



## Loneliness and the Writer

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‘I COULD WRITE A BOOK’, people tell me. Then the pause. ‘If I had time.’ *No, you couldn’t, I want to shout. It’s not about time. It’s about desire. And creativity. And hard work.* But I keep quiet, fake interest in their mythical book. These people are not my tribe. I am alone.

Isolation is something to crave and dread. Depending on how the writing’s going, it can mean working without distractions. The flipside is loneliness. Then, company is required. Of people who actually *do* write books — or poems or songs or plays. The company of writers.

I’ve sought out fellow writers to keep loneliness at healthy levels. Classes. Groups. Associations. But what has stopped it from turning sour was an email that found its serendipitous way into my inbox. ‘Someone’s dropped out of our retreat. There’s a space going spare. Fancy it?’ Yes. Yes, I fancy it.

There, set against steep wooded valleys on the edge of Exmoor, a miracle of a Victorian country house. A diverse group of people. A transgender pioneer from Brooklyn, a man with the voice of Prince Charles, two psychiatrists. My tribe. ‘I’ve put you in the lodge with Hilda,’ the mamma writer/theatre director told me. ‘You’ll get on. She’s a brilliant poet.’ As I made my way from the big house down to the lodge, I was nervous about meeting this brilliant poet but the mamma’s match-making skills were spot on. Hilda turned up late with her juicer and laptop. Within half an hour I knew she was my kindred spirit; by the end of the week, the sister I don’t have.



We writers are solo creatures, but humans are sociable. We need each other. That week Hilda and I became versions of Tove Jansson's Mari and Jonna, the writer and artist from *Fair Play*. Our vignettes were sparked by Hilda's genius as a poet and writer of flash and moulded by my novelist's sense of narrative. We shared the lodge, working alongside each other, together and yet separate. Hilda made me kefir to ease my troubled gut. Glass bottles bubbled in the spring sunshine on the kitchen windowsill. I made us strong black coffee and drove us to town for tonic and lemons. As the sun dipped behind those dark trees, we played characters. Dressed up. Disco-danced like kids.

Then back to our lives. Messages. Visits. FaceTime. A year till the next retreat. Then another. And another. Until she moved to Luxembourg. She couldn't come to the lodge. I was on my own. I truly felt lonely. But I used the energy stored up from previous years, went up the hill to send texts, and cracked on.

In *Fair Play*, when Jonna is awarded a studio in Paris for a year, we expect Mari to be devastated with loneliness. But instead, a surprise. 'She began to anticipate a solitude of her own, peaceful and full of possibility. She felt something close to exhilaration, of a kind that people can permit themselves when they are blessed with love.'

The spirit of Jonna and Mari sustains me through the loneliness but oh, how I long to dance with Hilda in the lodge.