

WAYS OF CONSIDERING CONTACT

by

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A contribution to the SamePulse digital care package

For anyone else for whom touch is not a native language, and for the loved ones
who draw us out of ourselves. Thank you.

PART I: Popcorn Flick (a two-hander)

Schubert's "Der Hirt auf dem Felsen" plays as we open on a black and white shot of TWO HANDS resting on adjacent armrests. Between them, a large bowl of popcorn.

HAND 1, girthy and grabby, plunges confidently into the bucket, emerging with a fistful of popcorn. It rises out of sight, then returns to its armrest, empty.

HAND 2, slender and furtive, taps gingerly at its armrest, moving methodically, finger by finger.

HAND 2 climbs carefully up the bucket, plucks a few pieces out, and glides upward. Then it slowly lowers back to the armrest, empty. HAND 1 curls into a fist and flexes wide before relaxing.

HAND 1 moves in front of the bucket, palm facing upward in expectation. Wiggling its fingers playfully, invitingly. HAND 2 clings to its armrest with white knuckles.

After a little too long, HAND 1 stops wiggling and slithers back to its place. HAND 2 wipes sweat and popcorn grease onto its armrest.

HAND 2, still damp, inches toward the popcorn bucket. HAND 1 perks up, stretching its sinewy fingers upward toward HAND 2. Both HANDS hover for a moment above the bucket, less than an inch of space between them.

Music swells. Slowly, HAND 1 reaches to grab HAND 2. Sensing danger, HAND 2 dives into the bucket, sweating all over the popcorn as HAND 1 closes around empty space.

HAND 2 retreats upward from the bucket, raising one piece out of the frame and then returning home, empty.

HAND 1, defeated, plunges back into the bucket of sweaty popcorn.

Music fades as iris wipe transitions us to black.

PART II: The Hugger (an internal monologue)

We're back in full color as we open on THE HUGGER, who is midway through an engaging conversation with the camera. We see them speaking animatedly, but we can't hear them.

Behind the camera, we hear a VOICE, which echoes slightly as it talks to itself.

VOICE (V.O.)

Huh. Okay. This went well. I think.

Yeah, yeah really well, right? For like the third time hanging out with a new friend, it wasn't as awkward as I would have expected. I mean I did shake their hand at the beginning, that was a little off. Do people even shake hands anymore? Either way, I guess I just did, so I'll be thinking about that for the rest of my life. But they seem nice.

Why are short people so intimidating? There's got to be some kind of deep-seated issue there, but who has time to unpack that? God, I feel like Big Bird. Except I think my feet are bigger. Today's show is brought to you by—

THE HUGGER reaches forward to pat the owner of the VOICE on the shoulder.

Oh, oh god they're touching my shoulder. Ha yeah, that's great. Okay. Okay, it's fine, super fine, just don't be weird about it... God, this probably means they're a hugger. Wonder if they're like a both arms over kind of person, or if it's more of a one-arm-down, one-arm-up situation. Maybe that's why short people are so scary. Like what if they put both arms under and I and up with both my arms around their whole head like a boa constrictor?

Remember that time I went to hug Nick from college, but both of us went left and I accidentally kissed his eyebrow? Okay, if we hug here, we'll both go right. But like, our respective individual rights, not the same right... right? Shit, I'm overthinking this.

The HUGGER moves in for the kill.

Op, okay moment of truth, coming in hot.

Okay, am I supposed to bend down, or—nope, we're going over-under. Maybe a... friendly pat on the back? Nope, that was weird.

The HUGGER pulls away.

Okay great, let go, detach—aaand ya did it. Stuck the landing. A stunning six out of ten.

(to the HUGGER)

Sorry, what? I think I blacked out for a second. Oh, okay, see ya later. Bye friend!

THE HUGGER waves cheerfully and exits, knowing not what chaos they hath wrought.

(internally again)

Fuck.

Fade out.

PART III: On Faith and Bruises (a late night chat)

We're indoors, staring upward toward the ceiling. Lo-fi music plays softly as smoke begins to swirl lazily about the screen.

VOICE (V.O.)

His optimism was enviable
There was a generosity
To the way he forgave—
An innate, guileless grace that carried him,
Softening the edges of his memory—
Christ, it was almost biblical.

Watching his fingers play over the pipe,
I wondered how they got so steady.
Already, I saw, his grace was at work,
Returning his body and heart to stasis

The boy contained rivers of living water,
While I was made for Old Testament fire.
No bother. If he's not angry enough for himself,
I'll hold enough indignance for the both of us.

He exhaled, and for a moment, his grace fell.

"I just never saw this happening again,"
He said, through tired eyes, and gritted teeth,
And bluing skin.

And as the stolen smoke from the old man's bag of tricks
Flew from his nostrils and into the rafters,
I folded my arms and laughed,
"Well, that makes one of us."

One last tendril of smoke finds its way onscreen as music and camera fade.

PART IV: First Date (a musical fever dream)

Outside the KISS DODGER'S home, we hear laughter and the jingling of keys as she approaches the front door. It's been a good date, but it's about 14 minutes past time to go home.

The KISS DODGER enters the frame.

KISS DODGER

Hey, thanks so much—it was really great to meet you tonight.

The KISSER, who is very clearly somewhere random in Massachusetts filming this because we're all in quarantine right now, appears. Through clever camera trickery, you'd almost think he was in the same place as the KISS DODGER, but neither party involved in filming this is all that clever with a camera.

KISSER

Me too, I had a great time.

KISS DODGER

Well we'll just have to do it again sometime, then.

A very long and uncomfortable pause ensues.

The KISSER raises one arm to the doorframe and leans on it, thereby declaring his irrefutable dominance over the entire state of Massachusetts.

KISSER

Cool, well, I'm gonna just—

The KISS DODGER fumbles for her keys and moves toward the door to unlock it. The KISSER, eager but always a fan of mutual consent, leans in slightly to signal his intentions.

Suddenly, the KISS DODGER spins around, and instead of keys in her hand, she's got a ukulele. She strums a cheerful chord and begins to sing.

KISS DODGER

*So look, you're really nice and all
And I've enjoyed this very much,
But if you haven't noticed yet,
I've sort of got this thing with touch.*

*I know that people say this,
But it's me, it isn't you...
If you could back away a little,
I'd have space to think this through*

As the song progresses, the KISSER slowly inches closer and closer to the camera. It's safe to assume that he can't actually hear the song being performed. Probably, he's experiencing a long period of silence as he waits for the KISS DODGER to close the gap between them.

KISS DODGER

*It's just that I don't want to kiss you on the mouth
Cause I've just met you
And I don't know where your mouth has been.
Sorry, that came out a little weird,
I'm sure you're fine,
But is it fine if we just hug this out and I'll head in?*

*I don't know what you're waiting for,
I'm halfway to the door
And I can see you leaning in,
But I don't want to kiss you on the mouth
Cause I've just met you
And I don't know where your mouth has been.*

The KISSER has gotten rather startlingly close at this point.

KISS DODGER

(speaking)

Wow, you've gotten really close... Are we still doing this?

Apparently, we are.

KISS DODGER

(singing)

*Well this has been the longest
Fifteen seconds I have ever had,
I thought that after six,
You'd get the hint and shuffle back a tad*

*And yet, you've gotten closer,
Wow, you're really in my space—
I didn't know you after work
And now you're inches from my face.*

*I'm sorry,
I don't want to kiss you on the mouth
Cause I've just met you
And I don't know where your mouth has been.
I don't mean to offend,
I'm sure you floss,
But you are glossing over lots of information
Just to dive right in.*

*Why don't you just text me?
We can schedule out for Sunday
And we'll try all this again,
But right now,
I don't want to kiss you on the mouth
Cause I've just met you
And I don't know where your mouth has been.*

With a profoundly awkward flourish, the KISS DODGER mercifully wraps up the musical portion of this film. The KISSER is still mostly oblivious to his surroundings.

Another very long and uncomfortable pause ensues.

By now, the KISSER is close enough to the camera that his mouth is basically in Pacific Time.

KISSER

(spoken)

Okay, well, um—I'm gonna head inside now. Um, I'll see you later, it was great to—

You—you can probably open your eyes now... No? Okay, well—

The KISS DODGER moves toward the door.

Bye. I'll, uh... I'll text you.

The KISS DODGER backs through her front door and shuts it behind her, presumably leaving the KISSER in an eternal state of puckered anticipation.

Fade out.

PART V: A Toast to Tiny Disasters

Easygoing electronic music plays as the VOICE from Parts II and III returns. Throughout the following story, we watch videos of people around the world hugging the loved ones they're currently in quarantine with. Sweet, right?

VOICE (V.O.)

The best worst hug I've ever had was from a good friend who would later become a great friend.

I turned to leave the room, and he held his arms out wide. Stress mounting, I trudged over and slapped a pair of awkward, brittle arms around his shoulders, and he felt the sting of instant regret.

He eyed me sideways and said,
"You're not very good at this, are you?"

He understated it.
I'm terrible at this.

Hugs, kisses, friendly pats on the shoulder—these are the tiny disasters that keep me up at night.

Now, six feet apart from the world, I am really in my element here. Three weeks after we were told to avoid contact with people, I realized I hadn't had a hug in four weeks.

But all around, people are mourning the loss of their everyday connections, and much to my surprise, the grief is contagious.

I find I miss my tiny disasters, and I remember the gift I was given a long time ago when my friend showed me, just for a moment, how other people experience touch.

"You're not very good at this, are you?"
He said. And he laughed, both at me and with me,
As only the best friends do.

And then he opened his arms again and said "Come back."
And he explained which way your arms go,
and how you can't tense up like that,
and what you're supposed to do with your head.

And he stood there with me until the tension in my mind
and shoulders released,

and for a few seconds, I understood.

Now, years later, I search my home for the two remaining
people to whom I'm allowed to reach out. I find them in the
kitchen and my gratitude overflows. I'll open my arms for
them today, remembering someone who once did the same
for me.

Fade out.

Credits roll. My grandma probably cries because she's generous and she loves
me like that. You scroll on to the next piece in this care package, still confused
about why I didn't just get someone who wasn't in Massachusetts to go on a
fake date with me. Your guess is as good as mine.

Thank you to everyone who contributed videos of your quarantine hugs.
Special thanks to my sister and her fiancé, who got spectacularly high for the
smoke shot in Part III.

Wishing you all connection and joy today.

THE END