

**PLEASE ANSWER YOUR PHONE.  
I NEED TO TELL YOU THAT I LOVE YOU.**

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2020 response

by jd stewart

## **cast of characters and suggested doubling**

ME  
MUM / FRIEND ONE / CUSTOMER ONE  
SISTER / FRIEND TWO / CUSTOMER TWO  
GRINDR / FRIEND THREE / CUSTOMER THREE  
PIGLET / FRIEND FOUR / CUSTOMER FOUR  
CUSTOMER FIVE / NEIGHBOR / WORK MANAGER / DOCTOR  
NEWS (Non-Speaking)  
BORIS JOHNSON (Voice Only)  
NICOLA STURGEON (Voice Only)

**setting:** *various*

**time:** *2020*

### **author note:**

*This short play is presented without stage directions. In doing this, my hope is that technology can be implemented throughout, much like the year of 2020 when it began to take even more control of most of our lives. The **NEWS** moments should be nothing more than projections. Doubling is cool, but distinction between characters should be obvious. It should flow, like a dream. Or make people uncomfortable, like a nightmare. The rest, is up to you.*

### **Fresh Ink Pitch**

*I am a 33 year old gay man who lived alone during the pandemic. I also worked part time in a grocery store. I also have severe anxiety issues and borderline depression. I am also in love with a man who lives halfway around the world and on nights when it was particularly rough, I would talk to him because he makes me feel safe. My response to the theme would be a one act play, exploring mental health and loneliness during the past year. As we truly became a digital age, the internet would be crucial in the storytelling, as would overcoming the personal mental health obstacles while being stuck inside for so long. It would be innovative in staging, content and theme as LGBTQI stories like these, are rarely told.*

### **Reference:**

*Covid Timeline: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2020/dec/16/covid-chaos-a-timeline-of-the-uks-handling-of-the-coronavirus-crisis>*

### **Special Thanks:**

*Calum Lake, Afton Moran, Lesley Hart, Neshla Caplan, Ralph Adriel Johnson, Josh McDiarmid. And you.*

ME

The main rule of story telling dictates that for it to be successful it should have a beginning, middle, and an end. I think this has two out of three. Maybe only one? It's more like a dream. Apologies in advance.

People hate hearing dreams because they lack all three of these elements. Have you ever noticed that when you go to tell someone your dream they shut down? Their eyes glaze over and it's like a part of their soul has died. If you've never noticed this or are terrible at social cues, take this as fact and apply it in future. Don't bore someone with your dream. Please. Hopefully this won't be boring. And it does have a beginning. I am a thirty-three year old gay man living in Edinburgh. And it started like this:

NICOLA STURGEON (V.O.)

I said a few days ago that this crisis was reminding us all of the fragility of life and the world we live in but that it was also reminding us of what matters most, health, love and solidarity. So let's all do what we are being asked to do now to protect our own health and that of others and show love and solidarity for our fellow citizens.

BORIS JOHNSON (V.O.)

...the people of this country will rise to that challenge. And we will come through it stronger than ever. We will beat the coronavirus and we will beat it together. And therefore I urge you at this moment of national emergency to stay at home, protect our NHS and save lives. Thank you.

NEWS

March 23rd, 2020: 1,012 Covid deaths.

ME

He's a dickhead and I hate him.

MUM

True. She's better at speaking. Why don't you come home.

ME

How is me coming home going to make me hate blow job Johnson any less?

MUM

Don't say blow job.

ME

I'm not coming home, mum. I'll be fine. I have a job. A place to live. Bills to pay.

SISTER

But you're on your own. You could quarantine in the cottage next door and then help me with the kids.

ME

Would you pay me?

SISTER

What?

ME

Would you pay me?

SISTER

You're my little brother.

ME

Exactly. I'll be fine. I'll try to be fine.

NEWS

March 24th, 2020: 1,274 Covid deaths.

ME

The first few weeks feel endless. I stay consistent. I go to work in the grocery store. I come home. I watch TV. I sleep. I navigate the four rooms in my apartment with such certainty that this will be over soon. I reach for my phone to call you, but instead I wait. I think it is better if you call me first.

FRIEND ONE

Did you download Houseparty?

FRIEND TWO

I can't get Zoom to work properly, do you understand it?

FRIEND THREE

Maybe we can have some drinks on Facetime? It would be good to chat.

FRIEND FOUR

It's been so long since we talked. How are you?

ME

I don't get invites to online quizzes because I think people don't want me there. But in reality it's probably because they know I will say no.

In the past, I have always said no to social events. But I think now I would say yes. I begin to notice small cracks around the roof of the living room. A story I can't remember. But I know they're there. I go to work. I come home. I look at the cracks and begin to see a version of your name inside every one.

NEWS

March 25th, 2020: 1,610 Covid deaths.

ME

When you're told not to do something, it makes you want to do that thing even more. Does that make sense? Blow Job and his merry band of idiots banned seeing people inside. That's all I wanted to do. Have people come inside.

GRINDR

Welcome back, darling. That picture of your body is perfect. I love when you come back to me.

NEWS

March 27th, 2020: 2,482 Covid deaths.

ME

Living alone is great when you want to be bent over and fucked as many times as you can take in one day. It's not so great when there's a virus spreading through the world and you're cooped up with nobody to talk to. On my bed there is a cuddly stuffed Eeyore and Piglet. You call me Eeyore so I felt it fair that you were Piglet. I set them into a pose and send you the picture. You see the message but you don't reply.

PIGLET

You could talk to me.

ME

I could. It might be considered weird.

PIGLET

It's all you have right now.

ME

Okay. What do you want to talk about?

PIGLET

You tell me. You're the one who wants to talk.

ME

I've called you and you won't answer me.

PIGLET

I am not him.

ME

I know. I said this would be weird.

PIGLET

You're doing it anyway. Projecting him into me.

ME

I need someone. Something.

PIGLET

I'm a stuffed animal.

ME

My fingers land on your name but I can't bring myself to hit call. Sometimes no message is the message.

NEWS

March 31st, 2020: 5,119 Covid deaths.

ME

I want to talk calmly and clearly about how work makes me feel but I can't because I mainly feel traumatised. That sounds dramatic. As I stack shelves and try to avoid the public, I remember someone once told me it takes a lot more paracetamol to do serious damage than you think. You can only buy two packets at a time. That must be why. I work on a Thursday evening. In the street I hear people clap for the front line workers. Inside the shop, a woman yells at me because I asked her to step back so she wasn't as close.

CUSTOMER ONE

I've not got it. It's all fake anyway.

NEWS

April 1st, 2020: 6,039 Covid deaths.

MUM

What have you been doing today?

Nothing. ME

What's wrong? MUM

Nothing. ME

You can talk to me. MUM

I don't want to talk, mum. I'm waiting on someone to call. ME

You'll talk to them and not me. MUM

It's not that. Never mind, mum. I have to go. ME

NEWS  
April 2nd, 2020: 7,044 Covid deaths.

ME  
There are so many cracks around the roof of my living room. I spend my time studying the walls. I know every mark they contain. Every blemish. Every rise in paint reminds me of your forearms. I didn't notice these until this began. I try to reach them with my fingertips but I can't. They're covering your name but they have a story and I don't know what it is. If I touch them it might feel like your eyes on my skin.

You should call him again. PIGLET

You mean you. ME

Not me. Him. Call him. PIGLET

I've tried. ME

Liar. PIGLET

ME

He won't answer me.

PIGLET

There's a time difference.

ME

I delete all the messages you have sent me over the eight years we have known each other. Across every possible platform. I feel sick.

PIGLET

That was something you shouldn't have done.

NEWS

April 3rd, 2020: 8,099 Covid deaths.

ME

If I stand at my kitchen sink I can see into the apartments across the street. To the right is an old woman who always looks out her window. I wish she'd look at me. I want her to look at me. To share a smile. Protected by distance and glass. Directly opposite there is one where two guys live. One night, they were both in their underwear lifting weights. Helping each other. I thought it was hot.

GRINDR

Bend over and let me fuck you.

ME

I don't think that's a good idea. My neighbors might report me.

GRINDR

Fine. Delete me.

ME

I do. And then I wish I could delete myself. Dragged and dropped into the trash.

NEWS

April 13th, 2020: 21,012 Covid deaths.

ME

I take extra shifts at work to get through the empty loneliness which greets me every morning. Each room feels like its own cell. I now know this will not last a few weeks. I sit in the hall and wait to hear someone coming up the stairs. I hope that it's you. Every day I hope that it's you coming back to me.



NEWS

April 17th, 2020: 26,121 Covid deaths.

ME

They continue to clap for heroes. I am not a hero. I have to pay rent. I have to eat. I have to live. I tell myself I have to keep going even though my insides feel numb and the only thing that I want is to feel your laughter on my fingertips.

FRIEND ONE

You haven't answered your phone. Are you okay?

FRIEND TWO

Did you watch Tiger King?

FRIEND THREE

I've become a runner. I'm doing 10K every single minute of the day.

FRIEND FOUR

Do you sell yeast at work? Can you get me some?

ME

The cracks are bigger. I should have measured them when I saw them but I am too afraid to step on the ladder. I'm worried that I fall and if I fall I won't be able to answer my phone if you call. I'll have to drag my body to the door and even then I won't be able to reach the handle to open it. My door has no handle. It's hard to open. Everyone says that.

GRINDR

Welcome back, bitch! I knew your ass wouldn't stay away for long.

NEWS

April 27th, 2020: 36,480 Covid deaths.

ME

The guys across the street have moved their living room around. If I look at their apartment from my living room I can see the only decoration they have is a Scottish flag. One time I passed them in the street and they are both English. They have English accents. I am not attracted to them because they look the same. I can't tell them apart. But one of them looks like you.

PIGLET

It's not me.

ME

I know that.

PIGLET

Have you tried to call?

ME

I'm tired. Of waiting.

PIGLET

Maybe you should give up. You are good at giving up.

ME

That's not fair.

PIGLET

I think you are.

ME

I do as well.

NEWS

May 10th, 2020: 45,186 Covid deaths.

ME

I hate the clapping. It echoes up the street and into every crack inside my apartment. I don't clap for anyone. Working in a shop has shown me who people really are. I'm afraid when this is over I'll be at lunch with a friend and they will know one of the people who treated me like shit. On that day I hope I treat them like shit.

NEWS

May 12th, 2020: 46, 053 Covid deaths.

CUSTOMER ONE

I'm not using the self-service.

CUSTOMER TWO

I've not got it. You don't have to act like that.

CUSTOMER THREE

What do you mean I can't come in with my whole family?

CUSTOMER FOUR

Fuck you, I've followed all the rules.

ME

I am a human punching bag.

CUSTOMER ONE

Why don't you have anymore toilet paper?

CUSTOMER TWO

You need to watch your tone when you talk to me.

CUSTOMER THREE

It's my human right to pay with cash and you have to take it.

CUSTOMER FOUR

I'm going to report you to your manager.

NEWS

May 20th, 2020: 49,313 Covid deaths.

MUM

I miss you.

ME

We talk every day.

MUM

I miss you.

ME

We talk every day.

NEWS

May 22nd 2020: 49,955 Covid deaths.

GRINDR

Nobody is interested in you because you're fat. You need to lose weight.

ME

I start to run. I become a couch to 5K wanker and my joints hate me. They scream at me from inside my skin and still I push them every day. There is a cold feeling in my chest and I narrow it down to the fact I used to smoke 40 cigarettes a day and now I don't. I wait to get sick. We're all waiting to get sick.

NEWS

May 23rd, 2020: 50,239 Covid deaths.

ME

One evening, I get back from my work and my neighbor is wiping down his groceries with anti-bacterial wipes. He looks at me, his eyes afraid of what I will do. He says:

NEIGHBOR

I have a family. I have a daughter. We can't get sick.

ME

I go into my apartment and I look for the messages you sent me but I have deleted them all. Why did I do that? They were all I had left of you and now they're gone. What do I have to remind myself of you?

I cry.

I haven't cried in years. I can't stop. I look up into the cracks and I see your words. All the words you wrote to me. That is where they live now.

NEWS

June 16th, 2020: 54,817 Covid deaths.

ME

The cracks have reached the middle of the room and I touch them. I read the moments I can see and try to remember who you are. The heat they give off makes me horny.

GRINDR

I knew you'd be back, bitch. I'm always going to be here. I'm not going anywhere.

ME

I run.

I go until my legs cry.

I pass a man who stops me and asks me where I'm from. I'm wearing a shirt which has your home state's name on it. He says that's where he is from. I am not from there. You are.

NEWS

June 18th, 2020: 55,010 Covid deaths.

ME

The deaths keeps rising and I feel jealous. I wonder what the silence would feel like. Who would miss me if I was gone.

PIGLET

That's when I would call.

ME

I know.

PIGLET

Right after you had gone.

ME

I know.

PIGLET

It would be too late.

ME

You're not going to call me. I know that. Even though I wish you'd answer when I call because I have something I need to say. Something I should have said forever ago but it's been eight years and I don't know if saying anything would mean anything anymore.

PIGLET

ME

Now you stop talking.

NEWS

June 30th, 2020: 56,236 Covid deaths.

ME

The guy across the street undressed with his curtains open. He could see me standing at the kitchen sink and he undressed anyway.

GRINDR

Welcome back, honey. It's always good to see you.

ME

I delete and download. Delete and download. Delete and download. I wait for the police to come and arrest me for breaking the law. I wait to get sick.

PIGLET

Being a part of someone else doesn't make you whole.

ME

It could help.

PIGLET

It won't.

ME

It might.

PIGLET

Why do I still matter? You deleted everything.

NEWS

August 17th, 2020: 57,512 Covid deaths.

ME

The cracks have joined together like when I took a pen and connected the freckles on your chest. I am sure that if I put my hand inside I could see what's on the other side. I'd be able to hold your words in the palm of my hand. Watch them blend into my skin.

NEWS

August 25th, 2020: 57,624 Covid deaths.

MUM

Your dad and I will come up.

ME

No, mum. Please don't. I'm fine. (No thank you, I don't want any).

MUM

Who are you talking to?

ME

What?

MUM

You told someone you didn't want any. Who are you speaking to? Is someone there? Is it ██████?

ME

No mum. It's nothing. I'm fine. I'm going to be late for work.

CUSTOMER ONE

This is all a conspiracy. They want to lock us inside. They want to control us.

CUSTOMER TWO

Watch your tone when you talk to me. Who do you think you are?

CUSTOMER THREE

Exempt.

CUSTOMER FOUR

Exempt.

Exempt. CUSTOMER ONE  
 Exempt. CUSTOMER TWO  
 Exempt. CUSTOMER THREE  
 Exempt. CUSTOMER FOUR  
 WORK MANAGER  
 Your attitude needs to change. You're not doing a good job. We're heroes. Act like one.  
 ME  
 We stack beans onto a shelf.  
 WORK MANAGER  
 We're heroes. Don't forget that.  
 CUSTOMER ONE  
 I'm exempt. So is he. And we're coming in or you can call the police.  
 CUSTOMER TWO  
 Call them. I don't care.  
 CUSTOMER THREE  
 Do you sell masks?  
 CUSTOMER FOUR  
 Where's the toilet paper?  
 CUSTOMER ONE  
 Why are you stock piling stuff? There's plenty to go around.  
 CUSTOMER TWO  
 Back off, bitch. I'll do what I want.  
 CUSTOMER THREE  
 Stop talking to people like that.  
 CUSTOMER FOUR  
 Back the fuck away from me. If you want to fight I'll meet you outside.

ME

Everyone needs to calm down.

CUSTOMER FOUR

You want to be a big man, do you? Meet me outside. I'll show you who the man is.

ME

Everyone needs to calm down! We're all trying to live in this world. On this giant rock floating through space. Please stop. Please be kinder.

CUSTOMER FIVE

(You handled that really well).

NEWS

September 3rd, 2020: 57,736 Covid deaths.

ME

Would he have thought less of me if I told him that I love you? The man I met while running. How do strangers react when they are told things they don't want to know? Is it the same way they react to dreams? Outside of work, seeing him running is the only human interaction I have that week. I return home and check my messages. Nothing new for our story to begin again.

PIGLET

You could message me first.

ME

What would the point of that be?

PIGLET

It shouldn't have to be me.

ME

It's always me.

MUM

Haven't heard from you in days. Are you okay?

SISTER

Why won't you reply? It's like we don't exist to you?

NEWS

September 9th, 2020: 58,186 Covid deaths.



ME

I'm barely existing. When I get home from work, I sit on the sofa and I watch the cracks. Your words pulsate under my fingertips. The wallpaper underneath the paint reveals itself like the bulge in a man's jeans. Teasing. It wants me to pull on it. I haven't seen the guys across the street in what feels like years. There's a for sale sign on the apartment front door. My neighbor has gone. I think they've gone as well.

NEWS

September 22nd, 2020: 58,186 Covid deaths.

ME

I call the doctor. They're only accepting emergency appointments. I don't know if this is an emergency. Should I tell them that you haven't contacted me? Is that an emergency?

DOCTOR

Do you think you're anxious?

ME

I don't think I am. I know I am.

DOCTOR

What are you anxious about?

ME

That my family is going to get sick and die. That gay rights are going to be taken away. That this government will kill us all. That this will never end. That someone will cough on me at work and I will get sick. That when I don't go to work they hate me. That when a friend doesn't reply to my messages they hate me. That when he won't answer me he hates me. That he shows up. That he climbs the steps to my apartment after a twelve hour flight and knocks on the door. That I don't know what to say to him when he does reply. That I've left the oven on. That I've left the heating on and I'll be charged too much. That I am too fat. That I'll never have good sex. That nobody will ever love me. That nobody would care if I was gone. I could go on.

DOCTOR

People would care if you were gone.

ME

That's the one that interests the doctor the most. I'm prescribed anti-anxiety medication.

DOCTOR

Do you want something stronger?

ME

I know people on it. I want to feel things. I have to feel something. What's the point in being alive if we don't feel anything?

DOCTOR

There's an online course where you can manage your anxiety. I think you should do it.

ME

I have a pain. In my chest. It's like it feels cold. I thought it was because I used to smoke but it isn't there always. It comes and goes.

DOCTOR

I would link that to anxiety.

ME

Right.

DOCTOR

The course will help you.

ME

Okay.

NEWS

October 12th, 2020: 59,657 Covid deaths.

ME

The pills sit in my cupboard. I don't take them. I like knowing they're there. It's been seven months since this began. You haven't messaged me. Maybe if I learned how to get over myself, you wouldn't spend so much time living for free inside my veins. The cracks in the living room have gone. I'm not sure if it they were there in the first place. I manage my anxiety better than when I knew you. I remember the taste of your fingers in my mouth from the first time I tried to take myself out of this world. You opened the door and grabbed my arm. You pulled me into the bathroom and forced your hand into my mouth. That won't happen again.

NEWS

Hands. Face. Space.

ME

I breathe. I take walks. I spend less time on my phone.

17.

NEWS

November 1st, 2020: 64,311 Covid deaths.

ME

I no longer dislike the government. I hate them.

NEWS

November 8th, 2020: 66,985 Covid deaths.

ME

People continue to die. Every day more people die. I stand in my window watching the world try to move on. Do you feel like it's a dream? It isn't ending. It keeps going. None of us are waking up.

NEWS

December 1st, 2020: 77,636 Covid deaths.

ME

I check my messages.

NEWS

December 3rd, 2020: 78,541 Covid deaths.

ME

After nine months.

NEWS

December 14th, 2020: 83,639 Covid deaths.

ME

There you are.

NEWS

December 16th, 2020: 85,760 Covid deaths.

ME

My fingers hover over the buttons to reply.

NEWS

December 19th, 2020: 86,268 Covid deaths.

ME

A short answer? Or long. You want to know what I need to say.

18.

NEWS

December 20th, 2020: 86,808 Covid deaths.

ME

What do you want to hear?

NEWS

December 23rd, 2020: 88,614 Covid deaths.

ME

I write three different responses and delete them all.

NEWS

December 27th, 2020: 91,228 Covid deaths.

ME

Maybe this is the start of a new dream.

NEWS

December 28th, 2020: 91,934 Covid deaths.

ME

My life feels so small.

NEWS

December 29th, 2020: 92,360 Covid deaths.

ME

The pain in my chest has gone.

NEWS

December 30th, 2020: 93,373 Covid deaths.

ME

I hit call and raise the phone to my ear. You answer. I say:

**END OF PLAY**

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