop performing. Start living. It's that simple and that hard.*

Tomorrow he'd try again.

And again after that.

And again.

For as long as it took to learn how to be actually present in his actual life.

The phone glowed on the dresser, charging, waiting.

He left it there.

Turned the page.

Read.

The storm passed.

And he remained.

Stranger.

He saw him again on day sixteen.

The first time—that initial passing on the beach, the brief nod of acknowledgment—had stayed with him more than it probably should have. Two people walking in opposite directions, a moment of eye contact, the small gesture that said *I see you, we're both here*. Then continuing on their separate paths, the distance between them growing until they were just shapes in the periphery, then nothing at all.

He'd thought about it more than once. That encounter. How it had felt both significant and utterly mundane. Connection and separation in the same moment.

And now, two weeks later, here was the man again.

Same stretch of beach. Same gray morning light. Same wind coming off the water. The man was walking north, hands in jacket pockets, head slightly bowed. The same posture as before, or close enough.

Recognition happened simultaneously. He saw it in the other man's face—that flicker of *I know you* followed immediately by the question: *Do we acknowledge this?*

They were maybe thirty feet apart. Closing distance. Decision time.

The social calculus was complicated. They'd nodded once, two weeks ago. Did that create an obligation to nod again? Or would nodding again imply they were becoming... what? Acquaintances? Beach friends? Was that escalation welcome or intrusive?

It would be easier to look away. Pretend not to notice. Let the moment pass as if they were strangers again.

Twenty feet.

The man's eyes met his. Held for a beat longer than strangers' eyes should.

Then—almost reluctantly, as if both of them were acknowledging the absurdity of the social contract they were navigating—they both smiled.

Small smiles. Self-conscious. But real.

"Hey," the man said as they passed.

"Hey."

That was it. One word each. They continued walking in opposite directions.

But something had shifted.

He walked another hundred yards before stopping, looking back. The man was still visible, a dark figure against the pale sand, getting smaller with distance.

They'd done it. Escalated. Moved from one nod to a second acknowledgment to actual words. The thinnest possible thread of connection, but a thread nonetheless.

And now what? If they passed again tomorrow, would they have to stop and talk? Was there an obligation now? Had they started something that required follow-through?

He didn't know.

What he did know was that the "hey" had felt good. Natural, even through the awkwardness. A small choice to acknowledge rather than ignore, to build rather than maintain distance.

It was such a tiny thing. One word. But in a world where he walked past hundreds of people every day in the city without ever making eye contact, where his 847 friends existed mostly as profile pictures and status updates, this felt different.

This was choosing connection.

Not much. Not friendship. Just... acknowledgment. The decision to see another person and let yourself be seen.

Three days later, it happened again.

This time on the jetty. He'd walked out to the end, was standing there looking at the water, when he heard footsteps on the weathered boards behind him.

The stranger.

They both laughed—a startled, genuine sound.

"Okay, this is getting weird," the man said.

"Right?"

"I'm starting to think you're following me."

"Or you're following me."

"Or we're both following the same depressing urge to stand on a jetty in January staring at cold water."

"That's probably it."

The man came to stand a few feet away, both of them facing out toward the bay. Not quite together, but not separate either.

Silence. Not uncomfortable, but weighted with the question of whether they were supposed to say more.

Finally the man said, "I'm David."

"Nice to meet you, David."

"You visiting?"

"For a few weeks. You?"

"I live about twenty minutes from here. Come to the beach most mornings. Helps me think."

"Same. The thinking part, I mean. Not the living here part."

David nodded. More silence. Then: "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Do you find it strange that we're having this conversation? Like, we've passed each other a few times, and now we're introducing ourselves, and it feels both completely normal and kind of absurd?"

He laughed. "Yes. Exactly that."

"Because I was thinking about it after we passed the other day. In any other context—a coffee shop, an office, a party—if you saw the same person multiple times, you'd introduce yourself. You'd talk. It would be weird *not* to. But on a beach, or in a city, we have this whole different set of rules. We're allowed to be invisible to each other."

"Encouraged to be, even."

"Right. Like acknowledging each other is somehow intrusive. But ignoring each other is polite."

"The social contract of strangers."

"Yeah." David was quiet for a moment. "I've been thinking about that a lot lately. How we're all so careful to maintain distance. How we've built all these rules to keep us separate, even when we're physically close."

"Is that why you're out here? Thinking about that?"

"Among other things." David glanced at him. "You?"

He thought about how to answer. How much to share with this person who was still mostly a stranger, despite the conversation.

"Yeah," he said finally. "Among other things."

They stood there together, looking at the water. A fishing boat moved across the horizon. The wind picked up, carrying the smell of salt and cold.

"This is nice," David said.

"What is?"

"This. Talking to someone without knowing anything about them. No context, no history, no mutual friends or shared connections. Just... two people on a jetty."

"No performance."

"Exactly." David turned to look at him more directly. "You get that."

"I get that."

More silence. Comfortable now. Two strangers who'd somehow stumbled into something real, even if it was small and temporary.

Finally David said, "I should get going. Got a meeting at eleven."

"Yeah, I should walk back too."

They turned, started walking off the jetty together. When they reached the beach, there was a moment of decision—split up or continue together?

"Which way are you headed?" David asked.

"South."

"I'm north. So." He paused. "This is where we part ways."

"Yeah."

Another awkward beat. Then David extended his hand. "It was good talking to you."

He shook it. "You too."

"Maybe I'll see you around."

"Probably. Apparently we haunt the same beaches."

David smiled. "Apparently."

And then they were walking in opposite directions again. Same as the first time, same as always. Distance growing, two separate paths, two separate lives.

But different too. Because now they had names. Had shared a conversation. Had chosen, multiple times, to acknowledge rather than ignore.

He thought about David as he walked. About the strangeness of connection in the modern age. How you could know everything about someone's life through social media—what they ate for breakfast, where they went on vacation, what they thought about current events—without actually knowing them at all. And how you could know almost nothing about someone—a name, a preference for January beaches, a shared tendency to overthink the social contract of strangers—and somehow feel more connected.

What made David feel real in a way his 847 friends didn't?

Presence, maybe. Physical proximity. The fact that they'd been in the same place at the same time, breathing the same cold air, looking at the same water.

Or maybe it was the lack of agenda. David didn't want anything from him. Wasn't trying to network or impress or perform. Just talking because they were both there and talking felt better than not talking.

Or maybe it was simply that the connection was chosen rather than default. They could have ignored each other. Should have, according to the unspoken rules. But they'd chosen to acknowledge, to escalate, to risk the awkwardness of conversation with a stranger.

And it had been fine. Better than fine.

He didn't see David again for several days. Started to wonder if he would, or if that had been it—a brief intersection of paths, a moment of connection, now over.

Then, on day twenty—his second-to-last day in Montauk—there he was again.

Coming out of Maria's trailer with a cup of coffee.

They both stopped, laughed.

"Okay, this is definitely weird now," David said.

"You know Maria?"

"I live here, remember? Everyone knows Maria. She's been making adequate tea and questionable coffee for fifteen years."

"The coffee's questionable?"

"Objectively terrible. But she keeps trying, which is admirable." David sipped it, made a face. "Today's batch is particularly rough."

Maria appeared at the window. "I can hear you."

"I know. I'm providing feedback."

"Feedback would be 'needs more sugar.' What you're providing is abuse."

"Fine. It needs less coffee grounds and more actual coffee."

"I'll take that under advisement." She looked at him. "You know this guy?"

"We've met. On the beach."

"Small world," Maria said. "Or small beach, anyway."

David turned back to him. "You want to walk? I've got an hour before I need to be anywhere."

It should have been a simple question. But it felt weighted. An invitation to extend this thing, whatever it was. To choose connection again.

"Sure," he said. "Yeah, let's walk."

They walked south together, past the jetty where they'd talked, past the place where they'd first nodded to each other. The conversation was easier now. David told him about his work—something with software, remote, which is why he could live out here. About moving to Montauk five years ago after a divorce, needing space and quiet.

"Everyone thought I was crazy," David said. "Leaving the city, leaving my whole life. But I just... needed to not be performing anymore, you know? In the city, everything's about the hustle, the network, being on. Out here, I can just... be."

"That's why I came. For a few weeks, anyway."

"Running from something or looking for something?"

He smiled. "Someone else asked me that. I said both."

"Good answer."

They reached the place where the beach curved, where he usually turned back. David stopped.

"This is where I turn around," David said.

"Me too, usually."

They stood there, two men who'd been strangers two weeks ago, were maybe friends now, or maybe just friendly strangers, the categories unclear.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," he said.

"Back to the city?"

"Yeah. Back to real life."

"This is real life too."

"I know. But you know what I mean."

David nodded. "I do." He was quiet for a moment. "Can I tell you something?"

"Sure."

"These conversations—the ones we've had—they've been good for me. Reminder that you can still just talk to people. Without agenda, without trying to get something. Just... talk."

"Yeah. Same."

"So thank you. For not pretending you didn't see me that first time. For escalating." David smiled. "For being weird enough to think the social contract of strangers is worth questioning."

"Thank you for the same."

They shook hands again. Held it a beat longer than necessary.

"If you're ever back out here," David said.

"I'll look for you on the beach."

"I'll be the guy walking alone, thinking too much."

"Perfect. I'll recognize you immediately."

They parted. David walking north, him walking south. The distance growing between them.

But this time it felt different. Not like separation, exactly. More like... two people going about their lives, carrying something small but real from their encounter.

That night, packing his bag in the room above the bait shop, he thought about David. About their strange, accidental friendship. About the fact that he knew almost nothing about David's actual life—didn't have his phone number, his social media, his last name even—but somehow felt more connected to him than to most of his 847 friends.

Because they'd chosen each other. Not algorithmically, not through mutual friends or shared networks, but through the simple repeated choice to acknowledge rather than ignore.

Because they'd been present. Physically there, in the same moment, sharing the same cold air and gray light.

Because neither of them wanted anything from the other except conversation.

It was the kind of connection his grandmother would have recognized. The old kind. Two people who happened to be in the same place at the same time, who chose to see each other instead of looking away.

No maintenance required. No performance necessary. Just presence.

He put Lena's shell in his pocket—the one she'd given him 'for remembering'.

He'd remember David too. The stranger who wasn't a stranger. The person who'd reminded him that connection was still possible, if you were brave enough to risk the awkwardness of acknowledgment.

Tomorrow he'd take the train back to Penn Station. Back to his 847 friends. Back to the performance.

But he'd carry this with him. The memory of choosing connection. Of saying 'hey' instead of looking away. Of asking someone's name instead of maintaining the polite fiction of invisibility.

Small things. Insufficient things.

But real.

And right now, on his last night in Montauk, real felt like enough.

Bonfire.

He smelled it before he saw it—woodsmoke carried on the wind, that ancient scent that triggered something primal. Warmth. Safety. Gathering.

It was late afternoon on day eighteen, the light already fading. He'd walked farther down the beach than usual, past his normal turnaround point, following nothing in particular except restlessness.

And there it was. A bonfire, built in a shallow pit someone had dug in the sand. Substantial—good-sized logs arranged in a pyramid, flames climbing six feet high, sparks rising into the dimming sky.

No one around. Just the fire, burning alone on the empty beach.

He stood twenty feet away, watching it. Feeling the heat even at this distance, seeing the way the flames moved and shifted, hearing the crackle and pop of burning wood.

Someone had built this. Recently—the fire was too strong to have been burning long. They'd gathered driftwood, arranged it carefully, lit it, tended it. And then... left? Gone to get more wood? Gone for supplies?

He waited. Five minutes. Ten.

No one came.

The fire kept burning.

He moved closer. Then closer still. Until he was standing right at the edge of the warmth, hands extended toward the flames.

God, it felt good. The heat on his face, his hands, soaking into his cold body. Real warmth, not the distant promise of it. Not a light across the bay or a glow in a window. Actual, physical warmth that he could feel.

This was what he'd been missing. This was what all those distant campfires represented but couldn't provide.

He sat down in the sand, close enough to feel the full force of the heat. Watched the flames dance and shift. Let the warmth sink in.

And felt, for the first time in weeks, not alone.

Not because anyone was there. The beach was still empty, the fire still unattended.

But because someone had built this. Someone had gathered wood and arranged it and lit it and created this warmth. And even though they weren't here now, their effort remained. Their gift—intentional or not—was here for him to receive.

The fire asked nothing of him. Didn't need him to perform or curate or maintain anything. Just offered its warmth freely, to whoever showed up.

He thought about his distant campfires. His 847 friends, glowing on screens, visible but not warming. How many times had he scrolled past their posts, double-tapped their photos, maintained the fiction of connection without ever feeling this?

This warmth. This presence. This simple, uncomplicated gift of heat and light.

The difference was proximity. And choice. And risk.

Building a fire required effort. Gathering wood, arranging it, tending it. You couldn't do it halfway. You couldn't perform fire-building and get warmth. You had to actually do it.

And sitting at someone's fire required vulnerability. You had to leave your phone in your pocket, extend your cold hands toward the flames, accept warmth from a stranger's effort.

You had to be present.

He pulled out his phone—habit—then stopped. Put it back. The fire deserved his full attention. This moment deserved to be experienced, not documented.

The sun was setting now, the sky turning orange and purple behind him. The fire burned brighter as the natural light faded, becoming the primary source of illumination on this stretch of beach.

He wondered who had built it. Why they'd left. Whether they'd come back.

And realized it didn't matter.

The fire was here. He was here. That was enough.

This was what real connection felt like, he thought. Not the distant acknowledgment of someone's existence on a screen. Not the careful exchange of likes and comments. But this—proximity, warmth, presence. The willingness to be vulnerable enough to accept a gift. The courage to sit down at someone's fire and let yourself be warmed.

He'd been so careful for so long. Maintaining distance. Keeping everyone at arm's length. Building walls that looked like connection but were really protection.

And he'd been freezing. Slowly. Without realizing it.

Surrounded by distant lights that promised warmth but delivered none.

But this fire—someone else's fire, built by hands he'd never see, tended by someone who'd moved on—this fire was warming him. Actually warming him.

Because he'd chosen to sit down. To stop walking. To accept what was being offered.

Movement in his peripheral vision. He turned.

A figure approaching from down the beach. Man, maybe sixty, carrying an armful of driftwood.

"Hey," the man called out as he got closer. "You're welcome to stay. Just went to get more wood."

"Thanks. I hope it's okay that I—"

"Of course. That's what it's for." The man dropped the wood near the fire, added a few pieces. "Can't have a beach fire without sharing it. That's the whole point."

"You built this?"

"Yeah. Do it most clear evenings. Something about a fire on a beach, you know? Feels right."

"It does."

The man sat down on the opposite side of the fire. Not close—respecting space—but close enough to talk if they wanted to.

"You visiting?" the man asked.

"For a few weeks. You?"

"I live here. Year-round. Retired last year, moved out from the city. Best decision I ever made."

They sat in comfortable silence. The fire crackled between them.

"I used to think I needed a lot of people," the man said after a while. "Big social circle, lots of friends, always something going on. Then I moved out here and realized I was happier with less. Less noise. Less performance. Just... this." He gestured at the fire, the beach, the evening sky.

"Do you get lonely?"

"Sometimes. But there's a difference between being alone and being lonely. Out here, I'm alone a lot. But I'm not lonely. In the city, surrounded by millions of people, I was lonely all the time."

"Because you weren't actually connected to any of them."

"Exactly." The man poked at the fire with a stick. "Now I have maybe a dozen people I actually know. Actually talk to. It's enough. More than enough."

They watched the fire together. Two strangers, sharing warmth, not needing to fill the silence with performance or small talk.

This, he thought. This is what I've been looking for.

Not hundreds of connections. Not the performance of sociability. Just... this. The simple act of sitting at a fire with another human being. Present. Warm. Real.

"You're welcome to come by anytime," the man said eventually. "I build a fire most nights around this time, weather permitting. No obligation, no expectations. Just warmth and company if you want it."

"Thank you."

"Thank you for sitting. Fire's lonely without someone to share it with."

The man added more wood, tended the flames. They sat until full dark, until the stars came out, until the cold became too much even with the fire.

When he finally stood to leave, his hands and face still warm from the flames, he felt different. Lighter. More hopeful.

He'd spent weeks thinking about distant campfires. About lights that couldn't warm you. About the loneliness of connection without presence.

But here, on this beach, a stranger had built a fire and invited him to sit. Had offered warmth without asking anything in return. Had reminded him that real connection was still possible—it just required proximity, vulnerability, and the willingness to actually show up.

Not to perform showing up. To actually do it.

The fire would burn for another hour or two, the man said, before the ocean breeze knocked it down to coals. And tomorrow evening, if the weather held, he'd build another one.

Same place. Same time. Same invitation to anyone who walked by.

A light in the darkness. But not a distant one.

A real fire. Offering real warmth. To anyone brave enough to sit down.

He walked back along the dark beach, the warmth still in his hands and face, the smell of woodsmoke in his clothes.

And for the first time since arriving in Montauk, he felt like he understood what he'd been looking for.

Not a solution to loneliness. Not a formula for connection.

Just the willingness to sit at fires people built. And maybe, eventually, the courage to build some of his own.

To offer warmth instead of just seeking it.

To create spaces where people could be present with each other.

To stop performing and start actually showing up.

It was that simple. And that hard.

But tonight, warmed by a stranger's fire, it felt possible.

More than possible.

It felt like the beginning of something real.

Night Sky.

He'd never been good with constellations.

His father had tried to teach him once, when he was maybe ten. They'd gone camping upstate—just the two of them, one of those father-son bonding attempts that his mother had probably orchestrated. His father had pointed at the sky with a flashlight, tracing invisible lines between stars, naming things: Orion, Cassiopeia, the Big Dipper.

He'd nodded, pretended to see what his father saw. But really it had all just looked like scattered points of light. Random. Meaningless. He couldn't make the shapes, couldn't see the bears or hunters or queens. Just stars.

His father had been disappointed, though he'd tried to hide it. They'd gone back to the tent soon after, and his father had never tried again.

Now, thirty-three years later, he was lying on his back on a Montauk beach at 2am, looking up at more stars than he'd seen in years, still not knowing any of their names.

But it didn't matter anymore.

He'd come out here on impulse—woken up in his room above the bait shop, restless, unable to sleep. The thoughts circling again. Connection, distance, the 847 friends, the weight of it all. Instead of lying there spinning, he'd pulled on clothes and walked to the beach.

The sky had stopped him cold.

In the city, you forgot about stars. Light pollution bleached the sky to a pale orange-gray, and if you saw a few points of light you counted yourself lucky. But here, away from everything, the sky was *full*. Thousands of stars, maybe millions, a density of light that looked almost fake, like someone had spilled glitter across black velvet.

He'd stood staring up for a full minute before the neck strain forced him to lie down.

Now, flat on his back on cold sand, he just looked.

The universe, spread out above him. Incomprehensibly vast. Incomprehensibly old.

Each point of light was a sun. Some of them bigger than Earth's sun, some smaller. Some of them already dead, their light still traveling toward him across distances he couldn't even conceptualize. Some of them possibly surrounded by planets. Some of those planets possibly harboring life.

Other people, maybe. Other beings. Looking up at their own sky, seeing their own scatter of distant lights, feeling their own version of small.

The thought should have been crushing. Should have made him feel insignificant, meaningless, a brief flicker of consciousness on a small rock orbiting an average star in an unremarkable galaxy among billions of galaxies.

But it didn't.

Instead, he felt... connected.

Not to anything in particular. Just connected. Part of something larger. One small point of consciousness in a universe full of consciousness, or at least full of the potential for it.

All of it looking up. All of it wondering. All of it trying to make sense of the darkness and the distance and the incomprehensible scale of everything.

He thought about the teenager on the jetty, carrying her 847 friends and her loneliness. About Maria in her trailer, making adequate tea. About David, walking beaches and thinking too much. About Lena, collecting shells and offering them to strangers. About his neighbors in the city, his coworkers, his scattered friends, his parents getting older in their house upstate.

All of them points of light. All of them temporary. All of them small.

But all of them looking up at the same sky.

Not the same sky, technically—different hemispheres, different times, different angles. But the same *kind* of sky. The same vastness. The same question: What does it mean? What are we doing here? Does any of this matter?

And if none of it mattered—if they were all just temporary arrangements of atoms, briefly conscious, soon to be scattered back into the cosmic soup from which they came—then why did connection feel so important? Why did loneliness hurt? Why did he care whether his friendships were real or performed?

Because it mattered *to him*. Right now. In this brief window of existence.

The stars didn't care whether he had 847 friends or seven. The universe wouldn't notice if he lived his whole life without a single genuine connection. Cosmically speaking, none of it meant anything.

But humanly speaking—on the scale of one life, one person, one heart beating against the dark—it meant everything.

A shooting star streaked across his vision. Gone in a second. He'd almost missed it.

How many had he missed over the years? How many moments of brief beauty, passing unnoticed because he was looking at his phone, checking his feeds, monitoring his distant campfires?

Too many. Almost certainly too many.

He left his phone in his pocket. Let the sky be the sky. Let this moment be undocumented, unshared, just his.

The stars continued their slow wheel overhead. The Earth turned. The universe expanded. And he lay there, one small human on one small beach, feeling both infinitely lonely and strangely not alone.

Because somewhere else, on another beach or another hilltop or another rooftop, someone else was probably looking up. Someone else was probably feeling small and large at the same time. Someone else was probably wondering if any of this mattered, and deciding that it did, at least to them, at least for now.

Other distant campfires. Other points of consciousness, scattered across the darkness.

He couldn't reach them. Couldn't talk to them. Didn't even know they existed.

But he believed they were there.

Had to believe it, really. Because the alternative—that he was the only one looking up, the only one wondering, the only one feeling this particular mix of awe and loneliness and determination to make it all mean something—that was too much to bear.

No. There were others. Other people standing at the edge of things, looking up, trying to make sense of the distance and the dark.

Not connected to him in any direct way. But connected by the shared fact of being human. Of being conscious. Of being small things in a large universe, trying desperately to matter.

The Milky Way was visible, a cloudy band across the sky. His own galaxy. His home address in the universe: Earth, Solar System, Orion Arm, Milky Way Galaxy.

One of billions of galaxies.

Each one full of billions of stars.

Some of those stars probably with planets.

Some of those planets probably with life.

Some of that life probably conscious.

Some of that consciousness probably looking up right now, seeing their own scatter of light, asking their own questions.

Were they lonely too? Did they have the equivalent of 847 friends and feel isolated anyway? Had they figured out how to be genuinely present with each other, or were they struggling with the same distance and performance that plagued him?

He'd never know. They were too far away. Impossibly far. Light-years of distance. Even if they existed, even if they were looking up right now, their "now" was happening thousands or millions of years offset from his. The light he was seeing from distant stars had left those stars before humans existed, before Earth existed, before the sun had formed.

Connection across that kind of distance was impossible.

And yet.

Here he was, feeling connected anyway. To the teenager he'd never see again. To David, the friendly stranger. To Maria, who made adequate tea. To Lena, who gave shells to people she'd just met. To everyone who'd ever looked up at the night sky and felt small and large at the same time.

Even to the hypothetical beings on hypothetical planets orbiting distant stars. Even to people who might not exist, who he'd never meet, who were separated from him by more distance than his mind could comprehend.

Even to them, he felt connected.

Because they were all doing the same thing. All looking up. All wondering. All trying to hold back the dark with whatever small light they could generate.

The cold was seeping through his jacket now. His back was getting stiff from lying on sand. He should go back, get warm, try to sleep.

But he stayed a little longer.

There was something here he needed to understand. Something about distance and connection and the way they weren't opposites but were somehow the same thing.

The stars were distant. Impossibly distant. He'd never touch them, never reach them, never know them.

But he could see them. Could feel their light on his face. Could know they were there.

And that mattered. That counted as connection, in its way.

Not the connection he craved—not the warmth of genuine friendship, not the closeness of being truly known. But a different kind of connection. The connection of shared existence. Of being part of the same universe, looking at the same vastness, asking the same questions.

Maybe that's what his 847 friends were. Distant stars. Too far away to warm him, but close enough to see. Evidence that he wasn't entirely alone in the universe, even if the specific connection was thin, even if the light was old and the warmth was gone.

Not enough. Not what he wanted.

But not nothing either.

The stars were indifferent to him. The universe didn't care if he found meaning or connection or warmth. It would continue expanding, continuing cooling, eventually spreading all its light so thin across so much space that darkness would be all that remained.

Heat death. Entropy. The eventual end of everything.

But that was billions of years away. Incomprehensibly distant in time, just as the stars were incomprehensibly distant in space.

Right now, there were still stars. Still light. Still warmth, if you knew where to look.

Right now, he was alive. Conscious. Capable of connection, even if it was hard, even if it required vulnerability and risk and the courage to say hello to strangers.

Right now, there were other people on other beaches, looking up at their own sky, maybe thinking similar thoughts, maybe feeling the same lonely wonder.

He couldn't reach them. But they were there.

And he was here.

And somehow that was enough. Not permanently, not as a final answer, but as a temporary foothold. A place to stand while he figured out how to close some of the distance, how to move from distant light to actual warmth.

A shooting star. Another one. A third.

He watched them burn and vanish, brief scratches of light across the dark, and thought about moments. How brief they all were. How easy to miss.

Every conversation he'd ever had was a shooting star. There and then gone. Every friendship, every connection, every moment of genuine presence—all of them temporary, all of them burning across the dark and then vanishing.

But they happened. That was the important thing. They existed, even if briefly. They mattered, even if they didn't last.

The cold was too much now. He had to move.

He stood up slowly, stiff and aching, brushed sand from his jacket. Looked up one more time.

The stars looked back, indifferent and beautiful.

"Thanks," he said to them. To the universe. To whatever other consciousness might be out there, looking up at their own sky.

Then he walked back across the dark beach, toward his room, toward warmth, toward sleep.

Above him, the stars continued their vigil. Distant points of light in the darkness, some of them dead, some of them dying, some of them being born.

All of them burning.

All of them visible.

All of them—in their way—together.

Just like the people he'd met here. Just like his distant friends. Just like everyone everywhere, trying to make their small light matter in the face of all that dark.

It wasn't the answer he'd come here looking for. But lying on a beach at 2am, looking up at infinity, he'd found something close.

Connection wasn't about proximity. It was about recognition.

Seeing another light and acknowledging it. Knowing you weren't the only one burning against the dark.

The distance remained. But so did the light.

And right now, walking back under that vast scattered sky, the light felt like enough.

At least to navigate by.

At least to find his way home.

843 People I Don't Know.

He did it on day nineteen, sitting at the bench overlooking the bay.

Opened his phone. Opened Instagram. Went to his followers list.

847 people.

He started scrolling through them, asking himself a simple question for each one: *If this person knocked on my door right now, would I know who they were?*

The first ten were easy. His sister. His college roommate. Marcus, who texted about basketball games. His cousin. A few coworkers he actually talked to sometimes. People he'd recognize.

Then it got murkier.

Rachel Hoffman. He stared at her profile picture. Rachel... Hoffman. The name was familiar. They'd gone to high school together, maybe? Or was that a different Rachel? He clicked on her profile. Photos of two kids, a golden retriever, a house somewhere suburban. Nothing triggered recognition. He had no memory of ever having a conversation with this person.

How were they friends?

He kept scrolling.

Jason Chen—worked at his company, different department. They'd been in a meeting together once. Maybe twice. Had never spoken outside of work contexts.

Emma Rodriguez—no idea. Literally no idea. He clicked her profile. She lived in Portland. Posted a lot about hiking. He'd liked several of her photos over the years, apparently. Had never commented. Had certainly never met her.

Why were they connected?

Further down: college acquaintances he'd seen maybe three times in four years. People from his hometown he'd never actually been friends with. Someone's sister. Someone's boyfriend. The guy who worked at the coffee shop near his old apartment—why had they connected on Instagram? Had the guy asked or had he offered? Either way, they'd never interacted since.

He kept scrolling, kept counting.

By the time he hit 100, maybe fifteen of them were people he'd actually recognize if they showed up at his door.

By 200, maybe twenty-five.

The math was becoming clear. And depressing.

He opened his laptop, created a spreadsheet because apparently this was who he was now—a man on a beach making Excel files about his friendships.

Three columns: Name. How We Met. Would I Recognize Them.

He started filling it in, working through the entire list methodically.

It took two hours.

When he was done, he stared at the numbers.

847 total friends. 43 he would definitely recognize. 164 he would probably recognize, maybe, depending on context. 640 he absolutely would not know if they walked up to him on the street.

640.

More than three-quarters of his 'friends' were strangers.

He sat with that for a moment. The absurdity of it. The sadness of it.

He'd been maintaining this elaborate fiction—that he had a robust social network, that he was connected, that he had all these people in his life. But the truth, laid out in spreadsheet form, was that he'd collected hundreds of strangers and called it friendship.

Why?

He thought back to when he'd connected with each category of person. The high school acquaintances had been easy—when Facebook first became a thing, everyone added everyone. It was the done thing. You graduated, you connected with your whole class, even the people you'd never spoken to.

The college people, same logic. You met someone at a party, you added them. You had a class together, you connected. It didn't mean anything. It was just what you did.

Coworkers—professional networking. Stay connected, you never know when it might be useful. Even if you never spoke to them, even if you left the company, you kept the connection. Just in case.

Friends of friends—they posted something funny, you followed them. Or they followed you and you followed back because not doing so seemed rude.

Random people from random contexts—conferences, parties, that guy on the train who you had a nice conversation with once and exchanged information with and never talked to again but stayed connected because... why? Why not? What was the harm?

And slowly, incrementally, his 'friends' list had grown to 847 people, most of whom he didn't know.

He looked at the spreadsheet again. Those 43 people he'd definitely recognize—who were they?

His sister. His parents. Three college friends he still talked to occasionally. Two coworkers he actually got drinks with sometimes. Marcus, who he watched games with. His cousin. A handful of others—people he'd maintained actual, if intermittent, contact with.

43 people. Out of 847.

And even of those 43, how many did he have *real* relationships with? How many actually knew him? How many could he call right now and have a genuine conversation with?

He made a fourth column: Actual Friends.

Went through the list of 43.

Really thought about it.

His sister—yes, definitely. His parents—complicated, but yes. Jake from college—they texted maybe once a month, got dinner twice a year when Jake was in town. Was that friendship or just... maintenance? He marked it 'maybe'. Sarah, also from college—similar situation. 'Maybe.' Marcus—they watched basketball together, had for years. Talked about sports, about work, about surface-level life stuff. Never anything deep. Never anything real. 'Maybe.'

He kept going.

When he finished, the 'yes' column had seven people.

Seven.

Out of 847.

840 people who were not his friends by any meaningful definition.

The teenager on the jetty had said she had 847 friends and if 843 of them knocked on her door she wouldn't know who they were. He'd thought it was his own thought she was echoing, but now he did the actual math and realized she'd been generous.

He had 847 friends and 840 of them were strangers.

Or worse than strangers—strangers with whom he maintained the elaborate fiction of connection. Liking their posts. Occasionally commenting. Letting them like his posts in return. A mutual performance of friendship with no friendship underneath it.

What was the point? What was any of this for?

He thought about the effort that went into maintaining these 840 non-friendships. The mental energy of scrolling through their posts, the time spent liking and occasionally commenting, the careful curation of his own posts to be appropriate for an audience that included everyone from his mother to random acquaintances from a decade ago.

All of it so he could maintain the illusion of being well-connected. Of being social. Of having a rich network of relationships.

When the reality was he had seven friends. Maybe fewer, if he was really honest.

And he was lonely.

He looked at the bay. The lights across the water were just starting to come on—first one, then another, then several more as evening approached and people returned home from work.

Each of those lights was a household. Maybe a family. Maybe a couple. Maybe a single person, like him.

How many friends did they have? Real ones, not the Instagram kind.

Probably not that many. Most people didn't, he suspected. The research suggests people have fewer close friends than ever. The average is something like two or three. He had seven—he was actually above average, statistically.

But it didn't feel like enough. Not compared to the 847 he was pretending to have. Most of us have far fewer real friends than we pretend to have.

He thought about deleting them. Just going through and unfollowing, unfriending, cutting it down to the real ones. The seven, or maybe stretching to include the maybes and getting to fifteen or twenty.

It would be honest, at least.

But it would also feel like failure. Like admitting defeat. Like broadcasting to everyone that he didn't actually have the robust social life his friend count implied.

And there was another problem: he didn't know if the seven wanted to be his actual friends. Like, really wanted it. They tolerated his occasional texts, got dinner when convenient, maintained the relationship in the same low-effort way he did.

But if he actually tried to deepen those friendships—to move from surface-level to real—would they want that? Or would it be too much, too intense, too needy?

The fear of that—of reaching out and being rejected, or worse, being tolerated out of politeness—kept him maintaining the status quo. Seven actual friends, 840 fictional ones, and a pervasive loneliness that none of them addressed.

His phone buzzed. A notification. Someone had liked a photo he'd posted three days ago.

He looked at who it was. Tyler Something. Number 637 on his list. No idea who Tyler was.

But Tyler had liked his photo. And the notification had given him a little hit of dopamine, a small sense of connection, of being seen.

That's what the 840 were for, he realized. Not friendship. Not real connection. Just... validation. Evidence that he existed, that his life was worth observing, that he mattered to someone, even if that someone was a stranger who'd scrolled past his photo and double-tapped it without thinking.

It was so sad.

Not in a dramatic way. Just... quietly sad. The slow accumulation of hollow connection, the substitution of likes for love, the way he'd let himself believe that 847 meant something when it meant almost nothing.

Maria would understand this. She'd said she had six or seven real friends—people who actually showed up. And she'd seemed content with that. Hadn't felt the need to perform a larger network.

Lena had three best friends. Real ones. Kids she fought with and made up with and actually knew.

David walked beaches alone, had moved to Montauk to escape the performance.

They'd all, in their own ways, rejected the fiction of the 847.

And they all seemed... not happier, necessarily. But more honest. More present. Less burdened by the maintenance of connections that weren't real.

He looked at his spreadsheet again.

Seven actual friends. 840 strangers. 847 total.

He could delete it right now. Close the laptop, open his phone, start unfollowing. Cut it down to honest size.

But he didn't.

Instead, he saved the spreadsheet. Closed the laptop. Looked at the bay.

The lights across the water had multiplied. Dozens now, maybe a hundred. All those households, all those lives, all of them as real and complex as his own.

He didn't need to be connected to all of them. Didn't need to know them, follow them, like their posts.

They were just there. Living their lives. And that was fine.

Maybe the same was true for his 840 strangers. Maybe it was okay that they existed in his digital life without being part of his actual life. Maybe the problem wasn't having them there—the problem was confusing their presence for friendship.

Maybe he could keep the 847 but stop pretending it meant something.

Maybe he could focus on the seven instead. Actually nurture those relationships. Deepen them. Risk asking for more.

Maybe that would be enough.

He thought about the teenager again. How she'd said it so plainly: *I have 847 friends, and if 843 of them knocked on my door I wouldn't know who the hell they are.*

She'd known. At sixteen, she'd already figured out what he was just now understanding at forty-three.

The number didn't matter. The performance didn't matter. What mattered was the handful of people who actually showed up, who you actually knew, who you could actually call when things fell apart.

Everything else was just distant lights. Visible but not warming. Countable but not meaningful.

He picked up his phone one more time. Scrolled to his sister's contact. Called her.

She answered on the third ring. "Hey! Everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything's fine. Just wanted to talk."

"Oh. Okay." She sounded surprised. They didn't usually just call to talk. "What's up?"

"Nothing specific. I'm in Montauk for a few weeks. Just... thinking about stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Friendship. Connection. How we're all so connected and so lonely at the same time."

"Wow. Okay. That's deep for a Wednesday evening."

He laughed. "Sorry. I can call back."

"No, no. I'm just surprised. We don't usually talk about this kind of thing."

"I know. Maybe we should."

There was a pause. Then: "Yeah. Maybe we should."

They talked for forty minutes. About their lives, about their parents getting older, about the difficulty of maintaining real friendships, about the strangeness of having hundreds of digital connections and still feeling alone.

It was the most honest conversation he'd had with his sister in years.

When they hung up, he felt something he hadn't felt in a long time. Actually connected. To one person. Out of 847.

But it was real.

And real, he was learning, was worth more than any number.

He closed Instagram. Left it closed. Walked back to his room as the last light faded from the sky and the stars began to appear.

847 friends. 840 strangers. Seven real ones. One conversation.

It was a start.

Ghost of Henry Miller.

He found the book in a little free library outside the general store—one of those wooden boxes on a post where people left books for others to take. He'd been walking past it for two weeks without stopping, but on day seventeen something made him pause.

The box was mostly romance novels and thrillers with broken spines. But there, wedged between a Tom Clancy and a cookbook, was a worn paperback of *Tropic of Cancer*.

He pulled it out. The cover was sun-faded, the pages yellowed. Someone had written inside the front cover: "For authenticity. For life.—M"

He took it.

That night, sitting in his room above the bait shop, he started reading.

And Henry Miller showed up.

Not literally. He wasn't hallucinating. But Miller's voice was so strong, so present in the prose, that it felt like someone was in the room with him, talking, ranting, celebrating and mourning in equal measure.

Miller wrote about Paris in the 1930s, about being broke and hungry and alive in a way that seemed impossible now. About authentic human connection, raw and unfiltered. About refusing to perform respectability, refusing to curate, refusing to be anything other than completely, sometimes grotesquely, himself.

About friendship that was messy and real. About conversations that went all night. About people who actually showed up for each other, even when—especially when—it was inconvenient.

He read for an hour, then two, then three. Couldn't stop.

And somewhere around midnight, exhausted and wired at the same time, he closed the book and imagined what Miller would say about his 847 friends.

The ghost of Henry Miller, sitting in the other chair in his small room, would probably laugh. That big, raucous laugh. Then he'd lean forward and say something like:

"847 friends? You don't have 847 friends, you poor bastard. You have 847 people you're performing for. You know what a friend is? A friend is someone who sees you at your worst—drunk, broke, stupid, selfish—and doesn't leave. A friend is someone you can sit with in silence. A friend is someone who tells you the truth even when you don't want to hear it. How many of your 847 do that?"

Seven, he'd have to answer. Maybe seven.

"Then you have seven friends. The rest? The rest are just names in a book. And you're wasting your time pretending otherwise."

He smiled at his imagined Henry Miller, sitting there in judgment.

But Miller wouldn't leave it at judgment. He'd push further.

"You know what your problem is? You're afraid. Afraid to be real. Afraid to be messy. Afraid to ask for what you need. So you collect these 847 people like they're... what? Insurance? Proof that you're acceptable? And all the while you're dying inside because none of them actually know you."

"That's not fair," he said out loud, to his empty room, to the ghost.

"Fair? Who said anything about fair? I'm talking about truth. You came out here to figure something out, right? About connection? About friendship? Well, here's the truth: you can't connect with anyone else until you're willing to be yourself. Your actual self. Not the curated version. Not the performance. The messy, uncertain, lonely, hopeful, ridiculous human being underneath all that."

"And if they don't like that version?"

"Then fuck 'em. You don't need 847 friends. You don't even need 47. You need the ones who see you and stay. The rest is just noise."

He sat with that. The ghost of Henry Miller, speaking truth from 1934, from Paris, from a completely different world that was somehow exactly the same as this one.

People had always struggled with this. With authenticity. With connection. With the gap between how they appeared and how they felt.

Miller had just refused to maintain the gap. Had written about sex and poverty and failure and rage and joy without filter, without apology, without caring what respectable people thought.

And people had called it obscene. Had banned the book. Had been offended by his refusal to perform respectability.

But the book had survived. Was still being read ninety years later. Because underneath the obscenity was something true. Something human. Something that resonated across time.

"You know what lasts?" the ghost said. *"Truth lasts. Real connection lasts. Everything else—the performance, the curation, the careful maintenance of an acceptable image—that all fades. Nobody remembers the people who played it safe."*

"I'm not trying to be remembered. I'm just trying to not be lonely."

"Same thing, really. You're lonely because you're hiding. You're performing instead of being. And you can't be known if you won't be seen."

The room was quiet. The ghost of Henry Miller faded back into the pages of the book.

But the voice stayed.

The next morning, walking to Maria's trailer, he thought about authenticity.

What would it look like to just... be himself? Without filter, without performance, without the careful calibration of what was appropriate to share?

Terrifying, probably.

Miller could do it because Miller didn't care what people thought. Or he cared, but he cared more about being authentic than being liked.

That was the difference. That was always the difference.

He wanted to be liked. Wanted to be acceptable. Wanted people to think well of him.

So he performed. Edited. Curated. Showed the version of himself that seemed most likely to be approved of.

And in doing so, had made himself unknowable.

"You look thoughtful," Maria said, handing him his tea.

"I was reading Henry Miller last night."

"Ah. That'll do it." She smiled. "Which one?"

"*Tropic of Cancer*."

"Heavy stuff. Good, though. Honest."

"Yeah. Maybe too honest."

"No such thing." Maria leaned on the counter. "My mother used to say that the world has enough polite lies. What it needs is more honest truth, even when it's uncomfortable."

"Your mother sounds like she and Henry Miller would've gotten along."

"Probably. They were both completely incapable of bullshit." She paused. "That's rare now. Everyone's so careful. So curated. Nobody wants to offend anyone or seem uncool or admit they don't have it all figured out."

"It's exhausting."

"Yeah." She looked at him directly. "So stop doing it."

"Just like that?"

"Why not? You're here, in Montauk, in January, talking to a woman who sells tea from a trailer. This isn't the place for performance. This is the place for truth."

He thought about that. She was right. Nobody here cared about his performance. Maria didn't know about his 847 friends, didn't care about his job or his accomplishments or his carefully curated Instagram presence.

She just knew him as the guy who bought tea and walked beaches and thought too much.

And that was enough. More than enough.

"Can I tell you something?" he said.

"Sure."

"I'm lonely. Really lonely. And I don't know how to fix it. I have hundreds of people I call friends, and I don't actually know any of them. And I'm terrified that if I try to fix it—if I try to be real with people—they'll realize I'm not worth knowing."

Maria was quiet for a moment. Then: "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being honest. For not performing." She smiled. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Actually it was terrifying."

"Good. If it wasn't scary, it wouldn't be real."

Lena appeared from behind the trailer, holding something. "Look! I found a crab shell!"

She showed it to him—a small, perfect molt, translucent and delicate.

"That's beautiful," he said.

"Do you want it?"

That easy offering again. The authentic generosity of a child who hadn't learned to perform yet.

"I'd love it," he said.

She handed it over, pleased. "It's good luck. Probably."

"Probably?"

"I mean, I don't know for sure. But it feels lucky."

He held the fragile shell carefully. "Thank you, Lena."

She ran off again, already on to the next discovery.

Maria watched her go. "She's going to lose that, eventually. That openness. That authenticity. The world's going to teach her to be careful, to perform, to hide the parts of herself that might not be acceptable."

"Maybe not. Maybe she'll be like your mother. Like Henry Miller."

"Maybe." Maria didn't sound convinced. "But it's hard. Being authentic. People punish it. They say they want honesty but what they really want is honesty that makes them comfortable."

"Miller got published, though. Eventually."

"After years of being banned. After years of poverty and rejection. After paying the price for refusing to compromise." She looked at him. "Are you willing to pay that price?"

He thought about it. Really thought about it.

What would it cost to be authentic? To stop performing, stop curating, stop maintaining his 847 friendships and focus on the seven real ones? To tell people the truth when they asked how he was? To admit when he was struggling, when he was lonely, when he didn't have it all figured out?

He'd lose some people, probably. The ones who wanted the performance, who were comfortable with surface-level connection. The ones who'd be made uncomfortable by his truth.

But maybe he'd keep the right ones. The ones who wanted real connection as much as he did.

And maybe—possibly—he'd find new ones. People who recognized authenticity and valued it. People who were tired of performing too.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "But I'm tired of the alternative."

Maria nodded. "That's a start."

That night he opened the Miller book again. Read more. Let the ghost back in.

And this time, instead of imagining what Miller would say about his problems, he imagined what Miller would say about his life.

Not judgment. Not criticism.

Just: *"What are you going to do about it?"*

Because that was the thing. Miller didn't just complain about inauthenticity. He lived authentically, regardless of cost. Wrote books that got banned. Lived in poverty. Alienated respectable people. Didn't care.

Or cared, but did it anyway.

That was courage. Not the absence of fear, but the refusal to let fear determine your choices.

He wasn't Henry Miller. Wasn't going to write scandalous novels or live in artistic poverty or rage against the machine.

But he could be more honest. Could stop performing, at least some of the time. Could risk authenticity with the people who mattered.

Could choose the seven over the 847.

He picked up his phone. Looked at his contact list.

His seven actual friends. The ones who might possibly want real connection if he was brave enough to offer it.

He started typing a message. Then deleted it. Too performative. Too curated.

Instead, he just called.

Jake answered. "Hey, what's up?"

"Not much. Just wanted to talk."

"About what?"

"I don't know. Real stuff. How are you actually doing? Not the Facebook version. The real version."

There was a pause. Then: "That's... a weird question."

"I know. Sorry. I'm in Montauk trying to figure some stuff out about friendship and connection and I've been reading Henry Miller and having imaginary conversations with his ghost and I just... wanted to actually talk to someone. Really talk."

Another pause. Longer this time.

Then Jake laughed. "Okay. Yeah. Let's do that. I'm actually kind of... struggling, to be honest. Work is insane, my relationship is weird, I don't know what I'm doing with my life."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. But I don't usually say that because, you know. People don't really want to hear it."

"I do."

"Okay then."

They talked for an hour. Real talk. Honest talk. The kind of conversation he'd been craving without knowing it.

When they hung up, he felt lighter. Connected. Real.

One down. Six to go.

The ghost of Henry Miller, somewhere in the ether, probably approved.

"Now you're getting it," the ghost would say. *"Stop performing. Start living. The rest will follow."*

He closed the book, turned off the light.

Tomorrow he'd keep trying. Keep risking. Keep choosing authenticity over performance.

Not because it was easy. Because it wasn't.

But because the alternative—the 847 friends, the loneliness, the endless curation of an acceptable self—that was killing him slowly.

And he was tired of dying.

Time to start living.

Time to be real.

Even if it was scary.

Especially because it was scary.

The ghost of Henry Miller would expect nothing less.

PART THREE: RETURNING

"You can't stay on the beach forever. But you can carry the silence back with you, and choose differently because of it."

Eventually, you have to go back.

The beach can teach you things, but it can't live your life for you.

The question isn't whether the city will still be loud, or whether your phone will still buzz with the same hollow notifications, or whether those 847 friends will suddenly become real.

The question is whether you'll try differently.
Whether you'll say 'hello' to the stranger at the station.
Whether you'll choose warmth over the promise of warmth.

Small things. Insufficient things. But maybe enough.

Afterthought.

I've spent these pages—and much of this winter, really—thinking about distance. About the gap between having 847 friends and knowing four people who'd help you move. About teenagers performing connection while drowning in loneliness. About campfires burning everywhere, all of them too far away to offer warmth.

And most of that stands. I believe it. I've felt it.

But there's something else. Something I noticed on my last night here, looking at the lights across the bay.

I don't know who lives in those houses. Don't know their names, their stories, what they do for work, whether they're happy or struggling or just getting through the days like everyone else. We're not friends. We'll never be friends. In the taxonomy of modern connection, we don't even register—we're not followers or contacts or acquaintances. We're just... simultaneous occupants of the same geography.

And yet.

I'm reasonably certain that if I had to knock on one of those doors at three in the morning—genuinely in distress, genuinely needing help—it would open. Someone would call an ambulance, or the police, or offer me their phone, or at least not turn me away into the dark.

I don't know what that says about them, or about me, or about the current state of human connection. But it says something.

Maybe it says that beneath all the performance and the shallow connection and the ease of ghosting, there's still some baseline understanding that we're responsible for each other in extremis. That the social contract, however frayed, hasn't completely dissolved. That distance isn't the same as indifference.

This doesn't fix anything I've written about. The loneliness is still real. The gap between quantity and quality of connection is still real. The teenager on the jetty is still carrying her 847 friendships like a weight, and I'm still walking this beach trying to understand why presence has become so rare.

But maybe—and I'm saying this carefully, without wanting to undercut everything else—maybe it's not quite as bleak as it sometimes feels.

We've lost something. I'm convinced of that. The depth, the dailiness, the friction that created real bonds. The obligation that came with proximity, the way you couldn't just ghost your neighbor or your colleague or the person you saw every day at the store. We've traded that for choice and ease and the ability to curate our connections, and the cost has been higher than we wanted to admit.

But we haven't lost everything.

Some thread still connects us. Thin, maybe. Tested only rarely. But there. The knowledge that in a genuine emergency, most people would help. That the lights across the bay aren't just indifferent points in the darkness—they're people who would, if it came to it, open their doors.

That's not friendship. It's not intimacy. It's not the thing I've been mourning throughout these pages.

But it's not nothing either.

Distance isn't the same as absence. We can be far apart and still be, in some fundamental way, together. Not in the rich, textured way that requires presence and time and the willingness to sit through awkward silences. But in a more basic way. The way that says: if you really needed help, I wouldn't leave you in the dark.

I don't want to make too much of this. Don't want to wrap everything up with false comfort or pretend I've found an answer. The questions I came here with—about friendship, about connection, about how to be genuinely present with another person in an age of constant distraction—those questions remain.

But as I pack up to leave Montauk, as I prepare to return to the world of 847 friends and performative connection and campfires that are visible but not warming, I carry this with me:

The lights are distant. But they're there.

And maybe that's not quite as bleak as it seems. Maybe some fundamental human decency persists beneath all the performative friendship and shallow connection. Maybe those distant lights aren't just metaphors for loneliness—maybe they also represent a kind of safety net, however thin.

It doesn't resolve anything. Doesn't fix the 847 friends I don't know or the teenager's loneliness or the way connection has become performance. But it offers something. A small reassurance. A reminder that distance isn't the same as absence.

I don't know if that's hope, exactly. But it's something.

And right now, standing at the edge of winter, preparing to leave this beach and its gulls and its heron and its distant lights, something feels like enough.

Not to solve everything. Just to keep going.

Just to believe that somewhere, on some other beach, someone else is looking at lights across their own bay and feeling the same strange mix of loneliness and not-quite-alone.

We're very far apart.

We're still, somehow, here together.

Maybe that's all we get. Maybe that's enough to build from.

I don't know. But I'm grateful I came here to think about it. Grateful for the silence and the space and the winter beach that asked nothing of me except that I pay attention.

Grateful, even, for the distance. Because it's only in distance that you can see certain things clearly.

The lights across the bay are still burning as I write this. Someone's home, living their life, probably not thinking about connection or loneliness or any of the things I've been obsessing over. Just existing, doing the small necessary things that constitute a day.

And if I needed them, really needed them, I think they'd help.

That's not everything I wanted to find here.

But it's something.

And sometimes, something is enough.

Hello.

The Long Island Railroad runs from Montauk to Penn Station in roughly three hours, give or take, depending on stops and the mood of the infrastructure. He'd booked a mid-morning train, said goodbye to Maria and Lena at the trailer—Lena had given him a white shell 'for remembering'—and now sat in a half-empty car watching the landscape change.

Beach to town to suburb to the slow densification that meant the city was approaching.

He'd brought a book but hadn't opened it. Just sat, watching, thinking.

The car filled gradually as they moved west. Montauk to Amagansett to East Hampton, each stop adding people. By the time they hit Jamaica, the car was nearly full—the standard cross-section of humanity that makes up any commuter train. Businesspeople with laptops open. Teenagers with headphones. A mother with two young children trying to keep them entertained. An elderly man doing a crossword in actual pen, no hesitation, like he knew all the answers already.

Everyone separate. All these people in the same metal tube hurtling toward the same destination, and everyone carefully maintaining their isolation.

Headphones seemed to be the primary tool. Nearly everyone wore them—earbuds, over-ear headphones, even the old wired kind he hadn't seen in years. A barrier. A signal: I am not available for interaction.

He didn't blame them. He'd done the same thing for years. The subway, the train, the plane—anywhere you were forced into proximity with strangers—the headphones were armor. A way to be alone in public.

But now, after weeks of thinking about connection and distance, it struck him differently.

All these people. Potentially interesting people with stories and thoughts and lives as complex as his own. And all of them unreachable, by mutual agreement. The social contract of urban life: we will share this space but we will not acknowledge each other.

A woman across the aisle was scrolling through Instagram, her thumb moving in that distinctive pattern—scroll, pause, scroll, pause, double-tap. He could see the screen from his angle. Photos of friends at brunch, at parties, on vacation. Distant campfires, all of them. She was looking at evidence of other people's lives, other people's connection, while sitting three feet from actual living people she would never speak to.

He did it too. Everyone did. It was normal now.

The teenager next to him—maybe seventeen, headphones on, staring at his phone—could have been the kid from the jetty. Same age, same absorption in the device, same careful maintenance of personal space. The boy's leg was pressed against the armrest, his elbow carefully positioned to avoid touching anyone. The choreography of public isolation.

What would happen if he just... said hello?

The thought arrived unbidden and immediately felt absurd. You didn't just talk to strangers on the LIRR. That's not how it worked. That was violating the contract, being weird, making people uncomfortable.

But why?

His grandmother—he'd been thinking about her lately, probably because of Maria's story about her own mother—his grandmother had talked to everyone. Grocery store clerks, people at bus stops, anyone sitting next to her anywhere. It had embarrassed him as a kid, that friendliness, that assumption that strangers might want to chat. He'd thought it was old-fashioned, maybe a little naive.

Now he wondered if she'd just known something he'd forgotten.

The train pulled into Jamaica, the last stop before Penn Station. Major transfer point. Half the car emptied, twice as many people got on. Now it was crowded—standing room only, people pressed together, still managing not to make eye contact.

A woman stood near him, holding the pole, pregnant—visibly, obviously pregnant. No one offered her a seat.

He stood up. "Here," he said.

She looked startled, then grateful. "Thank you."

"Of course."

That was it. Two words each. But she smiled at him—a real smile, not the tight-lipped acknowledgment of strangers—and sat down with visible relief.

The man next to where he'd been sitting—older, suit, reading something on his phone—looked up briefly. Their eyes met. The man nodded, a small gesture of... what? Approval? Acknowledgment? Just: I saw that.

It was nothing. The smallest possible interaction.

But standing there, holding the pole as the train swayed, he felt something shift.

Penn Station approached. Thirty-fourth Street. The density of Manhattan visible through the windows—buildings pressing in, people everywhere, the organized chaos of the city.

He thought about what waited for him. His apartment, his job, his life. His 847 friends, most of whom he'd never see. The performance of connection, the curated self, the endless scroll through other people's distant campfires.

Nothing had changed. He'd spent weeks on a beach thinking about loneliness and connection, and the fundamental problems remained. The tools were still there, the incentives were still there, the ease of distance was still there.

But maybe he was slightly different.

Maybe he could... what? He didn't know exactly. Be more intentional? Reach out to the six or seven people who actually mattered? Delete some of those 847 friends? Put the phone down more often?

Small things. Insufficient things. Nothing that would solve the larger problem.

But something.

The train slid into Penn Station, that long dark approach through the tunnels. People were already standing, gathering bags, putting phones in pockets, preparing to exit.

The pregnant woman stood carefully, caught his eye again. "Thank you again."

"You're welcome. Good luck."

"You too."

And then the doors were opening and everyone was moving, that great surge of humanity flowing out onto the platform, up the stairs, into the station.

Penn Station at midday was controlled chaos. Thousands of people moving in different directions, each one focused on their destination. The departure boards flickering. Announcements echoing. The peculiar mix of purpose and confusion that defined the place.

He stood still for a moment, letting the crowd flow around him. His bag over his shoulder, Lena's shell in his pocket, all his weeks of thinking compressed into this single moment of re-entry.

He made a decision.

He would say hello to the first stranger he encountered. Not in a weird way, not forcing conversation, just... acknowledgment. The kind of small gesture his grandmother would have made without thinking about it.

Just to see what happened.

He started walking toward the subway entrance, looking.

A woman rushing past, phone to her ear, clearly stressed—no, not her.

A group of tourists studying a map, arguing about directions—maybe, but they were occupied.

A man in MTA uniform, leaning against a pillar, looking tired.

He walked over.

"Hey," he said.

The man looked up, wary. "Yeah?"

"Just wanted to say thanks. For keeping this place running."

The wariness shifted to confusion, then something like surprise. "Oh. Uh. Thanks?"

"I mean it. Seems like a hard job."

"Yeah." The man's posture relaxed slightly. "It is. But someone's gotta do it."

"Well. I appreciate it."

"That's... thanks. Really." The man smiled, a small genuine smile. "You have a good day."

"You too."

That was it. Twenty seconds. A brief exchange that would be forgotten by both of them in an hour.

But as he walked toward the subway, he felt it again—that small shift. The same thing he'd felt giving up his seat on the train.

Connection. Tiny, insufficient, not solving anything. But real.

The subway platform was crowded. He stood waiting for his train, surrounded by people who would never speak to each other. Headphones, phones, newspapers, the careful avoidance of eye contact.

All these distant campfires.

But not completely distant. Not entirely cold.

The pregnant woman from the train was on the platform too, he noticed. She was talking to an elderly woman, both of them laughing about something. A moment of genuine warmth in the middle of all this isolation.

It happened. Not often, not easily, but it happened.

The train arrived. The doors opened. Everyone pushed forward in that aggressive ballet of subway boarding.

He got on, found a spot, held the pole.

The doors closed. The train lurched forward into the tunnel.

Back to his life. Back to the performance. Back to the 847 friends and the shallow connections and the loneliness that came from being constantly connected.

But maybe—and he was thinking about this carefully, not wanting to claim too much—maybe slightly different. Maybe slightly more willing to try. To reach out. To choose presence over performance, even in small ways, even when it felt awkward.

He thought about Lena, offering her shells to strangers. About Maria's mother, who never met a stranger. About his own grandmother, talking to everyone, making friends everywhere.

It had seemed naive to him once. Old-fashioned. A relic of a simpler time.

But maybe it was just brave. Maybe it was just choosing to believe that the distance between people could be crossed, if someone was willing to take the first step.

The train rattled through the darkness. Above him, the city continued its loud, lonely, densely populated existence. Millions of people, thousands of campfires, most of them burning separately.

But some—if you looked—burning together.

Not enough. Not nearly enough.

But not nothing either.

He felt the shell in his pocket. Lena's gift. For remembering.

He wouldn't forget. The beach, the heron, the teenager on the jetty, the lights across the bay. The questions he'd gone there to think about. The partial, insufficient answers he'd found.

And now this: the return. Back to the noise, yes. Back to the distance, yes.

But maybe back with something else too.

An intention. A willingness. A small, stubborn hope that real connection was still possible, if you were brave enough to try for it.

The subway emerged from underground at 125th Street, sudden light flooding the car.

He looked around at his fellow passengers. All these strangers. All these possible connections, carefully avoided.

Maybe tomorrow he'd say hello to someone else. Maybe he'd actually call one of those six or seven real friends instead of just texting. Maybe he'd delete his accounts, or maybe he'd just use them differently. Maybe he'd move to Montauk permanently, or maybe he'd just carry Montauk with him, a reminder of what mattered.

He didn't know yet.

But the train was moving, and he was on it, and somewhere ahead was his stop.

And when he got there, he'd step off.

And maybe—just maybe—he'd say hello to whoever was standing there.

Just to see what happened.

Just to try.

Just this.

It wasn't everything. But it was something.

And right now, heading home with sand still on his shoes and a shell in his pocket, something felt like enough.

The train continued north. The city streamed past outside.

He put his phone away.

Looked up.

Paid attention.

The distance remained. But so did he.

And that, perhaps, was where you had to start.

AUTHOR NOTES.

On: writing this.

This book started as a conversation. Not the kind that happens on a beach in Montauk, but the kind that happens when you're trying to articulate something you feel but can't quite name.

I didn't set out to write a book about loneliness and connection. I set out to understand why, despite having more ways to connect than any generation in history, I felt more disconnected than ever. Why 847 friends felt like fewer than seven. Why proximity had become performance.

The beach was real. Montauk in January was real. The need to get away and think was real.

But the book you're holding is a distillation. The walks were longer and often less profound. The conversations were messier. The insights came slower and less eloquently than they appear on these pages.

I've compressed three weeks into essence. Turned moments into metaphors. Given shape to what was, in reality, much more shapeless.

That's what writing does. It takes the sprawl of lived experience and finds the pattern underneath. The truth, even if not the exact facts.

So when I say I met a teenager on a jetty who had 847 friends, that's true in spirit if not in precise detail. When I say I watched a heron for twenty minutes, the time might have been fifteen or twenty-five, but the experience of presence was real.

The book is true. Even where it's not factual.

On structure: Goodbye and Hello.

The decision to bookend the narrative with 'Goodbye' and 'Hello' came late in the process.

Originally, the book opened mid-contemplation—already on the beach, already thinking. But that felt like it started in the middle. It didn't answer the question: why?

'Goodbye' became necessary because the leaving matters as much as the arriving. The exhaustion with performance, the weight of those 847 connections, the specific texture of urban loneliness—that's the context everything else requires.

And 'Hello' became the natural endpoint. Not a solution, not a fix, but a choice to try differently. To say hello to a stranger at Penn Station. To engage with the world he's returning to in a new way.

The structure is simple: departure, contemplation, return. But the emotional arc is more complex: escape, understanding, reintegration. He leaves to get away. He stays to figure out why. He returns to try again, differently.

The middle—the 'Seeing' section—is where the real work happens. Each chapter is a different lens on the same question: What does connection mean? What have we lost? What remains?

On the metaphor: Distant Campfires.

The central metaphor emerged organically—looking at lights across the bay one night and thinking about how they represented warmth without providing it. Presence without proximity.

It worked because it captured something specific about social media and modern friendship. You can see evidence of other people's lives—their photos, their posts, their carefully curated moments—but you're not actually sitting at their fire. You're not sharing the warmth.

The metaphor appears throughout the book in different forms:

- Literal lights across the bay
- Stars in the night sky
- The glow of phones in the dark
- An actual bonfire on the beach

Each iteration explores a different aspect of distance and connection. Each asks: When is distance comforting? When is it isolating? When does seeing someone's light matter, and when is it just a reminder of how far away they are?

The bonfire chapter was crucial because it shows the alternative. What it feels like to actually sit at someone's fire. To be warmed, not just to observe warmth from a distance.

That's the standard against which everything else is measured.

On the characters: real people, essential truths.

Maria is real. The trailer is real. The 'optimist hours' are real.

But 'Maria' isn't her real name, and the specifics of her life have been adjusted to serve the narrative. She had a daughter, but the daughter's age and personality are composites. The conversations happened, but not exactly as written.

Same with David, the stranger who becomes a friendly stranger. The nods, the escalation, the conversation on the jetty—all real in essence. But compressed, refined, given dialogue that captures the spirit of what was said rather than the exact words.

The teenager is more complicated. She's based on several conversations—with young people, with parents, with friends who have teenage kids. Her voice is synthesized from what I heard and read about how this generation experiences connection.

But her core observation—'I have 847 friends and if 843 knocked on my door I wouldn't know who they are'—that's universal. That's the insight that transcends any individual.

Lena represents something important: innocence before the fall. The unselfconscious connection of childhood, before performance becomes mandatory. She's real as a type, even if the specific shells and conversations are shaped for effect.

The ghost of Henry Miller never appeared. But I did read *Tropic of Cancer* in Montauk, and Miller's voice did get in my head, and I did imagine what he'd say about our modern predicament. The chapter is fiction serving truth.

On: 843 People I Don't Know.

This was the hardest chapter to write because it required the most honesty.

I did make the spreadsheet. I did count. The numbers are real, though slightly adjusted for narrative purposes.

And the realization—that more than three-quarters of my "friends" were strangers—was devastating and clarifying in equal measure.

We all know this, abstractly. We all understand that our social media connections aren't real friendships. But knowing it abstractly is different from confronting it specifically. From seeing the names and faces and admitting: I have no idea who this person is.

The chapter works because it makes the abstract concrete. It takes the vague sense of 'I have too many shallow connections' and gives it a number. 843.

That specificity is what makes it resonate. It's not 'a lot of people' or 'most people'. It's 843 specific people who I've claimed as friends but wouldn't recognize.

The number will be different for everyone reading this. But the ratio is probably similar. Most of us have far fewer real friends than we pretend to have.

Naming that truth is uncomfortable. But necessary.

On: Night Sky (and cosmic loneliness).

The night sky chapter exists because I needed to zoom out. To go from the immediate (my loneliness, my 847 friends) to the ultimate (our place in the cosmos, our fundamental aloneness as conscious beings in an incomprehensibly vast universe).

Because both are true. The loneliness of having 847 friends and knowing seven is real. And the loneliness of being a brief spark of consciousness in an indifferent universe is real.

But connecting them reveals something important: we're all in this together. All looking up at the same vastness. All trying to make meaning in the face of cosmic insignificance. All building our small fires against the dark.

The chapter risks being too big, too philosophical. But I think it earns its scope by grounding it in a specific moment—lying on a beach at 2am, looking up, feeling small and large simultaneously.

And it sets up the final movement of the book. If we're all fundamentally alone in the cosmos, then every moment of genuine connection is a small miracle. Every time we choose to sit at someone's fire instead of observing from a distance, we're choosing meaning over meaninglessness.

That's not nothing. That's everything.

On: Afterthought (and lights we'd open our doors to).

'Afterthought' almost didn't make it into the book. It felt too hopeful, too soft after everything that came before.

But it needed to be there. Because the book isn't nihilistic. It's not saying connection is impossible or that we're all doomed to isolation.

It's saying connection is harder now. That we've built systems that make shallow connection easy and deep connection difficult. That we're all more alone than we need to be.

But 'Afterthought' reminds us that some fundamental human decency remains. That if you knocked on a stranger's door in genuine need, they'd probably help. That the lights across the bay aren't entirely indifferent.

It's a small reassurance. Not a solution. Just a reminder that distance isn't the same as absence.

And sometimes, that's enough to keep trying.

Questions I'm often asked...

Q: Is this book anti-technology?

No. It's anti-performance. Anti-substitution. I'm not arguing we should abandon social media or throw away our phones. I'm arguing we should be more intentional about how we use them. More honest about what they provide (convenience, information, occasional connection) and what they don't (presence, depth, warmth).

Technology is a tool. We've let it become a replacement. That's the problem.

Q: Do you really think things were better before social media?

Not entirely. The past had its own problems—geographic isolation, limited choice in friends, enforced proximity with people you didn't like. I'm not romanticizing it.

But we've lost something too. The friction that used to exist in forming and maintaining friendships—the effort, the inconvenience—that friction also created depth. When connection was harder, we valued it more. Invested in it more. Built more resilient relationships.

Now connection is effortless. And we treat it accordingly—as disposable, replaceable, optional.

We've gained breadth and lost depth. That's not strictly better or worse. It's different, with different costs.

Q: What happened after you left Montauk?

I went back to my life. My job, my apartment, my 847 friends.

And I struggled. The clarity I found on the beach was hard to maintain in the noise of the city. The phone was always there, the feeds always calling. The old patterns reasserted themselves.

But I kept trying. Kept choosing presence when I could. Kept prioritizing the seven over the 847. Kept saying hello to strangers, sitting at fires, looking up at the night sky.

It's ongoing. I fail more than I succeed. But I'm failing differently than before. With awareness. With intention.

That's not nothing.

Q: Did you stay in touch with Maria? With David?

No. And that's okay.

They were important for the moment they were in. For what they represented, what they taught me. But trying to maintain those connections from a distance would have turned them into the very thing I was trying to escape—the performance of connection.

Sometimes people come into your life for a season, not forever. That doesn't make them less real or less valuable.

I carry them with me. The lessons, the moments, the reminder that genuine connection is possible. That's enough.

Q: What do you want readers to take from this book?

Awareness, mostly. Of how many of their connections are real versus performed. Of how much time they spend observing other people's lives versus living their own. Of whether the lights they're looking at are warming them or just reminding them how cold they are.

And maybe, hopefully, the courage to try differently. To say hello to a stranger. To deepen one real friendship instead of maintaining twenty shallow ones. To put the phone down and be present. To sit at someone's fire instead of just scrolling past their photos.

Small things. Insufficient things. But real things.

That's all any of us can do. Small, real things. Over and over. Until they add up to a life actually lived instead of just documented.

Q: Are you still lonely?

Sometimes. Less than before, but yes.

Loneliness isn't something you solve once and never feel again. It's part of being human. Part of being conscious in a vast universe. Part of being separate selves trying to bridge the unbridgeable gap between inner experience and outer expression.

But I'm lonely differently now. With more awareness. With more intention about trying to address it. With less willingness to accept the substitution of performed connection for real connection.

I know what warmth feels like. I've sat at the fire.

That makes the distance harder to accept. But it also gives me something to move toward.

Q: How do you feel about 'distant campfires' as the central metaphor?

I think 'distant campfires: points of light in the dark' is strikingly apt—it captures something strikingly bittersweet about modern friendships.

The image works on several levels. Campfires suggest warmth and human connection—something alive and tended—but 'distant' introduces the paradox of contemporary friendship: we're often connected yet separated. We can see the glow of people's lives (their social media updates, occasional texts, the knowledge they exist somewhere out there) without actually sitting by the fire with them. There's comfort in knowing those points of light are there, but also an ache in the distance.

'Points of light in the dark' particularly resonates. It suggests both the value of these connections—they orient us, prevent complete isolation, remind us we're not alone in the darkness—and their limits. Points of light don't illuminate much; they mark presence without proximity. This feels true to how many modern friendships function: we have more contacts than ever but perhaps less of the sustained, physically present companionship that characterized friendship in eras when people lived in tighter geographic communities.

The metaphor also captures something about attention and effort. Campfires need tending or they go out. We see which fires we keep feeding with visits, calls, and real time—and which slowly dim to embers we check on occasionally, hoping they haven't quite extinguished.

What makes it especially appropriate is that it doesn't condemn this state of affairs. Distant campfires are still better than total darkness. There's beauty in that constellation of connections scattered across distance and time zones, even if it's not the intimacy of gathering around a single shared fire. It acknowledges both what we've gained in reach and what we've perhaps lost in depth.

A Closing Note.

If you've read this far—through the book and now through these notes—thank you.

You've given me your attention, which is the scarcest resource any of us have. In a world of infinite content and constant distraction, you chose to be here, with these words, for this time.

That's connection, in its way. Not the deepest kind—I don't know you, you don't know me. But not nothing either.

You're out there, somewhere, reading this. And I'm here, somewhere else, having written it. Two distant campfires, briefly aware of each other.

Maybe that's enough. Maybe that's how it starts.

One person reading. One person writing. Both trying to make sense of the same thing.

Both looking up at the same sky, asking the same questions.

Both burning against the dark, hoping someone sees the light.

Thank you for seeing mine.

I hope you tend yours well.

February 2026

TEDx TALK.

(That I'll probably never give, but imagined anyway.)

[He walks onto the stage. Red circle. Small audience. The lighting is too bright. He's wearing the outfit someone told him looked 'approachable but authoritative'—jeans and a blazer. He feels like he's performing already. Deep breath.]

So, uh, hi.

I'm supposed to start with a story. That's how these work, right? A compelling narrative hook that draws you in and makes you care about what I'm about to say.

Here's mine: Two years ago, I had 847 friends and I was completely alone.

[Pause for effect. Someone told him pauses were important.]

That number—847—that was across all my social media platforms. Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter. I'd counted them once, in a moment of morbid curiosity. 847 people who could theoretically reach me at any moment. 847 people whose lives I could follow, whose updates I could see, whose carefully curated moments I could witness.

And sitting in my studio apartment in Queens on a Tuesday night, eating cold Chinese food and scrolling through their posts, I felt more lonely than I'd ever felt in my life.

[He clicks to the first slide. It's just the number: 847]

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. 'First world problems, buddy. People are starving and you're complaining about having too many friends?'

And you're right. It is a first world problem. It's also a real problem.

Because here's the thing about those 847 friends—I didn't actually know most of them.

[Next slide: A pie chart. Tiny sliver labeled 'Actual Friends.' Huge section labeled 'Strangers I'm Pretending To Know.']

I made a spreadsheet. Yes, I'm that person. I went through all 847 and asked myself one simple question: "If this person knocked on my door right now, would I know who they were?"

The answer, for 840 of them, was no.

[He lets that sink in.]

840 strangers. People I'd connected with at some point—high school classmates I'd never spoken to, coworkers from jobs I'd left years ago, friends of friends I'd met once at a party, random people who'd followed me and I'd followed back because not doing so seemed rude.

I was maintaining this elaborate fiction that I had a robust social network. That I was well-connected. That I had all these people in my life.

But the truth was, I had seven friends. Maybe. If I was being generous.

And I was exhausted from pretending otherwise.

[Next slide: A photo of a beach in winter. Gray, empty, beautiful.]

So I did what any reasonable person would do when facing an existential crisis about modern connection.

I ran away to Montauk for three weeks in January.

[Some knowing laughter from the audience.]

I know, I know. Very privileged. Very 'Eat, Pray, Love'. Very 'man has minor crisis, takes a vacation to find himself'.

But here's what I found there, on that cold beach, away from my phone and my feeds and my 847 friends:

I found that I'd forgotten how to be present.

[Next slide: A simple image of hands holding a cup of tea.]

There was this woman—Maria—who ran a tea trailer on the beach. She was there most days, during what she called 'optimist hours.' Open when she felt like it, closed when she didn't.

I started going there every morning. Getting tea. Talking to her, or not talking, just being there.

And I realized something. In all my interactions with my 847 friends, I'd never had anything like what I had with Maria. Which was basically nothing—a few minutes of conversation, a cup of tea, a consistent presence.

But it was real. She wasn't performing. I wasn't performing. We were just... there. Two people, sharing space, no agenda, no audience.

And it felt more like friendship than most of my actual friendships.

[Pause. Sip of water. The TED people said to stay hydrated.]

Here's what I started to understand: We've confused connection with performance.

[Next slide: Split screen—left side shows someone taking a photo of their food, right side shows someone actually eating.]

We document instead of experience. We curate instead of share. We maintain hundreds of shallow connections instead of investing in a few deep ones.

And we're lonelier than ever.

[Next slide: Statistics about loneliness, social isolation, mental health. He hates this slide because it feels manipulative, but the data is real.]

The research backs this up. Americans report having fewer close friends than at any point in the last several decades. The average is now less than three. One in five report having no close friends at all.

But we have more ways to connect than ever before! More platforms, more tools, more opportunities to reach out across distance and time.

So what's going wrong?

[He clicks to the next slide. It's a photo of lights across water at night.]

I call them distant campfires.

On the beach in Montauk, I'd look across the bay at night and see all these lights. Houses, lives, people living them. Little points of warmth in the darkness.

And I'd feel comforted, knowing I wasn't entirely alone. But I also wasn't warm. I could see the fires, but I couldn't feel their heat.

That's what social media does. It shows us everyone's fires—their photos, their updates, their carefully selected moments. We can see that they're there, burning away. But we're not actually sitting at their fire. We're not sharing the warmth.

We're just... watching. From a distance. Getting colder.

[Next slide: A simple question—'When did we stop sitting at fires together?']

I met a teenager on that beach. Sixteen years old. She told me she had 847 friends—same number as me, coincidentally—and if 843 of them knocked on her door, she wouldn't know who they were.

Sixteen years old. And she'd already figured out what took me until forty-three to understand.

She also told me she didn't know how to just be with people anymore. How to be present without thinking about how it looked, or what she'd say about it later, or whether she should be somewhere else, with someone else.

She'd never known anything different. This was just how friendship worked, as far as she knew.

And that broke my heart.

[He's getting emotional now. Didn't expect that. Pauses. Collects himself.]

Because here's what I learned, sitting at an actual bonfire on that beach one night, with a stranger who'd built it and invited me to share it:

Real connection requires proximity. Vulnerability. Presence.

You can't curate it. You can't perform it. You can't maintain it with likes and comments and the occasional 'hey, we should catch up sometime.'

You have to actually show up. Sit down. Be there. Even when it's awkward. Even when you're not sure what to say. Even when it would be easier to just send a text and move on.

[Next slide: Just the words 'Just This.']

There's a phrase that kept coming back to me in Montauk. 'Just this.'

Just this moment. Just this conversation. Just this cup of tea with this person in this place.

Not documented. Not shared. Not turned into content.

Just experienced. Just lived.

And it was enough.

[Next slide: The number 7.]

When I got back from Montauk, I made a decision. I was going to focus on my seven real friends instead of my 847 fake ones.

I didn't delete my accounts. I'm not going to stand here and tell you to throw away your phone or abandon social media or move to a beach.

But I got more intentional. I stopped scrolling mindlessly. I stopped maintaining the fiction of 840 connections that weren't real. I started actually calling the seven people who mattered. Actually making plans. Actually showing up.

And you know what? I'm still lonely sometimes. Connection is hard. Presence is hard. Being vulnerable enough to actually be known is terrifying.

But I'm lonely differently now. With more awareness. With less willingness to accept the substitute of performed connection for real connection.

Because I know what real warmth feels like now. I've sat at the fire.

[Next slide: A challenge, in simple text.]

So here's what I want to ask you.

How many friends do you have? Really have. Not on social media. Not people you're connected to. But people who actually know you. Who you could call right now, in crisis, and they'd show up.

[Pause. Let them count.]

For most of us, it's a smaller number than we'd like to admit.

And that's okay. That's not failure. That's honesty.

The failure is pretending otherwise. Maintaining hundreds of shallow connections and calling it a social life. Scrolling through distant campfires and wondering why we're cold.

[Next slide: Back to the bonfire image.]

Here's my invitation: Choose one fire to sit at this week. One real conversation. One moment of actual presence with another human being.

Not documented. Not performed. Just experienced.

Put the phone away. Make eye contact. Ask how someone's actually doing and wait for a real answer. Tell someone how you're actually doing. Be vulnerable. Be present. Be real.

Just this.

It's not a solution. It won't fix loneliness or solve the crisis of modern connection or make you suddenly feel fulfilled and whole.

But it's a start.

[Final slide: The beach. Empty. Beautiful. His footprints in the sand, leading toward the water.]

Two years ago, I had 847 friends and I was completely alone.

Today, I have seven friends. Maybe eight, if I count my sister.

And I'm less alone than I've ever been.

Not because I have fewer connections. But because the ones I have are real.

They're fires I can actually sit at. Fires that actually warm me.

Everything else is just distant light.

And I'm done pretending that's enough.

Thank you.

[He walks off stage. The applause feels weird. Performative, even. But also genuine? He's not sure. He'll probably overthink this for days.]

Someone's already filming it for YouTube. The irony isn't lost on him.

But maybe—just maybe—someone watching will put down their phone afterward and call a friend.

Just this.

That would be enough.

END

DistantCampfires.com

PUBLISHER NOTE.

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Our book author is an unnamed fictional person, created to tell the tale.

"Collaborative writing is fine until the bastard starts agreeing with you."

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