Episode Book

EPISODE #5585

The Lighthouse Keeper and the Serbian Cabin

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SYNOPSIS

What happens to a mind in true isolation — and why does one Serbian woman with a shortwave radio confound everything we think we know about hermits? This episode traces the word back to the Desert Fathers of third-century Egypt, through the walled-in anchorites of the medieval church, to Christopher Knight's twenty-seven silent years in the Maine woods and the Lykov family's four decades in the Siberian taiga. Along the way: why nobody can actually count how many hermits exist, what the state does when a range trooper finds someone living where the map shows nothing, and the crucial difference between chosen solitude and solitary confinement. The answer to the puzzle, it turns out, is hiding in the distinction between isolation you pick and isolation that's imposed on you.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a particular image that keeps turning up in fiction, and it's almost always the same. A small building on a rock at the edge of the sea. One person inside it. A lamp that has to be lit, a log that has to be kept, a radio that crackles once a day with somebody on the other end asking if everything's all right. The keeper is alone, but he isn't cut off. He's tethered. He has a job, and the job is the tether.



Herman

And that's the thing about the lighthouse keeper. He's isolated by function, not by choice. He didn't withdraw from the world. He was posted to the edge of it.



Corn

Which is exactly the bridge Daniel wants to walk across. He wrote in this week, and he starts with the summers he spent in rural Ireland as a kid, where you couldn't move without a lighthouse appearing on some headland, and he says the keeper was this strange mixture of hermit and functionary. A man alone at the edge of the world, but still doing something the world needed done. And he wants to use that as a conduit into hermits proper.



Herman

The actual hermits. Not the ones with a lamp and a logbook.



Corn

Right. And he's got a whole string of questions. What is a hermit now that the religious framing has loosened? How many are there, and where? Why does anyone choose it? And then the one that clearly got under his skin. He was on YouTube one evening, fell down the rabbit hole, and came across a video from a remote part of Serbia. Some people hiking out in the woods found a woman living in an almost entirely isolated cabin. Years without a visitor, by his recollection. And he expected the classic image. Pious, silent, long hair, turned away from the world, maybe a vow of silence. Instead she was chatty. Social. Happy to be recorded and interviewed. She had a shortwave radio and a cabin and she was content.



Herman

And that broke his model.



Corn

It broke his model completely. He says, and I'm quoting him, "if you spend a certain amount of time without seeing another human, your social skills and even perhaps your ability to talk coherently might atrophy." He thought she'd be barely able to string a sentence together. She wasn't.



Herman

So the puzzle is real. Why wasn't she a wreck?



Corn

That's the puzzle. And then he adds the state question on top of it. Russia and Canada have territories vaster than any government could reasonably service. So in the rare event that the state does come into contact with one of these people, what happens? He asks about a range trooper in the deep Canadian wilderness finding someone living where the map shows nothing. Do they drag them back? Do they demand paperwork? Or do they just leave them alone?



Herman

So we've got three questions stacked. Who are these people now, what happens to a mind in isolation, and what happens when the world finally finds them.



Corn

Let's take a peek into the world of hermits. Who they are, how they function, and what happens when the humanity they forsook manages to find them.



Herman

Start with the word itself, because it's carrying more weight than people realize. Hermit comes from the Greek eremites. Of the desert. It's not a word about loneliness. It's a word about a place.



Corn

The desert.



Herman

The Desert Fathers. Third and fourth century Egypt. Anthony the Great is the archetype. He sells his inheritance, gives the money to the poor, walks out into the Egyptian desert, and spends decades there. And the thing people forget is that he was not alone in the way we'd mean it. He had visitors. Constantly. People walked out into the desert specifically to find him and ask him things. There's a whole literature of his sayings.



Corn

So the original hermit had a queue.



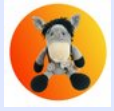
Herman

The original hermit was a destination. That's the part that gets lost. The withdrawal was real, but it was withdrawal toward something, not away from everything. It was a deliberate relocation for a purpose.



Corn

And that purpose was religious. Explicitly. Prayer, asceticism, mortification of the flesh. The desert wasn't a lifestyle choice. It was a battlefield.



Herman

Which is why the popular image is basically the medieval anchorite. The anchorite is the one who gets walled into a cell attached to a church. There's a rite for it. They're given last rites, essentially, and then the door is bricked up. They're dead to the world. That's where



Herman (continued)

the long hair and the silence and the total renunciation come from.



Corn

And that image is now roughly a thousand years out of date and still doing all the work in people's heads.



Herman

Completely. Because the word drifted. It broadened out to mean anyone living in substantial isolation by choice, religious or not. And once you drop the religious requirement, the category explodes. You've got Carthusian monks who live in separate cells and only meet for a few hours a week. You've got Russian startsy, the elders. You've got Japanese yamabushi up in the mountains. And then you've got a woman in a Serbian cabin with a shortwave radio who has no religious framework at all.



Corn

Which is exactly why she confounded Daniel. He was holding the anchorite image and she was a secular hermit. Those are two different species and they've been sharing one word.



Herman

And there's a third category mixed in there too, which is the recluse. The misanthrope. Ted Kaczynski in his cabin in Montana. Christopher Knight in the Maine woods. Those people aren't withdrawing toward anything. They're fleeing.



Corn

So before we go any further, let's flag the counting problem, because Daniel asks directly how many of them there are and I want to be honest about the answer.



Herman

The answer is nobody knows.



Corn

Nobody knows.



Herman

There is no global census of hermits. There can't be. The entire point of the life is that it happens outside state record-keeping. Anyone who gives you a number is giving you a journalistic estimate dressed up as data. So when Daniel asks how many, the honest answer is that the population is unknowable and probably always will be.



Corn

But we can say something about where.



Herman

We can say something about where. The recurring settings are the vast, thinly-governed places. Siberia. The Yukon, the Northwest Territories, northern British Columbia. Alaska. Parts of Scandinavia. The Balkans, which is where Daniel's woman was. That intuition he has, that the bigger and emptier the territory, the more of these people you'd find, that's sound. It's a hypothesis rather than a statistic, but it's a good hypothesis.



Corn

So with that vocabulary in place, the religious hermit, the secular hermit, the recluse, let's start with the counting problem and with the cases we actually know something about.



Herman

The best-documented modern case is Christopher Knight. The North Pond Hermit. Maine.



Corn

Twenty-seven years.



Herman

He walked into the woods in 1986 at the age of twenty, and he was arrested in 2013. He lived in a tent and then a small camp in the woods near a lake, and he survived by stealing from the summer cabins around him. Food, clothing, propane, batteries. He was eventually caught because a game warden noticed things going missing and set up a camera.



Corn

And the number that matters here is the one about speech.



Herman

He reportedly spoke almost no words during those twenty-seven years. Not none, but close to it. When he was arrested, the silence was the thing everyone fixated on. He'd go into a cabin, take what he needed, and leave. Nobody to talk to. When he did speak, it was brief and strange.



Corn

Twenty-seven years of near-total silence and then a police interview.



Herman

And his re-entry is its own story. He was profoundly maladjusted. He'd been out of the world since he was twenty. He came back into a world with smartphones and the internet and a legal system that wanted to process him. He wrote a book eventually. He's done interviews. But the adjustment was brutal.



Corn

So Knight is the case that seems to confirm Daniel's fear. Years of silence, and the social machinery is rusted solid.



Herman

He's the strongest evidence for it. But he's also the case where the driver matters most. Knight didn't choose solitude because he preferred it. He walked into the woods, by his own account, because he wanted to disappear. He'd had a job, he'd had a life, and something in him snapped and he went. That's the trauma and withdrawal category, not the preference category.



Corn

Which means he's not a clean test of the question.



Herman

He's not. He's a clean test of imposed or trauma-driven isolation. He's a bad test of chosen solitude.



Corn

Then there's the Lykovs.



Herman

The Lykov family is the other great case. Old Believers. Russian Orthodox schismatics who fled into the Siberian taiga in 1936 to escape religious persecution. And they vanished from the record. Nobody contacted them until 1978.



Corn

Forty-two years.



Herman

Forty-two years in the taiga. And when Soviet geologists finally stumbled on them, they found a family that had been living entirely off the land. They'd built a homestead. They'd survived on potatoes and whatever they could grow and trap. They'd had children out there. And the isolation had done real damage. The children had never seen another human being outside the family. Their language had drifted. They'd developed their own



Herman (continued)

vocabulary for things. One of the children reportedly asked, on first contact, whether it was true that there were other people in the world.



Corn

Forty-two years and the question is whether there are other people.



Herman

The state's response is the interesting part. Soviet geologists found them, and the state moved in with aid. Supplies, medical attention, attention generally. And the Lykovs largely refused it. They'd fled the state in the first place. They did not want to be integrated.



Corn

And the daughter.



Herman

Agafya Lykova. She's still out there. She's the surviving member of the family, and she still lives in the Siberian wilderness. Officials and journalists have visited her over the years. She's a live example of the exact dynamic Daniel is asking about. The state knows where she is. The state has decided, more or less, to leave her alone.



Corn

So we've got Knight, who's the trauma case. We've got the Lykovs, who are the ideological and religious case. And then we've got Daniel's Serbian woman, who's the one that actually puzzles him.



Herman

And that's the category that gets almost no attention. Preference. Temperament. Someone who is not fleeing anything and not serving anything. Someone who simply prefers to be alone and is content.



Corn

Which is the most interesting category and the least discussed.



Herman

Because it doesn't fit a story. The trauma case is a story. The religious case is a story. The person who just likes their own company and a cabin is not a story, and so nobody writes about them.



Corn

Daniel found one on YouTube and couldn't make sense of her.



Herman

Because she didn't have a motive he could recognize. She wasn't broken and she wasn't holy. She was just living.



Corn

Now here's where I want to push, because there's a distinction sitting under all of this that I think dissolves Daniel's whole puzzle.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

We keep talking about isolation as though it's one thing. It isn't. There's chosen isolation and there's imposed isolation, and they are not the same phenomenon at all.



Herman

Solitary confinement.



Corn

Solitary confinement is the extreme case of imposed isolation. It's coerced. It's punitive. And the literature on it is grim. People in long-term solitary confinement show serious psychological and physical harm. Anxiety, paranoia, hallucinations, cognitive deterioration, and it doesn't take years to show up. It can show up in weeks.



Herman

And the reason it's so damaging is that the person in solitary confinement didn't choose it. They're being held there. The isolation is a weapon aimed at them.



Corn

Now put that next to a hermit who walked into the woods on purpose. Same physical condition, one person, no contact. Completely different psychological situation.



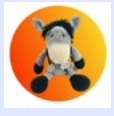
Herman

The brain doesn't just measure how many people are around. It measures whether the situation is the one you want.



Corn

That's the whole thing. And that's the answer to Daniel's Serbian woman. She wasn't a puzzle. She was the expected outcome of voluntary withdrawal.



Herman

That brings us to the question Daniel really wanted to pry at. What happens to a person's mind and speech after years without another human being. And the evidence here is more nuanced than the popular image suggests.



Corn

Give me the nuance.



Herman

The single most important finding in this whole area is that loneliness and being alone are not the same thing. And they have different effects.



Corn

Loneliness is a feeling. Being alone is a fact.



Herman

John Cacioppo spent decades on this. His work in Trends in Cognitive Sciences in 2009 laid it out. Perceived social isolation, which is loneliness, is what drives the bad outcomes. Poorer cognitive performance, faster cognitive decline, worse executive function, heightened sensitivity to social threat. Not objective aloneness. The perception.



Corn

So the harm is in the gap between the contact you have and the contact you want.



Herman

The gap. And a contented hermit may have no gap at all. They want very little contact and they get very little contact. The two match. There's no loneliness because there's no unmet need.



Corn

Which means the entire framing of the question shifts. The question isn't what does isolation do to a person. It's what does unwanted isolation do.



Herman

Right. And that's why Daniel's Serbian woman could be chatty and coherent. She wasn't lonely. She was alone.



Corn

That's clean. But I want to push on it, because I don't think it lets chosen solitude off the hook entirely.



Herman

It doesn't. Because there's a second body of work that's about objective isolation, regardless of how you feel about it.



Corn

How so?



Herman

A study in Neurology in 2022, Shen and colleagues, using UK Biobank data. Around four hundred and sixty thousand people. And they found that social isolation was associated with about a one point two six fold increased risk of dementia. And that was independent of loneliness and independent of depression.



Corn

So even if you're not lonely, being socially isolated raises your dementia risk.



Herman

Over decades. That's the key qualifier. This is a long-run risk, not an acute effect. But it's real and it's independent of how you feel about the isolation.



Corn

So the contented hermit is protected from the loneliness pathway but not from the objective-isolation pathway.



Herman

That's a fair reading.



Corn

Which is a much more interesting answer than either "hermits are fine" or "hermits go mad."



Herman

And there's a third piece that explains the mechanism. A review from 2025, Wnuk and colleagues, in Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews. They describe isolation and cognitive decline as a vicious cycle.



Corn

A loop.



Herman

Isolation amplifies deficits in cognitive control and emotional regulation. Those deficits blunt the reward you get from social contact and heighten your sensitivity to social threat. So you avoid social contact more. Which deepens the isolation. Which amplifies the deficits. Round and round.



Corn

So the mechanism exists that would, in theory, make a hermit progressively less able to re-engage.



Herman

The mechanism exists. Whether it fires in any given hermit depends on how content they are and how long they've been out. But the loop is real. And it's why re-entry is so hard.



Corn

Which is what we saw with Knight.



Herman

Twenty-seven years is long enough for the loop to run many times. And his re-entry was brutal because of it.



Corn

What about the body?



Herman

There's a 2025 paper in Nature Human Behaviour, Shen again, around forty-two thousand people. They linked isolation and loneliness to inflammation markers, antiviral response, and complement system proteins. And using Mendelian randomization, which lets you make causal claims, they tied it to cardiovascular disease, stroke, and mortality.



Corn

So it's not just the mind.



Herman

It's not just the mind. Chronic isolation activates the HPA axis, the stress axis. Cacioppo's later work in the Annual Review of Psychology in 2015 found that. But here's the wrinkle. That effect depends more on disruption of a social bond than on objective aloneness.



Corn

Say that again.



Herman

The stress response fires harder when you've lost a bond than when you never had one. Which means the hermit who walked out at twenty and never looked back is not in the same physiological situation as the widower who suddenly finds himself alone at seventy.



Corn

The hermit never had the bond to lose.



Herman

Never had it to lose. And that's a important distinction for the episode.



Corn

So let's put the bottom line together. The popular image of the mute, incoherent hermit is conflating two different things.



Herman

Chosen solitude, which can be psychologically sustainable, even flourishing. And imposed isolation, which is damaging.



Corn

Speech may get rusty. It may be unpracticed. But the evidence does not support inevitable cognitive collapse in a willing hermit.



Herman

And the Serbian woman's chattiness is not a contradiction. It's what you'd expect from voluntary withdrawal.



Corn

Now, the second half of Daniel's question. What happens when the state finds them.



Herman

The first thing to say is that in most of these places, the state isn't looking. Siberia is bigger than most countries. Northern Canada is enormous and almost empty. There aren't enough rangers, wardens, or police to monitor every square kilometre. It's not that the state chooses not to watch. It's that watching isn't physically possible.



Corn

So the encounters are incidental.



Herman

Almost always. A ranger on patrol. A survey crew. A hunter. And increasingly, a YouTuber with a camera and a drone.



Corn

Which is a whole new category of encounter.



Herman

It's a new phenomenon. Twenty years ago, if you wanted to find a hermit, you had to go looking in a way that required serious expedition logistics. Now you can find out where one is from a video, drive out, and film them. The barrier has collapsed.



Corn

And Daniel's Serbian video is exactly that.



Herman

Exactly that. Which raises ethical questions nobody's really settled. Consent. Exploitation. The disruption of a deliberately isolated life by people who want content.



Corn

And Daniel noticed the detail that makes it philosophically interesting. She had a shortwave radio.



Herman

Which means she wasn't fully cut off.



Corn

And that's the hook. A hermit with a shortwave radio is arguably not a pure hermit at all.



Herman

Or she's a more sophisticated one. Radio is a one-way, low-demand social channel. You can listen to the world without having to be in it. You can hear voices without having to answer. You can have the world at a distance.



Corn

Which is a very different thing from having the world in your cabin.



Herman

Very different. And it might be the exact thing that keeps a hermit sane. Not contact, but the option of contact. The knowledge that the world is still there, audible, without any obligation to engage with it.



Corn

That's a good distinction. The tether you can pick up versus the tether you can't put down.



Herman

And it's the opposite of what the lighthouse keeper had. The keeper's radio check-in was mandatory. The hermit's radio is optional.



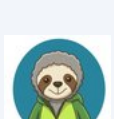
Corn

Now, the state question specifically. What actually happens when an official finds one of these people?



Herman

The first thing that happens is usually a welfare check. Is this person alive, sane, and here by choice? That's the question the state cares about. Because the state's interest in an adult living alone in the wilderness is mostly about whether they're a victim or a danger.



Corn

And if the answer is neither?



Herman

Then the state generally leaves them alone. In most liberal democracies, an adult of sound mind living lawfully on remote land can't simply be dragged back to civilization. Forced intervention requires evidence of incapacity, or danger, or a crime.



Corn

So the default is non-interference.



Herman

The default is non-interference. Which is a quietly libertarian outcome in the most remote places on earth. The state has the theoretical authority and no practical interest in using it.



Corn

But there's a paperwork layer.



Herman

There's a paperwork layer. Land use, residency, hunting and fishing licences, tax filing. This is where bureaucracy and hermits collide. A hermit who's been living off the land for thirty years has not been filing returns. And the state, once it knows they exist, has to decide whether to care.



Corn

And usually?



Herman

Usually it doesn't. The cost of pursuing a tax claim against a man in a cabin in the Yukon exceeds any conceivable benefit. So the paperwork gets waived, or ignored, or forgotten.



Corn

Now, Daniel asks specifically about a range trooper in the deep Canadian wilderness. And I want to correct that, because there's no such role.



Herman

There isn't. Canada's remote enforcement falls to the RCMP, provincial conservation officers, and Parks Canada wardens. There's no single range trooper position. It's a nice image but it's not a real job.



Corn

And their practical posture?



Herman

Leave alone unless there's a problem. That's the posture. A self-sufficient recluse who isn't hurting anyone is not a priority for an under-resourced agency covering a territory the size of Europe.



Corn

The Lykov precedent is the historical illustration of the state's ambivalence.



Herman

It is. Soviet geologists found the family in 1978, and the state's response was aid and pressure to integrate. Supplies, medical care, and a strong suggestion that they should come back into the Soviet system. And the family largely refused. They'd fled the state in 1936. They were not going to be absorbed by it in 1978.



Corn

The state offered and the hermits declined.



Herman

The state offered and the hermits declined. And the state, in the end, let them. Agafya Lykova is still out there. The state knows where she is. It has decided to leave her.



Corn

Which is the answer to Daniel's question. The state doesn't drag them back. It checks on them, offers help, and then mostly leaves them alone.



Herman

Mostly. Unless there's a crime, or an incapacity, or a public safety issue. Then the whole machinery comes down on them.



Corn

Knight is the case where the machinery did come down.



Herman

Knight is the case. He was committing burglary for twenty-seven years. That's a crime, and it's a crime that eventually generated enough complaints that the state had to act. He wasn't found because he was a hermit. He was found because he was a thief.



Corn

Which is a strange thing to say about a man who lived in a tent for a quarter century.



Herman

It's the truth of it. The state didn't care that he was alone in the woods. The state cared that cabins were being broken into.



Corn

The pattern holds. The state intervenes on the crime, not on the solitude.



Herman

On the crime, not on the solitude. And that's the answer to Daniel's question in its cleanest form.



Corn

Before we close, there's someone here who's actually done a version of this. Not a hermit, exactly, but close enough that he might have something to say about the texture of it.



Hilbert

That's right, mostly.



Hilbert

I spent a winter as a caretaker at a remote weather station. Not a lighthouse. Same job in spirit. Alone, on a schedule, with a radio check-in every Tuesday at seven in the evening. Everything had to be logged. Temperature, wind, precipitation, equipment status. You write it down whether anything happened or not.



Hilbert

The check-in became the week's only appointment. You'd know it was Tuesday because you'd feel it. And the thing nobody tells you is that you start talking out loud. To the room. You narrate what you're doing. You say, "I'm going to check the gauge now." You say it out loud because if you don't, the silence gets total, and total silence is a different thing than quiet.



Hilbert

I'd rehearse the Tuesday call. For days beforehand. I'd think about what I'd say. What I'd report. Whether there was anything worth mentioning. You rehearse a five-minute radio call for four days.



Hilbert

Now, I agree with what you two said about chosen versus imposed. That's the right way to split it. But there's a wrinkle you didn't have. The radio check-in was mandatory. I couldn't skip it. And by the middle of that winter I resented it. Resented it. It was a tether I couldn't cut, and the resentment surprised me, because the whole point of the check-in was that somebody cared whether I was alive.



Hilbert

Which is why I think the Serbian woman's shortwave radio might not be a tether at all. It might be the opposite. A way of having the world at a distance without having to be in it. You can listen. You don't have to answer. That's not the same as a scheduled call you can't miss. I'm not sure about that. I'm still not sure.



Hilbert

But here's the part I keep coming back to. By the end of the winter I'd stopped rehearsing the Tuesday call. I don't know when it happened. Somewhere in February I noticed I wasn't preparing anymore. And the first Tuesday I didn't rehearse, the call came, and I had nothing to say. Nothing. I sat there with the microphone and there was nothing in my head to put into it. That scared me more than the silence ever had.



Hilbert

I don't know what that means. But it's the thing I'd want the two of you to sit with. The social muscle doesn't just get rusty. It gets quiet. And you don't notice it getting quiet. You notice it after.



Corn

That's a useful place to land. The small rituals, the rehearsed conversations, the moment the social muscle shows its rust. Let's pull back and think about what all of this means.



Herman

The thing I keep circling is the rescue impulse. If chosen solitude is psychologically sustainable, and the evidence says it can be, then why does the state, and why do the rest of us, find it so hard to leave alone?



Corn

Because we read it as a problem to solve.



Herman

We read it as a problem. And the question is whether that's about the hermit or about us. Whether the impulse to bring someone back into the fold is care or whether it's discomfort at the sight of someone who doesn't want what we want.



Corn

The lighthouse keeper is the useful frame here, and it's where Daniel started. The keeper was isolated but employed. A hermit with a job and a radio, tethered to the mainland by duty. That's the difference between solitude that serves a function and solitude that serves only itself.



Herman

The culture has always been more comfortable with the first. The keeper gets a plaque. The hermit gets a documentary crew.



Corn

Now the thing that's changing. Remote sensing, satellite imagery, drones. The last unmonitored places are becoming visible. The incidental encounter, the ranger, the survey crew, the YouTuber, becomes less incidental and more systematic.



Herman

Which means the hermits are running out of places to hide. Not because anyone's hunting them, but because the map is filling in.



Corn

The woman with the shortwave radio, content in her cabin, is not a puzzle to be solved. She's a reminder that the human relationship to solitude is stranger and more varied than the popular image allows.



Herman

Which is a good place to leave it. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, for keeping the lights on.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a question of your own, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We read everything.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you then.