

***The Big Red Naugahyde Booth
(or, Would-be Elks)***

a comedy about negotiations, acceptance and belonging
by Jennie Webb

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The Big Red Naugahyde Booth (or, Would-be Elks)

Characters:

BETH, a substantial woman, is in her mid-thirties (or beyond) and not particularly thrilled about it. She likes to count on things and drinks red wine unless she remembers to order scotch. She hates people who take advantage. She's all too aware of her own limitations which often stops her in her tracks.

CASSIE, a very small woman, is just on either side of forty. She pretty much sticks to white wine. She's very invested in the people she loves, and keeping them happy. And close. That way she doesn't have to really look at her own life, in which she tends to put off or hide all the stuff that's too big for her to carry.

ERIN, a younger woman, is somewhere in her twenties. She's needs a martini. And a lot of other things. She sometimes doesn't pay attention but is thrilled to be included. She spends most of the time questioning herself, and maybe should spend more of it on questioning the people and world around her.

ALEXANDRA, a dramatic woman, does not admit her age. She gimlets. Enthusiastically. She loves being the center of attention, but is totally willing to admit it, and readily acknowledges the imperative nature of having followers. What she doesn't admit is ever needing to follow, or feeling like an outsider.

DIANE, an earnest woman, is probably in her thirties or forties. Not that this matters to her. She doesn't really drink. She listens. And cares deeply. Maybe too deeply. About many things that are very important. But maybe sometimes she sees only the big picture and loses herself in it.

ZACH, a youthful-looking man, is, surprisingly, close to thirty. Maybe even past it. He's a martini guy. On the rocks. Probably because this gives him the impression of being far more grown up than he feels. He's been waiting a long time for something. But doesn't quite know what it is.

Time:

Friday night.

Setting:

A big red naugahyde booth somewhere in America.

NOTE: Although there are massive amounts of alcohol and food in this play, it's not suggested that actors actually consume any of it, or play the effects of either. The food and beverages are open to extreme stylization, which probably escalates as the evening wears on and becomes more and more absurd.

Dialogue Notes:

— Indicates a character's dialogue is interrupted, by another character speaking, an event or a character abruptly shifting gears within a line of dialogue.

... Indicates a character is searching for words, does not complete a thought or leaves a line of dialogue open.

// Indicates the point at which a character starts the next line of dialogue during another character's previous line. Characters completely talking over one another is indicated by columns within the script.

Casting Notes:

While the characters of Alexandra and Cassie are probably white, any of the other characters can be played by actors of color and it is requested that the cast be no more than 50% white.

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SYNOPSIS

A comedy about negotiations, acceptance and belonging, *The Big Red Naugahyde Booth (or, Would-be Elks)* tracks the cocktails and confessions of a group of larger than life women who regularly meet to drink and dish. But on this particular evening of excess, a girls' night out becomes an surreal exploration of female bonds in a changing world.

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The Big Red Naugahyde Booth (or, Would-be Elks)

We see two women sitting together in the center of a red naugahyde booth which—along with its environment—seems somewhat surreal, a bit larger than life. Whatever the size of the booth initially, it expands to fit the characters and action as the play progresses. It might ultimately span the width of the entire playing area.

One woman is Beth, who can best be described as substantial in presence and personality if not physicality. The other is Cassie, a very small woman, literally and perhaps, in some regards, figuratively. Both have nearly empty glasses of wine. Neither seems ready for what's next.

BETH:
Yikes.

CASSIE:
Yeeeesh!

BETH:
Yeah!

CASSIE:
You said it, darling.

BETH:
Well?

CASSIE:
I guess!

The two women drain what's left in their glasses and take out their bags.

God, I'm glad we have this. Even if we're small tonight, this is absolutely what keeps me going.

BETH:
Oh, *you*... I love you. And I'm sorry if my head's all not here...

CASSIE:
No! I love you! You're good. It's all good.

BETH:
Good... I hope so!

She looks around the room; Cassie raises her hand and into it falls—or is placed from an unseen source, or in some other way very obviously appears—a restaurant check.

CASSIE:
The total's sixty-seven. We'll just split it?

BETH:

What? Oh, the check. Fine.

CASSIE:

You sure? That's all right?

BETH:

Sure. No. Wait. What about Ava? (*pronounced AAva*) What did Ava leave?

CASSIE:

(*counting cash on the table*) Eighteen.

BETH:

Eighteen? She ordered a steak.

CASSIE:

But she didn't drink.

BETH:

She had appetizers.

CASSIE:

She didn't drink, though.

BETH:

Can I say something? Ava did that last time, too.

CASSIE:

Did what last time?

BETH:

Didn't leave enough. That pisses me off.

CASSIE:

She left eighteen.

BETH:

For a steak? And the calamari and the potstickers. Plus tax and tip?

CASSIE:

But she didn't—

BETH:

(*interrupting*) Whatever. I mean, I love her and everything...

CASSIE:

I absolutely love her. Next time we'll say something.

BETH:

You will? It shouldn't always be me.

CASSIE:

We'll figure it out. Next time. *(indicating the check)* So. Sixty-seven minus eighteen.

BETH:

Say fifty. Plus tax and tip. What's that on sixty-seven? Say eighty.

CASSIE:

Minus eighteen.

BETH:

Yeah. So... Say thirty-one, thirty-two each?

CASSIE:

(taking the check) That's a big tip.

BETH:

(pulling out a bill) I only have a twenty. Can I get fifteen from you? For Rochelle's present?

Short pause.

CASSIE:

What?

BETH:

Her birthday present. It was fifteen each.

CASSIE:

I thought I gave that to you; I gave money for the present and money for the dinner.

BETH:

Oh. Really?

CASSIE:

Yeah.

BETH:

You're sure gave it to *me*?

CASSIE:

That's not what you remember?

BETH:

I wasn't doing the money for the dinner. So maybe...

CASSIE:

It's okay. You have twenty? I'll leave another, what: twelve.

BETH:

No. I feel awful. I just thought—

CASSIE:

(interrupting) Never mind. It's fine.

BETH:

No. *(returning her cash)* Take this. If you said you paid it. I'll put it on my card.

CASSIE:

I said I paid it because I did pay it. But it's twelve dollars! Next time you get me.

She scoots out of the booth.

BETH:

I—

CASSIE:

(interrupting) I have to go. I love you.

BETH:

I love you... I feel awful. I really didn't think—

CASSIE:

(interrupting) Don't be silly! See you next time?

BETH:

Um, yeah!

CASSIE:

I really need to get home. Unfortunately. You're fine?

BETH:

Fine! I feel awful.

CASSIE:

Don't! I love you!

BETH:

I love you!

Beth rises from the booth and they embrace.

Are we okay?

CASSIE:
Of course we are! You ready?

BETH:
Yeah. I mean no. I mean, I'll just hang for a bit... I'm meeting Zach.

Short pause.

CASSIE:
Oh! Here? You're meeting him here?

BETH:
I am. He said he really needed to see me. Ha ha.

Short pause.

CASSIE:
All right, then. Give him my love.

BETH:
Definitely! And a kiss for your sister. How's she doing, anyway?

CASSIE:
They had her working at a copy place, but that ended tragically. Don't ask—it'll open the floodgates. See you!

BETH:
Love you!

Cassie exits and perhaps we hear sounds of the outside world: voices, traffic. A siren? Beth moves back into the center of the booth to escape them. At the same time, the booth appears to increase in size, as if it's stretching its legs between rounds. Beth takes a small mirror out of her purse and gives her face a once-over. Satisfied by—or resigned to—what she sees, she puts it away and pulls out a credit card.

I need another drink. (*shouting in a civilized tone*) HELLO?

A younger woman, Erin, hurries in, looking flushed.

ERIN:
Hey!

BETH:
Oh! Hi...

ERIN:
I know. I'm so incredibly late. I couldn't get out of work. And then I had to take the bus. Ack. You don't want to hear about it. So where is everybody?

BETH:
Only three of us tonight. We already closed out the check.

ERIN:
Oh! I really am late! So everyone's gone? You're leaving?

BETH:
Actually, no, I'm—

ERIN:
(interrupting) Then I'm getting you a drink. *(picking up the check)* This is paid? I'll take it up?

BETH:
Uh, sure.

ERIN:
Be right back. White wine?

BETH:
Red.

ERIN:
(starting out) Okay.

BETH:
No. Wait!

ERIN:
What?

BETH:
Scotch. On the rocks. Single Malt!

ERIN:
Okay!

BETH:
(pulling out her credit card) Take my card.

ERIN:
No. I was late.

She exits. Maybe the booth expands a bit more, making Beth seem very alone. She checks to see if any wine is left in her glass. There isn't. Zach, a youthful-looking man, enters.

ZACH:
Am I safe? Are they gone?

BETH:
Hi!

Zach slips into the booth and gives her a quick kiss.

ZACH:
So like I told you on the phone, I really appreciate this. You know I would never intrude on you all and your... your whatever. It's your thing. It's just that... God. I don't know how to say this. Okay. You know we've talked about me needing to figure things out, my thing. That it's like I'm maybe on the verge of... whatever. I mean, *you* know. You told me! You sometimes have to do something even if you're not 100% sure why you're doing it, or even what you're doing? So. This is going to sound out of blue maybe, or maybe not, but today... Are you okay?

BETH:
No, I'm icky.

ZACH:
Awwwww.

BETH:
Do you have any money?

ZACH:
You need another glass of wine?

BETH:
Yes. No! Wait, I...

Erin enters with a large old-fashioned glass and martini.

ERIN:
So I took a cue from you, skipped the vino and went straight for a martini!

She sees Zach.

Oh!

ZACH:
Hi!

BETH:
I... You two know each other, right?

ERIN:
Sure!

ZACH:
How are you?

ERIN:
Good! Well, no. Actually I'm...

She holds up her martini.

How I am is really in need of this! Ha ha ha! *(setting down Beth's scotch, to Zach)*
Sorry, I didn't know you were coming. Can I get you something?

ZACH:
No! Look, I'm not supposed to be here—girls' night out, right? *(to Beth)* And I know you hate it when I call it that.

BETH:
(to Erin) He was going to meet me later, after everyone left.

ERIN:
Yow. And it is later. Right. And everyone did. So that's me, my fault. Boy, what a dummy. What a... Ohhhh...

She starts to cry. After a moment,

ZACH:
I'm going to go and...

BETH:
Okay.

He exits.

(to Erin) Come here, sit down. Are you okay?

ERIN:
Nooooo. I'm a dope. I'm a dope, dope dope.

BETH:
Nooooooo. Come here.

ERIN:
Nooooo.

BETH:
I'm sorry I invited him, I mean I didn't really invite him, it's just that he called earlier and we're usually all finished by now.

ERIN:
Nooooooo. I don't care. I'm just...*(holding up her glass)* Cheers.

BETH:
Cheers.

They clink glasses.

BETH:

So what's wrong? What happened?

ERIN:

Oh everything, nothing. It's all just... I'm just such a moron, I really am. You're not going to believe what I found out. It messed up my entire day and then with no car it was like I was trapped and got stuck in it, you know? I'm going to quit my stupid job. If they don't fire me first. They're all such idiots. I work for the idiot king, I really do. And I cannot take it anymore. The more I'm around him the dumber I become. I can't stand it. I can't, I just can't.

BETH:

What happened?

ERIN:

Was Ava here?

BETH:

Ava? Yeah. Yeah she was, actually.

ERIN:

Shoot. I need to find her. Do you know who she's staying with now?

BETH:

She still hasn't found a place?

ERIN:

Not yet. She's looking to house sit. To buy her more time.

BETH

She should be looking for an apartment. She's been back nearly six months.

ERIN:

Really?

BETH:

Yeah! She stayed with me for almost two when she first got here!

ERIN:

That's right! And then... Who'd she stay with?

BETH:

All of us! Each and every one of us! Six months on our collective couches hasn't given her enough time? God forbid she should be forced into paying rent! What the fuck is that about?

After a moment, Erin starts crying again.

BETH:

Ah! I'm sorry! I didn't mean...

ERIN:

Noooooooooo.

BETH:

Really. I am sorry. I'm just out of sorts, that's all. Drink your martini. Tell me about your day. Your car. Your boss. I'm sorry. What a jerk.

ERIN:

Oh, god. You're the best.

BETH:

No. Come here.

ERIN:

Ohhhh. It's okay. I'm okay. I don't want to talk about it. I just wanted to get here, and have drinks with you guys, and I messed everything up 'cause I was late.

BETH:

Don't be silly! I'm here!

ERIN:

Are you hungry? I'm starving.

BETH:

I... I had a snack; I could eat.

ERIN:

(looking around again) Is anyone...?

BETH:

They probably thought we were gone. Do you want to just get whatever? Take my card and open a tab.

ERIN:

No...

BETH:

(pressing the card into Erin's hand) Yes. Hey. Do you remember who did the money for Rochelle's birthday dinner?

ERIN:

Who did the money? No. Why? You want potstickers?

BETH:

No, not potstickers. I mean for her birthday. Someone collected it.

ERIN:
I don't remember.

BETH:
How about nachos?

ERIN:
I'm trying to cut back on dairy.

BETH:
Fries?

ERIN:
I can do nachos. So what's with the money? Did something—?

BETH:
(interrupting) No, it's nothing. You really want potstickers?

ERIN:
Nachos. I'll pick around the cheese.

BETH:
I'll do it. Let me get them. *(taking back her credit card)* I'll see if I can find someone, tell them we're here. Still. Again.

ERIN:
I'm soooooo sorry I'm late!

BETH:
No! It's not a problem! I'm glad it worked out! I'll be right back. You all right?

ERIN:
(holding up her martini) I will be!

BETH:
Uh huh!

She exits, her scotch holding her place at the table. Erin collapses back into the booth, which seems to embrace her and her martini. Zach enters with a healthy rocks glass.

ZACH:
Oh! Hi!

ERIN:
Hi! She's getting food. Want some nachos?

ZACH:
Sure, I— You know, she'll yell at me. I probably shouldn't.

ERIN:
Yell at you?

ZACH:
Cause I got here early and interrupted you guys.

ERIN:
No, I'm late; you're fine! And I am so sorry about getting all... before: I had to figure out how to get here on the bus and everyone already left and today was just...

ZACH:
Me too, quite a day! You mind if I sit?

ERIN:
No! She'll be right back.

ZACH:
So. A martini girl!

He slides into the booth.

ERIN:
Well, not really. Let's just say it's a martini night.

ZACH:
Definitely!

He raises his drink—clear liquid on ice.

Mine's on the rocks.

ERIN:
Oh! Sure!

She raises hers—straight up.

Me, I like the glass.

ZACH:
I'd drink it too fast.

ERIN:
Ha ha.

Pause.

ZACH:
Should I go? I should go. I'll go.

ERIN:
No! Don't!

ZACH:
I really should, I would never intrude. Ever. That's a given. This is like a religious thing for her: The girls. First and third Fridays.

ERIN:
Ooooh, she's the best. I love her so much!

ZACH:
Well... I'm just really glad she's got you. She's— Listen to me. I say that and then here I am, the interloper. But believe me, that's so not me, or what I'm about. I mean, even though I've done it a couple of times—we've done it a couple of times... Not here. Never here! This place is almost sacred, right?

Short pause.

We've met after, I mean. You ladies have your thing, and then we've...

ERIN:
Oh! Sure! I totally get it. I know like last time she left early because she—

ZACH:
(interrupting) Wait. She left early?

ERIN:
HMMMM?

ZACH:
She's not supposed to leave early! That's completely not right! This is your thing. She shouldn't be leaving early to meet me! She never told me that!

ERIN:
It's okay! It's really okay!

ZACH:
No, it is not.

ERIN:
Ooooooh. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. You can't say I told you!

ZACH:
No, I'm glad you did!

ERIN:
(interrupting) No! You can't! You caaaaaaaa...

She begins to cry again.

ZACH:

Heeeeeey. I won't! I won't tell her. I won't say anything! Heeeeeey! My lips are sealed!

As he moves to console her, two women enter. One is extremely dramatic—Alexandra—and the other, equally earnest—Diane.

ALEXANDRA:

Well! What do we have here? If it isn't a pair of sweet, young things!

ZACH:

(moving away from Erin) Hi!

ALEXANDRA:

Hello?

ZACH:

Hi, I'm—

DIANE:

(interrupting) Oh, hello! *(to Alexandra)* That's—

ALEXANDRA:

(interrupting) I know exactly who he is.

ZACH:

Right. We met at—

DIANE:

(interrupting) How are you?!

ZACH:

Great!

ALEXANDRA:

I'll bet.

ZACH:

(indicating Beth, offstage) She told me no one else would be here by now.

DIANE:

We shouldn't be; we weren't even supposed to come tonight.

ERIN:

I'm sorry. This is all my fault.

ALEXANDRA:

Oh?

ERIN:
It's just that the day I've had—

ZACH:
(interrupting) I'm going to go find her.

ALEXANDRA:
Yes. You do that.

ZACH:
She went to get—

ERIN:
(interrupting) I'm starving. All day, I didn't have a chance to—

ZACH:
(interrupting) I'll just go and— I'm going.

ALEXANDRA:
So you said.

ZACH:
Right.

With some difficulty he works his way out of the booth and exits, his drink on the table with the scotch and empty wine glasses.

ALEXANDRA:
Well then! I don't know about anyone else, but I could use a stiff one! *(looking around)* Isn't there a... somebody?

ERIN:
They don't know we're here, I don't think.

ALEXANDRA:
No? That is not going to work, is it? The service around here has gone to hell!

ERIN:
I can do it. White wine?

ALEXANDRA:
Vodka gimlet, straight up.

ERIN:
(to Diane) Yeah?

DIANE:
Yes. Thank you.

ERIN:

I'll be right back.

ALEXANDRA:

And bring a menu, will you?

ERIN:

Want me to just order something? We have nachos coming.

ALEXANDRA:

Nachos. Bring a menu.

DIANE:

You love nachos.

ERIN:

I'll bring a menu.

DIANE:

(to Erin) Thanks!

Erin exits; her glass remains on the table with the others. Alexandra and Diane settle into the booth with their bags.

You are terrible.

ALEXANDRA:

What?

DIANE:

She is frightened to death of you.

ALEXANDRA:

Please. She'll be fine. I'm giving her some character.

DIANE:

There was absolutely nothing going on here.

ALEXANDRA:

Oh, I know that. Nothing except one of her "I'm a big fucking baby take care of me" moments.

DIANE:

Don't say that; she's adorable!

ALEXANDRA:

Sure, but I cannot take another night of childcare over cocktails! She's fine. She's great. She's getting drinks. The thing is, what is *he* doing here?

DIANE:

I hope it wasn't some sort of emergency.

ALEXANDRA:

It better be! An emergency of major fucking proportions! Did we get a call asking permission to bring a boy into our midst?

DIANE:

She didn't know we were coming.

ALEXANDRA:

That doesn't matter. She has not been granted dispensation and for that our friend with a penchant for younger men shall pay the price!

DIANE:

You are beyond terrible.

ALEXANDRA:

I meant she's buying us a round.

DIANE:

Oh my!

ALEXANDRA:

This is a problem?

DIANE:

No, I hope she didn't think I wanted a vodka gimlet. I meant white wine. When I said "yes," I meant "yes" to white wine.

ALEXANDRA:

You can move up with the big kids tonight.

DIANE:

Could you be a worse influence?

ALEXANDRA:

Worse than your prison women?

DIANE:

They are an inspiration. You didn't think their stories were powerful?

ALEXANDRA:

I did! I told you I was inspired! To come here!

DIANE:

Ha ha. You could have stayed for the whole program.

ALEXANDRA:

Honey, I tried. It's just my heart was getting so full of incarcerated warmth...

DIANE:

Well, it didn't look good for me to leave.

ALEXANDRA:

Well, I didn't force you to come with me!

DIANE:

No. You didn't.

ALEXANDRA:

All right, then. So when we're all assembled I'm going make an announcement—giving you full credit for tonight's inspiration—and you must graduate to the hard stuff, for the greater good.

DIANE:

Wine's fine. I've got a march tomorrow.

ALEXANDRA:

Of course you do. While I do my own personal protest, at home in bed.

Beth enters, carrying an extra-large dish of nachos—a huge pile of tortilla chips covered with cheese, etc. and maybe the table and booth expand to accommodate it; on cue, a pile of empty plates appears.

BETH:

Hey! When did you guys get here?!

ALEXANDRA:

If it isn't herself!

DIANE:

Hi!

ALEXANDRA:

So my darling: It seems you've invited a special guest without proper clearance.

BETH:

Oh, stop. It's not like that; I thought you were at some event tonight.

DIANE:

We were. We left early.

ALEXANDRA:

But thank god we're here now. Tell me: Where in the Friday bylaws do we make an allowance for testosterone?

BETH:
Cheese, anyone?

Maybe she piles dripping chips onto a plate.

ALEXANDRA:
You're avoiding the question.

BETH:
Question or accusation? Where are your drinks?

ALEXANDRA:
The littlest angel is getting them. But you're paying for them!

DIANE:
Don't be mean.

ALEXANDRA:
Why is that mean?

BETH:
Why am I paying for them?

DIANE:
Hey. What's up with your young man? Is everything all right?

BETH:
I— Why? Where is he?

DIANE:
He went looking for—

ALEXANDRA:
(interrupting) He's fine. Gorgeous as always! My point is we didn't expect to find him here, and I have some very important business to discuss!

BETH:
Forgive my mortal sin, but I got a desperate message telling me he simply must see me tonight.

DIANE:
I knew it had to be something like that. He's very thoughtful, isn't he?

ALEXANDRA:
Hello? What about loyalties here?

BETH:
He was supposed to meet me *after*, after you guys had left, but then everyone...
Fine. Mea Culpa.

ALEXANDRA:

And where *are* those cocktails?

DIANE:

Listen: She might have thought I wanted vodka, and I know that's more than wine, so I can write you a check.

BETH:

It's fine. I started a tab. Hey! Do either of you remember who did the money for Rochelle's birthday?

ALEXANDRA:

You did. You got a plant or something.

DIANE:

We paid you, right? Thank you for doing that.

BETH:

An orchid. But for dinner. Who was in charge of the money for dinner?

DIANE:

I don't—

ALEXANDRA:

(interrupting) Did you discover some gross improprieties? Someone cooking the books?

BETH:

Never mind. It's silly.

DIANE:

Since when do we have books?

Erin enters with incredibly hefty drinks: a significant gimlet, martini and white wine.

ERIN:

Okay, then!

She sets them down before she sees Beth.

(not having brought her a drink) Oh!

BETH:

(retrieving her scotch) I'm good.

ERIN:

(handing a glass to Diane) Good. You wanted wine, right?

DIANE:
Ah.

ERIN:
You didn't.

ALEXANDRA:
(taking her drink) She did.

ERIN:
Did I mess up?

DIANE:
No! You were right. I wanted wine. I meant wine.

ALEXANDRA:
Once again, saddled with your good intentions. *(holding up her glass)* Salud!

ALL WOMEN:
Salud!

The four women toast with their super-sized glasses.

ALEXANDRA:
Did you bring a menu?

ERIN:
Oh! Sorry, I...

ALEXANDRA:
Never mind, young one. I will order something. *(to Beth)* And I'll put it on your tab!

She exits, her gimlet joining the other cocktails on the table.

BETH:
Yeah, yeah, yeah. I love her... *(to Diane)* but doesn't she drive you crazy?

DIANE:
She does indeed. *(holding up her glass)* To seeing beyond!

The three woman clink glasses again.

BETH:
(to Diane) And thank you for putting up with us.

DIANE:
What?

BETH:

Without you we're totally ridiculous; you know it's true and I'm really, really sorry about him being here. I didn't mean for this to happen.

DIANE:

It's okay!

BETH:

I never would've—

ERIN:

(interrupting) He said he was really glad you had us.

Short pause.

BETH:

What?

ERIN:

What.

BETH:

What does that mean?

ERIN:

What does what mean?

DIANE:

That he was glad you had us? I think that's wonderful. Aren't you?

BETH:

Aren't I what?

DIANE:

Glad you have us.

BETH:

Yeah, but why is he? *(to Erin)* What exactly did he say?

ERIN:

I can't really... He was just talking about how much we... I mean, you, and him, thinking you should be here, with us, tonight... and he was glad.

DIANE:

Glad as in supportive. Not a lot of men that young understand the importance of female relationships. Or a lot of men at all, actually.

BETH:

I guess.

ERIN:

I'm starving. (*looking after Alexandra*) What do you think she'll order? I'm trying to cut back on dairy.

BETH:

I think sometimes Zach and I are from completely different worlds. I mean, even besides the age thing.

DIANE:

That doesn't matter. It's like ten years? That's nothing.

BETH:

Actually, it's five. He looks young.

DIANE:

Only five? He certainly does.

BETH:

Thanks.

DIANE:

But so do you!

ERIN:

Hang on. If it's only five... He's older than I am!

BETH:

Oh god. Never mind.

DIANE:

Exactly. It doesn't matter.

BETH:

But it's just that there's a part of him that's... (*to Erin*) I love you. You: it doesn't matter. He: still has roommates.

ERIN:

Wow, really?

DIANE:

So he acts younger than he is?

BETH:

I thought you liked him.

DIANE:

I do like him! I didn't mean... I think he's terrific! What matters is that you care about the same things, you're on the same side, you're there for each other. Like I said, even ten, twelve years is— Am I in trouble, now?

BETH:
No. I love you. How young do you think he acts?

DIANE:
I told you, I thought he was—

BETH:
(interrupting) That's not fair of me. I'm sorry.

ERIN:
That's so funny. I always figured he was—

BETH
(interrupting) Right!

DIANE:
Now I feel like I've upset you and I didn't—

BETH:
(interrupting) I'm not upset! Where did I put my drink?

Cassie enters holding a glass of white wine the size of a vase and a bucket of scotch as large as a potted plant; the booth may have to grow again.

CASSIE:
I hoped you'd still be here! *(to Beth)* Ready?

BETH:
Oh I am so glad you came back!

ERIN:
Yay! I thought I'd missed everyone! How's your sister?

CASSIE:
At home, thanks. They put her on a new medication which is why I've returned, for more of mine.

She lifts her sizeable wine glass, then sets down the other with a substantial thud.

(to Beth) And Scotch, for you.

BETH:
Bless you. Did they tell you how much it was?

CASSIE:
Didn't ask. I opened a tab.

BETH:
But I opened a tab!

CASSIE:

So now we've got two! *(to Diane and Erin)* Are you ladies okay?

DIANE:

Fine, thanks. And how are you?

ERIN:

I'm good!

She holds up her martini.

DIANE:

Oh! *(holding up her wine)* Yes. I'm good.

CASSIE:

Hah! You are beyond good. I didn't think you guys were coming tonight.

DIANE:

We weren't.

CASSIE:

We haven't seen you for a while. Candlelight vigils or something?

DIANE:

I don't—

CASSIE:

(Interrupting) I'm kidding. Kinda. But it has been too long. Where is...?

DIANE:

She's getting food.

ERIN:

(to Cassie, perhaps offering nachos) Are you hungry?

CASSIE:

Am I hungry...

BETH:

I'm snacking.

CASSIE:

I could snack. What's she getting?

BETH:

I don't know.

ERIN:

I'm trying to cut back on—

CASSIE:

(interrupting, to Beth) I thought you were meeting your fella?

BETH:

Yeah, he's... somewhere. Or he was.

CASSIE:

I was afraid I might be interrupting.

BETH:

No. Things got— You have to let me get your next one. I owe you fifteen dollars.

CASSIE:

You don't owe me fifteen dollars.

BETH:

I do.

CASSIE:

No worries! I've already forgotten!

BETH:

Your next one's on me.

CASSIE:

And it was only twelve.

BETH:

Your next two.

Alexandra enters with an enormous platter of food. If she were a more delicate woman, she'd be staggering under its weight.

ALEXANDRA:

Aha! The gang's all here!

CASSIE:

Hi! And what have you got there?!

Alexandra sets down the food alongside the nacho set-up and assorted glasses on the table, which might have happily grown again.

ALEXANDRA:

What's this all still doing here? *(looking around)* Isn't anyone...?

DIANE:

I haven't seen anyone.

ALEXANDRA:

Not even a bus boy? Cocktails without a bus boy?!

BETH:

(looking at the platter) What is all that?

ALEXANDRA:

What *isn't* it; that's the better question. It's a sampler platter, darlings! A grand, fabulous, fried food sampler platter!

ERIN:

It's all fried?

ALEXANDRA:

Only the best things. Like in life.

ERIN:

Well, I'm starving. I don't care what it is.

BETH:

Or isn't. This is amazing.

CASSIE:

Yeah, I'm re-thinking my snack strategy.

ALEXANDRA:

And never fear, more drinks are on their way!

DIANE:

You didn't order me one. I really shouldn't—

ALEXANDRA:

(interrupting) This time you're getting a gimlet, baby. Getting and imbibing.

BETH:

I love you and am loving this, but is it all on my tab?

ALEXANDRA:

I took pity on you and opened my own.

CASSIE:

I have one, too!

ALEXANDRA:

It's a beautiful world, isn't it? Tabs everywhere you turn. The perfect moment to announce tonight's agenda!

ERIN:

And more cocktails? You found someone?

ALEXANDRA:

The next best thing. Ava's bringing them. I found her at the bar.

ERIN:

OH!! Thank god! Thank god thank god thank god I didn't know how I was going to get home. She has my car.

BETH:

What?

ERIN:

Ava had to borrow it.

BETH:

Oh, I cannot stand this. I really can't.

ALEXANDRA:

Drink up, dearest. Just wait until you hear what I have planned!

BETH:

I love Ava, but she makes me bonkers! Do NOT tell her I have a tab!

ALEXANDRA:

Don't get distracted. I'm about to upgrade your very existence, here.

DIANE:

Actually, it's *Ahva*

Short pause.

BETH:

What?

ALEXANDRA:

Who?

DIANE:

Her name's pronounced *Ahva*.

BETH:

Since when?

CASSIE:

I never knew that.

ERIN:

Really? *Ahva*?

DIANE:

That's how she introduced herself. When I first met her, before she left town.

ERIN:

Huh.

CASSIE:

That's so funny. *Ahva*.

BETH:

Hysterical. I swear to fucking god we've been saying Ava for... forever, and she's never said a goddamn thing!

DIANE:

Maybe she felt awkward.

CASSIE:

Now I feel awkward!

BETH:

I feel pissed off! *(to Erin)* And what the fuck is she doing with your car?

ALEXANDRA:

Ladies! I have an announcement! Can we drop the Ava issue for a moment?

ERIN:

The Ahva issue.

Alexandra stands on the seat of booth.

ALEXANDRA:

EXCUSE me, I have the floor! I brought food, and the way it works here is that the fried food bringer gets the red naugahyde floor!

Silence.

So!

For impact, perhaps she arranges herself along the top of the now expansive booth. We hear distant thunder in the background.

One and all, I was bound and determined to get here tonight because I have something very exciting to share. Mixing with the prison population this evening was just the impetus I needed to put forward a recently-birthered scheme, one with irresistible baby antlers that will grow to protect every one of us. *(to Diane)* So thank you, my friend.

DIANE:

Wait. You don't mean— You and I were joking about that.

ALEXANDRA:

We were. But that was before I chatted with one of your ladies and her jumpsuit!

DIANE:

About?

ALEXANDRA:

The power of belonging. Our collective need for advancement and validation.

DIANE:

Which somehow led you back to Victoria's insane invitation?

ALEXANDRA:

It's not insane, it's exciting!

CASSIE:

Who's Victoria?

BETH:

What are you two talking about?

ALEXANDRA:

Something which could very well change our lives. Or at the very least, our designated Friday nights.

ERIN:

Oooohh, that does sound exciting!

DIANE:

If it weren't so disturbing.

BETH:

Disturbing?

CASSIE:

That could be even better than exciting.

ALEXANDRA:

No, she's being a spoilsport. What I am proposing, my friends, is a transformative step which is so in keeping with our spirit that it'll be like slipping into a pair of comfortable yet classically styled shoes and moving gracefully forward with only the slightest bit of effort. One word, ladies: Elks. We are all going to become Elks.

Again we hear muted thunder, but it appears to be moving closer and is now accompanied by the rumbling of a large crowd.

BETH:

Elks?

ALEXANDRA:

That's what I said!

BETH:

That's what I thought you said.

CASSIE:

Elks.

ALEXANDRA:

Yes!

BETH:

We want to be Elks? This is a good thing?

ALEXANDRA:

It's an extraordinary thing!

BETH:

Not Moose, or Lions...

CASSIE:

Or Masons!

DIANE:

Or Knights of the KKK...

ALEXANDRA:

Please.

ERIN:

Oh! I get it! *Elks!*

ALEXANDRA:

Fine, fine, fine. So, do you all want to know the number one reason for embracing Elkdom?

BETH:

Jesus. They really say Elkdom?

ALEXANDRA:

Among the many perks of Elkdom, thank you very much, is a core philosophy which speaks, literally, volumes. Are you ready for this?

BETH:

No, not without another drink.

ALEXANDRA:

Exactly! That's it!

BETH:

What's it?

ALEXANDRA:

Drinks! Free or cut-rate cocktails! When you're an Elk, when you're a member of the inner circle, they charge next to nothing for one healthy, free-pour masterpiece after another.

CASSIE:

Really?

ALEXANDRA:

And to top that, no self-respecting Elk lets another Elk buy his own drinks!

DIANE:

"His" own drinks.

ALEXANDRA:

His, hers—Elk are all the same in Elkdom.

DIANE:

I'm sure.

BETH:

I don't know. I never thought of our spirit as being particularly Elkish.

CASSIE:

Elk-like.

ALEXANDRA:

Elks couldn't be more us. And there are Lodges all across the country; a dozen within a 25-mile radius!

BETH:

So you're basically looking at Elks Lodges as bars?

ERIN:

Bars with antlers!

ALEXANDRA:

Lounges. They're called lounges. Now I'm not saying that's the whole membership package, but you gotta hand it to those Elks. You can't have a Lodge without a lounge.

DIANE:

Full of nothing but old, white, Republican men?

ALEXANDRA:

There are good uses for old, white, Republican men! Think of it as opening up your world, with a Happy Hour bonus!

With a louder crack of thunder, Zach enters, struggling to carry an impressive tray of drinks for all, each would dwarf a large coffee can.

ZACH:

I know I'm wimping out but can I get a little help here?

ALEXANDRA:

Just in time! A young buck bearing oh-so-welcome gifts!

ZACH:

Your friend at the bar told me to bring these to you guys. So I'm not intentionally crashing the party. I'm obeying like a good boy.

CASSIE:

(helping him with the drinks) Awww!

ERIN:

(lifting her glass with effort) This is the most beautiful martini I've ever seen!

CASSIE:

Is that my white wine, you devil?

BETH:

Don't encourage him. He's just after a good tip.

ZACH:

And you don't think I deserve it?

DIANE:

Do Elks tip, or is service from the underclasses their privileged right?

ALEXANDRA:

Drink your gimlet and stop being fussy. What's with you, anyway?

DIANE:

This whole— Are you really serious?

ALEXANDRA:

Damn straight, I am!

DIANE:

Then you're right: I'd better keep drinking!

ALEXANDRA:

Exactly! Do you all understand the kind of opportunity I'm talking about here?

ERIN:
But where's Ava—I mean Ahva? Wasn't she—?

ALEXANDRA:
(interrupting) Jesus Christ! We'll fill her in when she gets here!

ZACH:
(to Erin) She's the one at the bar? She said she had to run.

ERIN:
Wait! She left?

ZACH:
Not quite. She was waiting for a to-go order.

BETH:
A to-go order?

ZACH:
A sandwich, or something

ERIN:
I have to catch her—she's got my car!

She abandons her martini and hurries away into a flash of lightening.

BETH:
Fabulous! Apparently we've just financed Ahva's after-dinner snack.

CASSIE:
We have?

BETH:
You can bet if there's a tab, that sandwich is on it. I can't stand this!

ZACH:
Baby, it's just a sandwich.

BETH:
It's not! It's everything! Every time!

ALEXANDRA:
And the answer to all your problems? B.P.O.E! The Benevolent Protective Order of Elks!

We hear a significant crack of thunder followed by voices from the crowd, rumbling.

ZACH:
So you guys are going to become Elks? Cool!

ALEXANDRA:

It is cool! Extremely cool, thank you for noticing!

BETH:

I'm sorry. I so do not get this.

CASSIE:

Wait. Wouldn't it just be *Elk*? More than one Elk is still *Elk*, right? Or is it possessive?

ALEXANDRA:

Oh, who cares why the "s!" What matters is the drinks! That's plural, if you didn't notice.

ZACH:

Actually, one or two elk is elk. A larger group is elks.

BETH:

No. You say a herd of elk. Not a herd of elks.

ZACH:

Do you?

BETH:

Yes!

ZACH:

Maybe you're wrong.

CASSIE:

So what do we have to do as members? What are we benevolently protecting?

ALEXANDRA:

I'm sure it's something worthwhile—I haven't worked out the details.

Suddenly, Diane stands, rattling plates and glasses as the storm approaches.

DIANE:

You shouldn't even be contemplating the details! Do you realize who these people are and what they stand for?!

ALEXANDRA:

What is your problem?

DIANE:

My problem? Is that you, apparently, have *no* problem joining a sexist, racist, fascist, religiously discriminatory organization whose latest throwback practice is interrogating members about their ties to Mother Russia!

CASSIE:

Whoa! That's... Really?

ALEXANDRA:

No. They are all about diversity and she's making that last bit up.

DIANE:

No. You said you heard it from Victoria, herself!

ALEXANDRA:

No. One of the exalted rulers made some vague reference, is all.

CASSIE:

Hang on. Exalted what?

DIANE:

Oh, yes! Picture bonfires and hooded figures, because the Elks have exalted rulers and one grand exalted ruler.

CASSIE:

Oooohhhh, that's marvelous.

DIANE:

Just leave it to a fraternal organization!

ALEXANDRA:

A fraternal order, a service organization. Consider it brotherly love. It's not gender-specific.

DIANE:

It most certainly is gender specific! Fraternal equals men!

ALEXANDRA:

There are tons of women Elk! It's just a phrase.

DIANE:

You don't know the kind of damage "just a phrase" can do?

ALEXANDRA:

You did not get the scoop here, I did! Here's what it takes to become an Elk: U.S. Citizen, over 21.

DIANE:

What about the god part?

ALEXANDRA:

Right. And you have to believe in god. But that strikes me as very loose. Belief, god... It could be interpreted a number of ways.

DIANE:

And the flag part.

CASSIE:

There's an Elk flag!?

ALEXANDRA:

No, the American flag. It's quite appropriate given our unsettling times. Members must pledge allegiance and salute the flag.

DIANE:

But note that Flag and God are always capitalized in Elkdom.

CASSIE:

That is a bit frightening.

ALEXANDRA:

It is not—we're a shoe-in! We get sponsored by our Elk pal Victoria, who uses her exalted poobah status to get us the requisite two co-sponsors, then breeze through the investigation and whaa lah!

CASSIE:

What sort of investigation?

DIANE:

"Are you now or have you ever been...!"

ALEXANDRA:

I DO NOT KNOW, you big old babies! I'm sure it's nothing! I mean, *everyone* cannot be an Elk!

DIANE:

And that statement in itself doesn't bother you?!!

ALEXANDRA:

OKAY, OKAY, OKAY! We don't all have to join! You can have up to nine non-Elk lounge guests per visit!

CASSIE:

Hey, maybe women are like Elk adjuncts. Does! Would that work?

DIANE:

That's not...!

Very short pause.

Pardon me. I have to get up early. I'll see you all next time. *(to Alexandra, collecting her bag)* You can find a ride?

ALEXANDRA:

Absolutely! Don't worry about me!

BETH:

Wait, no...

ZACH:

(to Diane) Let me walk you out.

DIANE:

No, I'm fine.

CASSIE:

Love you sweetie! We don't see you enough!

DIANE:

Sometimes I just have... other places to be. Bye!

ALEXANDRA:

Bye!

Diane exits.

BETH:

(to Zach) It's starting to rain. Why don't you walk her out.

ZACH:

I'll walk her out.

He exits and we hear rain coming down.

CASSIE:

Is she okay? Was she crying?

ALEXANDRA:

I don't know. She just gets like this.

BETH:

Why did you start this whole thing, anyway?

ALEXANDRA:

What's the matter, do you feel threatened?

CASSIE:

I'm game. I could be an Elk. Does that make me a bad person?

BETH:

(to Alexandra) What I'm saying is we're legitimate on our own. I don't know why you need that kind of... whatever it is.

ALEXANDRA:

Never mind. Just a fleeting whim shot down mid-flight.

CASSIE:

Are you okay?

ALEXANDRA:

Oh I'm fabulous. *(looking at the plates and glasses on the table)* But what the fuck is this mess about! This is a disaster! It's like the last supper with no one to bus the fucking table! I'm going to find someone. Anyone need anything? Another round? And they forgot the onion rings. I'll be back.

She exits and we hear the sound of a helicopter cutting through the rain.

CASSIE:

Hey! Wanna be an Eastern Star?

BETH:

What?

CASSIE:

My grandma was an Eastern Star, because my grandfather was a Mason. They have secrets and women couldn't join. Or at least that's how I remember it. So they were Eastern Stars. I thought that was just so wonderful. When I was little. It was all very mysterious and magical. They had pins and rings and meetings...

BETH:

Do you need another drink?

CASSIE:

I'm okay... Are you?

BETH:

I'm fine. I'm... *(looking after Zach)* I think we're calling it quits.

CASSIE:

What? Who's calling it quits?

BETH:

Who do you think?

CASSIE:

Wait: You and Zach? Why? What happened? Oh god—is there someone else?

BETH:

Yes, I've taken up with the bus boy, that's why you haven't seen one here tonight—he's at home in a sarong.

CASSIE:
No I meant him.

BETH:
Right. There's no one else. Really. It's just time.

CASSIE:
Why is it time?

BETH:
It just is. We have fun, we respect each other, he's terrific... But I— We talked about it. We knew when it started it wasn't a long term thing. He's got his problems to work out. I've got my stuff. And he's five years younger than me.

CASSIE:
Only five? I thought he was—

BETH:
(interrupting) It's five. But it's enough so that going into this it made him... safely unavailable. Except it didn't exactly work out that way.

CASSIE:
Yeah, well, lemme tell ya: I know from personal experience that "safe" sucks if it means you end up all alone.

BETH:
I won't be all alone; I'll have you guys.

CASSIE:
There's something you're not telling me.

BETH:
There's nothing I'm not telling you.

CASSIE:
Then why are you trying to sabotage this?

BETH:
It's not sabotage! It's just time! And you're not alone—what about your sister?!

CASSIE:
Yeah. My own little disabled albatross. Severely challenging any chance I have for independent living.

Very short pause.

Did I just say that?

BETH:
Did something happen?

CASSIE:
No nothing happened. Nothing ever happens. And I didn't mean it.

BETH:
I know you didn't.

CASSIE:
I love her very much and I'll take care of her until the day I die. That's what I do now. I'm the world's most ill-suited caregiver and she's my adorably oversized sister and a wonderful, sweet, funny, clueless thing and I love her.

BETH:
I know! I love her, too!

CASSIE:
And I love you. All you guys. You're like my—

BETH:
(interrupting) Don't say it. I'll cry.

CASSIE:
Okay. I won't. And don't cry. I don't know what I'd do if I saw you cry. But that's why I'm saying to you: Don't fuck things up and say "It's time" because there comes a point where there's not all that much time left, you know?

Very short pause.

BETH:
Well... It's not me who's saying it.

Short pause.

CASSIE:
Oh!

BETH:
I mean, it was bound to happen sooner or later and I'm okay with that.

CASSIE:
You look not okay.

BETH:
I guess it just sort of took me by surprise. A little bit. Even though I knew it shouldn't.

CASSIE:
What did he say?

BETH:
Oh, he didn't. Yet. But it's coming. That's why he's here tonight, why he wanted to meet me.

CASSIE:
Yuck. I thought it was funny, him here.

BETH:
It just seemed to make sense.

CASSIE:
That he come here? To do this? Made sense to whom?!

BETH:
It was actually my idea.

CASSIE:
Well, you're a masochist!

BETH:
It's not a big deal.

CASSIE:
It is a big deal! It's horrendous and you're insane, but he should know! What a shit! It's like he's defiling everything we're about! What a shit-head user selfish puppy bastard! I hate him! What a prick!

BETH:
No, I'm okay! It's all very, very, very okay!

We hear Alexandra and Zach approaching.

ALEXANDRA:
(offstage) You got that? Excellent! You definitely got a new career ahead of you, if you want it, baby!

ZACH:
(offstage) To tell you the truth, I wouldn't say no to anything right now.

ALEXANDRA:
(offstage) Reeeeeeally!

ZACH:
(offstage) Oh, yeah. It's my time, I can feel it.

BETH:

I'm not ready.

The seat of the booth opens up, allowing Beth to crawl into it and disappear. Alexandra and Zach enter; she is carrying an outrageously over-sized serving of onion rings which look more like bicycle tires. He carries a tray of gargantuan, pail-sized drinks.

ALEXANDRA:

Hello? Where is everyone?

CASSIE:

You need more than me?

ALEXANDRA:

Never, darling! It's just that you look so very small and pathetic, all alone in that big booth by yourself.

CASSIE:

Why do you always know just what to say?

ZACH:

(setting down the drinks) Where did...?

CASSIE:

She... slipped into the ladies room. Sanctuary.

ZACH:

Ha ha!

CASSIE:

You gotta white wine there?

ALEXANDRA:

Do I hear an edge of desperation?

ZACH:

Ha ha ha!

Alexandra sets down the onion rings. The table top is very crowded.

ALEXANDRA:

So! You'll love this. The staff was so chagrined about their short-shrifting us—

ZACH:

(interrupting) Chagrined or shamed?

ALEXANDRA:

There's a difference?

CASSIE:

(to Zach) "Shame." Funny you should use that word...

ALEXANDRA:

I was only showing the culinary crew the light, that in their last exercise they deprived us of a major food group. So they gave us a round and now you all have me to thank for your vegetables in the form of onion wheels!

ZACH:

Ha ha ha!

CASSIE:

I'm not hungry.

ALEXANDRA:

You'll never grow if you don't eat.

CASSIE:

Really. I'm fine.

ZACH:

Well, I'm starved. Do you mind? I feel like I could *eat* an Elk!

ALEXANDRA:

Ha ha!

ZACH:

Ha ha!

CASSIE:

Hah.

ALEXANDRA:

So my disapproving friend hasn't returned to the fold yet?

CASSIE:

Oh. No.

ALEXANDRA:

Can I just say that it would be much easier for all of us if she'd stop thinking of herself as Mother Fucking Theresa!

CASSIE:

I don't think she—

ALEXANDRA:

(interrupting) She does! Which makes me Satan incarnate! With tits!

ZACH:

Ha ha, that's great! You guys are great!

CASSIE:

You're certainly in a good mood! Something on your mind you wanna share with us?

ZACH:

I... No. Well, yes. But it's private. I'll wait.

ALEXANDRA:

Ohhhhh, that'll never work around here—we are not women who wait and secrets are not allowed, my pet!

ZACH:

Really?

ALEXANDRA:

Yes, really! If you're a man amongst us, you must show and tell.

CASSIE:

We've never had a man amongst us.

ALEXANDRA:

Read the bylaws. It's there. *(to Zach)* So before you take another bite, *or* another drink...!

His glass stops at his lips.

It's time for the truth: What has brought you to this place, to this very specific point in your life where you find yourself penetrating our particular circle?

ZACH:

Okay, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to work out like this. We were supposed to meet—

ALEXANDRA:

(interrupting) But the *real* reason. Reach into your past and reveal what it is that makes you the first male in our ranks, on this night of all nights!

CASSIE:

(to Zach) Precisely! Why the fuck are you here?

Short pause.

ZACH:

I... I got a scholarship once? From the Elks?

CASSIE:
What?

ZACH:
I mean, that's not why I came, but through some weird karmic universe connection, maybe that is why I'm here? What a night, huh?!

CASSIE:
Unbelievable.

ZACH:
I remembered when you guys were on the Elks bit. I wrote an essay and won a scholarship.

ALEXANDRA:
See? How beautiful is that?

ZACH:
It was about losing both my parents. I think one of my teachers sponsored me.

CASSIE:
That's the best you can come up with? You're not fooling anyone, you know.

ZACH:
What are you talking about? It's true!

CASSIE:
How dare you come here?! Here, of all places, like it would take the edge off of your snot-nosed speech of arrested adulting. You want to go find yourself? Do it somewhere else, far, far away and leave my friend alone!

ALEXANDRA:
What *are* you talking about?

Short pause.

CASSIE:
Nothing. Never mind. I have to go. I have my own circle of hell waiting for me at home.

She exits with amazing speed.

ZACH:
I didn't know she was married.

ALEXANDRA:
She's not.

Erin enters, barely managing three insanely big drinks—think bathroom trash cans.

ERIN:

Oh, wow. I thought I could do this but I shoulda' taken two trips.

Zach moves to help her; she holds up Cassie's white wine.

Wait, I thought I saw...?

ALEXANDRA:

She had to go get something out of her ass.

ZACH:

I think it was me.

ERIN:

What?

ZACH:

I mean, I think she was mad at me.

ERIN:

Why?

ZACH:

I have no idea. Cause I'm here? I should—

ALEXANDRA:

(interrupting) You most certainly should not, young man. Sit back down.

ZACH:

No, I have to go.

ERIN:

But who'll drink the wine?

ZACH:

You'll find someone.

ALEXANDRA:

That's what my mother always said.

Zach exits and Erin discovers the onion wheels.

ERIN:

Oh, gosh! Look at these!

ALEXANDRA:

Help yourself. I've had my fill.

ERIN:
They look great! *(taking a stack)* Thanks!

ALEXANDRA:
I remember when I could eat like that.

ERIN:
What?

ALEXANDRA:
I used to be able to eat anything I wanted. Any time I wanted.

ERIN:
Oh, it's not that I can eat anything...

ALEXANDRA:
Just most things?

ERIN:
No, not really. I have to be really careful, actually.

ALEXANDRA:
Ah! I so don't want to hear that!

ERIN:
What?

ALEXANDRA:
I want one of us to be free, to eat and drink with abandon, to dine wherever and do whatever, with whomever, completely without a care! I want, I need to know that you are careless! Not care-free, care-less. That you thoroughly consider the repercussions then say, "Fuck it!" because at least one of us should be able to take a step without worrying about where it lands! To have the freedom to move forward liberated from the yoke of always doing the right fucking thing!

Pause.

ERIN:
I don't understand.

ALEXANDRA:
No. You don't.

ERIN:
I...

Erin starts to tear up as Beth emerges from her hiding place.

BETH:
Is that my scotch?

By this time the plates, platters and glasses of increasing size completely cover the table and we again hear crowd noises from outside. Erin begins to sob and disappears behind the dishes.

She's had a really hard day.

ALEXANDRA:
Haven't we all.

BETH:
So. Be honest with me. What's really going on here?

ALEXANDRA:
With her impossibly hard day?

BETH:
No. With you. You guys.

ALEXANDRA:
Us guys. Us... Guys... You mean me and miss holier-than-thou? My indignant activist buddy?

BETH:
Yeah. What started this?

ALEXANDRA:
Let me see if I can recall that fateful moment... Did I meet her in the convent? Or was she out healing the sick?

BETH:
I meant the Elks conflict.

ALEXANDRA:
The Elks conflict! Is that what this is? Has she organized some sort of woodland creature uprising?

BETH:
You know what I mean. There's more going on here than Elks.

ALEXANDRA:
Yes, there is! That's what I'm saying. She's the one attacking them and she doesn't even know what she's talking about! The world is not black and white and there is more to life than crusades! You spend all your time worrying about women behind bars and oppressed animals in costume but since you have no fucking sense of humor, you don't think before you lash out and just because my problems are first world problems doesn't mean they're not problems!

Erin reappears.

ERIN:

What's wrong with animals in costume?

ALEXANDRA:

Not a goddamn thing. *(to Beth)* I'm sorry, but it's like I can't do or say anything anymore without her getting all up in arms.

BETH:

Are you just doing this to piss her off? Is that what this is?

ALEXANDRA:

Why would you say that?

BETH:

Because that's what you do. Over and over again and this time you're gone too far. You and the goddamn Elks are going to drive her away!

ALEXANDRA:

Suddenly I've crossed some invisible line of bovine evil?

BETH:

No, that's—

ALEXANDRA:

(interrupting) Then stop making me feel like I'm a bad person! Last time I looked you were sitting here with me, knocking 'em back while she was out there fighting for the rest of the planet.

BETH

Okay! You're right! But you do know that a line in this world has been crossed. We can't go back and that is actually good! It means we should all be more like her. Or try to be. It's like... me, I get totally overwhelmed and tell myself I do what I can and that maybe it makes a difference but *she*... she *believes* in things. She believes things can change. She believes with such absolute certainty.

ALEXANDRA:

Which makes life extremely difficult, thank you.

BETH:

Thank *her*! I feel lucky she chooses to be with us!

ALEXANDRA:

Fine! Then I'll just leave you to it. Join the Elks myself. Plenty of members I can get lucky with.

She makes her way out of the booth.

BETH:

Stop it. And that is such a horrible term: “member.” Why would do you even want to be a member? Of anything!

ERIN:

Does being a member count if you don't know you're a member?

Short pause.

ALEXANDRA:

What?

ERIN:

Because they just made me one. I never wanted to be one!

ALEXANDRA:

Who did?

BETH:

What are you talking about?

ERIN:

AOL. That's what happened today. What I found out. I guess it started back when I was in school?

BETH:

AOL?

ALEXANDRA:

America Online.

BETH:

I know what AOL is. My mother has AOL. AOL. That's your big crisis?

ERIN:

No. I mean yes. Because I had no idea! About any of it! I feel so stupid, I try to tell myself I'm a successful, functioning adult and that I'm bright and interesting and people want to be my friend and I'm going to get married and have a career and be a good parent and tastefully decorate my home so that people say to me “Oh! How does she do it all, without any effort” and then something like this happens and—!

BETH:

(interrupting) What happened, for chrissakes?!

ERIN:

I found out today that I've been paying AOL to be a member for seven years!

Short pause.

BETH:
Nobody pays for AOL. Not anymore.

ALEXANDRA:
Apparently some people do.

BETH:
(to Erin) But how could you not know? They didn't send you notices?

ERIN:
To my AOL address. That I forgot I had.

BETH:
You never looked at your bills?

ERIN:
It's not like there was a big AOL, or anything.

BETH:
What was there?

ERIN:
A little aol.

BETH:
So how much money have you paid. Over seven years. How much total?

ERIN:
Almost Three Thousand Dollars.

BETH:
What?

ERIN:
Almost—

BETH:
(interrupting) Jesus! That's worse than stupid! That's completely irresponsible! You throw away thousands of dollars because you couldn't be bothered to read a fucking statement, then show up here expecting us to feel sorry for you and it's all so cute while the rest of us have to fight to hang onto everything we've got! What is wrong with you?

Erin starts to cry. These tears are more raw and genuine than her previous outbursts.

I'm... I'm sorry. *(to Erin)* I'm so, so sorry. I don't know... I don't know why I said that. I didn't mean it.

ALEXANDRA:

And now who's gone too far?

BETH:

I...

Erin continues to cry, softly.

Okay. You know what? We're going to get you that money back. Every last dime!

ALEXANDRA:

Really?

ERIN:

Really?

BETH:

Yes, really!

ERIN:

I love you!

ALEXANDRA:

(to Beth) So, what: You're just going to make a phone call?

BETH:

I'll start there. Then, who knows? We'll start a petition. We'll stage a protest!

ERIN:

(to Alexandra) And I love you!

ALEXANDRA:

Thank you. *(to Beth)* But you are crazy if you think you can do anything.

BETH:

See, that's where you're wrong. They think they can get away with this crap because we're all powerless and polarized and don't have any connections, but the truth is we are connected—to each other! We don't need to be part of something bigger to validate us. We're enough. Together.

ALEXANDRA:

You sound like an ex-friend of mine.

BETH:

Good. So you're not leaving us, right?

ALEXANDRA:

Because we're all just one happy family? All for one and one for all?

BETH:
Yes!

ALEXANDRA:
Including Ahva?

BETH:
Right. Ahva.

ERIN:
I love A—!

BETH:
(interrupting) The answer is yes. She's part of the package. I'm not wired to take on the world. Not on my own; I know that. But I also know there are things in my life right now I need to believe in. To fight for.

Very, very short pause.

I don't want to be alone.

ALEXANDRA:
And where did *that* come from?

BETH:
A sudden realization. And the need for another drink.

ERIN:
I'll get them!

BETH:
You don't have to.

ERIN:
I want to!

BETH
Are we okay?

ERIN:
Yeah!

She slides out of the booth.

BETH:
Okay!

ALEXANDRA:
(to Erin) And see if they have a dessert menu!

ERIN:
Want me to just order something?

ALEXANDRA:
I'll go with you.

BETH:
Are we okay?

ALEXANDRA:
Sure! It'll be my farewell coo de graasss.

BETH:
Don't say that! You're not going anywhere!

The two women start out as Zach enters.

ZACH:
(to Beth) Hey!

BETH:
Hi...

ALEXANDRA:
Look who's re-surfaced! What've you been up to?

ZACH:
Looking for her!

He slides into the booth and gives Beth a heartfelt kiss.

BETH:
I needed that.

ZACH:
To be looked for?

BETH:
Right.

ALEXANDRA:
You're just in time for a treat to end all treats. Don't move!

ERIN:
We'll be right back!

They exit.

ZACH:

You women. My god. It's like I dived into your hole and got completely lost.

BETH:

Yeah?

ZACH:

Wait. That didn't come out right. I meant like a rabbit hole, like—

BETH:

(interrupting) I know. You need a drink, sweetie?

ZACH:

No. Well, yes. But I actually have to go.

BETH:

Oh.

ZACH:

I didn't want to leave without talking to you, only now I'm out of time. I have to meet someone.

BETH:

Oh!

ZACH:

I'm sorry.

BETH:

You never mentioned.

ZACH:

I know. Things just got so crazy.

BETH:

It's a crazy night.

ZACH:

That's what I was trying to tell you, what I came here to tell you! But I didn't want to say anything with them around.

BETH:

Oh?

ZACH:

It's kind of hard to go into. I mean, I know you'll understand but I don't know if they would. I'm not sure if I do. I'm as much scared as I am excited. That's why I wanted to tell you alone.

BETH:

Okay.

ZACH:

Only not like this. Cause now I have to just lay it on you and run!

BETH:

Okay...

ZACH:

To meet this woman!

BETH:

Okay. This is not okay. I made a mistake. It's not okay.

ZACH:

What?

BETH:

It's not okay for you to tell me this. We need to talk. About a lot of things. Somewhere not here. Not tonight.

ZACH:

But I just... What are you talking about?

BETH:

That it's not time. Not yet. So you go, and I'll see you tomorrow.

ZACH:

Did I say something?

BETH:

Are you serious? How old are you?

ZACH:

Look! Lemme just tell you! Today I found this woman online—

BETH:

(interrupting, unable to find her scotch) Hand me that drink.

ZACH:

Or she found me, which is the most amazing thing because she was a friend of my mother's! And after all these years—

BETH:

(interrupting) Your mother's? A friend of your mother's?

ZACH:

Right!

BETH:
What age would that make her?

ZACH:
I... I don't... I mean, my mother died when I was three so she'd be like... old! But that doesn't matter! She's great!

BETH:
Uh huh.

ZACH:
But here's the thing! The thing is that she told me she lost touch with my grandparents so for years didn't know where I was, but she has this tape that my mother made for me when she was sick, before she died! This whole tape that my mother asked her to keep safe so I could hear it when I turned eighteen; a message from my mom to me because even though no one else would admit she was dying, she—my mom—knew it, so she made this tape. For me. To hear when I became... a man. As stupid as that sounds.

Pause.

BETH:
What?

ZACH:
Ha ha. Unbelievable, isn't it? I mean, you know how I've always felt like there was this...mystery...when it came to my mother. Of course, I lost my dad, too, but he just wasn't all that complicated, you know?

BETH:
Okay. So this woman, this friend...

ZACH:
Of my mom's. Came out of nowhere. And it's pretty incredible when you think about it because I have pictures and even video tapes of my mom, but I could never come up with a complete person. I mean, even the fact that she died when she really wasn't supposed to. I always felt like there was some clue in that: Why I'm here. Where I belong. What I'm supposed to do. If that makes any sense.

BETH:
I...

ZACH:
You know me. You've said it. It's like I'm afraid to make a move because I'm always waiting for something. And I don't want to miss it, or go in the wrong direction without it. So I just stay still, and wait.

BETH:
Right.

ZACH:

But I know I can't keep waiting forever. And I think that this is maybe that something.

Short pause.

BETH:

Let me walk you out.

ZACH:

Okay.

They start to leave.

BETH:

Remember Rochelle's birthday dinner?

ZACH:

Which one's Rochelle?

BETH:

We went to that snotty French place?

They are gone. Maybe we hear music coming from outside. Maybe it's an accordion. Cassie and Diane emerge from behind the booth with giant gimlets reminiscent of parasols, which they must hold with both arms. The rain has stopped and we're bathed in streaks of moonlight. Perhaps the women stand on the seat of the booth in order to be seen from behind the mound on the table, and for a moment contemplate the enormity of it all.

DIANE:

So. Where is she?

CASSIE:

Oh, she's here. Thanks for letting me drag you back.

DIANE:

You didn't—

CASSIE:

(interrupting) I so did, but... were you really going anywhere?

DIANE:

Maybe not. Not yet, anyway. As much as I'd like to, sometimes.

CASSIE:

Hearts are funny, like that.

Short pause.

DIANE:
Maybe.

Very short pause.

Should we order something to eat?

CASSIE:
I could use a little something. A snack.

DIANE:
(looking around) A bite.

Short pause.

CASSIE:
Okay, I know we give you a hard time. But you know we love you, right? And really, what are a few would-be Elks in the grand scheme of things?

DIANE:
It's not even— The point is that she doesn't care about what's important to me. She has no idea, everything that I carry with me. Every day!

CASSIE:
Which is why you have us! So you can let some of it go once in a while!

DIANE:
That's not—

CASSIE:
(interrupting) Why not? Let us be your dirty little unworthy secret!

DIANE:
I don't—

CASSIE:
(interrupting) Consider it? Then all you have to worry about carrying is that gorgeous gimlet!

DIANE:
You think?

CASSIE:
It's a burden, but.... Oh! You know what I wish? I wish I had a bathtub full of gimlets. Or a wading pool full of gimlets. Where I could lie down, naked, surrounded by nice, cool gimlets.

DIANE:
That sounds... really nice.

CASSIE:

Doesn't it? If you played your cards right, you could make it into an act of civil disobedience.

DIANE:

Is that a joke?

CASSIE:

No, actually. I mean, if anyone could do it, you could. Hey! I think that would be fabulous—I'd pay money to see that. We could make it a B.P.O.E. fundraiser!

Very short pause.

That is a joke.

DIANE:

So you think I'm completely ridiculous?

CASSIE:

I— No! I'm sorry. I think you're the opposite!

Very short pause.

Wait. Oh, god. What would that even be? No one wants to be the opposite of ridiculous, do they? How about just the right amount of ridiculous. Just enough so you know you belong here. With us. Because you do.

After a moment, both women smile and maybe even laugh a little.

DIANE:

We'll see...

Beth enters, slowly floating down from above in front of a very full and extremely bright moon.

BETH:

Yaaaahhhhh! Isn't that always the way? From up above it's all manageable, doable, dealable, adorable... and I can see exactly why and where and how I fit in. It's a beautiful thing to look at and then I'm back down and suddenly I can barely move, barely function, barely even scavenge for liquor. I'm going to pretend like I'm already home. I'm going to lie down and you can cover me with paper napkins and leftover food to keep me warm and I'll wake up and it'll be tomorrow and life will be crystal clear and neat and tidy and I'll just put it in my snappy little pocketbook for safekeeping.

Cassie and Diane help her before she collapses onto the ground.

It's been a really long evening. Have you eaten?

DIANE:

Not anything real.

BETH:

That's just the way I feel.

Alexandra and Erin enter. Alexandra pushes a cart with mugs of Irish coffee the size of tall laundry baskets, generously topped with whipped cream. Erin pulls a row of sofa cushion-sized pieces of chocolate cake with extravagant icing.

ALEXANDRA:

Hey ho, ladies. Nightcap and dessert.

BETH:

Irish coffee? Come to mamma.

She takes one of the mammoth coffees and holds it against her chest with both arms.

And whipped cream. Does it get any better than this?

She rests her head on the pillow of whipped cream and Erin sidles up to her own mug.

ERIN:

This is the most excellent Irish coffee I've ever seen. What makes it Irish. Just the whiskey?

ALEXANDRA:

(to Diane and perhaps Cassie) So! Are you going to join us?

CASSIE:

Oh, yeah. Nothing like a warm body late at night.

ALEXANDRA:

Except maybe chocolate. *(to Diane, pointing at the cake)* What do you think? Will you indulge me?

DIANE:

Indulge *with* you?

ALEXANDRA:

That, too.

BETH:

Did I hear chocolate?

ERIN:

I was allergic to chocolate when I was a kid.

BETH:

I was lucky. I was allergic to lima beans.

ALEXANDRA:

(indicating Diane) She was allergic to heights.

CASSIE:

To heights?

ALEXANDRA:

That's what her parents told her.

DIANE:

That is true.

CASSIE:

That is so wrong!

ALEXANDRA:

(to Diane) But you'll still sit in a tree outside of AOL with us, won't you?

DIANE:

What?

ERIN:

Oh! Yes!

BETH:

(to Alexandra) I knew you'd step up. *(to Diane)* Just say yes.

ERIN:

Please say yes!

DIANE:

To AOL?

BETH:

No, to us!

CASSIE:

Count me in, whatever it is.

ERIN:

(putting down her drink with great effort) And *this* is the most magnificent cake I've ever seen!

The women put down their drinks.

BETH:
What do you say?

ALEXANDRA:
Dive in?

CASSIE:
I'm ready.

ERIN:
Let's do it!

CASSIE:
Should we wait for Ahva?

BETH:
You're kidding me, right?

Diane suddenly kicks off her shoes and steps directly into the piece of cake. Her feet sink into the soft cake and the icing laps up onto her calves. After a momentary look of panic, her face settles into an expression of complete and total happiness. The women look at her expectantly.

DIANE:
Delicious.

The other women remove their shoes and follow suit. They speak quickly and on top of one another as they revel in the experience.

ERIN:
This is the kind of cake I want for my wedding. Everyone has white cakes. But I want chocolate. // All chocolate. Chocolate everything. Every part of it deep, dark, chocolately chocolate.

CASSIE:
Carrot cakes were big for a while. Remember when // everyone had carrot cakes?

BETH:
Cream cheese frosting. // Bring it on.

ALEXANDRA:
Whatever happened to angel food cake?

BETH:
You could never really frost // angel food cake, could you?

CASSIE:
God. I think I still have a pan // somewhere.

DIANE:

You served it with fruit.

CASSIE:

It got a bad rap. // Angel food cake.

BETH:

Because there was // nothing there!

ALEXANDRA:

Got aced out by devil's food cake.

ERIN:

What's devil's food cake?

ALEXANDRA:

You're in it up to your ankles, // sweetie pie.

ERIN:

Chocolate cake is devil's food cake?// That's great! I've never heard that!

DIANE:

I'd actually forgotten that...

CASSIE:

Wait. Why is it devil'S food cake, and not angel'S food cake.

BETH:

There's only one angel?

CASSIE:

It's not a plural possessive.

The women shake off their feet and pick up shoes and bags, making their way out.

ALEXANDRA:

Or maybe the cake was not to feed an angel, it was made of angel.

DIANE:

You're terrible.

ERIN:

(to Alexandra) You *are* terrible.

CASSIE:

But what if she's right?

BETH:

You can't be right *and* terrible? What's the point?

As they exit, Zach enters from the audience. He takes in the monumental coffee mugs left on the floor and the detritus of cake and frosting. Without entering the playing area, he speaks directly to the audience.

ZACH:

When I was little I had a teacher who always said to me, “Nothing ever turns out like you think it will.” Like that’s a bad thing.

So... I met this woman, this friend of my mother’s. And it was cool because immediately I really liked her. It was all incredibly easy. It’s not usually that way with me. And we get ready to listen to this tape—which she has never heard, never listened to all these years because it was mine—but before we turned it on she asked if I wanted to listen to it alone... Only it seemed right that she be there, because I could see how much she loved my mother. I mean, loved her. Really, really loved her.

At the start of the tape, I’m like, wow. I mean I’ve heard my mother’s voice before in videos but this is different because this time it’s for *me*. And as the voice goes on this friend goes totally berserk, she’s crying and I’m crying and she—my mother—is talking about the weather and her parents and my bathroom habits at three and her medical reports and hospitals and how much everything was costing and my dad’s being angry and her being angry and did I, at three, know they were angry and how was that affecting the weather and her parents and my bathroom habits...

Well. It became very clear that the voice on the tape wasn’t my mother. I mean, not really. By the time she made this tape my mother was already... very sick.

So I get this and I’m disappointed and the tape is still playing, but I look over at this woman, this friend, and she’s stopped crying. She looks horrified. She looks panicked. She looks me in the eye and I can tell that she thinks... she’s failed.

My god, I’ve never felt so awful for anyone in my life. I go to hold her, and say “It’s okay! It’s okay! It’s okay!”, and for the first time ever I hear in my voice, my mother’s voice. And I believe myself: that it is okay.

Then this woman—who by this time is bawling again like a maniac; we both are—says to me, “I’m so sorry!” And I’m ready to do my magical “it’s okay” again so that I can be the one to make everything better... Only she stops me.

With, “Well... I guess the truth is, if you want to know your mother, you’ll have to meet her friends.”

Short pause as he looks again at what’s left of the evening, onstage.

And if they’re anything like this, I cannot wait.

The women begin to re-enter, having managed to slap themselves back together.

ERIN:
Can someone give me a ride home? Ahv—

BETH:
(interrupting) Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll give you a ride home. If someone else drives.

ALEXANDRA:
The rain's stopped?

DIANE:
It's beautiful out.

BETH:
How many cars do we have?

CASSIE:
Too many. We have too much of everything.

ALEXANDRA:
Yet never enough.

DIANE:
I can drive.

BETH:
How many of us can you deal with?

ALEXANDRA:
And if that's not a loaded question...

DIANE:
You're all good.

ERIN:
We are all good! We're the best.

BETH:
Oh! Don't we have tabs?

ALEXANDRA:
Don't worry. A couple of visiting Elks picked 'em up.

ERIN: Really? CASSIE: Hah!

CASSIE:
Wouldn't that be "Elk?"

DIANE:
 Could be!

BETH:
 Yeah.

ALEXANDRA:
 Definitely.

Zach watches their exodus, then turns back to the audience.

ZACH:
 God, I love women!

The lights start to fade on the playing area, and a light emanates from the pile on top of the table. The big red naugahyde booth seems somehow satisfied—we might hear an audible sigh or other sound. Maybe we wonder who's going to do the dishes.

End of Play