



*These sheep are always in a pack and yet they
always seem so lonely.*

I WANT TO BE SOMEONE BETTER THAN ME:
A COMPANION TO HARMONY KORINE'S
MISTER LONELY

1. "I have been trying, for some time now, to find dignity in my loneliness. I have been finding this hard to do." Maggie Nelson, *Bluets*.

2. This is about a movie you haven't seen if you haven't seen Harmony Korine's *Mister Lonely*. [If you *have* seen it, go to #4.] Don't worry. That's why I'm here. Take my hand.

3. INSTRUCTION MANUAL FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NOT SEEN *MISTER LONELY*: There are four ways to do this.

3a. Read this, then watch *Mister Lonely*.

3b. Watch *Mister Lonely*, then read this.

3c. Watch 15% of *Mister Lonely*, then read 15% of this; watch 30% of the remainder of *Mister Lonely*, then read 30% of the remainder of this; watch 45% of the remainder of *Mister Lonely*, then read 45% of the remainder of this. And so on.¹

3d. Watch the *Mister Lonely* trailer on Youtube, get a *feel* for the movie, read this, and then watch *Mister Lonely*.

4. Ironically, this will make both you and I feel less lonely.

5. I watched *Mister Lonely* for the first time in a shopping-mall multiplex with a woman I was sort of dating. Let's call her Genevieve. I say *sort of dating* because nothing ever really happened between Genevieve

¹ 60%, 75%, 90%, 100%.

and I. We kissed a couple of times.

The first time Genevieve and I kissed she was drunk. She kind of had a problem with alcohol. She wasn't an alcoholic or anything, but when she drank she completely lost control. It really was a Jekyll and Hyde deal. I'd never seen anything like it. This little speck of a woman—very short, skin and bones, frequent giggler—drank a few beers and morphed from nebbish to femme fatale.

After watching *Mister Lonely*, Genevieve and I went our separate ways. She said she had to go be with her dog. (Genevieve loved her dog, a tiny black hairball, more than anything in the world.) When I got home I had an email from her with a link to a video of Bobby Vinton singing Mr. Lonely, the song that plays in the opening of Korine's movie. It's a beautiful, heartbreaking song.

6. The opening scene of *Mister Lonely*: Michael is riding a mini-motorcycle with Vinton singing in the background. Next to the mini-motorcycle flies a small stuffed monkey with angel wings. The monkey's not flying, of course, it's held by a rod that sticks out of the mini-motorcycle.

Remember Michael's chimpanzee? Bubbles. Jacko adopted him from a Texan research facility in the '80s. Wikipedia: "During the *Bad World Tour* . . . Jackson brought Bubbles with him to Japan, where they both drank tea with the mayor of Osaka."

7. Plots are for dead people. So says David Shields. Plots are clunky and contrived. They stand in our way. What happens is not important. What's important is that it feels like what happens to you.

Let's get a big chunk of the plot over with.

The main character, played by Diego Luna, is a Michael Jackson impersonator living in Paris. Michael—for that's what everyone calls him, he *is* Michael—ekes out a living dancing in the park and every once in a while getting a gig in a nursing home.

It is in the nursing home where he meets (a) Marilyn Monroe (im-

personator). “Don’t die!” Michael is saying to the old French people in his Mexican English. “Never die! Stay young forever!” Marilyn, played by Samantha Morton, is helping some old guy clean snot from his face or something. I don’t need to describe her. You know what Marilyn looks like. You know which dress she’s wearing.

Michael has no friends and speaks no French. He is (Mister) capital “L” Lonely and hits it off with Marilyn – an American – while they walk a Parisian park after their workday. He asks her where she lives. Marilyn, it turns out, lives in a commune in Scotland populated exclusively by impersonators. “You should come, Michael!”

8. Diego Luna was the only reason I got to see *Mister Lonely* in a multiplex. I was living in Mexico City when it came out and it’s not easy to see artsy films there. But Diego Luna is huge in Mexico,² so there was *Mister Lonely*, in the city’s mainstream theaters next to shitty comedies and shitty love stories.

9. Before Michael leaves for the Highlands there’s a scene in which he stands in the doorway of his room and says his goodbyes. It goes something like, “Goodbye, room. I’ll miss you. Goodbye, bed. You’re a very good bed. Goodbye, closet.” And so on.

Loneliness is your apartment when you leave for a trip.

10. To become a celebrity one needs to be very good at pretending to be someone else. Celebrities are already impersonators. A paradox of celebrity culture is that we want our celebrities to be just like us but at the same time to be *more* than us. Celebrities are people who’ve somehow tricked us (and themselves) into thinking that they’re something bigger than people.

Madonna perfected the art of being Sexy and that’s why she deserves to be a celebrity. Who doesn’t want to be Sexy? How few

² His “big break” was starring in *Y Tu Mama También* alongside Gael García Bernal.

accomplish it. No one was as Sexy as Madonna. She achieved what we all desire: to make people believe that her disguise is actually who she was. The problem, however, is that the expert disguiser never succeeds in convincing him/herself of his/her own disguise, so eventually s/he wants a change of disguise.

There used to be a girl in my class who worked extremely hard at convincing everyone that she was a troubled, dark, rebellious youth with no morals. Later she became a full-on Christian. Another curse of the expert disguiser is that there's no middle ground. Think of an actor on a popular sitcom who complains that s/he can't get work anymore because everyone thinks of her/him as the character they play on television. That's surprising? You begged us for years to believe you were that character! And we believed you! And they gave you millions for it!

So we believed Madonna when she told us she was Sexy, but then she got bored or ashamed of that persona and thought she could make us think she was Elegant British Artiste. *I fooled 'em once, how hard could it be to fool 'em again?* Very hard. As George W. wisely said, "Fool me once, shame on . . . shame on you? You fool me you can't get fooled again." We feel betrayed and gullible when a celebrity tells us that the disguise was a disguise. That's why listening to Madonna's British accent is jarring and her cone bra isn't.

11. Michael voiceover: "I have always wanted to be someone else . . . To find purpose in this world."

12. Michael and Marilyn arrive at the commune on boat. Charlie Chaplin and Shirley Temple, Marilyn's husband and daughter, eagerly await Marilyn's return. We accompany Michael as he is introduced to the other members of the commune: Abraham Lincoln, James Dean, the Pope, Sammy Davis, Jr., Queen Elizabeth, Little Red Riding Hood, '80s Madonna, and The Three Stooges.

13. The reason Genevieve and I were attracted to one another was that we were both so incredibly lonely – apartments whose occupants had gone on vacation – and thought that maybe we’d de-lonely each other. But that’s not how loneliness works. Two wrongs don’t make a right. We the Lonely are not lonely because we are alone, but because we are lonely people. Loneliness is part of us. The lonely person must find a not-lonely person in order to feel less lonely. Even then, however, the illusion eventually evaporates and we’re left feeling lonely again.

14. From Frederick Exley’s *A Fan’s Notes*:

I would . . . get a girl. I once had a very clear picture of her: she was to have a degree from Vassar (I was willing to go as low as a B.A. in Fine Arts from Wellesley); she must have bobbed, blond hair, green eyes, and golden, vibrant legs; to offset my increasing “melancholy,” I determined that she must be a gregarious girl, spontaneously witty, and capable of thunderous laughter.

15. I’m drawn to people who wear their heart on their sleeve. I like to be around those who aren’t afraid to show (or simply can’t hide) their weaknesses. That’s part of the reason why my favorite U.S. president – by far – is Lincoln.

“I’m the loneliest man in the world,” Lincoln wrote once. He was a terribly depressed man. A loner, Lincoln was always trying to find peace from his demanding wife. The night he was assassinated Abe had actually wanted to stay home and rest, but he’d already announced that he’d be at Ford’s Theatre and he didn’t want to let “the people” down.

16. Harmony Korine wrote the script for the movie *Kids* when he

was 19.³ I remember watching it as a teenager lying on the floor of my mother's bedroom while she was away and thinking it was the coolest. Here I was, watching a movie on a Friday afternoon, while in New York – this movie dixit – kids younger than me spent their time doing drugs, having sex and beating people up with skateboards. I needed to get myself a nicotine addiction.

Korine then wrote and directed *Gummo*. Here's the beginning of the *New York Times*' review of *Gummo*: "October is early, but not too early to acknowledge Harmony Korine's *Gummo* as the worst film of the year. No conceivable competition will match the sourness, cynicism and pretension of Mr. Korine's debut feature." Then Korine made *Julien Donkey-Boy*, which I think is about schizophrenia. I have not seen either of these films. I've held their DVD boxes and considered renting them, but they just don't seem like movies I'd enjoy.⁴

At some point between *Kids* and *Mister Lonely* Korine had one of those too-much-fame-&-too-much-partying moments and moved to Paris to "clear his head" and be depressed and drug-addled in a more romantic setting. Also at some point two of his houses burned down.⁵ My favorite Harmony Korine story is that he's banned from *The Late Show with David Letterman* for (reportedly) pushing Meryl Streep backstage. The idea of someone pushing Meryl Streep makes me happy. She's one of those people who doesn't wear her heart on her sleeve. She's perfect. I hate her.

17. I only write so I can feel a sense of connection.

18. Why did Marilyn invite Michael to the Scottish Highlands? At first it seems like she's being friendly. Why *wouldn't* she invite him? He's

³ Or 22. Not really sure.

⁴ I'll eventually watch these movies and I'm sure I'll enjoy them as I've enjoyed the rest of Korine's work.

⁵ *The New York Times*: "The first one I don't know what happened," he said. "The second one was my fault. I fell asleep smoking."

an impersonator and she lives in a commune of impersonators. But very quickly we realize that Marilyn's relationship with Chaplin isn't, let's say, perfect. Marilyn is cold with Chaplin and Chaplin is an angry man. Their relationship is emotionally and physically abusive. (The interesting thing about abusive relationships is how contradictory they are: there's no stranger feeling than wanting to hurt the one you love.)

There seems to be something "brewing" between Michael and Marilyn. It's something innocent, though. Like my relationship with Genevieve. They certainly like each other, but what is it they like in each other? What are we supposed to look for in a partner? Michael's relationship with Marilyn is never consummated. She kisses him on the forehead once.

19. So is *Mister Lonely* about our obsession with celebrities? No, it's about loneliness, but isn't celebrity obsession about loneliness?

Our celebrity-obsessed culture allows us to be voyeurs of other people's search to find themselves. We're all always trying to figure out who we are, but celebrities do it in public and in an exaggerated fashion. Britney Spears is a Lolita.→Britney Spears is a wholesome American girl.→Britney Spears is a vixen, a dominatrix.→Britney Spears is a mom.→Britney Spears is a fat girl.→Britney Spears is a party girl.→Britney Spears is a punk chick with a shaved head who attacks paparazzi.→Britney Spears is back!

Don't we all live our own semi-private versions of this metamorphosis?

20. Plots are for dead people, we've been through this, but dead people invented cinema, dead people control the entertainment industry, and dead people pay good money to be entertained.

So the Korines⁶ came up with a plot. The impersonators want to put on a show for the townspeople—*The Greatest Show on Earth*. It's

⁶ *Mister Lonely* was written by Harmony and his brother Avi.

the only aspect of the movie that feels forced.

This reminds me of my fiction students. I ask them what they're planning to write their story about and they tell me this convoluted quasi-existential fever dream.

"Yes," I say, "but what does your character *want*?"

"Um," says puzzled student, "like, he wants like, love, and he's lonely, so he kind of wants to be less lonely."

"OK, that's definitely a start, but it's too vague." I'm playing the part of the dead people. "Your character needs to chase something *concrete*. Pick something that represents not being lonely and have the character chase that. What if you have them put on a show?"

"A show?"

"Yeah! For the townspeople. Then you can have scenes in which they're building the theater from scratch, rehearsing, panicking that no one will come . . . It's very *dramatic*."

21. Genevieve was a very strange woman. One night she called me drunk or stoned or whatever and while we were talking I suddenly heard a child's voice.

"Hey," said the child.

"Hey," said Genevieve, laughing. "Is your mom home?"

"Yes."

"Could you ask her for a cigarette? I'm from apartment 503."

"What are you doing?" I said

"Shh. I need a cigarette." When Genevieve needed a cigarette, I knew this well, she *needed* a cigarette.

The boy came back after a minute. "She said to give you two."

"Thanks!"

Then the boy said, "Are you the lady who likes to sleep on the floor?"

Genevieve laughed. "Yes."

"Why do you do that?"

"Because I like it."

When she was back at her apartment smoking one of those cigarettes I asked her the same thing the boy had, why did she sleep on the floor?

“Because I like it.”

22. “If there is a worse place than Hell, I am in it.” (The real) Abe Lincoln.

23. By the way, there is a sort of parallel B story in *Mister Lonely*. A group of nuns led by a priest (Werner Herzog) are travelling around what seems to be Latin America throwing rice “like bombs” from a small plane for the poor people to eat. SPOILER: One of the nuns falls from the plane. SPOILER: The nun prays to God and God lands her safely on the ground.

What does this story have to do with the Jacko-in-the-Highlands story? Nothing. They run parallel to each other.

24. From *Science Daily*:⁷ “The ‘Peter Pan Syndrome’ affects people who do not want or feel unable to grow up, people with the body of an adult but the mind of a child. They don’t know how to or don’t want to stop being children and start being mothers or fathers.”

Michael Jackson has always been compared to Peter Pan, an eternal child, pied-piper figure that children love and adults find unsettling. This is a comparison Michael obviously embraced since he called his 3,000 acre ranch Neverland Valley.

However, it seems to me that Michael Jackson did not suffer from PPS, but rather of whatever the opposite of PPS is. PPSers have such overprotective parents that they’re crippled for adult life; Michael had a psychopath of a father who treated him like a slave. While PPSers can’t seem to grow into adulthood, Michael spent his adulthood trying to live like the child he never was. The only reason Michael fetishized

⁷ “Overprotecting Parents Can Lead Children to Develop ‘Peter Pan Syndrome.’” (May 1, 2007.)

childhood was that he never had one. He didn't know that it actually sucks to be a child. Never-ending childhood sounds like the cruelest form of Hell.

25. A fan of Abraham Lincoln will eventually end up browsing the archives of something called *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* published by the University of Illinois Press. Upon browsing these archives said Lincoln fan will giggle when he comes across an article by Martin P. Johnson titled, "Did Abraham Lincoln Sleep with His Bodyguard? Another Look at the Evidence."

Listen, we've all heard the stories. It seems to me that (almost) every Lincolnist says the same thing: We're pretty sure Lincoln had sex with guys, but we can't confirm it. One of the oft quoted stories is that Lincoln slept in other men's beds. He slept in the bed of his friend Joshua Speed for years.⁸ But it's important to note here that in times of Lincoln it was common practice for two heterosexual men to share a bed. If you were taking a trip from City A to City C and your friend lived in City B that was on the way to City C, then you'd probably spend a night in your friend's bed.

The more weighty piece of evidence, however, is that there are accounts of Lincoln sharing *his own* bed with a soldier named Derickson while Mrs. Lincoln was away from home. Johnson's article cites two accounts, the first one is the diary of Virginia Woodbury Fox: "Tish says, 'there is a Bucktail Soldier here devoted to the President, drives with him, & when Mrs L. is not home, sleeps with him. What stuff!'" The second account is from a book published in 1895 with the catchy title of *History of One Hundred and Fiftieth Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, Second Regiment, Bucktail Brigade* written by Thomas Chamberlin who once guarded Lincoln. Chamberlin says, "Captain Derickson, in particular, advanced so far in the President's confidence and esteem that, in Mrs. Lincoln's absence, he frequently spent the night at his

⁸ Then Speed married, moved to Kentucky, and the two men sent each other what read to me like love letters.

cottage, sleeping in the same bed with him, and — it is said — making use of His Excellency's night-shirt!"

26. I have, in my adult life, watched too many hours of cable news. This politician said that about this other politician so we'll ask this "strategist" what s/he thinks. Oh my god! I can't believe the strategist said that! Why was s/he being so aggressive? Now let's interview the first politician and see how s/he reacts to the strategist's reaction. Now let's ask another politician why the political climate is so confrontational.

It's idiotic. I can't get enough of it. When I was a kid I remember relating CNN to information and overall seriousness, now it's difficult to watch *Anderson Cooper 360°* and not feel like I'm reading *US Weekly*.⁹

There are only two types of events I don't like to follow on cable news: natural disasters and celebrity deaths. Why? No dramatic tension. Cable news has cease-fires when confronted with natural disasters and celebrity deaths. I like to see fighting. When an earthquake devastates some far away land we're all on the same side, crying, *praying*, hoping for the best.

Take Michael Jackson's death. Jacko was a constant source of drama throughout his life, but what happens when he dies? All praise.¹⁰ As Paul Hollander explains in "Michael Jackson, the Celebrity Cult, and Popular Culture,"¹¹ "the solicitous reminiscences overlooked and in effect purified his dubious private life, including his reported payment of 20 million dollars to settle out of court allegations of child molestation . . . However those of us not enamored of popular culture find it hard to know exactly what his artistic genius consisted of."

The reason we're all so eager to praise celebrities upon their deaths

⁹ I wonder if media historians will be able to point out exactly when CNN went from being a news network to being The Worst Thing in the World.

¹⁰ Cable news cease-fires, of course, are quickly terminated. The Anderson Coopers and Greta Van Susterens immediately pivoted to, "Was it the doctor's fault? Should we lynch the doctor?"

¹¹ *Society*, Volume 47, Number 2.

speaks directly to our narcissism. Something big happened and we need to make it about us. So if [celebrity] dies and everyone around the world is crying their eyes out, we want to be part of that event, so we go on Facebook and post something like, "Still shocked from the death of [celebrity]. OMG I was just [watching/listening to] [his/her movie/music] last nite. Soooo freaky." Or, "[Dead celebrity]'s aunt lived two blocks away from my grandma. My prayers go out to [celebrity]'s fam." READ: *All of you are crying because of [celebrity]'s death, but it is me who is actually part of that death. I win.*

27. There are sheep in this movie. I hadn't mentioned that. They're in the commune, twenty or thirty penned sheep. If I remember correctly they're all black except one. Why are there sheep in this movie? I wondered the first, second and third time I watched *Mister Lonely*. The easy answer would be to quote the Bible. For some reason people are always quoting the Bible. So let us quote the Bible. Isaiah 53:6: All we like sheep have gone astray.

See? That got us nowhere.

These sheep are always in a pack and yet they always seem so lonely. Lonely together.¹² Like Genevieve and me. Lonely together. Like the Michael Jackson impersonator story and the story about the

¹² Is the concept of lonely together reminding you of that book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less from Each Other* by MIT professor and Harvard alumnus, Sherry Turkle? I assure you lonely together is not in any way derived from *Alone Together*. I, in fact, have not read that book. I don't particularly like Sherry Turkle because she talks about the future with no intelligence or sense of adventure.

Example #1: Her 1999 essay "Cyberspace and Identity" argues that the internet will allow us to create online personae with names like "Armani Boy" and "MrSensitive." Boy was she wrong. The internet is all about us and our narcissism.

Example #2: She recently published an Op/Ed in *The New York Times* about the dangers of texting: "A 16-year-old boy who relies on texting for almost everything says almost wistfully, 'Someday, someday, but certainly not now, I'd like to learn how to have a conversation.'" Ok, grandma.

nuns. Lonely together. Like Michael and Marilyn. Like Bubbles and Michael. Like celebrities. Like reading *US*. Lonely together.

28. I think it's during dinner one night when the Pope says, "Dreams make us who we are!"

Very few of us—*none* of us—are who we want to be, but we are all who we are *because of* who we want to be.

29. Marilyn to Chaplin: "Sometimes when I look at you you seem more like Adolph Hitler than Charlie Chaplin." Inside of every funny man lives an angry boy.

30. Genevieve and I remained friends after we stopped dating. I moved to the U.S. and she moved to *el interior de la República*.¹³ We emailed and chatted "and stuff." Genevieve kept wanting me to visit her and I kept blowing her off.

ME: guess what??? i'm going to mexico in a couple of weeks.

G: !!! come visit me!

ME: too far. are you going to be in the city?

G: have to work. ./ but commmmme!!!!!!

ME: maybe.

In one of those chats Genevieve told me she'd been raped. Or maybe it was on the phone. I remember I was in Mexico. Let's say it was on the phone.

"Something bad happened to me."

"What do you mean *bad*?"

"I think someone put something in my drink."

¹³ Literally "the interior of the Republic," *el interior de la República* is a despective term used by people from Mexico City to refer to any part of Mexico that is not Mexico City.

I won't pretend to know exactly what was said next—a kind of dizziness had come over me—but basically Genevieve told me she was at a bar, drunk, made “friends” with some creepy guys and next thing she knew she was waking up on the concrete of a random sidewalk.

“Did they . . . *do something* to you?” What a stupid question. I should've said that I'd be at her house as soon as however much time it took to get to her house. I'd feed her soup or something. I don't know if I didn't do those things out of cowardice or out of selfishness. Maybe I'm just lazy.

“I think so. I'm going to the doctor on Monday, see what she says.”

Genevieve went to the doctor on Monday. The doctor said that yes, they had done things to her.

31. Seeing lonely people makes me sad. By lonely people I mean people who I've decided are lonely. I love going to movies by myself, but if I go to the movies in a group and there's some guy sitting there by himself, I feel sad for him.

Once I was with a friend walking a museum when I saw a man sitting on a bench. He was there with his daughter and her friends who were busy looking at the paintings. The father was tired, fat.

“That guy made me so sad,” I said in that *Oooh I'm so sensitive* voice that I despise in myself. He really had made me sad, though.

“Why?” said my friend.

“Because he looked so lonely just sitting there.”

“He took his daughter and her friends to the museum. That's what dads do.”

But when I remember things my parents did for me I also get sad. Like the time my mother and my sister went out and bought me

a red soccer ball. Just thinking about that makes me want to weep.¹⁴ But let's get on topic. There was also the time my mother took me to see Michael Jackson at the Azteca Stadium. Or the time she went to New York and bought me an almost exact replica of Michael Jackson's multi-pocketed leather jacket (black).¹⁵ Now let's get back off topic. There's the time my father drove me and a friend to watch a professional indoor soccer game and picked us up after the game was over.¹⁶ Thinking of these things makes me want to call my mother and father simultaneously and simultaneously apologize and thank them for everything and then jump off a bridge to honor life's deep sadness.

The other day my girlfriend and I were leaving our apartment when one of my neighbors approached us. He was a thirty-something Indian (maybe) man with some sort of congenital disease that, apart from making him very short and skinny, makes it impossible for him to bend his knees, so he walks like he just shit his pants.

"Excuse me," he said, "could you tell me where the laundry room is?"

I gave him directions.

"So far away," he said.

When my new neighbor parted ways with us I said to my girlfriend, "That was so sad."

"Shut up," she said. She's used to this. "He seemed perfectly happy."

¹⁴ I took that ball to school the next day so we could all play with it during recess, but when recess came everyone began to play with someone else's soccer ball, so I just walked around the school by myself kicking my new red soccer ball. But that's not what makes the buying of the soccer ball sad for me, which is why I'm putting all of this in a footnote.

¹⁵ Yes. Like every other person my age, I too *loved* Michael Jackson.

¹⁶ Wikipedia: The Mexico Toros were an indoor soccer team based in Mexico City that played in the Continental Indoor Soccer League. They played only one season in 1995. Their home arena was [the] Palacio de los Deportes. The average attendance for their games was ~4,000.

32. A year after Genevieve's *bad thing* I was back in Mexico City for a couple of weeks and it turned out Genevieve was there too. She was excited. We'd finally see each other again. One night I was at a bar with some friends and Genevieve called me—she was at a bar about fifteen minutes from where I was. She wasn't drunk. She sounded happy and calm. I blew her off, kept postponing our rendezvous until I stopped answering her texts. When I got home I had an email from her. It said that she was angry and sad. *I thought we were friends.*

I haven't seen Genevieve in years. We've stopped emailing and "chatting." Last time I spoke to her she told me her brother had gone crazy. He was hearing voices.

33. I won't talk about the end of *Mister Lonely* because the end doesn't matter. Movies always want to provide us with a sense of closure because people like closure. Why? Because we never feel closure in our daily lives. Which is also the reason why movies—art—should *never* give us a sense of closure: it's a made-up feeling only felt when consuming fiction.

34. Marilyn to Michael: "Does anything ever really change?" ■