The loneliness of owning the place

Entrepreneur loneliness can sit inside a full shop. A small business owner can be surrounded all day and still be the only one in the room with the thing. Customers are not company. A crew is not the same chair. The chair that matches is another person who also has the key and wishes they did not.

This week, say one true sentence about the business to one person who is not a customer and not your crew.

If there is nobody, start with an owner you already buy from. One question about their week counts as the hour.

You are the one who knows the number, the worry, the customer you cannot talk about at dinner because dinner would become a meeting. So dinner does not get the truth. Dinner gets "busy." Busy is a lid.

You cannot complain to the crew without it landing as panic, or as a hint that the place is in trouble, or as a job they now have to soothe. So you smile. The smile is a management tool. It is also a wall. On the other side of the wall you are alone with the thing.

You are tired of being the strong one in every room. At home you are the steady one. At work you are the answer. In the truck you are nobody's answer, and the quiet is so loud you turn on a podcast you do not hear. The podcast is a person-shaped noise. It does not ask how you are.

A friend with a job says they understand. They are kind. They go back to a boss, a Friday, a paycheck that is not also the rent. You do not correct them. Correction would take an hour, and you do not have an hour that is not already sold. You say "yeah" and you stay lonely.

You think about a group, a club, a breakfast, and you do not go, because the last one was a pitch, or a contest, or a room where someone wanted your struggle as content. You are allergic now. The allergy is keeping you from the one room that would help, which is not a pitch. It is a table.

You refresh a feed of other owners and feel worse. They are selling a calm you do not have. Comparison is a bad companion. It looks like company and it charges you.

A full life can still leave you with nobody to hand the real sentence to, because the real sentence sounded like weakness and the rooms you were in had no use for weakness. Weakness was the wrong name. It was the ordinary weight of being the one who locks up.

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Who says the short version?

Alicia is 33, first year in a cleaning business she franchised into. When the alarm runs her, she copes the Adventurer way: one foot already leaving. Her tell is the earbud. A cleaner quits by text before dawn. She covers the work, and then she opens another company's paperwork in a second tab, looking for a number that would make it easier. She hears herself. She says, "That's my dad." Her father never stayed. The tab is his ghost with a logo.

Ken, 63, who has turned the 3:30 key for twenty-two years, says the short version. Twenty-two years. Same.

That is the loneliness, named, in one exchange. Not a label. A recognition. The young owner thinks she invented the isolation. The older one did not escape it by lasting. Lasting without a table is a longer version of the same quiet. The book puts them in the same room on purpose. Five key rings on one table. More keys than the room has doors. The point of the pile is that someone else can see your ring and not need it explained.

Renee is at the same table, with a word she cannot say out loud yet. A person can run the place for years and still have one.

The facilitator ran a frame shop for nineteen years and sold it. He was late with payroll twice, he says, and he does not dress it up. Nobody asked him. The library posted a notice looking for somebody to sit with the owners, and he put his name in. "Nobody asked me. I put my name in." The room is not a class where the person at the front has no scars. It is a person who did the work and says so once. You do not need his biography. You need the shape. Owners, a table, no pitch, the real week.

Who could hold a key to this?

Not a customer. They need you to be the shop. Not, usually, the crew, who need you to be steady enough that their Friday is safe. Not a feed. The person who can hold it is another owner, or two or three of them, with a rule about what the hour is for.

At the library, people put the week down on the table. What they tried. What happened. Nobody is there to sell the next thing. The facilitator asks whose the key is. That question is enough to make a room.

You can start smaller than a franchise breakfast. One other owner. Coffee. Not a brand, not a circle with a fee and a funnel. A standing hour. The rule is simple enough to say out loud. We will talk about the real week. We will not pitch. We will not turn each other's numbers into content. We will go home at the hour we said.

If you cannot find that person yet, five owners in a book can be company until you can. Read it, and then look up and see who in your town locks up when you do. The supply house bulletin board. The diner counter. The person you already nod at and have never asked. Sergio pulls a flyer off a corkboard at a supply house. That is not a strategy. It is a way a lonely errand becomes a room. Your version does not have to look like a library. It has to have a second human who is not on your payroll.

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What is the loneliness not?

Circle 3 is the fact that the role is singular. Someone signs. Someone lies awake. A town may not have a dozen people who own what you own. You did not fail by feeling the singular. The singular is the job's shape.

Circle 2 is the one person you ask, the hour you protect, the flyer you do not walk past. They may say no. A no is not proof you should go back to the podcast and call it enough.

Circle 1 is the sentence you stop swallowing, and the ask. Worth lives in Circle 1. Nowhere else. Not a rebrand of your personality into someone who does not need people. You need a person. The worth is in admitting that without making a customer carry it.

The alarm will offer substitutes. A second business, so you can feel new instead of known. Alicia's tab. A harder schedule, so the quiet has no gap to show up in. Ken's 3:30, worn as a medal. A public post about the struggle, which is company for an hour and exposure for a week. Growing the same business can still be the exit. So can a post. The table is slower, and it tells the truth.

What does the hour look like when nobody is pitching?

Two owners, after close, somewhere that is not either shop. Phones face down. One of you talks about the real week. The other does not solve it. Solving is how owners show love and also how they avoid being seen. The question, if you need one, is whose key this is. The answer is usually mine, and I am tired of that, and then the hour has done its job.

End when you said you would. An hour that ends gets a second hour. An hour that sprawls will not be repeated, and then you will say groups do not work. Put the time in the ask. Keep it.

If the person starts to sell you something, you are allowed to say the rule again and leave. You did not come to be a lead. The table Alicia needs is the one where Ken can say twenty-two years, same, and nobody tries to fix him. Someone else heard the ring. That is the company.

What do you do this week?

One true sentence, to a person who is not a customer and not your crew. Not the whole year. One sentence about the business. "I have not had a day that was mine." "I do not know who else to tell this number to." If the only person you can imagine is the one you live with, start there, and tell them you are not asking them to fix the shop. If that person is also your unpaid partner in the work, do not turn the sentence into another shift for them. The word Renee cannot say is a reminder. Company is not the same as handing someone your fear as a job. This page will not unwind a marriage, a payroll, or a family business.

Ask one other owner for an hour. Coffee, a counter, a walk after close. Say the rule in the ask, so it does not become a pitch by accident: "Coffee after close one night this week? Real week, no selling, we leave on the hour." If you do not know an owner, go where you already nod at one and use your mouth. The corkboard counts.

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Notice the substitute you use instead of a table. The tab. The feed. The extra hour that keeps the quiet away. Name it once, on paper. You do not have to quit it today. You have to see that it is not company. Alicia closes the tab without deleting it. That is a good week's work.

This is what small business owner mental health often looks like on a full day: a person with nobody to hand the real sentence to. If this is keeping you from sleeping or eating, or it is not easing, talk to your doctor or a counselor. If it has gone darker than that, or you are having thoughts of not wanting to be here, call or text 988 in the US, any hour.

The sentence under the exhaustion, if the loneliness is also a lost reason, is on Small business owner burnout. The key you will not hand over is on Can your business run without you?.

The book is the Monday Alicia says "That's my dad," and Ken answers, twenty-two years, same.

Be first to know when *Someone Else Can Lock Up* is out

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Tonight's move

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What to do

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