

Love in the Time of Coronavirus

A One Act Play (approximately 25 to 30 minutes)

By Gary Davis

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24 Pages; 11/18/22 version

SETTING

A nursing home in 2020 isolated from the rest of the world that is being ravaged by Coronavirus.

CHARACTERS

- RUTH An elderly nursing home resident, once a respected doctor and medical researcher now suffering from Alzheimer's, but is presently experiencing an extended period of lucidity.
- BOB A friend to Ruth and fellow resident, he is in a wheelchair and is suffering the late stages of cancer. Bob has been many things in life, primarily a theater director.
- JOY A young black nurse well loved by the nursing home residents and a primary caretaker for Ruth and Bob. She is a widow with two children.

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SCENE OPENS

(Ruth is sitting at a desk in a nursing home office. She washes her hands with hand sanitizer then opens up a laptop to make a video call. She is wearing a face mask and removes it for the call. She looks somewhat disheveled. Ruth's conversation is awkward and stilted. Although lucid, she is NOT 100% and sometimes has trouble finding the words she wants. But she is determined to find those words even when easier words will do. What might appear in the script as stuttering is actually her searching for the words. Words seem to flow easier for her when she's angry.)

RUTH

Hi, Deb. It's me. It's still me. I **know** me and I know **you**. I'm surprised how long it's lasting this time. It's happened before, but never more than a day. But it's been several days now. Sometimes it feels like maybe I'm back for good. But I know better. Eventually the ... um ... dementia will return. But I'm so grateful for this time. Grateful that I can say how much I love you and know who I'm saying that to.

(pause)

How's everyone doing? The kids, the grandkids, everyone still safe?

(pause for response)

It's not good. I tested negative today, but almost half of the residents and even the nurses and staff have it. So many of them are in ... are in ... re-respiratory distress and there are no ... v-ventilators to be had for love or money.

(pause)

It's a losing battle, but I'm going to see this through as long as I can – make sure they're at least comfortable.

(pause)

I can't account for this extended period of ... Illlucidity. Why should it happen at just this time when my life's skills are so desperately needed? Maybe some intervention from God. The nurses and staff seem to respect it and are looking to me for guidance. I do what I can ... while I can. I wish I were back in research working on this bastard.

There are so many things about this virus that don't make sense. The ... uh ... the ... oxygen depletion comes on so rapidly. The body is ... starving for oxygen. The patient should be gasping for air long before it gets to this point! Why aren't they? At that point the only thing left to do is ... is ... is intubation, but it's no guarantee of survival.

(pause)

Well we don't. There are no ventilators here, the hospitals can't spare them, so there's no ... um ... intubation. All we can do is make them comfortable.

(angry)

This place might as well be a goddamned petri dish. Nursing homes, veterans homes, prisons, any kind of assisted living facility, we're just an all you can eat buffet for this goddamned nightmare.

(Bob enters in a wheelchair, speaks in a raspy voice and occasionally coughs. Ruth sees the distressed look on his face.)

Bob ... is something wrong?

BOB

(removes his mask, but stays at a distance)

We lost Emil and Hang.

(pronounced 'Hahng')

RUTH

(this is crushing, devastating news)

Oh no, both of them?

BOB

I'm afraid so. The nurses had moved their beds together the other day. They passed away holding hands.

RUTH

(to Deb, Ruth is obviously grieved)

Bob says Hang and Emil have passed.

(pause)

We've lost so many I can't keep track, but this hits so close. Even at my worst they were such good friends to me.

(to Bob)

How are you holding up, Bob?

BOB

(avoiding the question)

Just took my test ... I'm good for another day at least. Is that Deb? Say hello for me.

RUTH

Bob says hello. "Hello Bob."

(she relays from Deb)

I'll call you again as soon as I can. Keep everyone safe for me. Give them my love.

(to Bob)

Did you want to call Carol?

BOB

(wheels his chair next to the desk, but still maintains social distance)

All the time. But I talked to her a moment ago. So I'm good for an hour at least.

(Ruth closes the laptop)

Honestly, I wish I could just stay with her till my curtain falls. That's what I hate so much about this Covid. We're at the end of our lives here. It's the time we most need our loved ones by our side. And we like to think that **that** time means something precious to them, too. But Covid is so cruel. Everybody's dying alone. Emil and Hang? I **envy** them so much – to 'shuffle off this mortal coil' ...

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together ... holding hands. I was told Emil passed first and Hang passed shortly after.

RUTH

She probably couldn't bear to be without him.

BOB

Maybe, but I see it another way. Hang was the first to come down with this. She was showing symptoms a few days before Emil. I don't think she died because she couldn't be without him. I think she was holding on past her time, clinging to life to make sure Emil wasn't left alone. Once he was gone, her mission was complete and she left to be with him. One hand held his as her other hand held his face. They were so in love. Did you know that Emil had saved her life when he was stationed in Vietnam? He was her knight in shining armor. Protected her and fought like hell to bring her back to America. He risked a court martial by marrying her while still stationed there as it was the only way to get her out. He had to leave without her to be able to raise enough money and make arrangements to fly her here. Her family hated him and told her she would never see him again. But she never lost faith and he never stopped fighting. It took months, but they were together again. And then, once home, he had to fight the bigotry in his own family.

RUTH

Yes, I do remember.

BOB

He once told me that her name meant 'angel in the full moon.'

RUTH

So much meaning in one syllable. He certainly saw her that way.

BOB

My heart really breaks for the nurses and staff that have it. Emil and Hang had a full life. You and me, we're on our last curtain call anyway. But they're just kids. Do you know how Joy is doing?

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RUTH

The nurses tell me she's not doing well. She still has a fighting chance, but she's not out of the woods yet.

BOB

Damnit, dammit. She shouldn't be here! She should be in the hospital, all of them! All the nurses and staff who have it should be in the hospital!

RUTH

They should. But all the hospitals are over capacity. The ICUs don't have enough ventilators to treat all the Covid patients they have. It's ... it's like ... um ... triage, war time triage. The fact that we have some open beds at least gives them a place to stay. That'll protect their families. They would want that. I can't help thinking of the homeless who could end up dying in the streets.

BOB

It kills me that they can't be in a hospital because they're here with us.

(pause)

I want to go hold her hand.

RUTH

Joy?

BOB

Yes, Joy. I want to go hold her hand. I want her to know that someone cares. I don't want her to be alone.

RUTH

Bob, she's in isolation on the third floor. You can't go up there.

BOB

Why not?

RUTH

Bob, get serious! You'll be exposed.

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BOB

Do you think I care? Jesus! My days are numbered anyway. The cancer will take me before the fucking Covid!

RUTH

Bob, everything above the second floor is in quarantine. If you go up, you can't come back down.

(pause)

I need you down **here**, Bob. I need your help. We all do.

(Bob realizes the truth of this, but is still upset about it)

I know you have a bond with Joy. She's such a sweet kid. She's made us all feel ... cared for. Her kids, too.

BOB

(with such fondness)

Oh, God, those crazy little kids.

(laughs tearfully)

I worry about them the most. Where are they right now?

RUTH

I think they're with Joy's mother. It's surprising she was able to have them here so often. I think most nursing homes wouldn't have allowed that.

BOB

They'd have had a riot on their hands if they'd tried to stop that! A cane or two up their asses for sure! Those two visited everyone here and they're everyone's grandchildren.

RUTH

Well, they're certainly yours! Your eyes always lit up when they came. I loved watching you act out stories for them ... singing show tunes.

(treading carefully)

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Although I think you sometimes forgot the lyrics. I know some of those words weren't right.

BOB

(in mock offense)

I would never forget a Broadway song, NEVER! It's just that I'd be singing them a song ... well, teaching them really, because they'd love to sing with me ...

RUTH

Oh, yes, that was a sight!

BOB

so there I was in the middle of a song and it would occur to me that the next verse was, well, a tad ... saucy!

RUTH

A saucy Broadway song? Shades of Sondheim, I can't imagine!

BOB

Yes, there are ... a few, more than a few. Soooo ... I made up a different lyric.

RUTH

What? On the spot?

BOB

Well ... yes. What else could I do? I didn't want Joy mad at me for corrupting her kids!

RUTH

(laughs)

Damn! I'm impressed.

(applauds)

BOB

(takes a bow)

Thank you!

RUTH

You know, I was in one of your shows once. It was a summer stock. I'd just graduated high school and had a couple months before I headed off to college and eventually medical school at Cornell. It was The Sound of Music. I played one of the nuns.

(sings)

“How do you solve a problem like Maria ...”

BOB

Yes, I remember.

RUTH

No you don't!

BOB

(mock indignation)

I never forget a show. And it makes me so happy that you remember it, too. Now we can share it again ... for a little while at least.

RUTH

I remember what fun it was and how we were like a family if only for a short while.

BOB

Yes, a cast is always a family that comes together, then sadly falls apart.

RUTH

I often wonder what happened to them. Did any of them go on to fame and fortune?

BOB

Do you remember Rachel?

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RUTH

Mmmmmm ...

BOB

She played Gretl.

RUTH

(musing)

Hmmmm, Gretl.

(gasps)

Gretl? You mean little Gretl? She must have been all of six years old at the time!
So adorable!

TOGETHER

(singing)

“The sun has gone to bed and so must I.”

(they laugh)

BOB

Five, actually! She later went on to have a pop singing career, released a couple albums. Then later moved on to script writing and producing in Hollywood!

RUTH

Imagine that! I’m so happy for her.

BOB

She was just five years old back then. Her world was a blank page and she writ large upon it.

(pause, Bob stares at nothing as he ponders)

Camila is five years old. Caden is eight. Their world is still in front of them. Most of their books are still blank. One of them could be president one day. One of them could be an astronaut. They’ve already lost a father.

(pause)

What if Joy doesn't make it?

RUTH

Oh, Bob, don't say that!

BOB

Oh God, Ruth, she's on the fucking third floor! Who comes down from the third floor?

(Ruth has no answer)

I'm scared Ruth. I'm scared for those kids. They're so young. Who's going to help them write their story?

RUTH

(steely resolve)

She'll do it ... she'll do it. I know she will. If anyone can do it, she can. She's strong ... feisty, too! Remember how Booker was? She kicked his ass ... put him on the straight and narrow!

BOB

Booker? He seems nice enough. When did this happen?

RUTH

Oh, I guess it was before you came. Booker's OK now, but he didn't start out that way. He wasn't pleasant to be around. But Joy took him aside and gave him what for. I think Booker didn't have a good upbringing, abusive parents maybe, but apparently he had a soft spot for his grandmother. Joy hit him right in that soft spot. She told him his grandmother could end up in a nursing home some day, maybe even this one. And would he want himself as her caretaker? Would he want someone like him, someone like the man he was at that moment to take care of her? I think he went home in tears that day ... came back the next a better man.

BOB

What a story! I can't believe I never heard that. Ruth, I've been working on a couple projects ... just some silly little ideas to make people feel better, maybe go out with a bit more dignity.

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RUTH

I'm all ears. Tell me about it.

BOB

I'd read that over in Africa during the last Ebola outbreak a medical worker noticed that patients were frightened by the medical personnel who were completely covered in protective gear ... hazmat suits, really. Couldn't see their faces. It was like they were aliens in space suits. The patients were frightened of the people who were trying to save them. So she took pictures of their smiling faces and put them on the suits. It made them seem much more ... human ... and caring. She found it eased some of the patients' stress. So I'm doing that here.

RUTH

That's brilliant. I can see the value in that. What's the other thing?

BOB

Ruth, I don't want them to die alone. I want them to have their families with them. So I made some calls. In the next day or two, there's going to be a delivery of laptops, about a hundred of them. Everyone who's sick will get one and they'll be able to video call their family and stay with them – not just five minutes before passing the laptop to the next patient. They won't be physically in the room with them, but they'll be there in more than just spirit.

RUTH

That's wonderful! I'm simply amazed, Bob!

BOB

And, of course, I'm keeping one for myself ... so Carol and I can be together.

RUTH

How did you manage to pull that off?

BOB

(proclaiming with arm raised)

I'm a theater director, I can do anything! Well, almost anything. What I wouldn't give to go see a show one last time. Better yet to be in one or direct one ... to be part of that act of creation and share it with an audience ... one more time.

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RUTH

Yes, that would be wonderful.

BOB

“But I have strut and fret my hour upon the stage and will be heard no more.”

RUTH

Mac-

BOB

(cutting her off forcefully)

Ah, ah, ah – we don’t say that name!

RUTH

Oh ... right. But technically we’re not in a theater right now.

BOB

All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players ...

RUTH

OK, OK, you’ve got me!

(they laugh)

BOB

Anyway, as for the laptops, I called in a few favors ... probably all of them actually. No sense holding on to them now.

(pause)

How are **you** holding up? If you don’t mind my saying it, you’re looking exhausted. You could use some rest. Maybe you should lie down ... take a nap.

RUTH

(long pause, it’s difficult to say)

I ... I can’t.

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(pause)

I'm afraid.

(trembling, almost in tears)

I'm afraid if I go to sleep ... it won't be me who wakes up.

(pause)

There was a time not too long ago ... I woke up in the hospital. Didn't know how I got there. Two beautiful young girls were standing over me. For a moment I thought they were angels. They were talking to me and one said, "...we love you, Grandma."

(pause)

And

(painfully)

I didn't know who they were. So with my usual twisted sense of humor I answered, "I love me, too," and laughed. They were my granddaughters, Gail and Sara. They drove all the way from New York when they heard I was in the hospital. At that moment I was confused. They looked so familiar, but I couldn't remember who they were. Why did I have to make a joke? Why couldn't I just say, "I love you, too?" I regret that.

BOB

(takes her hand)

I understand. I'm glad you're here.

RUTH

You know, I've only been awake ... been myself for a few days. I don't know how long it's been since that last happened. When did this all start?

BOB

It was several months ago. When it started the CDC and World Health Organization were trying to raise the red flag. But they were ignored. The argument went, "The flu is deadlier than this and you don't see that on the news every year." I can't remember how many people I heard spout that bullshit in the beginning. You sure don't hear it now.

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RUTH

Not deadlier than the flu? There's no metric by which that statement is true. Not now, not ever! This has the potential to surpass the 1918 Spanish Flu in casualties. We're almost there now!

BOB

Sweet Jesus! I remember stories about that from my grandparents.

RUTH

I keep going over it in my head – the ... um ... um ... the rapid onset of ... oxygen deprivation. By the time the patient – the victim is showing signs, they're already in ... um ... significant distress with a poor prospect for survival.

BOB

Is it really that fast?

RUTH

Hold your breath.

BOB

What?

RUTH

Humor me. Hold your breath. See how long you can do it.

BOB

Ok.

(holds his breath while Ruth counts, finally gasps)

RUTH

___ seconds, not bad. So what was happening towards the end there? What was your brain telling you?

BOB

(still gasping)

That I was running out of air!

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RUTH

Actually no. Believe it or not, the brain doesn't measure oxygen in the bloodstream. It measure ... it measures ... um ... carbon dioxide. When CO2 starts building up the brain starts yelling at you to breathe! But if the lungs are still getting rid of the ... um ... CO2, but not taking in enough oxygen, then that early warning system has been ... turned off.

BOB

So it just happens all at once? Crash and burn?

RUTH

(struggles to find the words)

Not necessarily. The virus has an unusually long ... long ... um ...unusually long ... a-a-asymptomatic phase, up to 14 days, all during which the carrier is ... um ... contagious. The ... the ... the oxygen depletion could begin a day before ... um ... symptoms display or even several days. On-onset of ox-oxygen d-d-deprivation could occur at any time in this phase.

BOB

(sees her struggling, approaches and takes her hand. He has broken social distancing and Ruth is taken aback)

Ruth, it's OK. You don't need those words to talk to me. You're not Dr. Fauci.

RUTH

(stands angrily)

I am, too! I am Dr. Fauci! I am!

(long pause, slowly)

I was ... Dr. Fauci. I was on that level. Hell, we went to school together, Cornell.

(calm now, jokes)

He probably copied one of my papers. And let me tell you, at NIH I never carried water for him!

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BOB

I'm sorry, Ruth. Let me put it another way. **I'M** not Dr. Fauci. So you don't need to struggle for me.

RUTH

(very emotive)

It's not **for** you. It's for **me!** It's the part of me that was my life and I've lost it. But now I can see it again. It's there,

(points out)

right there. And if I just reach far enough, I can hold onto it ... if only for a moment. No, I'm not Dr. Fauci, I'm Charlie Gordon. And I won't remember to put flowers on Algernon's grave.

BOB

I understand.

RUTH

Do you?

BOB

Let me put it like this. You see me as I am. But if I could get up out of this chair, I wouldn't walk. I would dance! And no one could stop me!

RUTH

(smiles)

Oh my, I guess you do understand.

BOB

So go ahead, Ruth. Dance for me!

RUTH

Ok, so we were talking about oxygen loss starting before the symptoms.

BOB

But without symptoms, there's no way of telling.

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RUTH

And that's the problem. Right now we can't get ahead of the virus and the health care system is so stressed, so overwhelmed, we're stuck in a ... in a ... rrrreactive mode. We're in a ... um ... societal triage. Wait, have I already said that? Well anyway, there's your goddamned death panels!

BOB

Isn't there any way of predicting where the next hotspots will be?

RUTH

(long pause while in thought)

Shit.

(said matter of factly)

BOB

I guess it's not that easy.

RUTH

No. Shit. The answer to your question is 'shit.'

BOB

(a bit confused)

Shhhit?

RUTH

Shit ... definitely shit.

BOB

Uhhh...

RUTH

With any type of infection, germ, virus, whathaveyou, some will exit the body through ... elimination.

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BOB

(getting it)

Shit!

RUTH

Well, and piss, too. Shit and piss.

BOB

OK, soooo how exactly does that work in a practical sense?

RUTH

You set up testing in the ... community waste water systems. Once an increase in the Covid-19 virus shows itself in the waste water, it'll predict an ... an ... outbreak of symptoms within one to two weeks. If you know where it's going to show up and at what level, you can ... mmmartial resources to that area.

BOB

Holy ... uh ... shit! Have you told anyone this idea?

RUTH

I just thought of it. So ... you. I told you.

BOB

Aaaaah! I mean someone who'll know what to do with it!

RUTH

Mmmmmm, there's an old research associate ... a friend, Dr. Li Chang. She's actually visited me here a couple times. She's at Johns Hopkins now. Maybe I can reach out to her. Although, honestly, I'd be surprised if this is news to her. Someone must have thought of this.

BOB

So what's next? If you know that some little town or big city is two weeks away from a major outbreak, what do you do?

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RUTH

Mandate lockdowns, mobilize resources ... logistics, equipment, personnel, space ... massive testing. But even with all that you still don't know which of the infected will need the most care until they show up at the hospital at death's door. If only we could predict before that moment who's at risk.

(long pause)

Oh!

BOB

Ruth?

RUTH

No, no. That can't be right. It can't be that easy!

BOB

What! What are you talking about?

RUTH

A ... a ... damn it! ... a p-pulse ... ox-ox-oximeter...

BOB

Am I supposed to know what that is? Jesus, it sounds like some giant piece of equipment. It must cost a fortune. How the hell can that be easy?

RUTH

No, no.

(laughing excitedly)

It's not big at all. It's tiny, just a tiny little ... little ... thingamabob ... fits on the end of your finger. It measures your pulse and the oxygen levels in your bloodstream. You can buy them on-line for \$20 or \$30. They use them here all the time!

BOB

That finger pulse thingy? They've used that on me several times.

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RUTH

On all of us! The p-p-pulse oximeter would clearly show the beginnings of ... oxygen ... depletion long before it becomes ... critical. It's not a vaccine ... not a cure. But from a treatment perspective ... um ... early detection could mean the difference between life and death. I should call Li! But, oh God, I'm tired ... I'm so tired.

BOB

Maybe you should take a short nap. I'll wake you in an hour or so. I promise.

RUTH

I can't. I can't go to sleep. I'm afraid.

BOB

OK, make your call. But maybe there's another call you should make first. Maybe you should call those granddaughters you mentioned.

RUTH

Oh, Bob. You're right. I so want to do that. Thank you ... thank you, Bob!

(Ruth runs her fingers through her hair to make herself presentable. Stage lights fade to black except for a spot on Bob.)

BOB

(wheels to a distance to give her some little bit of privacy)

Well if you're not going to take a nap, I hope you don't mind if I do. Don't let me sleep too long, Ruth.

(Bob takes the blanket on his lap and pulls it up over his shoulders. He takes a moment to relax and closes his eyes taking several deep breaths. As he does, Joy walks in and kisses him on the forehead. He opens his eyes.)

Joy? Joy! You shouldn't be out of bed. Are you OK? How are you feeling?

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JOY

Everything's OK now, Bob. But we need some help. Me and some of the other residents and staff are putting together a show. Know anyone who could help?

BOB

Well, let me think. Of course I'll help! Like you actually had to ask.

(He starts to wheel off following her. Joy turns back to him.)

JOY

Bob, you don't really need that.

(She takes his hand and he stands up)

BOB

(as they start to walk off)

What about Ruth? I know she'd love to help.

JOY

I think this call's pretty important to her. She'll be along when she's ready.

(As they walk off Bob does a little dance shuffle. Joy laughs and joins in. The spotlights follow the two of them leaving Ruth in the dark. The shuffle eventually becomes a spectacular dance number. After the finale, they laugh, hug and exit. Lights shift to a narrow spot on Ruth at her video chat.)

RUTH

I love you, Gail! Take care of those great-grandkids for me. You were the first, you know, the first to give me great-grandkids!

(pause)

I love you all so much. Bye now.

(ends call)

Thanks, Bob. I'm so happy I made that call.

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(Spot widens and general lights come up. Bob is still in his wheelchair.)

Bob?

(no response)

Bob?!

(She rushes over, gently shakes his shoulder. After a pause puts her fingers on his neck to check his pulse, does not find it.)

Oh, Bob!

(In tears, puts her hands on his arm, kneels down and buries her head in his shoulder crying. After a moment she looks up again. Looks around unsure, confused, voice shows a frailty not there before)

Bob? Was I supposed to call someone? Bob, tell me, who am I supposed to call?

(shakes his arm)

Bob! Bob!

THE END

Note to choreographer and music director – the dance segment should not be too short. It should start simple and gradually build to a grand finale. It could be five minutes or longer. Have fun with it. Also, if casting will allow, add

another older man and woman to the dance. The woman is Asian. Although never stated, the audience may rightly assume they are Emil and Hang. Their choreography should include a kiss at the end.

Note to lighting director – as the ‘shuffle’ becomes a dance extravaganza, some dazzling lighting can take place as long as it doesn’t reveal Ruth on her call. Some can go out into the audience so that after the number, when the lights go down, their eyes will need to readjust to the dark. The idea is that when a narrow spot comes up on Ruth, the audience will not see Bob return to his wheelchair and will not know he’s still there until the general lights come up.