4 Sunday

An intimate self-dialogue about loneliness

Cináed Thomas

Hate it when the only friend I have that does a few things with me, makes me feel like Sunday leftovers. #lonely #bored #depressed #gay

Anonymised Twitter User

Cináed: I dread Sundays. They are the days when I feel the loneliest. As I lie in my bed on a Sunday morning, I hear the screams and laughter of family life outside, and I wonder what noises my home would make if it were filled with family. I ask myself why those families want to be together and why I am not with mine. On Sundays, as I wander to the kitchen and pour milk onto a bowl of cereal, I fantasise about home-made muesli and freshly squeezed orange juice; that's the breakfast I see Jamie Oliver prepare on TV whilst surrounded by his many children. Friends are always encouraging me to make my fantasy breakfast. Often, they are mothers who live in homes like Jamie's, filled with the noise of family life: people who struggle after a couple of hours of solitude, let alone a whole weekend. However, as my mum says, 'What's the point of cooking for one?'

Sundays have a tempo unlike that of any other day of the week. Sunday time moves more slowly. Minutes turn into hours, and hours become tortuous stretches of solitude, almost as if time itself struggled just as much as I do to pull itself along from dawn to dusk. On Sundays, time is my torturer, dangling its existential sword cruelly above my soul. They are the days of the week when the mobile phone pings the least. On Sundays, hardly anyone messages me. I'll often wait all day for the mobile to show signs of life. On Sundays, the excitement of a numbered red dot appearing on the screen cannot be overestimated. But when the hours go by and no red dots appear, the loneliness I experience can be crippling. On Sundays, time tries to break me, but I hold on to the idea that, one day, Sundays will be full of pleasure rather than pain. When you experience life alone, Sundays are hell.

Sometimes I prostitute myself online: not for sex, but for conversation to fill the emptiness left by the people who I feel have abandoned me. I'll message a guy on Grindr multiple times who I know isn't

interested in me and provoke him into maintaining a chat. Sometimes I'll ask questions, too many questions, to keep him chatting for as long as I can. I know who I am, what I have become. As one Twitter post said, 'Please, God, let me find love before the age of 30, so I'm not a creepy, lonely old man on Grindr'. He isn't alone; another post reads, 'my biggest fear in life is not finding a husband and becoming one of those lonely 40-something-year-old men who spend their time harassing twinkles on Grindr'. No wonder I find it hard to look in a mirror. Some want to see 'body pics', but I can't show them because I have the average body of someone in their mid-forties. As Shield¹ writes, 'By centring on the user photo, Grindr's interface hyper-valuates visual self-presentations'. So, within Grindr, there's nowhere to hide. It's different for my straight friends or my gay friends in long-term relationships. They don't worry about having a flabby belly, or having to keep themselves toned like I do. Sometimes I get blocked, because they find me too persistent. Gay men can be cruel. They can inflict the same degree of emotional pain as any straight person. As one Twitter user said, 'Is there a rule in NYC that says all #gay men must not be seen in public on Sundays until afternoon? I'm #lonely'. Maybe that's why we are experts at spurning those who repel us. Occasionally, I'll introduce long, artificial pauses to make myself appear busy. After all, what 'normal' person would be on Grindr on a Sunday morning? In 2014, Grindr claimed, 'nearly 10 million users in over 192 countries' of whom over two million were 'daily active users' (Grindr, 2014); by 2017, Grindr reported that its three million daily active users averaged about an hour a day on the platform (cited in Shield, 2018).² I wonder how many of those men are looking at their screens, like me, longing for a connection. Three million is a big number, but despite the enormity of the statistic, I am alone. At a time of my life when all I want is to eat a family-type Sunday roast dinner surrounded by loved ones, I still have to keep myself sexually attractive to other men. In the gay world, being in my mid-40s makes me the equivalent of a cow put out to pasture. I'm over the hill – a desexualised pensioner. Being middle-aged and gay only adds to my loneliness.

C: Have you always felt lonely?

Cináed: Probably. Even within the intimacy of a family Christmas when growing up, I felt lonely. Christmas cards depicting heteronormative family life lay strewn across my mother's sideboard. Even the television showed straight, newlywed couples buying furniture in the New Year sales. Occasionally, I am asked whether I have a 'special friend', but that's it. For the rest of Christmas, my gayness remains unspoken.

1 A. Shield. 2018. Grindr culture: Intersectional and socio-sexual. *Ephemera*, 18(1), 149–161.

2 Ibid., p. 150, 2018.

Hence, tucking into Christmas dinner surrounded by my parents, my brother, and his family, my loneliness makes me feel like an outsider in the only home I know. Even amid ‘family’, I’ve always felt the odd one out. And somehow, the common wisdom of the ‘families of choice’³ doesn’t feel so comforting, I still find, as many other gay men do⁴ my family of origin pulls heavily on my fibres of being; what they do affects me, probably more than I would like to admit.

I feel ashamed to admit that I feel lonely. It’s yet another coming out, in a lifetime of coming-outs. I’m worried I’ll be judged as a failure, as someone to avoid. Anybody glancing at my life would not necessarily see loneliness. I have friends and a family forged from blood. However, over time they have found others, predominantly spouses, who fill the space once occupied by our friendship. Some have children and others have busy work lives, but one by one, they have abandoned me. Time spent with me has fallen into the cracks of life’s pavement. Text messages aren’t replied to, or a birthday card stops arriving. I’m no longer useful or as relevant as I once was. No longer do they need a wingman to distract them during their free time, or someone to listen to their troubles. I am the toy everyone picked up and played with when the noise of family was missing and then dropped when it was there again. I have served my purpose, and now I am alone.

I’ve never felt that I fitted in: not with family, friends, or even within ‘gay culture’. People often assume that if I were in a relationship, then my persistent loneliness would evaporate. However, the emptiness I feel is not partner-shaped. I don’t know what would fill the void I have inside me, but the loneliness I refer to isn’t about having an empty bed. It’s subtler than that. I am part of a family held together by genes but have never created one based on love alone. I know my writing will break my mother’s heart. But my persistent feelings of loneliness are not a result of anything she or anyone else in my family has done. The best word to describe it is ‘aphasic’. I have always felt out of sync with everybody else. I’ve never felt I belonged to anything or anywhere and being gay feels like a large part of that.

C: Why are you writing about it now?

Cináed: I feel lonelier than I have for a long time, and I know I am not the only gay man who feels this way. There are others too. I spoke to one guy on Grindr who hadn’t left his bed all weekend. And there’s the friend who speaks of the crucifying heartache he puts himself through when decorating his Christmas tree. The simple act of placing baubles on every

3 J. Weeks, B. Heaphy, and C. Donovan, eds. 2001. *Same sex intimacies: Families of choice and other life experiments*. London: Routledge.

4 A. Ocobock. 2013. The power and limits of marriage: Married gay men’s family relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75(1), 191–205.

branch kills him a little inside. He's tried different tactics over the years to make it less of an ordeal. He's bought expensive ornaments and invited friends over for mulled wine, but nothing has worked. You see, even if we make these events full of laughter, inevitably everyone leaves. So many men in empty houses looking at Christmas trees decorated with a home in mind. I know of others, many in their 40s and 50s, who are gregarious and well-connected, some who even have partners. However, we all seem to share that innate sense of never finding others willing to walk alongside us in life, people who vibrate at the same frequency. I read an article on middle-aged gay men and loneliness, and I found myself disheartened, as if they were writing about me, 'Given the heterosexist, homophobic, and ageist attitudes that render some midlife and older gay and bisexual men vulnerable to feel sexually undesirable and invisible, and that gay men lack external resources available to heterosexual men, it could logically be expected that these factors would have an influence on the loneliness of gay and bisexual men over 40'.⁵ It seems we all harbour a lingering loneliness that walks alongside us in our everyday lives.

What's made matters worse is that I've lost six or so elderly relatives to cancer in as many years, and I have four more who are terminally ill. The only family I have known is fading away. Watching them endure years of sickening chemotherapy is weighing on my mind. What will happen if I get cancer? Who will be there to nurse me? My godchildren and nephews have their own lives. I cannot impose on them. I don't want to die alone, but it's increasingly likely to happen.

Most recently, I lost an uncle whose beloved wife had died some years earlier. He was utterly lost without her. After her death, life drained from his soul. To hear my mother tell stories of him struggling to cook tinned food in the microwave, or of spending his days riding the bus and eating alone in the cafés he frequented with my aunt, broke my heart. For the first time in his life, at 82, he was alone and with no understanding of how to look after himself. He was the embodiment of a broken man.

Within a year of his wife's death, he developed cancer, first in his bowel and later in his bones. Limping and struggling to get the morphine down, he told me he regretted not having a daughter to look after him and that all he wanted was to die. That was the last time I spoke to him. A few weeks later, he was dead. Unbeknownst to everybody, he had refused life-extending treatment, seemingly because he didn't see the point of prolonging his agony. At his funeral, I recall conversations about how wise his decision was to withhold radiotherapy because, as one relative said, 'He had no family to live for'. That statement stabbed

5 R.J. Jacobs and M.N. Kane. 2012. Correlates of loneliness in midlife and older gay and bisexual men. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 24(1), 40–61.

me to my core. Does that mean I don't have a family? If it does, then my life is meaningless.

C: Fuck, Cináed, that sounds heavy.

Cináed: I've concluded that if I get cancer, I will refuse treatment. What's the point? Why would I put myself through that? If I don't have kids who need to see me grow old or a partner who needs me, I'm not putting myself through months of nausea and deteriorating health. I saw aunts and uncles wither away because of gruelling chemotherapy. They became living skeletons, trapped in makeshift downstairs bedrooms and nursed by their children. I can't become a burden because I have no one to look after me, which concerns me to the extent that I've become paranoid about falling ill. I eat healthily, I exercise, and I have the flu jab every year. I cannot fail. I've had times when I've lain on my bathroom floor ill from food poisoning. The fear of choking on one's vomit while being alone is terrifying. If you've always had intimate others in your life, someone you can shout out for in times of desperation, I don't think you can comprehend these moments. So much of everyday life centres on family. I know the term can be problematised, and that families come in different shapes and sizes, but when you are lying on the bathroom floor choking, that debate is terrifyingly distant.

C: I'm worried about you.

Cináed: There's no need. I've never felt any different. I've always felt lonely. Of course, we typically associate loneliness with being old, but there is an inherent heteronormativity within that belief. It assumes that a man will marry a woman and that they will have a family, which will stave off any feelings of isolation. I am one of the gay men of Generation X – men squeezed between illegality and gay liberation. We are the men who grew up just before the tsunami that was the Internet took hold of our lives and drowned them in a sea of chat rooms and dating apps. It was a wave of freedom and of connection that came after we had internalised the shame and fear of our parents' generation. We are the boys who grew up being told that gay sex infects and kills. We are the sons whose only gay role models were 'poofers' on TV or men banished from our communities.

Now we are expected to be in healthy relationships and to have worked through the trauma that dogged our childhoods. How can I be in a long-term intimate relationship when it wasn't modelled as a child? How can I be vulnerable and truthful in adulthood when those things could have killed me as a child? A therapist told me that I should get a dog, as it would help me to have a sense of what it's like to be in a relationship. But the commitment frightens me. How can a dog love me unconditionally if a partner never has? How the hell can I expect a dog to come back to me and want to be with me when no human ever has? All I knew as a gay boy was loneliness and isolation. It's natural to me; I'm accustomed to it. But now that I am old, what kept me safe

has become my enemy. Unless I do something about it, and I'm not sure what that is, then loneliness will kill me. Of that I am sure.

C: How old are you?

Cináed: I'm 42.

C: You sound like an old man; like one of those elderly people who have stopped cooking with fresh ingredients and turned to microwaving ready meals.

Cináed: Only recently have I realised that midlife existence resembles that of a pensioner. I feel gay and grey; you might not be familiar to this reference, why would you? I'm talking about *Gay and Gray* in New York City, a documentary of the often-invisible lives of elderly gay people. They state that 'Gays are ten times more likely not to have someone to turn to for support compared to the general population'.⁶ Maybe it's because my parents are of that age, and coupled with the recent deaths of relatives, I myself have aged. For years, not having a family kept me young. I went to bars and nightclubs long after my straight friends stopped. I worry that if I went on holiday with gay men now it would turn into one of those drink-obsessed, innuendo-filled holidays that I enjoyed (or should that be endured) up to a few years ago. I just want a holiday during which I can relax. I am one of those old ladies my mother knows, whose husbands have died and who find themselves solo travellers on a coach trip somewhere nice, not too far away, and with other widows.

Being gay and lonely is killing me. Some days when I don't see anyone else, I only walk 200 steps. I've gone from being young to being old. My sofa has a sag in the middle where I've sat for too long. My grandfather's chair had the same sag. I often sit there sipping a coffee, like an old man susceptible to bedsores, suffocating in a silence that takes away whatever optimism I had. The slump breaks my heart and makes my back ache. Even my furniture has moulded itself to my solitude. Sometimes I forget I haven't done the washing up, and I go to the kitchen where the dirty plates are still piled up at the side of the sink, and I want to weep. Living alone is tough; minor tasks become difficult when you haven't got somebody to help you. A folded fitted sheet is never as neat as when somebody helps you fold it. Everything is always just good enough. Maybe the slightly dishevelled, good enough nature of the folded sheet is a metaphor for my life. Living alone, nothing moves unless I move it. A bottle of shampoo drags on for months, and the first voice I hear on a morning is the DJ on the radio.

Sometimes I feel helpless, lost. I worry that there is a stench of loneliness about me, a flatness, a sense of decay. I worry people can smell my

6 N. Chesla, C. Creager, and J. Englander. 1999. *Gay and Gray in New York City*. Film. 22 min. Distributed by Fanlight Productions, Boston, MA.

loneliness. I know they can't, but I worry I give off an odour. Loneliness means life becomes stagnant. If I haven't spoken to someone for a few days, my voice becomes frail and my jaw aches when I speak. It's funny; actually, it's not funny at all, that the muscles in my mouth weaken in such a short time. Now I know why some old people talk that way. I don't spend Sunday mornings watching kids play football or preparing a family-sized Sunday dinner.

C: I wonder how many men feel the same. Surely, you're not the only one.

Cináed: Too many elderly gay men are in the same situation.⁷ However, many men of my own age might feel the same. On Sundays, Twitter is full of muscular bearded men enjoying each other's company while smiling into the lens of a mobile phone camera. However, there are also photos of others lying in bed, clearly using social media to fill the emptiness that Sundays evoke. I know of one man who has spent years living by himself, to the extent that he finds terrifying the thought of somebody else entering his flat. Just the other day I met a man who hadn't left his flat for four days, and although he was clearly depressed, I couldn't bring myself to admit feeling precisely the same way. Last Sunday I was chatting to a guy on Grindr whom I had previously met for a coffee, who described Sundays as the 'dullest day of the week'. To meet him you would think he was the life and soul of the party, full of stories of his past adventures. He's even got a boyfriend. Yet he, too, found Sundays a painful reminder of the loneliness many of us gay men have lived with all our lives. Grindr is busy on Sundays. So many of us turn to strangers online for our first connection with humanity in the morning. Emotionally, we want to feel part of something: a family, a community; and I do this by lying in bed staring at my phone. I dread Sundays. They are the cruel reminder that, for many gay men, our battles are not yet won.

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A painful making sense of a painful experience

I wish you hadn't read this about me. Loneliness is yet another thing about which I feel ashamed. And in sharing a somewhat depressing text, I feel embarrassed. But it feels important to tell you what goes on in what Edgar writes about in the introductory chapter: my personal space, my home. A sometimes brutal, non-scripted intersection of identity, place, and space for which narratives both grand and personal have yet to be created.

7 S. McLaren. 2016. The relationship between living alone and depressive symptoms among older gay men: The moderating role of sense of belonging with gay friends. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 28(11), 1895–1901.

I've seen the faces and read the responses of those who have read the self-dialogue you have just read. I see the pity in their eyes and in their words. And while I appreciate the offers of getting together, a new self-aware part of me does not want to expose myself to the emotionally rich everyday experiences that I crave. Call it self-care. What I seek, something I can articulate more succinctly through writing this chapter, is an ease of companionship that Esther Rantzen (a UK campaigner and widow) exquisitely captured when she said loneliness is like having people to do something with, but no one to do nothing with.⁸

It's taken a lot to write this chapter, more than you know. We know loneliness kills, it's equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.⁹ So, while no one is holding a cigarette to my mouth, one manufactured by a cultural vacuum hangs from my lips. My gayness is literally killing me. There are no stories about single gay men enjoying Sundays that I can follow. I am adrift without meaning. Without scripts, I move my body less and I eat what I put in the fridge. What, I have agency you say? Why don't I go out for a Sunday walk and treat myself to a roast dinner, you ask? Because nobody has told me I can. Someone once said I had an underdeveloped sense of entitlement, but I now realise I've never known what I am entitled to. Others haven't known what to do with me. I've fallen in between the cracks of the grand narratives Edgar and Jason write about in the introductory chapter and it fucking hurts. In fact, the fact that I was raised without stories about others like me will directly or indirectly lead to my death. The musculoskeletal and physiological consequences of living without a script are emerging. Only now, in my early forties, am I realising how much my everyday life has(n't) been shaped by stories about others like me. Every day is hard when there is no script to follow. I am an actor on the side of life's stage waiting for his lines. Others have their scripts; they know their roles. But they or the directors in my life haven't got a script for me, and now I am paying the price. Every Sunday, every day.

8 E. Rantzen. 2021. 'Nobody to do nothing with.' *Combating loneliness*. [online] Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE). Available at: <<https://www.scie.org.uk/news/opinions/esther-rantzen-silverline>> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

9 J. Holt-Lunstad, T. B. Smith, M. Baker, T. Harris, and D. Stephenson. 2015. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), 227–237.