

Lifeforce

A play

By Brian Coyle

Characters:

Alex (m or f) – twenty-four

SCENE 1

The lights are low. All we can hear are noises of an emergency taking place in a hospital. Lots of shouting and beeping and CPR etc.

ALEX: Would you keep the noise down? Some people are trying to think here.

The noise fades. It's now whispering in the background, beeping and faint hospital noises.

That's better.

As the lights come up ALEX is standing on a stage, in front of a mic stand. They address the audience almost like a standup comedian.

Now what was I going to say? Yeah... that was it.

If you had a time machine and you had the choice, would you live now, right now, or would you live in some other time. In the past maybe, or in the future?

I'm not being funny or anything, it's a hypothetical question. A thought experiment.

I'm not sure about the past. It all looks a bit... shit: grey, brown, beige and bad teeth. And we always seemed to be killing each other. Show me a history programme where we're not shooting or stabbing or blowing some poor bugger up.

Not everyone was killing each other. I mean there's Bridgerton... let's not go there... And then there's Jane Austen. She's Serena's favourite. I can't see the point of her myself, all that being genteel and sipping tea. But she lived in the past, so I guess it wasn't all bad back then. If you could stand the boredom.

But now then, now then! How about... if you could live in the future – fifty years – a hundred years – a thousand years! Driverless cars, an iPhone implanted into your brain, cancer cured, no First Bus to deal with!

Yeah... it sounds really cool the future. Why would you want to live now, in this shitfest? It just doesn't make any sense. The future is where it's at. Definitely!

Mind you, if I didn't live right now, I would never have seen Bake-Off. And that scares me. That blows my mind. Me and Serena love Bake Off. Shit...! If I didn't live right now, I would have never have ever known Nadiya or Liam, or even Rahul. I wouldn't want that. No way.

It's all academic, though. Jane Austen, Planet Facebook – Cause you don't have the choice. Do you? You live in the here and now and you just have to lump it whether you like it or not.

On the other hand, if I had lived in the past or in the future, I would never have met the Barista from Pret. And I wouldn't have ended up in here. In this state...

ALEX's mood changes.

I feel myself falling.
All the time I feel myself falling.
Down and down
Further and further.
Like a rag doll
Crack against a wall
Bang on some rocks.
And still I fall.
But here's the thing
As I fall, I feel no pain.
Even as I tumble

Even as I crash
There is no pain.
I feel nothing at all.
Nothing.

They return to performance mode.

Serena and me never miss Bake Off. She's my flatmate. I tell her everything and she tells me everything. Including stuff I really, really don't want to know. When she saw me in a hospital gown that first time and she knew I was "out-of-the-woods", she almost ended herself. She said it was the funniest thing she'd ever seen. I didn't laugh.

Mind you, if you had to design an outfit that was universally unflattering that would be it. Sorry, I just don't want to see some middle-aged man's hairy arse please. Even Beyonce would look like a minger in a hospital gown. Well maybe not Beyonce, but the rest of the planet would. Especially me.

Beat.

The Barista from Pret had these blue eyes. I'm not giving the Barista from Pret a name by the way. I've decided not to utter, or even think about the name ever again – Damn I just did.

Cobalt blue they were. And mournful. Even when they smiled – even when they laughed, the eyes were mournful. It's not fair that. Italian they turned out to be.

Enough of all this!

I was getting on fine. Better than fine. I was getting on brilliantly. Serena told me I was a deeply beautiful person. She was pissed when she said it obviously, but she meant it. She said I was the most beautiful person on Earth, behind: her mum, her gran, Taylor Swift and her dog Ponto. I said to her I

was honoured, but could I perhaps, just perhaps, be ahead of the mutt. She said, “of course you don’t come behind Ponto, we were equally beautiful” – yeah... very funny. That was her little joke by the way. She said so afterwards. She apologised and made me promise to believe that I *am* a “deeply beautiful person”. She worries about me you see. All the time. I told her, “Don’t worry, it’s not *that* difficult to believe.”

The Barista from Pret was allergic to dogs. They wheezed like forty a day-er anywhere near one. This created a minor problem in our fledgling romance.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. What you all want to know, I’m sure, is more about *me* first.

My name is Alex, I’m twenty-four, single, I work in Admin at the Council – I know, I know... boring – but I’m really an actor and a “one to be watched” stand-up comedian.

When anyone asks me what I do I don’t tell them I work for the council obviously; I tell them I’m an actor and comedian. They’re usually impressed by that I can tell. But, anticipating the next question I get it in before they do and say: no you wouldn’t have seen me in anything and no I don’t know Noel Fielding or Simon Amstell or Jack fucking Whitehall. Actually though, they might have seen me in something on TV. I was in a deodorant ad a couple of years ago – but does two and a half a seconds count? And I have met Simon Amstell. He swore at me once when I stood on his toe in Oblivion. “Fuck you too”, I said to him. Serena had to drag me off.

I’m not unintelligent by the way, if that’s what you’re thinking. I have a degree in Psychology I’ll have you know and an MA in Performing Arts. I wish I was thick sometimes. That’s part of my problem. You see if I was as fatuous as some people I can

mention then I'd probably be alright. But I'm not. So I'm not alright. And that's my problem.

Let me explain: you see if you're not fatuous then you begin to think about stuff – big stuff. Philosophical stuff. Questions like: what's the point? Just what *is* the point?

Each of us is like a grain of sand lying on the beach - billions of us – anonymous, totally alone and shouting: “look at me; I'm different to the other grains. I'm unique. I'm me.” Oh yeah...?

And if that's not enough, just for the fun of it we're destroying the beach we're all lying. It's covered in oil and plastic and condoms and other horrible stuff. And we're destroying the corral just off the coast. And the whales and the dolphins and the fish and the plankton or whatever. So that's when I begin to think, as any intelligent person would: what *is* the point?

And then as if *that's* not enough, it gets worse. We're only here on this miserable planet we're destroying for like an instant, a sliver, a wink, three score and ten or whatever it is. That's like we're here for a fraction of a fraction of a second of the full day in the history of the universe. You blink and literally we've been and gone...

Some people say religion is the answer. A meaning to life. A purpose. A point to it all, with eternal salvation thrown in. Oh yeah...? So there's some old guy up there (he's always male) watching over us. Benignly. Really...?

Mind you, when I think about it, maybe they're right. Maybe he is up there looking down on us. But if he is, he's anything but benign. I think he's more like those Greek or Roman Gods and he's having a laugh – at our expense. We're his playthings. Here for his amusement, for his entertainment. We're his TOWIE or Housewives of Cheshire – the ultimate reality show.

But you know something, if he is doing all this for laughs, I'll tell you this as someone who knows, he's not very funny.

Beat.

So that's me. I think too much. My mum says I should laugh more. She laughs. More than me. She says, "how can a stand-up be miserable?" I'm not miserable all the time. Not all the time. Quite the opposite. I'm the life and soul sometimes. What I'd like to tell her is that you only see me at home. Any normal person would be miserable in that house.

It's got nothing to do with her, I'd like to make that clear. It's *him* I have a problem with. She's a saint my mum. Thank God. We have a bat-phone together. It's part of my "safety plan". Any time of day, even in the middle of the night, I can call her. And I do. In fact, it usually is the middle of the night. And the first thing she always says is, "Are you alright love? Tell me you're alright."

We hear some talking in the background. A doctor, a nurse. And the beeping gets louder.

I know she'll be kicking herself. I know she will. She'll be in a terrible state. The one time she didn't answer. The one time her phone was switched off. That's when I decided to call. And she'll blame herself. I don't know if it would have made any difference. That's hypothetical.

I decided not to call Serena. She was on a first date with this guy she met in WH Smith. She said, "I'll be home by twelve. Don't you worry yourself". And I said, "you stay out, maybe your luck has changed". She said, "I'm not sure... he is pretty buff though. I'll see". She didn't come home in end. I guess her luck had changed.

And that made it an ideal opportunity.

The only other person I called, but who failed to pick up was... you guessed it – the beautiful Barista from Pret. The mournful eyed bastard!

So, that's why I'm here. In this place – again...

What? What...!?

They said it was a cry for help the last time. But it wasn't. They were wrong. Totally. It wasn't a cry for help; I just didn't know what I was doing. But this time I do. This time I know exactly what I'm doing.

SCENE 2

Slowly the lights come up. ALEX is crouching with the mic.

ALEX: I've stopped falling now
I've hit the bottom
With a bang.
Just me, on my own
And it's dark here.
All on my own.
It's so dark.
And quiet. Not a single sound.
Total silence.
Like in a vacuum.
There's no air for sound.
It's all been sucked out
And there's no air left.
No... no... no...

They gasp for air suddenly. And again.

And finally they catch their breath. They swallow it and start to calm down.

They listen.

It's not completely quiet anymore.
I can hear a car in the distance
I can hear the wind in the trees
And I can hear my own breathing.
But it's still dark. It's so dark.
I can't see a thing.

They put the mic back and we start to hear background hospital noises and whispering.

ALEX is back in performance mode.

It's a funny old thing – *life* – when you think about it. Not funny ha-ha. Just funny weird. Fucking weird.

For example, how many people that you meet in a lifetime do you think – do you have actual contact with? I have no idea, but I guess it must be... thousands. But here's the thing, how many of these people do you actually connect to – have meaningful contact? How many of them is it more than just an: "excuse me", or "alright?", or "town please"?

You see the thing is we're around people all the time, but there's no connection between us. We look at a homeless person sitting on the street and everyone is just walking by – never saying a word – and we think: "that's awful". But is it really that much different for the rest of us? I say hello to my boss Abbie at work and she says hello back, we talk about her horrible journey into work and I ask her about her horrible boyfriend and she tells me he's not that bad really.

Occasionally we have a laugh. It's not unknown. It's usually something about her weekend that she's found "incredibly funny". I play along with her. But here's the thing, she never asks me about my life. Never in over a year has she asked me a single question about my life – well almost never. I went away for a week to Ibiza with Serena last summer and all she said when I got back was "nice time?" And then went on to tell me about the time she went away to Corfu without the horrible boyfriend and how she was "very, very naughty".

So, does that count as being connected? I don't think so.

The homeless guy probably has more meaningful conversations that I do with Abbie.

Her boss, Susan, is even worse than her. She has never spoken to me in all the time I've been here - never. It's like I don't exist – like a literally don't exist. I know I'm only a freelancer and she's a solicitor, but really...?

Funny thing is Miss "Legal-Eagle" was sucking the face off Tom from IT at the Christmas "do". It was actually quite embarrassing. She was rubbing his crotch at the same time. I took a photo and it somehow managed to get on the internal website. That'll teach you to ignore me you ignorant bitch...!

I know... I know... A bit harsh. It's not really me – that person. Well, it is. And it isn't. I call them "bad Alex". Don't we all have a "side" like them?

So, who do I connect to, if not to Susan or Abbie?

There's my mum of course. And my gran. And there's Serena. And little Stan. And then, I guess, there's the Barista from Pret – kind of.

And... wait a minute...there are others...honest – there must be. It's just that right now, my mind has gone blank.

The hospital background noises fade. ALEX crouches again with the mic.

Black.

It's so black

But there's something there. I think.

There's definitely something there.

A shadow.

I can make it out - just.

I don't know what it is

But it feels familiar.

It feels safe.

We hear faint hospital noises again and ALEX is back in performance mode.

One person who definitely isn't on the "connection" list is Steve "Shit for Brains". Even though we shared the same home for years.

Steve is my mum's partner. A man so extraordinarily stupid that the term thick just doesn't do him justice. He's not my dad by the way. I hope you've already worked that one out. I wouldn't want any of his thick genes anywhere near me thank you very much.

One day, when I was about twelve, he just turned up. I knew my mum was seeing someone – she told me. And she told me I'd like him. I very much doubted that. And then a few weeks later he came to stay and he never left.

Little Stan is theirs' – my mum and him. So, in theory he should be subnormal like his dad. But he's not. He's very bright actually. He must have got his intelligence gene from his mum. He told me once that dogs don't see in colour – they see everything in black and white. Serena was a bit shocked by this. "Ponto definitely sees in colour", she says, "Ponto loves Christmas because he gets to wear his red coat". Little Stan thought this was very funny when I told him.

Yeah...he's cool he is. He looks a bit like his dad though, which is unfortunate.

I don't know what my mum sees in him. Although, I have to admit, he treats her well – he worships her actually. But how she puts up with his endless pointless anecdotes, I will never know. I told him once: "Steve, you know this story you're telling us, does it actually have a point to it. That's usually the

reason for telling a story – just saying.” It didn’t stop him though.

I know... I’m being unfair. I’m “bad Alex” again.

He came by earlier with my mum. Stood over there. Sort of half way in and half way out the room. He never came up to the bed. He never actually made any attempt to “connect”. But I guess he was probably thinking “Why start now...”?

My mum was in a bad state – howling she was. She just sat there holding my hand – stroking it. I thought she was never going to leave. It was him in the end that had to say to her: “we have to go love”.

She’s lovely she is. It’s not your fault mum. None of this is your fault. You are the last person at fault. The very last person.

I’ve been thinking about what Steve said to me once. It was a throwaway remark, but it’s always stuck with me. He said, “You’ll worry your mother to death you will – you have no idea...”. And I thought, he’s right. I can see it in her eyes. I’m putting her through so much pain. I knew what he really thought. He would never say it though. To anyone. It would be better for everyone if I was just...

ALEX goes back into performance mode.

Anyway, here’s the big news though. The BIG news...They weren’t my only visitors. Serena was here obviously. Mascara running, snot everywhere, a juddering wreck she was. As you’d expect. She’s like that watching Call the Midwife, so anything else and I would have been mightily insulted. It was who she brought with her that’s the big news... Yep, you guessed it, the beautiful Barista from Pret.

Tears there were – actual salty tears. Not like Serena or my mum obviously. But they were there – running down their cheek. And sad. Such a look of sadness. I don't think I've ever seen anyone look so sad. Those mournful eyes have never had a better cause. It almost made it all worthwhile.

The background hospital noises fade and ALEX whispers again.

I can make it out now.
The shape. In the dark.
I least I think I can.
It's human. A man.
And he's telling me it's all going to be alright.
That's nice of him.
It's my dad. I'm sure it's my dad.
Except it can't be.
Can it?

Background hospital noises return.

My dad – my real dad that is – would *never* tell a pointless anecdote. He didn't say much at all in fact. "Your dad was one of the quiet ones" my mum said, "you never knew what was going on his head". Only speak when you have something worth saying, that was his policy. I think that's a good quality to have. Although it's not one I've inherited. I have my moments though, when I don't utter a word for days.

Serena doesn't like it when I go into one. She calls it my "Community" days. Not because I volunteer in the community or anything, I go to bed and binge-watch dozens of episodes of Community the sitcom. I'm not really watching them or anything. They're just on the background. I don't come out of my room for a long time. When I'm in that state Serena fusses

over me: feeding me, cups of tea, cake – she bakes it herself, which is nice. I don't know what I'd do without her.

I got a diagnosis in the end – of my “problem”. They love to classify and categorise, medical people, as if it makes any difference. As if a label will help. As if just by naming it, it will go away. But let me tell you – it doesn't.

I guess I inherited my “condition” from him – he had days too when he never left his room. My mum told me not to bother him – to leave him to himself. He wasn't always like that though. Not all the time. Sometimes he was great – we'd laugh and have fun. He used to pick me up and carry me on his shoulders – everywhere. I loved that. And we played football. Even though I was hopeless he always encouraged me. He said I had two left feet, but he also said I was determined and that was the main thing – better than being good.

I don't remember much about what happened. I was only seven. The only thing I do remember is the funeral. There were lots of people there and lots of whispering. Lots of looking at me and my mum and then whispering. I asked my mum “what are they whispering about?” She told me to ignore them.

After the service we had some tea and cake at the church hall. I stuffed my face: Victoria sponge, Bakewell tart, chocolate cake. While they all stood about whispering and shaking their heads I crawled under the table. I just popped up to grab some cake and then disappeared again.

At the end they couldn't find me. They shouted for me. But I never moved. I had this spot hidden away and I was not going anywhere. I wanted to stay there forever.

But they did find me in the end and we went home. And the house was deadly quiet. I was sick in the night – all the cake, I guess.

The background noises fade and they whisper again.

It wasn't my dad in the dark
It was just a shadow.
He was never there.
It's lighter now
Almost daylight.
I can hear voices

Background hospital noises return.

And I can make out the room.

Beat.

I know now of course what they were whispering about that day. I worked that out when I was about twelve: "How could he do it? What was he thinking of? That poor woman and that poor child".

So, there you go. I have previous. At least, we have previous in our family. It's probably genetic. That'll be it. It must be. It makes sense. I am my father's offspring after all. So, it was always going to happen like this.

Wasn't it?

SCENE 3

ALEX mimics a couple of audience members at his stand-up gig.

ALEX: What do you think?
What?
Them?
Not very funny.
They are. I saw you laughing.
Not me.
You were.
Not much.
I think they're funny.
Do you now.
I guess it's the subject matter – risky stuff.
That's exactly why I didn't laugh. Not suitable.
Not suitable?
That's right. Not suitable.
I still laughed.
I didn't.
You did. I saw you.

Beat

I guess we all have those thoughts.
You what?
Those thoughts.
I don't.
You must have.
I fucking don't.
I thought everyone did.
Do you then – have those thoughts?
Sometimes.
Eh?

I thought everyone did.

Well they don't.

Beat.

My stand-up isn't everybody's cup of tea. I don't care though. You can't please everyone. Sometimes you can't please anyone.

Background hospital noises return. ALEX addresses the audience again – in performance mode.

You're probably wondering what happened between me and the beautiful Barista from Pret. What can I say? It was all going so well. Too well. And then...

But I'm getting ahead of myself, the first thing you'll want to know is how I made sure we properly "connected".

What I needed was a plan. A strategy. So, I came up with one. First thing I did is send Serena into Pret to check them out and start a conversation. "Oh my God", she said, "you have no chance." Cheeky cow. We'll see. And she asked them where they were from, why they were here etc. etc. For the next part of the plan, I went with her. I could see them looking at me with those eyes. I stopped breathing obviously; I was probably turning blue - not a good look. Serena was great, she said, "This is my flatmate. Alex is an actor and a brilliant stand-up comedian." And then they smiled and nodded and I thought shit... what now?

You see the problem with me is I'm useless at all this. I hate rejection. I know what you're thinking: don't we all. But I really hate it. Which is unfortunate because as an actor that is basically what your life is all about. Serena says I'm a masochist and that I love it really. But I don't. So actually,

compared to my acting career my love life, rejection wise, is a breeze.

Except it doesn't work like that. Losing a small part in a dental hygiene ad is not the same thing as being stood up waiting outside Wagamama's by a so called "partner" of six months and then not being able to sleep properly for weeks and pulling lots of Community days. This wasn't the Barista from Pret, by the way, this was a previous "thing". And it wasn't as if we were meant for each other or anything. We weren't. It's just... well... I can't handle...

My mum was great about that time. She was lovely. And Serena. But even so, I still ended up in here. A trigger they call them. Well named, I'll give them that.

Bang!

I'm sensitive my mum says. I'm over anxious. And I need looking after. She was very upset when I left home. "You don't need to leave", she said, "this is your home too". But it wasn't anymore. Steve was very glad to see me go and me likewise. I missed my mum though and Stan. I still miss them...

I must admit, he did have his reasons to dislike me. I wasn't always perfect - hard to believe I know.

But the thing is I was a teenager. Isn't that what teenagers do? Isn't it part of the job description? I probably pushed it a bit. I admit. But the problem was he was always making it worse. A positive feedback loop it's called. I wasn't going to listen to him going on about what a worry I was to my mum. He wasn't my dad so why should I?

Sometimes I didn't come home for days. I stayed at mates' - until their parents had enough of me. And sometimes I ended

up in some very dubious places, with some very dubious people. And, it's true, I didn't always tell my mum where I was. And that must have worried her. I was an idiot about that. And I apologised to her and she forgave me. She is my mum after all. But he didn't. I could see he didn't.

And then when I was at home, I took the piss out of him – mercilessly. “Bad Alex” on turbo. Most of the time I thought he never got it, but in hindsight I think he probably got it more than I gave him credit for.

Then finally one day it happened. We were in the house together, on our own, and I was being super arsey. And that's when he said it. I'd just told him I had no idea whether I'd be home that night when he exploded and said: “No wonder your dad did what he did, I don't blame him - not one bit”.

He didn't mean to say it. It just came out. He's that type. Any small thoughts that go on in his head just seep out. We stood there for a few seconds. I thought he was going to apologise. It was on the tip of his tongue. But he didn't. So finally I just said “fuck you” and left.

It felt like someone had put their hand down my throat and pulled something out. Out of my innards. With their bare hands. Had pulled something out that was still throbbing and dripping with blood. They pulled it out, took it away and dropped it in the nearest bin, where it just shrivelled and died.

Beat.

In the speech above they have completely lost their “performance” mode. They snap back into it.

Sorry. I've got all serious. You don't want to hear all about that stuff. I've strayed away from what you really want to know: the big romance. Right?

It turns out the Barista from Pret loves movies – serious movies – not Tom Cruise or Jack Black rubbish. So we, Serena as well of course, went along to see a Palestinian film. It was pretty grim, but it had its tender moments too and I could see the eyes doing their stuff – even in the dark.

After the film we had a coffee and Serena said she had to dash – a prior engagement. So, there we were, together, alone. And that's when it all started. The good stuff that is. The bad stuff happened later.

*We hear some louder hospital noises and voices.
They sound concerned.*

Finally they fade a bit.

Are you finished yet...?

Thank you. Cause I'm not. Not yet anyway.

*They address us again, but they've lost their
performance mode.*

Little Stan is funny. We zoom mostly these days. He had his first date a few weeks ago – Petal she was called... He zoomed me because he wanted my advice. *My* advice. It turns out he thought they'd had a great time together, but when he messaged her afterwards, she didn't get back to him. Just ignored him. So perhaps he was right, and I was a good person to ask advice. The problem is there's nothing you can say, is there? Someone has pierced your heart with a long sharp pin and the pain won't go away for a very long time. I didn't tell him that obviously. But he'll be ok eventually and he

has my mum. And even Steve is not a bad dad to Stan – I must admit. He's actually quite good at it.

I miss what Stan has. Having a dad. Even though he's less than perfect. At least he's there for him.

That was the real reason I did Psychology, if I'm honest, it wasn't that it interested me as a subject. I just thought: maybe, just maybe I could find out why he did it, I'd understand the real reason. The trouble is a Psychology degree is mostly about rats and mice and other animals and when it does finally get onto human beings it's all biases and cognitive this and that.

So, the fact of the matter is I'll probably never know why he did it. Which is a shame.

I have this recurring dream about him. I've had it since I was a teenager. Me and my dad, we're sitting on the bank of a river and we're fishing, which is interesting because I can't remember ever doing that with him. So, we're sitting there and we're not saying a word. You don't apparently. It scares them off. We're just sitting there.

But you see the thing is I can't shut up, it's a weakness of mine. So I'm starting to ask questions. When will they bite, is it time for lunch...? And he's saying nothing. And finally, after I've asked one question too many, he looks at me and he gets up. Gets up and leaves. I watch him walk away and I shout after him, but for some reason I can't follow him and he just disappears into the distance. And as he goes, I shout after him: "Come back, I don't know how to do it. You haven't taught me how to do it". But he doesn't come back.

He never comes back.

Beat.

Sorry. I've done it again. It's becoming a habit. I've strayed back to the sad stuff. Sorry.

So where were we, with you-know-who?

It turned out we got on really well. Famously in fact. Serena said, "how did you just do that? You never have any luck in your love life. It's like a law of nature."

We even had a city break in Copenhagen. It was cold. It was colder than I've ever known, but it was worth it. We did all the Scandi Noir tours and hung out at some art galleries.

Yeah, we were doing just fine. They weren't one for much talking – who does that remind you off? But I didn't mind. I did enough talking for both of us. But the thing is, after a few months, what little talking there was, became less and less and the silences were beginning to be a bit too long for comfort.

That's when I received the letter.

Yeah, a fucking letter. What century are we in? It was quite long, I'll give them that, and they said lots of nice things about me, which all seemed pretty self-evident to me anyway. But then they went on to talk about the partner in Italy. Excuse me! I'll just read that again. The *partner*! And how it was all getting complicated so they've decided to go home – to Verona. What is this, a fucking Shakespeare comedy? Or tragedy...

It turns out I'm not much more than a holiday romance. A roll in the hay... or snow even.

I did think of framing it. I showed it to Serena of course and she was shocked. She said she'd never eat in Pret again. I

didn't frame it though. The first night I couldn't sleep I read it about twenty times and then tore it up. Not much good though because every word was burnt into my brain. And yes, quite a few Community days followed. And my "safety" plan kicked into action. Serena keeping an eye on me and my mum calling twice a day.

My mum was lovely. She said that I didn't deserve this and that I deserved better. Well, she has to say that – doesn't she? And even Little Stan had a kind word. He said he knew how I was feeling and hoped I'd be better soon.

Beat.

Since then, I've been doing a lot of thinking. Not so much about the Barista from Pret actually. That was just the trigger – I guess. What I couldn't get out of my mind were these thoughts about my dad. I always knew they were there. I'd push them away, but I could never get rid of them for good. They were always there at the back of my head. In the background – churning away. And now, right now, was their time.

Why did he do it?

How *could* he do it?

How could he leave my mum behind?

How could he leave *me* behind?

What the fuck!

I know what you're thinking. Isn't that what you're doing? Isn't that exactly what you're doing? You can't believe he'd leave you behind and here you are doing exactly that to your mum and to Serena and little Stan. How could *I* do it?

What the fuck!

But it's no use, you see. Because whatever was going on in my head and whatever questions I was asking, there was only one answer: I just couldn't see myself spending another day on this planet. Not one more day.

I was having these thoughts even as I was taking the pills.

Sound of people whispering in the background. They sound anxious.

It fades.

And then it struck me. Like a lightning bolt it struck me. How could I never have thought of it before? He must have had the same thought as me on that day: this is the only solution – there is no other way out. Even though it makes no rational sense – that it's a completely selfish thing to do – it's the only thing that can be done.

And at that moment, at that exact moment I understood him better than I ever had before. I understood exactly why he went through with it that day.

But here's the thing, as soon as I understood it, I knew, I suddenly knew that I didn't want to go through with it. I knew why he did it that day – he had to, he thought he had no other choice. And that was important for me to know. But at the same time, it meant finally, that I realised I didn't want to go through with it.

How could I not see my mum again? How could I miss little Stan playing football for his school? How could I never watch another Bake Off with Serena?

It's almost funny. In a morose way. It's the stuff of comedy. I needed to kill myself, before I realised I wanted to live.

And now it was too late....

Noises of a major emergency taking place in the hospital, Lots of shouting and beeping and CPR etc.

After a few seconds the noise dies away to a murmur.

The thing is though, apparently Serena's date that night didn't go so well after all. She went back to his place, but before anything happened, she changed her mind, called an Uber and made a quick exit.

And when she got home that's when she found me...

Just in time.

Yes, there was an ambulance. Rush to the hospital. Minutes from death. Much drama. As you've just heard.

But here I am. Still here. Thank God!

And I have Serena's useless date to thank. It's funny how things turn out. Isn't it?

Except, she told me earlier, that's not quite how it happened. It turns out she did like him. She liked him a lot. But she couldn't get me out of her head. She had a very bad feeling. She felt in in her bones. And that's why she dashed home.

She's a good friend – the best.

And here I am.

Beat.

I'm sorry it's not a happy ending with me and the Barista from Pret. They came and visited me and then caught the next flight back home.

Serena didn't want to tell me at first, that they'd gone. But I told her I was relieved. I don't think she believed me. I know I didn't.

Little Stan is coming in tomorrow. That's nice. I'll look forward to that. He'll be with my mum and *him* probably, but even so I look forward to it. I might even let Steve tell me one of his useless anecdotes and not lose the plot at him – for a change.

Beat.

I wonder if my dad had any misgivings... Probably not. That's sad that is. That'll always be sad. He just couldn't see beyond that day. He just couldn't see what he'd miss. What we'd all miss. What a waste. What a terrible waste.

I'll never forget him though. On his shoulders. Laughing. And playing football together. At least I have that. I'll always have that.

Beat.

Sorry, I've got all serious again. Sorry. I'm meant to be funny. You'll be asking for your money back.

What I really wanted to do was perform my new act for you.

ALEX fumbles with the mic and mic stand.

I'll start again. Ok? It's a bit rough... but... here goes... I'm thinking of calling it Lifeforce. What do you think?

The end.