

Lockdown Baby And The Death of Liza Minnelli

(2,370 words)

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Eileen's parents named her after the song. There are lots of things she wishes now she'd asked them before they died, but mainly she wonders if they knew what a dirty song it was. Who would do such a thing? Name you after a dirty song and then die? Inconsiderate. Siobhan said they probably named her because they did dirty things while they listened to the song and made her while they were doing it. Brendan says it's about drugs, but Brendan says everything is about drugs.

Eileen, Siobhan and Brendan used to smoke together outside the stage door. Before that they smoked outside the box office until a member of the public complained. Now they will have to smoke on their flat balconies and out the windows of their childhood bedrooms. The theatre says it will reopen and Brendan says fuck off will it reopen. It's not a cultural landmark, this one. The last act before they closed was a psychic who got the town's name wrong and smelled of gin. The whole theatre always smells of gin on a spiritual level if not a physical one. It has upholstery from the last opium war. It did pay a living wage though.

As she packs up her locker, before they go to the pub one last time, the manager comes over and asks Eileen if she'll be okay. He learned how to do his concerned voice on a course about compassionate management. She's the only one he checks up on, she's the only orphan girl, the

only urchin, the only one who didn't go to uni. She is a charity case who fits the establishment's penny dreadful aesthetic.

“Thank you Mr Daniel, but I'll be okay.”

“You know you can email me if you're experiencing any distress or hardship?”

“I do know I can email you if I'm experiencing any distress or hardship. Thank you Mr Daniel.”

“Are you going to be on your own during this difficult time?”

“I have my Auntie Nora. I'll be fine.” Fuck off will she go see Auntie Nora though. Auntie Nora has only eaten Weight Watchers ready meals for fifteen years. She wants Eileen to join a pyramid scheme.

“This is a terrible time to be young Eileen.”

“Thank you so much for your concern, Mr Daniel. You're a very compassionate manager.”

A lot of shit has accumulated in Eileen's locker. By the time it's packed in two fat rucksacks the pub is almost empty. Everyone must have realised they weren't meant to be in the pub. It didn't seem worth going in. The bags were heavy and the public transport was only going to get more

worrying so she went home. She saw a lady on the pavement coughing, but she saw it through the window of the bus from eight or nine metres away so it was probably, probably alright.

Her housemates have already gone, Nina and Alice and the other one. Nina moved in with her asthmatic girlfriend, half out of love, a quarter to do her shopping and a quarter because she has a one bedroom with a bathtub. Alice is trapped in Prague. She says it's terrible and she's very worried. She's staying with her grandparents and they own two Picassos though so it's probably fine. Eileen isn't sure about the other one, but they've definitely cleared out so she guesses they have parents who live somewhere, or something. Eileen is the sole inhabitant of a four bedroom house. She has achieved a million people's property goals. She can exercise naked, she can leave ham unwrapped in the fridge, she can die and not be found for six weeks.

The others have taken half their stuff with them, but half heartedly. They did a supermarket sweep of the living room to prepare for the coming siege. Eileen walks around barefoot noting what is gone and what is part of her armoury now. The throw from the sofa, the toasted sandwich machine, the good fan heater, and approximately fifteen coathangers are all gone. No one has cleared out any food so she will eat all of it, every last bite. She can be a gourmand now. She will eat all the leftover pizza once she has picked off the mushrooms. If she had parents would they have bought her a toasted sandwich machine like Nina's did? Was Auntie Nora meant to buy her one and she's been shirking responsibility all this time? Bitch.

Before unpacking she opens her laptop and types Liza into YouTube. The search bar autofill knows what she needs before she types it. When she starts singing it's the perfect compromise between wanting someone's voice to colour the silence and not wanting to talk to anyone she knows. Maybe Cabaret this time. If Eileen's voice could fill a room like that she'd never be lonely, if she could win best actress in a purple evening gown and turquoise eyeshadow. If she could make looking at her that magnificent, she'd never be quiet again.

In her backpacks from work she takes out four half-finished packs of paracetamol (essential in these troubled times), two stilettos with broken heels, a book she never finished and her favourite feather boa. When Siobhan asked why she had it she said it was for the staff party. She didn't say it was the only childhood dream she'd ever achieved. That's enough unpacking for today. She puts the feather boa on and lies down on her stomach in the middle of the kitchen. Her breasts and stomach smush into the lino gratifyingly. How excellent to have no work, no one to share your house, and be totally free to smush yourself into the kitchen lino in your favourite feather boa. The floor smells of fear and fairy liquid. She is a dying whale. She hauls herself onto her back and feathers gather sparkly in her nostrils. They smell of pink.

"Don't tell me not to fly, I've simply got to." She begins low like a secret. Her voice rumbles across the lino like a wave gathering itself to submerge a city.

How many weeks has it been? Hard to say, but there's mould on the apples now. She'd throw them away but she wants to see what colour they'll go next. Every time she's about to put them in the compost she remembers she lives alone.

Siobhan is crying because now she will never meet the perfect man she found on Hinge just a few days ago. He liked Grey's Anatomy and good wine and she's sure this one can't be married. What if he was the love of her life?

"He probably was the love of your life." Eileen says. She is upside down at the end of her bed in a yoga pose she invented herself. "You'll probably never find love again. It was only him in the entire world."

"Fuck off Eileen."

Eileen doesn't want to go on a date. If she wants anything she wants someone to tell her she's pretty then walk briskly away. She misses being stared at and she misses the customer who asked her to join him in the disabled toilet cubicle. She didn't meet him, but she still likes to imagine him waiting.

"Just think how you'd have felt when you found he was married."

“You’re right.” Siobhan is nearly twenty three and her greatest fear is running out of time to have a baby. She’s never had sex with a man who wasn’t married. Why this always happens is a mystery to science.

Brendan says “Mm.” He doesn’t like talking about men in case he could sound gay, but otherwise he’s in a good mood. He recently discovered Hunter S Thompson which was a very meaningful experience for him. They think he feels isolated and lonely but he won’t tell them about it, he just goes very quiet. Eileen brainstorms the things she thinks he might miss and wonders whether she should bring them up or not. He’ll be missing his gym, he’ll be missing second hand record stores that smell of smoke, he’ll be missing strange one man shows in theatres above pubs. She went with him to some of those but they made her feel stupid so she stopped.

“Are you alright Eileen?” Says Siobhan. Eileen thinks how they’d love for her to be lonely right now. They’d love for her to be sad like them so they won’t feel like fuck ups. If she’s doing okay and she has so much less than them, if she’s doing okay even though her parents are dead and she’s about to run out of money, what does that make them? She knows they’re scared of being avocado toast archetypes. She knows what they need from her. They can be a mess if she is a disaster. She wonders if she’ll give them what they want.

“I’m very well thank you. Nothing to complain about at all.” Maybe next time she’ll say she’s suffering. They can make her feel better and write in their secret diaries that they helped. “I’m

learning Spanish and I've been making soup. It's been a meaningful time for me really, I'm learning a lot about myself and I've got quite into meditation." The looks on their faces.

Shortly after that the call ends and she laughs to herself, upside down half off the end of the bed in the empty room. Maybe the houses next door are empty too. Maybe the whole street is. Maybe she could reach her arms out a kilometer wide and that whole space would be uninhabited, and she can role play Planet of the Apes running down the street in her pants towards the corner shop. Auntie Nora never showed her what to do with time like this. She never learned to bake. She doesn't like soup. For breakfast she ate four gherkins lined up a perfect distance apart on a plate decorated with tiny fancy leaves.

Lonely and hungry feel similar to her. They both start in the torso and radiate outwards. She's lonely in a not wanting to talk to people way and she's hungry in a not wanting to eat way. The house feels different now, it is part of a stranger and quieter nation away from the one the newspapers write about. Other people can go to the shops now or sit two metres apart in parks but Eileen has been given different rules to follow in the dreamworld country. She's a different sort of creature now. Her purpose in life is inhabiting this house alone.

There must be a way to talk to someone without losing the game of not talking. On a Thursday she has an idea. She goes to a website for people no one else wants to fuck and introduces herself as Sally. She tells a man she was addicted to speed in the eighties but she's clean now. She sucked off a Rolling Stone but she won't tell you which one. She has pierced nipples but you

can't see. If you look at the picture she posts you see her topless from behind holding her favourite feather boa up above her head. It could be an old photo, she could be any age, it might be a real polaroid or she might have made it with a pretentious app. Siobhan took that picture at a work party when she thought it would be funny if they took all their clothes off. A man had just left her and she was drinking vodka. It turned out he was married.

A man from the website calls her and she answers curled up in a ball under the coffee table. Life's candy and the sun's a ball of butter. Yes, she is naked right now, apart from her stiletto heels, a top hat and her favourite feather boa. She's having fun when she's talking but not when he's talking. She doesn't want to hear what he's up to or what he looks like, she just wants to listen to the silence when he believes her. She tells him he's a pervert and hangs up.

Next time her name is Fanny and she blocks anyone who thinks it's funny. Now there's less food left. She ate a whole box of praline chocolates at three in the morning then didn't eat for twenty six hours to see what would happen. Nothing happened. She nearly ordered Chinese food then she bought a book about sculpture instead. She doesn't go outside because then she would lose. She tells the next man that she had a husband called Peter but he turned out to be gay. It's okay because she meets so many lovely men on the world wide web. This one likes eighties pop music so she blocks him too.

She crawls through the web looking for flies.

She tells a woman from Chicago that her name is Vincente and she has a pacemaker. She thinks the woman is probably lying to her as well.

The bank starts texting about overdraft limits. She decides to drink Malibu and call Auntie Nora in floods of tears. How does she expect her to live without toasted sandwiches? If Nora wasn't such a fuck up, if she sold more vitamins to more housewives, she could finally treat Eileen how she deserves. Then she decides that would be boring and she doesn't have any Malibu left anyway. Siobhan has started karate to help her with her self confidence and Brendan has grown a beard.

In her pyjama bottoms decorated with Christmas sheep and her feather boa, she strokes up and down her ribs between her breasts.

Eileen wonders if she could go out now. It might have been months since she saw the news. She prefers current events to be a surprise. She thinks when it's time she'll build a new world with the other survivors, she'll be their funny girl goddess of valium and Follies. Everything will be different. When the moon is high enough and she feels the curtains about to open, she will be a freckle on the nose of life's complexion. She will step magnificently down the front stairs and sing.