

## Unmuting

By Emily Parr

ALAN, A (male, 30s) takes a deep breath and taps the video call button.

EVE, E (female, 30s) takes a deep breath and taps to receive it.

E Hello.

A Hello. I won't ask if it's you, then.

E At least we've been spared that.

A You okay?

E I think so. You?

A That bit's over with, so- you look nice.

E How do you know?

A I can see you.

E Head and shoulders. I could be half woman, half pangolin for all you know.

A It's what people say, isn't it? (*retracting*) I mean it, obviously, but-

E (*shyly*) You look good too.

A Thanks. I'll level with you, this serves me well. My bottom half's like a melting snowman.

E (*laughing*) I've seen the pictures, remember.

A Which ones did I put on again?

E That one you're pointing at a big pretzel.

A Why did I put that on?

E You tell me! (*retracting*) Not that it's not nice of you, it is, but-

*Pause.*

A It's weird to see your face move. You get so used to the profile photo.

E Do I look like my photo?

A Technically, you're just a moving image, so it's hard to judge.

E I was wondering about your voice.

A Does it match?

E Yeah.

A Good...I think.

*Pause.*

E *(rapidly, with nervous energy)* I wasn't sure whether you wanted to do the whole meal thing or the coffee thing. I only drink tea, but no one says 'meet for tea'. I suppose it's too ambiguous when you call your dinner 'tea' as well. What do you call your tea?

A Tea.

E Good...Sorry, am I talking too fast?

A *(amused)* I'm keeping up, don't worry. Just not sure the wi-fi is.

E I've put my tea on, anyway, just in case you want to make it more – formal- or whatever.

A What – like- mutually clinking the screens with our glasses?

E *(embarrassed)* Sorry - I just thought –

A *(feeling bad)* No, please! Don't let me stop you!

E No, it's fine. I'll wait. I just didn't know what was best.

A I feel bad now.

E Don't. Saves me worrying about the mic amplifying my chewing sounds anyway.

A What are you having?

E Breaded chicken elephants. I was lucky to get them. This mum was close to wrestling them off me, I could tell.

A Hard times!

E I'll get it out the way - I'm not a great cook. I can't magic something up from sauces and pulses or whatever.

A Nobody can. Don't believe the posts.

E But I'm force-fed photos of wholesome home bakes from wholesome families every three seconds.

A Just mute the groups!

E I can't. It looks anti-social.

A They don't know. Just console yourself with the fact the novelty will wear off soon anyway.

E I suppose...Sorry, I don't want to sound negative. I know those things were set up for people like us.

A Like this, you mean?

E This is fine.

A That's good to know.

*E looks uneasy, distracted.*

Are you okay?

E *(anxious)* I'm just thinking – I better turn my elephants off.

A (amused) Go ahead.

E Don't watch me run.

A (playful) Well, I'm obviously going to now.

E No! Sorry, won't be a minute.

*E finds a book to cover the screen with: the ridiculous collage images of 'Puzzle Compendium'. She rushes out and back in again, removing it.*

A I liked your test card. Beats girl with clown.

E (thrilled) Do you remember that?

A Where is she now, eh?

*Pause.*

E So what have you been up to today?

A Rearranging my books in alphabetical order, ascending. Rearranging my blu-rays in alphabetical order, descending, just to mix things up a bit. How about you?

E I tried jogging. I don't think I've cracked it.

A (laughing) Why not?

E My gait's too weird.

A Your what?

E My gait. My feet are too heavy. It shouldn't be that noisy. It's embarrassing. Definitely can't do treadmills. I look normal walking, don't worry. It's just - anyway, you'll see.

A Will I?

E Sorry – I suppose – it depends, doesn't it?

*Pause.*

How do you find all this?

A Which 'this'? Isolation?

E If you like.

A I don't. Everyone insists on talking about being stressed about talking about it. The problem with distance is it makes people noisier.

E No show, all tell.

A That's good, that.

E Thanks.

A I like having the choice to be quiet in company, that's all. This forces you to talk. And it's all the overlapping, then the awkward pauses.

*Awkward pause.*

Sorry. You go. What do you think?

E We're bound to like quiet, aren't we, if we live alone? I miss having the choice of company though. There's no dystopic, I mean, futuristic-

A (*amused*) I know what dystopic means.

E (*mortified*) Sorry.

A You're such an English teacher.

E Sorry.

A Don't be! Go on.

E I bet no novels have ever predicted what happens when humans have to physically disconnect and hide away. Even in zombie films, they're out on the streets fighting them. Even in alien invasions, there's priests offering salvation. I can't even light a candle anymore.

A Are they out of stock as well?

E I mean in mass.

A (*surprised*) You go to church?

E Not anymore. (*defending*) I did put it on the list.

A I know. I've just never known anyone who says they are and actually goes.

*Pause.*

E You've just mentally given me a cross, haven't you?

A Far from it.

E I'm not going to quote Revelations at you or anything; no weeping or gnashing of teeth required, don't worry.

A I thought it was 'grinding'?

E Might be. (*wryly*) Impressive, for a heathen.

A If I can cope without footy, you'll be okay.

E You watch football?

A Not anymore. (*defending, like E before*) I did put it on the list.

E I know. I just didn't see you posing in a kit with a pint in your hand, that's all.

A Well I didn't see you with rosary beads wistfully looking into a beam of divine light either.

E (*amused*) Touché.

*Pause.*

A So what's your plan for tomorrow?

E I might try going out in different disguises to see how many trips I can get away with.

A Seriously?

E No.

A Oh. Well, in that case, I'll just make myself a big lollipop, steal some hi-vis and usher the angriest looking people I can find across the road. While playing the tuba.

E *(laughing)* Can you play the tuba?

A No. Failing that, I'll just kick a stick.

*Both laugh.*

E This has really helped.

A Which 'this'?

E You know what I mean.

*Pause.*

A Me too.

E I still can't believe our luck that we planned it just before the lockdown. Do you think that's a sign?

A I don't believe in signs. Do you?

E Not in that one, no.

*Pause.*

Are you sure you wouldn't rather have waited?

A It would have been too long.

E Do you think?

A Well, we don't know how long this will go on, do we?

E If it ever does end.

A Don't be daft.

E *(gravely)* But what if we're never allowed to meet anyone new ever again?

A Less of that. Tell me something else.

E Like what?

A Er...show me the three closest items to you.

E *(wary)* Why, what are you going to do? Is it a magic trick?

A Just do it.

E *(agonizing)* I can't – I don't know-

A - Don't overthink it! Just pick up anything.

E But they're not interesting enough. You're obviously going to judge.

A I'm not! I'm just curious. Come on, show me.

E *(reluctant)* Okay...*(showing one at a time)* A paint brush. A mouse in a dress ornament.

A So that's an ornament of a mouse in a dress, not a mouse inside an ornament of a dress.

E *(uncertainly)* Y-es.

A And last but not least?

E A notebook.

A Of?

E Bits of poems and stuff.

A *(beat)* You've thought that through.

E No, I haven't!

A *(teasing)* You said to yourself, 'In the event of him asking, I'll select ones that perfectly represent me...'

E *(smiling)* No, I didn't!

A You thought, 'But I'll have to make sure they're close by, so it looks improvised.'

E Why would I pick these? Why would I admit to a lady mouse?

A Come on! Anyone else would have a stained mug, remote control and crisp packet.

E Well, I'm not anyone.

A It seems.

E *(playfully defensive)* What about you, then?

A *(coolly)* I can't show you any.

E You made me. It's only fair.

A Ah, but mine would be too prepared, wouldn't they? You couldn't trust that. I could have raided a respectable skip.

E I've been analysing your background for the last 5 minutes anyway.

A Have you now? And what have you deduced?

E As if I'd say.

A Probably something along the lines of me having the colour scheme of a maniac.

*E laughs.*

Say no more.

*Pause.*

E Have you ever done it like this before?

A Oh, from my extensive experience of dating? Let me think...

E It's not been too awkward?

A Do you think it has?

E I'm not saying that.

A Me neither.

E So...

A So...

*Awkward pause.*

E I better see to the elephants.

A Enjoy. Ketchup or brown sauce?

E Neither. The barer the better.

A Right then.

*Pause.*

E Thanks for...speaking.

A Thanks for replying.

E Nice to meet you –ish. As in meet-ish, not nice-ish.

A *(amused)* And you.

E See you s- see you.

*A taps to end the call. E looks disappointed. She waits a second, then goes to turn the oven back on. She hears a text ping, and rushes back in. We see the screen.*

A 'No good'.

*E is gutted. There's another text ping.*

A 'Just made waiting to be next to you even harder'.