

FOREWORD BY IAN MORGAN CRON

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TRUE
COMPANIONS

A BOOK FOR EVERYONE ABOUT THE
RELATIONSHIPS THAT SEE US THROUGH



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ABANDONMENT IS NOT LONELINESS

*You are not dead yet, it's not too late
to open your depths by plunging into them
and drink in the life
that reveals itself quietly there.*

RAINER MARIA RILKE

I WAS EIGHT WHEN MY TWO-YEAR-OLD BROTHER fell into the deep end of the pool.

Our family was living in a mobile home at the time. In a way, I think, the whole family was drowning. A couple of years earlier, my parents had both returned to college. My mother had finished her associate's degree, but her meager salary as an entry-level nurse was not enough to keep us in the home we'd been renting while my father finished his bachelor's degree. The trailer park we'd moved into had two perks for a third-grade boy: a huge mountain of dirt to play in and a small community pool to swim in. That was a hard year. My parents were raising three

kids while trying to start their lives over. They were tired. All the time. One summer afternoon at the pool, my father's fatigue finally caught up with him.



I'm swimming in the shallow end as I watch my little brother—who cannot swim—toddle over to the pool and walk right off the edge into the deep end. I look around, panicked. We're alone at the pool. No lifeguard. No other families. I'm the only one who has witnessed my brother's aquatic ambition. I shout for my father. Nothing. He has dozed off in a lounge chair, a textbook laying open on his chest. Frantically, I swim toward where my brother went under, plunge downward, and drag him upward. I break the surface with him, and I shout for my father again. Again, nothing. I shout. Nothing. My brother is getting heavier. I don't have the strength to drag him to the pool's edge, nor do I have the strength to keep us both above the waterline at the same time. I do the only thing that comes to mind. I take a deep breath and hoist him upward, the weight of him pushing me downward into the water.

Beneath the surface, it's quiet. I look around, hoping against hope to see another set of legs in the water, but the pool remains empty. I stay under as long as I can, giving my brother as much time to breath as possible, but my own lungs are beginning to burn. So, we switch positions. I break the surface with a great gasp and lose my leverage to keep him above the water. I hold on to him but allow him to drop beneath the surface, as I alternate between filling my lungs with air and emptying them with shouts to my father. Still nothing.

I'm getting scared for my brother, so I take another deep breath, and I switch our positions again. He goes up, and I go down. Nothing has changed beneath the surface. It is still empty. It is still quiet. The sound and fury of what just happened up above is muted down here. I'm not frantically shouting words; I'm steadily treading water. Up there I *felt* alone, but down here I actually *am* alone. Yet, it is somehow more peaceful. A liquid cocoon of sorts.

This is the difference between loneliness and abandonment.

Loneliness is a still and quiet space somewhere beneath the surface of us. Though we may not be alone above the surface, where all the hustle and bustle of life is happening—where all the people are—we *are* all alone on the inside, where no one else can really join us. The center of us is a swimming pool for one. The existence of this lonely space within us does not mean we are broken. It simply means we are human. However, we rarely experience our ordinary loneliness as a mere fact of our humanity, because we rarely experience it *purely*. Usually, our earliest awareness of our loneliness comes bundled up with other things. Things like abandonment.

Abandonment is not a space that exists within us; it's a moment that happens *to* us. It's usually a scary moment. A frantic moment. Whether the abandonment is intentional, like a parent walking out, or completely accidental, like a parent nodding off, it doesn't really matter. Abandonment feels like abandonment, regardless of motivation or cause. The big losses. The painful departures. The small, ordinary moments of neglect. For a child, these moments of abandonment above the water work their tendrils into the tranquility beneath the water. These

feelings of abandonment sink into the fact of our loneliness and, without knowing it, we begin to confuse them with each other. They begin to feel like one and the same.



My lungs are burning once more, so my brother and I switch positions again. I breathe, and I shout. Thirty-five years later it's hard to know how many times we went through that cycle of abandonment and loneliness before my father jumped in to save us both. I'm pretty sure, though, the cycle never *really* ended for me. I'm pretty sure it never really ends for many of us. Gasp, shout, quiet submersion, gasp, shout, quiet submersion. It's how we encounter our abandonment. It's how we discover our loneliness. It's how we come to confuse the two.

I'm forty-four years old now, and I've spent the last couple of decades disentangling my experiences of abandonment and loneliness. It's tricky work. There have been more big abandonments along the way. For instance, when my grandfather died during the spring of my freshman year in college, and I never got a chance to say goodbye to him. I felt abandoned, though of course it was no fault of his. Sitting at the desk in my dorm room, having received the news, the telephone back in its cradle, I also felt utterly alone in my grief, because I was. I was the only grandson he ever took golfing every summer morning in those formative years leading up to high school. No one else could know what it felt like to be me losing him. Big abandonment *and* big loneliness. All at once. It makes it hard to disentangle them.

There have been plenty of small abandonments too. Micro-abandonments, if you will. People who would consistently snooze right through my big moments and then want to tell me all about theirs. I've slowly let those folks go. Some abandonment you can't do anything about. Some abandonment you can. However, you will discover, like I have, even as your feelings of abandonment diminish, the fact of your loneliness won't. That's okay, though, because disentangled from your experience of abandonment, your loneliness won't hurt you or scare you the way it once did. It won't feel so much like drowning.

It will feel more like swimming.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes, "It's not too late to open your depths by plunging into them and drink in the life that reveals itself quietly there." I'm starting to learn a new way of relating to my loneliness. It used to feel like my loneliness chose me in the midst of every abandonment; now it feels like I can choose my loneliness in the midst of any moment. These days I go out of my way to grow quiet. I let myself sink beneath the surface of myself, into the depths, where I am totally alone and I can feel my liquid loneliness all around me. I become present to it. Gradually, I'm befriending it.

I hope you too will choose your loneliness over your abandonment. Feelings of abandonment will launch you on a journey of hiding instead of abiding, protection rather than connection, and fighting rather than loving. Loneliness, on the other hand, is in you for a reason. Your loneliness, when you experience it as a friend rather than a foe, will launch you on a mostly peaceful search for connection and closeness and companionship. You don't have to drown in abandonment.

You can learn to swim in your loneliness instead.