

COVER STORY

COPING WITH LONELINESS

- Nandita Mishra

"The best things in life happen to you when you're alone,"
-Artist Agnes Martin

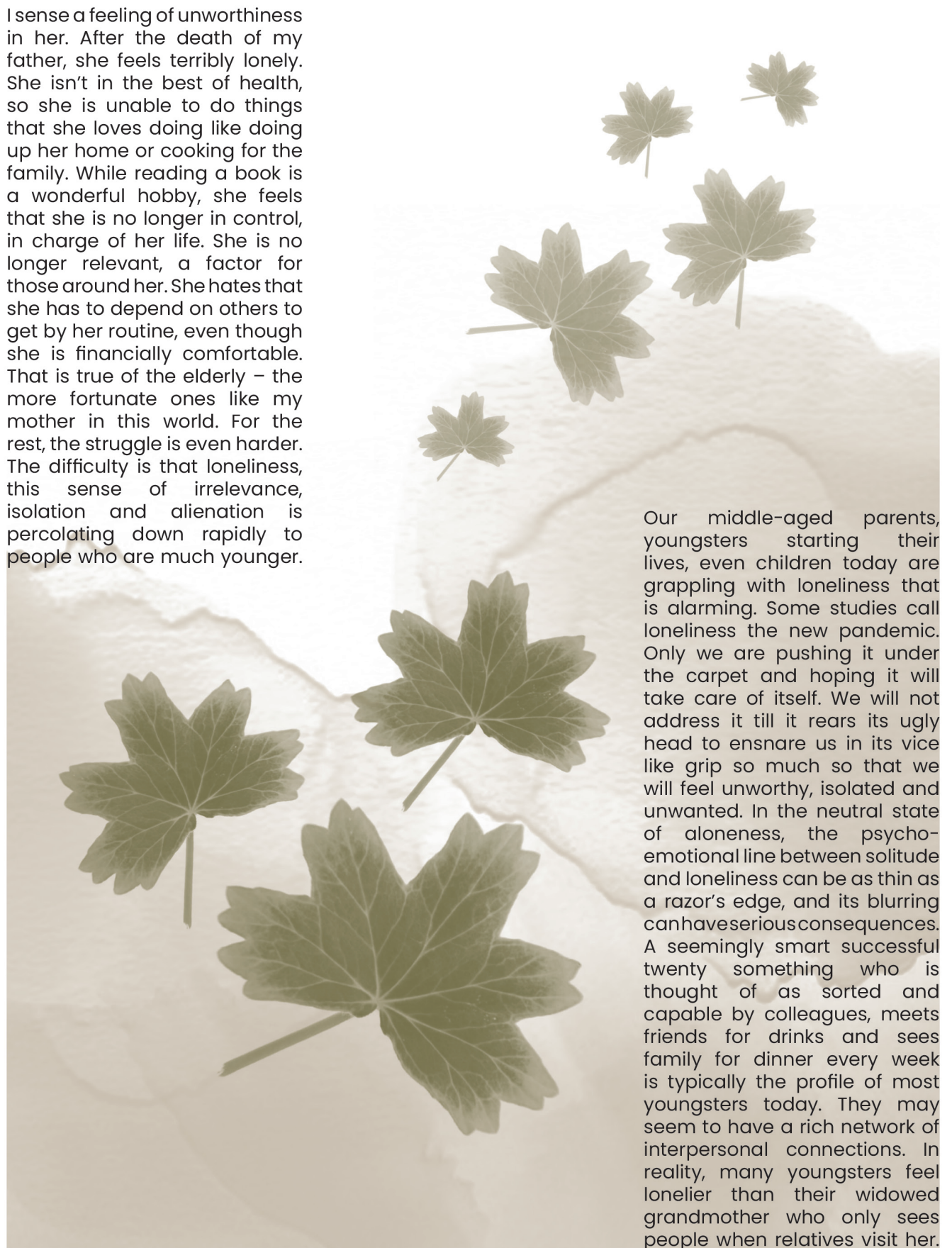
The poet, Elizabeth Bishop believed that everyone should experience at least one prolonged period of solitude in life. For in true solitude, "one's inner voices become audible [and] in consequence, one responds more clearly to other lives" (Wendell Berry). We have grown up reading the romantic poets glorifying loneliness and solitude. Wordsworth's poem, I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud, The Solitary Reaper and so many others glorify loneliness as a means to connect with the finer nuances that are lost in the humdrum of life.

Hindu philosophy espouses that the realization of the self, Atman is possible only in solitude, in distancing oneself from the pulls and tugs of the business of living. And yet, loneliness today engulfs us as a dense fog that refuses to budge with the wind. When you are lonely, you are not alone. One in five people in the world are trying to cope with loneliness. For the longest time, we believed the elderly and the old are lonely, because of their age, health, beliefs, world views and inability to cope with the changing times. For most of us, it meant making a conscious effort to spend time with the elderly, involve them with aspects of our lives, our children's lives so that they don't feel left out and unwanted.

There is a popular ad by Helpage India where a grandmother talks about samosas from Nathuram's in her heydays as the family is having samosas with tea in the evening. When she wants to have some, the son refuses telling her that she won't be able to digest it at her age. Obviously upset at being denied a bite of the samosa, the next shot is of the son giving the samosa with the tagline, "It's your turn now. Enjoy their childhood." The elderly feel lonely often, some having lost their partners, learning to adjust to life with their children and grandchildren, living with diet and mobility limitations and a sense of losing control over their lives, among other things which is never easy. Whenever I talk to my mother, I invariably ask her, what she is doing. Her one-line reply tells a story. "Nothing. I was just reading a book. What else can I do?"



I sense a feeling of unworthiness in her. After the death of my father, she feels terribly lonely. She isn't in the best of health, so she is unable to do things that she loves doing like doing up her home or cooking for the family. While reading a book is a wonderful hobby, she feels that she is no longer in control, in charge of her life. She is no longer relevant, a factor for those around her. She hates that she has to depend on others to get by her routine, even though she is financially comfortable. That is true of the elderly – the more fortunate ones like my mother in this world. For the rest, the struggle is even harder. The difficulty is that loneliness, this sense of irrelevance, isolation and alienation is percolating down rapidly to people who are much younger.



Our middle-aged parents, youngsters starting their lives, even children today are grappling with loneliness that is alarming. Some studies call loneliness the new pandemic. Only we are pushing it under the carpet and hoping it will take care of itself. We will not address it till it rears its ugly head to ensnare us in its vice like grip so much so that we will feel unworthy, isolated and unwanted. In the neutral state of aloneness, the psycho-emotional line between solitude and loneliness can be as thin as a razor's edge, and its blurring can have serious consequences. A seemingly smart successful twenty something who is thought of as sorted and capable by colleagues, meets friends for drinks and sees family for dinner every week is typically the profile of most youngsters today. They may seem to have a rich network of interpersonal connections. In reality, many youngsters feel lonelier than their widowed grandmother who only sees people when relatives visit her.



Research shows that young people are more likely to feel lonely than older adults for myriad reasons. The lockdown portion of the pandemic gave us all a taste of loneliness. It may seem an obvious outcome of a pandemic where social contact is discouraged, even made illegal, but concerns about rising levels of loneliness were common before the pandemic, and continue even today. Humans are an incredibly social species with a very developed brain and high levels of intelligence to keep track of and maintain numerous relationships. Our social interactions are a major factor in how we think, act, and see ourselves, because much of our brains is dedicated to social cognition. We are wired to fall back on our fellow human beings to deal with any crisis that we may experience. But with the changing socio-economic fabric, our direct interface with family, friends and the community has become much less than what it was.

Dependence on technology seems to contribute to loneliness among teens and young adults. People who grew up swiping screens interact with devices more often and with greater comfort than they do with people. However, it is inevitable and we need to learn to live with it and also beyond it. If older people living alone have found better ways of dealing with loneliness, it is because they no longer depend on peer approval and the need to have friends and be trendy like the youth. It is important that you find ways of spending time with yourself, without depending on social media to see you through. Self-care and self-affirmation with a few activities that you can do alone and enjoy it is a great way to start. Go for a trek, a walk, or even a cycle ride by yourself a few times a week. Pick up a hobby, do simple things at home that make you want to do it again, that make you feel worthy. Talk to people that you know have your back, and take it easy. There is no magic pill that will wipe away this malaise, yet you can take small steps forward. "Find company within yourself and you'll never spend a day alone. Find love within yourself and you'll never have a lonely day." —Connor Chalfant