

Thirty-Four Empty Pages, a new play

By Jake Alexander

CHARACTERS

STEF, female-identifying, a writer, stuck in a time loop

REGGIE, female identifying, her agent

(Lights up. A small apartment somewhere in Brooklyn. Not entirely sure what time of day it is. Shabby and disorganized and messy. Not entirely lived in; the places where a person exists are obvious, while some parts are never touched. Piles of books and pages and empty cans. Dirty dishes. A couch in the middle of the room, it definitely needs to be replaced. A small table, not entirely coffee-style, not entirely-desk, in front of it. A laptop sits open, the light from which streams onto a mass curled up on the couch. Suddenly, the buzzer sounds, loud and jarring. STEF sits up in shock, yelping a little. We shouldn't have been aware that she was even there. Her hair, her clothes, everything (generally speaking) is a mess about her. She looks around, wipes her eyes. She shakes her head a little, then remembers. She checks the laptop, slumps out of disappointment.)

STEF

Fuckity-fuck. Fuck fuck FUCK.

(The buzzer sounds again, loud and jarring. STEF gets up, pushes the button to unlock the door. She goes back to the laptop, scrolls down the page, hoping to find what she's looking for. She doesn't. There's a knock at the door. She doesn't get up.)

REGGIE *(offstage)*

Stef? Stef!

(No response.)

REGGIE *(offstage)*

Stef, open the door.

STEF

Hang on!

REGGIE *(offstage)*

Why am I waiting here?

STEF

Hang on!

REGGIE *(offstage)*

We have a meeting-

STEF

Hold on. God-

(STEF gets up and opens the door. REGGIE enters, put together.)

REGGIE

What was that about?

STEF

I was getting there.

REGGIE

Did you forget we have a meeting?

STEF

Yes.

REGGIE

You forgot?

STEF

No. I didn't forget, sorry I'm not myself right now.

REGGIE

I can see that.

STEF

I mean, I'm in my pajamas.

REGGIE

Stef.

STEF

What?

REGGIE

What's going on?

STEF

I'm having a problem.

REGGIE

Well, for starters, hygiene.

STEF

No, I mean with the play.

REGGIE
We talked about this-/

STEF
/No, you don't understand, just listen-/

REGGIE
/I thought we worked through all of this-/

STEF
/Reg-/

REGGIE
The theatre isn't going to give another extension.

STEF
I'm not asking for one.

REGGIE
Then what? Character? Dialogue?

STEF
Not any of that, it's all working-

REGGIE
Then why am I here at eight in the morning?

STEF
What day is it?

(A beat.)

REGGIE
We've had this on the books for weeks.

STEF
What day is it?

(A beat.)

REGGIE
What day is it? Have you slept?

STEF

Yes.

REGGIE
When? You look horrible.

STEF
Agents aren't supposed to tell their client they look horrible!

REGGIE
That's **exactly** what agents are supposed to do. When did you sleep last?

STEF
Just now.

REGGIE
Now?

STEF
Yes, you woke me up with the buzzing. Stupidly, I fell asleep.

REGGIE
Well, you clearly needed rest.

STEF
No! I needed to stay up! It was almost done!

REGGIE
What was?

STEF
The play! The show! I was so **fucking close** to being done.

REGGIE
Then why did you call me?

STEF
You didn't answer the question.

REGGIE
What question? You're all over the place.

STEF (*shaking REGGIE*)
What day is it?

REGGIE

Relax, would you? It's Friday.

(A beat. STEF slumps, lands on the couch.)

STEF
Fuckity-fuck.

REGGIE
Listen, I'm worried about you-

STEF
It happened again.

REGGIE
What did?

STEF
I can't believe it. Now I have to start exactly where I left off.

REGGIE
What's wrong with the play?

STEF
It's not done. I'm thirty-four pages away from being done!

REGGIE
How do you know how many pages you have left?

STEF
I just do.

REGGIE
Well, as I mentioned, the theatre is expecting it-

STEF
I know.

REGGIE
They want to announce on Monday.

STEF
I know that too.

REGGIE *(pulling out a sheet of paper)*
I printed the press release for you to approve, since you weren't answering my emails-

STEF

I can't look at that right now.

REGGIE

That's fine, I'll just read it aloud to you. You don't even have to say anything, just nod your head if you approve or grimace if you don't. Actually, you're always sort of grimacing, so give me a solid shake of the head if you don't approve.

STEF

Reg-

REGGIE (*reading*)

"From the brilliant mind that gave New York theatre-goers "Figments" and "Try Not to Slow Me Down" comes a new play on loss, abandonment, and outer space. Writer Stefanie Bloom steps back into the spotlight at The Plaything's Theatre after a five-year hiatus from the stage, with "If You Never Let Go", an amazing new take on space travel and our collective futures, which will have audiences wondering whether the gravity that holds them down is worth it at all. "

(A beat. STEF says nothing, just stares at the laptop screen.)

REGGIE

A simple nod or shake of your head will do.

STEF

Reg-

REGGIE

I can cut that last part, the part about gravity-holding-holding-us-down, that was a little-/

STEF

/Reg, seriously-/

REGGIE

/-I know, I know, it was a little creative license I took there, but you're not good with this type of copy. And what the marketing team had come up with, my god!

STEF

I have to tell you something.

REGGIE

Okay?

STEF

This is serious.

REGGIE

Okay, I think I know what this is about.

STEF

I promise you don't.

REGGIE

It's the nomination snub, I know, I know, I dropped the ball.

STEF

I know about it. And I don't give a shit about that.

REGGIE

"Figment" deserved to at least be nominated, I know that.

STEF

Seriously, I don't care.

REGGIE

And if I had just pampered the Obie-voters that night, if I had been more aggressive-

STEF

Reg, you need to let me talk!

REGGIE

But it's not reason to fire me!

(A beat.)

STEF

Fire you?

REGGIE

Yes. I deserve to keep managing you.

STEF

I wasn't going to fire you.

REGGIE

Oh. Thank goodness.

STEF

But now that you mention it-

REGGIE

Wait-

STEF

Why didn't I get nominated?

REGGIE

Really?

STEF

Yeah. It hadn't occurred to me until you just said something.

REGGIE

I shot myself in the foot because I properly informed you??

STEF

"Figment" is a good play.

REGGIE

It's amazing!

STEF

So why didn't I get nominated?

REGGIE

You know these things, they're so political.

STEF

I'm an up-and-coming talent.

REGGIE

You are!

STEF

People are clamoring to do my work. To produce me.

REGGIE

My email inbox is full to the brim!

STEF

So why the fuck wasn't I nominated?

REGGIE

I just told you-

STEF (*distracted*)

Wait. This is new.

(A beat.)

REGGIE
What's new?

STEF (*going back to it, forgetting*)
Who **was** nominated?

REGGIE
You don't want to see the list.

STEF
Why not?

REGGIE
Because it's just going to make you mad.

STEF
It's all men isn't it?

REGGIE
Not entirely.

STEF
Who on it isn't a man?

REGGIE
Jackie. The one-woman show.

STEF
Where she calls herself a "bitch" forty times in a row?

REGGIE
Cherry Lane really liked it.

STEF
So, because she told a story about how she used to strip, and referred to herself derogatorily forty times, audiences went wild?

REGGIE
Yes.

STEF
And she got nominated?

REGGIE

Yes.

STEF

Fuck!

REGGIE

Look, don't worry about it. It's all going to be fine. Now this piece-

STEF

You have to let me talk now.

REGGIE

As long as I'm not fired.

STEF

You're **not** fired.

REGGIE

Can I get that in writing?

STEF

Stop it. Don't interrupt me while I tell you this.

(A beat.)

STEF

Okay?

REGGIE

Oh, I thought you didn't want me to interrupt.

STEF

I don't. But you always so "okay" here.

REGGIE

I always say okay when?

STEF *(shaking it off)*

Nevermind. But a verbal confirmation that you won't interrupt me is important.

REGGIE

Okay.

STEF

You won't?

REGGIE
I won't.

STEF
Okay. Okay. (*A beat.*) I can't finish the piece.

(*A beat.*)

STEF
Aren't you going to say anything?

REGGIE
You told me not to interrupt. And I knew it wasn't done.

STEF
Well say something!

REGGIE
Okay. Why can't you finish the piece?

STEF
Because. Because the piece won't let me finish.

REGGIE
Won't...let you.

STEF
Yes.

REGGIE
Can I ask a question?

STEF
Yes.

REGGIE
How exactly will it not let you?

STEF
This is the weird part: I'm stuck in a time loop.

(*A beat.*)

STEF

You have to say something to that.

REGGIE

Stef. What?

STEF

I'm stuck in a time loop. I'm stuck on Friday. I'm trapped here. I don't know how long it's been, it's been forever as far as I can tell. I wake up every Friday, ready to finish the play, trying to figure it out, desperately trying to figure it out. I get so close, and I get to the end of Friday, and *poof*. It starts over again. Some days I finish! Some days I get to the end of the play, sometimes it's not very good, but I get there! I get to the end of the play, and I think, that'll be it. This will be over. At first I thought I just needed to *finish* the play. But it's more complicated than that. (*A beat.*) The first time it happened, it was like a gift. I thought it was the universe saying this was a good play, that I deserved more time to finish it. Like I needed all of Friday, and the universe knew I needed more time. So it gave it to me! And I got it done, and I was proud of it, and then POOF I woke up on Friday again. And all the work was gone. Thirty-four pages, gone. Like seeing something in a dream and having it disappear as soon as you open your eyes. Do you know how horrible that feels? How horrible it is? (*A beat.*) But the pages disappear. As soon as I wake up, all of the pages go away. And there's nothing I can do about it! I've tried everything, I wrote it in a book hidden on the book shelf, tried to hide it from this whole thing, but when I woke up, it was gone. I wrote it on my body. The entire play covering my body, and, gone. I've saved it every way I can think. I printed it out once! Put it outside the door, thinking, maybe it had to do with my apartment. Like the apartment was what was trapped, and as long as the play went outside it would be saved. But I woke up and it was gone. Like someone had stolen it. (*A beat.*) But last night, it came to me. I've tried the staying up thing before, but the problem is that Thursday, last night, I went out. And I'm always hungover on this Friday. I always am super exhausted. So I can't stay up! But it occurred to me, if I power through, if I have enough coffee, stay awake, I can get it done. As long as the sun rises on Saturday, I'll be fine. I made it to six this morning. I didn't even know what I was writing, but I had one more scene. I just had the final scene to finish. One more scene and I'd be done. So I saved it, just like I always do. I saved it so I could send it to Playthings on Saturday, and sleep. I could sleep knowing I had gotten it done. But I fucking fell asleep and you buzzed, and there they are thirty-four empty pages. I can't. I can't finish the play.

(*A beat.*)

STEF

Well you've gotta say something to all that.

REGGIE

Did you try driving off a cliff in a red truck while holding a groundhog?

STEF

Don't joke, I'm serious!

REGGIE

I have heard some excuses for writer's block, but this one is a first.

STEF

It's not writer's block!

REGGIE

Can you finish?

STEF

What?

REGGIE

Can you finish the play?

STEF

No...

REGGIE

And what keeps you from finishing?

STEF

The universe!

REGGIE

Yeah. That's writer's block.

STEF

Reg! I'm serious. Look at this. Look! (*she holds up the laptop, scrolls*) see all these empty pages after what I'd already written? That's what I write every day. That's what I do! I fill these pages, I hit save, and as soon as I wake up, they disappear. But the pages stay there.

REGGIE

You must've pressed down on the enter key too many times.

STEF

No! It's taunting me. Thirty-four empty pages. That will never be done. They will always be empty.

(*A beat.*)

REGGIE

Stef. Look. I know, the pressure of "Figment" and the last one-

STEF

“Try Not to Slow Me Down”.

REGGIE

Right, that one. I know the pressure to write something good is high, you want audiences to stay with you, but it just needs to be done at this point. The theatre doesn't even care what it looks like-

STEF

I care!

REGGIE

And you should! But there's readings and rehearsals and previews and loads of opportunities to finalize, to finesse, to polish. You're putting a ton of pressure on a first draft.

STEF

It's a first draft I *can't* finish.

REGGIE

Then submit it unfinished!

STEF

I can't submit it at all! I told you, I never get to Saturday!

REGGIE

If you're talking about pulling out-

STEF

I'm not!

REGGIE

Because we can't! We lose our advance. We have to hand it back. Are you prepared to hand back that amount of money? To have a press release go out saying you're not being produced? Because that would be career suicide. No one comes back from that.

STEF

You don't fucking get it.

REGGIE

I'm trying very hard to, but you're not making any sense.

STEF

It doesn't matter! This conversation is just going to happen all over again anyways.

(A beat. STEF stews. REGGIE tries again.)

REGGIE

Okay let's just say you're not making an elaborate excuse for being "artistic" or whatever. Have we had this conversation before?

STEF

Yes.

REGGIE

Every day?

STEF

Every day.

REGGIE

And what do I usually say.

STEF

You usually walk out right about now.

(A beat. REGGIE sits.)

REGGIE

So I'll stay then. See that it gets done.

STEF

Really?

REGGIE

I'm here for my clients.

STEF

It really won't matter.

REGGIE

Just. Try it. Write a little. See if we can get it done.

(A beat. STEF begins typing, half-heartedly, like she's done it over and over again (because she has).)

REGGIE

What did you mean before?

STEF

When?

REGGIE

Before you said “this is new”?

STEF

Did I?

REGGIE

You said “this is new” about what I was saying. When I brought up being fired.

STEF

Yeah. Because you haven’t said that before.

REGGIE

Huh. Well maybe this time is different then.

STEF

Things have been new before.

REGGIE

Have I ever been new before?

STEF

No. I guess not.

REGGIE

Then maybe there’s a clue. Maybe you’re getting out of it.

(STEF thinks on it. She goes back to writing.)

REGGIE

How far did you get? In the play?

STEF

The end of act one. The conflict is there, I just don’t know how to resolve it.

REGGIE

Maybe we should get you a typewriter. Something not backed-up on a hard drive. Maybe when you hit save-

STEF

Reg. This is serious.

REGGIE

Sorry. I’ll let you write.

STEF
Thank you.

REGGIE
Time loops make for interesting plays.

STEF
It's been done.

REGGIE
Hmm.

STEF
Reggie?

REGGIE
Yeah?

STEF
What if I don't get it done?

REGGIE
This draft?

STEF
Yeah?

REGGIE
You'll get it done. You've got 34 pages left.

STEF
You believe me?

REGGIE
I didn't say that.

STEF
What happens?

REGGIE
We lose our jobs.

STEF
No, seriously.

REGGIE

I don't know. (*A beat.*) Some plays don't have endings.

STEF

No. All plays need endings.

REGGIE

That doesn't mean we are supposed to like them.

STEF

This isn't my first draft. It's like my millionth draft.

REGGIE

Well. I'm sure they're getting better.

STEF

I don't know.

(STEF goes back to typing. They sit there awhile.)

REGGIE

When did you notice?

STEF

When did I notice what?

REGGIE

That you were stuck?

STEF

I don't even know. I tried marking the days but I lost count somewhere. (*at laptop*) How the fuck am I supposed to resolve this?

REGGIE

I'm not the artist.

(STEF keeps writing, stops, starts again.)

REGGIE

You should save your work right now. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe it's your laptop.

STEF

It's **not** my laptop.

REGGIE

Okay. Sorry.

(A beat.)

REGGIE

“Her bare feet seem to be saying: we have come so far, it is over”.

STEF

What?

REGGIE

Sylvia Plath. She wrote that a few months before she killed herself.

STEF

So what?

REGGIE

Maybe this is hell.

STEF

If this is supposed to be inspirational, it's not helping.

REGGIE

I'm not the artist.

STEF

Why did you bring up getting fired?

REGGIE

I thought that's why you wanted to meet.

STEF

I didn't want to meet?

REGGIE

Yes you did.

STEF

No, I didn't. I didn't set the meeting.

REGGIE

You did. I got a text from you.

STEF

Wait. What?

REGGIE (*pulling out their phone*)

Last night. You sent me this text.

(STEF reads the text.)

STEF

I didn't. Send that.

REGGIE

Then who did?

STEF

No, I mean, on the Thursday night. When I was out. I didn't text anyone. Because I left my phone at home.

REGGIE

Well, you sent me this text message at 1:42am "come over tomorrow so we can talk about it all".

STEF

Holy shit.

REGGIE

I thought "talk about it all" was a little dramatic. That's why I thought I was getting fired.

STEF

No it's about this. I wanted to talk to you about this. Somehow. I got a message through! That's the first thing that's changed. For real.

REGGIE

I thought I didn't ask you about getting fired in other times?

STEF

No, I mean, outside of the day. There are always variations, always small things inside of the Friday, but never anything outside of it! Thursday is always the same. The *context* is always the same.

REGGIE

So what does that mean?

STEF

I think I changed it. I think something stopped the loop. Oh, Reg, you stopped the loop! Which means...I think I have to finish the play.

REGGIE

All right! See! I did it! I managed you!

STEF

I don't love how surprised you are.

REGGIE

Stop it. Now finish up. We have to get this to the theatre by Sunday.

STEF

You'll stay?

REGGIE

I'll stay. (*A beat.*) But you should really hit save, though. You've got thirty-two pages to go.

STEF (*going to click save*)

That's a good idea. I really should-

(There's a flash. A buzzing. The time loops back around to: exactly where we started. REGGIE has vanished. STEF is back in the ball on the couch. The buzzer sounds again, loud and jarring. STEF bolts upright. She looks around. She looks to the laptop, scrolls down the page, hoping to find what she's looking for. She doesn't. The door pounds. She doesn't get up.)

REGGIE (*offstage*)

Stef? Stef!

STEF

Fuck. Back to the beginning.

(Lights down. End of play.)