

## We Have Never Been Alone by Hannah Brencher

I received a letter in the mail the other day.

It was the kind of letter that is painful to read because it stirred up old feelings and made me believe, for a mere moment or two, that I was right back in the muds of my yesterday. That, at any moment, I could be vulnerable to pulling the thread that would lead to my unraveling once again.

I stood still; I put the phone in my pocket; I breathed in to read:

“I’m tired of feeling like this but cannot seem to break the cycle of blah. Part of me does not want to get better because I don’t want to get better just to fall apart again. How can I even begin to find something else to define me, when I feel so empty right now? Not that I expect you to answer or know the answers. I’ve had enough disappointment to know that no one has any answers. It’s just kind of a relief to be able to tell someone and talk about it. That’s all I want to do anymore—talk about how sad I am, how much I need him and miss him. How angry I am. Am I even a good person anymore?”

She dumped her feelings upon the page.

I felt like I showed up to clean up the wreckage of Sandy with just a bucket and a mop. But more than her stories and her pains and her questions hitched to a prayer for answers, I felt my own emotions rushing back. I began nodding my head. I sucked back the tears. And I thought, “Goodness, I never had the courage to admit I felt this way. Ever.”

Instead, when my own life carried the same echoes of her print on the page, I ushered myself into a life of writing love letters to others, and I covered my wounds with thin lined paper. I never faced the reality or taught myself this truth (this truth would have changed everything from the beginning):

Loneliness is quite capable of swallowing us whole. And Loneliness will think to do a lot of things, but it will never think to spit us back up until we look around and realize that we have never been Alone.

Alone and Loneliness. They are two different things. One is thick, and the other is a myth. We have never been alone, not a day in our lives. What kind of devil hissed this lie in our ears? Yes, we have felt tender. Yes, we have felt defeated. But no, we have never been

alone so much as we have refused to let the others in.

Anyone who knows me—knows the heart of me and the bone of me and the bends of my smile—knows why I really started writing love letters.

It was not some strange aficionado for stationery. Never a day in my life have I ached to bring the art form of letter writing back to her fullness. It wasn't a racing heart for cursive and curves on a page. It was a fear that I was very much alone in this world. It was a fear that I might never feel whole again. It was fear that not a single soul needed my footprints, my input, my laughter. It was a crippling belief that I would live and die and I would never have made noise in this world.

I fell apart, and the letters just happened. And even in the scripting of hundreds of these letters, the falling-apart-ness never felt so robust, like it was going to be the end of me every single day.

And so, when this letter arrived in my mailbox the other day, that same familiar helplessness curled into my hip like a little girl gasping for her mama's closeness. For a second, I almost felt as though I was standing naked in the middle of the post office. Wanting to cry. And curl. And surrender. Because I don't know each one of your faces, and I have to get over the fact that it has come to kill me a bit inside.

I am not familiar with the frown lines of your yesterday. I would like to spend tiny eternities sipping tea with all of you, but time is a cruel little mistress, and she barely lets me pay the bills on time. And when letters pour in and emails pour in and the whole world seems to need a love letter, I just want you to know...no, I need you to know...that you have never embarked on a journey of Loneliness alone. Even in this moment, when the tears are dripping down your cheeks and you feel hollow and sucked dry, you are not alone. I know it feels otherwise. Trust me, I know it feels otherwise.

But Aloneness is something you need to admit. You need to talk of it.

You need to speak it out into the air before it grows claws and legs and fangs on the inside and silences us into thinking that never a soul has tread on this lonely soil before. Every single one of us—short or stout, blue-eyed or kissed by the hollow of hazel—can tell stories of Loneliness. I know we've got so many of them. We could build cities out of stories of loneliness. There would be bridges and fountains and libraries and cafes made with the bold stackings of Loneliness.

The first step is to unravel it. To admit it. To go no more seconds, no more minutes, no more hours thinking you are called to harboring emptiness alone. It's not true. It is simply not true.