

Characters

- Jean (F)** - Chip shop owner
- Elvis (M)** - Chip Shop assistant
- Harry (M)** - A regular customer
- Other Customers (M/F)** - Non-speaking

Scene 1 – Chip Shop

(A back-street chip shop, somewhere in England, sometime in June 2020. The fryer is centre stage with a small counter attached to it stage right. A large saltshaker and vinegar bottle are on the counter. We see a notice board displaying the prices and the shop signage “A Chip on the Shoulder”. A makeshift sign reads “Welcome back!” There are various arrows on poles to point customers across the shop to a ‘turning circle’ and then arrows pointing back to the front door. It is confusing, over complicated and should make no sense to the audience. To add confusion there is black and yellow tape running down the front of the fryer and across the floor at two metre intervals. Stage left, in the turning circle, is a circular table with some hand sanitiser on it. There is a huge arrow with the words *stand here* pointing down in front of the counter to a large blue spot on the floor. Stage left exit (behind the fryer) leads into the backroom room of the shop. Stage right exit (in front of the fryer) is the shop door. The bulk of the action takes place in front of the fryer and counter. SFX. The song ‘There’s a guy works down the shop swears he’s Elvis’ plays. Lights up on the empty chip shop. Jean enters stage left. She carries a spray and a container of wipes. She’s looking for someone but can’t find them. She sprays the top of the fryer, wipes it down and exits stage left. Elvis enters stage right. He pensively stands in front of the fryer and looks about. He goes back to the door and looks through the glass onto the street. Mid song, the music fades as Jean re-enters stage left. Seeing Elvis, she coughs loudly to get his attention. Sheepishly, he turns to find his boss glaring at him.)

Elvis: (Apologetic) I was checking.

Jean: And?

Elvis: Still no sign.

Jean: So, no different than three minutes ago?

Elvis: No.

Jean: Or five minutes before that?

Elvis: No.

(Elvis crosses towards Jean).

Jean: Two metres!

Elvis: I forgot.

They awkwardly manoeuvre around each other. Jean: heads to the door. She sprays the door and wipes the handle.

Jean: Your hands.

Elvis: What?

Jean: You opened the door, then you closed it.

Elvis: Oh yeah.

(Elvis takes a hand gel from his pocket and cleans his hands)

Elvis: What if no one shows up?

Jean: You're having a big tea.

Elvis: We can share it.

Jean: Not for me. Three months living over a chippy might be your idea of a dream come true, but I'm starting to look like a steak and kidney pudding.

(Elvis crosses back towards the door.)

Jean: Two metres!

(Elvis stops. They awkwardly walk around each other. Elvis crosses to the door. He reaches out for the handle.)

Jean: Don't!

(Too late, Elvis has touched the door handle and then realises what he has done.)

Elvis: Sorry.

(Jean sighs. Jean sprays him with cleaning spray. Elvis steps to one side as Jean crosses to the handle and cleans it again.)

Elvis: Can't we prop it open?

Jean: It's a fire door.

Elvis: Does that matter?

Jean: **(Sarcastic)** Of course not, I mean it's not like there's anything flammable in the building. It's not like we have gallons of cooking oil bubbling away.

Elvis: Oh, yeah.

Jean: Out the way.

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(Jean threatens him with the spray gun. Elvis raises his hands in surrender and steps aside. Jean passes him. Elvis heads back to the door.)

Jean: Leave it alone.

Elvis: I'm just looking through the glass.

Jean: You'll frighten people off.

(Elvis looks offstage.)

Elvis: Nothing. Hang on. It's that woman with the tartan coat, the one with the big hair and the halitosis. Now there's someone who actually needs to wear a mask. Cooee!
(Waves frantically and then stops.) She's crossed over.

Jean: I'm not surprised.

Elvis: **(Shouts)** Are you coming in? **(To Jean)** She's waving. She'll be over in two minutes. I think that's what she meant.

Jean: Step away from the door, Elvis.

Elvis: I'm sure that it will be fine. They'll be queued up before you know it, just like the old days.

Jean: You think?

Elvis: **(Trying to convince himself)** Yeah.

Jean: I give us two months, maybe three. If we're not back to normal by then, that's it, we're done.

Elvis: You reckon?

Jean: I've got suppliers ringing and red bills stacking up. If we don't get the footfall and get it quick... we're as stuffed as a deep-fried haggis.

Elvis: Technically speaking, your genuine deep-fried haggis isn't stuffed. The sheep's innards, onion, oatmeal, suet and spices are wrapped inside the sheep's lung before its placed in the batter.

Jean: It doesn't matter.

Elvis: It does to the sheep. Can't you take out one of those loans?

Jean: No point in prolonging the agony. I'll still end up shutting down, just with more debt.

Elvis: Maybe if you refurbished and advertised?

Jean: How do I pay for that?

Elvis: You could go online. You could have an App.

Jean: I can't afford that, and you can hardly peddle about on your bike doing the deliveries.

Elvis: There's always been a chippie here.

Jean: That's what people will say. "Oh, you can't close. It won't be the same". Well, they have to come back and put their hands in their pockets. If they don't, then it's time to move on.

Elvis: And do what?

Jean: I've no idea.

Elvis: There's a lot to think about.

Jean: I've thought about precious little else, sat up there, day after day. It all just keeps going round in my head.

Elvis: Best not to dwell on it.

Jean: What else is there to do?

Elvis: I've made the most of my time.

Jean: Well good for you.

Elvis: Kept m'self busy – tried to get rid of the old lockdown lard - plenty of exercise.

Jean: In your flat?

Elvis: I improvised a skipping rope with a bit of washing line, but I got complaints from the woman downstairs. Apparently my jumping up and down on the spot was disturbing her budgie. So, I did some exercises with weights.

Jean: Weights?

Elvis: Two tins of baked beans. It was a bit of a non-starter.

Jean: Too much like hard work?

Elvis: I was hungry. After four days of lockdown there was nothing else to eat apart from onion rings. I was going to do some decorating, but with everything shut, and I couldn't buy any paint. That was a close call. So, I had a spring clean. When I say clean, I mean took all the junk out of one room and stacked it up in another room. With the tip and charity shops being shut, I'd nowhere to put it. It's all piled up in the middle of the lounge. I've not been able to watch the telly for a fortnight.

Jean: Couldn't see it?

Elvis: Couldn't find it. So, I've been pondering. I like to ponder.

Jean: What did you ponder? Where's my telly?

Elvis: Music. Art. Philosophy. Literature. The nature of existence. I am a man of the renaissance.

Jean: I thought you said you were from Rossendale.

Elvis: I have been musing the vagaries of life. Life is an enigma. Unquantifiable. Unfathomable. Much like myself.

Jean: Yeah.

Elvis: While I was sat on m' own with nothing to do, you'll never guess what I got up to.

Jean: I don't want to begin to imagine.

Elvis: I had a revelation.

Jean: **(Not interested)** Did you?

Elvis: When I was having m' sort out I found this Self Help Book.

Jean: You have a self-help book?

Elvis: It illustrates "How simple lifestyle changes empower you to increase your confidence and maximise your potential for success in life."

Jean: Oh. **(pause)** Have you asked for your money back?

Elvis: It was in a charity shop. I had a space on my bookshelf. I thought it would impress visitors.

Jean: You don't have visitors.

Elvis: On the off chance.... I had nothing else to read and what with my telly being temporarily unavailable, I thought why not. It said you can re-energise, give yourself a fresh perspective on life, by trying something new..... like break dancing.

Jean: Break dancing?

Elvis: It's an old book. I've decided that for the next fortnight, I'm going to do something new every day. Yesterday.... I had a salad.

Jean: Bloody hell.

Elvis: I know. Adventurous, eh?

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Jean: It's a slippery slope. You'll be buying baguettes before you know it.

Elvis: One step at a time. I even had garnish. Raw red onion and.... sliced radishes.

Jean: You poor sod. You'll be eating at the table next.

Elvis: I had to microwave a steak pie ten minutes later, but I dipped my toe into the waters of possibility. You should try it. What's the one thing you want to do, that you haven't done? You don't have to tell me, just think about it. Blow caution to the win. It can be anything, so long as it's out of your comfort zone. Take up a new hobby. Ride a horse. Draw. Be nice to people....

Jean: What?

Elvis: You don't have to go that far. Read a poem. Listen to classical music. Eat a pomegranate.

Jean: I'll think about it.

Elvis: It's opened up a whole new world. Now, I face challenges head on and battle whatever the fates throw in my path.

Jean: It can't have been easy for you.

Elvis: How do you mean?

Jean: You know.

Elvis: I don't.

Jean: Facing the world with a name Elvis. What sort of parent saddles their kid with a name like that? It's like having "kick me" tattooed on your forehead.

(Elvis smiles and gives a half laugh. He's not sure how to react.)

Jean: The things parents do. I don't know why you didn't change it.

Elvis: I did. On my eighteenth birthday I changed it by deed poll.

Jean: But you're still called Elvis.

Elvis: No, I changed my name to Elvis.

Jean: Let me get this straight. You changed your name to Elvis?

Elvis: Uh – hu.

(Awkward pause.)

Jean: Why?

Elvis: Why?

Jean: Were you a fan?

Elvis: Of who?

Jean: Elvis!!!

Elvis: Not particularly. I wanted to be.... enigmatic.

Jean: That's one word for it. So, what were you called before?

Elvis: You won't tell anyone?

(Jean looks about the empty shop)

Elvis: I don't want to tarnish my imagine, shatter my aura of mystique. *(Pause)* I was called Geoff.

Jean: Geoff?

Elvis: Geoff. Geoffrey... Geoff.

Jean: There's nothing wrong with being called Geoff. I had an Uncle Geoff.

Elvis: What was he like?

Jean: Well.... He was... um... He.... I don't really know. He used to sit at the back at family dos, drink tea and agree with everything that Auntie Marjorie said. He didn't say much.... Didn't get involved. Didn't voice an opinion, but that was Uncle Geoff. That's what he did. He was a bit, well, nondescript.

Elvis: I didn't want to be nondescript.

Jean: But you are nondescript. Well, maybe not nondescript. That's the wrong word. **(Pause.)** Boring. That's the word, boring.

Elvis: Oh.

Jean: Dull. Not interesting. You know - boring. You don't mind me mentioning it?

Elvis: No.

Jean: There's nothing wrong with being boring. Speaking as an employer, I find it a positive asset.

Elvis: Thank you. I think.

(Pause.)

Elvis: You've never said.

Jean: It's not the sort of opinion you voice unless you've knocked back the gin.

Elvis: Started early, have you?

Jean: I speak as I find.

Elvis: And you wonder why we've no customers.

(Elvis looks away. Pause.)

Jean: I've not spoken much over the last three months. I'm out of practice. It just came out. I didn't mean it.

Elvis: It's fine.

Jean: I didn't want to...

Elvis: It doesn't matter.

Jean: I... er... like you.

Elvis: We're friends.

Jean: Colleagues.

Elvis: For twenty years.

Jean: Nearly twenty years.

Elvis: And for most of it, it's just been the pair of us. You stood there frying. Me stood next to you serving. All that time, two metres apart and never a cross word. It's quite remarkable.

Jean: You never say anything.

Elvis: There is that.

Jean: It was different when Roger was still with us. It could get a bit cosy with the three of us behind the counter. He could never have coped with all this, all these rules and regulations.

Elvis: He was never one for rules.

Jean: At least it's me that's left behind.

Elvis: You're not on your own. You can talk to me if you want to.

Jean: Not like I did with Roger. No offence.

Elvis: It's OK.

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Jean: I pay your wages. I can't... We have to keep our....

Elvis: Distance?

Jean: Social distance.

Elvis: Two metres....

Jean: I couldn't have kept going without you though. You know that.

Elvis: You still miss him, but it's been a long time.

Jean: Seventeen years. Seventeen years and three months.

Elvis: *(Trying to make light)* At least you haven't counted the odd days.

Jean: Eight days.

Elvis: Oh.

(Jean sighs.)

Elvis: It just feels awkward, now he's...

Jean: Now he's what?

Elvis: You know....

Jean: You can say it.

Elvis: Now that he's...

Jean: Spit it out!

Elvis: No longer with us.

Jean: **(Snapping)** Don't skirt around it. I hate it when people skirt around it.

Elvis: Now, he's gone.

Jean: I still come downstairs in a morning and sometimes, just for a second, I can smell that horrible aftershave that his old mum used to buy him at Christmas. Then I see him cleaning the fryer in his vest. It's just my mind playing tricks, seeing what I want to see. Some men have cars. Roger had his fryer! He'd polish it like it was a Porsche. I once caught him talking to it. I stand in here and his presence washes over me. I could drown in it. When Auntie Josie passed on, I wanted to spend the money on a caravan, but no. Roger wanted us to have our own business. No one wants another backstreet chippy I said. Every other shop on the row is a flaming takeaway. Then he smiled. "If you fry it, they will come", he said. I could never resist that smile. This was our life. Now, it's just mine. I know it sounds daft, but whenever I see that fryer, he's here.

(Pause.)

Elvis: Is he still living in Blackpool?

Jean: Yes. He's still living in Blackpool... with the woman we don't talk about...

Elvis: Do you hear much from your sister?

(Jean looks away.)

Jean: Oh, Roger!

Elvis: Never was a man more aptly named.

Jean: The kitchen bin needs emptying.

(Pause. Elvis thinks about responding but thinks better of it. He heads towards the exit stage left, but he can't hold his tongue.)

Elvis: **(To himself)** I suppose he could have been called Dick.

(Elvis exits stage left. Jean: looks about the shop. She approaches the fryer and smooths the top with her hand. She spots a mark and sprays it with her cleaning spray. She stops to think. Jean kicks the fryer. She clutches the top of it and tries not to cry. Elvis enters stage left.)

Elvis: Was that the door?

(Jean shakes her head. Elvis registers that she is upset.)

Elvis: It's all this lockdown business. It gets to everybody.

Jean: **(Deliberately changing the subject)** Have you put the potato peelings in the compost yet?

Elvis: Yeah.

Jean: The surfaces in the back will need re-doing.

Elvis: I've done them.

(Jean carries on polishing the fryer. She stays focussed on the fryer throughout the conversation. Elvis crosses towards Jean.)

Jean: Two metres!

Elvis: Don't you think that maybe... maybe, you're...

Jean: Your job is to prepare the spuds and serve the customers.

Elvis: ...dwelling on things too much.

Jean: There are plenty of opportunities for unskilled blokes your age. No need to work your notice. I can manage. You'll be fighting potential employers off with a stick.

Elvis: I'm not leaving here. I'm not leaving you. Not till, you know...

Jean: Then shut your noise.

(Jean is now feverishly cleaning the fryer.)

Elvis: He might as well be dead.

(A livid Jean turns and walks towards Elvis.)

Elvis: Two metres.

(Jean raises her hand to slap him.)

Elvis: Two metres!

(Jean takes a step back.)

Jean: Stay alert!

(Jean turns and carries on polishing the fryer. Elvis turns and starts to head to the back room. He stops and turns back.)

Elvis: I was here too.

(Jean stops cleaning.)

Jean: Relationships have their ups and downs.

Elvis: No marriage is perfect.

Jean: How would you know?

(Elvis tries to hide his hurt.)

Elvis: I saw what it did to you.

Jean: If we'd have worked at it.... Persevered... He had plans....

Elvis: He always had plans.

Jean: The first of a chain, he said. We'll have more money than we'll know what to do with. A fortnight in North Wales every summer, just the two of us. I would have been happy with just that. I didn't want this. Now it's all I've got. It was his dream. The customers loved him.

Elvis: They did.

Jean: Always laughing and joking with the blokes, and the women... They liked him too. Over familiar? That's being friendly. You have to when you're in business. If you're not attentive to your customers you lose them, that's what he used to say. If there's a problem you back each other up in front of the customers and sort it out behind closed doors. That's what we did. He explained. Every business goes through difficulties, cash flow problems, misunderstandings...

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Elvis: It was more than that.

Jean: You spend too much time on your own. Too much time in that head of yours. See things that aren't there. You should watch your mouth.

Elvis: Jean...

(Elvis moves forward.)

Jean: Two metres!

(Pause.)

Elvis: I stayed here for you.

Jean: I know.

Elvis: When he started seeing your Cheryl on the side....

Jean: You knew?

Elvis: Well, yeah.

Jean: You knew?

Elvis: I said.

Jean: You bloody knew and you never told me?

Elvis: I thought it would have been over and done with in a fortnight, like the others...

(Jean glares incredulously.)

Elvis: To do something stupid once, when you've had a drink.... I'm not condoning it... but it happens.... You can sort it out....

Jean: That's what he said the first time.

Elvis: But with four different women.

Jean: That's one more than I know about.

Elvis: Oh.

Jean: Don't tell me. I don't need to know.

(Pause)

Jean: Well?

Elvis: You said that you didn't need to know.

Jean: Elvis, when a woman says that she doesn't need to know.... she needs to know!

Elvis: That doesn't make any logical sense.

Jean: Logic or sense have nothing to do with it.

(Elvis flounders. Jean waits for a reply.)

Jean: Do you know how much damage I could do to you with the gravy ladle?

Elvis: No.

Jean: Would you like to find out?

(Elvis looks away.)

Elvis: There was that blonde from the wholesalers – I can't remember her name.

Jean: Sandra.

Elvis: That's the one. Mary from the newsagents, that was a surprise considering her impediment...

Jean: No wonder she smiles at me every time she passes me my Women's Own.

Elvis: And of course Linda.

Jean: Linda? Leopard skin Linda?

Elvis: The same.

Jean: She still cuts my hair.

Elvis: Not at the moment.

Jean: When did....

Elvis: It was just a couple of times.... I think. It was a long time ago. They all sort of merge into one. They didn't mean anything to him.

Jean: And that's makes it better?

Elvis: He still loved you.

Jean: So you talked to him about it?

Elvis: We didn't exactly talk.

Jean: You wrote it down? Used semaphore?

Elvis: He intimated things.

Jean: Had a laugh about it? A couple of blokes over a pint? What the old woman doesn't know won't hurt her.

Elvis: I never drank with Roger.

Jean: No. You didn't.

Elvis: I caught him in the back room with Linda once – when you were at keep fit.

Jean: So was he by the sound of it.

Elvis: He gave me a choice. Keep m' gob shut or have m' cards. I was going to tell you, but I couldn't find the right moment. He was always watching. After a week, well, it was too late. When he moved in with your Cheryl, a little voice inside me cheered.

Jean: You what?

Elvis: It meant it would all stop for you.

(Jean:cannot make eye contact. She tries to mask how upset she is.)

Jean: If it had been some slip of thing... That what happens with some men, but they come back. She used to paint her toenails different colours. I'm nearly three years younger. It was probably the smell of chip fat that did it.

Elvis: Don't make excuses for him.

Jean: He walked away...

(Elvis offers Jean a mangled hanky.)

Jean: I'm fine.

Elvis: You're sure?

Jean: I'm sure.

Elvis: I know what you're like.

(Elvis looks vulnerable.)

Jean: You're too sensitive. It's no wonder.

Elvis: What's no wonder?

Jean: A man of your age, on his own in a flat.

Elvis: You live on your own in a flat.

Jean: Its different. In all the years you've been working here you've not mentioned anyone, not once, family, friends, partner, nothing.

Elvis: It's not like I'm what they used to call "a catch".

Jean: No.

Elvis: There was someone once, a long time ago. It never got started. I blew it before we'd even begun. I've always wondered what would have happened if..... Still, I did dance with her. For me, that was brave. She was called Deborah. St Cecilia's School Disco 1976. I didn't want to go, but mum said had to, so I sat at the back with my I Spy Book of Civil Aircraft, willing for the whole thing to be over. This Deborah. she'd fallen out with her friend over some lad. The friend had won and they were out on the dance floor. Everyone else was dancing, except me. They were all having fun. I was having fun too. I was studying a diagram of the fuel tanks on Concorde. And she asked me to dance, well, told me to dance. She marched across the church hall, face like an over ripe plum, snatched the book away and said, "Are you dancing or what?" A magical moment. **(Pause)** Showaddywaddy.

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Jean: Showaddywaddy?

Elvis: Showaddywaddy. We danced to Showaddywaddy. **(Sings – not necessarily in tune)** "Let's go for a little walk, under the moon of love.... "

Jean: No. No. You can't sing!

Elvis: What?

Jean: You can't sing.

Elvis: Oh. The new Covid regulations. I forgot. Sorry.

Jean: No, *you* can't sing. It was just an observation.

Elvis: You've broken my flow.

Jean: Showaddywaddy

Elvis: Oh Yes. I'd seen them on Top of Pops. I had a vague idea. I could see the other kids sniggering, but I didn't care. Someone wanted to dance with me – and I was ready!

(Elvis poses and launches himself into a demonstration.)

Jean: You can't dance either.

(Elvis stops.)

Elvis: But you haven't seen my moves.

Jean: I don't need to. You dancing would be breaking the law. Excessive sweat spreads the virus It's too terrible to think about.

Elvis: Covid 19?

Jean: No, you sweating.

Elvis: It's an infringement of my civil liberties.

Jean: It's a relief for everyone else. Now please, we close in three hours, finish the story....

Elvis: OK, so I'm dancing. I was concentrating so hard it hurt. Slowly I got into it. I started to lose myself – I took her by the hand, she smiled, an over enthusiastic swing.... and she's flat on her arse.

Jean: At least you made an impression.

Elvis: It would never have worked. Even then she had her sights on better prospects. She was going somewhere. She's the receptionist at my dentists. Married the deputy manager at Aldi. Out of my league. So Geoff had to go. Its just been me, Elvis, ever since.

Jean: But are you happy?

Elvis: That's what I tell myself.

Jean: I was happy.... to start with.

Elvis: It used to hurt seeing what Roger was doing to you. After he left it was awful watching you shut down. I've seen blokes come in over the years, talking to you, you always give them the brush off. Remember that truck driver?

Jean: That's my business.

Elvis: He was interested.

Jean: I wasn't.

Elvis: A bit rough around the edges, but he owned his own juggernaut.

Jean: I'm fine as I am.

Elvis: It's hardly healthy.

Jean: It's up to me.

Elvis: Not every bloke is like Roger.

Jean: Aren't they?

Elvis: No.

(Pause.)

Elvis: When's the last time you let anyone get close to you?

Jean: That's enough. Sitting at home's sent you do-lally. I don't need anyone in my life.

Elvis: I do.

Jean: Then do something about it.

Elvis: What do you think I'm doing now?

(Jean finally realises what Elvis has been edging around.)

Jean: What? You don't mean...

Elvis: It's the next thing on my list to do.

Jean: It's a bit of a leap after eating a salad.

Elvis: All these years on my own... I've been thinking.... Writing m' list of things I should do with my life.

(Pause.)

Jean: This isn't the right time.

Elvis: Is there ever a right time?

Jean: I don't know. I don't know!

Elvis: puts out his hand.

Elvis: Let's eat a pomegranate...

Jean: It's not safe.

Elvis: I've waved at the postie through the window and that's it. This is the closest I've come to anyone in weeks.

Jean: That's not what I'm talking about.

Elvis: I'm not like Roger.

Jean: How do I know that?

Elvis: Sometimes you have to take a risk. Seventeen years Jean....

(Elvis moves closer.)

Jean: **(Disappointed, not angry)** Don't break the rules.

Elvis: I'm following my instincts.

Jean: This is a chip shop. It's not Barnard Castle.

Elvis: Jean...

Jean: A customer could walk in at any moment.

Elvis: Its hardly likely is it?

(Jean stops. It's like Elvis has slapped her.)

Elvis: No one is going to come. We've peeled and chipped all them spuds for nothing. Everyone's staying in. They're too scared to come out and I don't blame 'em.

Jean: Then clear off home.

Elvis: I couldn't bear the thought of you being here on your own.

(Elvis tentatively puts his hand out towards her.)

Jean: Two metres.

(Elvis withdraws his hand.)

Elvis: Let me put my arm around you. Just that. Nothing else. I promise.

Jean: Two metres!

(Pause.)

Elvis: I want to put my left arm around you and draw you in to me. I want to put my right arm around your waist. I want to let you bury your head into my shoulder so that no one can see that you're crying.

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(Pause.)

Jean: I want that too.

Elvis: I've wanted to for a long time.

(Pause.)

Jean: You don't understand.

(Pause.)

Elvis: Help me to do that.

Jean: People will see.

Elvis: What people?

Jean: Through the window.

Elvis: We could slip into the back.

Jean: It's tempting.

Elvis: It is.

Jean: We'd have to deep clean afterwards. When we're closed, maybe. Don't rush me. I've been self-isolating for three months.

Elvis: I've been locked down for much longer than that.

(Pause.)

Jean: Lets stick to imagining we're holding each other – for now.

(Jean closes her eyes.)

Jean: I'm ready. You ready?

(Elvis nods and closes his eyes.)

Elvis: I'm ready.

Jean: OK.

Elvis: Brace yourself.

(They both close their eyes and imagine they are holding each other.)

Jean: It's just been such a long time. I don't suppose it's possible to have a socially distanced love life.

Elvis: Oh, you can.

(Startled, Jean opens her eyes. Elvis does the same and awkwardly turns to her.)

Elvis: I said that out loud didn't I?

Jean: You did.

Elvis: Pretend I didn't. Imagine I kissed you.

(Pause.)

Jean: Well go on then...

(They pretend to kiss across a two-metre distance.)

Jean: Put some feeling into it.

(They air kiss again, this time it's much longer. They stop. They are both exhausted.)

Elvis: How was it for you?

Jean: I'm a bit rusty.

Elvis: Would you like a cigarette?

Jean: Not in here. Fire risk.

Elvis: Oh yeah. **(Pause.)** Can I ask you something?

Jean: What?

Elvis: Does this mean we're a social bubble?

Jean: It's the new normal.

Elvis: Can we... you know...

Jean: What?

Elvis: You know...

Jean: Eat a pomegranate?

Elvis: That's it.

Jean: You'll have to wait.

Elvis: I've waited twenty years.

Jean: Twenty years?

Elvis: Sorry, seventeen years. Seventeen years.

Jean: Then another few hours won't make much difference. Use your imagination.

Elvis: I am.

Jean: In my experience, when it comes to sex, imagination is far more fulfilling than the reality. Also, it lasts much longer and its far less messy.

Elvis: Remind me what I'm missing.

(They continue to air kiss, but this time move their arms as if they are embracing. They remain apart. Unnoticed by either, a customer enters, stage right. Harry stands patiently waiting for them to finish. Harry has a scarf

wrapped round his face. His bobble hat is pulled down and his coat collar is turned up. You can barely make out his features except his glasses.)

Harry: (muffled and inaudible) Mmmfffgggmm.

(Elvis and Jeanncarry on air kissing.)

Harry: (muffled and inaudible) Mmmfffgggmm.

(Still no reaction.)

Harry: (Pulls down the scarf) Service!

(Embarrassed, Jean and Elvis stop air kissing.)

Elvis: (Together. Disappointed) Hello Harry.

Jean: (Together. Disappointed) Hello Harry.

Harry: (Equally disappointed) How did you know it was me?

Jean: No one else wears a bobble hat in June.

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Harry: What?

Jean: Take your hat off Harry.

Harry: Speak up!

Jean: Take your hat off.

Harry: I can't hear you. I'll take my hat off.

(Harry removes his hat.)

Harry: (He doesn't lessen the volume of his voice.) How did you know it was me?

Jean: (Together. finger to lip) Shhhh

Elvis: (Together. finger to lip) Shhhh

Harry: What?

Elvis: (Barely audible) You must speak quietly!

Harry: Eh?

Jean: Raising your voice increases the chances of you spreading the virus. We've had instructions.

(Jean produces a leaflet from her pocket and waves it about. She reads from it.)

Jean: No raising of voices. No shouting. No yelling. No singing. No chanting. No yodelling and no playing of musical instruments that require you to blow.

Harry: You're in luck. I've left m' bagpipes at home. Now are you serving or what?

(Elvis and Jean exchange glances. They run behind the fryer/counter and stand there waiting with fixed smiles to serve their Harry.)

Harry: I hope that you both washed your hands.

(They both take hand sanitisers from their pockets and quickly wash their hands, singing "Happy Birthday to you.")

Harry: You're supposed to sing it twice.

(They sing it again, much faster this time.)

Harry: **(Interrupts)** I'll take the risk!

Jean: So Harry, how have you been keeping?

Harry: I manage. It's a struggle. But you know me, I don't grumble.

Elvis: **(To Jean – under his breath)** Here we go....

Jean: **(To Elvis)** It's like we've never been closed. Yes Harry –

Harry: You're the first people I've spoken to in months.

Jean: **(Genuinely sympathetic)** Oh love....

Harry: No one talks to me. The phone never rings. I sit in m' front room and look out of the window – doing me neighbourhood watch –

Jean: Of course –

Harry: It's m' public duty. I'm not being nosey.

Jean: No.

Harry: There's no cars going down our street. And no one walks past. No one knocks on m' door. There aren't even any kids playing in the road. **(Pause)** It's bloody marvellous. I'm hoping that they can arrange this again next summer.

Jean: You been OK for food?

Harry: I still get m' meals on wheels. They just leave it on the doorstep and bugger off. They don't stop and chat anymore, which is a blessing. I'm always well stocked. If I see a money off yellow sticker in the supermarket it goes in the trolley and then in the freezer. I've got more frozen cherry bakewells and loaves than you can count.

Jean: You can't live off cakes and bread Harry.

Harry: I've got plenty of crisps.

Elvis: Would you like some old fashioned, traditional, fish and chips?

Harry: I've not come for the conversation. If it's not too much trouble. I haven't got all day. No, that's not right. I have got all day. Shouldn't you be wearing a mask?

Elvis: You're being served from a safe distance.

Harry: It wasn't for hygiene reasons.

Elvis: Right, well, you need to follow the arrows.

Harry: The arrows?

(Elvis points out all the arrows on poles.)

Elvis: The arrows...

Harry: Oh. I didn't see them. It's like a cross between It's a Knockout and The Krypton Factor.

Elvis: It's a miracle of British ingenuity – a world beating oven ready solution.

Harry: It sends you round in a big circle.

Elvis: That too. Just follow the arrows to the Sanitation Station.

Harry: You mean the table?

Elvis: The Sanitation Station. Then wash your hands. Follow the arrows back to the safe serving area. That's here. Stand on the big blue dot on the floor. Then order your purchase with the knowledge that you're perfectly safe.

Harry: So I stand here?

Elvis: Yes.

Harry: On the big blue dot?

Elvis: Yes.

Harry: I walk over there, wash my hands, then I walk back and stand where I am now?

Elvis: Yes.

Harry: But I'm here.

Elvis: You have to follow the rules. It's for your safety and protection.

Harry: I'm already here!

Elvis: Follow the arrows. Go to the Sanitation Station. Wash your hands. Follow the arrows to the safe serving area, stand on the blue dot and make your purchase. If you've any queries, please refer to our Social Distancing Champion. That's me. I have a badge.

Harry: **(Exasperated)** I've got a dodgy knee, you know.

(Harry hesitantly starts to cross the stage. He soon gets lost in the maze of arrows.)

Elvis: No! One way. You have to go one way.

Harry: I'm only going one way.

Elvis: Get in the right lane. It's not a slalom course. It's a victory for good old British common sense! We have to protect you from possible cross contamination from other customers.

Harry: What other customers?

(Harry starts to navigate his way through the poles.)

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Jean: And stay alert!

Harry: I'm walking across an empty space.

Jean: You still need to stay alert.

Harry: If the virus leaps out and rugby tackles me as I walk round that table you'll be the first to know.

(Harry walks to the table. He makes a bit of a meal of it and Elvis has to direct him. He uses the hand wash. He squirts far too much so ends up wiping his hands on his coat. He gets to the counter. Elvis looks over the counter and points at the floor. Harry looks down and takes a single step, so he is stood on the blue dot. Elvis smiles a beaming smile.)

Elvis: **(Suddenly realises.)** Hang on.

(Elvis pulls a large Perspex helmet with a see-through visor from under the counter. He puts it on. He smiles again.)

Harry: Well, Sir Lancelot, I'd like my usual.

Elvis: Haddock and chips, mushy peas and a barm cake.

Harry: Aye.

Elvis: That'll be £4.50.

Harry: £4.50 ?

Elvis: It's always £4.50

Harry: Don't you do a reduction for pensioners?

Elvis: That's with the reduction.

Harry: What about an early bird special?

Elvis: £4.50

Harry: Discount for cash?

Elvis: You ask that every time you come in.

Harry: Are you familiar with haggling?

Jean: No, but I am familiar with bankruptcy. It's £4.50 Harry.

(Harry takes out a purse and peers inside.)

Harry: It's a sad state of affairs. Here I am, a pensioner, a loyal customer. I've braved the outside world, ventured into the unknown, trekked to your shop, risking contamination to support your business and this is the thanks I get.

Jean: Harry, you live next door.

Harry: I made the effort.

Jean: All right. All right. Have 'em.

Harry: I should think so too. Could you throw in a jumbo sausage?

Elvis: No, we can't....

Jean: Just give it to him!

Elvis: Haddock and chips, mushy peas, a barm cake *and* a jumbo sausage.

Jean: The fish will be two minutes.

(Harry tuts.)

Jean: You don't want a soggy bottom on your fillet. You have to let the batter crisp.

Harry: I could have got a burger on the High Street.

Jean: Well why didn't you?

Harry: It's not the same.

Jean: No, because we make our food with love. We're not flashy.

Harry: I'll say....

Jean: We've no fancy uniforms. No glossy menus. No corporate logo. Just us, on a back street, keeping folk's stomachs full.

Elvis: This place is about soul.

Jean: He's not talking about fish.

Elvis: It's much deeper than that.

Jean: You want me to explain?

Harry: Is it optional?

Jean: I'll tell you why we've bothered to open. Why we've gone through all this social distancing palaver. Why we've put ourselves at risk just to make your tea?

Harry: Because if you don't you'll go bust?

Jean: There is that, yes....

Harry: Just tell me. Preferably before m' chips go cold....

Jean: It's about having something that you can depend on. Going to the chip shop, it's a return to life as it should be. Comfort food that holds a community together. It's what we do.

(Harry is confused. He looks to Elvis for a translation.)

Elvis: In cod we trust.

Jean: I've had a lot to think about these past months, about this building.

(Harry shakes his head in disbelief.)

Jean: This Royal throne of mushy peas,
These wooden forks.
These pies of majesty,
these pickled eggs that no one buys.
This other Eden, this gravy paradise.
This fortress built of Accrington brick
for tipsy revellers on a Friday night.
This happy breed of fryers, this little shop
with precious fish trawled from northern seas
served in plastic, newspaper wrapped,
ate staggering home or on the bus.
Hearty succour on a rainy night
against the envy of less English fare.
This blessed shop, these tiles, this realm, this Chippy!

(Harry is speechless.)

Elvis: Salt and vinegar?

(Harry gives a half smile and nods.)

Harry: **(Dazed)** Plenty of vinegar on m' jumbo sausage.

(Elvis serves Harry and they continue to converse. Jean busies herself with the fryer. SFX. The song 'Under the moon of love' plays. Elvis starts to dance with the saltshaker and vinegar bottle. Jean joins in. Harry gawps in disbelief. A

chorus line of customers enters the shop, stage right. They are all kitted out with masks and gloves (Yes, I know gloves don't work, but it will be funnier, trust me.) They dance to the music as they queue for their fish and chips. Harry stands apart watching in amazement. Jean and Elvis come out from behind the fryer and join the dance. They turn towards each other as if to kiss – but still socially distanced. Harry looks into the audience and shakes his head in despair. He grabs his chips and exits stage right. Balloons fall from the ceiling. The dancers celebrate. Party poppers. Ludicrously happy ending. Blackout.)