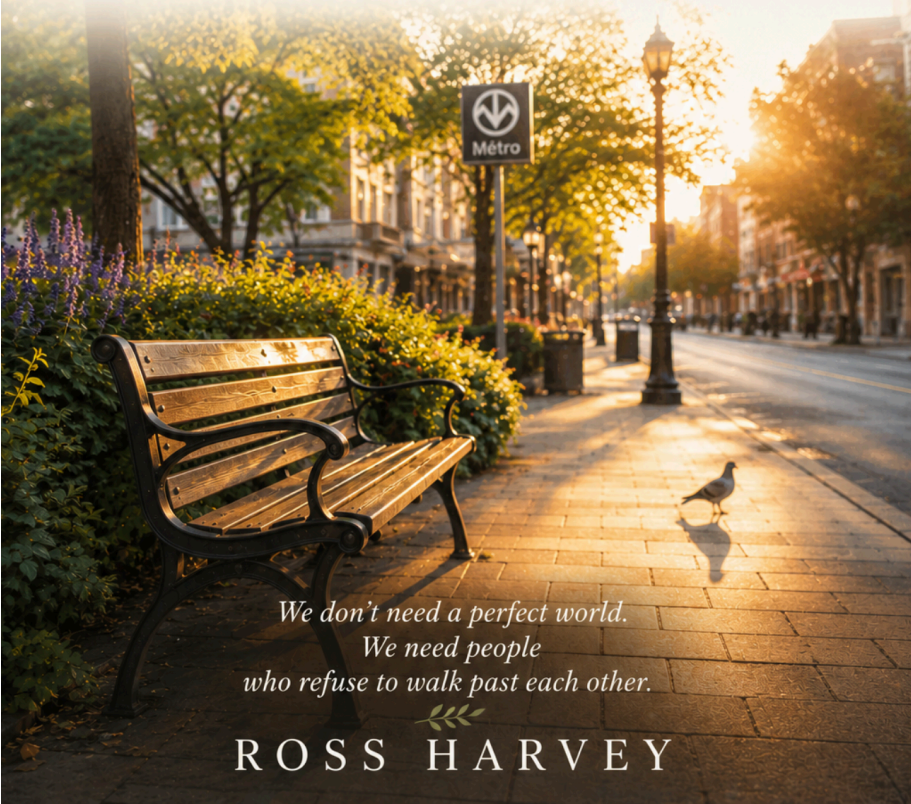




THE STRANGER

Beside Me

FINDING CONNECTION, BUILDING COMMUNITY,
AND CHANGING THE WORLD
ONE PERSON AT A TIME



*We don't need a perfect world.
We need people
who refuse to walk past each other.*



ROSS HARVEY

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Foreword

There are people all around us whom we do not know.

We stand beside them in elevators.

We pass them on sidewalks.

We wait behind them at grocery stores.

We sit three feet away from them on park benches.

We see them walking their dogs every morning. We recognize their coats, their bicycles, their routines, sometimes even the peculiar way they walk—and yet we may know absolutely nothing about them.

Not their names.

Not what makes them laugh.

Not whom they have loved.

Not whom they have lost.

Not what happened yesterday.

Not what they are afraid will happen tomorrow.

We call them strangers.

But I have begun to wonder whether *stranger* is really a description of another human being—or merely a description of the distance we have chosen to maintain between us.

Over the past while, I have been conducting a very small experiment.

There is no laboratory.

There are no researchers.

There is no funding.

There are simply a couple of benches, some sidewalks, a grocery store, a park, the entrance to an apartment building and the streets of NDG in Montreal.

And the experiment consists primarily of two words:

Good morning.

That's it.

I say hello.

I smile.

I ask someone's name.

I compliment somebody's dog.

I tell a mother that she has beautiful children.

I ask an elderly person how the day is treating them.

Sometimes nothing happens.

They smile and keep walking.

But sometimes they stop.

And when they stop, something remarkable happens.

A stranger becomes a person.

The person acquires a name.

The name acquires a story.

And suddenly someone who had existed on the periphery of my life has stepped into it.

I have discovered athletes, immigrants, widows, mothers, workers, retirees, dog lovers, people struggling financially,

people living alone, people in pain, people with extraordinary histories and people who simply needed somebody to notice that they were there.

None of them were actually strangers.

I simply hadn't met them yet.

This book is about those people.

But more importantly, it is about **us**.

Because perhaps the great loneliness of modern life is not caused solely by a shortage of people.

Perhaps it is caused by a shortage of connection.

We have never been surrounded by more human beings—and we have become remarkably skilled at walking past one another.

Maybe changing that doesn't require a government program.

Maybe it doesn't require millions of dollars.

Maybe it doesn't even require very much courage.

Maybe it begins when one person looks at another person and says:

Hello.

And waits long enough to discover who answers.

Introduction

The People We Almost Meet

Think about how many people you almost met today.

The woman who held the door.

The man walking the old golden retriever.

The cashier who handed you your receipt.

The elderly gentleman sitting alone.

The delivery driver carrying boxes into your building.

The mother pushing the stroller.

The person beside you on the bus.

You saw them.

But did you *meet* them?

There is an enormous difference.

Every morning, I walk through my neighbourhood of NDG in Montreal.

I have walked these streets countless times.

But something changed when I stopped treating walking as merely a way of getting from one place to another.

I began looking at the people.

Then I began smiling at them.

Then I began saying good morning.

Then I began stopping.

And then they began stopping too.

The neighbourhood changed.

Except, of course, the neighbourhood hadn't changed at all.

I had.

The people had always been there.

Their stories had always been there.

I simply hadn't opened the door.

One of the places where this became most obvious was outside Metro grocery store on Somerled.

There are two benches there.

I jokingly began referring to them as **the office**.

Most offices have desks, computers, telephones and fluorescent lights.

Mine has traffic.

People heading to work.

People walking dogs.

People carrying groceries.

People catching buses.

People starting another ordinary day.

I sit.

I watch.

And I say hello.

At first, people were strangers.

Then something curious happened.

They became familiar strangers.

Then acquaintances.

Then people with names.

And some became friends.

That transformation fascinates me because almost nothing is required to make it happen.

No application.

No membership.

No money.

No technology.

Just attention.

And perhaps that is what this book is really about.

Attention.

The decision to notice another human being.

Because every person you pass contains an entire universe.

There are childhoods inside them.

Heartbreaks.

Victories.

Regrets.

Songs.

Parents.

Children.

First kisses.

Last goodbyes.

Secret fears.

Private dreams.

And you can walk past that entire universe without ever knowing it was there.

Or you can say hello.

This book contains stories about what happens next.

Chapter One

The Empty Bench

Nobody appointed me to change the neighbourhood.

I simply stopped walking past it.

It began with a bench.

Actually, two benches.

They sit outside Metro grocery store on Somerled Avenue in NDG, and there is nothing particularly remarkable about either one.

No plaque.

No historical significance.

No spectacular view.

People sit there because they are tired, waiting for someone, eating something they have just purchased, or simply because the bench happens to be there.

But I began arriving early in the morning.

Very early.

Around 5:30.

Montreal feels different at that hour.

The city hasn't completely awakened.

Delivery trucks arrive.

Workers hurry toward buses.

Streetlights are still competing with the morning sky.

The people you see at 5:30 are different from the people you see at ten.

They are cleaners.

Bakery workers.

Delivery people.

Nurses.

Early-shift employees.

Dog walkers.

People carrying coffee.

People carrying exhaustion.

And there I was.

Sitting on a bench.

At first, I simply watched.

Then somebody walked past.

"Good morning!"

The person looked slightly surprised.

"Morning."

Another person came.

"Have a wonderful day!"

A smile.

Then another.

And another.

Nothing dramatic happened.

There was no music.

Nobody announced that a community-building experiment had begun.

But something had.

I returned the next morning.

And the morning after that.

Faces became recognizable.

"Good morning!"

"Morning!"

Then:

"How are you?"

"Good. You?"

Eventually:

"How was your weekend?"

Something almost imperceptible was happening.

The distance between us was shrinking.

A person I had never seen before became someone I recognized.

Someone I recognized became someone I greeted.

Someone I greeted became someone whose absence I noticed.

That last part surprised me.

Where's Darren this morning?

Haven't seen so-and-so.

Hope they're okay.

They had entered my world.

And I had entered theirs.

The bench hadn't changed.

The grocery store hadn't changed.

Somerled Avenue hadn't changed.

But an anonymous piece of Montreal had begun turning into something else.

A neighbourhood.

Not because we lived near one another.

We already did.

Because we had begun to **know** one another.

One morning I looked at the empty space beside me on the bench.

It occurred to me that throughout the city there were probably thousands of empty spaces just like it.

Spaces beside people.

Spaces at tables.

Spaces on buses.

Spaces in parks.

And perhaps the real emptiness wasn't the vacant seat.

Perhaps it was the conversation that never happened there.

I wondered how many friendships had never begun because nobody said the first word.

How many lonely people had sat three feet apart.

How many extraordinary stories had passed one another on sidewalks.

How many people had needed exactly what another person could have offered.

A laugh.

A connection.

A job lead.

A recommendation.

A friendship.

Or merely the feeling that somebody had noticed them.

All because one of them had been willing to say:

"Hello."

The next person came walking toward me.

I smiled.

"Good morning!"

And the experiment continued.

Chapter Two

The Woman Who Sat Down

Most people kept walking.

She didn't.

That was the difference.

She was an older woman, and she had been walking for a while. When she reached the benches, she decided to rest her feet.

Her name was Bailey.

She was eighty-two.

Five minutes earlier, she had been simply another person walking through NDG.

Now she was sitting beside me telling me about her life.

She lived on Randall.

She walked every morning.

She had two children.

Her daughter was a lawyer in Miami.

Her son was a psychologist.

I told her I wouldn't hold that against him.

She laughed.

That laugh mattered.

Not because the joke was particularly brilliant.

It wasn't.

It mattered because somewhere between her sitting down and her laughing, the invisible wall separating two strangers disappeared.

Bailey told me she had lived in Montreal and NDG for quite some time. Before that, she had lived in Brockville for nine years. She had spent time in the United States while her children were studying because of educational opportunities available to them through the Adventists.

One fact led to another.

One question led to another answer.

And within minutes I knew more about Bailey than I knew about hundreds of people I had passed repeatedly over the years.

Then something struck me.

Bailey had been carrying this story the entire time.

Before she sat down.

Before I knew her name.

Before I knew about Randall or Brockville or Miami.

Everything I had just discovered had existed while she was merely "an elderly woman walking down the street."

How often do we do that?

We reduce people to what we can see.

Old man.

Young mother.

Homeless guy.

Immigrant.

Cashier.

Delivery driver.

Woman with dog.

Man on bicycle.

We turn complicated human beings into scenery.

Bailey was not scenery anymore.

She was Bailey.

Eventually she stood.

She had more walking to do.

We said goodbye.

She continued down the street.

And I remained on the bench.

The whole encounter might have lasted only a few minutes.

But the neighbourhood now contained one fewer stranger.

That seems like a small thing.

I am increasingly convinced it isn't.

Chapter Three

Five Loaves of Bread

Sometimes generosity arrives in a delivery truck.

His name was Bedis.

He delivered bread.

Our relationship began the way many relationships in my neighbourhood begin—with greetings exchanged often enough that eventually the person behind the greeting emerges.

One morning, Bedis gave me bread.

Not one loaf.

Five.

I carried them home.

There was more bread than Christy Anne and I needed, so I put the loaves in the entranceway of our apartment building.

No announcement.

No complicated system.

No application form.

Just bread.

Free to whoever wanted it.

Later, the bread was gone.

I loved that.

I didn't know exactly who had taken each loaf.

I didn't need to.

Someone had bread because Bedis had extra bread, because he gave it to me, because I carried it home, because I put it where somebody else could find it.

Think about the chain.

Bedis.

Me.

An entranceway.

A neighbour.

Bread.

That was the entire infrastructure.

We have become accustomed to believing that solving human problems requires enormous systems.

Sometimes it does.

But sometimes the distance between abundance and need is only one person.

Someone has too much.

Someone else has too little.

And standing between them is somebody willing to carry five loaves of bread home.

The next time I saw Bedis, he was no longer simply the bread delivery man.

He was the man whose bread had fed my neighbours.

And I suspect he had no idea how much I loved that.

There is something beautiful about generosity when nobody keeps score.

No receipt.

No recognition.

No photograph.

No plaque saying:

THESE LOAVES DONATED BY BEDIS.

Just bread disappearing into homes.

I began wondering how much unused abundance existed within a few blocks of where I was sitting.

Food.

Clothing.

Furniture.

Time.

Knowledge.

Skills.

Friendship.

How many people had something another person desperately needed?

And how often were they passing one another without knowing it?

Perhaps community is partly the art of connecting those dots.

Bedis had bread.

My neighbours had hands.

I happened to be standing in the middle.

Five loaves disappeared.

And for one morning, that seemed like a pretty good definition of civilization.

Chapter Four

The Man Outside Metro

Darren was outside Metro again.

By then, seeing him had become part of the rhythm of the morning.

That is one of the strange things that happens when you begin paying attention to people.

They become landmarks.

We usually think of neighbourhood landmarks as buildings.

The church.

The school.

The park.

The grocery store.

But human beings become landmarks too.

You expect them.

You look for them.

And when they aren't there, something feels different.

One morning Darren was outside Metro when I arrived later than usual.

I teased him.

"You're only working half-days now!"

He laughed.

There was nothing profound about the exchange.

That is precisely why I remember it.

Friendship is not built exclusively from profound conversations.

Most human relationships are constructed from tiny moments.

A joke.

A wave.

"How was your weekend?"

"Cold enough for you?"

"Where were you yesterday?"

"Have a good one."

We underestimate these exchanges because they appear to contain almost nothing.

But repeated over time, they say something much larger:

I know you.

I recognize you.

You belong here.

Your presence matters enough for me to notice it.

That morning Darren and I didn't solve poverty.

We didn't discuss the meaning of life.

We didn't create a plan for transforming Montreal.

We joked about half-days.

And both of us smiled.

Perhaps there are mornings when that is enough.

I continued on my walk.

But Darren remained in my thoughts.

Not because anything extraordinary had happened.

Because something wonderfully ordinary had.

Two people who once would have walked past one another no longer did.

Chapter Five

The Woman Who Wanted Muscle

She was exercising outdoors when I saw her.

An elderly Asian woman stretching in the exercise area in the park.

There was a time when I probably would have continued walking.

Not because I was unfriendly.

Because that is what we have been trained to do.

Don't interrupt.

Don't intrude.

Mind your own business.

Give people their space.

All perfectly reasonable rules.

And all excellent ways to spend twenty years living near people you never meet.

So I spoke to her.

Her name was Marie.

Marie used the gym at Concordia, but she preferred the outdoor exercise area.

I understood why.

Fresh air.

Trees.

Sky.

The sounds of the neighbourhood waking up around you.

No membership card required to see the clouds.

We talked about exercise.

Marie wanted to put on some muscle.

That made me smile.

Here was this older woman, outdoors early in the morning, determined to make herself stronger.

There was something wonderfully defiant about it.

Age had apparently forgotten to tell Marie what she was supposed to stop doing.

We talked for perhaps ten minutes.

Then we went our separate ways.

Ten minutes.

That is one-sixth of an hour.

It is almost nothing.

Yet afterward, whenever I thought about that exercise area, it wasn't merely equipment sitting in a park.

Marie was there.

That is how places change.

People inhabit them in our memories.

A bench becomes the place where you met Bailey.

An entranceway becomes the place where five loaves disappeared.

Metro becomes the place where Darren stands.

The outdoor gym becomes the place where Marie wanted muscle.

A neighbourhood slowly fills with stories.

And once a place contains stories, it belongs to you differently.

I walked away thinking about Marie.

She wanted to become stronger.

Perhaps that was what I was trying to do too.

Not physically.

Socially.

Humanly.

Perhaps communities have muscles.

And perhaps, like every other muscle, they weaken when they aren't used.

Every greeting is a repetition.

Every conversation another exercise.

Every friendship adds strength.

Maybe we have been waiting for someone to rebuild our communities.

Maybe we simply need to start exercising them.

Chapter Six

The Dog Named Enzo

The dog was moving like a missile.

His name was Enzo.

He was a Belgian Shepherd, and his owner, Guy, was throwing a tennis ball across the dog park.

Enzo exploded after it.

There was no hesitation.

No strategic planning.

No concern about appearances.

Ball.

Run.

That was Enzo's entire philosophy of life.

Guy told me Enzo had crashed into the fence more than once.

I could believe it.

There was something joyful about watching an animal commit himself completely to a tennis ball.

I started talking with Guy.

Again, nothing had been planned.

I hadn't left home that morning thinking:

Today I shall meet Guy and Enzo.

I had simply walked into the park.

There they were.

And I spoke.

We had a wonderful conversation.

Meanwhile Enzo continued demonstrating why enthusiasm occasionally requires a fence.

I watched him race away again.

There is something about dogs that makes strangers easier.

Dogs do not respect the social barriers humans spend years constructing.

A dog sniffs another dog and suddenly two owners are standing together.

"What's his name?"

"How old is she?"

"What breed?"

"He's friendly."

"Mine too."

Conversation accomplished.

Perhaps dogs have secretly understood community all along.

They approach.

We avoid.

They investigate.

We assume.

They show enthusiasm.

We maintain composure.

They seem genuinely delighted that another living creature exists.

We could learn something from that.

Eventually Guy and I said goodbye.

Enzo probably didn't care.

There was still a ball.

I continued walking.

But once again, my map of the neighbourhood had changed.

There was now a man named Guy on it.

And a Belgian Shepherd named Enzo.

The dog park wasn't just a dog park anymore.

It was somewhere I knew somebody.

That distinction is enormous.

A city is made of places.

A community is made of relationships.

You can build apartment towers, sidewalks, parks, shopping centres and transit systems and still not have a community.

Community exists in the invisible lines connecting one person to another.

Guy to me.

Me to Darren.

Darren to somebody else.

Bailey to her neighbours.

Bedis to the people who ate his bread.

Marie to whoever exercises beside her tomorrow.

Millions of tiny lines.

Most invisible.

Together they form something extraordinary.

A web of belonging.

Enzo returned with the tennis ball.

Guy threw it again.

And Enzo tore across the park as though retrieving that ball
were the most important job in the world.

I smiled.

Maybe he knew something I didn't.

Maybe whatever is directly in front of us deserves our complete
attention.

Including the stranger beside us.

Chapter Seven

The Man Who Needed Noodles

His name was Felix.

I had seen him before.

He was homeless, and I sometimes encountered him around the neighbourhood, including near Benny Pool.

That morning I was walking to Dollarama.

I needed paperclips.

Felix needed food.

There is something almost absurd about that juxtaposition.

I was thinking about paperclips.

He was thinking about eating.

When I saw him, Felix told me he had no money.

He wasn't asking for much.

Noodles.

Popcorn.

Things he knew he could get inexpensively at Dollarama.

"I'll get them for you," I told him.

And I continued walking.

It wasn't heroic.

It wasn't even particularly generous.

A few dollars.

A few minutes.

Noodles and popcorn.

But as I walked, I found myself thinking about the strange arithmetic of need.

The same amount of money can mean almost nothing to one person and almost everything to another.

Five dollars disappears from many of our lives without being noticed.

A coffee.

A snack.

Something we toss into a shopping cart without thinking.

For Felix, that same five dollars represented food.

That is one of the things that happens when strangers acquire names.

Problems stop being theoretical.

Homelessness is a subject.

Felix is a man.

Poverty is an issue.

Felix is hungry.

Food insecurity is a statistic.

Felix wants noodles.

Statistics are easy to walk past.

People are harder.

That may be one reason we prefer statistics.

They don't look us in the eye.

They don't tell us their names.

They don't stand outside Dollarama and say they are hungry.

People do.

I bought what Felix had asked for.

It was such a small thing.

Yet perhaps that is precisely the point.

We often imagine compassion in grand gestures.

Building shelters.

Funding programs.

Changing laws.

All of those things matter.

But while we wait for the grand solution, a man may still need lunch.

There is an expression I have come to love:

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.

That morning I couldn't solve homelessness.

I couldn't solve poverty.

I couldn't solve Felix's life.

But I could buy noodles.

There is humility in accepting the limits of what we can do.

There is also danger in using those limits as an excuse to do nothing.

Perhaps we have been asking ourselves the wrong question.

Instead of:

How can I solve this?

Maybe we should ask:

What can I do right now?

Sometimes the answer will be enormous.

Sometimes it will be noodles.

Both count.

Chapter Eight

The Woman With Two Little Dogs

I don't know why two little dogs seem so much more determined than one large dog.

But they do.

There was a woman in our building whom I frequently saw walking hers.

Two little dogs.

They had their routine.

I had mine.

At first, our relationship consisted mostly of proximity.

We lived in the same building.

We occupied the same elevators.

We crossed the same entranceway.

We stepped onto the same sidewalks.

That is one of the peculiar things about apartment living.

Hundreds of people can share an address without sharing their lives.

We hear one another through walls.

We wait for the same elevators.

Our mail arrives in boxes a few feet apart.

We may sleep twenty feet from people whose names we don't know.

We call that normal.

Perhaps it is.

But I have begun wondering whether it should be.

I started spending part of my mornings downstairs in the entrance area of our building.

Tea in hand.

Watching people leave.

"Good morning!"

"Have a wonderful day!"

Sometimes that was all.

But slowly the entranceway changed.

Or perhaps I did.

I began recognizing people.

Susan and her little dog.

The woman with the two little dogs.

Anne.

Jamal.

People heading to work.

People taking their dogs outside.

People collecting mail.

People who had lived near me for years.

The building became populated.

Of course it had always been populated.

But there is a difference between being surrounded by residents and being surrounded by neighbours.

A resident is someone whose apartment happens to be near yours.

A neighbour is someone you notice.

That distinction may be one of the most important in this book.

Because neighbourhoods are not created by postal codes.

They are created by recognition.

One morning the woman with the two little dogs came through.

We exchanged our greetings.

She continued on.

Nothing extraordinary happened.

Yet I found myself smiling.

Two little dogs.

One woman.

One greeting.

Another thread.

I sometimes wonder what would happen if every apartment building had someone sitting near the entrance for half an hour each morning simply saying hello.

Not a security guard.

Not an employee.

Not somebody collecting money or signatures.

Just a neighbour.

Someone whose job—self-appointed, unpaid and wonderfully unnecessary—was to remind people:

You live among human beings.

Maybe loneliness would diminish.

Maybe older people living alone would feel more connected.

Maybe somebody would notice when a neighbour hadn't appeared for several days.

Maybe the person who needed help carrying groceries would know whom to ask.

Maybe someone going through a terrible time would have one familiar face to turn toward.

Maybe nothing dramatic would happen at all.

Maybe people would simply smile more often on their way to work.

That would be enough reason for me.

Chapter Nine

Good Morning, Bailey

The second time you see someone is different.

The first time, you meet.

The second time, you remember.

And being remembered is one of the quietest forms of love.

"Good morning, Bailey!"

There is power in a name.

We hear our names thousands of times throughout our lives, yet somehow they never become ordinary.

Across a crowded room, you can hear your name spoken softly and your attention immediately turns.

A name says:

You.

Not somebody.

Not ma'am.

Not sir.

Not the lady who walks every morning.

Bailey.

I began trying harder to remember names.

This sounds easy.

It isn't.

Faces are easier for me.

I might recognize someone immediately and then search desperately through my mind.

Susan?

Marie?

Guy?

No, Guy has Enzo.

Come on, Ross.

You know this.

There is an embarrassment in forgetting someone's name.

But there is also a lesson in trying to remember it.

Remembering requires attention.

And attention is the currency of human connection.

When Bailey appeared again, she wasn't the eighty-two-year-old woman anymore.

She was Bailey.

I knew something about her.

Randall.

Brockville.

Her children.

Her morning walks.

Our previous conversation existed between us.

We now had history.

Not much.

But some.

And history is where relationships begin.

Think about the people who matter most in your life.

Your oldest friend.

Your spouse.

Your children.

Your siblings.

The person you can call at two in the morning.

What makes those relationships different?

History.

Thousands of accumulated moments.

Meals.

Arguments.

Trips.

Birthdays.

Jokes.

Illnesses.

Conversations.

Silences.

No friendship begins with all of that.

It begins with one encounter.

Then another.

Then another.

A stranger becomes familiar.

The familiar becomes personal.

The personal becomes meaningful.

And sometimes the meaningful becomes indispensable.

All because somebody came back.

"Good morning, Bailey."

She smiled.

"Good morning."

We were no longer meeting.

We were continuing.

Chapter Ten

The Cyclist Who Finally Stopped

For weeks, he had been part of the scenery.

A bicycle.

A helmet.

A face.

A wave.

He would pass.

I would greet him.

He would continue.

That was our relationship.

Then one morning he stopped.

This is how it happens.

Not always immediately.

Sometimes friendliness requires repetition.

The first hello is merely a hello.

The second establishes familiarity.

The fifth says, *This person seems harmless.*

The tenth says, *Apparently we're going to keep doing this.*

And somewhere along the way, the invisible wall comes down.

He put a foot on the ground.

We talked.

I learned something about him.

He learned something about me.

The cyclist became a person.

I have thought often about why people hesitate to engage with strangers.

Some of it is sensible.

We protect ourselves.

We have learned caution.

Cities teach us to maintain boundaries.

Headphones help.

Phones help even more.

Look down.

Keep moving.

Avoid eye contact.

The unwritten rules are clear.

But there is another reason.

We don't want awkwardness.

What if I say hello and they ignore me?

What if I start talking and they don't want to talk?

What if they think I'm strange?

All possible.

And none fatal.

I have greeted people who didn't answer.

I survived.

I have smiled at people who looked away.

I recovered.

I have probably had people wonder why this man is talking to everyone.

I can live with that too.

Because the alternative is worse.

The alternative is a world in which we become so afraid of minor social discomfort that we surrender the possibility of connection.

Sometimes the cyclist doesn't stop.

Keep saying hello anyway.

One day he might.

Chapter Eleven

His Name Was Felix

Once you know someone's name, it becomes difficult to unknow their humanity.

Felix was no longer "the homeless man."

He was Felix.

That change may seem semantic.

It isn't.

Language determines what we see.

"The homeless" is a category.

"Felix" is somebody I know.

Categories allow distance.

Names demand relationship.

I began wondering about the phrase *homeless person* itself.

We use it so casually.

But what does it mean to have a home?

Four walls?

A lease?

A mortgage?

A key?

Certainly those things matter.

But home is also recognition.

It is the place where people know when you arrive.

It is where somebody notices when you're missing.

It is where your name is spoken.

It is where you belong.

And by that definition, there may be people sleeping in beautiful houses who are profoundly homeless.

And perhaps there are people without houses who find moments of home in the relationships around them.

I don't want to romanticize Felix's situation.

There is nothing romantic about poverty.

Nothing charming about hunger.

Nothing noble about not knowing where your next meal will come from.

A human being deserves safety, food and shelter.

But Felix also deserved something that cost nothing.

Recognition.

When I saw him, I said his name.

"Felix!"

His face changed.

That is what names do.

Maybe the first gift we give another human being is not money.

Maybe it is the message:

I see you.

The noodles matter.

The name matters too.

Chapter Twelve

Susan

Sometimes a stranger opens a door and your own past walks through it.

Susan lived in our building.

She had recently had hip surgery.

One morning she came downstairs and sat beside me.

We talked.

Not for two minutes.

Not the usual elevator conversation.

We really talked.

Twenty minutes or so.

And somehow we travelled backward through Montreal.

Gayle.

My father's store.

Royal Vale.

West Hill.

Names and places from another time.

The present dissolved.

We were no longer two people sitting in the entrance of an apartment building.

We were travellers visiting a city that existed decades ago.

That's another thing strangers carry.

Your past.

You don't know it until you speak.

Someone remembers the restaurant where your family ate.

Someone went to your school.

Someone knew your cousin.

Someone lived on the street where you grew up.

Someone remembers the store that disappeared forty years ago.

Suddenly the past isn't gone.

It's sitting beside you.

Susan and I talked.

Residents came and went.

The building continued its morning.

But for twenty minutes, time folded.

When I eventually went upstairs, I thought about how close I had come to never having that conversation.

What if I hadn't been downstairs?

What if Susan hadn't sat?

What if I had been looking at my phone?

What if we had exchanged only:

"Morning."

"Morning."

That would have been perfectly normal.

And we would have missed everything.

How many conversations are waiting inside the people around us?

How many shared memories?

How many coincidences?

How many connections?

We tend to imagine strangers as people with whom we have nothing in common.

That is an assumption.

Talk long enough and the odds are good you will find something.

A place.

A person.

A passion.

A loss.

A memory.

A hope.

Maybe six degrees of separation isn't merely a clever theory.

Maybe it is an invitation.

Start talking.

See how close we already are.

Chapter Thirteen

The Athlete at the Burger Joint

He looked good.

Really good.

His name was Ian Robinson.

I encountered him outside Burger de Ville.

We started talking.

Then the surprises began.

Ian was seventy-five.

He had been a serious runner.

A tennis player.

An extreme skier.

Now he cycled and played golf.

He was still working in finance from his home on Ballantyne.

Sharp.

Active.

Engaged.

Alive.

I loved meeting him.

Perhaps because as an athlete myself, I have always had a particular appreciation for people who refuse to surrender their bodies to the calendar.

Age tells us strange things.

At thirty, you're supposed to settle down.

At fifty, slow down.

At sixty-five, retire.

At seventy-five, apparently someone forgot to tell Ian.

There he was.

Working.

Cycling.

Golfing.

Talking.

Living.

As we spoke, he introduced me to another man.

His nickname was Speedy.

Of course it was.

Speedy worked at Burger de Ville.

He had run forty marathons.

Forty.

And now he did ultramarathons.

I laughed inwardly at the improbability of the whole thing.

I had gone for a walk.

I stopped outside a burger restaurant.

And suddenly I was standing in what felt like an impromptu meeting of athletes.

Then came another connection.

They knew Carl Anderson.

There it was again.

The web.

One person connects to another, who connects to another.

The neighbourhood is not a collection of isolated lives.

It is a network.

We simply don't see the lines until we talk.

Before that morning, Ian was a man outside a restaurant.

Speedy was a guy who worked there.

Then they became stories.

Athletes.

Connections.

People I would look forward to seeing again.

I walked away energized.

Not because we had accomplished anything.

Because I had discovered something.

There are treasures hidden all over the neighbourhood.

They look like ordinary people.

Chapter Fourteen

Speedy

You don't get a nickname like Speedy by sitting still.

Forty marathons.

Then ultramarathons.

Think about that for a moment.

A marathon is 42.195 kilometres.

Most people consider finishing one an achievement worth remembering for the rest of their lives.

Speedy had finished forty.

Then apparently decided they weren't long enough.

I liked him immediately.

Not simply because he was an athlete.

Because people who have spent years pushing themselves tend to understand something about distance.

You don't run forty marathons by thinking about forty marathons.

You run to the next kilometre.

Then the next.

Then the next.

Transformation works the same way.

We look at our neighbourhoods, our cities, our countries, our world and become overwhelmed by the scale of what needs changing.

Loneliness.

Poverty.

Hunger.

Division.

Isolation.

Violence.

Distrust.

How could one person possibly make a difference?

The question itself defeats us.

A marathoner doesn't stand at the starting line asking:

How can one step possibly carry me 42 kilometres?

One step can't.

But that's not the point.

The first step makes the second possible.

Then the third.

Eventually something impossible becomes a finish line.

Perhaps community works that way.

One greeting.

One conversation.

One loaf of bread.

One bag of noodles.

One name remembered.

One stranger who stops being a stranger.

Then another.

Then another.

I thought about Speedy's forty marathons.

Millions of footsteps.

None individually remarkable.

Together, extraordinary.

Maybe that is how we change the world.

Not with one enormous act.

With millions of small ones.

And perhaps the greatest mistake we make is dismissing the first step because it doesn't look like the finish line.

Chapter Fifteen

The Woman on Walkley

I saw Pearl outside her duplex on Walkley.

That sentence sounds almost too ordinary to matter.

But ordinary is where most of life happens.

She was outside.

I was walking.

We stopped.

We talked.

Then I continued on.

No headline.

No revelation.

No life-changing announcement.

Just two people acknowledging one another.

I have come to appreciate these encounters more than I once did.

We tend to measure importance by intensity.

Big conversation.

Big emotion.

Big decision.

Big event.

But perhaps relationships are sustained more often by small continuities.

Seeing someone.

Remembering them.

Stopping for a moment.

Asking how they are.

That morning, Pearl became part of the walk.

And because she did, Walkley became something more than a street.

That may sound sentimental.

It isn't.

Places become meaningful because of people.

You can live somewhere for decades and still experience it merely as geography.

Street.

Corner.

Store.

Park.

Building.

But add human connection and geography becomes memory.

There is the corner where I met Guy.

There is the bench where Bailey sat.

There is Metro, where Darren often stands.

There is the building entrance where Susan and I talked about the old days.

And there is Walkley, where Pearl was outside her duplex.

The neighbourhood slowly becomes populated with stories.

I think this may be one reason people feel displaced when they move.

It is not simply that the streets are unfamiliar.

The streets have no stories yet.

Nobody waves.

Nobody calls their name.

Nobody knows where they have been.

A new place has buildings.

Home has history.

Maybe the work of belonging is simply the work of accumulating enough human moments that a place begins to remember you.

I waved goodbye to Pearl.

She waved back.

Then I kept walking.

Another thread had been tied.

Chapter Sixteen

A Man Named Younes

Sometimes a person gives you an idea without knowing they have given you anything.

That happened with Younes.

He was from Morocco.

We talked.

And something about that conversation stayed with me.

Not necessarily because of one dramatic statement.

Sometimes it is the spirit of an encounter that lingers.

The warmth.

The openness.

The ease with which two people who could have walked straight past one another instead shared a few minutes.

Later I found myself thinking about friendliness.

Not as etiquette.

As infrastructure.

We talk constantly about infrastructure.

Roads.

Bridges.

Transit.

Sewers.

Internet.

Hospitals.

Schools.

All necessary.

But communities also depend on invisible infrastructure.

Trust.

Courtesy.

Recognition.

Goodwill.

The willingness to help.

The expectation that the person beside you is not an enemy.

You cannot pave it.

You cannot photograph it from the air.

There are no engineering drawings.

But remove it, and a community begins falling apart.

Friendliness is one part of that infrastructure.

A smile says:

I am not a threat.

A greeting says:

I acknowledge your existence.

A short conversation says:

For these few minutes, you matter more than wherever I was rushing to go.

That last one may be increasingly rare.

We are always going somewhere.

Even when we aren't.

Phones have made sure of that.

There is always another message.

Another article.

Another video.

Another notification.

Another place for our attention to be other than where our bodies actually are.

Younes was standing in front of me.

So I talked to Younes.

A simple thing.

But what if we did more of that?

What if every neighbourhood became slightly friendlier?

Not dramatically.

Ten percent.

Five percent.

One degree warmer.

More greetings.

More doors held.

More names remembered.

More people asking:

"How are you?"

And occasionally waiting for the real answer.

What would happen?

I don't know.

But I know what happens when the opposite occurs.

People withdraw.

Suspicion grows.

Loneliness deepens.

We live increasingly private lives in increasingly crowded places.

Maybe friendliness isn't trivial at all.

Maybe it is preventive medicine for society.

And perhaps the prescription begins with something as unsophisticated as:

"Good morning."

Chapter Seventeen

Darren at the Post

There are people whose routines intersect with yours so regularly that eventually their absence becomes louder than their presence.

Darren was one of those people.

I would see him near Metro.

We would talk.

We would joke.

Nothing formal.

Nothing scheduled.

Yet over time, expectation formed.

He should be there.

That is an interesting phrase.

He should be there.

Not because Darren owed me his presence.

Because my mental picture of the morning had begun including him.

That is belonging in miniature.

You become part of somebody else's expectation.

The first time someone notices you are absent, something has changed.

You matter enough to be missed.

I sometimes wonder how many people go through entire days without being missed anywhere.

They leave their apartment.

Nobody notices.

They sit on a bus.

Nobody knows them.

They work quietly.

They return home.

No one asks where they were.

No one says:

"I didn't see you yesterday."

There is a loneliness deeper than being physically alone.

It is the feeling that your presence or absence makes no difference.

Maybe community begins when that changes.

Where were you?

Everything okay?

Haven't seen you in a couple days.

Those are small sentences.

But inside them is an enormous message:

You occupy space in my mind.

I know you're usually here.

I noticed when you weren't.

I care enough to ask.

You can build an entire society from that feeling.

Maybe not a perfect one.

But a human one.

Chapter Eighteen

The Stranger in the Elevator

Her name was Anne.

I liked her.

One morning we met in the elevator.

She looked at me and called me Scott.

I laughed.

Apparently I had been living a secret life.

"No," I told her. "Ross."

She was tired.

Very tired.

There is something revealing about elevators.

For a few seconds, people are trapped together in a small moving box.

Most of us respond to this unusual intimacy by pretending nobody else is there.

We stare at the numbers.

We examine the floor.

We look at our phones.

Anything but one another.

I have always found that funny.

Put two human beings on a park bench ten feet apart and conversation is possible.

Put them shoulder to shoulder in an elevator and suddenly everybody becomes fascinated by illuminated numbers.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Anything to avoid eye contact.

But Anne and I talked.

Briefly.

She told me she was tired.

That was all.

Yet even those two words were real.

"I'm tired."

How often is that what people actually need to say?

Not:

"Fine."

Not:

"Great."

Not:

"Can't complain."

Just the truth.

I'm tired.

I'm worried.

I'm lonely.

I'm having a bad day.

I'm scared.

I'm happy.

I'm excited.

I got good news.

I don't know what to do.

Human beings carry all of this into elevators.

And we stare at the numbers.

Anne got off.

The doors closed.

I continued upward.

I wondered how many truths ride elevators every day without ever being spoken.

Chapter Nineteen

Remembering Their Names

I started keeping track.

Not formally at first.

Just mentally.

Bailey.

Felix.

Marie.

Guy.

Enzo.

Darren.

Susan.

Pearl.

Younes.

Ian.

Speedy.

Anne.

The list grew.

And with every name, the neighbourhood changed.

Names are extraordinary things.

They transform categories into individuals.

Think about the difference between these sentences:

A homeless man was sitting outside.

Felix was sitting outside.

An elderly woman walked past.

Bailey walked past.

A man was throwing a ball for his dog.

Guy was throwing a ball for Enzo.

One is observation.

The other is relationship.

We sometimes say that somebody is "just a name."

I think the opposite may be true.

A name is the beginning of refusing to let someone remain *just* anything.

Not just the cashier.

Not just the janitor.

Not just the homeless man.

Not just the old woman.

Not just the immigrant.

Not just the delivery guy.

Not just the person in apartment 407.

A name interrupts our ability to generalize.

And generalization is one of the easiest ways to stop seeing people.

Once I know your name, you become inconveniently specific.

You have preferences.

A history.

A sense of humour.

Good days.

Bad days.

Contradictions.

Maybe I like some things about you and dislike others.

Good.

That means you have become human.

Real people are complicated.

Categories aren't.

I made an effort to remember.

Sometimes I failed.

I would see the face and the name would disappear precisely when I needed it.

I hated that.

But perhaps the effort itself mattered.

Because remembering someone is a form of honour.

It says:

Of all the people I encountered, I decided you were worth storing somewhere inside me.

Maybe that is why we love hearing our own names.

It is evidence that we did not pass unnoticed.

Chapter Twenty

When They Remember Yours

Then something unexpected happened.

People began remembering me.

"Morning, Ross."

There it was.

My name.

Coming back toward me.

I had been so focused on learning other people's names that I hadn't fully appreciated what it meant when they learned mine.

I was no longer merely the strange man sitting on the bench greeting everybody.

I was Ross.

That matters.

Connection is reciprocal.

You cannot build community by standing outside it and dispensing friendliness.

Eventually you have to belong too.

People have to know you.

They have to learn your rhythms.

Your jokes.

Your habits.

Your stories.

They have to be allowed to ask you questions.

Otherwise friendliness can become performance.

Real relationship involves risk.

To know someone is also to become knowable.

I realized that I was becoming part of other people's mornings.

Perhaps someone would walk toward Metro and expect me to be sitting there.

Perhaps someone would enter the building and wonder whether I would be in the mezzanine.

Perhaps somebody would notice if I wasn't there.

The idea moved me.

Because that meant the experiment had changed direction.

I had begun by asking:

What happens if I notice people?

Now another question appeared:

What happens when they begin noticing me?

The answer was simple.

I became less alone too.

That is the secret buried inside kindness.

You imagine you are giving something away.

A greeting.

A smile.

Attention.

Encouragement.

But human connection rarely travels in only one direction.

I wanted other people to feel seen.

And gradually, because I had seen them, they began seeing me.

Maybe generosity is like that.

What you send outward eventually creates a world capable of sending something back.

"Good morning, Ross."

"Good morning."

And somehow two words felt different now.

Chapter Twenty-One

Everyone Is Carrying Something

You can rarely tell by looking.

That may be one of the most important things I have learned.

Someone smiles.

They may be grieving.

Someone laughs.

They may be terrified.

Someone irritates you.

They may have spent the night in a hospital.

Someone moves slowly in front of you.

They may be in pain.

Someone doesn't return your greeting.

Maybe they are rude.

Or maybe their world fell apart twenty minutes ago.

We don't know.

That doesn't mean every unkind act should be excused.

It means judgment should occasionally leave room for mystery.

Everyone is carrying something.

I was reminded of this with Christy Anne.

I could look at her and see the woman I love.

Someone else passing us on the street might simply see another person.

They would not know about the pain.

They would not know the history behind it.

They would not know that weather itself could make a difficult day considerably worse.

They would see the outside.

Human beings are icebergs.

The visible portion is tiny.

Below the waterline:

Childhood.

Trauma.

Illness.

Debt.

Divorce.

Caregiving.

Fear.

Regret.

Loneliness.

Grief.

Dreams.

Secrets.

Responsibility.

The phone call they received last night.

The test result they are waiting for.

The person they miss.

The thing they cannot tell anyone.

And then we bump into them at the grocery store and form an opinion in seven seconds.

Too slow.

Too loud.

Too impatient.

Too unfriendly.

Too strange.

Maybe.

Or maybe carrying something heavy.

I have begun trying to remember this when someone doesn't respond the way I hope.

I don't always succeed.

I am human too.

But the idea helps.

Everyone is carrying something.

And sometimes the kindest thing we can do is avoid adding weight.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Conversation That Wasn't Supposed to Happen

Jamal came into the mezzanine just before seven.

He looked clean and rested, and I asked whether it was his day off.

He told me he had weekends off.

That could have been the entire conversation.

Question.

Answer.

Done.

Instead, he sat.

And we talked.

For nearly half an hour.

During that whole time, nobody else came through.

I found that remarkable.

Normally I might see residents moving in and out.

Dogs being taken for walks.

People starting their day.

But that morning, for those thirty minutes, it was just Jamal and me.

We talked about all kinds of things.

The subjects matter less to me now than the fact that we had the conversation at all.

Because neither of us had scheduled it.

No calendar invitation.

No meeting agenda.

No appointment.

No:

Jamal and Ross — 7:00 a.m. — Meaningful Human Connection.

He simply appeared.

I asked a question.

He stayed.

And half an hour of life opened up.

How many important conversations begin this way?

By accident.

A neighbour pauses.

Someone misses a bus.

A stranger sits beside you.

A dog stops to sniff another dog.

A rainstorm forces two people under the same awning.

We think meaningful relationships are things we deliberately create.

Sometimes they are.

But often opportunity simply walks into the room.

The question is whether we recognize it.

I could have been looking at my phone.

I could have answered briefly.

I could have said I was busy.

I could have returned upstairs.

Instead, we talked.

For thirty minutes, the rest of the building seemed to disappear.

Then we said goodbye.

Jamal left.

I went upstairs.

The morning continued.

But something had happened that could not be scheduled again in exactly the same way.

That is one reason I have become wary of being too busy.

Busyness does not merely consume time.

It can eliminate serendipity.

If every minute is assigned a task, there is nowhere for the unexpected person to fit.

And sometimes the unexpected person is the whole point of the day.

The conversation wasn't supposed to happen.

Which may be exactly why it needed to.

Chapter Twenty-Three

What Happened Before I Met You

Every person arrives from somewhere.

Not geographically.

Emotionally.

Historically.

Spiritually.

You meet someone at 8:17 on a Tuesday morning.

But their life did not begin at 8:17.

They have already lived through thousands of mornings.

They have loved people you will never know.

They have made mistakes they may still regret.

They have survived things they rarely discuss.

They have been hurt.

They have hurt others.

They have dreamed.

Failed.

Recovered.

Changed.

They arrive in front of you carrying an invisible biography.

And you meet only the current page.

I think we forget that.

We encounter people in fragments and judge the whole book.

A cashier seems impatient.

A neighbour is distant.

A stranger snaps at us.

A driver cuts us off.

We react to the sentence without knowing the chapter that came before it.

Sometimes there is no excuse.

People can simply behave badly.

But sometimes context would change everything.

Perhaps the cashier just learned her mother is sick.

Perhaps the neighbour has been caring for a spouse through the night.

Perhaps the stranger has been unemployed for six months.

Perhaps the driver is rushing toward a hospital.

We don't know.

That phrase may deserve more respect than we give it.

We don't know.

I have come to believe those three words could make us kinder.

Not gullible.

Not passive.

Kinder.

Because knowing that we don't know creates room.

Room for another explanation.

Room for patience.

Room for grace.

Room for curiosity.

There is a wonderful question hidden inside every human encounter:

What happened before I met you?

You may never get the full answer.

Perhaps you shouldn't.

People are entitled to privacy.

But simply remembering that an answer exists changes the way you look at them.

The stranger beside you has already survived an entire life before reaching your side.

Treat that history with care.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Widow at the Grocery Store

She was standing near the fruit.

Older.

Nicely dressed.

Holding a small basket.

Nothing about her announced loneliness.

Loneliness rarely announces itself.

It does not always look sad.

Sometimes it wears lipstick.

Sometimes it carries groceries.

Sometimes it says, "I'm fine."

I smiled at her.

She smiled back.

We made some small comment about the produce.

Then another.

Soon we were talking.

Her husband had died.

It had been some time, but grief does not obey calendars.

She still bought too much food occasionally.

Two apples instead of one.

A larger carton of milk than she needed.

A package designed for a household that no longer existed.

"I still catch myself shopping for two," she said.

That sentence stayed with me.

Shopping for two.

There are losses that happen once.

And losses that happen again every morning.

One toothbrush.

One coffee cup.

Half the bed untouched.

One plate at dinner.

One ticket.

One coat on the hook.

One apple instead of two.

The world tells us grief is an event.

Someone dies.

We attend a funeral.

We offer condolences.

Then ordinary life resumes.

But ordinary life is precisely where grief lives.

The supermarket.

The empty passenger seat.

The television program they watched together.

The joke with nobody left to tell.

I did not know this woman.

Not really.

We spoke only briefly.

But for a few minutes she told me something true.

And I listened.

That was all I could offer.

No solution.

Grief is not a broken appliance.

You do not fix it.

Sometimes another person simply needs somewhere to place a sentence.

"I still catch myself shopping for two."

She said it.

I received it.

Then we said goodbye.

I watched her continue down the aisle with her small basket.

I never saw her again.

Perhaps I never will.

But I have thought about her many times.

Which means that for those few minutes beside the fruit, a stranger entrusted me with a piece of her husband.

I consider that a privilege.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Man Who Hadn't Been Asked

I asked him what he used to do.

He looked surprised.

Not confused.

Surprised.

As though nobody had asked in a long time.

He was an older man sitting alone.

I had seen him more than once.

Always quiet.

Always by himself.

The first few conversations were simple.

Weather.

The neighbourhood.

How are you?

Then one day I asked about his work.

His face changed.

He had been an engineer.

Not merely an engineer, it turned out, but someone who had worked on major projects.

He began telling me about buildings.

Materials.

Problems that had seemed impossible.

Teams he had led.

Places he had travelled.

His hands came alive as he spoke.

This quiet elderly man disappeared.

In his place was the professional he had once been—or perhaps still was.

That distinction matters.

Retirement changes employment.

It does not erase identity.

Age changes bodies.

It does not delete accomplishment.

One of the great mistakes we make with older people is meeting only the person standing in front of us.

We see eighty.

We don't see thirty-five.

But thirty-five is still in there.

So is twenty.

So is ten.

The young athlete.

The mother raising three children.

The businessman negotiating deals.

The teacher controlling a classroom.

The nurse working nights.

The musician playing clubs.

The carpenter building houses.

The engineer solving problems.

They did not vanish.

Time simply covered them with additional years.

He talked for quite a while.

I barely spoke.

I didn't need to.

He had stories waiting behind a door.

All I had done was turn the handle.

When we finally said goodbye, I wondered how long it had been since anyone had asked him that question.

What did you do?

What were you good at?

What are you proud of?

What was your life like?

Older people are walking libraries.

And every day, libraries close.

Stories disappear.

Experiences vanish.

Wisdom leaves without being transferred.

Perhaps we should ask more questions while the books are still open.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sit Down for a Minute

We are very good at saying:

"How are you?"

We are less good at creating enough time for the answer.

The phrase has become almost ceremonial.

"How are you?"

"Good. You?"

"Good."

Exchange complete.

Nobody is required to be good.

But everybody knows the script.

The real question is different.

It sounds something like:

How are you really?

And it requires something dangerous.

Time.

One morning I encountered someone who clearly wasn't himself.

I could see it.

The shoulders.

The eyes.

The lack of energy.

I asked how he was.

"Fine."

There it was.

The official answer.

I could have accepted it.

Instead I gestured toward the bench.

"Sit down for a minute."

He did.

Then fine disappeared.

There was trouble at home.

Money problems.

Fear about the future.

Nothing I could solve.

But that wasn't what he needed at first.

He needed to speak.

So I listened.

The conversation reminded me how often we treat human distress as a puzzle.

Someone tells us something difficult and immediately we begin manufacturing solutions.

Have you tried this?

You should call so-and-so.

Here's what I would do.

Maybe.

Sometimes advice is useful.

But sometimes advice arrives too quickly.

It can accidentally say:

I would prefer to solve your problem rather than sit inside it with you.

Listening asks more.

It asks us to tolerate helplessness.

To hear pain without immediately converting it into action.

To say:

That sounds hard.

Tell me more.

What happened?

How are you managing?

Four of the most powerful words in human language may be:

Sit down for a minute.

They mean:

I have somewhere else I could be.

But right now, you are more important.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Things We Tell Strangers

People tell strangers extraordinary things.

I used to find that surprising.

Now I understand it better.

Sometimes a stranger is easier.

A stranger has no history with you.

No expectations.

No side in the argument.

No memory of who you used to be.

You can speak without worrying that the story will become family property.

Perhaps that is why airplanes are filled with confessions.

Two people sit together for three hours, knowing they may never meet again.

Suddenly someone tells the truth.

A marriage is ending.

A child is struggling.

A parent is dying.

A career has become unbearable.

A dream has been abandoned.

Why tell a stranger?

Because there is freedom in impermanence.

I have experienced versions of this on benches and sidewalks.

A conversation begins with nothing.

A dog.

The weather.

A building.

Then, somehow, the door opens.

"My wife died last year."

"My son doesn't speak to me."

"I hate my job."

"I'm scared."

"My mother is sick."

The transition can be astonishing.

One moment you are discussing rain.

The next, somebody hands you their heart.

There is a responsibility in that moment.

Not an obligation to fix.

An obligation to honour.

If a person gives you something fragile, do not throw it around afterward.

Do not turn vulnerability into gossip.

Do not use someone's confession to make yourself interesting.

Receive it carefully.

I think of those conversations as borrowed objects.

Someone places something precious in your hands.

For ten minutes, you hold it.

Then you return it undamaged.

That is trust.

Sometimes between friends.

Sometimes between strangers.

Perhaps the difference is smaller than we think.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Things We Don't

For every story someone tells you, there are ten they don't.

That matters too.

Connection does not mean interrogation.

Friendliness is not entitlement.

You do not earn access to someone's private life because you said good morning three times.

There are doors we should leave closed unless invited through them.

I have learned that silence is also communication.

Someone changes the subject.

Leave it.

Someone answers briefly.

Accept it.

Someone does not want to talk.

Wish them a good day.

Community cannot be built by violating boundaries.

It must be built by respecting them.

That may seem obvious, but enthusiasm can become intrusive if it forgets the other person.

I love talking to people.

But not everyone does.

Some people need quiet.

Some are shy.

Some are anxious.

Some are tired.

Some simply want to walk their dog without explaining their life to the man on the bench.

Fair enough.

There is a generosity in allowing people to remain private.

You can still acknowledge them.

A smile.

A nod.

"Morning."

Then let them go.

Perhaps that is another kind of seeing.

Not:

Tell me who you are.

But:

I recognize that you are here, and I will allow you to decide how much of yourself you wish to share.

That is respect.

The stranger beside me does not owe me a story.

But if one day they choose to tell it, I want to be the sort of person who knows how to listen.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ten Minutes on a Sidewalk

Ten minutes is almost nothing.

We waste ten minutes all the time.

Waiting for coffee.

Scrolling.

Looking for keys.

Watching something we didn't care about.

Yet ten minutes can be enormous when given to another person.

I once stopped to speak with someone on the sidewalk.

I had somewhere to go.

So did he.

Neither of us was in any real hurry.

That distinction is worth noticing.

We often move as though everything is urgent.

It isn't.

We talked.

One subject became another.

Then another.

By the time we separated, perhaps ten minutes had passed.

My schedule survived.

His survived.

The world continued functioning.

But the day felt different.

I have begun thinking of attention as one of the few gifts whose value depends less on quantity than quality.

Ten distracted minutes can feel like nothing.

Ten present minutes can feel enormous.

You know the difference.

Someone talks while looking over your shoulder.

Waiting for their turn.

Checking a phone.

Half listening.

Then there is the rare person who looks directly at you.

Who follows what you are saying.

Who remembers what you said five minutes ago.

Who is actually there.

Presence is becoming unusual.

Which means it is becoming valuable.

Perhaps one of the most radical things we can do in modern life is give somebody ten undivided minutes.

No phone.

No rushing.

No performance.

Just:

I'm here.

Tell me.

There are people who have not received that gift in months.

Maybe years.

Ten minutes.

A sidewalk.

Two human beings.

Nothing remarkable.

Everything remarkable.

Chapter Thirty

The Invisible People

Every neighbourhood has invisible people.

The cleaner working before dawn.

The man collecting shopping carts.

The woman at the cash register.

The janitor.

The security guard.

The delivery driver.

The person emptying garbage bins.

The homeless man sitting where everyone passes.

We see them.

But seeing is not always noticing.

There is a difference.

To see someone means their image enters your eyes.

To notice them means their existence enters your awareness.

I began observing how often people perform essential work while receiving almost no human acknowledgment.

A person can clean the floors of a building every night for years and remain "the cleaner."

Thousands of residents benefit from the work.

Few know the name.

There is something wrong with that.

Not because every interaction must become friendship.

Because dignity begins with recognition.

"Good morning."

"Thank you."

"What's your name?"

Simple things.

Yet simplicity should not be confused with insignificance.

I once watched someone walk past a worker without looking at him.

Then another.

Then another.

Nobody was being cruel.

That is what troubled me.

Cruelty would have been easier to identify.

This was ordinary.

Normal.

Invisible.

And I wondered how it feels to spend an entire day being physically present while socially absent.

Maybe that is one of the quiet wounds of modern life.

Not hatred.

Non-recognition.

People don't insult you.

They simply behave as though you aren't there.

I began making a point of greeting people who are easy to overlook.

Not as charity.

As correction.

Because the person cleaning the building and the person living in the penthouse possess exactly the same fundamental human value.

Occupation changes function.

Money changes options.

Status changes access.

None of those changes worth.

Imagine a neighbourhood where everyone believed that.

Not theoretically.

Practically.

Where the cashier has a name.

Where the janitor is thanked.

Where the homeless person is greeted.

Where the elderly resident is noticed.

Where the person alone at the bus stop is not automatically treated as empty space.

That neighbourhood would feel different.

Warmer.

Safer.

More human.

And here is the encouraging part:

We would not have to wait for anybody to create it.

There is no legislation required to notice someone.

No budget.

No committee.

No permission.

You simply begin.

Look up.

See the person.

Say hello.

The invisible become visible one human being at a time.

Chapter Thirty-One

The Geography of Belonging

A neighbourhood is not where you live.

Not really.

It is where you are known.

You can own a house somewhere for twenty years and still feel like an outsider.

You can move into an apartment building and, within months, feel deeply at home.

The difference is not architecture.

It is relationship.

Belonging has geography.

There are streets where you know nobody.

There are corners where someone waves.

There are stores where the cashier knows your name.

There are parks where you expect to see certain people.

There are benches that carry memories.

And slowly the map changes.

Not the physical map.

The emotional one.

I can walk along Somerled and think of Darren.

Walkley brings Pearl to mind.

The dog park belongs partly to Guy and Enzo.

The outdoor exercise area belongs partly to Marie.

The building entrance contains Susan, Anne, Jamal and others whose faces have become part of home.

This is how belonging grows.

One person at a time.

One location at a time.

A street ceases to be merely a route and becomes a corridor of relationships.

There is a great deal of talk today about community design.

Urban planners consider density.

Walkability.

Green space.

Transit.

Access to services.

All of that matters enormously.

But there is something no architect can draw.

Human recognition.

You can build the perfect public square.

It means very little if everyone crossing it stares at a screen.

You can design beautiful apartment buildings.

They can still house lonely people.

You can create parks.

People can remain strangers inside them.

Physical design can encourage community.

Only people can create it.

The geography of belonging is therefore partly ours to make.

Every time you learn a name, one more spot on the map becomes personal.

Every time you stop to speak, another place becomes associated with a story.

Every time someone sees you and waves, the neighbourhood quietly tells you:

You are part of this place.

That may be one of the most comforting messages a human being can receive.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Bench Becomes an Office

I began calling the benches outside Metro my office.

It made me laugh.

Most offices contain computers, phones, filing cabinets and people looking at clocks.

Mine contained pigeons, grocery carts and whoever happened to walk by.

The commute was excellent.

The dress code was forgiving.

The coffee machine was elsewhere.

And the purpose was simple.

Meet people.

I would arrive early.

Sometimes around 5:30 in the morning.

There is something special about a neighbourhood at that hour.

The day has not yet become complicated.

People are beginning rather than ending.

The air is quieter.

You notice things.

Who arrives early.

Who walks every morning.

Who delivers bread.

Who catches which bus.

Who seems tired.

Who always smiles.

The bench became a kind of observation post.

But I wasn't watching the neighbourhood from outside it.

I was becoming part of its rhythm.

People began expecting me.

I began expecting them.

The joke about "the office" stopped feeling entirely like a joke.

Because what is an office?

A place where work happens.

And I had begun thinking of this as work.

Not employment.

Not a job.

Work in the deeper sense.

The work of connecting people.

The work of friendliness.

The work of remembering names.

The work of helping people feel that somebody sees them.

We do not normally classify these things as work.

Perhaps we should.

A person who repairs a road improves a neighbourhood.

A person who picks up garbage improves a neighbourhood.

A person who runs a business improves a neighbourhood.

And surely a person who strengthens relationships does too.

The difference is that social infrastructure has no obvious maintenance crew.

Nobody receives a municipal salary to ensure that neighbours greet one another.

There is no department responsible for friendship.

No ministry of small conversations.

Maybe that is why it falls to all of us.

The bench became my office because it gave me somewhere to begin.

Everyone needs somewhere.

A front porch.

A café.

A lobby.

A park.

A corner store.

A bus stop.

A bench.

Sit somewhere often enough.

Look up often enough.

Say hello often enough.

Eventually the place starts talking back.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The Lobby

The lobby became another office.

A branch location.

I would come home, make tea, and spend a little time downstairs near the entrance.

People passed through on their way to work.

Residents took dogs outside.

Someone collected mail.

Someone waited for a ride.

Most interactions lasted seconds.

"Good morning!"

"Have a great day!"

"Beautiful dog."

"How are you?"

Simple.

But I began noticing the effect.

People smiled.

Not everyone.

But many.

And sometimes a person who had been rushing slowed down.

Sometimes someone sat.

Sometimes a conversation appeared.

The lobby itself began feeling different to me.

Before, it had been transitional space.

A place you moved through on the way somewhere else.

Most modern buildings are filled with transitional spaces.

Hallways.

Elevators.

Garages.

Entrances.

Stairwells.

We have designed enormous portions of our lives around passing through.

What if some of those spaces became meeting places again?

Older buildings often had front porches.

People sat.

They watched the street.

They knew who came and went.

Children played outside.

Neighbours talked.

Modern life gave us greater privacy.

Privacy is valuable.

But we may also have traded away some accidental connection.

We pull into garages.

Ride elevators.

Enter apartments.

Close doors.

The architecture makes isolation easy.

So perhaps we need to create new porches.

My lobby became one.

Not because furniture changed.

Because behaviour changed.

I stopped treating it as a place to pass through.

I stayed.

A chair can do that.

A cup of tea can do that.

A person willing to sit still can do that.

And once someone remains in a transitional space, everyone else has a choice.

Keep moving.

Or stop.

Most keep moving.

A few stop.

Those few can change everything.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Dog Park

Dogs are community organizers.

Nobody has told them.

They require no grants.

They produce no strategic plan.

Yet put several dogs in a park and sooner or later their owners will talk.

"What's his name?"

"How old?"

"What breed?"

"Is she friendly?"

Conversation begins.

Dogs make introductions humans are often too cautious to make themselves.

They also create routine.

The same people come at similar times.

Soon they recognize each other.

The dogs recognize each other even faster.

Humans sometimes take weeks to become comfortable.

Dogs accomplish it by sniffing.

I am not suggesting we adopt the complete canine approach.

But there is a lesson.

Connection needs a reason to begin.

Dogs provide one.

So do children.

Gardens.

Sports.

Books.

Food.

Weather.

Anything shared.

The hardest part of talking with a stranger is often the first ten seconds.

What do I say?

Once conversation begins, the difficulty disappears.

The dog park eliminates that problem.

The dog becomes the bridge.

I thought about how many other bridges already exist in every neighbourhood.

A man working on his garden.

Ask what he planted.

A woman reading a book.

Ask what she thinks of it.

Someone wearing a sports cap.

Ask about the team.

A parent with a child.

Say something kind.

A person carrying an unusual instrument.

Ask what they play.

The world is filled with openings.

We wait for formal introductions.

Life keeps offering informal ones.

Perhaps we simply need to notice them.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The People We Pass Every Day

There is a man you pass almost every morning.

You have never spoken.

There is a woman who shops at the same time you do.

You recognize her.

She probably recognizes you.

There is someone who walks a dog past your building every evening.

You know the dog before you know the person.

This happens everywhere.

We develop entire populations of familiar strangers.

People we know without knowing.

Their absence would be noticeable.

Their name is unknown.

I find this fascinating.

Familiarity is already half a bridge.

Fear is lower.

Recognition exists.

All that is missing is the crossing.

"Good morning."

There.

Bridge complete.

Not always.

Some people will remain private.

That is fine.

But often the familiar stranger seems almost relieved.

As though both people had been waiting for someone to break the strange ritual of recognizing one another while pretending not to.

I have done this myself.

You see the same face day after day.

Eventually it becomes ridiculous not to speak.

So speak.

The first conversation may last fifteen seconds.

The second might last a minute.

Months later you may know their name.

One day you may discover they live two streets away.

Years later they may become a friend.

Or maybe they remain simply the person you wave to every morning.

That has value too.

Not every connection must become deep.

A neighbourhood needs layers.

Close friends.

Acquaintances.

Familiar faces.

People whose names you know.

People whose dogs' names you know.

People who simply wave.

Together they create social texture.

Without them, a place feels anonymous.

With them, it begins to feel inhabited.

Chapter Thirty-Six

From Familiar Face to Friend

Friendship rarely announces the moment it begins.

There is no ceremony.

No certificate.

No clear line.

At some point, someone you used to merely recognize becomes someone you care about.

How?

Repetition.

Attention.

Trust.

Small disclosures.

Shared humour.

Mutual concern.

One day you realize you would miss them.

Maybe that is the moment.

Friendship begins when someone's absence matters.

I have watched this happen gradually.

First:

"Morning."

Then:

"How are you?"

Then:

"How was your weekend?"

Then:

"What happened with your appointment?"

That last question changes everything.

It means you remembered.

You carried part of their life from one conversation to the next.

That is relationship.

Friendship is built from continuity.

Remembering what matters to someone.

Following up.

Showing up.

Not necessarily in dramatic ways.

Sometimes friendship is simply evidence that yesterday's conversation survived until today.

We often imagine friendship as chemistry.

Two people click.

Certainly that happens.

But many friendships are built less dramatically.

A hundred small encounters.

None memorable individually.

Together, they create trust.

This should be encouraging.

It means we do not need extraordinary charisma to create connection.

We need consistency.

Say hello.

Come back.

Remember.

Ask again.

Care.

Repeat.

That is how strangers become friends.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The Loneliest Apartment in the Building

You cannot tell which apartment is lonely from the hallway.

The doors all look the same.

Behind one, a family may be having breakfast.

Behind another, someone is rushing to work.

Behind another, a couple may be arguing.

Behind another, a person may have gone days without meaningful conversation.

Same doors.

Different worlds.

I began wondering about the people living in my own building.

Who lives alone?

Who rarely receives visitors?

Who is caring for someone?

Who has lost a spouse?

Who is new to Montreal?

Who is frightened?

Who is lonely?

I did not know.

And I realized that this was part of the problem.

Loneliness can exist ten feet away and remain completely invisible.

There may be someone on your floor who would love to be invited for coffee.

Someone in the elevator who needs a hand with groceries.

Someone downstairs who has not heard their own name spoken affectionately in days.

We often think of helping people as something we do far away.

Charities.

Missions.

Programs.

Necessary things.

But perhaps there is also a mission field on the other side of the wall.

Not to invade.

Not to assume.

Simply to notice.

A knock.

A greeting.

An invitation.

"Would you like anything from the store?"

"We're having coffee downstairs if you'd like to join us."

"Haven't seen you lately. Everything okay?"

Small openings.

Some will be declined.

Respect that.

But someone else may have been hoping for exactly that invitation.

The loneliest apartment in the building may be closer than you think.

And loneliness does not always need a grand solution.

Sometimes it needs one empty chair and someone saying:

Sit here.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

A Neighbourhood Begins With Two People

We talk about changing communities as though we need everyone.

We don't.

Not at first.

A neighbourhood can begin with two people.

One person says hello.

Another answers.

That is enough.

Because community is not a crowd.

It is a connection.

Crowds are easy.

Put enough people in one place and you have one.

Community requires something else.

Relationship.

Consider two apartment buildings.

Both contain one hundred residents.

In the first, nobody knows anyone.

In the second, people greet each other, know names, help with groceries, watch children, notice absences and occasionally eat together.

Same number of people.

Completely different worlds.

The difference begins with pairs.

One person knows another.

Then another.

Then someone introduces two people.

Networks form.

This is hopeful because it means we do not have to wait for mass participation.

You can start alone.

That sounds contradictory.

It isn't.

One person can begin creating the conditions for two.

Smile at someone.

Now there are two.

Learn a name.

Connection strengthens.

Introduce them to another neighbour.

Now there are three.

Social transformation is partly multiplication.

Small relationships replicating.

I sometimes imagine drawing a dot for every person in NDG.

Tens of thousands of dots.

Then lines between everyone who knows one another.

Some people would have hundreds of lines.

Others almost none.

What if we simply increased the number of lines?

Not endlessly.

Not artificially.

Just enough that fewer people remained isolated.

Enough that every person had someone nearby who knew their name.

Someone who would notice.

Someone who could help.

Someone they could call.

That would change the neighbourhood profoundly.

And it begins ridiculously small.

Two people.

You.

And the stranger beside you.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Village We Thought We'd Lost

People often say that we have lost the village.

I understand what they mean.

There was a time when neighbours seemed to know more about one another.

Children played outside.

People sat on porches.

Shopkeepers knew their customers.

If someone became sick, word travelled.

If a family needed help, casseroles appeared.

Of course, nostalgia edits.

The old village was not perfect.

People were excluded.

Privacy could be scarce.

Gossip travelled as efficiently as kindness.

There is no need to pretend the past was better in every way.

But something valuable may have diminished.

Interdependence.

We need one another less visibly now.

Technology delivers food to our doors.

Entertainment arrives through screens.

Banking happens without tellers.

Shopping happens without stores.

Work happens without offices.

Communication happens without voices.

Convenience has given us extraordinary freedom.

But freedom from needing other people can slowly become freedom from knowing them.

We can live astonishingly self-contained lives.

Perhaps the village didn't disappear.

Perhaps we stopped practicing it.

Because a village is not really a collection of small houses.

It is a collection of relationships.

If that is true, the village can be rebuilt anywhere.

Even in a city.

Even in an apartment tower.

Even on Somerled Avenue.

The materials are readily available.

People.

Time.

Attention.

Food.

Benches.

Dogs.

Stories.

Names.

The village appears whenever people begin behaving as though the lives around them matter.

A neighbour becomes ill.

Someone checks in.

A person has extra bread.

Someone shares it.

An older resident hasn't been seen.

Someone knocks.

A new family arrives.

Someone introduces themselves.

A child drops something.

Someone picks it up.

No committees required.

No ribbon cutting.

No announcement:

THE VILLAGE IS NOW OPEN.

It simply appears.

One relationship at a time.

Maybe we never lost the village.

Maybe it has been waiting for us to come outside.

Chapter Forty

Nobody Is a Stranger Anymore

Imagine walking through your neighbourhood and knowing everyone.

Not deeply.

That would be impossible.

But imagine knowing enough.

Names.

Faces.

Dogs.

Families.

Stories.

The woman at the bakery.

The man who walks at six.

The crossing guard.

The cashier.

The elderly gentleman on the corner.

The teenager who rides the red bicycle.

The young mother with twins.

The man who sleeps outside.

Not strangers.

People.

What would that feel like?

I think it would feel safer.

Not because danger disappeared.

Because anonymity diminished.

It would feel warmer.

Not because everyone became your friend.

Because recognition became normal.

It would feel like home.

This is the world I have begun glimpsing on my walks.

It is far from complete.

There are thousands of people I don't know.

But there are fewer strangers than there used to be.

That alone changes the experience of walking.

I don't merely pass locations.

I pass relationships.

Someone waves.

Someone smiles.

Someone stops.

Someone tells me what happened yesterday.

The neighbourhood speaks.

This has led me to an idea that once would have sounded impossible:

What if we tried to create a place where nobody felt like a stranger?

Not where everybody agreed.

That would be neither possible nor desirable.

Not where everyone became best friends.

Not where privacy disappeared.

Simply a place where everyone had some sense of belonging.

Where somebody knew your name.

Where someone noticed if you vanished.

Where there was somewhere to sit.

Someone to call.

Someone willing to listen.

Maybe that is one definition of a healthy community.

Not the absence of strangers.

The absence of people who feel they do not matter.

Chapter Forty-One

The Courage to Say Hello

It takes courage to say hello.

Not much.

But some.

There is always a tiny risk.

They might ignore you.

They might look suspicious.

They might wonder what you want.

They might not hear.

They might simply be having a bad day.

Rejection, even tiny rejection, is uncomfortable.

So we avoid it.

We wait for the other person.

And often they are waiting for us.

Two people pass.

Neither speaks.

Both might have welcomed it.

I have become increasingly willing to take the risk.

"Good morning!"

Most people respond.

Some smile.

Some brighten visibly.

A few begin talking.

And occasionally an entire relationship emerges from those two words.

That seems like a remarkably good return on investment.

The cost is almost zero.

The possible reward is enormous.

Yet courage is still required because someone has to go first.

This is true of nearly every human relationship.

Someone has to introduce themselves.

Someone has to invite.

Someone has to apologize.

Someone has to say:

"I miss you."

Someone has to ask:

"Are you okay?"

Someone has to admit:

"I need help."

Someone has to cross the distance.

We spend much of our lives waiting for other people to cross it.

Maybe the courage to say hello is practice for all the larger crossings.

Start small.

Look at someone.

Smile.

Speak.

If they don't answer, keep walking.

You have lost nothing.

If they do, something has begun.

Chapter Forty-Two

One Degree Warmer

I don't expect everyone to become extroverted.

I don't expect strangers to embrace on sidewalks.

I don't expect every apartment building to turn into one enormous family.

That isn't the goal.

What if we simply made the world **one degree warmer**?

That's all.

One more smile.

One more greeting.

One more door held.

One more thank-you.

One more name remembered.

One more person invited.

One more conversation in an elevator.

One more moment of patience with someone moving slowly.

One more question asked sincerely.

One more answer actually heard.

Individually, these things seem insignificant.

Collectively, they change the emotional temperature of a place.

We understand this instinctively in homes.

You can enter a house and feel tension without anybody explaining it.

You can enter another and immediately feel welcome.

Places have emotional climates.

So do workplaces.

Schools.

Stores.

Apartment buildings.

Neighbourhoods.

We create those climates through thousands of tiny interactions.

A rude cashier cools the room.

A patient customer warms it.

Someone yelling in traffic cools the street.

Someone allowing another car to merge warms it.

Indifference cools.

Recognition warms.

Cruelty cools.

Kindness warms.

Perhaps transforming a neighbourhood is less like constructing a building and more like changing the temperature.

Nobody controls the thermostat.

Everyone contributes.

Today, perhaps you raise it one degree.

Tomorrow somebody else does.

Eventually people notice.

"This is a friendly place."

What they really mean is:

Enough people here have decided to be warm.

Chapter Forty-Three

The Ministry of Remembering

Remembering is a form of caring.

How did the appointment go?

Is your daughter feeling better?

Did you get the job?

How is your dog?

What happened with the landlord?

Those questions tell people something important.

I carried your story with me after you left.

That may be one of the most beautiful gifts we give one another.

Because many conversations disappear the moment they end.

We listen.

We nod.

We move on.

Then somebody asks three days later:

"How did that thing turn out?"

And suddenly you realize they remembered.

I think of this as a kind of ministry.

The ministry of remembering.

No church required.

No title.

No ordination.

Just attention.

Remember birthdays if you can.

Remember names.

Remember illnesses.

Remember victories.

Remember grief.

Remember the little thing someone mentioned almost accidentally.

Then ask.

I have noticed that people sometimes seem surprised when you remember.

That tells us something.

Maybe they are accustomed to being heard but not retained.

There is a difference.

To listen is to receive somebody in the moment.

To remember is to carry a small part of them into the future.

Of course, none of us remembers everything.

I certainly don't.

Names escape.

Details disappear.

Life becomes crowded.

But effort matters.

Because behind every remembered detail is the same message:

You were important enough for me not to forget.

Chapter Forty-Four

The Stranger Who Saved Me

I began this experiment thinking about what I might give other people.

A smile.

A greeting.

Encouragement.

Attention.

Maybe food.

Maybe help.

I was thinking outward.

Then something slowly became clear.

They were giving something to me too.

A great deal.

My mornings became richer.

My walks became adventures.

I looked forward to seeing people.

I came home with stories.

Someone made me laugh.

Someone surprised me.

Someone reminded me of the past.

Someone introduced me to somebody else.

Someone shared a piece of their life.

I had set out to notice the neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood began noticing me.

That matters.

Because the giver needs connection too.

The person trying to help other people is still a person.

We all need to be known.

We all need people who wave.

We all need somewhere we belong.

Perhaps there is a subtle arrogance in imagining kindness as a one-way transaction.

I have something.

You need it.

I give.

You receive.

Real human connection is rarely that simple.

The person you help changes you.

The person you encourage encourages you.

The lonely person you sit beside may make you less lonely.

The stranger you notice may eventually notice when you are missing.

Who saved whom?

Perhaps that is the wrong question.

Maybe we save pieces of one another all the time.

Not dramatically.

Not permanently.

But enough.

A laugh saves five minutes of a difficult day.

A conversation saves an empty morning.

A friendship saves a lonely season.

A stranger becomes a neighbour.

And suddenly the world feels less enormous.

I thought I was sitting on the bench for them.

Eventually I realized I was sitting there for me too.

Chapter Forty-Five

What If Everyone Did It?

Whenever I describe small acts of kindness, there is an obvious objection.

That's nice.

But it doesn't solve the big problems.

Correct.

Saying good morning does not solve poverty.

Learning someone's name does not fix healthcare.

Holding a door does not stop war.

Buying Felix noodles does not end homelessness.

We should never confuse small kindness with structural change.

We need both.

Policies matter.

Institutions matter.

Money matters.

Leadership matters.

But there is another mistake we make.

Because a small act cannot solve everything, we decide it solves nothing.

That is absurd.

A sandwich does not solve hunger.

It solves hunger for one person for a few hours.

Ask the hungry person whether that counts.

A conversation does not solve loneliness.

It can make someone less lonely today.

Ask them whether that counts.

A smile does not transform society.

But thousands of people smiling at one another might transform the experience of living within it.

This leads to my favourite question:

What if everyone did it?

What if everyone learned the names of five neighbours?

What if everyone checked on one older person?

What if every apartment building created some place for residents to meet?

What if every shopkeeper knew a few more customers?

What if every person walking through NDG greeted three people?

What if children grew up watching adults do this?

What if friendliness became contagious?

Suddenly the small thing isn't small.

It has multiplied.

We often wait for leaders to change society.

But culture is largely created by ordinary people repeating behaviours until those behaviours become normal.

Maybe the revolution begins there.

Not with everyone.

With someone.

Then someone else.

Then you.

Chapter Forty-Six

The Revolution Nobody Notices

There will be no breaking-news banner.

No reporter will stand outside Metro announcing:

MAN SAYS GOOD MORNING TO TWELVE PEOPLE.

No newspaper headline will read:

NEIGHBOUR REMEMBERS WOMAN'S NAME.

Nobody will call a press conference because someone carried groceries for an elderly resident.

That is why this revolution is easy to miss.

It happens beneath the threshold of newsworthiness.

A man sits on a bench.

A woman stops.

Two people talk.

Bread is shared.

A homeless man gets noodles.

A neighbour is remembered.

Someone who was invisible becomes visible.

Nothing happens.

And everything happens.

We have been trained to look for transformation at scale.

Election results.

Billions of dollars.

New institutions.

Mass movements.

Those things can change history.

But beneath history is daily life.

And daily life is where human beings actually live.

Most people will never address Parliament.

Most will never run a corporation.

Most will never command an army or lead a national movement.

But almost everyone will stand beside another human being today.

There is our opportunity.

The revolution nobody notices is the decision to stop treating other people as background scenery.

It is a revolution of attention.

You matter.

You have a name.

You have a story.

I may disagree with you.

I may never become your friend.

I may know you for only three minutes.

But for those three minutes, I will recognize that your life is as real to you as mine is to me.

Imagine that principle spreading.

Across one apartment building.

One street.

One neighbourhood.

One city.

One country.

The world.

Would it solve everything?

No.

But it might change the kind of people attempting to solve everything.

And perhaps that is where lasting change has always begun.

Not in systems.

In human hearts.

One person turns toward another.

A stranger is standing there.

"Hello."

The revolution begins.

Chapter Forty-Seven

The World Between Two People

There is a space between you and every other human being.

Most of the time, we don't notice it.

A few feet on a sidewalk.

A seat on a bus.

The distance across a table.

The thin wall between apartments.

The invisible boundary between two lives.

I have become fascinated by that space.

Because almost everything human happens there.

Love.

Friendship.

Conflict.

Forgiveness.

Misunderstanding.

Compassion.

Laughter.

Trust.

The world likes to divide us into enormous categories.

Countries.

Religions.

Races.

Political parties.

Generations.

Economic classes.

But human beings rarely encounter categories.

We encounter people.

One at a time.

You don't actually meet "the elderly."

You meet Bailey.

You don't meet "the homeless."

You meet Felix.

You don't meet "immigrants."

You meet Younes.

You don't meet "seniors."

You meet Ian, still working and cycling and golfing at seventy-five.

Categories are useful for understanding populations.

They are terrible substitutes for understanding people.

Once a human being is standing in front of you, statistics become inadequate.

There is a face.

A voice.

A sense of humour.

A history.

A person.

That is why I have come to believe that some of the world's greatest problems ultimately have to be solved in the space between two people.

Prejudice weakens when someone becomes a friend.

Loneliness weakens when someone sits down.

Suspicion weakens when people talk.

Indifference weakens when suffering acquires a name.

None of this means conversation can solve every conflict.

It cannot.

Some disagreements are profound.

Some injustices require confrontation.

Some problems require laws, money, institutions and political action.

But even those systems are eventually operated by human beings.

And human beings carry into those systems whatever exists inside them.

Fear.

Compassion.

Anger.

Generosity.

Suspicion.

Love.

Maybe changing the world begins with changing what happens in the few feet separating one person from another.

That is a manageable distance.

I cannot personally reach eight billion people.

Neither can you.

But there is probably one person within reach right now.

Start there.

The world between two people may be the smallest country on Earth.

It may also be the most important.

Chapter Forty-Eight

The Empty Chair

Put an empty chair beside you.

Then wait.

That may be one of the simplest invitations in the world.

A chair says:

There is room.

Sit if you want.

No obligation.

No program.

No agenda.

Just room.

I have come to think that every healthy community needs empty chairs.

Literal ones.

And figurative ones.

Space for somebody new.

Space for the person who doesn't already belong.

Space for the lonely neighbour.

Space for the awkward person.

Space for the person whose English or French isn't perfect.

Space for the elderly man who tells the same story twice.

Space for the child.

Space for the newcomer.

Space for the person who is different from everyone already sitting at the table.

We often say:

"Everyone is welcome."

But welcome is not a sentence.

It is architecture.

It is behaviour.

It is whether there is actually somewhere for the newcomer to sit.

I think back to all the benches.

The lobby.

The dog park.

The sidewalk conversations.

Every one of them contained an empty chair of some kind.

An opening.

A possibility.

Sometimes somebody occupied it.

Bailey sat.

Jamal stayed.

Susan talked.

Guy stopped throwing the ball long enough to have a conversation.

Others kept walking.

That was fine too.

An invitation is not a demand.

The chair remains.

This may be one of the secrets of creating community.

Do not chase people.

Create spaces where connection can happen.

Then be present.

Sit.

Smile.

Wait.

There is enormous patience in that.

Not every morning produces a great conversation.

Some mornings are quiet.

Sometimes I greet six people.

Sometimes many more.

Some people stop.

Others wave.

Others don't respond.

That is life.

You cannot force human connection.

You can only make it possible.

Perhaps that is what an empty chair represents.

Possibility.

There is room beside me.

If you would like it, sit down.

Chapter Forty-Nine

The Stranger Beside Me

I don't remember the first stranger I ever spoke to.

None of us does.

It probably happened when we were children.

Children have a very different concept of strangers.

Put two four-year-olds in a playground.

One asks:

"Want to play?"

That's it.

Friendship established.

No résumé.

No background check.

No careful calculation of social compatibility.

Want to play?

Yes.

Done.

Somewhere along the way, we become more cautious.

Some of that caution is necessary.

But perhaps we also lose something.

We learn to sort.

Assess.

Judge.

Avoid.

Protect.

We become sophisticated enough to be lonely in crowded rooms.

And then one day we find ourselves sitting three feet from another human being whom we have seen fifty times and whose name we do not know.

A stranger beside me.

That phrase once meant someone unknown.

Now it means something different to me.

It means:

Someone I haven't met yet.

That is a profound distinction.

A stranger is closed.

Someone I haven't met yet is possibility.

Perhaps they will remain unknown.

Perhaps we will exchange only one sentence.

Perhaps I will learn their name and never see them again.

Perhaps they will become someone I wave to.

Perhaps a neighbour.

Perhaps a friend.

I cannot know.

That is the adventure.

Every person contains a door.

Most remain closed because we never knock.

"Good morning."

Knock.

"What's your dog's name?"

Knock.

"Beautiful day."

Knock.

"How are you?"

Knock.

Sometimes nobody answers.

Fine.

Move on.

But sometimes the door opens.

And behind it is a world.

A woman named Bailey who walks every morning.

A man named Felix who needs noodles.

A woman named Marie who wants stronger muscles.

A man named Guy and a Belgian Shepherd named Enzo.

Ian and his lifetime of athletics.

Speedy and forty marathons.

Susan and memories of another Montreal.

Jamal and an unexpected half-hour conversation.

Darren standing outside Metro.

Pearl on Walkley.

Younes.

Anne.

Bedis with his bread.

One by one, the strangers disappear.

Not physically.

Conceptually.

They become people.

Then I realized something else.

I was the stranger beside them.

I had been thinking of the story from my perspective.

I noticed them.

I greeted them.

I learned their names.

But when Bailey first sat beside me, I was a stranger to Bailey.

When I spoke to Marie, I was a stranger to Marie.

When Guy met me in the dog park, I was the unknown man.

Connection had not merely revealed them to me.

It had revealed me to them.

That changed everything.

Because now the question wasn't simply:

What happens when I stop walking past strangers?

It became:

What happens when we stop walking past one another?

There is the entire book.

Not me helping them.

Not them helping me.

Us.

Meeting.

Seeing.

Remembering.

Belonging.

The stranger beside me is not a problem to solve.

Not a project.

Not an act of charity.

The stranger beside me is another human being.

Just like me.

Waiting, perhaps, for somebody to go first.

Chapter Fifty

Stop Walking Past

Tomorrow morning, millions of people will wake up.

They will shower.

Dress.

Drink coffee.

Check their phones.

Leave their homes.

And walk past one another.

In elevators.

On sidewalks.

At bus stops.

In train stations.

In grocery stores.

In office buildings.

In schools.

In parks.

In apartment lobbies.

Millions of near encounters.

Millions of people standing within a few feet of one another.

Each carrying a universe.

And most of those universes will never collide.

Perhaps that is simply life.

We cannot meet everyone.

We shouldn't try.

But we can meet someone.

That is my invitation.

Not a program.

Not a movement you need to join.

Not another obligation.

An experiment.

Tomorrow, stop walking past one person.

Just one.

Look up.

Smile.

Say hello.

If there is an obvious opening, use it.

"What's your dog's name?"

"Beautiful morning."

"How old is your little one?"

"I see you here all the time. I'm Ross."

Use your own name, obviously.

That would be confusing otherwise.

Then see what happens.

Maybe nothing.

Maybe they smile.

Maybe they keep walking.

Maybe they tell you their name.

Maybe five minutes later you discover you went to the same school.

Maybe they tell you about their dog.

Maybe they are lonely.

Maybe you are.

Maybe you laugh.

Maybe you never see each other again.

Maybe ten years from now, that person will be sitting at your kitchen table.

You don't know.

That is the point.

Human beings are possibilities.

But possibilities require openings.

I began with a bench.

There was no plan.

I simply sat.

People passed.

I greeted them.

Then something happened.

The neighbourhood came alive.

Faces became names.

Names became stories.

Stories became relationships.

Relationships became belonging.

And belonging changed the way the streets felt beneath my feet.

I began to understand something I had known intellectually for years but had not fully experienced:

Community is not something somebody else builds for us.

We build it.

Every day.

With every interaction.

We can build cold communities.

Walk past.

Look down.

Don't engage.

Keep moving.

Or we can build warm ones.

Smile.

Wave.

Remember.

Stop.

Listen.

Help.

Neither kind appears overnight.

Both are created one interaction at a time.

That is what makes this so hopeful.

We do not need permission.

We do not need to wait for the government.

We do not need enormous resources.

We do not need everybody to agree.

We don't even need everybody to participate.

We need enough people to begin.

One person becomes two.

Two become three.

A few people in an apartment building begin knowing one another.

A few people on a street begin watching out for one another.

A merchant knows customers by name.

An elderly neighbour is checked on.

Extra bread is shared.

Someone buys Felix noodles.

Someone sits with the person who says they are fine but clearly isn't.

Someone notices the invisible person.

Someone leaves an empty chair.

And slowly, quietly, almost invisibly, the emotional temperature rises.

One degree warmer.

Then another.

Perhaps this is how a neighbourhood changes.

Perhaps this is how a city changes.

Perhaps this is even how the world changes.

Not instead of the big things.

Alongside them.

We still need good government.

Good healthcare.

Good schools.

Good businesses.

Good organizations.

We need to address poverty, housing, hunger, violence, addiction, mental illness, discrimination and injustice.

But while we build better systems, we must not forget what those systems are supposed to serve.

People.

Individual human beings.

Each with a name.

Each with a story.

Each carrying something.

Each wanting, at some level, to know that their existence matters.

That part cannot be legislated.

No government can force me to care about the person beside me.

No law can make a neighbourhood friendly.

No program can manufacture genuine belonging.

That work belongs to us.

And perhaps we have made changing the world sound so complicated that ordinary people have forgotten they possess any power at all.

You do.

You possess enormous power.

You can change the next thirty seconds of somebody's life.

You can make the cashier smile.

You can learn the janitor's name.

You can tell the mother that her children are beautiful.

You can ask the elderly man about his life.

You can welcome the newcomer.

You can buy someone lunch.

You can call the neighbour who has been alone.

You can listen.

You can remember.

You can sit on a bench.

You can say hello.

Will that change the world?

It will change one tiny piece of it.

And the world is made entirely of tiny pieces.

So tomorrow, when you leave your home, try something.

Put your phone away for a few minutes.

Look around.

There will be people everywhere.

One of them may be familiar.

You have seen the face before.

Perhaps dozens of times.

You don't know the name.

Maybe this is the day.

Or perhaps it will be someone you have never seen.

Someone standing beside you.

Someone waiting.

Someone walking a dog.

Someone sitting alone.

Do not worry about saying something profound.

The best beginnings rarely are.

Two words will do.

Good morning.

Then let the world decide what happens next.

Because the person standing beside you is carrying an entire lifetime you know nothing about.

Joy.

Pain.

Memory.

Loss.

Love.

Fear.

Hope.

A story.

And for one brief moment, your two stories have arrived at exactly the same place.

Do not underestimate that moment.

Do not assume it means nothing.

And every once in a while—

stop walking past.

Epilogue

The Bench Is Still There

Tomorrow morning, the bench will still be there.

Metro will open.

Delivery trucks will arrive.

Dogs will need walking.

People will hurry toward work.

Someone will be tired.

Someone will be happy.

Someone will be worried.

Someone will have received wonderful news.

Someone may have spent the night crying.

And almost none of this will be visible from the outside.

I will sit.

Someone will approach.

Perhaps I will know them.

Perhaps I won't.

If I do, I will try to remember their name.

If I don't, maybe I will learn it.

There is something comforting about knowing that this work is never finished.

There will always be another person.

Another morning.

Another story.

Another opportunity to make one small corner of the world warmer.

I no longer need every encounter to become something.

The greeting itself has value.

The smile has value.

The acknowledgment has value.

We are telling one another:

I see you.

You are here.

So am I.

For this brief moment, our lives have crossed.

That is enough.

And sometimes, wonderfully, it becomes much more.

A conversation.

A name.

A story.

A friendship.

A community.

I once thought I was sitting on a bench watching the neighbourhood go by.

I understand it differently now.

The neighbourhood was introducing itself.

One person at a time.

And perhaps that is all any of us need to do.

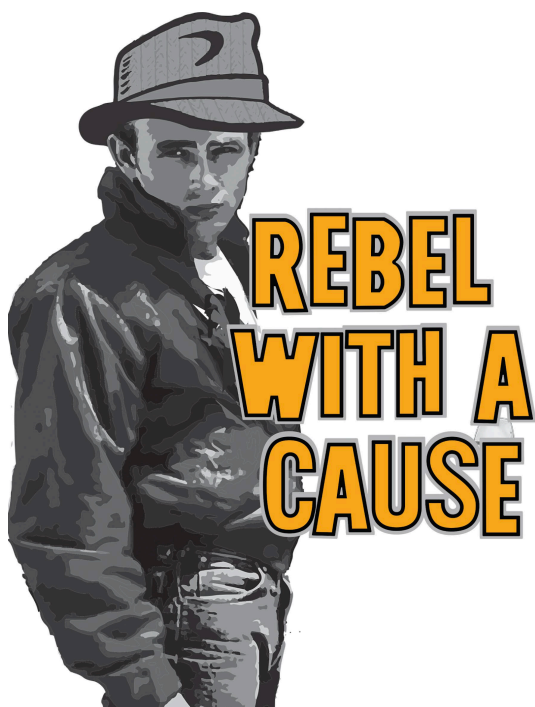
Find our bench.

Leave an empty place beside us.

Look up.

And when the stranger comes—

smile.



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