

**WHAT?!?**

*(It's 7:30 on the same Friday night in the same alternate suburban reality. Lights up on BEN, standing at THE FRONT PORCH of a modest home. He looks great. He knocks on the door. Beat. He knocks again. After a moment, ANDY answers.)*

BEN: Hey!

ANDY: Hey! Um...what's—? I thought you were gonna pick me up a little after eight., It's only 7:30., Reservation's not till 8:30.

BEN: Yeah, um...I don't think I want to go out to dinner tonight.

ANDY: Okay. *(Beat.)* Is there...something else you'd like to do tonight?

BEN: Yup. There are a lotta things I wanna do with you, Andy. Tonight. *(Little beat.)* For starters...I wanna come in.

ANDY: Um... *(Andy closes the door behind him and steps outside so that whatever transpires must transpire outside—not inside.)*

BEN: And do some stuff. With you. *(Classy innuendo.)*

ANDY: Well, Ben...I can't...do that. I have to take things slow, I // told you—

BEN: I know, and I have totally respected that, but...this is just *too* slow! It's been over a month now, and I haven't even been inside your place, and you've never been over to mine, and I've never even held your hand, and it's just gettin' a little weird! I mean, are you into this?!?

ANDY: Yeah, yes!

BEN: Good!, 'Cause I am! And, well...I just think you're great, Andy.

ANDY: I think // you're great, too...

BEN: You're different, and sweet, and not...messed up.

ANDY: Well—

BEN: You're actually decidedly *un*-messed up.

ANDY: Well, I put up a good front.

BEN: But—I feel like...we haven't really moved forward since we met. We're not getting anywhere. And I want to get somewhere. With *you*. Because...*(He has something*

*big to say but struggles to say it.)—argh!—I can't believe—... God!—this is crazy—I never thought I'd be this guy, but...(He struggles to find the words.)*

ANDY: Are you okay?

BEN: Yeah—*(A happy struggle.)—argh, Andy, listen: Nobody's more surprised by this than I am, but... (Ben can't quite say what he says next directly to Andy, so he says it—but without eye contact. He probably says it to Andy's knees or to the ground—which isn't odd, actually, because the most important things we say are often said without eye contact.)* I love you. *(Beat. No response from Andy. He's just smiling. Ben reengages with Andy, expecting the best.)* Andy?

ANDY: What?

BEN: *(Again, not directly to Andy's face.)* I love you, Andy.

ANDY: What?

BEN: *(Maybe a little irked.)* Andy...

ANDY: What? I didn't hear you. *(He really didn't.)*

BEN: *(This is weird.)* Oh. Okay. Okay. Well...I mean, again, I know this might be a little soon, but...*(Again—not making eye contact.)*...I think I love you.

ANDY: What?

BEN: *(Irrked and hurt.)* Andy. Stop it. Come on! Cut it out! *(Little beat; then, simultaneous realizations.)*

ANDY/BEN: Oh, God! Oh, God!

ANDY: *(To himself.)* Tell me this isn't happening!

BEN: You know what? This was a mistake!

ANDY: What was a mistake?

BEN: Forget I said anything.

ANDY: What did you *say*?!?

BEN: Because, obviously, that was way too soon, wasn't it?, // Dammit! >

ANDY: What was too soon?

BEN: (*Ben is leaving.*) Stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid. >

ANDY: (*Not wanting Ben to go.*) Ben—no, no, no!—

BEN: (*Ben comes right back.*) But, you know what?, No!! I'm not sorry, and it's not stupid, and I don't care if you're gettin' all guy on me here, because I do!, (*Again, avoiding full on eye contact—saying it to Andy's knees or the ground.*) I love you, A//ndy and if—

ANDY: (*Andy does not hear the "I love you" part of what Ben said.*) Aaah!, It happened again!, // You do what?

BEN: *What* happened again?!?

ANDY: Ben: I didn't hear all of what you just said, so you have to say it // again—

BEN: What?!? Andy, // come on—

ANDY: Ben: Just say what you said again!

BEN: No!, And why would I want to?, It hasn't really worked out the way I planned!

ANDY: Because I think I know what you said and I wanna make sure you said it, >

BEN: Andy—

ANDY: **and I just need you to say it again! So just say it again, please!**

BEN: Andy—

ANDY: **Please!**

BEN: All right.

ANDY: And look at me when you do!

BEN: [This is weird, but...] All right. (*Little beat. Then, directly to Andy.*) I love you.

ANDY: (*Overwhelmed—happily so.*) Oh-my-God! Really?

BEN: Yeah. So...you heard me?

ANDY: No—I read your lips.

BEN: What?

ANDY: (*Andy is overwhelmed—he can't breathe.*) Oh-my-God!

BEN: What's goin' on? Are you okay?

ANDY: Yeah, yeah—oh, God, Ben—I'm sorry—um...there's this thing about me that might make you think a little differently about the me-not-being-messed-up-thing.

BEN: I think I've already started thinking differently about the “you-not-being-messed-up” thing.

ANDY: No—sh! I'm serious. God, I should have told you this before: Um, I have this thing—have you ever heard of hysterical blindness?

BEN: No.

ANDY: Well, it's like that.

BEN: I don't know what that's like—

ANDY: Well—they call it conversion disorder now, and...basically what happens is...whenever I undergo emotional stress, that stress manifests itself physically and gets converted into a physical response or symptom, and what you just said there, a second ago—that caused me stress, and so my hearing went.

BEN: That caused *you* stress?!?, >

ANDY: Yeah—

BEN: What I said cause *you* stress? >

ANDY: Yeah—

BEN: *I'm* the one who said it!!!

ANDY: Yeah, yeah, I know—but...I wasn't *expecting* it. That was just *fast*. And I can't do fast. I can only do...slow. Or...incremental.

BEN: Incre//mental?

ANDY: Incremental steps towards joy, yeah, but—

BEN: Incremental steps // towards joy? (*i.e., what are you talking about!?!*)

ANDY: Towards joy, yeah, but what you did—*said*—there a second ago just...launched me headlong into it, and I am not really capable of handling that.

BEN: Are you serious?

ANDY: Yeah. I can't be dazzled.

BEN: (*Receive and process.*) What—dazzl//ed?

ANDY: Yeah. My body shuts down when it's dazzled. And, you...dazzle me. >

BEN: (*Flattered and moved.*) I—?

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ANDY: It's actually happened before with you: The first time I met you I couldn't actually see you because you're so handsome—and it's usually minor when it happens, and I've been able to manage it...but what you just said is *major*, and I don't know if I'm gonna be able to manage that, because I know from experience what it'll do to me—

BEN: Wait-wait-whoa—slow down: (*Little beat.*) Why does this happen?

ANDY: Protection.

BEN: From what?

ANDY: From good stuff—like you.

BEN: What do you need protection from me for? I would never hurt you!

ANDY: Because I *feel* things for you, and—

BEN: That's good!

ANDY: Yeah, but no!, No! It's not! Because...the first time I ever felt all the things I'm feeling for you right now—(*i.e., the first time I fell in love*)—well...I learned pretty quickly that a lot of people...were gonna be very disappointed and angry about those feelings, and that hurt so bad that the next guy I felt all these feelings for (*i.e., fell in love with*)...well, my body just started shutting stuff down. So I couldn't have...those feelings—to protect me, they think—I actually collapsed that first time—I had to go to the hospital—and since then...I've just avoided anything like what we have...and, now, well: Here we are.

BEN: Yeah. Here we are.

ANDY: Yeah. (*Little beat.*) And there's no treatment except to take things as slow as possible—which you have done very well, but—argh—who am I kidding?, This is gonna be impossible!, You don't need this in your life!—which is maybe why we should just end this all tonight, right now, >

BEN: What?! No—

ANDY: save us both some trouble., So if you wanna walk away right now, no hard feelings, I get it.

BEN: Whoa-whoa-whoa, I don't wanna walk away.

ANDY: Well, what's—!?! What do you wanna do?!?, What do we do?!

BEN: We figure this out. 'Cause I love you, Andy, // and—

ANDY: Huh?

BEN: *(Looking right at Andy.)* I love you!

ANDY: Oh, yeah, // right.

BEN: Yeah, and I feel like—what you're saying—is that all the feelings you're feeling...well, I feel like that means that you feel the same way?

ANDY: Oh, I do, Ben!, // I *do*! >

BEN: Well, good!, Then let's [figure this out]—

ANDY: Oh, Ben!, I yuh yeuoh, too, Ben, but [that's not the point]—...(*"Ah yuh yeuoh" is "I love you," and it should sound like guttural and non-human—almost like throwing up. It's marred speech—like the tongue gets paralyzed for a second. It should be loud, ugly, and unexpected—almost like Andy is possessed. Tip: Drop the consonants, use the vowels and get guttural, ugly, and a little animal. Andy responds to his strange utterance.*) Oh-my-God. *(He tries to say "I love you" again, but he can't, because his speech is impaired.)* Ah yuh yeuoh, too, Ben, but—...

BEN: Are you // okay?

ANDY: *(Helpless discovery.)* Oh, God!, My tongue—my tongue won't let me—aaaah—this is what I'm talking about! Ben: Ah yuh yeuoh, too, Ben—aah—but, see?!?! >

BEN: What? Oh! Wait!

ANDY: Ah yuh yeuoh, too, Ben! // Ah yuh yeuoh, too, Ben!

BEN: Okay, okay! I get it! I get // it!

ANDY: *(Rapid-fire—and loud, ugly, guttural, desperate, and fast.)* AH-YUH-YEUOH-TOO-AH-YUH-YEUOH-TOO-AH-YUH-YEUOH-TOO- // AH-YUH-YEUOH-TOO, BEN!

BEN: Okay, okay! Stop talking!, Stop talking! *(Beat.)* All right. This is good! A little not-quite-what-I-planned...but this is good!

ANDY: No!, It's not!

BEN: Yes, it is! This was...a big step we just took!

ANDY: Yeah, and that's—I can't do that! I can't take big steps!

BEN: All right. Then...we'll take small ones. *(Holding out his hand, offering it for Andy to hold—like you would if you were going on a walk with someone.)* Here.

ANDY: What are you doing?

BEN: Taking small steps. Take my hand.

ANDY: I can't—

BEN: Take it.

ANDY: But I don't know what'll happen to me if I do that. My nervous system might [shut down]—

BEN: I don't know what'll happen to me. So just take it. And let's go for a walk. *(He offers his hand again. Beat. Andy looks at Ben's hand in utter uncertainty. As he goes to take it, lights fade. Existential space vacuum sound/Music/Transition.)*

**THE END** *(And we move on to...)*