The Loneliness of the Season: A Letter to Myself (and Maybe You)

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Christmas arrives like a script someone else wrote for you. The songs tell you to be home for Christmas, surrounded by the ones you love, twinkling lights on a tree, the warmth of connection. The adverts show families laughing over turkey, presents piled high, a life that looks, above all, *full*. Full of people. Full of noise. Full of the things that are supposed to make a life worth living.

And if you're watching that from a chair in an empty room, the gap between the script and your life can feel unbearable.

I'm not here to tell you to get out more. I'm not going to suggest a walk on the beach, or a coffee morning, or joining a club. Those things have their place, but they're not the point. The point is something harder and quieter than that.

The point is this: you are not failing at Christmas. You are not weak, or broken, or pathological because the season hurts. Christmas is a performance of belonging, and if you're not performing it this year (if you're watching the performances of others from the outside) that is not evidence that something is wrong with you.

I know what January feels like. I know the particular cruelty of a month named after a god, Janus, who looked both forwards and backwards at the same time. January asks you to look ahead and to look behind simultaneously, and if behind you there is an absence (a voice that won't call) then January doesn't comfort you. It photographs the wound.

This is where the language of self-help fails us. We are told to *move forward*, to *heal*, to *grow*. As if grief were a problem to be solved and the solution were personal resilience. But some things don't get solved. Some things get carried. And the dignity is not in pretending you're not carrying them, but in walking upright with them all the same.

There's a word for that: **integrity**. It doesn't mean wholeness. It means showing up as you actually are, even when what you are is tired and sad and a bit lost. Integrity is not a feeling. It's a practice. It means you don't perform a happiness you don't have, but you also don't collapse into a self-pity that closes the door on everything else. It means letting yourself feel the grief without building a home in it.

I want to say something about hope, but not the easy kind. Not the kind that says *it will get better*. The kind that says, I am here, and I am still here, and that counts for something. Hope as **persistence** rather than optimism. Hope as the quiet decision to make coffee in the morning and see what the day offers, even if it doesn't offer much.

And self-worth… oh, this is the hard one. Because the world is not measuring your worth at Christmas. The world is measuring your belonging, and belonging is not the same thing. You can be

lonely in a crowd. You can be unseen in a full room. Belonging is about others. Worth is about you. And you don't need anyone to grant it to you. It's not a gift you're given. It's the ground you're standing on whether you feel it or not.

Here's what I've learned, or am learning, or hope to learn: **the friends who matter are not the ones who fix you**. They're the ones who sit with you while you're not fixed. The ones who don't require you to be okay. The ones who will listen to you talk about how rubbish this time of year is and who won't try to talk you out of it. The ones who tolerate your issues because they recognise something of their own in them. That is not a transaction. That is love.

And love, real love, the kind that isn't conditional on jollity, starts with you. With the way you talk to yourself on the hard days. With whether you tell yourself you're allowed to be struggling, or whether you insist on a performance of coping that exhausts you further.

I'm not the first person to sit with this. Millions of people are doing it right now, in their own quiet rooms, not saying anything because there's no one to say it to. So let me say it for all of us:

You are allowed to find this hard. You are allowed to miss what you've lost. You are allowed to not feel festive. And you are still a person of worth, even if your Christmas looks nothing like the script.

That's not a remedy. It's just the truth. And sometimes the truth is enough to keep you going until January's over.