

Ships Crossing at The End of The World
A 15-Minute play by Kayla Temshiv

CHARACTERS

Liz

Max

SETTING

A not-so-distant future.

TIME

Sunset. This play runs in real time.

NOTES

A “/” indicates overlapping dialogue.

Ships Crossing at The End of The World

An empty room, excepting two twin beds, a nightstand in between them, two chairs facing each other, and a table in between them. On the nightstand is a lamp. It does not work. The room is lit entirely by natural light coming from two curtained windows. Standing on either side of the two beds, facing each other, are two people wearing backpacks. MAX looks mildly tired but well put together, a cloth was over his mouth, but he's pulled it down so it hangs from his neck. LIZ is wide awake but looks like she's just made it through a storm. She also has a cloth hanging from her neck. LIZ cautiously sizes MAX up, while he is more optimistic. They both wear watches. Silence.

LIZ. Sorry I... I didn't know I'd be having a roommate.

MAX. I didn't know I'd be sleeping in a twin bed so...

A pause. They stare at each other for a while. It should become quite awkward. After some time, they break the tension. After all, they are professionals.

LIZ. It'll be dark in about fifteen.

MAX Right. Okay.

LIZ. *(Gesturing to a bed)* I can take this one, unless...?

MAX. No, you're good.

LIZ. Thanks. *(Putting her bag on the bed)* Mind if I...? *(Gesturing to the chair facing the door)* I just like to sit facing the door so-

MAX. So that you can see if anyone's coming.

LIZ. Yeah.

MAX. Yeah. I'm the same way.

LIZ. Oh, do you want the...?

MAX. No, no you've got it. As long as someone's on guard.

LIZ. Right.

She sits and begins to write. He starts to unpack. His unpacking consists of removing a book, notebook, and a pager. He sits for a while. She sits for a while. He crosses over and reaches out a hand.

MAX. I'm-

LIZ. No names. We're not supposed to... don't tell me your name.

MAX. Right, right. Safety. *(He drops his hand)* So... what are you working on?

LIZ. Documenting. You know the drill.

MAX. Oh, right. I've never been paired with-

LIZ. I'm kind of trying to race the light.

MAX. Oh... sorry. I'll let you work.

LIZ writes. Eventually, she looks up and sees MAX is still watching her.

LIZ. I haven't been paired with anyone either. I guess that's what happens when you're roomed in a neutral zone. Guess someone screwed up the booking.

MAX. Probably on my end. My group's pretty new.

A pause.

LIZ. You guys break off?

MAX. Yeah. Wasn't fun.

LIZ. Doesn't sound like it.

MAX. Your group's old?

LIZ. About as old as we can be. We've been together since the start.

MAX. That must be nice.

LIZ. Well, no one really escapes nuclear apocalypse.

MAX. When you put it that way...

LIZ. It is, that way.

MAX. It can be more complicated than that. I mean, the end of the world is supposed to be the end, isn't it? And yet, here you are. Here I am.

LIZ chuckles.

MAX. Could I... would you mind if I proposed a sort of... novel concept?

LIZ is silent, MAX takes it as a go-ahead. Is it?

MAX. So, as we're both charting habitable territories and once the land's claimed, we'll never see each other again...

LIZ. I know. Thank you for the exposition.

MAX. So, as there will be absolutely no repercussions of anything either of us say tonight, could I suggest we speak candidly?

LIZ. You know, we don't have to talk. We can finish our charting in silence and go our separate ways.

MAX. You know as well as I do that good conversation in our line of work is hard to come by. Look, we can ignore each other, or use someone else's screw up as an opportunity to actually...

share thoughts with someone. Worst case scenario, this is still the last time we see each other. No repercussions. Absolute freedom of speech.

LIZ. *(After a moment of thought)* Alright, I'm game if you are. Candid.

MAX. Candid.

A breath. They are both tentative to speak.

MAX. What's the closest you've been to one?

The energy shifts, LIZ is more eager to speak now.

LIZ. Fifteen feet.

MAX. Fifteen feet!?!

LIZ. My meter was going crazy at fourteen and a half, so I backed up, but yeah. Got fifteen feet from a site before I figured my life was worth more than another half-foot.

MAX. If you're going to go, fifteen feet isn't a bad way to go out.

LIZ. *(A weak attempt at a joke, she's not used to this)* I try to live on the edge. But, you know, emphasis on *live*.

MAX. Then again, you can try to outrun it but death is/ inevitable.

LIZ. /inevitable.

A pause.

MAX. Oh great, so we're both depressing.

LIZ. Didn't expect that out of you. I prefer "pragmatic".

MAX. So do I.

LIZ. Life is both too short and too long to do anything else. Other than being pragmatic, I mean.

MAX. What a sad way to live.

LIZ. What a *secure* way to live.

MAX. Emphasis on live.

LIZ. Of course. What's the closest you've gotten?

MAX. Hundred yards, I'm just starting out.

LIZ. You'll get to fifteen. Or you won't. It doesn't actually matter. No one's counting.

MAX. I am. You are.

LIZ. We are the exceptions that prove the rule.

MAX. Funny, somehow I expected nothing less.

LIZ. Funny.

MAX. Where are you from? Before, I mean.

LIZ. You ask a lot of questions.

MAX. Sorry. Is that a problem?

LIZ. No. Well... It doesn't have to be.

MAX. Anything off limits?

LIZ. You really are new.

MAX. I really am.

LIZ. You know. Anything identifying. That way my group can't find and consequently fight your group.

MAX. Yeah yeah, no names, pager, home address. Got it. So... where are you from?

LIZ. California, actually. Back when, you know, there was a California.

MAX. No way, me too. Small world.

LIZ. And getting smaller. Where in?

MAX. Orange County.

LIZ. Santa Monica. Huh.

MAX. What's that, an hour away?

LIZ. Something like it. Ships crossing, you know?

MAX. Like, "ships crossing in the night"?

LIZ. The very same.

MAX. I always found that expression sort of, redundant.

LIZ. How so?

MAX. It's just, cosmically unnecessary. Ships can cross in the night and miss each other, or in the day and miss each other, or be hundreds of miles away and miss each other. If the ships are supposed to meet, they meet. Or cross. Or collide. And if not, they won't. It just seems like a romanticized explanation for a simple concept. Some meet, some don't. Not all ships cross.

LIZ. Lot of big words there.

MAX. Well, it's hard to explain.

LIZ. I don't know...

MAX. What? Are you exceedingly passionate about ships crossing?

LIZ. There's just something to be said for running circles around something, getting close enough but never knowing. The fact that near misses can impact... I don't know. It's a butterfly/ripple effect thing. I don't know. I don't really tend to romanticize things...

MAX. You have a romanticized view of ships.

LIZ. Distance. I have a romanticized view of distance. *(A pause)* Besides, if we were two ships, we essentially collided, so... never mind what I said.

She sits on her bed and begins to unpack. A book, a roll of gauze, and a pager. She reaches to the bottom for a hair tie and ties up her hair. She tears off a strip of gauze and wraps it like a headband, holding back stray hairs.

MAX. You're upset.

LIZ. I'm not upset.

MAX. No, I think you are.

LIZ. I'm not.

MAX. But... I think you are.

LIZ. I can't be upset if I'm not invested, and I can't be invested in a conversation that will have virtually no impact on my future. Therefore... not upset.

MAX. But you are. And you are invested. This conversation, the distance thing, the butterfly effect, that means something to you.

LIZ. Don't go waxing poetic.

MAX. I'm not, trust me. I don't think I could wax or even wane poetic if I tried.

LIZ. I got into poetry once. I found it...

MAX. Redundant?

LIZ. Everything that could, or rather should be said, already has been. Poetry is the greatest redundancy I could commit myself to. Trying to pretend I'm not lacking original thought. There are only so many ways to describe existentialism.

MAX. Like how every story has already been told. The Lion King is Hamlet. Half of the preserved love stories are Romeo and Juliet.

LIZ. Well, the world lacks in plot anyway. No one's life is defined- well defined by story structure.

MAX. One might argue it's a stream of consciousness.

LIZ. Ha! Clever. I like that.

MAX. I thought you might.

LIZ. Very literal.

MAX. Literal literature. Ha.

LIZ. There are only eight actual characters in any given story.

MAX. Wait, what?

LIZ. It's a common redundancy.

MAX. There are only eight types of/ people-

LIZ. People in literature, yeah. Archetypes essentially. Protagonist, antagonist, sidekick, mentor, skeptic, voice of reason...

MAX. You're short two.

LIZ. I know I'm short two. The... fuck I never quite got this one. The tempter? Like, a secondary evil. And the emotional one... I don't remember the term for it.

MAX. The emotional one?

LIZ. Full pathos? The person who makes decisions based on purely feelings rather than logic.

MAX. Oh. Huh.

LIZ. They usually die pretty early on.

MAX. OH.

LIZ. Yeah, but everything else- Anti-hero, Christ-like figure, love interest- they all fit into one of those eight categories.

MAX. All of them?

LIZ. Every last one. Literature is cyclical.

MAX. Art imitates life.

LIZ. Huh.

MAX. Are there only eight types of people? Hero's, the Big Bad, and we all fall into little branch-off categories. Are we all that unoriginal?

LIZ. I would love to think I'm more complex than that but... that doesn't sound unreasonable to assume. Of course, I'm just being-

MAX. Pragmatic?

LIZ. Always.

MAX. Ah. The voice of reason.

LIZ. Excuse me?

MAX. Or the skeptic. You could go either way.

LIZ. Well, I have you pegged for a hell of a sidekick.

MAX. I'm just flattered I'm not the first to go.

LIZ. You underestimate yourself.

MAX. You've known me for about ten minutes. I think I might have a slightly stronger grasp of my own character.

LIZ. And you think you are...?

MAX. I don't know.

LIZ. You were able to make a fairly quick judgment of my character.

MAX. That's all it was. A snap judgment. A pause. A moment.

LIZ. Yes, I am invested in this conversation.

MAX. I know.

LIZ. I know.

MAX. I am as well.

LIZ. I know.

MAX. I'm glad we're on the same page.

A moment. LIZ starts getting ready for bed. After a second, MAX does as well.

MAX. Now that we've been talking for a while, do you mind if I bring up something more serious?

LIZ. More serious than the redundancy of personality and innate human behavior? By all means.

MAX. Do you miss it?

LIZ. Could you clarify what "it" is, just so that I don't reply with something moronic?

MAX. Do you miss what it was like before nuclear war tore apart the world and the human population divided itself into fragmented, violent clusters?

LIZ. Oh, that "it". Um... I don't really know. I don't think about it much.

MAX. How can you not think about it?

LIZ. I'm too busy trying to hold my group together. If I dwell on the past I can't focus on taking care of everything now.

MAX. But don't you miss it? Don't you miss being able to go outside and take a deep breath of air that didn't sting? Or not having to wear long sleeves and wrap your hands once you step outside a safe zone? I can't help but ache a little when I think about how many people there used to be and how much life there was. Now? I know my group of thirty-seven, and you, who I'll never see again. Forget about family, forget about friends. Forget about basic human connection.

A pause.

LIZ Basic human connection.

MAX. Yeah, basic- fucking- human connection! Caring about someone, or something, not just making it through another week without starving or your skin burning off.

LIZ. That's never fun.

MAX. Seriously. I'm being serious.

LIZ. We're still allowed to care about things. No one's taking that away from you.

MAX. It's just a lot harder when you never know who's telling you the truth and who's using you for what you can get them.

LIZ. Same thing could have been said for before.

A pause. Whatever MAX is doing, he stops and takes a breath. This is clearly the first time he's expressed these feelings to anyone.

LIZ. I miss some things. *(After a pause)* Planes. I always liked planes. It's quiet now, without them. Not that that's bad, I don't mind quiet but, I never realized how much noise planes made until they weren't there anymore. *(A pause)* But I haven't seen or heard a plane in eight and a half years. Even if we could still safely power them, what's the use? Lack of resources doesn't always promote peaceful connectivity.

MAX. Eight and a half years? *(A pause)* My group has somewhere around seven and three quarters.

LIZ. Eight and a half. Does your counter suck or something?

MAX. Counter?

LIZ. Do you not have a counter? God, get a counter. Pick one person to count the days, trust me. Don't guess when it comes to that kind of stuff.

MAX. So, it probably was someone on my end that messed up and sent me here.

LIZ. I'm starting to buy that, yeah.

MAX. You know what I'm glad made it?

LIZ. Yeah?

MAX. Music, good music.

LIZ. Yes!

MAX. The fact people still play, I mean, it's mostly old standards but still.

LIZ. They say only the strong survive.

MAX. Music's better live anyway. More/ authentic.

LIZ. /Authentic.

MAX. Absolutely.

LIZ. I'm glad we agree.

A moment. Eventually, LIZ checks her watch.

LIZ. It's almost dark and I need to be up at four, so I should probably get to sleep.

MAX. Right, right.

They both get ready for bed.

MAX. How long have you been doing this?

LIZ. Since they let me. Four years in a month.

MAX. And you've really never ran into anyone else before?

LIZ. They say not to engage-

MAX. But have you ever?

LIZ. We try not-

MAX. But?

LIZ. Early on. Once. About a month in. I saw this guy while I was out. I... engaged. I don't engage anymore.

MAX. What happened?

LIZ. It's not something I talk about.

MAX. Why not?

LIZ. Trust me, you won't like me if I tell you.

MAX. You'll never see me again, so what does it matter?

LIZ. Because sometimes we do things we're not proud of, and I don't really feel like reliving it.

A pause.

MAX. Hey. No repercussions.

LIZ decides.

LIZ. I hadn't seen anyone in a while. I was young, younger, and excited. I went over... to say "Hi" if you'll believe it, and he tried to steal my bag. So, I ran as fast as I could, as far as I could the way I came. And he followed me, and I'd just charted out the area so I... So I knew which spots were dangerous. So I got close, and slowed down, and when he caught up to me, I pushed him into one. (*A moment*) And I took a few steps back. And I stood there, just out of range, and watched him as he started screaming for help and clawing at me and... And I waited until he stopped screaming, and I left.

The dynamic of the room is different now.

MAX. Your group?

LIZ. (*Shaking her head*) I was afraid for my life, and I did what I needed to in order to survive. They didn't need to know.

MAX. You're not a bad person for that.

LIZ. I know.

MAX. I mean, I don't think you're a bad person. That story didn't make me not... like you.

LIZ nods.

MAX. And after that, you're not afraid of me?

LIZ. I didn't say that.

MAX. Oh.

A pause.

LIZ. I'm not, though. I was skeptical at first but... you're not the kinda person who steals packs.

MAX. I'm not.

LIZ. I know. *(After a pause)* Plus I feel like I could take you if I had to.

MAX. Oh gee, thanks.

They both chuckle, then finish getting ready for bed.

MAX. So you'll be out at four?

LIZ. Up at four. Out a few minutes after.

MAX. I'll be up around six so... I guess this is it.

LIZ. Guess so.

MAX. It got dark quick.

LIZ. Yeah.

It's quiet. Neither is sure how to express what they're feeling.

MAX. Thank you for agreeing to speak candidly with me.

LIZ. Thank you for asking.

A pause, and then MAX turns off the main light and they both climb into their twin beds. The lamp on the nightstand stays on. After a moment, MAX turns and sits on the edge, facing LIZ's bed.

MAX. I'm Max.

LIZ sits up, and turns so she's facing him.

LIZ. Liz.

MAX. Nice to meet you.

Blackout.