Cynics: Representations of Depression in Contemporary Theatre

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SENIOR HONORS THESIS
Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the
College Scholars Honors Program
North Central College
May 11, 2015

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Abstract

This research explores the ways in which clinical depression is represented in contemporary English-language plays between the years of 1996 and 2007; I conducted this research in order to determine the perceptions of mental illness perpetuated by different representations. Depression is presently a constantly debated topic; however our contemporary American society is still frequently plagued by misunderstanding and stigma. Depression is one of the most common classifications in the Diagnostics and Statistical Manual (DSM), and yet is vastly misunderstood, often resulting in false and negative perceptions. I explore these various attitudes towards depression through the close reading and analysis of four plays: 4.48 Psychosis, Shopping and Fucking, August: Osage County and Proof. Additionally, I created my own representation of depression through the writing and directing of an original play entitled Cynics. Through my research, I seek to provide a better understanding of our society’s perceptions of mental illness and the role that theatre and performance can play in shaping cultural perception of such illnesses.
Depression and Theatre

Mental health tends to be a loaded discussion topic, often fraught with stigma. While the field of psychology has made great bounds in its understanding and treatment of various mental illnesses, there seems to be a troublesome lack of public knowledge on the matter. Inaccurate representations of mental illness perpetuate this misinformation, encouraging harmful behavior as well as marginalization.

One of the most common mental illnesses is major depression, effecting roughly 6.7 percent of the U.S. population aged 18 and older (DBSA 1). Depression has slowly begun to make its way into mainstream Western culture as several public figures have spoken out about their struggles with the disorder. However, despite this development, depression continues to be misrepresented to the public, furthering misinformation and stalling progress.

Depression is very well catalogued in the Diagnostics and Statistics Manuel’s (DSM) 5th edition, last updated in May of 2013. A common belief is that depression is a frequent state of sadness; however, the reality is more complex. Rather than simple melancholy, many who suffer from depression experience anhedonia, the inability to experience pleasure from activities ordinarily found enjoyable (Nolen-Hoeksema 181). In order to be diagnosed with clinical depression, five or more of the following symptoms must be exhibited in the same two-week period and represent a change from previous functioning: Depressed mood or anhedonia every day or nearly every day, significant weight change or change in appetite nearly every day, insomnia or hypersonnia nearly every day, psychomotor agitation or retardation nearly every day, fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, and recurring thoughts of death or suicide ideation (DSM 161). At least one of the symptoms must be either depressed mood or loss of interest of pleasure (DSM 161). One of the key distinctions found in
the criteria for clinical depression is its duration; most of the symptoms must be present nearly
every day for an extended period of time. Furthermore, the symptoms must present an
interruption in ordinary functioning for the individual. These distinctions separate a depressed
mood, which many experience, from clinical depression. There now exists a great deal of
research and knowledge of clinical depression; however, despite this progress, depression
continues to be plagued by stigma. These stigmas and harmful attitudes are not necessarily
malicious; rather, they result from a lack of information. Harmful misrepresentations of
depression encourage harmful attitudes, leading to misinformed judgment and stigma.

We see depression represented in a variety of formats, especially in the world of
entertainment. Depression can be found in various films and television shows, often in a less
than accurate manner. Symptoms are often inaccurate or exaggerated, resulting in a false
portrayal of depression (Donley 1). Because of the wide-reaching influence the entertainment
industry has on its audience, accuracy is very important. Otherwise, the misinformation spread
throughout the public results in harmful attitudes as well as marginalization. Unfortunately,
misrepresentation of depression is still very prevalent in our society. India Knight wrote a
controversial column in The Sunday Times in which she offered her opinions on the matter:

The same simply isn’t true of depression. There is no stigma…where my sympathy
wavers is when depression is used as bait, or as the gilt on the lily…everybody gets
depressed, and one person’s depression is not a million miles from another’s (Knight 2).

Knight’s article misrepresents depression in many ways, yet her comments reach millions of
people. Furthermore, while Knight claims that there is not stigma attached to depression, her
article does a wonderful job of proving otherwise. The lack of knowledge on the subject is
apparent through Knight’s generalization and trivialization of the illness, as well as her claim
that all stigmas have been eradicated. To declare any major issue “solved” is a bold move, not to
mention a dangerous one. Stigma surrounding depression continues to flourish as depression continues to be misrepresented. A common stigma is that depression is somehow a sign of weakness, or even worse, that depression is something one has complete control over (Donley 1). Myths such as these trivialize depression, taking away its validity. Misunderstanding of depression may also lead to harmful associations; often depression is associated with instability and violence, leading to the marginalization and exclusion of those suffering (Cook and Wang 1). Inaccurate portrayals of depression are mass-produced with ease in our constantly connected society, perpetuating this stigma and misunderstanding. Furthermore, the overarching attitudes created by this sort of misrepresentation have very real consequences. Negative associations with depression may lead to social exclusion and isolation. Moreover, the stigmas attached to depression may discourage depressed individuals from seeking help. Interestingly enough, while these consequences result from negative associations with depression, other equally harmful consequences may result from the opposite end of the spectrum. As I will later discuss, a subculture of the “wannabe depressed” has emerged in recent years, especially in online communities. Its members treat depression as something to be glorified and romanticized, encouraging dangerous thoughts and behavior such as self-harm. The glorification of mental illness has in recent years formed an online presence, and is certainly not limited to depression. Interestingly enough, eating disorders receive a similar treatment in online communities through the presence of “pro-ana” and “pro-mia” blogs (referring to Anorexia and Bulimia respectively). The blogs offer “thinspiration” (thin-inspiration) pictures as well as advice for employing unhealthy weight-loss techniques, including tips on masking behaviors (one blog suggested leaving out plates with food stains in order to give the illusion that they had eaten something). This is all to say that depression is by no means the only mental illness with harmful portrayals.
While theatre does not hold the power to reach as many audiences as digital forms of entertainment, I believe it has the power to be just as influential. Theatre does, after all, have a long and intricate history, far outdating film and television. One of the most well known genres of theatre is that of realism; indeed, many tend to judge the value of a piece of theatre by its realistic qualities. While the realistic nature of a piece does not necessarily determine its value, theatrical realism as a movement is historically significant in the fields of both theatre and psychology. Henrik Ibsen is credited as being the “father of modern drama,” as he made groundbreaking progress in realism in the 19th century through the construction of plays such as *A Doll’s House* and *Hedda Gabler* (Lewis 2). Both plays not only introduced the sort of complex, multi-dimensional characters we are used to seeing today; they also boldly acknowledged social and marital problems faced by women, giving Ibsen the reputation of a feminist (Lewis 1). Not surprisingly, initial productions caused something of a controversy amongst audiences of the time; however, the progress made by Ibsen continues to influence theatre today. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of Ibsen’s plays is the introduction of more complex protagonists. As Otto Reinart describes in his article, “Ibsen and Mimesis,” Ibsen’s characters are “complex, both ‘good’ and ‘bad.’ They have psychic and moral ‘weight,’ are plausible (true to general human nature), and appropriate (true to their sex, age, social class)” (Reinart 217). Ibsen’s characters not only resemble genuine human beings more truthfully; they also undergo changes and make discoveries during their story arcs. In fact, in a letter written by Ibsen in 1882 concerning his play, *Ghosts*, he stated: “My intention was to make the impression upon the reader that he was experiencing a piece of reality while reading” (Reinart 217). While this sort of imitation of real life seems common to us now, it was groundbreaking during a time of melodramatic, “good versus evil” genres of plays. In contrast, plays centered in this sort of
realism focus more on the inner psychological struggles of characters. The flaws, desires, relationships and power struggles of characters are explored in depth, bringing a different level of concern with exploration of truth to the performance. Because of this psychological connection, theatrical realism has the potential to be an effective way of representing a complex psychological issue such as depression. This is not to say that realism is the only genre of any importance; there are a wide variety of theatrical movements, many of which purposefully rebel against realism for a desired effect. As I will discuss, the movement of In Yer Face Theatre uses visceral, taboo imagery in order to shock audiences.

Theatre can be an influential form of entertainment, especially in educating audiences and exploring ideas. In his article, “Mental Illness Through Popular Theater: Performing (In)sanely,” Steven Noble explores the powers and limitations of theatre in raising awareness of oppressed populations. Noble delves into the performance aspect of living with a psychiatric disorder; in order to be diagnosed in the first place, a person must “‘perform’ one’s body in a way that is read by others…interpreted as being ‘not normal!'” (Noble 50). The labels of ‘not normal’ and ‘normal’ are determined by ‘social gatekeepers,’ medical professionals who are often white, straight, male individuals from an upper-middle socio-economic class. These labels effectively distinguish the ‘others’ of the population, creating a gap between doctor and patient (Noble 48). One of the great advantages of theatre is that performance projects can be staged in informal community settings, away from “elitist control and censure” (Noble 51). Theatre can be a powerful method of activism in raising social and political issues, creating performances drawing from real experiences and exploring issues through mind and body (Noble 51). This use of theatre in raising political consciousness has been around for hundreds of years, gaining traction with Augusto Boal’s work with Theatre of the Oppressed in the 1960s (Noble 50).
Theatre is therefore an effective method in exploring social issues and encouraging collaboration and awareness.

There exists a diverse archive of research concerning the topic of mental health and theatre. An article by Christopher Dingwall-Jones discusses different approaches of displaying mental illness in Scottish theatre through the work of Michel de Certeau. The author examines performances of the play *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* and the short film *Does Anyone Know*, which incorporated work with prisoners with mental health problems at HM Prison Edinburgh (Dingwall-Jones 11). Through the analysis of these performances, the author explores “the contingent position of performances with mental illness, the ways in which actors writers, and service users act within the structures of theatres, prisons, and hospitals, to work around and within the ‘strategies’ which constitute psychiatric discourse” (Dingwall-Jones 13). Specifically, Dingwall-Jones focuses on Michel Foucault’s theory of tactical action in relation to structures of power in psychiatric institutions concerning the right to “nonmadness over madness” (Dingwall-Jones 14). He examines documents such as the Scottish Executive’s mental health policy, focusing on the power of diagnoses as an important factor in the power that can be exercised over the individual, both medical and judicial (Dingwall-Jones 17). The research conducted by Dingwall-Jones concerning mental illness and theatre is quite informative and helpful in working towards a more open discussion of mental health, especially in a relevant socio-political context. Additionally, an article from Morris Bernard Kaplan explores the representation of mental illness in Peter Schaffer’s well-known play, *Equus*, the story of a therapist communicating with a troubled boy who has gouged the eyes of six horses. While the play has been well received throughout the years, Kaplan points out the ways in which the play tends to romanticize mental illness. As he explains, “both secular instrumental rationality and
conventional modes of social behavior have been seen as diminishing the range of human possibility, as denying a deep need for transcendence” (Kaplan 10). At times the play seems to encourage a connection between psychosis and access to a “higher truth,” which could lead audiences to glorify mental illness. Furthermore, psychiatrists have criticized the lack of realism concerning therapy and psychoanalysis (Kaplan 10). Kaplan’s article begins the discussion of the potential consequences resulting from harmful portrayals of mental illness. *Equus* was written in 1973, and the representation of mental illness continues to be a relevant issue. There exists an archive of research on the presence of mental health in theatre; however, in order to conduct more focused research, I narrowed my subject to that of unipolar depression and its representation in theatre. I believe part of the process of resolving this issue of harmful misrepresentation comes from discussing these topics more openly. With that in mind, I used my research to inform the creation of my own representation of depression, a play entitled *Cynics*. While writing the script for *Cynics*, I set two goals based on my research: I wanted my script to be accurate as well as subtle. Based on my research I determined this method to be an effective way of communicating my ideas. There is much to be said on the prevalence of depression in popular entertainment; however, I was curious as to how depression has been represented in contemporary theater. In order to research this further, I selected four plays in which the topic depression was present: *4.48 Psychosis, Shopping and Fucking, Proof* and *August: Osage County*. Using dramaturgical as well as ideological analysis, I explore the plays’ unique representations of depression and offer arguments as to their potential implications.
4.48 Psychosis

Of the plays I have chosen to analyze, Sarah Kane’s 4.48 Psychosis is the most direct in its approach to the topic of depression. It is the only play I analyzed in which depression is the central theme. Kane’s writing not only captures the realities of depression and treatment, but also may leave the reader with an overall sense of melancholy, a dose of depression. Kane achieves this effect through her visceral imagery and avoidance of “conventional” theatrical structure. There are no definable characters or scenes, leaving much of the script open for interpretation.

Shortly after completing the script 4.48 Psychosis, Kane took her life at the age of 28 (Tycer 24). While it may be tempting to interpret Kane’s final play as a sort of suicide note, I would disagree with this interpretation. While there are indeed several parallels to Kane’s life, it does not seem to be Kane’s intention to be the star of her own play. The script itself is unique in the fact that it has no discernable structure; there is no separation of scenes or acts, and there are no defined characters. While the original production at the Royal Court’s Jerwood Theatre was cast with three people, there are seemingly endless opportunities for interpretation of the script. It is a skeleton script, one that must be added to and adapted by others. Because of this abstract format, audience members may feel this sense of attachment as well; Alicia Tycer argues that Kane’s script produces active audience members. While watching a staging of this script, audience members are able to “place themselves into the account,” filling in gaps and silences with their own personal details (Tycer 26). This sort of active audience is one of the goals of “In-Yer-Face-Theatre,” a movement that emerged in the 1990s, of which Kane was a member. Playwrights of the “In-Yer-Face-Theatre” movement frequently use violence, explicit language and shocking imagery in order to purposefully provoke audiences, pushing the boundaries of
taboo (Sierz 6). Aleks Sierz, the British theatre critic who coined the name “In-Yer-Face” theatre, explains that this style of writing “taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort” (Sierz 5). It is aggressive and confrontational, forcing audience members to confront the moral issues presented in the play. Kane’s writing in 4.48 Psychosis undoubtedly fits the style of “In-Yer-Face” theatre, showing no hesitation or boundaries when it comes to the subject of depression and self-harm. Kane’s “main character” (Kane created no discernible characters in her original script) exhibits extreme guilt and self-loathing throughout the play, using bold language as a means of expression:

I gassed the Jews, I killed the Kurds, I bombed the Arabs, I fucked small children while they begged for mercy, the killing fields are mine, everybody left the party because of me, I’ll suck your fucking eyes out send them to your mother in a box and when I die I’m going to be reincarnated as your child only fifty times worse and as mad as all fuck I’m going to make your life a living fucking hell I REFUSE I REFUSE LOOK AWAY FROM ME (Kane 19).

Kane’s writing depicts an uglier side of depression, which, while extreme, does not dip into the realm of melodrama as some other plays tend to do. In fact, what stands out most about Kane’s play is the accuracy with which she portrays clinical depression. This accuracy no doubt comes in part from Kane’s own experiences. Kane was known to have suffered from depression, even spending time under observation in a psychiatric wing (Ravenhill 1). Instead of turning the depression into something melodramatic, not unlike a Greek tragedy, Kane’s writing manages to capture the subtleties of the symptoms. For example:

-I don’t despise you. It’s not your fault. You’re ill.
-I don’t think so.
-No?
-No. I’m depressed. Depression is anger. It’s what you did, who was there and who you’re blaming.
-And who are you blaming?
-Myself (Kane 8).
In a “scene” that many interpret as a meeting between doctor and patient, Kane expresses her own definition of depression, rejecting the idea that it is an illness. Clinical depression is always unique to the individual; no one case is the same. Yet the depression experienced by Kane’s “main character” is strikingly accurate. As I mentioned before, there exists a subculture of the “wannabe depressed,” whose members have started the trend of glorifying and romanticizing self-harm, self-pity, depression and suicide. The origins of these attitudes towards depression can be traced back long before the 21st century; literature such as Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* arguably romanticized suicide. Whatever the reason, this culture of the “wannabe depressed” may create a distorted view of depression and mental illness. Instead of being viewed as a serious clinical condition, depression is viewed by some as mysterious, deep and beautiful. This culture does not only perpetuate false beliefs about mental illness; it also encourages dangerous justification of self-harm. Suicide in particular is romanticized in what Anne-Sophie Bine describes as “black and white photographs of mystical emaciated women who stare off into the distance…and quotes like…’I want to die a lovely death’” (Bine 2). In a stark contrast, Kane uses her unique experiential knowledge to create a refreshingly realistic portrayal of suicide:

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I do not want to die
I have become so depressed by the fact of my mortality that I have decided to commit suicide
I do not want to live (Kane 4).
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The ambiguity of this decision creates a more realistic image of depression and suicide: full of confusion, frustration and gray areas. In fact, Kane’s writing conveys the experience of depression to audience members; her use of repetition throughout the piece, for example, communicates the cyclical nature of the condition. Certain phrases are repeated several times in the script, such as “how do I stop,” “look away from me,” “what am I like” and “but you have
friends.” In this way, Kane is showing us rather than telling us what depression is like: seemingly endless. Furthermore, Kane’s use of abstract speech weaved in with moments of lucidity contribute to this cyclical feeling. Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of the play is the lack of closure provided by Kane. There is no resolution, no definitive ending to latch on to. Kane’s ambiguous ending leaves the audience with a sense of “eternal uncertainty” (Tycer 27). In this way, audience members cannot simply leave the show behind them as they normally would. Kane’s writing has the potential to stick with audience members, perhaps even moving some to take action.

Kane’s representations of depression are certainly unapologetic and direct; however, this does not necessarily mean that audience members are uncomfortable throughout the performance. The ambiguity of plot and character mixed with abstract dialogue creates a sort of buffer for the audience, making it easier to digest. In this way the bold accuracy of Kane’s work may in fact have a positive impact on perceptions of depression. At the very least, audiences leave the production well informed.

**Shopping and Fucking**

Mark Ravenhill, another member of the “In-Yer-Face” theatre movement, is known for his controversial play *Shopping and Fucking*. As the name suggests, the play is purposefully shocking; explicit language is paired with themes of sex, violence and addiction. As Mimi Kramer puts it, Ravenhill’s play belongs to “the subgenre of so-called smack-and-sodomy plays, in which drug use is rampant and sex is graphic, brutish and usually anal” (Kramer 71). *Shopping and Fucking* follows the lives of Mark, Robbie and Lulu. Mark has just been kicked out of a drug rehabilitation center and struggles to come to terms with his addictions. Lulu and Robbie must sell 300 Ecstasy tablets until Robbie gives them away while in a drug stupor, leading Lulu
and Mark to start a phone sex business. The plot, while fast-paced and at times outrageous, is actually quite easy to follow; the dialogue is clear and simple, and ideas are usually bluntly stated rather than implied through subtext. This structure draws a contrast with the abstract dialogue shown in Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis*. The themes, however, contain several parallels to Kane’s work, particularly in the themes of medication and emotional attachment. Furthermore, while *4.48 Psychosis* revolves around the theme of depression, *Shopping and Fucking* does not.

In my analysis of this play, I interpreted the character of Mark as having clinical depression, although his depression is never explicitly stated. The representation of depression in this play is blended in with the rest of Mark’s life, making it one of many issues he must deal with. In this way, *Shopping and Fucking* provides a different representation of depression, since it is included among various other plot lines rather than isolated. Moreover, the play’s themes of drugs and addiction play a large part in Mark’s depression, providing a different perspective on depression’s causes and treatment.

When diagnosing Mark’s depression, it is beneficial to focus on the relationship of his depression to his addictive personality. It is established from the first scene that Mark has been kicked out of a drug rehabilitation center for a heroin addiction. Upon his return, Mark attempts to turn his life around. In doing so, he makes several realizations about his addictions, all while struggling to explain himself to others:

MARK: Just something I’m trying to work through
ROBBIE: …Work through?
MARK: Yeah. Sort out. In my head. We’ve been talking a lot about dependencies. Things you get dependent on.
ROBBIE: Smack.
MARK: Smack, yes, absolutely. But also people. You get dependent on people. Like…emotional dependencies. Which are just as addictive ok? (Ravenhill 17)
Mark exhibits signs of dependency, both physical and emotional, throughout the play. While his drug addiction is still flourishing, we find that Mark is also sexually promiscuous; he pays Gary, an underage prostitute, to let him “lick his arse,” despite the fact that Mark is in a relationship with Robbie. We also learn that Mark was thrown out of his rehabilitation center for having an inappropriate relationship with another patient. What’s interesting about Mark’s infidelity is that it doesn’t seem to fit Mark’s character; despite Mark’s issues, he is shown to be the most level-headed of the group, offering several intelligent insights throughout the play. Mark’s infidelity is therefore driven by compulsion rather than desire. Through Mark’s actions and various dependencies I interpret him as having an addictive personality, which predisposes certain individuals to addictions (Nakken 70). Humans are pleasure-seeking creatures, and we seek rewards through both substances and behavior. However, as Craig Nakken explains in his book, *The Addictive Personality*, “we can lose ourselves in pleasure…our drive for connection and meaning prevents us from finding complete satisfaction…we seek to avoid the anxieties and pains…of life” (Nakken 71). Mark undoubtedly exhibits the traits of an addictive personality, using addictive substances and behaviors as a distraction from himself:

MARK: Listen. I want you to understand because. I have this personality you see? Part of me gets addicted. I have a tendency to define myself purely in terms of my relationship to others. I have no definition of myself you see. So I attach myself to others as a means of avoidance, of avoiding knowing the self (Ravenhill 33).

Mark is clearly aware of his addictive personality, and yet he cannot seem to break his habits. He has no sense of himself, as he fills his life with distractions. It is unclear whether Mark’s depression is a result of his addictions or a pre-existing condition. Addictive behaviors are, after all, common among those suffering from depression. When an individual is suffering from both a mental disorder and addiction, it is referred to as a “dual diagnosis” (Gotham 235). Those suffering from depression may seek out addictive substances as a coping mechanism and self-
medication. While these methods may provide short term results, the effectiveness of the addictive behavior lessens as tolerance increases, requiring more and more of the addictive behavior to achieve the same results (Nakken 75). Furthermore, the root cause of the depression is not treated. Mark appears to be caught in this vicious cycle between depression and addiction, displaying key symptoms of depression as he attempts to explain his feelings:

MARK: I used to know what I felt. I traded. I made money. Tic Tac. And when I made money I was happy, when I lost money I was unhappy. Then things got complicated. But for so many years everything I’ve felt has been…chemically induced. I mean, everything you feel you wonder…maybe it’s just the…I mean, are there any feelings left, you know? (Ravenhill 33).

Common symptoms of depression include feelings of hopelessness and feeling emotionally numb. Mark cannot seem to connect to anyone or find any authentic emotional meaning. Moreover, Mark’s depressive symptoms seem to be ongoing rather than short term. While everyone experiences short-term depressive symptoms at one time or another, clinical depression is long term and interferes with our ability to function, especially when paired with substance abuse. Nakken describes this effect more thoroughly:

By focusing on one value, pleasure seekers close themselves off to the healing possibilities of meaning, principles, and values that help and enrich life. This only precipitates more grief, boredom, and depression. (Nakken 76).

The combination of substance abuse and depression creates a vicious cycle, impairing our ability to function in daily life. Mark’s symptoms appear to have been impairing his life for quite some time. He is unable to maintain his relationships, receive help for his addictions, or express his thoughts. This long-term condition leads me to believe that Mark is suffering from a severe case of clinical depression.

What’s interesting about this play’s representation of depression is that it is never explicitly stated. While Kane’s 4.48 Psychosis takes us through the diagnosis and treatment of
depression, *Shopping and Fucking* incorporates the various social, biological and environmental factors that play a role in clinical depression, such as Mark’s unhealthy relationships and economic troubles. While depression can indeed be a result of genetics or a chemical imbalance, it can also develop from a traumatic event or situation. Mark’s depression serves as an example that depression can affect anyone under the right circumstances.

*Proof*

In stark contrast with both *4.48 Psychosis* and *Shopping and Fucking*, David Auburn’s *Proof* is the first play of the group that represents depression within the realm of realism. Much like *4.48 Psychosis*, this play tends to focus on the theme of mental illness in general. *Proof* follows the life of Catherine, a depressed 25-year-old who spent the last few years taking care of her mentally declining father, a mathematician at the nearby university. Following his death, she must deal with the arrival of her controlling sister, Claire, as well as a former student of her father, Hal. As the trio continues through their unique grieving process, Catherine’s mental state begins to spiral downward. Since the play is within the realm of realism, we are left with several clearly-defined questions and ideas concerning depression as well as mental health in general.

The theme of mental health is introduced almost immediately in the opening scene, in which Catherine carries out a conversation with her deceased father. We find that she is not only hallucinating; she is also showing clear signs of clinical depression, as her “father” points out:

ROBERT: Kid, I’ve seen you. You sleep til noon, you eat junk, you don’t work, dishes pile up in the sink. If you go out it’s to buy magazines. You come back with a stack of magazines this high-I don’t know how you read that crap. And those are the good days. Some days you don’t even get up, you don’t get out of bed (Auburn 8).
Catherine’s symptoms include loss of energy, lack of motivation, oversleeping and difficulty engaging in daily tasks. It becomes clear that this lifestyle has become the norm for Catherine, and pushes past the boundaries of everyday laziness. Catherine has fallen into a deep depression, and has no motivation whatsoever to do anything about it. Her “father,” who in many ways seems to be her voice of reason, comments further on her condition:

ROBERT: You see? Even your depression is mathematical. Stop moping and get to work. The kind of potential you have- (Auburn 9).

Although Catherine shows a great deal of talent, her depression prevents her from accomplishing anything. Both Robert and Claire mention that Catherine is very similar to her father, and that she inherited his mathematical skills. It becomes clear through Catherine’s conversation with Robert that she is indeed very intelligent, almost naturally it seems. But despite Catherine’s potential, her depression and lack of motivation prevents her from getting any work done. In this way, the play does an excellent job of showcasing the ways that depression disrupts one’s ability to function in daily activities; this distinguishes being depressed from being lazy, a very important distinction. Another aspect of depression brought up in Proof is the connection between mental health and genetics. Catherine strongly takes after her father, who had a mental breakdown in his later years. Catherine is worried that she is headed down the same path. Her sister Claire expresses the same concern:

CLAIRE: Living here with him didn’t do you any good. You said that yourself. You had so much talent…
CATHERINE: You think I’m like Dad.
CLAIRE: I think you have some of his talents and some of his tendency toward…instability (Auburn 39).

Even Claire notes Catherine’s great potential, which is partially due to her connection with her father. It is certainly accurate to make the connection between genetics and mental health; in the case of depression, about 50% is due to genetics, while the other 50% is attributed to
psychological, social and cultural factors (Levinson 1). In fact, it is very possible that genetics cause certain people to be more pre-disposed to depression than others (Levinson 2). In Catherine’s case, it seems very likely that genetics plays a part in her depression. The play brings up several important points about depression, which have the potential to provide more understanding about the condition to less-informed audience members. In this way, the play’s representation of depression may influence audience members towards more accurate perceptions. However, the place where the play runs into trouble is in its representation of depression in relation to creativity.

While the link between creativity and mental illness is inconclusive, the play strongly hints at the connection. Both Catherine and Robert possess an inherent skill for mathematics, the likes of which “normal” people, like Hal, can only dream of. Hal has been studying mathematics at the university for years, and yet it is Catherine who writes a groundbreaking mathematical proof, seemingly out of nowhere:

CATHERINE: I’m telling you both now. After I dropped out of school I had nothing to do. I was depressed, really depressed, but at a certain point I decided Fuck it, I don’t need them. It’s just math, I can do it on my own (Auburn 52).

Catherine has had no formal education in mathematics; her only education has been living with her father for most of her life. Hal describes her father’s work as “beautiful” and “streamlined,” bringing a sense of wonder into the equation. The implication seems to be that the abilities possessed by Catherine and Robert are intrinsic, and are connected to their mental illness. This idea that depression and creativity are connected is certainly a controversial idea. While it is valid to speculate on this connection, I remain skeptical concerning the link between depression and creativity. A perceived correlation between the two does not necessarily imply causation. A study from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro examined this link between creativity
and mental illness. Specifically, the study focused on anxiety and depression symptoms in relation to predicting creativity. The dimensions of anxiety and depression “explained small amounts of variance in creativity,” fueling a more skeptical attitude towards the perceived connection (Silvia and Kimbrel 6). One notable result, however, found that those with high social anxiety viewed themselves as less creative (Silvia and Kimbrel 7). This certainly makes sense, given the common symptoms of depression and anxiety. The symptoms of depression in particular, such as lack of motivation and loss of energy, can be counterproductive in the creative process. I do acknowledge the considerable amount of artists who have suffered from mental disorders; Goethe, for example, was known to struggle through depressive episodes (Hadulla, Roussel and Hofmann 45). However, my concern is the effect that this attitude may have on the already existing culture of the “wannabe depressed.” Creating a perceived link between creativity and depression may in fact increase the glorification of the condition, fueling false perceptions even further. While these false perceptions may be positive, they are often unrealistic, and therefore just as harmful as negative perceptions.

**August: Osage County**

Similarly to *Proof*, Tracy Letts’s *August: Osage County* is set in the realm of realism. Letts’s dark comedy focuses on the dysfunctional Weston family as they gather for the funeral of their patriarch, Beverly. In the events that follow, the family members struggle to maintain their sanity as dark secrets are brought to the surface, including but in no way limited to pill addiction, alcoholism, divorce, sexual assault and suicide. Amongst the chaos, the subject of depression manifests itself through the characters of Beverly and his eldest daughter Barbara. While the
subject matter of the play borders on tragic, Letts’s use of humor transforms the ways in which audiences may perceive the events of the play, as well as depression itself.

The first and last time we encounter Beverly Weston is in the opening scene of the play as he interviews a Native American woman, Johnna, for the position of live-in cook and caregiver for his pill-addicted wife, Violet. Though Beverly only appears for this one extended monologue, he makes a striking impression, setting the tone for the rest of the play. It is almost immediately obvious that Beverly is an alcoholic, and he freely admits to it as well. As he rambles about poetry, he foreshadows his impending suicide by showing us a glimpse of his depression:

BEVERLY:  …God a-mighty. You have to admire the purity of the survivor’s instinct. Berryman, the old goat: “The world is gradually becoming a place where I do not care to be anymore.” I don’t know what it says about me that I have a greater affinity with the damaged. Probably nothing good (Letts 10).

Beverly is fully aware of his less-than-ideal outlook towards life, and yet seems powerless to change it. He makes note of the supposed “survivor’s instinct” found in T.S. Eliot, who kept on living despite his difficult circumstances and the “Olympian Suicidalist” poets of his time. Beverly admires this survivors’ instinct, and perhaps even desires it, yet he seems programmed otherwise. For some reason, he simply cannot identify with Eliot’s ideals. Beverly is the victim of a condition over which he has no control. This yearning on Beverly’s part parallels an additional point brought up by Andrew Solomon:

One of the things that often gets lost in discussions of depression is that you know it’s ridiculous. You know it’s ridiculous while you’re experiencing it…and yet you are nonetheless in its grip and you are unable to figure out any way around it (Solomon 3).

The entire monologue is eloquently spoken, proving Beverly to be more intelligent than he first appears; he was, as we find, a highly respected poet in his time. It is Beverly’s motivation that is
lost. He seems to have a sort of learned helplessness, becoming resigned to what his life has become. He is even strangely at peace with the state of his marriage: “My wife takes pills and I drink. That’s the bargain we’ve struck.” Beverly is surprisingly unresponsive during his wife’s entrance in her pill-induced state, one of the first tragically humorous instances of the play. Nothing seems to affect him anymore at this point in his life. He exhibits the common signs of depression: a lack of motivation, loss of energy, feelings of hopelessness, etc. After Beverly’s initial disappearance, it is later revealed that his death is in fact thought by the police to be a suicide. Beverly’s suicide is kept vague; perhaps it was planned, perhaps it wasn’t. Once the Westons come together for Beverly’s funeral, we begin to witness Barbara’s decline. Depression can manifest itself in a variety of ways, usually resulting from an altered perception. The depressed person may suffer from a learned helplessness, giving them the illusion of a lack of control. On the other end of the spectrum, Barbara attempts to control everything around her, even things that are out of her power. We find out early on that Barbara is having trouble in her marriage; her husband is cheating on her with one of his younger students. Barbara tries desperately to understand her husband’s actions and keep her family together, yet her attempts are futile. We also see Barbara’s controlling nature affect her teenage daughter, Jean, who complains that her mother is on “hymen patrol.” In a climactic scene, Barbara seizes control of the family gathering, overpowering her mother by sending the rest of the family on a pill raid. Her efforts fail to yield any real results though; her mother remains resigned to stay indoors while Barbara spirals even further downward. The final, and perhaps saddest, sign of Barbara’s depression comes from her inability to connect with her old flame, Sheriff Gilbeau:

SHERIFF GILBEAU: So…can I call you sometime? About having lunch?

...  
BARBARA: I’m…
SHERIFF GILBEAU: I’m sorry?
In a tragic moment, Barbara’s depression prevents her from giving in to any sort of intimacy, furthering her isolation. Despite her best efforts, Barbara seems to have taken after her father, losing power over her life.

While the events of the play are indeed tragic, *August: Osage County* is labeled as a dark comedy. Letts’s use of humor is strategically balanced with the tragedy of the play as a mechanism to relieve tension. Laughter creates a sense of catharsis, breaking up the darkness of the show. Furthermore, humor arguably makes the play more realistic, as humor is often found even in darker situations. Letts’s use of humor also positively affects the play’s representation of depression; Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin explains the power of laughter in manipulating perceptions:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger at it familiarly on all sides…laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object…thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it (Bakhtin 23).

Much like the abstract language found in Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis*, Letts’s use of humor acts as a sort of buffer, inviting audiences to confront darker issues. The catharsis created by laughter may prevent discomfort by cutting tension, encouraging audiences to explore the subject of depression rather than avoid it. A more willing audience coupled with a realistic representation of depression has the potential to create more accurate and positive perceptions.

*Cynics*

As a part of the present research study, the data I gathered was used to inform the writing and directing of an original play entitled “*Cynics.*” I submitted my play to the North Central
College Theatre Department, and was accepted into the 2014-2015 Student Directed Series. By writing my own work, I was able to create my own representation of depression. My goals were simple enough: I sought to provide accuracy, inform the audience and spark discussion on the topic. During my initial research, what struck me about the topic of depression was the vast amount of misinformation as well as negative perceptions that circulate through our society. The topic of depression is often seen as taboo, and therefore is not discussed nearly enough. Through my individual representation, I did my best to avoid pushing any opinions on the audience. Instead, I encouraged the audience to remain critical, ask questions, debate and discuss the topic of depression.

Cynics focuses on Alex, a 19-year-old former college student with clinical depression who has been living at home for the past six months. Her obsessive mother Jean has ceased paying for Alex’s tuition in order to keep her home. The play begins the day before Alex’s 20th birthday, prompting the arrival of Jo, Jean’s younger sister, along with Alex’s older sister, Lauren. From the beginning of the writing process, I sought to create the play within the realm of realism. I felt this particular style was necessary to provide a realistic perception for the audience. Additionally, I made sure in my directors note to acknowledge the fact that the representation I created was “by no means an all-encompassing portrayal of such a broad issue, but a representation of one case.” With this attitude in mind, I set about writing the script.

One of the main false perceptions of depression that I challenged in my script was the idea of glorifying and romanticizing the illness. As previously mentioned, the culture of the “wannabe depressed” often portrays the condition as mysterious, deep and interesting. There is the idea of a “beautiful sadness.” These ideas are not only dangerous, but extremely misinformed. Andrew Solomon, a lecturer and activist, discusses these issues in his Ted Talk
entitled “Depression, the secret we share.” In his talk, he explains “the opposite of depression is not happiness, but vitality” (Solomon). Those who suffer from depression do not often view their condition as “beautiful.” It is often messy, frustrating and confusing. I attempted to portray these contrasting ideas through the interactions of Alex and Lauren. In one particular scene, when Alex and Lauren are alone in Alex’s room, Lauren begins to question Alex about her condition. Lauren, who is sorely misinformed on the topic, excitedly lectures Alex on the benefits of her illness:

LAUREN: …I’ve studied these great writers…that’s what they have in common, isn’t it? Sylvia Plath, she wrote amazing poetry, killed herself when she was 30…Virginia Woolf! Fantastic writer, committed suicide when she was 59! And Hunter S. Thompson at 67…I mean, what happened to them was horrible, or course, but…look what it led to. These great works. There’s a sort of beauty in their pain (49).

Lauren glorifies depression, building it up as some great source of creativity to tap into. It is important to note that while Lauren’s comments are arguably offensive and harmful, they stem from good intentions. I believe that false perceptions of depression are not born out of hate, but out of a lack of education. In earlier versions of the script, Alex explicitly challenged Lauren’s comments, explaining the true nature of depression. During the editing process, it made more sense to cut this portion out, and to take the approach of showing rather than telling. This subtlety not only allowed the audience to come to their own conclusions, but it made the script more realistic and less preachy. I used this approach during much of the editing process. In the final version of the script, Alex does not have the energy or motivation to challenge Lauren’s comments. I believe edits such as this served to create a more realistic representation.

There seems to be a misunderstanding in our society of the actual definition of clinical depression, which is why I included this in Cynics as well. Depression is often confused with grief or sadness. The words “depression” and “sadness” are often used interchangeably; the idea
of a “beautiful sadness” can be seen in this culture of the “wannabe depressed,” and yet depression is not the same as sadness. The American Psychological Association (APA) sheds more light on this topic:

Depression is more than just sadness. People with depression may experience a lack of interest and pleasure in daily activities, significant weight loss or gain, insomnia or excessive sleeping, lack of energy, inability to concentrate, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide (APA 1).

Non-depressed individuals may view these symptoms as trivial or commonplace. And these individuals are in some ways correct; most people do experience depressive symptoms at one point or another. However, while many experience depressive symptoms, only 16% of the general population will develop clinical depression at some point in life. This is why many do not acknowledge the legitimacy of depression. However, the difference comes from the length of the symptoms as well as the severity. In cases of legitimate clinical depression, these symptoms last for a prolonged period of time and disrupt our ability to function in day-to-day activities. I incorporated these ideas in the construction of Alex’s depression. On the surface level, Alex initially may seem like a typical young adult, perhaps a bit lazy. This is why Lauren is at first skeptical, accusing Alex of over-exaggerating. Similarly, Jean constantly pesters Alex to be productive, pushing her to find a job, get a gym membership and call her friends. Jean cannot understand why Alex cannot accomplish these goals. Again, Jean’s actions come from a place of good intentions, yet her forceful nature only serves to push Alex away even more. As the play continues, we see Alex’s steady decline; she has no energy, no appetite, no motivation and she cannot seem to get out of bed. Her sluggishness, while initially humorous, is revealed to be more serious as Lauren attempts to force Alex out of her bed:

LAUREN: Just get up…
ALEX: I can’t!
LAUREN: Why?
ALEX: I’d have to put my bra back on! And I’d have to stand up and open the door, and walk to the kitchen, and pick something to eat, and get it out, and make it, and chew it, and swallow it, and I can’t do all of that. (Beat.) Please just let me stay here (46).

It becomes clear that Alex is not simply choosing to act this way; she is aware of herself, yet she legitimately cannot complete these simple tasks. Activities that may seem easy to everyone require a massive amount of energy on Alex’s part, and she is therefore paralyzed by her illness. During the process of writing, I attempted to capture the many subtleties of depression. I also left the ending of the play purposefully ambiguous, so as not to provide any definitive resolution for the audience. My goal was not to force the audience into my own way of thinking, but rather to provide information as well as a representation to draw from. Disagreement is no doubt unavoidable, and completely expected. The goal of writing this play was to spark discussions while providing an accurate representation of depression. In this way, audiences of Cynics may leave with more informed, accurate perceptions.

With that in mind, the full script of Cynics, as it currently stands in its editing, can be found in Appendix B.

Conclusion

Varying styles of playwriting technique and dramatic structure create contrasting representations of depression. These representations effect perceptions of mental illness, producing potentially positive or negative consequences. Misinformed or romanticized representations may encourage harmful behavior and stigma, while more realistic representations may increase audience knowledge and awareness. I used these findings in order to better inform the writing of my own representation, Cynics.
Throughout the process of writing and directing *Cynics*, I incorporated as much information as I could without sacrificing the subtlety of realism. In order to do this, I used strategies found through my research such as humor in order to convey my research and ideas in a less forceful manner. I believed that by allowing audiences room to make their own discoveries and realizations throughout the play, they would be more open to receiving new information. My goal was essentially to inform audiences on the topic of depression and encourage more helpful attitudes towards the condition. I was pleased with the resulting production, which incorporated both the accuracy and subtlety I was striving for. It was certainly exciting to put my own representation on stage; however, this process lead me to realize that, while I can speculate on the effectiveness of my methods, my goals were entirely dependent on audience perception.

One of the great things about theatre is that every performance is different, and every theatregoer receives a different experience. However, because of this variety, we cannot control how the audience will interpret a performance. There is often a disparity between the author or director’s intentions and how their work is perceived. The character of Barbara in *August: Osage County* displays textbook signs of depression, yet an audience member could easily interpret her as lazy. Many of the obstacles Mark faces in *Shopping and Fucking* relate to his depression, but one could instead perceive him as simply selfish. This discrepancy of opinion may relate to the varying levels of audience knowledge and experience on the topic of depression. While through close reading I interpreted several characters as having depression, a performance may not convey these ideas of mental illness as clearly to all audience members. Furthermore, it is difficult to present new ideas to a resistant mind. An open, engaged audience member may receive a great deal of insight from a performance, yet not all audiences are this
ideal. This is all to say that there are endless variants to take into account when discussing audience perception. Different play structures certainly produce varying effects on attitudes towards mental illness; however, it is difficult to predict or control audience perception.
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Director’s Note:

I wrote this play as a part of my senior thesis, in which I am exploring representations of depression in theatre. Depression is a topic that is often misunderstood and misrepresented in our society. How many times have you heard someone exclaim “I’m so depressed” or “that was so depressing?” The word “depression” has been used so casually that the actual experience of those with clinical depression is often not given the validity that it deserves. Quite the opposite: many people often greet actual clinical depression with stigmas as well as judgment. Depression is a clinically proven condition, so why is it often not treated as such? Why are many people so afraid to talk about it? And why do so many people feel the need to hide it? This show asks a lot of questions. In fact, there are probably more questions than answers. Of course, I do hope that you leave this show more informed on the topic, but more importantly I want you to ask questions. Discuss, debate, argue. Going along with my thesis topic, I wanted to create a representation of depression. And that’s exactly what this is meant to be: a representation. It is by no means an all-encompassing portrayal of such a broad issue, but a representation of one case.

I wrote this show as a dark comedy. Dark, because…well…depression…and comedy because humor can be found in any situation. I wanted to create a realistic story, and no matter the topic I knew there had to be humor somewhere. There seems to be this idea that comedy cannot have meaning or depth. I attempted to disprove that idea while writing this play.

Thank you to my fantastic cast and crew for their hard work. Thank you to Kelly Howe for being a constant source of advice and support. And finally, thank you for coming to see this show! Enjoy.
Appendix B

Cynics

By Emma Smith
ACT I SCENE I

(Lights up, ALEX’s bedroom. Two bare beds, one on either side, two dressers and a desk. There is a bottle of pills on the desk. Throughout her dialogue ALEX is cleaning up her room, picking up clothes, etc., then putting on her coat and hat.)

ALEX: (Semi-towards the audience as she focuses on cleaning her room, then counting out pills.) The brain is the most amazing organ because it has the ability to think about itself. So I can articulate that my brain is a complete and utter dick. Of course I also used my brain to say that, so I guess it’s a bit of a masochist too. Actually, the brain can’t feel pain; it doesn’t have any pain receptors. It can’t feel pain, but it sends pain out to other parts of the body. So it’s actually more of a sadist really.
The brain controls our behavior. It controls our movement, our hunger, thirst, sex drive, mood and gives us our sense of self. The brain is one of the most protected organs. It is surrounded by the cranium, followed by three membranes and a liquid that cushions it from the outside. One dent, one puncture could compromise its security. It’s very fragile for such an important structure.
Any problems caused by the brain are also protected. Shielded. Hidden away from outside judgment. One hole, one break could destroy the façade that’s been meticulously created. And we wouldn’t want that.
Supposedly, knowledge plus choice equals power. So you could be completely stupid but still make choices, which wouldn’t result in any power. Like maybe investing in a pyramid scheme or deciding to open up another frozen yogurt shop. Or you could have knowledge but no choices, which also leaves you powerless. (Beat.) The brain controls all of that. The brain controls everything. (Lights shift.)

JEAN: (Enters with cleaning supplies, calls into bedroom.) Alex, are you almost finished?

ALEX: I’m all done.

JEAN: Everything is clean?

ALEX: Yes.

JEAN: So if I go over there I’m not going to see any clothes on the ground?

ALEX: It’s spotless, Mom.

JEAN: (Begins to unload cleaning supplies.) Come in here then, I could use some help.

ALEX: (Putting her boots on.) We don’t need to make the place spotless, it’s not a huge deal.

JEAN: It’s polite to have a clean home when you have guests.

ALEX: We’re not having guests, we’re having family, there’s a difference. Guest implies that we have a choice.
JEAN: Well family implies that we care about the space we’re providing for them. At least wipe the table for me. *(ALEX walks into the kitchen.)* Where are you going?

ALEX: I’m going for a walk.

JEAN: A walk where? *(Phone starts ringing.)*

ALEX: I don’t know, I just want to go on a walk.

JEAN: Why?

ALEX: Can’t I just go on a walk?

JEAN: I want to know where you’re going.

ALEX: Jesus, Mom… *(JEAN answers the phone.)*

JEAN: Hello? Jo? I can’t hear you very well…no it’s the wind, it’s too loud. That fast? Well. We can come pick you up…what do you mean, why would you…alright then, we’ll see you soon. *(Hangs up.)* No walking right now, she’s on her way here. *(ALEX goes to her room and takes her jacket off.)* Not that I’m not happy your exercising, it’s great. Why don’t you get a gym membership?

ALEX: I’m not getting a gym membership.

JEAN: Why not? They have all that equipment, an indoor track, you can run and walk all you want. They even have a snack bar.

ALEX: I’m not getting a gym membership, I don’t walk for the exercise.

JEAN: Walking is a great way to exercise.

ALEX: I never said it wasn’t.

JEAN: How far do you usually walk?

ALEX: I just sort of-

JEAN: There’s an app that lets you know your speed and distance, if you enter your information you can see how many calories you’ve burned.

ALEX: What if I’m eating while I’m walking?

JEAN: You eat while you walk?
ALEX: No.

JEAN: Then why would you ask?

ALEX: I thought we were talking about hypothetical situations.

JEAN: (Sighs.) You could have just said you’re not getting a gym membership.

ALEX: I did say that. I’m not getting a gym membership.

JEAN: Well you should. You can get a free 30 day trial, just try it out. They’re also hiring part-time receptionists.

ALEX: So?

JEAN: I’m just letting you know.

ALEX: Do you want me exercising or sitting at a desk all day?

JEAN: It was just a suggestion, Alex.

ALEX: No thank you.

JEAN: A job would give you some extra spending money.

ALEX: Money to spend on what?

JEAN: I don’t know, Alex, whatever you want. Clothes, movies…

ALEX: It’s not worth it to waste my day at a desk answering phone calls.

JEAN: It’s better than sitting around the house all day. You know, if you’re bored I can give you a list of chores that need doing around the house.

ALEX: Like what?

JEAN: There are still some boxes upstairs that haven’t been unpacked. You could do that.

ALEX: That’s just Lauren’s old stuff.

JEAN: I thought you had a few boxes up there too.

ALEX: It’s fine, we can just keep it packed. It’s so much smaller here anyway, I’m not even sure if there’s room for it.

JEAN: Oh that’s an exaggeration. Besides, we don’t need that much space anymore.
ALEX: Well I don’t really feel like unpacking.

JEAN: You could always do the laundry while I’m at work. That would be helpful.

ALEX: I’m really quite content doing nothing. It’s pretty great.

JEAN: That’s not good for you. You should at least be doing something constructive. *(Phone starts ringing again.)*

ALEX: Maybe if you let me go back to-

JEAN: *(JEAN picks up the phone, cutting off ALEX.)* Hello? No, it’s 581 Foxtree Avenue. Yes I’m sure. I texted it to you, Jo. I don’t care what google maps says. No…Jo, just tell him to take a left on Cranberry…ok. Yes. Alright, see you soon.

*(ALEX begins playing on her phone)*

JEAN: *(In a softer tone.)* Did you take your medicine today?

ALEX: I think so.

JEAN: You think so?

ALEX: Yes. I did. Yes.

JEAN: You’re positive?

ALEX: Yes, I remember, I took it right before I showered.

JEAN: Use the pill box I gave you. You can’t risk skipping a day.

ALEX: I know.

JEAN: Or accidentally taking two doses. You need to be more organized.

ALEX: I am. I will.

JEAN: I’m just making sure-

ALEX: *(Ending the conversation.)* Ok.

JEAN: *(Wiping the counters.)* Aunt Jo is staying in your room, so make sure there’s space in your dresser.

ALEX: What?
JEAN: I told you this morning, she’s staying in your room.

ALEX: You never told me that.

JEAN: Why wouldn’t I tell you that?

ALEX: That’s what I’m trying to figure out!

JEAN: She’s going to use Lauren’s old bed in your room.

ALEX: I thought she was going to use the guest room?

JEAN: Well apparently she’s not a guest, is she? She’s family. And the paint fumes are still too strong anyway.

ALEX: What about Lauren?

JEAN: She isn’t staying for long, she’s going back downtown later tonight. She has a presentation early tomorrow morning she wants to prepare for.

ALEX: A presentation.

JEAN: That’s what she called it. For work, I suppose. Very important.

ALEX: Mom she works at Wendy’s.

JEAN: She does PR for Wendy’s.

ALEX: So she’s unveiling a new frosty? That obviously takes priority over family.

JEAN: She’s working hard at this job. You should be proud of her. (Pause.) You got two cards yesterday, one from Grandma and Grandpa and one from Uncle Greg and Aunt Stacey. Remember to write them thank you cards.

ALEX: I will.

JEAN: And try not to mention Uncle Greg’s stomach ulcer, he’s still sensitive about it.

ALEX: Why would I mention his stomach ulcer in a thank you card?

JEAN: He’s been having a lot of problems with it. I think we should visit them soon.

ALEX: They live, like, six hours away.

JEAN: It’s worth it for family.
ALEX: So we get to spend all day in a car.

JEAN: You’d just spend the day walking anyway.

ALEX: Not if you don’t let me.

JEAN: If you really want to walk, go out and get the mail.

ALEX: Fine. *(ALEX enters her room, grabs her coat and exits out the front door.)*

(After ALEX is out of the room, JEAN walks stage left and examines herself in the mirror. She pokes and prods at her stomach, viewing her figure from several different angles, perhaps sucking in her stomach at one point. An overall dissatisfaction. The phone starts ringing.)

JEAN: Hello? Yes, this is she. Right, thank you for calling back. Her last appointment was the 15th, why don’t we schedule the next one for…I see. Well I was told we still had a grace period of…oh. No, no, of course. I understand. It’s not a problem. *(ALEX enters with the mail.)* Why don’t I call back later? Great. Thank you. *(Hangs up.)*

ALEX: I like the balloons outside, it’s a nice touch.

JEAN: You think Jo will like them?

ALEX: *(Beginning to sort through mail.)* I don’t know, I haven’t seen her since I was six.

JEAN: *(Hurriedly picking up mail from ALEX.)* Well she’s back in the United States now. And properly vaccinated, so there’s no need to worry.

ALEX: She doesn’t need to be properly vaccinated to come back into the United States.

JEAN: She’s been out of the country, she could have picked up any disease out there. They need to make sure she’s healthy before coming back.

ALEX: She came through U.S. customs, not Ellis Island.

JEAN: But she was still out of the country, away from our hospitals and medicine.

ALEX: I thought she went to Europe.

JEAN: Yes, she did.

ALEX: Don’t they have the National Health Service over there? She was probably getting better health care than she would here.

JEAN: I don’t know, Alex. The important thing is that we get to see her.
ALEX: *(Referring to the mail.)* Anything good?

JEAN: *(Handing ALEX an envelope.)* You got another card.

ALEX: Who from?

JEAN: Dr. Huffman’s office. You’re due for a teeth cleaning.

ALEX: Fantastic. I’ll write them a thank you card. *(ALEX picks up an envelope.)* Is that from Muhlenberg?

JEAN: *(Grabbing the envelope from ALEX.)* It’s just a letter from the business office.

ALEX: Can I see it?

JEAN: It’s probably just a statement from last semester, I’ll look at it later.

ALEX: It’s my school, I should be able to read their letters.

JEAN: It doesn’t concern you right now.

ALEX: Of course it does!

JEAN: We’ll talk about it later.

ALEX: How much longer are you going to-

JEAN: *(Cutting her off with a tone of finality.)* Alex. *(Beat..)* Everything is just about ready. Did you make a bed for Aunt Jo?

ALEX: *(Looks over at her bare bed.)* Crap… *(Runs into her bedroom.)*

JEAN: Alex, language! *(Doorbell rings.)* Shit. *(JEAN opens a drawer where there is an overstuffed folder. She sorts the mail into the folder, closes the drawer, then runs offstage to greet JO.)*

*(ALEX takes off coat and puts it in her room. She notices the bottle of pills on her desk and picks it up. After a moment of thought, she places it in her dresser, then returns to the kitchen. JEAN and JO enter. JO has a large backpack.)*

JEAN: Here we are! Let’s get you settled in. You’ll be staying in Alex’s room, feel free to use the dresser. Sorry I didn’t get a chance to finish cleaning.

JO: It’s fine, it’s fine, I’m just glad to finally be here. Long journeys really take their toll.
JEAN: Would you like a drink?

JO: I might take you up on that. Actually, do you have any cookies or anything? What I’m really craving after traveling all day is something with sugar. Just something I know is horrible for me would really hit the spot.

JEAN: Oh, well…

JO: Sorry, did I say something?

ALEX: She’s doing-

JEAN: (Cutting ALEX off.) We’re doing a cleanse week.

JO: A cleanse week?

JEAN: A week of completely healthy eating, no junk food in the house, to avoid temptation.

JO: Well, that sounds…cleansing.

ALEX: I feel sterile already.

JEAN: Alex why don’t you help Aunt Jo settle in, I’ll be right back with some sheets for that bed. (Exits.)

(ALEX and JO stand awkwardly for a moment, then ALEX leads JO into her room. ALEX sits on her bed as JO begins to unpack.)

JO: So, roommates.

ALEX: Yep.

JO: Am I intruding on your space?

ALEX: …Yep.

JO: Sorry.

ALEX: It’s alright. (Thinks for a moment, then reaches under bed, pulling out two snack cakes. ALEX tosses one to JO.)

JO: Ah, good girl. You just got a big stash back there?

ALEX: Yeah.

JO: Right on. (Stores snack cake in her bag.)
ALEX: You’re not going to eat it?

JO: I’m saving it. It’s got to last me this whole weekend.

ALEX: Fair enough. (Pointing to the dresser.) Bottom two are for you

JO: Thanks. (Begins unpacking clothes into second to bottom drawer. A short silence sets in. ALEX unwraps her snack.)

ALEX: Cool bag.

JO: Thanks, it’s from Ireland.

ALEX: You just use that one bag?

JO: It’s a lot easier to travel light, less expensive too.

ALEX: (Beat.) Did you have to get vaccinated before coming back to the U.S?

JO: What?

ALEX: Nothing.

JO: (Beat.) So…you’re much bigger than when I last saw you.

ALEX: Yeah. I grew boobs too.

JO: Congratulations.

ALEX: Thank you.

(JEAN enters with the bedding and mail.)

JEAN: Here we go, Alex will make your bed.

JO: Oh, it’s fine, I can do it.

JEAN: No, no, I insist. (Hands bedding to ALEX, noticing the unopened envelopes.) Alex, you haven’t opened your cards!

ALEX: The envelopes look so pretty.

JEAN: Your relatives put a lot of thought into those, you should appreciate them! I’m going to go get dinner started. You let me know if you need anything. (Exits.)
ALEX: So I have to send them a card to thank them for the card they sent me?

JO: Kind of a waste of paper.

ALEX: Right? A phone call would suffice.

(ALEX opens the cards.)

JO: Any money?

ALEX: You think that’s the only reason I’m opening these cards?

JO: Is it?

ALEX: I’m not that shallow. (Opens the cards.) Twenty dollars.

JO: Couldn’t get that from a phone call.

ALEX: I guess not. (Puts the money in her drawer, then pins the cards to her corkboard.)

ALEX: Not something a shallow person would do, is it?

JO: I wouldn’t know.

ALEX: Of course not.

(ALEX starts to make JO’s bed)

ALEX: (Beat.) Can I ask you a question?

JO: Sure.

ALEX: Great. (Silence.)

JO: …Are you going to ask it?

ALEX: When I think of a question, yeah.

JO: You don’t have a question?

ALEX: We ask questions all the time, right, but when someone says “can I ask you something” beforehand, it means it’s a personal or possibly offensive question. And no one ever says “no,” they always say yes without even knowing what the other person’s going to ask. This way, if I think of a question, I can ask you without asking you beforehand.

JO: You’re kind of a weird kid aren’t you?
ALEX: Come on, ask me permission.

JO: I don’t have a question.

ALEX: But you’ll think of one. It’s a free pass.

JO: *(Contemplates this.)* Can I ask you a question?

ALEX: Yes, yes you may.

JO: Fantastic.

ALEX: *(Beat.)* Do you want anything to drink?

JO: I’m alright for now, thanks.

ALEX: How about a sleeping pill?

JO: What?

ALEX: *(Reaching under her mattress and pulling out a bottle of pills.)* A sleeping pill. Prescription and everything, strong stuff. My doctor gave them to me to help me sleep but I don’t really need them anymore. You can have one…you know, if you have trouble sleeping.

JO: Do you offer sleeping pills to all of your guests?

ALEX: I haven’t really had any guests in a while.

JO: You don’t say.

ALEX: *(Continues making JO’s bed.)* Mom told me to be a good host.

JO: Well, you’re doing a great job.

ALEX: She also made me clean my room. It’s not usually like this.

JO: Just for me? I’m flattered.

ALEX: I think she really wants to impress you.

JO: Sounds like she hasn’t changed too much.

ALEX: Was she always like this? All clean and stuff? Like when you were kids? That’s not my question, by the way, not nearly intrusive enough.
JO: Honestly? I can’t even remember, it was so long ago.

ALEX: (Disappointed.) Oh.

JO: Just wait until you get older, you’ll start forgetting what you had for breakfast.

ALEX: It’s weird to think of your parents as kids, isn’t it? It’s like talking about a completely different person. (JO goes to open bottom drawer, ALEX jumps up to stop her. It’s too late.) Ah…

JO: (Pulls out bottle of pills.) Oh…I’m sorry… (An awkward exchange. JO isn’t quite sure what to do with the bottle. She attempts to hand it to ALEX.)

ALEX: (Reaching for the bottle then changing her mind.) It’s fine. (JO tries to give pills back to ALEX.) Read it.

JO: (Beat. Reads the label.) “Zoloft. 50 mg. Take once daily”

ALEX: Has a nice ring to it.

JO: That’s an antidepressant, right?

ALEX: Mm-hm. (Beat.) Clinical depression. And general anxiety disorder.

JO: Alright then. (Stands awkwardly with the bottle.)

ALEX: It’s just medicine.

JO: But you didn’t want me to see?

ALEX: (Beat.) Keep reading. What are the side effects?

JO: (Reading the label.) Nausea, dizziness, drowsiness, dry mouth, diarrhea, increased suicidal thoughts…

ALEX: Well that seems counter-productive.

JO: Do you get that?

ALEX: What?

JO: Diarrhea.

ALEX: No, I’m one of the lucky ones.

(Jean barges in with green beans and bowls.)
JEAN: Great, you’re unpacked! Who wants to snap some beans? (Sets down green beans and bowls.) Try to do the whole bag, I want us all to get our vegetables. Dinner will be ready soon! (Exits. JO and ALEX begin snapping beans. Silence.)

ALEX: (Hesitantly.) I forgot to get you a birthday present, by the way.

JO: Hm?

ALEX: I figured I’d get it out of the way… I forgot you were coming…or I didn’t think you’d make it… I didn’t get you anything.

JO: I see.

ALEX: I didn’t…I mean… did you get me something?

JO: I did.

ALEX: Well…shit. Now I’m the bad guy.

JO: Yeah, pretty much.

ALEX: Well it’s my actual birthday! Yours isn’t for another week.

JO: Oh, come on. 20 is a bullshit birthday anyway. You got your sweet 16, then your big 18th, hooray, then two years of nothing. Your biggest birthday will be your 21st of course, then it’s all downhill from there.

ALEX: Jesus.

JO: What? Too far?

ALEX: No, no, it’s just uplifting not to have an optimist in the room.

JO: Are you saying I’m a pessimist?

ALEX: I guess so.

JO: Look who’s talking!

ALEX: You know, I read that people with depression actually tend to see the world more accurately. Like, “healthy” people have these positive illusions of control, and they see things as better than they actually are. And that’s what keeps them sane.

JO: So you’re not a pessimist.
ALEX: I’m a realist. I mean, if everyone else has illusions and I don’t, that makes me the normal one, right?

JO: You see things for what they are.

ALEX: Exactly.

JO: And what do you see?

ALEX: I don’t know. Life, death, all that stuff.

JO: You see death?

ALEX: No, I just don’t avoid it.

JO: No one can avoid it.

ALEX: Yeah, but they sure as hell try.

JO: So you’re not a pessimist because you think about death more than other people do.

ALEX: Why would that make me a pessimist?

JO: You’re sure you don’t have any illusions?

ALEX: Look, death is all around us, right? Any angsty 16 year old with a black hair swoop could tell you that.

JO: And it isn’t pessimistic to focus on it?

ALEX: I’m not focusing on it. I’m acknowledging it. I mean, I could wait until we go to bed tonight and kill you in your sleep, it would be easy, there’s nothing stopping me (Awkward silence.) I mean, besides the fact that I don’t want to (Beat.) I’m not going to kill you…

(Silence as they continue snapping beans. Out of nowhere JO flicks ALEX in the face.)

ALEX: Ah! Why did you do that?

JO: There was nothing stopping me. And I wanted to do it. (Continues snapping beans.) Did you ever take a philosophy class?

ALEX: I go to a small liberal arts school (Pause.) That means yes.

JO: Did you ever learn about the Stoics?

ALEX: I don’t think so.
JO: You would like them. They were a school of philosophy in Ancient Greece. They believed that one could avoid suffering by living in this state of objectivity, avoiding worldly pleasures and temptations. They valued reason and logic. They were impervious to any harm.

ALEX: How can you be impervious to any harm? You can’t control life.

JO: They detached themselves. Illness, poverty, death…it didn’t affect them because their happiness didn’t depend on it.

ALEX: You just don’t let them affect you.

JO: Non-Stoics were seen as fools and slaves.

ALEX: Did you travel to Greece or something?

JO: Yes.

ALEX: Really?

JO: Several times.

ALEX: Why?

JO: There was nothing stopping me.

ALEX: Huh.

JO: A few years after I graduated high school I gathered my savings, got a plane ticket and visa, and left.

ALEX: Just like that.

JO: Just like that.

ALEX: Where did you go first?

JO: Amsterdam. Of course. A bit cliché, but I didn’t care. I was young and stupid and I had money. Of course, my visa was only valid for three months.

ALEX: So you came back.

JO: Nope. Just kept moving. Amsterdam was right next to Germany, then France, then Spain…

ALEX: Burning through your savings...
JO: You’d be surprised how much you can stretch a dollar when you’re twenty and have no standards. But yeah, it didn’t last forever. I came back to the states, found a job and got a studio apartment.

ALEX: You must have missed it.

JO: Of course. I got bored pretty quickly. It was the traveling I missed the most though. Going from one place to the next.

ALEX: Never staying in one place too long.

JO: Right. There’s just something about being able to uproot yourself and move on at any moment. No attachments. If you stay in one place for too long you just start to feel…restless, you feel…

ALEX: Trapped.

JO: Yes. Exactly. So I figured, why should I just stay in this one place?

ALEX: It costs money to travel.

JO: I didn’t have the money to go back to Europe, not for a while, anyway, but look at the United States. We’re one of the largest countries in the world. And travel is cheap if you’re smart. So I started moving again. I went to New York, California, Washington, Illinois…the big cities. Then I started coasting along from state to state. I’d find a job, stay for a while, then move on before I got too comfortable. I learned to pack light and eat cheap.

ALEX: That sounds great.

JO: Your mom didn’t think so. It wasn’t responsible enough for her. She really laid into me about it.

ALEX: Sounds like her.

JO: Just because I didn’t go to college and get a steady job doesn’t make me inferior. I chose my path, she chose hers. (Beat.) You’re in school, aren’t you?

ALEX: Um, yeah…Muhlenberg.

JO: And 20 would make you, what, a sophomore?

ALEX: Mhmm.

JO: Alright. What are you studying?

ALEX: I’m a Communications major
JO: Communications, huh? Interesting.

ALEX: Really?

JO: Kind of.

ALEX: (Shrugs.) I had to pick something. It sounds bad to say undeclared…I guess it’s not much better to say Communications.

JO: Well are you good at communicating?

ALEX: (Laughs.) No.

JO: Well why the hell would you be a Communications major?

ALEX: I don’t know, I guess so I could to learn how to communicate?

JO: (Laughs.) $100,000 to learn how to communicate. (Beat.) Sorry.

ALEX: (Laughs.) It’s fine. I don’t really know what I want to do with it anyway…

JO: Yeah, well…you’ve got time.

ALEX: Everyone keeps saying that.

JO: It’s true, isn’t it?

ALEX: I guess. I just don’t want to look back and think I made the wrong choice. Lauren majored in English literature, so I guess that’s not much better.

JO: But you get the college experience, don’t you? Friends, parties, togas, keg stands…(Beat.) I’ve never been to college, I’m getting all my knowledge from Animal House.

ALEX: (Laughs.) It’s not too far from the truth. I made friends, went to a few parties on the weekends…

JO: But you’re home for the weekend now?

ALEX: (Hesitating.) I…yes. Yes, I am.

JO: When are you heading back?

ALEX: (Beat.) I don’t know.

JO: What do you mean you don’t know?
ALEX: *(Shrugs.)* I don’t know.

JO: *(Contemplates this.)* How long have you been home?

*(ALEX looks as though she’s going to answer, then the doorbell rings.)*

JEAN: *(Rushing into the kitchen.)* That’s Lauren! Alex, Jo, Lauren is here! *(Rushes offstage and enters with LAUREN. They go into ALEX’s room)* Did you finish the beans?

ALEX: *(Staring at the neglected bowl of green beans.)* Um…

JO: I distracted her.

JEAN: Alright, well, that’s ok! Just finish up soon, dinner’s almost ready. *(Looks at watch.)* You three catch up, I’m going to check on the chicken. *(Exits.)*

LAUREN: *(Immediately goes in for a hug.)* Happy Birthday Alex! I’m so glad I could see you today!

ALEX: Thanks Lauren.

LAUREN: *(To JO.)* And your birthday is coming up too, right?

JO: That’s right.

LAUREN: How exciting! I love birthdays. Did you get any cards yet?

ALEX: *(Goes back to snapping beans.)* Yeah, I just got a few from Uncle Greg and Aunt Stacey. And Grandma and Grandpa.

LAUREN: That’s great! I brought my present for you, but you’ll have to wait until after dinner! No peeking!

ALEX: Scout’s honor.

LAUREN: And Aunt Jo, I’m sorry I…well I didn’t think…

JO: Didn’t think I’d actually make it?

LAUREN: Well, it’s…it’s a lovely surprise!

JO: Thank you, I like to think so.

*(Semi-awkward silence between the three of them as ALEX and JO continue to snap beans)*
LAUREN: Well, I’m going to see if Mom needs any help!

ALEX: Alright, I’ll talk to you later.

LAUREN: Happy Birthday again! (Exits.)

JO: I wonder what she got you.

ALEX: Gift card.

JO: Really?

ALEX: (Nodding.) Gift card. It’s always a gift card.

JO: Is that a bad thing?

ALEX: No, just unoriginal. People only get you gift cards if they don’t know what else to get you.

JO: (Beat. Reaches into her bag and hands ALEX an envelope.)

ALEX: What’s this?

JO: Happy Birthday.

ALEX: ( Pulls an iTunes gift card out of the envelope.) No card?

JO: I filtered it out.

ALEX: ( Looking at the gift card.) $10 for iTunes.

JO: I figured it was a safe bet. Better than just money.

ALEX: Thanks. ( Half-jokingly.) Maybe I could trade it for a bus ticket.

JO: Is that what you want?

ALEX: I mean…

JO: Well damn. I asked the guy at the store, “should I get her a gift card or a bus ticket?” He told me to go with the gift card.

ALEX: I’m just joking, really. I like it.

JO: No, no, you said it for a reason.
ALEX: I’ve just been butting heads with my mom lately.

JO: I’ve been there. My Mom and your Mom. *(Beat.)* What would you do with a bus ticket? Where would you go?

ALEX: I don’t know. *(Beat.)* I wouldn’t get very far, anyway. It’s like when I was five and I tried to run away from home. I only got a few blocks away before I realized I had nowhere to go.

JO: Yeah but you’re not five anymore.

ALEX: Seems like just yesterday.

JO: Oh, to be young again.

ALEX: How old are you turning, anyway?

JO: Didn’t your Mom tell you that’s a rude thing to ask?

ALEX: Yeah but you just flicked me in the face, so.

JO: Alright, alright.

ALEX: You didn’t answer the question.

JO: I know.

ALEX: Ok, I’m using my free question then. You already agreed to it.

JO: Not fair.

ALEX: I know.

JO: Fine. Forty-eight.

ALEX: Hey, that’s not bad. That’s only, like, 8 in dog years.

JO: Thanks.

ALEX: Anytime.

JEAN: *(Offstage.)* Alex? Jo? Are the beans ready?

JO: *(Looking at the unfinished bowl of beans.)* Shit.

ALEX: *(Quickly getting back to work.)* God damn it.
JO: There’s not much left…

ALEX: *(Moving the bowl.)* Here, just do it quickly…

JO: Yeah, I’m trying. Help me out here.

ALEX: If I get in trouble for this I’m flicking you in the face.

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**ACT I SCENE II**

*(Lights up on Kitchen. Everyone is seated at the table, dinner is just about finished. Maybe one or two people are still picking at their food. They are in the midst of dinner conversation.)*

LAUREN: But Gandhi said “the only way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”

ALEX: I really don’t think he was talking about flash mobs.

LAUREN: It’s for a good cause! We’re donating a portion of our profits to the Coalition for the Homeless.

ALEX: Why the big show then? Why the song and dance?

LAUREN: We draw attention to it so others will catch on and help people in need. At the end we’re handing out food samples to every homeless person we see.
ALEX: And getting your logo seen on every street corner.

LAUREN: That’s not the point of it.

JEAN: I think it’s a worthy cause.

LAUREN: Thank you.

JEAN: Although I still think you should have brought up my idea.

LAUREN: Mom…

JEAN: People want to know what they’re eating isn’t garbage! Do a healthy eating campaign, add more items to the menu! Or at least let them know where their food is coming from. Is the meat cruelty-free?

LAUREN: I don’t know…

JEAN: Well it should be. I don’t want you working for a company that endorses animal abuse. It’s bad enough you’re working for a fast food company…

LAUREN: Mom!

ALEX: What do you mean cruelty-free?

JEAN: The animals are treated well, they’re given proper care and they’re raised on free-range farms.

ALEX: Up until they kill them.

JEAN: In a humane way.

JO: I don’t know if a homeless person will care where the food came from. Beggars can’t be choosers.

JEAN: They most certainly can!

ALEX: What about the chicken we just had?

JEAN: All cruelty-free. I had to drive to the farmer’s market in Union Square to get it. I talked to the farmers too.

ALEX: You talked to the guys who killed your food?

JEAN: Yes, I asked them about the environment in which they raised their animals.
LAUREN: Maybe I could start a cruelty-free campaign with the PR department…

ALEX: So you know that what you’re eating is a humane meal?

JEAN: Exactly.

ALEX: Why not just be vegetarian?

JEAN: Alex…

ALEX: That would be even better, right?

JO: The animal wouldn’t die at all. (JEAN glares at JO.)

ALEX: Is it cruelty-free or is it guilt-free?

JEAN: It’s whatever you want it to be. You seemed to enjoy it either way.

ALEX: You’re right, I did.

LAUREN: It was a good meal, mom.

JO: Could’ve used a dash more cruelty, but I loved it.

JEAN: Alright, alright. I’m glad to hear my culinary talents are appreciated. That reminds me, Alex, I need you to pick up some things for me tomorrow while I’m at work. I’m going to bake a little something for the Caffertys.

ALEX: What’s going on with the Caffertys?

LAUREN: Mr. Cafferty has cancer, doesn’t he?

ALEX: No, he went into remission.

JEAN: Apparently the treatment wasn’t as effective as they’d hoped, he’s had a recurrence. Lung cancer. I’m going to bake them some cookies. I’m trying out a new recipe I found online, low-fat Oatmeal flax seed cookies.

JO: Oh for god’s sake, he doesn’t have that long to live, let him have some butter and sugar. That’s what’ll make them feel better. They don’t have the energy to be healthy.

JEAN: Fatty food isn’t going to make their situation better.

JO: Healthy food won’t cure his cancer.
LAUREN: I think they’ll appreciate the gesture either way.

JEAN: Thank you.

LAUREN: Just to know that we’re thinking of them, you know? They’re probably having a hard time.

ALEX: Still, a little comfort food might be nice for them. *(Agreement from LAUREN and JO.)*

JEAN: Well if you want to then you can bake them something. But speaking of baking, if everyone is finished eating I think it’s time for the main event!

ALEX: You mean this wasn’t it?

JEAN: Stay right there *(Exits, reenters with an oddly-shaped cake, singing. LAUREN joins in, while ALEX and JO sit awkwardly.)* Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday Jo and Alex, Happy Birthday to you! *(They sit for a moment, staring at the cake.)*

JO: No candles?

JEAN: I wasn’t sure how many candles to put on the cake, you’re two separate ages. But the cake is what matters. Chocolate, as requested.

ALEX: This is cake?

JEAN: Of course it’s cake, I just made a few healthy substitutions. I used almond flour instead of white flour, avocado puree instead of butter, unsweetened applesauce to substitute for sugar and I separated the yolk from the eggs. You can hardly taste the difference, and it doesn’t have any unnecessary fats or sugars.

ALEX: Yeah, we wouldn’t want any of that stuff in a cake.

LAUREN: *(Unconvincingly.)* It looks pretty good, Alex.

JO: *(Joining in.)* Yeah, it does.

ALEX: Maybe we’ll be pleasantly surprised.

LAUREN: You should take the rest of it back to school with you! *(Pause. A tense silence. No one knows whether they should say something.)*

JEAN: Alright, why don’t we cut the cake, birthday girls get the first pieces! *(Ad-lib excited responses. House phone rings.)*

ALEX: *(Springs out of her seat and exits.)* I got it.
JEAN: Who is calling at this time of day?

JO: They don’t switch off the phones after 6, Jean. Probably some telemarketer.

JEAN: Is it a rule that they have to call at inconvenient times?

LAUREN: It’s probably in their employee handbook.

JO: “Wait for the sound of relaxation, then dial.” (LAUREN and Mom laugh. ALEX enters.)

JEAN: There she is! That didn’t take too long, what did they want?

ALEX: (Sitting back down) That was Dr. Manning’s office, they wanted to schedule an appointment soon, my medication needs a refill. (Mom gives ALEX a look.)

LAUREN: I thought we had Dr. Holman as our doctor?

JEAN: Why don’t we slice the cake?

LAUREN: Did we switch doctors?

JEAN: Alex, you can do the honors

LAUREN: Should I make an appointment or something?

ALEX: No, it’s-

JEAN: Alex…

ALEX: Dr. Holman is still our primary care physician. Dr. Manning is my psychiatrist.

LAUREN: What?

JEAN: Alex, not now

ALEX: Why?

JEAN: (In a hushed voice) This is not appropriate dinner conversation

ALEX: Yeah, well Aunt Jo told us about her colonoscopy and that wasn’t pleasant.

JEAN: Alex!

JO: No, she’s right, that was gross.

JEAN: We’ll talk about it later, Alex.
ALEX: No we won’t!

LAUREN: I’m confused.

ALEX: You always do this!

LAUREN: Why is this my first time hearing this?

JO: Why are you making such a big deal out of it?

JEAN: This isn’t your business, Jo.

(JO pulls out the snack cake she’s been saving, begins to unwrap it.)

JEAN: Jo, put away that twinkie.

JO: (Shakes her head.) Uh-uh.

JEAN: Jo! (Starts towards JO.) I made a cake, Jo!

JO: I don’t want to eat that cake!

JEAN: Give me the twinkie, Jo! (JO quickly eats the whole thing in one bite.) Satisfied?

JO: (Mouth full.) Best decision I made all day.

LAUREN: What the hell are you doing?

JEAN: Can we please just all sit down?

ALEX: It’s chemicals, right? It’s chemicals? Nothing to be ashamed of, nothing abnormal. Then why can’t we talk about it without whispering? (Beat.) Mr. Cafferty, he has a chemical problem too, right? Some unwanted chemical reactions? Like me? So why can we talk about him? Why do I need to hide it? (Silence. Mom looks as if she’s about to say something, then decides against it.) Aunt Jo…I’m sorry I didn’t answer your question earlier. That was rude of me. I’ve been home since the end of school last year. My mood was unstable, and my psychiatrist decided I needed to try a new medication. Mom thought it was a good idea to keep me home for a little while. So I’ve been here. Doing absolutely nothing. Saying absolutely nothing. (Silence.)

JO: Alex. Can I ask you a question?

ALEX: Yes, Aunt Jo, you can ask me a question.

JO: (Beat.) Why is your pillbox full?
ALEX: What?

JO: Your psychiatrist said you need a refill soon. Why is your pillbox full. *(By this point JEAN has stood up.)*

ALEX: I-

JEAN: Alex? Are you not taking your medication?

ALEX: I’m just-

JEAN: You’re not taking your medication?

ALEX: Mom…

JEAN: For how long? *(Before ALEX can respond.)* Don’t you know how dangerous that is? Are you crazy?

ALEX: Apparently!

JEAN: Why on earth would you not take your medication?

ALEX: Maybe I didn’t like how it made me feel! Maybe it was making things worse! Maybe I couldn’t ever clear my head!

JEAN: So why not tell me, or tell your therapist? Why just stop by yourself? And if you don’t like the medication, why keep it? Huh? Why not flush all that expensive, helpful medication down the toilet? *(Beat.)* Why did you keep it? *(Beat, realizing.)* Alex. Why did you keep those pills.

**END OF ACT I**
ACT II SCENE I

(Lights up. ALEX is sitting on her bed. She speaks to the audience, like a therapist and patient.)

Niagara Falls might be one of the most disappointing tourist attractions in the United States. You get there, and you’ve probably spent a long time in the car driving to this place, expecting an amazing display of nature, and of course it is beautiful. I’m not denying that, it’s great. But you expect it to be this natural, reclusive landmark, separated from everything else when in reality it’s surrounded by all these casinos and neon lights that completely ruin the experience, not to mention the millions of people who had the same idea for a family trip. Anyway, my family used to go on these road trip vacations, at least back when dad was still here, and this one year we drove to Niagara Falls. One good thing about a 4 person family is that everyone gets a window seat. So we get on the highway, and dad locks our windows so we won’t open them. Lauren starts to throw a fit and demands that he unlock her window. He explains to her that going 75 miles an hour down I-76 is not the best time to open up her window, but she would have none of it and decided to make the car a living hell until she got her way. This all completely supports my theory that she was kind of a secret asshole early on, by the way. So dad finally unlocks her window, just to shut her up. And she doesn’t open it. She never opens it. The whole ordeal baffled us. Mom and dad thought she just did it to be a little shit. Actually that might be part of it. But here’s what I think: I think she never actually had the intention of opening her window; she knew it was a stupid decision. But maybe she wanted that decision for herself. Maybe she wanted to have the choice.

(lights change, JEAN is standing outside ALEX’s door. JO and LAUREN are seated at the table)
JEAN: *(Knocking.)* Alex, open your door *(ALEX doesn’t respond.)* Alex, open your door right now.

ALEX: Don’t talk to me like I’m a child.

JEAN: I will when you stop acting like one. Open up.

ALEX: Why should I?

JEAN: Because I told you to.

ALEX: You’re going to have to do better than that.

LAUREN: Mom…

JEAN: Alex, I swear to God.

ALEX: Well don’t bring him into this.

*(LAUREN starts to clear the table and clean the kitchen.)*

JEAN: *(Trying to maintain control.)* I’m going to count to three…

JO: Really?

JEAN: Shush! One…two…*(Exasperated.)* Alex, just unlock your door.

ALEX: I have no reason to do that.

JEAN: Aunt Jo needs to get something from her suitcase.

JO: It’s a backpack.

JEAN: She needs to get something from her backpack.

JO: Don’t bring me into this!

JEAN: You are not being helpful!

LAUREN: Maybe we should leave her alone…

JO: You’re not going to get anywhere this way.

JEAN: Am I supposed to take parenting advice from you?

LAUREN: *(Holding up a pan.)* Where do you want this to go?
JO: You said I wasn’t being helpful.

JEAN: I will deal with my own daughter.

LAUREN: I can just wrap up the cake…

JO: And how is that going for you so far?

JEAN: Don’t tell me-

ALEX: *(Springs up and opens her door.)* Oh my fucking god will everyone stop talking?

JEAN: Alex!

ALEX: What? What do you want? Can I just stay in my room?

JEAN: No you may not! *(Walks into room and shuts door. JO and LAUREN sit awkwardly at the table.)* What is going on? Do I need to call Dr. Manning?

ALEX: No, Mom…

JEAN: I’ll schedule an appointment with her tomorrow. Tell me, what is going on?

ALEX: I…

JEAN: We can get you another prescription for Klonopin if that…

ALEX: No, I don’t want more medication, I…

JEAN: It doesn’t matter if you don’t want it, Alex, you need to take your medicine…

ALEX: It’s not about the medicine!

JEAN: It is most certainly about the medicine!

ALEX: Can you just listen to me for a second?

JEAN: Where is your medicine right now? *(ALEX doesn’t respond.)* Alex, tell me, where are the pills? *(Beat. ALEX reaches in her pocket and produces the pills, which JEAN takes)* Alex, why aren’t you taking your medication?

ALEX: *(Struggling to find words.)* I… *(Silence.)*

JEAN: Alex. Talk to me.
ALEX: *(Seems as though she’s about to say something, but the words are caught in her throat.)*

JEAN: I can’t help you if you won’t talk to me.

ALEX: You can’t help me anyway!

JEAN: That is not true.

ALEX: Yes it is! There’s nothing that you can do.

JEAN: I can if you’ll let me. *(Beat.)* Tell me what to do. Tell me how to help.

ALEX: If you want to help, please leave me alone. Please. *(Beat.)* This doesn’t concern you right now.

JEAN: *(Opens her mouth as if to protest, stares at ALEX, at a loss for words.)*

ALEX: Please leave.

JEAN: *(Beat. JEAN slowly gets up and exits. Shares an awkward look with JO and LAUREN, who heard everything, then exits kitchen. ALEX lies on her bed and closes her eyes. After a moment, JO gets up and knocks and ALEX’s door.)*

ALEX: Occupied.

JO: It’s me.

*(After a moment, ALEX gets up and unlocks door. JO steps in.)*

JO: Do you want to try to sleep or anything?

ALEX: Not a chance.

*(Silence)*

JO: I can leave, if you…

ALEX: No, it’s ok. *(Beat.)* Those Stoics, they were from Greece right?

JO: Right.

ALEX: I want to go to Greece.

JO: You should, it’s great.

ALEX: Tell me about it.
JO: (Beat.) It’s beautiful. I went in the Spring. Not too hot, not too cold. Of course I had to stop by Athens, be a tourist. I saw the Acropolis. (Smiling, remembering.) I actually travelled to this one island called Chios and tasted Mastiha, this thing you chew on, specially made on that island. Supposedly a lot of therapeutic benefits…it certainly helps your digestive system…anyway, I drank while the sun set. One of the most beautiful sights I’ve seen. One of the happiest nights of my life. I didn’t want to leave.

ALEX: Why did you then? Why didn’t you find a job and stay?

JO: (Beat.) Because then it wouldn’t be special.

ALEX: But you’d be happy.

JO: Would I?

ALEX: You said it was the happiest night of your life. (LAUREN enters stage left and approaches ALEX’s door.)

JO: It was.

(LAUREN begins knocking.)

ALEX: So you left.

LAUREN: (Knocking.) Alex?

ALEX: Why would you leave?

LAUREN: (Still knocking.) Alex? Open up.

ALEX: If you were happy.

LAUREN: (Knocking.) Alex!

ALEX: (To LAUREN.) Stop yelling!

LAUREN: Let me in!

ALEX: Just leave me alone.

LAUREN: Alex, please…

(After a moment, JO gets up to open the door. ALEX doesn’t stop her. Both enter the room and sit next to ALEX. All three sit in silence.)
LAUREN: *(After the silence has set in.)* In some villages in Africa, old women are suspected of being witches and hacked to death. *(Silence. ALEX and JO stare at LAUREN in bewilderment.)* I’m just saying some people have it worse than you.

ALEX: You don’t say.

LAUREN: Just putting things in perspective.

ALEX: Thank you.

LAUREN: Why don’t we all go into the kitchen? It’s less crowded.

ALEX: I like it in here.

LAUREN: But there’s nothing to do in here.

ALEX: That’s the best part.

LAUREN: Could we at least-

ALEX: *(Cutting her off.)* Sshh. Hear that? That’s silence. Enjoy it.

*(Silence. JO’s phone begins to ring, a loud rock song. They attempt to let it go to voicemail, but it keeps ringing. JO finally reaches back and shuts it off. Shortly after, it starts to ring again.)*

ALEX: Just answer it.

JO: *(After a moment, grabs the phone and exits.)* I won’t be long, I promise. *(Answers the phone as she exits through front door.)* Anna? *(In a hushed voice.)* Look, I can’t talk right now. This had better be good…

LAUREN: *(After a brief silence.)* You know, Alex, I love you very much…

ALEX: Oh Jesus Christ…

LAUREN: What?

ALEX: Please, just don’t.

LAUREN: Why can’t I just say-

ALEX: It’s not-

LAUREN: I think it’s important-

ALEX: You don’t have to-
LAUREN: I just want you to know.

ALEX: You don’t have to care just because I’m your sister

LAUREN: Isn’t that kind of the point? And it’s not just because you’re my sister.

ALEX: *(Beat. Contemplating.)* If we weren’t sisters, do you think we would be friends?

LAUREN: What?

ALEX: Let’s say we went to high school together and we weren’t family, we didn’t know each other... do you think we would be friends?

LAUREN: Why?

ALEX: Just a hypothetical situation. Would we be friends?

LAUREN: *(Hesitates.)* Yes.

ALEX: You hesitated.

LAUREN: I did not! I took a moment to think about it.

ALEX: That is the definition of hesitate.

LAUREN: We would be friends.

ALEX: Really?

LAUREN: *(Thinking about it.)* We would at least know each other...

ALEX: Uh-huh...

LAUREN: Just maybe not as well as we do now.

ALEX: *(Beat. Thinks about this. Reaches behind her bed and pulls out a snack cake, holds it out as an offer.)*

LAUREN: Oh, I shouldn’t...

ALEX: Come on, just a little treat?

LAUREN: If I take it, I know I’m going to eat it.

ALEX: Yeah, isn’t that the point?
LAUREN: I just…I’m trying to watch my calories, and I had a second helping at dinner…

ALEX: You’re not fat, Lauren.

LAUREN: Yes, because I avoid food like that.

ALEX: And you never splurge?

LAUREN: Unhealthy food makes me feel…unhealthy.

(LEX lies down if she hasn’t already and eats a snack cake)

LAUREN: Don’t you feel bad eating that?

ALEX: (Mouth full.) Terrible.

LAUREN: Come on, let’s go outside. I’m getting claustrophobic.

ALEX: You can go.

LAUREN: Come with me.

ALEX: I’m comfortable here.

LAUREN: We don’t even have to go outside. We can just go to the living room…play cards or something. Would it kill you to leave your room?

ALEX: It’s my birthday.

LAUREN: Exactly. You’re just going to spend it in here alone?

ALEX: Of course not. You’re in here too.

LAUREN: We’re all here for you. And the day’s not over, we can still do something…what are you doing? (LEX begins fumbling with her shirt)

ALEX: (Removing her bra from inside her shirt.) Almost…

LAUREN: Alex, come on…

ALEX: (Pulls her bra out of her shirt and over her head, throwing it onto the bed. Sighs with relief.) Much better.

LAUREN: Really? Put it back on.
ALEX: No.

LAUREN: Put it back on!

ALEX: You can’t just put it back on once you’ve taken it off! It doesn’t matter anyway. I could walk around this house naked, wouldn’t make a difference.

LAUREN: Look, if you come back out with me you can open your presents.

ALEX: Tempting. But I’ve already taken off my bra for the day.

LAUREN: God damn it, Alex.

ALEX: These pants are starting to feel pretty restricting too.

LAUREN: I swear to god, Alex, you take off your pants and I leave. (Stands up and walks around the room.) This looks just like your old room. I’m impressed.

ALEX: Yeah, well I’ve had time to move all my stuff in.

LAUREN: Wait, this is my bookcase…

ALEX: Oh, yeah, mine broke.

LAUREN: So you just took mine?

ALEX: You weren’t using it!

LAUREN: (Picking up a book.) This is huge.

ALEX: Oh, yeah, you should probably put it on the bottom shelf.

LAUREN: Is this a textbook?

ALEX: It’s the DSM. It has information on mental disorders.

LAUREN: It’s so long.

ALEX: Yeah, well, I guess there’s a lot of them.

LAUREN: Where did you get this?

ALEX: The library. I never returned it.

LAUREN: (Reading through it.) Huh. Why did you get it?
ALEX: *Shrugs.* Research. *(Opens another snack cake.)*

LAUREN: Really? Another one?

ALEX: Lauren, I’ve been living with Mom for a while now. I’m on health food lockdown. You don’t want to know how I had to smuggle these in.

LAUREN: *Beat.* How long has this been going on?

ALEX: Well I started out shoving them in my jeans but the bulge didn’t look very natural…

LAUREN: Alex.

ALEX: What do you want to know?

LAUREN: I don’t know, all of it?

ALEX: I’ve been home since the end of last semester, if that’s what you’re wondering.

LAUREN: Really? That long?

ALEX: Oh, trust me, it feels like longer.

LAUREN: I guess I had no idea.

ALEX: Yeah, well you haven’t really been home.

LAUREN: I’ve been busy. Work has been crazy. We had to find a new secretary because the old one went on maternity leave…she was barely even showing, lucky.

ALEX: I’m just surprised you didn’t question anything, I mean, I’ve been home for a while.

LAUREN: I don’t know, I didn’t really pay attention I guess. I figured you were suspended again.

ALEX: That happened one time!

LAUREN: Yeah? That’s like saying ‘I went to prison…one time!’

ALEX: Oh please, those are two completely different things.

LAUREN: *(Laughs.)* Remind me, what happened your freshman year?

ALEX: *(Playfully angry. She’s told this story many times before.)* The campus police came pounding at our door at 2:00 in the morning.
LAUREN: Why?

ALEX: They thought we were smoking pot.

LAUREN: And why would they think that?

ALEX: …We were smoking pot. *(LAUREN laughs.)* You’re never going to let me live that down are you?

LAUREN: Not a chance.

ALEX: Well maybe I’ll tell mom about that Halloween party you took me to…

LAUREN: Like hell you will!

ALEX: *(Laughs.)* You’re just as bad as I am!

LAUREN: That’s debatable. But at least I didn’t get caught!

ALEX: Yeah, yeah. You just got lucky.

LAUREN: Nope, there’s no such thing as luck. That’s just what people tell themselves. I was smart, so I didn’t get the campus police pounding on my door.

ALEX: Maybe this is why families force each other to stick together…

LAUREN: What do you mean?

ALEX: We know too much shit about each other.

LAUREN: *(Laughs.)* Maybe you’re right.

ALEX: I guess not everything though.

LAUREN: *(Beat.)* I know how you feel.

ALEX: Do you?

LAUREN: When I moved to the city, I was on my own. I missed my friends and family. There were times when I felt really depressed, and all I wanted to do was go back.

ALEX: So why didn’t you?

LAUREN: Because I had to make it on my own. I had to break out of my rut. I started exercising more, I took up yoga…have you ever done yoga? *(ALEX shakes her head.)* that’s what did it for me. Well, a combination of things. I started eating healthier, thinking positively,
you know? It took time, but look at me now. You just need to pick yourself up, do the same thing. You’re in a rut.

ALEX: It’s not the same.

LAUREN: How is it not the same?

ALEX: You were feeling lonely because you moved to a new place.

LAUREN: Yes (LAUREN’s phone buzzes. She looks at it but ignores it.)

ALEX: But if you moved back, you would have felt better

LAUREN: I couldn’t do that, I graduated and I needed to…

ALEX: But you KNEW what was making you feel that way, and you KNEW what would make you feel better… (LAUREN’s phone buzzes again.)

LAUREN: I couldn’t go home, that would have been giving up. Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. (LAUREN’s phone buzzes again.)

ALEX: You’re phone’s been going off this whole time, just answer your texts. (LAUREN complies and gets out her phone. JO enters kitchen.)

JO: (On her phone.) Hello? Can you hear me? Shit. (Hangs up and redials.) Hi. It’s too windy, I can’t hear you out there. I know, I know. Well can’t he hold it any longer? I just need some time, I can…ok, fine. Yes. Ok, you tell him…right. Ok. Bye. (Hangs up.) Jesus Christ. (Starts to write a text as she walks further into the kitchen. While looking at the screen, she goes to sit in one of the chairs but misses and falls to the ground) Ah! Shit! (Rubbing her back.) God damn it…

JEAN: (Rushing into the kitchen.) Jo? What happened? Are you ok?

JO: (Still on the ground.) Yes, yes, I’m fine. (She starts to get up, with difficulty. JEAN helps her.)

JEAN: Is it your back again?

JO: I haven’t exactly had the chance to go to the chiropractor.

JEAN: (Helping JO into a chair.) Well maybe if you had health insurance…

JO: Oh stop it.

LAUREN: (Entering.) Aunt Jo? What’s wrong?
JEAN: She hurt her back.

JO: Jean…

JO: I’m fine, just an old injury.

JEAN: You need to lie down.

JO: No, please, I’m fine. I can just sit here. (Cringes.)

JEAN: (Helping JO up) We’ll get you some advil and a heating pad. Come on. (Helps JO up and starts walking her out of the kitchen.)

LAUREN: Do you need any help?

JEAN: (Brushing her off) No, we’re fine. (Glances at ALEX’s room as she exits.)

ALEX: Is everything ok?

LAUREN: Yeah, Aunt Jo just hurt her back or something. Mom’s on it.

ALEX: Got it. (They sit in silence for a moment, trying to think of something to say.) So…how’s your presentation going?

LAUREN: What?

ALEX: Mom said you had some important presentation you had to leave early to work on.

LAUREN: Oh, right. Good. (Beat) Actually…want to know a secret?

ALEX: You have secrets?

LAUREN: Of course I do

ALEX: Oh

LAUREN: What?

ALEX: No, nothing, I just…go ahead, tell me your secret

LAUREN: I’m not interesting enough to have a secret?

ALEX: I never said that

LAUREN: There are a lot of things about me you don’t know
ALEX: I’m sure there are. Go ahead, tell me

LAUREN: Ok…I don’t actually have a presentation for work.

ALEX: That’s it?

LAUREN: No, that’s not it. I have an early meeting at the bank to take out a loan.

ALEX: Take out a loan for what?

LAUREN: Promise you won’t tell mom?

ALEX: Promise.

LAUREN: I’m starting my own business!

ALEX: What do you mean?

LAUREN: I’m applying for a small business loan to start my own company!

ALEX: What do you know about business? You majored in English!

LAUREN: I have friends who are helping me with the business side of things. I’m heading the creative part. Don’t you want to know what the business is?

ALEX: *(Laughing.)* What?

LAUREN: *(Pulling documents from her bag.)* I’m starting my own cupcake shop!

ALEX: *(Beat.)* Oh! Oh you’re not kidding.

LAUREN: No!

ALEX: *(Beat.)* A cupcake shop.

LAUREN: Yes!

ALEX: A cupcake shop…

LAUREN: Not just any cupcake shop. Mine is unique. I’m going to put literature quotes in each cupcake. *(Pulls out a list of quotes.)* It’s like a fortune cookie. A nice surprise to go with your delicious treat. That’ll be our gimmick. I already have a list of quotes *(Reading from the list.)* “If music be the food of love, play on.” That’s Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night. They don’t all have to be food-related though *(Reading more.)* “The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched—they must be felt with the heart.” Helen Keller. “It is during our
darkest moments that we must focus to see the light.” Aristotle Onassis. Once I present my idea to the bank… *(Notices ALEX.)* You’re laughing.

ALEX: *(Muffling laughter.)* I’m not…

LAUREN: Why is this so funny?

ALEX: Lauren…

LAUREN: This is serious, I’m working hard on this

ALEX: It’s just…a cupcake shop? Really? That’s the big demand right now?

LAUREN: People like cupcakes

ALEX: People can already get cupcakes.

LAUREN: Not like mine! Close your eyes.

ALEX: What?

LAUREN: Close your eyes!

ALEX: Why?

LAUREN: Just do it!

ALEX: Alright, alright. *(Closes her eyes.)*

LAUREN: Ok. Now picture two cupcake shops.

ALEX: Where?

LAUREN: It doesn’t matter, they’re side by side –

ALEX: Ok but where are the shops? Downtown? What kind of neighborhood? Location is important.

LAUREN: Come on, Alex, focus.

ALEX: Ok. Two cupcake shops.

LAUREN: They’re right next to each other –

ALEX: That can’t be good for business.
LAUREN: Just use your imagination!

ALEX: I am!

LAUREN: One is your run of the mill, everyday cupcake shop, not a lot of decorations.

ALEX: Right.

LAUREN: And the other is a bright new shop with a great atmosphere that offers something extra to their customers. Which one do you choose?

ALEX: *(Thinks about it.)* Whichever one has better tasting cupcakes.

LAUREN: No! That’s not it!

ALEX: Whichever one has better prices?

LAUREN: The one that offers something new to their customers! The one that’s unique!

ALEX: The one that stands out in a crowd.

LAUREN: Exactly!

ALEX: Although, if they’re right next to each other, and I have money, I could just go to both…

LAUREN: Geez, Alex! Will you be serious about something for once in your life?

ALEX: Why should I? You’re serious enough for both of us

LAUREN: Well I’m not taking pills for it. *(Immediately regrets taking it too far, but stands her ground.)*

ALEX: *(Beat.)* You don’t know what you’re talking about.

LAUREN: And I suppose you do?

ALEX: More than you.

LAUREN: What is it that you know? What your therapist tells you? The person you’re paying to listen to your problems? Whatever they tell you in this? *(Picks up DSM.)*

ALEX: Don’t touch that.

LAUREN: *(Flipping through pages.)* You can’t believe everything you read in a book, Alex.

LAUREN: *(Reading from the book.)* Social Anxiety Disorder: fear and anxiety in social situations. So when I feel like staying home on a Friday night I should pop a Xanax?

ALEX: Lauren…

LAUREN: *(Flipping through more pages.)* Impulse Control Disorder…failure to resist a temptation, urge, self-control of emotions and behaviors…so any hormonal teenager is mentally ill?

ALEX: Lauren! *(Tries to grab the book. LAUREN turns away and continues reading.)*

LAUREN: How many categories do they need? I do a lot of these things, am I mentally ill?

ALEX: I’m starting to think so.

LAUREN: Trichotillomania: pulling out hair…Seasonal Affective Disorder: depressive symptoms during winter months…Premenstrual dysphoric disorder: depression symptoms, irritability, and tension before menstruation…you’ve got to be kidding me! *(Flips page.)* Major Depressive Disorder. *(Beat. Looks at ALEX.)* Depressed mood, irritable, decreased interest or pleasure in most activities, fatigue or loss of energy…Alex, I go through this all the time

ALEX: It’s not the same!

LAUREN: What’s not the same? My feelings don’t matter as much as yours?

ALEX: That’s not what I’m saying. Look, I don’t want to fight with you.

LAUREN: Then let’s go do something else. Anything. Mom and Jo are probably waiting for us.

ALEX: I don’t want to get up.

LAUREN: Why?

ALEX: I’m tired.

LAUREN: Then let’s get you something to eat. You barely had any dinner.

ALEX: I don’t want Mom’s chicken.

LAUREN: Then we can make you a snack.

ALEX: I’d have to put my bra back on.
LAUREN: Just come out to the kitchen with me.

ALEX: I can’t.

LAUREN: Come on Alex, yes you can…

ALEX: *(Turning away.)* No.

LAUREN: Just get up…

ALEX: I can’t!

LAUREN: Why?

ALEX: I’d have to put my bra back on! And I’d have to stand up and open the door, and walk to the kitchen, and pick something to eat, and get it out, and make it, and chew it, and swallow it, and I can’t do all of that. *(Beat.)* Please just let me stay here.

LAUREN: What’s wrong? *(Beat.)* You have people here who care about you.

ALEX: I know.

LAUREN: You have us, you have a family…

ALEX: I know. I have a family, and shelter, and food, and a good education, no major traumatic events…I have a good life. I have a *great* life.

LAUREN: Then what’s wrong?

ALEX: I don’t know. There are people out there who have reasons to feel bad. People get sick, loved ones die…apparently some people are accused of being witches. I don’t have those problems. I have no reason for feeling the way I do.

*(JEAN enters the kitchen on her phone, searching for advil.)*

JEAN: I don’t know, Dan. No, she hasn’t. Yes, I know, you…well I’m sorry! What do you suggest? Yes, I called their office, they’re closed for the day. *(Finds the advil.)* Because she’s your daughter too! Fine. No, it’s fine. I’ll figure it out. I don’t know, I’ll figure something out. *(Sarcastically, as she exits.)* Thanks for sending a card, by the way.

LAUREN: Maybe there isn’t a logical reason. Maybe it isn’t rational.

ALEX: But it is, isn’t it? It’s my brain, right? My brain isn’t producing enough serotonin neurotransmitters or whatever? *(Beat.)* Cheering me up won’t fix my brain.

LAUREN: Medication can.
ALEX: I don’t want medication. I don’t want to need medication just to function.

LAUREN: *(Beat.)* How long have you been on medication?

ALEX: Around Sophomore year of high school.

LAUREN: So why didn’t you tell me?

ALEX: I don’t know. I already felt insecure…I was 15. I didn’t want anyone to think I was…abnormal.

LAUREN: That’s what your psychiatrist told you?

ALEX: She said I had an imbalance of chemicals, and it was no different from any other illness. I hated that word. “Illness.” It feels dirty. But she said I wasn’t alone, and there were probably lots of other kids at school going through the same thing.

LAUREN: She was probably right.

ALEX: Right, but everyone was so secretive about it. When they called our house they were so cryptic over the phone, like we were talking in code. God forbid anyone know the truth.

LAUREN: I can imagine *(Beat.)* I’m sorry, Alex. *(With a weird sort of excitement.)* Did you ever do any writing?

ALEX: What do you mean?

LAUREN: A journal, stories, poetry…some of the best art comes from tortured minds. Ernest Hemingway was horribly depressed, he committed suicide when he was 61.

ALEX: I’m not Ernest Hemingway.

LAUREN: But you have something in common with him, you have a connection with him. That’s pretty cool.

ALEX: Ernest Hemingway was an alcoholic and a horrible husband.

LAUREN: But a brilliant writer.

ALEX: Yes. I also love dogs, and so did Hitler, but I like to think there’s a degree of separation between us

LAUREN: But his depression is what made him a great writer, it’s what made his writing so inspiring!
ALEX: That’s not true…

LAUREN: Yes it is, he spilled his thoughts onto the page, that’s what made him a good writer.

ALEX: He got up early in the morning and set a word goal of 500 words a day, that’s what made him a good writer.

LAUREN: He channeled his emotions onto the page, he gave people a different perspective to read about.

ALEX: Agree to disagree

LAUREN: I’m just saying, you could make the best of a bad situation. Use it to your advantage.

ALEX: (Shaking her head.) That’s not how it works.

LAUREN: I’m sure you have plenty of thoughts and stories you could express. If you just give yourself a mode of expression, you’ll feel so much better getting it off your chest, like a coping mechanism. I’ve studied these great writers…that’s what they have in common, isn’t it? Sylvia Plath, she wrote amazing poetry, killed herself when she was 30…Virginia Woolf! Fantastic writer, committed suicide when she was 59! And Hunter S. Thompson at 67!

ALEX: Do you just have a list of suicide statistics stored in your head?

LAUREN: I mean, what happened to them was horrible, of course, but…look what it led to. These great works. There’s a sort of beauty in their pain.

ALEX: (Annoyed, trying not to start another argument.) Mhmm.

LAUREN: I mean, I wish I had something to write about like they did. I just end up staring at a blank page.

ALEX: So you turn to cupcakes instead.

LAUREN: I guess so! (Puts away her folders.)

ALEX: You’re really doing this?

LAUREN: I am! And I’d appreciate some support too.

ALEX: It’s just…Lauren, there’s so much you’re not thinking about. What if your business fails? What if no one wants to buy quote-cakes?

LAUREN: (Writing it down in her phone.) Ooh, good name

ALEX: Lauren! If it doesn’t work you could go bankrupt. They could take legal action.
LAUREN: You don’t have to be so negative

ALEX: I’m not being negative, I’m being realistic! You can’t just survive on an idea.

LAUREN: Of course you can! And you don’t think I’ve thought about it? I know the risks. But if I thought about it too much, I wouldn’t even try in the first place. Things will work out.

ALEX: How do you know?

LAUREN: I just do.

ALEX: But you can’t possibly know that! What if things don’t work out?

LAUREN: They will! Or if they don’t, then I try again, or try something else, something will work eventually. I have to at least try. If I didn’t think things were going to work out in the end, I don’t know why I’d even get out of bed in the morning.

ALEX: (Beat.) Can I ask you a question?

LAUREN: Sure.

ALEX: (Contemplates this.) Why are you starting this business?

LAUREN: (Thinks about it.) I don’t know, I guess there’s nothing stopping me.

(JEAN and JO enter the kitchen. JEAN is supporting JO while simultaneously on the phone. It’s a difficult task.)

JEAN: (Into the phone.) Ok, and how long does it last? (Sets JO down in a chair.)

JO: For God’s sake, Jean, I’m fine!

JEAN: (Turning away from the phone.) If you were fine you wouldn’t need my help to walk up the stairs! (Back into the phone, while writing something down on a post-it note.) Great, thank you so much. I’ll talk to her and call back tomorrow. (Hangs up and puts the post-it in her pocket.) That diet of yours is what did it. You get absolutely no calcium intake. Your bones are getting brittle, they’ll shatter if you don’t take care of them. You know what you need? Calcium supplements. (Calling into ALEX’s room.) Alex? Lauren? Do you remember where we put your calcium supplements?

JO: I do not need your medicine!

JEAN: It’s fine, they don’t use them anymore. (Calling again.) Alex? Lauren? Aunt Jo needs your help.
JO: Jesus Christ. *ALEX and LAUREN share a look, then get up and enter the kitchen.*

LAUREN: Didn’t we leave them in the medicine cabinet?

JO: *(Starts to stand up.)* I can just –

JEAN: *(Stopping JO.)* That’s what I thought, but they aren’t there.

LAUREN: They should be in the bathroom.

JO: *(Starting to stand again.)* If you can’t find them –

JEAN: *(Stopping JO again.)* It’s so cluttered in there, we had to move everything in there so we could paint.

LAUREN: You didn’t throw them out?

JEAN: No, they’re in there somewhere. Would you two please go look for them?

LAUREN: Sure. *(Exits with ALEX.)*

JO: *(Clutching her back.)* Ah, ah, ah…

JEAN: *(Helping JO adjust herself.)* Here…

JO: *(Resisting help.)* I’m fine, I’m fine.

JEAN: Are you getting flare-ups again?

JO: No, not really. Just a few minor incidents. This is the worst it’s been in a while.

JEAN: Try to stay still. Let the medicine kick in.

JO: Can I have that drink now?

JEAN: You had advil, drinking will give you liver damage.

JO: It can’t be worse than what I’ve already done to it.

JEAN: When’s the last time you saw a doctor?

JO: I don’t know, Jean, I don’t keep a calendar…that’s like asking me the last time I saw a dentist…

JEAN: When is the last time you saw a dentist?
JO: I don’t know! *(Moves slightly and cringes.)*

JEAN: You need to get that looked at.

JO: I’ve handled it before. It goes away after a while.

JEAN: We’re taking you to see a doctor.

JO: Jean, no.

JEAN: This isn’t a negotiation. You can stay here a little while longer so you can rest, I’m sure Alex won’t mind sharing her room for a few extra days.

JO: *(Trying to protest.)* Jean…

LAUREN: *(Offstage.)* What color are the calcium supplements?

JEAN: *(Calling to LAUREN.)* It’s blue!

LAUREN: *(Offstage.)* I thought they were red?

JEAN: No, fiber is red, calcium is blue.

LAUREN: *(Offstage.)* Wait, the container is blue or the pills are blue?

JEAN: Are you even looking?

ALEX: *(Offstage.)* Geez, how many different pills do we have up here?

LAUREN: Everything’s cluttered up here, Mom, it’s impossible to find anything.

JEAN: *(To Jo.)* Just try to relax. *(Going upstairs.)* It should be right there.

ALEX: *(Offstage.)* How about fish oil? I found fish oil tablets.

JEAN: *(Offstage.)* Just look at the labels! *(The phone starts to ring.)*

JO: Jean?

JEAN: *(Offstage.)* It has to be here. I know we still have it. *(Phone rings again.)*

JO: Jean, the phone’s ringing. *(phone rings again)* Jean! *(phone rings again)* Damn it…*(awkwardly pulls herself up halfway and grabs the phone from the table, the drops back into her chair.)* Hello? *(glances at the door.)* Yes, this is the primary resident speaking. Uh huh. Really. How far behind? Ok. Well thank you for notifying me. Of course. Thank you. *(Hangs up. ALEX enters.)* No luck?
ALEX: Oh, they found them, but now they’ve gotta put all the pills back.

JO: How many pills are up there?

ALEX: Well, we could start our own drug business if we get short on cash.

JO: Great.

ALEX: You don’t take any pills, do you?

JO: That’s kind of an invasive question.

ALEX: I figured we’ve kind of crossed that line.

JO: Fair point. No, I don’t take any pills.

ALEX: So you can go wherever you want without worrying about pharmacies.

JO: I suppose.

ALEX: That sounds nice.

JO: It’s not bad.

ALEX: Where are you going next?

JO: Not sure yet. I have a few options.

ALEX: Yeah?

JO: Well, I’ve been meaning to get my passport renewed…but until then, a friend of mine knows a guy who’s driving to New Orleans. He’ll take me if I give him gas money.

ALEX: Which you don’t have?

JO: Eh. Not quite. I’ll figure it out though. That’s the exciting part, right? Not knowing?

JEAN: (Offstage.) Yes! I found them!

ALEX: I guess there are other ways to get excited.

JEAN: (Offstage.) Jo? I found them! (Enters.) I told you, Alex, blue container. Take this once a day, you’ll feel better in no time.

JO: Thank you, I feel healthier already.
JEAN: *(Hands container to JO.*) You should get a pillbox so you don’t forget.

JO: *(Wincing as she grabs the container.*) Yeah, I think I’ll be able to remember. *(ALEX starts to exit.)*

JEAN: Ok. *(Following ALEX and lowering her voice slightly.*) Listen, Alex, there’s something I’d like to discuss with you…*(ALEX exits before JEAN can finish)* Alex! What is she going to do in her room?

JO: Maybe she’s going to sleep.

JEAN: It’s not even 8:00. I wouldn’t be surprised though. That’s the only thing she likes to do lately. *(ALEX pulls the bottle of sleeping pills out from under her bed and holds it in her hand.)*

JO: What else is she supposed to do all day? No offense, but this town is boring. I looked around yesterday and I could not find one bar that stayed open past 11:00.

JEAN: Really? *(ALEX dumps out the pills and begins counting them out.)*

JO: I know, it’s ridiculous. I need until at least 1:00 to lose my inhibitions.

JEAN: No, I mean you were here yesterday?

JO: Oh, uh, yeah.

JEAN: You said you weren’t getting in until today.

JO: Well, I had plans with some old friends in the area.

JEAN: Doing what?

JO: Nothing, just hanging out.

JEAN: Where did you sleep?

JO: I crashed on their couch.

JEAN: You could have come here!

JO: I didn’t want to be a burden.

JEAN: Oh, please, we could have made up the bed for you.

JO: Well I’m here now.
JEAN: Yes, yes you are.

JO: I’m sorry, I didn’t see the point in telling you.

LAUREN: Did you give her the pills? *(JO shakes the container.)* Great! *(Silence.)*

JEAN: Well, we’re all out here. Let’s do something. Let’s play a game! Lauren, why don’t you get a pillow for Aunt Jo. *(LAUREN exits.)* Jo, just stay there for a sec.

JO: Can do.

JEAN: *(Knocking on ALEX’s door.)* Alex? Can I come in? Please? *(ALEX pours the pills into their container, stashes it under her bed, and reluctantly unlocks the door. JEAN steps in)* Come on, join us for a game. It’s your birthday.

ALEX: I’m really not in the mood.

JEAN: Don’t be lazy. Come out and be social. You’re being rude to your guests.

JO: That’s not really my main concern right now.

ALEX: I’d really rather not right now…

JEAN: Come on, Alex.

JO: Please don’t leave me alone with them. *(ALEX stands up and enters the kitchen with JEAN.)*

JEAN: Great! See, it’s not so bad out here. *(LAUREN enters with pillow.)* Why don’t you have a seat and I’ll get a game to play.

LAUREN: Why don’t we play…

JEAN: Hold on, I’ll be right back. I have just the game! *(Runs out and comes back with CLUE, sets it up on the table and deals everyone their cards.)* Alright, everyone pick a character. This is so great, a family game night! Ok, everyone’s set? I’ll roll first… *(Does an extravagant preparation to roll the dice.)* Alright, five! *(Counting out spaces.)* One, two, three, four five. Jo, your turn. *(JEAN hands the dice to JO, who awkwardly rolls from her position in her chair.)* Three! *(Counts out loud as she moves JO’s piece.)* One, two three. Lauren, your turn. *(LAUREN rolls.)* Ooh, a measly one. *(LAUREN moves one space.)* One! Alex? *(ALEX looks at JO, then rolls.)* A six! You can go anywhere! *(ALEX moves her piece six spaces.)* One, two, three, four, five, six. Good! My turn again! Isn’t this fun?

JO: Riveting.

JEAN: *(Rolls dice.)* Four. One, two, three, four. Jo? *(JO awkwardly rolls the dice again.)* Another four! *(JO moves her piece as JEAN counts.)* One, two, three, four.
JO: We can count, Jean.

JEAN: Lauren? *(LAUREN rolls dice.)* Two! You aren’t doing so well, are you? *(LAUREN moves her piece as JEAN counts.)* One, two.

JO: For gods sake, Jean.

JEAN: Alex? *(ALEX doesn’t respond.)* It’s your turn, aren’t you going to roll?

ALEX: I don’t know, you seem to be pretty good at it.

JEAN: Alright, alright, I’ll stop, just roll. *(ALEX rolls dice.)* Five! *(ALEX looks at her.)* Sorry. *(ALEX moves her piece as JEAN counts, this time under her breath.)* One, two, three, four, five.

ALEX: Your turn.

JEAN: Wait, are you sure you want to move there?

ALEX: Yes.

JEAN: No, no, you’re right next to the Library, you can go in.

ALEX: I don’t want to.

JEAN: But you have to, it’s the point of the game!

ALEX: I’ll just keep going towards the Billiards room, it sounds more fun.

JEAN: You’re passing up a great opportunity, none of us are near any doors yet!

JO: Jean.

JEAN: Look, see, you were here *(Moves ALEX’s piece.)* and you can go one, two, three, four, five. Right into the Library.

JO: Jean, it’s her character.

JEAN: I’m just giving her some advice.

JO: Let her choose where to move her piece.

JEAN: Well she didn’t move it the right way! I’m helping her.

LAUREN: It is a good move.
JEAN: See, Lauren agrees.

JO: It’s just a game.

JEAN: Exactly, I’m helping her win.

JO: The point of the game is to solve the mystery yourself!

JEAN: Which Alex can do if she goes the right way!

ALEX: Ok, ok, ok. I’ll go in the Library.

JEAN: Great! Now you get to make a guess! What do you think happened? Anything at all.

ALEX: (After thinking about it.) I think…Colonel Mustard hanged himself in the Library. With the rope.

JEAN: Alex. Be serious.

ALEX: I am. He’s obviously suffering from PTSD, probably having some war flashbacks. He’s still wearing his military uniform, after all. And now the murder of his friend Mr. Boddy is too much.

JO: I did notice him acting funny at dinner earlier.

JEAN: Alex, come on, make a real guess. Don’t ruin the game.

JO: I think, if anything, she’s making the game more interesting.

JEAN: We can’t play if you’re going to be like that. This is a family game.

ALEX: The central theme of the game is murder…

JEAN: Yes, well we don’t have to talk about it like that.

ALEX: No, we don’t talk about anything, do we.

JO: If you let her just go to the Billiards room she wouldn’t have found the poor Colonel there.

JEAN: Why do you have to be so dark?

JO: You picked the game about murder!

JEAN: It’s not about murder, it’s about solving a murder!

ALEX: Well I’m just trying to make it more realistic.
LAUREN: Should Mom just take her turn?

JEAN: No, Alex needs to finish her turn.

ALEX: I choose to be an innocent bystander

JEAN: You have to follow the rules. Move your piece into the library and make a guess.

ALEX: It’s my game piece, I should be able to do whatever I want with my game piece.

JEAN: Alex, if there’s something you want to talk about…

ALEX: Now you want to talk?

JEAN: Now isn’t the best time.

ALEX: No, the best time to talk was 5 months ago.

JO: (Beat.) Do you smoke, Lauren?

LAUREN: No.

JO: It’s great, you should try it. Now.

LAUREN: (Getting the hint.) Right…(Helps JO up)

JO: The trick is to inhale, that way the nicotine gets in your system. (Both exit.)

JEAN: We can’t get through one game as a family?

ALEX: Come on. Let’s talk.

JEAN: I’m scheduling an appointment with Dr. Manning tomorrow, we’ll talk with her then.

ALEX: I don’t want to talk to Dr. Manning, I want you to talk to me.

JEAN: Alex, I’ve been trying to talk to you.

ALEX: No you haven’t, you’ve been telling me what to do. There’s a difference.

JEAN: I’ve been doing what the psychiatrists tell me. They’re the experts. They know how to help you.

ALEX: But did you ever think to just talk to me like I’m a person? Could you look at me without seeing the therapy and the medication? Treating me like a pity case isn’t helping.
JEAN: What do you want from me, Alex?
ALEX: Let me go back. I can’t sit here doing nothing, it’s making it worse.
JEAN: You’re not ready to go back.
ALEX: Then when? Give me a time frame.
JEAN: I can’t talk to you if you’re going to be like this. And this isn’t your decision to make.
ALEX: Yes it is! It’s my life, and it’s my school. (Opening the kitchen drawer) And it’s my mail!
JEAN: It’s not…
ALEX: I should be able to open mail from my own school…(Leafs through letters. Pauses on one in particular. Goes through a few more.) This says we’re behind on payments. (Goes through a few more.) I thought our plan covered Dr. Manning.
JEAN: That’s not for you to worry about.
ALEX: (Keeps reading.) This is what I cost?
JEAN: (Putting away the mail.) Listen, Alex, there’s something I need to talk to you about.
ALEX: Is that why we sold our old house?
JEAN: (Pulling out the post-it note.) Look, I wanted to bring this up later, but there’s this program at Meadows Hospital…
ALEX: What kind of program?
JEAN: They help people like you, who need some extra guidance. It’s an inpatient program, and you’d be with other people who you can relate to.
ALEX: Inpatient program? So that means…
JEAN: You’d be living there, yes, but not necessarily for a long time. After the behavioral assessment we can discuss your treatment plan…
ALEX: I’ve already been assessed…I have a treatment plan. Behavioral therapy and medication, we’ve been through this.
JEAN: Yes but if the treatment plan isn’t working then it’s time to try something else.
ALEX: Who said it isn’t working?

JEAN: Is it? *(Beat. ALEX doesn’t know how to respond.)*

JEAN: This could be good for you. These people can help you in ways that I can’t. *(Pulls up the website on her phone.)* See? They have a team of trained psychiatrists and nurses, they cater to your individual needs.

ALEX: *(Looking at the website.)* How would you even pay for this.

JEAN: That’s for me to think about, not you. Money isn’t an issue.

ALEX: You don’t have to pay for this Mom, I’m fine.

JEAN: Obviously something isn’t working, Alex. At least give it a try. They have group therapy and 24-hour supervision, and they even have visiting hours.

ALEX: That sounds like prison.

JEAN: It’s not a prison.

ALEX: Look, I’m sorry I’ve been difficult lately, but this isn’t necessary. I’ll try something else.

JEAN: We’ve tried everything else. I’m telling you, and I’m sure Dr. Manning will agree, this is what you need.

ALEX: So you’re telling me now?

JEAN: Well I wanted to wait until your birthday was over.

ALEX: I think it’s safe to say it’s over. *(Beat.) I’m not going.

JEAN: I didn’t say you had a choice.

ALEX: You can’t force me to go, I’m a legal adult.

JEAN: If I believe you’re at risk, your consent isn’t required.

ALEX: What do you mean?

JEAN: I tell the psychiatrists that you are in danger of harming yourself, and they can commit you.

ALEX: That’s not fair.

JEAN: Alex…
ALEX: That’s not fair!

JEAN: I’m giving you the option to go on your own terms.

ALEX: I am not in danger of hurting myself!

JEAN: Really? Do you want to tell me what you were planning on doing with those pills?

ALEX: It’s not like that. It’s not like you think.

JEAN: I need to make sure that you don’t do anything you’ll regret.

ALEX: Well it’s not your choice to make, is it?

JEAN: You’re my daughter…

ALEX: It’s my decision.

JEAN: Not if you aren’t of sound mind.

ALEX: My mind is sound.

JEAN: Just go in for an assessment. If they don’t think you need the program, then you don’t have to go.

ALEX: You can’t do this.

JEAN: Yes I can. (Beat.) You need help, Alex. There’s nothing wrong with it, but this is what you need. (ALEX exits to her room. JEAN stands frozen, unsure what to do. ALEX grabs her backpack and begins packing it with money, clothes, etc. LAUREN and JO enter.)

JO: So? Not that bad right?

LAUREN: I don’t know, I’m still not a big fan.

JO: I’ll buy you a pack of menthols to start out with. (Settles back into her chair. ALEX retrieves her bottle of sleeping pills and packs them in her bag.) So is this game over?

LAUREN: I was thinking, maybe we could play a different game later. I brought a deck of cards. I could try learning poker again. Or maybe crazy eights instead. (Looking at JEAN.) Are you ok?

JEAN: (ALEX comes out of her room.) Alex! (ALEX quickly heads for the front door.) Where are you going?
ALEX: *(Without stopping.)* I’m going for a walk. *(Exits)*

*(JEAN makes a move towards the front door. JO gets up quickly to follow, her back starts to spasm.)*

JO: *(Crumpling back into her seat.)* FUCK!

JEAN: *(Turning back to JO.)* Jo?

JO: Oh Jesus…

JEAN: *(Helping her into a comfortable position.)* Just hold still…

LAUREN: Mom?

JEAN: Where does it hurt? *(Touches a spot on JO’s lower back, causing her to cry out.)*

LAUREN: Mom?

JEAN: *(Turning her attention to LAUREN as JO still struggles.)* Go get her! *(LAUREN, confused, obliges, grabbing her jacket and exiting.)*

JO: Son of a bitch…

*(Blackout)*

**ACT II SCENE II**

*(Lights up on JO and JEAN in the kitchen, both seated at the table. JO is eating a slice of the cake. JEAN is checking her phone. It’s silent for a short while.)*

JO: You know, once you get past the healthy stuff, it isn’t too bad. *(Beat. JEAN doesn’t respond. JO takes another bite.)* It’s kind of like drinking light beer. Yeah there’s less alcohol, but it’s still beer. *(Beat. JEAN is still fixated on her phone.)* Remember when I tried to make a cake for your tenth birthday? I was taking a cooking class in high school so I thought I could do it. I had it all planned out, I followed the recipe perfectly, and then I forgot to grease the god-
damn pan. I couldn’t get the cake out in one piece, it came out in clumps. So right before the party started Mom and I ran to the bakery and bought you that big strawberry cake…

JEAN: *(Distracted.)* It was red velvet.

JO: Are you sure? I remember it was this big, pink cake with strawberry filling…

JEAN: It was red velvet. I’m allergic to strawberries.

JO: Are you sure?

JEAN: Yes.

JO: Huh. Ok maybe you’re right. *(Continues eating. JEAN’s phone starts buzzing.)*

JEAN: *(Answering.)* Hello? Where have you looked so far? No, I tried her phone, she’s not answering. Ok, let me know. I’ll stay here in case she comes back. *(Hangs up.)*

JO: No luck?

JEAN: It’s getting dark.

JO: Yeah, that would make it difficult.

JEAN: You really like the cake?

JO: I do, it’s not nearly as bad as I had imagined.

JEAN: I’m glad someone got to enjoy it. It might as well be your birthday cake.

JO: Ha. If this was my birthday cake I’d kill myself. *(Awkward silence.)*

JEAN: What are your plans for your birthday? It’s coming up.

JO: *(Shrugs.)* I don’t know. Birthdays at our age seem kind of pointless. They just remind me that I’m getting old.

JEAN: Yeah, in a few years you can join AARP.

JO: Ugh, don’t remind me.

JEAN: You know, if you’re still here on your birthday…

JO: I’m not…

JEAN: I know, I know, but if you don’t have any plans, you could always celebrate here.
JO: Jean, I appreciate it and all, but…

JEAN: Oh, come on, at least let us take you out to dinner. My treat. There’s this new tapas place downtown, we can try it out! The girls never get to see their Aunt. It could be fun catching up!

JO: Yeah. (JEAN’s phone starts buzzing again.)

JEAN: (Answering) Hello? Ok. No, that’s fine. It’s alright. You helped a lot. Ok. I’ll see you soon. (Hangs up. Beat. Picks her phone back up and begins dialing.)

JO: You calling her again?

JEAN: I’m calling the police.

JO: What?

JEAN: Lauren can’t find her.

JO: What, are you going to file a missing person?

JEAN: Why not?

JO: It hasn’t been 24 hours.

JEAN: So I tell them it’s life-threatening.

JO: Is it?

JEAN: I would say so.

JO: She’s just blowing off some steam. She’ll come back.

JEAN: You don’t know that.

JO: So what, she ran away from home? She’s an adult, Jean.

JEAN: It doesn’t matter. Now is not the time to take chances.

JO: You really want to get the police involved?

JEAN: Yes!

JO: (Beat. Shifts in her seat, then begins faking back pain.) Ah, ah, ah…
JEAN: What is it? Your back again? Where does it hurt?

JO: It’s right here, It’s really bad… *(JEAN stands up and walks over to JO, who immediately grabs JEAN’s phone.)*

JEAN: Jo! Give it back!

JO: What are you worried about? You have the pills, right?

JEAN: Yes…

JO: So she doesn’t have them. Listen to me. You’re blowing this whole thing out of proportion. You always do that. Remember Fourth of July when we were kids? When I threw one water balloon at you so you convinced Mom and Dad to ground me?

JEAN: You got me all wet.

JO: We were having a water balloon fight, Jean.

JEAN: This is different.

JO: Look, she doesn’t have the pills, alright? There’s nothing she can do. Trust me. *(Beat.) You know, what I think this really comes down to is a matter of acceptance.

JEAN: Acceptance?

JO: Yeah.

JEAN: What am I supposed to accept?

JO: Her. Just accept her. It’s that simple.

JEAN: *(Beat.) Well acceptance takes time. You can’t expect it to happen overnight.*

JO: I know, I’m just saying. It’s important. *(Beat.) I need a cigarette.*

JEAN: Again?

JO: I need to relax.

JEAN: I can make some chamomile tea…

JO: *(Pulling out a pack.)* No, no, don’t go through all that trouble. *(Stands up gingerly and heads for the door.)*

JEAN: Smoking is horrible for you.
JO: I had some of your health cake, it balances out.

JEAN: At least put on a jacket, it’s cold. Jo?

JO: I can’t hear you, I have a cigarette in my mouth. *(Exits, letting LAUREN in as she leaves. JEAN puts her phone down.)*

LAUREN: I’m didn’t see her anywhere, I’m sorry.

JEAN: Don’t be sorry, it’s dark. She could be anywhere.

LAUREN: Why did she leave?

JEAN: Oh, just an argument we had. Don’t worry about it.

LAUREN: So you had an argument and she just up and left?

JEAN: Yes.

LAUREN: *(Beat.)* Why am I always the last to know anything?

JEAN: What do you mean? *(JO enters.)*

LAUREN: I’m a good daughter! I call you like I’m supposed to, I come home for birthdays. Why can’t I be in the loop?

JO: Trust me, you don’t want to be in the loop. It’s a weird place.

JEAN: What happened to your cigarette?

JO: Too windy.

LAUREN: You can tell me things, Mom, I can handle it.

JEAN: You don’t have to worry about these things, Lauren.

LAUREN: But I want to! Isn’t that what families do? Why do we have to have secrets?

JO: If we knew too much about each other, we wouldn’t want to spend any time together.

LAUREN: Yeah but we have to spend time together anyway, right?

JO: So we’re all trapped with each other no matter what.

LAUREN: Basically.
JO: Like being in a cult, but without all the fun costumes.

JEAN: Nice, Jo.

LAUREN: Exactly. You can at least count on your family, right?

JO: I believe you are what they call an idealist.

LAUREN: I’m taking that as a compliment.

JO: Like I said, an idealist.

LAUREN: What do you think, Mom? (JEAN yawns.) Are we boring you?

JEAN: It’s getting late.

LAUREN: (Checks the time on her phone.) Oh wow, it is. I should head back.

JEAN: Right, you have that presentation tomorrow, don’t you?

LAUREN: Oh, right, yeah…

JEAN: You should get some rest.

LAUREN: Yeah. I should get going…we’ll talk soon.

JEAN: Ok. Well take some food back with you.

LAUREN: No, it’s fine, I went grocery shopping yesterday.

JEAN: Those supermarkets in your neighborhood are full of processed foods. Nothing fresh. (Opening the refrigerator.) Let me pack you some nutrition.

LAUREN: Mom…

JEAN: I bet you haven’t even seen an asparagus in months.

LAUREN: Come on, Mom.

JEAN: (Tossing some food in a container.) I’ll just pack you a vegetable starter kit.

LAUREN: That’s not necessary.

JEAN: Please let me take care of my daughter.
LAUREN: (Beat.) Ok. (JEAN hands her the container.) Thank you.

JEAN: You have enough gas in your car?

LAUREN: Yes.

JEAN: Alright then. Drive safe. Call me tomorrow. (Gives her a hug.)

LAUREN: I will. Bye Aunt Jo. (Gives JO an awkward hug, then exits.)

JO: (Slowly stands up.) I’m getting kind of tired too.

JEAN: Go to sleep, it’s late.

JO: You should get some rest.

JEAN: I will. What do you want for breakfast tomorrow?

JO: I don’t usually eat breakfast.

JEAN: It’s the most important meal of the day.

JO: Yeah, I’ve heard.

JEAN: (More to herself than JO.) I read an article. A healthy breakfast charges your metabolism, gives you energy, helps improve your mood…(Trails off, lost in thought. Silence.)

JO: Well, when you put it like that.

JEAN: I’ll make you something. We can talk about it tomorrow.

JO: (Beat.) Right. Well. Goodnight, Jean. (Walks towards ALEX’s room.)

JEAN: Goodnight. (Gives JO a quick, careful hug. JO flinches anyway. JO enters ALEX’s room and gets in bed.)

JEAN: (Silence. JEAN sits at the table for a moment, then grabs her phone and dials.) Hi, I know it’s late, I’d like to file a missing person report for my daughter…

(Blackout)
Act II Scene III

(Lights half up. JO is packing her bag. When she finishes she slowly zips it up and stands up. She opens her bag and pulls out a notebook, tearing out a page in one swift movement, cringing at the noise. She writes a note on the paper, folds it up and pins it to ALEX’s corkboard, then starts towards the door. She hesitates, then turns around and removes the note. She slowly opens ALEX’s door and enters the kitchen. As she’s heading for the front door, her back begins to spasm. She halts and clutches her back without making any sounds, struggling for a few moments. She manages to readjust herself, then slowly hobbles towards the front door. As she does so, her phone begins to buzz. JO looks at the caller ID, hesitates, then ends the call and puts her phone away, exiting. Silence. JEAN’s phone starts ringing. Lights up on ALEX, off to the side, on her phone. It rings for a few moments before JEAN enters the kitchen and answers)

JEAN: Alex?

ALEX: Hi Mom.
JEAN: Where are you?

ALEX: I uh…I don’t know…

JEAN: You don’t know?

ALEX: I took the train but I fell asleep and I don’t know the routes…

JEAN: Is there anyone you could ask for directions?

ALEX: (Panicking slightly.) No, I walked around for a while but there’s no one else around, and it’s dark, and my phone battery is low…

JEAN: (Calmly.) Alex, listen to me, it’s ok. Look around you. Tell me where you are.

ALEX: (Taking a deep breath and looking around.) I’m…I’m somewhere downtown…there are some shops around me but they’re all closed…

JEAN: You don’t remember what stop you got off at?

ALEX: No.

JEAN: Ok. Just stay where you are. We’ll figure this out. Keep talking to me.

ALEX: Shit.

JEAN: It’s ok.

ALEX: So stupid.

JEAN: Don’t say that. We all get lost. Just stay on the line.

ALEX: (Beat.) Can I ask you a question?

JEAN: Yes.

ALEX: Do I embarrass you?

JEAN: Of course not.

ALEX: Then why can’t we ever talk about it?

JEAN: I’m here. We’re talking right now. Keep talking to me.

ALEX: I woke you up.
JEAN: It’s ok.

ALEX: You were sleeping, I woke you up.

JEAN: It’s alright, I wanted to talk to you.

ALEX: Why do you put up with me?

JEAN: Because you’re my daughter.

ALEX: Because you want to or because you have to?

JEAN: Because I love you.

ALEX: (Beat.) Because you want to or because you have to?

JEAN: What do you think?

ALEX: (Beat.) I think I’ve proven that I’m not even smart enough to run away from home properly. So, you know, congratulations. You win.

JEAN: Why do I win.

ALEX: Because I lost. I lost so you won. I’m wrong so you must be right. Of course you’re right. (Beat.) I can’t do anything right.

JEAN: That’s not true.

ALEX: You’re lying.

JEAN: I wouldn’t lie to you.

ALEX: It’d be fair if you did. I lied to you. (Beat.) You know, those pills clouded my head. This is probably the clearest I’ve been able to think in a while. I’ve had a lot of time to think.

JEAN: Is there anything around you that’s open? Maybe a bar or a liquor store…

ALEX: How much money would you have if I wasn’t there.

JEAN: Walk around, see if you can find someone…

ALEX: Probably a lot, right?

JEAN: Why would you think about that?

ALEX: You could probably even retire early.
JEAN: Alex, listen to me, walk around and see if you can find someone.

ALEX: I’m sorry.

JEAN: It’s alright.

ALEX: I’m sorry Mom.

JEAN: Don’t be sorry.

ALEX: What time is it?

JEAN: Late.

ALEX: I’m tired.

JEAN: I know.

ALEX: What do I do now?

JEAN: Come home.

ALEX: Yeah.

JEAN: Is that what you want to do?

ALEX: It doesn’t matter what I want to do.

JEAN: Yes it does.

ALEX: Where else am I going to go? *(Silence.)*

JEAN: What do you want to do?

ALEX: Can we keep talking?

JEAN: Of course.

ALEX: Please don’t hang up.

JEAN: I won’t. I’m not going anywhere.

ALEX: Ok.

JEAN: We’ll figure things out, Alex. I promise. *(Beat.)* It’s going to be ok.
ALEX: Ok. *(Opens bottle of pills.)*

JEAN: Things are going to work out.

ALEX: Mhmm.

JEAN: Do you believe me?

ALEX: *(Beat. Staring at the pills.)* Yes.

JEAN: Alex?

ALEX: *(Beat.)* I believe you.

JEAN: Good. Just keep talking to me.

ALEX: You’re going to stay on the phone all night?

JEAN: There’s nothing stopping me.

*(ALEX counts out pills as lights fade.)*

*(Blackout.)*

END OF PLAY