

Alfie Hudson's Locked Down For Christmas

by

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The video call came to an end and silence returned to the compact suburban living room, where everything had its place, and everything in its place told a story from the previous 87 years. The on-screen image of his smiling grandchildren faded away, no matter how hard he tried to keep it in his mind's eye, as the tablet in his hands transitioned to its normal background: a mountain range in some far-off country that he would never visit now. He folded the cover to protect the screen, placed the tablet on the coffee table next to the worn, faded fabric of his burgundy armchair, and finally let the fixed 'everything is fine, don't worry about me' smile on his face settle back into its normal, lonely resting position. They would speak again tomorrow. But tomorrow was still a long time away.

Alfie Hudson sighed. He watched the news like everybody else; he saw the concerns and the anxiety being played out on his television screen, but he also saw the kids who thought they were invincible, viewing the warnings they were being given as a challenge to overcome rather than ones to which they should rise. He would then berate himself for thinking like that. It wasn't just the kids and not all of them, of course, but some. He had been like that once, many years ago: feeling invincible, full of bravado. But self-isolation wasn't a new experience for Alfie. He had been doing it for most of the past five years, pretty much since David had relocated his family to San Francisco for work and a better lifestyle. He hadn't seen them in the flesh for over three years and the bigger part of him doubted now that he ever would again. He tried from time to time to remember what it felt like to hug and be hugged by his only son but, in truth, he couldn't. He could only imagine what it felt like and that

wasn't quite the same. Not that he blamed David. Not at all. It had been an opportunity he couldn't possibly have turned down; one taken in the best interests of Ethan and Daisy, those kids he loved so much. But that didn't mean he had to be happy about it.

He picked up the silver-framed photograph of 'his' Joan from the table next to his chair and dusted it down with the sleeve of his sweater. What would she make of all this nonsense, he wondered? It was hard to believe it had been twelve years since he had held her hand for the last time and, although he missed her more with every passing day, he had always been glad that it had been him that had been left behind to cope with the loneliness and not her. She would have said the same, of course. And, at least he had been with her at the end; not like so many of these poor families he was reading about now. He was pleased in some respects that she wasn't here in this strange and stressful time.

He wasn't sure she would have managed the isolation well. She wouldn't have wanted a Christmas like this. Every time he looked at her picture, more than fifty years of memories vied for position in his conscious mind whether they were walks by the side of the Grand Union Canal; family holidays on the Norfolk Broads; packed lunches that she made when he took David to watch the Orient at Brisbane Road, and, of course, their perfect wedding day in the Spring of 1957. The way that so many years' worth of memories could pass in what felt like the click of a finger was something that he would never really understand.

"I miss you every day." He wiped away a tear as it trickled down his cheek. He wouldn't have wanted anyone to see him crying....not that there was anyone who could. "I just wish you were here. I miss having someone to chat to. I miss you."

Alfie kissed the face behind the glass, replaced Joan's photograph to its rightful position and hauled himself out of his seat to walk the few yards to the kitchen. He stopped just the once to rest against a door frame and catch his breath. He filled the kettle, even though there was more than enough water in it already and leant on the worktop as he waited for it to boil. He crossed the kitchen, opened the creaking freezer door and took out a ready meal for one to defrost for that evening. A cottage pie. Aside from the sound of the water,

everything was quiet inside and out. He checked the dosset box that sat on the side near the kettle to just make sure he had taken all of his medication for the day. He knew he had – he had a routine he adhered to, after all - but checking gave him something to do for a second or two. Usually Radio Four would be on to break the silence in the kitchen and to create the illusion that maybe there really was somebody else in the room to talk to. But with the news so dominated by the virus, Alfie had decided it was better to leave it switched off and embrace the solitude.

Like the rest of the country, he had never really known a time like this. He had been six years old when Chamberlain had waived that piece of paper and declared ‘peace in our time’, much to his mother’s relief and subsequent despair. And he had been 13 years old when they had gathered around the wireless in his grandparents’ living room to listen to Winston Churchill speak to the nation on VE Day. And, as difficult as the time between those two events had been, especially the years separated from his father, in a way as he was now from David, he still remembered being able to go out from time to time, sometimes even to play in the ruins of a bombed East End building, to mix with people in a way he was now no longer allowed to, as the adults around him danced to The Andrews Sisters or Glenn Miller. In spite of the hardship and the lack of food, the one thing that hadn’t been lacking was a sense of community. To Alfie, community seemed a strange old-fashioned concept in this current world that he didn’t understand. In many ways the fear he saw now as the virus spread across the country again seemed more profound than anything he remembered from the war.

He made his tea, pressing the tea bag firmly against the side of the mug until the milky liquid turned an acceptable shade of brown. He stirred it anti-clockwise as he always had and took two digestive biscuits from the cupboard. Two was acceptable; three would just be self-indulgent. He walked to the window and pulled back the net curtain to see nobody walking past. Occasionally he would get a wave or a smile from a neighbour or a passer-by, but everyone was locked inside these days.

Nobody was coming out unless they had to; not down his little street anyway. He switched the television on to see the smiling news anchor trying to help two professors more accustomed to an audience of their peers explain

the inexplicable in layman's terms. Nobody had cracked it yet, he thought. He changed channels to a re-run of a sitcom so old that he remembered watching it the first time it had aired.

It was when he bit into the second digestive that Alf was sure he had heard something being pushed through his letterbox. It took him longer than it should have to reach the front door, lifting the white envelope up to his hands using the metal grabber tool that David had ordered him from Amazon. On the front in neat blue ballpoint, it simply said: "Mr Hudson, No.32". He took his glasses from his shirt pocket and tried his best to clean the smudged lenses with a tissue before opening the envelope and taking out a piece of lined paper, evidently torn from an exercise book or similar. He merely smudged the lenses even more in the process.

Hi Mr Hudson

It's Chloe and Ben from across the road at No. 27. We just wanted to check in and see how you're doing in these mad times. We know it's going to be difficult not to have anything to do or anyone to see at Christmas, but we wanted to let you know that we are here. Always happy to have a chat. And also, if you needed any shopping, I've written our number at the bottom if you want or need to call for anything.

Take care of yourself.

C&B

Alfie folded the note and slipped it back inside the envelope. It made him feel both a little warmer inside but also gave him a gentle reminder of how others saw him. In his mind, he was still perfectly capable of looking after himself. To others, obviously, he was that nice old man across the road who might just need some help. The realisation that others saw him as fragile, vulnerable was something he would never come to terms with. He never wanted to be a burden on anyone, but he knew what David would say. He could even hear him saying it. "They wouldn't have offered if they weren't happy to help. You should at least thank them for thinking of you."

He placed the folded envelope in his trouser pocket, vying for space with the screwed-up tissue, a two-pound coin and a half-eaten pack of Extra Strong Mints so that he could decide what to do about it later. Perhaps he'd listen to some music or do a crossword or reorganise his already tidy wardrobe for the fourth or fifth time since all this started. But he knew that he would lose interest within ten minutes of starting and move onto something else. Was that a bad thing? The problem of living alone, he had found, was that you believed everyone else was enjoying the most exciting life. The reality, of course, especially now, was that many were in the same position and many were worse. That's why he didn't like to complain. Nobody likes a whinger, his old school teacher had told him.

On the television a tanned young man in shorts and a vest, with hair longer than he would ever have been allowed, stood in front of a fireplace in what was apparently in his living room exercising and encouraging anyone who was watching to join in and do so with him. Alfie watched for a few moments, even momentarily trying to move his body in approximately the same way, knowing that he was safe from prying eyes. When he heard his hip crack, he decided to sit out the rest of the workout, though he did continue to move his feet in circles as a way of improving the circulation in his legs. Truth be told, he was exhausted just watching. Before long, he was asleep.

The Six O'Clock news was just starting as he opened his eyes again. It took him a few moments to register where he was and what had happened. He didn't like sleeping during the day. It didn't seem right and proper but when he heard the stern voice of the newsreader and the awful figures for how many had become infected that day, he wished he had stayed asleep for a few minutes more. He rose, stretched, took a sip of water from a glass on the table. He had no idea how long it had been sitting there, but it tasted okay. And he hauled himself upright and went to put his dinner in the oven. He'd have to give some thought, he supposed, to what to eat on Christmas Day. But then, why bother? It was going to be the same as any other day.

Darkness had fallen outside while he had been asleep. Through the net curtains he could see the sparkling lights on the outside of the houses opposite. It was

the kids he felt most sorry for. He'd had his fair share of family Christmases. The piling of presents into pillowcases and creeping around the house so as not to wake David. He could look back on those days of driving to buy the tree, of trying to fit it into the back of a car that simply wasn't long enough, and then the excitement of trying to decorate it as a family. For the first few years after Joan passed, he carried on decorating a small tree and putting up some lights of his own. It's what she would have wanted. But not anymore. This year, of all years, he couldn't see the point.

It was as he passed the telephone on his way back into the lounge that he retrieved the folded note from his pocket. He read it again as he held the telephone in his right hand. It seemed so counter-intuitive to simply phone people he had never had a meaningful conversation with before. He wasn't even sure how they knew his name. The only time he seemed to see people these days was when they came to collect the Amazon parcels that he had taken in for them. Even then, it was little more than a cursory smile and a thank you and they would be gone. But, as David had told him, this Chloe and Ben had reached out and it would be rude to not respond. He sat back in the armchair, muted Reeta Chakrabarti and began to press in the telephone number from the note. He sat back deep into the seat as it began to ring next to his ear.

"Hello." The cheeriness of the voice seemed to stand in direct contrast to everything Reeta had been saying a few minutes earlier.

"Hello, yes, it's Alf Hudson at number 32. I got your note."

"Oh Mr Hudson, it's so good to hear from you. How are you managing?" Chloe's voice was warm and welcoming, as if Alf had just received a telephonic hug. The vocal equivalent of a hot chocolate and a hob nob.

"Well, you know, not too bad. It's me and the television, really. How are you?"

"We're doing okay, thank you. We are both still trying to work from home and get as much exercise as we can. Are you able to get outside for some fresh air?"

"I can't imagine what that must be like. I couldn't have worked from home in my day. I would have got too distracted by other things. I don't get

out much, not now the cold and the rain are settling in, but I've been trying to open my front door once a day and breathe in what I can."

"Did you have any plans for Christmas, Mr Hudson? I say did, of course, because I don't think anybody does any more."

Alfie smiled and then realised she couldn't hear him smile. "Not really. The only family I have is my son and he and his family live in America. So, I was always going to be here. I guess that means I'm one of the few people who isn't particularly disappointed with the rules because my plans haven't had to change at all. Silver linings and all that. How about you?"

"We were going to Ben's family but that's all been knocked on the head. But, you know, a lot of people have it far worse than we do, so there's no point complaining."

"One thing I've learnt over the years is that whatever the situation, there's always somebody who has it worse. And my father always told me that complaining wouldn't get me anywhere anyway."

Chloe laughed. "So, is there anything you need, Mr Hudson? Anything we can fetch you?" Any number of things popped into Alfie's mind but instead he settled for the answer he thought the nice young girl would most want to hear.

"No, I'm fine, love. But I do appreciate you dropping that note in."

"And I appreciate you calling. Maybe I'll give you a call on Christmas Day to say hello?"

"Only if it doesn't interfere with whatever else you're doing. I'm sure there'll be plenty of rubbish on telly to keep me occupied."

Alfie placed the phone back on the table. He felt a little warmer inside.

"Joanie, Joanie," he said out loud, "what would you have made of all this nonsense?" Much to his embarrassment, emotion began to overcome him.

"What I would only give to have one more Christmas with you; one more Christmas feeling part of a family again. Just to be noticed, to be included in something. Hark at me, girl, becoming all of a misery. I know what you'd be

saying, pull yourself together Alfie, you've had a good run. And I know you're right. But even at my old age, it's tough not seeing a soul."

It was still getting light when Alfie woke on Christmas morning. He could feel through the window that it was cold outside, but no snow lay on the ground. It was grey and overcast and quiet. An imperfect Christmas at the end of a far from perfect year.

The street was still as everyone remained confined within their homes. In this strange new world, he wondered how many chimneys Santa had really descended during the previous night and how many he had decided to leave alone. He pulled back the curtain and glanced out, imagining the excitement that was building behind each of the tightly closed front doors: the anticipation of gifts to be opened; the parents being woken early by exhilarated kids; the food that was being prepared for sumptuous late lunches, and even the sherries or the whiskies that were being consumed with breakfast. It would be hours yet before he could speak to David and the family on the West Coast. Maybe he'd treat himself to a whiskey later. After all, there was nobody around to tell him he shouldn't. He would make himself some toast and then get dressed. He still had standards to maintain.

Throughout the morning the television filled the silence. A carol service from an empty chapel; a game show with no audience, a Christmas comedy that had been shown so many times he felt as if he knew the script by heart. This was what it would be like this year. And then he'd watch the Queen. Goodness only knows how she's going to explain the year away and make us all feel better, he thought to himself. Perhaps she and Philip were in the same situation as him, though he doubted it. The idea of them popping a frozen hot pot into the oven for their Christmas dinner amused him more than it should have done.

He had gifts that David had sent from San Francisco, all wrapped up on the dining room table, but he would wait until after the hot pot to open them. That had always been their family tradition, much to his son's annoyance. Lunch then gifts. Anyone doing it the other way round was wrong. Then this

evening, when they Facetimed, he could thank them and show himself wearing whatever jumper it was they had bought him this year.

The knock on the door startled him. Surely not even Amazon had parcels to drop off on Christmas Day. He put on a cardigan, walked towards the front door, turned the key in the lock and unhooked the chain at the top. Perhaps the biggest unseen sign of isolation is not having unlocked your own front door by two o'clock in the afternoon.

“Merry Christmas, Mr Hudson, it’s Chloe.”

Alfie wasn’t even aware that he was smiling. “Merry Christmas love. Is everything okay?” She nodded eagerly. Her husband Ben lifted his right hand, palm facing out as a way of saying hello. Under his arm was what looked like a fold-up table and propped up against his leg were two camping chairs.

“Everything’s fine. We thought that if it’s not too much to ask, you might like to join us for Christmas lunch?”

She pointed to a zipped-up bag that rested on the pathway to his door.

“I’m a bit speechless, my dear. I don’t know what to say. But I didn’t think we were allowed in each other’s houses this year.”

“We’re not. So, we thought, if it’s okay, we’d bring it to you. Do you think you can manage to drag a chair to the front door? If so, we can serve you lunch on your doorstep, we can wrap ourselves up warm and have ours on your path and that way nobody needs to be alone.”

Alfie was rarely speechless, but this rendered him astounded. As he went to retrieve a chair from the kitchen, Ben set up the temporary tables and camping chairs. They served Alfie first and then themselves. And it was amazing. The full works. They started with a hot soup. He didn’t know what it was, and he didn’t like to ask, but it was warming and tasty and orange in colour. The turkey was moist, the potatoes crisp and the turnips sweet with honey glaze. He hadn’t eaten turnips since Joan had passed. Maybe this was the company he had asked her to send.

They sat and rested and chatted and it all came naturally. They talked about each other. They asked about Joan and he was happy to talk. He knew it

sounded stupid but talking about her somehow seemed to keep her alive, at least in his own heart and mind. And then came the Christmas pudding. Ben had sprinted across to their house and run back again desperate to keep it hot, so that the brandy he poured on would still light a flame. This took Alfie back to his own childhood and he recounted the fascination – and no little fear – he had felt the first time he had seen his own grandfather light a Christmas Pudding back in the early days of the war. Chloe and Ben listened intently. He didn't know if they were being polite or were genuinely interested but it didn't matter. Here he was, eating, talking and laughing, with a flimsy paper hat pulled down over his head. He may not have known them before today, but this felt like Christmas the way it was meant to be.

As the temperature dropped a little and dusk threatened to descend, they decided it was probably best to return to their separate houses.

“You don't need to keep thanking us, Mr Hudson,” Chloe smiled. “We've really enjoyed ourselves and if you have too, well that just makes us doubly happy. And please don't think that you're alone anymore. We've spoken to the neighbours and we've set up a little rota. One of us is going to knock on every day for a few minutes and a chat, so I'd keep that chair close to your front door, if I was you.”

“Yeah, Brenda and Dennis, our neighbours at number 29 are going to pop over tomorrow with some carrot cake for a chat. Watch Brenda, she can go on a bit. Then I think the others along the street will begin to knock on from there. You have our number, so always feel free to call if you need anything or want a chat. And we won't be strangers either. We'll knock on again too.”

Alfie shook his head in wonder. Twelve hours earlier, none of this had seemed possible. Perhaps there really was such a thing as a miracle at Christmas. All he hoped was that the gratitude that was so genuine was also evident to them both. All Chloe wanted was to give him a hug but that would have to wait for another time. “You won't have to sit on your own, only having Joan's picture to talk to anymore, Mr Hudson.”

“You know, part of me thinks this was all Joan's doing; that you were sent by her. Only this morning I was telling her what I'd only give to feel part

of a family again at Christmas. And you, you lovely people, you've made that happen."

"Well, if it was Joan that sent us, we're both very happy that she did. Because we've also had a lovely day."

As Chloe and Ben walked back down the pathway, Alfie called after them. "You know, you've shown me today what I think I've always known - that those you have loved and lost can still shine a little light into your darkness, can give you something to hope for if things are looking bleak, and can always bring a little warmth when you're feeling the cold. All you have to do is ask them. And when they do, you know, it's as if they haven't really gone anywhere at all."
