

NEW, NEW NORMAL

a short pandemic play

**First Draft
March 2021**

CHARACTERS

SAM - late '20s, living alone, a digital marketing consultant and mixed media manager for a startup company. A good sense of humor.

EGAN - late '20s, living alone, an aspiring paralegal currently attending online classes. A strong head on her shoulders.

SETTING

The pandemic, on the cusp of year two. A city in the Northeast. An apartment complex. Two residents, both on separate floors.

A lively restaurant. Roaming servers and happily seated patrons are frozen as though they are in a photograph. "Let's Do It (Let's Fall in Love)" can be heard being played on piano. It is a surreal, almost artificial, tableau.

SAM is seated opposite EGAN. They are both eating, laughing, eating, laughing, pouring wine, eating, laughing.

SAM
Tiramisu?

EGAN
I shouldn't.

SAM
It's not gonna eat itself.

EGAN
No, but I really shouldn't. I feel so bloated it's not even funny.

SAM
You don't look bloated.

EGAN
Like you could even know that.

SAM
Come on. Just one more bite. You should nab it before they take it.

EGAN
Alright.

EGAN grabs her fork and nabs a bite. She gives an emphatic "mmm." SAM smiles.

SAM
Was it worth it?

EGAN
Is what worth it?

SAM
The last bite!

EGAN
Oh. Maybe.

SAM
Seriously, stop with all this “bloating” talk. You know I don’t care.

EGAN
Well you can’t really care.

SAM
What?

EGAN
I - never mind.

A beat. They both look around the restaurant. Piano music, the chatter and clinging of plates. They look back at each other and smile.

SAM
Think they’re gonna ask us to get up?

EGAN
What?

SAM
Management. I mean we’ve been here for a while. Do you think they’ll ask us to get up? So we can give up our table.

EGAN gives him a dry laugh. She’s tired.

No, I was being serious.

EGAN
Oh. Yeah. Uh...hey, I dunno if-

SAM
If what?

EGAN

I dunno if I'm in the mood tonight for-

SAM

For tiramisu? Wait, okay, here, you should try some of my gelato.

SAM waves a spoon in front of EGAN.

Hazelnut chocolate crunch!

EGAN

I actually meant that I think I'm tired of -

SAM

Of tiramisu. Yeah I get that. It's got a *ton* of eggs. Did you know you need, like, nine eggs to make tiramisu? Well, three egg and six yolks, so maybe just six, but still, half of a carton -

EGAN

No, I'm tired of -

SAM

Sitting? We can totally bounce if you want! I was actually thinking of leaving just now. We could hit the aquarium!

EGAN

I don't wanna "hit" the "aquarium."

SAM

That's cool. Yeah that makes sense, we were like. We were just there. Do you wanna catch a movie? Something's definitely still playing.

EGAN

(sighs) "Something" is *always* "playing."

SAM

That's the spirit! Anything jump out at you recently?

EGAN

Sam.

SAM

What?

EGAN

You didn't let me finish earlier.

SAM

Didn't let you-? Babe, I literally *told you* to finish, why waste a perfectly good dessert-

EGAN

Please stop talking about the tiramisu.

SAM

Okay! Sorry, I didn't know you were, like, *this* over tiramisu. Kinda wish you told me that before we ordered it.

EGAN

We didn't ORDER anything!

SAM

What are you talking about?

EGAN

I'm talking about the fact that none of this is *real*, Sam.

SAM

None of this...huh...?

He looks around, nervously. Like something is about to explode. The piano continues to roar.

Egan...let's not make a scene-

EGAN

"Make a scene" - do you *hear* yourself?

SAM

I...I don't understand. Are you still hungry? Here, do you want some gelato-? Hazelnut choc-

EGAN

I DO NOT WANT YOUR HAZELNUT CHOCOLATE CRUNCH GELATO.

SAM

Did you...want something else? I can ask-

EGAN

NO. No, you can't do that.

SAM

Why not?!

EGAN

Because we are NOT in a RESTAURANT, Sam. We're on a ZOOM CALL.

With this, EGAN turns off her virtual background - we are not in a restaurant, we're in a dimly-lit apartment. The piano abruptly stops. The illusion is broken - we are, indeed, in a video conference call. Not a restaurant.

SAM keeps his background on. He's stunned. Not sure how to respond. For a moment, the front crumbles. Then, a return to normalcy. He smiles.

SAM

Oh...ohhhh, shit, haha! Wait up! C'mon, you totally left me back at the rest-

EGAN

I didn't "leave you" ANYWHERE. You are on a *Zoom call*. I am on a Zoom call. *We are on a Zoom call. That is where we are right now.*

SAM

Egan, we don't have to -

EGAN

Don't have to what? Talk about the call? Acknowledge it? Address the fact that this is the extent to which we can interact with each other? Because, we do.

SAM

I was gonna say we don't *have* to stay at the restaurant!

EGAN

Oh, here we go.

SAM

No, I'm serious. We could...we could go to the aquarium!

SAM changes his virtual background from the restaurant - it is now a .GIF of the ocean, with hundreds of fish swimming around him. He looks around, as though he is taking it all in. EGAN is obviously unimpressed.

C'mon, you LOVE the aquarium! Hey, look over there, I think that's a -

EGAN
Blue tang fish.

SAM
- blue tang fish!

SAM
Just like the ones in / "Finding Nemo!"

EGAN
/ "Finding Nemo" - Sam, could we please -

SAM
What, you don't stay at the aquarium?

EGAN
We are NOT in an aquarium. And that's NOT a blue tang fish.

SAM
'Course it is, you can tell by the yellow fin behind its -

EGAN
Do you know how crazy you sound? You are talking about a *recording* of a blue tang fish swimming into a coral reef. A recording that is going to loop back around and show us the same fucking thing in about 12 seconds. Watch. That same blue tang fish is going to magically appear on the other side of your screen and swim right back to the coral reef it just disappeared into. Watch.

They watch - we might not see it, but the blue tang fish does, indeed, swim right back to where it once was.

A beat. SAM, again, looks worried. Like an illusion has been broken. Again, he bounces back, but with less vigor this time.

SAM
Okay...no aquarium...no aquarium...no aquari....
Small beat. An idea.

We could go to the movies! You wanna go to the movies? I know it's late, but there's probably some good stuff still playing, if we -

EGAN

If by "go to the movies" you mean open Netflix and share your screen with me? No. I'm all set.

SAM

Okay...no movies! That's fine. We could...we could hang out with Courteney and Jack! Do you wanna go see Courteney and Jack? Jack actually might be on a date with Jared, do you wanna see if we could do a double-?

EGAN

NO. No. I don't wanna "do" *anything* on a screen tonight. No Zoom hangouts, no virtual watch parties, no online trivia nights. *Nothing*.

A small silence. SAM is desperately looking for alternatives. He's running out of them. Suddenly, the mood changes - he raises his eyebrows. He clicks a button on his keyboard - sensual, sexy bass music begins to blast. His virtual background changes to a bed, surrounded by candles and rose pedals. He moves his hips to the beat. EGAN does not move.

SAM (*raises eyebrows*)

Well... if you *really* wanna turn in *early* tonight...Maybe...that means...it's time for a little-?

EGAN

If you try to get me to have Zoom sex one more time, I swear to god -

The music stops. SAM is out of ideas. He faces reality.

SAM

Damn it, Egan, why do you have to-!

EGAN

Because this is not the same, Sam, and you know it! We aren't together!

SAM

We *are* together!

EGAN

No! No we're not. We are not *together*. I'm here and you're there.

SAM

Yeah I know. I know, I know, okay! I get it. You've said it a million times. But...come on, can't we just keep trying and-?

EGAN

No. I'm sorry, but we can't. *I can't.* I cannot keep a long-distance relationship with someone who lives in the *same apartment building as me.*

SAM

Egan, look...okay, look. I know we've been at this a while. I know this kinda burns you out and it isn't the same and I understand you feel like that. I do. I'm sorry you feel like that.

A beat. EGAN watches, slightly impressed.

But... for what it's worth - and I know you don't always love it when you hear me say this, but -

EGAN

Seriously, you *cannot* tell me again that you "prefer" these stupid "date nights" / as opposed to the real thing -

SAM

/ They're not-!I don't think they're stupid.

EGAN

No - "stupid" is not - I didn't mean that.

SAM

You did. You did mean that.

SAM turns off his virtual background - nothing virtual this time. Just his bedroom. It's also dimly lit. There's takeout boxes on his bed. He sighs.

EGAN

Hey. I know you work hard. Like, *really* hard. To make these nights feel real. Like they're something we can look forward to. The food and the music and the backgrounds. I know it's not easy.

SAM

I just know how much you miss the real thing.

EGAN

I do. And I know that, on some level, you do, too.

SAM

Yeah.

A beat. EGAN sighs. SAM sighs, too.

Was it something I said?

EGAN

What do you mean?

SAM

I mean...what changed? What went wrong? Things were going really well, I thought. Things *have* been going really well. I mean, I know you've been making comments here and there, but...I just gotta know. Did I do something wrong?

EGAN

What? No. No! You didn't do anything wrong...it's just...

She struggles to find the words.

I haven't seen your feet.

SAM

My *feet*?

EGAN

Your feet - I haven't seen them!

SAM

So you...have a thing for...*feet*?

A beat.

This is pertinent.

EGAN (*laughs*)

No! Oh my god. NO. It's not that. It's just...we've been dating for six months. We've ended all of our calls with "I love you" for the last two weeks. You've met my parents. Well, virtually. But still. We've done all of this - fake dinners, fake movies, fake trips to zoos and aquariums and ice skating and... all of it, we've done together. But...I haven't once seen your feet. I've never seen them! I've known you for half a year but I've only known...*half of you*. And that's not some metaphor for you being, like, a cryptic person that's hid "The Real You" from me, or whatever. That's just...physically, objectively true. *I have never seen the bottom half of your torso*. And

when you see someone, and love someone, for weeks and for months - someone who, might I add, literally is *one floor* above you - and you have never seen stuff like their *feet*...well, that's just... You don't think that's a sign this is *weird*?

SAM thinks about this for a bit.

SAM

Yeah... Yeah. It is weird.

Silence. Neither SAM nor EGAN can make eye contact right now.

But. I mean...well, if it helps -

SAM keels over, without hesitation, and throws his feet up in the air. EGAN bursts into laughter - SAM gets back up, pleased with himself,

EGAN (*through laughter*)

Even through a screen, you are still five times funnier than I could ever be.

SAM

You're funny, too!

EGAN

If you really think so.

SAM

I do! I do think you're funny. I think you're smart, too. The way you kick my ass at trivia definitely proves that, so.

EGAN chuckles. SAM chuckles, too.

And you always know what you want. Which I've always been jealous of. Like right now. How you...know you...want to... you know.

EGAN

See, that's the thing. I don't...think I know *what* I want. Right now.

SAM

You mean...you don't want to -

EGAN

Well, no, I definitely don't want to keep doing *this*.

She motions between her and SAM, then to her whole screen.

This whole virtual thing. But I'm also not saying...I'm not sure if I want to...give this up. If that makes sense.

A beat.

I like being with you, Sam.

SAM

I like being with you, too.

EGAN

You do?

SAM

I do. Of course I do!

Another beat. EGAN has to gather courage to suggest this.

EGAN

Okay. Then...let's do it.

SAM

What do you mean?

EGAN

I mean...let's see each other.

SAM

We are seeing each other.

EGAN

Sam.

SAM

Egan!

EGAN

I mean: *see* each other.

A beat.

As in - not through a screen.

Another beat. SAM has a visible reaction to all of this.

As in...in-person. Together.

SAM

That kind of “see each other.”

EGAN

...Yeah.

SAM

Egan...

EGAN

Don't “Egan” me over this!

SAM

But you know how I feel about -

EGAN

About being safe and staying safe and keeping everybody in the building safe - *yes*. I totally get that. And I think that that's totally cool and great and admirable.

SAM

You do.

EGAN

I do! I really do admire it.

SAM

Okay...so, then why can't we just-?

EGAN

Because if I watch you pretend to talk to a waiter that doesn't exist eating at a restaurant that doesn't exist *one more time* I am going to lose my fucking mind.

SAM

Egan. I get none of this is ideal. I get it's been a huge ask for you - for both of us! - to have this kind of relationship. And if you don't want to...if you aren't...if this isn't something that works for you anymore, I will respect that. But...I can't...I can't just -

EGAN

You can't see me, here, six feet away, with a mask on - two masks! - on both of us? From across my living room? That's not something I can ask of you?

SAM

It's not just - it's more complicated than that.

EGAN

What, not comfy with indoors? The parking lot behind the building. Let's meet *there*! Outside, six feet, double-masks, the whole nine yards. It'll be great! We can...throw a frisbee back and forth! Romantic socially distant outdoor frisbee date!

EGAN loves the sound of this more than she expected. She repeats it, like a chant.

Romantic-socially-distant-outdoor-frisbee-date!!

SAM

You really would rather play frisbee in a parking lot in 20-degree weather than spend time together on here?

EGAN

Sam, I spend eight hours a day on my laptop. That's a third of my day, *every day*. Doing homework, going on calls, nodding and pretending I'm listening, talking to clients, talking to my graduate cohort *about* other clients. Eight hours. Everyday. *I cannot* keep doing this. I can't have every part of my life compartmentalized into a conference app. I need a connection - a real, human connection. One that isn't locked behind a meeting link. And as hard as we've tried to make it more than that, and as fun as that's been...I cannot keep doing a long-distance relationship with someone who is one dry-wall ceiling away from *really* holding my hand.

A beat. SAM thinks about all of this.

Please think about this. Really. I don't want this to end. And I don't think you do, either. I really do think it would be safe if, for just once a week, I saw you outside of this stupid-

SAM

It's more than just safety.

EGAN

It's what?

SAM

This. This thing we've been doing. It's...more than just being safe. For me.

EGAN

I didn't know that.

SAM

Nobody really does.

EGAN

Can I know? Shouldn't I *get* to know?

Silence. SAM struggles to find the words for what he's trying to say. Then, he relents.

SAM

I'm scared.

EGAN

You're scared? What are you scared of?

SAM

I'm scared...that when you meet me...when you meet... *all* of me. I'm scared that...

He trails off. Silence. EGAN waits, patiently.

What if I'm not what you need me to be?

EGAN

What do you think I need?

SAM

I don't know. But whatever it is...do you think I'll be enough? When I'm more than just a box on your laptop?

EGAN

There's only one way to find out.

Silence from SAM.

I wish you had told me this before.

SAM

I didn't know how.

EGAN

Can you find a way to, now?

Silence. SAM takes a deep breath.

SAM

Every relationship I've ever had has blown up in my face. Figuratively speaking, I mean. But... literally, I guess, too. This one time.

EGAN

You...? Sorry. Never mind. I won't ask.

A beat. SAM laughs, awkwardly. EGAN laughs a little, too.

SAM

Every time I've gone into a relationship - a "normal" one, I mean - one where you hug, and kiss, and fuck, and hold each other's hands, and go out to eat at a restaurant that isn't full of imaginary waiters - things haven't gone my way. We go out, we have a night, we drive home, we do it for a few more weeks, then they disappear and I never see them again. Like clockwork. It's always been like that, for me. I don't know if it's because I'm not what people expect. If I'm too big or too small or too tall or too short. If it's because I've done something wrong. But it's not like you get a grade at the end of a date or anything. So, you hope for the best, see where the cards fall, then dust yourself off and try it all over again.

SAM sighs. If EGAN could hold his hand right now, she would.

Then, last year, the world blew up and all of a sudden going to a restaurant was like trying to decide if your hotel mattress is gonna give you bedbugs. And when I met you, online, and when we started having calls and stuff, I thought it would be a total shitshow. I mean, that's always how it goes, right? The virtual stuff never compares to what we had before. But...Egan...we're at six months now - half a year of this virtual crap - and things have never been better. *This* was the most fulfilling relationship I've ever experienced. And I know that's kind of crazy to say, what with us just being on the computer and all, but...I really do love you. I do. I love watching you look at stupid .GIFs of fish. I love when you beat me in every game known to virtual mankind. I love everything about you and this stupid, online relationship.

EGAN smiles. If she could kiss him right now, she would.

EGAN

Thank you for sharing that.

SAM

You're welcome.

EGAN

I love this relationship, too. I love *you*, too.

SAM smiles. He probably very much wants to kiss her right now.

SAM

But...this thing you're suggesting we do...meeting up, in-person.

Small beat.

How do I know that I'm not gonna fuck this up? How do I know you're not gonna disappear?

EGAN

Would you believe me if I promised you I wouldn't?

SAM

I would want to.

EGAN

I could tell you that I know I won't leave. That I know I'll stick around. But...see, the thing is: I don't know how to prove that to you.

SAM

I don't know, either.

A beat - neither is sure what to say right now to make the situation any better.

EGAN

What I *do* know is that...if you were to do this...if you were to leave this meeting. Put on your mask. Come down one flight of stairs. And knock on my door...it would be the only thing better than you saying "I love you" at the end of this call.

SAM

The only thing, huh.

EGAN

The *only* thing.

A beat. SAM thinks about this.

I already love you, Sam. You've got me. Now, please: let me love *all* of you - no matter what it all looks like.

A long silence. EGAN stares at SAM. SAM stares at EGAN. It's as though she's dared him to do it, and is waiting to see if he will. Staring. Waiting.

A beat. SAM makes a decision.

SAM

Bye, Egan. I love you.

EGAN

Bye, Sam. Love you, too.

SAM leaves the call. EGAN is left, looking sad, a little confused - did they just break up? Maybe there are tears, maybe there's shudders, maybe there is nothing. She just stares at her empty screen.

Then, there's a knock at the door. EGAN jolts up - she looks at the door. She smiles. She smiles a really wide smile.

She puts on a mask. She gets up. She starts for the door - then she remembers she's still on the call. Without a thought, she comes back into the frame, briefly, and leaves the meeting.

BLACKOUT. END OF PLAY.