

Contest #184 winner 

All the Lonely People

Submitted into [Contest #184](#) in response to: Write a story where a character has to decide whether to press the button or not.... [view prompt](#)



Michelle Oliver [FOLLOW](#)

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MONDAY

I tap my foot nervously on the shiny marble floor as I watch the numbers descend. I'm going to be late... again. It really wasn't my fault. I'd had my hours swapped with George this week, so he could leave work in time to pick his kids up from school, while his wife recuperated from surgery. I now needed to be in the office by 10.00 instead of 8.30. You'd think that would make me early. However, since I was finishing later, I'd tried to get to the gym in the morning. Well that was a mistake. It was either shower and be late, or skip the shower and arrive stinky and sweaty. I figure that my coworkers would prefer a late me, than a pungent me.

The brisk tap of heels alerts me to the fact that I am not the

her wind swept hair behind her ears as she juggles a fully loaded satchel bag and a briefcase with one hand, while she reaches for the call button on the wall. I'd already pressed it, it was already lit, and pressing it again will not make the elevator move any faster.

The numbers stop at ground floor and the doors open. I gesture for the woman to precede me into the space and she uses her elbow to press floor 23, one floor above my own. I press 22 and stand back. It is just the two of us, and without trying to be obvious, I check her out. Tiny, with short black hair that curls about her ears, which sport a pair of Air Pods, and a killer figure enhanced by shiny black heels. I am a sucker for heels, but how the hell did women walk in them?

Hi, I'm Adrian. I don't say, but wish I could.

She smiles at me, a little half smile to acknowledge my presence accompanied by a fractional nod of the head.

I'm... well I don't know her name, perhaps it's Jane or Alice. What about Elizabeth? Sarah? I think I will call her Eleanor. You know like the Beatles song. We're all lonely people here. I'm Eleanor.

So Eleanor, how long have you worked... I run through my memory of the building's occupants. Floor 23 is a legal firm, I think. Jackson and Fuller is on the official gold name plate in the foyer. How long have you worked at Jackson and Fuller?

It's my first day. Well I haven't seen her around so it could very well be her first day, but she has a lot of papers stuffed in that briefcase.

Actually I have worked for them for six years. There is no way this girl can be old enough to have worked for them for six years. She looks about twenty five.

I'm doing my Internship and have been here two months

interested in me as I am in her.

I'm an Assistant Accountant at SP and Associates on the twenty second floor. I would tell her, just so she would know where to find me, should she be interested. I have worked there for the past three years.

Do you enjoy your work? Would she really ask such an inane question? Maybe it was small talk. What else do two people trapped alone in an elevator ask one another?

I wonder if she is single, and I cast my eyes sideways, trying to get a look at her fingers. I can't see, but I'm going out on a limb here... She's single.

I can see her head moving slightly, nodding to the beat of music that only she can hear. It's entrancing as if she were in her own private world and I was viewing her through a window.

What music are you listening to? I would ask. She's so cute, that she would be listening to something cool and hip. Perhaps an artist I'd never heard of, or something jazzy, or classical.

Miles Davis, she'd say. Of course I'm a big Miles Davis fan and I ask which album. Kind of Blue. Yep, she would be listening to my favourite album.

The ding of the elevator hitting my floor, halts the conversation we're not having and I smile at her as I exit.

TUESDAY

Although I am technically early to work the following day, having skipped my morning workout, I linger in the foyer, hoping to see my Eleanor again. Finally I realise that I'm being an idiot, there is no reason that she will be here today, just because she was here yesterday. As I press the button to call the elevator, I hear the tip-tap of heels on the marble floor and turn my head. There she is again. Her black curls secured this time but her satchel and brief case still bulging

Hi, again. I would say it, but I'm still struck mute.

Hi, yourself. Her voice would be husky, or maybe not. It might be breathy or high pitched, I don't know. But for me, it's a warm, throaty sound, reminiscent of Scarlett Johansson.

Did you get to work on time yesterday? I would ask. But how the hell would I know if she was late or early?

Yes, thanks, I might be a bit late today though. Slept in. She doesn't look like she slept in, she looks clean and fresh and incredibly relaxed for a Tuesday morning.

I find it easier to be on time if I start work at 8.00. Starting later just sees me wasting time in the morning, and all of a sudden, I'm late again! I would say and she would nod in understanding.

Yes, it's hard to get going when you have extra time to kill in the morning. I would prefer to start early and finish early too. She would agree with me, we are both morning people in my mind.

Perhaps we could meet up for a coffee before work? That wouldn't be creepy. Two adults who work in the same building meeting for coffee, it's nothing too alarming. I almost open my mouth to ask her, and then realise two things almost simultaneously. I've never actually spoken to her, and this is my floor.

WEDNESDAY

Again I wait until the last possible moment to press the button, hesitating with my hand hovering in mid air, but the click of heels on the marble floor never comes. So I reluctantly press it and wait until the elevator arrives. I delay entering until the last possible moment, before I take my solitary place within the lift.

Just as the doors begin to close, I hear the now familiar staccato tap, faster and more urgent this time, as if she was running. I shove my hand between the closing doors, causing them to bounce open again and there she is, breathless and grateful. She

“Thanks,” she murmurs so quietly that I barely catch the sound as it tumbles from her lips.

I just smile and nod back, my words caught behind my lips unable to force their way free.

You're welcome. Running late again? I would ask if I could.

I just can't seem to get the timing right in the morning. She would reply, her eyes twinkling ruefully.

Perhaps she is not the morning person I had believed her to be. Maybe it would be better to catch up after work for a drink and maybe some live music. I know a place around the corner from here that has live Jazz every night of the week. The Duke is a classy, classic Jazz bar, one of my favourite places to listen to music and unwind. We could get a table and share a bottle of wine with a meal.

I get my phone out to check the website, to see who is playing there this week and the elevator stops at my floor. I step out, still focused on the website and don't notice as the doors close behind me.

THURSDAY

This time I'm the one who is late. I'd had a cat emergency, Whiskers had left me a gift, a partially digested, totally unrecognisable gift that I discovered just as I was about to leave home. Therefore I missed the first bus and had to wait twenty minutes for the next one. I ran from the bus station, all the way to work. Lucky I'm fit and in the habit of working out.

The foyer is empty as I race through the glass sliding doors and my heart sinks with disappointment. She isn't there, I've missed her this morning, thanks to my bloody cat. The last elevator is just closing as I arrive in a breathless rush, and I run to try to catch it before it shuts. A small hand reaches out to catch the door and it bounces open.

There she is, my Eleanor. She smiles and steps back into her corner as I enter. A sound emerges from my mouth, it's meant to be words of thanks, but I don't think she hears them. I'm not even sure I spoke the English Language. Perhaps it was Neanderthal. I believe that's a language I'm fluent in, especially if you ask my mother.

My turn to be late today, I would tell her. My cat. He's a little bit feral still, even after fifteen years of the good life. He left a partially digested mouse in my foyer and I had to deal with it just as I was ready to leave. Would that have been too much information? Would she be squeamish? No she's a cat lover too.

She would laugh and tell me a story about her cat. Kitty is so fat she wouldn't be able to catch mice, poor love. She eats only the best gourmet cat food, poached in spring water.

Do you only have the one cat? I would ask

One is definitely enough, wouldn't you agree? She would speak with a smile one that shows how much she loves her cat. I adore Kitty, but I'm not quite ready to be a crazy cat lady just yet. Do you only have the one cat?

Yes, Mr Whiskers was a feral kitten I found out the back of my parents place about fifteen years ago. He lives a great life with me and has me wrapped around his paw.

Cats are like that. You need to be very careful, because they will steal your heart in an instant.

And an instant is all it took, but I was already in love with my Eleanor, however the lift stops at my floor and I step out.

FRIDAY

This is my last day on the late shift. George's wife has recovered from her surgery and I will be going back to my usual shift on Monday. I'm so early this morning, that I pace restlessly about

picked up on the way to work. I am going to speak with Eleanor the moment I see her, I tell myself sternly. I'm going to ask her to the Jazz club, or coffee, or lunch, or just to exchange email addresses. Something.

I pace the foyer some more, watching the minute hand on my watch creep closer and closer to twelve. I have to face it. Eleanor is not coming. Maybe she doesn't work Friday, she could be only a part time employee. Maybe she is still studying while completing her internship and she is on campus every Friday. I admit defeat and enter the elevator. It closes grimly, no cry of "hold the lift!" is forthcoming and I ride it silently all the way to the twenty second floor. It's the quietest lift I've taken all week.

This afternoon I have a heap of paperwork to finish up and sort out before I hand the files back to George on Monday, and so I am the last person in the office. Everyone else has clocked out and Dave, Maria and some others have headed off to The Craic for drinks. I wasn't interested in loud, raucous fun. The Mike Freely Quartet was playing at The Duke, but I didn't feel like sitting there alone, so I locked the office and walked toward the lifts, no spring in my step, just Friday exhaustion slowing me down.

I pressed the call button and waited, studying the tips of my scuffed shoes, without actually seeing them. Like an automaton, I shuffle into the elevator as the doors slide open.

"Hi," the voice is soft. "Tough week?"

I snap my head up and see the other occupant sharing my lift. It's Eleanor, and all of a sudden there is 'Sunshine on a rainy day!' I nod, unable to speak.

She smiles and sighs, "Me too." This is the longest conversation we have ever had out loud!

It's then that I notice that she is carrying a box, an A4 Reflex

item at the top catches my eye with its glinting gold plastic. A name plate, ‘Tamara Blank’. My mouth opens, then closes and I swallow. Tamara?

“It’s my last day,” she says.

The doors open on the ground floor and with a small sad smile she steps out before me. I hear her clipping heals tap across the marble floor toward the sliding glass exit, but I don’t move, and the elevator doors slowly shut in my face. I can see my reflection staring back at me in their shining metal surface.

‘Ah, look at all the lonely people’.



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February 05, 2023 02:02



Michelle Oliver

33 submissions

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306 likes **209 comments**

▲ ▼ 8 points Kathryn Kahn

00:23 Feb 12, 2023

I was so rooting for this character, I felt his disappointment and melancholy when he couldn't bring himself to act. But I loved him anyway, the way he seemed to live entirely inside his own head, but still had this wry view of the world and self-deprecating humor. I also like the depiction of the impersonal feeling of working in a city where you see thousands of people you don't know, but every now and then you get interested in a stranger and can't help but speculate about them and assign a personality. Nice story.

[Reply](#)



▲ ▼ 4 points [Michelle Oliver](#)

03:13 Feb 12, 2023

Thanks for your response. I'm one of those people who loves to invent whole realities based on what I see. It was fun to write a character so stuck in their own head that reality just passed them by and opportunities were missed. I also thought about how fantasy and reality don't match and how jarring this can be when we are forced to reevaluate our perception of others.

[Reply](#)



▲ ▼ 6 points [Dan Taylor](#)

20:47 Feb 17, 2023

I loved it. Very thoughtful and well written. I was stuck on the idea that Adrian was a woman, so it wasn't as sad. Maybe because you have a woman's name or because I tend to think a man could have spoken up. I'll have to follow you now!

Oh, I was also expecting to geek out on more Beatles references, but that might have been corny.

[Reply](#)



▲ ▼ 2 points [Michelle Oliver](#)

22:41 Feb 17, 2023

Thank you. More Beatles references may have taken me over the word limit! Maybe another story. Glad you enjoyed it

[Reply](#)



▲ ▼ 2 points [Timothy Cooper](#)

12:10 Feb 19, 2023

Whooooaaa u just absolutely blew my mind. That would've been an incredibly impressive twist, to have "Adrian" ultimately turn out to be female instead of the presumed male.

 5 points Marty B

18:49 Feb 17, 2023

Are you following me? I feel a close connection to your MC. ;)

I loved the line

"m not even sure I spoke the English Language. Perhaps it was Neanderthal. I believe that's a language I'm fluent in, especially if you ask my mother.'

Been there, done that! Great story!

[Reply](#)

 3 points Michelle Oliver

22:43 Feb 17, 2023

May favourite line too! I had fun writing an introvert with a communication problem.

[Reply](#)

 5 points Michał Przywara

21:43 Feb 07, 2023

Lovely! A great look at how we can get stuck in our own minds, overthinking things, inventing a reality while ignoring the real one.

I like the way it ends. Yes, there could have been a Hollywood moment where he overcomes his inhibitions and asks her out, but this seems more fitting. He doesn't actually know her, or anything about her, and this is the pattern he's established. He's in love with the fantasy of her.

"I almost open my mouth to ask her, and then realise two things almost simultaneously. I've never actually spoken to her, and...

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[Reply](#)

 3 points Michelle Oliver

22:04 Feb 07, 2023

Thanks for reading it. I did wonder how she reacted to his non-interactions. I may revisit this story from her pov some time. I'm not too sure about the ending. I know I didn't want a Hollywood ending, but wonder if it is still a bit of a let down, that there is no character arc or change. He is as frustratingly stuck in his own

Reply

 3 points Michał Przywara

21:41 Feb 08, 2023

I like the ending, though you do raise a good point. Now I'm wondering, is there no arc/change? Maybe there is. He spends his time inventing this fantasy about her, going so far as to structure his work schedule around her - and then it all comes crashing down. Perhaps it's a depressing reminder that reality doesn't care for our fantasies? An internal struggle, where perhaps he's forced to admit defeat - that both his fantasy of her, and his fantasy of himself as a man who seizes an opportunity, are false.

So he's still stuck in his mind, ... [Read more](#)

[Reply](#)

 3 points Michelle Oliver

22:26 Feb 08, 2023

I've added a line at the end, are you able to tell me if you think it works? I was going for the idea that he is confronted with his fantasy crashing down as her real name is revealed. Too much?

[Reply](#)

 3 points Michał Przywara

22:46 Feb 08, 2023

Yeah, I think that's fine. It's a bit of a rude shock, realizing you're wrong, and maybe enough a shock that he lets an opportunity slip out of his grasp.

[Reply](#)

 3 points Michał Przywara

22:06 Feb 17, 2023

Congratulations on the win!

[Reply](#)

 3 points Michelle Oliver

22:27 Feb 17, 2023

Thank you for your feedback on this story , I really appreciated it.

 3 points Timothy Cooper

11:55 Feb 19, 2023

I think the ending is perfection just as it is. In my personal opinion, nothing serves as a better demonstration of literary talent than writing something that mimics real life so well it becomes blurry whether the story is actually fiction or nonfiction. And this city boy knows all too well that in real life this is more or less exactly how that situation would have ended 9 times out of 10.

I like the idea of gifting the reader with that experience to feel raw emotion head on, even to the point of leaving a sort of residue behind on the i... [Read more](#)

[Reply](#)

 2 points Michelle Oliver

12:16 Feb 19, 2023

Thank you Timothy. I am so surprised by how many people resonated with this story. Thanks for your opinion on the ending. I'm glad I let it go this way, and did not give in to the temptation to wrap it up in a nice happy bow.

[Reply](#)

 2 points Savannah Kettlewell

03:55 Mar 17, 2023

TRUE i am only 10 years old and i read a lot

[Reply](#)

 2 points Joe Malgeri

21:12 Jul 25, 2023

Oh, that was great, excellent story, well structured, and of course the cool references to The Beatles, etc...

[Reply](#)

 1 points Michelle Oliver

22:38 Jul 25, 2023

Thank you

[Reply](#)

 2 points Adelaide Arbor

20:24 Jun 23, 2023

I love that it wasn't a meet cute, or something like that. The story has the feeling of being in that liminal space between work and home where nothing is supposed to happen. I can't quite explain how much I love that feeling that you've managed to capture and set the story. Nice work!

[Reply](#)



▲ ▼ 2 points [Michelle Oliver](#)

01:17 Jun 24, 2023

Liminal space, I like that idea. Thanks for reading this story and I'm happy that you enjoyed it.

[Reply](#)



▲ ▼ 2 points [Dany E.G.](#)

15:29 Jun 23, 2023

Couldn't just read the story without dropping by real quick and saying how you cleverly and perfectly captured that feeling of our own helplessness against the desire to interact with the people we look up to or admire. I must say that the ending frustrated me to no end! I really wanted to reach through the screen and slap some sense into Adrian. (When you break your readers emotionally, that's how you know you did a fantastic job) It's so easy to criticize him as a reader for being unable to act on his feelings, but the ending unfailingly b... [Read more](#)

[Reply](#)



▲ ▼ 2 points [Michelle Oliver](#)

01:23 Jun 24, 2023

Thank you for taking the time to read this story. I'm happy that you enjoyed the read, even if Adrian frustrated you. I think here is a little bit of Adrian in all of us, the 'should have' moments in our lives that we wish we could go back and have a redo.

There is the problem of overthinking your life, living so much in your own head that you forget to actually act upon your thoughts. I'm glad this story captured this for you.

[Reply](#)



▲ ▼ 1 points [Dany E.G.](#)

09:13 Jul 01, 2023

That's definitely true, more than we know. I like the way you think about our relationships with our minds and how it can

Reply

 2 points Sophia Zhang

07:49 May 26, 2023

Extremely well written story. Definitely caught my attention when I read through it. Loved the fact that you wrote it in a way where it felt like I felt his sadness and depression.

Reply

 2 points Michelle Oliver

03:44 May 27, 2023

Thank you for reading it.

Reply

 2 points Peter Wyatt

12:17 May 17, 2023

Hello Michelle,

My favorite story from this forum so far. I really liked the internal monologue which was very natural and realistic. In a compact, tight short story you really created a living breathing character many can relate to and want to root for. You have inspired me to try a story using this kind of internal voice structure. I am now following you. Really great story!

Reply

 1 points Michelle Oliver

12:56 May 17, 2023

Thank you Peter. I'm glad that you enjoyed it and that the character resonated with you.

Reply

 2 points Myranda Marie

21:20 May 06, 2023

As I read the inner monologue, I could hear his voice, nervous and sputtery. I could picture his mouth awkwardly agape unable to produce words. I wanted so badly for this nerdy guy to take the risk and stop living in his imagination. Honestly, when I read "It's my last day" I said "NO...." out loud !!! Great read !!!

Reply

 1 points Michelle Oliver

00:10 May 07, 2023

Reply

 2 points Jody S

00:59 Apr 29, 2023

Very well developed! The Beatles references were a nice tie.
Especially the last sentence! Great read!!

Reply

 1 points Michelle Oliver

01:08 Apr 29, 2023

Thanks for reading and responding. It was an enjoyable story to write.

Reply

 2 points Rita Kimak

11:05 Apr 27, 2023

What a great story. It flows so nicely and is such an enjoyable read!!
What a great job!!

Reply

 1 points Michelle Oliver

11:15 Apr 27, 2023

Thank you

Reply

 2 points Nigel Dougill

10:22 Apr 22, 2023

I really enjoyed this. I think it was because i put myself in the lead characters position. How would I have felt or reacted. Perfect position for a follow up.

Reply

 1 points Michelle Oliver

10:46 Apr 22, 2023

Thank you for reading. Glad you enjoyed it.

Reply

 2 points Juliet Driscoll

07:55 Apr 16, 2023

I've just discovered your name is Michelle. I'd thought it was Michael. Must be because I'd placed the narrator as male. See how

Reply

 1 points Michelle Oliver

08:11 Apr 16, 2023

Haha, yep brains are funny like that.

[Reply](#)

 2 points Arielle Baines

19:32 Apr 13, 2023

Awe!!! My poor heart! You pull in the reader very well. Thank you for the story, it was relatable and gosh, the disappointment when she walks away! My son is named Jude and my guitar is named Eleanor, for the prettiest little yellow flowers in Lothlorien. Thanks again, loved it.

[Reply](#)

 2 points Michelle Oliver

23:01 Apr 13, 2023

Thanks for reading and leaving a comment. Glad you enjoyed it.

[Reply](#)

 2 points Leona Burrell

16:51 Apr 13, 2023

Hey, this storie is amazing i love it KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK ❤

[Reply](#)

 1 points Michelle Oliver

23:02 Apr 13, 2023

Thank you.

[Reply](#)

 2 points Graham Kinross

10:30 Apr 11, 2023

Not quite how I met your mother, more how I might have met someone else's mother. Classic shy guy problem, I've had those in the past, meeting and asking someone out like that takes a lot of nerve for some of us. Shame he didn't run out after her and ask her before she left completely. I think that's the last chance to do it in a way that's not creepy. He could probably get her number from HR after that, but that's a bad start to anything. Shame. Like everyone says, I was rooting for him.

 2 points Michelle Oliver

10:46 Apr 11, 2023

Thanks for reading it Graham. I'm glad it resonated with you. I like your analogy too, how I met someone else's mother! I chuckled at that.

[Reply](#)

 2 points Graham Kinross

11:01 Apr 11, 2023

Your MC reminded me of myself in high school and early university. I'm probably one of many guys on here who can relate to this a lot. One of those things you wonder about afterwards, what would have happened.

[Reply](#)

 2 points Graham Kinross

11:05 Apr 11, 2023

Also reminds me of this guy's comedy:

https://youtu.be/Ar_XXEViAos

[Reply](#)

 2 points Michelle Oliver

11:23 Apr 11, 2023

Haha, situational comedy when there is no real situation.

[Reply](#)

 2 points Graham Kinross

19:36 Apr 11, 2023

I don't think he's a fan of situations.

[Reply](#)

 2 points Fin H

13:28 Mar 31, 2023

This is awesome. I mean, I kind of loved the "disappointing" ending--it's so different from the usual "Fairy-Tale, Happily-Ever-After" endings that most books have. I also love the very last line, it just ties everything together so well. And his disappointment when he realizes her real name?! You can practically SEE his fantasies crashing down around him.

I love this.

 1 points Michelle Oliver

13:42 Mar 31, 2023

Thank you, Fin. I'm glad you enjoyed it.

[Reply](#)

 2 points Tessa Elliott

03:17 Mar 27, 2023

This is a great story love how much detail you put into it.

[Reply](#)

 1 points Michelle Oliver

22:40 Mar 27, 2023

Thank you

[Reply](#)

 2 points Liana Graver

10:15 Mar 26, 2023

This is whole time I thought Adrian was a woman, as the character reminded me of how a woman would think, until I read the comments.

[Reply](#)

 1 points Michelle Oliver

22:43 Mar 26, 2023

The beauty of fiction is that you can bring your own interpretation to the table. No one is right or wrong.

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