

"I'm going to die alone." the old man muttered to himself as he sat on the edge of his old, tattered bed. His last remaining friend, arguably his only true friend lay on the cold stone floor before him, now just a shattered mess. The old man sat hunched over, his wrinkled hands resting firmly on the well worn cotton which covered his bony knees. The long, haggard strands of his unkempt gray beard draped over the front of his life stained shirt as he bowed his head in sorrow.

He had given up on his appearance a long time ago, much earlier in his years than he should have according to acquaintances. He had spent a lifetime silently enduring the criticisms and opinions of others. Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion as to how he should live his life. Yet, so few ever seemed interested in how he was getting along. When the rare inquiry arose, he was often caught off guard, his awkwardness yielding only the typically generic replies. The brief opportunity for meaningful conversation would be cut down before enjoying it's first figurative breath.

There was never a shortage of directives being thrust in his direction. The passive aggressive nature of people's comments would grate on his nerves leaving him stranded in an ocean of social distrust and contempt. In his youth, he was told to abandon his foolish goals. In his middle years he was told to discard his very identity. In his old age, he was told to betray his integrity. The opinions flowed like wine. They came from all directions like a hail of bullets screaming through the air with the deafening message, conform.

Over the years he found some comfort in meeting others who seemed to understand him. Yet, the more he opened up, the more clear it became that this understanding was far more superficial than he had thought and hoped. Consequently, his enthusiasm waned, followed shortly thereafter by any remaining desire to reach out. It was, for him, an unavoidable eventuality that he would find himself increasingly alone. He would sit in the park as hundreds of people walked by. Yet, for him, they were no more than shadows gliding along the cobblestones. Perhaps any one of them could have become a friend for life. This he knew. Yet he had long since abandoned the desire to connect. The pain and disappointment of so many failures sang to him in dulcet tones ringing with what had become the beautiful songs of solitude. Should he be burdened by the desire to look up and say hello, the songs would echo in his ears, the rich layers of glorious harmony reminding him of his place in the social stratum. He had made his peace.

But, through it all, there was always that one true friend. There was always one who understood the nuances of his thoughts. One who never tried to change him so as to meet their view of who he should be. Sadly, this one true friend was gone. The somber mood of the room was tangible. As the old man looked down at the remains, he didn't weep for his friend. His long life had drained him of his tears. Instead, he reached down and picked up the largest shard of the broken mirror and desperately sought the image of the one who truly understood him. But the image he hoped for was nowhere to be found. Instead, the dim flickering light afforded him just glimpses of a wrinkled face that he hardly recognized. Pieces of a stranger's image flashed back at him. As he stared as deeply as his tired eyes would allow, it became clear that his friend was, indeed, gone. "I'm going to die alone." he muttered to himself.