

Eleveneses

We always meet for eleveneses, he and I. Eleven o'clock comes and we descend from our various spheres, from whatever we are doing, to sit in the living room with a cup of tea and a biscuit or perhaps some homemade cake instead. Our other times of meeting – our lunches, afternoon teas and dinners – always vary. Either of us may be visiting friends, or perhaps we are out shopping, or I might be at church or he is perhaps at one of those skills classes he has taken up recently. But what you must understand is that eleveneses never changes. Every day for five years or so, since this arrangement began, we have met every day at eleven. On Sundays, I admit, I've ensured that eleveneses takes place an hour earlier, but aside from that, every day, without fail, he and I sit in the living room and talk over our morning tea.

We are both the sort who keep busy. We are not the kind of people who after retirement spend day upon day watching daytime television. We didn't have televisions when I was growing up and I suppose you never get used to those sorts of things. It just seems so alien to me, even now, even after decades (why, how old I must sound to you!) of sitting with my husband and children in front of the television, of watching films, of following sitcoms and BBC dramas – even after decades of all that, I still couldn't be quite comfortable with myself if I didn't fill up my days other ways. I read a lot. I go to book clubs, church groups, plays, have afternoon chats with friends. I help out with the local youth group. He is learning woodworking and computer skills, and he has his own friends.

The fact that we both are the sort to keep occupied is probably why this arrangement works. I am not sure if that is because we are both similar people in that respect, or because it means that we don't actually see each other all that much. Perhaps the first. After all, we do enjoy one another's company, and it is company we were longing for when we decided to move in together. But if we were always to sit in the same room, if we were always to have the same shared life, it might remind us of what we lack.

We meet, of an evening, sometimes, to play bridge, or to watch the television (he likes it more than me), and at about eleven we retire to our separate bedrooms.

It was the loneliness that brought this about. I wonder if I need to explain this to you, or if perhaps you know; you may have been lonely yourself. After seventy-five years on this earth, I've come to the conclusion that loneliness is one of the worst pains you can feel. Loss is a clear second, but loneliness is the real tragedy. I needed someone to live with, and so did he. We discussed this not long after we first met, through friends, and it seemed to make sense. Everybody thought we were crazy when we moved in together, me seventy then, and him sixty-six. Our respective children opened their eyes wide in amazement. They didn't understand, but then of course they had never been lonely. To us it was and is the perfect solution.

He and I talked, once, very briefly, about getting married, after a mutual friend had suggested it, but we decided there was no point. She clearly didn't know our situation properly, because if we were to marry, it would be a sham of a marriage. We are really just good friends.

It would have been entirely different, I suppose, under other circumstances. I do not mean if we were younger, but maybe if we were in some alternate world. After all, he is one of the nicest men I have ever met – kind, softly-spoken, enthusiastic about everything, keen to learn, intelligent, cheerful – and he has this certain quality of beauty about him that I have always admired. I have seen pictures of him back from the seventies when he was young, and he was certainly good-looking then. Just the kind of man I might have liked. And sometimes, when I do on occasion find myself unoccupied, I take to daydreaming, and think what if, what if... I hope you won't judge me for thinking about it; but what if he and I, who live in such platonic bliss now, had met in some parallel past, where there had been no Harry, no Meg? I think we would have fallen in love. I imagine us living out our lives, having children together, growing old and getting to this same point, except that in this dream we go upstairs together in the evening, and we sleep side by side.

The dream, too, is a defence against loneliness. Of course there was a Harry, and there was a Meg, and that changes everything.

We did sleep side by side, once, he and I, though we have never spoken of it since. Some little time after we had just moved in together, the loneliness hit me like never before, and I remember, in the middle of one sleepless night, hardly knowing what I was doing, I got up and crossed the hallway. I got into bed beside him, and lay there, silent, not touching him, staring at the ceiling. I closed my eyes, and I heard him breathe out, and I understood. I knew that, lying there together, we were both pretending the other was somebody else.

I often pretend. If I wake in the morning and hear him cooking breakfast down-the-stairs, I pretend the clattering is Harry instead. Of course I know the truth, but I always feel a tiny sting of disappointment when I come into the kitchen and see the smiling face of my friend, not of my husband.

We are both in love with the dead, and together we keep off the loneliness. Together we meet for eleveneses, share small talk over tea and biscuits, and smile at one another. Together we cope.