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WHAT?!

*It's 7:30 on the same Friday night in the same alternate suburban reality. Lights up on Ben, standing at the front door of a modest home. He looks great. He knocks on the door. He is excited and a little nervous. Beat. He knocks again. After a moment, Andy answers.*

BEN. Hey!

ANDY. (*Surprised.*) Hey! Wh[*at's up!*—*cool!*, Nice tie!

BEN. Huh?, // Oh, thanks.

ANDY. Where'd you get that?

BEN. I don't know. Online. SuperCenter.

ANDY. I like it!

BEN. Thanks. Um—

ANDY. So what are you doin' here?

BEN. Well—

ANDY. Isn't it Friday? >

BEN. Yeah—

ANDY. I thought we were on for tomorrow night.

BEN. Yeah, we were, but...I couldn't wait. >

ANDY. Oh—

BEN. So I thought I'd surprise ya. >

ANDY. Okay—

BEN. Surprise!

ANDY. So...what're we doin' tonight then?

BEN. Well, a lot of things, I hope.

ANDY. Okay.

BEN. For starters, I wanna come in...

ANDY. U//m...

*Andy quickly steps outside and closes the door behind him,*

*so that whatever transpires must transpire outside—not inside.*

—well—

BEN. (*Classy innuendo.*) ...cause some of the things I would like to do with you should probably be done inside.

ANDY. (*Deflecting the classy innuendo.*) Okay, okay, Well, Ben...I told you, I can't...do those kinds of things. Yet. 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 without making eye contact with him. 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 making eye contact.*

I love you.

*Beat. No response from Andy. He's just smiling. Ben reengages with Andy's eyes, expecting the best.*

Andy?

ANDY. What?

BEN. *(Again not making eye contact, and gathering the courage to say:)* I love you, Andy.

ANDY. What?

BEN. *(Reengaging with Andy's eyes; maybe a little inked.)* Andy!

ANDY. What? I didn't hear you.

*He really didn't.*

BEN. Oh. [Well, that's weird]. 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. *(Inked and hurt.)* Andy. Stop it. Come on, cut it out!

*Little beat. Then:*

ANDY and BEN. *(Simultaneous realizations.)* Oh, God! Oh, God!

ANDY. *(To himself.)* Tell me this isn't h//appening!

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. *(He is leaving.)* Stupid! Stupid—stupid—stupid. >

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

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 eye contact—saying this to Andy's knees or to the ground:*

I love you, A//ndy, and if—

*Andy does not hear the "I love you" part of what Ben said.*

ANDY. 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 jus 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, making eye contact with Andy, he says:*

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. *(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—I'm so sorry, but—um...

BEN. What?

ANDY. 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 caused *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? [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. (*Receives and processes.*) What—dazzl//ed?

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

BEN. I [dazzle you]—?

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. Anyway, 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 [fell in love and] felt all the things I'm feeling for you right now—... 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 [fell in love with and] felt all these feelings for... 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. And there's no treatment except to take things as slow as possible—which you have done ~~very well~~—but—argh—who