

Beyond Romance

The Solace of Going Solo

By Vivian Gornick

It's Sunday morning, and I'm walking up Columbus Avenue in New York City. Couples are coming at me on all sides. They fill the street from building line to pavement edge. Some are clasped together looking raptly into each other's faces; some are holding hands, their eyes restless, window-shopping; some walk side by side, stony-faced, carefully not touching. I have the sudden conviction that half these people will, in a few months, be walking with someone else now walking on the avenue as half of another couple. Eventually that arrangement will terminate as well, and each man and each woman will once again be staring out the window of a room empty of companionship. This is a population in a permanent state of intermittent attachment. Inevitably, the silent apartment lies in wait.

Who could ever have dreamed there would be so many of us loafing around, those of us between 35 and 55 who live alone? Thirty years of politics in the street opened a door that became a floodgate, and we have poured through in our monumental numbers, in possession of the most educated discontent in history. Yet we seem puzzled, most of us, about how we got here, confused and wanting relief from the condition. We roam the crowded streets in naked expectation of the last-minute reprieve. For

us, human density is a requirement. Density alone provides material for the perpetual grouping that is our necessity.

The way I see it, I said yes to this and no to that, and found myself living alone. I never *did* understand that response itself is choice. For years, my choices were strongly influenced only by what I took to be a grand concern: I was on my guard against the fear of loneliness. It seemed important to me that I sort out the issues of life—work and love—without securing against the terrors of a solitary old age. Fear of loneliness, I maintained, had been responsible for so many unholy bargains made by so many women that fighting the anxiety became something of a piece of politics for me. A position I took with ease, as my understanding of the matter was primitive.

I married in my mid-twenties. My husband and I had been friends, but once we were married we rapidly became locked into other people's ideas of a husband and a wife. One day we were a pair of serious-minded students putting our small meals on the table together, taking turns washing up, doing the laundry. The next day I was alone in the kitchen with a cookbook while he read the paper in the living room; when he looked up it was to speculate aloud, in the direction of the kitchen, about his work,

our future. I grew alarmed, and so did he. Our alarm filled the apartment and became a bane of our existence. This bane held our attention to a morbid degree. We seemed continuously to be brooding on why we were not happy.

We thought of ourselves as enlightened people. The idea had been to go forward into life side by side, facing outward, at the world, but now we found that we faced only inward, each toward the ignorant other. Slowly, the relationship that was meant to serve our lives became our life. The more uncertain we grew the more we protested that love was everything. Nothing, we said, was to come between us and our love. We two would be as one. That was the norm. Deviation from the norm could only unnerve and unsettle.

This policy did not take us to the promised land; it led us further out into the desert. Neither of us, it seemed, was to be allowed an independent impulse. It became habitual for one or the other to complain regularly, "How can you say you love me and want to do *that*?" Inevitably, what either he or I had wanted to do that so outraged the other was to gratify an interest that served only our own separate selves, a desire the other experienced as excluding and therefore disloyal. But the restriction went against nature: The impulse kept sur-

facing, like a weed pushing up through concrete.

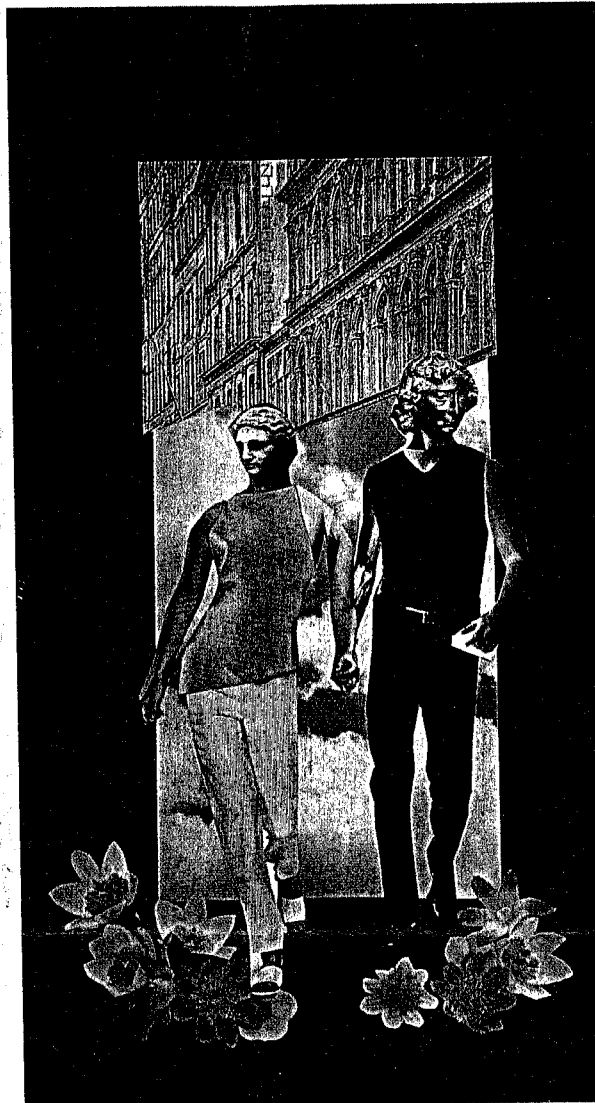
Grieving over failed intimacy (the shock and the abnormality of it), we found our unhappiness shameful (here we were, married and more alone than when we were alone). Shame isolates. The isolation was humiliating. Humiliation does not bear thinking about. We began to concentrate on not thinking.

The more troubled our attachment became the more time we spent in each other's company. We were always together. It wasn't that we enjoyed being together, not at all, it was simply that we could not bear to be apart. Together, we generated tension, but alone we each fell into an intense loneliness. The loneliness was more painful than the tension, to be avoided at any cost. Eventually, if I said I was going to the store for a container of milk, my husband said he'd walk along with me. The people we knew—they were all as young as us—said, Look how devoted they are. Marriage taught me that anxiety looks like devotion and that loneliness is the human condition that most rejects easy analysis.

The obsession with avoiding ourselves became degrading. Our own emotions were now the enemy. A protective shell grew up around all feeling. When this shell thickened, the flesh at the center shriveled. Young and healthy, I felt buried alive.

At last we parted.

I remember lying in bed that first morning staring up at the small square of bedroom ceiling. I remem-



ber the sunny silence and the bliss I felt at not having to respond to anyone. Peace, utter peace: the shadows gone, the anxiety cleared out. What remained was open space. My presence filled the tiny apartment. I stood naked in the middle of the room. I yawned and I stretched. The *idea* of love seemed an invasion. I had thoughts to think, a craft to learn, a self to discover. Solitude was a gift. A world was waiting to welcome me if I was willing to enter it alone. I put on my clothes and walked through the door.

It was the early '70s, an exciting time, and a great many women shared the excitement. We had become con-

verts to the women's movement. When we met, all of us, in public places, coming together again and again for the pleasure of elaborating the insight and repeating the analysis, the world expanded into an extended companionatness of extraordinary dimension. This companionatness exhilarated and sustained. Coming home from a meeting I experienced my rooms as warm and welcoming, the orderliness and the quiet a pleasure and a relief, the conversation still buzzing in my head. There was no one in the room but me, and I was far from alone. I had brought home company, wonderful company, and company gave me back myself.

But the closeness was a function of the moment—that moment when feminism had felt revolutionary—and when the moment passed, the comradeship passed with it. Then it was as though I knew a great many people, but none of

them knew each other. The illusion of an integrated life evaporated. It was back to urban social life as I had known it before my marriage: fragmented and highly strung, marked by the tensions and withdrawals of intense lives and personalities, friendships that were always in and out of phase. Without domestic companionship, it startled me to see, daily connection was by no means a given.

One day I realized I was alone, not only in the apartment but in the world. If I didn't pick up that phone and make at least one call . . . And even when I did pick up the phone, the times without number when, no matter how many calls I made, every-

one was occupied, no one was available . . . The quiet pressed in on me. The apartment resonated with its own silence. The silence deepened. Solitude was now problematic.

Loneliness, when it came, came—then as now—like a surge of physical illness. It began with a pressure behind the eyes that forced a frown onto my face. In a matter of minutes I'd be struck down, sick and sweating, misery washing through my chest, fear radiating out in waves from the pit of my stomach. I'd lie down on the couch with an open book in

my hands and wait for the seizure to pass. Sometimes, though, it would go on for days, especially in the warm and dreamy seasons of the year. I can recall a thousand mornings when I've awakened into the piercing sweetness of a summer day feeling as though my bed was anchored to a gray, unpeopled landscape, while just outside the window the world is bathed in a fluid element and all the people in it are splashing about, brilliant with color, in pairs and in groups.

So here I was, no longer alone and pleased to be alone; now alone and in pain. I did the obvious then: made those phone calls, went wherever I was invited, cultivated acquaintanceships indiscriminately; and shortly, if I wished, I could be out every night of the week. When mere sociability became intolerable, I'd give myself a little lecture on the former joys of solitude, urging myself to spend the evening reading as I had done so frequently throughout the years of my life. Then I'd lie down on the couch, barely getting through 50 pages in three hours, reading the same sentence three times before I absorbed its content, but on the

couch all the same, toughing it out. Pain produces insight and energy but not balance or detachment. Getting through a lonely evening like a patient surmounting a fever, and praising myself for not succumbing to the worst excesses of self-pity, was surely not a sign of indomitable spirit. If that was the best I could do, I might as well get married! At those words my back

Marriage taught me that anxiety looks like devotion and that loneliness is the human condition that most rejects easy analysis.

stiffened. I'd be damned and gone to hell first. I saw that more was involved here than a simple matter of pleasure or pain. I had begun to have a stake in living alone.

In 1984 I wrote a polemic, "Against Marriage," in which I argued that we marry not for the adventure of self-discovery or a shared inner life, but for emotional solace of a primitive sort. What comes with the solace is insularity, an amateurish relation to solitude, and hard questions about the inner self that go unasked for years at a time. Fear of loneliness, I said, is at the heart of the matter. To secure against a fear one must move into it, live with it, face it down. To live without love or domestic intimacy, I generously allowed, was indeed to be half alive, but, I concluded, what we want now is to be real to ourselves. The two-shall-become-as-one myth is no longer useful. Living consciously is the business of our lives. If one cannot win over loneliness, at least one can learn that it's not fatal. Such knowledge becomes a strength, an ally, a weapon.

Writing these thoughts became my

comfort and my necessity. To write clearly on the subject, I felt, was to be renewed if not redeemed. I did not notice the rhetoric riding these pages, swelling their sentences, confining thought. I had persuaded myself that to write the problem out was to put it behind me. Not only me, as it turned out: The piece, which appeared in *The Village Voice*, produced an uproar. I

was challenged on a dozen scores, and I replied on all of them. In my own ears the replies were reasonable, but the more I explained the more entrenched I became. Before I knew it, an insight

had become a theory, a theory a position, a position a dogma.

I was a born ideologue; I thrived on having a position. Now I had one: To live alone is to face down loneliness. It became a litany that in bad times strengthened me, gave me stamina and self-control. No need to review its contents. All I had to do was keep repeating the mantra.

Years passed (that's what they did: they passed). Things remained in place. Then suddenly, without warning or consent, I was thrown back on my own dogma, and after that nothing was in place. Teaching in a southern university town, I met a woman my own age, divorced with grown children away at school. She suggested I share a house with her. I thought her a sympathetic soul and decided, after years of living alone, to chance it.

I had stumbled into a remarkably compatible arrangement. Between me and this woman there were no moods, tensions, depressions, or withdrawals. We seemed never to bore, irritate, or intrude on each other. We conducted our daily lives independently, yet were always delighted to spend an evening

Romance continued on page 107

Friendship

Romance continued from page 65

at home together. Conversation was an ever-deepening pleasure between us, but neither of us ever made the other feel guilty for wanting to be alone. In short, the relationship was simplicity itself, and it provided us both with the joys of civilized friendship and domestic tranquility, a condition of life I had never known.

What took me by surprise was the relief I felt at not living alone. The relief and the gratitude. After all, what was happening here? I wasn't with a lover or even with an intimate friend. I was simply sharing a house with a compatible person. I had the pleasure of coffee in the morning and a chat in the evening with a woman I enjoyed talking with and the comfort of knowing we spent the night under the same roof. It was the absence of gross loneliness that was having an extraordinary effect on me.

And it was extraordinary. To begin with, I felt calm every day and all through the day—deeply calm. I realized from this calm that ordinarily I sustain, and probably have for years, a kind of low-grade anxiety that seeps daily into the nervous system. Nothing to get excited about, certainly nothing

I can't handle, but it's a *feeling* I have, one that I had stopped registering and would not again have been aware of if it weren't for this superb calm that now came bubbling up in me a couple of times a day.

Along with the calm, I felt smoothed out inside, as though some great blue-

I had not learned to live alone at all. I had learned to strategize: to lie down until the pain passed, to evade, to get by.

and-white wave had cleaned me down, washing away the grit. It was then I realized I feel gritty inside, all the time. Again, nothing to get excited about, nothing that can't be handled. Just there it was. Loneliness feels gritty.

Then the fog in my head—always a shred of it floating here or there—seemed to clear out. I found myself con-

centrating for hours, instead of minutes, at a time. I hadn't realized until that moment how continually my attention is being shredded, the worried granulation of inner clarity that is my constant companion.


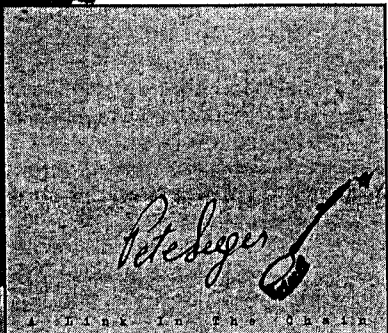
I looked around then, at my life, and I saw that I had not learned to live alone at all. What I had learned to do was strategize: to lie down until the pain passed, to evade, to get by. I wasn't drowning, but I wasn't swimming either. I was floating on my back, far from shore, waiting to be saved.

Looking closely at a condition that hadn't been reviewed in years, I saw that once again the thing was being named; the thing I knew and had forgotten times without number; the thing that each time I name I make more my own, but each time I forget makes me lose ground. I found myself remembering the time long ago when I had first understood the thing I would always forget. It was also the day I understood why I walk, why I am a walker in the city. The memory materialized so powerfully that suddenly the day was standing before me.

I had been wandering around the

**Seeger...Hardin...Forbert.
Their Influence Is Everywhere.
Their Music Is Here:**

**Introducing The COMMON CHORD
Series From Legacy.**

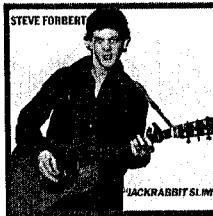
Pete Seeger
"A Link In The Chain"
A master storyteller and 1996 inductee into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame, Pete Seeger is one of America's most influential folk singers. These 38 digitally remastered songs from the 60's and early 70's—including material never before available on CD—provide an essential link to both the artist and the turbulent times when they were recorded.

TO ORDER BY PHONE...
**1-800 ASH
TOWER**
RECORDS • VIDEO • BOOKS
...OR FOR STORE LOCATIONS.

COMMON CHORD

Steve Forbert "Jackrabbit Slim"

Available for the first time on CD, this is Steve Forbert's masterpiece—

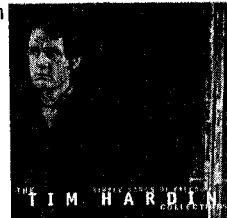


the brilliant singer-songwriter's most popular album featuring his biggest hit, "Romeo's Tune." "Meet me in the middle of the day, let me hear you say everything's O.K..."

Tim Hardin "Simple Songs Of Freedom:

The Tim Hardin Collection"

Often covered by a wide range of artists, Tim Hardin remains his own best interpreter. Featuring 17 songs including "Simple Song Of Freedom" and 5 previously unreleased tracks.



COLUMBIA epic legacy SBM

Enter a Catalog Request online at <http://www.sony.com/Music/The Vault/Legacy>
"Columbia," "Epic," "Legacy" and "SBM" Reg. U.S. Pat. & Tm. Off. Marca Registrada. © 1996 Sony Music Entertainment Inc. "SBM/Super Bit Mapping" is a trademark of Sony Corporation.

BIRKENSTOCK.

Comfort
Delivered to
Your Door



more than
40 styles

Call for your free mail order catalog

1-800-231-6740

BIRKENSTOCK®

A Service of Footwear, Inc.

EXPRESS

Dept. UT, 301 SW Madison, Corvallis, OR 97333

SALES • REPAIR • RESOLING

Recorded Books™

NEW How Stella Got Her Groove Back
by Terry McMillan

Narrated by Lynne Thigpen
Unabridged on cassette

Ask about quick and easy
rentals by mail.

Call for a free brochure:
1-(800)-638-1304

270 Skipjack Road • Prince Frederick, MD 20678



the past
didn't go
anywhere

(Just your typical neo-ambient,
post-traditional, jazz-hop,
hip-speak collaboration from
a 61-year-old folk legend and
a 26-year-old mosh-pit poet.)

stories by
uta phillips
and
and franco

the new album
in stores now

righteous babe records
1-800-on-her-own

apartment for hours, avoiding the desk. Couldn't think, couldn't write. My head filling up with fog, mist, cotton wool, dry ice; the fog rolling in through the window tops. The usual. The daily experience. The condition I struggle with from nine in the morning on, fighting to occupy a small clear space in my head until two or three in the afternoon when I desert the effort, feeling empty and defeated and as if I haven't heard the sound of a human voice in a thousand years.

That afternoon I had an appointment uptown, at an address three miles from my house, and on impulse I decided to walk. When I hit the street it was as though I'd emerged from a cave into the light. Everything I saw—shops, lights, cars, people—looked interesting to me. I took a deep breath and felt my lungs swell. Then I ran into someone I hadn't seen in years. The exhilaration of the unexpected encounter! My stride lengthened. I got where I was going, did what I'd gone to do, and decided to walk back. When I got home I saw that the bad feeling had washed out of me. The walk had purged me.

I realized then how ordinary my depression was. Ordinary and predictable, ordinary and daily. Daily depression, that's all it was. I saw, as though for the first time, that daily depression eats energy. Without energy inner life evaporates; without inner life there is no animation; without animation there is no work. A life in thrall to daily depression is doomed to mediocrity.

In the same moment I saw that *this* was loneliness, the thing itself. Loneliness was the evaporation of inner life. Loneliness was me cut off from myself. Loneliness was the thing nothing out there could cure.

The depression was, I knew, rooted in



a grievance that was old, older than love, older than marriage, older than friendship or politics. The grievance was my dear friend, my close friend. I have given up many others over the years, but not this one, never this one. This one, I saw, had been given the run of the house.

I knew enough to know that I would not hold on to what I was now seeing; that something in me would refuse to absorb the information. I would

forget. I would not take it in. I would be overwhelmed again. Insight alone could not save me. I'd have to clear out each day anew. Walking had purged me, washed me clean, but only for that day. I understood the dullness of the task. I was condemned to walk.

More important, I was condemned to live with what I could not take in.

We all are. Those of us who live alone; treading water; waiting for a pardon; clinging to the most educated discontent in history.

Now I walk up Columbus Avenue with new respect for life in a solitary state. I look into the avid, searching faces and I think how well we are doing here in the brutal filthy city, those of us who stare out the window of a room empty of companionship, with the taste of grit in the morning coffee, low-grade anxiety in the evening drink. Out there, in America, our faces are withdrawn and remote, made eccentric by isolation. On Columbus Avenue, collective loneliness is a stable element. It has culture-making properties.

Vivian Gornick is a New York-based writer. Reprinted from Approaching Eye Level by Vivian Gornick. Copyright ©1996 by Vivian Gornick. By permission of Beacon Press.